

An abstract painting composed of numerous overlapping, angular, and curved shapes. The color palette is dominated by warm tones: various shades of orange, from light peach to deep, vibrant red, and dark, almost black, areas. The brushwork is visible, giving the painting a textured, layered appearance. The composition is dense and non-representational, with no discernible figures or objects.

SHORT FICTION

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STAR SHIP

I

With sunset, there was rain. When Dougald Anson brought his boat in to Krakenau harbor, there was only a vast wet darkness around him.

He swore in a sulfurous mixture of Krakenai, Volgazani, and half a dozen other languages, including some spaceman's Terrestrial, and let down the sail. The canvas was heavy and awkward in the drenching rain; it was all he could do to lash it around the boom. Then he picked up the long wooden sweep and began sculling his boat in toward the dock.

Lightning flared blue through the rain, and he saw the great bay in one livid flash, filled with galleys at anchor and the little schooners of the fishing fleet. Beyond the wharfs, the land climbed steeply toward the sky, and he saw the dark mass of the town reaching up to the citadel on the hilltop. Dark—dark! Hardly a light showed in the gloom.

What in the name of Shantuzik was up? The waterfront, at least, should have been alive with torches and music and bawdy merriment. And the newly installed street lights should have been twinkling along the main avenues leading up to the castle. Instead Krakenau lay crouched in night, and—

He scowled, and drove the light vessel shoreward with rhythmic sweeps of the long oar. Uneasiness prickled along his spine. It wasn't right. He'd only been gone a few days. What had happened in the meantime?

When he reached the pier, he made fast with a quietness unusual to him. Maybe he was being overcautious. Maybe it was only that the king had died or some other reason for restrained conduct had arisen. But a man didn't

spend years warring among the pirates of the outer islands and the neighboring kingdoms around Krakenau without learning to be careful.

He ducked under the awning in the bows which was the boat's only shelter, and got a towel from the sea chest and rubbed his rain-wet body dry. He'd only been wearing a tattered pair of breeches, and the water ran along his ribs and down his flanks. Then he shrugged on a tunic, and a coat of ring-mail over that. A flat-bladed sword at his side and a helmet over his long yellow hair completed his outfit. He felt secure now, and jumped up to the pier.

For a moment he stood in thought. The steady rain washed down over his leather cape, blurring vision a few meters away, and only the intermittent flicker of lightning broke the darkness. Where to go? His father's house was the logical place, perhaps. But the Masefield dwelling was a little closer to here, and Ellen—

He grinned and set out at a long stride. Masefield's be it.

The street onto which he turned opened before him like a tunnel of night. The high steep-roofed houses lay dark on either side, walling it in, and the fluoroglobes were unlit. When the lightning blinked, the wet cobblestones gleamed; otherwise there was only darkness and rain.

He passed one of the twisting alleys, and glanced at it with automatic caution. The next instant he had thrown himself to the ground, and the javelin whipped through the place where his belly had been.

He rolled over and bounded to his feet, crouched low, the sword whining out of its scabbard into his hand. Four Khazaki sprang from the alley and darted at him.

Dougald Anson grunted, backed up against a wall. The natives were armed and mailed, they were warriors, and they had all the unhuman swiftness of their species. Four of them—!

The leading attacker met his sword in a clang of steel. Dougald let him come lunging in, took the cut on his mailed ribs, and swept his own weapon murderously out. Faster than a man could think, the Khazaki had his own blade up to parry the sweeping blow. But he wasn't quite fast enough; he met it at an awkward angle and the Terrestrial's sheer power sent the sword spinning from his hand. The hand went too, a fractional second later, and he screamed and fell back and away.

The others were upon Anson. For moments it was parry and slash, three against one, with no time to feel afraid or notice the cuts in his arms and

legs. A remote part of his brain told him bleakly: This is all. *You're finished. No lone Earthling ever stood up long to more than two Khazaki.* But he hardly noticed.

Suddenly there were only two in front of him. He darted forth from the wall, his sword crashing down with all the power of his huge body behind it. The warrior tried to skip aside—too late. The tremendous blow smashed his own parry down and sang in his skull-bones.

And the last of the attackers died. He tumbled over beside the second, and each of them had a feathered shaft between his ribs.

The bowman came loping through the rain. He paused, in typical Khazak fashion, to slit the throat of the wounded being, and then came up to where Dougald Anson stood panting.

The human strained through the rainy dark. Lightning glimmered in the sky, and he recognized the newcomer. “Janazik!”

“And Anson,” nodded the Khazaki. His sharp white teeth gleamed in his shadowed face. “You seem to have met a warm welcome.”

“Too warm. But—thanks!” Anson bent over the nearest of the corpses, and only now did the realization penetrate his brain. They all wore black mail of a certain pattern, spiked helmets, red cloaks—Gods of Gorzak! They were all royal guardsmen!

He looked up to the dark form of Janazik, and his lean face was suddenly tight. “What is this?” he asked slowly. “I thought maybe bandits or some enemy state had managed to enter the city—”

“That would be hard to do, now that we have the guns,” said Janazik. “No, these are within our own walls. If you’ll look closely, you’ll see they wear a gold-colored brassard.”

“Prince Volakech—but he—”

“There’s more to this than Volakech, and more than a question of the throne,” said Janazik. Then suddenly, urgently: “But we can’t stay here to talk. They’re patrolling the streets, it’s dangerous to be abroad. Let’s get to shelter.”

“What’s happened?” Anson got up, towering over the native by a good quarter meter, his voice suddenly rough. “What happened? How is everyone?”

“Not well. Come on, now.”

“Ellen? Masefield Ellen?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knows. Now come on!”

They slipped into the alley. Anson was blind in the gloom, and Janazik’s slim six-fingered hand took his to guide him. The Khazaki were smaller than Terrestrials and lacked the sheer strength and endurance which Earth’s higher gravity gave; but they could move like the wind, they had an utter grace and balance beside which humans were clumsy cattle, and they saw in the dark.

Dougald Anson’s mind whirled in desperate speculation. If Volakech had gotten enough guardsmen and soldiers on his side to swing a palace revolution, it was bad. But matters looked worse than that. Why should Volakech’s men have assaulted a human? Why should Janazik have to sneak him into a hiding place? How had the revolutionists gotten control in the first place, against King Aligan’s new weapons? What powers did they have now?

What had become of the human community in Krakenau? What of his father, his brother and sisters, his friends? What of Masefield Ellen? What of Ellen?

He grew aware that Janazik had halted. They were in an evil-smelling, refuse-littered courtyard, surrounded by tumble-down structures, dark and silent as the rest of the city. Anson realized that all Krakenau was blacked out. In such times of danger, the old Khazaki clandom reasserted itself. Families barricaded themselves in their dwellings, prepared to fight all comers till the danger was past. The city was awake, yes—it was crouched in breathless tension all around him—but not a light showed, not a hand stirred, not a voice spoke. They were all waiting.

Janazik crouched at the base of one of the old buildings and lifted a trapdoor. Light gleamed dimly up from a cellar. He dropped lightly down and Anson followed, closing the door behind him.

There was only one smoky lamp in the dank gloom. Shadows were thick and huge around the guttering wick. The red flame picked out faces, shimmered off cold steel, and lost itself in darkness.

Anson’s eyes scanned the faces. Half a dozen humans: Chiang Chung-Chen, DuFrere Marie, Gonzales Alonzo and his wife Nora who was Anson’s sister, Dougald Joan, Masefield Philip—No sign of Ellen.

“Anse! Anse!” The voices almost sobbed out of the dim-lit hollowness. Joan and Nora sprang forward as if to touch their brother, make sure he was alive and no vision of the night, but Janazik waved them back with his sword.

“No noise,” hissed the Khazaki’s fierce whisper. “No noise, by all the thirteen hells! Volakech’s *burats* are all over the city. If a patrol finds us—”

“Ellen!” Anson’s blue eyes searched for Masefield Philip, crouched near the lamp. “Where’s your sister, Phil?”

“I don’t know,” whispered the boy. “We’re all who seem to’ve escaped. They may have caught her—I don’t know—”

“Father.” Joan’s voice caught with a dry sob. “Anse, Father and Jamie are dead. The rebels killed them.”

For a moment, Anson couldn’t grasp the reality of that. It just wasn’t possible that his big laughing father and young Jamie-the-brat should be killed—*no!*

But—

He looked up, and then looked away. When he turned back to face them, his visage had gone hard and expressionless, and only the white-knuckled grip on his sword showed he was not a stranger.

“All right,” he said slowly, very slowly and steadily. “All right. Give me the story. What is it? What’s happened in Krakenau?”

II

Janazik padded around to stand before him. He was not the only Khazaki in the cellar; there were a good dozen others. Mostly they were young males, and Anse recognized them. Bolazan, Pragakech, Slavatozik—he’d played with them as a child, he’d fared out with them as a youth and a man to the wars, to storm the high citadel of Zarganau and smite the warriors of Volgazan and pirate the commerce of the outer islands. They were good comrades, yes. But Father and Jamie were dead. Ellen, Ellen was vanished. Only a fragment of the human community remained; his world had suddenly come down in ruin about him.

Well—his old bleak resolution came back to him, and he met the yellow slit-pupilled gaze of Janazik with a challenging stare.

They were a strange contrast, these two, for all that they had fought shoulder to shoulder halfway round the planet, had sung and played and roistered from Krakenau to Gorgazan. Comrades in arms, blood brothers maybe, but neither was human from the viewpoint of the other.

Dougald Anson was big even for a Terrestrial; his tawny head rode at full two meters and his wide shoulders strained the chain mail he wore. He was young, but his face had had the youth burned out of it by strange suns and wild winds around the world, was lean and brown and marked with an old scar across the forehead. His eyes were almost intolerably bright and direct in their blue stare, the eyes of a bird of prey.

The Khazaki was humanoid, to be sure—shorter than the Terrestrial average, but slim and lithe. Soft golden fur covered his sinewy body, and a slender tail switched restlessly against his legs. His head was the least human part of him, with its sloping forehead, narrow chin, and blunt-muzzled face. The long whiskers around his mouth and above the amber cat-eyes twitched continuously, sensitive to minute shifts in air currents and temperature. Along the top of his skull, the fur grew up in a cockatoo plume that swept back down his neck, a secondary sexual characteristic that females lacked.

Janazik was something of a dandy, and even now he wore the baggy silk-like trousers, long red sash, and elaborately embroidered blouse and vest of a Krakenau noble. It was woefully muddy, but he managed to retain an air of fastidious elegance. The bow and quiver across his back, the sword and dirk at his side, somehow looked purely ornamental when he wore them.

He was almost dwarfed by Anse's huge-thewed height. But old Chiang Chung-Chen noticed, not for the first time, that the human wore clothing and carried weapons of Khazaki pattern, and that the harsh syllables of Krakenau came more easily to his lips than the Terrestrial of his fathers. And the old man nodded, gravely and a little wearily.

Janazik spoke rapidly: "Volakech must have been plotting his return from exile a long time. He managed to raise a small army of pirates, mercenaries, and outlawed Krakenau, and he made bargains with groups within the city. Two days ago, certain of the guards seized the new guns and let Volakech and his men in. Others revolted within the town. I think King Aligan was killed; at least I've seen or heard nothing of him since. There's been some

fighting between rebels and loyalists but the rebels got all the Earth-weapons when they captured the royal arsenal and since then they've just about crushed resistance. Loyalists who could, fled the city. The rest are in hiding. Volakech is king."

"But—why us? The Terrestrials—what have we to do with—"

Janazik's yellow eyes blazed at him. "You aren't stupid, blood-brother. Think!"

After a moment Anse nodded bleakly. "*The Star Ship*—"

"Of course! Volakech has seized the rocket boat. No Terrestrial in his right mind would show him how to use it, so he had to capture someone who understood its operation and force them to take him out to the Star Ship. Old Masefield Henry was killed resisting arrest—you know how bloody guardsmen are, in spite of orders to take someone alive. Volakech ordered the arrest of all Terrestrials then. A few surrendered to him, a few were killed resisting, most were captured by force. As far as we know, this group is all which escaped."

"Then Ellen—?"

"That's the weird thing. I don't believe she has been caught. Volakech's men are still scouring the city for 'an Earthling woman' as the orders read. And who could it be but Ellen? No other woman represents any danger or any desirable capture to Volakech."

"Ellen understands astrogation," said Anse slowly. "She learned it from her grandfather."

"Yes. And now that he is dead, she is the only human—the only being on this planet—who can get that rocket up to the Star Ship. And Masefield Carson knows it."

"Carson? Ellen's older brother? What—"

Janazik's voice was cold as Winter: "Masefield Carson was with Volakech. He led the rebels inside the city. Now he's the new king's lieutenant."

"Carson! No!"

"Carson—yes!" Janazik's smile was without mirth or pity. His eyes sought out Philip, huddled miserably beside the lamp. "Isn't that the truth?"

The boy nodded, too choked with his own unhappiness to cry. “Carse always was a friend of Volakech, before King Aligan outlawed him,” he mumbled. “And he always said how it was a shame, and how Volakech would know better what to do with the Star Ship than anyone now. Then—that night—” His voice trailed off, he sat dumbly staring into the flame.

“Carson led the rebel guardsmen in their seizure of the city guns,” said Janazik. “He also rode to the Masefield house at the head of a troop of them and called on his people to surrender on promise of good treatment. Joe and the mother did, and I suppose they’re held somewhere in the citadel now. Phil and Ellen happened to be out at the time. When Phil heard of the uprising, he was afraid to give himself up, in spite of the heralds that went about promising safety to those who did. He heard how the rebels had been killing his friends. He went to Slavatozik here, whom he could trust, and later they got in touch with me. I’d used this hiding place before, and gathered all the fugitives I could find here.” Janazik shrugged, a sinuous unhuman gesture. “Since then I’ve seen Carse, at a distance, riding around like a prince of the blood, with a troop of his own personal guardsmen. I suspect he really runs things now. Volakech wants power, but only Carse can show him how to get it.”

“And Ellen—?”

“No sign of her. But as I said, I think she’s in hiding somewhere, or the guards wouldn’t be out looking for a woman. She wouldn’t give herself up.”

“Not Ellen.” A grim pride lifted Anse’s head.

“Remains the problem of finding her before they do,” said Gonzales Alonzo. “If they catch her and make her plot an orbit for the rocket, they’ll have the Star Ship—which means power over the whole planet.”

“Not that I care who’s king,” growled Pragakech. “But you know that Masefield Carson never did want to use the ship to get out to the stars. And I want to see those other worlds before I die.”

“To the thirteenth hell with the other worlds,” snarled Bolazan. “Aligan was my king, and it’s for me to avenge him and put his rightful heir on the throne.”

“We all have our motives for wanting the blood of Volakech and Carson,” said Janazik. “Never mind that now; the important thing is how to get at their livers. We’re few, Anse. Here are all the free humans we know of, except Masefield Ellen. There can’t be more than two or three at large, and

perhaps ten dead. That means the enemy holds almost a hundred humans captive. Discounting children and others who are ignorant of Terrestrial science, it still means they'll be able to operate the guns, the steel mill, the atomic-power plant—all the new machines except the rocket boat, and they only need Ellen for that."

Anse nodded, slowly. "What is our strength?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not much. I know where about a hundred Khazaki warriors are hiding, ready to follow us whenever we call on them, and there will be many more sitting at home now who'll rise if someone else takes the lead. But the enemy has all the guns. It would be suicide."

"What about the Khazaki who fled?" Usually, in one of the planet's violent changes of governments, the refugees were powerful nobles who would be slain as a safety measure if they stayed at home but who could, in exile, raise strong forces for a comeback. Such a one had Volakech himself been, barely escaping with his life after his disastrous attempt to seize the throne a few years back.

"Don't be more stupid than you can help," snorted Janazik. "By the time they can have rallied enough to do any good, Volakech and Carson will have the Star Ship, one way or another, and then the whole world is at their mercy."

"That means we have to strike back somehow—quickly!" Anse stood for a moment in thought.

The habits of his warring, wandering years were coming back to him. He had faced death and despair before, and with strength and cunning and bluff and sheer luck had come through alive. This was another problem, more desperate and more urgent, but still another problem.

No—there was more to it than that.

His face grew bleak, and it was as if a coldness touched his heart. Carson was Ellen's older brother, and even if they had quarreled from time to time he knew she had always felt deeply bound to him. *Carse is everything I never was. He stayed in Krakenau and studied and became an educated man and a skilled engineer while I went hallooing over the world. He's brave and a good fighter—so am I—but he's so much more than that. I*

imagine it was his example that made Ellen learn the astrology only her grandfather knew.

And now I'm back from roaming and roving with Janazik, and I'm trying hard to settle down and learn something so that I won't be just a barbarian, a wild Khazaki in human skin, when we go out to the civilization of the stars. So that I won't be too utterly ashamed to ask Ellen to marry me. And it was all going pretty well until now.

But now—I'm fighting her brother—

Well—he pushed the thought out of his brain. After all, apparently she was in opposition to Carse's plans too.

"I wonder why they tried to kill me?" he asked aloud, more to fill in the time while he thought than out of curiosity.

"You'd be of no use to Carson, having no technical education," said Janazik, "while your knowledge of fighting and your connections with warlike groups make you dangerous to him. Also, I don't think he ever liked your paying attention to Ellen."

"No—he always said I was a waster. Called me a—an absorbed Khazaki. I'd've split his skull if he hadn't been Ellen's brother—No matter now. We've more important things to talk over."

Have we, now? he thought sickly. *Carson must know Ellen well, better than I do. If he thinks he can have me killed without making her hate him, then—maybe I never had any chance with her then—*

"How'd you happen by?" he asked tonelessly.

"I've been out from time to time, looking for Ellen and killing guardsmen whenever I could catch them alone." Janazik's white fangs gleamed in a carnivore's smile. "And, of course, I expected you back from your fishing trip about this time, and watched for you lest you blunder into their hands."

Anse began to pace the floor, back and forth, his head bent to avoid the basement rafters. If Carson was in control, and out to kill him. ... There was more to it than that, of course. The whole future of the planet Khazak, perhaps of the fabulous Galactic civilization itself, was balanced on the edge of a sword. If Volakech or a descendant of his took the warlike race out among the stars, with a high level of industry to back a scheme of conquest—

But it didn't matter. All the universe didn't matter. There was only Ellen, and his own dead kin, and himself.

A man's heart can only hold so much.

Janazik stood quietly back, watching his friend's restless prowling. He had seen that pacing before, and he knew that some scheme would come out of it, crazy and reckless and desperate, with his own cool unhuman intelligence to temper it and make it workable. He and Anse made a good team. They made the best damned fighting team Khazak had ever seen.

Presently the human lifted his head. There was silence in the hiding place, thick and taut, so that they could hear their own breathing and the steady drum of rain on the trapdoor.

"I have an idea," said Anse.

III

The long night wore on. Janazik had sent most of his Khazaki out to alert the other loyalists in their hiding places, but only they had a chance of slipping unobserved past the enemy patrols. Humans, obviously alien, slow-footed and clumsy beside the flitting shadows of Khazak, would never get far. They had to wait.

Anse was glad of the opportunity for conference with Janazik, planning the assault on the citadel. Neither of them was very familiar with the layout, but Alonzo, as an engineer on the rocket building project, and old Chiang had been there often enough to know it intimately.

It was impossible that a few hundred warriors armed with the primitive weapons of Khazak could take the stronghold. Its walls were manned by more fighters than that, and there were the terrible Earth-type guns as well. Alonzo had a blaster with a couple of charges, but otherwise there was nothing modern in the loyalist force.

But still that futile assault was necessary—

"It's taking a desperate chance," said Dougald Joan. She was young yet, hardly out of girlhood, but her voice had an indomitable ring. The true warriors among the five Earthling families were all Dougald thought Janazik. "Suppose Ellen doesn't come out of hiding? Suppose she's dead or—or captured already, in spite of what we think."

“We’ll just have to try and destroy the rocket then,” said Alonzo.
“Certainly we can’t let Volakech get to the Star Ship.” He sighed, heavily.
“And the labor of another generation will be gone.”

“It wouldn’t take us long to build another boat,” said his wife. “We know how, now, and we have the industry to do it.”

“There are only a few who really know how to handle and build the Terrestrial machines, and most of them are in the enemy’s hands,” reminded old Chiang. “I’m sure I couldn’t tell you much about atomic engines, even though I was on the Star Ship herself once. If those few are killed, we may never be able to duplicate our efforts. What Terrestrials survive will sink back into barbarism, become simply another part of Khazaki culture.”

“I don’t know—” said Nora.

“I know, because I’ve seen it happen,” insisted Chiang. “In the fifty years since we were marooned here, two generations have been born on Khazak. They’ve grown up among Khazaki, played with native children, worked and fought with Khazaki natives, adopted the dress and speech and whole outlook of Krakenau. Only a few in this third generation have consciously tried to remain—Terrestrial. I must admit that Masefield Carson is one such. Ellen is another. But few others.”

“Would you have us wall ourselves out from the world?” asked Anse with a bridling anger.

“No. I don’t see how the situation could be helped. We are a minority in an alien culture with which we’ve had to cooperate. It’s only natural that we’d be more assimilated than assimilating. Even at that, we’ve wrought immense changes.”

Janazik nodded. The stranded Terrestrials had found themselves in an early Iron Age civilization of city-states, among a race naturally violent and predatory. For their own survival, they had had to league forces with the state in which they found themselves—Krakenau, as it happened. Before they could build the industry they needed, they had to have some security—which meant that they must teach the Krakenau military principles and means of making new weapons which would make them superior to their neighbors. After that—well, it took an immense technology to build even a small spaceship. The superalloys which could stand the combustion of

rocket fuel required unheard-of elements such as manganese and chromium, which required means of mining and refining them, which required a considerable chemical plant, which required—How far down do you have to start? And there were a hundred or a thousand other requirements of equal importance and difficulty.

Besides, the Terrestrials had had to learn much from scratch themselves. None of them had ever built a rocketship, had ever seen one in action even. It was centuries obsolete in Galactic civilization. But gravity drives were out of the question. So—they'd had to design the ship from the ground up. Which meant years of painstaking research... and only a few interested humans and Khazaki to do it. The rest were too busy with their own affairs in the brawling barbaric culture.

Ten years ago, the first spaceboat had blasted off toward the Star Ship—and exploded in mid-acceleration. More designing, more testing, more slow building—and now the second one lay ready. Perhaps it could reach the Star Ship.

The Star Ship—faster than light, weightless when it chose to be for all its enormous mass, armed with atomic guns that could blast a city to superheated vapor. Whoever controlled that ship could get to Galactic stars in a matter of weeks. Or could rule all Khazaki if he chose.

No wonder Carson and Volakech had struck now, before the rocket boat was launched. When *they* had the ship—

But only Ellen knew the figures of its orbit and the complicated calculations by which the boat would plot a course to get there. A bold warrior might make a try at reaching the ship by seat-of-the-pants piloting, but he wouldn't have much chance of making it. So Ellen, and the rocket boat, were the fulcrum of the future.

"Strange," mused Chiang. "Strange that we should have had that accident..."

They had heard the story a hundred times before, but they gathered around to listen; there was nothing else to do while the slow hours dragged on.

"We were ten, all told, five men and their wives. Exploratory expeditions are often out for years at a time, so the Service makes it a policy to man the ships with married couples. It's hard for a Khazaki to appreciate the absolute equality between the sexes which human civilization has achieved.

It's due to the advanced technology, of course, and we're losing it as we go back to barbarism—"

Anse felt a small hand laid on his arm. He looked down into the dark eyes of DuFrere Marie. She was a pretty girl, a little younger than he, and until he'd really noticed Ellen he'd been paying her some attention.

"I don't care about equality," she whispered. "A woman shouldn't try to be a man. I'd want only to cook and keep house for my man, and bear his children."

It was, Anse realized, a typical Khazaki attitude. But—he remembered with a sudden pity that Carson had been courting Marie. "This is pretty tough on you," he muttered. "I'll try to see that Carse is saved. . . . If we win," he added wryly.

"Him? I don't care about that Masefield. Let them hang him. But Anse—be careful—"

He looked away, his face hot in the gloom, realizing suddenly why Masefield Carson hated him. Briefly, he wished he hadn't had such consistent luck with women. But the accident that there was a preponderance of females in the second and third generations of Khazaki humans had made it more or less inevitable, and he—well, he was only human. There'd been Earthling girls; and not a few Khazaki women had been intrigued by the big Terrestrial. *Yes, I was lucky*, he thought bitterly. *Lucky in all except the one that mattered.*

"—we'd been a few weeks out of Avandar—it was an obscure outpost then, though I imagine it's grown since—when we detected this Sol-type sun. Seeing that there was an Earth-like planet, we decided to investigate. And since we were all tired of being cooped in the ship, and telescopes showed that any natives which might exist would be too primitive to endanger us, we all went down in the lifeboat.

"And the one-in-a-billion chance happened . . . the atomic converters went out of control and we barely escaped from the boat before it was utterly consumed. We were stranded on an alien planet, with nothing but our clothes and a few hand weapons—and with our ship that would go faster than light circling in its orbit not ten thousand kilometers above us!

“No chance of rescue. There are just too many suns for the Galactic Coordinators to hope to find a ship that doesn’t come back. Expansion into this region of space wasn’t scheduled for another two centuries. So there we were, and until we could build a boat which would take us back to our ship—there we stayed!

“And it’s taken us fifty years so far...”

Pragakech came in with the rain glistening on his fur and running in small puddles about his padding feet. “We’re ready,” he said. “Every warrior whose hiding place we knew has been contacted.”

“Then we might as well go.” Janazik got up and stretched luxuriously. His eyes were like molten gold in the murky light.

“So soon?” Marie held Anse back with anxious hands. “This same night?”

“The sooner the better,” Anse said grimly. “Every day that goes by, more of our friends will be found out and killed, more places will be searched for Ellen, Volakech’s grip on the city will grow stronger.” He put the spiked helmet back on his head, and buckled the sword about his mailed waist. “Come on, Janazik. The rest stay here and wait for word. If we’re utterly defeated, such of us as survive will manage to get back and lead you out of Krakenau—somehow.”

Marie started to say something, then shook her head as if the words hurt her throat and drew Anse’s face down to hers. “Goodbye, then,” she whispered. “Goodbye, and the gods be with you.”

He kissed her more awkwardly than was his wont, feeling himself a thorough scoundrel. Then he followed Pragakech and Janazik out the trapdoor.

IV

The courtyard was filled with Khazaki warriors, standing silently in the slow heavy rain. It was the darkness of early morning, and only an occasional wan lightning flash, gleaming on spears and axes, broke the chill gloom. Anse was aware of softly-moving supple bodies pressing around

him, of night-seeing eyes watching him with an impassive stare. It was he and Janazik who had the plan, and who had the most experience in warfare, and the rest looked to them for leadership. It was not easy to stand under that cool, judging scrutiny, and Anse strode forth into the street with a feeling of relief at the prospect of action.

As they moved toward the castle, along the narrow cobbled lanes winding up the hills, their army grew. Warriors came loping from alleys, came slipping out of the dark barricaded houses, seemed to rise out of the rainy night around them. All Krakenau was abroad, it seemed, but quietly, quietly.

And throughout the town other such forces were on the move, gathering under the lead of anyone who could be trusted, converging on the citadel and the rocketship it guarded.

Tonight—victory, or destruction of the boat and a drawn battle ... or repulsion and ultimate shattering defeat. The gods are abroad tonight.

Somewhere, faint and far through the dull washing of rain, a trumpet blew a harsh challenge, once and again. After it came a distance-muted shouting of voices and a clattering of swords.

“One of our bands has come across a patrol,” said Janazik unnecessarily. “Now all hell will be loose in Krakenau. Come on!”

They broke into a trot up the hill. Rounding a sharp turn in the street, they saw a close-ranked mass of warriors with spears aloft.

Guardsmen!

The two forces let out a simultaneous yell and charged at each other in the disorderly Khazaki fashion. It was beginning to lighten just a little; Anse could make out enough for purposes of battle. *Hai-ah*—here we go!

He smashed into a leading guard, who stabbed at him with his long pike. The edge grazed off Anse’s heavy chain mail as the Earthling chopped out with his sword. He knocked the shaft aside and thrust in, hewing at the Khazaki’s neck. The guard intercepted the blow with his shield, and suddenly rammed it forward. The murderous spike on its boss thudded against the Terrestrial’s broad chest and the linked rings gave under that blow—just a little, just enough to draw blood. Anse roared and chopped down across the other’s right arm. The Khazaki howled his pain and stumbled back.

Another was on the Earthling like a spitting cat. Swords hummed and clashed together. Leaping and dodging, the Khazaki lashed out with a blade

like a flickering flame, and none of Anse's blows could land on him.

The Khazaki leaped in suddenly, his edge reaching for the human's unprotected throat. Anse parried with his sword, while his left fist shot out like an iron cannonball. It hit the native full in the face, with a crunch of splintering bones. The guard's head snapped back and he fell to the blood-running street.

Janazik was fighting two at once, his sword never resting. He leaped and danced like the shadow of a flame in the wind, and he was laughing—laughing! Anse hewed out, and one of the foemen's heads sprang from its neck. Janazik darted in, there was a blur of steel, and the other guardsman toppled.

Axe and sword! Spear and dagger and flying arrows! The fight rolled back and forth between the darkling walls of houses. It grew with time; Volakech's patrols were drawn by the noise, loyalists crouched in hiding heard of the attack and sped to join it. Anse and Janazik fought side by side, human brawn and Khazaki swiftness, and the corpses were heaped where they went.

A pike raked Anse's hand. He dropped his sword and the enemy leaped in with drawn knife. Anse did not reach for his own dirk—no human had a chance in a knife fight with a Khazaki—but his arms snaked out, his hands closed on the native's waist, and he lifted the enemy up and hurled him against another. They both went down in a crash of denting armor and snapping bones. Anse roared his war-cry and picked up his sword again.

Janazik leaped and darted and fenced, grinning as he fought, demon-lights in his yellow eyes. A spear was hurled at him. He picked it out of the air, one-handed, and threw it back, even as he fought another guardsman. The rebel took advantage of it to get in under Janazik's guard. Swifter than thought, the warrior's dagger was in his left hand—and into the rebel's throat.

Back and forth the battle swayed, roaring, trampling, and the rain mingled with blood between the cobblestones. Thunder of weapons, shrieking of wounded, shouting of challenges—lightning dancing overhead!

Suddenly it was over.

Anse looked up from his last victim and saw that the confusion no longer snarled around him. The street was heaped with dead and wounded, and a few individual battles were still going on. But the surviving guardsmen were in full flight, and the victorious warriors were shouting their triumph.

“That was a fight!” panted Janazik. He quivered with feral eagerness. “Now on to the castle!”

“I think,” said Slavatozik thoughtfully, “that this was the decisive struggle as far as the city is concerned. Look at how many were involved. Almost all the patrols must have come here—and now they’re beaten. We hold the city!”

“Not much good to us while Volakech is in the castle,” said Anse. “He need only sally forth with the Earth-weapons—” He leaned on his sword, gasping great lungfuls of the cool wet air into him. “But where’s Ellen?”

“We’ve had heralds out shouting for her, as you suggested,” said Slavatozik. “Now that the city is in our control, she should come out. If not—”

“—then I know how to blow up the boat,” said Gonzales Alonzo bleakly. “If we can get inside the citadel to it.”

The loyalists were reassembling their forces. Warriors moved over the scene of battle, plundering dead guardsmen, cutting the throats of wounded enemies and badly mutilated friends. It was a small army that was crowding around Anse’s tall form.

His worried eyes probed into the dull gray light of the rainy dawn. Of a sudden, he stiffened and peered more closely. Someone was coming down the street, thrusting through the assembled warriors. Someone—someone—he knew that bright bronze hair. . . .

Ellen.

He stood waiting, letting her come up to him, and his eyes were hungry. She was tall and full-bodied and supple, graceful almost as a Khazaki, and her wide-set eyes were calm and gray under a broad clear forehead and there was a dusting of freckles over her straight nose and her mouth was wide and strong and generous and—

“Ellen,” he said wonderingly. “Ellen.”

“What are you doing?” she asked. “What have you planned?”

No question of how he was, no look at the blood trickling along his sides and splashed over his face and arms—well—“Where were you?” he asked, and cursed himself for not being able to think of a better greeting.

“I hid with the family of Azakhagar,” she said. “I lay in their loft when the patrolmen came searching for me. Then I heard your heralds going through the streets, calling on me to come out in your name. So I came.”

“How did you know it wasn’t a trick of Volakech’s?” asked someone.

“I told the heralds to use my name and add after it—well—something that only she and I knew,” said Anse uncomfortably.

Janazik remained impassive, but he recalled that the phrase had been “Dougald Anson, who once told you something on a sunny day down by Zamanau River.” He could guess what the something had been. Well, it seemed to happen to all Earthmen sooner or later, and it meant the end of the old unregenerate days. He sighed, a little wistfully.

“But what did you want me for?” asked Ellen. She stood before Anse in her short, close-fitting tunic, the raindrops glittering in her heavy coppery hair, and he thought wryly that the question was in one sense superfluous. But in another sense, and with time so desperately short—

“You’re the only one of us who can plot a course for the rocket,” he said. “Alonzo here, or almost anyone, should be able to pilot it, but you’re the only one who can take it to the Star Ship. So that, of course, is why Carson and Volakech were after you, and why we had to have you too. If we can get into the citadel, capture the rocket and get up to the Star Ship, it’ll be easy to overthrow Volakech. But if he gets there first, all Khazak couldn’t win against him.”

She nodded, slowly and wearily. Her gray eyes were haunted. “I wonder if it matters who gets there,” she said. “I wonder why we’re fighting and killing each other. Over who shall sit on the throne of an obscure city-state on an insignificant planet? Over the exact disposition to be made of one little spaceship? It isn’t worth it.” She looked around at the sprawled corpses, lying on the bloody cobblestones with rain falling in their gaping mouths, and shuddered. “It isn’t worth that.”

“There’s more to it than that,” said Janazik bleakly. “Masfield Carson and his friend—his puppet, I think—Volakech would use the ship to bring all the world under their rule. Then they would mold it into a pattern suited for conquering a small empire among the neighboring stars.”

“Volakech always talked that way, before his first revolution,” said Ellen. “And Carse used to say—but that can’t be right! He can’t have meant it. And even if he did—what of it? Is it worth enough for brothers to slay each other over?”

“Yes.” Janazik’s voice was pitiless. “Shall the freemen of Khazak become the regimented hordes of a tyrant? Let all this world be blown asunder first!”

“Shall the innocent folk of the other stars become his victims?” urged Alonzo. “Shall Khazak become a menace to the Galaxy, one which must be destroyed—or must itself destroy? Shall there be war with—Earth herself?”

“To Shantuzik with that,” growled Anse. “These are our enemies, to be fought and beaten. Out there is the great civilization of the Galaxy, and they would keep us from it for generations yet, and make it in the end our foe. And Volakech is a murderer with no right to the throne of Krakenau. I say let’s get at his liver!”

“Well—” Ellen looked away. When she turned back, there was torment in her eyes, but her voice was low and steady: “I’m with you in whatever you plan. But on one condition. Carse is not to be harmed.”

“Not harmed!” exploded Janazik. “Why, that dirty traitor deserves—”

“He is still my brother,” said Ellen. “When Volakech is beaten, he will not be able to do any more harm, and he will see that he was wrong.” Her eyes flashed coldly. “Whoever hurts Carse will have me for blood-enemy!”

“As you will,” shrugged Anse, trying to hide the pain in his heart. “But now. . . . Our plan is to storm the citadel. We can’t hope to take it, but we’ll keep the garrison busy. Meanwhile a few of us break in, get the rocket, and take it back out here, where you will have an orbit plotted—”

“I can’t make one that quickly. And who can pilot it well enough to land it here without cracking it up?”

They looked at each other, and then eyes turned to Gonzales Alonzo. He smiled mirthlessly. “I can try,” he said. “But I’m only an engineer; I never imagined I’d have to fly the thing. Chiang Ching-Wei was supposed to be the pilot, but he’s a prisoner now.”

“If we smash the rocket—well, then we smash it,” said Anse heavily. “It’ll mean a long and hard war against Volakech from outside, and he’ll

have all the advantages of the new weapons. We may never overthrow him before he gets another boat built. Still—we'll just have to try."

Ellen said quietly: "I can pilot it."

"You!"

"Of course. I've been working on the second boat from the beginning. I know it as well as anyone, every seam and rivet and wiring diagram. I was aboard when Chiang took her on a practice run only a few days ago. I'll fly it for you!"

"You can't—we have to fight our way into the castle itself, the very heart of Volakech's power—you'd be killed!"

"It's the best chance. If you think we can get in at all, I stand as good a chance of living through it as anyone else."

"She's right," said Janazik. "And while we waste time here arguing, the citadel is getting ready. Come on!"

Automatically, Anse broke into movement, trotting along beside Janazik, and the army formed its ranks and followed them.

He had time for a few hurried words with Ellen, whispered as they went up the hill: "Stay close by me. There'll be a small group of us getting in, picked fighters, and we'll make a ring about you."

"Of course," she nodded. Her gray eyes shone, and she was breathing quickly. "I begin to see why you were a rover all those years, Anse. It's mad and desperate and terrible—but before Cosmos, we're alive!"

"Most recruits are frightened green before their first battle," he said. "You have a warrior's heart, Ellen—" He broke off, hearing the banality of his own words.

"Listen, my dearest," he said then, quickly. "We may not come alive through all this. But remember what I did say, down by the river that day. I love you."

She was silent. He went on, fumbling for words: "You wouldn't answer me then—"

"I thought it was just your usual talk to women."

"It may have been—then," he admitted. "But it hasn't been since, and it isn't now." His sword-calloused hand found hers. "Don't forget, Ellen. I love you. I will always love you."

"Anse—" She turned toward him, and he saw her eyes alight. "Anse—"

A bugle shrilled through the rain, high and harsh ahead of them. Dimly, they made out the monstrous bulk of the castle, looming through the misty

gray light, its towers lost in the vague sky. Janazik's sword flashed from its sheath.

"The battle begins," said a voice out of the blurring rain.

Anse drew Ellen over against a wall and kissed her. Her lips were cool and firm under his, wet with rain; he would never forget that kiss while life was in him.

They looked at each other for a moment of wonder, and then broke apart and followed Janazik.

V

The loyalists charged in a living wave that roared as it surfed against the castle walls and spattered a foam of blood and steel. From three sides they came, weaving in and out of the hailing arrows, lifting shields above them, leaving their dead behind them.

The blaster cannon mounted on the walls spouted flame and thunder. Warriors were mowed down before that whirling white fury, armor melted when the lightning-like discharges played over it, but still the assault went on with all the grim bitter courage of the Khazaki race.

Old siege engines were appearing, dragged out of storehouses and hiding places where they had been kept against such a day of need. Now the great catapults and ballistae were mounted; stones and fireballs and iron-headed bolts were raking the walls. A testudo moved awkwardly forth up the steep hill toward the gates. It was blasted to flaming molten ruin, but another got underneath the walls and the crash of a battering ram came from under its roof.

Shadowlike in the blinding rain, the warriors flitted up toward the walls. No spot of cover was too small for one of those ghostly shapes; they seemed to carry their own invisibility with them. Under the walls—scaling ladders appearing as if out of nowhere—up the walls and into the castle!

The ladders were hurled down. The warriors who gained the walls were blasted by cannon, cut down by superior numbers, lost in a swirl of battle and death. Boiling water rained down over the walls on those below, spears

and arrows and the roaring blaster bolts. But still they came. Still the howling, screeching demons of Krakenau came, and died, and came again.

Anse cursed, softly, luridly, pain croaking in his voice: “We can’t be with them. They’re being slaughtered and we can’t be with them.”

“We’re needed worse here,” said Janazik curtly. “If only Pragakech can maintain the assault for an hour—”

He and Anse loped in the forefront. Behind them came Gonzales, Ellen, and a dozen picked young Khazaki. They wove through a maze of alleys and streets and deserted market squares, working around behind the castle. The roar of battle came to them out of the gray mist of rain; otherwise there was only the padding and splashing of their own feet, the breath rasping harsh in their lungs, the faint clank and jingle of their harness. All Krakenau not at the storming of the citadel had withdrawn into the mysterious shells of the houses, lay watching and waiting and whetting knives in the dark.

The paths dipped steeply downward, until, when they came around behind the citadel and stood peering out of a tunnel-like alley, there was a sheer cliff-face before them. On this side the castle was impregnable. The only approach was a knife-edged trail winding up the cliff, barely wide enough for one man at a time. At its top, flush with the precipice edge, the wall was built. Against this wall, commanding the trail, there had in the old days been an archer post, but lately a cannon had been mounted there.

Yet that very security, thought Anse, might be a weakness. Except for that gun, the approach wouldn’t be watched, especially with the fight going on elsewhere. So—

“Give me your weapon, Alonzo,” said Janazik.

“Here.” Gonzales handed him the blaster pistol. “But it only has two charges left in it.”

“That may be enough.” Janazik slipped it under his cloak. Then he wound a gold brassard about his arm and started up the trail. A couple of his Khazaki came behind them, then Anse, Ellen, and Alonzo, and finally the rest of the warriors.

The trail was steep and slippery, water swirling down it, loose rocks moving uneasily beneath the feet—and it was a dizzying drop off the sheer edge to

the ground below. They wound upward slowly, panting, cursing, wondering how much of a chance their desperate scheme really had.

Ellen slipped a little. Anse reached back and caught her hand. He smiled lopsidedly. "Now I don't want to let go," he said.

"I wonder—" Ellen looked away, then back to him, and her eyes were wide and puzzled. "I wonder if I want you to, Anse."

His heart seemed to jump up into his throat, but he let her go and said wryly: "I'm afraid I have to right now. But wait till later."

Up and up—*Later! Will there ever be a later?*

And if there is, what then? I'm still more than half a Khazaki. Can we live together in the great civilization I hardly comprehend?

It was simpler when Janazik and I were warring over the planet ... Janazik! I wonder if two beings of the same race could ever know as close a friendship as that between us two aliens. We've fought and laughed and sung together, we've saved each other's lives, sweated and suffered and been afraid, together. We know each other as we will never know any other being.

Well, it passes. We'll always remain close friends, I suppose. But the old comradeship—I'll have to give that up.

But Ellen—

Up and up—

Janazik whistled, long and loud, and called: "Hail Volakech! Friends!"

He could dimly see the looming bulk of the blaster cannon, crouched behind its iron shield. Above it the walls of the castle were high and dark and—empty.

The voice came from ahead of him, taut with nervousness: "Who goes there?"

"A friend. I have a message for His Highness." Janazik moved forward almost casually. His eyes gleamed with mirth. It tickled his heart, this dicing with death. Someday he'd overreach himself and that would be the end, but until then he was having fun.

"Advance. . . . No, no one else. Just you alone."

Janazik sauntered forward until he stood only a meter from the blunt ugly muzzle. He had his left arm out of his cloak, so that the golden brassard shone in plain view. Underneath, his right hand thumbbed the catch of Alonzo's pistol.

"Who are you?" challenged the voice from behind the shield.

“A messenger for His Highness from his allies in Volgazan,” said Janazik. “Seeing that there was still fighting going on, I and my men decided to come in the back way.”

“Well—I suppose I can let you in, under guard. But your men, will have to stay out here.”

“Very well.” Janazik strolled over behind the shield.

There were three warriors crouched there, in front of a small door in the wall. One of them was about to blow his trumpet for a guard detail. The other two poised their spears near Janazik’s throat. None of them thought that anyone outside the citadel might possess an Earth-weapon.

Janazik shot right through his cloak. In that narrow space, the ravenous discharge blinded and blistered him, stung his face with flying particles of molten iron. The hammerblow of concussion sent him reeling back against the wall. His cloak caught afire; he ripped it off and flung it down on the three blackened corpses before him.

Vision returned to his dazzled eyes. These Earth-weapons were hideous things, he thought; they made nothing of courage or strength or even cunning. He wondered what changes Galactic civilization would bring to old Khazak, and didn’t think he’d like most of them. Maybe Volakech was right.

But Anse was his comrade and Aligan had been his king. He whistled, and the others came running up.

“Quick,” rasped Janazik. “The noise may draw somebody—quick, inside!”

“Can’t we swing this lightning thrower around and blast them?” wondered a Khazaki.

“No, it’s fixed in place.” Anse threw his brawny shoulders against the solid mass of the door. It swung ponderously back and they dashed through the tunnel in the thick wall—out into the open courtyard of the castle!

The noises of the fight rose high from here, but there were only a few warriors in sight, scurrying back and forth on their errands without noticing the newcomers—a fact which did not surprise Anse or Janazik, who knew what vast confusion a battle was. The human remembered the layout now—

the rocket would be over by the machine shops, near the donjon keep—"This way!"

They trotted across the court, around the gray stone bulk of the citadel's buildings and towers, toward the long wooden shed which housed the new machine shop. The rain was beginning to slacken now, and the sun was up behind its gray veil, so that there was light shining through slanting silver. Against the dark walls, the lean torpedo shape of the rocket boat gleamed like a polished spearhead.

"Now—ahead!" Janazik broke into a run toward the boat, and they followed him in a close ring about Ellen.

A band of fighters came around the corner of the machine shop, in front of the rocket. The wet light shone off their brassards. Janazik swore bitterly, and his hand dropped to his sword.

One of the enemy warriors let out a yell. "Earthlings—two—three of them! Not ours—"

The blaster crashed in Janazik's hand, and five dropped their charred bodies on the ground. With a spine-shivering yell, Janazik bounded forward, and after him came Anse, Alonzo, and a round dozen of the fiercest fighters in Krakenau. The blaster was exhausted now—but they had their swords!

The leader of the enemy band was a huge Khazaki, dark-furred and green-eyed. His men were scattering in panic, but he roared a bull-voiced command and they rallied about him and stood before the rocket.

Volakech. By all the thirteen hells, *Volakech!*

He must have been leading reinforcements to a threatened point on the wall, thought Anse in a fleeting moment, and his sharp mind had instantly deduced that the invaders were after the rocket—and that they could have no more blaster charges, or they would be using them. And Volakech's band was still larger than theirs, and he had all the forces of the citadel behind him if he could summon them!

The two bands crashed together and steel began to fly. Anse stood before Ellen and lashed out at a spitting Khazaki who reached for his belly with a sword. The enemy dodged past his guard, drilled in close. Ellen shouted and

kicked at the native's ankles. He stumbled, dropping his defense, and Anse clove his skull.

Volakech roared. He swung a huge battle axe, and its shock and thunder rose high over the swaying tide of battle. Two of Janazik's men leaped at him. He swept the axe in a terrible arc and the spike cracked one pate and the edge split the other's face open. Alonzo sprang at him with furious courage, wielding a sword. Volakech knocked it spinning from his hand, but, before he could kill the engineer, Anse was on him.

They traded blows in a clamor of steel. Axe and sword clashed together, sheared along chain mail and rang on helmets. It was a blur of rake and slash and parry, with Volakech grinning at him behind a network of whirling steel.

Anse gathered his strength and pressed forward with reckless fury. His sword hummed and whistled and roared against Volakech's hard-held guard. He laid open arms, legs, cheek; he probed and lunged for the rebel king's trunk. Volakech snarled, but step by step he was driven back.

Warriors fell, but it was on the bodies of foemen and even dying they stabbed upward at the enemy. Bitter, bloody, utterly ruthless, the struggle swayed about the rocketship. It was old Khazak that fought, the planet of warriors, and, even as he hewed and danced and slew, Janazik thought bleakly that he was trying to end the gory magnificence of that age; he was bringing civilization and with it the doom of his own kind. Khazak of the future would not be the same world.

If they won—if they won!

"To me!" he yelled. "To me, men of Aligan! Hai, Aligan! Krakenau! Dougald!"

They heard and rallied round him, the last gasping survivors of his band. But there were few of Volakech's men left, few.

"Volakech! Aid the king! To me, men of Volakech!" The rebel shouted at the top of his lungs. And Anse lunged in at him, beating against the swift armor of the axe.

"Anse!" Janazik's urgent shout cut through the clangor of battle. "Anse, here! We're blasting free!"

The human hardly heard him. He forced his way closer in against Volakech, his sword whistling about the usurper's helmeted head.

"Anse!" shouted Janazik. "Anse—Ellen needs you—"

With a tiger snarl, Anse broke free from his opponent and whirled about. A rebel stood before him. There was an instant of violence too swift to be followed, and Anse leaped over the ripped body and up to Janazik.

The Khazaki stood by the airlock. There was a ring of corpses before him; his sword ran blood.

“Ellen?” gasped Anse. “Ellen?”

“Inside,” rasped Janazik. “She’s inside. We have to get out of here—only way to get your attention—*Come on!*”

Anse saw the armed band swarming at them from one of the outer towers, defenders who had finally noticed the battle at the rocket and were coming to aid their king. Not a chance against them—except the boat!

Man and Khazaki stepped back into the airlock. A storm of arrows and javelins broke loose. Anse saw two of his men fall—then Janazik had slammed the heavy outer valve and dogged it shut.

“Ellen!” he gasped. “Ellen—take the boat up before they dynamite it!”

The girl nodded. She was strapping herself into the pilot’s seat before the gleaming control panel. Only Alonzo was there with her, bleeding but still on his feet. Four of them survived—only four—but they had the boat!

Through the viewport, Anse saw the attackers surging around the hull. They’d use ballistae to crush it, dynamite to blow it up, blaster cannon to fry them alive inside the metal shell—unless they got it into the sky first.

“Take the engines, Alonzo,” said Ellen.

Gonzales Alonzo nodded. “You help me, Janazik,” he said. “I’m not sure I—can stay conscious—”

The pilot room was in the bows. Behind it, bulkheaded off, lay the air plant and the other mechanisms for maintaining life aboard—not very extensive, for the boat wouldn’t be in space long. Amidships were the control gyros, and behind still another bulkhead the engine controls. Rather than install an elaborate automatic feed system, the builders had relied on manual controls acting on light signals flashed by the pilot. It was less efficient, but it had shortened the labor of constructing the vessel and was good enough for the mere hop it had to make.

“I don’t know anything about it,” said Janazik doubtfully.

“I’ll tell you what to do—Help me—” Leaning on the Khazaki’s arm, Alonzo stumbled toward the stern.

Anse strapped his big body into the chair beside Ellen’s. “I can’t help much, I’m afraid,” he said.

“No—except by being here,” she smiled.

Looking out, he saw that the assault on the castle was almost over—beaten off. It had provided the diversion they needed—but at what cost, at what cost?

“We might as well take off for the Star Ship right away,” he said.

“Of course. And that will end the war. Volakech can either surrender or sit in the castle till he rots.”

“Or we can use the ship to blast the citadel.”

“No—oh, Cosmos, no!” Her eyes were filled with sudden horror.

“Why not?” he argued angrily. “Only way we can rescue our people if he won’t give them up of his own will.”

“We might kill Carse,” she whispered.

It was on his tongue to snap “good riddance,” but he choked down the impulse. “Why do you care for him that much?”

“He’s my brother,” she said simply, and he realized that in spite of her civilized protestations Ellen was sufficiently Khazaki to feel the primitive unreasoning clan loyalty of the planet. She added slowly: “And when Father died, years ago, Carse took his place, he’s been both father and big brother to me. He may have some wrong ideas, but he’s always been so—good—”

A child’s worship of the talented, handsome, genial elder brother, and she had never really outgrown it. Well—it didn’t matter. Once they had the Star Ship, Carse didn’t matter. “He’ll be as safe as anyone can be in these days,” said Anse. “I—I’ll protect him myself if need be.”

Her hand slid into his, and she kissed him, there in the little boat while it rocked and roared under the furious assaults from without. “Anyone who hurts Carse is my blood foe,” she breathed. “But anyone who helps him helps me, and—and—”

Anse smiled, dreamily. The engines began to stutter, warming up, and Volakech’s men scattered in dismay. They had seen the fire that spurted from the rocket tubes.

And in the engine room, Masefield Carson held his blaster leveled on Alonzo and Janazik. “Go ahead,” he smiled. “Go ahead—take the ship up.”

VI

The Khazaki swore lividly. His sword seemed almost to leap halfway out of the scabbard. Carse swung the blaster warningly, and he clashed the weapon back. Useless, useless, when white flame could destroy him before he got moving.

“How did you get here?” he snarled.

The tall, bronze-haired man smiled again. “I wasn’t in the fight,” he said. “Volakech wanted to save my knowledge and told me to stay out of the battle. I wasn’t really needed. But it occurred to me that your assault was obviously a futile gesture unless you hoped in some way to capture the boat. So I hid in here to guard it—just in case. And now—we’ll take her up. We may just as well do so. Once I have the Star Ship—” He gestured at Alonzo. “Start the engines. And no tricks. I understand them as well as you do.”

Gonzales strapped himself in place and stood swaying with weakness while he manipulated the controls. “I can’t—reach that wheel—” he gasped.

“Turn it, Janazik,” said Carse. “About a quarter turn—that’s enough.”

The impassive faces of meters wavered and blurred before Alonzo’s swimming eyes. He had been pretty badly hurt. But the engines were warming up.

“Strap yourself in, Janazik,” said Carse.

The Khazaki obeyed, sickly. He didn’t really need the anti-acceleration webbing—Carse himself was content to hang on to a stanchion with one hand—but it would hamper his movements, he would have no way of making a sudden leap. Between them, he and Alonzo could handle the engines readily enough, Carse giving them their orders. Then once they were at the Star Ship he could blast them down, go out to capture Anse and Ellen—and the old books said one man could handle the ship if necessary—

How to warn the two in the pilot room? How to get help? The warrior’s brain began to turn over, cool and steady now, swift as chilled lightning.

The boat spouted flame, stood on its tail and climbed for the sky. Acceleration dragged at Carse, but it wasn’t too great for a strong man to resist. Carse tightened his grip on the stanchion. His blaster was steady on them.

Ellen's signal lights blinked and blinked on the control panels. More on the No. 3 jet, ease to port, full ahead, cut No. 2. . . . Alonzo handled most of it, occasionally gasping a command to Janazik. The bellow of the rockets filled the engine room.

And in the bows, Dougald Anson saw the world reel and fall behind, saw the rainy sky open up in a sudden magnificence of sun, saw it slowly darken and the stars come awesomely out. Gods, gods, was this space? Open space? No wonder the old people had longed to get away!

How to get help, how to warn Anse—Janazik's mind spun like an unloaded engine, spewing forth plan after unusable plan. Quickly, now, by Shantuzik's hells!

No way out—and the minutes were fleeing, the rocket was reaching for the sky, he knew they were nearing the Star Ship and still he lay in his harness like a sheep and obeyed Carse's gunpoint orders!

The disgrace of it! He snarled his anger, and at Alonzo's gasped command swung the wheel with unnecessary savagery. The ship lurched as a rocket tube overfired. Carse nearly lost his hold, and for an instant Janazik's hands were at the acceleration webbing, ready to fling it off and leap at him.

The man recovered, and his blaster came to the ready again. He had to shout to be heard above the thundering jets: "Don't try that—either of you! I can shoot you down and handle it myself if I must!"

He laughed then, a tall and splendid figure standing strained against the brutal, clawing acceleration. Ellen's brother—aye! And one could see why she wanted him spared. Janazik's lip curled back from his teeth in a snarl of hate.

The rocket must be very near escape velocity now. Presently Ellen would signal for the jets to be turned off and they would rush weightless through space while she took her readings and plotted the orbit that would get them to the Star Ship. And if then Carse emerged with his blaster—

Anse had only a sword.

But—Anse is Anse, thought Janazik. If there is any faintest glimmer of a chance Anse will find it. And if not, we're really no worse off than now. I'll have to warn Anse and leave the rest up to him.

The Khazaki nodded bleakly to himself. It would probably mean his own death before Carse's blaster flame—and damn it, damn it, he liked living. Even if the old Khazak he knew were doomed, there had been many new worlds of the Galactic frontier. He and Anse had often dreamed of roving over them—

However—

A red light blinked on the panel. Ellen's signal to cut the rockets. They were at escape velocity.

Wearily, his hand shaking, Alonzo threw the master switch. The sudden silence was like a thunderclap.

And Janazik screeched the old Krakenauí danger call from his fullest lungs.

Carse turned around with a curse, awkward in the sickening zero-gravity of free fall. "It won't do you any good," he yelled thickly. "I'll kill him too—"

Alonzo threw the master switch up! With a coughing roar, the rockets burst back into life. No longer holding the stanchion, Carse was hurled to the floor.

Janazik clawed at his webbing to get free. Carse leveled his blaster on Alonzo. The engineer threw another switch at random, and the direction of acceleration shifted with sudden violence, slamming Carse against the farther wall.

His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him.

And in the control room, Anse heard Janazik's high ululating yell. The reflexes of the wandering years came back to galvanize him. His sword seemed to leap into his hand, he flung himself out of his chair webbing with a shout. . . .

"Anse!" Ellen's voice came dimly to his ears, hardly noticed. "Anse—what is it—"

He drifted weightless in midair, cursing, trying to swim. And then the rockets woke up again and threw him against the floor. He twisted with Khazaki agility, landed crouched, and bounded for the stern.

Ellen looked after him, gasping, for an instant yet unaware of the catastrophe, thinking how little she knew that yellow-maned savage after all, and how she would like to learn, and—

The rocket veered, crazily. Anse caught himself as he fell, adjusted to the new direction of gravity, and continued his plunging run. The crash of a blaster came from ahead of him.

He burst into the control room and saw it in one blinding instant. Alonzo's charred body sagging in its harness, Janazik half out of his, Carse staggering to his feet—the blaster turned on Janazik, Janazik, the finger tightening—

Tiger-like, Anse sprang. Carse glimpsed him, turned, the blaster half swung about... and the murderous fighting machine which was Dougald Anson had reached him. Carse saw the sword shrieking against his face; it was the last thing he ever saw. ...

Anse lurched back against the control panel. "Turn it off!" yelled Janazik. "Throw that big switch there!"

Mechanically, the human obeyed, and there was silence again, a deep ringing silence in which they floated free. It felt like an endless falling.

Falling, falling—Anse looked numbly down at his bloody sword. Falling, falling, falling—but that couldn't be right, he thought dully. He had already fallen. He had killed Ellen's brother.

"And I love her," he whispered.

Janazik drifted over, slowly in the silent room. His eyes were a deep gold, searching now. *If Ellen won't have him, he and I will go out together, out to the stars and the great new frontier. But if she will, I'll have to go alone, I'll always be alone—*

Unless she would come too. She's a good kid. ... I'd like to have her along. Maybe take a mate of my own too. ... But that can never be, now. She won't come near her brother's slayer.

"You might not have had to kill him," said Janazik. "Maybe you could have disarmed him."

"Not before he got one of us—probably you," said Anse tonelessly. "Anyway, he needed killing. He shot Alonzo."

He added, after a moment: "A man has to stand by his comrades."

Janazik nodded, very slowly. "Give me your sword," he said.

"Eh?" Anse looked at him. The blue eyes were unseeing, blind with pain, but he handed over the red weapon. Janazik slipped his own glaive into the human's fingers.

Then he laid a hand on Anse's shoulder and smiled at him, and then looked away.

We Khazaki don't know love. There is comradeship, deeper than any Earthling knows. When it happens between male and female, they are mates. When it is between male and male, they are blood-brothers. And a man must stand by his comrades.

Ellen came in, pulling her way along the walls by the handholds, and Anse looked at her without saying a word, just looking.

"What happened?" she said. "What is the—*Oh!*"

Carse's body floated in midair, turning over and over in air currents like a drowned man in the sea.

"Carse—Carse—"

Ellen pushed from the wall, over to the dead man. She looked at his still face, and stroked his blood-matted hair, and smiled through a mist of tears.

"You were always good to me, Carse," she whispered. "You were... goodnight, brother. Goodnight."

Then turning to Anse and Janazik, with something cold and terrible in her voice: "Who killed him?"

Anse looked at her, dumbly.

"I did," said Janazik.

He held forth the dripping sword. "He stowed away—was going to take over the ship. Alonzo threw him off balance by turning the rockets back on. He killed Alonzo. Then I killed him. He needed it. He was a traitor and a murderer, Ellen."

"He was my brother," she whispered. And suddenly she was sobbing in Anse's arms, great racking sobs that seemed to tear her slender body apart.

But she'd get over it.

Anse looked at Janazik over her shoulder, and while he ruffled her shining hair his eyes locked with the Khazaki's. *This is the end. Once we land, we can never see each other, not ever again. And we were comrades in the old days. ...*

Farewell, my brother.

When the star ship landed outside Krakenau's surrendered citadel, it was still raining a little. Janazik looked out at the wet gray world and shivered. Then, wordlessly, he stepped from the airlock and walked slowly down the hill toward the sea. He did not look back, and Anse did not look after him.

TIGER BY THE TAIL

I

Captain Flandry opened his eyes and saw a metal ceiling. Simultaneously, he grew aware of the thrum and quiver which meant he was aboard a spaceship running on ultra-drive.

He sat up with a violence that sent the dregs of alcohol swirling through his head. He'd gone to sleep in a room somewhere in the stews of Catawrayannis, with no prospect or intention of leaving the city for an indefinite time—let alone the planet! Now—

The chilling realization came that he was not aboard a human ship. Humanoid, yes, from the size and design of things, but no vessel ever built within the borders of the Empire, and no foreign make that he knew of.

Even from looking at this one small cabin, he could tell. There were bunks, into one of which he had fitted pretty well, but the sheets and blankets weren't of plastic weave. They seemed—he looked more closely—the sheets seemed to be of some vegetable fiber, the blankets of long bluish-gray hair. There were a couple of chairs and a table in the middle of the room, wooden, and they must have seen better days for they were elaborately hand-carved, and in an intricate interwoven design new to Flandry—and planetary art-forms were a hobby of his. The way and manner in which the metal plating had been laid was another indication, and—

He sat down again, buried his whirling head in his hands, and tried to think. There was a thumping in his head and a vile taste in his mouth which liquor didn't ordinarily leave—at least not the stuff he'd been drinking—and now that he remembered, he'd gotten sleepy much earlier than one would have expected when the girl was so good-looking—

Drugged—oh, no! *Tell me I'm not as stupid as a stereofilm hero! Anything but that!*

But who'd have thought it, who'd have looked for it? Certainly the people and beings on whom he'd been trying to get a lead would never try anything like that. Besides, none of them had been around, he was sure of it. He'd simply been out building part of the elaborate structure of demimonde acquaintances and information which would eventually, by exceedingly indirect routes, lead him to those he was seeking. He'd simply been out having a good time—*quite* a good time, in fact—and—

And now someone from outside the Empire had him. And *now* what?

He got up, a little unsteadily, and looked around for his clothes. No sign of them. And he'd paid three hundred credits for that outfit, too. He stamped savagely over to the door. It didn't have a photocell attachment; he jerked it open and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster.

It was of different design from any he knew, but it was quite unmistakable. Captain Flandry sighed, relaxed his taut muscles, and looked more closely at the guard who held it.

He was humanoid to a high degree, perhaps somewhat stockier than Terrestrial average—and come to think of it, the artificial gravity was a little higher than one gee—and with very white skin, long tawny hair and beard, and oblique violet eyes. His ears were pointed and two small horns grew above his heavy eyebrow ridges, but otherwise he was manlike enough. With civilized clothes and a hooded cloak he could easily pass himself off for human.

Not in the getup he wore, of course, which consisted of a kilt and tunic, shining beryllium-copper cuirass and helmet, buskins over bare legs, and a murderous-looking dirk. As well as a couple of scalps hanging at his belt.

He gestured the prisoner back, and blew a long hollow blast on a horn slung at his side. The wild echoes chased each other down the long corridor, hooting and howling with a primitive clamor that tingled faintly along Captain Flandry's spine.

He thought slowly, while he waited: No intercom, apparently not even speaking tubes laid the whole length of the ship. And household articles of wood and animal and vegetable fibres, and that archaic costume there—They were barbarians, all right. But no tribe that he knew about.

That wasn't too surprising, since the Terrestrial Empire and the half-dozen other civilized states in the known Galaxy ruled over several thousands of intelligent races and had some contact with nobody knew how many thousands more. Many of the others were, of course, still planet-bound, but quite a few tribes along the Imperial borders had mastered a lot of human technology without changing their fundamental outlook on things. Which is what comes of hiring barbarian mercenaries.

The peripheral tribes were still raiders, menaces to the border planets and merely nuisances to the Empire as a whole. Periodically they were bought off, or played off against each other—or the Empire might even send a punitive expedition out. But if one day a strong barbarian race under a strong leader should form a reliable coalition—then *vae victis*!

A party of Flandry's captors, apparently officers, guardsmen, and a few slaves, came down the corridor. Their leader was tall and powerfully built, with a cold arrogance in his pale-blue eyes that did not hide a calculating intelligence. There was a golden coronet about his head, and the robes that swirled around his big body were rainbow-gorgeous. Flandry recognized some items as having been manufactured within the Empire. Looted, probably.

They came to a halt before him and the leader looked him up and down with a deliberately insulting gaze. To be thus surveyed in the nude could have been badly disconcerting, but Flandry was immune to embarrassment and his answering stare was bland.

The leader spoke at last, in strongly accented but fluent Anglic: "You may as well accept the fact that you are a prisoner, Captain Flandry."

They'd have gone through his pockets, of course. He asked levelly, "Just to satisfy my own curiosity, was that girl in your pay?"

"Of course. I assure you that the Scothani are not the brainless barbarians of popular Terrestrial superstition, though—" a bleak smile—"it is useful to be thought so."

“The Scothani? I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure—”

“You have probably not heard of us, though we have had some contact with the Empire. We have found it convenient to remain in obscurity, as far as Terra is concerned, until the time is ripe. But—what do you think caused the Alarri to invade you, fifteen years ago?”

Flandry thought back. He had been a boy then, but he had, of course, avidly followed the news accounts of the terrible fleets that swept in over the marches and attacked Vega itself. Only the hardest fighting at the Battle of Mirzan had broken the Alarri. Yet it turned out that they’d been fleeing still another tribe, a wild and mighty race who had invaded their own system with fire and ruin. It was a common enough occurrence in the turbulent barbarian stars; this one incident had come to the Empire’s notice only because the refugees had tried to conquer it in turn. A political upheaval within the Terrestrial domain had prevented closer investigation before the matter had been all but forgotten.

“So you were driving the Alarri before you?” asked Flandry with as close an approximation to the right note of polite interest as he could manage in his present condition.

“Aye. And others. The Scothani have quite a little empire now, out there in the wilderness of the Galaxy. But, since we were never originally contacted by Terrestrials, we have, as I say, remained little known to them.”

So—the Scothani had learned their technology from some other race, possibly other barbarians. It was a familiar pattern, Flandry could trace it out in his mind. Spaceships landed on the primitive world, the initial awe of the natives gave way to the realization that the skymen weren’t so very different after all—they could be killed like anyone else; traders, students, laborers, mercenary warriors visited the more advanced worlds, brought back knowledge of their science and technology; factories were built, machines produced, and some tribal king used the new power to impose his rule on all his planet; and then, to unite his restless subjects, he had to turn their faces outward, promise plunder and glory if they followed him out to the stars—

Only the Scothani had carried it farther than most. And lying as far from the Imperial border as they did, they could build up a terrible power without the complacent, politics-ridden Empire being more than dimly aware of the fact—until the day when—

Vae victis!

II

“Let us have a clear understanding,” said the barbarian chief. “You are a prisoner on a warship already light-years from Llynathawr, well into the Imperial marches and bound for Scotha itself. You have no chance of rescue, and mercy depends entirely on your own conduct. Adjust it accordingly.”

“May I ask why you picked me up?” Flandry’s tone was mild.

“You are of noble blood, and a high-ranking officer in the Imperial intelligence service. You may be worth something as a hostage. But primarily we want information.”

“But I—”

“I know.” The reply was disgusted. “You’re very typical of your miserable kind. I’ve studied the Empire and its decadence long enough to know that. You’re just another worthless younger son, given a high-paying sinecure so you can wear a fancy uniform and play soldier. You don’t amount to anything.”

Flandry let an angry flush go up his cheek. “Look here—”

“It’s perfectly obvious,” said the barbarian. “You come to Llynathawr to track down certain dangerous conspirators. So you register yourself in the biggest hotel in Catawrayannis as Captain Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Intelligence Service, you strut around in your expensive uniform dropping dark hints about your leads and your activities—and these consist of drinking and gambling and wenching the whole night and sleeping the whole day!” A cold humor gleamed in the blue eyes. “Unless it is your intention that the Empire’s enemies shall laugh themselves to death at the spectacle.”

“If that’s so,” began Flandry thinly, “then why—”

“You will know something. You can’t help picking up a lot of miscellaneous information in your circles, no matter how hard you try not to. Certainly you know specific things about the organization and activities of your own corps which we would find useful information. We’ll squeeze all you know out of you! Then there will be other services you can perform, people within the Empire you can contact, documents you can translate for us, perhaps various liaisons you can make—eventually, you may even earn

your freedom.” The barbarian lifted one big fist. “And in case you wish to hold anything back, remember that the torturers of Scotha know their trade.”

“You needn’t make melodramatic threats,” said Flandry sullenly.

The fist shot out, and Flandry fell to the floor with darkness whirling and roaring through his head. He crawled to hands and knees, blood dripping from his face, and vaguely he heard the voice: “From here on, little man, you are to address me as befits a slave speaking to a crown prince of Scotha.”

The Terrestrial staggered to his feet. For a moment his fists clenched. The prince smiled grimly and knocked him down again. Looking up, Flandry saw brawny hands resting on blaster butts—not a chance, not a chance.

Besides, the prince was hardly a sadist. Such brutality was the normal order among the barbarians—and come to think of it, slaves within the Empire could be treated similarly.

And there was the problem of staying alive—

“Yes, sir,” he mumbled.

The prince turned on his heel and walked away.

They gave him back his clothes, though someone had stripped the gold braid and the medals away. Flandry looked at the soiled, ripped garments and sighed. Tailor-made—!

He surveyed himself in the mirror as he washed and shaved. The face that looked back was wide across the cheekbones, straight-nosed and square-jawed, with carefully waved reddish-brown hair and a mustache trimmed with equal attention. Probably too handsome, he reflected, wiping the blood from under his nose, but he’d been young when he had the plasticosmetician work on him. Maybe when he got out of this mess he should have the face made over to a slightly more rugged pattern to fit his years. He was in his thirties now, after all—getting to be a big boy, Dominic.

The fundamental bone structure of head and face was his own, however, and so were the eyes—large and bright, with a hint of obliquity, the iris of that curious gray which can seem any color, blue or green or black or gold. And the trim, medium-tall body was genuine too. He hated exercises, but

went through a dutiful daily ritual since he needed sinews and coordination for his work—and, too, a man in condition was something to look at among the usually flabby nobles of Terra; he'd found his figure no end of help in making his home leaves pleasant.

Well, can't stand here admiring yourself all day, old fellow. He slipped blouse, pants, and jacket over his silkite undergarments, pulled on the sheening boots, tilted his officer's cap at an angle of well-gauged rakishness, and walked out to meet his new owners.

The Scothani weren't such bad fellows, he soon learned. They were big brawling lusty barbarians, out for adventure and loot and fame as warriors; they had courage and loyalty and a wild streak of sentiment that he liked. But they could also fly into deadly rages, they were casually cruel to anyone that stood in their way, and Flandry acquired a not too high respect for their brains. It would have helped if they'd washed oftener, too.

This warship was one of a dozen which Cerdic, the crown prince, had taken out on a plundering cruise. They'd sacked a good many towns, even some on nominally Imperial planets, and on the way back had sent down a man in a lifeboat to contact Cerdic's agents on Llynathawr, which was notoriously the listening post of this sector of the Empire. In learning that there was something going on which a special agent from Terra had been investigating, Cerdic had ordered him picked up. And that was that.

Now they were homeward bound, their holds stuffed with loot and their heads stuffed with plans for further inroads. It might not have meant much, but—well—Cerdic and his father Penda didn't seem to be just ordinary barbarian chiefs, nor Scothania an ordinary barbarian nation.

Could it be that somewhere out there among the many stars someone had finally organized a might that could break the Empire? Could the Long Night really be at hand?

Flandry shoved the thought aside. He had too much to do right now. Even his own job at Llynathawr, important as it was, could and would be handled by someone else—though not, he thought a little sadly, with the Flandry touch—and his own immediate worry was here and now. He had to find out the extent of power and ambition of the Scothani; he had to learn their plans and get the information to Terra, and somehow spike them even a little. After that there might be time to save his own hide.

Cerdic had him brought to the captain's cabin. The place was a typical barbarian chief's den, with the heads of wild beasts on the walls and their hides on the floors, old shields and swords hung up in places of honor, a magnificent golden vase stolen from some planet of artists shining in a corner. But there were incongruous modern touches, a microprint reader and many bookrolls from the Empire, astrographic tables and computer, a vodograph. The prince sat in a massive carven chair, a silkite robe flung carelessly over his broad shoulders. He nodded with a certain affability.

"Your first task will be to learn Scothanian," he said without preliminary. "As yet almost none of our people, even nobles, speak Anglic, and there are many who will want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Flandry. It was what he would most have desired.

"You had better also start organizing all you know so you can present it coherently," said the prince. "And I, who have lived in the Empire, will be able to check enough of your statements to tell whether you are likely speaking the truth." He smiled mirthlessly. "If there is reason to suspect you are lying, you will be put to the torture. And one of our Sensitives will then get at the truth."

So they had Sensitives, too. Telepaths who could tell whether a being was lying when pain had sufficiently disorganized his mind were as bad as the Empire's hypnoprobes.

"I'll tell the truth, sir," he said.

"I suppose so. If you cooperate, you'll find us not an ungrateful people. There will be more wealth than was ever dreamed of when we go into the Empire. There will also be considerable power for such humans as are our liaison with their race."

"Sir," began Flandry, in a tone of weak self-righteousness, "I couldn't think of—"

"Oh, yes, you could," said Cerdic glumly. "I know you humans. I traveled incognito throughout your whole Empire, I was on Terra itself. I posed as one of you, or when convenient as just another of the subject races. I *know* the Empire—its utter decadence, its self-seeking politicians and pleasure-loving mobs, corruption and intrigue everywhere you go, collapse of morals and duty-sense, decline of art into craft and science into stagnancy—you were a great race once, you humans, you were the first to aspire to the stars and we owe you something for that, I suppose. But you're not the race you once were."

The viewpoint was biased, but enough truth lay in it to make Flandry wince. Cerdic went on, his voice rising: "There is a new power growing out beyond your borders, young peoples with the strength and courage and hopefulness of youth, and they'll sweep the rotten fragments of the Empire before them and build something new and better."

Only, thought Flandry, only first comes the Long Night, darkness and death and the end of civilization, the howling peoples in the ruins of our temples and a myriad petty tyrants holding their dreary courts in the shards of the Empire. To say nothing of the decline of good music and good cuisine, taste in clothes and taste in women and conversation as a fine art.

"We've one thing you've lost," said Cerdic, "and I think ultimately that will be the deciding factor. Honestly. Flandry, the Scothani are a race of honest warriors."

"No doubt, sir," said Flandry.

"Oh, we have our evil characters, but they are few and the custom of private challenges soon eliminates them," said Cerdic. "And even their evil is an open and clean thing, greed or lawlessness or something like that; it isn't the bribery and conspiracy and betrayal of your rotten politicians. And most of us live by our code. It wouldn't occur to a true Scothani to do a dishonorable thing, to break an oath or desert a comrade or lie on his word of honor. Our women aren't running loose making eyes at every man they come across; they're kept properly at home till time for marriage and then they know their place as mothers and houseguiders. Our boys are raised to respect the gods and the king, to fight, and to speak truth. Death is a little thing, Flandry, it comes to everyone in his time and he cannot stay it, but honor lives forever.

"We don't corrupt ourselves. We keep honor at home and root out disgrace with death and torture. We live our code. And that is really why we will win."

Battleships help, thought Flandry. And then, looking into the cold bright eyes: He's a fanatic. But a hell of a smart one. And that kind makes the most dangerous enemy.

Aloud he asked, humbly: "Isn't any stratagem a lie, sir? Your own disguised travels within the Empire—"

"Naturally, certain maneuvers are necessary," said the prince stiffly. "Nor does it matter what one does with regard to alien races. Especially when they have as little honor as Terrestrials."

The good old race-superiority complex, too. Oh, well.

“I tell you this,” said Cerdic earnestly, “in the hope that you may think it over and see our cause is just and be with us. We will need many foreigners, especially humans, for liaison and intelligence and other services. You may still accomplish something in a hitherto wasted life.”

“I’ll think about it, sir,” said Flandry.

“Then go.”

Flandry got.

The ship was a good three weeks en route to Scotha. It took Flandry about two of them to acquire an excellent working knowledge of the language, but he preferred to simulate difficulty and complained that he got lost when talk was too rapid. It was surprising how much odd information you picked up when you were thought not to understand what was being said. Not anything of great military significance, of course, but general background, stray bits of personal history, attitudes and beliefs—it all went into the neat filing system which was Flandry’s memory, to be correlated with whatever else he knew or learned into an astonishingly complete picture.

The Scothani themselves were quite friendly, eager to hear about the fabulous Imperial civilization and to brag of their own wonderful past and future exploits. Since there was obviously nothing he could do, Flandry was under the loosest guard and had virtually the freedom of the ship. He slept and messed with the warriors, swapped bawdy songs and dirty jokes, joined their rough-and-tumble wrestling matches to win surprised respect for his skill, and even became the close friend and confidant of some of the younger males.

The race was addicted to gambling. Flandry learned their games, taught them some of the Empire’s, and before the trip’s end had won back his stolen finery plus several other outfits and a pleasantly jingling purse. It was—well—he almost hated to take his winnings from these overgrown babies. It just never occurred to them that dice and cards could be made to do tricks.

The picture grew. The barbarian tribes of Scotha were firmly united under the leadership of the Frithian kings, had been for several generations. Theoretically it was an absolute monarchy, though actually all classes

except the slaves were free. They had conquered at least a hundred systems outright, contenting themselves with exacting tribute and levies from most of these, and dominated all others within reach. Under Penda's leadership, a dozen similar, smaller barbarian states had already formed a coalition with the avowed purpose of invading the Empire, capturing Terra, destroying the Imperial military forces, and making themselves masters. Few of them thought beyond the plunder to be had, though apparently some of them, like Cerdic, dreamed of maintaining and extending the Imperial domain under their own rule.

They had a formidable fleet—Flandry couldn't find out its exact size—and its organization and technology seemed far superior to that of most barbarian forces. They had a great industry, mostly slave-manned with the Scothan overlords supervising. They had shrewd leaders, who would wait till one of the Empire's recurring political crises had reduced its fighting strength, and who were extremely well informed about their enemy. It looked—bad!

Especially since they couldn't wait too long. Despite the unequalled prosperity created by industry, tribute, and piracy, all Scotha was straining at the leash, nobles and warriors in the whole coalition foaming to be at the Empire's throat; a whole Galactic sector had been seized by the same savage dream. When they came roaring in—well, you never could tell. The Empire's fighting strength was undoubtedly greater, but could it be mobilized in time? Wouldn't Penda get gleeful help from two or three rival imperia? Couldn't a gang of utterly fearless fanatics plow through the mass of self-seeking officers and indifferent mercenaries that made up most of the Imperial power today?

Might not the Long Night really be at hand?

III

Scotha was not unlike Terra—a little larger, a little farther from its sun, the seas made turbulent by three small close moons. Flandry had a chance to observe it telescopically—the ship didn't have magniscreens—and as they

swept in, he saw the mighty disc roll grandly against the Galactic star-blaze and studied the continents with more care than he showed.

The planet was still relatively thinly populated, with great forests and plains standing empty, archaic cities and villages huddling about the steep-walled castles of the nobles. Most of its industry was on other worlds, though the huge military bases were all on Scotha and its moons. There couldn't be more than a billion Scothani all told, estimated Flandry, probably less, and many of them would live elsewhere as overlords of the interstellar domain. Which didn't make them less formidable. The witless hordes of humankind were more hindrance than help to the Empire.

Cerdic's fleet broke up, the captains bound for their estates. He took his own vessel to the capital, Iuthagaar, and brought it down in the great yards. After the usual pomp and ceremony of homecoming, he sent for Flandry.

"What is your attitude toward us now?" he asked.

"You are a very likeable people, sir," said the Terrestrial, "and it is as you say—you are a strong and honest race."

"Then you have decided to help us actively?" The voice was cold.

"I really have little choice, sir," shrugged Flandry. "I'll be a prisoner in any case, unless I get to the point of being trusted. The only way to achieve that is to give you my willing assistance."

"And what of your own nation?"

"A man must stay alive, sir. These are turbulent times."

Contempt curled Cerdic's lip. "Somehow I thought better of you," he said. "But you're a human. You could only be expected to betray your oaths for your own gain."

Surprise shook Flandry's voice. "Wasn't this what you wanted, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Now come along. But not too close—you make me feel a little sick."

They went up to the great gray castle which lifted its windy spires over the city, and presently Flandry found himself granted an audience with the King of Scothania.

It was a huge and dim-lit hall, hung with the banners and shields of old wars and chill despite the fires that blazed along its length. Penda sat at one end, wrapped in furs against the cold, his big body dwarfed by the dragon-carved throne. He had his eldest son's stern manner and bleak eyes, without the prince's bitter intensity—a strong man, thought Flandry, hard and ruthless and able—but perhaps not too bright.

Cerdic had mounted to a seat on his father's right. The queen stood on his left, shivering a little in the damp draft, and down either wall reached a row of guardsmen. The fire shimmered on their breastplates and helmets and halberds; they seemed figures of legend, but Flandry noticed that each warrior carried a blaster too.

There were others in evidence, several of the younger sons of Penda, grizzled generals and councillors, nobles come for a visit. A few of the latter were of non-Scothan race and did not seem to be meeting exceptional politeness. Then there were the hangers-on, bards and dancers and the rest, and slaves scurrying about. Except for its size—and its menace—it was a typical barbarian court.

Flandry bowed the knee as required, but thereafter stood erect and met the king's eye. His position was anomalous, officially Cerdic's captured slave, actually—well, what was he? Or what could he become in time?

Penda asked a few of the more obvious questions, then said slowly: "You will confer with General Nartheof here, head of our intelligence section, and tell him what you know. You may also make suggestions if you like, but remember that false intentions will soon be discovered and punished."

"I will be honest, your majesty."

"Is any Terrestrial honest?" snapped Cerdic.

"I am," said Flandry cheerfully. "As long as I'm paid, I serve faithfully. Since I'm no longer in the Empire's pay, I must perforce look about for a new master."

"I doubt you can be much use," said Penda.

"I think I can, your majesty," answered Flandry boldly. "Even in little things. For instance, this admirably decorated hall is so cold one must wear furs within it, and still the hands are numb. I could easily show a few technicians how to install a radiant heating unit that would make it like summer in here."

Penda lifted his bushy brows. Cerdic fairly snarled: "A Terrestrial trick, that. Shall we become as soft and luxurious as the Imperials, we who hunt vorgari on ski?"

Flandry's eyes, flitting around the room, caught dissatisfied expressions on many faces. Inside, he grinned. The prince's austere ideals weren't very

popular with these noble savages. If they only had the nerve to—

It was the queen who spoke. Her soft voice was timid: “Sire, is there any harm in being warm? I—I am always cold these days.”

Flandry gave her an appreciative look. He’d already picked up the background of Queen Gunli. She was young, Penda’s third wife, and she came from more southerly Scothan lands than Iuthagaar; her folk were somewhat more civilized than the dominant Frithians. She was certainly a knockout, with that dark rippling hair and those huge violet eyes in her pert face. And that figure too—there was a suppressed liveliness in her; he wondered if she had ever cursed the fate that gave her noble blood and thus a political marriage.

For just an instant their eyes crossed.

“Be still,” said Cerdic.

Gunli’s hand fell lightly on Penda’s. The king flushed. “Speak not to your queen thus, Cerdic,” he said. “In truth this Imperial trick is but a better form of fire, which no one calls unmanly. We will let the Terrestrial make one.”

Flandry bowed his most ironical bow. Cocking an eye up at the queen, he caught a twinkle. She knew.

Nartheof made a great show of blustering honesty, but there was a shrewd brain behind the hard little eyes that glittered in his hairy face. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head and gave Flandry a quizzical stare.

“If it is as you say—” he began.

“It is,” said the Terrestrial.

“Quite probably. Your statements so far check with what we already know, and we can soon verify much of the rest. If, then, you speak truth, the Imperial organization is fantastically good.” He smiled. “As it should be—it conquered the stars, in the old days. But it’s no better than the beings who man it, and everyone knows how venial and cowardly the Imperials are today.”

Flandry said nothing, but he remembered the gallantry of the Sirian units at Garrapoli and the *dogged courage* of the Valatian Legion and—well, why go on? The haughty Scothani just didn’t seem able to realize that a state as

absolutely decadent as they imagined the Empire to be wouldn't have endured long enough to be their own enemy.

"We'll have to reorganize everything," said Nartheof. "I don't care whether what you say is true or not, it makes good sense. Our whole setup is outmoded. It's ridiculous, for instance, to give commands according to nobility and blind courage instead of proven intelligence."

"And you assume that the best enlisted man will make the best officer," said Flandry. "It doesn't necessarily follow. A strong and hardy warrior may expect more of his men than they can give. You can't all be supermen."

"Another good point. And we should eliminate swordplay as a requirement; swords are useless today. And we have to train mathematicians to compute trajectories and everything else." Nartheof grimaced. "I hate to think what would have happened if we'd invaded three years ago, as many hotheads wanted to do. We would have inflicted great damage, but that's all."

"You should wait at least another ten or twenty years and really get prepared."

"Can't. The great nobles wouldn't stand for it. Who wants to be duke of a planet when he could be viceroy of a sector? But we have a year or two yet." Nartheof scowled. "I can get my own service whipped into shape, with your help and advice. I have most of the bright lads. But as for some of the other forces—gods, the dunderheads they have in command! I've argued myself hoarse with Nornagast, to no use. The fool just isn't able to see that a space fleet the size of ours must have a special coordinating division equipped with semantic calculators and—The worst of it is, he's a cousin to the king, he ranks me. Not much I can do."

"An accident could happen to Nornagast," murmured Flandry.

"Eh?" Nartheof gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Flandry lightly. "But just for argument's sake, suppose—well, suppose some good swordsman should pick a quarrel with Nornagast. I don't doubt he has many enemies. If he should unfortunately be killed in the duel, you might be able to get to his majesty immediately after, before anyone else, and persuade him to appoint a more reasonable successor. Of course, you'd have to know in advance that there'd be a duel."

“Of all the treacherous, underhanded—!”

“I haven’t done anything but speculate,” said Flandry mildly. “However, I might remind you of your own remarks. It’s hardly fair that a fool should have command and honor and riches instead of better men who simply happen to be of lower degree. Nor, as you yourself said, is it good for Scothania as a whole.”

“I won’t hear of any such Terrestrial vileness.”

“Of course not. I was just—well, speculating. I can’t help it. All Terrestrials have dirty minds. But we did conquer the stars once.”

“A man might go far, if only—no!” Nartheof shook himself. “A warrior doesn’t bury his hands in muck.”

“No. But he might use a pitchfork. Tools don’t mind dirt. The man who wields them doesn’t even have to know the details—But let’s get back to business.” Flandry relaxed even more lazily. “Here’s a nice little bit of information which only highly placed Imperials know. The Empire has a lot of arsenals and munitions dumps which are guarded by nothing but secrecy. The Emperor doesn’t dare trust certain units to guard such sources of power, and he can’t spare enough reliable legions to watch them all. So obscure, uninhabited planets are used.” Nartheof’s eyes were utterly intent now. “I know of only one, but it’s a good prospect. An uninhabited, barren system not many parsecs inside the border, the second planet honeycombed with underground works that are crammed with spaceships, atomic bombs, fuel—power enough to wreck a world. A small, swift fleet could get there, take most of the stores, and destroy the rest before the nearest garrison could ever arrive in defense.”

“Is that—*true*?”

“You can easily find out. If I’m lying, it’ll cost you that small unit, that’s all—and I assure you I’ve no desire to be tortured to death.”

“Holy gods!” Nartheof quivered. “I’ve got to tell Cerdic now, right away—”

“You could. Or you might simply go there yourself without telling anyone. If Cerdic knows, he’ll be the one to lead the raid. If you went, you’d get the honor—and the power—”

“Cerdic would—not like it.”

“Too late then. He could hardly challenge you for so bold and successful a stroke.”

“And he is getting too proud of himself—he could stand a little taking down.” Nartheof chuckled, a deep vibration in his shaggy breast. “Aye, by Valtam’s beard, I’ll do it! Give me the figures now—”

Presently the general looked up from the papers and gave Flandry a puzzled stare. “If this is the case, and I believe it is,” he said slowly, “it’ll be a first-rate catastrophe for the Empire. Why are you with us, human?”

“Maybe I’ve decided I like your cause a little better,” shrugged Flandry. “Maybe I simply want to make the best of my own situation. We Terrestrials are adaptable beasts. But I have enemies here, Nartheof, and I expect to make a few more. I’ll need a powerful friend.”

“You have one,” promised the barbarian. “You’re much too useful to me to be killed. And—and—damn it, human, somehow I can’t help liking you.”

IV

The dice rattled down onto the table and came to a halt. Prince Torric swore good-naturedly and shoved the pile of coins toward Flandry. “I just can’t win,” he laughed. “You have the gods with you, human.”

For a slave, I’m not doing so badly, thought Flandry. *In fact, I’m getting rich.* “Fortune favors the weak, highness,” he smiled. “The strong don’t need luck.”

“To Theudagaar with titles,” said the young warrior. He was drunk; wine flushed his open face and spread in puddles on the table before him. “We’re too good friends by now, Dominic. Ever since you got my affairs in order—”

“I have a head for figures, and of course Terrestrial education helps—Torric. But you need money.”

“There’ll be enough for all when we hold the Empire. I’ll have a whole system to rule, you know.”

Flandry pretended surprise. “Only a system? After all, a son of King Penda—”

“Cerdic’s doing,” Torric scowled blackly. “The dirty avagar persuaded Father that only one—himself, of course—should succeed to the throne. He said no kingdom ever lasted when the sons divided power equally.”

“It seems very unfair. And how does he know he’s the best?”

“He’s the oldest. That’s what counts. And he’s conceited enough to be sure of it.” Torric gulped another beakerful.

“The Empire has a better arrangement. Succession is by ability alone, among many in a whole group of families.”

“Well—the old ways—what can I do?”

“That’s hardly warrior’s talk, Torric. Admitting defeat so soon—I thought better of you!”

“But what to *do*—?”

“There are ways. Cerdic’s power, like that of all chiefs, rests on his many supporters and his own household troops. He isn’t well liked. It wouldn’t be hard to get many of his friends to give allegiance elsewhere.”

“But—treachery—would you make a brother-slayer of me?”

“Who said anything about killing? Just—dislodging, let us say. He could always have a system or two to rule, just as he meant to give you.”

“But—look, I don’t know anything about your sneaking Terrestrial ways. I suppose you mean to dish—disaffect his allies, promise them more than he gives.... What’s that word—bribery?—I don’t know a thing about it, Dominic. I couldn’t do it.”

“You wouldn’t have to do it,” murmured Flandry. “I could help. What’s a man for, if not to help his friends?”

Earl Morgaar, who held the conquered Zanthudian planets in fief, was a noble of power and influence beyond his station. He was also notoriously greedy.

He said to Captain Flandry: “Terrestrial, your suggestions about farming out tax-gathering have more than doubled my income. But now the natives are rising in revolt against me, murdering my troops wherever they get a chance and burning their farms rather than pay the levies. What do they do about that in the Empire?”

“Surely, sir, you could crush the rebels with little effort,” said Flandry.

“Oh, aye, but dead men don’t pay tribute either. Isn’t there a better way? My whole domain is falling into chaos.”

“Several ways, sir.” Flandry sketched a few of them—puppet native committees, propaganda shifting the blame onto some scapegoat, and the rest of it. He did not add that these methods work only when skillfully administered.

“It is well,” rumbled the earl at last. His hard gaze searched Flandry’s impassively smiling face. “You’ve made yourself useful to many a Scothanian leader since coming here, haven’t you? There’s that matter of Nartheof—he’s a great man now because he captured that Imperial arsenal. And there are others. But it seems much of this gain is at the expense of other Scothani, rather than of the Empire. I still wonder about Nornagast’s death—”

“History shows that the prospect of great gain always stirs up internal strife, sir,” said Flandry. “It behooves the strong warrior to seize a dominant share of power for himself and so reunite his people against their common enemy. Thus did the early Terrestrial emperors end the civil wars and become the rulers of the then accessible universe.”

“Ummm—yes. Gain—power—wealth—aye, some *good* warrior—”

“Since we are alone, sir,” said Flandry, “perhaps I may remark that Scotha itself has seen many changes of dynasty.”

“Yes—of course, I took an oath to the king. But suppose, just suppose the best interests of Scothania were served by a newer and stronger family—”

They were into details of the matter within an hour. Flandry suggested that Prince Kortan would be a valuable ally—but beware of Torric, who had ambitions of his own—

There was a great feast given at the winter solstice. The town and the palace blazed with light and shouted with music and drunken laughter. Warriors and nobles swirled their finest robes about them and boasted of the ruin they would wreak in the Empire. It was to be noted that the number of alcoholic quarrels leading to bloodshed was unusually high this year, especially among the upper classes.

There were enough dark corners, though. Flandry stood in one, a niche leading to a great open window, and looked over the glittering town lights

to the huge white hills that lay silent beyond, under the hurtling moons. Above were the stars, bright with the frosty twinkle of winter; they seemed so near that one could reach a hand up and pluck them from the sky. A cold breeze wandered in from outside. Flandry wrapped his cloak more tightly about him.

A light footfall sounded on the floor. He looked about and saw Gunli the queen. Her tall young form was vague in the shadow, but a shaft of moonlight lit her face with an unearthly radiance. She might have been a lovely girl of Terra, save for the little horns and—well—

These people aren't really human. They look human, but no people of Terra were ever so—simple-minded! Then with an inward grin: But you don't expect a talent for intrigue in women, Terrestrial or Scothan. So the females of this particular species are quite human enough for anyone's taste.

The cynical mirth faded into an indefinable sadness. He—damn it, he liked Gunli. They had laughed together often in the last few months, and she was honest and warmhearted and—well, no matter, no matter.

“Why are you here all alone, Dominic?” she asked. Her voice was very quiet, and her eyes seemed huge in the cold pale moonlight.

“It would hardly be prudent for me to join the party,” he answered wryly. “I’d cause too many fights. Half of them out there hate my insides.”

“And the other half can’t do without you,” she smiled. “Well, I’m as glad not to be there myself. These Frithians are savages. At home—” She looked out the window and there were suddenly tears glittering in her eyes.

“Don’t weep, Gunli,” said Flandry softly. “Not tonight. This is the night the sun turns, remember. There is always new hope in a new year.”

“I can’t forget the old years,” she said with a bitterness that shocked him.

Understanding came. He asked quietly: “There was someone else, wasn’t there?”

“Aye. A young knight. But he was of low degree, so they married me off to Penda, who is old and chill. And Jomana was killed in one of Cerdic’s raids—” She turned her head to look at him, and a pathetic attempt at a smile quivered on her lips. “It isn’t Jomana, Dominic. He was very dear to me, but even the deepest wounds heal with time. But I think of all the other young men, and their sweethearts—”

“It’s what the men want themselves.”

“But not what the women want. Not to wait and wait and wait till the ships come back, never knowing whether there will only be his shield aboard. Not to rock her baby in her arms and know that in a few years he will be a stiffened corpse on the shores of some unknown planet. Not—well—” She straightened her slim shoulders. “Little I can do about it.”

“You are a very brave and lovely woman, Gunli,” said Flandry. “Your kind has changed history ere this.” And he sang softly a verse he had made in the Scothan bardic form:

“So I see you standing,
sorrowful in darkness.
But the moonlight’s broken
by your eyes tear-shining—
moonlight in the maiden’s
magic net of tresses.
Gods gave many gifts, but,
Gunli, yours was greatest.”

Suddenly she was in his arms....

Sviffash of Sithafar was angry. He paced up and down the secret chamber, his tail lashing about his bowed legs, his fanged jaws snapping on the accented Scothanian words that poured out.

“Like a craieex they treat me!” he hissed. “I, king of a planet and an intelligent species, must bow before the dirty barbarian Penda. Our ships have the worst positions in the fighting line and the last chance at loot. The swaggering Scothani on Sithafar treat my people as if they were conquered peasants, not warrior allies. It is not to be endured!”

Flandry remained respectfully silent. He had carefully nursed the reptile king’s smoldering resentment along ever since the being had come to Iuthagaar for conference, but he wanted Sviffash to think it was all his own idea.

“By the Dark God, if I had a chance I think I’d go over to the Terran side!” exploded Sviffash. “You say they treat their subjects decently?”

“Aye, we’ve learned it doesn’t pay to be prejudiced about race, your majesty. In fact, many nonhumans hold Terrestrial citizenship. And of

course a vassal of the Empire remains free within his own domain, except in certain matters of trade and military force where we must have uniformity. And he has the immeasurable power and wealth of the Empire behind and with him.”

“My own nobles would follow gladly enough,” said Sviffash. “They’d sooner loot Scothanian than Terrestrial planets, if they didn’t fear Penda’s revenge.”

“Many other of Scotha’s allies feel likewise, your majesty. And still more would join an uprising just for the sake of the readily available plunder, if only they were sure the revolt would succeed. It is a matter of getting them all together and agreeing—”

“And you have contacts everywhere, Terrestrial. You’re like a spinner weaving its web. Of course, if you’re caught I shall certainly insist I never had anything to do with you.”

“Of course, your majesty.”

“But if it works—hah!” The lidless black eyes glittered and a forked tongue flickered out between the horny lips. “Hah, the sack of Scotha!”

“No, your majesty. It is necessary that Scotha be spared. There will be enough wealth to be had on her province planets.”

“Why?” The question was cold, emotionless.

“Because you see, your majesty, we will have Scothan allies who will cooperate only on that condition. Some of the power-seeking nobles... and then there is a southern nationalist movement which wishes separation from the Frithian north... and I may say that it has the secret leadership of the queen herself...”

Flandry’s eyes were as chill as his voice: “It will do you no good to kill me, Duke Asdagaar. I have left all the evidence with a reliable person who, if I do not return alive, or if I am killed later, will take it directly to the king and the people.”

The Scothan’s hands clenched white about the arms of his chair. Impotent rage shivered in his voice: “You devil! You crawling worm!”

“Name-calling is rather silly coming from one of your history,” said Flandry. “A parricide, a betrayer of comrades, a breaker of oaths, a mocker of the gods—I have all the evidence, Duke Asdagaar. Some of it is on

paper, some is nothing but the names of scattered witnesses and accomplices each of whom knows a little of your career. And a man without honor, on Scotha, is better dead. In fact, he soon will be.”

“But how did you learn—?” Hopelessness was coming into the duke’s tone; he was beginning to tremble a little.

“I have my ways. For instance, I learned quite a bit by cultivating the acquaintance of your slaves and servants. You highborn forget that the lower classes have eyes and ears, and that they talk among themselves.”

“Well—” The words were almost strangled. “What do you want?”

“Help for certain others. You have powerful forces at your disposal—”

Spring winds blew softly through the garden and stirred the trees to rustling. There was a deep smell of green life about them; a bird was singing somewhere in the twilight, and the ancient promise of summer stirred in the blood.

Flandry tried to relax in the fragrant evening, but he was too tense—his nerves were drawn into quivering wires and he had grown thin and hollow-eyed. So too had Gunli, but it seemed only to heighten her loveliness; it had more than a hint of the utterly alien and remote now.

“Well, the spaceship is off,” said the man. His voice was weary.

“Aethagir shouldn’t have any trouble getting to Ifri, and he’s a clever lad—he’ll find a way to deliver my letter to Admiral Walton.” He scowled, and a nervous tic began over his left eye. “But the timing is so desperately close. If our forces strike too soon, or too late, it can be ruinous.”

“I don’t worry about that, Dominic,” said Gunli. “You know how to arrange these things.”

“I’ve never handled an empire before, my beautiful. The next several days will be touch and go. And that’s why I want you to leave Scotha now. Take a ship and some trusty guards and go to Alagan or Gimli or some other out-of-the-way planet.” He smiled with one corner of his mouth. “It would be a bitter victory if you died in it, Gunli.”

Her voice was haunted. “I should die. I’ve betrayed my lord—I am dishonored—”

“You’ve saved your people—your own southerners, and ultimately all Scotha.”

“But the broken oaths—” She began to weep, quietly and hopelessly.

“An oath is only a means to an end. Don’t let the means override the end.”

“An oath is an oath. But Dominic—it was a choice of standing by Penda or by—you—”

He comforted her as well as he could. And he reflected grimly that he had never before felt himself so thoroughly a skunk.

V

The battle in space was, to the naked eye, hardly visible—brief flashes of radiation among the swarming stars, occasionally the dark form of a ship slipping by and occulting a wisp of the Milky Way. But Admiral Walton smiled with cold satisfaction at the totality of reports given him by the semantic integrator.

“We’re mopping them up,” he said. “Our task force has twice their strength, and they’re disorganized and demoralized anyway.”

“Whom are we fighting?” wondered Chang, the executive officer.

“Don’t know for sure. They’ve split into so many factions you can never tell who it is. But from Flandry’s report, I’d say it was—what was that outlandish name now?—Duke Markagrav’s fleet. He holds this sector, and is a royalist. But it might be Kelry, who’s also anti-Terrestrial—but at war with Markagrav and in revolt against the king.”

“Suns and comets and little green asteroids!” breathed Chang. “This Scothanian hegemony seems just to have disintegrated. Chaos! Everybody at war with everybody else, and hell take the hindmost! How’d he do it?”

“I don’t know.” Walton grinned. “But Flandry’s the Empire’s ace secret service officer. He works miracles before breakfast. Why, before these barbarians snatched him he was handling the Llynathawr trouble all by himself. And you know how he was doing it? He went there with everything but a big brass band, did a perfect imitation of a political appointee using the case as an excuse to do some high-powered roistering, and worked his way up toward the conspirators through the underworld

characters he met in the course of it. They never dreamed he was any kind of danger—as we found out after a whole squad of men had worked for six months to crack the case of his disappearance.”

“Then the Scothanians have been holding the equivalent of a whole army—and didn’t know it!”

“That’s right,” nodded Walton. “The biggest mistake they ever made was to kidnap Captain Flandry. They should have played safe and kept some nice harmless cobras for pets!”

Iuthagaar was burning. Mobs rioted in the streets and howled with fear and rage and the madness of catastrophe. The remnants of Penda’s army had abandoned the town and were fleeing northward before the advancing southern rebels. They would be harried by Torric’s guerrillas, who in turn were the fragments of a force smashed by Earl Morgaar after Penda was slain by Kortan’s assassins. Morgaar himself was dead and his rebels broken by Nartheof—the earl’s own band had been riddled by corruption and greed and had fallen apart before the royalists’ counterblow.

But Nartheof was dead too, at the hands of Nornagast’s vengeful relatives. His own seizure of supreme power and attempt at reorganization had created little but confusion, which grew worse when he was gone. Now the royalists were a beaten force somewhere out in space, savagely attacked by their erstwhile allies, driven off the revolting conquered planets, and swept away before the remorselessly advancing Terrestrial fleet.

The Scothanian empire had fallen into a hundred shards, snapping at each other and trying desperately to retrieve their own with no thought for the whole. Lost in an incomprehensibly complex network of intrigue and betrayal, the great leaders fell, or pulled out of the mess and made hasty peace with Terra. War and anarchy flamed between the stars—but limited war, a petty struggle really. The resources and organization for real war and its attendant destruction just weren’t there any more.

A few guards still held the almost-deserted palace, waiting for the Terrestrials to come and end the strife. There was nothing they could do but wait.

Captain Flandry stood at a window and looked over the city. He felt no great elation. Nor was he safe yet. Cerdic was loose somewhere on the

planet, and Cerdic had undoubtedly guessed who was responsible.

Gunli came to the human. She was very pale. She hadn't expected Penda's death and it had hurt her. But there was nothing to do now but go through with the business.

"Who would have thought it?" she whispered. "Who would have dreamed we would ever come to this? That mighty Scotha would lie at the conqueror's feet?"

"I would," said Flandry tonelessly. "Such jerry-built empires as yours never last. Barbarians just don't have the talent and the knowledge to run them. Being only out for plunder, they don't really build.

"Of course, Scotha was especially susceptible to this kind of sabotage. Your much-vaunted honesty was your own undoing. By carefully avoiding any hint of dishonorable actions, you became completely ignorant of the techniques and the preventive measures. Your honor was never more than a latent ability for dishonor. All I had to do, essentially, was to point out to your key men the rewards of betrayal. If they'd been really honest, I'd have died at the first suggestion. Instead—they grabbed at the chance. So it was easy to set them against each other until no one knew whom he could trust—" He smiled humorlessly. "Not many Scothani objected to bribery or murder or treachery when it was shown to be to their advantage. I assure you, most Terrestrials would have thought further, been able to see beyond their own noses and realized the ultimate disaster it would bring."

"Still—honor is honor, and I have lost mine and so have all my people." Gunli looked at him with a strange light in her eyes. "Dominic, disgrace can only be wiped out in blood."

He felt a sudden tightening of his nerves and muscles, an awareness of something deadly rising before him. "What do you mean?"

She had lifted the blaster from his holster and skipped out of reach before he could move. "No—stay there!" Her voice was shrill. "Dominic, you are a cunning man. But are you a brave one?"

He stood still before the menace of the weapon. "I think—" He groped for words. No, she wasn't crazy. But she wasn't really human, and she had the barbarian's fanatical code in her as well. Easy, easy—or death would spit at him—"I think I took a few chances, Gunli."

“Aye. But you never fought. You haven’t stood up man to man and battled as a warrior should.” Pain racked her thin lovely face. She was breathing hard now. “It’s for you as well as him, Dominic. He has to have his chance to avenge his father—himself—fallen Scotha—and you have to have a chance too. If you can win, then you are the stronger and have the right—”

Might makes right. It was, after all, the one unbreakable law of Scotha. The old trial by combat, here on a foreign planet many light-years from green Terra—

Cerdic came in. He had a sword in either hand, and there was a savage glee in his bloodshot eyes.

“I let him in, Dominic,” said Gunli. She was crying now. “I had to. Penda was my lord—but kill him, kill him!”

With a convulsive movement, she threw the blaster out of the window. Cerdic gave her an inquiring look. Her voice was almost inaudible: “I might not be able to stand it. I might shoot you, Cerdic.”

“Thanks!” He ripped the word out, savagely. “I’ll deal with you later, traitress. Meanwhile—” A terrible laughter bubbled in his throat—“I’ll carve your—friend—into many small pieces. Because who, among the so-civilized Terrestrials, can handle a sword?”

Gunli seemed to collapse. “O gods, O almighty gods—I didn’t think of that—”

Suddenly she flung herself on Cerdic, tooth and nail and horns, snatching at his dagger. “Get him, Dominic!” she screamed. “*Get him!*”

The prince swept one brawny arm out. There was a dull smack and Gunli fell heavily to the floor.

“Now,” grinned Cerdic, “choose your weapon!”

Flandry came forward and took one of the slender broadswords. Oddly, he was thinking mostly about the queen, huddled there on the floor. Poor kid, poor kid, she’d been under a greater strain than flesh and nerves were meant to bear. But give her a chance and she’d be all right.

Cerdic’s eyes were almost dreamy now. He smiled as he crossed blades. “This will make up for a lot,” he said. “Before you die, Terrestrial, you will no longer be a man—”

Steel rang in the great hall. Flandry parried the murderous slash and raked the prince’s cheek. Cerdic roared and plunged at him, his blade

weaving a net of death before him. Flandry skipped back, sword ringing on sword, shoulders against the wall.

They stood for an instant, straining blade against blade, sweat rivering off them, and bit by bit the Scothan's greater strength bent Flandry's arm aside. Suddenly the Terrestrial let go, striking out almost in the same moment, and the prince's steel hissed by his face.

He ran back and Cerdic rushed him again. The Scothan was wide open for the simplest stop thrust, but Flandry didn't want to kill him. They closed once more, blades clashing, and the human waited for his chance.

It came, an awkward move, and then one supremely skillful twist—Cerdic's sword went spinning out of his hand and across the room and the prince stood disarmed with Flandry's point at his throat.

For a moment he gaped in utter stupefaction. Flandry laughed harshly and said: "My dear friend, you forget that deliberate archaism is one characteristic of a decadent society. There's hardly a noble in the Empire who hasn't studied *scientific* fencing."

Defeat was heavy in the prince's defiant voice: "Kill me, then. Be done with it."

"There's been too much killing, and you can be too useful." Flandry threw his own weapon aside and cocked his fists. "But there's one thing I've wanted to do for a long, long time."

Despite the Scothan's powerful but clumsy defense, Flandry proceeded to beat the living hell out of him.

"We've saved scotha, all Scotha," said Flandry. "Think, girl. What would have happened if you'd gone on into the Empire? Even if you'd won—and that was always doubtful, for Terra is mightier than you thought—you'd only have fallen into civil war. You just didn't have the capacity to run an empire—as witness the fact that your own allies and conquests turned on you the first chance they got. You'd have fought each other over the spoils, greater powers would have moved in, Scotha would have been ripe for sacking—eventually you'd have gone down into Galactic oblivion. The present conflict was really quite small—it took far fewer lives than even a successful invasion of the Empire would have done. And now Terra will bring the peace you longed for, Gunli."

"Aye," she whispered. "Aye, we deserve to be conquered."

"But you aren't," he said. "The southerners hold Scotha now, and Terra will recognize them as the legal government—with you the queen, Gunli."

You'll be another vassal state of the Empire, yes, but with all your freedoms except the liberty to rob and kill other races. And trade with the rest of the Empire will bring you a greater and more enduring prosperity than war ever would.

"I suppose that the Empire is decadent. But there's no reason why it can't someday have a renaissance. When the vigorous new peoples such as yours are guided by the ancient wisdom of Terra, the Galaxy may see its greatest glory."

She smiled at him. It was still a wan smile, but something of her old spirit was returning to her. "I don't think the Empire is so far gone, Dominic," she said. "Not when it has men like you." She took his hands. "And what will you be doing now?"

He met her eyes, and there was a sudden loneliness within him. She—was very beautiful—

But it could never work out. Best to leave now, before a bright memory grew tarnished with the day-to-day clashing of personalities utterly foreign to each other. She would forget him in time, find someone else, and he—well—"I have my work," he said.

They looked up to the bright sky. Far above them, the first of the descending Imperial ships glittered in the sunlight like a falling star.

WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS

I

Khroman the Conqueror, Thalassocrat of Achaera, stood watching his guards bring up the captured pirates. He was a huge man, his hair and square-cut beard jet-black despite middle age, the strength of his warlike youth still in his powerful limbs. He wore a plain white tunic and purple-trimmed cloak; the only sign of kingship was the golden chaplet on his head and the signet ring on one finger. In the gaudy crowd of slender, chattering courtiers, he stood out with a brutal contrast.

“So they’ve finally captured him,” he rumbled. “So we’re finally rid of Corun and his seagoing bandits. Maybe now the land will have some peace.”

“What will you do with them, sire?” asked Shorzon the Sorcerer.

Khroman shrugged heavy shoulders. “I don’t know. Pirates are usually fed to the erinyes at the games, I suppose, but Corun deserves something special.”

“Public torture, perhaps, sire? It could be stretched over many days.”

“No, you fool! Corun was the bravest enemy Achaera ever had. He deserves an honorable death and a decent tomb. Not that it matters much, but—”

Shorzon exchanged a glance with Chryseis, then looked back toward the approaching procession.

The city Tauros was built around a semicircular bay, a huge expanse of clear green water on whose surface floated ships from halfway round the world—the greatest harbor for none knew how many empty sea-leagues, capital of Achaera which, with its trade and its empire of entire archipelagoes, was the mightiest of the thalassocracies. Beyond the fortified sea walls at the end of the bay, the ocean swelled mightily to the clouded horizon, gray and green and amber. Within, the hulls and sails of ships were a bright confusion up to the stone docks.

The land ran upward from the bay, and Tauros was built on the hills, a tangle of streets between houses that ranged from the clay huts of the poor to the marble villas of the great. Beyond the city walls on the landward side, the island of Achaera lifted still more steeply, a gaunt rocky country with a few scattered farms and herds. Her power came all from the sea.

A broad straight road lined with sphinxes ran straight from the harbor up to the palace, which stood on the highest hill in the city. At its end, wide marble stairs lifted toward the fragrant imperial gardens in which the court stood.

Folk swarmed about the street, mobs straining to see the soldiers as they led their captives toward the palace. The word that Corun of Conahur, the most dangerous of the pirates, had finally been taken had driven merchants to ecstasy and brought insurance rates tumbling down. There was laughter in the throng, jeers for the prisoners, shouts for the king.

Not entirely so, however. Most of the crowd were, of course, Achaerans, a slim dark-haired folk clad generally in a light tunic and sandals, proud of their ancient might and culture. They were loudest in shouting at the robbers. But there were others who stood silent and glum-faced, not daring to voice their thoughts but making them plain enough. Tall, fair men from Conahur itself, galled by Achaeran rule; fur-clad barbarians from Norriki, blue-skinned savages from Umlotu, with a high professional regard for their fellow pirate; slaves from a hundred islands, who had not ceased dreaming of home and remembered that Corun had been in the habit of freeing slaves when he captured a ship or a town. Others might be neutral, coming from too far away to care, for Corun had only attacked Achaeran galleys; the black men from misty Orzaban, the copper-colored Chilatzis, the yellow wizards from mysterious Hiung-nu.

The soldiers marched their prisoners rapidly up the street. They were mercenaries, blue Umlotuan in the shining corselets, greaves, and helmets

of the Achaeran forces, armed with the short sword and square shield of Achaera as well as the long halberds which were their special weapon. When the mob came too close, they swung the butts out with bone-snapping force.

The captive pirates were mostly from Conahur, though there were a number of other lands represented. They stumbled wearily along, clad in a few rags, weighted down hand and foot by their chains. Only one of them, the man in the lead, walked erect, but he strode along with the arrogance of a conqueror.

“That must be Corun himself, there in the front of them,” said Chryseis.

“It is,” nodded Shorzon.

They moved forward for a better look. Imperceptibly, the court shrank from them. Khroman’s advisor and daughter were feared in Tauros.

Shorzon was tall and lean and dry, as if the Heaven-Fire beyond the eternal clouds had fallen on him and seared all moisture out of the gaunt body. He had the noble features of the old Achaeran aristocracy, but his eyes were dark and sunken and smoldering with strange fires. Even in the warmth of midday, he wore a black robe falling to his feet, and his white beard streamed over it. Folk knew that he had learned sorcery in Hiung-nu, and it was whispered that for all Khroman’s brawling strength it was Shorzon who really dominated the realm.

Khroman had married Shorzon’s daughter—none knew who her mother had been, though it was thought she was a witch from Hiung-nu. She had not lived long after giving birth to Chryseis, whose grandfather thus came to have much of her upbringing in his hands. Rumor had it that she was as much a witch as he a warlock.

Certainly she could be cruel and ungovernable. But she had a strange dark beauty over her that haunted men; there were more who would die for her than one could readily count... and, it was said, *had* died after a night or two.

She was tall and lithe, with night-black hair that streamed to her waist when unbound. Her eyes were huge and dark in a face of coldly chiseled loveliness, and the full red mouth denied the austere, goddess-like fineness of her countenance. Today she had not affected the heavy gold and jewels

of the court; a white robe hung in dazzling folds about her—and there might as well not have been another woman present.

The prisoners came through the palace gates, which clashed shut behind them. Up the stairs they went and into the fragrance of green trees and bushes, blooming plants, and leaping fountains that was the garden. There they halted, and the court buzzed about them like flies around a dead animal.

Khroman stepped up to Corun. “Greeting,” he said, and there was no mockery in his voice.

“Greeting,” replied the pirate in the same even tones.

They measured each other, the look of two strong men who understood what they were about. Corun was as big as Khroman, a fair-skinned giant of a man in chains and rags. Weather-bleached yellow hair hung to his shoulders from a haughtily lifted head, and his fire-blue eyes were unwavering on the king’s. His face was lean, long-jawed, curve-nosed, hardened by bitterness and suffering and desperate unending battle. A chained erinye could not have looked more fiercely on his captors.

“It’s taken a long time to catch you, Corun,” said Khroman. “You’ve led us a merry chase. Once I almost had the pleasure of meeting you myself. It was when you raided Serapolis—remember? I happened to be there, and gave chase in one of the war-galleys. But we never did catch you.”

“One of the ships did.” Corun’s voice was strangely soft for so big a man. “It didn’t come back, as you may recall.”

“How did they finally catch you?” asked Khroman.

Corun shrugged, and the chains about his wrists rattled. “You already know as much as I care to talk about,” he said wearily. “We sailed into Iliontis Bay and found a whole fleet waiting for us. Someone must finally have spied out our stronghold.” Khroman nodded, and Corun shrugged a shoulder: “They blocked off our retreat, so we just fought till everyone was dead or captured. These half-hundred men are all who live. Unfortunately, I was knocked out during the battle and woke up to find myself a prisoner. Otherwise—” his blue gaze raked the court with a lashing contempt—“I could be peacefully feeding fish now, instead of your witless fish-eyes.”

“I won’t drag out the business for you, Corun,” said Khroman. “Your men will have to be given to the games, of course, but you can be decently and privately beheaded.”

“Thanks,” said the pirate, “but I’ll stay with my men.”

Khroman stared at him in puzzlement. “But why did you ever do it?” he asked finally. “With your strength and skill and cunning, you could have gone far in Achaera. We take mercenaries from conquered provinces, you know. You could have gotten Achaeran citizenship in time.”

“I was a prince of Conahur,” said Corun slowly. “I saw my land invaded and my folk taken off as slaves. I saw my brothers hacked down at the battle of Lyrr, my sister taken as concubine by your admiral, my father hanged, my mother burned alive when they fired the old castle. They offered me amnesty because I was young and they wanted a figurehead. So I swore an oath of fealty to Achaera, and broke it the first chance I got. It was the only oath I ever broke, and still I am proud of it. I sailed with pirates until I was big enough to master my own ships. That is enough of an answer.”

“It may be,” said Khroman slowly. “You realize, of course, that the conquest of Conahur took place before I came to the throne? And that I certainly couldn’t negate it, in view of the Thalassocrat’s duty to his own country, and had to punish its incessant rebelliousness?”

“I don’t hold anything against you yourself, Khroman,” said Corun with a tired smile. “But I’d give my soul to the nether fires for the chance to pull your damned palace down around your ears!”

“I’m sorry it has to end this way,” said the king. “You were a brave man. I’d like to drain many beakers of wine with you on the other side of death.” He signed to the guards. “Take him away.”

“One moment, sire,” said Shorzon. “Is it your intention to lock all these pirates in the same dungeon cell?”

“Why—I suppose so. Why not?”

“I do not trust their captain. Chained and imprisoned, he is still a menace. I think he has certain magical techniques—”

“That’s a lie!” spat Corun. “I never needed your stinking woman’s tricks to flatten the likes of Achaera!”

“I would not leave him with his men,” advised Shorzon imperturbably. “Best he be given his own cell, alone. I know a place.”

“Well—well, let it be so.” Khroman waved a hand in dismissal.

As Shorzon turned to lead the guards off, he traded a long glance with Chryseis. Her eyes remained hooded as she looked after the departing captives.

II

The cell was no longer than a man's height, a dripping cave hewed out of the rock under the palace foundations. Corun crouched on the streaming floor in utter darkness. The chains which they had locked to ringbolts in the wall clashed when he stirred.

And this was how it ended, he thought bitterly. The wild career of the exiled conqueror, the heave and surge of ships under the running waves, the laughter of comrades and the clamor of swords and the thrum of wind in the rigging, had come to this—one man hunched in a loneliness and darkness like a colder womb, waiting in timeless murk for the day when they would drag him out to be torn by beasts for the amusement of fools.

They fed him at intervals, a slave bringing a bowl of prison swill while a spear-armed guard stood well out of reach and watched. Otherwise he was alone. He could not even hear the voices of other captives; there was only the slow dripping of water and the harsh tones of iron links. The cell must lie below even the regular dungeons, far down in the very bowels of the island.

Vague images floated across his mind—the high cliffs about Iliontis Bay, the great flowers blooming with sullen fires in the jungle beyond the beach, the slim black corsair galleys at anchor. He remembered the open sky, the eternally clouded sky under which blew the long wet winds, out of which spilled rain and lightning and grew the eerie blue of dusk. He had often wondered what lay beyond those upper clouds.

Now and then, he remembered, one could see the vague disc of the Heaven-Fire, and he had heard of times when incredibly violent storms opened a brief rift in the high cloud layers to let through a shaft of searing brilliance at whose touch water boiled and the earth burst into flame. It made him think of the speculations of Conahur's philosophers, that the

world was really a globe around which the Heaven-Fire swung, bringing day and night. Some had gone so far as to imagine that it was the world which did the moving, that the Heaven-Fire was a ball of flame in the middle of creation about which all other things revolved.

But Conahur was in chains now, he remembered, its folk bowed to the will of Achaera's greedy proconsuls, its art and philosophy the idle playthings of the conquerors. The younger generation was growing up with an idea that it might be best to yield, to become absorbed into the thalassocracy and so eventually gain equal status with the Achaerans.

But Corun could not forget the great flames flapping against a wind-torn night sky, the struggling forms at ropes' ends swaying from trees, the long lines of chained people stumbling hopelessly to the slave galleys under Achaeran lashes. Perhaps he had carried the grudge too long—no, by Breannach Brannor! There had been a family which was no longer. That was grudge enough for a lifetime.

A lifetime, he thought sardonically, which wouldn't be very much protracted now.

He sighed wearily in the stinking gloom of the cell. There were too many memories crowding in. The outlaw years had been hard and desperate, but they'd been good ones too. There had been song and laughter and comradeship and gigantic deeds over an endless waste of waters—the long blue hush of twilight, the soft black nights, the gray days with a sea running gray and green and gold under squalls of rain, the storms roaring and raging, the eager leap of a ship—frenzy of battle at the taking of town or galley, death so close one could almost hear the beat of black wings, orgy of loot and vengeance—the pirate town, grass huts under jungle trees, stuffed with treasure, full of brawling bawdy life, the scar-faced swaggering men and the lusty insolent women, ruddy firelight hammering back the night while the surf thundered endlessly along the beach—

Well, all things came to a close. And while he would have wished a different sort of death for himself, he didn't have long to wait in this misery.

Something stirred, far down the narrow corridor, and he caught the flickering glow of a torch. Scowling, he stood up, stooped under the low ceiling. Who in all the hells was this? It was too soon for feeding, unless his

time sense had gone completely awry, and he didn't think the games could have been prepared in the few days since his arrival.

They came up to the entrance of the cell and stood looking in by the guttering red torchlight. A snarl twisted Corun's lips. Shorzon and Chryseis—"Of all the scum of Achaera," he growled, "I had to be inflicted with you."

"This is no time for insolence," said the sorcerer coldly. He lifted the torch higher. The red light threw his face into blood-splashed shadow. His eyes were pits of darkness in which smoldered two embers. His black robe blended with the surrounding shadow, his face and hands seemed to float disembodied in the dank air.

Corun's eyes traveled to Chryseis, and in spite of the hate that burned in him he had to admit she was perhaps the loveliest woman he had ever seen. Tall and slim and lithe, moving with the soundless grace of a Sanduvian pherax, the dark hair sheening down past the chill sculptured beauty of her marble-white face, she returned his blue stare with eyes of dark flame. She was dressed as if for action—a brief tunic that left arms and legs bare, a short black cloak, and high buskins—but jewels still blazed at throat and wrists.

Behind her padded a lean shadow at sight of which Corun stiffened. He had heard of Chryseis' tame erinye. Folk said the devil-beast had found a harder heart in the witch's breast and yielded to her; some said less mentionable things.

The slitted green eyes flared at Corun and the cruel muzzle opened in a fanged yawn. "Back, Perias," said Chryseis evenly.

Her voice was low and sweet, almost a caress. It seemed strange that such a voice had spoken the rituals of black sorcery and ordered the flaying alive of a thousand helpless Issarian prisoners and counseled some of the darkest intrigues in Achaera's bloody history.

She said to Corun: "This is a fine end for all your noble thoughts, man of Conahur."

"At least," he answered, "you credit me with having had them. Which is more than I'd say for you."

The red lips curved in a cynical smile. "Human purposes have a habit of ending this way. The mighty warrior, the scourge of the seas, ends in a foul prison cell waiting for an unimaginative death. The old epics lied, didn't they? Life isn't quite the glorious adventure that fools think it to be."

"It could be, if it weren't for your sort." Wearily: "Go away, won't you? If you won't even let me talk with my old comrades, you can at least spare me your own company."

"We are here with a definite purpose," said Shorzon. "We offer you life, freedom—and the liberation of Conahur!"

He shook his tawny head. "It isn't even funny."

"No, no, I mean it," said Chryseis earnestly. "Shorzon had you put in here alone not out of malice, but simply to make this private talk possible. You can help us with a project so immeasurably greater than your petty quarrels that anything you can ask in return will be as nothing. And you are the one man who can do so."

"I tell you this so that, realizing you have some kind of bargaining position, you will meet us as equal to equal, not as prisoner to captor. If you agree to aid us, you will be released this instant."

With a sudden flame within him, Corun tautened his huge body. O gods—O almighty gods beyond the clouds—if it were true—!

His voice shook: "What do you want?"

"Your help in a desperate venture," said Chryseis. "I tell you frankly that we may well all die in it. But at least you will die as a free man—and if we succeed, all the world may be ours."

"What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"I cannot tell you everything now," said Shorzon. "But the story has long been current that you once sailed to the lairs of the Xanthi, the Sea Demons, and returned alive. Is it true?"

"Aye." Corun stiffened, with sudden alarm trembling in his nerves. "Aye, by great good luck I came back. But they are not a race for humans to traffic with."

"I think the powers I can summon will match theirs," said Shorzon. "We want you to guide us to their dwellings and teach us the language on the way, as well as whatever else you know about them. When we return, you may go where you choose. And if we get their help, we will be able to set Conahur free soon afterward."

Corun shook his head. "It's nothing good that you plan," he said slowly. "No one would approach the Xanthi for any good purpose."

"You did, didn't you?" chuckled the wizard dryly. "If you want the truth, we are after their help in seizing the government of Achaera, as well as certain knowledge they have."

"If you succeeded," argued Corun stubbornly, "why should you then let Conahur go?"

"Because power over Achaera is only a step to something too far beyond the petty goals of empire for you to imagine," said Shorzon bleakly. "You must decide now, man. If you refuse, you die."

Chryseis moved one slim hand and the erinye padded forward on razor-clawed feet. The leathery wings were folded back against the long black body, the barbed tail lashed hungrily and a snarl vibrated in the lean throat. "If you say no," came the woman's sweet voice, "Perias will rip your guts out. That will at least afford us an amusing spectacle for our trouble." Then she smiled, the dazzling smile which had driven men to their doom ere this. "But if you say yes," she whispered, "a destiny waits for you that kings would envy. You are a strong man, Corun. I like strong men—"

The corsair looked into the warm dark light of her eyes, and back to the icy glare of the devil-beast. No unarmed man had ever survived the onslaught of an erinye—and he was chained.

At thought of returning to the dark home of the Xanthi, he shuddered. But life was still wondrous sweet, and—once free to move about, he might still have some chance of escape or even of overpowering them.

Or—who knew? He wondered, with a brief giddiness, if the dark witch before him could be as evil as her enemies said. Strong and ruthless, yes—but so was he. When he learned the full truth about her soaring plans, he might even decide they were right.

In any case—to live! To die, if he must, under the sky!

"I'll go," he said hoarsely. "I'll go with you."

The low exultant laughter of Chryseis sang in the flare-lit gloom.

Shorzon came up and took a key from his belt. For a bare moment, the thought of snapping that skinny neck raged through Corun's mind.

The magician smiled grimly. "Don't try it," he said. "As a small proof of what we can do—"

Suddenly he was not there. It was a monster from the jungles of Umlotu standing in the cell with Corun, a scaled beast that hissed at him with

grinning jaws and spewed poison on the floor.

Sorcery! Corun shrank back, a chill of fear striking even his steely heart. Shorzon resumed human shape and wordlessly unlocked the chains. They fell away and Corun stumbled out into the corridor.

The erinye snarled and slipped closer. Chryseis laid a hand on the beast's head, checking that gliding rush as if with a leash. Her smile and the faint sweet scent of her hair were dizzying.

"Come," she said. One hand slipped between his own fingers and the cool touch seemed to burn him.

Shorzon led the way, down a long sloping tunnel where only the streaming torch-flames had life. Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the wet black length of it.

"We go at once," he said. "When Khroman learns of your escape, all Tauros will be after us. But it will be too late then. We sail swiftly tonight."

Sail—whither?

"What of my men?" asked Corun.

"They're lost, I'm afraid, unless Khroman spares them until we get back," said Chryseis. "But we saved you. I'm glad of that."

A faint smell of fresh salty air blew up the tunnel. It must open on the sea, thought Corun. He wondered how many passages riddled the depth under Tauros.

They came out, finally, on a narrow beach under the looming western cliffs. The precipices climbed into the utter dark of night, reaching into the unseen sky. Before them lay open sea, swirling with phosphorescence. Corun drew deep lungfulls of air. Salt and seaweed and wet wild wind—sand under his feet, sky overhead, a woman beside him—by the gods, it was good to be alive!

A galley was moored against a tiny pier. By the light of bobbing torches, Corun's mariner's eye surveyed her. She was built along the same lines as his own ship, a lean black vessel with one square sail; open-decked save at stem and stern, rower's benches lining the sides with a catwalk running between. There would be quarters for the men under the poop and forecastle decks, supplies in the hold beneath. A cabin was erected near the waist, apparently for officers, and there was a ballista mounted in the bows—

otherwise no superstructure. A carved sea monster reared up for figurehead, and the sternpost curved back to make its tail. He read the name on the bows: *Briseia*. Strange that that dark vessel should bear a girl's name.

About a fifty-man capacity, he judged. And she would be fast.

The crew were getting aboard—they must have come down the cliffs along some narrow trail. They were all Umlotuan blues, he noticed, a cutthroat gang if ever he saw one but silent and well disciplined. It was shrewd to take only the mercenary warriors along; they had no patriotic interest in what happened to Achaera, and their reckless courage was legendary.

A burly one-eyed officer came up and saluted. "All set, sir," he reported.

"Good," nodded Shorzon. "Captain Imazu, this is our guide, Captain Corun."

"The raider, eh?" Imazu chuckled and shook hands in the manner of the barbarians. "Well, we could hardly have a better one, I'm sure. Glad to know you, Corun."

The pirate murmured polite phrases. But he decided that Imazu was a likeable chap, and wondered what had led him to take service under anyone with Shorzon's reputation.

They went aboard. "The Sea of Demons lies due north," said Shorzon. "Is that the right way to sail?"

"For the time being," nodded Corun. "When we get closer, I'll be able to tell you more exactly."

"Then you may as well wash and rest," said Chryseis. "You need both." Her smile was soft in the flickering red light.

Corun entered the cabin. It was divided into three compartments—apparently Imazu slept with his men, or perhaps on deck as many men preferred. His own tiny room was clean, sparsely furnished with a bunk and a washbowl. He cleaned himself eagerly and put on the fresh tunic laid out for him.

When he came back on deck the ship was already under way. A strong south wind was blowing, filling the dark sail, and the *Briseia* surged forward under its thrust. The phosphorescence shone around her hull and out on the rolling waters. Behind, the land faded into the night.

He'd certainly been given no chance to escape, he thought. Barring miracles, he had to go through with it now—at least until they reached the Sea of Demons, after which anything might happen.

He shivered a little, wondering darkly whether he had done right, wondering what their mission was and what the world's fate was to be as a result of it.

Chryseis slipped quietly up to stand beside him. The erinye crouched down nearby, his baleful eyes never leaving the man.

"Outward bound," she said, and laughter was gay in her voice.

He said nothing, but stared ahead into the night.

"You'd better sleep, Corun," she said. "You're tired now, and you'll need all your strength later." She laid a hand on his arm, and laughed aloud. "It will be an interesting voyage, to say the least."

Rather! he thought with wry humor. It occurred to him that the trip might even have its pleasant aspects.

"Goodnight, Corun," she said, and left him.

Presently he went back to his room. Sleep was long in coming, and uneasy when it did arrive.

III

When he came out on deck in the early morning, there was only a gray emptiness of waters out to the gray horizon. They must have left the whole Achaeran archipelago well behind them and be somewhere in the Zurian Sea now.

There was a smell of rain in the air, and the ship ran swiftly before a keening wind over long white-maned rollers. Corun let the tang of salt and moisture and kelp, the huge restless vista of bounding waves, the creak and thrum of the ship and the thundering surge of the ocean, swell luxuriously up within him, the simple animal joy of being at home. The sea was his home now, he realized vaguely; he had been on it so long that it was his natural environment—his, as much as that of the laridae wheeling on white wings in the cloud-flying heavens.

He looked over the watch. It seemed to be well handled—the sailors knew their business. There were armored guards at bow and stern, and the rest—clad in the plain loincloth of ordinary seamen the world over—were

standing by the sail, swabbing the decks, making minor repairs and otherwise occupying themselves. Those off duty were lounging or sleeping well out of the watch's way. The helmsman kept his eye on the compass and held the tiller with a practiced hand—good, good.

Captain Imazu padded up to him on bare feet. The Umlotuan wore helmet and corselet, had a sword at his side, and carried the whip of authority in one gnarled blue hand. His scarred, one-eyed face cracked in a smile. “Good morning to you, Captain Corun,” he said politely.

The Conahurian nodded with an amiability he had not felt for a long time. “The ship is well handled,” he said.

“Thanks. I’m about the only Umlotuan who’s ever skippered anything bigger than a war-canoe, I suppose, but I was in the Achaeran fleet for a long time.” Again the hideous but disarming smile. “I nearly met you professionally once or twice before, but you always showed us a clean pair of heels. Judging from what happened to ships that did have the misfortune to overhaul you, I’m just as glad of it.” He gestured to the tiny galley below the poop deck. “How about some breakfast?”

Over food which was better than most to be had aboard ship, they fell into professional talk. Like all captains, Imazu was profoundly interested in the old and seemingly insoluble problem of finding an accurate position. “Dead reckoning just won’t do,” he complained. “Men’s estimates always differ, no matter how good they may be. There isn’t even a decent map to be had anywhere.”

Corun mentioned the efforts of theorists in Achaera, Conahur, and other civilized states to use the Heaven-Fire’s altitude to determine position north and south of a given line. Imazu was aware of their work, but regarded it as of little practical value. “You just don’t see it often enough,” he objected. “And most of the crew would consider it the worst sort of impiety to go aiming an instrument at it. That’s one reason, I suppose, why Shorzon shipped only Umlotuans. We don’t worship the Heaven-Fire—our gods all live below the clouds.” He cut himself a huge quid of *liangzi* and stuffed it into his capacious mouth. “Anyway, it doesn’t give you east and west position.”

“The philosophers who think the world is round say we could solve that problem by making an accurate timepiece,” said Corun.

“I know. But it’s a lot of gas, if you ask me. A sandglass or a water-clock can only tell time so close and no closer, and those mechanical gadgets they’ve built are worse yet. I knew an old skipper from Norriki once who kept a joss in his cabin and got his position in dreams from it. Only had one wreck in his life.” Imazu grinned. “Of course, he drowned then.”

“Look,” said Corun suddenly, “do you know where the hell we’re going, and why?”

“To the Sea of Demons is all they told me. No reason given.” Imazu studied Corun with his sharp black eye. “You don’t know either, eh? I’ve a notion that most of us won’t live to find out.”

“I’m surprised that any crew could be made to go there without a mutiny.”

“This gang of bully boys is only frightened of Shorzon and his witch granddaughter. They—” Imazu shut up. Looking around, Corun saw the two approaching.

In the morning light, Chryseis did not seem the luring devil-woman of the night. She moved with easy grace across the rolling deck, the wind blowing her tunic and her long black hair in careless billows, and there was a girlish joy and eagerness in her. The pirate’s heart stumbled and began to race.

She chattered gaily of nothing while she and the old man ate. Shorzon remained silent until he was through, then said curtly to the two men: “Come into the cabin with us.”

They filled Corun’s tiny room, sitting on bunk and floor. Shorzon said slowly, “We may as well begin now to learn what you know, Corun. What is the truth about your voyage to the Xanthi?”

“It was several seasons ago,” replied the corsair. “I got the thought you seem to have had, that possibly I could enlist their help against my enemies.” He smiled mirthlessly. “I learned better.”

“What do we know of them, exactly?” said Shorzon methodically. He ticked the points off on his lean fingers. “They are an amphibious nonhuman race dwelling in the Sea of Demons, which is said to grow grass so that ships become tangled there and never escape.”

“Not so,” said Corun. “There’s kelp on the surface, but you can sail right through it. I think the Sea is just a dead region of water around which the

great ocean currents move.”

“I know,” said Shorzon impatiently, and resumed his summary: “Generations ago, the Xanthi, of whose presence men had only been vaguely aware before, fell upon all the islands in their sea and slew the people living there. They had great numbers, as well as tamed sea monsters and unknown powers of sorcery, so that no one could stand against them. Since then, they have not gone beyond their borders, but they ruthlessly destroy all human vessels venturing inside. King Phidion III of Achaera sent a great fleet to drive the Xanthi from their stolen territory. Not one ship returned. Men now shun the whole region as one accursed.”

Imazu nodded. “There’s a sailor’s legend that the souls of the damned go to the Xanthi,” he offered.

Shorzon gave him an exasperated look. “I’m only interested in facts,” he said coldly. “What do you know, Corun?”

“I know what you just said, as who doesn’t?” answered the Conahurian. “But I think they must have limits to their powers, and be reasonable creatures—but the limits are far beyond man’s, and their reason is not as ours.

“I didn’t try an invasion, of course. I took one small fast boat manned with picked volunteers and waited outside the Sea for a storm that would blow me into it. When that came, we ran before it—fast! In the rain and wind and waves, I figured we could get undetected far into their borders. So, it seemed, we could, and in fact we made it almost to the largest island inside. Then they came at us.

“They were riding *cetaraea*, and driving sea serpents before them. They had spears and bows and swords, and there were hundreds of them. Any one of the snakes could have smashed our boat. We ran for land and barely made it.

“We hadn’t come to fight, so we held up our hands as the Xanthi leaped ashore and wondered if they’d just hack us down. But, as I’d hoped, they wanted to know what we were there for. So they took us to the black castle on the island.”

Momentarily Corun was cold as the memory of that wet dark place of evil shuddered through his mind. “I can’t tell you much about it. They have

great powers of sorcery, and the place seemed somehow unreal, never the same—always wrong, always with something horrible just beyond vision in the shadows. I remember the whole time as if it were a dream. There were treasures beyond counting. I saw gold and jewels from the sea bottom, mixed in with human skulls and the figureheads of drowned ships. The light was dim and blue, and there was always fog, and noises for which we had no name hooting out in the gloom. It stank, with the vile fishy smell they have. And the walls seemed to have a watery unreality, as I said, shifting and fading like smoke. You could smell sorcery in the very air of that place.

“They kept us there for many ten-days. We’d brought rich gifts, of course, which they accepted ungraciously, and they housed us in a dungeon under guard. They didn’t feed us so badly, if you like a steady fish diet. And they taught us their language.”

“How does it sound?” asked Chryseis.

“I can’t make it come out right. No human throat can. Something like this—” They stiffened at the chill hissing that slithered from Corun’s lips. “It has words for things I never did understand, and it lacks many of the commonest human words—fear, joy, hope, adventure—” His glance slid to Chryseis—“love—”

“Do they have a word for hate?” asked Shorzon.

“Oh, yes,” Corun grinned without humor. After a moment he went on: “They wanted to know more of the outside world. That was why they spared our lives. When we knew the language well enough, they began to question us. *How* they questioned us! It got to be torture, those unending days of answering the things that hissed and gabbled at us in those shadowy rooms. It was like a nightmare, where mad happenings go on without ever ending. Politics, science, philosophy, art, geography—they wanted to know it all. They pumped us dry of knowledge. When we came to something they didn’t understand, such as—love, say—they went back and forth over the same ground, over and over again, until we thought we’d go crazy. And at last they’d give up in bafflement. I think they believe humans to be mad.

“I made my offer, of course: the loot of Achaera in exchange for the freedom of Conahur. They—I might almost say they laughed. Finally they answered in scorn that they could take whatever they wanted, the whole world if need be, without my help.”

Shorzon’s eyes glittered. “Did you find out anything of their powers?” he asked eagerly.

“A little. They put any human magician to shame, of course. I saw them charm sea monsters to death just to eat them. I saw them working on a new building on the island—they planted a little package somewhere, and set fire to it, and great stones leaped into the air with a bang like thunder. I saw their *cetaraea* cavalry, their tamed war-snakes—oh, yes, they have more powers than I could name. And their numbers must be immense. They live on the sea bottom, you know—that is, their commoners do. The leaders have strongholds on land as well. They farm both sea and land, and have great smithies on the islands.

“Well, in the end they let us go. They were going to put us to death for our trespass, I think, but I did some fast talking. I told them that we could carry word of their strength back to humans and overawe our race with it, so that if they ever wanted to collect tribute or something of the sort, they’d never have to fight for it. Probably that carried less weight than the fact that we had, after all, done no harm and been of some use. They had no logical reason to kill us—so they didn’t.” Corun smiled grimly. “We were a pretty tough crew, prepared to take a few Xanthi to death with us even if we were disarmed. Their killing-charms seem to work only on animals. That was another reason to spare us.

“One of their wizards was for having me, at least, slain. He said he’d had a prevision of my return with ruin in my wake. But the others—laughed?—at him, at the very thought of a human’s being dangerous to them. Moreover, they pointed out, if that was to be the case then there was nothing they could do about it; they seem to believe in a fixed destiny. But the idea amused them so much that it was still another reason for letting us go.” Corun shrugged. “So we sailed away. That’s all. And never till now did I have any smallest thought of returning.”

He added bleakly after a moment when silence had been heavy: “They have all they want to know from my visit. There will be no reason for them to spare us this time.”

“I think there will,” said Chryseis.

“There’d better be,” muttered Imazu.

“You can start teaching us their language,” said Shorzon. “It might not be a bad idea for you to learn too, Imazu. The more who can talk to them, the better.”

The Umlotuan made a wry face. “Another tongue to learn! By the topknot of Mwanzi, why can’t the world settle on one and end this babble!”

“The poor interpreters would starve to death,” smiled Chryseis.

She took Corun’s arm. “Come, my buccaneer, let’s go up on deck for a while. There’s always time to learn words.”

They found a quiet spot on the forecastle deck, and sat down against the rail. The erinye settled his long body beside Chryseis and watched Corun with sleepy malevolence, but he was hardly aware of the devil-beast. It was Chryseis, Chryseis, dark sweet hair and dark lambent eyes, utter loveliness of face and form, singing golden voice and light warm touch and—

“You are a strange man, Corun,” she said softly. “What are you thinking now?”

“Oh—nothing.” He smiled crookedly. “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe that. You have too many memories.”

Almost without knowing it, he found himself telling her of his life, the long terrible struggle against overwhelming power, the bitterness and loneliness, the death of comrades one by one—and the laughter and triumphs and wild exultance of it, the faring into unknown seas and the dicing with fate and the strong, close bonds of men against the world. He mused wistfully about a girl who was gone—but her bright image was strangely fading in his heart now, for it was Chryseis who was beside him.

“It has been a hard life,” she said at the end. “It took a giant of a man to endure it.” She smiled, a small closed smile that made her look strangely young. “I wonder what you must think of this—sailing with your sworn foes to the end of the world on an unknown mission.”

“You’re not my foe!” he blurted.

“No—never your enemy, Corun!” she exclaimed. “We have been on opposite sides before—let it not be thus from this moment. I tell you that the purpose of this voyage, which you shall soon know, is—good. Great and good as the savagery of man has never known before. You know the old legend—that someday the Heaven-Fire will shine through opening clouds not as a destroying flame but as the giver of life—that men will see light in the sky even at night—that there will be peace and justice for all mankind? I think that day may be dawning, Corun.”

He sat dumbly, bewildered. She was not evil—she was not evil—It was all he knew, but it sang within him.

Suddenly she laughed and sprang to her feet. "Come on!" she cried. "I'll race you around the ship!"

IV

Rain and wind came, a lightning-shot squall in which the *Briseia* wallowed and bucked and men strained at oars and pumps. Toward evening it was over, the sea stilled and the lower clouds faded so that they saw the great dull-red disc of the Heaven-Fire through the upper clouds, sinking into the western sea. There was almost a flat calm, the glassy water was ruffled only by a faint breeze which half filled the sail and sent the galley sliding slowly and noiselessly northward.

"Man the oars," directed Shorzon.

"Give the men a chance to rest tonight, sir," begged Imazu. "They've all worked hard today. We can row all the faster tomorrow if we must."

"No time to spare," snapped the wizard.

"Yes, there is," said Corun flatly. "Let the men rest, Imazu."

Shorzon gave him a baleful glance. "You forget your position aboard."

Corun bristled. "I think I'm just beginning to remember it," he answered with metal in his voice.

Chryseis laid a hand on her grandfather's arm. "He's right," she said. "So is Imazu. It would be needless cruelty to make the sailors work tonight, and they will be better fitted by a night's rest."

"Very well," said Shorzon sullenly. He went into his room and slammed the door. Presently Chryseis bade the men goodnight and went to her quarters with the erinye trotting after.

Corun's eyes followed her through the deepening blue dusk. In that mystic light, the ship was a shadowy half-real background, a dimness beyond which the sea swirled in streamers of cold white radiance.

"She's a strange woman," said Imazu. "I don't understand her."

"Nor I," admitted Corun. "But I know now her enemies have foully lied about her."

“I’m not so sure about that—” As the Conahurian turned with a dark frown, Imazu added quickly, “Oh, well, I’m probably wrong. I never had much sight of her, you know.”

They wandered up on the poop deck in search of a place to sit. It was deserted save for the helmsman by the dimly glowing binnacle, a deeper shadow in the thick blue twilight. Sitting back against the taffrail, they could look forward to the lean waist of the ship and the vague outline of the listlessly bellying sail. Beyond the hull, the sea was an arabesque of luminescence, delicate tracteries of shifting white light out to the glowing horizon. The cold fire streamed from the ship’s bows and whirled in her wake, the hull dripped liquid flame.

The night was very quiet. The faint hiss and smack of cloven water, creak of planks and tackle, distant splashing of waves and invisible sea beasts—otherwise there was only the enormous silence under the high clouds. The breeze was cool on their cheeks.

“How long till we get to the Sea of Demons?” asked Imazu. His voice was oddly hushed in the huge stillness.

“With ordinary sailing weather, I’d say about three ten-days—maybe four,” answered Corun indifferently.

“It’s a strange mission we’re on, aye, that it is.” Imazu’s head wagged, barely visible in the dark. “I like it not, Corun. I have evil feelings about it, and the omens I took before leaving weren’t good.”

“Why then did you sail? You’re a free man, aren’t you?”

“So they say!” Sudden bitterness rose in the Umlotuan’s voice. “Free as any of Shorzon’s followers, which is to say less free than a slave, who can at least run away.”

“Why, doesn’t he pay well?”

“Oh, aye, he is lavish in that regard. But he has his ways of binding servants to him so that they must do his bidding above that of the very gods. He put his geas on most of these sailors, for instance. They were simple folk, and thought he was only magicking them a good-luck charm.”

“You mean they are bound? He has their souls?”

“Aye. He put them to sleep in some sorcerous way and impressed his command on them. No matter what happens now, they must obey him. The geas is stronger than their own wills.”

Corun shivered. “Are you—Pardon. It’s no concern of mine.”

“No, no, that’s all right. He put no such binding on me—I knew better than to accept his offer of a luck-bringing spell. But he has other ways. He lent me a slave-girl from Umlotu for my pleasure—but she is lovely, wonderful, kind, all that a woman should be. She has borne me sons, and made homecoming ever a joy. But you see, she is still Shorzon’s and he will not sell her to me or free her—moreover, he did put his geas on her. If ever I rebelled, she would suffer for it.” Imazu spat over the rail. “So I am Shorzon’s creature too.”

“It must be a strange service.”

“It is. Mostly all I have to do is captain his bodyguard. But I’ve seen and helped in some dark things. He’s a fiend from the lowest hell, Shorzon is. And his granddaughter—” Imazu stopped.

“Yes?” asked Corun roughly. His hand closed bruisingly on the other’s arm. “Go on. What of her?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I really have had little to do with her.” Imazu’s face was lost in the gloom, but Corun felt the one eye hard on him. “Only—be careful, pirate. Don’t let her lay her own sort of geas on you. You’ve been a free man till now. Don’t become anyone’s blind slave.”

“I’ve no such intention,” said Corun frostily.

“Then no more need be said.” Imazu sighed heavily and got up. “I think I’ll go to bed, then. What of you?”

“Not yet. I’m not sleepy. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Corun sat back alone. He could barely discern the helmsman—beyond lay only glowing darkness and the whispering of the night. He felt loneliness like a cold hollow within his breast.

Father and mother, his tall brothers and his laughing lovely sister, the comrades of youth, the hard wild stouthearted pirates with whom he had sailed for such a long and bloody time—where were they now? Where in all the blowing night were they?

Where was he and on what mission, sailing alone through a pit of darkness on a ship of strangers? What meaning and hope in all the cruel insanity of the world?

Suddenly he wanted his mother, he wanted to lay his head on her lap and cry in desolation and hear her gentle voice—no, by the gods, it wasn't her image he saw, it was a lithe and dark-haired witch who was crooning to him and stroking his hair—

He cursed tonelessly and got up. Best to go to bed and try to sleep his fancies away. He was becoming childish.

He went down the catwalk toward the cabin. As he neared it, he saw a figure by the rail darkly etched against a shimmering patch of phosphorescence. His heart sprang into his throat.

She turned as he came near. "Corun," she said. "I couldn't sleep. Come over here and talk to me. Isn't the night beautiful?"

He leaned on the rail, not daring to look at the haunting face pale-lit by the swirling sea-fire. "It's nice," he said clumsily.

"But it's lonely," she whispered. "I never felt so sad and alone before."

"Why—why, that's how I felt!" he blurted.

"Corun—"

She came to him and he took her with a sudden madness of yearning.

Perias the erinye snarled as they thrust him out of her cabin. He padded up and down the deck for a while. A sailor who stood watch near the forecastle followed him with frightened eyes and muttered prayers to the amulet about his neck.

Presently the devil-beast curled up before the cabin. The lids drooped over his green eyes, but they remained unwinkingly fixed on the door.

V

Under a hot sullen sky, the windless sea swelled in long slow waves that rocked the tangled kelp and ocean-grass up and down, heavenward and hellward. To starboard, the dark cliffs of a small jungled island rose from an angry muttering surf, but there were no birds flying above it.

Corun pointed to the shore. "That's the first of the archipelago," he said. "From here on, we can look for the Xanthi to come at any time."

“We should get as far into their territory as possible, even to the black palace,” said Shorzon. “I will put a spell of invisibility on the ship.”

“Their sorcerers can break that,” said Chryseis.

“Aye, so. But when they come to know our powers, I think they will treat with us.”

“They’d better!” smiled Imazu grimly.

“Steer on toward the island of the castle,” said Shorzon to the pirate. “I go to lay the spell.”

He went into his cabin. Corun had a glimpse of its dark interior before the door was closed—draped in black and filled with the apparatus of magic.

“He will have to be in a trance, physically, to maintain the enchantment,” said Chryseis. She smiled at Corun, and his pulses raced. “Come, my dearest, it is cooler on the afterdeck.”

The sailors rowed steadily, sweat glistening on their bare blue hides. Imazu paced up and down the catwalk, flicking idlers with his whip. Corun stood where he could keep an eye on the steersman and see that the right course was followed.

It had been utter wonder till now, he thought, unending days when they plowed through seas of magic, nights of joy such as he had never known. There had never been another woman such as Chryseis, he thought, never in all the world, and he was the luckiest of men. Though he died today, he had been more fortunate than any man ever dared dream.

Chryseis, Chryseis, loveliest and wisest and most valiant of women—and she was his, before all the jealous gods, she loved him!

“There has only been one thing wrong,” he said. “You are going into danger now. The world would go dark if aught befell you.”

“And I should sit at home while you were away, and never know what had happened, never know if you lived or died—no, no, Corun!”

He laid a hand on the sword at his waist. They had given him arms and armor again after she had come to him. Logical enough, he thought without resentment—he could be trusted now, as much as if he were one of Shorzon’s ensorcelled warriors.

But if this were a spell too, the gods deliver him from ever being freed of it!

He blinked. There was a sudden breath of chill on him, and his eyes were blurring—no, no, it was the ship that wavered, ship and men fading—He

clutched at Chryseis. She laughed softly and slipped an arm around his waist.

“It is only Shorzon’s spell,” she said. “It affects us too, to some extent. And it makes the ship invisible to anyone within seeing range.”

Ghost ship, ghost crew, slipping over the slowly heaving waters. There was only the foggiest outline to be seen, shadow of mast and rigging against the sky, glimpses of water through the gray smoke of the hull, blobs of darkness that were the crewmen. Sound was still clear; he heard the mutter of superstitious awe, the crack of the whip, and Imazu’s oaths that sent the oars creaking and splashing again. Corun’s hand was a misty blur before his eyes. Chryseis was a shadow beside him.

She laughed once more, a low exultant throb, and pulled his lips down to hers. He ruffled the streaming fragrant hair and felt a return of courage. It was only a spell.

But what were the spells? he wondered for the thousandth time. He did not hold with the simple theory that wizards were in league with gods or demons. They had powers, yes, but he was sure that somehow these powers came only from within themselves. Chryseis had always evaded his questions about it. There must be some simple answer to the problem, some real process, as real as that of making a fire, behind the performances of the sorcerers—but it baffled him to think what it might be.

Blast it all, it just wasn’t reasonable that Shorzon, for instance, should have been able actually to change himself into a jungle monster many times his size. Yet he, Corun, had seen the thing, had felt its wet scales and smelled its reptile stink. How?

The ship plowed slowly on. Now and then Corun looked at the compass, straining his eyes to discern the blurred needle. Otherwise they could only wait.

But waiting with Chryseis was remarkably pleasant.

It was at the end of a timeless time, perhaps half a day, that he saw the Xanthian patrol. “Look,” he pointed. “There they come.”

Chryseis stared boldly over the sea. The hand beneath his was steady as her voice: “So I see. They’re—beautiful, aren’t they?”

The *cetaraea* came leaping across the waves, big graceful beasts with the shapes of fish, their smooth black hides shining and the water white behind their threshing tails. Astride each was a great golden form bearing a lance. They quartered across the horizon and were lost to sight.

The crew mumbled in fear, shaken to their hardy souls by the terrible unhuman grace of the Xanthi. Imazu cursed them back to work. The ship went on.

Islands slipped by, empty of man-sign. They had glimpses of Xanthian works, spires and walls rearing above the jungle. These were not the white colonnaded buildings of Tauros or the timbered halls of Conahur—of black stone they were, with pointed towers climbing crazily skyward. Once a great sea serpent reared its head, spouted water, and writhed away. All creatures save man could sense the presence of wizardry and refused to go near it.

Night fell, an abyss of night broken only by faint glimmers of sea-fire under the carpeting weed. Men stood uneasy watch in full armor, peering blindly into the somber immensity. It was hot, hot and silent.

Near midnight the lookout shouted from the masthead: “Xanthi to larboard!”

“Silence, you fool!” called Imazu. “Want them to hear us?”

The patrol was a faint swirl and streaking of phosphorescence, blacker shadows against the night. It was coming nearer.

“Have they spotted us?” wondered Corun.

“No,” breathed Chryseis. “But they’re close enough for their mounts—”

There was a great snorting and splashing out in the murk. The *cetaraea* were refusing to go into the circle of Shorzon’s spell. Voices lifted, an unhuman croaking. The erinye, the only animal who did not seem to mind witchcraft, snarled in saw-edged tones, eyes a green blaze against the night.

Presently the squad turned and slipped away. “They know something is wrong, and they’ve gone for help,” said Corun. “We’ll have a fight on our hands before long.”

He stretched his big body, suddenly eager for action. This waiting was more than he could stand.

The ship drove on. Corun and Chryseis napped on the deck; it was too stiflingly hot below. The long night wore away.

In the misty gray of morning, they saw a dark mass advancing from the west. Corun’s sword rasped out of the sheath. It was a long, double-edged

blade such as they used in Conahur, and it was thirsty.

“Get inside, Chryseis,” he said tightly.

“Get inside yourself,” she answered. There was a lilt in her voice like a little girl’s. He felt her quiver with joyous expectation.

The ghostly outlines of the ship wavered, thickened, faded again, flickered back toward solidity. Suddenly they had sight; the vessel lay real around them; they saw each other in helm and corselet, face looking into tautened face.

“They have a wizard along—he broke Shorzon’s spell,” said the Conahurian.

“We looked for that,” answered Chryseis evenly. “But as long as Shorzon keeps fighting him, there will be a roiling of magic around us such that none of their beasts will approach.”

She stood beside him, slim and boyish in polished cuirass and plumed helmet, shortsword belted to her waist and a bow in one hand. Her nostrils quivered, her eyes shone, and she laughed aloud. “We’ll drive them off,” she said. “We’ll send them home like beaten iaganaths.”

Imazu blew the war-horn, wild brazen echoes screaming over the sea. His men drew in the oars, pulled on their armor, and stood along the rails, waiting.

“But did we come here to fight them?” asked Corun.

“No,” said Chryseis. “But we’ve known all along that we’d have to give them a taste of our might before they’d talk to us.”

The Xanthian lancers were milling about half a league away, as if in conference. Suddenly someone blew a harsh-toned horn and Corun saw half the troop slide from the saddle into the water. “So—they’ll swim at us,” he muttered.

The attack came from all sides, converging on the ship in a rush of foam. As the Xanthi neared, Corun saw their remembered lineaments and felt the old clutch of panic. *They weren’t human.*

With the fluked tail, one of them had twice the length of a man. The webbed hind feet, on which they walked ashore, were held close to the body; the strangely human hands carried weapons. They swam half under water, the dorsal fins rising over. Their necks were long, with gills near the

blunt-snouted heads; their grinning mouths showed gleaming fangs. The eyes were big, dark, alive with cold intelligence. They bore no armor, but scales the color of beaten gold covered back and sides and tail. They came in at furious speed, churning the sea behind them.

Chryseis' voice rose to a wild shriek. "Perias! Perias—kill!"

The erinye howled and unfolded his leather-webbed wings. Like a hurled spear he streaked into the air, rushed down on the nearest Xanthian like a thunderbolt—claws, teeth, barbed tail, a blinding fury of blood and death, ripping flesh as if it were parchment.

The ship's ballista *chunked* and balls of the ever-burning Achaeran fire were hurled out to fall blazing among the enemy. Chryseis' bow hummed beside Corun, a Xanthian went under with an arrow in his throat—the air was thick with shafts as the crew fired.

Still the Xanthi rushed on, ducking up and down, near impossible to hit. The first of them came up to the hull and sank their clawed fingers into the wood. The sailors thrust downward with pikes, howling in fear-maddened rage.

The man near Corun went down with a hurled javelin through him. At once a huge golden form was slithering over the rail, onto the deck. The sword in his hand flashed, another Umlotuan's weapon was knocked spinning from his hand and the reptile hewed him down.

Corun sprang to do battle. The swords clashed together with a shock that jarred the man backward. Corun spread his feet and smote out. His blade whirled down to strike the shoulder, gash the chest, and drive the hissing monster back.

With a rising cold fury, Corun followed it up. *That* for the long inquisition—*that* for being a horror out of the sea bottom—*that* for threatening Chryseis! The Xanthian writhed with a belly ripped open. Still he wouldn't die—he flopped and struck from the deck. Corun evaded the sweeping tail and cut off the creature's head.

They were pouring onto the ship through gaps in the line. Chryseis stood on the foredeck in a line of defending men, her bow singing death. Battle snarled about the mast, men against monsters, sword and halberd and ax belling in cloven bone.

A giant's blow bowled Corun off his feet, the tail of a Xanthian. He rolled over and thrust upward as the Sea Demon sprang on him. The sword

went through the heart. Hissing and snapping, his foe toppled on him. He heaved the struggling body away and sprang back to his stance.

“To me!” bellowed Imazu. “To me, men!”

He stood wielding a huge battle ax by the mast, striking at the beasts that raged around him, lopping heads and arms and tails like a woodman. The scattered humans rallied and began to fight their way toward him, step by bloody step.

Perias the erinye was everywhere, a flying fury, ripping and biting and smashing with wing-blows. Corun loomed huge over the men who fought beside him, the sword shrieking and thundering in his hands. Imazu stood stolidly against the mast, smashing at all comers. A rush of Xanthi broke past him and surged against the foredeck. The defenders beat them off, Chryseis thrusting as savagely with her sword as any man, and they reeled back against the masthead warriors to be cut down.

A Xanthian sprang at Corun, wielding a long-shafted ax that shivered the sword in his hand. The Conahurian struck back, his blade darting past the monster’s guard to stab through the throat. The Xanthian staggered. Corun wrenched the blade loose and brought it down again to sing in the reptile skull.

Before he could pull it loose, another was on him. Corun ducked under the spear he carried and closed his hands around the slippery sides. The clawed feet raked his legs. He lifted the thing and hurled it into another with bone-shattering force. One of them threshed wildly, neck broken—the other bounded at Corun. The man yanked his sword free and it whistled against the golden head.

Back and forth the struggle swayed, crashing of metal and howling of warriors. And the Xanthi were driven to the rails—they could not stand against the rallying human line in the narrow confines of the ship.

“Kill them!” roared Imazu. “Kill the misbegotten snakes!”

Suddenly the Xanthi were slipping overboard, swimming for their mounts beyond the zone of magic. Perias followed, harrying them, pulling them half out of the water to rip their throats out.

The ship was wet, streaming with human red and reptile yellow blood. Dead and wounded littered the decks. Corun saw the Xanthi cavalry

retreating out of sight.

“We’ve won,” he gasped. “We’ve won—”

“No—wait—” Chryseis inclined her head sharply, seeming to listen, then darted past him to open a hatch. Light streamed down into the hold. It was filling—the bilge was rising. “I thought so,” she said grimly. “They’re below us, chopping into the hull.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Corun, and unbuckled his cuirass. “All who can swim, after me!”

“No—no, they’ll kill you—”

“Come on!” rapped Imazu, letting his own breastplate clang to the deck.

Corun sprang overboard. He was wearing nothing but a kilt now, and had a spear in one hand and a dirk in his teeth. Fear was gone, washed out by the red tides of battle. There was only a bleak, terrible triumph in him. Men *had* beaten the Sea Demons!

Underwater, it was green and dim. He swam down, down, brushing the hull, pulling himself along the length of the keel. There were half a dozen shapes clustered near the waist, working with axes.

He pushed against the keel and darted at them, holding the spear like a lance. The keen point stabbed into the belly of one monster. The others turned, their eyes terrible in the gloom. Corun took the dirk in his hand, got a grip on the next nearest, and stabbed.

Claws ripped his flanks and back. His lungs were bursting, there was a roaring in his head and darkness before his eyes. He stabbed blindly, furiously.

Suddenly the struggling form let go. Corun broke the surface and gasped in a lungful of air. A Sea Demon leaped up beside him. At once the erinye was on him. The Xanthian screamed as he was torn apart.

Corun dove back under water. The other seamen were down there, fighting for their lives. They outnumbered the Xanthi, but the monsters were in their native element. Blood streaked the water, blinding them all. It was a strange, horrible battle for survival.

In the end, Corun and Imazu and the others—except for four—were hauled back aboard. “We drove them off,” said the pirate wearily.

“Oh, my dear—my dearest dear—” Chryseis, who had laughed in battle, was sobbing on his breast.

Shorzon was on deck, looking over the scene. “We did well,” he said. “We stood them off, killed about thirty, and only lost fifteen men.”

“At that rate,” said Corun, “it won’t take them long to clear our decks.”

“I don’t think they will try again,” said Shorzon.

He went over to a captured Xanthian. The Sea Demon had had a foot chopped off in the battle and been pinned to the deck by a pike, but he still lived and rasped defiance at them. If allowed to live, he would grow new members—the monsters were tougher than they had a right to be.

“Hark, you,” said Shorzon in the Xanthian tongue, which he had learned with astonishing ease. “We come on a mission of peace, with an offer that your king will be pleased to hear. You have seen only a small part of our powers. It is not beyond us to sail to your palace and bring it crumbling to earth.”

Corun wondered how much was bluff. The old sorcerer might really be able to do it. In any case—he had nerve!

“What can you things offer us?” asked the Xanthian.

“That is only for the king to hear,” said Shorzon coldly. “He will not thank you for molesting us. Now we will let you go to bear word back to your rulers. Tell them we are coming whether they will or no, but that we come in friendship if they will but show it. After all, if they wish to kill us it can be just as easily done—if at all—after they have heard us out. Now go!”

Imazu pulled the pike loose and the yellow-bleeding Xanthian writhed overboard.

“I do not think we will be bothered again,” said Shorzon calmly. “Not before we get to the black palace.”

“You may be right,” admitted Corun. “You gave them a good argument by their standards.”

“Friends?” muttered Imazu. “Friends with those things? As soon expect the erinye to lie down by the bovan, *I* think.”

“Come,” said Chryseis impatiently. “We have to repair the leak and clean the decks and get under way again. It is a long trip yet to the black palace.”

She turned to Corun and her eyes were dark flames. “How you fought!” she whispered. “How you fought, beloved!”

VI

The castle stood atop one of the high gray cliffs which walled in a little bay. Beyond the shore, the island climbed steeply toward a gaunt mountain bare of jungle. The sea rolled sullenly against the rocks under a low gloomy sky thickening with the approach of night.

The *Briseia* rowed slowly into the bay, twenty men at the oars and the rest standing nervous guard by the rails. On either side, the Xanthi cavalry hemmed them in, lancers astride the swimming *cetaraea* with eyes watchful on the humans, and behind them three great sea snakes under direction of their sorcerers followed ominously.

Imazu shivered. "If they came at us now," he muttered, "we wouldn't last long."

"We'd give them a fight!" said Corun.

"They will receive us," declared Shorzon.

The ship grounded on the shallows near the beach. The sailors hesitated. To pull her ashore would be to expose themselves almost helplessly to attack. "Go on, jump to it!" snapped Imazu, and the men shipped their oars and sheathed their weapons, waded into the bay and dragged the vessel up on the strand.

The chiefs of the Xanthi stood waiting for them. There were perhaps fifty of the reptiles, huge golden forms wrapped in dark flowing robes on which glittered ropes of jewels. A few wore tall miters and carried hooked staffs of office. Like statues they stood, waiting, and the sailors shivered.

Shorzon, Chryseis, Corun, and Imazu walked up toward them with all the slow dignity they could summon. The Conahurian's eyes sought the huge wrinkled form of Tsathu, king of the Xanthi. The monster's gaze brightened on him and the fanged mouth opened in a bass croak:

"So you have returned to us. You may not leave this time."

"Your majesty's hospitality overwhelms me," said Corun ironically.

A stooped old Xanthian beside the king plucked his sleeve and hissed rapidly: "I told you, sire, I told you he would come back with the ruin of worlds in his train. Cut them all down now, before the fates strike. Kill them while there is time!"

"There will be time," said Tsathu.

His unblinking eyes locked with Shorzon's and suddenly the twilight shimmered and trembled, the nerves of men shook and out in the water the sea-beasts snorted with panic. For a long moment that silent duel of

wizardry quivered in the air, and then it faded and the unreality receded into the background of dusk.

Slowly the Xanthian monarch nodded, as if satisfied to find an opponent he could not overcome.

“I am Shorzon of Achaera,” said the man, “and I would speak with the chiefs of the Xanthi.”

“You may do so,” replied the reptile. “Come up to the castle and we will quarter your folk.”

At Imazu’s order, the sailors began unloading the gifts that had been brought: weapons, vessels and ornaments of precious metals set with jewels, rare tapestries and incenses. Tsathu hardly glanced at them. “Follow me,” he said curtly. “All your people.”

“I’d hoped at least to leave a guard on the ship,” murmured Imazu to Corun.

“Would have done little good if they really wanted to seize her,” whispered the Conahurian.

It did not seem as if Tsathu could have heard them, but he turned and his bass boom rolled over the mumbling surf: “That is right. You may as well relax your petty precautions. They will avail nothing.”

In a long file, they went up a narrow trail toward the black palace. The Xanthian rulers went first, with deliberately paced dignity, thereafter the human captains, their men, and a silent troop of armed reptile soldiery. *Hemmed in*, thought Corun grimly. *If they want to start shooting—*

Chryseis’ hand clasped his, a warm grip in the misty gloom. He responded gratefully. She came right behind him, her other hand on the nervous and growling erinye.

The castle loomed ahead, blacker than the night that was gathering, the gigantic walls climbing sheer toward the sky, the spear-like towers half lost in the swirling fog. There was always fog here, Corun remembered, mist and rain and shadow; it was never full day on the island. He sniffed the dank sea-smell that blew from the gaping portals and bristled in recollection.

They entered the cavernous doorway and went down a high narrow corridor which seemed to stretch on forever. Its bare stone walls were wet

and green-slimed, tendrils of mist drifted under the invisibly high ceiling, and he heard the hooting and muttering of unknown voices somewhere in the murk. The only light was a dim bluish radiance from fungoid balls growing on the walls, a cold unhealthy shadowless illumination in which the white humans looked like drowned corpses. Looking behind, Corun could barely make out the frightened faces of the Umlotians, huddled close together and gripping their weapons with futile strength.

The Xanthi glided noiselessly through the mumbling gloom, tall spectral forms with faint golden light streaming from their damp scales. It seemed as if there were other presences in the castle too, things flitting just beyond sight, hiding in lightless corners and fluttering between the streamers of fog. Always, it seemed, there were watching eyes, watching and waiting in the dark.

They came into a cavernous antechamber whose walls were lost in the dripping twilight. Tsathu's voice boomed hollowly between the chill immensities of it: "Follow those who will show you to your quarters."

Silent Xanthi slipped between the human ranks, herding them with spears—the sailors one way, their chiefs another. "Where are you taking the men?" asked Imazu with an anger sharpened by fear. "Where are you keeping them?" The echoes flew from wall to wall, jeering him—*keeping them, keeping them, them, them—*

"They go below the castle," said a Xanthian. "You will have more suitable rooms."

Our men down in the old dungeons—Corun's hand whitened on the hilt of his sword. But it was useless to protest, unless they wanted to start a battle now.

The four human leaders were taken down another whispering, echoing tunnel of a corridor, up a long ramp that seemed to wind inside one of the towers, and into a circular room in whose walls were six doors. There the guards left them, fading back down the impenetrable night of the ramp.

The rooms were furnished with grotesque ornateness—huge hideously carved beds and tables, scaled tapestries and rugs, shells and jewels set in the mold-covered walls. Narrow slits of windows opened on the wet night.

Darkness and mist hid Corun's view of the ground, but the faintness of the surf told them they must be dizzyingly high up.

"Ill is this," he said. "A few guards on that ramp can bottle us up here forever. And they need only lock the dungeon gates to have our men imprisoned below."

"We will treat with them. Before long they will be our allies," said Shorzon. His hooded eyes were on Chryseis. It was with a sudden shock that Corun remembered. Days and nights of bliss, and then the violence of battle and the tension of approach, had driven from his mind the fact that he had never been told what the witch-pair was really here for. It was *their* voyage, not his, and what real good could have brought them to this place of evil?

He shoved his big body forward, a tawny giant in the foggy chill of the central room. "It is near time I was told something of what you intend," he said. "I have guided you and taught you and battled at your side, and I'll not be kept blindfolded any longer."

"You will be told what I tell you—no more," said Shorzon haughtily. "You have me to thank for your miserable life—let that be enough."

"You can thank me that you're not being eaten by fish at the bottom of the sea right now," snapped Corun. "By Breannach Brannor, I've had enough of this!"

He stood with his back against the wall, sweeping them with ice-blue eyes. Shorzon stood black and ominous, wrath in the smoldering, sunken eyes. Chryseis shrank back a little from both of them, but Perias the erinye growled and flattened his belly to the floor and stared greenly at Corun. Imazu shifted from foot to foot, his wide blue face twisted with indecision.

"I can strike you dead where you stand," warned Shorzon. "I can become a monster that will rip you to rags."

"Try it!" snarled Corun. "Just try it!"

Chryseis slipped between them and the huge dark eyes were bright with tears. "Are we not in enough danger now, four humans against a land of walking beasts, without falling at each other's throats? I think it is the witchcraft of Tsathu working on us, dividing us—fight *him*!"

She swayed against the Conahurian. "Corun," she breathed. "Corun, my dearest of all—you shall know, you shall be told everything as soon as we dare. But don't you see—you haven't the skill to protect yourself and your knowledge against the Xanthian magic?"

Or against your magic, beloved.

She laughed softly and drew him after her, into one of the rooms. "Come, Corun. We are all weary now, it is time to rest. Come, my dear. Tomorrow—"

VII

Day crept past in a blindness of rain. Twice Xanthians brought them food, and once Corun and Imazu ventured down the ramp to find their way barred by spear-bearing reptiles. For the rest they were alone.

It ate at the nerves like an acid. Shorzon sat stiff, unmoving on a couch, eyes clouded with thought; his gaunt body could have been that of a Khemrian mummy. Imazu squatted unhappily, carving one of the intricate trinkets with whose making sailors pass dreamy hours. Corun paced like a caged beast, throttled rage mounting in him. Even Perias grew restless and took to padding up and down the antechamber, passing Corun on the way. The man could not help a half smile. He was growing almost fond of the erinye and his honest malevolence, after the intriguing of humans and Xanthi.

Only Chryseis remained calm. She lay curled on her bed like a big beautiful animal, the long silken hair tumbling darkly past her shoulders, a veiled smile on her red lips. And so the day wore on.

It was toward evening that they heard slow footfalls and looked out to see a party of Xanthi coming up the ramp. It was an awesome sight, the huge golden forms moving with deliberation and pride under the shimmering robes that flowed about them. Some were warriors, with saw-edged pikes flashing in their hands, but the one who spoke was plainly a palace official.

"Greeting from Tsathu, king of the Demon Sea, to Shorzon of Achaera," the voice boomed. "You are to feast with the lords of the Xanthi tonight."

"I am honored," bowed the sorcerer. "The woman Chryseis will come with me, for she is equal with me."

"That is permitted," said the Xanthian gravely.

"And we, I suppose, wait here," muttered Corun rebelliously.

“It won’t be for long,” smiled Chryseis softly. “After tonight, I think it will be safe to tell you what you wish to know.”

She had donned banqueting dress carried up with her from the ship, a clinging robe of the light-rippling silk of Hiung-nu, a scarlet cloak that was like a rush of flame from her slim bare shoulders, barbarically massive bracelets and necklaces, a single fire-ruby burning at her white throat. Pearls and silver glittered like dewdrops in her night-black hair. The loveliness of her caught at Corun’s throat. He could only stare with dumb longing as she went after Shorzon and the Xanthi.

She turned to wave at him. Her whisper twined around his heart: “Goodnight, beloved.”

When they were gone, the erinye padding after them, Imazu gave Corun a rueful look and said, “So now we are out of the story.”

“Not yet,” answered the Conahurian, still a little dazed.

“Oh, yes, oh, yes. Surely you do not think that we plain sailormen will be asked for our opinions? No, Corun, we are only pieces on Shorzon’s board. We’ve done our part, and now he will put us back in the box.”

“Chryseis said—”

Imazu shook his scarred bald head sadly. “Surely you don’t believe a word that black witch utters?”

Corun half drew his sword. “I told you before that I’d hear no word against Chryseis,” he said thinly.

“As you will. It doesn’t matter, anyway. But be honest, Corun. Strike me down if you will, it doesn’t matter now, but try to think. I’ve known Chryseis longer than you, and I’ve never known anyone to change their habits overnight—for anyone.”

“She said—”

“Oh, I think she likes you, in her own way. You make as handsome and useful a pet as that erinye of hers. But whatever else she is after, it is something for which she would give more than the world and not have a second thought about it.”

Corun paced unhappily. “I don’t trust Shorzon,” he admitted. “I trust him as I would a mad pherax. And anything Tsathu plans is—evil.” He glared down the cavernous mouth of the ramp. “If I could only hear what they say!”

“What chance of that? We’re under guard, you know.”

“Aye, so. But—” Struck with a sudden thought, Corun went over to the window. The rain had ceased outside, but a solid wall of fog and night barred vision. It was breathlessly hot, and he heard the low muttering of thunder in the hidden sky.

There were vines growing on the wall, tendrils as thick as a man’s leg. The broad leaves hung down over the sill, wet with rain and fog. “I remember the layout of the castle,” he said slowly. “It’s a warren of tunnels and corridors, but I could find my way to the feasting hall.”

“If they caught you, it would be death,” said Imazu uneasily.

Corun’s grin was bleak. “It will most likely be death anyway,” he said. “I think I’ll try.”

“I’m not as spry as I once was, but—”

“No, no, Imazu, you had best wait here. Then if anyone comes prying and sees you, he’ll think we’re both here—maybe.”

Corun slipped off tunic and sandals, leaving only his kilt. He hung his sword across his back, put a knife in his belt, and turned toward the window.

“It may be all wrong,” he said. “I should trust Chryseis—and I do, Imazu, but they might easily overpower her. And anything is better than this waiting like beasts in a trap.”

“The gods be with you, then,” said Imazu huskily. He shook a horny fist. “To hell with Shorzon! I’ve been his thrall too long. I’m with you, friend.”

“Thanks.” Corun swung out the window. “Good luck to both—to all of us, Imazu.”

The fog wrapped around his eyes like a hood. He could barely see the shadowy wall, and he groped with fingers and toes for the vines. One slip, one break, and he would be spattered to red ruin in the courtyard below.

Down and down and down—Twigs clawed at him. The branches were slick in his hands, buried under a smother of leaves. His muscles began to ache with the strain. Several times he slipped and saved himself with a desperate clawing grip.

Something moaned in the night, under the deepening growl of thunder.

He clung to the wall and strained his eyes down. A breath of wind parted the fog briefly into ragged streamers through which winked the savage light

of a bolt of lightning, high in the murky sky. Down below was the courtyard. He saw the metallic gleam of scales, guards pacing between the walls.

Slowly, he edged his way across the outjutting tower to the main wall of the castle. Slantwise, he crept over its surface until a slit of blackness loomed before him, another window. He had to squeeze to get through, the stone scraping his skin.

For a moment he stood inside, breathing heavily, the drawn sword in his hand. There was a corridor stretching beyond this room, on into a darkness lit by the ghostly blue fungus-glow. He saw and heard nothing of the Xanthi, but something scuttled across the floor and crouched in a shadowed corner, watching him.

On noiseless bare feet, he ran down the hall. Fog eddied and curled in the tenebrous length of it, he heard the dripping of water and once a shuddering scream ripped the dank air. He thought he remembered where he was in that labyrinth—left here, and there would be another ramp going down—

A huge golden form loomed around the corner. Before the jaws could open to shout, Corun's sword hissed in a vicious arc and the Xanthian's head leaped from his shoulders. He kicked the flopping body behind a door and sped on his way, panting.

Halfway down the ramp, a narrow entrance gaped, one of the tunnels that riddled the building through its massive walls. Corun slithered down its lightless wet length. It should open on the great chamber and—

Black against the dim blue light of the exit, a motionless form was squatting. Corun groaned inwardly. They had a guard against intruders, then. Best to go back now—no! He snarled soundlessly and bounded forward, clutching the sword in one hand and reaching out with the other.

Fingers rasping across the scaly hide, he hooked the thing's neck into the crook of his elbow and yanked the heavy body back into the tunnel with one enormous wrench. Blind in the darkness, he stabbed into the mouth, driving the point of his sword through flesh and bone into the brain.

The dying monster's claws raked him as he crouched over the body. He reflected grimly that no matter how benevolent the Xanthi might be, he would die for murder if they ever caught him. But he had no great fear of their suddenly becoming tender toward mankind. The bulk of the reptile race was peaceable, actually, but their rulers were relentless.

The tunnel opened on a small balcony halfway up the rearing chamber wall. Corun lay on his belly, peering down over the edge.

They sat at a long table, the lords of the Demon Sea, and he felt a dim surprise at seeing that they were almost through eating. Had his nightmare journey taken that long? They were talking, and the sound drifted up to his ears.

At the head of the table, Tsathu and his councillors sat on a long ornate couch ablaze with beaten gold. Shorzon and Chryseis were reclining nearby, sipping the bitter yellow wine of the Xanthi. It was strange to hear the hideous hissing and croaking of the reptile language coming from Chryseis' lovely throat.

"—interesting, I am sure," said the king.

"More than that—more than that!" It seemed to Corun that he could almost see the terrible fire in Shorzon's eyes. The wizard leaned forward, shaking with intensity. "You can do it. The Xanthi can conquer Achaera with ease. Your sea cavalry and serpents can smash their ships, your devil-powder can burst their walls into the air, your legions can overrun their land, your wizardry blind and craze them. And the terror you will inspire will force the people to do our bidding."

"Possibly you overrate us," said Tsathu. "It is true that we have great numbers and a strong army, but do not forget that the Xanthi are actually a more peaceful race than man. Your kind is hard and savage, murdering even each other, making war simply for loot or glory or no real reason at all. Until the king-race arose, the Xanthi dwelt quietly on the sea bottom and a few small islands, without wish to harm anyone.

"They have not even the natural capacity for magic possessed, however undeveloped, by all humans. As a result they are much more susceptible to it than men. Thus, when the king-race was born with such powers, they were soon able to control all their people and make themselves the absolute masters of the Xanthi. But we, kings and wizards and lords of the Demon Sea, are all one interbred clan. Without us, the Xanthi power would collapse; they would go back to what they were.

"Even Xanthi science is all of our making. *We*, the king-race, developed the devil-powder and all that we have ever made is stored in the dungeons

of this very building—enough to blow it into the sky.”

Tsathu made a grimace which might have been a sardonic smile. “Do not read weakness into that admission,” he said. “Even though all the lords who make Xanthian might are gathered in this one room, that power is still immeasurably greater than you can imagine. To show you how helpless you are—your men are locked into the dungeons and your geas has been lifted from their minds.”

“Impossible!” gasped Shorzon. “A geas cannot be lifted—”

“But it can. What is it but a compulsion implanted in the brain, so deeply as to supersede all other habits? One mind cannot erase that imposed pattern, but several minds working in concert can do so, and that I and my councillors have done. As of today, your folk are free in soul, hating you for what you made them. You are alone.”

The great scaled forms edged closer, menacingly. Corun’s fist clenched about his sword. If they harmed Chryseis—

But she said coolly: “It does not matter. Our men were simply to bring us here, nothing else. We can dispense with them. What matters is our plan to impose magic control over Achaera.”

“And I cannot yet see what benefit the Xanthi would get of it,” said Tsathu impatiently. “Our powers of darkness are so much greater than yours already that—”

“Let us not use words meant to impress the ignorant among ourselves,” said Chryseis scornfully. “Every sorcerer knows there is nothing of heaven or hell about magic. It is but the imposition of a pattern on other minds. It creates, by control of the senses, illusions of lycanthropy or whatever else is desired, or it binds the subject by the unbreakable compulsion of a geas. But it is no more than that—one mind reaching through space to create what impressions it wills on another mind. Your devil-powder, or an ordinary sword or ax or fist, is more dangerous—if the fools only knew.”

Corun’s breath hissed between his teeth. If—if that—O gods, if *that* was the secret of the magicians—!

“As you will,” said Tsathu indifferently. “What matters is that there are more of our minds than your two, and thus we can beat down any attempt

you may make against us. So it comes back to the question, why should we help you seize and hold Achaera? What will we gain?"

"I should say nothing of its great wealth," said Shorzon. "But it is true, as you say, that many minds working together are immeasurably more powerful than one—more powerful, even, than the sum of all those minds working separately. I have worked with as many as a dozen slaves, having them concentrate with me, so that I could draw their mind-force through my own brain and use it as my own, and the results have amazed me. Now if the entire population of Achaera were forced to help us, all at one time—"

The Xanthi's eyes glittered and a low murmur rose among them. Shorzon went on, rapidly: "It would be power over the world. Nothing could stand before that massed mental force. With us, skilled sorcerers, to direct, and the soldiers of Xanthi to compel obedience, we could lay a geas on whole nations without even having to be near them. We could span immeasurable gulfs of space and contact minds on those other worlds which philosophers think exist beyond the upper clouds. We could, by thus heightening our own mental powers, think out the very problems of existence, find the deepest secrets of nature, forces beside which your devil-powder would be a spark. Drawing life-energy from other bodies, we would never grow old, we would live forever.

"Tsathu—lords of Xanthi—I offer you a chance to become gods!"

The stillness was broken only by the muttering and whispering of the Xanthi among themselves. Mist drifted through the raw wet night of the hall. The walls seemed to waver, shift and blur like smoke.

"Why could we not do this in our own nation?" asked Tsathu.

"Because, as you yourself said, the Xanthi do not have the latent mental powers of humans—save for you few who are the masters. It must be mankind who is controlled, with the commoners of your race as overseers."

"And why could we not kill you and do this ourselves?"

"Because you do not understand humans. The differences are too great. You could never control human thoughts as Chryseis or I could."

Another Xanthian spoke: "But do you realize what this will do to the human race? Your Achaerans will become mindless machines under such

control. Drained of life-energy, they will age and die like animals. I doubt that any will live ten seasons.”

“What of that?” shrugged Chryseis. “There are other nations nearby to draw on—Conahur, Norriki, Khemri, ultimately the world. We will have centuries, remember—we will never die!”

“And you do not care for your own race at all?”

“It will no longer be our race,” said Shorzon. “We will be gods, thinking and living and wielding such powers as they—as we ourselves right now—could never dream. Why, do what you will with our men here, to start. What does it matter?”

“But do not harm the yellow-haired man from Conahur,” said Chryseis sharply. “He’s mine—forever.”

Tsathu sat thinking, like the statue of a Khemrian beast-god cast in shining gold. Slowly, at last, he nodded, and an eerie sigh ran down the long table as the lords of the Xanthi hissed agreement.

“It will be done,” said Tsathu.

Corun stumbled back down the tunnel, reckless of discovery, blind and deaf with madness that roared in his skull. Chryseis—Chryseis—Chryseis—

It was not the horror of the scheme, the ruin that it would bring even if it failed, the revelation of how immeasurably powerful were the forces leagued against man. He could have stood that, and braced himself to fight it as long as there was breath in his lungs. But Chryseis—

She had been part of it. She had helped plan it, had coldly condemned her whole race to oblivion. She had lied to him, cheated him, betrayed him, used him, and now she wanted him for a toy, an immortal puppet—Witch! Witch! Witch!

Less human than the erinye at her feet, than the Xanthi themselves, mad with a cold madness such as he had never thought could be—*Chryseis, Chryseis, Chryseis, I loved you. With all my heart, I loved you.*

There was no hope in him, no longing for anything but the fullest revenge he could take before they hewed him to the ground. Had the old Xanthian wizard foretold he would bring death? Aye, by the mad cruel gods who ruled men’s destinies, he would!

He reached the corridor and began to run.

VIII

Down a long curving ramp that led into a pit of blackness—the dungeons could not be far, they lay this way—

He hugged himself into the shadows as a troop of guards went by. They were talking in their hoarse croaking language, and did not peer into the corners of the labyrinth. When they were past, Corun sped on his way.

The stone walls became rough damp tunnels, hewed out of the living rock under the castle. He groped through a blackness relieved only by the occasional dull glow of fungi. The darkness hissed and rustled with movements; he caught the glimmer of three red eyes watching, and something slithered over his bare feet. A far faint scream quivered down the hollow length of passages. It had shaken him when he was here before, but now—

What mattered? What was important, save to kill as many of the monsters as he could before they overwhelmed him?

The tunnel opened on a great cave whose floor was a pool of oily black water. As he skirted its rim along a narrow slippery ledge, something stirred, a misshapen giant thing darker than the night. It roared hollowly and swam toward him. A wave of foul odor came with it, catching Corun's throat in a sick dizziness.

He swayed on the edge of the pool and the swimmer began to crawl out of it toward him. Corun saw its teeth gleam wetly in the vague blue light, but there were no eyes—it was blind. He retreated along the ledge toward the farther exit. The ground trembled under the bulk of the creature.

Its jaws clashed shut behind him as he leaped free. Racing down the tunnel, he heard the bellowing of it like dull thunder through the reeking gloom. It wouldn't follow far, but that way of return would be barred to him.

No matter, no matter. He burst out into another open space. It was lit by a dim flickering fire over which crouched three armed Xanthi. Beyond, the red light glimmered on an iron-barred doorway, and behind that there were figures stirring. Men!

Corun bounded across the floor, the sword shrieking in his hand. It whirled down to crash through the skull-bones of one guard. Before he

could free it, the other two were on him.

He ducked a murderous pike thrust and slipped close to the wielder, stabbing upward with his dagger. The Xanthian screamed and hugged Corun close to himself, fastening his jaws in the man's shoulder. Corun slashed wildly, ripping open the throat. They tumbled to the ground, locked in each other's arms, raging like beasts. Corun's knife glanced off the Xanthian's ribs and he felt the steel snap over. He got both hands into the clamped jaws, heedless of the fangs, and wrenched. The jawbone cracked as he forced the reptile's mouth open.

He rolled from beneath the still feebly struggling creature and glared around for the third. That one lay in a hacked ruin against the cell; he had backed up too close to the bars, and the men inside still had their weapons.

Gasping, Corun climbed to his feet. An eager baying of fierce voices rolled out from the cell; men gripped the bars and howled in maddened glee.

"Corun—Captain Corun—get us out of here—let us out to rip Shorzon's guts loose—Aaarrgh!"

The Conahurian lurched over to a dead Xanthian at whose waist hung a bundle of keys. His hands shook as he tried them in the lock. When he got the door open, the men were out in a single tide.

He leaned heavily on an Umlotuan's arm. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"The devils led us down here and then closed the door on us," snarled the blue man. "Later a group of them in rich dress came down—and suddenly we saw what a slavery we'd been in to Shorzon, suddenly it no longer seemed that obedience to him was the only possible thing—Mwanzi, let me at his throat!"

"You may have that chance," said the pirate. He felt strength returning; he stood erect and faced them in the flickering firelight. Their eyes gleamed back at him out of the shadows, fierce as the metal of their weapons.

"Listen," he said. "We might be able to fight our way out of here, but we'd never escape across the Demon Sea. But I know a way to destroy this whole cursed house and every being in it. If you'll follow me—"

"Aye!" The shout filled the cavern with savage thunder. They shook their weapons in the air, gleam of red-lit steel out of trembling darkness. "Aye!"

Corun picked up his sword and trotted down the nearest passageway. He was bleeding, he saw vaguely, but he felt little pain from it—he was beyond that now. The thing was to find the devil-powder. Tsathu had said it was somewhere down here.

They went along tunnel after winding tunnel, losing all sense of direction in the wet hollow dark. Corun had a sudden nightmare feeling that they might wander down here forever, blundering from cave to empty cave while eternity grayed.

“Where are we going?” asked someone impatiently. “Where are Xanthi to fight?”

“I don’t know,” snapped Corun.

They came suddenly into another broad cavern, beyond which was another barred door. Four Xanthi stood guard in front of it. They never had a chance—the air was suddenly full of hurled weapons, and they were buried under a pile of edged steel.

Corun searched the bodies but found no keys. In the murk beyond, he could dimly see boxes and barrels reaching into fathomless distances, but the door was held fast. Of course—Tsathu would never trust his men-at-arms with entrance to the devil-powder.

The corsair snarled and grabbed a bar with both hands. “Pull, men of Umlotu!” he shouted. “Pull!”

They swarmed close, thirty-odd big blue men with the strength of hate in them, clutching the cell bars, grabbing each other’s waists, heaving with a force that shrieked through the iron. “Pull!”

The lock burst and they staggered back as the door swung wide. Instantly Corun was inside, ripping open a box and laughing aloud to see the black grains that filled it.

For a wild moment he thought of plunging a brand into the powder and going up in flame and thunder with the castle. Coldness returned—he checked himself and looked around for fuses. His followers would not have permitted him to commit a suicide that involved them. And after all—the longer he lived, the more enemies he’d have a chance to cut down personally.

“I’ve heard talk of this stuff,” said one of the men nervously. “Is it true that setting fire to it releases a demon?”

“Aye.” Corun found the long rope-like fuses coiled in a box. He knotted several together and put one end into the powder. The ignition of one

container would quickly set off the rest—and the cavern was huge, and filled with many shiploads of sleeping hell.

“If we can fight our way to our ship, and get clear before the fire reaches the powder—” began the Umlotuan.

“We can try that, I suppose,” said Corun.

He estimated the burning time of his fuse from memories of the use he’d seen the Xanthi make of the devil-powder. Yes, there would be a fair allowance for escape, though he doubted that they would ever reach the strand alive.

He touched a stick from the fire to the end of the fuse. It began to sputter, a red spark creeping along it toward the open box. “Let’s go!” shouted Corun.

They pounded along the tunnel, heedless of direction. There should be an upward-leading ramp somewhere—ah! There it was!

Up its length they raced, past levels of the dungeons toward the main floor of the castle. At the end, there was a brighter blue light than they had seen below. Up—up!

Up—and out!

The chamber was enormous, a pillared immensity reaching to a ceiling hidden in sheer height; rugs and tapestries of the scaled Xanthian weave were strewn about, and their heavy, intricately carved furniture filled it. At the far end stood a towering canopied throne, on which sat a huge golden form. Other shapes stood around it, and there were pikemen lining the walls at rigid attention.

Through the haze of mist and twilight, Corun saw the black robe of Shorzon and the flame-colored cloak of Chryseis. He shrieked an oath and plunged for them.

A horn screamed and the guards sprang from the walls to form a line before the throne. The humans shocked against the Xanthi with a fury that clamored through the building.

Swords and axes began to fly. Corun hewed at the nearest grinning reptile face, felt the sword sink in and roared the war-cry of Conahur. He spitted the monster on his blade, lifted it, and pitchforked it into the ranks of the guards.

Tsathu bellowed and rose to meet him. Suddenly the Xanthian king was not there; it was a tentacled thing from the sea bottom that filled the room, a thing whose bloated dark body reared to the ceiling. Someone screamed—fear locked the battlers into motionlessness.

“Magic!” It was a sneering rattle in Corun’s throat. He sprang into the very body of the sea creature.

He felt the shock of striking its solid form, the rasp of its hide against him, the overwhelming poisonous stench of it. One tentacle closed around him. He felt his ribs snapping and the air popping from his burst lungs.

It wasn’t real, his mind gasped through the whirling agony. It wasn’t real! He plowed grimly ahead, blind in the illusion that swirled around him, striking, striking.

Dimly, through the roaring in his nerves, he felt his blade hit something solid. He bellowed in savage glee and smote again, again, and again. The smashing pressure lifted. He sobbed air into himself and looked with streaming eyes as the giant form dissolved into smoke, into mist, into empty air. It was Tsathu writhing in pain at his feet, Tsathu with his head nearly chopped off. It was only another dying Xanthian.

Corun leaped up onto the throne and looked over the room. The guards and the sailors were still standing in shaken silence. “Kill them!” roared the pirate. “Strike them down!”

Battle closed again with a snarl and a clang of steel. Corun glared around after other Xanthi of the sorcerer breed. There were none in sight; they must prudently have fled into another part of the castle. Well—let them!

But other Xanthi were swarming into the chamber, battle horns were hooting and the guttural reptile voices crying a summons. If the humans were not to be broken by sheer numbers, they’d have to fight their way out soon. . . .

And down in the dungeons a single red spark was eating its way toward a box of black powder.

Corun jumped down again to the floor. His sword leaped sideways, cut a Xanthian spine across, bit the tail from another. “To me!” he bawled. “Over here, men of Umlotu!”

The blues heard him and rallied, gathering into compact knots that slashed their way toward where his dripping sword whined and thundered. He never stopped striking; he drove the reptiles before him until they edged away from his advance.

The men formed into one group and Corun led it across the floor in a dash for the looming doorway. A red thought flashed across his brain: Where were Shorzon and Chryseis?

The Xanthi scattered before the desperate human rush. The men came out into a remembered hallway—it led to the outside, Corun recalled. By Breannach Brannor, they might escape yet!

“Corun! Corun, you sea-devil! I knew it was your doing!”

The Conahurian turned to see Imazu bounding toward him with a bloody ax in one hand. Imazu—thank all the gods, Imazu was free!

“I heard a noise of fighting, and the tower guards went off toward it,” gasped the Umlotuan captain. “So I came too. On the way I met Shorzon and Chryseis.”

“What of them?” breathed Corun.

The blue warrior smiled savagely and flung a red thing down at Corun’s feet. “There’s Shorzon’s scheming head. My woman is free!”

“Chryseis—”

Imazu leaned on his ax, panting.

“She launched her erinye at me. I ducked into a room and slammed the door in its face, then came here through another entrance.”

Chryseis was loose—“We’ve got to get clear,” said Corun. “The devil-powder is going to go off any time now.”

The Xanthi were rallying. They came at the humans in another rush. Corun and Imazu and their best men filled the corridor with a haze of steel, backing down toward the outer portal.

It was a crazy blur of struggle, hewing at faces that wavered out of night, slapping down thrusts and reaching for the life of the enemy. Men fell, and others took their places in the line. Down the corridor they retreated, fighting to get free, and they left a trail of dead.

The end of the passage loomed ahead. And the monstrous iron door was swinging shut.

Chryseis stood in the entrance. A wild storm-wind outside sent her cloak flapping about her, red wings beating in the lightning-shot darkness about the devil’s rage of the goddess face.

“Stay here!” she screamed. “Stay here and be cut down, you triple traitor!”

The nearest Umlotuan sprang at her. The door clashed shut in his face—they heard the great bolt slam down outside. They were boxed in the end of

the hall, and the Xanthi need only shoot them down with arrows.

Down in the dungeons, the fuse burned to its end. A sheet of flame sprang up in the opened box of powder, reaching for the stacks around it.

IX

The first explosion came as a muffled roar. Corun felt the floor tremble under his feet. Men and Xanthi stood motionless, looking at each other with widening eyes in which a common doom arose.

So it ended. Shorzon and Tsathu and their wizard cohorts would be gone, but Chryseis, mad, lovely Chryseis, was loose, and the gods knew what hell she could brew among the leaderless Xanthi.

The walls groaned as another boom echoed down their length.

Well, death came to every man, and he had not done so badly. Corun began to realize how weary he was; he was bleeding from wounds and breath was raw in his lungs.

The Umlotuans hammered on the door in panic. But the twenty or fewer survivors could never break it down.

The devil-powder roared. The floor heaved sickeningly under Corun's feet. He heard the crash of collapsing masonry.

Wait—wait—one chance! One chance, by the gods!

“Be ready to run out when the walls topple,” he shouted. “We'll have a little time—”

The Xanthi were fleeing in terror. The humans stood alone, waiting while the explosions rolled and banged around them. Cracks zigzagged across the walls, dust choked the dank air.

Crash!

Corun saw the nearer wall swaying, toppling. The floor lifted and buckled and he fell to the lurching ground. All the world was an insanity of racket and ruin.

The lintel caved in, the portal sagged. Corun leaped for the opening like a pouncing erinye. The men swarmed with it, out through the widening hole while the roof came down behind them.

Someone screamed, a faint lost sound in the grinding fury of sundering stone. Rocks were flying—Corun saw one of them crack a man's head like a melon. Wildly he ran as the outer façade came down.

There was a madness of storm outside, wind screaming to fill the sky, driving solid sheets of rain and hail before it. The incessant blinding lightning glared in a cold shadowless brilliance, the bawling thunder drowned the roar of exploding devil-powder. They fought out through the courtyard, past the deserted outer gate.

There came a blast which seemed to crack the sky. Corun was knocked down as by a giant's fist. He lay in the mud and saw a pillar of flame lift toward the heavens with the castle fountaining up on its wings. Thunder roared over the earth, shouting to the storm that raged in the heavens.

Corun picked himself up and leaned dizzily against a tree stripped clean by the blast. Rain slanted across the ground, churning the mud beneath his feet, the livid lightning-glare blazing above. Vaguely, through ringing, deafened ears, he heard the wild clamor of the sea. Looking down the cataract which the upward trail had become, he saw the *Briseia* rocking in the wind where she lay on the beach.

He gestured to Imazu, who staggered up to join him. His voice was barely audible over the shouting wind: "Take the men down there. We can't sail in this storm, but make the ship fast, stand guard over her. If I'm not back when the storm is done, start for home."

"Where are you going?" cried the Umlotuan.

"I'll be back—maybe. Stay with the ship!"

Corun turned and slogged across the ground toward the jungle.

Weariness was gone. He was like a machine running without thought or pain until it burned out. Chryseis would have fled toward high ground, he thought dully.

Behind him, Imazu started forward, then checked himself. Something of the ultimate loneliness that was in Corun must have come to the Umlotuan. It was not a mission on which any other man might go. And they had to save the ship. He gestured to his few remaining men and they began the slow climb down to the beach.

The castle was a heap of shattered rock, still moving convulsively as the last few boxes of devil-powder exploded. The rain boiled down over it, churning through the fragments. Lightning flamed in the berserk heavens.

Corun pushed through underbrush that clutched at his feet and clawed at his skin. The sword was still hanging loosely in one hand, nicked and blunted with battle. He went on mechanically, scarcely noticing the wind-whipped trees that barred his way.

It came to him that he was fighting for Khroman, the thalassocrat of Achaera, ruler by right of conquest over Conahur. But there were worse things than foreign rule, if it was human, and one of the greater evils had fled toward the mountain.

Presently he came out on the bare rocks above the fringe of jungle growth. The rain hammered at him, driven by a wind that screamed like a maddened beast. Thunder boomed and rolled overhead, a roar of doom answering the thud of his heart. The water rushed over his ankles, foaming down toward the sea.

She stood waiting for him atop a high bare hill. Her cloak was drawn tightly about her slender body, but the wind caught at it, whipped and tore it. Her rain-wet hair blew wild.

“Corun,” she called under the gale. “Corun.”

“I am coming,” he said, not caring if she heard him or not. He struggled up to where she stood limned against the sheeted fire in heaven. They faced each other while the storm raged around them.

“Corun—”

She read death in his eyes as he lifted the sword. Her form blurred, the outlines of a monster grew to his eyes.

He laughed bitterly. “I know what your magic is,” he said. “You saw me kill Tsathu.”

She was human again, human and lovely, a light-footed spirit of the hurricane. Her face was etched white in the lightning-glare.

“Perias!” she screamed.

The erinye crept forth, belly to the ground, tail lashing. Hell glared out of the ice-green eyes. Corun braced himself, sword in hand.

Perias sprang—not straight at the man, but into the air. His wings caught the wind, whirling him aloft. Twisting in mid-flight, he arrowed down. Corun struck at him. The erinye dodged the blow and one buffeting wingtip

caught the man's wrist. The sword fell from Corun's hand. At once the erinye was on him.

Corun fell under that smashing attack. The erinye's fangs gleamed above his throat, the claws sank into his muscles. He flung up an arm and the teeth crunched on it, grinding at the bone.

Corun wrapped his legs in a scissor-lock around the gaunt body, pressing himself too close for the clawed hind feet to disembowel him. His free hand reached out, gouging—he felt an eyeball tear loose, and the erinye opened his mouth in a thin scream. Corun pulled his torn arm free. He struck with a balled fist at the devil-beast and felt his knuckles break under the impact. But bone snapped. Perias' jaw hung suddenly loose.

The erinye sprang back and Corun lurched to hands and knees. Perias edged closer, stiff-legged. Corun stumbled erect and Perias charged. One great wing smashed out, brought the man toppling back to earth. Perias leaped for his exposed belly.

Corun lashed out with both feet. The thud was dull and hollow under the racketing thunder. Perias tumbled back and Corun sprang on him. The barbed tail slashed, laying Corun's thigh open. He fell atop the struggling beast and got his free hand on the throat.

The mighty wings threshed, half lifting man and erinye. Corun pulled himself over on the writhing back. He locked legs around the body, arms around the neck, and heaved.

The erinye yowled. His wings clashed together with skull-cracking force, barely missing the head of the man who hugged his back. His tail raked against Corun's back, seeking the vitals. Corun gave another yank. He felt the supple spine bending. Heave!

Perias lifted a brassy scream. The strange dry sound of snapping vertebrae crackled out. Corun rolled away from the threshing form.

Perias gasped, lifted his broken head, and looked with filming green eyes at Chryseis where she stood unmoving against the white fire of the sky. Slowly, painfully, he dragged himself toward her. Breath rattled in and out of his blood-filled lungs.

"Perias—" Chryseis bent over to touch the great head. The erinye sighed. His rough tongue licked her feet. Then he shuddered and lay still.

"Perias."

Corun climbed to his feet and stood shaking. There was no strength left in him—it was running out through a dozen yawning wounds. The ground

whirled and tilted crazily about him. He saw her standing against the sky and slowly, slowly, he came toward her.

Chryseis picked up a stone and threw it. It seemed to take an immense time, arcing toward him. Some dim corner of his buckling consciousness realized that it would knock him out, that she could then kill him with the sword and escape into the hills.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

The stone crashed against his skull and the world exploded into darkness.

X

He woke up, slowly and painfully, and lay for a long time in a state of half-awareness, remembering only confused fragments of battle and despair.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the storm was dying. Lightning was wan in the sky, and thunder mumbled farewell. The wind had fallen, the rain fell slow and heavy down on him.

He saw her bending over him. The long wet hair tumbled past her face to fall on his breast. He was wrapped in her cloak, and she had ripped bandages from her robe for his hurts.

He tried to move, and could only stir feebly. She laid a hand on his cheek. "Don't," she whispered. "Just lie there, Corun."

His head was on her lap, he realized dimly. His eyes questioned her. She laughed, softly under the falling rain.

"Don't you see?" she said. "Didn't you think of it? Shorzon's geas was put on me as a child. I was always under his will. Even when he was dead, it was strong enough to drive me along his road.

"But I love you, Corun. I will always love you. My love warred with Shorzon's will even as I tried to kill you. And when I saw you lying there helpless, after such a fight as no man has ever waged since the gods walked the earth—

"I tried to stab you. And I couldn't. Shorzon's geas was broken."

Her hands stroked his hair. "You aren't too badly hurt, Corun. I'll get you down to the ship. With my witch's powers, we can win through any Xanthi

who try to stop us—not that I think they will, with their leaders destroyed. We can get safely to Achaera.”

She sighed. “I will see that you escape my father’s power, Corun. If you will return to the pirate life, I will follow you.”

He shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “No, I will take service under Khroman, if he will have me.”

“He will,” she vowed softly. “He needs strong men. And someday you can be thalassocrat of the empire—”

It wasn’t so bad, thought Corun drowsily. Khroman was a good sort. A highly placed Conahurian could gradually ease the burdens of his people until they had full equality with Achaera in a united and peaceful domain.

The menace of the Xanthi was ended. To be on the safe side, Achaera had better make them tributary; an expedition which he, Corun, could lead. After that, there would be enough to keep a man busy. As well as the loveliest and best of women for wife.

He slept. He did not waken when Imazu led a squad up in search of him. Chryseis laid a finger on her lips and a flash of understanding passed between her and the captain. He nodded, smiling, and clasped her hand with sudden warmth.

They bore the sleeping warrior back through the rain, down to the waiting ship.

WORLD OF THE MAD

He walked slowly through the curling purple mists, feeling the ground roll and quiver under his feet, hearing the deep-voiced rumble of shifting strata far underground. There were voices in the fog, singing in high unhuman tones, and no man had ever learned what it was that sang—for could the wind utter sounds so elfishly sweet, almost words that haunted you with half understanding of something you had forgotten and needed desperately to remember?

A face floated through the swirling mist. It was not human, but it was very beautiful, and it was blind. He looked away as it mouthed voiceless murmurs at him.

Somewhere a crystal tree was chiming, a delicate pizzicato of glass-like leaves vibrating against each other. The man listened to it and to the low muttering of the earth, for those at least were real and he was not at all sure whether the other things were there or not.

Even after two hundred years, he wasn't sure.

He went on through the mist. Flowers grew up around him, great fragile laceries of shining crystalline petals that budded and bloomed and died even as he walked by. Some of them reached hungrily for him, but he sidestepped their groping mouths with the unthinking ease of long habit.

Compasses didn't work on Tanith, and only a few men could even operate a radio direction finder, but Langdon knew his way and walked steadily ahead. His sense of direction kept rotating crazily; it insisted he was going the wrong way, no, now the house lay over to the right—no, the left, and a few paces straight up. . . . But by now he had compensated for that; he didn't need eyes or kinesthetic sense to find his way home.

There was a new singing in the violet air. Langdon checked his stride with a sudden eerie prickling along his spine. The mist eddied about him,

thick and blinding, but now the city was growing out of it; he saw the towers and streets and thronging airways come raggedly into being.

Suddenly he stood in the middle of the city. It was complete this time, not the few fragmentary glimpses he ordinarily had. The mist flowed through the ghostly spires and pylons but somehow he could see anyway, the city lay for kilometers around.

It was not a human city. It lay under three hurtling moons, lit only by their brilliant silver. But it lived, it pulsed with life about him; the shining dwellers soared past and seemed to leave a trail of little sparks luminous against the night. They were not men, the old folk of Tanith, but they were beautiful.

There was no sound. Langdon stood in a well of silence while the city lay around him, and he thought that perhaps he was the ghost, alone and excommunicated on a world which lay beyond even the dreams of man.

But that was nonsense, he thought, angry with himself. It was simply that temporal mirages transmitted only light, not sound. He was here, now, alive, and the city was dust these many million years.

Two dwellers flew past him, male and female with arms linked, laughing soundlessly into each other's golden eyes. The male's great glowing wings brushed through Langdon's body. He stood briefly in a shower of whirling light-motes—and they didn't heed him, they didn't know he was there. They were only for each other, those two, and he was a ghost out of an unreal and unthinkably remote future.

The mirage faded. Slowly, in bits and patches, it dissolved back into the purple fog. He was alone again.

He shivered, and hastened his steps homeward.

The mist began to break, raggedly, as he came out of the forest. He went by a lake of life with only a passing glance at the strangeness of the new shapes that seethed and bubbled, rose out of its slime and took shifting form and sank back into chemical disintegration. There was always something new, grotesque and horrible and sometimes eerily lovely, to be seen at such a place, but spontaneous generation was an old story to Langdon by now. And Eileen was waiting.

He came out on the brow of a steep hill that slanted down into the little cuplike valley where he had his dwelling. The hills were blue around it, blue with grass that tomorrow might be gold or green or gray, and the sky was currently blood-red. A grove of feather-like trees hid the house, swaying where there was no wind and murmuring to each other in their own language, and a few winged things hovered darkly overhead. For a moment Langdon paused there, savoring the richness of it. This was *his* home.

His land. Back on Terra they had forgotten the fullness that came with belonging to the earth, but the men who colonized among the stars remembered. Looking back, Langdon thought that the real instability and alienness was in the Solar System. Men had no roots there, and it was a secret woe in them and made them feverish and restless, eager to taste from all cups but shuddering away from draining any one.

On Tanith, thought Langdon with a quiet sort of exultation, a man drank his cup to the bottom, and there were many cups—or, if only one, it was never the same and could never be emptied.

For a man on Tanith did not grow old.

Suddenly he stiffened, and a psyche-feeder swooped low to absorb his furiously radiated nervous energy. The reaction of it eddied in his mind as a chilling fear. Angrily, without having to think about it, he drove the creature off with a jaggedly pulsed mental vibration and remained standing and listening.

Someone had screamed.

It came again, distorted by the wavering air, hardly recognizable to one who had not had time to adjust to Tanith, and it was Eileen's voice. "Joe, Joe, Joe—help—"

He ran, scrambling down the unstable hillside with his mist-wet cloak flapping behind him. A sword-plant slashed at him with its steely leaves. He swerved and went on down into the valley, running, leaping, a bounding black shadow against the burning sky.

Static electricity discharged in crackling blue sheets as he tore through the grove, hissing against his insulating clothes and stinging his face and hands. Something floated through the dark air, long and supple and dripping slime, grimacing at him with its horrible wet mouth. Another illusion or

mirage, he thought somewhere in the back of his mind. They no longer bothered him—in fact, he'd have missed them if they never showed up again—but—Eileen—

The cottage nestled under the tall whispering trees, a peak-roofed stone building in the ancient style that Langdon had thought most appropriate to the enchanted planet. There was little of Terra about it after its century and a half of existence; it was covered with fire-vines over which danced the seeming of little flames; luminous flying creatures nestled against the doorway, and he had never found the cause of the dim sweet singing he could always hear around it.

The door stood ajar, and Eileen was sobbing inside. Langdon came in and found her huddled on a couch before the fireplace, trembling so that it seemed her body must be shaken apart, and crying, crying.

He sat down and put his arms about her and let her cry herself out. Then he remained for a while stroking her hair and saying nothing.

She bit her lip to keep it steady. Her voice was like a small child's, high and toneless and frightened. "It bit," she said.

"It was an illusion," he murmured.

"No. It bit at me. And its eyes were dead. It came out of the floor there, and it was all in rags."

"You had an illusion frighten you," he said. "A psyche-feeder flying nearby caught your increased nervous output, drew on it, and that of course frightened you still more... they're easy to drive away, Eileen. They don't like certain pulse patterns—you just think at them the way I showed you—"

"It was real," she insisted, quietly, with something of a child's puzzlement that anything should have wanted to hurt her. "It was black, but there were grays and browns and red too, and it was ragged."

He went over to the cupboard and got out a darkly glowing bottle and poured two full glasses. "This'll help," he said, trying hard to smile at her. "Prosit."

"I shouldn't," said Eileen, still shakily but with some return of saneness. "Junior—"

"Junior won't take harm from a glass of wine," said Langdon. He sat down beside her again and they clinked goblets and drank. The fire wavered

ruddily before them, filling the room with warm restless light and with dancing shadows from which Eileen looked away.

“I’ll get an electronic range installed soon,” said Langdon, trying to fill the silence with trivia. “It can’t be convenient for you cooking on an ancient-style stove.”

“I thought they didn’t work on Tanith—electronics, I mean,” she answered with the same effort of ordinariness.

“Not at first, with the different laws prevailing here. In the first few decades, we were forced back to the old chemical techniques like fires. That’s one reason so few colonists ever came, or stayed long if they did come. But bit by bit, little by little, we’re learning the scientific laws and applying them. They’ve had all the standard household equipment available here for a century, I guess, but by that time I’d already built this place and liked my own things, fires and stoves and all the rest, too well to change. But now that I’ve got a wife to do my housekeeping, I ought to provide her with conveniences. In fact, I should have done so right away.”

“It isn’t that, Joe,” she said. “I’d have squawked long ago if those little things made any difference. I like handling things myself rather than turning them over to some robot. It’s fun to cook and get wood, but Joe, it’s no fun when a thing rises out of the steam and screams at you. It’s no fun when electric sparks jump over the house and all of a sudden there’s only fear, the whole place is choked with fear—” She shuddered closer against him.

“This planet is haunted,” she whispered.

“The laws of nature are a little different,” he answered as calmly as he could. “But they are still laws. Tanith seems like a chaos, governed by living spirits and most of them malignant, only because you don’t see the regularity. Its pattern is too different from what you’re used to. Terra herself must have seemed that way to primitive man, before he discovered order in nature.

“Our scientists here are slowly finding out the answers. Talk to old Chang sometime, he can tell you more about it than I. But I can see the order now, a little of it, and it’s a richer and deeper thing than the rest of the universe.

“And you live forever.” He gripped her shoulders and looked into her wide eyes. He had to expel the demons of terror from her. A woman five months pregnant couldn’t go on this way. He was suddenly shocked by how thin she had grown, and she never stopped shivering under his hands.

“You won’t grow old,” he said slowly. “We’ll be together forever, Eileen. And our children won’t die either.”

She looked away from him, and sudden bitterness twisted her mouth. “I wonder,” she said thinly, “whether immortality is worth having—on this planet.”

Suddenly she stiffened, and her lips opened to scream again. Langdon forgot the hurt of her words and looked wildly about the room. But there was only the furniture and the firelight and the weaving shadows. Inside the blood-red windows, the room was sane and real and human.

Eileen shrank against him. “It’s over there,” she gasped. “Over there in that corner, creeping closer—”

Langdon’s face grew bleak, and there was a desolation rising in him. Illusions of one sort or another were part of daily life on Tanith, but they had reality in that they were produced by physical processes and more than one person could perceive them. But hallucinations were another story.

He thought back over two hundred years to the first attempts to colonize. Of an initial three hundred or so, over two-thirds had left within the first three years. And many of them had been insane when the ships took them home.

Men came to Tanith and stayed if they could endure it. But if they couldn’t, and tried to stay anyway, they soon fled from the unendurable madness of its reality to a safer and more orderly madness of their own.

From what he had heard, few of them were cured again, even back on Terra.

“I’ve got to see Chang,” he said.

The colonists on Tanith tended to live well apart from each other, and unless they owned the new televisors designed especially for the planet their only contact was physical. Once a month or so he would go to the planet’s one town for supplies and a mild spree, and somewhat oftener he would spend a while at another house or have guests himself. But most of the time he had been alone.

And as a man grew older, without loss of physical and mental faculties, he found more and more within himself, an unfolding inward richness which none of the short-lived would ever appreciate or even comprehend.

He had less need of other men to prop him up. Or perhaps it was simply that the wisdom, the fullness which came with immortality, made a little of the other colonists' company go a long ways.

There was no denying it, Eileen's twenty-three years of life could not compare with Langdon's two hundred or more. She was like a child, thoughtless, mentally and physically timid, ignorant, essentially shallow.

But I love her. And I can afford to wait. In fifty or a hundred years she'll begin to grow up. In two hundred or so we'll begin to understand each other. As our ages increase, the absolute difference between them will become proportionately insignificant.

An immortal learns patience. I can wait—and meanwhile I love her very dearly.

"What do you have to see him about?" asked Eileen.

"Us," he answered bluntly. "Our situation. It isn't good."

"No," she whispered.

"Can't you learn that there's nothing to fear on Tanith?" he asked. "Death itself, the greatest dread of all, is gone. We've eliminated all actually dangerous life in the neighborhood of our settlements. There are things that can be annoying—the sword-plants, the psyche-feeders, the static discharges—but it's no trick to learn how to avoid them. Nothing here can hurt you, Eileen."

"I know," she said hopelessly. "But I'm still afraid. Day and night, I'm afraid. There are worse things than death. Joe."

"But afraid of *what*?"

"I don't know. Fear itself, maybe. How do I know something won't suddenly be deadly? But I'm not afraid of death. Even with the baby, I wouldn't be afraid of wild beasts or plague or—anything that I could understand." She shook her shining head, slowly. "That's just it, Joe. I don't understand this planet. Nobody does. You don't. . . . You admit it yourself."

"Someday I'll know it."

"When? A thousand years from now? A thousand years of horror. . . . Joe, some of those things are so hideous I think I'll go mad when they appear."

"A deep-sea fish on Terra is hideous."

"Not this way. These things aren't *right*. They can't exist, but still there they are, and I can't forget them, and I never know when they'll appear next or what they'll be this time—" She checked herself, gulping.

“This is a very beautiful world,” he said stubbornly. “The colors, the forms, the sounds—”

“None of them are right. Grass may look just as well when it’s red or blue or yellow—but it shouldn’t be all of them at different times. The sky is wrong, the trees are wrong. Those hideous lakes of life and the things in them, obscene—those voices singing out in the mists, nobody knows what they are—those images of things a hundred million years dead—and the faces, and the whisperings, and there’s always something watching and waiting and moving just a little outside the corner of your eye. . . . Oh, Joe, Joe, this planet is haunted!”

She sobbed in his arms with a rising note of hysteria that she couldn’t quite suppress. He looked grimly over her shoulder. A swirling, chiming mist of color formed on one corner of the room, amorphous stirrings within it, a sudden shining birth that laughed and jeered and slipped out through the wall.

He remembered that he had been frightened and repelled when he first came here. But not to this degree, and he soon got over it. Now, even while Eileen wept, he admired the shifting pulse of colors and his heart quickened to the elfin bells. Terran music sounded wrong to him after two hundred years of the sounds of Tanith.

He thought that all those voices and whisperings and singings, sliding up and down an inhuman scale, and the dreams and the visions, had a pattern, an overall immensity which some day he would grasp. And that would be a moment of revelation, he would see and know the wholeness of Tanith and there would be meaning in it. Not the chaotic jumble of random events which made up the rest of the universe—death-doomed universe tumbling blindly toward a wreck of level entropy and ashen suns—but a glimpse of that ultimate purposefulness which some men called God.

Briefly, a temporal mirage showed beyond the window, a fragmentary glimpse of a tower reaching for the sky. And it was no work of man, nor could it ever be, but it was of a heartbreaking loveliness.

He wondered about the ancient natives. Had they simply become extinct, reached a point of declining evolutionary efficiency such as seemed fated for all species and gone into limbo some millions of years previously? Or

had they, perhaps, finally seen the allness of the world and gone—elsewhere? Privately, Langdon rather thought it was the latter. *World without end*—

But Eileen was crying in his arms.

He kissed her, and tasted salt on her lips that trembled under his. Poor kid, poor kid, and with a baby on the way....

Something of the magic of their first days together came back to him. It was a disappointment in love which had sent him to Tanith in the first place, and for all his time here he had lived without that sort of affection. The women of the town served the casual needs of sex, which seemed to become less and less frequently manifest as his own undying personality grew in fullness and self-sufficiency, and that was all.

Still, a single man was incomplete. And a year ago one of the few colony ships landed, and Eileen had been aboard, and a forgotten springtime stirred within him.

Now ... well....

She released herself, smiling with unsteady lips. "I'll be all right now, dear," she said. "Let's go."

I have to talk this matter over privately with Chang. His wife can take care of Eileen. Certainly I can't leave her here alone.

But sooner or later he would have to. It wasn't only that he had to go out and oversee some of the fields on which grew the native plants whose secretions, needed by Terran chemistry, gave them their livelihood. Solitude and long walks through the misty forests and over the whispering hills had become virtual necessities to him. He had to get away and think, the mighty thoughts of an immortal which no Terran could ever comprehend in his pathetic lifetime were being gestated in his brain. Slowly, piece by piece, the coherent philosophy which is necessary for sanity was coalescing within him, and he was gathering into himself the essence of Tanith. Someday, perhaps a thousand years hence, he would know what it was that haunted him now.

He could not suppress a feeling of annoyance, however. Eileen had had over a year to adjust now, and she was getting worse instead of better. A brief sojourn in utter alienness might be merely pleasing and interesting, but

over a longer time one either got used to it or—She'd have to learn, have to accept the sanity of Tanith and know it for a deeper and more real one than the sanity of Terra.

Others had done it, why couldn't she?

Chang Simon and his wife lived several hundred kilometers away, an hour's flight by airjet. Their spacious house lay amid lawns and trees sloping down to a broad river; it held a serenity and graciousness which Terra had forgotten. Langdon was always glad to be there, and even Eileen seemed to be soothed. She had screamed once on the flight over, when the sky had suddenly seethed with hell-blue flame, and she was still trembling when they arrived. Their hostess took her off for one of those mysterious private conferences between women which no merely male creature will ever understand, and Langdon and Chang sat out on the veranda and talked.

The Chinese had been in his fifties when he came, one of the first load of colonists, and Tanith could not restore lost youth. But a healthy middle age had its own advantages, it conferred a peace and depth of mind more rapidly than an endlessly young body would permit. In the Solar System, Chang had been a synthesist, taking all knowledge and its correlation as his field of work, and he had come to Tanith in some of Langdon's mood of abandonment—futile to attempt the knowing and understanding of all things, when life had flickered out in a hundred years. But as an immortal synthesist.

The two men sat in the long twilight, saying little at first. It was good just to sit, thought Langdon, to let a glass of wine and a cigar relax tensed muscles while the dusk deepened toward night. At such times he felt more than ever drawn into the secret whole which was Tanith—almost, it seemed, he was on the verge of that revelation, of seeing the manifold aspects of reality gather themselves into one overwhelming entity of which he would be an integral part. The philosophers and mystics of Terra had sought such identification, and the scientists were still striving to build a unified picture of the cosmic whole. Here, in this environment and with all the ages before him, a man had a chance to reach that ancient goal, intellectual understanding and emotional integration—someday, someday.

The twilight was deep and blue and full of flitting ghostly lights. The feathery trees murmured to each other in a language of their own, and down under the long slope of dew-shining grass the river gleamed with shifting phosphorescence. Something was singing in the night, an eerie wavering scale that woke faint longings and dreads in men and set them straining after something they had once known and forgotten.

Overhead the million thronging stars of Galactic center winked and blazed through the flickering aurora. One of the moons rose, trailing golden light through the sky. A wind blew through drifting clouds, and it seemed as if the wind had language too and spoke to the men, if they could but understand it.

Chang said at last, slowly and heavily: "I don't know how she got past the psychologists on Terra."

"Eileen?" asked Langdon unnecessarily.

"Of course." The older man was a shadow in the dusk, but the red tip of his cigar waxed and waned as he drew on it for comfort. "Somebody blundered. Or—wait—perhaps it was only that, while she was fundamentally stable, the otherness of Tanith touched some deep-seated psychological flaw in her, something that would never appear under any other environment."

"I don't quite know the system," said Langdon. "What do they do, back at Sol?"

"The first attempts at colonization showed that only the most stable personalities could adapt to—or even survive—the apparent instability of this planet. There aren't many who want to come here at all, of course, but our planetary government maintains a psychological staff in the more important worlds of the Galaxy to check those who do apply. They're supposed to weed out all who couldn't take the strangeness, and so far it's been very successful. Eileen is the first failure I know of."

Something cold seemed to close around Langdon. And then, he realized wryly, he was skirting the main issue—afraid to face it.

"I wonder if we really have the right to keep secret the fact that there is no death here," he said.

“It was a hard decision to make,” answered Chang, “but leaving the morals of it aside, it was the only practicable way. Suppose it were generally known that this one place, in all the known universe, has no age. Imagine all who would want to come here! The planet couldn’t hold a fraction of them. Even as it is, we have to space births very carefully lest in a few centuries we crowd ourselves off the world. Furthermore, the unstable social environment produced by such an influx of colonists, most of whom couldn’t stand the place anyway, would delay, perhaps ruin, the research by which we hope to find out why life does not grow old here. When we have that answer, and can apply it outside this region of space, all the Galaxy will have immortality. But until then, we must wait.” He shrugged, a dim movement in the shining night. “And immortals know how to wait.”

“So instead, we simply accept colonists who agree to stay here for life—and then once they get here they’re told how long that life will be.”

“Yes. Actually, the miracle is that the first colonists stayed at all, after most had fled or gone insane. After all, it was ten or twenty years before we even suspected the truth. A world as alien as this was settled only because planets habitable to man and without aborigines are hard to find. Since then, many more such worlds—normal ones—have been discovered, and few people care to risk madness by coming here. Tanith is an obscure dominion of the Galactic Union, having a certain scientific interest because of its unique natural laws—but not too great even there, when science has so many other things to investigate just now. And we’re quite content to remain in the shadow.”

“Of course.” Langdon looked up to the swarming stars. A sheet of blue auroral flame covered them for a moment.

He asked presently: “How much further have our scientists gotten in explaining the phenomenon?”

“We’ve come quite a ways, but progress has been mostly in highly technical fields of mathematical physics. You’ll have to take a decade or two off soon, Joseph, and learn that subject. Briefly, we do know that this is a region of warped space, similar to those in the neighborhood of massive bodies but of a different character. As you know, natural constants are different in such regions from free space, phenomena such as gravitation

and the bending of light appear. This is another sort of geometric distortion, but basically the same. It produces differences in—well, in optics, in thermodynamics, in psi functions, in almost everything. The very laws of probabilities are different here. As a result, the curious phenomena we know appear. Many of them, of course, are simply illusions produced by complex refractions of light and sound waves: others are very real. The time axis itself is subject to certain transformations which produce the temporal mirages. And so it goes.”

“Yes, yes, I know all that. But what causes the warp itself?”

“We’re not sure yet, but we think it’s an effect of our being near the Galactic center of mass, together with—no, it would take me a week to write out the equations, let alone explain them.”

There was a comfort in impersonal discourse, but it was a retreat from more immediate problems. Langdon fairly rapped out the question: “How close are you to understanding why we are immortal?”

“Not at all close in detail,” said Chang. “We think that it’s due to the difference in thermodynamic properties of matter I mentioned just now, producing a balance of colloidal entropy. Well, elsewhere life is metastable and can only endure so long. Here it is the natural tendency of things, so much so indeed that life is generated spontaneously from the proper chemical mixtures such as occur in many of the lakes and pools hereabouts. In our own bodies, there is none of that tendency toward chemical and colloidal degradation which I think lies at the root of aging and death.

“But that’s just my guess, you know, and biological phenomena are so extraordinarily complex that it will probably take us centuries to work it out. After all, we haven’t even settled all the laws of Tanith’s physics yet!”

“Several centuries. . . . And there is no other planet where this might also happen?”

“None have been found, and on the basis of our theory I’m inclined to believe that Tanith is unique in the Galaxy—perhaps in the universe.” Langdon was aware of Chang’s speculative gaze on him. “And if there were others, they’d be just as foreign to Terra.”

“I see—” Langdon looked away, down to the streaming silver gleam of the river. There was a ring of little lights dancing on the lawn; he could hear

the tinkle of elfland bells and he thought he could see glowing wings and lithe light forms that were not human—but very lovely.

“You were thinking of moving away?” asked the synthesist at last.

“Yes. I hated the thought, but Eileen—well—you saw her. And you remember those first colonists.”

“I do. She is exhibiting all their symptoms. She can’t stand the unpredictability of her environment, and she can’t adjust her scale of values enough to see the beauty in what to her is wrong and horrible.” In the vague golden light, Langdon thought he glimpsed a grim smile on the other man’s face. “Perhaps she is right, Joseph. Perhaps it takes someone not quite sane by the rest of the Galaxy’s standards to adjust to Tanith.”

“But—can’t she see—I’ve told her—”

“Intellectual understanding of a problem never solves it, though it may help. Eileen takes your word for these being purely natural phenomena. She’s not superstitious. It might help if she were! Because explaining the horror doesn’t lessen it to her. Man is not a rational animal, Joseph, though he likes to pretend he is.”

“Can’t she be helped? Psychology?”

“No.” The old voice held pity, but it did not waver. “I’ve studied such cases. If you keep her here much longer, she’ll have a miscarriage and go insane. The insanity might be curable, back at Sol, or it might not, but as soon as she returned it would come again. Not that she could ever stand to come back.

“She is inherently unable to adapt herself to an utterly foreign environment. You’ll have to send her home, Joseph. Soon.”

“But—she’s my *wife*....”

Chang said nothing. A shining golden head swooped past in the darkness, laughing at them, and the laughter was visible as red pulses in the night.

There came a step on the veranda. Langdon turned and saw Chang’s wife coming out with Eileen. The girl walked more steadily now. In the dim radiance from the window, her face was calmer than it had been for some time, and for an instant there was a flood of love and joy and relief within Langdon.

Chang was wrong. Eileen would learn. She was already starting to learn. Tonight was the turning point. Tanith would take her to itself and they would be together forever.

“Eileen,” he said, very softly, and got up and walked toward her. “Eileen, darling.”

The atmosphere trembled between them. She saw the flesh run from his bones, it was a skull that grinned at her, shining evilly green against the dark, and the sounds that rasped from it were the mouthings of nightmare.

Somewhere, far back in the depths of her mind, a little cool voice told her that there was nothing to be afraid of, that it was a brief variation in optical and sonic constants which would pass away and then Joe would be there. But the voice was drowned in her own screaming, she was screaming for her mother to come and get her, it was a nightmare *and she couldn't wake up*—

Langdon ran toward her, with the rags of flesh hanging from his phosphorescent bones, until Chang grabbed him back with a violence he had never known to be possible in the old man.

There was a storm outside; the cottage shook to a fury of wind and was filled with its noise and power. They had a fire going, and its restless glow played over the room and beat against the calm white light of fluorotubes, but it could not drive out the luminousness beyond the window.

“Pull the shades,” asked Eileen. “Please, Joe.”

He looked away from the window where he stood staring out at the storm. Fire sleeted across the landscape, whirling heatless flames that hissed and crackled around the wind-tossed trees, red and blue and yellow and icy white. The wind roared and boomed, with a hollow voice that seemed to shout words in some unknown tongue, and from behind the curtain of flaming rain there was the crimson glow of an open furnace. As if, thought Langdon, as if the gates of Hell stood open just beyond the hills.

“It won't hurt us,” he said. “It's only a matter of phosphorescence and static discharges.”

“Please, Joe.” Her voice was very small in the racket of wind.

He shrugged, and covered the wild scene. He used to like to go out in firestorms, he remembered, their blinding berserk fury woke something elemental in him and he would go striding through them like a god shouting back at the wind.

Well, it wouldn't be long now. The *Betelgeuse Queen* was due in a couple of days on the intragalactic orbit that would take her back to Sol. Eileen didn't have long to wait.

He took a moody turn about the room. His wife had been very quiet since her collapse of a week ago. Too quiet. He didn't like it.

She looked wistfully up at his tall form. He thought that she looked pathetically small and alone, curled up—almost crouched—in the big armchair. Like a very beautiful child, too thin and hollow-eyed now but beautiful.

A child.

She has to go. She can't live here. And I—well—if she goes, it will be like a death within me. I love her.

"I remember winter storms on Terra," said Eileen softly. "It would be cold and dark, with a big wind driving snow against the house. We'd come inside, cold but warm underneath with being out in it, and we'd sit in front of a fire and have hot cocoa and cheese sandwiches. If it was around Christmas time, we'd be singing the old songs—"

The wind yammered, banging on the door. A stealthy shape of light and shadow wavered halfway between existence and nonexistence over in a corner of the room. Eileen's voice trailed off and her eyes widened and there was a small dry rattle in her throat. She gripped the arms of her chair with an unnatural tension.

Langdon saw it and came over to sit beside her on one arm of the chair. Her hand closed tightly around his and she looked away from the weaving shape in the corner.

"You were always good to me, Joe," she murmured.

"How could I be anything else?" he asked tonelessly. There was a new voice in the storm now, a great belling organ was crying to him to come out, Tanith was dancing in a sleet of fire just beyond the door.

"I'll miss you," she said. "I'll miss you very much."

"Why should you? I'll be along."

"Will you. Joe? I wonder. I can't ask it of you. I can't ask you to trade a thousand years of life, or ten thousand or a million, for the little sixty or

seventy you'll have left out there. I can't ask you to leave your world for mine. You'll never be at home on Terra."

He smiled, without much mirth. "It's a trite phrase," he said, "but you know I'd die for you."

"I don't doubt that. Joe. But would you—live for me?"

He kissed her to avoid answering. *I don't know. I honestly don't know.*

It isn't so much a question of losing immortality, though God knows that means a lot. It means more than any mortal will ever know. It's that I'd be losing—Tanith.

He thought of Sol, Sirius, Antares, the great suns and planets of the Galaxy, and could not keep from shuddering. Drabness, deadness, colorlessness, meaninglessness! Life was a brief blind spasm of accident and catastrophe, walled in by its own shortness and the barren environment of a death-doomed cosmos. Too small to achieve any purpose, too limited even to imagine a goal, it flickered and went out into an utter dark.

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty place from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. ...*

The storm sang outside, and he heard music and lure and enchantment. It was not a discord, after two centuries he could hear some of the tremendous harmony—after another while, he might begin to understand the song.

If he stayed, if he stayed.

Eileen.

His face twisted. She saw it, and pain bit at her, but there was nothing she could say.

He began pacing, and his mind took up the weary track of the past week. Logic—think it out like a rational being.

Eileen had to go. But he could stay, and she would understand insofar as any mortal could. Somewhere else, back in the Solar system or on some other of man's many planets, she would find another husband who could give her all his heart. *Which I could never do, because I love Tanith. She*

would come to think of me as dead, she would hold him dear for the brief span of their lives. She'd be happy. And maybe someday she'd send the child back to me.

As for himself—well, the initial pain of separation would be hard to take, but he had an immortal's endurance. Sooner or later, the longing would die. And there would be another woman someday on one of the colony ships whom he could love and take to wife forever. He could wait, he had all time before him. . . .

And he would be on Tanith. . . .

And there would be his friends. He thought of the utter loneliness that waited for him in the Galaxy. Two hundred years was a sizeable draft of eternity; he had acquired enough of the immortal's viewpoint and personality to find the short-lived completely alien. He could never know more than the most superficial comradeship with even the oldest of those who were younger than he. He could never be close to his wife; she would occupy only the smallest part of the emptiness within him. Because before she had grown enough to match him, they would both be dead.

We'll die, go down in the futility of the universe, and Tanith will go on. I might have been a god, but I'll go down in dust and nothingness. No one will have gotten any good of me. Unless I stay.

The wind called and called.

Eileen was right. I'm not afraid to die. But I am afraid to live, in the way she must. Horribly afraid.

But I love her.

Fifty years hence there'll be another woman.

But I love Eileen now!

Round and round, a crazy roaring whirlpool swinging and crashing toward madness. His thoughts were running in a meaningless circle, the familiar landmarks flickered by with ghastly speed in that devil's race, the room wavered before him.

He snarled with sudden inarticulate rage and grabbed his insulating cloak and rushed out the door.

Eileen shrank back in her chair. He was gone. She was alone now and all the powers of Tanith were rising up against her. The wind hooted and

whistled, piping down the chimney and skirling under the eaves. The blind lifted to an invisible force and she saw the red flames of Hell blazing outside. The fluoroglobes flickered toward extinction, darkness closed down; but it was full of dancing light and glimmering shapes that gibed and jeered and spun closer to her. The room began to whirl, faster and faster, a tipping tilting saraband on the edge of madness.

All the old forgotten powers of night and dark and Hell were abroad, whirling on the wind and slamming against the door and banging their heels on the roof. They rose out of the floor and seeped from the walls and the air. Fire danced around them, and they neared her, crying something that she knew would drive her mad when she understood it.

*Joe, Joe, Joe—Mother—God—*Joe was gone out into the storm. Mother was dead these many years. God had forgotten. And the powers closed in laughing at her and mocking and whispering what she could not stand to hear and there and around and around and around and around and around down, down, down, down, down into darkness—

Langdon did not hear her scream the first time. He stood in the living torrent of light. Fire streamed about him and dripped from his hands; his hair crackled with static electricity and the wind sang to him. It filled him, the song of the wind, the song of Tanith. He was lost in it, whirled up in a great singing joyous laughter. He *knew*—in another moment he would know, he would be part of the allness and have peace within him.

Fire, wind, the slender graceful trees laughing as the flames leaped around them, a great exultant chant from the living forests and the dancing hills, a glimpse of an ancient Tanithian across many million years, flying in the storm with the red and gold and blue and bronze rushing off his wings, Tanith, Tanith, Tanith.

Tanith, I love you, I am part of you. I can never go. This is the thing other men do not know. More than immortality, more than all the mighty dreams you give us, there is yourself. A day on Tanith is more than a lifetime on Terra, but they will never know that because they have never felt it. The strong love of a man for his home—but this is passion, it is the whole of life, and Tanith gives it back. Here, and here alone, is meaning and beauty and an unending splendid horizon. Here alone a man can belong.

See, see that bird with wings like molten silver!

The second scream was wordless and crazy and horrible, but the dying fragment of his own name went through him like a knife. For the barest instant he stood there while the storm roared about him and the fire rushed over the world. Then, quite simply, he ran back into the house.

The blood and pain and screeching horror of the abortion left him physically ill, but he managed to get her to bed and even, after a long while, to sleep. Then he walked over to the window and drew the blind. His shoulders sagged with the defeat and death and ruin that was here. . .

The captain of the *Betelgeuse Queen* did not like Tanith and said as much to his mate as they relaxed on the promenade deck.

“The place gives you the blue willies,” he declared. “Everything’s *wrong* there. Praise the powers it’s so backward and obscure we only have to stop there once a year or so.”

“The colonists seem to like it,” said the mate.

“They would,” snorted the captain. “Worst bunch of clannish provincials I ever saw. Why, they hardly ever leave the planet, except maybe for a year or so at a time on essential business, and they won’t be friendly with anybody. Takes a crazy man to stand that world in the first place.”

He pointed to a tall man who was half leading, half supporting a young woman along the deck. She would have been beautiful had she not been badly underweight. She smiled at the man, but her eyes were haunted, and his answering smile was faraway. It went no deeper than his lips.

“That fellow Langdon is the only longtime colonist I ever heard of who left Tanith for good,” said the captain. “He must have been there for years. Maybe he was born there, but he’s coming back to Sol now. His wife couldn’t take the place.”

“I think I remember her from a year or so ago,” nodded the mate. “Didn’t we carry her out with a few other colonists? Pretty as a picture then, and full of life and fun—now look at her. Tanith did that to her.”

“Uh-huh,” agreed the captain. “I heard a little of the story down by the spaceport. She nearly went crazy—finally had a miscarriage. It was all they could do to save her life and sanity. Only then would that Langdon take her

back. He let her go on that way for months.” The captain’s mouth twisted with contempt. “Holy sunspots, what a cold-blooded devil!”

DUEL ON SYRTIS

The night whispered the message. Over the many miles of loneliness it was borne, carried on the wind, rustled by the half-sentient lichens and the dwarfed trees, murmured from one to another of the little creatures that huddled under crags, in caves, by shadowy dunes. In no words, but in a dim pulsing of dread which echoed through Kreega's brain, the warning ran—

They are hunting again.

Kreega shuddered in a sudden blast of wind. The night was enormous around him, above him, from the iron bitterness of the hills to the wheeling, glittering constellations light-years over his head. He reached out with his trembling perceptions, tuning himself to the brush and the wind and the small burrowing things underfoot, letting the night speak to him.

Alone, alone. There was not another Martian for a hundred miles of emptiness. There were only the tiny animals and the shivering brush and the thin, sad blowing of the wind.

The voiceless scream of dying traveled through the brush, from plant to plant, echoed by the fear-pulses of the animals and the ringingly reflecting cliffs. They were curling, shriveling and blackening as the rocket poured the glowing death down on them, and the withering veins and nerves cried to the stars.

Kreega huddled against a tall gaunt crag. His eyes were like yellow moons in the darkness, cold with terror and hate and a slowly gathering resolution. Grimly, he estimated that the death was being sprayed in a circle some ten miles across. And he was trapped in it, and soon the hunter would come after him.

He looked up to the indifferent glitter of stars, and a shudder went along his body. Then he sat down and began to think.

It had started a few days before, in the private office of the trader Wisby.

“I came to Mars,” said Riordan, “to get me an owlie.”

Wisby had learned the value of a poker face. He peered across the rim of his glass at the other man, estimating him.

Even in Godforsaken holes like Port Armstrong one had heard of Riordan. Heir to a million-dollar shipping firm which he himself had pyramided into a System-wide monster, he was equally well known as a big game hunter. From the firedrakes of Mercury to the ice crawlers of Pluto, he'd bagged them all. Except, of course, a Martian. That particular game was forbidden now.

He sprawled in his chair, big and strong and ruthless, still a young man. He dwarfed the unkempt room with his size and the hard-held dynamo strength in him, and his cold green gaze dominated the trader.

“It's illegal, you know,” said Wisby. “It's a twenty-year sentence if you're caught at it.”

“Bah! The Martian Commissioner is at Ares, halfway round the planet. If we go at it right, who's ever to know?” Riordan gulped at his drink. “I'm well aware that in another year or so they'll have tightened up enough to make it impossible. This is the last chance for any man to get an owlie. That's why I'm here.”

Wisby hesitated, looking out the window. Port Armstrong was no more than a dusty huddle of domes, interconnected by tunnels, in a red waste of sand stretching to the near horizon. An Earthman in airsuit and transparent helmet was walking down the street and a couple of Martians were lounging against a wall. Otherwise nothing—a silent, deadly monotony brooding under the shrunken sun. Life on Mars was not especially pleasant for a human.

“You're not falling into this owlie-loving that's corrupted all Earth?” demanded Riordan contemptuously.

“Oh, no,” said Wisby. “I keep them in their place around my post. But times are changing. It can't be helped.”

“There was a time when they were slaves,” said Riordan. “Now those old women on Earth want to give 'em the vote.” He snorted.

“Well, times are changing,” repeated Wisby mildly. “When the first humans landed on Mars a hundred years ago, Earth had just gone through the Hemispheric Wars. The worst wars man had ever known. They damned near wrecked the old ideas of liberty and equality. People were suspicious

and tough—they'd had to be, to survive. They weren't able to—to empathize the Martians, or whatever you call it. Not able to think of them as anything but intelligent animals. And Martians made such useful slaves—they need so little food or heat or oxygen, they can even live fifteen minutes or so without breathing at all. And the wild Martians made fine sport—intelligent game, that could get away as often as not, or even manage to kill the hunter.”

“I know,” said Riordan. “That’s why I want to hunt one. It’s no fun if the game doesn’t have a chance.”

“It’s different now,” went on Wisby. “Earth has been at peace for a long time. The liberals have gotten the upper hand. Naturally, one of their first reforms was to end Martian slavery.”

Riordan swore. The forced repatriation of Martians working on his spaceships had cost him plenty. “I haven’t time for your philosophizing,” he said. “If you can arrange for me to get a Martian, I’ll make it worth your while.”

“How much worth it?” asked Wisby.

They haggled for a while before settling on a figure. Riordan had brought guns and a small rocketboat, but Wisby would have to supply radioactive material, a “hawk,” and a rockhound. Then he had to be paid for the risk of legal action, though that was small. The final price came high.

“Now, where do I get my Martian?” inquired Riordan. He gestured at the two in the street. “Catch one of them and release him in the desert?”

It was Wisby’s turn to be contemptuous. “One of them? Hah! Town loungers! A city dweller from Earth would give you a better fight.”

The Martians didn’t look impressive. They stood only some four feet high on skinny, claw-footed legs, and the arms, ending in bony four-fingered hands, were stringy. The chests were broad and deep, but the waists were ridiculously narrow. They were viviparous, warm-blooded, and suckled their young, but gray feathers covered their hides. The round, hook-beaked heads, with huge amber eyes and tufted feather ears, showed the origin of the name “owlie.” They wore only pouched belts and carried sheath knives; even the liberals of Earth weren’t ready to allow the natives modern tools and weapons. There were too many old grudges.

“The Martians always were good fighters,” said Riordan. “They wiped out quite a few Earth settlements in the old days.”

“The wild ones,” agreed Wisby. “But not these. They’re just stupid laborers, as dependent on our civilization as we are. You want a real old timer, and I know where one’s to be found.”

He spread a map on the desk. “See, here in the Hraefnian Hills, about a hundred miles from here. These Martians live a long time, maybe two centuries, and this fellow Kreega has been around since the first Earthmen came. He led a lot of Martian raids in the early days, but since the general amnesty and peace he’s lived all alone up there, in one of the old ruined towers. A real old-time warrior who hates Earthmen’s guts. He comes here once in a while with furs and minerals to trade, so I know a little about him.” Wisby’s eyes gleamed savagely. “You’ll be doing us all a favor by shooting the arrogant bastard. He struts around here as if the place belonged to him. And he’ll give you a run for your money.”

Riordan’s massive dark head nodded in satisfaction.

The man had a bird and a rockhound. That was bad. Without them, Kreega could lose himself in the labyrinth of caves and canyons and scrubby thickets—but the hound could follow his scent and the bird could spot him from above.

To make matters worse, the man had landed near Kreega’s tower. The weapons were all there—now he was cut off, unarmed and alone save for what feeble help the desert life could give. Unless he could double back to the place somehow—but meanwhile he had to survive.

He sat in a cave, looking down past a tortured wilderness of sand and bush and wind-carved rock, miles in the thin clear air to the glitter of metal where the rocket lay. The man was a tiny speck in the huge barren landscape, a lonely insect crawling under the deep-blue sky. Even by day, the stars glistened in the tenuous atmosphere. Weak pallid sunlight spilled over rocks tawny and ocherous and rust-red, over the low dusty thorn-bushes and the gnarled little trees and the sand that blew faintly between them. Equatorial Mars!

Lonely or not, the man had a gun that could spang death clear to the horizon, and he had his beasts, and there would be a radio in the rocketboat

for calling his fellows. And the glowing death ringed them in, a charmed circle which Kreega could not cross without bringing a worse death on himself than the rifle would give—

Or was there a worse death than that—to be shot by a monster and have his stuffed hide carried back as a trophy for fools to gape at? The old iron pride of his race rose in Kreega, hard and bitter and unrelenting. He didn't ask much of life these days—solitude in his tower to think the long thoughts of a Martian and create the small exquisite artworks which he loved; the company of his kind at the Gathering Season, grave ancient ceremony and acrid merriment and the chance to beget and rear sons; an occasional trip to the Earthling settling for the metal goods and the wine which were the only valuable things they had brought to Mars; a vague dream of raising his folk to a place where they could stand as equals before all the universe. No more. And now they would take even this from him!

He rasped a curse on the human and resumed his patient work, chipping a spearhead for what puny help it could give him. The brush rustled dryly in alarm, tiny hidden animals squeaked their terror, the desert shouted to him of the monster that strode toward his cave. But he didn't have to flee right away.

Riordan sprayed the heavy-metal isotope in a ten-mile circle around the old tower. He did that by night, just in case patrol craft might be snooping around. But once he had landed, he was safe—he could always claim to be peacefully exploring, hunting leapers or some such thing.

The radioactive had a half-life of about four days, which meant that it would be unsafe to approach for some three weeks—two at the minimum. That was time enough, when the Martian was boxed in so small an area.

There was no danger that he would try to cross it. The owlies had learned what radioactivity meant, back when they fought the humans. And their vision, extending well into the ultraviolet, made it directly visible to them through its fluorescence—to say nothing of the wholly unhuman extra senses they had. No, Kreega would try to hide, and perhaps to fight, and eventually he'd be cornered.

Still, there was no use taking chances. Riordan set a timer on the boat's radio. If he didn't come back within two weeks to turn it off, it would emit a

signal which Wisby would hear, and he'd be rescued.

He checked his other equipment. He had an airsuit designed for Martian conditions, with a small pump operated by a power-beam from the boat to compress the atmosphere sufficiently for him to breathe it. The same unit recovered enough water from his breath so that the weight of supplies for several days was, in Martian gravity, not too great for him to bear. He had a .45 rifle built to shoot in Martian air, that was heavy enough for his purposes. And, of course, compass and binoculars and sleeping bag. Pretty light equipment, but he preferred a minimum anyway.

For ultimate emergencies there was the little tank of suspensine. By turning a valve, he could release it into his air system. The gas didn't exactly induce suspended animation, but it paralyzed efferent nerves and slowed the overall metabolism to a point where a man could live for weeks on one lungful of air. It was useful in surgery, and had saved the life of more than one interplanetary explorer whose oxygen system went awry. But Riordan didn't expect to have to use it. He certainly hoped he wouldn't. It would be tedious to lie fully conscious for days waiting for the automatic signal to call Wisby.

He stepped out of the boat and locked it. No danger that the owlie would break in if he should double back; it would take tordenite to crack that hull.

He whistled to his animals. They were native beasts, long ago domesticated by the Martians and later by man. The rockhound was like a gaunt wolf, but huge-breasted and feathered, a tracker as good as any Terrestrial bloodhound. The "hawk" had less resemblance to its counterpart of Earth: it was a bird of prey, but in the tenuous atmosphere it needed a six-foot wingspread to lift its small body. Riordan was pleased with their training.

The hound bayed, a low quavering note which would have been muffled almost to inaudibility by the thin air and the man's plastic helmet had the suit not included microphones and amplifiers. It circled, sniffing, while the hawk rose into the alien sky.

Riordan did not look closely at the tower. It was a crumbling stump atop a rusty hill, unhuman and grotesque. Once, perhaps ten thousand years ago, the Martians had had a civilization of sorts, cities and agriculture and a neolithic technology. But according to their own traditions they had achieved a union or symbiosis with the wild life of the planet and had abandoned such mechanical aids as unnecessary. Riordan snorted.

The hound bayed again. The noise seemed to hang eerily in the still, cold air; to shiver from cliff and crag and die reluctantly under the enormous silence. But it was a bugle call, a haughty challenge to a world grown old—stand aside, make way, here comes the conqueror!

The animal suddenly loped forward. He had a scent. Riordan swung into a long, easy low-gravity stride. His eyes gleamed like green ice. The hunt was begun!

Breath sobbed in Kreega's lungs, hard and quick and raw. His legs felt weak and heavy, and the thudding of his heart seemed to shake his whole body.

Still he ran, while the frightful clamor rose behind him and the padding of feet grew ever nearer. Leaping, twisting, bounding from crag to crag, sliding down shaly ravines and slipping through clumps of trees, Kreega fled.

The hound was behind him and the hawk soaring overhead. In a day and a night they had driven him to this, running like a crazed leaper with death baying at his heels—he had not imagined a human could move so fast or with such endurance.

The desert fought for him; the plants with their queer blind life that no Earthling would ever understand were on his side. Their thorny branches twisted away as he darted through and then came back to rake the flanks of the hound, slow him—but they could not stop his brutal rush. He ripped past their strengthless clutching fingers and yammered on the trail of the Martian.

The human was toiling a good mile behind, but showed no sign of tiring. Still Kreega ran. He had to reach the cliff edge before the hunter saw him through his rifle sights—had to, had to, and the hound was snarling a yard behind now.

Up the long slope he went. The hawk fluttered, striking at him, seeking to lay beak and talons in his head. He batted at the creature with his spear and dodged around a tree. The tree snaked out a branch from which the hound rebounded, yelling till the rocks rang.

The Martian burst onto the edge of the cliff. It fell sheer to the canyon floor, five hundred feet of iron-streaked rock tumbling into windy depths. Beyond, the lowering sun glared in his eyes. He paused only an instant,

etched black against the sky, a perfect shot if the human should come into view, and then he sprang over the edge.

He had hoped the rockhound would go shooting past, but the animal braked itself barely in time. Kreega went down the cliff face, clawing into every tiny crevice, shuddering as the age-worn rock crumbled under his fingers. The hawk swept close, hacking at him and screaming for its master. He couldn't fight it, not with every finger and toe needed to hang against shattering death, but—

He slid along the face of the precipice into a gray-green clump of vines, and his nerves thrilled forth the appeal of the ancient symbiosis. The hawk swooped again and he lay unmoving, rigid as if dead, until it cried in shrill triumph and settled on his shoulder to pluck out his eyes.

Then the vines stirred. They weren't strong, but their thorns sank into the flesh and it couldn't pull loose. Kreega toiled on down into the canyon while the vines pulled the hawk apart.

Riordan loomed hugely against the darkening sky. He fired, once, twice, the bullets humming wickedly close, but as shadows swept up from the depths the Martian was covered.

The man turned up his speech amplifier and his voice rolled and boomed monstrously through the gathering night, thunder such as dry Mars had not heard for millennia: "Score one for you! But it isn't enough! I'll find you!"

The sun slipped below the horizon and night came down like a falling curtain. Through the darkness Kreega heard the man laughing. The old rocks trembled with his laughter.

Riordan was tired with the long chase and the niggling insufficiency of his oxygen supply. He wanted a smoke and hot food, and neither was to be had. Oh, well, he'd appreciate the luxuries of life all the more when he got home—with the Martian's skin.

He grinned as he made camp. The little fellow was a worthwhile quarry, that was for damn sure. He'd held out for two days now, in a little ten-mile circle of ground, and he'd even killed the hawk. But Riordan was close enough to him now so that the hound could follow his spoor, for Mars had no watercourses to break a trail. So it didn't matter.

He lay watching the splendid night of stars. It would get cold before long, unmercifully cold, but his sleeping bag was a good-enough insulator to keep him warm with the help of solar energy stored during the day by its Gergen cells. Mars was dark at night, its moons of little help—Phobos a hurtling speck, Deimos merely a bright star. Dark and cold and empty. The rockhound had burrowed into the loose sand nearby, but it would raise the alarm if the Martian should come sneaking near the camp. Not that that was likely—he'd have to find shelter somewhere too, if he didn't want to freeze.

The bushes and the trees and the little furtive animals whispered a word he could not hear, chattered and gossiped on the wind about the Martian who kept himself warm with work. But he didn't understand that language which was no language.

Drowsily, Riordan thought of past hunts. The big game of Earth, lion and tiger and elephant and buffalo and sheep on the high sun-blazing peaks of the Rockies. Rain forests of Venus and the coughing roar of a many-legged swamp monster crashing through the trees to the place where he stood waiting. Primitive throb of drums in a hot wet night, chant of beaters dancing around a fire—scramble along the hell-plains of Mercury with a swollen sun licking against his puny insulating suit—the grandeur and desolation of Neptune's liquid-gas swamps and the huge blind thing that screamed and blundered after him—

But this was the loneliest and strangest and perhaps most dangerous hunt of all, and on that account the best. He had no malice toward the Martian; he respected the little being's courage as he respected the bravery of the other animals he had fought. Whatever trophy he brought home from this chase would be well earned.

The fact that his success would have to be treated discreetly didn't matter. He hunted less for the glory of it—though he had to admit he didn't mind the publicity—than for love. His ancestors had fought under one name or another—viking, Crusader, mercenary, rebel, patriot, whatever was fashionable at the moment. Struggle was in his blood, and in these degenerate days there was little to struggle against save what he hunted.

Well—tomorrow—he drifted off to sleep.

He woke in the short gray dawn, made a quick breakfast, and whistled his hound to heel. His nostrils dilated with excitement, a high keen drunkenness that sang wonderfully within him. Today—maybe today!

They had to take a roundabout way down into the canyon and the hound cast about for an hour before he picked up the scent. Then the deep-voiced cry rose again and they were off—more slowly now, for it was a cruel stony trail.

The sun climbed high as they worked along the ancient riverbed. Its pale chill light washed needle-sharp crags and fantastically painted cliffs, shale and sand and the wreck of geological ages. The low harsh brush crunched under the man's feet, writhing and crackling its impotent protest. Otherwise it was still, a deep and taut and somehow waiting stillness.

The hound shattered the quiet with an eager yelp and plunged forward. Hot scent! Riordan dashed after him, trampling through dense bush, panting and swearing and grinning with excitement.

Suddenly the brush opened underfoot. With a howl of dismay, the hound slid down the sloping wall of the pit it had covered. Riordan flung himself forward with tigerish swiftness, flat down on his belly with one hand barely catching the animal's tail. The shock almost pulled him into the hole too. He wrapped one arm around a bush that clawed at his helmet and pulled the hound back.

Shaking, he peered into the trap. It had been well made—about twenty feet deep, with walls as straight and narrow as the sand would allow, and skillfully covered with brush. Planted in the bottom were three wicked-looking flint spears. Had he been a shade less quick in his reactions, he would have lost the hound and perhaps himself.

He skinned his teeth in a wolf-grin and looked around. The owlie must have worked all night on it. Then he couldn't be far away—and he'd be very tired—

As if to answer his thoughts, a boulder crashed down from the nearer cliff wall. It was a monster, but a falling object on Mars has less than half the acceleration it does on Earth. Riordan scrambled aside as it boomed onto the place where he had been lying.

"Come on!" he yelled, and plunged toward the cliff.

For an instant a gray form loomed over the edge, hurled a spear at him. Riordan snapped a shot at it, and it vanished. The spear glanced off the

tough fabric of his suit and he scrambled up a narrow ledge to the top of the precipice.

The Martian was nowhere in sight, but a faint red trail led into the rugged hill country. *Winged him, by God!* The hound was slower in negotiating the shale-covered trail; his own feet were bleeding when he came up. Riordan cursed him and they set out again.

They followed the trail for a mile or two and then it ended. Riordan looked around the wilderness of trees and needles which blocked view in any direction. Obviously the owlie had backtracked and climbed up one of those rocks, from which he could take a flying leap to some other point. But which one?

Sweat which he couldn't wipe off ran down the man's face and body. He itched intolerably, and his lungs were raw from gasping at his dole of air. But still he laughed in gusty delight. What a chase! What a chase!

Kreega lay in the shadow of a tall rock and shuddered with weariness. Beyond the shade, the sunlight danced in what to him was a blinding, intolerable dazzle, hot and cruel and life-hungry, hard and bright as the metal of the conquerors.

It had been a mistake to spend priceless hours when he might have been resting working on that trap. It hadn't worked, and he might have known that it wouldn't. And now he was hungry, and thirst was like a wild beast in his mouth and throat, and still they followed him.

They weren't far behind now. All this day they had been dogging him; he had never been more than half an hour ahead. No rest, no rest, a devil's hunt through a tormented wilderness of stone and sand, and now he could only wait for the battle with an iron burden of exhaustion laid on him.

The wound in his side burned. It wasn't deep, but it had cost him blood and pain and the few minutes of catnapping he might have snatched.

For a moment, the warrior Kreega was gone and a lonely, frightened infant sobbed in the desert silence. *Why can't they let me alone?*

A low, dusty-green bush rustled. A sandrunner piped in one of the ravines. They were getting close.

Wearily, Kreega scrambled up on top of the rock and crouched low. He had backtracked to it; they should by rights go past him toward his tower.

He could see it from here, a low yellow ruin worn by the winds of millennia. There had only been time to dart in, snatch a bow and a few arrows and an axe. Pitiful weapons—the arrows could not penetrate the Earthman's suit when there was only a Martian's thin grasp to draw the bow, and even with a steel head the axe was a small and feeble thing. But it was all he had, he and his few little allies of a desert which fought only to keep its solitude.

Repatriated slaves had told him of the Earthlings' power. Their roaring machines filled the silence of their own deserts, gouged the quiet face of their own moon, shook the planets with a senseless fury of meaningless energy. They were the conquerors, and it never occurred to them that an ancient peace and stillness could be worth preserving.

Well—he fitted an arrow to the string and crouched in the silent, flimmering sunlight, waiting.

The hound came first, yelping and howling. Kreega drew the bow as far as he could. But the human had to come near first—

There he came, running and bounding over the rocks, rifle in hand and restless eyes shining with taut green light, closing in for the death. Kreega swung softly around. The beast was beyond the rock now, the Earthman almost below it.

The bow twanged. With a savage thrill, Kreega saw the arrow go through the hound, saw the creature leap in the air and then roll over and over, howling and biting at the thing in its breast.

Like a gray thunderbolt, the Martian launched himself off the rock, down at the human. If his axe could shatter that helmet—

He struck the man and they went down together. Wildly, the Martian hewed. The axe glanced off the plastic—he hadn't had room for a swing. Riordan roared and lashed out with a fist. Retching, Kreega rolled backward.

Riordan snapped a shot at him. Kreega turned and fled. The man got to one knee, sighting carefully on the gray form that streaked up the nearest slope.

A little sandsnake darted up the man's leg and wrapped about his wrist. Its small strength was just enough to pull the gun aside. The bullet screamed past Kreega's ear as he vanished into a cleft.

He felt the thin death-agony of the snake as the man pulled it loose and crushed it underfoot. Somewhat later, he heard a dull boom echoing

between the hills. The man had gotten explosives from his boat and blown up the tower.

He had lost axe and bow. Now he was utterly weaponless, without even a place to retire for a last stand. And the hunter would not give up. Even without his animals, he would follow, more slowly but as relentlessly as before.

Kreega collapsed on a shelf of rock. Dry sobbing racked his thin body, and the sunset wind cried with him.

Presently he looked up, across a red and yellow immensity to the low sun. Long shadows were creeping over the land, peace and stillness for a brief moment before the iron cold of night closed down. Somewhere the soft trill of a sandrunner echoed between low wind-worn cliffs, and the brush began to speak, whispering back and forth in its ancient wordless tongue.

The desert, the planet and its wind and sand under the high cold stars, the clean open land of silence and loneliness and a destiny which was not man's, spoke to him. The enormous oneness of life on Mars, drawn together against the cruel environment, stirred in his blood. As the sun went down and the stars blossomed forth in awesome frosty glory, Kreega began to think again.

He did not hate his persecutor, but the grimness of Mars was in him. He fought the war of all which was old and primitive and lost in its own dreams against the alien and the desecrator. It was as ancient and pitiless as life, that war, and each battle won or lost meant something even if no one ever heard of it.

You do not fight alone, whispered the desert. *You fight for all Mars, and we are with you.*

Something moved in the darkness, a tiny warm form running across his hand, a little feathered mouse-like thing that burrowed under the sand and lived its small fugitive life and was glad in its own way of living. But it was a part of a world, and Mars has no pity in its voice.

Still, a tenderness was within Kreega's heart, and he whispered gently in the language that was not a language, *You will do this for us? You will do it, little brother?*

Riordan was too tired to sleep well. He had lain awake for a long time, thinking, and that is not good for a man alone in the Martian hills.

So now the rockhound was dead too. It didn't matter, the owlie wouldn't escape. But somehow the incident brought home to him the immensity and the age and the loneliness of the desert.

It whispered to him. The brush rustled and something wailed in darkness and the wind blew with a wild mournful sound over faintly starlit cliffs, and it was as if they all somehow had voice, as if the whole world muttered and threatened him in the night. Dimly, he wondered if man would ever subdue Mars, if the human race had not finally run across something bigger than itself.

But that was nonsense. Mars was old and worn-out and barren, dreaming itself into slow death. The tramp of human feet, shouts of men and roar of sky-storming rockets, were waking it, but to a new destiny, to man's. When Ares lifted its hard spires above the hills of Syrtis, where then were the ancient gods of Mars?

It was cold, and the cold deepened as the night wore on. The stars were fire and ice, glittering diamonds in the deep crystal dark. Now and then he could hear a faint snapping borne through the earth as rock or tree split open. The wind laid itself to rest, sound froze to death, there was only the hard clear starlight falling through space to shatter on the ground.

Once something stirred. He woke from a restless sleep and saw a small thing skittering toward him. He groped for the rifle beside his sleeping bag, then laughed harshly. It was only a sandmouse. But it proved that the Martian had no chance of sneaking up on him while he rested.

He didn't laugh again. The sound had echoed too hollowly in his helmet.

With the clear bitter dawn he was up. He wanted to get the hunt over with. He was dirty and unshaven inside the unit, sick of iron rations pushed through the airlock, stiff and sore with exertion. Lacking the hound, which he'd had to shoot, tracking would be slow, but he didn't want to go back to Port Armstrong for another. No, hell take that Martian, he'd have the devil's skin soon!

Breakfast and a little moving made him feel better. He looked with a practiced eye for the Martian's trail. There was sand and brush over everything, even the rocks had a thin coating of their own erosion. The owlie couldn't cover his tracks perfectly—if he tried, it would slow him too much. Riordan fell into a steady jog.

Noon found him on higher ground, rough hills with gaunt needles of rock reaching yards into the sky. He kept going, confident of his own ability to wear down the quarry. He'd run deer to earth back home, day after day until the animal's heart broke and it waited quivering for him to come.

The trail looked clear and fresh now. He tensed with the knowledge that the Martian couldn't be far away.

Too clear! Could this be bait for another trap? He hefted the rifle and proceeded more warily. But no, there wouldn't have been time—

He mounted a high ridge and looked over the grim, fantastic landscape. Near the horizon he saw a blackened strip, the border of his radioactive barrier. The Martian couldn't go further, and if he doubled back Riordan would have an excellent chance of spotting him.

He tuned up his speaker and let his voice roar into the stillness: "Come out, owlie! I'm going to get you, you might as well come out now and be done with it!"

The echoes took it up, flying back and forth between the naked crags, trembling and shivering under the brassy arch of sky. *Come out, come out, come out—*

The Martian seemed to appear from thin air, a gray ghost rising out of the jumbled stones and standing poised not twenty feet away. For an instant, the shock of it was too much; Riordan gaped in disbelief. Kreega waited, quivering ever so faintly as if he were a mirage.

Then the man shouted and lifted his rifle. Still the Martian stood there as if carved in gray stone, and with a shock of disappointment Riordan thought that he had, after all, decided to give himself to an inevitable death.

Well, it had been a good hunt. "So long," whispered Riordan, and squeezed the trigger.

Since the sandmouse had crawled into the barrel, the gun exploded.

Riordan heard the roar and saw the barrel peel open like a rotten banana. He wasn't hurt, but as he staggered back from the shock Kreega lunged at him.

The Martian was four feet tall, and skinny and weaponless, but he hit the Earthling like a small tornado. His legs wrapped around the man's waist and his hands got to work on the airhose.

Riordan went down under the impact. He snarled, tigerishly, and fastened his hands on the Martian's narrow throat. Kreega snapped futilely at him with his beak. They rolled over in a cloud of dust. The brush began to chatter excitedly.

Riordan tried to break Kreega's neck—the Martian twisted away, bored in again.

With a shock of horror, the man heard the hiss of escaping air as Kreega's beak and fingers finally worried the airhose loose. An automatic valve clamped shut, but there was no connection with the pump now—

Riordan cursed, and got his hands about the Martian's throat again. Then he simply lay there, squeezing, and not all Kreega's writhing and twistings could break that grip.

Riordan smiled sleepily and held his hands in place. After five minutes or so Kreega was still. Riordan kept right on throttling him for another five minutes, just to make sure. Then he let go and fumbled at his back, trying to reach the pump.

The air in his suit was hot and foul. He couldn't quite reach around to connect the hose to the pump—

Poor design, he thought vaguely. *But then, these airsuits weren't meant for battle armor.*

He looked at the slight, silent form of the Martian. A faint breeze ruffled the gray feathers. What a fighter the little guy had been! He'd be the pride of the trophy room, back on Earth.

Let's see now—He unrolled his sleeping bag and spread it carefully out. He'd never make it to the rocket with what air he had, so it was necessary to let the suspensine into his suit. But he'd have to get inside the bag, lest the nights freeze his blood solid.

He crawled in, fastening the flaps carefully, and opened the valve on the suspensine tank. Lucky he had it—but then, a good hunter thinks of everything. He'd get awfully bored, lying here till Wisby caught the signal in ten days or so and came to find him, but he'd last. It would be an experience to remember. In this dry air, the Martian's skin would keep perfectly well.

He felt the paralysis creep up on him, the waning of heartbeat and lung action. His senses and mind were still alive, and he grew aware that complete relaxation has its unpleasant aspects. Oh, well—he'd won. He'd killed the wiliest game with his own hands.

Presently Kreega sat up. He felt himself gingerly. There seemed to be a rib broken—well, that could be fixed. He was still alive. He'd been choked for a good ten minutes, but a Martian can last fifteen without air.

He opened the sleeping bag and got Riordan's keys. Then he limped slowly back to the rocket. A day or two of experimentation taught him how to fly it. He'd go to his kinsmen near Syrtis. Now that they had an Earthly machine, and Earthly weapons to copy—

But there was other business first. He didn't hate Riordan, but Mars is a hard world. He went back and dragged the Earthling into a cave and hid him beyond all possibility of human search parties finding him.

For a while he looked into the man's eyes. Horror stared dumbly back at him. He spoke slowly, in halting English: "For those you killed, and for being a stranger on a world that does not want you, and against the day when Mars is free, I leave you."

Before departing, he got several oxygen tanks from the boat and hooked them into the man's air supply. That was quite a bit of air for one in suspended animation. Enough to keep him alive for a thousand years.

INSIDE EARTH

I

The biotechnicians had been very thorough. I was already a little undersized, which meant that my height and build were suitable—I could pass for a big Earthling. And of course my face and hands and so on were all right, the Earthlings being a remarkably humanoid race. But the technicians had had to remodel my ears, blunting the tips and grafting on lobes and cutting the muscles that move them. My crest had to go and a scalp covered with revolting hair was now on the top of my skull.

Finally, and most difficult, there had been the matter of skin color. It just wasn't possible to eliminate my natural coppery pigmentation. So they had injected a substance akin to melanin, together with a virus which would manufacture it in my body, the result being a leathery brown. I could pass for a member of the so-called "white" subspecies, one who had spent most of his life in the open.

The mimicry was perfect. I hardly recognized the creature that looked out of the mirror. My lean, square, blunt-nosed face, gray eyes, and big hands were the same or nearly so. But my black crest had been replaced with a shock of blond hair, my ears were small and immobile, my skin a dull bronze, and several of Earth's languages were hypnotically implanted in my brain—together with a set of habits and reflexes making up a pseudo-personality which should be immune to any tests that the rebels could think of.

I *was* Earthling! And the disguise was self-perpetuating: the hair grew and the skin color was kept permanent by the artificial "disease." The biotechnicians had told me that if I kept the disguise long enough, till I

began to age—say, in a century or so—the hair would actually thin and turn white as it did with the natives.

It was reassuring to think that once my job was over, I could be restored to normal. It would need another series of operations and as much time as the original transformation, but it would be as complete and scarless. I'd be human again.

I put on the clothes they had furnished me, typical Earthly garments—rough trousers and shirt of bleached plant fibers, jacket and heavy shoes of animal skin, a battered old hat of matted fur known as felt. There were objects in my pockets, the usual money and papers, a claspknife, the pipe and tobacco I had trained myself to smoke and even to like. It all fitted into my character of a wandering, outdoors sort of man, an educated atavist.

I went out of the hospital with the long swinging stride of one accustomed to walking great distances.

The Center was busy around me. Behind me, the hospital and laboratories occupied a fairly small building, some eighty stories of stone and steel and plastic. On either side loomed the great warehouses, military barracks, officers' apartments, civilian concessions, filled with the vigorous life of the starways. Behind the monstrous wall, a mile to my right, was the spaceport, and I knew that a troopship had just lately dropped gravs from Valgolia herself.

The Center swarmed with young recruits off duty, gaping at the sights, swaggering in their new uniforms. Their skins shone like polished copper in the blistering sunlight, and their crests were beginning to wilt a little. All Earth is not the tropical jungle most Valgolians think it is—northern Europe is very pleasant, and Greenland is even a little on the cold side—but it gets hot enough at North America Center in midsummer to fry a shilast.

A cosmopolitan throng filled the walkways. Soldiers predominated—huge, shy Dacors, little slant-eyed Yangtusans, brawling Gorrads, all the manhood of Valgolia. Then there were other races, blue-skinned Vegans, furry Proximans, completely non-humanoid Sirians and Antarians. They were here as traders, observers, tourists, whatever else of a nonmilitary nature one can imagine.

I made an absentminded way through the crowds. A sudden crack on the side of my head, nearly bowling me over, brought me to awareness. I looked up into the arrogant face of one of the new recruits and heard him rasp, "Watch where you're going, Terrie!"

The young blood in the Valgolian military is deliberately trained to harshness, even brutality, for our militarism must impress such backward colonies as Earth. It goes against our grain, but it is necessary. At another time this might have annoyed me. I could have pulled rank on him. Not only was I an officer, but such treatment must be used with intellectual deliberation. The occasional young garrison trooper who comes here with the idea that the natives are an inferior breed to be kicked around misses the whole point of Empire. If, indeed, Earth's millions were an inferior breed, I wouldn't have been here at all. Valgol needs an economic empire, but if all we had in mind was serfdom we'd be perfectly content with the plodding animal life of Deneb VII or a hundred other worlds.

I cringed appropriately, as if I didn't understand Valgolian Universal, and slunk past him. But it griped me to be taken for a Terrie. If I was to become an Earthling, I would at least be a self-respecting one.

There were plenty of Terries—Terrestrials—around, of course, moving with their odd combination of slavish deference toward Valgolians and arrogant superiority toward mere Earthlings. They have adopted the habits and customs of civilization, entered the Imperial service, speak Valgolian even with their families. Many of them shave their heads save for a scalp lock, in imitation of the crest, and wear white robes suggesting those of civil functionaries at home.

I've always felt a little sorry for the class. They work, and study, and toady to us, and try so hard to be like us. It's frustrating, because that's exactly what we don't want. Valgolians are Valgolians and Earthlings are men of Earth. Well, Terries are important to the ultimate aims of the Empire, but not in the way they think they are. They serve as another symbol of Valgolian conquest for Earth to hate.

I entered the Administration Building. They expected me there and took me at once to the office of General Vorka, who's a general only as far as this solar system is concerned. Had there been any Earthlings around, I would

have saluted to conform to the show of militarism, but General Vorka sat alone behind his desk, and I merely said, "Hello, Coordinator."

The sleeves of his tunic rolled up, the heat of North America beading his forehead with sweat, the big man looked up at me. "Ah, yes. I'm glad you're finally prepared. The sooner we get this thing started—" He extended a silver galla-dust box. "Sniff? Have a seat, Conru."

I inhaled gratefully and relaxed. The Coordinator picked up a sheaf of papers on his desk and leafed through them. "Umm-mm, only fifty-two years old and a captain already. Remarkably able, a young man like you. And your work hitherto has been outstanding. That Vegan business...."

I said yes, I knew, but could he please get down to business. You couldn't blame me for being a bit anxious to begin. Disguised as I was as an Earthman, I felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, almost, at being with my ex-countrymen.

The Coordinator shrugged. "Well, if you can carry this business off—fine. If you fail, you may die quite unpleasantly. That's their trouble, Conru: you wouldn't be regarded as an individual, but as a Valgolian. Did you know that they even make such distinctions among themselves? I mean races and sub-races and social castes and the like; it's keeping them divided and impotent, Conru. It's also keeping them out of the Empire. A shame."

I knew all that, of course, but I merely nodded. Coordinator Vorka was a wonderful man in his field, and if he tended to be on the garrulous side, what could I do? I said, "I know that, sir. I also know I was picked for a dangerous job because you thought I could fill the role. But I still don't know exactly what the job is."

Coordinator Vorka smiled. "I'm afraid I can't tell you much more than you must already have guessed," he said. "The anarch movement here—the rebels, that is—is getting no place, primarily because of internal difficulties. When members of the same group spit epithets at each other referring to what they consider racial or national distinctions which determine superiority or inferiority, the group is bound to be an insecure one. Such insecurity just does not make for a strong rebellion, Conru. They try, and we goad them—but dissention splits them constantly and their revolutions fizzle out."

“They just can’t unite against us, can’t unite at all. Conru, you know how we’ve tried to educate them. It’s worked, too, to some extent. But you can’t educate three billion people who have a whole cultural pattern behind them.”

I winced. “Three billion?”

“Certainly. Earth is a rich planet, Conru, and a fairly crowded one at the same time. Bickering is inevitable. It’s a part of their culture, as much as cooperation has been a part of ours.”

I nodded. “We learned the hard way. The old Valgol was a poor planet and we had to unite to conquer space or we could not have survived.”

The Coordinator sniffed again at his silver box. “Of course. And we’re trying to help these people unite. They don’t have to make the same mistakes we did, long ago. They don’t have to at all. Get them to hate us enough, get them to hate us until all their own clannish hatreds don’t count at all. ... Well, you know what happened on Samtrak.”

I knew. The Samtraks are now the entrepreneurs of the Empire, really ingenious traders, but within the memory of some of our older men they were a sore-spot. They didn’t understand the meaning of Empire any more than Earth does, and they never did understand it until we goaded them into open rebellion. The very reverse of divide and rule, you might say, and it worked. We withdrew trading privileges one by one, until they revolted successfully, thus educating themselves sociologically in only a few generations.

Vorka said, “The problem of Earth is not quite that simple.” He leaned back, made a bridge of his fingers, and peered across them at me. “Do you know precisely what a provocateur job is, Conru?”

I said that I did, but only in a hazy way, because until now my work had been pretty much restricted to social relations on the more advanced Empire planets. However, I told him that I did know the idea was to provoke discontent and, ultimately, rebellion.

The Coordinator smiled. “Well, that’s just the starter, Conru. It’s a lot more complex than that. Each planet has its own special problems. The Samtraks, for example, had a whole background of cutthroat competition. That was easy: we eliminated that by showing them what *real* cutthroat

competition could be like. But Earth is different. Look at it this way. They fight among themselves. Because of their mythical distinctions, not realizing that there are no inferior races, only more or less advanced ones, and that individuals must be judged as individuals, not as members of groups, nations or races. A planet like Earth can be immensely valuable to the Empire, but not if it has to be garrisoned. Its contribution must be voluntary and wholehearted.”

“A difficult problem,” I said. “My opinion is that we should treat all exactly alike—*force* them to abandon their unrealistic differences.”

“Exactly!” The Coordinator seemed pleased, but, actually, this was pretty elementary stuff. “We’re never too rough on the eager lads who come here from Valgol and kick the natives around a bit. We even encourage it when the spirit of rebelliousness dies down.”

I told him I had met one.

“Irritating, wasn’t it, Conru? Humiliating. Of course, these lads will be reconditioned to civilization when they finish their military service and prepare for more specialized work. Yes, treating all Earthlings alike is the solution. We put restrictions on these colonials; they can’t hold top jobs, and so on. And we encourage wild stories about brutality on our part. Not enough to make everybody mad at us, or even a majority—the rumored tyranny has always happened to someone else. But there’s a certain class of beings who’ll get fighting mad, and that’s the class we want.”

“The leaders,” I chimed in. “The idealists. Brave, intelligent, patriotic. The kind who probably wouldn’t be a part of this racial bickering, anyway.”

“Right,” said the Coordinator. “We’ll give them the ammunition for their propaganda. We’ve *been* doing it. Result: the leaders get mad. Races, religions, nationalities, they hate us worse than they hate each other.”

The way he painted it, I was hardly needed at all. I told him that.

“Ideally, that would be the situation, Conru. Only it doesn’t work that way.” He took out a soft cloth and wiped his forehead. “Even the leaders are too involved in this myth of differences and they can’t concentrate all their efforts. Luron, of course, would be the other alternative—”

That was a very logical statement, but sometimes logic has a way of making you laugh, and I was laughing now. Luron considered itself our

arch-enemy. With a few dozen allies on a path of conquest, Luron thought it could wrest Empire from our hands. Well, we let them play. And each time Luron swooped down on one of the more primitive planets, we let them, for Luron would serve as well as ourselves in goading backward peoples to unite and advance. Perhaps Luron, as a social entity, grew wiser each time. Certainly the primitive colonials did. Luron had started a chain reaction which threatened to overthrow the tyranny of superstition on a hundred planets. Good old Luron, our arch-enemy, would see the light itself some day.

The Coordinator shook his head. "Can't use Luron here. Technologies are entirely too similar. It might shatter both planets, and we wouldn't want that."

"So what do we use?"

"You, Conru. You get in with the revolutionaries, you make sure that they want to fight, you—"

"I see," I told him. "Then I try to stop it at the last minute. Not so soon that the rebellion doesn't help at all—"

The Coordinator put his hand down flat. "Nothing of the sort. They *must* fight. And they must be defeated, again and again, if necessary, until they are ready to succeed. That will be, of course, when they are *totally* against us."

I stood up. "I understand."

He waved me back into the chair. "You'll be lucky to understand it by the time you're finished with this assignment and transferred to another ... that is, if you come out of this one alive."

I smiled a bit sheepishly and told him to go ahead.

"We have some influence in the underground movement, as you might logically expect. The leader is a man we worked very hard to have elected."

"A member of one of the despised races?" I guessed.

"The best we could do at this point was to help elect someone from a minority subgroup of the dominant white race. The leader's name is Levinsohn. He is of the white subgroup known as Jews."

"How well is this Levinsohn accepted by the movement?"

“Considerable resistance and hostility,” the Coordinator said. “That’s to be expected. However, we’ve made sure that there is no other organization the minority-haters can join, so they have to follow him or quit. He’s able, all right; one of the most able men they have, which helps our aims. Even those who discriminate against Jews reluctantly admire him. He’s moved the headquarters of the movement out into space, and the man’s so brilliant that we don’t even know where. We’ll find out, mainly through you, I hope, but that isn’t the important thing.”

“What is?” I asked, baffled.

“To report on the unification of Earth. It’s possible that the anarch movement can achieve it under Levinsohn. In that case, we’ll make sure they win, or think they win, and will gladly sign a treaty giving Earth equal planetary status in the Empire.”

“And if unity hasn’t been achieved?”

“We simply crush this rebellion and make them start all over again. They’ll have learned some degree of unity from this revolt and so the next one will be more successful.” He stood up and I got out of my chair to face him. “That’s for the future, though. We’ll work out our plans from the results of this campaign.”

“But isn’t there a lot of danger in the policy of fomenting rebellion against us?” I asked.

He lifted his shoulders. “Evolution is always painful, forced evolution even more so. Yes, there are great dangers, but advance information from you and other agents can reduce the risk. It’s a chance we must take, Conru.”

“Conrad,” I corrected him, smiling. “Plain Mr. Conrad Haugen... of Earth.”

II

A few days later, I left North America Center, and in spite of the ominous need to hurry, my eastward journey was a ramble. The anarchs would be

sure to check my movements as far back as they could, and my story had better ring true. For the present, I must *be* my role, a vagabond.

The city was soon behind me. It was far from other settlement—it is good policy to keep the Centers rather isolated, and we could always contact our garrisons in native towns quickly enough. Before long I was alone in the mountains.

I liked that part of the trip. The Rockies are huge and serene, a fresh cold wind blows from their peaks and roars in the pines, brawling rivers foam through their dales and canyons—it is a big landscape, clean and strong and lonely. It speaks with silence.

I hitched a ride for some hundreds of miles with one of the great truck-trains that dominate the western highways. The driver was Earthling, and though he complained much about the Valgolian tyranny he looked well-fed, healthy, secure. I thought of the wars which had been laying the planet waste, the social ruin and economic collapse which the Empire had mended, and wondered if Terra would ever be fit to rule itself.

I came out of the enormous mountainlands into the sage plains of Nevada. For a few days I worked at a native ranch, listening to the talk and keeping my mouth shut. Yes, there was discontent!

“Their taxes are killing me,” said the owner. “What the hell incentive do I have to produce if they take it away from me?” I nodded, but thought: *Your kind was paying more taxes in the old days, and had less to show for it. Here you get your money back in public works and universal security. No one on Earth is cold or hungry. Can you only produce for your own private gain, Earthling?*

“The labor draft got my kid the other day,” said the foreman. “He’ll spend two good years of his life working for them, and prob’ly come back hopheaded about the good o’ the Empire.”

There was a time, I thought, when millions of Earthlings clamored for work, or spent years fighting their wars, gave their youth to a god of battle who only clamored for more blood. And how can we have a stable society without educating its members to respect it?

“I want another kid,” said the female cook. “Two ain’t really enough. They’re good boys, but I want a girl too. Only the Eridanian law says if I go over my quota, if I have one more, they’ll sterilize me! And they’d do it, the meddling devils.”

A billion Earthlings are all the Solar System can hold under decent standards of living without exhausting what natural resources their own culture left us, I thought. We aren't ready to permit emigration; our own people must come first. But these beings can live well here. Only now that we've eliminated famine, plague, and war, they'd breed beyond reason, breed till all the old evils came back to throttle them, if we didn't have strict population control.

“Yeah,” said her husband bitterly. “They never even let my cousin have kids. Sterilized him damn near right after he was born.”

Then he's a moron, or carries hemophilia, or has some other hereditary taint, I thought. Can't they see we're doing it for their own good? It costs us fantastically in money and trouble, but the goal is a level of health and sanity such as this race never in its history dreamed possible.

“They're stranglin' faith,” muttered someone else.

Anyone in the Empire may worship as he chooses, but should permission be granted to preach demonstrable falsehoods, archaic superstitions, or antisocial nonsense? The old “free” Earth was not noted for liberalism.

“We want to be free.”

Free? Free for what? To loose the thousand Earthly races and creeds and nationalisms on each other—and on the Galaxy—to wallow in barbarism and slaughter and misery as before we came? To let our works and culture be thrown in the dust, the labor of a century be demolished, not because it is good or bad but simply because it is Valgolian? Epsilon Eridanian!

“We'll be free. Not too long to wait, either—”

That's up to nobody else but you!

I couldn't get much specific information, but then I hadn't expected to. I collected my pay and drifted on eastward, talking to people of all classes—farmers, mechanics, shopowners, tramps, and such data as I gathered tallied with those of Intelligence.

About twenty-five percent of the population, in North America at least—it was higher in the Orient and Africa—was satisfied with the Imperium, felt they were better off than they would have been in the old days. “The Eridanians are pretty decent, on the whole. Some of 'em come in here and act nice and human as you please.”

Some fifty percent was vaguely dissatisfied, wanted “freedom” without troubling to define the term, didn’t like the taxes or the labor draft or the enforced disarmament or the legal and social superiority of Valgolians or some such thing, had perhaps suffered in the reconquest. But this group constituted no real threat. It would tend to be passive whatever happened. Its greatest contribution would be sporadic rioting.

The remaining twenty-five percent was bitter, waiting its chance, muttering of a day of revenge—and some portion of this segment was spreading propaganda, secretly manufacturing and distributing weapons, engaging in clandestine military drill, and maintaining contact with the shadowy Legion of Freedom.

Childish, melodramatic name! But it had been well chosen to appeal to a certain type of mind. The real, organized core of the anarch movement was highly efficient. In those months I spent wandering and waiting, its activities mounted almost daily.

The illegal radio carried unending programs, propaganda, fabricated stories of Valgolian brutality. I knew from personal experience that some were false, and I knew the whole Imperial system well enough to spot most of the rest at least partly invented. I realized we couldn’t trace such a well-organized setup of mobile and coordinated units, and jamming would have been poor tactics, but even so—

The day is coming. ... Earthmen, free men, be ready to throw off your shackles. ... Stand by for freedom!

I stuck to my role. When autumn came, I drifted into one of the native cities, New Chicago, a warren of buildings near the remains of the old settlement, the same gigantic slum that its predecessor had been. I got a room in a cheap hotel and a job in a steel mill.

I was Conrad Haugen, Norwegian-American, assigned to a spaceship by the labor draft and liking it well enough to re-enlist when my term was up. I had wandered through much of the Empire and had had a great deal of contact with Eridanians, but was most emphatically not a Terrie. In fact, I thought it would be well if the redskin yoke could be thrown off, both because of liberty and the good pickings to be had in the Galaxy if the Empire should collapse. I had risen to second mate on an interstellar tramp,

but could get no further because of the law that the two highest officers must be Valgolian. That had embittered me and I returned to Earth, footloose and looking for trouble.

I found it. With officer's training and the strength due to a home planet with a gravity half again that of Earth, I had no difficulty at all becoming a foreman. There was a big fellow named Mike Riley who thought he was entitled to the job. We settled it behind a shed, with the workmen looking on, and I beat him unconscious as fast as possible. The raw, sweating savagery of it made me feel ill inside. *They'd let this loose among the stars!*

After that I was one of the boys and Riley was my best friend. We went out together, wenching and drinking, raising hell in the cold dirty canyons of steel and stone which the natives called streets. *Valgolia, Valgolia, the clean bare windswept heights of your mountains, soughing trees and thunderous waters and Maara waiting for me to come home!* Riley often proposed that we find an Eridanian and beat him to death, and I would agree, hiccupping, because I knew they didn't go alone into native quarters any more. I sat in the smoky reek of the bars, half deafened by the clatter and raucousness called music, trying not to think of a certain low-ceilinged, quiet tavern amid the gardens of Kalariho, and sobbed the bitterness of Conrad Haugen into my beer.

"Dirty redskins," I muttered. "Dirty, stinking, bald-headed, sons of bitches. Them and their goddamn Empire. Why, y'know, if 't hadn' been f' their laws I'd be skipper o' my own ship now. I knew more'n that slob o' a captain. But he was born Eridanian—God, to get my hands on his throat!"

Riley nodded. Through the haze of smoke I saw that his eyes were narrowed. He wasn't drunk when he didn't want to be, and at times like this he was suddenly as sober as I was, and that in spite of not having a Valgolian liver.

I bided my time, not too obviously anxious to contact the Legion. I just thought they were swell fellows, the only brave men left in the rotten, stinking Empire; I'd sure be on their side when the day came. I worked in the mill, and when out with the boys lamented the fact that we were really producing for the damned Eridanians, we couldn't even keep the products of our own sweat. I wasn't obtrusive about it, of course. Most of the time

we were just boozing. But when the talk came to the Empire, I made it clear just where I stood.

The winter went. I continued the dreary round of days, wondering how long it would take, wondering how much time was left. If the Legion was at all interested, they would be checking my background right now. Let them. There wouldn't be much to check, but what there was had been carefully manufactured by the experts of the Intelligence Service.

Riley came into my room one evening. His face was tight, and he plunged to business. "Con, do you really mean all you've said about the Empire?"

"Why, of course. I—" I glanced out the window, as if expecting to see a spy. If there were any, I knew he would be native. The Empire just doesn't have enough men for a secret police, even if we wanted to indulge in that sort of historically ineffective control.

"You'd like to fight them? Like really to help the Legion of Freedom when they strike?"

"You bet your obscenity life!" I snarled. "When they land on Earth, I'll get a gun somewhere and be right there in the middle of the battle with them!"

"Yeah." Riley puffed a cigarette for a while. Then he said, "Look, I can't tell you much. I'm taking a chance just telling you this. It could mean my life if you passed it on to the Eridanians."

"I won't."

His eyes were bleak. "You damn well better not. If you're caught at that—"

He drew a finger sharply across his throat.

"Quit talking like a B-class stereo," I bristled. "If you've got something to tell me, let's have it. Otherwise get out."

"Yeah, sure. We checked up on you, Con, and we think you're as good a prospect as we ever came across. If you want to fight the Eridanians now—*join the Legion* now—here's your chance."

"My God, you know I do! But who—"

"I can't tell you a thing. But if you really want to join, memorize this." Riley gave me a small card on which was written a name and address.

“Destroy it, thoroughly. Then quit at the mill and drift to this other place, as if you’d gotten tired of your work and wanted to hit the road again. Take your time, don’t make a beeline for it. When you do arrive, they’ll take care of you.”

I nodded, grimly. “I’ll do it, Mike. And thanks!”

“Just my job.” He smiled, relaxing, and pulled a flask from his overcoat. “Okay, Con, that’s that. We’d better not go out to drink, after this, but nothing’s to stop us from getting stinko here.”

III

Spring had come and almost gone when I wandered into the little Maine town which was my destination. It lay out of the way, with forested hills behind it and the sea at its foot. Most of the houses were old, solidly built, almost like parts of the land, and the inhabitants were slow-spoken, steady folk, fishermen and artisans and the like, settled here and at home with the darkling woods and the restless sea and the high windy sky. I walked down a narrow street with a cool salt breeze ruffling my hair and decided that I liked Portsboro. It reminded me of my own home, twenty light-years away on the wide beaches of Kealvigh.

I made my way to Nat Hawkins’ store and asked for work like any drifter. But when we were alone in the back room, I told him, “I’m Conrad Haugen. Mike Riley said you’d be looking for me.”

He nodded calmly. “I’ve been expecting you. You can work here a few days, sleep at my house, and we’ll run the tests after dark.”

He was old for an Earthling, well over sixty, with white hair and lined leathery face. But his blue eyes were as keen and steady, his gnarled hands as strong and sure as those of any young man. He spoke softly and steadily, around the pipe which rarely left his mouth, and there was a serenity in him which I could hardly associate with anarch fanaticism. But the first night he led me into his cellar, and through a well-hidden trapdoor to a room below, and there he had a complete psychological laboratory.

I gaped at the gleaming apparatus. “How off Earth—”

“It came piece by piece, much of it from Epsilon Eridani itself,” he smiled. “There is, after all, no ban on humans owning such material. But to play safe, we spread the purchases over several years, and made them in the names of many people.”

“But you—”

“I took a degree in psychiatry once. I can handle this.”

He could. He put me through the mill in the next few nights—intelligence tests, psychometry, encephalography, narcosis, psycho-probing, everything his machines and his skill could cover. He did not find out anything we hadn’t meant to be found out. The Service had ways of guarding its agents with counter-blocks. But he got a very thorough picture of Conrad Haugen.

In the end he said, still calmly, “This is amazing. You have an I.Q. well over the borderline of genius, an astonishing variety of assorted knowledge about the Empire and about technical subjects, and an implacable hatred of Eridanian rule—based on personal pique and containing self-seeking elements, but no less firm for that. You’re out for yourself, but you’ll stand by your comrades and your cause. We’d never hoped for more recruits of your caliber.”

“When do I start?” I asked impatiently.

“Easy, easy,” he smiled. “There’s time. We’ve waited fifty years; we can wait a while longer.” He riffled through the dossier. “Actually, the difficulty is where to assign you. A man who knows astrogation, the use of weapons and machines, and the Empire, who is physically strong as a bull, can lead men, and has a dozen other accomplishments, really seems wasted on any single job. I’m not sure, but I think you’ll do best as a roving agent, operating between Main Base and the planets where we have cells, and helping with the work at the base when you’re there.”

My heart fairly leaped into my throat. This was more than *I* had dared hope for!

“I think,” said Nat Hawkins, “you’d better just drop out of sight now. Go to Hood Island and stay there till the spaceship comes next time. You can spend the interval profitably, resting and getting a little fattened up; you look half starved. And Barbara can tell you about the Legion.” His leather

face smiled itself into a mesh of fine wrinkles. "I think you deserve that, Conrad. And so does Barbara."

Mentally, I shrugged. My stay in New Chicago had pretty well convinced me that all Earthling females were sluts. And what of it?

The following night, Hawkins and I rowed out to Hood Island. It lay about a mile offshore, a wooded, rocky piece of land on which a moon-whitened surf boomed and rattled. The place had belonged to the Hood family since the first settlements here, but Barbara was the last of them.

Hawkins' voice came softly to me above the crash of surf, the surge of waves and windy roar of trees as we neared the dock. "She has more reason than most to hate the Eridanians. The Hoods used to be great people around here. They were just about ruined when the redskins first came a-conquering, space bombardment wiped out their holdings, but they made a new start. Then her grandfather and all his brothers were killed in the revolt. Ten years ago, her father was caught while trying to hijack a jetload of guns, and her mother didn't live long after that. Then her brother was drafted into a road crew and reported killed in an accident. Since then she hasn't lived for much except the Legion."

"I don't blame her," I said. My voice was a little tight, for indeed I didn't. But somebody has to suffer; civilization has a heavy price. I couldn't help adding, "But the Empire's lately begun paying pensions to cases like that."

"I know. She draws hers, too, and uses it for the Legion."

That, of course, was the reason for the pensions.

The boat bumped against the dock. Hawkins threw the painter up to the man who suddenly emerged from the shadow. I saw the cold silver moonlight gleam off the rifle in his hand. "You know me, Eb," said Hawkins. "This here's Con Haugen. I slipped you the word about him."

"Glad to know you, Con." Eb's horny palm clasped mine. I liked his looks, as I did those of most of the higher-up Legionnaires. They were altogether different from the low-caste barbarians who were all the rebels I'd seen before. They had a great load of ignorance to drag with them.

We went up a garden path to a rambling stone house. Inside, it was long and low and filled with the memoirs of more gracious days, art and fine furniture, books lining the walls, a fire crackling ruddily in the living room.

"Barbara Hood—Conrad Haugen."

Almost, I gaped at her. I had expected some gaunt, dowdy fanatic, a little mad perhaps. But she was—well, she was tall and supple and clad in a long dark-blue evening gown that shimmered against her white skin. She was not conventionally pretty, her face was too strong for all of its fine lines, but she had huge blue eyes and a wide soft mouth and a stubborn chin. The light glowed gold on the hair that tumbled to her shoulders.

I blurted something out and she smiled, with a curious little twist that somehow caught in me, and said merely, “Hello, Conrad.”

“Glad to be here,” I mumbled.

“The spaceship should arrive in a month or so,” she went on. “I’ll teach you as much as I can in that time. And you’d better get your own special knowledge onto a record wire, just in case. I understand you’ve been in the Vegan System, for instance, which nobody else in the Legion knows very much about.”

Her tone was cool and businesslike, but with an underlying warmth. It was like the sea wind which blew over the islands, and as reviving. I recovered myself and helped mix some drinks. The rest of the evening passed very pleasantly.

Later a servant showed me to my room, a big one overlooking the water. I lay for a while listening to the waves, thinking drowsily how rebellion, when its motives were honest, drew in the best natives of any world, and presently I fell asleep.

The month passed all too quickly and agreeably. I learned things which Intelligence had spent the last three years trying to find out, and dared not attempt to transmit the information. That was maddening, though I knew there was time. But otherwise—

I puttered about the place. There were only three servants, old family retainers who had also joined the anarchists. They had little modern machinery, and of course Earthlings weren’t allowed robots, so there was need for an extra man or two. I cut wood and repaired the roof and painted the boathouse, spaded the garden and cleared out brush and set up a new picket fence. It was good to use my hands and muscles again.

And then Barbara was around to help with most of what I did. In jeans and jersey, the sun ablaze on her hair, laughing at my clumsy jokes or frowning over some tough bit of work, she was another being than the cool, lovely woman who talked books and music and history with me in the evenings, or the crisp bitter anarchist who spat facts and figures at me like an

angry machine. And yet they were all her. I remembered Ydis, who was dead, and the old pain stirred again. But Barbara was alive.

She was more alive to me than most of Valgolia.

I make no apologies for my feelings. I had been away from anything resembling home for some two years now. But I was careful to remain merely friendly with Barbara.

She didn't know a great deal about the rebel movement—no one agent on Earth did—but her knowledge was still considerable. There was a fortified base somewhere out in space, built up over a period of four years with the help of certain unnamed elements or planets outside the Empire. I suspected several rival states of that!

Weapons of all kinds were manufactured there in quantities sufficient to arm the million or so rebels of the “regular” force, the twenty million or so in the Solar System and elsewhere who held secret drills and conducted terrorist activities, and the many millions more who were expected to rise spontaneously when the rebel fleet struck.

There was close coordination and a central command at Main Base for the undergrounds of all dissatisfied planets—a new and formidable feature which had not been present in the earlier uprisings. There were rumors of a new and terrible weapon being developed.

In any case, the plan was to assault Epsilon Eridani itself simultaneously with the uprisings in the colonies, so that the Imperial fleet would be recalled to defend the mother world. The anarchists hoped to blast Valgolia to ruin in a few swift blows, and expected that the Empire's jealous neighbors would sweep in to complete the wreckage.

This gentle girl spoke of the smashing of worlds, the blasting of helpless humans, and the destruction of a culture as if it were a matter of insect extermination.

“Have you ever thought,” I asked casually once, “that the Juranians and the Slighs and our other hypothetical allies may not respect the integrity of Sol any more than the Eridanians do?”

“We can handle them,” she answered confidently. “Oh, it won't be easy, that time of transition. But we'll be free.”

“And what then?” I went on. “I don’t want to be defeatist, Barbara, but you know as well as I do that the Eridanians didn’t conquer all mankind at a single swoop. When they invented the interstellar engine and arrived here, man was tearing the Solar System apart in a war between super-nations that was rapidly reducing him to barbarism. The redskins traded for a while, sold arms, some of their adventurers took sides in the conflict, the government stepped in to protect Eridanian citizens and investments—the side which the Eridanians helped won the war, then found its allies were running things and tried to revolt against the protectorate—and without really meaning to, the strangers were conquering and ruling Earth.

“But the different factions of man still hate each other’s guts. There are still capitalists and communists, blacks, whites and Browns, Hindus and Muslims, Germans and Frenchmen, city people and country people—a million petty divisions. There’ll be civil war as soon as the Eridanians are gone.”

“Some, perhaps,” she agreed. “But I think it can be handled. If we have to have civil wars, well, let’s get them over with and live as free men.”

Personally, I could see nothing in the sort of military dictatorship that would inevitably arise which was preferable to an alien, firm, but just rule that insured stability and a reasonable degree of individual liberty.

But I didn’t say that aloud.

Another time we talked of the de-industrialization of Earth. Barbara was, of course, venomous about it. “We were rich once,” she said. “All Earth was. We have one of the richest planets in the Galaxy. But because their own world is poor, the redskins have to take the natural resources of their conquests. Earth is a granary and a lumberyard for Valgolia, and the iron of Mars and the petrolite of Venus go back to their industry. What few factories they allow us, they take their fat percentage of the product.”

“Certainly they’ve made us economically dependent,” I said, “and their standard of living is undoubtedly higher than ours. But ours has, on the whole, gone up since the conquest. We eat better, we’re healthier, we aren’t burdened with the cost of past and present and future wars. Our natural resources aren’t being squandered. The forests and watersheds and farmlands we ruined are coming back under Eridanian supervision.”

She gave me an odd look. "I thought you didn't like the Empire."

"I don't," I growled. "I don't want to be held back just because I'm white-skinned. But I've known enough reddies personally so that I try to be fair."

"It's all right with me," she said. "I can see your point, intellectually, though I can't really *feel* it. But not many of the people will out at Main Base."

"Free men," I muttered sardonically.

We went fishing, and swam in the tumbling surf, and stretched lazily on the beach with the sun pouring over us. Or we might go tramping off into the woods on a picnic, to run laughing back when a sudden rain rushed out of the sky, and afterward sit with beer and cheese sandwiches listening to a wire of Beethoven or Mozart or Tchaikovsky—the old Earthlings could write music, if they did nothing else!—and to the rain shouting on the roof. We might have a little highly illegal target practice, or a game of chess, or long conversations which wandered off every which way. I began to have a sneaking hope that the spaceship would be delayed.

We went out one day in Barbara's little catboat. The waves danced around us, chuckling against the hull, glittering with sunlight, and the sail was like a snow mountain against the sky. For a while we chatted dreamily, ate our lunch, threw the scraps to the hovering gulls. Then Barbara fell silent.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. Touch of *Weltschmerz*, maybe." She smiled at me. "You know, Con, you don't really belong in the Legion."

"How so?" I raised my eyebrows.

"You—well, you're so darned honest, so really decent under that carefully rough surface, so—reasonable. You'll never make a good fanatic."

Honest! I looked away from her. The bright day seemed suddenly to darken.

IV

Spaceships from Main Base had little trouble coming to Earth with their cargoes of guns, propaganda, instructors, and whatever else the rebels on the planet needed. They would take up an orbit just beyond the atmosphere and send boats to the surface after dark. There was little danger of their being detected if they took the usual precautions; a world is simply too big to blockade completely.

Ours dropped on noiseless gravitic beams into the nighted island woods. We had been watching for it the last few days, and now Eb came running to tell us it was here. The pilot followed after him.

“Harry Kane, Conrad Haugen,” Barbara introduced us.

I shook hands, sizing him up. He was tall for an Earthling, almost as big as I, dark-haired, with good-looking young features. He wore some approximation of a uniform, dark-blue tunic and breeches, peaked cap, captain’s insignia, which gave him a rather dashing look. It shouldn’t have made any difference to me, of course, but I didn’t like the way he smiled at Barbara.

She explained my presence, and he nodded eagerly. “Glad to have you, Haugen. We need good men, and badly.” Then to her: “Get Hawkins. You and he are recalled to Main Base.”

“What? But—”

A dark exultation lit his face. “The time for action is near—very near! We’re pulling all our best agents off the planets. They can work more effectively with the fleet now.”

I tried to look as savagely gleeful as they, but inwardly I groaned. How in all the hells was I going to contact Vorka? If I were stranded out in space when the fleet got under way—no, they must have an ultrabeam. I’d manage somehow to call on that even if they caught me at it.

We sent Eb in a boat to get Hawkins while Barbara and I packed a few necessities. Kane paced back and forth, spilling out the news from Main Base, word of mighty forces gathering, rumors of help promised from outside, it was like the thunder which mutters just before a gale.

Presently Hawkins arrived. The old man’s calm was undisturbed: he puffed his pipe and said quietly, “I called up my housekeeper, told her my sister in California was suddenly taken sick and I was leaving at once for the transcontinental jetport. Just to account for disappearing, you know. There aren’t any Eridanians or Terries hereabouts, but we desperate characters—” he grinned, briefly—“can’t be too careful. Brought my

equipment along, of course. I suppose they want me to do psychometry on fleet personnel?"

"Something on that order. I don't know."

We made our way through a fine drizzle of rain to the little torpedo of the spaceboat. I looked around into the misty dark and breathed a deep lungful of the cool wet wind. And I saw that Barbara was doing the same.

She smiled up at me through the night and the thin sad rain. "Earth is a beautiful world, Con," she whispered. "I wonder if we'll ever see it again."

I squeezed her hand, silently, and we crowded into the boat.

Kane made a smooth takeoff. In minutes we were beyond the atmosphere, Earth was a great glowing shield of cloudy blue behind us, and the stars were bitter bright against darkness. We sent a coded call signal and got a directional beam from the ship. Before long we were approaching it.

I studied the lean black cruiser. She seemed to be of about the same design as the old Solarian interplanetary ships, modified somewhat to accommodate the star drive. Apparently, she was one of those built at Main Base. Her bow guns were dark shadows against the clotted cold silver of the Milky Way. I thought of the death and the ruin which could flame from them, I thought of the hell she and her kind bore—atomic bombs, radiodust bombs, chemical bombs, disease bombs, gravity snatchers, needle beams, disintegrative shells, darkness and doom and the new barbarism—and felt a stiffening within me. Fostering this murderousness was a frightful risk. The main defense against it was Intelligence, and that depended on agents like myself. Perhaps *only* myself.

The crew was rather small, no battles being anticipated. But they were well disciplined, uniformed and trained, a new Solarian army built up from the fragments of the old. The captain was a stiff gray German who had been a leader in the earlier revolt and since fled to space, but most of the officers, such as Kane, were young and violent in their eagerness.

We orbited around the planet for another day or so till all the boats had returned. There was tension in the ship—if the Imperial navy should happen to spot us, we were done. Off duty, we would sit around talking, smoking, playing games with little concentration.

Kane spent most of his free hours with Barbara. They had much to talk about. I swallowed a certain irrational jealousy and wandered around cautiously pumping as many men as I could.

We got under way at last. By this time I had learned that Main Base was a planet, but no more. Only the highest leadership of the Legion knew its location, and they were pledged to swallow the poison they always carried if there seemed to be any danger of capture.

For several days by the clocks we ran outward, roughly toward Draco. Our velocity was not revealed, and the slow shift in the outside view didn't help much. I guess that we had come perhaps ten parsecs, but that was only a guess.

"Approaching Main Base. Stand by."

When the call rang hollowly down the ship's passageways, I could feel the weariness and tautness easing, I could see homecoming in the faces around me. I stole a glance at Barbara. Her eyes were wide and her lips parted, she looked ahead as if to stare through the metal walls. She had never been here either, here where all her dreams came home.

So we landed, we slipped down out of the dark and the cold and the void, and I heard the rattle and groan of metal easing into place. When the ship's interior grav-field was turned off, I felt a sudden heaviness; this world had almost a quarter again the pull of Earth. But people got used to that quickly enough. It was the landscape which was hard to bear.

They had told us that even though Boreas had a breathable atmosphere and a temperature not always fatally low, it was a bleak place. But to one who had never been far from the lovely lands of Earth, its impact was like a blow in the face. Barbara shuddered close to me as we came out of the airlock, and I put an arm about her waist, knowing the sudden feeling of loneliness which rose in her.

Save for the spaceport and other installations, Main Base was underground. There was no city to relieve the grimness of the scene. We were in a narrow valley between sheer, ragged cliffs that soared crazily into a murky sky. The sun was low, a smouldering disc of dull red like curdling blood; its sullen

light glimmered on the undying snow and ice and seemed only to make the land darker. Stars glittered here and there in the dusky heavens, hard and bright and cruel, almost, as in space.

Dark sky, dark land, dark world, with the sheer terrible mountains climbing gauntly for the upper gloom, crags and glaciers like fangs against the dizzy cliffs, with the great shadows marching across the bloody snow toward us, with a crazed wind muttering and whining and chewing at our flesh. It was cold. The cold was like a knife. Pain stung with every breath and eyes watered with tears that froze on suddenly numb cheeks. A great shudder ripped through us and we ran toward the entrance to the city. The snow crunched dry and old under our boots, the cold ate up through the soles, and the wind whistled its scorn.

Even when an elevator had taken us a mile down into the warmth and light of the base, we could not forget. It was a city for a million men and other beings and more than a few women and children, a city of long streets and small neat apartments, hydroponic farms and food synthesizers, schools, shops and amusement places, factories, military barracks and arsenals, even an occasional little flower garden. Its people could live here almost indefinitely, working and waiting for their day of rising.

There was little formality in the civilian areas. Everyone who had come this far was trusted. A man came up to us new arrivals from Earth, asked about conditions there, and then said he would show us to our quarters. Later we would be told to whom we should report for duty.

“Let’s go, then, Con,” said Barbara, and slipped a cool little hand into mine. I could not refrain from casting a smug backward glance at the somewhat chapfallen Kane.

V

We slipped quickly into the routine of the place. It was a taut-nerved, hardworking daily round. I could feel the savage expectancy building up like a physical force, but intelligent life is adaptable and we got used to it. There was work to do.

Hawkins was second in command of the psychological service, testing and screening and treating personnel, working on training and indoctrination, and with a voice in the general staff where problems of unit coordination and psychological warfare were concerned. Barbara worked under him, secretary and records keeper and general troubleshooter. Those were high posts, but both were allowed to retain the nominally civilian status which they preferred.

Their influence and my own test scores got me appointed assistant supervisor of the shipyards. That suited me very well—I was reasonably free from direct orders and discipline, with authority to come and go pretty much as I pleased. They kept me busy; sometimes I worked the clock around, and I did my best to further production of the weapons which might destroy my planet. For whatever I did would make little difference at this late date.

A good deal of my time also went to drill with the armed forces of which, like every able-bodied younger man, I was a reserve member. They put me in an engineer unit and I soon had command of it. I did my best here too, whipping my grim young charges into a sapper group comparable to the Empire's, for I had to be above all suspicion, even of incompetence.

We worked at our learning. We went topside and shivered and manned our guns, set our mines and threw up our bridges, in the racking cold of Boreas. Over ancient snow and ice we trotted, lost in the jumbled wilderness of cruel peaks and railing wind, peeling the skin from our fingers when we touched metal, camped under scornful stars and a lash of drifting ice-dust—but we learned!

My own, more private education went on apace. I found where we were. It was a forgotten red dwarf star out near the shadowy border of the Empire, listed in the catalogues as having one Class III planet of no interest or value. That was a good choice; no spaceship would ever happen into this system by accident or exploration. The anarchs had built their hopes on the one lonely planet, and had named it Boreas after the god of the north wind in one of their mythologies. My company called it less complimentary things.

The base, including the attached city, was under military command which ultimately led up to the general staff of the Legion. This was a council of officers from half a score of rebellious planets, though Earthlings predominated and, of course, Simon Levinsohn held the supreme authority. I met him a few times, a gaunt, lonely man, enormously able, ridden by his

cause as by a nightmare, but not unkindly on a personal level. With just that indomitable heart, the Maccabees had faced Rome's iron legions—Valgolia was greatly interested in the ancient history of a conquered province, knowing how often it held the key to current problems.

There was also a liaison officer from Luron sitting at staff meetings. Luron!

When I first saw him, this Colonel Wergil, I stood stiff and cold and felt the bristling along my spine. He looked as humanoid as most of the races at the base. Hairless, faintly scaled greenish-yellow skin, six fingers to a hand, and flat chinless face don't make that breed hideous to me; I have reckoned Ganolons and Mergri among my friends. But Luron—the old and deadly rival, the lesser empire watching its chance to pounce on us, hating us for the check we are on the ambitions of their militarists, Luron.

I have no race prejudices and am willing to take the word of our comparative psychologists that there is no more inherent evil in the Luronians than in any other stock, that the peculiar cold viciousness of their civilization is a matter of unfortunate cultural rather than biological evolution and could be changed in time. But none of this alters the fact that at present they are what they are, brilliant, greedy, heartless, and a menace to the peace of the Galaxy. I have been too long engaged in the struggle between my nation and theirs to think otherwise.

Other states had sent some clandestine help to the Legion, weapons and money and vague promises. Luron, I soon found, had said it would attack us in full strength if the uprising showed a good chance of success, and meanwhile, they gave assistance, credits and materiel and the still more important machine tools, and Wergil's military advice was useful.

I know now, as I suspected even then, that Levinsohn and his associates were not fooled as to Luron's ultimate intentions. Indeed, they planned to make common cause with what remained of Valgolia, as well as certain other traditional foes of their present ally, as soon as they had gained their objectives of independence, and stop any threat of aggression from Luron. It was shrewdly planned, but such a shaky coalition, still bleeding with the hurts and hatreds of a struggle just ended, would be weaker than the

Empire, and Luron almost certainly would have sowed further dissension in it and waited for its decay before striking.

The Earthlings have a proverb to the effect that he who sups with the Devil must use a long spoon. But they seemed to have forgotten it now.

The attack, I learned, was scheduled for about four months from the time the agents were recalled. The rebels were counting on the Valgolian power being spread too thinly over the Empire to stand off their massed assault on a few key points. Then, with the home planet a radioactive ruin, with revolt in a score of planetary systems and the ensuing chaos and communications breakdown, and with the Luronians invading, the Imperial fleet and military would have to make terms with the anarchs.

It would work. I knew with a dark chill that it would work. Unless somehow I could get a warning out. That had to be done for more than the protection of Epsilon Eridani, which, even in a surprise attack could defend itself better than these conspirators realized. But all bloodshed should be spared, if possible—and the rebellion did not yet deserve to succeed, for the unity achieved thus far had been the unity of a snake pit against a temporary enemy.

Did it all rest on me? God of space, had the whole burden of history suddenly fallen on *my* shoulders?

I didn't dare think about it. I forced the consequences of failure out of my forebrain, back down into the unconscious, the breeding ground of nightmares, and lived from one day to the next. I worked, and waited, learned what I could and watched for my chance.

But it was not all grimness and concentration. It couldn't be; intelligent life just isn't built that way. We had our social activities, small gatherings or big parties, we relaxed and played. At first I found that gratifying, for it gave me a chance to pump the others. Then I found it maddening, because it kept me from snooping and laying plans. Finally it began to hurt—I was coming to know the anarchs.

They lived and laughed and loved even as humans do. They were basically as decent and reasonable as any similar group of Valgolians. Many were as tormented as I by the thought of the slaughter they readied. There were embittered ones, who had lost all they held dear, and I realized that,

while civilization has its price, you can't be objective about it when you are the one who must pay. There were others who had been well off and had chucked all their hopes to join a desperate cause in which they happened to believe. There were children—and what had they done to deserve having their parents gambling away life?

In spite of their appearance, to which I was now accustomed, they were *human*. When I had laughed and talked and sung and drunk beer and danced and arranged entertainments with them, they were my friends.

Moodily, I began to see that I would be one of the price-payers.

I saw most of Hawkins and Barbara, and after them—because of her—Kane. The old psychologist and I got along famously. He would drop into my room for a smoke and a cup of coffee and a drawled conversation whenever he had the chance. His slow gentle voice, his trenchancy, the way the little crinkles appeared around his eyes when he smiled, reminded me of my father. I often wish those two could have met. They would have enjoyed each other.

Then Barbara would stop by on her way from work, or, better yet, she would ask me over to her apartment for a home-cooked dinner. Yes, she could cook too. We would sometimes take long walks down the corridors of the city, we even went up once in a while to the surface for a breath of cold air and loneliness, and it was the most natural thing in the world for us to go hand in hand.

There was no sunlight underground. But when the fluorotube glow shone on her hair, I thought of sunlight on Earth, the high keen light of the Colorado plateaus, the morning light stealing through the trees of Hood Island.

Ydis, Ydis, I said, once your violet eyes were like the skies over Kalariho, over Kealvigh, our home, pasture land of winds. But it has been so long. It has been ten years since you died—

I fought. May all the gods bear witness that I fought myself. And I thought I was winning.

VI

I will never forget one certain evening.

Hawkins and I had come over to Barbara's for supper, and the three of us were sitting now, talking. Wieniawski's *Violin Concerto* cried its sorrow, muted in the background, and the serene home she had made of the bare little functional apartment folded itself around us. Then Kane dropped in as he often did, with a casualness that fooled nobody, and sat with all his soul in his eyes, looking at Barbara. He was a nice kid. I didn't know why he should annoy me so.

The talk shifted to Valgolia. I found myself taking the side of my race. It wasn't that I hoped to convert anyone, but—well, it was wrong that we should be monsters in the sight of these friends.

"Brutes," said Kane. "Two-legged animals. Damned bald-headed, copper-skinned giants. Wouldn't be quite so bad if they were octopi or insects, but they're just enough different from us to be a caricature. It's obscene."

"Sartons look like a dirty joke on mankind," I said. "Why don't you object to them?"

"They're in the same boat as us."

"Then why mix political and esthetic prejudices? And have you ever thought that you look just as funny to an Eridanian?"

"No race should look odd to another," said Nat Hawkins. He puffed blue clouds. "Even by our standards, the redskins are handsome, in a more spectacular way than humans, maybe."

"And Barbara," I smiled, with a curious little pang inside me, "would look good to any humanoid."

"I should think so," said Kane sulkily. "The redskins took enough of our women."

"Well," I said, "their original conquistadores were young and healthy, very far from home, and had just finished a hard campaign where they lost many friends. At least there were no half-breeds afterward. And since the reconquest none of their soldiers has been permitted to have anything to do with an Earthwoman against her consent. It's not their fault if the consent is forthcoming oftener than you idealists think."

"That sort of thing was more or less standard procedure at home with them, wasn't it?" asked Hawkins.

I nodded. “The harshness of their native world forced them to develop their technology faster than on Earth, so they kept a lot of barbarian customs well into the industrial age. For instance, the rulers of the state that finally conquered all the others and unified the planet took the title *Waelsing*, Emperor, and it’s still a monarchy in theory. But a limited monarchy these days, with parliamentary democracy and even local self-government of the town-meeting sort. They’re highly civilized now.”

“I wouldn’t call that spree of conquest they went on exactly civilized.”

“Well, just for argument’s sake, let’s try to look at it from their side,” I answered. “Here their explorers arrived at Sol, found a system richer than they could well imagine—and all the wealth being burned up in fratricidal war. Their technical power was sufficiently beyond ours so that any band of adventurers could do pretty much as it wanted in the Solar System, and all native states were begging for their help. It was inevitable that they’d mix in.

“Sure, the Eridanians have been exploiting Solarian resources, though perhaps more wisely than we did. Sure, they garrison unwilling planets. But from their point of view, they’re slowly civilizing a race of atomic-powered savages, and taking no more than their just reward for it. Sure, they’ve done hideous things, or were supposed to have, but there’ve been plenty of reforms in their policy since our last revolt. They’ve adopted the—the red man’s burden.”

“Could be. But Sol wasn’t their only conquest.”

“Oh, well, of course they had their time of all-out imperialism. There are still plenty of the old school around, starward the course of empire, keep the lesser breeds in their place, and so on. That’s one reason why the highest posts are still reserved for members of their own race, another being that even the liberal ones don’t trust us that far, yet.

“Their first fifty years or so saw plenty of aggression. But then they stabilized. They had as much as they could manage. To put it baldly, the Empire is glutted. And now, without actually admitting they ever did wrong, they’re trying to make up what they did to many of their victims.”

“They could do that easily enough. Just let us go free.”

“I’ve already told you why they don’t dare. Apart from fearing us, they’re economically and militarily dependent on their colonies. You’re an American, Nat. Why didn’t our nation let the South go its own way when it wanted to secede? Why don’t we all go back to Europe and let the Indians have our country?”

“And, of course, Epsilon Eridani honestly thinks it has a great civilizing mission, and is much better for the natives than any lesser independence could ever be. In some cases, you’ve got to admit they’re right. Have you ever seen a real simon-pure native king in action? Or read the history of nations like Germany and Russia? And why do we have to segregate races and minorities even in our own organization to prevent clashes?”

“We’re getting there,” said Nat Hawkins. “It’s not easy, but we’ll make it.”

Only you’re not there yet, I thought, and for that reason you must be stopped.

“You claim they’re sated,” said Barbara. “But they’ve kept on conquering here and there, to this very day.”

“Believe it or not, but with rare exceptions that’s been done reluctantly. Peripheral systems have learned how to build star ships, become nuisances or outright menaces, and the Empire has had to swallow them. Modern technology is simply too deadly for anarchy. A full-scale war can sterilize whole planets. That’s another function of empire, so the Eridanians claim—just to keep civilization going till something better can be worked out.”

“Such as what?”

“Well, several worlds already have *donagangor* status—self-government under the Emperor, representatives in the Imperial Council, and no restrictions on personal advancement of their citizens. Virtual equality with the Valgolians. And their policy is to grant such status to any colony they think is ready for it.”

Hawkins shook his head. “Won’t do, Con. It sounds nice, but old Tom Jefferson had the right idea. ‘If men must wait in slavery until they are ready for freedom, they will wait long indeed.’”

“Who said we were slaves—” I began.

“You talk like a damned reddie yourself,” said Kane. “You seem to think pretty highly of the Empire.”

I gave him a cold look. "What do you think I'm doing here?" I snapped.

"Yeah. Yeah, sorry. I'm kind of tired. Maybe I'd better go now." Before long Kane made some rather moody good nights and went out.

Nat Hawkins twinkled at me. "I'm a little bushed myself," he said. "Guess I'll hit the bunk too."

When he was gone, I sat smoking and trying to gather up the will to leave. There was a darkness in me. What, after all, *was* I doing here? Gods, I believed I was in the right, but why is right so pitiless?

On Earth they represent the goddess of justice as blind. On Valgolia she has fangs.

Barbara came over and sat on the arm of my chair. "What's the matter, Con?" she asked. "You look pretty grim these days."

"My work's developing some complications," I said tonelessly. My mind added: *It sure is. No way to call headquarters, the rebellion gathering enormous momentum, and on a basis of treachery and racial hatred.*

Barbara's fingers rumbled my hair, the grafted hair which by now felt more a part of me than my own lost crest. "You're an odd fellow," she said quietly. "On the surface so frank and friendly and cheerful, and down underneath you're hiding yourself and your private unhappiness."

"Why," I looked up at her, astonished, "even the psychologists—"

"They're limited, Con. They can measure, but they can't feel. Not the way—"

She stopped, and the light glowed in her hair and her eyes were wide and serious on mine and one small hand stole over to touch my fingers. Blindly, I wrenched my face away.

Her voice was low. "It's some other woman, isn't it?"

"Other—? Well, no. There was one, but she's dead now. She died ten years ago."

Ydis, Ydis!

"Your wife?"

I nodded. "We were only married for three years. My daughter is still alive; she's going on twelve now. But I haven't seen her for over two years. She's not on Earth. I wonder if she even thinks of me."

"Con," said Barbara, very softly and gravely, "you can't go on mourning a woman forever."

"I'm not. Forget it. I shouldn't have spoken about it."

"You needed to. That's all right."

“My girl ought to have a mother—” The words came of themselves. What followed thereafter seemed also to happen without my willing it.

Presently Barbara stood back from me. She was laughing, low and sweet and joyous. “Con, you old sourpuss, cheer up! It isn’t that bad, you know!”

I managed a wry grin, though it seemed to need all the energies left in me. “You look so happy your fool self that I have to counterbalance it.”

“Con, if you knew how I’d been hoping!”

We talked for a long time, but she did most of it—the plans, the hopes, the trip we were going to take and the house we were going to build down by the seashore—“Mary,” my daughter, was going to have a home, along with the dozen brothers and sisters she’d have in due course—after the war.

After the war.

I left, finally, stumbling like a blind man toward my quarters. Oh, yes, I loved her and she loved me and we were going to have a home and a sailboat and a dozen children, after the war, when Earth was free. What more could a man ask for?

It had been many years since I’d needed autohypnosis to put myself to sleep, but I used it now.

VII

The delay was partly due to the slowness with which I had to work, even after a plan had been laid. I could only do a little at a time, and the times had to be well separated. Each day brought the moment of onslaught closer, but I dared not hurry myself. If they caught me at my work, there would be an end of all things.

But I cannot swear that my own mind did not prompt me to an unnatural slowness and caution. I was only human, and every day was one more memory.

They had all been very good to us; our friends had a party to celebrate our engagement and we were universally congratulated and all the rest of it. Yes, Kane was there too, shaking my hand and wishing me all the luck in

the world. Afterward he went back to his work and his pilot's practice with a strange fierceness.

If at times I fell into glum abstraction, well, I had always been a little moody and Barbara could tease me out of it. Most of the times I was with her, I didn't think about the future at all.

There had been a certain deep inward coldness to her. She had carried the old wound of her losses with bitter dignity. But as the days went on, I saw less and less of it. She would even admit that individual Valgolians might be fine fellows and that the Empire had done a few constructive things for Earth. But it was more than a change of attitude. She was thawing after a long winter, she laughed more, she was wholly human now.

Human—

We sat one evening, she and I, in one of the big lounges the base had for its personnel. There were only one or two muted lights in the long quiet room, a breathing of music, snatches of whispering like our own. She sat close against me, and my lips kept straying down to brush her hair and her cheek.

"When we're married—" she said dreamily. Then all at once: "Con, what are we waiting for?"

I looked at her in some surprise.

"Con, why do we assume we can't get married before the war's over?" Her voice was low and hurried, shaking just a little. "The base here has chaplains. It's less than a month now till the business starts. God knows what'll happen then. Either of us might be killed." I heard her gulp. "Con, if they killed you—"

"They won't," I said. "I'm kill-proof."

"No, no. We have so little time, and it may be all we'll ever have. Marry me now, darling, dearest, and at least there'll be something to remember. Whatever comes, we'll have had that while."

"I tell you," I insisted, with a sudden hideous dismay, "there's nothing to worry about. Forget it."

"Oh, I'm not asking for pity. I've more happiness now than is right. Maybe that's why I'm afraid. But, Con, they killed my father and they

killed my mother and they killed Jimmy, and if they take you too, it'll be more than I can stand."

The savage woe of an old Earthly poet lanced through my brain:

*The time is out of joint
O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born
To set it right!*

And then, for just a moment, there came the notion of yielding. *You love the girl, Conru. You love her so much it's a pain in you. Well, take her! Marry her!*

No. I was not excessively tender of heart or conscience, but neither was I that kind of scoundrel.

I kissed her words away. Afterward, alone in the darkness of my room, I realized that Conrad Haugen had no good reason to hang back. It was true, all she said was true, and no other couple was waiting for an uncertain future.

It was the time for action.

I had been ready for days now, postponing the moment. And those days were marching to the time of war, the rebels were quivering to go, a scant few weeks at most lay between me and the ruin of Valgolian plans and work and hope.

In my steadily expanding official capacity, I could go anywhere and do almost anything in an engineering line. So, bit by bit, I had tinkered with the base's general alarm system.

We had scoutships posted, of course, but by the very nature of things they had to be close to the planet or an approaching enemy would slip between them without detection. And the substantial vibrations of a ship traveling faster than light do not arrive much ahead of the ship itself. Whatever warning we had of a hypothetical assault would be very short. It would be signaled to all of us by a siren on the intercommunications system, and after that it would be battle stations, naval units to their ships and all others to such ground defenses as we had.

But modern warfare is all to the offense. There is no way of stopping an attack from space except by meeting it and annihilating it before it gets to its destination. The rebels were counting on that fact to aid them when they struck, but it would, of course, work against them if their enemy should happen to hit first. Everyone was understandably nervous about the chance of our being discovered and assailed.

Working a little at a time, I had put a special switch in the general alarm circuit. It showed up merely as one of many on a sector call board near my room; no one was likely to notice it. And my quarters were not those originally given me. I had moved to a smaller place farther from Barbara, ostensibly to be near my work at the shipyards, actually to be near the base's ultrabeam shack.

Now it was time to act.

I needed an excuse for not going to the gun turret where I was assigned. That involved faking a serious fever, but like all Intelligence men, I had been trained to full psychosomatic integration. The same neural forces that in hysteria produce paralysis, stigmata, and other real symptoms were under my conscious control. I thought myself sick. By morning I was half delirious and my veins were on fire.

The surgeon general came to see me. "What the hell's the trouble?" he wondered. "This place is supposed to be sterile."

"Maybe it's too damn sterile," I murmured with a perfectly genuine weakness. Then, fighting the lightheadedness that hummed and buzzed in me: "*Tsitbu* fever, Doc. I'm sure that's what it is."

"Can't say I've ever heard of it."

"You'll find it in your medical books." He would, too. "It's found on the planet Sirius V, where I once visited. Filter-passing virus, transmitted by airborne spores. Not contagious here. In humans it becomes chronic; no ill effects except a few days' fever like this every few years. Now go 'way and lemme die in peace." I closed my eyes on the distorted and unreal world of sickness.

Later Barbara came in, pale and with her hair like a rumpled halo. I had to assure her many times that I was all right and would be on my feet in two or

three days. Then she smiled and sat down on the bunk and passed a cool palm over my forehead.

“Poor Con,” she said. “Poor squarehead.”

“I feel fine as long as you’re here,” I whispered.

“Don’t talk,” she said. “Just go to sleep.” She kissed me and sat quiet. Hers was the rare gift of being a definite personality even when silent and motionless. I clasped her hand and pretended to fall into uneasy sleep. After a while she kissed me again, very softly, and went out.

I told my body to recover. It took time, hours of time, while the stubborn cells retreated to a normal level of activity. I lay there thinking of many things, most of them unpleasant.

It was well into the night, the logical time to act even if the factories did go on a twenty-four hour basis.

I got up, still swaying a little with weakness, the dregs of the fever ringing in my head. After I had vomited and swallowed a stimulant tablet, I felt better. I put on my uniform, but substituted a plain service jacket without insignia of rank for the tunic. That should make me fairly inconspicuous in the confusion.

Strength came. I glanced cautiously along the dim-lit corridor, and it was empty and silent. I stole out and hurried toward the ultrabeam shack. My hidden switch was on the way; I threw it and ran on with lowered head.

The siren screamed behind me, before me, around me, the howling of all the devils in hell—*Hoo! hoo! Battle stations! Strange ships approaching! Battle stations! All hands to battle stations! Hoo-oo!*

I could imagine the pandemonium that erupted, men boiling out of factories and rooms, cursing and yelling and dashing frantically for their posts—children screaming in terror, women white-faced with sudden numbness—weapons manned, instruments sweeping the skies, spaceships roaring heavenward, incoherent yelling on the intercoms to find out who had given that signal. With luck, I would have fifteen minutes or half an hour of safe insanity.

A few men raced by me, on their way to the nearest missile rack. They paid me no heed, and I hurried along my own path.

The winding stair leading up to the ultrabeam shack loomed before me. I went its length, three steps at a time, bounding and gasping with my haste, up to the transmitter.

It was the tenuous link binding together a score of rebel planets, the only communication with the stars that glittered so coldly overhead. The ultrabeam does not have an infinite velocity, but it does have an unlimited speed, one depending solely on the frequency of the generating equipment, and since it only goes to such receivers as are tuned to its pattern—there must be at least one such tuned unit for the generator to work—it has a virtually infinite range. So men can talk between the stars, but are their words the wiser for that?

Up and up and up, round and round, up and up, metal clanging underfoot and always the demon screech of the siren—up!

I sprang from the head of the stairs and crossed the areaway in one leap to the open door of the shack. There was only one operator on duty, a slim boyish figure before the glittering panel. He didn't hear me as I came behind him. I knocked him out with a calculated blow to the base of the skull. He'd be unconscious for at least fifteen minutes and that was time enough. I heaved his body out of the chair and sat down.

The unit was set for the complicated secret scrambler pattern of the Legion, one which was changed periodically just in case. I twirled the dials, adjusting for the pattern of the set I knew was kept tuned for me at Vorka's headquarters.

The set hummed, warming up. I lifted my eyes and stared into the naked face of Boreas. The shack was above ground, itself dominated by the skeletal tower of the transmitter, and a broad port revealed land and sky.

Overhead the stars were glittering, bright and hard and cruel, flashing and flashing out of the crystal dark. The peaks rose on every side, soaring dizziness of cliffs and ragged snarl of crags, hemming us in with our tiny works and struggles. It was bitterly, ringingly cold out there; the snow screamed when you walked on it; the snapping thunder of frost-split rock woke the dull roar of avalanches, and there was the wind, the old immortal wind, moaning and blowing and wandering under the stars. I saw them running, little antlike men spilling from their nest and racing across the snow before they froze. I saw the ships rise one after the other and rush darkly skyward. The base had come alive and was reaching up to defy the haughty stars.

The set buzzed and whistled, warming up, muttering with the cosmic interference whose source nobody knows. I began to speak into the microphone, softly and urgently: "Calling Intelligence H.Q., Sol III, North America Center. Captain Halgan Conru calling North America Center. Come in, Center, come in."

The receiver rustled with the thin dry voice of the stars. Dimly, I could hear the wind outside, snarling around the walls.

"Come in, Center. Come in, Center."

"Captain Halgan!" The voice rattled into the waiting stillness of the shack. "Captain Halgan, is it really you?"

"Get General Vorka at once," I said. "Meanwhile, are you recording? All right, be sure you get this."

I told them everything I knew. I told them what planet this was, and where we were on its surface, and what our strength and plans were. I gave them the disposition of the scoutship pickets, as far as those were known to me, and the standard Legion recognition signals. I finished with an account of the savage differences still existing between Earthman and Earthman, and Earth and its treacherous allies. And all the time I was talking to a recording machine. Nobody was listening.

When I was through, I waited a minute, not feeling any particular emotion. I was too tired. I sat there, listening to the wind and the interstellar whistling, till Vorka spoke to me.

"Halgan! Halgan, you've done it!"

"Shut up," I said. "What's coming now?"

"I checked the Fleet units. We have a Supernova with escort at Bramgar, about fifteen light-years from where you are. You are at their base, aren't you? Can you hold out for two days more?"

"I think so."

"Better get into the hills. We may have to bombard."

"Go to hell." I turned off the set.

Now to get back. They must already know it was a trick; they must be scouring the base for the saboteur. As soon as all loyal men were back, the hunt would really be on.

I had, of course, worn gloves. There would be no fingerprints. And the operator wouldn't know who had attacked him.

I changed the scrambler setting to one picked at random. And in a corner, as if it had fallen there by accident, I dropped a handkerchief stolen from Wergil of Luron. The tiny fragments of tissue which adhere to such a thing could easily be proven to be from him or one of his associates, for the basic Luronian life-molecules are all levorotatory. It might help.

I slipped back down the stairs, quickly and quietly. It was over. The base was as good as taken. But there was more to be done. Apart from the saving of my own life, there was still a desperate need for secrecy. For if the rebels knew what was coming, they might choose to stand and fight, or they might flee into the roadless wildernesses of space. Whichever it was, all our work and sacrifice would have gone for little.

The provocateur policy is the boldest and most farsighted enterprise ever undertaken. It is the first attempt to make history as we choose, to control the great social forces we are only dimly beginning to understand, so that intelligence may ultimately be its own master.

Sure. Very fine and idealistic, and no doubt fairly true as well. But there is death and treachery in it, loneliness and heartbreak, and the bitterness of the betrayed. Have we the right to set ourselves up as God? Can we really say, in our omniscience, that everyone but us is wrong? There were sane, decent, intelligent folk here on Boreas, the ones we needed so desperately for all civilization. Did we have to make them our enemies, so that their grandchildren might be our friends?

I didn't know. Wherever I turned, there were treason and injustice. However hard I tried to do right, I had to wrong somebody.

I ran on, back to my cabin. I peeled off my clothes and dived into bed, and by the time they looked in on me I had worked back most of my fever.

Don't think, Conru. Don't think of this new victory and the safety of the Empire. And, perhaps, a step closer to the harshly won unity of Earth. Don't think of the way the light catches in Barbara's hair and gets turned into molten gold. You've got a fever to create, man. You've got to think yourself sick again. That ought to be easy.

VIII

Barbara came in. She was white and still, and presently she leaned her head against my breast and cried quietly, for a long time.

“There is a spy here,” she told me.

“I heard about it.” I stroked her hair and held her to me, clumsily. “Do you know who it was?”

“I don’t know. Somehow, they seem to think the Luronians may be guilty, but they aren’t sure. They arrested them, and two were killed resisting. Colonel Wergil is in the brig now, while they decide if Luron can still be trusted.”

“It can’t,” I said. “Earth must win alone.”

“We’ll win,” she said dauntlessly. “With Luron or without it, we’ll win.” Then, like a little frightened girl, creeping close to me: “But we needed that help so much.”

I kissed her and remained silent.

The next day I got on my feet again, weak but recovered. I wandered aimlessly around the base, waiting for Barbara to get through work, listening to people talk. It was ugly, the fear and tension and wolfish watchfulness. *Whom can we trust? Who is the enemy?*

Mostly, they thought the Luronians were guilty. After all, those were the only beings on the planet who had not had to pass a rigorous investigation and psychological examination. But nobody was sure.

Levinsohn spoke over the televisor. His gaunt, lined face had grown very tired, yet there was metal in his voice. The new situation necessitated a change of plans, but the time of assault would, if anything, be moved ahead. “Be of good heart. Stand by your comrades. We’ll still be free!”

I went to Barbara’s apartment and we sat up very late. But even in this private record I do not wish to say what we talked about.

And the next day the Empire came.

There was one Supernova ship with light escort, but that was enough. Such vessels have the mass of a large asteroid, and one of them can sterilize

a planet; two or three can take it apart. Theoretically, a task force comprising twenty Nova-class battleships with escorts can reduce one of those monsters if it is willing to lose most of its units. But nothing less can even do significant damage, and the rebel base did not have that much. Nor could they get even what they had into full action.

The ships rushed out of interstellar space, flashing the recognition signals I had given. Before the picket vessels suspected what was wrong, the Valgolians were on them. One managed to bleat a call to base and the alarm screamed again, men rushed to battle stations. Then the Imperials blanketed all communications with a snarl of interference through which nothing the rebels had could drive.

So naturally they were thought to have been annihilated in a few swift blazes of fire and steel, a quick clean death and forgetfulness of defeat. But only the drivers were crippled, and then the Supernova yanked the vessels to its titan flanks and held them in unbreakable gravity beams. The crews would be taken later, with narcotic gas or paralyzer beams—alive.

For the Empire needs its rebels.

I knew the uselessness of going to battle stations, so I hung behind, seeking out Barbara, whose place was with the missile computer bank. I met her and Kane in the hallway. The boy's face was white, and there were tears running down his cheeks.

"This is the end," he said. "They've found us out, and there's nothing left but to die. Good by, Barbara." He kissed her, wildly, and ran for his ship. Moodily, I watched him go. He expected death, and he would get only capture, and afterward—

"What are you doing here, Con?" asked Barbara.

"I'm too shaky to be any good in the artillery. Let me go with you, I can punch a computer."

She nodded silently, and we went off together.

The floor shook under us, and a crash of rock roared down the halls. The heavy weapons on the Supernova were bloodlessly reducing our ground installations and our ships not yet in action to smashed rubble. They would kill not a single one of us, except by uncontrollable accident, and save many

Valgolian and Earth lives that way, but it wasn't pleasant to be sluggish. The girl and I staggered ahead. When the lights went out, I stopped and held her.

"It's no use," I said. "They've got us."

"Let me go!" she cried.

I hung on, and suddenly she collapsed against me, crying and shaking. We stood there with the city rumbling and shivering around us, waiting.

Presently the Valgolian commander released the interference and contacted Levinsohn, offering terms of surrender. It seemed to Levinsohn, and it was meant to seem, that further resistance would be useless butchery. His ships were gone and his foes need only bombard him to ruin. He capitulated, and one by one we laid down our arms and filed to meet the victors.

The terms, as announced by messengers—the intercom was out of action—were generous. Leading rebels and those judged potentially "dangerous" would go to penal colonies on various Earth-like planets. Except that they weren't penal colonies at all, but, of course, the Earthlings wouldn't know this. They were indoctrination centers, and, with all my bitterness, I still longed to observe a man like Levinsohn after five years in one of the centers. He'd see things in a different perspective. He'd see the Empire for what it was—even if I sometimes had a little trouble seeing that now—and he'd be a better rebel for it.

Someday Levinsohn and his kind would be back on Earth, the new leaders ready to lead the way to a new tomorrow. And I would be with them.

I'd be back with Levinsohn and the rest, and with Barbara, too, and we'd try to pave the way to the peace and friendship. But meanwhile there'd be other revolutions—striving and hoping and breaking their hearts daring what they thought would be death to win what they called freedom and what we hoped would be evolution.

It was the fire to temper a new civilization.

We walked down the hall, Barbara and I, hand in hand, alone in spite of all the people who were shuffling the same way. Most of them were weeping. But Barbara's head was high now.

"What will happen to us?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But, Barbara, whatever happens after this, remember that I love you. Remember that I'll always love you."

“I love you too,” she smiled, and kissed me. “We’ll be together, Con. That’s all that matters. We’ll be together.”

That was important—and it made me feel good. Yes, we’d be together; I’d see to that. But for a while Barbara would hate me through all the long years of the indoctrination. Someday, perhaps, she would understand... the indoctrination could do it, and I could help. But by the gods of space, how would it be to take that hate all that while?

We came out into the central chamber where the prisoners were gathering to be herded up to the ships. Armed Valgolian guards stood under the glare of improvised lights. Other Imperials were going through the city, flushing out those who might be hiding and removing whatever our armed forces could use. The equipment would do no one any good here, and Boreas would be left to its darkness.

It was cold in the vast shadowy room. The heating plant had broken down and the ancient cold of Boreas was seeping in. Barbara shivered and I held her close to me. Nat Hawkins moved over to join us, wordlessly.

I was questioned in a locked room by one of the big Valgolian officers. He looked at a stereograph in his hand and he took me aside, but it was not unusual. Many of the starbound prisoners were being questioned by their guards, and I was merely one of them.

“Colonel Halgan?” the officer asked with an eagerness close to hero-worship. He was obviously fresh from school and military terminology came from his lips as if it really meant something to a Valgolian. The colonel, of course, meant that in a titular sense I had been elevated for my work. Funny, if you use the language enough, you get to believe it yourself.

“Sir,” the young officer continued, “this is one of the greatest pieces of work I’ve ever seen. I am to extend the official congratulations of—”

I let him talk for a while and then I raised my hand peremptorily and I told him that the girl with the Earthling Hawkins was to go along for indoctrination, despite the fact that her name did not appear on his lists. He nodded, and I went back to Barbara, but half a dozen men had come between us.

Levinsohn and five guards. The man’s carriage was still erect, the old unbreakable pride and courage were still in him. Someone among the

prisoners broke loose and rushed at him, cursing, till the Valgoleans thrust him back into line.

“Levinsohn!” screamed the man. “Levinsohn, you dirty Jew, you sold us out!”

There you see why this rebellion had to be crushed. Earth still had a long way to go. The Levinsohns, the Barbaras, the more promising of the anarchs would be educated and returned and the civilizing process would go on. Earth’s best and bravest would unite and fight us, and with each defeat they would learn something of what we had to teach them, that all races, however divergent, must respect each other and work together, learn it with an intensity which the merely intellectual teaching of schools and propaganda could not achieve alone—or, at any rate, soon enough.

Valgolia is the great and lonely enemy, the self-appointed Devil since none of us can be angels. It is the source of challenge and adversity such as has always driven intelligence onward and upward, in spite of itself.

Sooner or later, generations hence, perhaps, all the subject worlds will have attained internal unity, forgetting their very species in a common bond of intelligence. And on that day Valgolia’s work will be done. She and her few friends, her *donagangors*, will seemingly capitulate without a fight and become simply part of a union of free and truly civilized planets.

And such a union will be firmer and more enduring than all the tyrant empires of the past. It will have the strength of a thousand or more races, working together in the harmony which they achieved in struggling against us.

That is the goal, but it is a long way ahead; there may be centuries needed, and meanwhile Valgolia is alone.

Barbara would understand. In time she would understand what she as yet did not even know. But first would be the hatred, the cold stark hatred that must come of knowing who and what I really am. I could only wait for that hatred to come after she learned, and then wait for it to go, slowly, slowly...

Lines of the Earthlings were filing forward, and, with Nat Hawkins, Barbara waited for me. I walked to her and took her hand. Her head was

high, as high as Levinsohn's. She expected all of us to die, but she'd meet the relatives and friends she thought were dead.

It would be a great, a crushing humiliation, to know one's martyrs were alive and being well treated and intensively educated by the foe, who was supporting and encouraging one's supposedly dangerous revolution.

"It won't be so bad as long as we're together, darling," I said.

She smiled, misunderstanding, and kissed me defiantly before our Valgolian guards.

THE VIRGIN OF VALKARION

I

The sun was low in the west and a thin chill wind was blowing along the hills when Alfric saw Valkarion below him. He reined in his hengist and sat for a moment scouting the terrain with the hard-learned caution of many wandering years.

Save for himself, the broad highway that flung its time-raddled length down the rock slope was empty. On either hand, the harsh gullied hills stretched away to the dusky horizon, wind whispering in gray scrub and low twisted trees. Here and there, evening fires glimmered red from peasants' huts, or the broken columns of temples in ruins these many thousand years loomed against the darkening greenish-blue. Behind him, the land faded toward the raw naked desert from which he had come. A falkh hovered on silent wings far above him, watching for a movement that might mean prey—otherwise he was alone.

Still—he felt uneasy. A prickling not due to the gathering cold tingled along his spine, and he had spent too much of his life in the nearness of death to ignore such warnings.

He looked ahead, down the great road. It twisted and swooped between the fantastically wind-carven crags, a dim white ribbon in the deepening twilight. The smooth stone blocks were cracked apart by ages so long that the thought made his head reel, and in places the harsh wiry vegetation had

grown through and over it, but still the old Imperial Way was there. The ancients had built mightily.

Halfway down the huge slope of hillside, the road ran into Valkarion city. Below that level, the cliffs dropped sharply, white with old salt-streaks, to the dead sea-bottoms—a vast depression, sand and salt and thin bitter plant-growth, reaching out to the sunset horizon.

Lights were winking on in the city. It was not far, and Alfric had no wish to sleep in the open or under some peasant's stinking roof. So—why not go ahead? The city, his goal, was there, and naught to hold him from it save—

The hengist whickered and stamped its broad cloven hoofs. Its eyes rolled uneasily, and Alfric's hand slid to his sword hilt. If the beast also sensed a watchfulness—

He caught the stir in the thick brush-clump out of the corner of one eye. Only a hunter would have noticed it; only a rover at once, without stopping to think, would have struck spurs into his mount. The hengist leaped, and the dart whispered past Alfric's face.

One scratch from the poisoned missile of the southern blowguns was enough to kill a man. Alfric yelled, and flung his hengist at the brush. The sword whined from its scabbard, flamed in his hand.

Two men slipped from the thicket as he crashed into it. They were of a race foreign even to these southlands, small and lithe and amber-skinned. They wore only loincloths; all hair had been shaved from their heads and bodies, and the iron slave-collars were about their necks. Vaguely, Alfric was aware of the brands on their foreheads, but at the moment he was only concerned with their weapons.

One skipped aside, raising the blowgun to his lips. Alfric yanked the javelin from its holster by his saddle and launched it left-handed—through the slave's belly and out his back.

Steel hissed beside him as the other swung with a scimitar. The hengist screamed as the blade cut its sleek gray hide. The forehoofs lashed out, the great hooked beak snapped, and the slave lay a bloody ruin on the Imperial Way.

Alfric reined in his prancing mount and looked around, breathing hard. An ambush—by the bear of Ruho, they'd meant to kill him!

But—why?

A poor solitary wanderer was no worthwhile quarry for footpads—anyway, these weren't outlaws but slaves; they must have been set here

with orders to destroy some specific person. But no one in Valkarion knew Alfric—he was a stranger without friend or enemy.

Had they mistaken him for someone else? That would be hard to do even in this dim light; he was too plainly a barbarian outlander. It made no sense. By Luigur, it made no sense!

He leaned over, studying the dead men. They were secretive even in the sprawled puppet-like helplessness of death; he could learn nothing. Except—hold, what was that owner's brand—

A double crescent.

The double crescent!

The knowledge shocked home like a spear-thrust, and Alfric sat silent for a long moment with the wind ruffling his night-black hair. The double crescent—the sign of the Two Moons—that meant the slaves were Temple property. They'd been under orders of the priesthood of the Moons, which was the old Imperial faith and still the state religion of Valkarion.

But if the Temple sent out assassins—

Alfric's eyes traveled up to Amaris, the farther moon, high in the darkening heavens. The nearer one, Dannos, had not yet risen—out of the west, as was its strange wont—but its rocket-like speed would carry it up to and beyond the farther before dawn.

Aye—aye, now he remembered that tonight the moons would mate. On such nights the Temple no doubt had great ceremonies afoot; perhaps this matter of the assassination was involved in some religious proceeding.

Whispered legend and the moldering history books alike agreed that the turning points of the old Empire's fate had come on nights when the moons mated. No doubt that still held good for the withered remnant of territory which Valkarion still ruled.

The moons were not important in the religion of the Aslakan barbarians, whose chief gods were the wind and the stars and nameless powers of winter and death. But a tingle of fear ran along Alfric's spine at the thought of what might be abroad that night.

To Luigur with it! His lean face twisted in a snarl, and he snapped sword and javelin back in place and rode trotting on toward Valkarion. Come

ambush or priesthood or the Moons themselves, he meant to sleep in the city tonight.

Behind him, the hovering falkh wheeled down toward the two still forms sprawled on the highway.

The sun slipped into the dead sea-bottom, and night came with a silent rush. Amaris rode high in a froth of stars, painting the hills with a dim eerie silver in which monstrous shadows lurked. The wind blew stronger, colder, with a faint smell of salt like the ghost of the long-dried ocean. Alfric wrapped his worn cloak tighter about him against its searching chill. Save for the vast echoing howl of the wind, the hiss of sand and rustle of leaves, he was alone in the dark. He heard the creak and jingle of his harness, the rapid *clop-clop* of the hengist's hoofs, against a background of hooting night.

The crumbling city walls loomed darkly before him, rearing enormously against the myriad brilliant, unwinking stars. He had half expected to find the gates closed, but instead a fire blazed in the tunnel which the gateway made through the walls. A dozen city guards stood about it.

They sprang to alertness as he rode up, a sudden wall of spears leaning forth in front of him. Behind that shining steel, the light picked out helmets and corselets and faces drawn tight with strain.

"Who goes?" called one. His voice shook a little.

"A stranger, but a friend," said Alfric in his north-accented Valkariona.

He rode into the circle of firelight and sat in a watchful quiet as their eyes raked him. Plainly he was an outland barbarian—taller by a head than most of the southerners, his hard-thewed body clad in the plain leather and ring-mail of a northern warrior, his sword a double-edged claymore rather than the scimitar or shortsword of the south. His skin was a sunburned leathery brown where theirs was tawny, his long slant eyes a brilliant green where theirs were dark, and there were jeweled rings in his pointed ears. He went cleanshaven in accordance with southern custom, but the high cheekbones, thin straight nose, and long jaw were not theirs.

"Who are you, stranger," demanded the guard captain, "and what is your errand?"

"I am Alfric, Beodan's son, of Aslak," he answered truthfully enough, "and am simply wandering about in search of employment. Perhaps Valkarion could use another sword-arm, or some merchant may want a good warrior to help guard his caravan, or—" he spread his calloused hands

in a general gesture. No need to add that perhaps some highwayman was in town recruiting or some would-be rebel was in search of an experienced war-captain who would help for the loot. In his years of adventuring, Alfric had held most jobs, lawful or otherwise.

The guards seemed more taut and wary than the occasion warranted. Surely they had passed stranger and more dubious visitors than a single barbarian. Perhaps they wanted a bribe to let him by, or—

The captain nodded stiffly. “You may enter, since you are alone,” he said; and then, with a friendliness not quite natural: “If you wish good cheap lodging, and a place where men come who might want to hire a fighter, try the Falkh and Firedrake. First turn to your right, three streets down, one to your left. Good luck, stranger.”

Alfric scowled. For a moment he paused, tensing. There was something here—To Luigur with it. His nerves were still on edge from the fight. If something was supposed to happen, let it.

“Thanks,” he said, and rode into the city.

It was like most of the old Imperial towns—somewhat larger and busier than the rest, no more. On either side of the broad paved street rose the ancient, columned façades of the Empire, proud building even now when their treasures were long gone and their corners worn smooth by the winds of millennia. There were lamps lighting the main ways, their yellow glow splashing on a milling throng of folk.

Most were native Valkarionas—merchants in their flowing cloaks and fur-trimmed silken robes, workers and artisans in tunics of blue or gray, peasants in clumsy homespun garments and fur caps, swaggering young soldiers in red tunics and polished metal, painted harlots, ragged beggars, near-naked slaves, the others of a city where life still pulsed strong though the days of glory were more thousands of years behind than it was pleasant to count. But there were strangers—robed traders from Tsungchi and Begh Sarrah riding their humped dromads, black-skinned men of Suda and Astrak, coppery feather-cloaked mercenaries from Tollaciuatl, fair-haired barbarians from Valmannstad and the Marskan hills—all the world seemed met at Valkarion, in a babble of tongues and a swirl of colors.

There were many of the tonsured priests of the Moons abroad in long red and black robes with the double crescent hanging from a silver chain about the neck. After each shaven-pate padded one or more of the yellow slaves, silent and watchful, hand on knife or blowgun. Alfric scowled, and decided he had best find lodging before venturing out into such company. A trading center like Valkarion necessarily tolerated all creeds—still, someone *had* tried to kill him—

He edged out of the throng and followed the captain's directions. They brought him into an unsavory part of town, where moldering blank-walled houses crowded a winding labyrinth of narrow, unlighted streets and stinking alleys. Men of dubious aspect moved furtively through the shadowy maze, or brawled drunkenly before the tawdry inns and bawdy houses. Strange place for a city guardsman to direct him to—

But no priests or soldiers were in sight, which was recommendation enough. Alfric rode on until he saw the sign of the Falkh and Firedrake creaking in the chill gusty wind above a gloomy doorway.

He dismounted and knocked, one hand on his dagger. The door groaned open a crack and a thin scar-faced man looked out, his own hand on a knife.

"I want lodging for myself and my hengist," said Alfric.

The landlord's hooded eyes slid up and down the barbarian's tall form. An indrawn breath hissed through his lips. "Are you from the northlands?" he asked.

"Aye." Alfric flung open the door and stepped into the taproom.

It was dim and dirty and low-ceiled, a few smoky torches throwing a guttering light on the hard-faced men who sat at the tables drinking the sour yellow wine of the south. They were all armed, all wary—the place was plainly a hangout of thieves and murderers.

Alfric shrugged broad shoulders. He'd stayed in such places often enough. "How much do you want?" he asked.

"Ah—" The landlord licked his lips, nervously. "Two chrysterces for supper now and breakfast tomorrow, one soldar room and girl."

The rate was so low that Alfric's eyes narrowed and his ears cocked forward in an instinctive gesture of suspicion. These southerners all named several times the price they expected to get, but he had never haggled one down as far as this fellow's asking price.

"Done," he said at last. "But if the food is bad or the bed lousy or the woman diseased, I'll throw you in your own pot and cut my breakfast off

your ribs.”

“’Twill not be needful, noble sir,” whined the landlord. He waved a thin little slave boy over. “Take care of the gentleman’s hengist.”

Alfric sat down at a corner table and ate his meal alone. The food was greasy, but not bad. From the shadows he watched his fellow guests, sizing up their possibilities. That big spade-bearded fellow—he might be the head of a gang which would find an expert sword-swinger useful. And the little wizened man in the gray cloak might be a charlatan in need of a bodyguard—

He grew slowly aware of their own unease. There were too many sharp glances thrown in his own direction, entirely too many—too much whispering behind hands, too much furtive loosening of sheathed daggers. There was something infernally strange going on in Valkarion.

Alfric bristled like an angry jaccur, but throttled impatience and got up. Time enough to find all that out tomorrow—he was tired now from his long ride; he would sleep and then in the morning look the city over.

He mounted the stairs, conscious of the glances following him, and opened the door the boy showed to him. There he paused, and his hard jaw fell.

The room was just a room, small, lit by one stump of candle, no furniture save a bed. Its window looked out on an alley which was like a river of darkness.

It was the woman who held Alfric’s eyes.

She was clad only in the usual gaudy silken shift, and she sat plucking thin chords from the usual one-stringed harp. Her rings and bracelets were ordinary cheap gewgaws. But she was no common tavern bawd—not she!

Tall and lithe and tawny-skinned, she rose to face him. Her shining blue-black hair tumbled silkily to her slim waist, framing a face as finely and proudly chiseled as a piece of ancient sculpture—broad clear forehead, delicately arched nose, full mobile mouth, stubborn chin, long smooth throat running down toward her high firm breasts. Her eyes were wide-set, dark and starry brilliant as the desert nights; her lips were like red flame.

When she spoke, it was music purring under the wind that whimpered outside and rattled the window sash.

“Welcome, stranger.”

Alfric gulped, licked his lips, and slowly recovered his voice: “Thank you, my lovely.” He moved closer to her. “I had not—not thought to find one like you—here.”

“But now that you have—” She came closer, and her smile blinded him—“now that you have, what will you do?”

“What do you think?” he laughed.

She bent over and blew out the candle.

II

Alfric lost desire for sleep, the girl being as skilled in the arts of love as she was beautiful. But later they fell to talking.

A dim shaft of moonlight streamed through the window and etched her face against the dark, a faint mysterious rippling of light and shadow and loveliness. He drew her closer, kissed the smooth cheek, and murmured puzzledly: “Who are you? Why are you working in a place like this, when you could be the greatest courtesan in the world? Kings would be your slaves, and armies would go to battle with your name on their lips—if they only knew you.”

She shrugged. “Fortune does strange things sometimes,” she said. “I am Freha, and I am here because I must be.” Her slim fingers ruffled his harsh black hair. “But tonight,” she breathed, “I am glad of it, since you came. And who are you, stranger?”

“I am Alfric, called the Wanderer, son of Beodan the Bold, son of Asgar the Tall, from the hills and lakes of Aslak.”

“And why did you leave your home, Alfric?”

“I was restless.” For a bleak moment, he wondered why, indeed, he had ever longed to get away from the wind-whispering trees and the cool blue hills and the small, salty, sun-glinting lakes of home—from his father’s great hall and farmstead, from the brawling lusty warriors who were his comrades, from the tall sweet girls and joys of the hunt and feast—Well, it was past now, many years past.

“You must have come far,” said Freha.

“Far indeed. Over most of the world, I imagine.” From Aslak, pasture lands of hengists, to the acrid red deserts of Begh Sarrah, the scrub forests of Astrak and Tollaciuatl, the towered cities of Tsungchi—along the great canals which the ancient Empire had built in its last days, still bringing a trickle of water from the polar snows to the starved southlands—through ruins, always ruins, the crumbling sand-filled bones of cities which had been like jewels a hundred thousand years ago and more—

Her cool hands passed over his face, pausing at the long dull-white scar which slashed across his forehead and left cheek. “You have fought,” she said. “How you have fought!”

“Aye. All my life. That scar—? I got it at Altaris, when I led the Bonsonian spears at the storming of the gates. I have been war-captain, sitting beside kings, and I have been hunted outlaw with the garms baying at my heels. I have drunk the wine of warlords and eaten the gruel of peasants and stalked my own game through the rime-white highlands of Larkin. I have pulled down cities, and been flung into the meanest jails. One king put a price on my head, another wanted me to take over his throne, and a third went down the streets before me, ringing a bell and crying that I was a god. But enough.” Alfric stirred restlessly. Somehow, he felt again uneasy, as if—

Freha pulled his face to hers, and the kiss lasted a long time. Presently she murmured, “We have heard some rumors of great deeds and clashing swords, here in Valkarion. The story of the fall of Altaris is told in the marketplaces, and folk listen till far into the night. But why did you not stay with your kings and warlords and captured cities? You could have been a king yourself.”

“I grew weary of it,” he answered shortly.

“Weary—of kingly power?”

“Why not? Those courts are nothing—a barbarian ruling over one or two cities, and calling himself a king and trying drearily to hold a court worthy of the title. The same, always the same endless squabbling, carrion birds quarreling among the bones of the Empire. I went on the next war, or to see the next part of the world, and ere long I learned never to stay too long in one place lest the newness of it wear off.”

“Valkarion is ever new, Alfric. A man could live his life here and never see all there was.”

“Perhaps. So they told me. And it was, after all, the old seat of the Empire, and its shrunken remnant of territory is still greater than any other domain. So I came here to see for myself.” Alfric grinned, a wolfish gleam of teeth in the night. “Also, I heard tales—restlessness, a struggle for power between Temple and Imperium, with the Emperor an old man and the last of his line, unable to get a child on his young queen Hildaborg. It seemed opportune.”

“How so?” He thought she breathed faster, lying there beside him.

He chuckled, a harsh iron sound in his corded throat. “How should I know? Except that when such a hell’s broth is bubbling, a fighting man can always scoop up loot or power or—at the very least—adventure. If nothing else, there might be the Empress. They say she’s a half barbarian herself, a princess of Choredon, and a lusty wench giving hospitality to every visiting noble or knight.” He felt Freha stiffen a little, and added: “But that doesn’t interest me now, when I’ve found you. Freha, leave this place with me tomorrow and you’ll wear the crown jewels of Valkarion.”

“Or else see your head on a pike above the walls,” she said.

Faintly through the window and the whining night-wind, they heard the crash of a great gong.

“Dannos is rising,” whispered Freha. “Tonight he mates with Mother Amaris. It is said that the Fates walk through the streets of Valkarion on such nights.” She shivered. “Indeed they do on this eve.”

“Perhaps,” said Alfric, though the hackles rose on his neck. “But how do you know?”

“Have you not heard?” Her voice shuddered, seeming to blend with the moan of wind and steady, slow boom of gong. “Have you not heard? The Emperor Aureon is dying. He is not expected to last till dawn. The Thirty-Ninth Dynasty dies with him, and—and there is no successor!”

The wind mumbled under the eaves, rattling the window frame and flowing darkly through the alley.

“Ha!” Alfric laughed harshly, exultantly. “A chance—by Ruho, what a chance!”

Of a sudden he stiffened, and the voice of danger was a great shout in his head. He sat up, cocking his ears, and heard the faint scratch and scrape—

aye, under the window, coming close—

He slid from the covers and drew his sword where it lay on the floor. The boards felt cold under his bare feet, the night air fingered his skin with icy hands. “What is it?” whispered Freha. She sat up, the dark hair tumbling past her frightened face. “What is it, Alfric?”

He made no answer, but padded over to the window. Flattened against the wall, he stood waiting as a hand raised the sash from outside.

The pale cold light of Amaris fell on the hand that now gripped the sill. A body lifted itself, one-handed, the other clutching a knife. For an instant Alfric saw the flat hairless face in the moonlight, the double crescent brand livid against its horrible blankness. Then in one rippling motion the slave was inside the room.

Alfric thrust, slicing his heart. As the man fell, another swarmed up behind him. He and Alfric faced each other, tableau for one instant of rivering moonlight and whining wind and remotely beating gong. Then the barbarian’s long arm shot out, yanked the slave in, and twisted him in an unbreakable wrestler’s grip.

“Talk!” he hissed into the ear of the writhing creature. “Talk, or I’ll break you bone by bone. Why are you here?”

“He can’t,” said Freha. She came up to them, white in the moonlight, her long hair blowing loose about her shoulders. “The Temple breeds these slaves, raises them from birth to utter, fanatical obedience. And—see—” She pointed to the dead man gaping under the window.

Stooping over, Alfric saw that he had no tongue.

The northerner shuddered. With a convulsive movement, he broke the neck of his prisoner and flung the body aside. “What do they want?” he panted. “Why are they after me?”

“There is a prophecy—but quick, there will be others. Out, down to the taproom—we must have protection—”

“The assassins would hardly be so stupid as to leave us a way out,” grunted Alfric. “Any down there who might help us are probably dead or made prisoner now. No doubt these men have friends on guard, just outside the door—men who’ll come in pretty soon when these don’t come out—”

“Aye—that would be the way of the Temple—but where, then, where?”

Alfric flung on his kilt, dagger belt, and baldric. “Out the window!” He whipped the girl to him, held her supple body against his, kissed her hard and swift as the swoop of a hunting falkh. “Goodbye, Freha, you have been a wonderful companion. I’ll see you again—if I live.”

“But—you can’t leave me!” she gasped. “The slaves will burst through—”

“Why should they harm you? They’re after me.”

“They will.” He felt her shaking against him. “They will, that’s their way—oh!”

The door shuddered as a heavy weight was flung against it. “That’s they,” snarled Alfric. “And the bolt won’t hold very long. I’d like to stay and fight, but—Come!” He grabbed his cloak off the floor and buckled it across Freha’s slim naked shoulders. “I’ll go first—then you jump.”

He balanced on the windowsill, then leaped. Even as he fell, he wondered at the agility of the slaves who had crawled up the wall. It was of roughset stones, but even so—

He hit the muck and cobblestones of the alley with the silent poise of a jaccur, and turned up to the window. It was just above the pit-black shadows, a square of darkness in the moon-whitened wall. “Come!” he called softly.

Freha’s body gleamed briefly in the moonlight as she sprang. He caught her in his arms, set her down, and drew his sword. “Let’s go,” he growled. Then suddenly: “But where? Will the city guards protect us?”

“Some might,” she answered shakily, “but most are controlled by fear of the Temple’s curse. Best we go toward the palace. The Emperor’s Household troops are loyal to him and hate the priesthood which seeks to usurp his power.”

“We can head that way,” he nodded, “meanwhile looking for a place to hide.” He took her hand and they trotted through the thick darkness toward the dim light marking the end of the alley.

Other feet padded in the gloom. Alfric snarled soundlessly and pulled himself and the girl against a wall. He was almost blind in the dark, but he strained his ears, pointing them this way and that in search of the enemy.

The others had also stopped moving. They would be waiting for him to stir, and their own motionlessness could surely outlast the girl’s—anyway, the pursuit from the room would be after him in another moment, when the door gave way—

“Run!” he snapped.

He felt a dart blow by the spot where he had spoken, and lengthened his frantic stride. A form rose before him, vague in the night. He chopped down with his sword, and felt a grim joy at the ripping of flesh and sundering of bone.

Now—out of the alley, into a street not much wider or lighter, and down its shadowy length. The slaves would be behind, but—

There was a one-story house ahead, of the usual flat-roofed construction. “Up!” gasped Alfric, and made a stirrup of his hands. He fairly flung the girl onto the roof. She gave him a hand up, bracing her feet against the parapet, and they fell down together behind it.

Alfric heard the slaves’ bare feet trotting below him, but dared not risk a glance. Snakelike, he and Freha slithered across the housetop. Only a narrow space separated them from the next; they jumped that and crossed over to another and higher roof. From this, Alfric peered into the street beyond.

A couple of city guards were walking down it, spears at the ready. Alfric wondered whether he should join them—no, they would be no shield against a blowgun dart sent from an alley—anyway, they might be priest-loyal.

He put his mouth to Freha’s ear, even then aware of the dark silky hair tickling his lips, and whispered: “What next?”

“I don’t know.” She looked ahead over the nighted roofs to the great central forum, still ruddy-bright with torches. Beyond it, the city climbed toward a double hill, on either crest of which was a building. One must be the palace, thought Alfric—it was in the graceful colonnaded style of the later Empire, white marble under Amaris. Nearly all its windows were dark; but he thought, puzzledly, that it was surrounded by a ring of fires.

The other building was a great gray pile, sprawling its grim massiveness in a red blaze of light. From it came the steady gong-beat and a rising chant—the Temple of the Two Moons, holding vigil at their wedding.

The night was huge above them, a vault of infinite crystal black in which the stars glittered in their frosty myriads and the Milky Way tumbled its bright mysterious cataract between the constellations. The pale disc of

Amaris rode high, painting the city and the hills and the dead sea-floor with its cold ghostly light. And now Dannos was swinging rapidly out of the west, brightening the dark and casting weird double shadows that slowly writhed with its changing position.

It was bitter chill. The wind blew and blew, hooting down the streets, banging signs and driving dead leaves and sand and bits of parchment before it. Alfric shivered, wishing for the rest of his clothes. In the waxing moonlight, he could see sand-devils whirling on the sea-bottom, a witches' dance—and on such a night, trolls and ghosts and the Fates themselves might well be abroad.

He set his teeth against chattering and tried to fix his mind on real and desperately urgent problems. "The priests seemed able to trace us," he said. "At least, they knew where I went for lodging. Best we work toward the palace as you say, but look for a ruined house or some such place to hide in till morning."

III

The street below was deserted now. They jumped down to it and darted into the shadows on the other side. Slipping along the walls of buildings they followed its twisting length for some time. An occasional cloaked form passed silently by; otherwise there was only the bitter wind echoing hollowly along the tunnel-like streets.

Of a sudden Alfric stiffened. He heard the measured tramp of feet—a city patrol approaching, just around the next corner. Whirling, he led the way into an alley black as a cave mouth. It was blind, but there was a door at the end, from behind which came the twanging of harps and the thin evil whine of desert flutes. A tavern—shelter, of a sort—

Moonlight glistened on steel as the half-dozen guardsmen passed the alley—passed, stopped, and turned back. "They may be here," Alfric heard a voice.

Cursing under his breath, the northerner opened the door and stepped through, into a room barely lit by a few tapers, thick with smoke and the

smell of unwashed bodies. Alfric's nostrils quivered at the heavy sweet odor of shivash, and he noticed the floor covered with stupefied smokers. A little yellow man scurried back and forth, filling the pipes. At the farther end, with music and girls, were wine-drinkers, ragged men of ill aspect who looked up with hands on knives.

Freha slammed the bolt down behind them, and Alfric brandished his great sword and said to them all: "Show us a way out."

A fist beat on the door, a voice shouted: "Open, in the name of the Holy Temple!"

"No way out," gasped the landlord.

"There is always an exit to these dens," snapped Freha. "Show us, or we split your skull."

A man's knife-hand moved with blurring speed. Alfric stopped the thrown dagger with his sword-blade in a clang of steel, caught it in midair, and hurled it back. The man screamed as it thumped into his belly.

"Out!" snarled the barbarian, and his glaive sang about the landlord's ears.

"Here," cried the little man, running toward the end of the room.

The door groaned as the guardsmen hurled themselves against it.

The landlord opened a concealed trapdoor. Only darkness was visible below. Alfric snatched a torch from the wall and saw a tunnel of dark stone. "Down!" he rapped, and Freha jumped. He followed, bolting the trap behind him. It was of heavy iron—the soldiers would have to work to break through it.

The tunnel stretched hollowly away on either side. Freha broke into a run and Alfric loped beside her, the torch streaming in one hand and the sword agleam in the other. Their footfalls echoed through the cold moist dark.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Old sewers—not used now when water is scarce—a warren under the city—" gasped Freha.

"We can hide here, then," he panted.

"No—only the Temple knows all the passages—they'll have slaves guarding every exit—we'll be trapped unless we get out soon—"

Dim sky showed ahead, a hole with a rusted iron ladder leading up into it. Alfric doused his torch and swung noiselessly up the rungs to peer out.

The manhole opened into one of the ruinous abandoned districts, crumbling structures and shards of stone half buried by the drifting sand.

Three guardsmen stood watching, spears at the ready. Otherwise there were only the moons and the wind and the silently watching stars.

Alfric's lip twisted in a snarl. So—the holes were already plugged! But—wait, all egresses could not be guarded yet; best to go on in search of another—no, by the time the fugitives got there it might be watched too. Here there was at least an absence of people to interfere.

He sprang out and rushed at the three, so swiftly that they were hardly aware of him before his blade was shrieking about them. One man tumbled with his head nearly sheared off. Another yelled, leaping back to thrust with his spear. Alfric dodged the jab, grabbed the shaft in one hand and pulled. The guardsman stumbled forward and Alfric's sword rang on his helmet. He dropped, stunned by the fury of the blow.

The third was on Alfric like an angry jaccur. His spear-thrust furrowed along the barbarian's ribs. Alfric closed in, grinning savagely in the cold white moonlight, and thrust with his sword. The guard parried the blow with his small buckler, dropped his spear, and drew his shortsword. Bending low, he rushed in, probing for Alfric's guts, and the northerner skipped aside barely in time. The broadsword chopped down, through the guard's left leg. Blood spurted, the man crashed to earth, and Alfric stabbed him through the face before he could scream.

The second was climbing dizzily to his feet. Alfric knocked the sword from a nerveless hand and brought his own blade against the guardsman's throat. "Hold," he said. "One word, one movement, and you'll roll in the gutter with your comrades."

Freha came up, the cloak blowing about her wonderful naked body in the wild wind. She was a fay sight under the moons, and the prisoner groaned as he saw her. "Lady—lady, forgive—"

"Forgive a traitor?" she asked, wrath sparking in her voice.

"Why are the priests after me?" rapped Alfric.

The guard stared. "Surely—surely you know—"

"I know nothing. Speak, if you want to remain a man."

"The prophecy—the priests warned us about you, that you were the heathen conqueror of the prophecy. . . . Later they said that—" the guard's

desperate eyes turned to Freha. “They said you, your majesty—” His voice trailed off.

“Say on,” she snapped. “Give me the priests’ own words. By Dannos, they’ll all swing for this! I am still Empress of Valkarion!”

Alfric looked at her in sudden shock, as if he had been clubbed. Empress—the Empress of Valkarion—

“But—they said you were not, your majesty ... the Emperor is dead, he died soon after sundown—”

“As soon as I was gone, eh? A priest’s work, I am thinking. Someone will answer for that. Go on!”

“The High Priest sent word over the city. He told of the prophecy—we all knew of that, but he told it anew. But he said the heathen king could still be slain, and offered a thousand gildars to the man who did it.” The guard gulped. “Then he said you—forgive me, lady, you asked for his words—he said since the Dynasty was now dead, the Temple would rule till further arrangements could be made. But the Empress Hildaborg, half barbarian, idolatrous witch—those were his words, your majesty—she lay under the Temple’s ban. He said she was to be killed, or better captured, with the heathen stranger, with whom she would probably join forces. He put the most solemn curse of the Two Moons on anyone who should aid you and the man, or even fail to help hunt for you—” The guardsman sank to his knees, shaking. “Lady, forgive me! I have a family, I was afraid to refuse—”

“What of my Household troops?” she snapped.

“The priests sent a detachment of the city guards against them—a dreadful battle. The Household repelled the attack, but now they are besieged in the palace—”

“Little help there, then.” Hildaborg laughed mirthlessly. “All the city against us, and our only friends bottled in a ring of spears. You chose an unlucky time to enter Valkarion, Alfric.”

The barbarian’s head was spinning. “You are—the Empress,” he gasped, “and there’s some nonsense about me. ... What is this prophecy? Why did you—” his voice, helpless with bewilderment, faded off into the moaning wind.

“No time now, someone may be along any moment. ... Where to hide, where to hide?”

Alfric's eyes traveled down to the two bodies sprawled on the street. Suddenly he laughed, a harsh metallic bark. "Why, in the very lair of the foe!" he said. "As good citizens, it behooves us to join the hunt for the outlaws. Here is suitable clothing for us."

She nodded, and fell at once to stripping the corpses. Alfric looked narrowly at the prisoner. "If you betray us—" he murmured.

"I won't—by the Moons, I swear I won't—"

"Indeed you won't," said Alfric, and lifted sword to cut him down.

Hildaborg sprang up and grabbed his arm. "That's a barbarous trick," she exclaimed angrily. "You need only bind and gag him, and hide him in one of these ruins."

"Why worry about the life of a guardsman?" he asked contemptuously.

Her dark head lifted in pride. "I am Empress of the guardsmen too," she said.

"As you like," shrugged Alfric.

The captive turned a face of utter worship to the woman. "You must secure me," he said, his voice shaking. "But when I am released, my body and soul are yours forever, my lady."

Hildaborg smiled, and proceeded to cut strips of cloth and dispose of the guard as she had said. Then she turned to Alfric. "You are hard of heart," she murmured, "but perhaps Valkarion needs one like you, strong and ruthless." Her deep eyes glowed. "How you fought, Alfric! How you fought!"

The barbarian squatted down and began wiping blood off the looted armor. "I've had enough," he growled. "I've been hoodwinked and hounded over the whole damned city, I've been thrown into a broil I never heard of, and now I want some truth. What is this prophecy? Why are you here? What does everyone want—" he laughed humorlessly—"besides our heads?"

"The prophecy—it is in the Book of the Sibyl, Alfric. It was made I know not how many thousands or tens of thousands of years ago, at the time of the Empire's greatest glory. There was a half-mad priestess who chanted songs of ruin and desolation, which few believed—what could harm the Empire? But the songs were handed down through many generations by a few who had some faith, and slowly it was seen that the songs spoke truth. One thing came to pass after another, just as it was

foretold. Then the songs were collected by the priesthood, who use the book to guide their policies.”

“Hmmm—I wonder. I’ve no great faith in spaedom myself.”

“These prophecies are true, Alfric! Now and again they have erred, but I think that is simply because the songs had become garbled in the long time they were handed down without much belief. All too often, the future history in the Book has been written anew by time’s own pen.” Hildaborg slipped a guardsman’s tunic over her slim form. Her eyes were half-shut, dreaming. “They say the Sibyl was loved by Dannos, who gave her the gift of prophecy, and that Amaris jealously decreed she should foretell evil oftener than good. But a wise man at court, who had read much of the almost forgotten science of the ancients, told me he thought the prophecies could be explained rationally. He said sometimes the mind can slip forward along the—the world line, he called it, the body’s path through a space and time that are one space-time. Sometimes, he said, one can ‘remember’ the future. He said the Sibyl’s mind could have followed the world lines of her descendants too, thus traveling many ages ahead... but be that as it may, she spaed truly, and her prophecy of tonight is of—you!”

The warrior shook his dark head, feeling a sudden eerie weight of destiny. “What was the tale?” he whispered. The wind whipped the words from his mouth and whirled them down the empty street.

Hildaborg stood while he buckled the corselet on her, and her voice rose in a weird chant that sang raggedly across the ruined buildings, under the stars and the two flying moons. Even Alfric’s hardy soul was shaken by the ominous words, his hands trembling ever so faintly as he worked.

“Woe, woe to Dannos and to Amaris and to those who serve them, cry woe on Valkarion and the world! The Thirty-Ninth Dynasty shall end on the night when Dannos weds again with Amaris; winds shall howl in the streets and bear away his soul. Childless shall the Emperor die, the Imperial line shall die with him, and a stranger shall sit in the high throne of Valkarion.

“He shall come riding alone and friendless, riding a gray hengist into Valkarion on the evening of that night. A heathen from the north is he, a worshipper of the wind and the stars, a storm which shall blow out the last guttering candles of the Empire. From the boundless wastes of the desert

shall he ride, ruin and darkness in his train, and the last long night of the Empire will fall when he comes.

“Woe, Dannos, your temple will stand in flames when the heathen king is come! Woe, Mother Amaris, he will defile your holy altars and break them down! Gods themselves must die, their dust will whirl, on the breath of his wind-god, the last blood of the Empire will be swallowed by the thirsty desert.

“Woe, for the heathen night which falls! Woe, for the bitter gray dawn which follows! The Moons of the Empire have set, and an alien sun rides baleful over Valkarion.”

There was silence after that, save for the hooting of wind and the thin dry whisper of blowing sand. Dannos swung higher, a pale cold eye in the frosty heavens. Alfric clamped his teeth together and finished the disguise.

The armor and clothing were strained on his tall form, ill-fitting, but with the cloak draped over, and the helmet shadowing his face, he should pass muster. Under the cloak, across his back, he had his broadsword—these short southern stabbers were no good.

Hildaborg was better fitted. Slim and boyish in the shining steel, her long hair tucked under the crested helm, spear carried proudly erect, she seemed a young goddess of war. Alfric thought dizzily that no such woman had ever crossed even his dreams.

He hid the corpses in the ruins and they started down the street together. “We’ll try to work through the line of siege, into the palace,” he said. “Once we’re with your troops, something may still be done.”

“I doubt it. They are brave men, but few—few.” Her voice was bitter.

“If we can—” Alfric sank into thought for a while. Then suddenly he said: “Now I know why the priests are after me. But what of you? Where do you come into this picture?”

“I knew about the prophecy,” she replied. “Also, I knew what my fate was likely to be when Aureon died. The Temple and the Imperium, ostensibly the two pillars of the Empire, have long been struggling for power. Each side has its warriors and spies, its adherents among the nobles and commons—oh, the last several generations have been a weary tale of intrigue, murder, corruption, with first one side and now another on top. The Temple wants a figurehead Emperor, the Imperium wants a subservient priesthood—well, you know the story.”

“Aye. A sorry one. It should be ended with the sword. Wipe both miserable factions out and start anew.”

She looked curiously at him. “So the Sibyl was not wrong,” she murmured. “The heathen come out of the north with destruction alike for the Empire and the gods.”

“Luigur take it, I don’t care about Valkarion! Not even enough to destroy it. I only want to save my own neck.” His hand stroked her arm, softly. “And yours. But go on.”

“The Thirty-Ninth Dynasty was the last family with any pretensions to even a trace of the legendary Imperial blood, the line of Dannos himself. And Aureon was the last of them—his sons slain in war, himself an old man without relatives. The Imperial line had been weakening and dying for generations—inbred, enfeebled, degenerate, the blood of Dannos running thinner in each new birth. Aureon had sense enough to take a second wife of different stock—myself, princess of Choredon. Thereby he gained a valuable ally for Valkarion—but no children, and now he is dead.”

Hildaborg sighed. “So the Imperium is gone, the Temple is the sole power, and a strong and unscrupling High Priest rules Valkarion. I think the Priest, Therokos, intends to proclaim Valkarion a theocracy with himself as the head. But first, for reasons of politics and personal hatred, he must get rid of me.”

“Why should he hate you?”

Hildaborg smiled twistedly. “He disapproves of barbarians, and my mother was from Valmannstad. He disapproves of my laxness in religious matters. He knows I stand between him and absolute power. I gave Aureon strength to oppose him and thwarted many of his measures. The commons think well of me, I have done what I could to improve their lot, and he hates any hold on Valkarion’s soul other than his own.

“I knew that with Aureon dead and no heir of the blood, Therokos would feel free to strike. I could not hope to match him for long, especially since the law is that no woman may rule in Valkarion. My one chance seemed to lie in the new conqueror who was to come. Yet I could not approach him openly—the Temple spies were everywhere, and anyway the prophecy was

that he would be a destroying fury, worse perhaps than the priests. I had to sound him out first, and secretly.

“So I put a trustworthy guards-captain in charge of the gate today, with instructions to direct the stranger to the Falkh and Firedrake. The landlord there was paid to make sure you would stay, and would take the room where I was in my guise of tavern girl.

“So you came. But now it seems the priests were ware to my plan. They have acted swifter than I thought, striking instantly at my men—I expected at least a few days of truce. And I played into their hands by thus cutting myself off from all help. Now they need only hunt us down and kill us.”

“’Twill take some doing,” growled Alfric. “Ha, we may yet pull their cursed temple down about their shaven skulls!”

“And so the prophecy would be fulfilled—you would blow out the last dim flicker of light—” She stopped, staring at him, and her voice came slowly: “Valkarion, the last citadel of civilization, the last hope of the dying world, to be wasted by a heathen bandit—perhaps the priests are right, Alfric of Aslak. Perhaps you should die.”

“Luigur take your damned prophecy!” he snarled.

They stood tautly facing each other in the thin chill moonlight. The wind blew and blew, whining between the empty ruins of houses, blowing the dust of their erosion along the empty street.

“I know your old Imperial towns,” said Alfric savagely. “I’ve seen them, moldering shells, half the place deserted because the population has shrunk so far—wearily dreaming of a dead past, grubbing up the old works and sitting with noses buried in the old books, while robbers howl in the deserts and thieving politicians loot the treasury. Year by year, the towns crumble, bridges fall, canals dry up, people grow fewer—and nobody cares. A world is blowing away in red dust, and nobody stirs to help. By the winds of Ruho, it’s about time someone pulled down that tottering wreck you call Imperial civilization! It’s about time we forgot the past and started thinking—and doing—something about the present. The man who burns Valkarion will be doing the world a service!”

Silence, under the wind and the stars and the two moons marching toward their union. Hildaborg hefted her spear until the point gleamed near

Alfric's throat.

He sneered, out of bitterness and despair and a sudden longing for her lips. "Don't try to stick me with that toy. You saw what happened to the guards."

"And you would kill me?" Her voice was all at once desolate; she dropped the spearhead to the ground.

"No. But I would leave you—no, by the Holy Well, I wouldn't. But I'd leave the damned city." He stepped forward, laying his hands on her mailed shoulders, and his voice rang with sudden earnestness. "Hildaborg, that is your answer. No need to stay in this place of death. We can steal hengists and bluff our way past the gates and be in the hills ere dawn. If you fear for Valkarion at my hands, leave it—leave it to rot and come with me."

"Come—where?"

"Home, back to Aslak. Back to the blue hills and the windy trees and the little lakes dancing in the sun—to an open heaven and a wide land and free folk who look you honestly in the eye. Luigur take the Empire, as he will whatever we do." He laughed, a joyous sound echoing in the night. "We'll build our own stead and live as freefolk and raise a dozen tall sons. Hildaborg, let's go!"

For a moment she stood silent. When she spoke, her voice trembled a little, and the moonlight glinted off tears in her eyes.

"I love you for it, Alfric, and gladly would go. But Therokos is besieging the palace—he is gathering in all who ever spoke well of me... shall my friends be hanged and burned and hacked to bits, and I safe in Aslak?"

"You're a fool. What could you do for them?"

"Die. But this is no quarrel of yours, Alfric. If you wish, go, and I shall not think of the less of you. Go—my dearest—"

He laughed again, and kissed her for a very long moment. "You are a fool and a madwoman, and I love you for that," he said. "Come—we can still show these priests the color of steel!"

IV

They trotted rapidly along the ways, their mail clanking. Erelong they were out of the deserted district and approaching the central forum.

It seethed with people. All Valkarion seemed to be out tonight, moving slowly, aimlessly, under the compulsion of a nameless fear. The town buzzed with voices, low, secretive, and the shuffle of thousands of feet under the lamps and the bobbing torches. High over the muted tumult, blown on the harrying wind, chant and gong-beat came from the Temple.

Alfric and Hildaborg pushed their way through the milling, murmuring tide. The unease, the rising wave of fear, was like a tangible force; the northerner's skin prickled with it. Eyes, thousands of eyes, shifting and staring out of pale faces—the city was full of eyes.

He heard a voice as he came to the edge of the great plaza. Thrusting forward, the tall barbarian looked over the heads of the crowd. There was a rostrum, surrounded by a tight ring of Temple guards, and from atop it a robed priest was haranguing the throng.

“—the Dynasty is dead, and the wrath of the Moons lies heavy over Valkarion. Woe to the world, for the heathen fiend, the scourge of Dannos, is loose!

“Yet I bring hope—aye, from all-merciful Mother Amaris I bring cheer in this darkest hour. There is time, still time to seize the barbarian ere his power grows. There is still time, too, to seize and disown the half-caste witch Hildaborg. There is time to submit to the wise rule of the Temple, that the High Priest may intercede with All-Father Dannos. Repent and be forgiven—destroy the evilworkers who brought this trouble on you, and the Mating of the Moons will yet bring forth a new birth of hope!”

Alfric grew aware of the muttering about him—the commons of Valkarion, laborer, artisan, merchant, peasant, turning thought over and growling it to his neighbor.

“—an ill choice, to see the city ruined or bow to the shavepates.”

“I am afraid. The Moons are high and bitter bright now, they are looking down on us. I am afraid.”

“’Twas Hildaborg who lowered the taxes. ’Twas Hildaborg, and not dotard Aureon or thieving Therokos, who whipped the army into shape and beat off the Savonnian invaders. What has the Temple ever done for us, save milk us for our tithes and frighten our babes with stories of godly wrath?”

“Hush! The Moons are watching!”

“Hildaborg is beautiful, she is like a goddess as she rides through the streets and smiles on us. Amaris herself is not more beautiful.”

“The Temple is holy.”

“The priests burned my brother for sorcery. He had one of the old books, that is all; he tried to build the machine it told of—and they burned him.”

“They have enough old books themselves. They sit on all the wisdom of the ancients, and none of us can so much as read.”

“The Fates are abroad tonight. I am afraid.”

“My son is in the Household. They’re after his skin—he’ll hang if he isn’t dead already—unless—”

“Aye, my son is in the city guards. They told him to go hunt down the stranger and the Empress—the *Empress!*—and off he went.” A grim chuckle. “But I think he is sitting quietly in some corner, waiting.”

“There is an old battle ax at home. My grandfather bore it in the Rurian war. I think I could still swing it if need be.”

“I am afraid—”

Alfric smiled, a steely grimace in the shadow of his visor, and led the way onward.

But he was not to pass easily. He thrust aside a burly peasant, who turned on him with a snarl. “Mind your manners, guardsman! Is’t not enough you should be traitor to the Empress?”

“Aye, the city guards have sat about drinking and gaming and making the streets unsafe for our daughters,” said another man harshly. “They didn’t get off their fat butts till this chance came to go yapping after Hildaborg.”

Alfric tried to shoulder past the ring of angry folk who gathered.

“Aside!” he called. “Aside, or I use my spear!”

“Mind your manners, guardsman,” grinned the peasant. He came closer, and Alfric smelled the wine on his breath. “What say we have a little fun with these priest-lovers, comrades? Will they squeal when we pummel ’em?”

Alfric’s fist shot out like a ball of iron. There was a dull smack, and the peasant flew back against the man behind. The barbarian flailed out with his spear butt, and the crowd gave way.

“Through!” he muttered to Hildaborg. “Quick, we have to get away.”

“They’re our friends,” she whispered frantically. “Can’t we reveal—”

“And bring the guard down on this unarmed mob? We wouldn’t last a moment. Come!”

A stone clanged against the girl’s helmet. She staggered, half collapsing into Alfric’s arms. The crowd growled, beast-like, and shoved in closer.

“Aside!” shouted Alfric. “Make way, or the curse of the Moons is on you!”

“You talk like a priest,” said a laborer thickly. He lifted a heavy billet of wood. “On them, boys! Kill them!”

Alfric laid the half-stunned girl on the ground, stood over her, and drew his broadsword. “An outlander!” shouted someone, back in the sea of shadowy, torch-lit, hating faces. “A mercenary, hunting our empress!”

The mob surged against him. He thrust around with the sword, striking to disable but not to kill—though he’d slay if he had to, he thought desperately.

Stones were flying. One hit him on the cheek. Pain knifed through his head. “Hai, Ruho!” he roared, and banged a skull. The mob edged away a little. Eyes and teeth gleamed white in the bloody torchlight.

A trumpet-blast sounded, harsh and arrogant over the rising voices. Someone screamed. Alfric saw spears aloft, steel gleaming red—a squad of guardsmen to the rescue.

The rescue! He groaned, lifted Hildaborg, and sought to retreat through the crowd.

Too late. The guards were hacking a bloody way through the mob; it scattered in panic and the squad was there.

“Just in time,” panted its chief. “The folk are ugly. They’ve killed a dozen guardsmen already, to my knowledge, a couple of priests, I don’t know how many Temple slaves—Dannos smite the blasphemers!”

“Thanks.” Alfric set the reviving girl on her feet. “Now I have to go—special mission, urgent—”

The chief looked sharply at him. “You have a barbarous accent,” he said slowly, “and you’re no Valkariona. Who—”

Hildaborg groaned, stirring back to consciousness. “Alfric—”

“A boy—no—” The officer stepped forth. Hildaborg’s lovely face turned toward the light, and he gasped. “*She—*”

Alfric picked up his spear and hurled it through the chief's throat. Then he lifted his dripping sword and stood by Hildaborg, waiting for the end.

"The Empress—the Empress, and the heathen—*We've found them*—"

The crowd had withdrawn, milling around the edges of the forum, too frightened and confused to help. The priest and his guards were coming on the double, yelling for help. Other armed men seemed to be springing from the ground.

"Alive!" shrilled the priest. "Take them alive if you can! A thousand gildars!"

The guards were well disciplined. They locked shields in a ring about Alfric and closed in. Man for man, he could have laughed at them—but this way—

Hildaborg swayed on her feet beside him. "So this is the end?" she whispered. "I love you, Alfric—"

He howled his rage, and sprang forward. The sword blurred in his hands, ringing on shields and helmets. A guard fell, shrieking, his right arm sheared off. Alfric stabbed another in the neck, kicked a third in the groin, and roared.

They surged around him, hemming him in with their shields. Clubbed spears thudded against his helmet, and it rang like a brazen gong. He staggered, shouted, struck out again—the sword fell from his hands—he toppled into a clamoring darkness—

Dimly, he was aware of being stripped of armor, chained hand and foot, hauled roughly to his feet. He lurched mechanically along, and slowly his head cleared. Through a mist of throbbing pain, he saw that Hildaborg walked beside him. Spears pricked their backs, the chains rattled on ankles and wrists. They were in the middle of a tight triple ring of guards, marching up the hill toward the Temple.

The villas of the mighty lay around them, white in the moonlight, fragrant with gardens. Alfric saw fountains splashing, and even then thought of the parched land beyond the walls, land that might flower again if it had that water.

But that would never be. He would swing high above the city, the falkhs would pick out his eyes—Hildaborg would die, and the grip of the Temple would be locked on Valkarion till its last stones were dust on the wind.

Strength came back, a bleak resolve not to go down without one more fight. His brain began whirring, the old cold craftiness of his turbulent

lifetime surged forward... hopeless. They were caught, they were done; all his struggles were the vain writhings of a beast in a cage.

“So this ends it.” Hildaborg’s voice was weary. Then she smiled a little. “But we made a good try, Alfric.” And warmly: “And we have loved each other. That is enough.”

“It is not,” he answered. “But it is something.”

“Silence!” commanded the priest.

Now they were on the hillcrest, the mighty walls of the Temple looming before them. Alfric saw it aswarm with slaves and guards and priests of all degrees. The gong-beat was a steady, tremendous crashing—it seemed to fill the world with its brazen clamor. High rose the chant of the Moon Wedding.

The warrior glanced aside, over to the palace. There was a bridge spanning the gully between the two hillcrests, and guards were on it. Other guards, city and Temple, were besieging the palace; he saw their fires in a ring about it. They were setting up a great ballista whose stones, he knew, would bring the walls down in ruin.

From the hilltop he could see over the moon-whitened desert and the vast reach of the old sea-bottom. Once it had been blue and alive, glittering with sunlight, the long waves rolling in to crash in foam and thunder on a dazzling beach. The harbor of Valkarion had been crowded with ships from all the world, a forest of tall masts, a wild perfumery of salt and tar and the spices of the south. And beyond, the land had been green, and white clouds had sailed through a soft blue summer sky.

Well, it was gone—the world was dried into desert and scrubby forest and harsh meadowland, sand blew in the ancient beds of rivers and seas, the air was thin and chill and held a bitter tang of rust. The cities were in ruins, the Empire was a shadow, and man was gone back to a few wretched remnants, sinking into barbarism and death.

Alfric looked up to the cold, splendid night sky. There was a tradition from the wise ancients, he had once been told, that those swarming bright star-hosts were other worlds and suns, happier, maybe, than this. It was some consolation.

The Moons were near their mating now. Bright Dannos was sweeping triumphantly down on pale Mother Amaris; he would cover her and then pass on, and out of that wedding would come the fate of the world. Cold fate, dark destiny—night and famine and death, the moons hurtling over a world sunk into final oblivion.

Well, men died, sometime or other, and all they could do about it was to meet the end bravely. Alfric squared his shoulders and marched into the Temple.

There was a long corridor, at the end of which he saw a vast room flashing in gold and silver and fiery jewels, draped with the costliest ancient tapestries. Even then, Alfric's eyes gleamed greenly. To loot that room!

They turned off along another hall, and then down a stone-cut flight of steps into the Temple dungeons. Alfric had been in enough jails before not to find the damp, rough-hewn rock tunnels strange, but Hildaborg shuddered and pressed closer to him.

A scream echoed down the corridor, rose and fell and died raggedly into the echoes. The priest smirked. "A heretic is being shown the error of his ways," he said unctuously. "He blasphemed against the Moons and swore he would abide by the Empress."

"Then the gods abide by him," said Hildaborg defiantly.

The guards thrust them into a cell, little more than a cave chipped out of the hill's heart, and locked their chains to staples in the walls. They were held barely able to move, facing each other with a few scant inches between—miles between, a world between, thought Alfric wearily—he would never kiss her again—

The guards clanged the door shut and left them in utter darkness. Hildaborg's voice trembled, but she spoke bravely: "What can we do?"

"Nothing, now." The barbarian strained against his chains, felt their solidity, and relaxed. "Wait for a chance, maybe. Otherwise—die."

"I don't want to die, Alfric. I want to live, I want to see the sky and feel the wind and bear your sons."

"I don't enjoy the thought of death either, dearest. If we had fled to Aslak—"

"But we didn't, and for myself I am still glad. Though that you should die too—" Her voice broke, and he heard her quiet sobbing in the dark.

He tried to find words, but they were awkward. So he fell into silence.

Presently the door opened again. A man came in with only two torch-bearing Temple slaves accompanying. Alfric looked at his magnificent robes and knew him for Therokos the High Priest.

He was tall, stoop-shouldered, a little on the fat side but well muscled underneath. His face was wide and heavy, sallow under the high shaven forehead, the mouth hard and thin, the eyes small and black and glittering-cold. When he spoke, his voice was wondrous, a deep organ which he played like a master musician.

“So we meet again, your majesty,” he said, and bowed. There was little mockery in his tones; he seemed straightforward and businesslike.

Hildaborg did not answer. She stood with her beauteous form in its ragged soldier’s tunic pressed against the wall. Her sweat-dampened black hair clung to her forehead, fell down her shoulders in a shining wave. In the restless torchlight, her face was white and drawn, streaked with blood and dirt and the tracks of tears, but she gave the High Priest glance for glance and her lips were steady.

Therokos looked Alfric’s tall form up and down. “And so you are the conqueror of the prophecy,” he murmured. “A mighty man—but just how did you think you could do it? Who are your allies in the city? What was your plan?”

“I am Alfric of Aslak, and I came here without friends or plan, knowing nothing of any prophecy,” answered the barbarian coldly. “And you are a misbegotten son of a she-garm, with whose head I will yet play football.”

“Come now,” said Therokos softly, “surely you do not expect me to believe you are here by mere chance? Your cause is lost, you are doomed, but you can save yourself the inquisition and die easily if you will tell us what you know.”

“I know nothing, you jerrad!”

“You may know more after the inquisitioners have worked on you awhile,” said Therokos coldly. Then turning to Hildaborg, his voice suddenly rich and warm, throbbing with love and pity: “My lady, my lady, you do not know how I regret this. That the Empress of Valkarion should, even for dire necessity, be thus humiliated is the greatest sorrow of my life.”

Hildaborg’s lip curled. “I see you weeping,” she said coldly.

“But I do, my lady—my heart is ashes within me. Only need drove me to this—and it is not yet too late to repent, your majesty. What the Moons have taken, the Moons can restore.

“Surely, my lady,” said Therokos reasonably, “you can see the absolute necessity of my actions. Under the law, you could not rule, and there was no Imperial heir. Without a strong hand, leaderless Valkarion would have split under the quarreling of the nobles and the lawlessness of the commons, easy prey for barbarian enemies such as this man—and the Sibyl’s warning would have come true. With the Imperium gone, the Temple, sole remaining pillar of Valkarion, *must* bear the burden of state.”

“In other words,” said Hildaborg coldly, “you will have yourself anointed Theocrat.”

“The Moons have seen fit thus to honor my unworthiness,” said Therokos. “But it would still be well if we should unite our forces. You have many loyal friends, my lady, myself not the least of them. If you will but wed me, we can together unite the factions in the city and build the Empire anew.”

She smiled, almost a sneer. “Yours was a strange courtship.”

“I have told you how the necessity grieved me,” said the priest. Suddenly his voice came hard as steel, cold as winter and death: “It is now my duty to offer you a choice. Call on your troops to surrender, your followers in the city to desist from their treasonous activities, and wed me this night, or—” he paused—“burn at the stake for blasphemy and witchcraft. But first you will be tied down and every slave in the Temple have his way with you.”

“That might not be worse than leading my men into your hands,” she flared. But her face was suddenly bloodless.

“You will be surprised how much worse it will be—especially since your men will die anyway. But I will offer you this, too: if you call on them to surrender, those who do may go into exile.”

She stood a moment in silence, and Alfric knew what a horror must be clawing her heart. Then she nodded toward him: “What of my protector here?”

“The heathen bandit must die in any case, that the city may know itself safe from him and the prophecy,” said Therokos. “He still has his choice of easy hanging or slow torture. But if you refuse me, Hildaborg, he will no longer have the choice; he will go to hell by inches, cursing you for it.”

The lovely dark head bowed. It was as if a flame had gone out. Alfric felt ill at seeing her thus broken, given over to a lifetime's prisoning—golden chains they would be, but no less heavy and galling. "Goodbye, my dear," he whispered. "Goodbye, I will always love you."

She made no reply, but said to Therokos, tonelessly: "I yield me, lord."

V

The high priest's face lit, and Alfric realized dully that Therokos, too, loved the queen—in his own cold way. "You do well, beautiful one," he said shakily. He came over and kissed her and fondled her stiff body. "You have never done better, black witch. Now come—to your wedding."

He signed to the two slaves, who sconced their torches and took a key from their master. They unlocked Hildaborg's chains, and she almost fell into Therokos' arms.

He caressed her, murmuring softly. "There, dear, easy—you will wash and eat and rest, you will wear the robes of honor—be at ease, you are safe now, you are mine forever."

"Aye—" She braced herself, every muscle tautened under the silken skin, and suddenly she hurled the priest from her—sent him staggering against Alfric. "*Kill!*" she screamed.

The barbarian snarled, wild with a sudden murderous glory, and his manacled hands shot out. One gripped Therokos over the mouth, and the other sank steely fingers into the wattled throat.

The two slaves sprang at him like wild garms. Knives flashed in the bloody light. Hildaborg snatched a torch and swept its flaming end across the eyes of one. He screamed wordlessly, rolling over and over, clawing at his face. Hildaborg snatched up his dagger and lunged at the other.

Alfric groaned. What chance did she have against the deadly experience of a Temple assassin?—Therokos had gone limp. Alfric flung the heavy body crashing into the slave. They went down together. Hildaborg leaped in, her knife rising and falling and rising again, streaming red.

Then she was in his arms, shaken by wild sobbing. He held her close, kissed her, stroked her hair, and had time for a dim wondering amazement that such a woman should have lain in his—*his*—fate.

There was no time to lose. “Unlock me,” he said. “Unlock me and let’s get out of this den of Luigur.”

She searched Therokos’ robes for the key, found it, and cast the chains rattling aside. Alfric snatched up a knife, with an uneasy glance at the door. But the noise had drawn no guards. They must be used to screams in this part of the Temple.

Therokos stirred, groaning. Alfric’s big brown form stooped over him, dagger against throat. “Up with you, fat jerrad,” hissed the northerner. “Up, and not a word, or you’ll be spilling guts over the floor.”

The High Priest climbed unsteadily to his feet. “Now lead us out by a secret way,” rasped Alfric.

“There is none—” groaned Therokos.

Alfric slapped him with savage fury. “Shut up! I know there is. You priests are like all burrowing snakes, you’ve more than one exit to your holes. March! And if we meet guards, you’ll die first.”

Therokos flung him a glance of utter hate, but stumbled obediently ahead. The empty corridor echoed dully to their footfalls. Near its end, Therokos pressed a camouflaged stud, and a section of the rock wall swung aside on noiseless hinges.

Hildaborg took a torch from the wall and closed the door behind them. They went down a long sloping tunnel, so low that Alfric had to stoop. “You cannot hope to escape,” said Therokos, his voice again under his wondrous control. “Best you give up peaceably, saving trouble and lives on both sides. In exchange, I will offer better terms than before.”

“What?” asked Alfric skeptically.

“Weapons, money, and hengists—then you can leave the city for the hell that awaits you.”

“And my men?” insisted Hildaborg.

“Exile, with you.”

Alfric pondered the proposal. If they could get free, with men at their back, they could always raise an army for a new attempt. But surely Therokos

was aware of that. So if he had some trick—and it would be strange if he did not—

“How do we know you’ll keep the bargain?” he asked coldly.

“You have the honor of the High Priest,” answered Therokos loftily. Alfric sneered, and Therokos added: “Also, I assume you keep me prisoner until you are safe.”

“It does not sound ill—” mused Hildaborg.

Nor did it to Alfric. But he shook his head, stubbornly. “I mistrust him. Moreover, a new war, after he had time to get ready, would take time and lives, and might fail. If tonight is indeed the night of destiny, we can still strike.”

“With what?” jeered Therokos.

Alfric was not quite sure himself, but prodded the captive ungently onward. They came to another hinged rock, and Therokos opened that door for them. Alfric’s spine crawled with the thought of what might lie beyond; he kept the dagger against Therokos’ back as they stepped out.

They were in the shadows of a ruined portico, in a deserted section near the bottom of the hill. White and serene, the ancient columns lifted toward the two moons. The gracious remnants of elder days stretched on either side, half buried by drifting sand. Black against the sky, the Temple loomed on the hillcrest, but Alfric saw no movement.

Hildaborg slipped against him. “Now what shall we do?” she whispered.

He laughed softly, the old grim battle joy flowing up in him. Weariness and despair fell off like an outworn cloak—there was new strength in his thighs and a goal in his mind.

“I heard, down there, how Valkarion really hates the priests,” he said. “The city is seething with revolt which wants only a leader. Could the common folk rise, I think nigh all the city guards, impressed into priest service by fear, would come over to their side. And you—they love you, Hildaborg. Could you go to sure friends?”

“Aye—there is old Bronnes the merchant and Captain Hassalon of the guard, and—many.”

“Then go. Slip down to them, give them word and tell them to pass it on, to shout it over the city. You, the Empress, the divinely appointed lady of Valkarion, tell the folk to rise against the Temple. Let them storm the citadel, and they may have the looting of it!” He chuckled. “That should bring in the laggards.”

“But—untrained mobs, against the guards—”

“There will be other guardsmen on your side. And—this is my part—your Household will also be there.”

“But—they’re besieged—”

“I’ll get them out.” Alfric stripped off Therokos’ gold-braided cloak, and slung it over her shoulders. “This will cover you well enough so you can get to your friends unharmed. Now go, Hildaborg, and Ruho go with you.”

He kissed her, with a wild hunger that dissolved into tenderness. “Stay out of danger,” he whispered. “Stay in a safe place till I come for you—Hildaborg—”

Therokos scuttled aside. “Oh, no!” snarled Alfric, and stabbed. The priest tumbled, with blood rivering from his stomach, choking his screams. Alfric took Hildaborg again in his arms. “Goodbye, my dearest dear—”

She slipped into the shadows. Alfric sighed, wondering with a brief heaviness if he would ever see her again. He knew full well how desperate his gamble was.

Well, there was work to be done. He turned and ran crouched along the hillside, weaving in and out of darkness. The Moons were almost at their mating now, flooding the city with chill silver radiance.

He grinned up at them. And what did they think of this ruination of their ancient godhead? He could hardly imagine them caring about it. Surely Dannos, the swift warrior, and bright Mother Amaris had more use for an honest fighting man and his warmhearted love than for a bunch of sniveling shavepates. All honor to the Moons, but not to tyrants and murderers in their name.

He was in the gully now, between Temple and palace. Snakelike, he crawled under the shadow of the bridge to its farther end, where he peered cautiously around an abutment.

The trampled gardens were full of city and Temple guards, whose watchfires ringed the palace. He saw the light agleam on spears and swords and armor, and had time to wonder if he would ever make it past them.

But he had to try. He drew a deep breath, tightened his muscles, and ran.

Like a flying arrow he ran, noiseless on bare feet, and none saw him before he was hugged against a low thorn-tree near one of the fires. Up it he went,

wincing as the thorns raked him, and slipped along a branch almost overhanging the blaze.

He caught a snatch of muttered conversation. “—when they finish those siege engines, down the palace goes. But the Household will be out like a swarm of stinger asts. I don’t relish fighting the best swords in Valkarion.”

“No, but we outnumber them.”

“My cousin is in there. I hate to think of—”

Alfric sprang! He soared from his perch and crashed into the chest of the man he had picked. The guard went down in a clang of armor and dry snap of breaking ribs. Alfric snatched his spear and jabbed it through the groin of another. Through that gap, then, he raced, low and zigzag among the bushes.

The siege line roared. The air was suddenly thick with spears and arrows. Alfric felt one rake his leg, and cursed between gasps. To the palace!

“Open!” he howled. “Open, let me by, in the name of the Empress!”

If the garrison took this for a ruse and shot him, it was all over. He plunged up the long staircase, past the crouching craven sphinxes of the Empire. The doors had been broken down in the first assault, but the Imperials had put up a barricade. He saw steel flash as he neared it.

“Hildaborg!” he bawled. “Live the Empress!”

They held their fire. He fell under the barricade while their arrows hummed overhead. The disorderly Temple pursuit broke into retreat, back out of bowshot.

Alfric climbed over the barricade into the great palace antechamber. Its golden glory was gutted by fighting, splashed with dry blood, the tapestries in rags and the furniture splintered. Dead men and wounded lay side by side against the walls, under the ancient murals of the Empire’s greatness. A dozen tall cuirassiers in gold and purple uniforms—now torn and bloodstained—stood waiting for him. Their spears and swords, axes and bows were at the ready, their haggard faces bleak with suspicion.

“Who are you?” demanded the captain. “What is this?”

“I am Alfric of Aslak—” panted the newcomer.

“*A barbarian—the barbarian—the outlander of the prophecy—*” They hefted their weapons, eyes narrowing, mouths drawing into taut lines.

“I am with Hildaborg, against the Temple,” said Alfric. “’Twas with my help she escaped their net. Now she leads all of us to overthrow her foes.”

“How do we know you speak truth?” snapped the captain.

“You’ll know it when I lead you out against the Temple!”

“Out—to be cut down by thrice our number? Go to!”

“They’ll have more to worry about than us,” said Alfric. In hard brief words, he told them the plan.

At the end of it, the tall captain clapped his shoulder and said in a voice suddenly warm: “That is a tale whose truth we can see for ourselves, when the Empress’ folk come up against the Temple. So I’ll believe it, for one. I am Ganimos of the Imperial Household. Welcome, Alfric of Aslak!”

The barbarian nodded, too weary for speechmaking. “Give me some water and wine and a little to eat,” he said. “I’ll wash, refresh myself, and be ready to go with you at the time of the uprising. If we hit the Temple from the side then, it will fall.”

But he had scarcely gotten clean, donned a guardsman’s armor, and stretched himself on a couch for a moment’s nap, when he heard the blare of trumpets. Ganimos burst into the room where he lay, shouting: “The Temple’s men are storming us again in full force, and no help from the city in sight. Up—up and die!”

VI

Alfric swung to his feet, suddenly raging. “Therokos!” he growled. “I thought the devil was left dying, but someone must have found him. He knows the plan, means to thwart it by taking us before Hildaborg’s force can be raised. Without us to attack from the flank, the Temple may well drive off her assault.”

Ganimos fingered his shortsword with an ominous side glance. “Unless this be some treachery of yours, barbarian—” he murmured.

“What difference has my coming made in your actions so far?” snapped Alfric. “Were I of the enemy camp, would I have come here to fight on your side when they attacked?”

“Aye—truth, truth. But come!” Ganimos smiled twistedly. “If this is your night of destiny as they say, Alfric, the Fates have their work cut out for them!”

A roar of battle rose as they came out into the antechamber. Ganimos groaned. "There are too many ways into this damned building—we have to guard them all and we lost a quarter of our men the first time. If the Temple men assault one point in strength, they'll be inside!"

"Let them!" blazed Alfric. His eyes were like green fire under the swaying crystal candelabra. "Send messengers to all entrances, Ganimos—tell the men there to retreat, firing the palace to hinder pursuit. We'll gather all our forces here—"

"Burn the palace?" cried the guardsman. "I swore to defend it!"

"You swore to defend the Imperial family too, didn't you? If we can't get outside to help the Empress, you'll be a hell of a use to her! Now go!"

There was no gainsaying the wild power which blazed in the northerner. Ganimos went, shouting. Alfric swung joyously to the barricade, lifting the battle ax he had taken in preference to a shortsword.

The archers and spearmen were sending forth a deadly hail, but they could not halt the enemy charge. Alfric saw that there was cavalry coming against the main entrance, with foot soldiers behind. If they got over or through the flimsy barrier—

"Spears!" he roared. "Spearmen, hold firm!"

He led the way to the barricade top and ranked his guardsmen—they were *his* now, he was again master of war and equal of kings—in a tight line, with spears braced outward. "Now hold!" he shouted. "Hold, for the sake of Ruho!"

The hengists thundered up the stairs, across the portico, against and up the sides of the barricade in a living wave. For a moment battle raged. The heap of wood and stone chunks broke some of the speed of the charge, but still it shocked against the spear line with a fury that trembled in the walls. Metal clanged, men shouted, hengists screamed in a boiling tide of struggle. Alfric saw a spearman fall, spitted on a lance. He snatched the shaft and thrust it into the throat of the hengist breaking through—with all his straining force he rammed it home, and steed and rider tumbled back.

The cavalry broke, hengists bucking, refusing to hit that gleaming line again. The Temple infantry line scattered as the maddened animals trampled into it. Householders were streaming into the antechamber, and Alfric's nostrils quivered to the first acrid whiffs of smoke. With a burning palace behind them, the Imperials need have less fear of an attack from the rear.

"The infantry will be up against us in a moment," panted Ganimos.

“Aye, we’d better charge out while they’re still disorganized,” said Alfric. “We’ll assault the Temple itself. And pray your Moons help comes ere we’re cut down!”

“We’ll die like men, anyway,” said Ganimos, “not like beasts in a trap. Thank you for that, stranger.”

“Then—*hai, Hildaborg!*” Alfric plunged over the barricade.

The Household guards followed, a wave that formed into a wedge and plunged across the gardens. The finest warriors of Valkarion hit the wavering Temple forces like a spear going home.

Ax and sword! Spear and arrow! Clang and roar of metal, whirring weapons, rushing blood—shouts and curses, screams, deep-throated oaths—death unchained in the gardens of Valkarion!

Alfric led the way at the point of the wedge, smiting, smiting. No man could stand before his raging fury—his ax was a dazzle and thunder before him. Hewing, hewing, he led the Household forth.

“*Hildaborg! Hai, Hildaborg!*” The war cry shouted over the hills, rang in echoes with the clamor of metal and shock of combat. “*Hildaborg!*”

These Householders fought like demons, thought Alfric dimly as he struck at the faces and bodies which loomed briefly out of night and shadow into the red dance of fire. How they fought! But—Ruho, if he only had a levy of Aslakan axmen behind him now!

They won through to the bridge—through and over, in a dash that drove the few guards before it like dry leaves before a gale. Alfric turned gasping to Ganimos. “Hold the bridge,” he said. “As soon as we’re all over, hold the bridge. That’ll protect our rear from cavalry—hengists can’t go through that steep gully. And when the foot soldiers have gathered enough wits to come after us that way, you can throw spears down on top of them.”

“Aye, your majesty.” The title came without thought to the soldier’s lips, as he saluted and turned to hail a squad to stay with him.

Alfric led the assault of the rest on the Temple. There were fewer guards on this side of the gully. He hewed at one and felt the shock of the splitting skull through his arms and shoulders, rattling his teeth. Howling, he yanked the weapon free and brought it up to knock aside a sword-thrust and beat the foeman to earth.

Back the Household drove the guards, back to the scowling walls of the Temple. Weird battle, in darkness and cold, with the moons and the great rising flames for fitful illumination. Strange, to trade blows with men who were only red highlights against the roaring night. For a timeless interval, it was all clamor and death and flying steel.

But the Household was being carved away—man after man fell—and now the palace besiegers were streaming through the gully, Ganimos and his squad cut off on the bridge—hai, Hildaborg, it had been a lovely fight but it was nearing its end.

Alfric looked up at the mighty sky, and he saw the majestic shield of Dannos slip over Amaris. Her light was cut off, the hilltop grew dimmer—the Moons were mated.

“O Hildaborg, if only—”

He looked along the wall, against which he now had his back, and saw the torches which swept up the hill, saw the dark mass of humanity and heard its beast cry for blood. And his heart leaped into his throat, and he laughed aloud under Dannos, for here was life again.

“*Hai, Hildaborg!*” he roared.

The remaining troopers heard him and lifted their weary heads to see. They answered his cry, then, and hewed a way to where he stood. And now the dismayed Temple forces were breaking—the Household swept along the walls toward the Temple gates.

Battle raged there, as the rebel guards and the blood-howling mob bore down on the garrison. Fire was already licking at the rafters where flame arrows had struck; the Temple would soon stand aflame even as the palace was burning, as the Empire was burning and sundering. The two pillars of Valkarion were crashing to earth, and what would be left when they were gone?

By the leaping fire-blaze, Alfric saw the torn and trampled bodies of priests and slaves. He recognized one battered face and stooped over for a closer look. Therokos lay dead. His wound somehow bandaged and braced, his body cased in armor, he lay where he had fallen.

Well, the High Priest had been a brave man in his way—Alfric gave him warrior’s salute and passed on to join the fight.

An armored figure astride a great war-hengist was leading the charge. Even without hearing that lovely voice crying its challenge, Alfric would have known her. He sprang forward, crying out, and seized the bridle,

pulling her aside just as the gate defense broke and the attackers burst into the Temple.

“I told you to stay in a safe place!” he raged. Huge and bloodsmear, his lean face painted red by the rising fires, his eyes like green ice in the moonlight, he stood looking up at her.

Hildaborg laughed. “You’re still a poor fool, Alfric,” she said. “Could I stay at home while you were fighting for me?”

She took off her helmet. Her dark hair streamed down over his face as she leaned forward to kiss him.

In the sky, Dannos swept past Amaris and swung eastward toward the horizon.

Dawn came, chill and gray, full of weariness and the sobbing of women. Alfric stood leaning on a spear, atop the flat roof of Bronnes the merchant, and looked out over the city. A leather cloak hung from his broad shoulders against the thin bitter dawn-wind. His face was drawn into bleak lines.

To him came Hildaborg, lovely in the cold colorless light, her unbound locks floating in the breeze. He looked at her in a vague wonder as to how many women she really was. The passionate lover of the tavern, the haughty queen who had faced the captive guard and the captor priest, the wild war-goddess of the battle—and now this girl, slim and fair and mysterious, with wind-cooled cheeks and a secret laughter behind her eyes—which was the real one? Or were they all Hildaborg? And would he ever know?

She touched his arm. “We’ve won,” she whispered.

“Aye—won,” said Alfric tiredly. “Won what? The Temple is down, but so is the palace, and there’s still riot and looting in the city.”

“It will pass. Victory was dearly bought, but now it is ours. And you, Alfric, are ruler of Valkarion.”

“I—a heathen outlander?”

“After last night, the Household and the guards will follow you to hell and back. And the rest—” she smiled shyly—“will follow me, who follow you myself.”

“A big task. Too big, perhaps, for the son of an Aslakan peasant.” Alfric smiled crookedly down at Hildaborg. “’Tis more for you, who are born a

queen. Best I continue my travels.”

“The queen,” she said firmly, “needs a king. You have come to the end of your wandering, Alfric.” She laughed, a clear beautiful sound in the quiet morning. “You have no choice, my dear. The Sibyl grudgingly admits that the Fortieth Dynasty, ‘sons of the heathen,’ will be among the greatest. But how can you have sons without—”

Alfric grinned. “I surrender,” he said. “Who am I to challenge the Fates?”

Down in the street a hengist, escaped from his owner in the rioting, whinnied his greeting to the early sun.

LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS

“Yes, you’ll find almost anything man has ever imagined, somewhere out in the Galaxy,” I said. “There are so damned many millions of planets, and such a fantastic variety of surface conditions and of life evolving to meet them, and of intelligence and civilization appearing in that life. Why, I’ve been on worlds with fire-breathing dragons, and on worlds where dwarfs fought things that could pass for the goblins our mothers used to scare us with, and on a planet where a race of witches lived—telepathic pseudohypnosis, you know—oh, I’ll bet there’s not a tall story or fairy tale ever told which doesn’t have some kind of counterpart somewhere in the universe.”

Laird nodded. “Uh-huh,” he answered, in that oddly slow and soft voice of his. “I once let a genie out of a bottle.”

“Eh? What happened?”

“It killed me.”

I opened my mouth to laugh, and then took a second glance at him and shut it again. He was just too deadpan serious about it. Not poker-faced, the way a good actor can be when he’s slipping over a tall one—no, there was a sudden misery behind his eyes, and somehow it was mixed with the damndest cold humor.

I didn’t know Laird very well. Nobody did. He was out most of the time on Galactic Survey, prowling a thousand eldritch planets never meant for human eyes. He came back to the Solar System more rarely and for briefer visits than anyone else in his job, and had less to say about what he had found.

A huge man, six-and-a-half feet tall, with dark aquiline features and curiously brilliant greenish-grey eyes, middle-aged now though it didn’t show except at the temples. He was courteous enough to everyone, but shortspoken and slow to laugh. Old friends, who had known him thirty

years before when he was the gayest and most reckless officer in the Solar Navy, thought something during the Revolt had changed him more than any psychologist would admit was possible. But he had never said anything about it, merely resigning his commission after the war and going into Survey.

We were sitting alone in a corner of the lounge. The Lunar branch of the Explorers' Club maintains its building outside the main dome of Selene Center, and we were sitting beside one of the great windows, drinking Centaurian sidecars and swapping the inevitable shop-talk. Even Laird indulged in that, though I suspected more because of the information he could get than for any desire of companionship.

Behind us, the long quiet room was almost empty. Before us, the window opened on the raw magnificence of moonscape, a sweep of crags and cliffs down the crater wall to the riven black plains, washed in the eerie blue of Earth's light. Space blazed above us, utter black and a million sparks of frozen flame.

"Come again?" I said.

He laughed, without much humor. "I might as well tell you," he said. "You won't believe it, and even if you did it'd make no difference. Sometimes I tell the story—alcohol makes me feel like it—I start remembering old times...."

He settled farther back in his chair. "Maybe it wasn't a real genie," he went on. "More of a ghost, perhaps. That was a haunted planet. They were great a million years before man existed on Earth. They spanned the stars and they knew things the present civilization hasn't even guessed at. And then they died. Their own weapons swept them away in one burst of fire, and only broken ruins were left—ruins and desert, and the ghost who lay waiting in that bottle."

I signalled for another round of drinks, wondering what he meant, wondering just how sane that big man with the worn rocky face was. Still—you never know. I've seen things out beyond that veil of stars which your maddest dreams never hinted at. I've seen men carried home mumbling and empty-eyed, the hollow cold of space filling their brains where something

had broken the thin taut wall of their reason. They say spacemen are a credulous breed. Before Heaven, they have to be!

“You don’t mean New Egypt?” I asked.

“Stupid name. Just because there are remnants of a great dead culture, they have to name it after an insignificant valley of ephemeral peasants. I tell you, the men of Vwyrdda were like gods, and when they were destroyed whole suns were darkened by the forces they used. Why, they killed off Earth’s dinosaurs in a day, millions of years ago, and only used one ship to do it.”

“How in hell do you know that? I didn’t think the archeologists had deciphered their records.”

“They haven’t. All our archeologists will ever know is that the Vwyrddans were a race of remarkably humanoid appearance, with a highly advanced interstellar culture wiped out about a million Earth-years ago. Matter of fact, I don’t really know that they did it to Earth, but I do know that they had a regular policy of exterminating the great reptiles of terrestroid planets with an eye to later colonization, and I know that they got this far, so I suppose our planet got the treatment too.” Laird accepted his fresh drink and raised the glass to me. “Thanks. But now do be a good fellow and let me ramble on in my own way.

“It was—let me see—thirty-three years ago now, when I was a bright young lieutenant with bright young ideas. The Revolt was in full swing then, and the Janyards held all that region of space, out Sagittari way you know. Things looked bad for Sol then—I don’t think it’s ever been appreciated how close we were to defeat. They were poised to drive right through our lines with their battle-fleets, slash past our frontiers, and hit Earth itself with the rain of hell that had already sterilized a score of planets. We were fighting on the defensive, spread over several million cubic light-years, spread horribly thin. Oh, bad!

“Vwyrdda—New Egypt—had been discovered and some excavation done shortly before the war began. We knew about as much then as we do now. Especially, we knew that the so-called Valley of the Gods held more relics than any other spot on the surface. I’d been quite interested in the work, visited the planet myself, even worked with the crew that found and restored that gravitomagnetic generator—the one which taught us half of what we know now about g-m fields.

“It was my young and fanciful notion that there might be more to be found, somewhere in that labyrinth—and from study of the reports I even thought I knew about what and where it would be. One of the weapons that had novaed suns, a million years ago—

“The planet was far behind the Janyard lines, but militarily valueless. They wouldn’t garrison it, and I was sure that such semi-barbarians wouldn’t have my idea, especially with victory so close. A one-man sneakboat could get in readily enough—it just isn’t possible to blockade a region of space; too damned inhumanly big. We had nothing to lose but me, and maybe a lot to gain, so in I went.

“I made the planet without trouble and landed in the Valley of the Gods and began work. And that’s where the fun started.”

Laird laughed again, with no more mirth than before.

There was a moon hanging low over the hills, a great scarred shield thrice the size of Earth’s, and its chill white radiance filled the Valley with colorless light and long shadows. Overhead flamed the incredible sky of the Sagittarian regions, thousands upon thousands of great blazing suns swarming in strings and clusters and constellations strange to human eyes, blinking and glittering in the thin cold air. It was so bright that Laird could see the fine patterns of his skin, loops and whorls on the numbed fingers that groped against the pyramid. He shivered in the wind that streamed past him, blowing dust devils with a dry whisper, searching under his clothes to sheathe his flesh in cold. His breath was ghostly white before him, the bitter air felt liquid when he breathed.

Around him loomed the fragments of what must have been a city, now reduced to a few columns and crumbling walls held up by the lava which had flowed. The stones reared high in the unreal moonlight, seeming almost to move as the shadows and the drifting sand passed them. Ghost city. Ghost planet. He was the last life that stirred on its bleak surface.

But somewhere above that surface—

What was it, that descending hum high in the sky, sweeping closer out of stars and moon and wind? Minutes ago the needle on his gravitomagnetic detector had wavered down in the depths of the pyramid. He had hurried up and now stood looking and listening and feeling his heart turn stiff.

No, no, no—not a Janyard ship, not now—it was the end of everything if they came.

Laird cursed with a hopeless fury. The wind caught his mouthings and blew them away with the scudding sand, buried them under the everlasting silence of the valley. His eyes traveled to his sneakboat. It was invisible against the great pyramid—he'd taken that much precaution, shoveling a low grave of sand over it—but, if they used metal detectors that was valueless. He was fast, yes, but almost unarmed; they could easily follow his trail down into the labyrinth and locate the vault.

Lord if he had led them here—if his planning and striving had only resulted in giving the enemy the weapon which would destroy Earth—

His hand closed about the butt of his blaster. Silly weapon, stupid popgun—what could he do?

Decision came. With a curse, he whirled and ran back into the pyramid.

His flash lit the endless downward passages with a dim bobbing radiance, and the shadows swept above and behind and marched beside, the shadows of a million years closing in to smother him. His boots slammed against the stone floor, *thud-thud-thud*—the echoes caught the rhythm and rolled it booming ahead of him. A primitive terror rose to drown his dismay; he was going down into the grave of a thousand millennia, the grave of the gods, and it took all the nerve he had to keep running and never look back. He didn't dare look back.

Down and down and down, past this winding tunnel, along this ramp, through this passageway into the guts of the planet. A man could get lost here. A man could wander in the cold and the dark and the echoes till he died. It had taken him weeks to find his way into the great vault, and only the clues given by Murchison's reports had made it possible at all. Now—

He burst into a narrow antechamber. The door he had blasted open leaned drunkenly against a well of night. It was fifty feet high, that door. He fled past it like an ant and came into the pyramid storehouse.

His flash gleamed off metal, glass, substances he could not identify that had lain sealed against a million years till he came to wake the machines. What they were, he did not know. He had energized some of the units, and they had hummed and flickered, but he had not dared experiment. His idea

had been to rig an antigrav unit which would enable him to haul the entire mass of it up to his boat. Once he was home, the scientists could take over. But now—

He skinned his teeth in a wolfish grin and switched on the big lamp he had installed. White light flooded the tomb, shining darkly back from the monstrous bulks of things he could not use, the wisdom and techniques of a race which had spanned the stars and moved planets and endured for fifty million years. Maybe he could puzzle out the use of something before the enemy came. Maybe he could wipe them out in one demoniac sweep—just like a stereofilm hero, jeered his mind—or maybe he could simply destroy it all, keep it from Janyard hands.

He should have provided against this. He should have rigged a bomb, to blow the whole pyramid to hell—

With an effort, he stopped the frantic racing of his mind and looked around. There were paintings on the walls, dim with age but still legible, pictographs, meant perhaps for the one who finally found this treasure. The men of New Egypt were shown, hardly distinguishable from humans—dark of skin and hair, keen of feature, tall and stately and robed in living light. He had paid special attention to one representation. It showed a series of actions, like an old time comic-strip—a man taking up a glassy object, fitting it over his head, throwing a small switch. He had been tempted to try it, but—gods, what would it do?

He found the helmet and slipped it gingerly over his skull. It might be some kind of last-ditch chance for him. The thing was cold and smooth and hard, it settled on his head with a slow massiveness that was strangely—*living*. He shuddered and turned back to the machines.

This thing now with the long coil-wrapped barrel—an energy projector of some sort? How did you activate it? Hellfire, which was the muzzle end?

He heard the faint banging of feet, winding closer down the endless passageways. Gods, his mind groaned. They didn't waste any time, did they?

But they hadn't needed to... a metal detector would have located his boat, told them that he was in this pyramid rather than one of the dozen others scattered through the valley. And energy tracers would spot him down here...

He doused the light and crouched in darkness behind one of the machines. The blaster was heavy in his hand.

A voice hailed him from outside the door. "It's useless, Solman. Come out of there!"

He bit back a reply and lay waiting.

A woman's voice took up the refrain. It was a good voice, he thought irrelevantly, low and well modulated, but it had an iron ring to it. They were hard, these Janyards, even their women led troops and piloted ships and killed men.

"You may as well surrender, Solman. All you have done has been to accomplish our work for us. We suspected such an attempt might be made. Lacking the archeological records, we couldn't hope for much success ourselves, but since my force was stationed near this sun I had a boat lie in an orbit around the planet with detectors wide open. We trailed you down, and let you work, and now we are here to get what you have found."

"Go back," he bluffed desperately. "I planted a bomb. Go back or I'll set it off."

The laugh was hard with scorn. "Do you think we wouldn't know it if you had? You haven't even a spacesuit on. Come out with your hands up or we'll flood the vault with gas."

Laird's teeth flashed in a snarling grin. "All right," he shouted, only half aware of what he was saying. "All right, you asked for it!"

He threw the switch on his helmet.

It was like a burst of fire in his brain, a soundless roar of splintering darkness. He screamed, half crazy with the fury that poured into him, feeling the hideous thrumming along every nerve and sinew, feeling his muscles cave in and his body hit the floor. The shadows closed in, roaring and rolling, night and death and the wreck of the universe, and high above it all he heard—laughter.

He lay sprawled behind the machine, twitching and whimpering. They had heard him, out in the tunnels, and with slow caution they entered and stood over him and watched his spasms jerk toward stillness.

They were tall and well-formed, the Janyard rebels—Earth had sent her best out to colonize the Sagittarian worlds, three hundred years ago. But the long cruel struggle, conquering and building and adapting to planets that

never were and never could be Earth, had changed them, hardened their metal and frozen something in their souls.

Ostensibly it was a quarrel over tariff and trade rights which had led to their revolt against the Empire; actually, it was a new culture yelling to life, a thing born of fire and loneliness and the great empty reaches between the stars, the savage rebellion of a mutant child. They stood impassively watching the body until it lay quiet. Then one of them stooped over and removed the shining glassy helmet.

“He must have taken it for something he could use against us,” said the Janyard, turning the helmet in his hands; “but it wasn’t adapted to his sort of life. The old dwellers here looked human, but I don’t think it went any deeper than their skins.”

The woman commander looked down with a certain pity. “He was a brave man,” she said.

“Wait—he’s still alive, ma’m—he’s sitting up—”

Daryesh forced the shaking body to hands and knees. He felt its sickness, wretched and cold in throat and nerves and muscles, and he felt the roiling of fear and urgency in the brain. These were enemies. There was death for a world and a civilization here. Most of all, he felt the horrible numbness of the nervous system, deaf and dumb and blind, cut off in its house of bone and peering out through five weak senses....

Vwyrdda, Vwyrdda, he was a prisoner in a brain without a telepathy transceiver lobe. He was a ghost reincarnated in a thing that was half a corpse!

Strong arms helped him to his feet. “That was a foolish thing to try,” said the woman’s cool voice.

Daryesh felt strength flowing back as the nervous and muscular and endocrine systems found a new balance, as his mind took over and fought down the gibbering madness which had been Laird. He drew a shuddering breath. Air in his nostrils after—how long? How long had he been dead?

His eyes focused on the woman. She was tall and handsome. Ruddy hair spilled from under a peaked cap, wide-set blue eyes regarded him frankly out of a face sculptured in clean lines and strong curves and fresh young coloring. For a moment he thought of Ilorna, and the old sickness rose—then he throttled it and looked again at the woman and smiled.

It was an insolent grin, and she stiffened angrily. “Who are you, Solman?” she asked.

The meaning was dear enough to Daryesh, who had his—host's—memory patterns and linguistic habits as well as those of Vwyrdda. He replied steadily, "Lieutenant John Laird of the Imperial Solar Navy, at your service. And your name?"

"You are exceeding yourself," she replied with frost in her voice. "But since I will wish to question you at length... I am Captain Joana Rostov of the Janyard Fleet. Conduct yourself accordingly."

Daryesh looked around him. This wasn't good. He hadn't the chance now to search Laird's memories in detail, but it was clear enough that this was a force of enemies. The rights and wrongs of a quarrel ages after the death of all that had been Vwyrdda meant nothing to him, but he had to learn more of the situation, and be free to act as he chose. Especially since Laird would presently be reviving and start to resist.

The familiar sight of the machines was at once steadying and unnerving. There were powers here which could smash planets! It looked barbaric, this successor culture, and in any event the decision as to the use of this leashed hell had to be his. His head lifted in unconscious arrogance. *His!* For he was the last man of Vwyrdda, and they had wrought the machines, and the heritage was his.

He had to escape.

Joana Rostov was looking at him with an odd blend of hard suspicion and half-frightened puzzlement. "There's something wrong about you, Lieutenant," she said. "You don't behave like a man whose project has just gone to smash. What was that helmet for?"

Daryesh shrugged. "Part of a control device," he said easily. "In my excitement I failed to adjust it properly. No matter. There are plenty of other machines here."

"What use to you?"

"Oh—all sorts of uses. For instance, that one over there is a nucleonic disintegrator, and this is a shield projector, and—"

"You're lying. You can't know any more about this than we do."

"Shall I prove it?"

"Certainly not. Come back from there!"

Coldly, Daryesh estimated distances. He had all the superb psychosomatic coordination of his race, the training evolved through millions of years, but the sub-cellular components would be lacking in this body. Still—he had to take the chance.

He launched himself against the Janyard who stood beside him. One hand chopped into the man's larynx, the other grabbed him by the tunic and threw him into the man beyond. In the same movement, Daryesh stepped over the falling bodies, picked up the machine rifle which one had dropped, and slammed over the switch of the magnetic shield projector with its long barrel.

Guns blazed in the dimness. Bullets exploded into molten spray as they hit that fantastic magnetic field. Daryesh, behind it, raced through the door and out the tunnel.

They'd be after him in seconds, but this was a strong long-legged body and he was getting the feel of it. He ran easily, breathing in coordination with every movement, conserving his strength. He couldn't master control of the involuntary functions yet, the nervous system was too different, but he could last for a long while at this pace.

He ducked into a remembered side passage. A rifle spewed a rain of slugs after him as someone came through the magnetic field. He chuckled in the dark. Unless they had mapped every labyrinthine twist and turn of the tunnels, or had life-energy detectors, they'd never dare trail him. They'd get lost and wander in here till they starved.

Still, that woman had a brain. She'd guess he was making for the surface and the boats, and try to cut him off. It would be a near thing. He settled down to running.

It was long and black and hollow here, cold with age. The air was dry and dusty, little moisture could be left on Vwyrdda. How long has it been? How long has it been?

John Laird stirred back toward consciousness, stunned neurons lapsing into familiar pathways of synapse, the pattern which was personality fighting to restore itself. Daryesh stumbled as the groping mind flashed a random command to his muscles, cursed, and willed the other self back to blankness. Hold on, Daryesh, hold on, a few minutes only—

He burst out of a small side entrance and stood in the tumbled desolation of the valley. The keen tenuous air raked his sobbing lungs as he looked wildly around at sand and stone and the alien stars. New constellations—Gods, it had been a long time! The moon was larger than he remembered, flooding the dead landscape with a frosty argence. It must have spiraled close in all those uncounted ages.

The boat! Hellblaze, where was the boat?

He saw the Janyard ship not far away, a long lean torpedo resting on the dunes, but it would be guarded—no use trying to steal it. Where was this Laird's vessel, then?

Tumbling through a confusion of alien memories, he recalled burying it on the west side. . . . No, it wasn't he who had done that but Laird. Damnation, he had to work fast. He plunged around the monstrous eroded shape of the pyramid, found the long mound, saw the moongleam where the wind had blown sand off the metal. What a clumsy pup this Laird was.

He shoveled the sand away from the airlock, scooping with his hands, the breath raw in throat and lungs. Any second now they'd be on him, any instant, and now that they really believed he understood the machines—

The lock shone dully before him, cold under his hands. He spun the outer dog, swearing with a frantic emotion foreign to old Vwyrdda, but that was the habit of his host, untrained psychosomatically, unevolved—There they came!

Scooping up the stolen rifle, Daryesh fired a chattering burst at the group that swarmed around the edge of the pyramid. They tumbled like jointed dolls, screaming in the death-white moonlight. Bullets howled around him and ricocheted off the boat-hull.

He got the lock open as they retreated for another charge. For an instant his teeth flashed under the moon, the cold grin of Daryesh the warrior who had ruled a thousand suns in his day and led the fleets of Vwyrdda.

"Farewell, my lovelies," he murmured, and the remembered syllables of the old planet were soft on his tongue.

Slamming the lock behind him, he ran to the control room, letting John Laird's almost unconscious habits carry him along. He got off to a clumsy start—but then he was climbing for the sky, free and away—

A fist slammed into his back, tossed him in his pilot chair to the screaming roar of sundered metal. Gods, O gods, the Janyards had fired a

heavy ship's gun, they'd scored a direct hit on his engines and the boat was whistling groundward again.

Grimly, he estimated that the initial impetus had given him a good trajectory, that he'd come down in the hills about a hundred miles north of the valley. But then he'd have to run for it, they'd be after him like beasts of prey in their ship—and John Laird would not be denied, muscles were twitching and sinews tightening and throat mumbling insanity as the resurgent personality fought to regain itself. That was one battle he'd have to have out soon!

Well—mentally, Daryesh shrugged. At worst, he could surrender to the Janyards, make common cause with them. It really didn't matter who won this idiotic little war. He had other things to do.

Nightmare. John Laird crouched in a wind-worn cave and looked out over hills lit by icy moonlight. Through a stranger's eyes, he saw the Janyard ship landing near the down-glided wreck of his boat, saw the glitter of steel as they poured out and started hunting. Hunting *him*.

Or was it him any longer, was he more than a prisoner in his own skull? He thought back to memories that were not his, memories of himself thinking thoughts that were not his own, himself escaping from the enemy while he, Laird, whirled in a black abyss of half-conscious madness. Beyond that, he recalled his own life, and he recalled another life which had endured a thousand years before it died. He looked out on the wilderness of rock and sand and blowing dust, and remembered it as it had been, green and fair, and remembered that he was Daryesh of Tollogh, who had ruled over whole planetary systems in the Empire of Vwyrdda. And at the same time he was John Laird of Earth, and two streams of thought flowed through the brain, listening to each other, shouting at each other in the darkness of his skull.

A million years! Horror and loneliness and a wrenching sorrow were in the mind of Daryesh as he looked upon the ruin of Vwyrdda. A million years ago!

Who are you? cried Laird. What have you done to me? And even as he asked, memories which were his own now rose to answer him.

It had been the Erai who rebelled, the Erai whose fathers came from Vwyrdda the fair but who had been strangely altered by centuries of environment. They had revolted against the static rule of the Immortals, and in a century of warfare they had overrun half the Empire and rallied its populations under them. And the Immortals had unleashed their most terrible powers, the sun-smashing ultimate weapons which had lain forbidden in the vaults of Vwyrdda for ten million years. Only—the Erai had known about it. And they had had the weapons too.

In the end, Vwyrdda went under, her fleets broken and her armies reeling in retreat over ten thousand scorched planets. The triumphant Erai had roared in to make an end of the mother world, and nothing in all the mighty Imperial arsenals could stop them now.

Theirs was an unstable culture, it could not endure as that of Vwyrdda had. In ten thousand years or so, they would be gone, and the Galaxy would not have even a memory of that which had been. Which was small help to us, thought Laird grimly, and realized with an icy shock that it had been the thought of Daryesh.

The Vwyrddan's mental tone was, suddenly, almost conversational, and Laird realized what an immensity of trained effort it must have taken to overcome that loneliness of a million years. "See here, Laird, we are apparently doomed to occupy the same body till one of us gets rid of the other, and it is a body which the Janyards seem to want. Rather than fight each other, which would leave the body helpless, we'd better cooperate."

"But—Lord, man! What do you think I am? Do you think I want a vampire like you up there in my brain?"

The answer was fierce and cold. "What of me, Laird? I, who was Daryesh of Tollogh, lord of a thousand suns and lover of Ilorna the Fair, immortalized noble of the greatest empire the universe has ever seen—I am now trapped in the half-evolved body of a hunted alien, a million years after the death of all which mattered. Better be glad I'm here, Laird. I can handle those weapons, you know."

The eyes looked out over the bleak windy hillscape, and the double mind watched distance-dwarfed forms clambering in the rocks, searching for a trail. "A hell of a lot of good that does us now," said Laird. "Besides, I can hear you thinking, you know, and I can remember your own past thoughts. Sol or Janya, it's the same to you. How do I know you'll play ball with me?"

The answer was instant, but dark with an unpleasant laughter. “Why—read my mind, Laird! It’s your mind too, isn’t it?” Then, more soberly: “Apparently history is repeating itself in the revolt of the barbarians against the mother planet, though on a smaller scale and with a less developed science. I do not expect the result to be any happier for civilization than before. So perhaps I may take a more effective hand than I did before.”

It was ghostly, lying here in the wind-grieved remnants of a world, watching the hunters move through a bitter haze of moonlight, and having thoughts which were not one’s own, thoughts over which there was no control. Laird clenched his fists, fighting for stability.

“That’s better,” said Daryesh’s sardonic mind. “But relax. Breathe slowly and deeply, concentrate only on the breathing for a while—and then search my mind which is also yours.”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

“I am afraid that is impossible. We’re in the same brain, you know, and we’ll have to get used to each other’s streams of consciousness. Relax, man, lie still; think over the thing which has happened to you and know it for the wonder it is.”

Man, they say, is a time-binding animal. But only the mighty will and yearning of Vwyrdda had ever leaped across the borders of death itself, waited a million years that that which was a world might not die out of all history.

What is the personality? It is not a thing, discrete and material, it is a pattern and a process. The body starts with a certain genetic inheritance and meets all the manifold complexities of environment. The whole organism is a set of reactions between the two. The primarily mental component, sometimes called the ego, is not separable from the body but can in some ways be studied apart.

The scientists had found a way to save something of that which was Daryesh. While the enemy was blazing and thundering at the gates of Vwyrdda, while all the planet waited for the last battle and the ultimate night, quiet men in laboratories had perfected the molecular scanner so that the pattern of synapses which made up all memory, habit, reflex, instinct, the continuity of the ego, could be recorded upon the electronic structure of certain crystals. They took the pattern of Daryesh and of none other, for only he of the remaining Immortals was willing. Who else would want a pattern to be repeated, ages after he himself was dead, ages after all the

world and all history and meaning were lost? But Daryesh had always been reckless, and Ilorna was dead, and he didn't care much for what happened.

Ilorna, Ilorna! Laird saw the unforgotten image rise in his memory, golden-eyed and laughing, the long dark hair flowing around the lovely suppleness of her. He remembered the sound of her voice and the sweetness of her lips, and he loved her. A million years, and she was dust blowing on the night wind, and he loved her with that part of him which was Daryesh and with more than a little of John Laird. . . . O Ilorna. . . .

And Daryesh the man had gone to die with his planet, but the crystal pattern which reproduced the ego of Daryesh lay in the vault they had made, surrounded by all the mightiest works of Vwyrdda. Sooner or later, sometime in the infinite future of the universe, someone would come; someone or something would put the helmet on his head and activate it. And the pattern would be reproduced on the neurons, the mind of Daryesh would live again, and he would speak for dead Vwyrdda and seek to renew the tradition of fifty million years. It would be the will of Vwyrdda, reaching across time—But Vwyrdda is *dead*, thought Laird frantically. Vwyrdda is gone—this is a new history—you've got no business telling us what to do!

The reply was cold with arrogance. "I shall do as I see fit. Meanwhile, I advise that you lie passive and do not attempt to interfere with me."

"Cram it, Daryesh!" Laird's mouth drew back in a snarl. "I won't be dictated to by anyone, let alone a ghost."

Persuasively, the answer came, "At the moment, neither of us has much choice. We are hunted, and if they have energy trackers—yes, I see they do—they'll find us by this body's thermal radiation alone. Best we surrender peaceably. Once aboard the ship, loaded with all the might of Vwyrdda, our chance should come."

Laird lay quietly, watching the hunters move closer, and the sense of defeat came down on him like a falling world. What else could he do? What other chance was there?

"All right," he said at last, audibly. "All right. But I'll be watching your every thought, understand? I don't think you can stop me from committing suicide if I must."

"I think I can. But opposing signals to the body will only neutralize each other, leave it helplessly fighting itself. Relax, Laird, lie back and let me

handle this. I am Daryesh the warrior, and I have come through harder battles than this.”

They rose and began walking down the hillside with arms lifted. Daryesh’s thought ran on, “Besides—that’s a nice-looking wench in command. It could be interesting!”

His laughter rang out under the moon, and it was not the laughter of a human being.

“I can’t understand you, John Laird,” said Joana.

“Sometimes,” replied Daryesh lightly, “I don’t understand myself very well—or you, my dear.”

She stiffened a little. “That will do, Lieutenant. Remember your position here.”

“Oh, the devil with our ranks and countries. Let’s be live entities for a change.”

Her glance was quizzical. “That’s an odd way for a Solman to phrase it.”

Mentally, Daryesh swore. Damn this body, anyway! The strength, the fineness of coordination and perception, half the senses he had known, were missing from it. The gross brain structure couldn’t hold the reasoning powers he had once had. His thinking was dull and sluggish. He made blunders the old Daryesh would never have committed. And this young woman was quick to see them, and he was a prisoner of John Laird’s deadly enemies, and the mind of Laird himself was tangled in thought and will and memory, ready to fight him if he gave the least sign of—

The Solarian’s ego chuckled nastily. Easy, Daryesh, easy!

Shut up! his mind snapped back, and he knew drearily that his own trained nervous system would not have been guilty of such a childish emotional response.

“I may as well tell you the truth, Captain Rostov,” he said aloud. “I am not Laird at all. Not any more.”

She made no response, merely drooped the lids over her eyes and leaned back in her chair. He noticed abstractedly how long her lashes were—or was that Laird’s appreciative mind, unhindered by too much remembrance of Ilorna?

They sat alone, the two of them, in her small cabin aboard the Janyard cruiser. A guard stood outside the door, but it was closed. From time to time they would hear a dull thump or clang as the heavy machines of Vwyrdda were dragged aboard—otherwise they might have been the last two alive on the scarred old planet.

The room was austere furnished, but there were touches of the feminine here and there—curtains, a small pot of flowers, a formal dress hung in a half-open closet. And the woman who sat across the desk from him was very beautiful, with the loosened ruddy hair streaming to her shoulders and the brilliant eyes never wavering from his. But one slender hand rested on a pistol.

She had told him frankly, “I want to talk privately with you. There is something I don’t understand... but I’ll be ready to shoot at the first suspicion of a false move. And even if you should somehow overpower me, I’d be no good as a hostage. We’re Janyards here, and the ship is more than the life of any one of us.”

Now she waited for him to go on talking.

He took a cigarette from the box on her desk—Laird’s habits again—and lit it and took a slow drag of smoke into his lungs. *All right, Daryesh, go ahead. I suppose your idea is the best, if anything can be made to work at all. But I’m listening, remember.*

“I am all that is left of this planet,” he said tonelessly. “This is the ego of Daryesh of Tollogh, Immortal of Vwyrdda, and in one sense I died a million years ago.”

She remained quiet, but he saw how her hands clenched and he heard the sharp small hiss of breath sucked between the teeth.

Briefly, then, he explained how his mental pattern had been preserved, and how it had entered the brain of John Laird.

“You don’t expect me to believe that story,” she said contemptuously.

“Do you have a lie detector aboard?”

“I have one in this cabin, and I can operate it myself.” She got up and fetched the machine from a cabinet. He watched her, noticing the grace of her movements. You died long ago, Ilorna—you died and the universe will never know another like you. But I go on, and she reminds me somehow of you.

It was a small black thing that hummed and glowed on the desk between them. He put the metal cap on his head, and took the knobs in his hands, and waited while she adjusted the controls. From Laird's memories, he recalled the principle of the thing, the measurement of activity in separate brain-centers, the precise detection of the slight extra energy needed in the higher cerebral cortex to invent a falsehood.

"I have to calibrate," she said, "Make up something I know to be a lie."

"New Egypt has rings," he smiled, "which are made of Limburger cheese. However, the main body of the planet is a delicious Camembert—"

"That will do. Now repeat your previous statements."

Relax, Laird, damn it—blank yourself! I can't control this thing with you interfering.

He told his story again in a firm voice, and meanwhile he was working within the brain of Laird, getting the feel of it, applying the lessons of nerve control which had been part of his Vwyrddan education. It should certainly be possible to fool a simple electronic gadget, to heighten activity in all centers to such an extent that the added effort of his creative cells could not be spotted.

He went on without hesitation, wondering if the flickering needles would betray him and if her gun would spit death into his heart in the next moment: "Naturally, Laird's personality was completely lost, its fixed patterns obliterated by the superimposition of my own. I have his memories, but otherwise I am Daryesh of Vwyrdda, at your service."

She bit her lip. "What service! You shot four of my men."

"Consider my situation, woman. I came into instantaneous existence. I remember sitting in the laboratory under the scanner, a slight dizziness, and then immediately I was in an alien body. Its nervous system was stunned by the shock of my entry, I couldn't think clearly. All I had to go on was Laird's remembered conviction that these were deadly foes surrounding me, murderous creatures bent on killing me and wiping out my planet. I acted half-instinctively. Also, I wanted, in my own personality, to be a free agent, to get away and think this out for myself. So I did. I regret the death of your men, but I think they will be amply compensated for."

"H'm—you surrendered when we all but had you anyway."

"Yes, of course, but I had about decided to do so in all events." Her eyes never lifted from the dials that wavered life or death. "I was, after all, in your territory, with little or no hope of getting clear, and you were the

winning side of this war, which meant nothing to me emotionally. Insofar as I have any convictions in this matter, it is that the human race will best be served by a Janyard victory. History has shown that when the frontier cultures—which the old empire calls barbaric but which are actually new and better adapted civilizations—when they win out over the older and more conservative nations, the result is a synthesis and a period of unusual achievement.”

He saw her visibly relaxing, and inwardly he smiled. It was so easy, so easy. They were such children in this later age. All he had to do was hand her a smooth lie which fitted in with the propaganda that had been her mental environment from birth, and she could not seriously think of him as an enemy.

The blue gaze lifted to his, and the lips were parted. “You will help us?” she whispered.

Daryesh nodded. “I know the principles and construction and use of those engines, and in truth there is in them the force that molds planets. Your scientists would never work out the half of all that there is to be found. I will show you the proper operation of them all.” He shrugged. “Naturally, I will expect commensurate rewards. But even altruistically speaking, this is the best thing I can do. Those energies should remain under the direction of one who understands them, and not be misused in ignorance. That could lead to unimaginable catastrophes.”

Suddenly she picked up her gun and shoved it back into its holster. She stood up, smiling, and held out her hand.

He shook it vigorously, and then bent over and kissed it. When he looked up, she stood uncertain, half afraid and half glad.

It's not fair! protested Laird. The poor girl has never known anything of this sort. She's never heard of coquetry. To her love isn't a game, it's something mysterious and earnest and decent—

I told you to shut up, answered Daryesh coldly. Look, man, even if we do have an official safe-conduct, this is still a ship full of watchful hostility. We have to consolidate our position by every means at hand. Now relax and enjoy this.

He walked around the desk and took her hands again. “You know,” he said, and the crooked smile on his mouth reminded him that this was more than half a truth, “you make me think of the woman I loved, a million years ago on Vwyrdda.”

She shrank back a little. “I can’t get over it,” she whispered. “You—you’re old, and you don’t belong to this cycle of time at all, and what you must think and know makes me feel like a child—Daryesh, it frightens me.”

“Don’t let it, Joana,” he said gently. “My mind is young, and very lonely.” He put a wistfulness in his voice. “Joana, I need someone to talk to. You can’t imagine what it is to wake up a million years after all your world is dead, more alone than—oh, let me come in once in awhile and talk to you, as one friend to another. Let’s forget time and death and loneliness. I need someone like you.”

She lowered her eyes, and said with a stubborn honesty, “I think that would be good too, Daryesh. A ship’s captain doesn’t have friends, you know. They put me in this service because I had the aptitude, and that’s really all I’ve ever had. Oh, comets!” She forced a laugh. “To space with all that self-pity. Certainly you may come in whenever you like. I hope it’ll be often.”

They talked for quite a while longer, and when he kissed her goodnight it was the most natural thing in the universe. He walked to his bunk—transferred from the brig to a tiny unused compartment—with his mind in pleasant haze.

Lying in the dark, he began the silent argument with Laird anew. “Now what?” demanded the Solarian.

“We play it slow and easy,” said Daryesh patiently—as if the fool couldn’t read it directly in their common brain. “We watch our chance, but don’t act for a while yet. Under the pretext of rigging the energy projectors for action, we’ll arrange a setup which can destroy the ship at the flick of a switch. They won’t know it. They haven’t an inkling about subspatial flows. Then, when an opportunity to escape offers itself, we throw that switch and get away and try to return to Sol. With my knowledge of Vwyrddan science, we can turn the tide of the war. It’s risky—sure—but it’s the only chance I see. And for Heaven’s sake let me handle matters. You’re supposed to be dead.”

“And what happens when we finally settle this business? How can I get rid of you?”

“Frankly, I don’t see any way to do it. Our patterns have become too entangled. The scanners necessarily work on the whole nervous system. We’ll just have to learn to live together.” Persuasively: “It will be to your own advantage. Think, man! We can do as we choose with Sol. With the Galaxy. And I’ll set up a life-tank and make us a new body to which we’ll transfer the pattern, a body with all the intelligence and abilities of a Vwyrddan, and I’ll immortalize it. Man, you’ll never die!”

It wasn’t too happy a prospect, thought Laird skeptically. His own chances of dominating that combination were small. In time, his own personality might be completely absorbed by Daryesh’s greater one.

Of course—a psychiatrist—narcosis, hypnosis—

“No, you don’t!” said Daryesh grimly. “I’m just as fond of my own individuality as you are.”

The mouth which was theirs twisted wryly in the dark. “Guess we’ll just have to learn to love each other,” thought Laird.

The body dropped into slumber. Presently Laird’s cells were asleep, his personality faded into a shadowland of dreams. Daryesh remained awake a while longer. Sleep—waste of time—the Immortals had never been plagued by fatigue—

He chuckled to himself. What a web of lies and counterlies he had woven. If Joana and Laird both knew—

The mind is an intricate thing. It can conceal facts from itself, make itself forget that which is painful to remember, persuade its own higher components of whatever the subconscious deems right. Rationalization, schizophrenia, autohypnosis, they are but pale indications of the self-deception which the brain practices. And the training of the Immortals included full neural coordination; they could consciously utilize the powers latent in themselves. They could by an act of conscious will stop the heart, or block off pain, or split their own personalities.

Daryesh had known his ego would be fighting whatever host it found, and he had made preparations before he was scanned. Only a part of his mind was in full contact with Laird’s. Another section, split off from the main stream of consciousness by deliberate and controlled schizophrenia, was thinking its own thoughts and making its own plans. Self-hypnotized,

he automatically reunited his ego at such times as Laird was not aware, otherwise there was only subconscious contact. In effect a private compartment of his mind, inaccessible to the Solarian, was making its own plans.

That destructive switch would have to be installed to satisfy Laird's waking personality, he thought. But it would never be thrown. For he had been telling Joana that much of the truth—his own advantage lay with the Janyards, and he meant to see them through to final victory.

It would be simple enough to get rid of Laird temporarily. Persuade him that for some reason it was advisable to get dead drunk. Daryesh's more controlled ego would remain conscious after Laird's had passed out. Then he could make all arrangements with Joana, who by that time should be ready to do whatever he wanted.

Psychiatry—yes, Laird's brief idea had been the right one. The methods of treating schizophrenia could, with some modifications, be applied to suppressing Daryesh's extra personality. He'd blank out that Solarian... permanently.

And after that would come his undying new body, and centuries and millennia in which he could do what he wanted with this young civilization.

The demon exorcising the man—He grinned drowsily. Presently he slept.

The ship drove through a night of stars and distance. Time was meaningless, was the position of the hands on a clock, was the succession of sleeps and meals, was the slow shift in the constellations as they gulped the light-years.

On and on, the mighty drone of the second-order drive filling their bones and their days, the round of work and food and sleep and Joana. Laird wondered if it would ever end. He wondered if he might not be the *Flying Dutchman*, outward bound for eternity, locked in his own skull with the thing that had possessed him. At such times the only comfort was in Joana's arms. He drew of the wild young strength of her, and he and Daryesh were one. But afterward—

We're going to join the Grand Fleet. You heard her, Daryesh. She's making a triumphal pilgrimage to the gathered power of Janya, bringing the invincible weapons of Vwyrdda to her admiral.

Why not? She's young and ambitious, she wants glory as much as you do. What of it?

We have to escape before she gets there. We have to steal a lifeboat and destroy this ship and all in it soon.

All in it? Joana Rostov, too?

Damn it, we'll kidnap her or something. You know I'm in love with the girl, you devil. But it's a matter of all Earth. This one cruiser has enough stuff in it now to wreck a planet. I have parents, brothers, friends—a civilization. We've got to act!

All right, all right, Laird. But take it easy. We have to get the energy devices installed first. We'll have to give them enough of a demonstration to allay their suspicions. Joana's the only one aboard here who trusts us. None of her officers do.

The body and the double mind labored as the slow days passed, directing Janyard technicians who could not understand what it was they built. Laird, drawing on Daryesh's memories, knew what a giant slept in those coils and tubes and invisible energy-fields. Here were forces to trigger the great creative powers of the universe and turn them to destruction—distorted space-time, atoms dissolving into pure energy, vibrations to upset the stability of force-fields which maintained order in the cosmos. Laird remembered the ruin of Vwyrdda, and shuddered.

They got a projector mounted and operating, and Daryesh suggested that the cruiser halt somewhere that he could prove his words. They picked a barren planet in an uninhabited system and lay in an orbit fifty thousand miles out. In an hour Daryesh had turned the facing hemisphere into a sea of lava.

"If the dis-fields were going," he said absentmindedly, "I'd pull the planet into chunks for you."

Laird saw the pale taut faces around him. Sweat was shining on foreheads, and a couple of men looked sick. Joana forgot her position enough to come shivering into his arms.

But the visage she lifted in a minute was exultant and eager, with the thoughtless cruelty of a swooping hawk. "There's an end of Earth, gentlemen!"

"Nothing they have can stop us," murmured her exec dazedly. "Why, this one ship, protected by one of those spacewarp screens you spoke of, sir—this one little ship could sail in and lay the Solar System waste."

Daryesh nodded. It was entirely possible. Not much energy was required, since the generators of Vwyrdda served only as catalysts releasing fantastically greater forces. And Sol had none of the defensive science which had enabled his world to hold out for a while. Yes, it could be done.

He stiffened with the sudden furious thought of Laird: *That's it, Daryesh! That's the answer.*

The thought-stream was his own too, flowing through the same brain, and indeed it was simple. They could have the whole ship armed and armored beyond the touch of Janya. And since none of the technicians aboard understood the machines, and since they were now wholly trusted, they could install robot-controls without anyone's knowing.

Then—the massed Grand Fleet of Janya—a flick of the main switch—man-killing energies would flood the cruiser's interior, and only corpses would remain aboard. Dead men and the robots that would open fire on the Fleet. This one ship could ruin all the barbarian hopes in a few bursts of incredible flame. And the robots could then be set to destroy her as well, lest by some chance the remaining Janyards manage to board her.

And we—we can escape in the initial confusion, Daryesh. We can give orders to the robot to spare the captain's gig, and we can get Joana aboard and head for Sol! There'll be no one left to pursue!

Slowly, the Vwyrddan's thought made reply: *A good plan. Yes, a bold stroke. We'll do it!*

“What's the matter, Daryesh?” Joana's voice was suddenly anxious. “You look—”

“Just thinking, that's all. Never think, Captain Rostov. Bad for the brain.”

Later, as he kissed her, Laird felt ill at thought of the treachery he planned. Her friends, her world, her cause—wiped out in a single shattering blow, and he would have struck it. He wondered if she would speak to him ever again, once it was over.

Daryesh, the heartless devil, seemed only to find a sardonic amusement in the situation.

And later, when Laird slept, Daryesh thought that the young man's scheme was good. Certainly he'd fall in with it. It would keep Laird busy till they were at the Grand Fleet rendezvous. And after that it would be too late. The Janyard victory would be sealed. All he, Daryesh, had to do when the time came was keep away from that master switch. If Laird tried to

reach it their opposed wills would only result in nullity—which was victory for Janya.

He liked this new civilization. It had a freshness, a vigor and hopefulness which he could not find in Laird's memories of Earth. It had a tough-minded purposefulness that would get it far. And being young and fluid, it would be amenable to such pressures of psychology and force as he chose to apply.

Vwyrdda, his mind whispered. *Vwyrdda, we'll make them over in your image. You'll live again!*

Grand Fleet!

A million capital ships and their auxiliaries lay marshaled at a dim red dwarf of a sun, massed together and spinning in the same mighty orbit. Against the incandescent whiteness of stars and the blackness of the old deeps, armored flanks gleamed like flame as far as eyes could see, rank after rank, tier upon tier, of titanic sharks swimming through space—guns and armor and torpedoes and bombs and men to smash a planet and end a civilization. The sight was too big, imagination could not make the leap, and the human mind had only a dazed impression of vastness beyond vision.

This was the great spearhead of Janya, a shining lance poised to drive through Sol's thin defense lines and roar out of the sky to rain hell on the seat of empire. *They can't really be human any more, thought Laird sickly. Space and strangeness have changed them too much. No human being could think of destroying Man's home. Then, fiercely: All right Daryesh. This is our chance!*

Not yet, Laird. Wait a while. Wait till we have a legitimate excuse for leaving the ship.

Well—come up to the control room with me. I want to stay near that switch. Lord, Lord, everything that is Man and me depends on us now!

Daryesh agreed with a certain reluctance that faintly puzzled the part of his mind open to Laird. The other half, crouched deep in his subconscious, knew the reason: It was waiting the posthypnotic signal, the key event which would trigger its emergence into the higher brain-centers.

The ship bore a tangled and unfinished look. All its conventional armament had been ripped out and the machines of Vwyrdda installed in its place. A robot brain, half-alive in its complexity, was gunner and pilot and ruling intelligence of the vessel now, and only the double mind of one man knew what orders had really been given it. *When the main switch is thrown, you will flood the ship with ten units of disrupting radiation. Then, when the captain's gig is well away, you will destroy this fleet, sparing only that one boat. When no more ships in operative condition are in range, you will activate the disintegrators and dissolve this whole vessel and all its contents to basic energy.*

With a certain morbid fascination, Laird looked at that switch. An ordinary double-throw knife type—Lord of space, could it be possible, was it logical that all history should depend on the angle it made with the control panel? He pulled his eyes away, stared out at the swarming ships and the greater host of the stars, lit a cigaret with shaking hands, paced and sweated and waited.

Joana came to him, a couple of crewmen marching solemnly behind. Her eyes shone and her cheeks were flushed and the turret light was like molten copper in her hair. *No woman*, thought Laird, *had ever been so lovely, and she was going to destroy that to which she had given her life.*

“Daryesh!” Laughter danced in her voice. “Daryesh, the high admiral wants to see us in his flagship. He’ll probably ask for a demonstration, and then I think the fleet will start for Sol at once with us in the van. Daryesh—oh, Daryesh, the war is almost over!”

Now! blazed the thought of Laird, and his hand reached for the main switch. Now—easily, causally, with a remark about letting the generators warm up—and then go with her, overpower those guardsmen in their surprise and head for home!

And Daryesh’s mind reunited itself at that signal, and the hand froze. . . .

No!

What? But—

The memory of the suppressed half of Daryesh’s mind was open to Laird, and the triumph of the whole of it, and Laird knew that his defeat was here.

So simple, so cruelly simple—Daryesh could stop him, lock the body in a conflict of wills, and that would be enough. For while Laird slept, while Daryesh's own major ego was unconscious, the trained subconscious of the Vwyrddan had taken over. It had written, in its self-created somnambulism, a letter to Joana explaining the whole truth, and had put it where it would easily be found once they started looking through his effects in search of an explanation for his paralysis. And the letter directed, among other things, that Daryesh's body should be kept under restraint until certain specified methods known to Vwyrddan psychiatry—drugs, electric waves, hypnosis—had been applied to eradicate the Laird half of his mind.

Janyard victory was near.

“Daryesh!” Joana's voice seemed to come from immensely far away; her face swam in a haze and a roar of fainting consciousness. “Daryesh, what's the matter? Oh, my dear, what's wrong?”

Grimly, the Vwyrddan thought: *Give up, Laird. Surrender to me, and you can keep your ego. I'll destroy that letter. See, my whole mind is open to you now—you can see that I mean it honestly this time. I'd rather avoid treatment if possible, and I do owe you something. But surrender now, or be wiped out of your own brain.*

Defeat and ruin—and nothing but slow distorting death as reward for resistance. Laird's will caved in, his mind too chaotic for clear thought. Only one dull impulse came: *I give up. You win, Daryesh.*

The collapsed body picked itself off the floor. Joana was bending anxiously over him. “Oh, what is it, what's wrong?”

Daryesh collected himself and smiled shakily. “Excitement will do this to me, now and then. I haven't fully mastered this alien nervous system yet. I'm all right now. Let's go.”

Laird's hand reached out and pulled the switch over.

Daryesh shouted, an animal roar from the throat, and tried to recover it, and the body toppled again in a stasis of locked wills.

It was like a deliverance from hell, and still it was but the inevitable logic of events, as Laird's own self reunited. Half of him still shaking with defeat, half realizing its own victory, he thought savagely:

None of them noticed me do that. They were paying too much attention to my face. Or if they did, we've proved to them before that it's only a harmless regulating switch. And—the lethal radiations are already flooding

us! If you don't cooperate now, Daryesh, I'll hold us here till we're both dead!

So simple, so simple. Because, sharing Daryesh's memory, Laird had shared his knowledge of self-deception techniques. He had anticipated, with the buried half of his mind, that the Vwyrddan might pull some such trick, and had installed a posthypnotic command of his own. In a situation like this, when everything looked hopeless, his conscious mind was to surrender, and then his subconscious would order that the switch be thrown.

Cooperate, Daryesh! You're as fond of living as I. Cooperate, and let's get the hell out of here!

Grudgingly, wryly: *You win, Laird.*

The body rose again, and leaned on Joana's arm, and made its slow way toward the boat blisters. The undetectable rays of death poured through them, piling up their cumulative effects. In three minutes, a nervous system would be ruined.

Too slow, too slow. "Come on, Joana. Run!"

"Why—" She stopped, and a hard suspicion came into the faces of the two men behind her. "Daryesh—what do you mean? What's come over you?"

"Ma'm. . . ." One of the crewmen stepped forward. "Ma'm, I wonder . . . I saw him pull down the main switch. And now he's in a hurry to leave the ship. And none of us really know how all that machinery ticks."

Laird pulled the gun out of Joana's holster and shot him. The other gasped, reaching for his own side arm, and Laird's weapon blazed again.

His fist leaped out, striking Joana on the angle of the jaw, and she sagged. He caught her up and started to run.

A pair of crewmen stood in the corridor leading to the boats. "What's the matter, sir?" one asked.

"Collapsed—radiation from the machines—got to get her to a hospital ship," gasped Daryesh.

They stood aside, wonderingly, and he spun the dogs of the blister valve and stepped into the gig. "Shall we come, sir?" asked one of the men.

"No!" Laird felt a little dizzy. The radiation was streaming through him, and death was coming with giant strides. "No—" He smashed a fist into the insistent face, slammed the valve back, and vaulted to the pilot's chair.

The engines hummed, warming up. Fists and feet battered on the valve. The sickness made him retch.

O Joana, if this kills you—

He threw the main-drive switch. Acceleration jammed him back as the gig leaped free.

Staring out the ports, he saw fire blossom in space as the great guns of Vwyrdda opened up.

My glass was empty. I signalled for a refill and sat wondering just how much of the yarn one could believe.

“I’ve read the histories,” I said slowly. “I do know that some mysterious catastrophe annihilated the massed fleet of Janya and turned the balance of the war. Sol speared in and won inside of a year. And you mean that you did it?”

“In a way. Or Daryesh did. We were acting as one personality, you know. He was a thoroughgoing realist, and the moment he saw his defeat he switched wholeheartedly to the other side.”

“But—Lord, man! Why’ve we never heard anything about this? You mean you never told anyone, never rebuilt any of those machines, never did anything?”

Laird’s dark, worn face twisted in a bleak smile. “Certainly. This civilization isn’t ready for such things. Even Vwyrdda wasn’t, and it’ll take us millions of years to reach their stage. Besides, it was part of the bargain.”

“Bargain?”

“Just as certainly. Daryesh and I still had to live together, you know. Life under suspicion of mutual trickery, never trusting your own brain, would have been intolerable. We reached an agreement during that long voyage back to Sol, and used Vwyrddan methods of autohypnosis to assure that it could not be broken.”

He looked somberly out at the lunar night. “That’s why I said the genie in the bottle killed me. Inevitably, the two personalities merged, became one. And that one was, of course, mostly Daryesh, with overtones of Laird.

“Oh, it isn’t so horrible. We retain the memories of our separate existences, and the continuity which is the most basic attribute of the ego. In fact, Laird’s life was so limited, so blind to all the possibilities and wonder of the universe, that I don’t regret him very often. Once in a while I still get nostalgic moments and have to talk to a human. But I always pick

one who won't know whether or not to believe me, and won't be able to do much of anything about it if he should."

"And why did you go into Survey?" I asked, very softly.

"I want to get a good look at the universe before the change. Daryesh wants to orient himself, gather enough data for a sound basis of decision. When we—I—switch over to the new immortal body, there'll be work to do, a galaxy to remake in a newer and better pattern by Vwyrddan standards! It'll take millennia, but we've got all time before us. Or I do—what do I mean, anyway?" He ran a hand through his gray-streaked hair.

"But Laird's part of the bargain was that there should be as nearly normal a human life as possible until this body gets inconveniently old. So—" He shrugged. "So that's how it worked out."

We sat for a while longer, saying little, and then he got up. "Excuse me," he said. "There's my wife. Thanks for the talk."

I saw him walk over to greet a tall, handsome red-haired woman. His voice drifted back: "Hello, Joana—"

They walked out of the room together in perfectly ordinary and human fashion.

I wonder what history has in store for us.

SWORDSMAN OF LOST TERRA

The third book of the Story of the Men of Killorn. How Red Bram fought the Ganasthi from the lands of darkness, and Kery son of Rhiach was angered, and the pipe of the gods spoke once more.

I

Now it must be told of those who fared forth south under Bram the Red. This was the smallest of the parties that left Killorn, being from three clans only—Broina, Dagh, and Heorran. That made some thousand warriors, mostly men with some women archers and slingers. But the pipe of the gods had always been with Clan Broina, and so it followed the Broina on this trek. He was Rhiach son of Glyndwyrr, and his son was Kery.

Bram was a Heorran, a man huge of height and thew, with eyes like blue ice and hair and beard like a torch. He was curt of speech and had no close friends, but men agreed that his brain and his spirit made him the best leader for a journey like this, though some thought that he paid too little respect to the gods and their priests.

For some five years these men of Killorn marched south. They went over strange hills and windy moors, through ice-blinking clefts in gaunt-cragged mountains and over brawling rivers chill with the cold of the Dark Lands.

They hunted and robbed to live, or reaped the grain of foreigners, and cheerfully cut down any who sought to gainsay them. Now and again Bram

dickered with the chiefs of some or other city and hired himself and his wild men out to fight against another town. Then there would be hard battle and rich booty and flames red against the twilight sky.

Men died and some grew weary of roving and fighting. There was a sick hunger within them for rest and a hearthfire and the eternal sunset over the Lake of Killorn. These took a house and a woman and stayed by the road. In such ways did Bram's army shrink. On the other hand most of his warriors finally took some or other woman along on the march and she would demand more for herself and the babies than a roof of clouds and wind. So there came to be tents and wagons, with children playing between the turning wheels. Bram grumbled about this, it made his army slower and clumsier, but there was little he could do to prevent it.

Those who were boys when the trek began became men with the years and the battles and the many miles. Among these was the Kery of whom we speak. He grew tall and lithe and slender, with the fair skin and slant blue eyes and long ash-blond hair of the Broina, broad of forehead and cheekbones, straight-nosed, beardless like most of his clan.

He was swift and deadly with sword, spear, or bow, merry with his comrades over ale and campfire, clever to play harp or pipe and make verses—not much different from the others, save that he came of the Broina and would one day carry the pipe of the gods. And while the legends of Killorn said that all men are the offspring of a goddess whom a warrior devil once bore off to his lair, it was held that the Broina had a little more demon blood in them than most.

Always Kery bore within his heart a dream. He was still a stripling when they wandered from home. He had reached young manhood among hoofs and wheels and dusty roads, battle and roaming and the glimmer of campfires, but he never forgot Killorn of the purple hills and the far thundering sea and the lake where it was forever sunset. For there had been a girl of the Dagh sept, and she had stayed behind.

But then the warriors came to Ryvan and their doom.

It was a broad fair country into which they had come. Trending south and east, away from the sun, they were on the darker edge of the Twilight Lands and the day was no longer visible at all. Only the deep silver-blue dusk lay

around them and above, with black night and glittering stars to the east and a few high clouds lit by unseen sunbeams to the west. But it was still light enough for Twilight Landers' eyes to reach the horizon—to see fields and woods and rolling hills and the far metal gleam of a river. They were well into the territory of Ryvan city.

Rumor ran before them on frightened feet, and peasants often fled as they advanced. But never had they met such emptiness as now. They had passed deserted houses, gutted farmsteads, and the bones of the newly slain, and had shifted their course eastward to get into wilder country where there should at least be game. But such talk as they had heard of the invaders of Ryvan made them march warily. And when one of their scouts galloped back to tell of an army advancing out of the darkness against them, the great horns screamed and the wagons were drawn together.

For a while there was chaos, running and yelling men, crying children, bawling cattle, and tramping hests. Then the carts were drawn into a defensive ring atop a high steep ridge and the warriors waited outside. They made a brave sight, the men of Killorn, tall barbarians in the colorful kilts of their septs with plundered ornaments shining around corded throat or sinewy arm.

Most of them still bore the equipment of their homeland—horned helmets, gleaming ring-byrnies, round shields, ax and bow and spear and broadsword, worn and dusty with use but ready for more. The greater number went afoot, though some rode the small shaggy hests of the north. Their women and children crouched behind the wagons, with bows and slings ready and the old battle banners of Killorn floating overhead.

Kery came running to the place where the chiefs stood. He wore only a helmet and a light leather corselet, and carried sword and spear and a bow slung over his shoulders. "Father," he called. "Father, who are they?"

Rhiach of Broina stood near Bram with the great bagpipes of the gods under one arm—old beyond memory, those pipes, worn and battered, but terror and death and the avenging furies crouched in them, power so great that only one man could ever know the secret of their use. A light breeze stirred the warlock's long gray hair about his gaunt face, and his eyes brooded on the eastern darkness.

The scout who had brought word turned to greet Kery. He was panting with the weariness of his hard ride. An arrow had wounded him, and he shivered as the cold wind from the Dark Lands brushed his sweat-streaked

body. "A horde," he said. "An army marching out of the east toward us, not Ryvan but such a folk as I never knew of. Their outriders saw me and barely did I get away. Most likely they will move against us, and swiftly."

"A host at least as great as ours," added Bram. "It must be a part of the invading Dark Landers who are laying Ryvan waste. It will be a hard fight, though I doubt not that with our good sword-arms and the pipe of the gods we will throw them back."

"I know not." Rhiach spoke slowly. His deep eyes were somber on Kery. "I have had ill dreams of late. If I fell in this battle, before we won... I did wrong, son. I should have told you how to use the pipe."

"The law says you can only do that when you are so old that you are ready to give up your chiefship to your first born," said Bram. "It is a good law. A whole clan knowing how to wield such power would soon be at odds with all Killorn."

"But we are not in Killorn now," said Rhiach. "We have come far from home, among alien and enemy peoples, and the lake where it is forever sunset is a ghost to us." His hard face softened. "If I fall, Kery, my own spirit, I think, will wander back thither. I will wait for you at the border of the lake, I will be on the windy heaths and by the high tarns, they will hear me piping in the night and know I have come home... but seek your place, son, and all the gods be with you."

Kery gulped and wrung his father's hand. The warlock had ever been a stranger to him. His mother was dead these many years and Rhiach had grown grim and silent. And yet the old warlock was dearer to him than any save Morna who waited for his return.

He turned and sped to his own post, with the tyrns.

The cows of the great horned tyrns from Killorn were for meat and milk and leather, and trudged meekly enough behind the wagons. But the huge black bulls were wicked and had gored more than one man to death. Still Kery had gotten the idea of using them in battle. He had made iron plates for their chests and shoulders. He had polished their cruel horns and taught them to charge when he gave the word. No other man in the army dared go near them, but Kery could guide them with a whistle. For the men of Broina were warlocks.

They snorted in the twilight as he neared them, stamping restlessly and shaking their mighty heads. He laughed in a sudden reckless drunkenness of power and moved up to his big lovely Gorwain and scratched the bull behind the ears.

“Softly, softly,” he whispered, standing in the dusk among the crowding black bulks. “Patient, my beauty, wait but a little and I’ll slip you, O wait, my Gorwain.”

Spears blinked in the shadowy light and voices rumbled quietly. The bulls and the hests snorted, stamping and shivering in the thin chill wind flowing from the lands of night. They waited.

Presently they heard, faint and far, the skirling of war pipes. But it was not the wild joyous music of Killorn, it was a thin shrill note which ran along the nerves, jagged as a saw, and the thump of drums and the clangor of gongs came with it. Kery sprang up on the broad shoulders of Gorwain the tyr and strained into the gloom to see.

Over the rolling land came marching the invaders. It was an army of a thousand or so, he guessed with a shiver of tension, moving in closer ranks and with tighter discipline than the barbarians. He had seen many armies, from the naked yelling savages of the upper Norlan hills to the armored files of civilized towns, yet never one like this.

Dark Landers, he thought bleakly. Out of the cold and the night that never ends, out of the mystery and the frightened legends of a thousand years, here at last are the men of the Dark Lands, spilling into the Twilight like their own icy winds, and have we anything that can stand against them?

They were tall, as tall as the northerners, but gaunt, with a stringy toughness born of hardship and suffering and bitter chill. Their skins were white, not with the ruddy whiteness of the northern Twilight Landers but dead-white, blank and bare, and the long hair and beards were the color of silver.

Their eyes were the least human thing about them, huge and round and golden, the eyes of a bird of prey, deep sunken in the narrow skulls. Their faces seemed strangely immobile, as if the muscles for laughter and weeping were alike frozen. As they moved up, the only sound was the tramp of their feet and the demon whine of their pipes and the clash of drum and gong.

They were well equipped, Kery judged, they wore close-fitting garments of fur-trimmed leather, trousers and boots and hooded tunics. Underneath he glimpsed mail, helmets, shields, and they carried all the weapons he knew—no cavalry, but they marched with a sure tread. Overhead floated a strange banner, a black standard with a jagged golden streak across it.

Kery's muscles and nerves tightened to thrumming alertness. He crouched by his lead bull, one hand gripping the hump and the other white-knuckled around his spearshaft. And there was a great hush on the ranks of Killorn as they waited.

Closer came the strangers, until they were in bowshot. Kery heard the snap of tautening strings. *Will Bram never give the signal? Gods, is he waiting for them to walk up and kiss us?*

A trumpet brayed from the enemy ranks, and Kery saw the cloud of arrows rise whistling against the sky. At the same time Bram winded his horn and the air grew loud with war shouts and the roar of arrow flocks.

Then the strangers locked shields and charged.

II

The men of Killorn stood their ground, shoulder to shoulder, pikes braced and swords aloft. They had the advantage of high ground and meant to use it. From behind their ranks came a steady hail of arrows and stones, whistling through the air to crack among the enemy ranks and tumble men to earth—yet still the Dark Landers came, leaping and bounding and running with strange precision. They did not yell, and their faces were blank as white stone, but behind them the rapid thud of their drums rose to a pulse-shaking roar.

“*Hai-ah!*” bellowed Red Bram. “Sunder them!”

The great long-shafted ax shrieked in his hands, belled on an enemy helmet and crashed through into skull and brain and shattering jawbone. Again he smote, sideways, and a head leaped from its shoulders.

A Dark Land warrior thrust for his belly. He kicked one booted foot out and sent the man lurching back into his own ranks. Whirling, he hewed

down one who engaged the Killorner beside him. A foeman sprang against him as he turned, chopping at his leg. With a roar that lifted over the clashing racket of battle, Bram turned, the ax already flying in his hands, and cut the stranger down.

His red beard blazed like a torch over the struggle as it swayed back and forth. His streaming ax was a lightning bolt that rose and fell and rose again, and the thunder of metal on breaking metal rolled between the hills.

Kery stood by his tyrs, bow in hand, shooting and shooting into the masses that roiled about him. None came too close, and he could not leave his post lest the unchained bulls stampede. He shuddered with the black fury of battle. When would Bram call the charge. How long? Zip, zip, gray-feathered death winging into the tide that rolled up to the wagons and fell back and resurged over its corpses.

The men of Killorn were yelling and cursing as they fought, but the Dark Landers made never a sound save for the hoarse gasping of breath and the muted groans of the wounded. It was like fighting demons, yellow-eyed and silver-bearded and with no soul in their bony faces. The northerners shivered and trembled and hewed with a desperate fury of loathing.

Back and forth the battle swayed, roar of axes and whine of arrows and harsh iron laughter of swords. Kery stood firing and firing, the need to fight was a bitter catch in his throat. How long to wait, how long, how long?

Why didn't Rhiach blow the skirl of death on the pipes? Why not fling them back with the horror of disintegration in their bones, and then rush out to finish them?

Kery knew well that the war-song of the gods was only to be played in time of direst need, for it hurt friend almost as much as foe—but even so, even so! A few shaking bars, to drive the enemy back in death and panic, and then the sortie to end them!

Of a sudden he saw a dozen Dark Landers break from the main battle by the wagons and approach the spot where he stood. He shot two swift arrows, threw his spear, and pulled out his sword with a savage laughter in his heart, the demoniac battle joy of the Broina. Ha, let them come!

The first sprang with downward-whistling blade. Kery twisted aside, letting speed and skill be his shield, his long glaive flickered out and the enemy screamed as it took off his arm. Whirling, Kery spat the second through the throat. The third was on him before he could withdraw his

blade, and a fourth from the other side, raking for his vitals. He sprang back.

“Gorwain!” he shouted. “*Gorwain!*”

The huge black bull heard. His fellows snorted and shivered, but stayed at their place—Kery didn’t know how long they would wait, he prayed they would stay a moment more. The lead tyr ran up beside his master, and the ground trembled under his cloven hoofs.

The white foemen shrank back, still dead of face but with fear plain in their bodies. Gorwain snorted, an explosion of thunder, and charged them.

There was an instant of flying bodies, tattered flesh ripped by the horns, and ribs snapping underfoot. The Dark Landers thrust with their spears, the points glanced off the armor plating and Gorwain turned and slew them.

“Here!” cried Kery sharply. “Back, Gorwain! Here!”

The tyr snorted and circled, rolling his eyes. The killing madness was coming over him, if he were not stopped now he might charge friend or foe.

“Gorwain!” screamed Kery.

Slowly, trembling under his shining black hide, the bull returned.

And now Rhiach the warlock stood up behind the ranks of Killorn. Tall and steely gray, he went out between them, the pipes in his arms and the mouthpieces at his lips. For an instant the Dark Landers wavered, hesitating to shoot at him, and then he blew.

It was like the snarling music of any bagpipe, and yet there was more in it. There was a boiling tide of horror riding the notes, men’s hearts faltered and weakness turned their muscles watery. Higher rose the music, and stronger and louder, screaming in the dales, and before men’s eyes the world grew unreal, shivering beneath them, the rocks faded to mist and the trees groaned and the sky shook. They fell toward the ground, holding their ears, half blind with unreasoning fear and with the pain of the giant hand that gripped their bones and shook them, shook them.

The Dark Landers reeled back, falling, staggering, and many of those who toppled were dead before they hit the earth. Others milled in panic, the army was becoming a mob. The world groaned and trembled and tried to dance to the demon-music.

Rhiach stopped. Bram shook his bull head to clear the ringing and the fog in it. "At them!" he roared. "*Charge!*"

Sanity came back. The land was real and solid again, and men who were used to the terrible drone of the pipes could force strength back into shuddering bodies. With a great shout, the warriors of Killorn formed ranks and moved forward.

Kery leaped up on the back of Gorwain, straddling the armored chine and gripping his knees into the mighty flanks. His sword blazed in the air. "Now kill them, my beauties!" he howled.

In a great wedge, with Gorwain at their lead, the tyrs rushed out on the foe. Earth shook under the rolling thunder of their feet. Their bellowing filled the land and clamored at the gates of the sky. They poured like a black tide down on the Dark Land host and hit it.

"Hoo-ah!" cried Kery.

He felt the shock of running into that mass of men and he clung tighter, holding on with one hand while his sword whistled in the other. Bodies fountained before the rush of the bulls, horns tossed men into the heavens and hoofs pounded them into the earth. Kery swung at dimly glimpsed heads, the hits shivered along his arm but he could not see if he killed anyone, there wasn't time.

Through and through the Dark Land army the bulls plowed, goring a lane down its middle while the Killorners fell on it from the front. Blood and thunder and erupting violence, death reaping the foe, and Kery rode onward.

"Oh, my beauties, my black sweethearts, horn them, stamp them into the ground. Oh, lovely, lovely, push them on, my Gorwain, knock them down to hell, best of bulls!"

The tyrs came out on the other side of the broken host and thundered on down the ridge. Kery fought to stop them. He yelled and whistled, but he knew such a charge could not expend itself in a moment.

As they rushed on, he heard the high brazen call of a trumpet, and then another and another, and a new war-cry rising behind him. What was that? What had happened?

They were down in a rocky swale before he had halted the charge. The bulls stood shivering then, foam and blood streaked their heaving sides. Slowly, with many curses and blows, he got them turned, but they would only walk back up the long hill.

As he neared the battle again he saw that another force had attacked the Dark Landers from behind. It must have come through the long ravine to the west, which would have concealed its approach from those fighting Southern Twilight Landers, Kery saw, well trained and equipped though they seemed to fight wearily. But between men of north and south, the easterners were being cut down in swathes. Before he could get back, the remnants of their host was in full flight. Bram was too busy with the newcomers to pursue and they soon were lost in the eastern darkness.

Kery dismounted and led his bulls to the wagons to tie them up. They went through a field of corpses, heaped and piled on the blood-soaked earth, but most of the dead were enemies. Here and there the wounded cried out in the twilight, and the women of Killorn were going about succoring their own hurt. Carrion birds hovered above on darkling wings.

“Who are those others?” asked Kery of Bram’s wife Eiyla. She was a big rawboned woman, somewhat of a scold but stouthearted and the mother of tall sons. She stood leaning on an unstrung bow and looking over the suddenly hushed landscape.

“Ryvanians, I think,” she replied absently. Then, “Kery—Kery, I have ill news for you.”

His heart stumbled and there was a sudden coldness within him. Mutely, he waited.

“Rhiach is dead, Kery,” she said gently. “An arrow took him in the throat even as the Dark Landers fled.”

His voice seemed thick and clumsy. “Where is he?”

She led him inside the laager of wagons. A fire had been lit to boil water, and its red glow danced over the white faces of women and children and wounded men where they lay. To one side the dead had been stretched, and white-headed Lochly of Dagh stood above them with his bagpipes couched in his arms.

Kery knelt over Rhiach. The warlock’s bleak features had softened a little in death, he seemed gentle now. But quiet, so pale and quiet. And soon the earth will open to receive you, you will be laid to rest here in an alien land where the life slipped from your hands, and the high windy tarns of Killorn will not know you ever again, O Rhiach the Piper.

Farewell, farewell, my father. Sleep well, goodnight, goodnight!

Slowly, Kery brushed the gray hair back from Rhiach's forehead, and knelt and kissed him on the brow. They had laid the god-pipe beside him, and he took this up and stood numbly, wondering what he would do with this thing in his hands.

Old Lochly gave him a somber stare. His voice came so soft you could scarce hear it over the thin whispering wind.

"Now you are the Broina, Kery, and thus the Piper of Killorn."

"I know," he said dully.

"But you know not how to blow the pipes, do you? No, no man does that. Since Broina himself had them from Llugan Longsword in heaven, there has been one who knew their use, and he was the shield of all Killorn. But now that is ended, and we are alone among strangers and enemies."

"It is not good. But we must do what we can."

"Oh, aye. 'Tis scarcely your fault, Kery. But I fear none of us will ever drink the still waters of the lake where it is forever sunset again."

Lochly put his own pipes to his lips and the wild despair of the old coronach wailed forth over the hushed camp.

Kery slung the god-pipes over his back and wandered out of the laager toward Bram and the Ryvanians.

III

The southern folk were more civilized, with cities and books and strange arts, though the northerners thought it spiritless of them to knuckle under to their kings as abjectly as they did. Hereabouts the people were dark of hair and eyes, though still light of skin like all Twilight Landers, and shorter and stockier than in the north. These soldiers made a brave showing with polished cuirass and plumed helmet and oblong shields, and they had a strong cavalry mounted on tall hests, and trumpeters and standard bearers and engineers. They outnumbered the Killorners by a good three to one, and stood in close, suspicious ranks.

Approaching them, Kery thought that his people were, after all, invaders of Ryvan themselves. If this new army decided to fall on the tired and disorganized barbarians, whose strongest weapon had just been taken from them, it could be slaughter. He stiffened himself, thrusting thought of Rhiach far back into his mind, and strode boldly forward.

As he neared he saw that however well armed and trained the Ryvanians were they were also weary and dusty, and they had many hurt among them. Beneath their taut bearing was a hollowness. They had the look of beaten men.

Bram and the Dagh, tall gray Nessa, were parleying with the Ryvanian general, who had ridden forward and sat looking coldly down on them. The Heorran carried his huge ax over one mailed shoulder, but had the other hand lifted in sign of peace. At Kery's approach, he turned briefly and nodded.

"Well you came," he said. "This is a matter for the heads of all three clans, and you are the Broina now. I grieve for Rhiach, and still more do I grieve for poor Killorn, but we must put a bold face on it lest they fall on us."

Kery nodded, gravely as fitted an elder. The incongruity of it was like a blow. Why, he was a boy—there were men of Broina in the train twice and thrice his age—and he held leadership over them!

But Rhiach was dead, and Kery was the last living of his sons. Hunger and war and the coughing sickness had taken all the others, and so now he spoke for his clan.

He turned a blue gaze up toward the Ryvanian general. This was a tall man, big as a northerner but quiet and graceful in his movements, and the inbred haughtiness of generations was stiff within him. A torn purple cloak and a gilt helmet were his only special signs of rank, otherwise he wore the plain armor of a mounted man, but he wore it like a king. His face was dark for a Twilight Lander, lean and strong and deeply lined, with a proud high-bridged nose and a long hard jaw and close-cropped black hair finely streaked with gray. He alone in that army seemed utterly undaunted by whatever it was that had broken their spirits.

"This is Kery son of Rhiach, chief of the third of our clans," Bram introduced him. He used the widespread Aluardian language of the southlands, which was also the tongue of Ryvan and which most of the Killorners had picked up in the course of their wanderings. "And Kery, he

says he is Jonan, commander under Queen Sathi of the army of Ryvan, and that this is a force sent out from the city which became aware of the battle we were having and took the opportunity of killing a few more Dark Landers.”

Nessa of Dagh looked keenly at the southerners. “Methinks there’s more to it than that,” he said, half to his fellows and half to Jonan. “You’ve been in a stiff battle and come off second best, if looks tell aught. Were I to make a further venture, it would be that while you fought clear of the army that beat you and are well ahead of pursuit, it’s still on your tail and you have to reach the city fast.”

“That will do,” snapped Jonan. “We have heard of you plundering bandits from the north, and have no intention of permitting you on Ryvanian soil. If you turn back at once, you may go in peace, but otherwise...”

Casting a glance behind him, Bram saw that his men were swiftly reforming their own lines. They sensed the uneasiness in the air. If the worst came to the worst, they’d give a fearsome account of themselves. And it was plain that Jonan knew it.

“We are wanderers, yes,” said the chief steadily, “but we are not highwaymen save when necessity drives us to it. It would better fit you to let us, who have just broken a fair-sized host of your deadly enemies, proceed in peace. We do not wish to fight you, but if we must it will be all the worse for you.”

“Ill-armed barbarians, a third of our number, threatening us?” asked Jonan scornfully.

“Well, now, suppose you can overcome us,” said Nessa with a glacial cheerfulness. “I doubt it, but just suppose so. We will not account for less than one man apiece of yours, you know, and you can hardly spare so many with Dark Landers ravaging all your country. Furthermore, a battle with us could well last so long that those who follow you will catch up, and there is an end of all of us.”

Kery took a breath and added flatly, “You must have felt the piping we can muster at need. Well for you that we only played it a short while. If we chose to play you a good long dirge...”

Bram cast him an approving glance, nodded, and said stiffly, "So you see, General Jonan, we mean to go on our way, and it would best suit you to bid us a friendly goodbye."

The Ryvanian scowled blackly and sat for a moment in thought. The wind stirred his hest's mane and tail and the scarlet plume on his helmet. Finally he asked them in a bitter voice, "What do you want here, anyway? Why did you come south?"

"It is a long story, and this is no place to talk," said Bram. "Suffice it that we seek land. Not much land, nor for too many years, but a place to live in peace till we can return to Killorn."

"Hm." Jonan frowned again. "It is a hard position for me. I cannot simply let a band famous for robbery go loose. Yet it is true enough that I would not welcome a long and difficult fight just now. What shall I do with you?"

"You will just have to let us go," grinned Nessa.

"No! I think you have lied to me on several counts, barbarians. Half of what you say is bluff, and I could wipe you out if I had to."

"Methinks somewhat more than half of your words are bluff," murmured Kery.

Jonan gave him an angry look, then suddenly whirled on Bram. "Look here. Neither of us can well afford a battle, yet neither trusts the other out of its sight. There is only one answer. We must proceed together to Ryvan city."

"Eh? Are you crazy, man? Why, as soon as we were in sight of your town, you could summon all its garrison out against us."

"You must simply trust me not to do that. If you have heard anything about Queen Sathi, you will know that she would never permit it. Nor can we spare too many forces. Frankly, the city is going to be under siege very soon."

"Is it that bad?" asked Bram.

"Worse," said Jonan gloomily.

Nessa nodded his shrewd gray head. "I've heard some tales of Sathi," he agreed. "They do say she's honorable."

"And I have heard that you people have served as mercenaries before now," said Jonan quickly, "and we need warriors so cruelly that I am sure some arrangement can be made here. It could even include the land you want, if we are victorious, for the Ganasthi have wasted whole territories. So this is my proposal—march with us to Ryvan, in peace, and there

discuss terms with her majesty for taking service under her flag.” His harsh dark features grew suddenly cold. “Or, if you refuse, bearing in mind that Ryvan has very little to lose after all, I will fall on you this instant.”

Bram scratched his red beard, and looked over the southern ranks and especially the engines. Flame-throwing ballistae could make ruin of the laager. Jonan galled him, and yet—well—however they might bluff about it, the fact remained that they had very little choice.

And anyway, the suggestion about payment in land sounded good. And if these—Ganasthi—had really overrun the Ryvanian empire, then there was little chance in any case of the Killorners getting much further south.

“Well,” said Bram mildly, “we can at least talk about it—at the city.”

Now the wagons, which the barbarians would not abandon in spite of Jonan’s threats, were swiftly hitched again and the long train started its creaking way over the hills. Erelong they came on one of the paved imperial roads, a broad empty way that ran straight as a spearshaft southwestward to Ryvan city. Then they made rapid progress.

In truth, thought Kery, they went through a wasted land. Broad fields were blackened with fire, corpses sprawled in the embers of farmsteads, villages were deserted and gutted—everywhere folk had fled before the hordes of Ryvan. Twice they saw red glows on the southern horizon and white-lipped soldiers told Kery that those were burning cities.

As they marched west the sky lightened before them until at last a clear white glow betokened that the sun was just below the curve of the world. It was a fair land of rolling plains and low hills, fields and groves and villages, but empty—empty. Now and again a few homeless peasants stared with frightened eyes at their passage, or trailed along in their wake, but otherwise there was only the wind and the rain and the hollow thudding of their feet.

Slowly Kery got the tale of Ryvan. The city had spread itself far in earlier days, conquering many others, but its rule was just. The conquered became citizens themselves and the strong armies protected all. The young queen Sathi was nearly worshipped by her folk. But then the Ganasthi came.

“About a year ago it was,” said one man. “They came out of the darkness in the east, a horde of them, twice as many as we could muster. We’ve

always had some trouble with Dark Landers on our eastern border, you know, miserable barbarians making forays which we beat off without too much trouble. And most of them told of pressure from some powerful nation, Ganasth, driving them from their own homes and forcing them to fall on us. But we never thought too much of it. Not before it was too late.

“We don’t know much about Ganasth. It seems to be a fairly civilized state, somewhere out there in the cold and the dark. How they ever became civilized with nothing but howling savages around them I’ll never imagine. But they’ve built up a power like Ryvan’s, only bigger. It seems to include conscripts from many Dark Land tribes who’re only too glad to leave their miserable frozen wastes and move into our territory. Their armies are as well trained and equipped as our own, and they fight like demons. Those war-gongs, and those dead faces...”

He shuddered.

“The prisoners we’ve taken say they aim to take over all the Twilight Lands. They’re starting with Ryvan—it’s the strongest state, and once they’ve knocked us over the rest will be easy. We’ve appealed for help to other nations but they’re all too afraid, too busy raising their own silly defenses, to do anything. So for the past year the war’s been raging up and down our empire.” He waved a hand, wearily, at the blasted landscape. “You see what that’s meant. Famine and plague are starting to hit us now—”

“And you could never stand before them?” asked Kery.

“Oh, yes, we had our victories and they had theirs. But when we won a battle they’d just retreat and sack some other area. They’ve been living off the country—our country—the devils!” The soldier’s face twisted. “My own little sister was in Aquilaea when they took that. When I think of those white-haired fiends—

“Well about a month ago, the great battle was fought. Jonan led the massed forces of Ryvan out and caught the main body of Ganasthi at Seven Rivers, in the Donam Hills. I was there. The fight lasted, oh, four sleeps maybe, and nobody gave quarter or asked it. We outnumbered them a little, but they finally won. They slaughtered us like driven cattle. Jonan was lucky to pull half his forces out of there. The rest left their bones at Seven Rivers. Since then we’ve been a broken nation.

“We’re pulling all we have left back toward Ryvan in the hope of holding it till a miracle happens. Do you have any miracles for sale, Northman?”

The soldier laughed bitterly.

“What about this army here?” asked Kery.

“We still make sorties, you know. This one went out from Ryvan city a few sleeps past to the relief of Tusca, which our scouts said the Ganasthi were besieging with only a small force. But an enemy army intercepted us on the way. We cut our way out and shook them, but they’re on our tail in all likelihood. When we chanced to hear the noise of your fight with the invaders we took the opportunity ... Almighty Dyuus, it was good to hack them down and see them run!”

The soldier shrugged. “But what good did it do, really? What chance have we got? That was a good magic you had at the fight. I thought my heart was going to stop when that demon-music started. But can you pipe your way out of hell, barbarian? Can you?”

IV

Ryvan was a fair city, with terraced gardens and high shining towers to be seen over the white walls, and it lay among wide fields not yet ravaged by the enemy. But around it, under its walls, spilling out over the land, huddled the miserable shacks and tents of those who had fled hither and could find no room within the town till the foe came over the horizon—the broken folk, the ragged horror-ridden peasants who stared mutely at the defeated army as it streamed through the gates.

The men of Killorn made camp under one wall and soon their fires smudged the deep silver-blue sky and their warriors stood guard against the Ryvanians. They did not trust even these comrades in woe, for they came of the fat southlands and the wide highways and the iron legions, and not of Killorn and its harsh windy loneliness.

Before long word came that the barbarian leaders were expected at the palace. So Bram, Nessa, and Kery put on their polished byrnies, and over them tunics and cloaks of their best plunder. They slung their swords over their shoulders and mounted their hests and rode between two squads of Ryvanian guardsmen through the gates and into the city.

It was packed and roiling with those who had fled. Crowds surged aimlessly around the broad avenues and spilled into the colonnaded temples and the looming apartments and even the gardens and villas of the nobility.

There was the dusty, bearded peasant, clinging to his wife and his children and looking on the world with frightened eyes. Gaily decked noble, riding through the mob with patrician hauteur and fear underneath it. Fat merchant and shaven priest, glowering at the refugees who came in penniless to throng the city and must, by the queen's orders, be fed and housed. Patrolling soldiers, striving to keep order in the mindless whirlpool of man, their young faces drawn and their shoulders stooped beneath their mail. Jugglers, mountebanks, thieves, harlots, tavern-keepers, plying their trades in the feverish gaiety of doom; a human storm foaming off into strange half-glimpsed faces in darkened alleys and eddying crowds, the unaccountable aliens who flit through all great cities—the world seemed gathered at Ryvan, and huddling before the wrath that came.

Fear rode the city, Kery could feel it, he breathed and the air was dank with terror, he bristled animal-like and laid a hand to his sword. For an instant he remembered Killorn, the wide lake rose before him and he stood at its edge, watching the breeze ruffle it and hearing the whisper of reeds and the chuckle of water on a pebbled shore. Miles about lay the hills and the moors, the clean strong smell of ling was a drunkenness in his nostrils. It was silent save for the small cool wind that ruffled Morna's hair. And in the west it was sunset, the mighty sun-disc lay just below the horizon and a shifting, drifting riot of colors, flame of red and green and molten gold, burned in the twilit heavens.

He shook his head, feeling his longing as a sharp clear pain, and urged his hest through the crowds. Presently they reached the palace.

It was long and low and gracious, crowded now since all the nobles and their households had moved into it and, under protest, turned their own villas over to the homeless. Dismounting, the northerners walked between files of guardsmen, through fragrant gardens and up the broad marble steps of the building—through long corridors and richly furnished rooms, and finally into the audience chamber of Queen Sathi.

It was like a chalice of white stone, wrought in loveliness and brimming with twilight and stillness. That deep blue dusk lay cool and mysterious between the high slim pillars, and somewhere came the rippling of a harp and the singing of birds and fountains. Kery felt suddenly aware of his

uncouth garments and manners and accent. His tongue thickened and he did not know what to do with his hands. Awkwardly he took off his helmet.

“Lord Bram of Killorn, your majesty,” said the chamberlain.

“Greeting, and welcome,” said Sathi.

Word had spread far about Ryvan’s young queen but Kery thought dazedly that the gossips had spoken less of her than was truth. She was tall and lithe and sweetly formed, with strength slumbering deep under the wide soft mouth and the lovely curves of cheeks and forehead. Blood of the Sun Lands darkened her hair to a glowing blue-black and tinted her skin with gold, there was fire from the sun within her. Like other southern women, she dressed more boldly than the girls of Killorn, a sheer gown falling from waist to ankles, a thin veil over the shoulders, little jewelry. She needed no ornament.

She could not be very much older than he, if at all, thought Kery. He caught her great dark eyes on him and felt a slow hot flush go up his face. With an effort he checked himself and stood very straight, with his strange blue eyes like cold flames.

Beside Sathi sat the general, Jonan, and there were a couple of older men who seemed to be official advisors. But it soon was clear that only the queen and the soldier had much to say in this court.

Bram’s voice boomed out, shattering the peace of the blue dusk. For all his great size and ruddy beard he seemed lost in the ancient grace of the chamber. He spoke too loudly. He stood too stiff. “Thank you, my lady. But I am no lord, I simply head this group of the men of Killorn.” He waved clumsily at his fellows. “These are Nessa of Dagh and Kery of Broina.”

“Be seated, then, and welcome again.” Sathi’s voice was low and musical. She signaled her servants to bring wine.

“We have heard of great wanderings in the north,” she went on, when they had drunk. “But those lands are little known to us. What brought you so far from home?”

Nessa, who had the readiest tongue, answered. “There was famine in the land, your majesty. For three years drought and cold lay like iron over Killorn. We hungered and the coughing sickness came over many of us. Not

all our magics and sacrifices availed to end our misery, they seemed only to raise great storms that destroyed what little we had kept.

“Then the weather smiled again, but as often happens the gray blight came in the wake of the hard years. It reaped our grain before we could, the stalks withered and crumbled before our eyes, and wild beasts came in hunger-driven swarms to raid our dwindling flocks. There was scarce food enough for a quarter of our starving folk. We knew, from what had happened in other lands, that the gray blight will waste a country for years, five or ten, leaving only perhaps a third part of the crop alive at each harvest. Then it passes away and does not come again. But meanwhile the land will not bear many folk.

“So in the end the clans decided that most must move away leaving only the few who could keep alive through the niggard years to hold the country for us. Hearts broke in twain, your majesty, for the hills and the moors and the lake where it is forever sunset were part of us. We are of that land and if we die away from it our ghosts will wander home. But go we must, lest all die.”

“Yes, go on,” said Jonan impatiently when he paused.

Bram gave him an angry look and took up the story. “Four hosts were to wander out of the land and see what would befall. If they found a place to stay they would abide there till the evil time was over. Otherwise they would live however they could. It lay with the gods, my lady, and we have traveled far from the realms of our gods.

“One host went eastward, into the great forests of Norla. One got ships and sailed west, out into the Day Lands where some of our adventurers had already explored a little way. One followed the coast southwestward, through country beyond our ken. And ours marched due south. And so we have wandered for five years.”

“Homeless,” whispered Sathi, and Kery thought her eyes grew bright with tears.

“Barbarian robbers!” snapped Jonan. “I know of the havoc they have wrought on their way.”

“And what would you have done,” growled Bram. Jonan gave him a stiff glare, but he rushed on. “Your majesty, we have taken only what we needed....”

And whatever else struck our fancy, thought Kery in a moment’s wryness.

“—and much of our fighting has been done for honest pay. We want only a place to live a few years, land to farm as free yeomen, and we will defend the country which shelters us as long as we are in it. We are too few to take that land and hold it against a whole nation—that is why we have not settled down ere this—but on the march we will scatter any army in the world or leave our corpses for carrion birds. The men of Killorn keep faith with friends and foes alike, help to the one and harm to the other.

“Now we saw many fair fields in Ryvan where we could be at home. The Ganasthi have cleared off the owners for us. So we offer you this—give us the land we need and we will fight for you against these Ganasthi or any other foes while blood runs through our hearts. Refuse us and we may be able to make friends with the Dark Landers instead. For friends we must have.”

“You see?” snarled Jonan. “He threatens banditry.”

“No, no, you are too hasty,” replied Sathi. “He is simply telling the honest truth. And the gods know we need warriors.”

“This general was anxious enough for our help out there in the eastern marches,” said Kery suddenly.

“Enough, barbarian,” said Jonan with ice in his tones.

Color flared in Sathi’s cheeks. “Enough of you, Jonan. These are brave and honest men, and our guests, and our sorely needed allies. We will draw up the treaty at once.”

The general shrugged, insolently. Kery was puzzled. There was anger here, crackling under a hard-held surface, but it seemed new and strange. *Why?*

They haggled for a while over terms, Nessa doing most of the talking for Killorn. He and Bram would not agree that clansmen should owe fealty or even respect to any noble of Ryvan save the queen herself. Also they should have the right to go home whenever they heard the famine was over. Sathi was willing enough to concede it but Jonan had to be almost beaten down. Finally he gave grudging assent and the queen had her scribes draw the treaty up on parchment.

“That is not how we do it in Killorn,” said Bram. “A tyr must be sacrificed and vows made on the ring of Llугan and the pipes of the gods.”

Sathi smiled. “Very well, Red One,” she nodded. “We will make the pledge thusly too, if you wish.” With a sudden flame of bitterness, “What difference does it make? What difference does anything make now?”

V

Now the armies of Ganasth moved against Ryvan city itself. From all the plundered empire they streamed in, to ring the town in a living wall and hem the defenders within a fence of spears. And when the whole host was gathered, which took about ten sleeps from the time the Killorners arrived, they stormed the city.

Up the long slope of the hills on which Ryvan stood they came, running, bounding, holding up shields against the steady hail of missiles from the walls. Forward, silent and blank-faced, no noise in them save the crashing of thousands of feet and the high demon-music of their warmaking—dying, strewing the ground with their corpses, but leaping over the fallen and raging against the walls.

Up ladders! Rams thundering at the gates! Men springing to the top of walls and toppling before the defenders and more of them snarling behind!

Back and forth the battle raged, now the Ryvanians driven back to the streets and rooftops, now the Dark Landers pressed to the edge of the walls and pitchforked over. Houses began to burn, here and there, and it was Sathi who made fire brigades out of those who could not fight. Kery had a glimpse of her from afar, as he battled on the outer parapets, a swift and golden loveliness against the leaping red.

After long and vicious fighting the northern gate went down. But Bram had foreseen this. He had pulled most of his barbarians thither, with Kery's bulls in their lead. He planted them well back and had a small stout troop on either side of the great buckling doors. When the barrier sagged on its hinges, the Ganasthi roared in unopposed, streaming through the entrance and down the broad bloody avenue.

Then the Killorners thrust from the side, pinching off the several hundred who had entered. They threw great jars of oil on the broken gates and set them ablaze, a barrier of flame which none could cross. And then Kery rode his bulls against the enemy, and behind him came the might of Killorn.

It was raw slaughter. Erelong they were hunting the foe up and down the streets and spearing them like wild animals. Meanwhile Bram got some engineers from Jonan's force who put up a temporary barricade in the now open gateway and stood guard over it.

The storm faded, grumbled away in surges of blood and whistling arrows. Shaken by their heavy losses, the Dark Landers pulled back out of missile range, ringed the city with their watchfires, and prepared to lay siege.

There was jubilation in Ryvan. Men shouted and beat their dented shields with nicked and blunted swords. They tossed their javelins in the air, emptied wineskins, and kissed the first and best girl who came to hand. Weary, bleeding, reft of many good comrades, and given at best a reprieve, the folk still snatched at what laughter remained.

Bram came striding to meet the queen. He was a huge and terrible figure stiff with dried blood, the ax blinking on his shoulder and the other hairy paw clamped on the neck of a tall Dark Lander whom he helped along with an occasional kick. Yet Sathi's dark eyes trailed to the slim form of Kery, following in the chief's wake and too exhausted to say much.

"I caught this fellow in the streets, my lady," said Bram merrily, "and since he seemed to be a leader I thought I'd better hang on to him for a while."

The invader stood motionless, regarding them with a chill yellow stare in which there lay an iron pride. He was tall and well-built, his black mail silver-trimmed, a silver star on the battered black helmet. The snowy hair and beard stirred faintly in the breeze.

"An aristocrat, I would say," nodded Sathi. She herself seemed almost too tired to stand. She was smudged with smoke and her dress was torn and her small hands bleeding from their recent burdens. But she pulled herself erect and fought to speak steadily. "Yes, he may well be of value to us. That was good work. Aye, you men of Killorn fought nobly, without you we might well have lost the city. It was a good month when you came."

"It was no way to fight," snapped Jonan. He was tired and wounded himself, but there was no comradeship in the look he gave the northerners. "The risk of it—why, if you hadn't been able to seal the gate behind them, Ryvan would have fallen then and there."

"I did not see you doing much of anything when the gate was splintering before them," answered Bram curtly. "As it is, my lady, we've inflicted such heavy losses on them that I doubt they'll consider another attempt at storming. Which gives us, at least, time to try something else." He yawned mightily. "Time to sleep!"

Jonan stepped up close to the prisoner and they exchanged a long look. There was no way to read the Dark Lander's thoughts but Kery thought he saw a tension under the general's hard-held features.

"I don't know what value a food-eating prisoner is to us when he can't even speak our language," said the Ryvanian. "However, I can take him in charge if you wish."

"Do," she nodded dully.

"Odd if he couldn't talk any Aluardian at all," said Kery. "Wanderers through alien lands almost have to learn. The leaders of invading armies ought to know the tongue of their enemy, or at least have interpreters." He grinned with the cold savagery of the Broina. "Let the women of Killorn, the ones who've lost husbands today, have him for a while. I daresay he'll soon discover he knows your speech—whatever is left of him."

"No," said Jonan flatly. He signalled to a squad of his men. "Take this fellow down to the palace dungeons and give him something to eat. I'll be along later."

Kery started to protest but Sathi laid a hand on his arm. He felt how it was still bleeding a little and grew silent.

"Let Jonan take care of it," she said, her voice flat with weariness. "We all need rest now—O gods, to sleep!"

The Killorners had moved their wagons into the great forum and camped there, much to the disgust of the aristocrats and to the pleasure of whatever tavern-keepers and unattached young women lived nearby. But Sathi had insisted that their three chiefs should be honored guests at the palace and it pleased them well enough to have private chambers and plenty of servants and the best of wine.

Kery woke in his bed and lay for a long while, drowsing and thinking the wanderous thoughts of half-asleep. When he got up he groaned for he was stiff with his wounds and the long fury of battle. A slave came in and rubbed him with oil and brought him a barbarian-sized meal, after which he felt better.

But now he was restless. He felt the letdown which is the aftermath of high striving. It was hard to fight back the misery and loneliness that rose in him. He prowled the room unhappily, pacing under the glowing cressets, flinging himself on a couch and then springing to his feet again. The walls were a cage.

The city was a cage, a trap, he was caught like a snared beast and never again would he walk the moors of Killorn. Sharply as a knife thrust, he remembered hunting once out in the heath. He had gone alone, with spear and bow and a shaggy half-wild cynor loping at his heels, out after antlered prey somewhere beyond the little village. Long had they roamed, he and his beast, until they were far from sight of man and only the great gray and purple and gold of the moors were around them.

The carpet under his bare feet seemed again to be the springy, pungent ling of Killorn. It was as if he smelled the sharp wild fragrance of it and felt the leaves brushing his ankles. It had been gray and windy, clouds rushed out of the west on a mounting gale. There was rain in the air and high overhead a single bird of prey had wheeled and looped on lonely wings. O almighty gods, how the wind had sung and cried to him, chilled his body with raw wet gusts and skirled in the dales and roared beneath the darkening heavens! And he had come down a long rocky slope into a wooded glen, a waterfall rushed and foamed along his path, white and green and angry black. He had sheltered in a mossy cave, lain and listened to the wind and the rain and the crystal, ringing waterfall, and when the weather cleared he had gotten up and gone home. There had been no quarry, but by Morna of Dagh, that failure meant more to him than all his victories since!

He picked up the pipe of the gods, where it lay with his armor, and turned it over and over in his hands. Old it was, dark with age, the pipes were of some nameless ironlike wood and the bag of a leather such as was never seen now. It was worn with the uncounted generations of Broinas who had had it, men made hard and stern by their frightful trust.

It had scattered the legions of the southerners who came conquering a hundred years ago and it had quelled the raiding savages from Norla and it had gone with one-eyed Alrigh and shouted down the walls of a city. And more than once, on this last dreadful march, it had saved the men of Killorn.

Now it was dead. The Piper of Killorn had fallen and the secret had perished with him and the folk it had warded were trapped like animals to die of hunger and pestilence in a strange land—*O Rhiach, Rhiach my father, come back from the dead, come back and put the pipe to your cold lips and play the war-song of Killorn!*

Kery blew in it for the hundredth time and only a hollow whistling sounded in the belly of the instrument. Not even a decent tune, he thought bitterly.

He couldn't stay indoors, he had to get out under the sky again or go mad. Slinging the pipe over his shoulder he went out the door and up a long stairway to the palace roof gardens.

They slept all around him, sleep and silence were heavy in the long corridors, it was as if he were the last man alive and walked alone through the ruins of the world. He came out on the roof and went over to the parapet and stood looking out.

The moon was near the zenith which meant, at this longitude, that it was somewhat less than half full and would dwindle as it sank westward. It rode serene in the dusky sky adding its pale glow to the diffused light which filled all the Twilight Lands and to the white pyre of the hidden sun. The city lay dark and silent under the sky, sleeping heavily, only the muted tramp of sentries and their ringing calls drifted up to Kery. Beyond the town burned the ominous red circle of the Ganasthi fires and he could see their tents and the black forms of their warriors.

They were settling down to a patient death watch. All the land had become silent waiting for Ryvan to die. It did not seem right that he should stand here among fragrant gardens and feel the warm western breeze on his face, not when steadfast Lluwynn and Boroda the Strong and gay young Kormak his comrade were ashen corpses with the women of Killorn keening over them. *O Killorn, Killorn, and the lake of sunset, have their ghosts gone home to you? Greet Morna for me, Kormak, whisper in the wind that I love her, tell her not to grieve.*

He grew aware that someone else was approaching, and turned with annoyance. But his mood lightened when he saw that it was Sathi. She was very fair as she walked toward him, young and lithe and beautiful, with the dark unbound hair floating about her.

"Are you up, Kery?" she asked, sitting down on the parapet beside him.

"Of course, my lady, or else you are dreaming," he smiled with a tired humor.

"Stupid question wasn't it?" She smiled back with a curving of closed lips that was lovely to behold. "But I am not feeling very bright just now."

"None of us are, my lady."

“Oh, forget that sort of address, Kery. I am too lonely as it is, sitting on a throne above all the world. Call me by my name, at least.”

“You are very kind—Sathi.”

“That is better.” She smiled again, wistfully. “How you fought today! How you reaped them! What sort of a warrior are you, Kery, to ride wild bulls as if they were hests?”

“We of clan Broina have tricks. We feel things that other men do not seem to.” Kery sat down beside her feeling the frozenness within him ease a little. “Aye, it can be lonely to wield power and you wonder if you are fit for it, not so? My father died in our first battle with the Ganasthi, and now I am the Broina, but who am I to lead my clan? I cannot even perform the first duty of my post.”

“And what is that?” she asked.

He told her about the god-pipe. He showed it to her and gave her the tales of its singing. “You feel your flesh shiver and your bones begin to crumble, rocks dance and mountains groan and the gates of hell open before you but now the pipes are forever silent, Sathi. No man knows how to play them.”

“I heard of your music at that battle,” she nodded gravely, “and wondered why it was not sounded again this time.” Awe and fear were in her eyes, the hand that touched the scarred sack trembled a little. “And this is the pipe of Killorn! You cannot play it again? You cannot find out how? It would be the saving of Ryvan and of your own folk and perhaps of all the Twilight Lands, Kery.”

“I know. But what can I do? Who can understand the powers of heaven or unlock the doors of hell save Llugin Longsword himself?”

“I do not know. But Kery—I wonder. This pipe.... Do you really think that gods and not men wrought it?”

“Who but a god could make such a thing, Sathi?”

“I do not know, I say. And yet—Tell me, have you any idea of what the world is like in Killorn? Do you think it a flat plain with the sun hanging above, forever fixed in one spot?”

“Why I suppose so. Though we have met men in the southlands who claimed the world was a round ball and went about the sun in such a manner as always to turn the same face to it.”

“Yes, the wise men of Ryvan tell us that that must be the case. They have learned it by studying the fixed stars and those which wander. Those others are worlds like our own, they say, and the fixed stars are suns a very long

ways off. And we have a very dim legend of a time once, long and long and long ago, when this world did not eternally face the sun either. It spun like a top so that each side of it had light and dark alternately.”

Kery knitted his brows trying to see that for himself. At last he nodded. “Well, it may have been. What of it?”

“The barbarians all think the world was born in flame and thunder many ages ago. But some of our thinkers believe that this creation was a catastrophe which destroyed that older world I speak of. There are dim legends and here and there we find very ancient ruins, cities greater than any we know today but buried and broken so long ago that even their building stones are almost weathered away. These thinkers believe that man grew mighty on this forgotten world which spun about itself, that his powers were like those we today call divine.

“Then something happened. We cannot imagine what, though a wise man once told me he believed all things attract each other—that is the reason why they fall to the ground he said—and that another world swept so close to ours that its pull stopped the spinning and yanked the moon closer than it had been.”

Kery clenched his fists. “It could be,” he murmured. “It could well be. For what happens to an unskillful rider when his hest stops all at once? He goes flying over its head, right? Even so, this braking of the world would have brought earthquakes greater than we can imagine, quakes that levelled everything!”

“You have a quick wit. That is what this man told me. At any rate, only a very few people and animals lived and nothing remained of their great works save legends. In the course of many ages, man and beasts alike changed, the beasts more than man who can make his own surroundings to suit. Life spread from the Day Lands through the Twilight Zone. Plants got so they could use what little light we have here. Finally even the Dark Lands were invaded by the pallid growths which can live there. Animals followed and man came after the animals until today things are as you see.”

She turned wide and serious eyes on him. “Could not this pipe have been made in the early days by a man who knew some few of the ancient secrets? No god but a man even as you, Kery. And what one man can make another can understand!”

Hope rose in him and sagged again. "How?" he asked dully. And then, seeing the tears glimmer in her eyes: "Oh, it may all be true. I will try my best. But I do not even know where to begin."

"Try," she whispered. "Try!"

"But do not tell anyone that the pipe is silent, Sathi. Perhaps I should not even have told you."

"Why not? I am your friend and the friend of your folk. I would we had all the tribes of Killorn here."

"Jonan is not," he said grimly.

"Jonan—he is a harsh man, yes. But. . ."

"He does not like us. I do not know why but he doesn't."

"He is a strange one," she admitted. "He is not even of Ryvanian birth, he is from Guria, a city which we conquered long ago, though of course its people have long been full citizens of the empire. He wants to marry me, did you know?" She smiled. "I could not help laughing for he is so stiff. One would as soon wed an iron cuirass."

"Aye—wed—" Kery fell silent, and there was a dream in his gaze as he looked over the hills.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked after a while.

"Oh—home," he said. "I was wondering if I would ever see Killorn again."

She leaned over closer to him. One long black lock brushed his hand and he caught the faint fragrance of her. "Is it so fair a land?" she asked softly.

"No," he said. "It is harsh and gray and lonely. Storm winds sweep in and the sea roars on rocky beaches and men grow gnarled with wresting life from the stubborn soil. But there is space and sky and freedom, there are the little huts and the great halls, the chase and the games and the old songs around leaping fires, and—well—" His voice trailed off.

"You left a woman behind, didn't you?" she murmured gently.

He nodded. "Morna of Dagh, she of the sun-bright tresses and the fair young form and the laughter that was like rain showering on thirsty ground. We were very much in love."

"But she did not come too?"

"No. So many wanted to come that the unwed had to draw lots and she lost. Nor could I stay behind for I was heir to the Broina and the god-pipes would be mine someday." He laughed, a harsh sound like breaking iron.

"You see how much good that has done me!"

“But even so—you could have married her before leaving?”

“No. Such hasty marriage is against clan law and Morna would not break it.” Kery shrugged. “So we wandered out of the land, and I have not seen her since. But she will wait for me and I for her. We’ll wait till—till—” He had half raised his hand but as he saw again the camp of the besiegers it fell helplessly to his lap.

“And you would not stay?” Sathi’s tones were so low he had to bend his head close to hear. “Even if somehow Ryvan threw back its foes and valiant men were badly needed and could rise to the highest honors of the empire, you would not stay here?”

For a moment Kery sat motionless, wrapping himself about his innermost being. He had some knowledge of women. There had been enough of them along the dusty way, brief encounters and a fading memory.

His soul had room only for the bright image of one unforgotten girl. It was plain enough what this woman, who was young and beautiful and a queen, was saying and he would not ordinarily have hung back.

Especially when the folk of Killorn were still strangers in a camp of allies who did not trust them very far, when Killorn needed every friend it could find. And the Broina were an elvish clan who had never let overly many scruples hold them.

Only—only he liked Sathi as a human being. She was brave and generous and wise and she was, really, so pitiaably young. She had had so little chance to learn the hard truths of living in the loneliness of the imperium and only a scoundrel would hurt her.

She sighed, ever so faintly, and moved back a little. Kery thought he saw her stiffening. One does not reject the offer of a queen.

“Sathi,” he said, “for you, perhaps, even a man of Killorn might forget his home.”

She half turned to him, hesitating, unsure of herself and him. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

“Kery, Kery, Kery—” she whispered, and her lips stole back toward his.

He felt rather than heard a footfall and turned with the animal alertness of the barbarian. Jonan stood watching them.

“Pardon me,” said the general harshly. His countenance was strained. Then suddenly, “Your majesty! This savage mauling you. . . .”

Sathi lifted a proud dark head. “This is the prince consort of Imperial Ryvan,” she said haughtily. “Conduct yourself accordingly. You may go.”

Jonan snarled and lifted an arm. Kery saw the armed men step from behind the tall flowering hedges and his sword came out with a rasp of steel.

“Guards!” screamed Sathi.

The men closed in. Kery’s blade whistled against one shield. Another came from each side. Pikes shafts thudded against his bare head—

He fell, toppling into a roaring darkness while they clubbed him again. Down and down and down, whirling into a chasm of night. Dimly, just before blankness came, he saw the white beard and the mask-like face of the prince from Ganasth.

VI

It was a long and hard ride before they stopped and Kery almost fell from the hest to which they had bound him.

“I should have thought that you would soon awake,” said the man from Ganasth. He had a soft voice and spoke Aluardian well enough. “I am sorry. It is no way to treat a man, carrying him like a sack of meal. Here. . .” He poured a glass of wine and handed it to the barbarian. “From now on you shall ride erect.”

Kery gulped thirstily and felt a measure of strength flowing back. He looked around him.

They had gone steadily eastward and were now camped near a ruined farmhouse. A fire was crackling and one of the score or so of enemy warriors was roasting a haunch of meat over it. The rest stood leaning on their weapons and their cold amber eyes never left the two prisoners.

Sathi stood near bleak-faced Jonan and her great dark eyes never left Kery. He smiled at her shakily and with a little sob she took a step toward him. Jonan pulled her back roughly.

“Kery,” she whispered. “Kery, are you well?”

“As well as could be expected,” he said wryly. Then to the Ganasthian prince, “What is this, anyway? I woke up to find myself joggling eastward and that is all I know. What is your purpose?”

“We have several,” answered the alien. He sat down near the fire pulling his cloak around him against the chill that blew out of the glooming east. His impassive face watched the dance of flames as if they told him something.

Kery sat down as well, stretching his long legs easily. He might as well relax he thought. They had taken his sword and his pipes and they were watching him like hungry beasts. There was never a chance to fight.

“Come, Sathi,” he waved to the girl. “Come over here by me.”

“No!” snapped Jonan.

“Yes, if she wants to,” said the Ganasthian mildly.

“By that filthy barbarian. . . .”

“None of us have washed recently.” The gentle tones were suddenly like steel. “Do not forget, General, that I am Mongku of Ganasth and heir apparent to the throne.”

“And I rescued you from the city,” snapped the man. “If it weren’t for me you might well be dead at the hands of that red savage.”

“That will do,” said Mongku. “Come over here and sit by us, Sathi.”

His guardsmen stirred, unacquainted with the Ryvanian tongue but sensing the clash of wills. Jonan shrugged sullenly and stalked over to sit opposite them. Sathi fled to Kery and huddled against him. He comforted her awkwardly. Over her shoulder he directed a questioning look at Mongku.

“I suppose you deserve some explanation,” said the Dark Lander. “Certainly Sathi must know the facts.” He leaned back on one elbow and began to speak in an almost dreamy tone.

“When Ryvan conquered Guria, many generations ago, some of its leaders were proscribed. They fled eastward and so eventually wandered into the Dark Lands and came to Ganasth. It was then merely a barbarian town but the Gurians became advisors to the king and began teaching the people all the arts of civilization. It was their hope one day to lead the hosts of Ganasth against Ryvan, partly for revenge and partly for the wealth and easier living to be found in the Twilight Lands. Life is hard and bitter in the eternal night, Sathi. It is ever a struggle merely to keep alive. Can you wonder so very much that we are spilling into your gentler climate and your richer soil?

“Descendants of the Gurians have remained aristocrats in Ganasth. But Jonan’s father conceived the idea of moving back with a few of his friends

to work from within against the day of conquest. At that time we were bringing our neighbors under our heel and looked already to the time when we should move against the Twilight Lands. At any rate he did this and nobody suspected that he was aught but a newcomer from another part of Ryvan's empire. His son, Jonan, entered the army and, being shrewd and strong and able, finally reached the high post which you yourself bestowed on him, Sathi."

"Oh, no—Jonan—" She shuddered against Kery.

"Naturally when we invaded at last he had to fight against us, and for fear of prisoners revealing his purpose very few Ganasthians know who he really is. A risk was involved, yes. But it is convenient to have a general of the enemy on your side! Jonan is one of the major reasons for our success.

"Now we come to myself, a story which is very simply told. I was captured and it was Jonan's duty as a citizen of Ganasth to rescue his prince—quite apart from the fact that I do know his identity and torture might have loosened my tongue. He might have effected my escape easily enough without attracting notice, but other factors intervened. For one thing, there was this barbarian alliance, and especially that very dangerous new weapon they had which he had observed in use. We clearly could not risk its being turned on us. Indeed we almost had to capture it. Then, too, Jonan is desirous of marrying you, Sathi, and I must say that it seems a good idea. With you as a hostage Ryvan will be more amenable. Later you can return as nominal ruler of your city, a vassal of Ganasth, and that will make our conquest easier to administer. Though not too easy, I fear. The Twilight Landers will not much like being transported into the Dark Lands to make room for us."

Sathi began to cry, softly and hopelessly. Kery stroked her hair and said nothing.

Mongku sat up and reached for the chunk of meat his soldier handed him. "So Jonan and his few trusty men let me out of prison and we went up to the palace roof after you, who had been seen going that way shortly before. Listening a little while to your conversation we saw that we had had the good luck to get that hell-pipe of the north, too. So we took you. Jonan was for killing you, Kery my friend, but I pointed out that you could be useful in many ways such as a means for making Sathi listen to reason. Threats against you will move her more than against herself, I think."

"You crawling louse," said Kery tonelessly.

Mongku shrugged. "I'm not such a bad sort but war is war and I have seen the folk of Ganasth hungering too long to have much sympathy for a bunch of fat Twilight Landers.

"At any rate, we slipped out of the city unobserved. Jonan could not remain for when the queen and I were both missing, and he responsible for both, it would be plain to many whom to accuse. Moreover, Sathi's future husband is too valuable to lose in a fight. And I myself would like to report to my father the king as to how well the war has gone.

"So we are bound for Ganasth."

There was a long silence while the fire leaped and crackled and the stars blinked far overhead. Finally Sathi shook herself and sat erect and said in a small hard voice, "Jonan, I swear you will die if you wed me. I promise you that."

The officer did not reply. He sat brooding into the dusk with a look of frozen contempt and weariness on his face.

Sathi huddled back against Kery's side and soon she slept.

On and on.

They were out of the Twilight Lands altogether now. Night had fallen on them and still they rode eastward. They were tough, these Ganasthi, they stopped only for sleep and quickly gulped food and a change of mounts and the miles reeled away behind them.

Little was said on the trail. They were too tired at the halts and seemingly in too much of a hurry while riding. With Sathi there could only be a brief exchange of looks, a squeeze of hands, and a few whispered words with the glowing-eyed men of Ganasth looking on. She was a gallant girl, thought Kery. The cruel trek told heavily on her but she rode without complaint—she was still queen of Ryvan!

Ryvan, Ryvan, how long could it hold out now in the despair of its loss? Kery thought that Red Bram might be able to seize the mastery and whip the city into fighting pitch but warfare by starvation was not to the barbarians' stomachs. They could not endure a long siege.

But what lay ahead for him and her and the captured weapon of the gods?

Never had he been in so grim a country. It was dark, eternally dark, night and cold and the brilliant frosty stars lay over the land, shadows and snow

and a whining wind that ate and ate and gnawed its way through furs and flesh down to the bone. The moon got fuller here than it ever did over the Twilight Belt, its chill white radiance spilled on reaching snowfields and glittered like a million pinpoint stars fallen frozen to earth.

He saw icy plains and tumbled black chasms and fanged crags sheathed in glaciers. The ground rang with cold. Cramped and shuddering in his sleeping bag, he heard the thunder of frost-split rocks, the sullen boom and rumble of avalanches, now and again the faint far despairing howl of prowling wild beasts of prey.

“How can anyone live here?” he asked Mongku once. “The land is dead. It froze to death ten thousand years ago.”

“It is a little warmer in the region of Ganasth,” said the prince. “Volcanos and hot springs. And there is a great sea which has never frozen over. It has fish, and animals that live off them, and men that live off the animals. But in truth only the broken and hunted of man can ever have come here. We are the disinherited and we are claiming no more than our rightful share of life in returning to the Twilight Lands.”

He added thoughtfully: “I have been looking at that weapon of yours, Kery. I think I know the principle of its working. Sound does many strange things and there are even sounds too low or too high for the human ear to catch. A singer who holds the right note long enough can make a wine glass vibrate in sympathy until it shatters. We built a bridge once, over Thunder Gorge near Ganasth, but the wind blowing between the rock walls seemed to make it shake in a certain rhythm that finally broke it. Oh, yes, if the proper sympathetic notes can be found much may be done.

“I don’t know what hell’s music that pipe is supposed to sound. But I found that the reeds can be tautened or loosened and that the shape of the bag can be subtly altered by holding it in the right way. Find the proper combination and I can well believe that even the small noise made with one man’s breath can kill and break and crumble.”

He nodded his gaunt half-human face in the ruddy blaze of fire. “Aye, I’ll find the notes, Kery, and then the pipe will play for Ganasth.”

The barbarian shuddered with more than the cold, searching wind. Gods, gods, if he did—if the pipes should sound the final dirge of Killorn!

For a moment he had a wild desire to fling himself on Mongku, rip out the prince's throat and kill the score of enemy soldiers with his hands. But no—no—it wouldn't do. He would die before he had well started and Sathi would be alone in the Dark Lands.

He looked at her, sitting very quiet near the fire. The wavering light seemed to wash her fair young form in blood. She gave him a tired and hopeless smile.

Brave girl, brave girl, wife for a warrior in all truth. But there was the pipe and there was Killorn and there was Morna waiting for him to come home.

They were nearing Ganasth, he knew. They had ridden past springs that seethed and bubbled in the snow, seen the red glare of volcanos on the jagged horizon, passed fields of white fungus-growths which the Dark Landers cultivated. Soon the iron gates would clash shut on him and what hope would there be then?

He lay back in his sleeping bag trying to think. He had to escape. Somehow he must escape with the pipe of the gods. But if he tried and went down with a dozen spears in him there was an end of all hope.

The wind blew, drifting snow across the sleepers. Two men stood guard and their strangely glowing eyes never left the captives. They could see in this realm of shadows where he was half blind. They could hunt him down like an animal.

What to do? What to do?

On the road he went with his hands tied behind him, his ankles lashed to the stirrups, and his hest's bridle tied to the pommel of another man's saddle. No chance of escape there. But one must get up after sleep.

He rolled close to Sathi's quiet form as if he were merely turning over in slumber. His lips brushed against the leather bag and he wished it were her face.

"Sathi," he whispered as quietly as he could. "Sathi, don't move, but listen to me."

"Aye," her voice drifted back under the wind and the cold. "Aye, darling."

"I am going to make a break for it when we get up. Help me if you can but don't risk getting hurt. I don't think we can both get away but wait for me in Ganasth!"

She lay silent for a long while. Then, “As you will, Kery. And whatever comes, I love you.”

He should have replied but the words stuck in his throat. He rolled back and, quite simply, went to sleep.

A spear butt prodding his side awoke him. He yawned mightily and sat up, loosening his bag around him, tensing every muscle in his body.

“The end of this ride will see us in the city,” Mongku said.

Kery rose slowly, gauging distances. A guardsman stood beside him, spear loose in one hand. The rest were scattered around the camp or huddled close to the fire. The hests were a darker shadow bunched on the fringes.

Kery wrenched the spear of the nearest man loose, swinging one booted foot into his belly. He brought the weapon around in a smashing arc, cracking the heavy butt into another’s jaw and rammed the head into the throat of a third. Even as he stabbed he was plunging into motion.

A Ganasthian yelled and thrust at him. Sathi threw herself on the shaft, pulling it down. Kery leaped for the hests.

There were two men on guard there. One drew a sword and hewed at the northerner. The keen blade slashed through heavy tunic and undergarments, cutting his shoulder—but not too badly. He came under the fellow’s guard and smashed a fist into his jaw. Seizing the weapon he whirled and hacked at the other Dark Lander beating down the soldier’s ax and cutting him across the face.

The rest of the camp was charging at him. Kery bent and cut the hobbles of the hest beside him. A shower of flung spears rained about him as he sprang to the saddleless back. Twisting his left hand into the long mane he kicked the frightened beast in the flanks and plunged free.

Two Ganasthi quartered across his trail. He bent low over the hest’s back, spurring the mount with the point of his sword. As he rode down on them he hewed at one and saw him fall with a scream. The other stumbled out of the path of his reckless charge.

“*Hai-ah!*” shouted Kery.

He clattered away over the stony icy fields toward the shelter of the dark hills looming to the north. Spears and arrows whistled on his trail and he heard, dimly, the shouts of men and the thud of pursuing hoofs.

He was alone in a land of foes, a land of freezing cold where he could scarce see half a mile before him, a land of hunger and swords. They were

after him and it would take all the hunter's skill he had learned in Killorn and all the warrior's craftiness taught by the march to evade them. And after that—Ganasth!

VII

The city loomed dark before him reaching with stony fingers for the ever-glittering stars. Of black stone it was, mountainous walls ringing in the narrow streets and the high gaunt houses. A city of night, city of darkness. Kery shivered.

Behind the city rose a mountain, a deeper shadow against the frosty dark of heaven. It was a volcano and from its mouth a red flame flapped in the keening wind. Sparks and smoke streamed over Ganasth. There was a hot smell of sulphur in the bitter air. The fire added a faint blood-like tinge to the cold glitter of moonlight and starlight on the snowfields.

There was a highway leading through the great main gates and the glowing-eyed people of the Dark Lands were trafficking along it. Kery strode directly on his way, through the crowds and ever closer to the city.

He wore the ordinary fur and leather dress of the country that he had stolen from an outlying house. The parka hood was drawn low to shadow his alien features. He went armed, as most men did, sword belted to his waist, and because he went quietly and steadily nobody paid any attention to him.

But if he were discovered and the hue and cry went up that would be the end of his quest.

A dozen sleeps of running and hiding in the wild hills, shivering with cold and hunger, hunting animals which could see where he was blind, and ever the men of Ganasth on his trail—it would all go for naught. He would die and Sathi would be bound to a hateful pledge and Killorn would in time be the home of strangers.

He must finally have shaken off pursuit, he thought. Ranging through the hills he had found no sign of the warriors who had scoured them before. So he had proceeded toward the city on his wild and hopeless mission.

To find a woman and a weapon in the innermost citadel of a foe whose language even was unknown to him—truly the gods must be laughing!

He was close to the gates now. They loomed over him like giants, and the passage through the city wall was a tunnel. Soldiers stood on guard and Kery lowered his head.

Traffic streamed through. No one gave him any heed. But it was black as hell in the tunnel and only a Ganasthian could find his way. Blindly Kery walked ahead, bumping into people, praying that none of the angry glances he got would unmask his pretense.

When he came out into the street the breath was sobbing in his lungs. He pushed on down its shadowy length feeling the wind that howled between the buildings cold on his cheeks.

But where to go now, where to go?

Blindly he struck out toward the heart of town. Most rulers preferred to live at the center.

The Ganasthi were a silent folk. Men stole past in the gloom, noiseless save for the thin snow scrunching under their feet. Crowds eddied dumbly through the great market squares, buying and selling with a gesture or a whispered syllable. City of half-seen ghosts... Kery felt more than half a ghost himself, shade of a madman flitting hopelessly to the citadel of the king of hell.

He found the place at last, more by blind blundering through the narrow twisting streets than anything else. Drawing himself into the shadow of a building across the way he stood looking at it, weighing his chances.

There was a high wall around the palace. He could only see its roof but it seemed to be set well back. He spied a gate not too far off, apparently a secondary entrance for it was small and only one sentry guarded it.

Now! By all the gods, now!

For a moment his courage failed him, and he stood sweating and shivering and licking dry lips. It wasn't fear of death. He had lived too long with the dark gods as comrade—he had but little hope of escaping alive from these nighted hills. But he thought of the task before him, and the immensity of it and the ruin that lay in his failure, and his heartbeat nearly broke through his ribs.

What, after all, could he hope to do? What was his plan, anyway? He had come to Ganasth on a wild and hopeless journey, scarcely thinking one

sleep ahead of his death-dogged passage. Only now—now he must reach a decision, and he couldn't.

With a snarl, Kery started across the street.

No one else was in sight, there was little traffic in this part of town, but at any moment someone might round either of the corners about which the way twisted and see what he was doing. He had to be fast.

He walked up to the sentry who gave him a haughty glance. There was little suspicion in it for what had anyone to fear in the hearth of Ganasth the mighty?

Kery drew his sword and lunged.

The sentry yelled and brought down his pike. Kery batted the shaft aside even as he went by it. His sword flashed, stabbing for the other man's throat. With a dreadful gurgling the guard stumbled and went clattering to earth.

Now quickly!

Kery took the man's helmet and put it on. His own long locks were fair enough to pass for Ganasthian at a casual glance, and the visor would hide his eyes. Shedding his parka he slipped on the bloodstained tunic and the cloak over that. Taking the pike in hand he went through the gate.

Someone cried out and feet clattered in the street and along the garden paths before him. The noise had been heard. Kery looked wildly around at the pale bushes of fungus that grew here under the moon. He crawled between the fleshy fronds of the nearest big one and crouched behind it.

Guardsmen ran down the path. The moonlight blinked like cold silver on their spearheads. Kery wriggled on his stomach through the garden of fungus, away from the trail but toward the black palace.

Lying under a growth at the edge of a frost-silvered expanse of open ground he scouted the place he must next attack. The building was long and rambling, seemingly four stories high, built of polished black marble. There were two guards in sight, standing warily near a door. The rest must have run off to investigate the alarm.

Two—

Kery rose, catching his stride even as he did, and dashed from the garden toward them. The familiar helmet and tunic might assure them for the

instant he needed but he had to run lest they notice.

“Vashtung!” shouted one of the men.

His meaning was plain enough. Kery launched his pike at the other who still looked a bit uncertain. It was an awkward throwing weapon. It brought him down wounded in a clatter of metal. The other roared and stepped forth to meet the assault.

Kery’s sword was out and whirring. He chopped at the pikeshaft that jabbed at him, caught his blade in the tough wood and pushed the weapon aside. As he came up face to face he kneed the Ganasthian with savage precision.

The other man reached up and grabbed his ankle and pulled him down. Kery snarled, the rage of battle rising in him. It was as if the pipes of Broina skirled in his head. Fear and indecision were gone. He got his hands on the soldier’s neck and wrenched. Even as the spine snapped he was rising again to his feet.

He picked up sword and pike and ran up the stairs and through the door. Now—Sathi! He had one ally in this house of hell.

A long and silent corridor, lit by dim red cressets, stretched before him. He raced down it and his boots woke hollow echoes that paced him through its black length.

Two men in the dress of servants stood in the room into which he burst. They stared wildly at him. He stabbed one but the other fled screaming. He’d give the alarm but there was no time to chase. No time!

A staircase wound up toward the second story and Kery took it, flying up three steps at a time. Dimly, below him, he heard the frantic tattoo of a giant gong, the alarm signal, but the demon fury was fire and ice in his blood.

Another servant gaped at him. Kery seized him with a rough hand and held the sword at his throat.

“Sathi,” he snarled. “Sathi—Ryvan—Sathi!”

The Ganasthian gibbered in a panic that seemed weird with his frozen face. Kery grinned viciously and pinked him with the blade. “Sathi!” he said urgently. “Sathi of Ryvan!”

Shaking, the servant led the way, Kery urging him ungently to greater speed. They went up another flight of stairs and down a hallway richly hung with furs and tapestries. Passing lackeys gaped at them and some ran. Gods, they’d bring all Ganasth down on his neck!

Before a closed door stood a guardsman. Kery slugged the servant when he pointed at that entrance and ran to meet this next barrier. The guard yelled and threw up his pike.

Kery's own long-shafted weapon clashed forth. They stabbed at each other, seeking the vitals. The guardsman had a cuirass and Kery's point grazed off the metal. He took a ripping slash in his left arm. The Ganasthian bored in, wielding his pike with skill, beating aside Kery's guard.

VIII

The Twilight Lander dropped his own weapon, seized the other haft in both hands, and wrenched. Grimly the Ganasthian hung on. Kery worked his way in closer. Suddenly he released the shaft, almost fell against his enemy, and drew the Dark Lander's sword. The short blade flashed and the sentry fell.

The door was barred. He beat on it frantically, hearing the clatter of feet coming up the stairs, knowing that a thunderstorm of hurled weapons was on its way. "Sathi!" he cried. "Sathi, it is Kery, let me in!"

The first soldiers appeared down at the end of the corridor. Kery threw himself against the door. It opened, and he plunged through and slammed down the bolt.

Sathi stood there and wonder was in her eyes. "Oh, Kery," she breathed, "Kery, you came...."

"No time," he rasped. "Where is the pipe of Killorn?"

She fought for calmness. "Mongku has it," she said. "His chambers are on the next floor, above these—"

The door banged and groaned as men threw their weight against it.

Sathi took his hand and led him into the next room. A fire burned low in the hearth. "I thought it out, against the time you might come," she said. "The only way out is up that chimney. It should take us to the roof and thence we can go down again."

"Oh, well done, lass!" With a sweep of the poker Kery scattered the logs and coals out on the carpet while Sathi barred the door into the next room.

Drawing a deep breath the Killorner went into the fireplace, braced feet and back against the sides of the flue and began to climb up.

Smoke swirled in the chimney. He gasped for breath and his lungs seemed on fire. Night in here, utter dark and choking of fouled air. His heart roared and his strength ebbed from him. Up and up and up, hitch yourself still further up.

“Kery.” Her voice came low, broken with coughing. “Kery—I can’t. I’m slipping—”

“Hang on!” he gasped. “Here. Reach up. My belt—”

He felt the dragging weight catch at him, there in the smoke-thickened dark, and drew a grim breath and edged himself further, up and up and up. And out!

He crawled from the chimney and fell to the roof with the world reeling about him and a rushing of darkness in his head. His tormented lungs sucked the bitter air. He sobbed and the tears washed the soot from his eyes. He stood up and helped Sathi to her feet.

She leaned against him, shuddering with strain and with the wind that cried up here under the flickering stars. He looked about, seeking a way down again. Yes, over there, a doorway opening on a small terrace. Quickly now.

They crawled over the slanting, ice-slippery roof, helping each other where they could, fighting a way to the battlement until Kery’s grasping fingers closed on its edge and he heaved both of them up onto it.

“Come on!” he snapped. “They’ll be behind us any moment now.”

“What to do?” she murmured. “What to do?”

“Get the pipes!” he growled, and the demon blood of Broina began to boil in him again. “Get the pipes and destroy them if we can do nothing else.”

They went through the door and down a narrow staircase and came to the fourth floor of the palace.

Sathi looked up and down the long empty hallway. “I have been up here before,” she said with a coolness that was good to hear. “Let me see—yes, this way, I think—” As they trotted down the hollow length of corridor she said further: “They treated me fairly well here, indeed with honor though I was a prisoner. But oh, Kery, it was like sunlight to see you again!”

He stooped and kissed her, briefly, wondering if he would ever have a chance to do it properly. Most likely not but she would be a good

companion on hell-road.

They came into a great antechamber. Kery had his sword out, the only weapon left to him, but no one was in sight. All the royal guards must be out hunting him. He grinned wolfishly and stepped to the farther door.

“Kery—” Sathi huddled close against him. “Kery, do we dare? It may be death—”

“It will be like that anyway,” he said curtly and swung the door open.

A great, richly furnished suite of chambers, dark and still, lay before him. He padded through the first, looking right and left like a questing animal, and into the next.

Two men stood there, talking—Jonan and Mongku.

They saw him and froze for he was a terrible sight, bloody, black with smoke, fury cold and bitter-blue in his eyes. He grinned, a white flash of teeth in his sooted face, and drew his sword and stalked forward.

“So you have come,” said Mongku quietly.

“Aye,” said Kery. “Where is the pipe of Killorn?”

Jonan thrust forward, drawing the sword at his belt. “I will hold him, prince,” he said. “I will carve him into very bits for you.”

Kery met his advance in a clash of steel. They circled, stiff-legged and wary, looking for an opening. There was death here. Sathi knew starkly that only one of those two would leave this room.

Jonan lunged in, stabbing, and Kery skipped back. The officer was better in handling these shortswords than he who was used to the longer blades of the north. He brought his own weapon down sharply, deflecting the thrust. Jonan parried, and then it was bang and crash, thrust and leap and hack with steel clamoring and sparking. The glaives hissed and screamed, the fighters breathed hoarsely and there was murder in their eyes.

Jonan ripped off his cloak with his free hand and flapped it in Kery’s face. The northerner hacked out, blinded, and Jonan whipped the cloth around to tangle his blade. Then he rushed in, stabbing. Kery fell to one knee and took the thrust on his helmet, letting it glide off. Reaching up he got Jonan around the waist and pulled the man down on him.

They rolled over, growling and biting and gouging. Jonan clung to his sword and Kery to that wrist. They crashed into a wall and struggled there.

Kery got one leg around Jonan's waist and pulled himself up on the man's chest. He got a two-handed grasp on the enemy's sword arm, slipped the crook of one elbow around, and broke the bone.

Jonan screamed. Kery reached over. He took the sword from his loosening fingers and buried it in Jonan's breast.

He stood up then, trembling with fury, and looked at the pipes of Killorn.

It was almost as if Mongku's expressionless face smiled. The Ganasthian held the weapon cradled in his arms, the mouthpiece near his lips. He nodded. "I got it to working," he said. "In truth it is a terrible thing. Who holds it might well hold the world someday."

Kery stood waiting, the sword hanging limp in one hand.

"Yes," said Mongku. "I am going to play it."

Kery started across the floor—and Mongku blew.

The sound roared forth, wild, cruel, seizing him and shaking him, ripping at nerve and sinew. Bone danced in his skull and night shouted in his brain. He fell to the ground, feeling the horrible jerking of his muscles, seeing the world swim and blur before him.

The pipes screamed. Goodnight, Kery, goodnight, goodnight! It is the dirge of the world he is playing, the coronach of Killorn, it is the end of all things skirling in your body—

Sathi crept forth. She was behind the player, the hell-tune did not strike her so deeply, but even as his senses blurred toward death Kery saw how she fought for every step, how the bronze lamp almost fell from her hand. Mongku had forgotten her. He was playing doom, watching Kery die and noting how the music worked.

Sathi struck him from behind. He fell, dropping the pipes, and turned dazed eyes up to her. She struck him again and again.

Then she fled over to Kery and cradled his head in her arms and sobbed with the horror of it and with the need for haste. "Oh, quickly, quickly, beloved, we have to flee, they will be here now—I hear them in the hallway, come—"

Kery sat up. His head was ringing and thumping, his muscles burned and weakness was like an iron hand on him. But there was that which had to be

done and it gave him strength from some forgotten wellspring. He rose on shaky legs and went over and picked up the bagpipe of the gods.

“No,” he said.

“Kery...”

“We will not flee,” he said. “I have a song to play.”

She saw the cold remote mask of his face. He was not Kery now of the ready laugh and the reckless bravery and the wistful memories of a lost homestead. He had become something else with the pipe in his hands, something which stood stern and somber and apart from man. There seemed to be ghosts in the vast shadowy room, the blood of his fathers who had been Pipers of Killorn, and he was the guardian now. She shrank against him for protection. There was a small charmed circle which the music did not enter but it was a stranger she stood beside.

Carefully Kery lifted the mouthpiece to his lips and blew. He felt the vibration tremble under his feet. The walls wavered before his eyes as unheard notes shivered the air. He himself heard no more than the barbarian screaming of the war-music he had always known but he saw death riding out.

A troop of guardsmen burst through the door—halted, stared at the tall piper, and then howled in terror and pain.

Kery played. And as he played Killorn rose before him. He saw the reach of gray windswept moors, light glimmering on high cold tarns, birds winging in a sky of riven clouds. Space and loneliness and freedom, a hard open land of stern and bitter beauty, the rocks which had shaped his bones and the soil which had nourished his flesh. He stood by the great lake of sunset, storms swept in over it, rain and lightning, the waves dashed themselves to angry death on a beach of grinding stones.

He strode forward, playing, and the soldiers of Ganasth died before him. The walls of the palace trembled, hangings fell to the shuddering floor, the building groaned as the demon-music sought and found resonance.

He played them a song of the chase, the long wild hunt over the heath, breath gasping in hot lungs and blood shouting in the ears, running drunk with wind after the prey that fled and soared. He played them fire and comradeship and the little huts crouched low under the mighty sky. And the walls cracked around him. Pillars trembled and broke. The roof began to cave in and everywhere they died about him.

He played war, the skirl of pipes and the shout of men, clamor of metal, tramp of feet and hoofs, and the fierce blink of light on weapons. He sang them up an army that rode over the rim of the world with swords aflame and arrows like rain and the whole building tumbled to rubble even as he walked out of it.

Tenderly, dreamily, he played of Morna the fair, Morna who had stood with him on the edge of the lake where it is forever sunset, listening to the chuckle of small wavelets and looking west to the pyre of red and gold and dusky purple, the eyes and the lips and the hair of Morna and what she and he had whispered to each other on that quiet shore. But there was death in that song.

The ground began to shake under Ganasth. There is but little strength in the lungs of one man and yet when that strikes just the right notes, and those small pushes touch off something else far down in the depths of the earth, the world will tremble. The Dark Landers rioted in a more than human fear, in the blind panic which the pipes sang to them.

The gates were closed before him, but Kery played them down. Then he turned and faced the city and played it a song of the wrath of the gods. He played them up rain and cold and scouring wind, glaciers marching from the north in a blind whirl of snow, lightning aflame in the heavens and cities ground to dust. He played them a world gone crazy, sundering continents and tidal waves marching over the shores and mountains flaming into a sky of rain and fire. He played them whirlwinds and dust storms and the relentless sleety blast from the north. He sang them ruin and death and the sun burning out to darkness.

When he ceased, and he and Sathi left the half-shattered city, none stirred to follow. None dared who were still alive. It seemed to the two of them, as they struck out over the snowy plains, that the volcano behind was beginning to grumble and throw its flames a little higher.

IX

He stood alone in the gardens of Ryvan's palace looking out over the city. Perhaps he thought of the hard journey back from the Dark Lands. Perhaps he thought of the triumphant day when they had sneaked back into the fastness and then gone out again, the Piper of Killorn and Red Bram roaring in his wake to smash the siege and scatter the armies of Ganasth and send the broken remnants fleeing homeward. Perhaps he thought of the future—who knew? Sathi approached him quietly, wondering what to say.

He turned and smiled at her, the old merry smile she knew but with something else behind it. He had been the war-god of Killorn and that left its mark on a man.

“So it all turned out well,” he said.

“Thanks to you, Kery,” she answered softly.

“Oh, not so well at that,” he decided. “There were too many good men who fell, too much laid waste. It will take a hundred years before all this misery is forgotten.”

“But we reached what we strove for,” she said. “Ryvan is safe, all the Twilight Lands are. You folk of Killorn have the land you needed. Isn't that enough to achieve?”

“I suppose so.” Kery stirred restlessly. “I wonder how it stands in Killorn now?”

“And you still want to return?” She tried to hold back the tears. “This is a fair land, and you are great in it, all you people from the north. You would go back to—that?”

“Indeed,” he said. “All you say is true. We would be fools to return.” He scowled. “It may well be that in the time we yet have to wait most of us will find life better here and decide to stay. But not I, Sathi. I am just that kind of fool.”

“This land needs you, Kery. I do.”

He tilted her chin, smiling half sorrowfully into her eyes. “Best you forget, dear,” he said. “I will not stay here once the chance comes to return.”

She shook her head blindly, drew a deep breath, and said with a catch in her voice, “Then stay as long as you can, Kery.”

“Do you really mean that?” he asked slowly.

She nodded.

“You are a fool too,” he said. “But a very lovely fool.”

He took her in his arms.

Presently she laughed a little and said, not without hope, “I’ll have a while to change your mind, Kery. And I’ll try to do it. I’ll try!”

SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS

I

Basil Donovan was drunk again. He sat near the open door of the Golden Planet, boots on the table, chair tilted back, one arm resting on the broad shoulder of Wocha, who sprawled on the floor beside him, the other hand clutching a tankard of ale. The tunic was open above his stained gray shirt, the battered cap was askew on his close-cropped blond hair, and his insignia—the stars of a captain and the silver leaves of an earl on Ansa—were tarnished. There was a deepening flush over his pale gaunt cheeks, and his eyes smoldered with an old rage.

Looking out across the cobbled street, he could see one of the tall, half-timbered houses of Lanstead. It had somehow survived the space bombardment, though its neighbors were rubble, but the tile roof was clumsily patched and there was oiled paper across the broken plastic of the windows. An anachronism, looming over the great bulldozer which was clearing the wreckage next door. The workmen there were mostly Ansans, big men in ragged clothes, but a well-dressed Terran was bossing the job. Donovan cursed wearily and lifted his tankard again.

The long, smoky-raftered taproom was full—stolid burgers and peasants of Lanstead, discharged spacemen still in their worn uniforms, a couple of tailed greenies from the neighbor planet Shalmu. Talk was low and spiritless, and the smoke which drifted from pipes and cigarettes was bitter, cheap tobacco and dried bark. The smell of defeat was thick in the tavern.

“May I sit here, sir? The other places are full.”

Donovan glanced up. It was a young fellow, peasant written over his sunburned face in spite of the gray uniform and the empty sleeve. Olman—

yes, Sam Oلمان, whose family had been under Donovan fief these two hundred years. “Sure, make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, sir. I came in to get some supplies, thought I’d have a beer too. But you can’t get anything these days. Not to be had.”

Sam’s face looked vaguely hopeful as he eyed the noble. “We do need a gas engine bad, sir, for the tractor. Now that the central powercaster is gone, we got to have our own engines. I don’t want to presume, sir, but—”

Donovan lifted one corner of his mouth in a tired smile. “I’m sorry,” he said. “If I could get one machine for the whole community I’d be satisfied. Can’t be done. We’re trying to start a small factory of our own up at the manor, but it’s slow work.”

“I’m sure if anyone can do anything it’s you, sir.”

Donovan looked quizzically at the open countenance across the table. “Sam,” he asked, “why do you people keep turning to the Family? We led you, and it was to defeat. Why do you want anything more to do with nobles? We’re not even that, any longer. We’ve been stripped of our titles. We’re just plain citizens of the Empire now like you, and the new rulers are Terran. Why do you still think of us as your leaders?”

“But you are, sir! You’ve always been. It wasn’t the king’s fault, or his men’s, that Terra had so much more’n we did. We gave ’em a fight they won’t forget in a hurry!”

“You were in my squadron, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir. C.P.O. on the *Ansa Lancer*. I was with you at the Battle of Luga.” The deep-set eyes glowed. “We hit ’em there, didn’t we, sir?”

“So we did.” Donovan couldn’t suppress the sudden fierce memory. Outnumbered, outgunned, half its ships shot to pieces and half the crews down with Sirius fever, the Royal Lansteads had still made naval history and sent the Imperial Fleet kiwoodling back to Sol. Naval historians would be scratching their heads over that battle for the next five centuries. Before God, they’d fought!

He began to sing the old war-song, softly at first, louder as Sam joined him—

“Comrades, hear the battle tiding,
hear the ships that rise and yell

faring outward, starward riding—
Kick the Terrans back to hell!”

The others were listening, men raised weary heads, an old light burned in their eyes and tankards clashed together. They stood up to roar out the chorus till the walls shook.

“Lift your glasses high,
kiss the girls goodbye,
for we’re riding,
for we’re riding,
for we’re riding out to Terran sky! Terran sky! Terran sky!
We have shaken loose our thunder
where the planets have their way,
and the starry deeps of wonder
saw the Impies in dismay.
Lift your glasses high,
kiss the girls goodbye—”

The workmen in the street heard it and stopped where they were. Some began to sing. The Imperial superintendent yelled, and an Ansan turned to flash him a wolfish grin. A squad of blue-uniformed Solarian marines coming toward the inn went on the double.

“Oh, the Emp’ror sent his battle
ships against us in a mass,
but we shook them like a rattle
and we crammed them—”

“Hi, there! Stop that!”

The song died, slowly and stubbornly, the men stood where they were and hands clenched into hard-knuckled fists. Someone shouted an obscenity.

The Terran sergeant was very young, and he felt unsure before those steady, hating eyes. He lifted his voice all the louder: “That will be enough of that. Any more and I’ll run you all in for *lèse majesté*. Haven’t you drunken bums anything better to do than sit around swilling beer?”

A big Ansan smith laughed with calculated raucousness.

The sergeant looked around, trying to ignore him. “I’m here for Captain Donovan—Earl Basil, if you prefer. They said he’d be here. I’ve got an Imperial summons for him.”

The noble stretched out a hand. “This is he. Let’s have that paper.”

“It’s just the formal order,” said the sergeant. “You’re to come at once.”

“Commoners,” said Donovan mildly, “address me as ‘sir.’”

“You’re a commoner with the rest of ’em now.” The sergeant’s voice wavered just a little.

“I really must demand a little respect,” said Donovan with drunken precision. There was an unholy gleam in his eyes. “It’s a mere formality, I know, but after all my family can trace itself farther back than the Empire, whereas you couldn’t name your father.”

Sam Olman snickered.

“Well, sir—” The sergeant tried elaborate sarcasm. “If you, sir, will please be so good as to pick your high-bred tail off that chair, sir, I’m sure the Imperium would be mostly deeply grateful to you, sir.”

“I’ll have to do without its gratitude, I’m afraid.” Donovan folded the summons without looking at it and put it in his tunic pocket. “But thanks for the paper. I’ll keep it in my bathroom.”

“You’re under arrest!”

Donovan stood slowly up, unfolding his sheer two meters of slender, wiry height. “All right, Wocha,” he said. “Let’s show them that Ansa hasn’t surrendered yet.”

He threw the tankard into the sergeant’s face, followed it with the table against the two marines beside him, and vaulted over the sudden ruckus to drive a fist into the jaw of the man beyond.

Wocha rose and his booming cry trembled in the walls. He’d been a slave of Donovan’s since he was a cub and the man a child, and if someone had liberated him he wouldn’t have known what to do. As batman and irregular groundtrooper he’d followed his master to the wars, and the prospect of new skull-breaking lit his eyes with glee.

For an instant there was tableau, Terrans and Ansans rigid, staring at the monster which suddenly stood behind the earl. The natives of Donarr have the not uncommon centauroid form, but their bodies are more like that of a rhinoceros than of a horse, hairless and slaty blue and enormously massive. The gorilla-armed torso ended in a round, muzzled, apelike face, long-

eared, heavy-jawed, with canine tusks hanging over the great gash of a mouth. A chair splintered under his feet, and he grinned.

“Paraguns—” cried the sergeant.

All hell let out for noon. Some of the customers huddled back into the corners, but the rest smashed the ends off bottles and threw themselves against the Terrans. Sam Olman’s remaining arm yanked a marine to him and bashed his face against the wall. Donovan’s fist traveled a jolting arc to the nearest belly and he snatched a rifle loose and crunched it against the man’s jaw. A marine seized him from behind, he twisted in the grip and kicked savagely, whirled around and drove the rifle butt into the larynx.

“Kill the bluebellies! Kill the Impies! Hail, Ansa!”

Wocha charged into the squad, grabbed a hapless Terran in his four-fingered hands, and swung the man like a club. Someone drew his bayonet to stab the slave, it glanced off the thick skin and Wocha roared and sent him reeling. The riot blazed around the room, trampling men underfoot, shouting and cursing and swinging.

“Donovan, Donovan!” shouted Sam Olman. He charged the nearest Impy and got a bayonet in the stomach. He fell down, holding his hand to his wound, screaming.

The door was suddenly full of Terrans, marines arriving to help their comrades. Paraguns began to sizzle, men fell stunned before the supersonic beams and the fight broke up. Wocha charged the rescuers and a barrage sent his giant form crashing to the floor.

They herded the Ansans toward the city jail. Donovan, stirring on the ground as consciousness returned, felt handcuffs snap on his wrists.

Imperial summons being what they were, he was bundled into a groundcar and taken under heavy guard toward the ordered place. He leaned wearily back, watching the streets blur past. Once a group of children threw stones at the vehicle.

“How about a cigarette?” he said.

“Shut up.”

To his mild surprise, they did not halt at the military government headquarters—the old Hall of Justice where the Donovans had presided before the war—but went on toward the suburbs. The spaceport being still

radioactive. They must be going to the emergency field outside the city. Hm. He tried to relax. His head ached from the stun-beam.

A light cruiser had come in a couple of days before, H.M. *Ganymede*. It loomed enormous over the green rolling fields and the distance-blued hills and forests, a lance of bright metal and energy pointed into the clear sky of Ansa, blinding in the sun. A couple of spacemen on sentry at the gangway halted as the car stopped before them.

“This man is going to Commander Jansky.”

“Aye, aye. Proceed.”

Through the massive airlock, down the mirror-polished companionway, into an elevator and up toward the bridge—Donovan looked about him with a professional eye. The Impies kept a clean, tight ship, he had to admit.

He wondered if he would be shot or merely imprisoned. He doubted if he’d committed an enslaving offense. Well, it had been fun, and there hadn’t been a hell of a lot to live for anyway. Maybe his friends could spring him, if and when they got some kind of underground organized.

He was ushered into the captain’s cabin. The ensign with him saluted. “Donovan as per orders, ma’m.”

“Very good. But why is he in irons?”

“Resisted orders, ma’m. Started a riot. Bloody business.”

“I—see.” She nodded her dark head. “Losses?”

“I don’t know, ma’m, but we had several wounded at least. A couple of Ansans were killed, I think.”

“Well, leave him here. You may go.”

“But—ma’m, he’s dangerous!”

“I have a gun, and there’s a man just outside the door. You may go, ensign.”

Donovan swayed a little on his feet, trying to pull himself erect, wishing he weren’t so dirty and bloody and generally messed up. You look like a tramp, man, he thought. Keep up appearances. Don’t let them outdo us, even in spit and polish.

“Sit down, Captain Donovan,” said the woman.

He lowered himself to a chair, raking her with deliberately insolent eyes. She was young to be wearing a commander’s twin planets—young and trim and nice looking. Tall body, sturdy but graceful, well filled out in the blue uniform and red cloak; raven-black hair falling to her shoulders; strong blunt-fingered hands, one of them resting close to her sidearm. Her face

was interesting, broad and cleanly molded, high cheekbones, wide full mouth, stubborn chin, snub nose, storm-gray eyes set far apart under heavy dark brows. A superior peasant type, he decided, and felt more at ease in the armor of his inbred haughtiness. He leaned back and crossed his legs.

“I am Helena Jansky, in command of this vessel,” she said. Her voice was low and resonant, the note of strength in it. “I need you for a certain purpose. Why did you resist the Imperial summons?”

Donovan shrugged. “Let’s say that I’m used to giving orders, not receiving them.”

“Ah—yes.” She ruffled the papers on her desk. “You were the Earl of Lanstead, weren’t you?”

“After my father and older brother were killed in the war, yes.” He lifted his head. “I am still the Earl.”

She studied him with a dispassionate gaze that he found strangely uncomfortable. “I must say that you are a curious sort of leader,” she murmured. “One who spends his time in a tavern getting drunk, and who on a whim provokes a disorder in which many of his innocent followers are hurt or killed, in which property difficult to replace is smashed—yes, I think it was about time that Ansa had a change of leadership.”

Donovan’s face was hot. Hell take it, what right had she to tell him what to do? What right had the whole damned Empire to come barging in where it wasn’t wanted? “The Families, under the king, have governed Ansa since it was colonized,” he said stiffly. “If it had been such a misrule as you seem to think, would the commons have fought for us as they did?”

II

Again that thoughtful stare. She saw a tall young man, badly disarrayed, blood and dirt streaking his long, thin-carved, curve-nosed features, an old scar jagging across his high narrow forehead. The hair was yellow, the eyes were blue, the whole look that of an old and settled aristocracy. His bitter voice lashed at her: “We ruled Ansa well because we were part of it, we grew up with the planet and we understood our folk and men were free

under us. That's something which no upstart Solar Empire can have, not for centuries, not ever to judge by the stock they use for nobility. When peasants command spaceships—"

Her face grew a little pale, but she smiled and replied evenly, "I am the Lady Jansky of Torgandale on Valor—Sirius A IV—and you are now a commoner. Please remember that."

"All the papers in the Galaxy won't change the fact that your grandfather was a dirt farmer on Valor."

"He was an atomjack, and I'm proud of it. I suggest further that an aristocrat who has nothing to trade on but his pedigree is very ragged indeed. Now, enough of that." Her crisp tones snapped forth. "You've committed a serious offense, especially since this is still occupied territory. If you wish to cooperate with me, I can arrange for a pardon—also for your brawling friends. If not, the whole bunch of you can go to the mines."

Donovan shook his head, trying to clear it of alcohol and weariness and the ringing left by the parabeam. "Go on," he said, a little thickly. "I'll listen, anyway."

"What do you know of the Black Nebula?"

She must have seen his muscles jerk. For an instant he sat fighting himself, grasping at rigidity with all the strength that was in him, and the memory was a blaze and a shout and a stab of pure fear.

Valduma, Valduma!

The sudden thudding of his heart was loud in his ears, and he could feel the fine beads of sweat starting forth on his skin. He made a wrenching effort and pulled his mouth into a lopsided grin, but his voice wavered: "Which black nebula? There are a lot of them."

"Don't try to bait me." Her eyes were narrowed on him, and the fingers of one hand drummed the desktop. "You know I mean *the* Black Nebula. Nobody in this Galactic sector speaks of any other."

"Why—well—" Donovan lowered his face to hide it till he could stiffen the mask, rubbing his temples with manacled hands. "It's just a nebula. A roughly spherical dustcloud, maybe a light-year in diameter, about ten parsecs from Ansa toward Sagittari. A few colonized stars on its fringes, nothing inside it as far as anyone knows. It has a bad name for some reason. The superstitious say it's haunted, and you hear stories of ships disappearing—Well, it gets a pretty wide berth. Not much out there anyway."

His mind was racing, he thought he could almost hear it click and whirr as it spewed forth idea after idea, memory after memory. *Valduma and the blackness and they who laughed. The Nebula is pure poison, and now the Empire is getting interested. By God, it might poison them! Only would it stop there? This time they might decide to go on, to come out of the blackness.*

Jansky's voice seemed to come from very far away: "You know more than that, Donovan. Intelligence has been sifting Ansan records. You were the farthest-ranging space raider your planet had, and you had a base on Heim, at the very edge of the Nebula. Among your reports, there is an account of your men's unease, of the disappearance of small ships which cut through the Nebula on their missions, of ghostly things seen aboard other vessels and men who went mad. Your last report on the subject says that you investigated personally, that most of your crew went more or less crazy while in the Nebula, and that you barely got free. You recommend the abandonment of Heim and the suspension of operations in that territory. This was done, the region being of no great strategic importance anyway.

"Very well." The voice held a whipcrack undertone. "What do you know about the Black Nebula?"

Donovan had fought his way back to impassivity. "You have about the whole story already," he said. "There were all sorts of illusions as we penetrated, whisperings and glimpses of impossible things and so on. It didn't affect me much, but it drove many toward insanity and some died. There was also very real and unexplainable trouble—engines, lights, and so on. My guess is that there's some sort of radiation in the Nebula which makes atoms and electrons misbehave; that'd affect the human nervous system too, of course. If you're thinking of entering it yourself, my only advice is—don't."

"Hm." She cupped her chin in one hand and looked down at the papers. "Frankly, we know very little about this Galactic sector. Very few Terrans were ever here before the war, and previous intercourse on your part with Sol was even slighter. However, Intelligence has learned that the natives of almost every inhabited planet on the fringes of the Nebula worship it or at least regard it as the home of the gods."

"Well, it is a conspicuous object in their skies," said Donovan. He added truthfully enough: "I only know about Heim, where the native religion in the area of our base was a sort of devil-worship centered around the Nebula.

They made big sacrifices—foodstuffs, furs, tools, every conceivable item of use or luxury—which they claimed the devil-gods came and took. Some of the colonists thought there was something behind the legends, but I have my doubts.” He shrugged. “Will that do?”

“For the time being.” Jansky smiled with a certain bleak humor. “You can write a detailed report later on, and I strongly advise you not to mislead me. Because you’re going there with us.”

Donovan accepted the news coldly, but he thought the knocking of his heart must shake his whole body. His hands felt chilly and wet. “As you wish. Though what I can do—”

“You’ve been there before and know what to expect. Furthermore, you know the astrogation of that region; our charts are worse than sketchy, and even the Ansan tables have too many blank spots.”

“Well—” Donovan got the words out slowly. “If I don’t have to enlist. I will not take an oath to your Emperor.”

“You needn’t. Your status will be that of a civilian under Imperial command, directly responsible to me. You will have a cabin of your own, but no compensation except the abandonment of criminal proceedings against you.” Jansky relaxed and her voice grew gentler. “However, if you serve well I’ll see what I can do about pay. I daresay you could use some extra money.”

“Thank you,” said Donovan formally. He entered the first phase of the inchoate plan which was taking cloudy shape in his hammering brain: “May I have my personal slave with me? He’s nonhuman, but he can eat Terran food.”

Jansky smiled. There was sudden warmth in that smile, it made her human and beautiful. “As you wish if he doesn’t have fleas. I’ll write you an order for his embarkation.”

She’d hit the ceiling when she found what kind of passenger she’d agreed to, thought Donovan. But by then it would be too late. *And, with Wocha to help me, and the ship blundering blind into the Nebula—Valduma, Valduma, I’m coming back! And this time will you kiss me or kill me?*

The *Ganymede* lifted gravs and put the Ansa sun behind her. Much farther behind was Sol, an insignificant mote fifty light-years away, lost in the

thronging glory of stars. Ahead lay Sagittari, Galactic center and the Black Nebula.

Space burned and blazed with a million bitter-bright suns, keen cold unwinking flames strewn across the utter dark of space, flashing and flashing over the hollow gulf of the leagues and the years. The Milky Way foamed in curdled silver around that enormous night, a shining girdle jeweled with the constellations. Far and far away wheeled the mysterious green and blue-white of the other galaxies, sparks of a guttering fire with a reeling immensity between. Looking toward the bows, one saw the great star-clusters of Sagittari, the thronging host of suns burning and thundering at the heart of the Galaxy. *And what have we done?* thought Basil Donovan. *What is man and all his proud achievements? Our home star is a dwarf on the lonely fringe of the Galaxy, out where the stars thin away toward the great emptiness. We've ranged maybe two hundred light-years from it in all directions and it's thirty thousand to the Center! Night and mystery and nameless immensities around us, our day of glory the briefest flicker on the edge of nowhere, then oblivion forever—and we won't be forgotten, because we'll never have been noticed. The Black Nebula is only the least and outermost of the great clouds which thicken toward the Center and hide its ultimate heart from us, it is nothing even as we, and yet it holds a power older than the human race and a terror that may overwhelm it.*

He felt again the old quailing funk, fear crawled along his spine and will drained out of his soul. He wanted to run, escape, huddle under the sky of Ansa to hide from the naked blaze of the universe, live out his day and forget that he had seen the scornful face of God. But there was no turning back, not now, the ship was already outpacing light on her secondary drive and he was half a prisoner aboard. He squared his shoulders and walked away from the viewplate, back toward his cabin.

Wocha was sprawled on a heap of blankets, covering the floor with his bulk. He was turning the brightly colored pages of a child's picture book. "Boss," he asked, "when do we kill 'em?"

"The Impies? Not yet, Wocha. Maybe not at all." Donovan stepped over the monster and lay down on his bunk, hands behind his head. He could feel the thrum of the driving engines, quivering in the ship and his bones. "The Nebula may do that for us."

"We go back there?" Wocha stirred uneasily. "I don't like, boss. It's *toombar*. Bad."

“Yeah, so it is.”

“Better we stay home. Manor needs repair. Peasants need our help. I need beer.”

“So do I. I’ll see if we can’t promote some from the quartermaster. Old John can look after the estate while we’re away, and the peasants will just have to look after themselves. Maybe it’s time they learned how.” At a knock on the door: “Come in.”

Tetsuo Takahashi, the ship’s exec, brought his small sturdy form around Wocha and sat down on the edge of the bunk. “Your slave has the Old Lady hopping mad,” he grinned. “He’ll eat six times a man’s ration.”

“And drink it.” Donovan smiled back; he couldn’t help liking the cocky little Terran. Then, with a sudden renewed bitterness: “And he’s worth it. I couldn’t be without him. He may not be so terribly bright, but he’s my only proof that loyalty and decency aren’t extinct.”

Takahashi gave him a puzzled look. “Why do you hate us so much?” he asked.

“You came in where you weren’t asked. Ansa was free, and now it’s just another province of your damned Empire.”

“Maybe so. But you were a backwater, an underpopulated agricultural planet which nobody had ever heard of, exposed to barbarian raids and perhaps to nonhuman conquest. You’re safe now, and you’re part of a great social-economic system which can do more than all those squabbling little kingdoms and republics and theocracies and God knows what else put together could ever dream of.”

“Who said we wanted to be safe? Our ancestors came to Ansa to be free. We fought Shalmu when the greenies wanted to take what we’d built, and then we made friends with them. We had elbow room and a way of life that was our own. Now you’ll bring in your surplus population to fill our green lands with yelling cities and squalling people. You’ll tear down the culture we evolved so painfully and make us just another bunch of kowtowing Imperial citizens.”

“Frankly, Donovan, I don’t think it was much of a culture. It sat in its comfortable rut and admired the achievements of its ancestors. What did your precious Families do but hunt and loaf and throw big parties? Maybe they did fulfill a magisterial function—so what? Any elected yut could do the same in that simple a society.” Takahashi fixed his eyes on Donovan’s.

“But rights and wrongs aside, the Empire had to annex Ansa, and when you wouldn’t come in peaceably you had to be dragged in.”

“Yeah. A dumping ground for people who were too stupid not to control their own breeding.”

“Your Ansan peasants, my friend, have about twice the Terran birth rate. It’s merely that there are more Terrans to start with—and Sirians and Centaurians and all the old settled planets. No, it was more than that. It was a question of military necessity.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

“Read your history sometime. When the Commonwealth broke up in civil wars two hundred years ago it was hell between the stars. Half savage peoples who never should have left their planets had learned how to build spaceships and were going out to raid and conquer. A dozen would-be overlords scorched whole worlds with their battles. You can’t have anarchy on an interstellar scale. Too many people suffer. Old Manuel I had the guts to proclaim himself Emperor of Sol—no pretty euphemisms for him, an empire was needed and an empire was what he built. He kicked the barbarians out of the Solar System and went on to conquer their home territories and civilize them. That meant he had to subjugate stars closer to home, to protect his lines of communication. This led to further trouble elsewhere. Oh, yes, a lot of it was greed, but the planets which were conquered for their wealth would have been sucked in anyway by sheer economics. The second Argolid carried on, and now his son, Manuel II, is finishing the job. We’ve very nearly attained what we must have—an empire large enough to be socioeconomically self-sufficient and defend itself against all comers, of which there are many, without being too large for control. You should visit the inner Empire sometime, Donovan, and see how many social evils it’s been possible to wipe out because of security and central power. But we need this sector to protect our Sagittarian flank, so we’re taking it. Fifty years from now you’ll be glad we did.”

Donovan looked sourly up at him. “Why are you feeding me that?” he asked. “I’ve heard it before.”

“We’re going to survey a dangerous region, and you’re our guide. The captain and I think there’s more than a new radiation in the Black Nebula.

I'd like to think we could trust you."

"Think so if you wish."

"We could use a hypnoprobe on you, you know. We'd squeeze your skull dry of everything it contained. But we'd rather spare you that indignity."

"And you might need me when you get there, and I'd still be only half conscious. Quit playing the great altruist, Takahashi."

The exec shook his head. "There's something wrong inside you, Donovan," he murmured. "You aren't the man who licked us at Luga."

"Luga!" Donovan's eyes flashed. "Were you there?"

"Sure. Destroyer *North Africa*, just come back from the Zarune front—Cigarette?"

They fell to yarning and passed a pleasant hour. Donovan could not suppress a vague regret when Takahashi left. *They aren't such bad fellows, those Impies. They were brave and honorable enemies, and they've been lenient conquerors as such things go. But when we hit the Black Nebula—*

He shuddered. "Wocha, get that whiskey out of my trunk."

"You not going to get drunk again, boss?" The Donarrian's voice rumbled disappointment.

"I am. And I'm going to try to stay drunk the whole damn voyage. You just don't know what we're heading for, Wocha."

Stranger, go back.

Spaceman, go home. Turn back, adventurer.

It is death. Return, human.

The darkness whispered. Voices ran down the length of the ship, blending with the unending murmur of the drive, urging, commanding, whispering so low that it seemed to be within men's skulls.

Basil Donovan lay in darkness. His mouth tasted foul, and there was a throb in his temples and a wretchedness in his throat. He lay and listened to the voice which had wakened him.

Go home, wanderer. You will die, your ship will plunge through the hollow dark till the stars grow cold. Turn home, human.

"Boss. I hear them, boss. I'm scared."

"How long have we been under weigh? When did we leave Ansa?"

"A week ago, boss, maybe more. You been drunk. Wake up, boss, turn on the light. They're whispering in the dark, and I'm scared."

"We must be getting close."

Return. Go home. First comes madness and then comes death and then comes the spinning outward forever. Turn back, spaceman.

Bodiless whisper out of the thick thrumming dark, sourceless all-pervading susurrations, and it mocked, there was the cruel cynical scorn of the outer vastness running up and down the laughing voice. It murmured, it jeered, it ran along nerves with little icy feet and flowed through the brain, it called and gibed and hungered. It warned them to go back, and it knew they wouldn't and railed its mockery at them for it. Demon whisper, there in the huge cold loneliness, sneering and grinning and waiting.

Donovan sat up and groped for the light switch. "We're close enough," he said tonelessly. "We're in their range now."

Footsteps racketed in the corridor outside. A sharp rap on his door. "Come in. Come in and enjoy yourself."

III

Donovan hadn't found the switch before the door was open and light spilled in from the hallway fluorotubes. Cold white light, a shaft of it picking out Wocha's monstrous form and throwing grotesque shadows on the walls. Commander Jansky was there, in full uniform, and Ensign Jeanne Scoresby, her aide. The younger girl's face was white, her eyes enormous, but Jansky wore grimness like an armor.

"All right, Donovan," she said. "You've had your binge, and now the trouble is starting. You didn't say they were voices."

"They could be anything," he answered, climbing out of the bunk and steadying himself with one hand. His head swam a little. The corners of the room were thick with shadow.

Back, spaceman. Turn home, human.

"Delusions?" The man laughed unpleasantly. His face was pale and gaunt, unshaven in the bleak radiance. "When you start going crazy, I imagine you always hear voices."

There was contempt in the gray eyes that raked him. "Donovan, I put a technician to work on it when the noises began a few hours ago. He

recorded them. They're very faint, and they seem to originate just outside the ear of anyone who hears them, but they're real enough. Radiations don't speak in human Anglic with an accent such as I never heard before. Not unless they're carrier waves for a message. Donovan, who or what is inside the Black Nebula?"

The Ansan's laugh jarred out again. "Who or what is inside this ship?" he challenged. "Our great human science has no way of making the air vibrate by itself. Maybe there are ghosts, standing invisible just beside us and whispering in our ears."

"We could detect nothing, no radiations, no energy-fields, nothing but the sounds themselves. I refuse to believe that matter can be set in motion without some kind of physical force being applied." Jansky clapped a hand to her sidearm. "You know what is waiting for us. You know how they do it."

"Go ahead. Hypnoprobe me. Lay me out helpless for a week. Or shoot me if you like. You'll be just as dead whatever you do."

Her tones were cold and sharp. "Get on your clothes and come up to the bridge."

He shrugged, picked up his uniform, and began to shuck his pajamas. The women looked away.

Human, go back. You will go mad and die.

Valduma, he thought, with a wrenching deep inside him. *Valduma, I've returned.*

He stepped over to the mirror. The Ansan uniform was a gesture of defiance, and it occurred to him that he should shave if he wore it in front of these Terrans. He ran the electric razor over cheeks and chin, pulled his tunic straight, and turned back. "All right."

They went out into the hallway. A spaceman went by on some errand. His eyes were strained wide, staring at blankness, and his lips moved. The voices were speaking to him.

"It's demoralizing the crew," said Jansky. "It has to stop."

"Go ahead and stop it," jeered Donovan. "Aren't you the representative of the almighty Empire of Sol? Command them in the name of His Majesty to stop."

"The crew, I mean," she said impatiently. "They've got no business being frightened by a local phenomenon."

“Any human would be,” answered Donovan. “You are, though you won’t admit it. I am. We can’t help ourselves. It’s instinct.”

“Instinct?” Her clear eyes were a little surprised.

“Sure.” Donovan halted before a viewscreen. Space blazed and roiled against the reaching darkness. “Just look out there. It’s the primeval night, it’s the blind unknown where unimaginable inhuman Powers are abroad. We’re still the old half-ape, crouched over his fire and trembling while the night roars around us. Our lighted, heated, metal-armored ship is still the lonely cave-fire, the hearth with steel and stone laid at the door to keep out the gods. When the Wild Hunt breaks through and shouts at us, we must be frightened, it’s the primitive fear of the dark. It’s part of us.”

She swept on, her cloak a scarlet wing flapping behind her. They took the elevator to the bridge.

Donovan had not watched the Black Nebula grow over the days, swell to a monstrous thing that blotted out half the sky, lightlessness fringed with the cold glory of the stars. Now that the ship was entering its tenuous outer fringes, the heavens on either side were blurring and dimming, and the blackness yawned before. Even the densest nebula is a hard vacuum; but tons upon incredible tons of cosmic dust and gas, reaching planetary and interstellar distances on every hand, will blot out the sky. It was like rushing into an endless, bottomless hole, the ship was falling and falling into the pit of Hell.

“I noticed you never looked bow-wards on the trip,” said Jansky. There was steel in her voice. “Why did you lock yourself in your cabin and drink like a sponge?”

“I was bored,” he replied sullenly.

“You were afraid!” she snapped contemptuously. “You didn’t dare watch the Nebula growing. Something happened the last time you were here which sucked the guts out of you.”

“Didn’t your Intelligence talk to the men who were with me?”

“Yes, of course. None of them would say more than you’ve said. They all wanted us to come here, but blind and unprepared. Well, Mister Donovan, we’re going in!”

The floorplates shook under Wocha’s tread. “You not talk to boss that way,” he rumbled.

“Let be, Wocha,” said Donovan. “It doesn’t matter how she talks.”

He looked ahead, and the old yearning came alive in him, the fear and the memory, but he had not thought that it would shiver with such a strange gladness.

And—who knew? A bargain—

Valduma, come back to me!

Jansky's gaze on him narrowed, but her voice was suddenly low and puzzled. "You're smiling," she whispered.

He turned from the viewscreen and his laugh was ragged. "Maybe I'm looking forward to this visit, Helena."

"My name," she said stiffly, "is Commander Jansky."

"Out there, maybe. But in here there is no rank, no Empire, no mission. We're all humans, frightened little humans huddling together against the dark." Donovan's smile softened. "You know, Helena, you have very beautiful eyes."

The slow flush crept up her high smooth cheeks. "I want a full report of what happened to you last time," she said. "Now. Or you go under the probe."

Wanderer, it is a long way home. Spaceman, spaceman, your sun is very far away.

"Why, certainly." Donovan leaned against the wall and grinned at her. "Glad to. Only you won't believe me."

She made no reply, but folded her arms and waited. The ship trembled with its forward thrust. Sweat beaded the forehead of the watch officer and he glared around him.

"We're entering the home of all lawlessness," said Donovan. "The realm of magic, the outlaw world of werebeasts and nightgangers. Can't you hear the wings outside? These ghosts are only the first sign. We'll have a plague of witches soon."

"Get out!" she said.

He shrugged. "All right, Helena. I told you you wouldn't believe me." He turned and walked slowly from the bridge.

Outside was starless, lightless, infinite black. The ship crept forward, straining her detectors, groping into the blind dark while her crew went mad.

Spaceman, it is too late. You will never find your way home again. You are dead men on a ghost ship, and you will fall forever into the Night.

“I saw him, Wong, I saw him down in Section Three, tall and thin and black. He laughed at me, and then there wasn’t anything there.”

Sound of great wings beating somewhere outside the hull.

Mother, can I have him? Can I have his skull to play with?

Not yet, child. Soon. Soon.

Wicked rain of laughter and the sound of clawed feet running.

No one went alone. Spacemen First Class Gottfried and Martinez went down a starboard companionway and saw the hooded black form waiting for them. Gottfried pulled out his blaster and fired. The ravaging beam sprang backward and consumed him. Martinez lay mumbling in psychobay.

The lights went out. After an hour they flickered back on again, but men had rioted and killed each other in the dark.

Commander Jansky recalled all personal weapons on the grounds that the crew could no longer be trusted with them. The men drew up a petition to get them back. When it was refused, there was muttering of revolt.

Spacemen, you have wandered too far. You have wandered beyond the edge of creation, and now there is only death.

The hours dragged into days. When the ship’s timepieces started disagreeing, time ceased to have meaning.

Basil Donovan sat in his cabin. There was a bottle in his hand, but he tried to go slow. He was waiting.

When the knock came, he leaped from his seat and every nerve tightened up and screamed. He swore at himself. They wouldn’t knock when they came for him. “Go on, enter—” His voice wavered.

Helena Jansky stepped inside, closing the door after her. She had thinned, and there was darkness in her eyes, but she still bore herself erect. Donovan had to salute the stubborn courage that was in her. The unimaginative peasant blood—no, it was more than that, she was as intelligent as he, but there was a deep strength in that tall form, a quiet vitality which had perhaps been bred out of the Families of Ansa. “Sit down,” he invited.

She sighed and ran a hand through her dark hair. “Thanks.”

“Drink?”

“No. Not on duty.”

“And the captain is always on duty. Well, let it go.” Donovan lowered himself to the bunk beside her, resting his feet on Wocha’s columnar leg.

The Donarrian muttered and whimpered in his sleep. “What can I do for you?”

Her gaze was steady and grave. “You can tell me the truth.”

“About the Nebula? Why should I? Give me one good reason why an Ansan should care what happens to a Solarian ship.”

“Perhaps only that we’re all human beings here, that those boys have earth and rain and sunlight and wives waiting for them.”

And Valduma—no, she isn’t human. Fire and ice and storming madness, but not human. Too beautiful to be flesh.

“This trip was your idea,” he said defensively.

“Donovan, you wouldn’t have played such a foul trick and made such a weak, self-righteous excuse in the old days.”

He looked away, feeling his cheeks hot. “Well,” he mumbled, “why not turn around, get out of the Nebula if you can, and maybe come back later with a task force?”

“And lead them all into this trap? Our subtronics are out, you know. We can’t send information back, so we’ll just go on and learn a little more and then try to fight our way home.”

His smile was crooked. “I may have been baiting you, Helena. But if I told you everything I know, it wouldn’t help. There isn’t enough.”

Her hand fell strong and urgent on his. “Tell me, then! Tell me anyway.”

“But there is so little. There’s a planet somewhere in the Nebula, and it has inhabitants with powers I don’t begin to understand. But among other things, they can project themselves hyperwise, just like a spaceship, without needing engines to do it. And they have a certain control over matter and energy.”

“The fringe stars—these beings in the Nebula really have been their ‘gods’?”

“Yes. They’ve projected themselves, terrorized the natives for centuries, and carry home the sacrificial materials for their own use. They’re doubtless responsible for all the ships around here that never came home. They don’t like visitors.” Donovan saw her smile, and his own lips twitched. “But they did, I suppose, take some prisoners, to learn our language and anything else they could about us.”

She nodded. “I’d conjectured as much. If you don’t accept theories involving the supernatural, and I don’t, it follows almost necessarily. If a few of them projected themselves aboard and hid somewhere, they could

manipulate air molecules from a distance so as to produce the whisperings—” She smiled afresh, but the hollowness was still in her. “When you call it a new sort of ventriloquism, it doesn’t sound nearly so bad, does it?”

Fiercely, the woman turned on him. “And what have you had to do with them? How are you so sure?”

“I—talked with one of them,” he replied slowly. “You might say we struck up a friendship of sorts. But I learned nothing, and the only benefit I got was escaping. I’ve no useful information.” His voice sharpened. “And that’s all I have to say.”

“Well, we’re going on!” Her head lifted pridefully.

Donovan’s smile was a crooked grimace. He took her hand, and it lay unresisting between his fingers. “Helena,” he said, “you’ve been trying to psychoanalyze me this whole trip. Maybe it’s my turn now. You’re not so hard as you tell yourself.”

“I am an officer of the Imperial Navy.” Her haughtiness didn’t quite come off.

“Sure, sure. A hard-shelled career girl. Only you’re also a healthy human being. Down underneath, you want a home and kids and quiet green hills. Don’t lie to yourself, that wouldn’t be fitting to the Lady Jansky of Torgandale, would it? You went into service because it was the thing to do. And you’re just a scared kid, my dear.” Donovan shook his head. “But a very nice-looking kid.”

Tears glimmered on her lashes. “Stop it,” she whispered desperately. “Don’t say it.”

He kissed her, a long slow kiss with her mouth trembling under his and her body shivering ever so faintly. The second time she responded, shy as a child, hardly aware of the sudden hunger.

She pulled free then, sat with eyes wide and wild, one hand lifted to her mouth. “No,” she said, so quietly he could scarce hear. “No, not now—”

Suddenly she got up and almost fled. Donovan sighed.

Why did I do that? To stop her inquiring too closely? Or just because she’s honest and human, and Valduma isn’t? Or—

Darkness swirled before his eyes. Wocha came awake and shrank against the farther wall, terror rattling in his throat. "Boss—boss, she's here again—"

Donovan sat unstirring, elbows on knees, hands hanging empty, and looked at the two who had come. "Hello, Valduma," he said.

"Basil—" Her voice sang against him, rippling, lilting, the unending sharp laughter beneath its surprise. "Basil, you have come back."

"Uh-huh." He nodded at the other. "You're Morzach, aren't you? Sit down. Have a drink. Old home week."

The creature from Arzun remained erect. He looked human on the outside, tall and gaunt in a black cape which glistened with tiny points of starlight, the hood thrown back so that his red hair fell free to his shoulders. The face was long and thin, chiseled to an ultimate refinement of classical beauty, white and cold. Cold as space-tempered steel, in spite of the smile on the pale lips, in spite of the dark mirth in the slant green eyes. One hand rested on the jeweled hilt of a sword.

Valduma stood beside Morzach for an instant, and Donovan watched her with the old sick wildness rising and clamoring in him.

You are the fairest thing which ever was between the stars, you are ice and flame and living fury, stronger and weaker than man, cruel and sweet as a child a thousand years old, and I love you. But you are not human, Valduma.

She was tall, and her grace was a lithe rippling flow, wind and fire and music made flesh, a burning glory of hair rushing past her black-caped shoulders, hands slim and beautiful, the strange clean-molded face white as polished ivory, the mouth red and laughing, the eyes long and oblique and gold-flecked green. When she spoke, it was like singing in Heaven and laughter in Hell. Donovan looked at her, not moving.

"Basil, you came back to me?"

"He came because he had to." Morzach of Arzun folded his arms, eyes smoldering in anger. "Best we kill him now."

"Later, perhaps later, but not now." Valduma laughed aloud.

Suddenly she was in Donovan's arms. Her kisses were a rain of fire. There was thunder and darkness and dancing stars. He was aware of nothing else, not for a long, long time.

She leaned back in his grasp, smiling up at him, stroking his hair with one slender hand.

His cheek was bloody where she had scratched him. He looked back into her eyes—they were cat's eyes, split-pupiled, all gold and emerald without the human white. She laughed very softly. "Shall I kill you now?" she whispered. "Or drive you mad first? Or let you go again? What would be most amusing, Basil?"

"This is no time for your pranks," said Morzach sharply. "We have to deal with this ship. It's getting dangerously close to Arzun, and we've been unable yet to break the morale and discipline of the crew. I think the only way is to wreck the ship."

"Wreck it on Arzun, yes!" Valduma's laughter pulsed and throbbed. "Bring them to their goal. Help them along, even. Oh, yes, Morzach, it is a good thought!"

"We'll need your help," said the creature-man to Donovan. "I take it that you're guiding them. You must encourage them to offer no resistance when we take over the controls. Our powers won't stand too long against atomic energy."

"Why should I help you?" Donovan's tones were hoarse. "What can you give me?"

"If you live," said Valduma, "and can make your way to Drogobych, I might give you much." She laughed again, maniac laughter which did not lose its music. "That would be diverting!"

"I don't know," he groaned. "I don't know—I thought a bargain could be made, but now I wonder."

"I leave him to you," said Morzach sardonically, and vanished.

"Basil," whispered Valduma. "Basil, I have—sometimes—missed you."

"Get out, Wocha," said Donovan.

"Boss—she's *toombar*—"

"Get out!"

Wocha lumbered slowly from the cabin. There were tears in his eyes.

IV

The *Ganymede*'s engines rose to full power and the pilot controls spun over without a hand on them.

"Engine room! Engine room! Stop that nonsense down there!"

"We can't—they're frozen—the converter has gone into full without us—"

"Sir, I can't budge this stick. It's locked somehow."

The lights went out. Men screamed.

"Get me a flashlight!" snapped Takahashi in the dark. "I'll take this damned panel apart myself."

The beam etched his features against night. "Who goes?" he cried.

"It's I." Jansky appeared in the dim reflected glow. "Never mind, Takahashi. Let the ship have her way."

"But ma'm, we could crash—"

"I've finally gotten Donovan to talk. He says we're in the grip of some kind of power-beam. They'll pull us to one of their space stations and then maybe we can negotiate—or fight. Come on, we've got to quiet the men."

The flashlight went out. Takahashi's laugh was shrill. "Better quiet me first, Captain."

Her hand was on his arm, steadying, strengthening. "Don't fail me, Tetsuo. You're the last one I've got. I just had to paralyze Scoresby."

"Thanks—thanks, chief. I'm all right now. Let's go."

They fumbled through blindness. The engines roared, full speed ahead with a ghost on the bridge. Men were stumbling and cursing and screaming in the dark. Someone switched on the battle-stations siren, and its howl was the last voice of insanity.

Struggle in the dark, wrestling, paralyzing the berserk, calling on all the iron will which had lifted humankind to the stars—slow restoration of order, men creeping to general quarters, breathing heavily in the guttering light of paper torches.

The engines cut off and the ship snapped into normal matter state. Helena Jansky saw blood-red sunlight through the viewport. There was no time to sound the alarm before the ship crashed.

"A hundred men. No more than a hundred men alive."

She wrapped her cloak tight about her against the wind and stood looking across the camp. The streaming firelight touched her face with red, limning it against the utter dark of the night heavens, sheening faintly in the hair that blew wildly around her strong bitter countenance. Beyond, other fires danced and flickered in the gloom, men huddled around them while the cold seeped slowly to their bones. Here and there an injured human moaned.

Across the ragged spine of bare black hills they could still see the molten glow of the wreck. When it hit, the atomic converters had run wild and begun devouring the hull. There had barely been time for the survivors to drag themselves and some of the cripples free, and to put the rocky barrier between them and the mounting radioactivity. During the slow red sunset, they had gathered wood, hewing with knives at the distorted scrub trees reaching above the shale and snow of the valley. Now they sat waiting out the night.

Takahashi shuddered. "God, it's cold!"

"It'll get colder," said Donovan tonelessly. "This is an old planet of an old red dwarf sun. Its rotation has slowed. The nights are long."

"How do you know?" Lieutenant Elijah Cohen glared at him out of a crudely bandaged face. The firelight made his eyes gleam red. "How do you know unless you're in with them? Unless you arranged this yourself?"

Wocha reached forth a massive fist. "You shut up," he rumbled.

"Never mind," said Donovan. "I just thought some things would be obvious. You saw the star, so you should know it's the type of a burned-out dwarf. Since planets are formed at an early stage of a star's evolution, this world must be old too. Look at these rocks—citrified, back when the stellar energy output got really high just before the final collapse; and nevertheless eroded down to bare snags. That takes millions of years."

He reflected that his reasoning, while sound enough, was based on foreknown conclusions. *Cohen's right. I have betrayed them. It was Valduma, watching over me, who brought Wocha and myself unhurt through the crash. I saw, Valduma, I saw you with your hair flying in the chaos, riding witch-like through sundering ruin, and you were laughing. Laughing!* He felt ill.

"Nevertheless, the planet has a thin but breathable atmosphere, frozen water, and vegetable life," said Takahashi. "Such things don't survive the final hot stage of a sun without artificial help. This planet has natives. Since we were deliberately crashed here, I daresay the natives are our earlier

friends.” He turned dark accusing eyes on the Ansan. “How about it, Donovan?”

“I suppose you’re right,” he answered. “I knew there was a planet in the Nebula, the natives had told me that in my previous trip. This star lies near the center, in a ‘hollow’ region where there isn’t enough dust to force the planet into its primary, and shares a common velocity with the Nebula. It stays here, in other words.”

“You told me—” Helena Jansky bit her lip, then slowly forced the words out: “You told me, and I believed you, that there was nothing immediately to fear when the Nebulites took over our controls. So we didn’t fight them; we didn’t try to overcome their forces with our own engines. And it cost us the ship and over half her crew.”

“I told you what happened to me last time,” he lied steadfastly. “I can’t help it if things were different this trip.”

She turned her back. The wind blew a thin hissing veil of dry snow across her ankles. A wounded man suddenly screamed out there in the dark.

How does it feel, Donovan? You made her trust you and then betrayed her for a thing that isn’t even human. How does it feel to be a Judas?

“Never mind recriminations,” said Takahashi. “This isn’t the time to hold trials. We’ve got to decide what to do.”

“They have a city on this planet,” said Donovan. “Drogobych, they call it, and the planet’s name is Arzun. It lies somewhere near the equator, they told me once. If they meant us to make our own way to it—and it would be like them—then it may well lie due south. We can march that way, assuming that the sun set in the west.”

“Nothing to lose,” shrugged the Terran. “But we haven’t many weapons, a few assorted sidearms is all, and they aren’t much use against these creatures anyway.”

Something howled out in the darkness. The ground quivered, ever so faintly, to the pounding of heavy feet.

“Wild animals yet!” Cohen grinned humorlessly. “Better sound battle stations, Captain.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose so.” She blew her whistle, a thin shrilling in the windy dark. As she turned around, Donovan saw a gleam running along her

cheek. Tears?

The noise came closer. They heard the rattle of claws on stone. The Terrans moved together, guns in front, clubs and rocks and bare hands behind. They have guts, thought Donovan. God, but they have guts!

“Food would be scarce on a barren planet like this,” said Ensign Chundra Dass. “We seem to be elected.”

The hollow roar sounded, echoing between the hills and caught up by the thin harrying wind. “Hold fire,” said Helena. Her voice was clear and steady. “Don’t waste charges. Wait—”

The thing leaped out of darkness, a ten-meter length of gaunt scaled body and steel-hard claws and whipping tail, soaring through the snow-streaked air and caught in the vague uneasy firelight. Helena’s blaster crashed, a lightning bolt sizzled against the armored head.

The monster screamed. Its body tumbled shatteringly among the humans, it seized a man in its jaws and shook him and trampled another underfoot. Takahashi stepped forward and shot again at its dripping wound. The blaster bolt zigzagged wildly off the muzzle of his gun.

Even the animals can do it—!

“I’ll get him, boss!” Wocha reared on his hind legs, came down again with a thud, and charged. Stones flew from beneath his feet. The monster’s tail swept out, a man tumbled before it with his ribs caved in, and Wocha staggered as he caught the blow. Still he rushed in, clutching the barbed end of the tail to his breast. The monster writhed, bellowing. Another blaster bolt hit it from the rear. It turned, and a shot at its eyes veered away.

Wocha hit it with all the furious momentum he had. He rammed its spear-like tail down the open jaws and blood spurted. “Ho, Donovan!” he shouted. As the thing screamed and snapped at him, he caught its jaws in his hands.

“Wocha!” yelled Donovan. “Wocha!” He ran wildly toward the fight.

The Donarrian’s great back arched with strain. It was as if they could hear his muscles crack. Slowly, slowly, he forced the jaws wider. The monster lashed its body, pulling him to his knees, dragging him over the ground, and still he fought.

“Damn you,” he roared in the whirling dust and snow, “hold still!”

The jaws broke. And the monster screamed once more, and then it wasn’t there. Wocha tumbled over.

Donovan fell across him, sobbing, laughing, cursing. Wocha picked him up. "You all right, boss?" he asked. "You well?"

"Yes—yes—oh, you blind bloody fool! You stupid, blundering ass!" Donovan hugged him.

"Gone," said Helena. "It vanished."

They picked up their dead and wounded and returned to the fires. The cold bit deep. Something else hooted out in the night.

It was a long time before Takahashi spoke. "You might expect it," he said. "These parapsychical powers don't come from nowhere. The intelligent race, our enemies of Drogobych, simply have them highly developed; the animals do to a lesser extent. I think it's a matter of life being linked to the primary atomic probabilities, the psi functions which give the continuous-field distribution of matter-energy in space-time. In a word, control of external matter and energy by conscious will acting through the unified field which is space-time. Telekinesis."

"Uh-huh," said Dass wearily. "Even some humans have a slight para power. Control dice or electron beams or what have you. But why aren't the—what did you call them?—Arzunians overrunning the Galaxy?"

"They can only operate over a certain range, which happens to be about the distance to the fringe stars," said Donovan. "Beyond that distance, dispersion limits them, plus the fact that differences of potential energy must be made up from their own metabolism. The animals, of course, have very limited range, a few kilometers perhaps. The Arzunians use telekinesis to control matter and energy, and the same subspatial principles as our ships to go faster than light. Only since they aren't lugging around a lot of hull and passengers and assorted machinery—just themselves and a little air and maybe an armful of sacrificial goods from a fringe planet. They don't need atomic engines.

"They aren't interested in conquering the Galaxy. Why should they be? They can get all their needs and luxuries from the peoples to whom they are gods. An old race, very old, decadent if you will. But they don't like interference."

Takahashi looked at him sharply. "I glimpsed one of them on the ship," he said. "He carried a spear."

"Yeah. Another reason why they aren't conquerors. They have no sense for mechanics at all. Never had any reason to evolve one when they could manipulate matter directly without more than the simplest tools. They're

probably more intelligent than humans in an all-around way, but they don't have the type of brain and the concentration needed to learn physics and chemistry. Aren't interested, either."

"So, swords against guns—We may have a chance!"

"They can turn your missiles, remember. Guns are little use, you have to distract them so they don't notice your shot till too late. But they can't control you. They aren't telepaths and their type of matter-control is heterodyned by living nerve currents. You could kill one of them with a sword where a gun would most likely kill you."

"I—see—" Helena looked strangely at him. "You're becoming very vocal all of a sudden."

Donovan rubbed his eyes and shivered in the cold. "What of it? You wanted the truth. You're getting it."

Why am I telling them? Why am I not just leading them to the slaughter as Valduma wanted? Is it that I can't stand the thought of Helena being hunted like a beast?

Whose side am I on? he thought wildly.

Takahashi gestured and his voice came eager. "That's it. That's it! The ship scattered assorted metal and plastic over twenty hectares as she fell. Safe for us to gather up tomorrow. We can use our blaster flames to shape weapons. Swords, axes, spears. By the Galaxy, we'll arm ourselves and then we'll march on Drogobych!"

V

It was a strange little army, thought Donovan, as strange as any the Galaxy had ever seen.

He looked back. The old ruined highway went down a narrow valley between sheer cliffs of eroded black stone reaching up toward the deep purplish heaven. The sun was wheeling westerly, a dull red ember throwing light like clotted blood on the dreariness of rock and ice and gaunt gray trees; a few snowflakes, borne on a thin chill wind, drifted across the path

of march. A lonely bird, cruel-beaked and watchful, hovered on great black wings far overhead, waiting for them to die.

The men of the Imperial Solar Navy walked close together. They were haggard and dirty and bearded, clad in such ragged articles as they had been able to salvage, armed with the crudely forged weapons of a vanished age, carrying their sick and wounded on rude litters. Ghost world, ghost army, marching through an echoing windy solitude to its unknown weird—but men's faces were still brave, and one of them was singing. The sunburst banner of the Empire flapped above them, the one splash of color in the great murky landscape.

Luck had been with them, of a sort. Game animals had appeared in more abundance than one would have thought the region could support, deer-like things which they shot for meat to supplement their iron rations. They had stumbled on the old highway and followed its arrow-straight course southward. Many days and many tumbled hollow ruins of great cities lay behind them, and still they trudged on.

Luck? wondered Donovan. *I think it was intentional. I think the Arzunians want us to reach Drogobych.*

He heard the scrape of boots on the slanting hillside behind him, and turned around to face Helena. He stopped and smiled. There had been a slow unspoken intimacy growing between them as they worked and struggled together. Not many words, but the eyes of each would often stray to the other, and a hand would brush over a hand as if by accident. Tired and hungry and road-stained, cap set askew on tangled hair, skin reddened by wind and blued with cold, she was still good to look on.

"Why are you walking so far from the road?" she asked.

"Oh serving as outrider, maybe," he said, resuming his stride. She fell into step beside him. "Up here you get a wider view."

"Do you think we have much further to go, Basil?"

He shrugged.

"We'd never have come this far without you," she said, looking down at her scuffed boots. "You and Wocha and Takahashi."

"Maybe the Empire will send a rescue mission when we don't come back," he suggested.

"No doubt they will. But they can't find one little star in this immensity. Even thermocouples won't help, the Nebula diffuses radiation too much.

And they'd be blundering into the same trap as we." Helena looked up. "No, Basil, we've got to fight our way clear alone."

There was a long stretch of thicket growing on the hillside. Donovan went along the right of it, cutting off view of the army. "You know," he said, "you and those boys down there make me feel a lot kinder toward the Empire."

"Thank you. Thank you. We—" She took his arm. "It's a question of unifying the human race, ultimately this whole region of stars, and—*Oh!*"

The beasts were suddenly there in front of them, lean black things which snarled with mouths of hunger. One of them circled toward the humans' flank, the other crouched. Donovan yanked his sword clear.

"Get behind me," he snapped, turning to face the approaching hunter.

"No—back to back—" Helena's own blade rasped from its sheath. She lifted a shout for help.

The nearest animal sprang for her throat. She hacked wildly, the blade twisted in her hand and scraped the muzzled face. Jaws clamped on the edged steel and let go with a bloody howl. Donovan swung at the other beast, the blow shuddered home and it screamed and writhed and snapped at his ankles.

Whirling, he turned on the thing which had launched itself at Helena. He hewed, and the animal wasn't there, his blade rang on naked stone. A weight crashed against his back, he went down and the teeth clamped on his shoulder.

Helena swung. The carnivore raised its head to snarl at her, and she gripped the sword in both hands and stabbed. It threshed wildly, dying, spewing blood over the hillside. The other wounded creature disappeared.

Helena bent over Donovan, held him close, her eyes wild. "Are you hurt? Basil. Oh Basil, are you hurt?"

"No," he muttered. "The teeth didn't have time to work through this heavy jacket." He pulled her head down against his.

"Basil, Basil!"

He rose, still holding her to him. Her arms locked about his neck, and there were tears and laughter in her voice. "Oh, Basil, my darling."

"Helena," he murmured. "I love you, Helena."

"When we get home—I'm due for furlough, I'll retire instead—your house on Ansa—Oh, Basil, I never thought I could be so glad!"

The massive thunder of feet brought them apart. Wocha burst around the thicket, swinging his giant ax in both hands. "Are you all right, boss?" he roared.

"Yes, yes, we're all right. A couple of those damned wolf-like things which've been plaguing us the whole march. Go on back, Wocha, we'll join you soon."

The Donarrian's ape-face split in a vast grin. "So you take a female, boss?" he cried. "Good, good, we need lots of little Donovans at home!"

"Get on back, you old busybody, and keep that gossiping mouth shut!"

Hours later, Helena returned to the army where it was making camp. Donovan stayed where he was, looking down at the men where they moved about gathering wood and digging fire-pits. The blazes were a note of cheer in the thickening murk.

Helena, he thought. Helena. She's a fine girl, wonderful girl, she's what the thinning Family blood and I, myself, need. But why did I do it? Why did I talk that way to her? Just then, in the strain and fear and loneliness, it seemed as if I cared. But I don't. She's just another woman. She's not Valduma.

The Twilight murmured, and he saw the dim sheen of metal beside him. The men of Drogobych were gathering.

They stood tall and godlike in helmet and ring-mail and night-black cloaks, leaning on swords and spears, death-white faces cold with an ancient scorn as they looked down on the human camp. Their eyes were phosphorescent green in the dark.

Donovan nodded, without fear or surprise or anything but a sudden great weariness. He remembered some of them from the days when he had been alone in the bows of the ship with the invaders while his men cowered and rioted and went crazy in the stern sectors. "Hello, Morzach, Uboda, Zegoian, Korstuzan, Davleka," he said. "Welcome back again."

Valduma walked out of the blood-hued twilight, and he took her in his arms and held her for a long fierce time. Her kiss was as cruel as a swooping hawk. She bit his lips and he tasted blood warm and salt where she had been. Afterward she turned in the circle of his arm and they faced the silent men of Drogobych.

“You are getting near the city,” said Morzach. His tones were deep, with the chill ringing of struck steel in them. “It is time for the next stage.”

“I thought you saved some of us deliberately,” said Donovan.

“*Us?*” Valduma’s lips caressed his cheek. “Them, Basil, them. You don’t belong there, you are with Arzun and me.”

“You must have projected that game where we could spot it,” went on Donovan, shakily. “You’ve kept us—them—alive and enabled us to march on your city—on the last inhabited city left to your race. You could have hunted them down as you did all the others, made sport of them with wild animals and falling rocks and missiles shooting out of nowhere, but instead you want them for something else. What is it?”

“You should have guessed,” said Morzach. “We want to leave Arzun.”

“Leave it? You can do so any time, by yourselves. You’ve done it for millennia.”

“We can only go to the barbarian fringe stars. Beyond them it is a greater distance to the next suns than we can cross unaided. Yet though we have captured many spaceships and have them intact at Drogobych, we cannot operate them. The principles learned from the humans don’t make sense! When we have tried to pilot them, it has only brought disaster.”

“But why do you want to leave?”

“It is a recent decision, precipitated by your arrival, but it has been considered for a long while. This sun is old, this planet exhausted, and the lives of we few remnants of a great race flicker in a hideous circumscribed drabness. Sooner or later, the humans will fight their way here in strength too great for us. Before then we must be gone.”

“So—” Donovan spoke softly, and the wind whimpered under his voice. “So your plan is to capture this group of spacemen and make them your slaves, to carry you—where?”

“Out. Away.” Valduma’s clear lovely laughter rang in the night. “To seize another planet and build our strength afresh.” She gripped his waist and he saw the white gleam of her teeth out of shadow. “To build a great army of obedient spacegoing warriors—and then out to hunt between the stars!”

“Hunt—”

“Look here.” Morzach edged closer, his eyes a green glow, the vague sheen of naked steel in his hand. “I’ve been polite long enough. You have your chance, to rise above the human scum that spawned you and be one of

us. Help us now and you can be with us till you die. Otherwise, we'll take that crew anyway, and you'll be hounded across the face of this planet."

"Aye—aye—welcome back, Basil Donovan, welcome back to the old king-race. ... Come with us, come with us, lead the humans into our ambush and be the lord of stars. ..."

They circled about him, tall and mailed and beautiful in the shadow-light, luring whispering voices, ripple of dark laughter, the hunters playing with their quarry and taming it. Donovan remembered them, remembered the days when he had talked and smiled and drunk and sung with them, the Lucifer-like intoxication of their dancing darting minds, a wildness of magic and mystery and reckless wizard sport, a glory which had taken something from his soul and left an emptiness within him. Morzach, Marovech, Uboda, Zegoian, for a time he had been the consort of the gods.

"Basil." Valduma laid sharp-nailed fingers in his hair and pulled his lips to hers. "Basil, I want you back."

He held her close, feeling the lithe savage strength of her, recalling the flame-like beauty and the nights of love such as no human could ever give. His whisper was thick: "You got bored last time and sent me back. How long will I last now?"

"As long as you wish, Basil. Forever and forever." He knew she lied, and he didn't care.

"This is what you must do, Donovan," said Morzach.

He listened with half his mind. It was a question of guiding the army into a narrow cul-de-sac where the Arzunians could perform the delicate short-range work of causing chains to bind around them. For the rest, he was thinking.

They hunt. They intrigue, and they whittle down their last few remnants with fighting among themselves, and they prey on the fringe stars, and they capture living humans to hunt down for sport. They haven't done anything new for ten thousand years, creativeness has withered from them, and all they will do if they escape the Nebula is carry ruin between the stars. They're mad.

Yes—a whole society of psychopaths, gone crazy with the long racial dying. That's the real reason they can't handle machines, that's why they don't think of friendship but only of war, that's why they carry doom within them.

But I love you, I love you, I love you, O Valduma the fair.

He drew her to him, kissed her with a terrible intensity, and she laughed in the dark. Looking up, he faced the blaze that was Morzach.

“All right,” he said. “I understand. Tomorrow.”

“Aye—good, good, well done!”

“Oh, Basil, Basil!” whispered Valduma. “Come, come away with me, now.”

“No. They’d suspect. I have to go down to them or they’ll come looking for me.”

“Good night, Basil, my darling, my *vorza*. Until tomorrow!”

He went slowly down the hillside, drawing his shoulders together against the cold, not looking back. Helena rose when he approached her campfire, and the flimmering light made her seem pale and unreal.

“Where have you been, Basil? You look so tired.”

“Just walking around. I’m all right.” He spread his couch of stiff and stinking animal hides. “We’d better turn in, eh?”

But he slept little.

VI

The Highway curved between great looming walls of cragged old rock, a shadow tunnel with the wind yowling far overhead and the sun a disc of blood. Men’s footfalls echoed from the cracked paving blocks to boom hollowly off time-gnawed cliffs and ring faintly in the ice. It was cold, their breath smoked from them and they shivered and cursed and stamped their feet.

Donovan walked beside Helena, who was riding Wocha. His eyes narrowed against the searching wind, looking ahead and around, looking for the side track where the ambush waited. Drogobych was very near.

Something moved up on the ridge, a flapping black thing which was instantly lost to sight. The Arzunians were watching.

There—up ahead—the solitary tree they had spoken of, growing out between age-crumbled fragments of the road. The highway swung west around a pinnacle of rock, but here there was a branch road running straight

south into a narrow ravine. *All I have to do is suggest we take it. They won't know till too late that it leads up a blind canyon.*

Helena leaned over toward him, so that the long wind-whipped hair blew against his cheek. "Which way should we go?" she asked. One hand rested on his shoulder.

He didn't slacken his stride, but his voice was low under the whine of bitter air: "To the right, Helena, and on the double. The Arzunians are waiting up the other road, but Drogobych is just beyond that crag."

"Basil! How do you know—"

Wocha's long hairy ears cocked attentively, and the little eyes under the heavy bone ridges were suddenly sharp on his master.

"They wanted me to mislead you. I didn't say anything before for fear they'd be listening, somehow."

Because I hadn't decided, he thought grayly. Because Valduma is mad, and I love her.

Helena turned and lifted her arm, voice ringing out to rattle in jeering echoes: "Column right! Forward—charge!"

Wocha broke into a trot, the ground booming and shivering under his huge feet. Donovan paced beside, drawing his sword and swinging it naked in one hand, his eyes turned to the canyon and the rocks above it. The humans fell into a jogging run.

They swept past the ambush road, and suddenly Valduma was on the ridge above them, tall and slim and beautiful, the hair like a blowing flame under her helmet. "Basil!" she screamed. "Basil, you triple traitor—"

The others were there with her, men of Drogobych standing on the heights and howling their fury. They had chains in their hands, and suddenly the air was thick with flying links.

One of them smashed against Donovan and curled itself snakelike around his waist. He dropped his sword and tugged at the cold iron, feeling the breath strained out of him, cursing with the pain of it. Wocha reached down a hand and peeled the chain off, snapping it in two and hurling it back at the Arzunians. It whipped in the air, lashing itself across his face, and he bellowed.

The men of Sol were weltering in a fight with the flying chains, beating them off, stamping the writhing lengths underfoot, yelling as the things cracked against their heads. "Forward!" cried Helena. "Charge—get out of here—forward, Empire!"

A chain whistled viciously for her face. She struck at it with her sword, tangling it on the blade, metal clashing on metal. Takahashi had his blaster out, its few remaining charges thundering to fuse the missiles. Other flames roared at the Arzunians, driving them back, forcing them to drop control of the chains to defend their lives.

“Run! Forward!”

The column shouted and plunged down the highway. Valduma was suddenly before them, her face distorted in fury, stabbing a spear at Donovan’s breast. The man parried the thrust and hewed at her—she was gone, and the Terrans rushed ahead.

The rocks groaned. Donovan saw them shuddering above him, saw the first hail of gravel and heard the huge grinding of strata. “They’re trying to bury us!” he yelled. “We’ve got to get clear!”

Wocha stooped, snatched him up under one arm, and galloped. A boulder whizzed by his head, smashing against the farther wall and spraying him with hot chips of stone. Now the boom of the landslide filled their world, rolling and roaring between the high cliffs. Cracks zigzagged across the worn black heights, the crags shivered and toppled, dust boiled across the road.

“Basil!”

Donovan saw Valduma again, dancing and leaping between the boulders, raising a scream of wrath and laughter. Morzach was there, standing on a jut of rock, watching the hillside fall.

Wocha burst around the sentinel peak. A line of Arzunians stood barring the way to Drogobych, the sunlight flaming off their metal. Wocha dropped Donovan, hefted his ax in both hands, and charged them.

Donovan picked himself up and scrambled in the wake of his slave. Behind him, the Terrans were streaming from the collapsing dale, out over open ground to strike the enemy. The rocks bounded and howled, a man screamed as he was pinned, there were a dozen buried under the landslide.

Wocha hit the Arzunian line. His ax blazed, shearing off an arm, whirling up again to crumple a helmet and cleave the skull beneath. Rearing, he knocked down two of them and trampled them underfoot. A warrior smote at his flank. Helena, gripping one mighty shoulder, engaged him with her free hand, her blade whistling around his ears. They fell away from that pair, and the Terrans attacked them.

Donovan crossed swords with one he knew—Marovech, the laughing half-devil whose words he had so much enjoyed in earlier days. The Arzunian grinned at him across a web of flying steel. His blade stabbed in, past the Ansan's awkward guard, reaching for his guts. Donovan retreated, abandoning the science he didn't know for a wild whirling and hacking, his iron battering at the bright weapon before him. Clash and clang of edged metal, leaping and dancing, Marovech's red hair wild in the rising wind and his eyes alight with laughter.

Donovan felt his backward step halted, he was against the high stone pillar and could not run. He braced his feet and hewed out, a scream of cloven air and outraged steel. Marovech's sword went spinning from his hand.

It hit the ground and bounced up toward the Arzunian's clutch. Donovan smote again, and the shock of iron in flesh jarred him where he stood. Marovech fell in a rush of blood.

For an instant Donovan stood swaying over the Arzunian, looking stupidly at the blood on his own hands, hearing the clamor of his heartbeat and sucking a dry gasp into his lungs. Then he picked up the fallen being's glaive. It was a better weapon.

Turning, he saw that the fight had become a riot, knots of men and un-men snarling and hacking in a craziness of death. No room or time here for wizard stunts, it was blood and bone and nerve against its kind. The Terrans fought without much skill in the use of their archaic equipment but they had the cold courage blended of training and desperation. And they knew better how to cooperate. They battled a way to each other and stood back to back against all comers.

Wocha raged and trampled, smashing with ax and fist and feet and hurled stones, his war-cry bellowing and shuddering in the hills. An Arzunian vanished from in front of him and appeared behind with spear poised. The Donarrian suddenly backed up, catching the assailant and smashing him under his hind feet while he dueled another from the front. Helena's arm never rested, she swung to right and left, guarding his flanks yelling as her blade drove home.

Donovan shook himself and trotted warily over to where a tide of Arzunians raged about a closely-drawn ring of Impies. The humans were standing firm, driving each charge back in a rush of blood, heaping the dead before them. But now spears were beginning to fall out of the sky, driven by

no hand but stabbing for the throats and eyes and bellies of men. Donovan loped for the sharp edge of the hills, where they toppled to the open country in which the fight went on.

He scrambled up a rubbled slope and gripped a thin pinnacle to swing himself higher. She was there.

She stood on a ledge, the heap of spears at her feet, looking down over the battle and chanting as she sent forth the flying death. He noticed even then how her hair was a red glory about the fine white loveliness of her head.

“Valduma,” he whispered, as he struck at her.

She was not there, she sat on a higher ledge and jeered at him. “Come and get me, Basil, darling, darling. Come up here and talk to me!”

He looked at her as Lucifer must have looked back to Heaven. “Let us go,” he said. “Give us a ship and send us home.”

“And have you bring our overlords back in?” She laughed aloud.

“They aren’t so bad, Valduma. The Empire means peace and justice for all races.”

“Who speaks?” Her scorn flamed at him. “You don’t believe that.”

He stood there for a moment. “No,” he whispered. “No, I don’t.”

Stooping, he picked up the sheaf of spears and began to crawl back down the rocks. Valduma cursed him from the heights.

There was a break in the combat around the hard-pressed Terran ring as the Arzunians drew back to pant and glare. Donovan ran through and flung his load clashing at the feet of Takahashi.

“Good work,” said the officer. “We need these things. Here, get into the formation. Here we go again!”

The Arzunians charged in a wedge to gather momentum. Donovan braced himself and lifted his sword. The Terrans in the inner ring slanted their spears between the men of the outer defense. For a very long half minute, they stood waiting.

The enemy hit! Donovan hewed at the nearest, drove the probing sword back and hammered against the guard. Then the whirl of battle swept his antagonist away, someone else was there, he traded blows and the howl of men and metal lifted skyward.

The Terrans had staggered a little from the massive assault, but it spitted itself on the inner pikes and then swords and axes went to work. Ha, clang, through the skull and give it to ’em! Hai, Empire! Ansa, Ansa! Clatter and

yell and deep-throated roar, the Arzunians boiling around the Solar line, leaping and howling and whipping out of sight—a habit which saved their lives but blunted their attack, thought Donovan in a moment's pause.

Wocha smashed the last few who had been standing before him, looked around to the major struggle, and pawed the ground. "Ready, lady?" he rumbled.

"Aye, ready, Wocha. Let's go!"

The Donarrian backed up to get a long running space. "Hang on tight," he warned. "Never mind fighting, lady. All right!"

He broke into a trot, a canter, and then a full gallop. The earth trembled under his mass. "Hoooo!" he screamed. "Here we come!"

Helena threw both arms around his corded neck. When they hit it was like a nuclear bomb going off.

In a few seconds of murder, Wocha had strewn the ground with smashed corpses, whirled, and begun cutting his way into the disordered main group of the Arzunians. They didn't stand before him. Suddenly they were gone, all of them, except for the dead.

Donovan looked over the field. The dead were thick, thick. He estimated that half the little Terran force was slain or out of action. But they must have taken three or four times their number of Arzunians to the Black Planet with them. The stony ground was pooled and steaming with blood. Carrion birds stooped low, screaming.

Helena fell from Wocha's back into Donovan's arms. He comforted her wild sobbing, holding her to him and murmuring in her ear and kissing the wet cheeks and lips. "It's over, dear, it's over for now. We drove them away."

She recovered herself in a while and stood up, straightening her torn disarray, the mask of command clamping back over her face. To Takahashi: "How are our casualties?"

He reported. It was much as Donovan had guessed. "But we gave 'em hell for it, didn't we?"

"How is that?" wondered Cohen. He leaned against Wocha, not showing the pain that jagged through him as they bandaged his wounded foot except by an occasional sharp breath. "They're more at home with this cutlery than we, and they have those damned parapsych talents too."

"They're not quite sane," replied Donovan tonelessly. "Whether you call it a cultural trait or a madness which has spread to the whole population,

they're a wild bloodthirsty crew, two-legged weasels, and with a superiority complex which wouldn't have let them be very careful in dealing with us. No discipline, no real plan of action." He looked south over the rolling moorland. "Those things count. They may know better next time."

"Next time? Fifty or sixty men can't defeat a planet, Donovan," said Takahashi.

"No. Though this is an old dying race, their whole population in the city ahead, and most of it will flee in panic and take no part in any fighting. They aren't used to victims that fight back. If we can slug our way through to the spaceships they have there—"

"*Spaceships!*" The eyes stared at him, wild with a sudden blaze of hope, men crowding close and leaning on their reddened weapons and raising a babble of voices. "*Spaceships, spaceships—home!*"

"Yeah." Donovan ran a hand through his yellow hair. The fingers trembled just a bit. "Some ships, the first ones, they merely destroyed by causing the engines to run loose; but others they brought here, I suppose, by inducing the crew to land and parley. Only they killed the crews and can't handle the machines themselves."

"If they captured ships," said Helena slowly, "then they captured weapons too, and even they can squeeze a trigger."

"Sure. But you didn't see them shooting at us just now, did you? They used all the charges to hunt or duel. So if we can break through and escape—"

"They could still follow us and wreck our engines," said Takahashi.

"Not if we take a small ship, as we'd have to anyway, and mount guard over the vital spots. An Arzunian would have to be close at hand and using all his energies to misdirect atomic flows. He could be killed before any mischief was done. I doubt if they'd even try.

"Besides," went on Donovan, his voice dry and toneless as a lecturing professor's, "they can only do so much at a time. I don't know where they get the power for some of their feats, such as leaving this planet's gravitational well. It can't be from their own metabolisms, it must be some unknown cosmic energy source. They don't know how it works themselves, it's an instinctive ability. But it takes a lot of nervous energy to direct that flow, and I found last time I was here that they have to rest quite a while after some strenuous deed. So if we can get them tired enough—and the

fight is likely to wear both sides down—they won't be able to chase us till we're out of their range."

Takahashi looked oddly at him. "You know a lot," he murmured.

"Yeah, maybe I do."

"Well, if the city is close as you say, we'd better march right away before our wounds stiffen, and before the natives get a chance to organize."

"Rig up carrying devices for those too badly hurt to move," said Helena. "The walking wounded can tote them, and the rest of us form a protective square."

"Won't that slow us and handicap us?" asked Donovan.

Her head lifted, the dark hair blowing about her proud features in the thin whimpering wind. "As long as it's humanly possible we're going to look after our men. What's the Imperium for if it can't protect its own?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose so."

Donovan slouched off to join the salvaging party that was stripping the fallen Arzunians of arms and armor for Terran use. He rolled over a corpse to unbuckle the helmet and looked at the blood-masked face of Korstuzan who had been his friend once, very long ago. He closed the staring eyes, and his own were blind with tears.

Wocha came to join him. The Donarrian didn't seem to notice the gashes in his hide, but he was equipped with a shield now and had a couple of extra swords slung from his shoulders. "You got a good lady, boss," he said. "She fights hard. She will bear you strong sons."

"Uh-huh."

Valduma could never bear my children. Different species can't breed. And she is the outlaw darkness, the last despairing return to primeval chaos, she is the enemy of all which is honest and good. But she is very fair.

Slowly, the humans reformed their army, a tight ring about their wounded, and set off down the road. The dim sun wheeled horizonward.

VII

Drogobych lay before them.

The city stood on the open gray moor, and it had once been large. But its outer structures were long crumbled to ruin, heaps and shards of stone riven by ages of frost, fallen and coveted by the creeping dust. Here and there a squared monolith remained like the last snag in a rotted jaw, dark against the windy sky. It was quiet. Nothing stirred in all the sweeping immensity of hill and moor and ruin and loneliness.

Helena pointed from her seat on Wocha, and a lilt of hope was eager in the tired voice: "See—a ship—ahead there!"

They stared, and someone raised a ragged cheer. Over the black square-built houses of the inner city they could make out the metal nose of a freighter. Takahashi squinted. "It's Denebian, I think," he said. "Looks as if man isn't the only race which has suffered from these scum."

"All right, boys," said Helena. "Let's go in and get it."

They went down a long empty avenue which ran spear-straight for the center. The porticoed houses gaped with wells of blackness at their passage, looming in cracked and crazily leaning massiveness on either side, throwing back the hollow slam of their boots. Donovan heard the uneasy mutter of voices to his rear: "*Don't like this place. ... Haunted. ... They could be waiting anywhere for us. ...*"

The wind blew a whirl of snow across their path.

Basil. Basil, my dear.

Donovan's head jerked around, and he felt his throat tighten. Nothing. No movement, no sound, emptiness.

Basil, I am calling you. No one else can hear.

Why are you with these creatures, Basil? Why are you marching with the oppressors of your planet? We could free Ansa, Basil, given time to raise our armies. We could sweep the Terrans before us and hound them down the ways of night. And yet you march against us.

"Valduma," he whispered.

Basil, you were very dear to me. You were something new and strong and of the future, come to our weary old world, and I think I loved you.

I could still love you, Basil. I could hold you forever, if you would let me.

"Valduma—have done!"

A mocking ripple of laughter, sweet as rain in springtime, the gallantry of a race which was old and sick and doomed and could still know mirth. Donovan shook his head and stared rigidly before him. It was as if he had

laid hands on that piece of his soul which had been lost, and she was trying to wrench it from him again. Only he wanted her to win.

Go home, Basil. Go home with this female of yours. Breed your cubs, fill the house with brats, and try to think your little round of days means something. Strut about under the blue skies, growing fat and gray, bragging of what a great fellow you used to be and disapproving of the younger generation. As you like, Basil. But don't go out to space again. Don't look at the naked stars. You won't dare.

"No," he whispered.

She laughed, a harsh bell of mockery ringing in his brain. *You could have been a god—or a devil. But you would rather be a potbellied Imperial magistrate. Go home, Basil Donovan, take your female home, and when you are wakened at night by her—shall we say her breathing?—do not remember me.*

The Terrans slogged on down the street, filthy with dust and grease and blood, uncouth shamblers, apes in the somber ruin of the gods. Donovan thought he had a glimpse of Valduma standing on a rooftop, the clean lithe fire of her, silken flame of her hair and the green unhuman eyes which had lighted in the dark at his side. She had been a living blaze, an unending trumpet and challenge, and when she broke with him it had been quick and clean, no soddenness of age and custom and—and, damn it, all the little things which made humanness.

All right, Valduma. We're monkeys. We're noisy and self-important, compromisers and trimmers and petty cheats, we huddle away from the greatness we could have, our edifices are laid brick by brick with endless futile squabbling over each one—and yet, Valduma, there is something in man which you don't have. There's something by which these men have fought their way through everything you could loose on them, helping each other, going forward under a ridiculous rag of colored cloth and singing as they went.

Fine words, added his mind. *Too bad you don't really believe them.*

He grew aware of Helena's anxious eyes on him. "What's the matter, darling?" she asked gently. "You look ill."

"Tired," he said. "But we can't have so very far to go now—"

"Look out!"

Whirling, he saw the pillars of the house to the right buckle, saw the huge stone slabs of the roof come thundering over the top and streetward. For a

blinding instant he saw Valduma, riding the slab down, yelling and laughing, and then she was gone and the stone struck.

They were already running, dropping their burden of the hurt and fleeing for safety. Another house groaned and rumbled. The ground shook, flying shards stung Donovan's back, echoes rolled down the ways of Drogobych. Someone was screaming, far and faint under the grinding racket.

"Forward. Forward!" Helena's voice whipped back to him, she led the rush while the city thundered about her. Then a veil of rising dust blotted her out, he groped ahead, stumbling over fallen pillars and cornices, hearing the boom around him, running and running.

Valduma laughed, a red flame through the whirling dust. Her spear gleamed for his breast, he grabbed it with one hand and hacked at her with his sword. She was gone, and he raced ahead, not stopping to think, not daring.

They came out on a great open plaza. Once there had been a park here, and carved fountains, but nothing remained save a few leafless trees and broken pieces. And the spaceships.

The spaceships, a loom of metal against the dark stone beyond, half a dozen standing there and waiting—spaceships, spaceships, the most beautiful sight in the cosmos! Helena and Wocha were halted near a small fast Comet-class scoutboat. The surviving Terrans ran toward them. Few, thought Donovan sickly, few—perhaps a score left, bleeding from the cuts of flying stone, gray with dust and fear. The city had been a trap.

"Come on!" yelled the woman. "Over here and off this planet!"

The men of Drogobych were suddenly there, a ring about the ship and another about the whole plaza, crouched with their weapons and their cat's eyes aflame. A score of hurt starvelings and half a thousand un-men.

A trumpet blew its high note into the dusking heavens. The Arzunians rested arms, expressionless. Donovan and the other humans continued their pace, forming a battle square.

Morzach stood forth in front of the scoutship. "You have no further chance to escape," he called. "But we want your services, not your lives, and the service will be well rewarded. Lay down your weapons."

Wocha's arm straightened. His ax flew like a thunderbolt, and Morzach's head burst open. The Donarrian roared and went against the enemy line.

They edged away, fearfully, and the Terrans followed him in a trotting wedge. Donovan moved up on Wocha's right side, sword hammering at the thrusts for his ribs.

An Arzunian yelled an order which must have meant "Stop them!" Donovan saw the outer line break into a run, converging on the knot of struggle. No flying spears this time, he reflected in a moment's bleak satisfaction—tearing down those walls must have exhausted most of their directing energies.

A native rushed at him, sword whistling from behind a black shield. Donovan caught the blow on his own plundered scute, feeling it ring in the bones of his arm, and hewed back. His blade screamed close to the white teeth-bared face, and he called a panting salutation: "Try again, Davleka!"

"I will!"

The blows rained on his shield, sang viciously low to cut at his legs, clattering and clanging, whistle of air and howl of iron under the westering sun. He backed up against Wocha's side, where the Donarrian and the woman smote against the airlock's defenders, and braced himself and struck out.

Davleka snarled and hacked at Donovan's spread leg. The Ansan's glaive snaked forth against his unshielded neck. Davleka's sword clashed to earth and he sprawled against the human. Raising his bloody face, he drew a knife, lifted it, and tried to thrust upward. Donovan, already crossing blades with Uboda, stamped on his hand. Davleka grinned, a rueful crooked grin through the streaming blood, and died.

Uboda pressed close, working up against Donovan's shield. He had none himself, but there was a dirk in his left hand. His sword locked with Donovan's, strained it aside, and his knife clattered swiftly for an opening.

Helena turned about and struck from her seat. Uboda's head rolled against Donovan's shield and left a red splash down it. The man retched.

Wocha, swinging one of his swords, pushed ahead into the Arzunians, crowding them aside by his sheer mass, beating down a guard and the helmet or armor beyond it. "Clear!" he bellowed. "I got the way clear, lady!"

Helena sprang to the ground and into the lock. "Takahashi, Cohen, Basil, Wang-ki, come in and help me start the engines. The rest of you hold them

off. Don't give them time to exert what collective para power they have left and ruin something. Make them think!"

"Think about their lives, huh?" Wocha squared off in front of the airlock and raised his sword. "All right, boys, here they come. Let 'em have what they want."

Donovan halted in the airlock. Valduma was there, her fiery head whirling in the rush of black-clad warriors. He leaned over and grabbed a spaceman's arm. "Ben Ali, go in and help start this crate. I have to stay here."

"But—"

Donovan shoved him in, stood beside Takahashi, and braced himself to meet the Arzunian charge.

They rushed in, knowing that they had to kill the humans before there was an escape, swinging their weapons and howling. The shock of the assault threw men back, pressed them to the ship and jammed weapons close to breasts. The Terrans cursed and began to use fists and feet, clearing a space to fight in.

Donovan's sword clashed against a shield, drove off another blade, stabbed for a face, and then it was all lost in the crazed maelstrom, hack and thrust and take the blows they give, hew, sword, hew!

They raged against Wocha, careless now of their lives, thundering blows against his shield, slashing and stabbing and using their last wizard strength to fill the air with blades. He roared and stood his ground, the sword leaped in his hand, metal clove in thunder. The shield was crumpled, falling apart—he tossed it with rib-cracking force against the nearest Arzunian. His nicked and blunted sword burst against a helmet, and he drew the other.

The ship trembled, thutter of engines warming up, the eager promise of sky and stars and green Terra again. "Get in!" bawled Donovan. "Get in! We'll hold them!"

He stood by Wocha as the last crewmen entered, stood barring the airlock with a wall of blood and iron. Through a blurring vision, he saw Valduma approach.

She smiled at him, one slim hand running through the copper hair, the other held out in sign of peace. Tall and gracious and lovely beyond his knowing, she moved up toward Donovan, and her clear voice rang in his darkening mind.

Basil—you, at least, could stay. You could guide us out to the stars.

“You go away,” groaned Wocha.

The devil’s rage flamed in her face. She yelled, and a lance whistled from the sky and buried itself in the great breast.

“Wocha!” yelled Donovan.

The Donarrian snarled and snapped off the shaft that stood between his ribs. He whirled it over his head, and Valduma’s green eyes widened in fear.

“Donovan!” roared Wocha, and let it fly.

It smashed home, and the Ansan dropped his sword and swayed on his feet. He couldn’t look on the broken thing which had been Valduma.

“Boss, you go home now.”

Wocha laid him in the airlock and slammed the outer valve shut. Turning, he faced the Arzunians. He couldn’t see very well—one eye was gone, and there was a ragged darkness before the other. The sword felt heavy in his hand. But—

“Hooo!” he roared and charged them.

He spitted one and trampled another and tossed a third into the air. Whirling, he clove a head and smashed a rib-case with his fist and chopped another across. His sword broke, and he grabbed two Arzunians and cracked their skulls together.

They ran, then, turned and fled from him. And he stood watching them go and laughed. His laughter filled the city, rolling from its walls, drowning the whistle of the ship’s takeoff and bringing blood to his lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand, spat, and lay down.

“We’re clear, Basil.” Helena clung to him, shivering in his arms, and he didn’t know if it was a laugh or a sob in her throat. “We’re away, safe, we’ll carry word back to Sol and they’ll clear the Black Nebula for good.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his eyes. “Though I doubt the Navy will find anything. If those Arzunians have any sense, they’ll project to various fringe planets, scatter, and try to pass as harmless humanoids. But it doesn’t matter, I suppose. Their power is broken.”

“And we’ll go back to your home, Basil, and bring Ansa and Terra together and have a dozen children and—”

He nodded. “Sure. Sure.”

But he wouldn’t forget. In the winter nights, when the stars were sharp and cold in a sky of ringing crystal black, he would—go out and watch them? Or pull his roof over him and wait for dawn? He didn’t know yet.

Still—even if this was a long ways from being the best of all possible universes, it had enough in it to make a man glad of his day.

He whistled softly, feeling the words run through his head:

Lift your glasses high,
kiss the girls goodbye,
 (Live well, my friend, live well, live you well)
for we're riding,
for we're riding
for we're riding out to Terran sky! Terran sky! Terran sky!

The thought came all at once that it could be a song of comradeship, too.

CAPTIVE OF THE CENTAURIANESS

The hero is the child of his times, in that his milieu furnishes him with motives and means, and yet the hero seizes the time and shapes it as he will. And he remains an enigma to his contemporaries and to the future.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the strange story of the three whose discoveries and achievements determined the whole course of history. The driving idealism and bold military genius of Dyann Korlas; the mighty wisdom, profound and benign, of Urushkidan; above all, perhaps, the transcendent clarity of mind and inspired leadership of Ballantyne—these molded our century and all centuries to come, and yet we will never understand them, they are too far beyond us and their essential selves must be forever a mystery.

VALLABBHAI RASMUSSEN, *HISTORY OF THE TWENTY-THIRD CENTURY*, v. 1

I

The tender loomed above the crowd of passengers and leave-takers, a great shining bullet caught in floodlights against the dark, and Ray Ballantyne quickened his steps. By Heaven, he'd made it! The flight from San Francisco to Quito, the nail-biting dawdle as he waited for the airbus, then

the flight out to Ecuador Spaceport, the last walk through the vast echoing hollowness of the terminal, out onto the field—and there it was, there the little darling lay, waiting to carry him from Earth up to the *Jovian Queen* and safety.

He kissed his fingers at the tender and shoved rudely through the swarm of people and Martians. He'd already missed the first trip up to the liner, and the thought of waiting for the third was beyond endurance.

“Hey, chum.”

As the heavy hand fell on his arm, Ballantyne whirled, his heart slamming against his teeth and his spine dropping out. The thickset man compared his thin sharp features with the photograph in the other paw, nodded, and said, “All right, Ballantyne, come along.”

“*Se llama Garcia!*” gibbered the engineer. “*No hablo Inglés.*”

“I said come along,” said the detective wearily. “I thought you’d try to leave Earth. This way.”

Ballantyne’s free hand reached up and crammed the fellow’s hat down over his eyes. Wrenching loose, he turned and ran for the gangway, upsetting a corpulent Latin woman en route and pursued by a volley of imprecations. He shoved aside the passenger before him and ran into the solid wall of an impassive Jovian ship’s officer.

The Jovian, a tall muscular blond in a dazzling crispness of white uniform, looked at him with the thinly veiled contempt of a proper Confed for the lesser breeds of humanity. “Ticket and passport, please,” he said stonily.

Ballantyne shoved them at him, glancing shakily back to the detective who had become entangled with the indignant woman and was being slapped with a handbag and volubly cursed. With maddening deliberation the Jovian scanned the engineer’s papers, compared them with a list in his hand, and waved him on.

The detective caromed against the same immovable barrier. “Let me by!” he gasped.

“Your ticket and passport, please,” said the Jovian.

“That man is under arrest. Let me by.”

“Your ticket and passport, please.”

“I tell you I’m an officer of the law and I have a warrant for that man. Let me by.”

“Proper authorization may be obtained at the main office,” said the Jovian coldly.

The detective tried to rush, encountered a bit of expert judo, and tumbled back into the crowd. Every able-bodied Jovian was a well-trained military reservist.

“Proper authorization may be obtained at the main office,” repeated the immovable barrier. To the next man, “Your ticket and passport, please.”

Ray Ballantyne dashed the sweat off his brow and permitted himself a nasty chuckle. By the time the hapless detective had gone through all that red tape, the tender would be well on its way.

Before one of his country’s secret police the Jovian would have quailed and said nothing. But this was Earth, and the Confeds loved to bait Terrestrials, and there was no better way than by demanding the endless papers which their file-clerk mentalities had devised.

The engineer went on into the tender, found a seat, and strapped himself in. He was clear. Before Heaven, he was away!

Even the long Vanbrugh arm did not reach to Jupiter. Ballantyne’s alleged crimes weren’t enough for the Earth government to ask his extradition. He could stay on Ganymede till the whole business had blown over, and then—well—

He sighed, relaxing—a medium-sized young man, slender and wiry, with close-cropped yellow hair and features a little too sharp to be handsome. His thin deft fingers rearranged his overly colorful tie and straightened his sports jacket. Always wanted to see the Jovian System, anyway, he rationalized.

The tender’s airlock sighed shut and a stewardess went down the aisle handing out anti-acceleration pills. She had the full-bodied, pure-blooded good looks of the ideal Jovian together with their faintly repellent air of hard, purposeful efficiency. The rockets began to throb, warming up, and a siren hooted.

Ballantyne turned to the man beside him, obsessed with the idiotic desire for conversation found in all recent escapees from the law or the dentist. “Going home, I see,” he remarked.

The man was a tall specimen in the gray Jovian army uniform, with colonel’s planets on his shoulders and a chestful of ribbons and medals—about forty, closely shaven head, iron jaw, ramrod spine. He fixed the

Earthling with a chill pale eye and said, “And you, I see, are leaving home. Two scintillating deductions.”

“Ummm—uh—well.” Ballantyne looked away, his ears ablaze. The Jovian clutched his heavy portfolio tighter to his side.

The tender shook itself, howled, and jumped into the sky. Ballantyne leaned back in the cushioned seat, staring out the port at the fire-starred unfolding of space. The Jovian colonel sat rigid as before, not deigning to yield to the pressure.

They came up to the *Jovian Queen*, where the great liner held her orbit about Earth, and Ballantyne glimpsed her long metal shape, blinding in the raw sunlight, as the tender swung in for contact. When the airlocks joined there was a steady one-gravity as the spaceship rotated on her axis. Whatever you could say against the Jovians—and that was quite a bit—they did maintain the best transport in the Solar System. Earth’s heavy passenger and freight haulers were in tight financial straits competing with the state-subsidized lines of Jupiter.

An expressionless uniformed steward took charge of the passengers as they entered the ship, herding them to their respective destinations. Ballantyne lugged his valise toward third-class section. He’d have to share his cabin with two others—how had the mighty fallen! Thinking over the decline and fall of the Ballantyne pocketbook, he sighed, and the suitcase seemed to drag at him. He’d hit Ganymede pretty broke, unless. . . .

He opened his assigned door.

“Put—me—down!”

Ballantyne dropped his suitcase and his jaw. Within the narrow cabin a Martian was struggling in the clutch of a six-foot armored woman.

“Put—me—down!” he spluttered. He coiled his limbs snakelike around the woman’s brawny arms, and a Martian’s four thick, rubbery walking-tentacles have formidable strength. She didn’t seem to notice. She laughed and shook him a bit.

“I—beg your pardon—” gasped Ballantyne, backing away.

“You are forgiven,” said the woman. Her voice was a husky contralto, burdened with a rippling, slurring accent he couldn’t place. She shot out one Martian-encumbered arm, grabbed him by the coat, and hauled him inside. “You be the yudge, my friend. Is it not yustice that I have the lower berth?”

“It is noting of te sort!” screamed the Martian, fixing Ballantyne with round, bulging, and indignant yellow eyes. “My position, my eminence,

clearly entitle me to ebery consideration, and ten tis hulking monster—”

The Earthling let his gaze travel up and down the woman’s smooth-muscled form and said in an awed whisper, “I think you’d better accept the lady’s generous offer. But—uh—I seem to have the wrong cabin—”

“Are you Ray Ballantyne of Earth?” asked the woman.

He pleaded guilty.

“Then you belon vith us. I have looked at the passenyer lists. You may have the cot.”

“Th-thanks,” shivered Ballantyne, sitting down on it.

The Martian seemed to give the fight up as a bad job and allowed himself to be placed on the upper bunk. “To tink of it,” he squeaked. “Tat I, te great Urushkidan of Ummunashektaru, should be manhandled by a sabage who does not know a logaritm from an exponent!”

Urushkidan. Ballantyne knew the name of the Martian mathematician, the latter-day Gauss or Einstein, and stared as if this were the first Martian he had seen in his life. Urushkidan looked like any other of his race, at least to the inexperienced eye. A great gray-skinned cupola of a body balanced four feet high on the walking-tentacles, with the two slim, three-fingered arm-tentacles writhing from either side of a wide lipless mouth set beneath that torse. Big unwinking eyes behind horn-rimmed spectacles, flat nose, elephantine ears—“Not *the* Urushkidan?” he gasped.

“Tere is only *one* Urushkidan,” said the Martian.

The amazon sat down on her own bunk and laughed, a Homeric shout of laughter ringing between the metal walls and shivering the furniture.

“Velcome, little Earthman,” she cried. “You are cute, I think I vill like you. I am Dyann Korlas of Kathantuma.” She grabbed his hand in a bone-cracking grip.

“One of the Centaurians,” said Ballantyne feebly.

“Yes, so you call us.” She opened her trunk and began unpacking. Ballantyne watched her with appreciation and some curiosity. He’d only seen the Alpha Centaurian visitors on television before now.

She looked human enough externally, aside from a somewhat different convolution of the ears. Internally there were plenty of peculiarities, among them a skeletal and tissue structure considerably harder and denser than that

of *Homo Solis*. Alpha Centauri III—or Varann, as its more advanced nation had decided to call it after learning from the terrestrial explorers that it was a planet—was Earth-like enough in a cool and bracing way, but it had half again the surface gravity.

Sexual differentiation also varied a bit from the Solar norm. The Centaurian men were somewhat smaller and weaker than the women. They stayed at home and did the housework while their wives conducted the business. In the warlike culture of Kathantuma and its neighbor states that meant going out, cutting the other army into hamburger, and stealing everything which wasn't bolted down.

This—Dyann Korlas—was something to write home about as far as looks went. Her size and the broadsword at her waist were intimidating, but her build was magnificent in a statuesque, tiger-lithe way. She looked young, her skin smooth, and faintly golden, a heavy mass of shining bronze hair coiled about the haughtily lifted head. Her face was close to the ideal of an ancient Hellenic sculptor, clean straight lines, firm jaw, brilliant gray eyes under heavy brows. She wore a light cuirass over her tunic, sandals, a bat-winged helmet on her head.

"It—ah—it's strange they'd put you in the same cabin with me," said Ballantyne hesitantly.

"Oh, you are safe enough," she grinned.

He flushed, reflecting that the ladies from Centauri were in little danger from any Solar man. Very likely it was the other way around. Then he recalled that their native titles translated into things like warrior, district-ruler, chief, and so on. With their arrogant indifference to mere exploration and ethnology, the Jovians had probably assumed that Dyann Korlas was male. Well, he wasn't going to enlighten them.

He looked up to Urushkidan, who was morosely stuffing a big-bowled pipe. "Ah, I know of your work, of course," he said hesitantly. "I am—was—a nuclear engineer, so maybe I even have some appreciation of what it's about."

The Martian preened. "Doubtless you have grasped it very well," he said generously. "As well as any Earthman could, which is, of course, saying very little."

"But, if I may ask, sir, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I have an invitation from the Jobian Academy of Science to lecture. They are commendably interested and seem to realise my fundamental

importance. I will be glad to get off Eart. Te air pressure, te gravity, pfui!”

“But a man, uh, Martian of your distinction—traveling third class—”

“Oh, they sent me a first-class ticket, of course. But I turned it in, bought a tird class, and banked te difference.” He scowled darkly at Dyann Korlas. “Tough if I must be treated so—Well.” He shrugged. A Martian shrugging is quite a sight. “It is of no matter. We of Uttu—Mars as you insist on calling it—are so incomparably far advanced in te philosophic virtues of serenity, generosity, and modesty tat I can accept wit equanimity.”

“Oh,” said Ballantyne. To the Centaurian, “And may I ask why you are going to Jupiter—ah—Miss Korlas?”

“You may call me Dyann,” she said sweetly, “and I vill call you Ray, so? I vish only to see Yupiter, though I doubt it vill be as glamorous as Earth.” Her eyes glowed. “You live in a fable. The flyin and travelin machines, auto—automatic kitchens, television, clocks an vatches, exotic dress. Aah, it vas vorth ten years travelin yust to see them.”

Ballantyne reflected on what he knew of Alpha Centauri. Even the fantastically fast new exploratory ships took ten years to cross the interstellar gulf to its wild planets, and there had only been three expeditions so far. The third had brought back a group of curious natives who were to report to their queen what the strangers’ homeland was like.

He imagined that the spacemen had had quite a time, with that score of turbulent barbarians crammed into a narrow hull though of course they’d passed almost the whole voyage in suspended animation. The visitors had spent about a year now on Earth and Luna, staring, asking endless questions, wondering what their hosts did with themselves now that the U.N. had brought the nations together and ended war. There hadn’t been much trouble. Occasionally one of them would get mad and break somebody’s jaw, and then there’d been the one who was invited to speak at a women’s club. . . . He chuckled to himself.

“Are these Yovians humans like you?” asked Dyann.

“Uh-huh,” he nodded. “The moons were colonized from Earth about a hundred and twenty-five years ago. They declared their independence about sixty years past, and nobody thought it was worth the trouble to fight about it. Though maybe we should have.”

“Vy that?”

“Oh well, the colonists were misfits originally, remnants of the old Eurasian militarisms. They did do heroic work in settling and developing the Jovian System, but they live under a dictatorship and make no bones about despising Earth and considering themselves the destined rulers of all the planets. Last year they grabbed the Saturnian colonies on the thinnest of pretexts, and Earth was too chicken-livered to do more than give them a reproachful look. Not that the U.N. has much of a navy these days, compared to theirs.”

Dyann shrugged and went on unpacking. She hung an extra sword on the wall, unshipped her armor and put it up, and slipped into a loose fur-trimmed robe. Urushkidan slithered to the floor and opened his own trunk, pulling out a score of fat books which he placed on the shelf over his bunk and expropriated the little table for his papers, pencils, and humidior.

“You know—ah—Dr. Urushkidan—” said Ballantyne uneasily, “I wish you weren’t going to Jupiter.”

“And why not?” asked the Martian belligerently.

“Well, doesn’t your reformulation of general relativity indicate a way to build a ship which can go faster than light?”

“Among oter tings, yes.” Urushkidan blew a malodorous cloud of smoke.

“Well, I don’t think the Jovians are interested in science for its own sake. I think they want to get you and your knowledge so they can build such ships themselves which would be the last thing they need to take over the Solar System.”

“A Martian,” said Urushkidan condescendingly, “is not concerned wit te squabblings of te lower animals. Noting personal, of course.”

Dyann pulled an idol from her trunk and put it on her shelf. It was a small wooden image, gaudily painted and fiercely tusked, each of its six arms holding some weapon. One, Ballantyne noticed, was a carved Terrestrial tommy-gun. “Qviet, please,” she said, raising one arm. “I am about to pray to Ormun the Terrible.”

“Barbarian,” guffawed Urushkidan.

Dyann took a pillow and stuffed it in his mouth. “Qviet, please, I said.” She smiled gently and prostrated herself before the god.

After a while she got up. Urushkidan was still speechless with rage. She turned to Ballantyne and asked, “Do the ships here carry live animals? I would like to make a small sacrifice too.”

II

The bulletin board said that in the present orbital positions of the planets, the *Jovian Queen* would make her voyage at one Earth-gravity acceleration in six days, forty-three minutes, and twelve seconds, plus or minus ten seconds. That might be pure braggadocio, though Ballantyne wouldn't have been surprised to learn that it was sober truth. He hoped the time was overestimated. His cabin mates were a little wearing on the nerves. Urushkidan filling the room with smoke, sitting up till all hours covering paper with mathematical symbols and screaming at any interruption. Dyann was nice-looking but rather overwhelming. In some ways she was reminiscent of Catherine Vanbrugh. The Engineer shuddered.

He slouched moodily into the bar and ordered a martini he could ill afford. The place was quiet, discreetly lit, not very full. His eyes fell on the stiff-laced Jovian colonel, still clutching his portfolio like grim death, but talking with unusual animation to a stunning Terrestrial redhead. It was clear that ideas about the purity of the Jovian stock—"hardened in the fire and ice of outer space, tempered and beaten into the new and dominant mankind"—had been temporarily shelved.

If I had some money, thought Ballantyne gloomily, I could detach her from him and enjoy this trip.

The bartender informed him, with some awe, that the man was Colonel Ivan Hosea Domenico Roshevsky-Feldkamp, late military attaché of Jupiter's Terrestrial embassy and an officer who had served with distinction in suppressing the Ionian revolt and in asserting Jupiter's rightful claims to Saturn. Ray was more interested in the girl's name and antecedents. Just as he'd thought, an heiress on a pleasure trip. Expensive.

A couple of genial Earthmen moved up and began talking to him. Before long they suggested a friendly game of poker.

Oh-ho! thought Ray, who knew that sort. "Sure," he said.

They played most of the time for a couple of days. Luck went back and forth but in general Ray won, and toward the end he was a couple of thousand U.N. credits to the good. He let his eyes glitter with febrile cupidity, and the sharks—there were three of them all told—almost licked their lips.

“Excuse me a minute,” said Ray, pocketing his winnings. “I’ll be back, and then we’ll play for real stakes.”

“You bet,” said the sharks. They sat back, lit anticipatory cigars, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Ray found the redhead remarkably easy to pry from the colonel.

The girl thought it would be just too much fun to go slumming and have the captain’s dinner with him in the third-class saloon. He led her down the thrumming corridor, thinking wistfully that before he knew it he’d be in Ganymede City and as broke as he’d been to start with.

Urushkidan crawled slowly by, waving an idle tentacle at him. The Martian walking system was awkward under Earth gravity and, their table manners being worse than atrocious, they ate in a separate section. It was Dyann who really started the trouble. She strode up behind Ray and clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Vere have you been?” she asked reproachfully. “You have not been in our cabin for two days and nights now.”

The redhead blushed.

“Oh hullo, Dyann,” said Ray, annoyed. “I’ll see you later.”

“Of course you vill.” She smiled. “Ah, you dashin’ glamorous Earthmen, you make me feel so small and veak.” She topped him by a good two inches.

They came into the doorway of the saloon and three familiar figures barred Ray’s passage.

“What the hell became of you, Ballantyne?” demanded one. His geniality was quite gone. “You was going to play some more with us.”

“I forgot,” said Ray huskily. The three men looked bigger than they had, somehow.

“It’s not sporting to quit when you’re so far ahead,” said another.

“Yeah,” said a third. “You ought at least to give us our money back.”

“I haven’t got it,” said Ray.

“Look, pal, things happen to people that ain’t good sports. They ain’t very pop-u-lar, and things happen to them. Where’s that money?”

They crowded in, hemming him against the wall. Beyond them, he could see Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp staring coldly at the tableau. Ray

wondered if he hadn't put the players up to this. They wouldn't have dared start trouble without some kind of *sub rosa* official hint.

"Come on back to our cabin and we'll talk this over, pal."

The redhead squeaked and shrank aside. A meaty hand closed on Ray's arm and dragged him half off his feet. Dyann bristled, one hand clapped to her sword. "Are these men annoyin' you, Ray?" she asked.

"No, we just want a quiet little private talk with our friend," said one of them. "Just come along easy, Ballantyne."

"Dyann, I think they are annoying me," said the engineer, the words rattling in a suddenly dry and tightened throat.

"Oh, vell, in that case—" She smiled, reached out, and grabbed a collar.

There was a minor explosion. The man catapulted into the air, hit the ceiling, caromed off a wall, and bounced on the floor. Sheer reflex sent knives flying into the hands of the other two.

"Ormun is good!" shouted Dyann joyously. She gave the nearest gambler a fistful of knuckles, tossed him into the air, clutched his ankles as he came down, and whirled him against the wall.

The third was stabbing at her back. Blindly, Ray grabbed his arm and pulled him away. He snarled and lunged at the engineer, who tumbled backward clutching after the nearest weapon. It happened to be Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp's massive briefcase. He grabbed it free and brought it down on the gambler's head. It hit with a dull *thwack* and the fellow lurched. Ray hit him again. The briefcase burst open and papers snowed through the air. Then Dyann got the enemy from behind and proceeded to tie him in knots.

The redhead had already departed, screaming. Ray sank to one shaky knee and looked up into the colonel's livid face.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," he gasped. "Here, let me help—"

He began stuffing papers back into the briefcase. A polished boot hit him where it would do the most good and he skidded through the disorderly mass. "You unutterable fool!" raged the voice above him.

"You would kick my friend, huh?" asked Dyann indignantly.

A revolver clanked from the colonel's belt. "That will do," he snapped. "Consider yourself under arrest."

Dyann's broad smooth shoulders sagged a little. "I am so sorry," she said meekly. "Let me help yust a litle." She stooped and picked up one of the unconscious men.

"March!" rapped the colonel.

"Yes, sir," whispered Dyann abjectly. Then, being almost next to him, she rammed her burden into his belly. He sat down with a thunderous *oof* and Dyann kicked him behind the ear.

"That vas fun," she grinned, picking up the revolver and sticking it into her belt. "Vat shall ve do now?"

"You," said Urushkidan acidly, "are a typical human."

Ray looked despairingly out of the brig at him. "What else could I do?" he asked wildly. "I couldn't fight a shipful of Jovians. It was all I could do to talk Dyann into surrendering."

"I mean in fighting in te first place," said Urushkidan. "I hear it started over a female. Why don't you lower animals habe a regular rutting season as we do on Uttu? Ten you could spend time tinking of someting else too, someting constructive."

"Well—" Ray couldn't suppress a wry smile, "those are constructive thoughts, of a sort. But what happened to Dyann?"

"Oh, tey questioned her, found she couldn't read, and let her go. But tey won't let her see you."

"I suppose Earth would raise more of a stink over her being arrested than it's worth to the Jovians. But what's her literacy got to do with it?"

"Te colonel's papers, you idiot. Tey are bery secret. Doubtless tey are information about Eart's defenses, obtained by his spies and to be brought home by him in person."

"But I didn't read them either!"

"You saw tem. Tey are implanted in your subconscious memories and a hypnotreatment could extract tem. An illiterate like Dyann lacks te word-gestalts, she would not remember eben subconsciously, but you—Well, tat is luck. Maybe Eart can sabe you."

"Oh, no!" Ray clutched his head. "They won't bother. They don't give a damn. I'm wanted back there, and old Vanbrugh will be only too pleased to see me get the works."

“Banbrugh—te Nort American Councillor?”

“Uh-huh.” Ray leaned gloomily against the door. “I was just a plain ordinary engineer till Uncle Hosmer left me a million credits. Damn him, I hope he fries in hell.”

“A man left you money and you don’t like it?” Urushkidan’s eyes bugged so they seemed in some danger of falling out. “Shalmuannusar, what did you do wit it?”

“I spent it. I spent damn near every millo in a year.”

“On *what*?”

“Oh, wine, women, song—the usual.”

Urushkidan clapped his tentacles to his eyes and groaned. “A million credits!”

“It got me into high society,” went on Ray. “I made out as if I had more than I did. I met Catherine Vanbrugh—that’s the Councillor’s daughter—and she got ideas that I might make a good fifth husband, or would it be the sixth? Well, she wasn’t a bad-looking wench, and I—uh—well—about the time my money gave out and I went into debt, she was really after me. It was somewhat urgent. I skipped, of course. Old Vanbrugh got the cops after me. I barely escaped. He’s got enough influence to—well, it boils down to the fact that the Jovians can do anything to me their little hearts desire.”

He strained against the bars. “Can’t you do anything, sir? Your fame is so illustrious. Can’t you slip the word to somebody?”

The Martian puffed out his chest above his eyes and simpered. Then he said with mild regret, “No, I cannot entangle myself in te empirical. My domain is te beauty and purity of matematics alone. I adbise you to accept your fate wit philosophy. Perhaps I can lend you Ekbannutil’s *Treatise on te Unimportance of Temporal Sorrows*. It has many consoling toughts.”

He waved affably and waddled off. Ray sank to the bunk.

Presently a squad of soldiers arrived to escort him to the tender which would take him down to Ganymede. Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp was there, as stiff as ever, though the bandage behind his ear set his cap somewhat askew.

“Where am I going?” asked Ray.

“To Camp Muellenhoff, outside the city,” said the Jovian with a hard satisfaction. “It is where we keep spies until we get ready to question and shoot them.”

III

It took Dyann Korlas about two Earth-days to decide that she didn't like Ganymede.

The Jovians had been very courteous, apologized in a stiff way for the unfortunate misunderstanding aboard ship, and assigned her a brawny young sergeant as guide. Their armament was much more in evidence and much more interesting than Earth's but granting that spaceships and atomic bombs and guided missiles were more effective than swords and bows and mounted lancers, they took all the fun out of war and left nothing to plunder. She missed the brawling mirth of the war-camps of Varann among these bleak-faced and endlessly marching men in their drab uniforms.

The civilians were almost as depressingly clad, and even more orderly and obedient than those of Earth. Only the arrogant, bemedaled officer caste had any touch of dash or glamor about it. The Terrestrial concept of sexual equality had been interesting, even exciting in a way, but these Jovians had inverted the natural order of things to a repulsive extent.

She had seen the sights, and those were impressive enough—the grim rocky face of Ganymede, with mighty Jupiter eternally high in the dusky heavens; the bustling, crowded, machine-crammed underground cities, level after level of apartments, farms, factories, shops, barracks—but Earth could show more. Her guide promised to take her to the other moons of the Jovian Confederacy but she felt as bored by the thought as he seemed to be.

She got the impression that she was hurried along, from sight to sight and speech to speech, without ever a chance to talk to anyone and find out what really was dreamed and striven for on this land. To be sure, the Jovians all talked endlessly about a superior way of life and their right to return to the green vales of Earth whence their forefathers had been cruelly made to flee. But if they were going to fight why didn't they just hop in their ships and go there?

The dictator's face seemed to be framed wherever she turned, a small and puffy-eyed man in an elaborate uniform. Martin Wilder the Great. Her guide the sergeant, one Robert Hamand, said in an awed tone that she might be introduced to the dictator. He looked hurt when she yawned.

And what had become of Ray? Hamand knew nothing and seemed to care less. The secret police officer had said he would be held for a short time as a lesson and then released but surely he'd look her up if he were free. She contrasted the Earthling's liveliness with the quiet men of Varann and thought that he would be an ornament to anyone's harem even if there couldn't be issue between the two species.

On the third day, as she got up, she decided to ask counsel of Ormun. She washed, singing a cheerful song of clattering swords and sundering skulls, stowed away a breakfast that would have sufficed two humans, and walked into the sitting room of the apartment assigned her.

Hamand was waiting, very straight and correct in his uniform. "Good day," he said, bowing from the waist. "Today we will go topside again and visit the Devil's Garden. Then at eleven forty-five proceed to Robinsburg where we will lunch until thirteen hundred and then go on to—"

"I must take an omen first," said Dyann.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You need not do so, you have done no wrong." Dyann prostrated herself before the god. Then, struck with a sudden thought, gestured at Hamand.

"You too."

"What?" cried the sergeant.

"You too. She might be offended if you do not pray."

"Madam," said Hamand, stiff with indignation, "I am a Jovian of the machine age, not a savage groveling before superstition."

Dyann got up, knocked him to the floor, and rubbed his nose in the carpet before Ormun. "You vill please to grovel," she said urbanely. "It is good manners." She laid herself prone again, keeping one hand on the sergeant's head, and repeated several magic formulas. Then she rose to her knees, fished three Centaurian dice from her pocketed kilt, and tossed them.

"Ah-hah," she said. "The omen says—hm, let me see now, I am not a *marya*. I think they say go to Urushkidan." She bowed deeply before Ormun. "Thank you, my lady. Now come, we go find Urushkidan."

"You can't!" gibbered Hamand. "He's doing important work. He's at the Academy—"

Dyann strolled out and he trailed futilely in her wake, still protesting. She inquired her way along the many tunnels and corridors and ramps to the Academy of Science. There were no slideways. Everyone walked. The Jovian leaders, with their concern over physical fitness, insisted that there be as much assorted exercises as possible to compensate for Ganymede's low gravity. To Dyann, weight was feathery. She bounded twenty or thirty feet at a time when the crowd thinned enough.

The Academy, a combined college and technical research institute, had a good-sized sector to itself. There was a broad open space covered with turf and the uniformed students and professors went from one to another of the doors which opened on the grass. Dyann loomed over an undersized academician who gibbered in answer to her that Dr. Urushkidan was in *that* sector and then scuttled away.

There was an armed sentry in front of the door. Seeing none elsewhere, Dyann concluded shrewdly that he was posted because of the potential military applications of Urushkidan's work. He slanted his rifle across her path. "Halt!"

"I must see the Martian," said Dyann mildly. "Please to let me by."

"No one sees him without a pass," said the guard.

Dyann shoved him aside and opened the door. He yelled and grabbed her arm. That was his big mistake.

"A man," said the Varannian reprovingly, "should have respect for women." She yanked the rifle from him and hit him in the stomach with the butt. He flew across the plaza, retching, rolled to one elbow, and snatched at his sidearm. Dyann leaped, landing on his face with a crunch of bone and a small explosion of blood and teeth.

She turned back, hefting the rifle appreciatively. The Earthlings on Varann had been regrettably stingy about giving modern weapons to the natives. Assorted people, including Hamand, fled in all directions as she entered the doorway.

Down a long hall, peering into the rooms on either side, up a staircase—another sentry before a frosted-glass door gaped at her. She smiled reassuringly, moved close to him, and got her hands on his throat. Shortly thereafter she had his rifle and revolver.

Loud voices drifted through the door and Dyann, who was not at all stupid, listened with interest. One was—yes, that was Urushkidan himself, bubbling like an indignant teakettle.

“I will not, sir, do you hear me? I will not. And I demand a return passage from tis foul satellite at once!”

“Come now, Dr. Urushkidan, be reasonable.” Was that the voice of Roshevsky-Feldkamp? “After all, can you complain of your treatment? You have Mars-conditioned quarters, servants, high pay, every consideration.”

“I came here to lecture and complete my mathematical research. Now I find you have arranged no lectures for me and expect me to—to superbiise an—an *engineering* project! As if—as if I were a mere—empiricist!”

“But Dr. Urushkidan—after all, science advances by checking its theory against the facts. If with your help we create the first faster-than-light ship, it will be a triumphant confirmation of—”

“My theories need no confirmation. They are a development of certain relativity postulates, a piece of pure mathematics in all its elegance and beauty. If they agree or disagree with the facts, that is of no interest to any proper native of Uttu. The mathematics is enough, and I will have nothing to do with applied physics. And furthermore—” The squeaky voice rose even higher—“you want only the military applications, you would have me stoop to such vulgarity. You do not appreciate me, and I am going back to Uttu!”

“I am afraid,” said the man slowly, “that that is impossible.”

Dyann entered. “Are they annoyin you?” she asked.

Urushkidan whirled about. The room was thick with the fumes of his pipe, and one of the two Jovians with him—a bald man in the black uniform of the secret police—was holding a handkerchief to his nose. The other one was Roshevsky-Feldkamp, who started to his feet with an oath and grabbed for his revolver.

Dyann held her own stolen gun on his midriff. “No,” she said.

“What are you doing here?” gasped the officer.

“Vere is Ray Ballantyne?”

“Get out! Guards—”

Dyann took one long leap across the office, seized Roshevsky-Feldkamp by the neck and hammered his forehead against the desk. Her free hand covered the secret policeman. “Vere is Ray Ballantyne?” she repeated.

“I am glad you came,” said Urushkidan. “Shall we leave this uncivilised place?”

Two armed soldiers appeared in the doorway. Dyann brought her gun around. The silenced weapon hissed. One of the men tumbled with a hole drilled in his forehead. She was rather proud of herself, she'd never had much chance for target practice.

There wasn't much time for self-praise, though. The other man already had his rifle up. Dyann dropped behind the desk, and the stream of slugs ripped through the wood after her. She bunched her muscles and threw the desk. There was a crash of splintering wood as it knocked down the Jovian.

The secret police officer had his gun out and trained on her. Urushkidan snaked forth a tentacle and pulled him off his feet. Dyann stopped to slug Roshevsky-Feldkamp before she got her hands about the policeman's throat.

"Vere is Ray Ballantyne?" she growled.

"Come on, come on, we habe to get out of here!" wailed the Martian.

"Vich is the vay out?"

"I'll show you—come along, quick—tis way."

Dyann frogmarched the Jovian cop toward a rear door. Booted feet were thudding up the stairs toward the office. Urushkidan held a pistol in each hand, gingerly as if he feared they would blow up. He led the way into a hall and down a long, echoing ramp.

"Hurry, hurry," he gasped. "Shalmuannusar, we habe te whole Jobian Confederacy after us!"

A voice bellowed atop the ramp and a slug whanged after them. Dyann whirled and fired back, using the helplessly pinioned captive as a shield. They retreated slowly, rounding a corner and going on down a long slope to a heavy steel door.

Urushkidan opened it, slamming it frantically as they went through. They were in a hangar where several small spaceships rested on their rail-mouthed cradles. Mechanics stared at the trio.

"Quick!" snapped the Martian. "Te laboratory ships!"

The prisoner opened his mouth. Dyann laid a friendly hand on the back of his neck and squeezed a little.

"Yes, yes, the laboratory ship—practice maneuvers—hurry!" the man said.

"Aye, sir! At once!" A life time's training in blind obedience spoke there, behind the puzzled faces.

A teardrop-shaped rocket was trundled forth. Dyann looked nervously back at the door. Pursuit was most likely playing it safe, posting men outside while others went around to block all remaining exits. Once that was done they'd close in.

"I'll warm up the engine for you, sir," said one of the mechanics.

"Ve'll take it now," said Dyann.

"But you can't! You'll carbon the tubes—be likely to crash—"

"I said now." Dyann propelled her captive ahead of her through the airlock and Urushkidan crawled after. The valves clanged shut after them.

"I hope you can fly vun of these thins," said Dyann, lashing the secret policeman to a recoil chair.

"I hope so too," said Urushkidan.

Dyann stood over her prisoner. "Vere is Ray Ballantyne?" she asked. "The Earthman who vas arrested off the liner a few days ago."

"I don't know," he gasped.

Dyann drew her knife, smiling nastily.

"Camp Muellenhoff, you savage! Outside the city, to the north. You'll never make it. You'll kill us all."

The cradle rumbled forward to the hangar airlock. Urushkidan took the pilot chair and strapped himself in and relit his pipe with nervous boneless fingers. Dyann whistled tunelessly between her teeth. It was dark in the airlock chamber as the pumps evacuated it.

"Why bother wit tis Ballantyne?" asked the Martian. "What claim has he on us? It will need all our luck and my genius for us to escape with our own lives."

"We need his luck too, maybe," said Dyann shortly.

The outer valve swung open and they trundled over the rails to the surface of Ganymede. Behind them, the dome covering the city rose against a background of saw-toothed mountains and dark, faintly starlit sky. A dwarfed sun lit the spaceport field with pale cold luminance. There were not many vessels in sight, no liner or freighter was in and the military ports were elsewhere. One lean black patrol ship stood not far off.

"They vill be out after us soon," said Dyann. "Vat can you do about that boat there, huh?"

“We will see,” said Urushkidan. He touched studs, levers, and buttons. The engines thuttered and the little vessel shook.

“Let’s go!”

The rocket stood on her tail and climbed for the sky. Urushkidan brought her around, the gyros screaming at his clumsy management, and lowered her on her jets directly above the patrol ship. An atom-driven ion-blast is not good for a patrol ship.

“Now,” said Dyann as they took off again, “you, my policeman friend, vill call this Camp Muellenhoff and tell them to release Ballantyne to us. If you do that, ve vill set you down somevere. If not—vell—” She tested the edge of her knife on his ear. “You may still be a police, but you vill not be very alive.”

“You can’t escape,” said the Jovian with a certain hollow lack of conviction. “You’d better throw yourself on the Leader’s mercy.”

Dyann knocked a few teeth loose.

“You savage!” he gasped. “You cruel, murdering—”

“I tought you Jobians were always talking about te glories of war and te ruthless superman,” snickered Urushkidan. “Also destiny and tings. Better call te camp as she says.”

A few minutes later the ship lowered into the walled enclosure of Camp Muellenhoff. It was a dreary place, metal barracks lying harsh under the guns of the watchtowers, spacesuited prisoners clumping to work through the thin chill air of Ganymede. A detail hurried up and shoved an unarmed, suited form into the airlock.

Their leader’s voice rattled over his helmet radio of the ship’s telereceiver, “Major, sir, are you sure they want this man in the city now? We just got an alert to look out for a couple of escaped desperadoes.”

Dyann slammed the outer valve in his face by the remote-control lever and the little ship stood on her tail again and flamed skyward.

A somewhat battered Ray Ballantyne crawled out of his suit and blinked at them. It had been a rough two or three days, though they hadn’t gone very far with him. The truth drugs must have satisfied them that he was not an intentional spy, and thereafter they had simply held him until orders for his execution should come. He swayed into Dyann’s arms.

“Oh, my poor Ray,” she murmured. “My poor, poor little Earthlin’.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” he began weakly.

“Just lie still, I will take care of you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of. Lemme go!”

They sat down again on a remote mountaintop, gave the policeman a spacesuit, and kicked him out of the ship. He was still wailing about barbarous and inhuman treatment. He said something too about wild beasts.

“And now,” said Dyann, “let us get back to Earth before the Yovians find us.”

“This crate’ll never make Earth,” said Ray. “I’ve flown ’em—let me at those controls, Urushkidan.”

They heard it as well, the ominous sizzling and knocking from the engine-room shields, and felt the ship tremble with it.

“Is tat te carboning te man was talking about?” asked the Martian innocently.

“I’m—afraid—so.” Ray shook his head. “We’ll have to land somewhere before the rockets quit altogether. Then it’ll take a week for the radioactivity to get low enough so we can go back there and clean them out.”

“And all the Yovian army, navy, police, and fire department out chasin us by now,” said Dyann. Her clear brow wrinkled. “I fear that Ormun is offended because I left her amon’ the heathen back there. I am afraid our luck is runnin’ low.”

“And,” said Ray bleakly, “how!”

IV

They used the last sputter of flame to sit down in the wildest and remotest valley they could find. Looking out the port, Ray wondered if they hadn’t perhaps overdone it.

Beyond the little ship there was a stretch of seamed and gullied stone, a rough craggy waste sloping up toward the fang-peaked razorback ridge of the hills, weird flickering play of shadows between the looming boulders as the thin wind blew a veil of snow across the deep greenish-blue sky. Jupiter was an amber scimitar low on the northern horizon. They were near the south pole with a sprawling panorama of sharp stars around it fading out

near the tiny sun. Snow lay heaped in drifts beyond the wind-scoured rocks, and the far green blink of glaciers reflected the pale heatless sunlight from the hills.

Snow—well, yes, thought Ray, it was snow of a sort. All the water on Ganymede was of course solid ice. So were the carbon dioxide and ammonia. But the temperature often dropped low enough to precipitate methane or nitrogen. The moon's atmosphere what there was of it, consisted mostly of argon, nitrogen, methane, and vapors of the frozen substances—not especially breathable.

The colonists used the standard green-plant air-renewal system, obtaining extra oxygen from its compounds and water from the ice-strata, and heated their dwellings from the central atomic-energy units. Ray hoped the ship's equipment was in working order.

There was native life out there, a few scrubby gray-leaved thickets, a frightened leaper bounding kangaroo-like into the hills. The biochemistry of Ganymede was a weird and wonderful thing which human scientists were still a long way from understanding, but it involved substances capable of absorbing heat energy directly and releasing it as needed. The carnivores lacked the secretions, obtaining them from their prey, and had given the colonists a lot of trouble because of their fondness for the generous supply of heat a human necessarily carried around with him.

“And now what do we do?” asked Ray.

Dyann's eyes lit with a hopeful gleam. “Hunt monsters?” she suggested.

“Bah!” Urushkidan snaked his way to the small desk bolted to the cabin floor and extracted paper and pencil from the drawers. “I shall develop an interesting aspect of unified field theory. Do not disturb me.”

Ray looked around the ship. Behind the forward cabin, which held bunks and a little cooking outfit as well as the controls, there was a larger space cluttered with assorted physical apparatus. Beyond that, he supposed, were the gyros, airplant, and misbehaving engines. “Is this a laboratory boat?” he inquired.

“Yes,” said the Martian. “I chose it because they are always kept ready to go out for gibing field tests to new apparatus. Get me a table of elliptic integrals, please.”

“Look,” said Ray, “we've got to do something. The Jovians will be combing this damned moon for us, and it's not so big that we have much

chance of their not finding us before we can clean out those tubes. We've got to prepare an escape."

"How?" Urushkidan fixed him with a bespectacled stare.

"Well—uh—well—maybe get ready to flee into the hills."

"How long would we last out tere?" The Martian turned back to his work and blew a cloud of smoke. "No, I will devote myself to the beauties of pure mathematics."

"But if they catch us, they'll kill us!"

"They won't kill me," said Urushkidan smugly. "I am too valuable."

"Come on, Ray," said Dyann. "Let's go monster-huntin."

"Waaah!" The Earthman blew up, jumping with rage. In the low gravity, his leap cracked his head against the ceiling.

"Oh, my poor Ray!" Dyann folded him in a bear's embrace.

"Let me go! Damn it, I want to live if you don't!"

"Be serene," advised Urushkidan. "Look at it from the aspect of eternity. You are one of the lower animals and your life is of no importance."

"You octopus! You conceited windbag! If I needed any proof that Martians are inferior, you'd be it."

"Temper, temper!" Urushkidan wagged a flexible finger at Ray. "Be objective, my friend, and if your philosophy is so deficient that it will not prove *a priori* that Martians are always right—by definition—then consider the facts. Martians are beautiful. Martians have an old and peaceful civilization. Even physically, we are superior—we can live under Earth conditions but I dare you to go out on Mars without a spacesuit. I double-dog dare you."

"Martians," gritted Ray, "didn't come to Earth. Earthmen came to Mars."

"Certainly. We had no reason to visit Earth, but you, of course, came to Mars to admire our beauty and wisdom. Now please fetch me that table of integrals."

"There is nothing we can do to help ourselves," said Dyann, "so we might as well go huntin. Afterward we can make love."

"Oh, no!" Ray grunted. "If I had that damn interstellar drive I'd get out of this hole so fast that—that—that—"

"Yes?" asked Dyann.

"Gods of Pluto!" whispered the man. "That's it. *That's it!*"

“Get me tat table!” screamed Urushkidan.

“The drive—the faster-than-light drive—” Ray did a jig, bouncing from floor to wall to ceiling. “We’ve got a shipful of equipment, we’ve got the System’s only authority on the subject, we’ll build ourselves a faster-than-light engine!”

Urushkidan grumbled his way back into the lab. “I’ll get it myself, ten,” he muttered. “See if I care.”

“The engine—the engine—Dyann, we can escape!” Ray grabbed her by the arms and tried to shake her. “We can go home!”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You vant to leave me,” she accused. “You vant to get rid of me.”

“No, no, no, I want to save all our lives. Come on, give me a hand, we’ve got some heavy stuff to move around.”

Dyann shook her head, pouting. “No,” she said. “You don’t love me. I won’t help you.”

“Oh, Lord! Look, Dyann, I love you, I adore you, I worship at your feet. But give me a hand.”

Dyann brightened considerably, but said only, “Prove it.”

Ray kissed her. She kissed back and he yelled as his ribs began to give way.

“Yowp! Some other time, honey. I want only to save your life, don’t you see?”

“Some other time,” said Dyann firmly, “is not now. Come here, you.”

“Stop tat noise!” yelled Urushkidan, and slammed the laboratory door.

“Ve will honeymoon on Varann,” sighed Dyann happily. “You shall ride to battle at my side.”

Much later the aroma of coffee drew Urushkidan back into the forward cabin. A disheveled and weary-looking Ray Ballantyne was puttering around the hotplate while Dyann sat polishing her sword and humming to herself.

“Now,” said Ray, turning with what seemed like relief to the Martian, “just how does this new drive of yours work?”

“It is not a dribe and it does not work—it is a structure of pure matematics,” said Urushkidan. “Anyway, te teory is beyond te comprehension of anybody but myself. Gibe me some coffee.”

“But you must have an idea how it would work in practice.”

“Oh, no doubt if I wanted to take te time I could debise someting. But I am engaged in debeloping a new teory of cosmic origins.” Urushkidan slurped coffee into himself.

“We’ve got to build it and escape.”

“I told you you are of neiter beauty nor importance. Why should I take time wit you?”

“But look, if the Jovians capture you they’ll force you to build it for them. They have ways. And then they’ll overrun Mars along with all the other planets. The only thing that’s held them back so far is the difficulty of interplanetary logistics. But when you have ships that can cross the orbit of Pluto in a matter of hours or minutes that isn’t a problem any longer.”

“Tat would be unfortunate, yes. But I am in te midst of a bery new and important train of tought. It would be more unfortunate if tat were lost tan if a few ephemeral Jobians conquered te System. Tey wouldn’t last a tousand years, but a genius like me is born once in a million.”

Dyann hefted her sword. “Do as Ray says,” she advised.

“You dare not hurt me,” said Urushkidan with a smug expression, “or you will neber get away.”

He went over to the desk and began investigating the drawers again.

“Where do tey keep teir tobacco? I cannot work witout my pipe.”

“Jovians,” said Ray glumly, “don’t smoke. They consider it a degenerate habit.”

“What?” The Martian’s howl rattled the coffeepot on the hotplate. “No tobacco?”

“Only your own supply, back in Ganymede City, and I daresay the Jovians have confiscated and destroyed it by now. That puts the nearest cigar store somewhere in the Asteroid Belt.”

“Oh, no! Te new cosmology ruined by tobacco shortage.” Urushkidan stood thinking a moment, then came to a sudden decision. “Tere is no help for it. If te nearest tobacco is millions of miles away we must build te faster-tan-light engine at once.”

Ray made no attempt to follow the Martian’s long-winded equations in detail. What he was interested in was making use of them, and he proceeded

with slashing approximations that brought screams of almost physical agony from Urushkidan.

Essentially, though, he recognized that the scientist's achievement lay in making what seemed to be a final correlation of relativity and wave mechanics, something which even the Goldfarb-Olson formulas had not fully reached.

Relativity deals with solid bodies moving at definite velocities which cannot exceed that of light, but in wave mechanics the particle becomes a weird and shadowy psi function and is only probably where it is. In the latter theory, point-to-point transitions are not velocities but shifts in the node of a complex wave. It turned out that the electronic wave velocity—which, unlike the group velocity, is not limited by the speed of light—could be imparted to matter under the right conditions, so that the most probable position of the electron went from point to point at a bewildering rate. The trick was to create the right conditions.

“A field of nuclear space-strain is set up by the circuit, and the ship, reacting against the entire mass of the universe, moves without need of rockets—right?” asked the Earthman.

“Wrong,” said Urushkidan.

“Well, we'll build it anyway,” said Ray. “Here, Dyann, bring that generator over this way, will you?”

“I vant to go monster-huntin,” she sulked.

“Bring—it—over, you lummo!”

Dyann glared, but stooped over the massive machine and, between Ganymedean gravity and Varannian muscles, staggered across the floor with it. Ray was checking circuits on the oscilloscope. Urushkidan sat grumbling about heat and humidity and fanning himself with his ears. The lab was a mess of tubes, condensers, rheostats, and tangled wire.

“I'm stuck,” wailed Ray. “I need a resistor having so-and-so many ohms along with such-and-such a capacitance. Find me one, quick.”

“If you would specify your units more precisely—” began Urushkidan huffily.

Ray pawed through the litter on the floor, putting one object after another into his testing circuit, glancing at the meters, and throwing it across the room. “It's vital,” he said.

“Vill this do, maybe?” asked Dyann innocently, holding out the ship's one and only frying pan.

“Get out!” screamed Ray.

“I go monster-huntin,” she pouted.

Absentmindedly, Ray tested the frying pan. It was nearly right. By Luna, if he sawed off the handle—

“Hey!” yelled Urushkidan.

“I don’t like the thought of eating cold beans, cold canned meat, and raw eggs any better than you,” said Ray. “But damn it, we’ve got to get out of here.” He soldered the emasculated pan into his circuit. “Starward the course of human empire,” he muttered viciously.

“Martian empire,” corrected Urushkidan.

“It’ll be Jovian empire if we don’t clear out of here. Okay, big brain, what comes next?”

“How should I know? How can you expect me to tink in tis foul tick air, and witout tobacco?” Urushkidan turned his back. Dyann clumped in, spacesuited, sword in one hand and rifle in the other. “I saw monsters out there,” she said. “I’m goin out to kill them.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” muttered Ray without looking up from his slide rule. “Urushkidan, you’ve got to calculate the resonant psi function for me.”

“Won’t,” said the Martian.

“By Heaven, you snake-legged bagpipe, I’m the captain here and you’ll do as I say.”

“Up your rectifier.” Urushkidan was emptying his ash tray in search of tobacco shreds.

The airlock clanged behind Dyann. “I’ll be damned,” murmured Ray. “She really is going out after them.”

“It is a good idea,” said Urushkidan, a trifle more amiably. “Tey habe sensed te radiations of our ship and are probably coming to crack it open.”

“Oh, well, if that’s all—*Huh?*” Ray sprang to the nearest port and looked out.

“Gannydragons,” he groaned. “I thought they’d been exterminated.”

“Tose two don’t seem to know it,” said Urushkidan uneasily. “All right, I’ll calculate your function for you.”

There were two of the monsters moving toward the boat. They looked like thirty feet of long-legged alligator, but the claws and beaks had ripped metal

in earlier days of colonization. Dyann lifted her rifle and fired.

A dragon screamed, thin and faint in the wispy atmosphere, and turned his head and snapped. Dyann laughed and bounded closer. Another shot and another. . . .

Something hit her and the gun flew from her hand. The dragon's tail smote again and Dyann soared skyward. As she hit the ground the two monsters leaped for her.

"Ha, Ormun!" she yelled, shaking her ringing head till the ruddy hair flew within the helmet. She crouched low and then sprang.

Up—over the fanged head—striking down with her sword as she went by. The monster whirled after her, greenish blood streaming from the cut and freezing.

Dyann backed against a looming rock, spread her feet and lifted the sword. The first dragon struck at her, mouth agape. Dyann hewed out again, the sword a leaping blaze of steel, the blow smashing home and exploding its force back into her own muscles. The dragon's head sprang from the neck. She rolled under the lashing claws and tail to get free. The headless body struck the other dragon which promptly began to fight it.

Dyann circled warily about the struggle, breathing hard. The live dragon trampled its opponent underfoot, looked around, and charged her. The ground shuddered under its galloping mass. Dyann turned and fled.

The dragon roared hollowly as she went up the long slope of the nearest hill. She saw a high crag and scrambled to its top, the dragon rampaging below her.

"Nyaaaah!" She thumbed her faceplate. "Come and get me."

The monster's dim brain finally decided that the ship was bigger and easier prey. Turning, it lumbered down the hillside. Dyann launched herself into the air and landed astride its neck.

The dragon hooted and snapped after her. She climbed higher, grabbed its horn with one gauntleted hand, and hung on for her life. The steed began to run.

Hoo, bang, away over the hills with the moonscape blurring in speed. Wind shrieked thinly about Dyann's helmet. She bounced off her seat and came down again, a landslide rumbled behind her. The dragon zoomed up the ridge, leaped from a bluff, and started across the cratered plain beyond. Dyann dragged at the horn, turning its head, fighting the monster into a circular stampede. "Ha, Ormun!" she yelled. "Ha, Kathantuma!"

In an hour or so the dragon stopped and stood gasping. Dyann slid stiffly to the ground, whirled her sword over her head, and decapitated the monster. Then she skipped home, laughing.

“Dyann!” cried Ray as she came through the airlock. “Dyann, we thought you were dead—”

“Oh, it was fun,” she grinned. “Fix me a sandwich.” She sat down, got up rather quickly, and opened her arms to Ray. He retreated nervously toward the lab. Urushkidan snickered and slammed the door in his face.

V

The eighty-six hour day of Ganymede drew to a close. Jupiter was at the half now, a banded amber giant in a sky of thronging wintry stars. Ray wiped his grimy hands and sighed.

“Done,” he said, looking fondly at the haywired mess filling half the lab and reaching back toward the engines. “We’ve done it—we’ve conquered the stars.”

“My little Earthlin’ is so clever,” simpered Dyann.

“I am horribly afraid,” said Urushkidan, “that this minor achievement of mine will eclipse my true accomplishments in the popular mind. Oh, well.” He shrugged. “I can always use the money.”

“Umm, yeah, I never thought of that,” said Ray. “I’m safe enough from Vanbrugh now—you don’t arrest the man who’s given Earth the Galaxy—but by gosh, there’s a fortune in this little gadget too.”

“For me, of course, when I have patented it,” said Urushkidan.

“What?” yelped Ray. “You—”

“Certainly. I invented it, didn’t I? I shall patent it too. Tell me, should I charge an exorbitant royalty or would there be more money in mass sales at small price?”

“Look here,” snarled Ray, “I happen to know how this thing is put together too.”

“Do you?” grinned Urushkidan nastily.

“Uh—” Ray looked at the jungle of apparatus and gulped. He had only a few fragmentary drawings. By Einstein, he had no idea how the damned thing worked.

“But we helped you,” he protested feebly.

“When you pay your mules and cows, I may consider gifting you a small percentage,” said Urushkidan loftily.

“You’ve already got more money than you know what to do with, you bloated capitalist. I happen to know you invested your Nobel Prize in mortgages and then foreclosed.”

“And why not? When te royalties on tis engine start coming in, and I get my second Nobel Prize, maybe ten I can afford an occasional cigar. You Earthlings neber reward genius. All tese years I’ve had to smoke tat foul pipe—And tat reminds me, we habe to test tis machine. Where is te nearest tobacco store?”

Ray sighed and gave up. Martians had replaced Scotchmen in the lexicon of thrift, but Urushkidan set some kind of new record.

He sat down in the pilot chair and started the atomic generator on high level conversion. “I hope it works,” he muttered nervously. His fingers moved over the improvised control panel for the star drive. “Hang on, folks, here goes nothing.”

“Nothin,” said Dyann after a long silence, “is correct.”

“Oh, lord! What’s the matter now?” Ray went back to the new engine. Its circuits were alive, tubes glowed and indicators blinked, but the boat sat stolidly where it was.

“I told you not to use tose approximations,” said Urushkidan.

Ray fiddled with the main-drive settings. “It’s like any other gadget,” he complained. “You sweat yourself dry designing it from theory, and then you have to tinker till it works.”

He began changing the positions of resistors and condensers, cutting sections out of the circuit to work on them. Urushkidan shredded a piece of paper, wetted it, and tried to smoke it.

“Ray!” Dyann’s voice came sharp and urgent from the forward cabin. “I saw a rocket flare.”

“Oh, no!” He sprang back to her and peered into the night sky. A long trail of flame arced across it. And another, and another—

“The Jovians,” he groaned. “They’ve found us.”

“They may not see us,” said Dyann hopefully.

“They have metal detectors. We’re done for.”

“Vell, ve can only die vunce. Kiss me, sveetheart.” Dyann folded Ray in one arm while the other reached for her sword.

The patrol rockets went over the horizon, braking, and swam back. Blast-flames spattered off the valley floor and frozen-gas vapors boiled furiously up toward mighty Jupiter.

The boat telescreen blinked its indicator light. Numbly, Ray tuned it in. The lean hard face of Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp sprang into its frame.

“Ah, there you are,” said the Jovian.

“If we surrender,” said Ray, “will you give us safe conduct back to Earth?”

“Certainly not. But you may be allowed to live.”

Urushkidan spoke from the lab. “Ballantyne, I tink te trouble lies in tis square-wave generator. If we doubled te boltage—”

The first patrol ship sizzled to a landing. Roshevsky-Feldkamp leaned forward till his face seemed to project from the screen and Ray had a wild desire to punch its nose. “So you’ve been working on our project.” He said, “Well, so much the more labor spared us.”

Dyann cut loose with a short-range blaster she had located somewhere on the lab ship.

“Urushkidan will die before he surrenders to you,” said Ray belligerently.

“I will do noting of te sort,” said the Martian. Experimentally, he cut the square-wave generator back into the circuit and turned a dial.

The boat lifted off the ground.

“Hey, there,” roared the colonel. “You can’t do that!”

The Jovian soldiers who had been pouring from the grounded ship looked stupidly upward.

“Shell them!” snapped the colonel.

Ray slammed the main star drive switch clear over.

There was no feeling of acceleration. They were suddenly floating weightless and Jupiter whizzed past the forward port.

“Stop!” howled the Jovian.

The engine throbbed and sang, energy pulsing in great waves through its shuddering substance. The stars crawled eerily across the ports.

“Aberration,” gasped Ray. “We’re approaching the speed of light.”

Space swam and blazed with a million million suns. They bunched near the forward port, thinning out toward the rear, as the ship added its fantastic velocity vector to their light-rays. A distorted pale-green globe grew rapidly before the vessel.

“Vat planet is that up ahead?” pointed Dyann.

“I think—” muttered Ray. He looked out the rearward port. “I think it was Neptune.”

“Triumph!” chortled Urushkidan, rubbing his tentacles together. “My teory is confirmed. Not tat it needs confirmation, but now even an Eartman can see tat I am always right. And oh, how tey’ll habe to pay!”

The colors of the stars shifted toward blue in front and red behind. Doppler effect, thought Ray wildly. He was probably seeing by radio waves and gamma rays now. How fast were they going, anyway? He should have thought to install some kind of speed gauge. Several times the velocity of light at least.

“Ha, this is fun,” laughed Dyann.

“Hmmm—we better stop while we can still see the Solar System,” said Ray, and cut the main drive.

The ship kept on going.

“Hey!” screamed the Earthling. “Stop! Whoa!”

“We can’t stop,” said Urushkidan coolly. “We’re in a certain pseudobelocity-state now. Te engine merely accelerates us.”

“Well, how in hell do you brake?” groaned Ray.

“I don’t know. We’ll habe to figure tat out. I tought you knew tis would happen.”

“Now I do.” Ray floated free of his chair, beating his forehead with his fists. “I hope to heaven we can do it before the food runs out.”

Dyann looked at Urushkidan speculatively. “If vorst comes to vorst,” she murmured, “roast Martian—”

“Let’s get busy,” gasped Urushkidan.

It took a week to improvise a braking system. By that time they were no longer very sure where they were.

“This is all my fault,” said Dyann contritely. “If I had brought Ormun along she would have looked after us.”

“One thing that worries me,” said Ray, “is the Jovians. They aren’t fools, and they won’t be sitting on their hands waiting for us to come back and give the star drive to Earth.”

“First,” said Urushkidan snappishly, “there is the problem of finding our sun.”

Ray looked out the port. The ship was braked and, in the normal space-time state of matter, was floating amidst a wilderness of unfamiliar constellations. “It shouldn’t be too hard,” he said thoughtfully. “Look, there are the Magellanic Clouds, I think, and we should be able to locate Rigel or some other bright star. That way we can get a fix and locate ourselves relative to Sol.”

“There are no astronomical tables aboard ship,” pointed out Urushkidan, “and I certainly don’t clutter my brain with mere numerical data.”

“Which star is Rigel?” asked Dyann.

“Why—uh—well—that one—no, it might be that one over there—or perhaps—how should I know?” growled Ray.

“We will simply have to go back the way we came, as nearly as we can judge it,” said Urushkidan.

“Maybe we can find someone who knows,” suggested Dyann.

Ray thought of landing on a planet and asking a winged, three-headed monster, “Pardon me, do you know which way Sol is?” To which the monster would doubtless reply, “Sorry, I’m a stranger here myself.” He chuckled wryly. They’d encountered a difficulty which all the brave futuristic stories about exploring the Galaxy seemed to have overlooked.

They had headed out in the ecliptic plane, very nearly on a line joining the momentary positions of Jupiter and Neptune. That didn’t help much, though, in a boat never meant for interplanetary flight and thus carrying only the ephemerides of the Jovian System. Presumably they had gone in a straight line, so that one of the zodiacal constellations was at their back and should still be recognizable, but the high-velocity distortions of the outside view had precluded anyone’s noticing which stars had been where.

Ray floated over to the port and looked out at the eerie magnificence of unknown space. “If I’d been a Boy Scout,” he lamented, “I might know the constellations. The thing to do is to head back toward any one which looks halfway familiar, since that must be the one which was at our stern. But I

only know Orion and the Big Dipper.” He looked at Urushkidan with accusing eyes. “You’re the great astrophysicist. Can’t you tell one star from another?”

“Certainly not,” said the Martian huffily. “No astrophysicist ever looks at the stars if he can help it.”

“Oh, you want a con—con—star-picture?” asked Dyann innocently.

Ray said, “I mean one we know, as we see the stars from Sol, or from Centauri. You’re nice to look at, honey, but right now I can’t help wishing you Varannians were a little more intellectual.”

“Oh, I know the stars,” said Dyann. “Every noble learns them. Let me see—” She floated around the chamber, from port to port, staring out and muttering to herself. “Oh, yes. There is Kunatha the Hunter-threatened-by-woman-devourin-monster. Not changed much.”

“Huh?” Ray and Urushkidan pushed themselves over beside her. “By gosh,” said the Earthling, “it does look like Virgo, I think, or one of ’em. Dyann, I love you to pieces.”

“Let’s get home quick, then,” she beamed. “I want to be on a planet.” During the outward flight she had been somewhat discomforted by discovering the erotic importance of gravity.

“*You* steer us home?” screeched Urushkidan. “How in Nebukadashatbu do you know the stars?”

“I had to learn them,” she said. “Every noble on Varann has to know—what you call it?—astroloyee. How else could we plan our battles wisely?”

“Astrology?” screamed the Martian. “You are an—an—*astrologer*?”

“Vy, of course. I thought you were too, but it seems like you Solarians are more backward than I supposed. Shall I cast your horoscope?”

“Astrology,” groaned Urushkidan. He looked ill.

“Well,” said Ray helplessly, “I guess it’s up to you to pilot us back, Dyann.”

“Vy, sure.” She jumped into the pilot seat. “Anchors aweigh.”

“Brought home by an astrologer,” groaned Urushkidan. “The ignominy of it all.”

Ray started the new engine. They could accelerate all the way back and use the brake to stop almost instantly—it shouldn’t take long. “All set,” he

called, and the rising note of power thrummed behind his words.

“Giddap!” yelled Dyann. She swung the ship around and slammed the main drive switch home.

Ray looked out at the weirdly distorted heavens. “There should be some way to compensate for that aberration,” he murmured. “A viewplate using photocells, with the electron beam control-fields hooked into the drive circuit—sure. Simple.” He floated back to the lab and began assembling scattered apparatus. In a few hours he emerged with a gadget as uncouth as the engine itself but there was a set of three telescreens which gave clear views in three directions. Dyann smiled and pointed to one of them. “See, now Avalla—the Victorious-warrior-returnin-from-battle-vith-captive-man-slung-across-her-saddle-bow—is taking shape,” she said.

“That,” said Ray, “is Ursa Major. You Varannians have a fantastic imagination.”

A blue-white giant of a sun flamed ahead, prominences seething millions of miles into space. Dyann’s eyes sparkled and she applied a sideways vector to the star drive. “Yippee!” she howled.

“Hey!” screamed the Earthman.

They whizzed past the star, playing tag with the reaching flames while Dyann roared out a Centaurian battle chant. Ray’s subconscious mind spewed forth every prayer he had even known.

“Okay, we are past it,” said Dyann.

“Don’t do such things!” he said weakly.

“Darlin,” said the girl, “I think we should spend our honeymoon flyin’ through space like this.”

The stars blurred past. The Galaxy’s conquerors looked at the splendor of open space and ate cold beans out of a can.

“I think,” said Dyann thoughtfully, “we should go first to Varann.”

“Alpha Centauri?” asked Urushkidan. “Nonsense. We are going back at once to Uttu and civilised society.”

“We may need help at Sol,” said the girl. “We have been gone—how long—about two weeks? Much could have happened in that time.”

“But—but—it’s not practical,” objected Ray.

Dyann grinned cheerfully. “And how will you stop me?”

“Varann—oh, well, I’ve always wanted to see it anyway.”

The Centaurian began casting about, steering by the aspect of the sky. Before many hours, she was slanting in toward a double star with a dim red

dwarf in the background. “This is it,” she said. “This is it.”

“Okay,” answered Ray. “Now tell me how you find a planet.”

“Hmmm—vell—” Dyann scratched her ruddy head.

Ray began to figure it aloud.

“The planets—let me see, now—yeah, they’re in the plane of the two stars. They’d have to be. So if you go out to a point in that plane where Alpha A, your sun, seems of about the right size, and then swing in a circle of that radius, you should come pretty close to Varann. It has a good-sized moon, doesn’t it, and its color is greenish-blue? Yes, we should be able to spot it.”

“You are so clever,” sighed Dyann.

“Hah!” sneered Urushkidan.

At a mere fraction of the velocity of light—Ray thought of the consequences of hitting a planet when going faster than light, and wished he hadn’t—the spaceboat moved around Alpha A. It seemed only minutes before Dyann pointed and cried joyously, “There ve are. There is home. After many years—home!”

“I would still like to know what we are going to do when we get there,” said Urushkidan.

He was not answered. Dyann and Ray were too busy bringing the vessel down into the atmosphere and across the wild surface.

“Kathantuma!” cried the girl. “There is my homeland. See, there is the mountain, old Mother Hastan. There is the city Mayta. Hold on, ve’re goin down!”

VI

Mayta was a huddle of thatch-roofed wooden buildings at the foot of a fantastically spired gray castle, sitting amid the broad fields and forests and rivers of Kathantuma with the mountains shining in the far distance. Dyann set the ship down just outside the town, stood up, and stretched her tigress body with an exultant laugh.

“Home!” she cried. “Gravity!”

“Uh—yeah.” Ray tried to lift his feet. It went slowly, with some strain—half again the pull of Earth. Urushkidan groaned and wheezed his painful way to a chair and collapsed all over it.

“Let’s go!” Dyann snatched up her sword, set the helmet rakishly on her bronze curls, and opened the airlock. When Ray hesitated she reached and yanked him out.

The air was cool and windy, pungent with a million scents of earth and growing things, tall clouds sailing over a high blue heaven, and even the engineer was grateful for it after the stuffiness of the boat. He looked around him. Not far off was a charming rustic cottage. It was like a scene from some forgotten idyll of Earth’s old past.

“Looks good,” he said.

A four-foot arrow hummed past his ear and rang like a gong on the ship’s hull.

“Yowp!” Ray dove for shelter. Another arrow zipped in front of him. He whirled at a storm of contralto curses.

There were half a dozen women pouring from the charming rustic cottage, a battle-scarred older one and five tall young daughters, waving swords and axes and spears. A couple of men peered nervously from the door.

“Ha, Ormun!” yelled Dyann. She lifted her sword and dashed to meet the onslaught. The oldest woman caught the amazon’s blow on a raised shield and her ax clanged off Dyann’s helmet. Dyann staggered, shook her head, and struck out afresh. The others closed in, yelling and jabbing.

Dyann’s sword met the nearest ax halfway and broke across. She stooped, picked the woman off her feet, and whirled her over her head. With a shout, she threw the old she-warrior into two of her nearest daughters, and the trio went down in a roar of metal.

Centaurian hospitality, thought Ray.

A backhanded blow sent him reeling. He looked up to see a yellow-haired girl looming over him. Before he could do more than mutter she had slugged him again and thrown him over one brawny shoulder.

Hoofs clattered down the narrow dirt road. A squad of armored women riding animals reminiscent of Percherons, but horned and red of hide, were charging from the town. They swept into the fight, wielding clubbed lances with fine impartiality, and it broke up in a sullen wave of red-splashed femininity. Nobody, Ray saw from his upside-down position, had been

killed, but there were plenty of slashes and the intent had certainly been there.

The harsh barking language of Kathantuma rose on either side. Finally an understanding seemed to be reached. One of the riders pointed a mailed hand at Ray's captor and snapped an order. The girl protested, was overruled, and tossed him pettishly to the ground. He recovered consciousness in a minute or two.

Dyann picked him up, tenderly. "Poor Ray," she murmured. "Ve play too rough for you here, huh?"

"What was it all about?" he mumbled.

"Oh, these people were mad because we landed in their field, but the queen's riders stopped the fight in time. It is only lawful to kill people on the regular duelling grounds, inside the city limits. We must have law and order, you know."

"I see," said Ray faintly.

It was a large and turbulent crowd which gathered at sunset to hear Dyann speak. She and her companions were on a raised stand in the market square, together with the scarred, arrogant queen and her troop of pikewomen and cavalry. In the guttering red flare of torches, Ray looked down on a surging lake of women, the soldier-peasants of Kathantuma gathered from all the hinterland, brandishing their weapons and beating clangorous shields in lieu of applause. Here and there public entertainers circulated, thinly clad men with flowers twined into their hair and beards, strumming harps and watching with great liquid eyes.

Ray was still not quite sure what the girl's plan was, and by now didn't much care. A combination of the dragging Varannian gravity and the potent Varannian wine made him so sleepy that he could barely focus on the milling crowd. Urushkidan slept the sleep of the just, snoring hideously.

Dyann ended her harangue and the racket of metal and voices shook the surrounding walls. After that there were long-winded arguments which sometimes degenerated into fistfights, until Ray himself dropped off to sleep.

He was shaken awake by Dyann and looked blearily around him. Dawn was streaking the horizon with cold colorless light, and the mob was slowly

and noisily dispersing. He groaned as he stretched his stiffened body and tried to brush the dew off his clothes.

“The natural life—Hah!” he said miserably, and sneezed.

“It has been decided,” cried the girl. She was still as fresh as the morning, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes ablaze. “They agreed at last, and now the var-vord goes over the land and envoys are bound for Almarro and Kurin to get allies. How soon can ve leave, Ray?”

“Leave?” he asked stupidly. “Leave for where?”

“Vy, for Yupiter, of course!”

“Huh?”

“You are tired, my little bird. Come vith me, and ve shall rest in the castle.”

Ray groaned again.

How do you equip an army of barbarians still in the early Iron Age to cross four and a third light-years of space?

A preliminary question, perhaps is, Do you want to?

Ray emphatically didn't, but he had very little choice in the matter. He was soon given forcibly to understand that men kept their place and did as they were commanded.

He went to Urushkidan and poured out his sorrows. The Martian, after an abortive attempt to steal the spaceship and sneak home, had been given a room in one of the castle towers and was covering large sheets of local parchment with equations. This place, thought Ray, has octopuses in the belfry.

“They want to go to Jupiter and fight the Jovians,” he said.

“What of it?” asked Urushkidan, lighting his pipe. He had found that dried bark could be smoked. “Tey may eben succeed. Primitibes habe often obercome more adbanced and better armed hosts. Read te history of Eart sometime.”

“But they'll take us along.”

“Oh. Oh-oh! Tat is different.” The Martian riffled through his papers. “Let me see, I tink Equations 549 trough 627 indicate—yes, here we are. It is possible to project te same type of dribing beam as we use in te faster-tan-light engine so as to impart a desired belocivity bector to external objects.

Toward or away from you. Or—look here, differentiation of tis equation shows it would be equally simple to break intranuclear bonds by trowing only a certain type of particle into te pseudo-condition. Te atom would ten feed on its own energy.”

Ray looked at him in awe. “You,” he whispered, “have just invented the tractor beam, the pressor beam, the disintegrator, and the all-purpose, all-fuel atomic motor.”

“I habe? Is tere money in tem?”

Ray went to work.

The three expeditions from Sol had left a good deal of assorted supplies and equipment behind for the use of later arrivals. Most of this had been stored in a local temple, and sacrifices were made yearly to the digital computer. It took an involved theological argument to obtain the stuff—the point that Ormun had to be rescued was conceded to be a good one, but it wasn’t till the high priestess suddenly disappeared that the material was forthcoming.

The Ballantyne-Urushkidan circuits were simple things, once you knew how to make them. With the help of a few tolerably skilled smiths, Ray hammered out enough of the new-type atomic generators to lift the fleet off Varann and across to Sol. He built the drive-circuits carefully, designing them to burn out after landing again on Varann. The prospect of the amazon planet’s people flitting whither they pleased in the Galaxy was not one any sane man could cheerfully contemplate.

The spaceships were mere hulks of varnished and greased hardwood, equipped with airlocks and slapped together by the carpenters of Mayta in a few weeks. The crossing would be made so rapidly that heating and air plants wouldn’t be needed. Once the haywired star drives were installed, a pilot sketchily trained for each vessel, and every hull crammed with a couple of hundred yelling warriors, the fleet was ready to go.

They poured in, ten times as many as the thirty ships could hold, riding and hiking from the farthest of the continent’s little kingdoms to be in on the most glorious piracy of their dreams. Only Dyann cared much about Ormun, who was after all merely her personal joss, and only Ray gave a good damn about the menace of Jupiter. The rest came to fight and steal and see new countries. They were especially eager to kidnap husbands—the polyandrous system of Varann worked undue hardships on many women,

and Dyann shrewdly gave preference to the unmarried in choosing her followers.

As to the practicability of the whole insane idea—Ray didn't dare think about it.

Three hectic months after his arrival at Centauri, the barbarian fleet left for Sol.

Jupiter swam enormously in the forward ports, diademed with the bitter glory of open space, growing and growing as the ship rushed closer. Ray pushed his way through the restless crowd of armed women that jammed the boat. "Dyann," he pleaded, "couldn't I at least call up Earth and find out what's happened?"

"Vy, I suppose so," she said, not taking her eyes off the swelling giant before them. "But be quick, please."

The human fiddled with the telescreen. Three months ago the notion of calling over nearly half a billion miles with that undersized thing would have been merely ridiculous. But that was another byproduct of Urushkidan's theory. You used an electron wave with unlimited velocity as a carrier beam for your radio photons. It induced a similar effect in the other transmitter. No distance diminution. No time lag. Anyway, not within the limits of anything so small as the Solar System. Ray got the standard wavelength of the U.N. public relations office, the only one which he could call freely without going through a lot of red tape.

A blurred face looked out at him. He hadn't refined his circuits to the point of eliminating distortion, and the U.N. official resembled something seen through ten feet of rippled water—at least, his image did. But the voice was clear enough. "Who is this, please?"

"Ray Ballantyne, returning from Alpha Centauri on the first faster-than-light spaceship. Calling from the vicinity of Jupiter."

"This is no time for joking. Who the devil are you and what do you want? Please report."

"I want to give the U.N. Patrol the secret of faster-than-light travel. Stand by to record."

"Hey!" screamed Urushkidan. "I neber said I'd gibe—"

Dyann put her foot on his head and pushed him against the floor.

“Oh, well,” he said. “Trough te incredible generosity of myself, ten, te secret is made freely available—”

“Ready to record?” asked Ray tightly.

“I said your humor is in very bad taste,” said the official, and switched off with an ugly scowl.

Ray blinked weakly at the set for a while. Then he tuned in on Earth broadcasts until he caught a news program. Jupiter had declared war a month ago, defeated the U.N. navy in a running battle off Mars, seized bases on Luna, and was threatening atomic bombardment of Earth unless terms were met. “Oh, gosh,” said Ray.

“Such an inbasion could only be launched on a shoestring,” said Urushkidan. “Te U.N. still has bases closer to home, it can cut Jobian supply lines—”

“And meanwhile poor old Earth is reduced to radioactive rubbish,” said Ray gloomily. “And those gruntbrains in charge won’t believe I’ve got the decisive weapon to save them.”

“Would you beliebe such a claim?”

“No, but this is different, damn it.”

“Ganymede dead ahead,” shouted Dyann. “Stand by for action! Get ready to make a landing.”

VII

The flagship-spaceboat slanted into the moon’s atmosphere with a whoop and a holler, blazed across the ragged surface, and lowered outside the great dome of Ganymede City. The clumsy hulks behind her wallowed after at a more leisurely pace.

Lacking spacesuits, the amazons were faced with a certain problem of entry. Dyann hovered over the spaceport and opened her disintegrators full blast. The port disappeared in a sudden tornado of boiling rock and leaping blue fires. When she had sunk a fifty-foot pit, she went down into it, hung

before the side of it facing the city, and narrowed the dis-beam to a drill. In moments she had cut a tunnel through to the lower levels of the city.

Air began streaming out, ghost-white with freezing water vapor, but it would take quite a few minutes for the pressure within to fall dangerously low. Meanwhile Dyann sailed blithely through her tunnel, disintegrated various walls and bulkheads to clear a landing space, and set down amid the ruins of the city's factory level.

"All out!" she cried. "Hai, Kathantuma!"

Ray buckled on his helmet with shaking fingers, drew his sword, and followed her out the airlock, more because of the press of bodies behind than from any desire for glory. In fact, he admitted to himself, he was scared witless. Only Urushkidan stayed behind—the lucky devil.

The rest of the barbarian fleet streamed in one by one, landing clumsily and discharging their clamorous hordes. When the clear area was filled, they landed on top of each other and the armored warriors jumped down in a flash of edged metal. After they were all in, Urushkidan projected a beam and melted the passageway shut against the escape of air and heat. Also, thought Ray sickly, against a quick retreat.

"Hoo, hah!" Dyann's sword shrieked in the air above the helmeted heads of her milling army. She started down the nearest corridor, running and bounding and whooping. The amazons were hard on her heels, and the racket of clashing armor and girlish voices was shattering.

Up a long staircase, five steps at a time, into the hall beyond that, spilling out over a broad plaza—

A machine gun raved and Ray saw three Centaurians tumble to the floor. As he dove for it himself, he looked across the square and into the muzzle of the thing where it sat in one of the branch corridors. There might be only a skeleton garrison left in the city but it had reacted with terrifying swiftness. Ray tried to dig through the metal floorplates.

The air was suddenly thick and whistling. A solid rain of spears and arrows loosed. It didn't leave much of the machine gun crew. One of the amazon officers—they had some notion of firearms—picked up the .50 caliber under one arm. When a squad of Jovian soldiers appeared down the hallway, she held it against her knee and used it tommy-gun style. It worked.

Ray was carried along by the tide. In this weird struggle, modern firearms weren't of decisive use. Boiling through the miles of gloomy

hallways and narrow apartments, the fight was almost entirely hand-to-hand, and that was exactly what the Varannians loved.

Dyann vaulted over a row of bodies and hit a Jovian squad with all her mass and momentum. She trampled two men underfoot while her sword howled in a shearing arc around her. A Jovian grenadier hurled his pineapple in her direction. She snatched it out of the air and tossed it back. Wildly, he caught it and threw it again. Dyann laughed and pitched it once more—very shortly before it went off. Turning, she skewered one Jovian, kicked another in the belly, used her sword's guard as a knuckle-duster against a third, and cut down a fourth in almost the same motion. The squad broke up.

Ray saw an inviting door and scurried for it. There was a bed to hide under. Two Jovian soldiers came in at that moment, fleeing the barbarians.

Ray's helmet and cuirass were as good as a uniform, or he would have shouted "Hail, Wilder!" As it was, the nearest man lunged at him with a bayonet. Ray's sword clattered against the weapon, driving it briefly aside. The Jovian snarled and probed inward, but a bayonet is clumsy compared to a well-handled blade and Ray had done a little fencing. He beat the assault back and thrust under the fellow's guard.

The other man had been circling, trying to get in on the fun. Now he charged. Ray whirled to meet him and tripped on his scabbard. He clanged to the floor and the rushing Jovian tripped on him. Ray got on the man's back, pulled off his helmet, and beat his head against the floor.

Rising, he checked the two rifles. Empty—the Jovians must have used all their clips in an attempt to stem the Centaurian thrust, which explained their choice of cold steel against him. But they had full cartridge belts. Ray reloaded one of the guns and felt better.

Peering carefully out the door, he saw that the fight had moved somewhere else. He started back toward the ships, the safest place he could think of.

As he rounded a corner a tommy-gun blast nearly took his head off. He yelled, dropped to the floor just in time, and let the gun fall from his hands.

A hard boot slammed against his ribs. "Get up!"

He lurched to his feet and stared into the faces of a Jovian detachment, the black-clad elite guard of the dictator himself. Martin Wilder the Great huddled in their midst. Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp was at their head, in charge of Jupiter's home defense, Ray thought wildly, and tried to stretch his arms higher.

"Ballantyne!" The Jovian officer glared at him for a long moment. "So you are responsible."

"I had nothing to do with it, so help me I didn't," protested Ray between the clattering of his teeth.

"You brought these savages in, you and your damned faster-than-light engine. If it weren't for your hostage value, I'd shoot you now. As it is, I'll wait till later. March!"

They went carefully down the glutted hall-street. The Centaurians had been picking up souvenirs from every shop and apartment they passed. "Don't think this will accomplish anything," said Wilder pompously. "You may have driven us from our capital, but we have already called for help from the other cities—from the whole Jovian System. The fleet is on its way."

So the amazons had taken Ganymede City. And now they'd be too busy looting to think about counterattacks from outside. Ray groaned.

"We have to get out of here, sir," said Roshevsky-Feldkamp. "We don't want you to be caught in the fighting."

"No, no, that would never do," said Wilder quickly.

"There is a military airlock this way, with spacesuits. We can get out on the surface."

"I will strike a new medal," chattered the dictator. "The Defense of the Homeland Medal."

"And afterward we will take those ships." Roshevsky-Feldkamp's hard face lit with a terrible glee. "And then the stars are ours."

"Hoo-ah!"

The shout rang down the hallway. Ray saw a Centaurian band, staggering under armloads of assorted plunder, emerge from a side passage. The Jovians brought their rifles up.

Something like an atomic bomb hit the group from the rear. Dyann's war-cry shrieked above the sudden din. She hadn't been altogether a fool.

Ray was shoved back against the wall by the sudden whirlpool of struggling bodies. He ducked as a Varannian sword whistled overhead.

Dyann was wading in among the Jovians, kicking, striking, hewing like a maniac. She split one enemy apart, pitched another into a third, turned around and chopped loose. Her warriors got to work at her side.

A panting Jovian backed up close to Ray, lifting his rifle anew to shoot down the bronze-haired girl. The Earthmen thoughtfully removed the soldier's pistol from its holster and shot him.

"My little hero!" cried Dyann happily. "I love you so much!" She beat down another man's gun and broke his head.

The fight ended. Most of the Jovians had simply been knocked galley-west and submitted in a stunned way to being bound and hoisted to Varannian shoulders. Ray had a glimpse of Martin Wilder the Great and Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp being dragged off by a squat and muscular amazon with a silly smirk on her sword-scarred face. They were destined for her harem, and he couldn't think of two people he'd rather have it happen to.

Only there were those Jovian ships—

Ray had no way, just then, of knowing that Urushkidan had prudently taken the spaceboat outside again and was using its long-range beams to disintegrate the fleet as it came down. He hummed an old Martian work song to himself as he did. There are times when even a philosopher must take measures.

Official banquets are notoriously dull affairs, and the present celebration was no different. That the Luna-based invaders had capitulated on hearing of the disaster at home, that a democratic government with U.N. membership had been set up for a permanently disarmed Jupiter, and that the stars were open to mankind, seemed to call forth only bigger and better platitudes.

Ray Ballantyne, drowsy with food and cocktails, nearly snowblind with white tablecloth, would have fallen asleep except for the fact that his shoes pinched him. So he listened with some surprise to the president of his alma mater telling what an outstanding student he had been. As a matter of fact, he recalled, he'd damn near been expelled.

Urushkidan, crammed into a Martian-designed tuxedo, smoked a thoughtful pipe at his right and made calculations on the tablecloth. Dyann

Korlas, her shining hair braided around a stolen Jovian tiara, looked stunning in a low-cut evening gown on his left. The dagger at her waist was to set a new fashion on Earth, but there had been some confusion when she insisted on having Ormun the Terrible placed in front of her and grace said to the idol. Oh, well.

“—and this dauntless genius of science, whom his university is pleased to honor with a doctorate of law—”

She leaned over and whispered in his ear—it could only be heard for three yards around—“Ray, vat vill you do now?”

“I dunno,” he murmured back. “I want to get a patent on that damn interstellar drive before Urushkidan does, but after that—well—”

“It vas a lot of fun vile it lasted, vasn’t it?” Dyann’s smile was wistful. “But I have been thinking, Ray. I am goin’ back to Varann and carve me out a throne. You—vell, Ray, you are too fine and beautiful for such rough vork. You belon’ here, in the glamor and bright lights, not out vith a lot of coarse unruly vomen who might hurt you.”

“You know,” he said, “I think you’ve got something there.”

“I vill always remember you,” she said sentimentally. “Maybe some day ven ve are old, ve can meet again and bore the youth vith talk of our great days.” She looked around. “If only ve could sneak out of here now and have a farevell party of our own—I know a bar—”

“Hmmm.” Ray stroked his chin. “This calls for tactics. If we could sort of slump down in our chairs, as if we were tired—and Lord, I am!—and gradually sink out of sight, we could crawl under the table and through that door—”

As he crept from the hall, Ray heard Urushkidan, called on for a speech, begin the detailed exposition of his latest theory.

SECURITY

It had been a tough day at the lab, one of those days when nothing seems able to go right. And, of course, it had been precisely the day Hammond, the Efficiency inspector, would choose to stick his nose in. Another mark in his little notebook—and enough marks like that meant a derating, and Control had a habit of sending derated labmen to Venus. That wasn't a criminal punishment, but it amounted to the same thing. Allen Lancaster had no fear of it for himself; the sector chief of a Project was under direct Control jurisdiction rather than Efficiency, and Control was friendly to him. But he'd hate to see young Rogers get it—the boy had been married only a week now.

To top the day off, a report had come to Lancaster's desk from Sector Seven of the Project. Security had finally cleared it for general transmission to sector chiefs—and it was the complete design of an electronic valve on which some of the best men in Lancaster's own division, Sector Thirteen, had been sweating for six months. There went half a year's work down the drain, all for nothing, and Lancaster would have that much less to show at the next Project reckoning.

He had cursed for several minutes straight, drawing the admiring glances of his assistants. It was safe enough for a high-ranking labman to gripe about Security—in fact, it was more or less expected. Scientists had their privileges.

One of these was a private three-room apartment. Another was an extra liquor ration. Tonight, as he came home, Lancaster decided to make a dent in the latter. He'd eaten at the commissary, as usual, but hadn't stayed to talk. All the way home in the tube, he'd been thinking of that whiskey and soda.

Now it sparkled gently in his glass and he sighed, letting a smile crease his lean homely face. He was a tall man, a little stooped, his clothes—

uniform and mufti alike—perpetually rumpled. Solitary by nature, he was still unmarried in spite of the bachelor tax and had only one son. The boy was ten years old now, must be in the Youth Guard; Lancaster wasn't sure, never having seen him.

It was dark outside his windows, but a glow above the walls across the skyway told of the city pulsing and murmuring beyond. He liked the quiet of his evenings alone and had withstood a good deal of personal and official pressure to serve in various patriotic organizations. "Damn it," he had explained, "I'm not doing routine work. I'm on a Project, and I need relaxation of my own choosing."

He selected a tape from his library. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* lilted joyously about him as he found a chair and sat down. Control hadn't gotten around to making approved lists of music yet, though you'd surely never hear Mozart in a public place. Lancaster got a cigar from the humidor and collapsed his long gaunt body across chair and hassock. Smoke, whiskey, good music—they washed his mind clean of worry and frustration; he drifted off in a mist of unformed dreams. Yes, it wasn't such a bad world.

The mail-tube went *ping!* and he opened his eyes, swearing. For a moment he was tempted to let the pneumo-roll lie where it fell, but habit was too strong. He grumbled his way over to the basket and took it out.

The stamp across it jerked his mind to wakefulness. *OfiSal, sEkret, fOr adresE OnlE*—and a Security seal!

After a moment he swallowed his thumping heart. It couldn't be serious, not as far as he personally was concerned anyway. If that had been the case, a squad of monitors would have been at the door. Not this message tube. . . . He broke the seal and unfolded the flimsy with elaborate care. Slowly, he scanned it. Underneath the official letterhead, the words were curt. "*Dis iz A matr uv urjensE and iz top sEkret. destrY Dis letr and Du tUb kontAniN it. tUmOrO, 15 jUn, at 2130 ourz, U wil gO tU Du obzurvatOrE, A nIt klub at 5730 viktOrE strEt, and ask Du hedwAtr fOr A mistr Berg. U wil asUm Dat hE iz an Old frend uv yOrz and Dat Dis iz A sOSal EveniN. Du UZUal penaltEz ar invOkt fOr fAlUr tU komplI.*"

There was no signature. Lancaster stood for a moment, trying to imagine what this might be. There was a brief chill of sweat on his skin. Then he

suppressed his emotions. He had nothing to fear. His record was clean and he wasn't being arrested.

His mind wandered rebelliously off on something that had occurred to him before. Admittedly the new phonetic orthography was more efficient than the old, if less esthetic; but since little of the earlier literature was being reissued in modern spelling not too many books had actually been condemned as subversive—only a few works on history, politics, philosophy, and the like, together with some scientific texts restricted for security reasons; but one by one, the great old writings were sent to forgetfulness.

Well, these were critical times. There wasn't material and energy to spare for irrelevant details. No doubt when complete peace was achieved there would be a renaissance. Meanwhile he, Lancaster, had his Euripides and Goethe and whatever else he liked, or knew where to borrow it.

As for this message, they must want him for something big, maybe something really interesting.

Nevertheless, his evening was ruined.

The Observatory was like most approved recreation spots—large and raucous, selling unrationed food and drink and amusement at uncontrolled prices of which the government took its usual lion's share. The angle in this place was astronomy. The ceiling was a blue haze aglitter with slowly wheeling constellations, and the strippers began with make-believe spacesuits. There were some rather good murals on the walls depicting various stages of the conquest of space. Lancaster was amused at one of them. When he'd been here three years ago, the first landing on Ganymede had shown a group of men unfurling a German flag. It had stuck in his mind, because he happened to know that the first expedition there had actually been Russian. That was all right then, seeing that Germany was an ally at the time. But now that Europe was growing increasingly cold to the idea of an American-dominated world, the Ganymedean pioneers were holding a good safe Stars and Stripes.

Oh, well. You had to keep the masses happy. They couldn't see that their sacrifices and the occasional short wars were necessary to prevent another real smashup like the one seventy-five years ago. Lancaster's annoyance

was directed at the sullen foreign powers and the traitors within his own land. It was because of them that science had to be strait-jacketed by Security regulations.

The headwaiter bowed before him. "I'm looking for a friend," said Lancaster. "A Mr. Berg."

"Yes, sir. This way, please."

Lancaster slouched after him. He'd worn the dress uniform of a Project officer, but he felt that all eyes were on its deplorable sloppiness. The headwaiter conducted him between tables of half-crooked customers—burly black-uniformed Space Guardsmen, army and air officers, richly clad industrialists and union bosses, civilian leaders, their wives and mistresses. The waiters were all Martian slaves, he noticed, their phosphorescent owl-eyes smoldering in the dim blue light.

He was ushered into a curtained booth. There was an auto-dispenser so that those using it need not be interrupted by servants, and an ultrasonic globe on the table was already vibrating to soundproof the region. Lancaster's gaze went to the man sitting there. In spite of being short, he was broad-shouldered and compact in plain gray evening pajamas. His face was round and freckled, almost cherubic, under a shock of sandy hair, but there were merry little devils in his eyes.

"Good evening, Dr. Lancaster," he said. "Please sit down. What'll you have?"

"Thanks, I'll have Scotch and soda." Might as well make this expensive, if the government was footing the bill. And if this—Berg—thought him un-American for drinking an imported beverage, what of it? The scientist lowered himself into the seat opposite his host.

"I'm having the same, as a matter of fact," said Berg mildly. He twirled the dial and slipped a couple of five-dollar coins into the dispenser slot. When the tray was ejected, he sipped his drink appreciatively and looked across the rim of the glass at the other man.

"You're a high-ranking physicist on the Arizona Project, aren't you, Dr. Lancaster?" he asked.

That much was safe to admit. Lancaster nodded.

"What is your work, precisely?"

“You know I can’t tell you anything like that.”

“It’s all right. Here are my credentials.” Berg extended a wallet. Lancaster scanned the cards and handed them back.

“Okay, so you’re in Security,” he said. “I still can’t tell you anything, not without proper clearance.”

Berg chuckled amiably. “Good. I’m glad to see you’re discreet. Too many labmen don’t understand the necessity of secrecy, even between different branches of the same organization.” With a sudden whip-like sharpness: “You didn’t tell anyone about this meeting, did you?”

“No, of course not.” Despite himself, Lancaster was rattled. “That is, a friend asked if I’d care to go out with her tonight, but I said I was meeting someone else.”

“That’s right.” Berg relaxed, smiling. “All right, we may as well get down to business. You’re getting quite an honor, Dr. Lancaster. You’ve been tapped for one of the most important jobs in the Solar System.”

“Eh?” Lancaster’s eyes widened behind the contact lenses. “But no one else has informed me—”

“No one of your acquaintance knows of this. Nor shall they. But tell me, you’ve done work on dielectrics, haven’t you?”

“Yes. It’s been a sort of specialty of mine, in fact. I wrote my thesis on the theory of dielectric polarization and since then—no, that’s classified.”

“M-hm.” Berg took another sip of his drink. “And right now you’re just a cog in a computer-development Project. You see, I do know a few things about you. However, we’ve decided—higher up, you know, in fact on the very top level—to take you off it for the time being and put you on this other job, one concerning your specialty. Furthermore, you won’t be part of a great organizational machine, but very much on your own. The fewer who know of this, the better.”

Lancaster wasn’t sure he liked that. Once the job was done—if he were possessed of all information on it—he might be incarcerated or even shot as a Security risk. Things like that had happened. But there wasn’t much he could do about it.

“Have no fears.” Berg seemed to read his thoughts. “Your reward may be a little delayed for Security reasons, but it will come in due time.” He leaned forward, earnestly. “I repeat, this project is *top secret*. It’s a vital link in something much bigger than you can imagine, and few men below the President even know of it. Therefore, the very fact that you’ve worked on

it—that you’ve done any outside work at all—must remain unknown, even to the chiefs of your Project.”

“Good stunt if you can do it,” shrugged Lancaster. “But I’m hot. Security keeps tabs on everything I do.”

“This is how we’ll work it. You have a furlough coming up in two weeks, don’t you—a three months’ furlough? Where were you going?”

“I thought I’d visit the Southwest. Get in some mountain climbing, see the canyons and Indian ruins and—”

“Yes, yes. Very well. You’ll get your ticket as usual and a reservation at the Tycho Hotel in Phoenix. You’ll go there and, on your first evening, retire early. Alone, I need hardly add. We’ll be waiting for you in your room. There’ll be a very carefully prepared duplicate—surgical disguise, plastic fingerprinting tips, fully educated in your habits, tastes, and mannerisms. He’ll stay behind and carry out your vacation while we smuggle you away. A similar exchange will be affected when you return, you’ll be told exactly how your double spent the summer, and you’ll resume your ordinary life.”

“Ummm—well—” It was too sudden. Lancaster had to hedge. “But look—I’ll be supposedly coming back from an outdoor vacation, with a suntan and well rested. Somebody’s going to get suspicious.”

“There’ll be sun lamps where you’re going, my friend. And I think the chance to work independently on something that really interests you will prove every bit as restful to your nerves as a summer’s travel. I know the scientific mentality.” Berg chuckled. “Yes, indeed.”

The exchange went off so smoothly that it was robbed of all melodrama, though Lancaster had an unexpectedly eerie moment when he confronted his double. It was his own face that looked at him, there in the impersonal hotel room, himself framed against blowing curtains and darkness of night. Then Berg gestured him to follow and they went down a cord ladder hanging from the window sill. A car waited in the alley below and slid into easy motion the instant they had gotten inside.

There was a driver and another man in the front seat, both shadows against the moving blur of street lamps and night. Berg and Lancaster sat in

the rear, and the secret agent chatted all the way. But he said nothing of informational content.

When the highway had taken them well into the loneliness of the desert, the car turned off it, bumped along a miserable dirt track until it had crossed a ridge, and slowed before a giant transcontinental dieselectric truck. A man emerged from its cab, waving an unhurried arm, and the car swung around to the rear of the van. There was a tailgate lowered, forming a ramp; above it, the huge double doors opened on a cavern of blackness. The car slid up the ramp, and the man outside pushed it in after them and closed the doors. Presently the truck got into motion.

“This is *really* secret!” whistled Lancaster. He felt awed and helpless.

“Quite so. Security doesn’t like the government’s right hand to know what its left is doing.” Berg smiled, a dim flash of teeth in his shadowy face. Then he was serious. “It’s necessary, Lancaster. You don’t know how strong and well-organized the subversives are.”

“They—” The physicist closed his mouth. It was true—he hadn’t the faintest notion, really. He followed the news, but in a cursory fashion, without troubling to analyze the meaning of it. Damn it all, he had enough else to think about. Just as well that elections had been suspended and bade fair to continue indefinitely in abeyance. If he, a member of the intelligentsia, wasn’t sufficiently acquainted with the political and military facts of life to make rational decisions, it certainly behooved the ill-educated masses to obey.

“We might as well stretch ourselves,” said the driver. “Long way to go yet.” He climbed out and switched on an overhead light.

The interior of the van was roomy, even allowing for the car. There were bunks, a table and chairs, a small refrigerator and cookstove. The driver, a lean saturnine man who seemed to be forever chewing gum, began to prepare coffee. The other sat down, whistling tunelessly. He was young and powerfully built, but his right arm ended in a prosthetic claw. All of them were dressed in inconspicuous civilian garb.

“Take us about ten hours, maybe,” said Berg. “The spaceship’s way over in Colorado.”

He caught Lancaster's blank stare, and grinned. "Yes, my friend, your lab is out in space. Surprised?"

"Mmm—yeah. I've never been off Earth."

"Sokay. We run at acceleration, you won't be spacesick." Berg drew up a chair, sat down, and tilted it back against a wall. The steady rumble of engines pulsed under his words:

"It's interesting, really, to consider the relationship between government and military technology. The powerful, authoritarian governments have always arisen in such times as the evolution of warfare made a successful fighting machine something elaborate, expensive, and maintainable by professionals only. Like in the Roman Empire. It took years to train a legionnaire and a lot of money to equip an army and keep it in the field. So Rome became autarchic. However, it was not so expensive a proposition that a rebellious general couldn't put some troops up for a while—or he could pay them with plunder. So you did get civil wars. Later, when the Empire had broken up and warfare relied largely on the individual barbarian who brought his own weapons with him, government loosened. It had to—any ruler who got to throwing his weight around too much would have insurrection on his hands. Then as war again became an art—well, you see how it goes. There are other factors, of course, like religion—ideology in general. But by and large, it's worked out the way I explained it. Because there are always people willing to fight when government encroaches on what they consider their liberties, and governments are always going to try to encroach. So the balance struck depends on comparative strength. The American colonists back in 1776 relied on citizen levies and weapons were so cheap and simple that almost anyone could obtain them. Therefore government stayed loose for a long time. But nowadays, who except a government can make atomic bombs and space rockets? So we get absolute states."

Lancaster looked around, feeling the loneliness close in on him. The driver was still clattering the coffee pot. The one-armed man was utterly blank and expressionless. And Berg sat there, smiling, pouring out those damnable cynicisms. Was it some kind of test? Were they probing his loyalty? What kind of reply was expected?

“We’re a democratic nation and you know it,” he said. It came out more feebly than he had thought.

“Oh, well, sure. This is just a state of emergency which has lasted unusually long, seventy-two years to be exact. If we hadn’t lost World War III, and needed a powerful remilitarization to overthrow the Soviet world—but we did.” Berg took out a pack of cigarettes. “Smoke? I was just trying to explain to you why the subversives are so dangerous. They have to be, or they wouldn’t stand any kind of chance. When you set out to upset something as big as the United States government, it’s an all or nothing proposition. They’ve had a long time now to organize, and there’s a huge percentage of malcontents to help them out.”

“Malcontents? Well, look, Berg—I mean, you’re the expert and of course you know your business, but a natural human grumble at conditions doesn’t mean revolutionary sentiments. These aren’t such bad times. People have work, and their needs are supplied. They aren’t hankering to have the Hemispheric Wars back again.”

“The standard revolutionary argument,” said Berg patiently, “is that the rebels aren’t trying to overthrow the nation at all, but simply to restore constitutional and libertarian government. It’s common knowledge that they have help and some subsidies from outside, but it’s contended that these are merely countries tired of a world dominated by an American dictatorship and, being small Latin-American and European states, couldn’t possibly think of conquering us. Surely you’ve seen subversive literature.”

“Well, yes. Can’t help finding their pamphlets. All over the place. And—” Lancaster closed his mouth. No, damned if he was going to admit that he knew three co-workers who listened to rebel propaganda broadcasts. Those were silly, harmless kids—why get them in trouble, maybe get them sent to camp?

“You probably don’t appreciate the hold that kind of argument has on all too many intellectuals—and a lot of the common herd, too,” said Berg. “Naturally you wouldn’t—if your attitude has always been unsympathetic, these people aren’t going to confide their thoughts to you. And then there are bought men, and spies smuggled in, and—oh, I needn’t elaborate. It’s enough to say that we’ve been thoroughly infiltrated, and that most of their

agents have absolutely impeccable dossiers. We can't give neoscop to everybody, you know—Security has to rely on spot checks and the testing of key personnel. Only when organizations get as big as they are today, there's apt to be no real key man, and a few spies strategically placed in the lower echelons can pickup a hell of a lot of information. Then there are the colonists out on the planets—our hold on them has always necessarily been loose, because of transportation and communication difficulties if nothing else. And, as I say, foreign powers. A little country like Switzerland or Denmark or Venezuela can't do much by itself, but an undercover international pooling of resources. . . . Anyway, we have reason to believe in the existence of a large, well financed, well organized underground, with trained fighting men, big secret weapons dumps, and saboteurs ready for the word 'go'—to say nothing of a restless population and any number of covert sympathizers who'd follow if the initial uprising had good results."

"Or bad, depending on whose viewpoint you take," grinned the one-armed man.

Lancaster put his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead on shaking hands. "What has all this got to do with me?" he protested. "I'm not the hero of some cloak-and-dagger spy story. I'm no good at undercover stuff—what do you want of me?"

"It's very simple," Berg replied quietly. "The balance of power is still with the government, because it does have more of the really heavy weapons than any other group can possibly muster. Alphabet bombs, artillery, rockets, armor, spaceships and space missiles. You see? Only research has lately suggested that a new era in warfare is developing—a new weapon as decisive as the Macedonian phalanx, gunpowder, and aircraft were in their day." As Lancaster raised his eyes, he met an almost febrile glitter in Berg's gaze. "And *this* weapon may reverse the trend. It may be the cheap and simple arm that anyone can make and use—the equalizer! So we've got to develop it before the rebels do. They have laboratories of their own, and their skill at stealing our secrets makes it impossible for us to trust the research to a Project in the usual manner. The fewer who knew of this weapon, the better—because in the wrong hands it could mean—Armageddon!"

The run from Earth was short, for the space laboratory wasn't far away at the moment as interplanetary distances go. Lancaster wasn't told anything about its orbit, but guessed that it had a path a million miles or so sunward from Earth and highly tilted with respect to the ecliptic. That made for almost perfect concealment, for what spaceship would normally go much north or south of the region containing the planets?

He was too preoccupied during the journey to estimate orbital figures, anyway. He had seen enough pictures of open space, and some of them had been excellent. But the reality towered unbelievably over all representations. There simply is no way of describing that naked grandeur, and when you have once experienced it you don't want to try. His companions—Berg and the one-armed Jessup, who piloted the spaceboat—respected his need for silence.

The station had been painted nonreflecting black, which complicated temperature control but made accidental observation of its existence almost impossible. It loomed against the cold glory of stars like a pit of ultimate darkness, and Jessup had to guide the boat in with radar. When the last lock had clanged shut behind him and he stood in a narrow metal corridor, shut away from the sky, Lancaster felt a sense of unendurable loss.

It faded, and he grew aware of others watching him. There were half a dozen people, a motley group dressed in any shabby garment they happened to fancy, with no sign of the semi-military discipline of a Project crew. A Martian hovered in the background, and Lancaster didn't notice him at first. Berg introduced the humans casually. There was a stocky gray-haired man named Friedrichs, a lanky space-tanned young chap called Isaacson, a middle-aged woman and her husband by the name of Dufrere, a quiet Oriental who answered to Hwang, and a red-haired woman presented as Karen Marek. These, Berg explained, were the technicians who would be helping Lancaster. This end of the space station was devoted to the labs and factories; for security reasons, Lancaster couldn't be permitted to go elsewhere, but it was hoped he would be comfortable here.

"Ummm—pardon me, aren't you a rather mixed group?" asked the physicist.

"Yes, very," said Berg cheerfully. "The Dufreres are French, Hwang is Chinese, and Karen here is Norwegian though her husband was Czech. Not to mention. . . . There you are, I didn't see you before! Dr. Lancaster, I'd like you to meet Rakkan of Thyle, Mars, a very accomplished labman."

Lancaster gulped, shifting his feet and looking awkwardly at the small gray-feathered body and the beaked owl-face. Rakkan bowed politely, sparing Lancaster the decision of whether or not to shake the clawlike hand. He assumed Rakkan was somebody's slave—but since when did slaves act as social equals?

“But you said this project was top secret!” he blurted.

“Oh, it is,” smiled Karen Marek. She had a husky, pleasant voice, and while she was a little too thin to be really good-looking, she was cast in a fine mold and her eyes were large and gray and lovely. “I assure you, non-Americans are perfectly capable of preserving a secret. More so than most Americans, really—we don't have ties on Earth. No one to blab to.”

“It's not well known today, but the original Manhattan Project that constructed the first atomic bombs had quite an international character,” said Berg. “It even included German, Italian, and Hungarian elements though the United States was at war with those countries.”

“Come along and we'll get you settled in your quarters,” invited Isaacson.

Lancaster followed him down the long hallways, rather dazed with the whole business. He noticed that the space station had a crude, unfinished look, as if it had been hastily thrown together from whatever materials were available. That didn't ring true for a government enterprise, no matter how secret.

Berg seemed to read his thought again. “We've worked under severe handicaps,” he said. “Look, just suppose a lot of valuable material and equipment were ferried into space. If it's an ordinary government deal, you know how many light-years of red tape are involved. Requisitions have to be filled out in triplicate, every last rivet has to be accounted for—there'd simply have been too much chance of a rebel spy getting a lead on us. It was safer all around to use whatever chance materials could be obtained from salvage or through individual purchases on other planets. Ever hear of the *Waikiki*?”

“Ummm—seems so—wasn't she the big freighter that disappeared many years ago?”

“That's the one. A meteor swarm struck her on the way to Venus. Furthermore, one of them shorted out her engine controls, so that she swooped out of the ecliptic plane and fell into an eccentric skew orbit.

When this project was first started, one of our astronomers thought he'd identified the swarm—it has a regular path of its own about the sun, though the orbit is so cockeyed that spaceships hardly ever even see the things. Anyway, knowing the orbit of the meteors and that of the *Waikiki* at the time, he could calculate where the disaster must have taken place—which gave us a lead in searching for the hulk. We found it after a lot of investigation, moved it here, and built the station up around it. Very handy. And completely secret.”

Lancaster had always suspected that Security was a little mad. Now he knew it. Oh, well—

His room was small and austere, but privacy was nice. The lab crew ate in a common refectory. Beyond the edge of their territory, great bulkheads blocked off three-fourths of the space station. Lancaster was sure that many people and several Martians lived there, for in the days that followed he saw any number of strangers appearing and disappearing in the region allowed him. Most of these were workmen of some kind or other, called in to help the lab crew as needed, but all of them were tightlipped. They must have been cautioned not to speak to the guest more than was strictly necessary.

Living was Spartan in the station. It rotated fast enough to give weight, but even on the outer skin that was only one-half Earth gravity. A couple of silent Martians prepared undistinguished meals and did housework in the quarters. There were no films or other organized recreation, though Lancaster was told that the forbidden sector included a good-sized room for athletics.

But the crew he worked with didn't seem to mind. They had their own large collections of books and music wires, which they borrowed from each other. They played chess and poker with savage skill. Conversation was, at first, somewhat restrained in Lancaster's presence, and most of the humor had so little reference to things he knew that he couldn't follow it, but he became aware that they talked with more animation and intelligence than his friends on Earth. Manners were utterly informal, and it wasn't long before even Lancaster was being addressed by his first name; but

cooperation was smooth and there seemed to be none of the intrigue and backbiting of a typical Project crew.

And the work filled their lives. Lancaster was caught up in it the “day” after his arrival, realized at once what it meant, and was plunged into the fascination of it. Berg hadn’t lied; this was big!

The perfect dielectric.

Such, at least, was the aim of the project. It was explained to Lancaster that one Dr. Sophoulis had first seen the possibilities and organized the research. It had gone ahead slowly, hampered by a lack of needed materials and expert personnel. When Sophoulis died, none of his assistants felt capable of carrying on the work at any decent rate of speed. They were all competent in their various specialties, but it takes more than training to do basic research—a certain inborn, intuitive flair is needed. So they had sent to Earth for a new boss—Lancaster.

The physicist scratched his head in puzzlement. It didn’t seem right that something so important should have to take the leavings of technical personnel. Secrecy or not, the most competent men on Earth should have been tapped for this job, and they should have been given everything they needed to carry it through. Then he forgot his bewilderment in the clean chill ecstasy of the work.

Man had been hunting superior dielectrics for a long time now. It was more than a question of finding the perfect electrical insulator, though that would be handy too. What was really important was the sort of condensers made possible by a genuinely good dielectric material. Given that, you could do fantastic things in electronics. Most significant of all was the matter of energy storage. If you could store large amounts of electricity in an accumulator of small volume, without appreciable leakage loss, you could build generators designed to handle average rather than peak load—with resultant savings in cost; you could build electric motors, containing their own energy supply and hence portable—which meant electric automobiles and possibly aircraft; you could use inconveniently located power sources, such as remote waterfalls, or dilute sources like sunlight, to augment—maybe eventually replace—the waning reserves of fuel and fissionable

minerals; you could. . . . Lancaster's mind gave up on all the possibilities opening before him and settled down to the immediate task at hand.

"The original mineral was found on Venus, in the Gorbu-vashtar country," explained Karen Marek. "Here's a sample." She gave him a lump of rough, dense material which glittered in hard rainbow points of light. "It was just a curiosity at first, till somebody thought to test its electrical properties. Those were slightly fantastic. We have all chemical and physical data on this stuff already, of course, as well as an excellent idea of its crystal structure. It's a funny mixture of barium and titanium compounds with some rare earths and—well, read the report for yourself."

Lancaster's eyes skimmed down the sheaf of papers she handed him. "Can't make very good condensers out of this," he objected. "Too brittle—and look how the properties vary with temperature. A practical dielectric has to be stable in every way, at least over the range of conditions you intend to use it in."

She nodded.

"Of course. Anyway, the mineral is very rare on Venus, and you know how tough it is to search for anything in Gorbu-vashtar. What's important is the lead it gave Sophoulis. You see, the dielectric constant of this material isn't constant at all. It *increases* with applied voltage. Look at this curve here."

Lancaster whistled. "What the devil—but that's impossible! That much variability means a crystal structure which is—uh—flexible, damn it! But you've got a brittle substance here—"

According to the accepted theory of dielectricity, this couldn't be. Lancaster realized with a thumping behind his veins that the theory would have to be modified. Rather, this was an altogether different phenomenon from normal insulation.

He supposed some geological freak had formed the mineral. Venus was a strange planet anyway. But that didn't matter. The important thing now was to get to know this process. He went off into a happy mist of quantum mechanics, oscillation theory, and periodic functions of a complex variable.

Karen and Isaacson exchanged a slow smile.

Sophoulis and his people had done heroic work under adverse conditions. A tentative theory of the mechanism involved had already been formulated, and the search had started for a means to duplicate the super-dielectricity in materials otherwise more suitable to man's needs. But as he grew familiar with the place and the job, Lancaster wondered just how adverse the conditions really were.

True, the equipment was old and cranky, much of it haywired together, much of it invented from scratch. But Rakkan the Martian, for all his lack of formal education, was unbelievably clever where it came to making apparatus and making it behave, and Friedrichs was a top-flight designer. The lab had what it needed—wasn't that enough?

The rest of Lancaster's crew were equally good. The Dufresnes were physical chemists *par excellence*, Isaacson a brilliant crystallographer with an unusual brain for mathematics, Hwang an expert on quantum theory and inter-atomic forces, Karen an imaginative experimenter. None of them quite had the synthesizing mentality needed for an overall picture and a fore-vision of the general direction of work—that had been Sophoulis' share, and was now Lancaster's—but they were all cheerful and skilled where it came to detail work and could often make suggestions in a theoretical line.

Then, too, there was no Security snooping about, no petty scramble for recognition and promotion, no red tape. What was more important, Lancaster began to realize, was the personal nature of the whole affair. In a Project, the overall chief set the pattern, and it was followed by his subordinates with increasingly less latitude as you worked down through the lower ranks. You did what you were told, produced results or else, and kept your mouth shut outside your own sector of the Project. You had only the vaguest idea of what actually was being created, and why, and how it fitted into the broad scheme of society.

Hwang and Rakkan commented on that, one "evening" at dinner when they had grown more relaxed in Lancaster's presence. "It was inevitable, I suppose, that scientific research should become corporate," said the Chinese. "So much equipment was needed, and so many specialties had to be coordinated, that the solitary genius with only a few assistants hadn't a chance. Nevertheless, it's a pity. It's destroyed initiative in many promising young men. The top man is no longer a scientist at all—he's an administrator with some technical background. The lower ranks do have to exercise ingenuity, yes, but only along the lines they are ordered to follow.

If some interesting sideline crops up, they can't investigate it. All they can do is submit a memorandum to the chief, and most likely if anything is done it will be carried out by someone else."

"What would you do about it?" shrugged Lancaster. "You just admitted that the old-time genius in a garret can't compete."

"No—but the small team of creative specialists, each with an excellent understanding of the others' fields, and each working in a loose, free-willed cooperation with the rest, can. Indeed, the results will be much better. It was tried once, you may know. The early cybernetics men, back in the last century, worked that way."

"I wish we could co-opt some biologists and psychologists into this," murmured Rakkan. His English was good, though indescribably accented by his vocal apparatus. "The cellular and neural implications of dielectricity look—promising. Maybe later."

"Well," said Lancaster defensively, "a large Project can be made more secure—less chance of leakage."

Hwang said nothing, but he cocked an eyebrow at an almost treasonable angle.

In going through Sophoulis' equations, Lancaster found what he believed was the flaw that was blocking progress. The man had used a simplified quantum mechanics without correction for relativistic effects. That made for neater mathematics but overlooked certain space-time aspects of the psi function. The error was excusable, for Sophoulis had not been familiar with the Belloni matrix, a mathematical tool that brought order into what was otherwise incomprehensible chaos. Belloni's work was still classified information, being too useful, in the design of new alloys, for general consumption. Lancaster went happily to work correcting the equations. But when he was finished, he realized that he had no business showing his results without proper clearance.

He wandered glumly into the lab. Karen was there alone, setting up an apparatus for the next attempt at heat treatment. A smock covered her into shapelessness, and her spectacular hair was bound up in a kerchief, but she still looked good. Lancaster, a shy man, was more susceptible to her than he wanted to be.

“Where’s Berg?” he asked.

“Back on Earth with Jessup,” she told him. “Why?”

“Damn! It holds up the whole business till he returns.” Lancaster explained his difficulty.

Karen laughed. “Oh, that’s all right,” she said in the low voice he liked to hear. “We’ve all been cleared.”

“Not officially. I’ve got to see the papers.”

She glared at him then and stamped her foot. “How stupid can you get without having to be spoon fed?” she snapped. “You’ve seen how much we think of regulations here. Let’s have those equations, Mac.”

“But—blast it, Karen, you don’t appreciate the need for security. Berg explained it to me once—how dangerous the rebels are, and how easily they can steal our secrets. And they’ll stop at nothing. Do you want another Hemispheric War?”

She looked oddly at him, and when she spoke it was softly. “Allen, do you really believe that?”

“Certainly! It’s obvious, isn’t it? Our country is maintaining the peace of the Solar System—once we drop the reins, all hell will run away from us.”

“What’s wrong with setting up a worldwide federation of countries? Most other nations are willing.”

“But that—it’s not *practical*!”

“How do you know? It’s never been tried.”

“Anyway, we can’t decide policy. That’s just not for us.”

“The United States is a democratic country—remember?”

“But—” Lancaster looked away. For a moment he stood unspeaking, and she watched him with grave eyes and said nothing. Then, not really knowing why he did it, he lifted a defiant head. “All right! We’ll go ahead—and if Berg sends us all to camp, don’t blame me.”

“He won’t.” She laughed and clapped his shoulder. “You know, Allen, there are times when I think you’re human after all.”

“Thanks,” he grinned wryly. “How about—uh—how about having a—a b-beer with me now? To celebrate.”

“Why, sure.”

They went down to the shop. A cooler of beer was there, its contents being reckoned as among the essential supplies brought from Earth by Jessup. Lancaster uncapped two bottles, and he and Karen sat down on a bench, swinging their legs and looking over the silent, waiting machines. Most of the station personnel were off duty now, in the arbitrary “night.”

He sighed at last. “I like it here.”

“I’m glad you do, Allen.”

“It’s a funny place, but I like it. The station and all its wacky inhabitants. They’re heterodox as the very devil and would have trouble getting a dog catcher’s job back home, but they’re all refreshing.” Lancaster snapped his fingers. “Say, that’s it! That’s why you’re all out here. The government needs your talents, and you aren’t quite trusted, so you’re put here out of range of spies. Right?”

“Do you have to see a rebel with notebook in hand under every bed?” she asked with a hint of weariness. “The First Amendment hasn’t been repealed yet, they say. Theoretically we’re all entitled to our own opinions.”

“Okay, okay, I won’t argue politics. Tell me about some of the people here, will you? They’re an odd bunch.”

“I can’t tell you much, Allen. That’s where Security does apply. Isaacson is a Martian colonist, you’ve probably guessed that already. Jessup lost his hand in a—a fight with some enemies once. The Dufreres had a son who was killed in the Moroccan incident.” Lancaster remembered that that affair had involved American power used to crush a French spy ring centered in North Africa. Sovereignty had been brushed aside. But damn it, you had to preserve the status quo, for your own survival if nothing else. “Hwang had to go into exile when the Chinese government changed hands a few years back. I—”

“Yes?” he asked when her voice faded out.

“Oh, I might as well tell you. My husband and I lived in America after our marriage. He was a good biotechnician and had a job with one of the big pharmaceutical companies. Only he—went to camp. Later he died or was shot, I don’t know which.” Her words were flat.

“That’s a shame,” he said inadequately.

“The funny part of it is, he wasn’t engaged in treason at all. He was quite satisfied with things as they were—oh, he talked a little, but so does everybody. I imagine some rival or enemy put the finger on him.”

“Those things happen,” said Lancaster. “It’s too bad, but they happen.”

“They’re bound to occur in a police state,” she said. “Sorry. We weren’t going to argue politics, were we?”

“I never said the world was perfect, Karen. Far from it. Only what alternative have we got? Any change is likely to be so dangerous that—well, man can’t afford mistakes.”

“No, he can’t. But I wonder if he isn’t making one right now. Oh, well. Give me another beer.”

They talked on indifferent subjects till Karen said it was her bedtime. Lancaster escorted her to her apartment. She looked at him curiously as he said good night, and then went inside and closed the door. Lancaster had trouble getting to sleep.

The corrected equations provided an adequate theory of super-dielectricity—a theory with tantalizing hints about still other phenomena—and gave the research team a precise idea of what they wanted in the way of crystal structure. Actually, the substance to be formed was only semi-crystalline, with plastic features as well, all interwoven with a grid of carbon-linked atoms. Now the trick was to produce that stuff. Calculation revealed what elements would be needed, and what spatial arrangement—only how did you get the atoms to assume the required configuration and hook up in the right way?

Theory would get you only so far, thereafter it was cut and try. Lancaster rolled up his sleeves with the rest and let Karen take over the leadership—she was the best experimenter. He spent some glorious and all but sleepless weeks, greasy, dirty, living in a jungle of haywired apparatus with a restless slide rule. There were plenty of failures, a lot of heartbreak and profanity, an occasional injury—but they kept going, and they got there.

The day came—or was it the night?—when Karen took a slab of darkly shining substance out of the furnace where it had been heat-aging. Rakkan sawed it into several chunks for testing. It was Lancaster who worked on the electric properties.

He applied voltage till his generator groaned, and watched in awe as meters climbed and climbed without any sign of stopping. He discharged the accumulated energy in a single blue flare that filled the lab with thunder

and ozone. He tested for time lag of an electric signal and wondered wildly if it didn't feel like sleeping on its weary path.

The reports came in, excited yells from one end of the long, cluttered room to the other, exultant whoops and men pounding each other on the back. This was it! This was the treasure at the rainbow's end.

The substance and its properties were physically and chemically stable over a temperature range of hundreds of degrees. The breakdown voltage was up in the millions. The insulation resistance was better than the best known to Earth's science.

The dielectric constant could be varied at will by a simple electric field normal to the applied voltage gradient—a field which could be generated by a couple of dry cells if need be—and ranged from a hundred thousand to about three billion. For all practical purposes, here was the ultimate dielectric.

“We did it!” Friedrichs slapped Lancaster's back till it felt that the ribs must crack. “We have it!”

“Whooppee!” yelled Karen.

Suddenly they had joined hands and were dancing idiotically around the induction furnace. Lancaster clasped Rakkan's talons without caring that it was a Martian. They sang then, sang till heads appeared at the door and the glassware shivered.

Here we go 'round the mulberry bush,
The mulberry bush, the mulberry bush—

It called for a celebration. The end of a Project meant no more than filing a last report and waiting for the next assignment, but they ran things differently out here. Somebody broke out a case of Venusian aguacaliente. Somebody else led the way to a storeroom, tossed its contents into the hall, and festooned it with used computer tape. Rakkan forgot his Martian dignity and fiddled for a square dance, with Isaacson doing the calling. The folk from the other end of the station swarmed in till the place overflowed. It was quite a party.

Hours later, Lancaster was hazily aware of lying stretched on the floor. His head was in Karen's lap and she was stroking his hair. The hardy

survivors were following the Dufreres in French drinking songs, which are the best in the known universe. Rakkan's fiddle wove in and out, a lovely accompaniment to voices that were untrained but made rich and alive by triumph.

*“Sur ma tomb’ je veux qu’on inscrive:
‘Ici-git le roi des buveurs.’
Sur ma tomb’ je veux qu’on inscrive:
‘Ici-git le roi des buveurs.
Ici-git, oui, oui, oui,
Ici-git, non, non, non—’”*

Lancaster knew that he had never been really happy before.

Berg showed up a couple of days later, looking worried. Lancaster's vacation time was almost up. When he heard the news, his eyes snapped gleefully and he pumped the physicist's hand. “Good work, boy!”

“There are things to clean up yet,” said Lancaster, “but it's all detail. Anybody can do it.”

“And the material—what do you call it, anyway?”

Karen grinned. “So far, we've only named it *ffuts*,” she said. “That's ‘stuff’ spelled backward.”

“Okay, okay. It's easy to manufacture?”

“Sure. Now that we know how, anybody can make it in his own home—if he's handy at tinkering apparatus together.”

“Fine, fine! Just what was needed. This is the ticket.” Berg turned back to Lancaster. “Okay, boy, you can pack now. We blast again in a few hours.”

The physicist shuffled his feet. “What are my chances of getting reassigned back here?” he asked. “I've liked it immensely. And now that I know about it anyway—”

“I'll see. I'll see. But remember, this is top secret. You go back to your regular job and don't say a word on this to anyone less than the President—no matter what happens, understand?”

“Of course,” snapped Lancaster, irritated. “I know my duty.”

“Yeah, so you do.” Berg sighed. “So you do.”

Leavetaking was tough for all concerned. They had grown fond of the quiet, bashful man—and as for him, he wondered how he'd get along among normal people. These were his sort. Karen wept openly and kissed him goodbye with a fervor that haunted his dreams afterward. Then she stumbled desolately back to her quarters. Even Berg looked glum.

He regained his cockiness on the trip home, though, and insisted on talking all the way. Lancaster, who wanted to be alone with his thoughts, was annoyed, but you don't insult a Security man.

"You understand the importance of this whole business, and why it has to be secret?" nagged Berg. "I'm not thinking of the scientific and industrial applications, but the military ones."

"Oh, sure. You can make lightning throwers if you want to. And you've overcome the fuel problem. With a few *ffuts* accumulators, charged from any handy power source, you can build fuelless military vehicles, which would simplify your logistics immensely. And some really deadly hand guns could be built—pistols the equivalent of a cannon, almost."

Lancaster's voice was dead. "So what?"

"So plenty! Those are only a few of the applications. If you use your imagination, you can think of dozens more. And the key point is—the *ffuts* and the essential gadgetry using it are cheap to make in quantity, easy to handle—the perfect weapon for the citizen soldier. Or for the rebel! It isn't enough to decide the outcome of a war all by itself, but it may very well be precisely the extra element which will tip the military balance against the government. And I've already discussed what that means."

"Yes, I remember. That's your department, not mine. Just let me forget about it."

"You'd better," said Berg.

In the month after his return, Lancaster lived much as usual. He was scolded a few times for an increasing absentmindedness and a lack of enthusiasm on the Project, but that wasn't too serious. He became more of an introvert than ever. Having some difficulty with getting to sleep, he resorted to soporifics and then, in a savage reaction, to stimulants. But outwardly there was little to show the turmoil within him.

He didn't know what to think. He had always been a loyal citizen—not a fanatic, but loyal—and it wasn't easy for him to question his own basic assumptions. But he had experienced something utterly alien to what he considered normal, and he had found the strangeness more congenial—more human in every way—than the norm. He had breathed a different atmosphere, and it couldn't but seem to him that the air of Earth was tainted. He reread Kipling's *Chant-Pagan* with a new understanding, and began to search into neglected philosophies. He studied the news in detail, and his critical eye soon grew jaundiced—did this editorial or that feature story have any semantic content at all, or was it only a tom-tom beat of loaded connotations? The very statements of fact were subject to doubt—they should be checked against other accounts, or better yet against direct observation; but other accounts were forbidden and there was no chance to see for himself.

He took to reading seditious pamphlets with some care, and listened to a number of underground broadcasts, and tried clumsily to sound out those of his acquaintances whom he suspected of rebellious thoughts. It all had to be done very cautiously, with occasional nightmare moments when he thought he was being spied on; and was it right that a man should be afraid to hear a dissenting opinion?

He wondered what his son was doing. It occurred to him that modern education existed largely to stultify independent thought.

At the same time, he was unable to discard the beliefs of his whole life. Sedition was sedition and treason was treason—you couldn't evade that fact. There were no more wars—plenty of minor clashes, but no real wars. There was a stable economy, and nobody lacked for the essentials. The universal state might be a poor solution to the problems of a time of troubles, but it was nevertheless a solution. Change would be unthinkably dangerous.

Dangerous to whom? To the entrenched powers and their jackals. But the oppressed peoples of Earth had nothing to lose, really, except their lives, and many of them seemed quite willing to sacrifice those. Did the rights of man stop at a full belly, or was there more?

He tried to take refuge in cynicism. After all, he was well off. He was a successful jackal. But that wouldn't work either. He required a more basic philosophy.

One thing that held him back was the thought that if he became a rebel, he would be pitted against his friends—not only those of Earth, but that strange joyous crew out in space. He couldn't see fighting against them.

Then there was the very practical consideration that he hadn't the faintest idea of how to contact the underground even if he wanted to. And he'd make a hell of a poor conspirator.

He was still in an unhappy and undecided whirlpool when the monitors came for him.

They knocked on the door at midnight, as was their custom, and he felt such an utter panic that he could barely make it across the apartment to let them in. The four burly men wavered before his eyes, and there was a roaring and a darkness in his head. They arrested him without ceremony on suspicion of treason, which meant that habeas corpus and even the right of trial didn't apply. Two of them escorted him to a car, the other two stayed to search his dwelling.

At headquarters, he was put in a cell and left to stew for some hours. Then a pair of men in the uniform of the federal police led him to a questioning chamber. He was given a chair and a smiling, soft-voiced man—almost fatherly, with his plump cheeks and white hair—offered him a cigarette and began talking to him.

“Just relax, Dr. Lancaster. This is pretty routine. If you've nothing to hide then you've nothing to fear. Just tell the truth.”

“Of course.” It was a dry whisper.

“Oh, you're thirsty. So sorry. Alec, get Dr. Lancaster a glass of water, will you, please? And by the way, my name is Harris. Let's call this a friendly conference, eh?”

Lancaster drank avidly. Harris' manner was disarming, and the physicist felt more at ease. This was—well, it was just a mistake. Or maybe a simple spot check. Nothing to fear. He wouldn't be sent to camp—not he. Such things happened to other people, not to Allen Lancaster.

“You've been immunized against neoscop?” asked Harris.

“Yes. It's routine for my rank and over, you know. In case we should ever be kidnapped—but why am I telling *you* this?” Lancaster tried to smile. His face felt stiff.

“Hm. Yes. Too bad.”

“Of course, I’ve no objection at all to your using a lie detector on me.”

“Fine, fine.” Harris beamed and gestured to one of the expressionless policemen. A table was wheeled forth, bearing the instrument. “I’m glad you’re so cooperative, Dr. Lancaster. You’ve no idea how much trouble it saves me—and you.”

They ran a few harmless calibrating questions. Then Harris said, still smiling, “And now tell me, Dr. Lancaster. Where were you really this summer?”

Lancaster felt his heart leap into his throat, and knew in a sudden terror that the dials were registering his reaction. “Why—I took my vacation,” he stammered. “I was in the Southwest—”

“Mmmm—the machine doesn’t quite agree with you.” Harris remained impishly cheerful.

“But it’s *true*! You can check back and—”

“There are such things as doubles, you know. Come, come, now, let’s not waste the whole night. We both have many other things to do.”

“I—look.” Lancaster gulped down his panic and tried to speak calmly. “Suppose I am lying. The machine should tell you that I’m not doing so out of disloyalty. There are things I can’t tell anyone without clearance. Like if you asked me about my work on the Project—I can’t tell you that. Why don’t you check through regular Security channels? There was a man named Berg—at least he called himself that. You’ll find that it’s all perfectly okay with Security.”

“You can tell me anything,” said Harris gently.

“I can’t tell you this. Not anybody short of the President.” Lancaster caught himself. “Of course, that’s assuming that I did really spend the summer for something other than my vacation. But—”

Harris sighed. “I was afraid of this. I’m sorry, Lancaster.” He nodded to his policemen. “Go ahead, boys.”

Lancaster kept sliding into unconsciousness. They jolted him back to life with stimulant injections and vigorous slaps and resumed working on him. Now and then they would let up and Harris’ face would swim out of a haze of pain, smiling, friendly, sympathetic, offering him a smoke or a shot of

whiskey. Lancaster sobbed and wanted more than anything else in the world to do as that kindly man asked. But he didn't dare. He knew what happened to those who revealed state secrets.

Finally he was thrown back into his cell and left to himself. When he recovered from his faint—that was a very slow process—he had no idea of how many hours or days had gone by. There was a water tap in the room and he drank thirstily, vomited the liquid up again, and sat with his head in his hands.

So far, he thought dully, they hadn't done too much to him. He was short several teeth, and there were some broken fingers and toes, and maybe a floating kidney. The other bruises, lacerations, and burns would heal all right if they got the chance.

Only they wouldn't.

He wondered vaguely how Security had gotten onto his track. Berg's precautions had been very thorough. So thorough, apparently, that Harris could find no trace of what had really happened that summer, and was going only on suspicion. But what had made him suspicious in the first place? An anonymous tip-off—from whom? Maybe some enemy, some rival on the Project, had chosen this way of getting rid of his sector chief.

In the end, Lancaster thought wearily, he'd tell. Why not do it now? Then—probably—he'd only be shot for betraying Berg's confidence. That would be the easy way out.

No. He'd hang on for awhile yet. There was always a faint chance.

His cell door opened and two guards came in. He was past flinching from them, but he had to be supported on his way to the questioning room.

Harris sat there, still smiling. "How do you do, Dr. Lancaster," he said politely.

"Not so well, thank you." The grin hurt his face.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But really, it's your own fault. You know that."

"I can't tell you anything," said Lancaster. "I'm under Security oath. I can't speak of this to anyone below the President."

Harris looked annoyed. "Don't you think the President has better things to do than come running to every enemy of the state that yaps after him?"

"There's been some mistake, I tell you," pleaded Lancaster.

"I'll say there has. And you're the one that's made it. Go ahead, boys." Harris picked up a magazine and started reading.

After awhile, Lancaster focused his mind on Karen Marek and kept it there. That helped him bear up. If they knew, out in the station, what was happening to him, they—well, they wouldn't forget him, try to pretend they'd never known him, as the little fearful people of Earth did. They'd speak up, and do their damndest to save their friend.

The blows seemed to come from very far away. They didn't do things like this out in the station. Lancaster realized the truth at that moment, but it held no surprise. The most natural thing in the world. And now, of course, he'd never talk.

Maybe.

When he woke up, there was a man before him. The face blurred, seemed to grow to monstrous size and then move out to infinite distances. The voice of Harris had a ripple in it, wavering up and down, up and down.

"All right, Lancaster, here's the President. Since you insist, here he is."

"Go ahead, American," said the man. "Tell me. It's your duty."

"No," said Lancaster.

"But I am the President. You wanted to see me."

"Most likely a double. Prove your identity."

The man who looked like the President sighed and turned away.

Lancaster woke up again lying on a cot. He must have been brought awake by a stimulant, for a white-coated figure was beside him, holding a hypodermic syringe. Harris was there too, looking exasperated.

"Can you talk?" he asked.

"I—yes." Lancaster's voice was a dull croak. He moved his head, feeling the ache of it.

"Look here, fellow," said Harris. "We've been pretty easy with you so far. Nothing has happened to you that can't be patched up. But we're getting impatient now. It's obvious that you're a traitor and hiding something."

Well, yes, thought Lancaster, he was a traitor, by one definition. Only it seemed to him that a man had a right to choose his own loyalties. Having experienced what the police state meant, he would have been untrue to himself if he had yielded to it.

“If you don’t answer my questions in the next session,” said Harris, “we’ll have to start getting really rough.”

Lancaster remained silent. It was too much effort to try to speak.

“Don’t think you’re being heroic,” said Harris. “There’s nothing pretty or even very human about a man under interrogation. You’ve been screaming as loud as anybody.”

Lancaster looked away.

He heard the doctor’s voice. “I’d advice giving him a few days’ rest before starting again, sir.”

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” asked Harris.

“Yes, sir. I was only assigned to this duty a few weeks ago.”

“Well, we don’t put on kid gloves for traitors.”

“That’s not what I mean, sir,” said the doctor. “There are limits to pain beyond which further treatment simply doesn’t register. Also, I’m a little suspicious about this man’s heart. It has a murmur, and questioning puts a terrific strain on it. You wouldn’t want him to die on your hands, would you, sir?”

“Mmmm—no. What do you advise?”

“Just a few days in the hospital, with treatment and rest. It’ll also have a psychological effect as he thinks of what’s waiting for him.”

Harris considered for a moment. “All right. I’ve got enough other things to do anyway.”

“Very good, sir. You won’t regret this.”

Lancaster heard the footsteps retreat into silence. Presently the doctor came around to stand facing him. He was a short, curly-haired man of undistinguished appearance. For a moment they locked eyes, then Lancaster closed his. He wanted to tell the doctor to go away, but it wasn’t worth the trouble.

Later he was put on a stretcher and carried down endless halls to another cell. This one had a hospital look about it, somehow, and the air was sharp with the smell of antiseptics. The doctor came when he was installed in bed and took his arm and slipped a needle into it. “Sleepy time,” he said.

Lancaster drifted away again.

When he woke up, he felt darkness and movement. He looked around, wondering if he had gone blind, and the breath moaned out between his bruised lips. A hand was laid on his shoulder and a voice spoke out of the black.

“It’s okay, fella. Take it easy. There’ll be no more questions.”

It was the doctor’s voice, and the doctor looked nothing at all like Charon, but still Lancaster wondered if he weren’t being ferried over the river of death. There was a thrumming all about him, and he heard a low keening of wind. “Where are we going?” he mumbled.

“Away. You’re in a stratorocket now. Just take it easy.”

Lancaster fell asleep after awhile.

Beyond that there was a drugged, confused period where he was only dimly aware of moving and trying to talk. Shadows floated across his vision, shadows telling him something he couldn’t quite grasp. He followed obediently enough. Full clarity came eventually, and he was lying in a bunk looking up at a metal ceiling. The shivering pulse of rockets trembled in his body. A spaceship?

A spaceship!

He sat up, heart thudding, and looked wildly around. “Hey!” he cried.

The remembered figure of Berg came through the door. “Hullo, Allen,” he said. “How’re you feeling?”

“I—you—” Lancaster sank weakly back to his pillow. He grew aware that he was thoroughly bandaged, splinted, and braced, and that there was no more pain. Not much, anyway.

“I feel fine,” he said.

“Good, good. The doc says you’ll be okay.” Berg sat down on the edge of the bunk. “I can’t stay here long, but the hell with it. We’ll be at the station soon. You deserve to know some things, such as that you’ve been rescued.”

“Well, that’s obvious,” said Lancaster.

“By us. The rebels. The underground. Subversive characters.”

“That’s obvious too. And thanks—” The word was so ridiculously inadequate that Lancaster had to laugh.

“I suppose you’ve guessed most of it already,” said Berg. “We needed a scientist of your caliber for our project. One thing we’re desperately short

of is technical personnel, since the only real education in such lines is to be had on Earth and most graduates find comfortable berths in the existing society. Like you, for instance. So we played a trick on you. We used part of our organization—yes, we have a big one, and it's pretty smart and powerful too—to convince you this was a government job of top secrecy. More damn things can be done in the name of Security—" Berg clicked his tongue. "Everybody you saw at the station was more or less playacting, of course. The whole thing was set up to fool you. We might not have gotten away with it if we'd used some other person, more shrewd about such things, but we'd studied you and knew you for an amiable, unsuspecting guy, too wrapped up in your own work to go witch-smelling."

"I guessed that much," admitted Lancaster. "After I'd been in the cells for awhile. Your way of living and thinking was so different from anything like—"

"Yeah. I'm sorry as hell about that, Allen. We thought you could just return to ordinary life, but somehow—through one of those accidents or malices inevitable in a state where every man spies on his neighbor—you were hauled in. We knew of it at once—yes, we've even infiltrated the secret police—and decided to do something about it. Quite apart from the danger of your betraying what you knew—we could have eliminated that by quietly murdering you—there was the fact that we'd gotten you into this and did owe you something. We managed to get Dr. Pappas transferred to the inquisitory where you were being held. He drugged you, producing a remarkably corpse-like figure, and smuggled you out as simply another one who'd died under questioning. I used my Security papers to get the body for special autopsy instead of the usual immediate cremation. Then we simply drove till we reached the stratorocket we'd arranged to have ready, and you were flown to our spaceboat, and now you're on the way back to the station. You were kept under drugs most of the way to help you rest—they'd knocked you around quite a bit in the inquisitory. So—" Berg shrugged. "Pappas can't go back to Earth now, of course, but we can always use a medic in space, and it was well worth the trouble to rescue you."

"I'm honored," said Lancaster.

"I still feel like hell about what happened to you, though."

"It's all right. I can't say I enjoyed it, but now that I've learned some hard facts—oh, well, forget the painful nature of the lesson. I'll be okay. And I'm going home!"

Jessup supported Lancaster as they entered the space station. His old crew was there waiting to greet him. They were all immensely pleased to have him back, though Karen wept bitterly on his shoulder.

“It’s all right,” he told her. “I’m not in such bad shape as I look. Honest, Karen, I’m all right. And now that I have gotten back, and know where I really belong—damn, but it was worth it!”

She looked at him with eyes as gray as a rainy dawn. “And you are with us?” she whispered. “You’re one of us? Of your own will?”

“Of course I am. Give me a week or two to rest, and I’ll be back in the lab bossing all of you like a Simon Legree. Hell, we’ve just begun on that super-dielectricity. And there are a lot of other things I want to try out, too.”

“It means exile,” she said. “No more blue skies and green valleys and ocean winds. No more going back to Earth.”

“Well, there are other planets, aren’t there? And we’ll go back to Earth in the next decade, I bet. Back to start a new American Revolution and write the Bill of Rights in the sky for all to see.” Lancaster grinned shyly. “I’m not much at making speeches, and I certainly don’t like to listen to them. But I’ve learned the truth and I want to say it out loud. The right of man to be free is the most basic one he’s got, and when he gives that up he finishes by surrendering everything else too. You people are fighting to bring back honesty and liberty and the possibility of progress. I hope nobody here is a fanatic, because fanaticism is exactly what we’re fighting against. I say we, because from now on I’m one of you. That is, if you’re sure you want me.”

He stopped, clumsily. “Okay. Speech ended.”

Karen drew a shivering breath and smiled at him. “And everything else just begun, Allen,” she said. He nodded, feeling too much for words.

“Get to bed with you,” ordered Pappas.

Jessup led Lancaster off, and one by one the others drifted back to their jobs. Finally only Karen and Berg stood by the airlock.

“You keep your beautiful mouth shut, my dear,” said the man.

“Oh, sure.” Karen sighed unhappily. “I wish I’d never learned your scheme. When you explained it to me I wanted to shoot you.”

“You insisted on an explanation,” said Berg defensively. “When Allen was due to go back to Earth, you wanted us to tell him who we were and keep him. But it wouldn’t have worked. I’ve studied his dossier, and he’s not the kind of man to switch loyalties that easily. If we were to have him at all, it could only be with his full consent. And now we’ve got him.”

“It was still a lousy trick,” she said.

“Of course it was. But we had no choice. We *had* to have a first-rate physicist.”

“You know,” she said, “you’re a rat from way back.”

“That I am. And by and large, I enjoy it.” Berg grimaced. “Though I must admit this job leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I like Allen. It was the hardest thing I ever did, tipping off the federal police about him.”

He turned on his heel and walked away, smiling faintly.

SENTIMENT, INC.

I

She was twenty-two years old, fresh out of college, full of life and hope, and all set to conquer the world. Colin Fraser happened to be on vacation on Cape Cod, where she was playing summer stock, and went to more shows than he had planned. It wasn't hard to get an introduction, and before long he and Judy Sanders were seeing a lot of each other.

"Of course," she told him one afternoon on the beach, "my real name is Harkness."

He raised his arm, letting the sand run through his fingers. The beach was big and dazzling white around them, the sea galloped in with a steady roar, and a gull rode the breeze overhead. "What was wrong with it?" he asked. "For a professional monicker, I mean."

She laughed and shook the long hair back over her shoulders. "I wanted to live under the name of Sanders," she explained.

"Oh—oh, yes, of course. Winnie the Pooh." He grinned. "Soulmates, that's what we are." It was about then that he decided he'd been a bachelor long enough.

In the fall she went to New York to begin the upward grind—understudy, walk-on parts, shoestring-theaters, and roles in outright turkeys. Fraser returned to Boston for awhile, but his work suffered, he had to keep dashing off to see her.

By spring she was beginning to get places; she had talent and everybody enjoys looking at a brown-eyed blonde. His weekly proposals were also beginning to show some real progress, and he thought that a month or two of steady siege might finish the campaign. So he took leave from his job

and went down to New York himself. He'd saved up enough money, and was good enough in his work, to afford it; anyway, he was his own boss—consulting engineer, specializing in mathematical analysis.

He got a furnished room in Brooklyn, and filled in his leisure time—as he thought of it—with some special math courses at Columbia. And he had a lot of friends in town, in a curious variety of professions. Next to Judy, he saw most of the physicist Sworsky, who was an entertaining companion though most of his work was too top-secret even to be mentioned. It was a happy period.

There is always a jarring note, to be sure. In this case, it was the fact that Fraser had plenty of competition. He wasn't good-looking himself—a tall gaunt man of twenty-eight, with a dark hatchet face and perpetually-rumpled clothes. But still, Judy saw more of him than of anyone else, and admitted she was seriously considering his proposal and no other.

He called her up once for a date. “Sorry,” she answered. “I'd love to, Colin, but I've already promised tonight. Just so you won't worry, it's Matthew Snyder.”

“Hm—the industrialist?”

“Uh-huh. He asked me in such a way it was hard to refuse. But I don't think you have to be jealous, honey. Bye now.”

Fraser lit his pipe with a certain smugness. Snyder was several times a millionaire, but he was close to sixty, a widower of notably dull conversation. Judy wasn't—Well, no worries, as she'd said. He dropped over to Sworsky's apartment for an evening of chess and bull-shooting.

It was early in May, when the world was turning green again, that Judy called Fraser up. “Hi,” she said breathlessly. “Busy tonight?”

“Well, I was hoping I'd be, if you get what I mean,” he said.

“Look, I want to take you out for a change. Just got some unexpected money and dammit, I want to feel rich for one evening.”

“Hmmm—” He scowled into the phone. “I dunno—”

“Oh, get off it, Galahad. I'll meet you in the Dixie lobby at seven. Okay?” She blew him a kiss over the wires, and hung up before he could argue further. He sighed and shrugged. Why not, if she wanted to?

They were in a little Hungarian restaurant, with a couple of Tzigani strolling about playing for them alone, it seemed, when he asked for details. “Did you get a bonus, or what?”

“No.” She laughed at him over her drink. “I’ve turned guinea pig.”

“I hope you quit *that* job before we’re married!”

“It’s a funny deal,” she said thoughtfully. “It’d interest you. I’ve been out a couple of times with this Snyder, you know, and if anything was needed to drive me into your arms, Colin, it’s his political lectures.”

“Well, bless the Republican Party!” He laid his hand over hers, she didn’t withdraw it, but she frowned just a little.

“Colin, you know I want to get somewhere before I marry—see a bit of the world, the theatrical world, before turning hausfrau. Don’t be so—Oh, never mind. I like you anyway.”

Sipping her drink and setting it down again: “Well, to carry on with the story. I finally gave Comrade Snyder the complete brush-off, and I must say he took it very nicely. But today, this morning, he called asking me to have lunch with him, and I did after he explained. It seems he’s got a psychiatrist friend doing research, measuring brain storms or something, and—Do I mean storms? Waves, I guess. Anyway, he wants to measure as many different kinds of people as possible, and Snyder had suggested me. I was supposed to come in for three afternoons running—about two hours each time—and I’d get a hundred dollars per session.”

“Hm,” said Fraser. “I didn’t know psych research was that well-heeled. Who is this mad scientist?”

“His name is Kennedy. Oh, by the way, I’m not supposed to tell anybody; they want to spring it on the world as a surprise or something. But you’re different, Colin. I’m excited; I want to talk to somebody about it.”

“Sure,” he said. “You had a session already?”

“Yes, my first was today. It’s a funny place to do research—Kennedy’s got a big suite on Fifth Avenue, right up in the classy district. Beautiful office. The name of his outfit is Sentiment, Inc.”

“Hm. Why should a research-team take such a name? Well, go on.”

“Oh, there isn’t much else to tell. Kennedy was very nice. He took me into a laboratory full of all sorts of dials and meters and blinking lights and os—what do you call them? Those things that make wiggly pictures.”

“Oscilloscopes. You’ll never make a scientist, my dear.”

She grinned. "But I know one scientist who'd like to—Never mind! Anyway, he sat me down in a chair and put bands around my wrists and ankles—just like the hot squat—and a big thing like a beauty-parlor hair-drier over my head. Then he fiddled with his dials for awhile, making notes. Then he started saying words at me, and showing me pictures. Some of them were very pretty; some ugly; some funny; some downright horrible. . . . Anyway, that's all there was to it. After a couple of hours he gave me a check for a hundred dollars and told me to come back tomorrow."

"Hm." Fraser rubbed his chin. "Apparently he was measuring the electric rhythms corresponding to pleasure and dislike. I'd no idea anybody'd made an encephalograph that accurate."

"Well," said Judy, "I've told you why we're celebrating. Now come on, the regular orchestra's tuning up. Let's dance."

They had a rather wonderful evening. Afterward Fraser lay awake for a long time, not wanting to lose a state of happiness in sleep. He considered sleep a hideous waste of time: if he lived to be ninety, he'd have spent almost thirty years unconscious.

Judy was engaged for the next couple of evenings, and Fraser himself was invited to dinner at Sworsky's the night after that. So it wasn't till the end of the week that he called her again.

"Hullo, sweetheart," he said exuberantly. "How's things? I refer to Charles Addams Things, of course."

"Oh—Colin." Her voice was very small, and it trembled.

"Look, I've got two tickets to *H. M. S. Pinafore*. So put on your own pinafore and meet me."

"Colin—I'm sorry, Colin. I can't."

"Huh?" He noticed how odd she sounded, and a leadenness grew within him. "You aren't sick, are you?"

"Colin, I—I'm going to be married."

"What?"

"Yes. I'm in love now; really in love. I'll be getting married in a couple of months."

"But—but—"

"I didn't want to hurt you." He heard her begin to cry.

“But who—how—”

“It’s Matthew,” she gulped. “Matthew Snyder.”

He sat quiet for a long while, until she asked if he was still on the line. “Yeah,” he said tonelessly. “Yeah, I’m still here, after a fashion.” Shaking himself: “Look, I’ve got to see you. I want to talk to you.”

“I can’t.”

“You sure as hell can,” he said harshly.

They met at a quiet little bar which had often been their rendezvous. She watched him with frightened eyes while he ordered martinis.

“All right,” he said at last. “What’s the story?”

“I—” He could barely hear her. “There isn’t any story. I suddenly realized I loved Matt. That’s all.”

“*Snyder!*” He made it a curse. “Remember what you told me about him before?”

“I felt different then,” she whispered. “He’s a wonderful man when you get to know him.”

And rich. He suppressed the words and the thought. “What’s so wonderful specifically?” he asked.

“He—” Briefly, her face was rapt. Fraser had seen her looking at him that way, now and then.

“Go on,” he said grimly. “Enumerate Mr. Snyder’s good qualities. Make a list. He’s courteous, cultured, intelligent, young, handsome, amusing—To hell! *Why*, Judy?”

“I don’t know,” she said in a high, almost fearful tone. “I just love him, that’s all.” She reached over the table and stroked his cheek. “I like you a lot, Colin. Find yourself a nice girl and be happy.”

His mouth drew into a narrow line. “There’s something funny here,” he said. “Is it blackmail?”

“No!” She stood up, spilling her drink, and the flare of temper showed him how overwrought she was. “He just happens to be the man I love. That’s enough out of you, goodbye, Mr. Fraser.”

He sat watching her go. Presently he took up his drink, gulped it barbarously, and called for another.

II

Juan Martinez had come from Puerto Rico as a boy and made his own way ever since. Fraser had gotten to know him in the army, and they had seen each other from time to time since then. Martinez had gone into the private-eye business and made a good thing of it; Fraser had to get past a very neat-looking receptionist to see him.

“Hi, Colin,” said Martinez, shaking hands. He was a small, dark man, with a large nose and beady black eyes that made him resemble a sympathetic mouse. “You look like the very devil.”

“I feel that way, too,” said Fraser, collapsing into a chair. “You can’t go on a three-day drunk without showing it.”

“Well, what’s the trouble? Cigarette?” Martinez held out a pack. “Girlfriend give you the air?”

“As a matter of fact, yes; that’s what I want to see you about.”

“This isn’t a lonely-hearts club,” said Martinez. “And I’ve told you time and again a private dick isn’t a wisecracking superman. Our work is ninety-nine percent routine; and for the other one percent, we call in the police.”

“Let me give you the story,” said Fraser. He rubbed his eyes wearily as he told it. At the end, he sat staring at the floor.

“Well,” said Martinez, “it’s too bad and all that. But what the hell, there are other dames. New York has more beautiful women per square inch than any other city except Paris. Latch on to somebody else. Or if you want, I can give you a phone number—”

“You don’t understand,” said Fraser. “I want you to investigate this; I want to know why she did it.”

Martinez squinted through a haze of smoke. “Snyder’s a rich and powerful man,” he said. “Isn’t that enough?”

“No,” said Fraser, too tired to be angry at the hint. “Judy isn’t that kind of a girl. Neither is she the kind to go overboard in a few days, especially when I was there. Sure, that sounds conceited, but dammit, I *know* she cared for me.”

“Okay. You suspect pressure was brought to bear?”

“Yeah. It’s hard to imagine what. I called up Judy’s family in Maine, and they said they were all right, no worries. Nor do I think anything in her own life would give a blackmailer or an extortionist anything to go on. Still—I want to know.”

Martinez drummed the desktop with nervous fingers. “I’ll look into it if you insist,” he said, “though it’ll cost you a pretty penny. Rich men’s lives

aren't easy to pry into if they've got something they want to hide. But I don't think we'd find out much; your case seems to be only one of a rash of similar ones in the past year."

"Huh?" Fraser looked sharply up.

"Yeah. I follow all the news; and remember the odd facts. There've been a good dozen cases recently, where beautiful young women suddenly married rich men or became their mistresses. It doesn't all get into the papers, but I've got my contacts. I know. In every instance, there was no obvious reason; in fact, the dames seemed very much in love with daddy."

"And the era of the gold-digger is pretty well gone—" Fraser sat staring out the window. It didn't seem right that the sky should be so full of sunshine.

"Well," said Martinez, "you don't need me. You need a psychologist."

Psychologist!

"By God, Juan, I'm going to give you a job anyway!" Fraser leaped to his feet. "You're going to check into an outfit called Sentiment, Inc."

A week later, Martinez said, "Yeah, we found it easily enough. It's not in the phone-book, but they've got a big suite right in the high-rent district on Fifth. The address is here, in my written report. Nobody in the building knows much about 'em, except that they're a quiet, well-behaved bunch and call themselves research psychologists. They have a staff of four: a secretary-receptionist; a full-time secretary; and a couple of husky boys who may be bodyguards for the boss. That's this Kennedy, Robert Kennedy. My man couldn't get into his office; the girl said he was too busy and never saw anybody except some regular clients. Nor could he date either of the girls, but he did investigate them.

"The receptionist is just a working girl for routine stuff, married, hardly knows or cares what's going on. The steno is unmarried, has a degree in psych, lives alone, and seems to have no friends except her boss. Who's not her lover, by the way."

"Well, how about Kennedy himself?" asked Fraser.

"I've found out a good bit, but it's all legitimate," said Martinez. "He's about fifty years old, a widower, very steady private life. He's a licensed psychiatrist who used to practice in Chicago, where he also did research in

collaboration with a physicist named Gavotti, who's since died. Shortly after that happened—

“No, there's no suspicion of foul play; the physicist was an old man and died of a heart attack. Anyway, Kennedy moved to New York. He still practices, officially, but he doesn't take just anybody; claims that his research only leaves him time for a few.” Martinez narrowed his eyes. “The only thing you could hold against him is that he occasionally sees a guy named Bryce, who's in a firm that has some dealings with Amtorg.”

“The Russian trading corporation? Hm.”

“Oh, that's pretty remote guilt by association, Colin. Amtorg does have legitimate business, you know. We buy manganese from them, among other things. And the rest of Kennedy's connections are all strictly blue ribbon. *Crème de la crème*—business, finance, politics, and one big union-leader who's known to be a conservative. In fact, Kennedy's friends are so powerful you'd have real trouble doing anything against him.”

Fraser slumped in his chair. “I suppose my notion was pretty wild,” he admitted.

“Well, there is one queer angle. You know these rich guys who've suddenly made out with such highly desirable dames? As far as I could find out, every one of them is a client of Kennedy's.”

“Eh?” Fraser jerked erect.

“'S a fact. Also, my man showed the building staff, elevator pilots and so on, pictures of these women, and a couple of 'em were remembered as having come to see Kennedy.”

“Shortly before they—fell in love?”

“Well, that I can't be sure of. You know how people are about remembering dates. But it's possible.”

Fraser shook his dark head. “It's unbelievable,” he said. “I thought Svengali was outworn melodrama.”

“I know something about hypnotism, Colin. It won't do anything like what you think happened to those girls.”

Fraser got out his pipe and fumbled tobacco into it. “I think,” he said, “I'm going to call on Dr. Robert Kennedy myself.”

“Take it easy, boy,” said Martinez. “You been reading too many weird stories; you'll just get tossed out on your can.”

Fraser tried to smile. It was hard—Judy wouldn't answer his calls and letters any more. “Well,” he said, “it'll be in a worthy cause.”

The elevator let him out on the nineteenth floor. It held four big suites, with the corridor running between them. He studied the frosted-glass doors. On one side was the Eagle Publishing Company and Frank & Dayles, Brokers. On the other was the Messenger Advertising Service, and Sentiment, Inc. He entered their door and stood in a quiet, oak-paneled reception room. Behind the railing were a couple of desks, a young woman working at each, and two burly men who sat boredly reading magazines.

The pretty girl, obviously the receptionist, looked up as Fraser approached and gave him a professional smile. "Yes, sir?" she asked.

"I'd like to see Dr. Kennedy, please," he said, trying hard to be casual.

"Do you have an appointment, sir?"

"No, but it's urgent."

"I'm sorry, sir; Dr. Kennedy is very busy. He can't see anybody except his regular patients and research subjects."

"Look, take him in this note, will you? Thanks."

Fraser sat uneasily for some minutes, wondering if he'd worded the note correctly. *I must see you about Miss Judy Harkness. Important.* Well, what the devil else could you say?

The receptionist came out again. "Dr. Kennedy can spare you a few minutes, sir," she said. "Go right on in."

"Thanks." Fraser slouched toward the inner door. The two men lowered their magazines to follow him with watchful eyes.

There was a big, handsomely-furnished office inside, with a door beyond that must lead to the laboratory. Kennedy looked up from some papers and rose, holding out his hand. He was a medium-sized man, rather plump, graying hair brushed thickly back from a broad, heavy face behind rimless glasses. "Yes?" His voice was low and pleasant. "What can I do for you?"

"My name's Fraser." The visitor sat down and accepted a cigarette. Best to act urbanely. "I know Miss Harkness well. I understand you made some encephalographic studies of her."

"Indeed?" Kennedy looked annoyed, and Fraser recalled that Judy had been asked not to tell anyone. "I'm not sure; I would have to consult my records first." He wasn't admitting anything, thought Fraser.

"Look," said the engineer, "there's been a marked change in Miss Harkness recently. I know enough psychology to be certain that such changes don't happen overnight without cause. I wanted to consult you."

“I’m not her psychiatrist,” said Kennedy coldly. “Now if you will excuse me, I really have a lot to do—”

“All right,” said Fraser. There was no menace in his tones, only a weariness. “If you insist, I’ll play it dirty. Such abrupt changes indicate mental instability. But I know she was perfectly sane before. It begins to look as if your experiments may have—injured her mind. If so, I should have to report you for malpractice.”

Kennedy flushed. “I am a licensed psychiatrist,” he said, “and any other doctor will confirm that Miss Harkness is still in mental health. If you tried to get an investigation started, you would only be wasting your own time and that of the authorities. She herself will testify that no harm was done to her; no compulsion applied; and that you are an infernal busybody with some delusions of your own. Good afternoon.”

“Ah,” said Fraser, “so she *was* here.”

Kennedy pushed a button. His men entered. “Show this gentleman the way out, please,” he said.

Fraser debated whether to put up a fight, decided it was futile, and went out between the two others. When he got to the street, he found he was shaking, and badly in need of a drink.

Fraser asked, “Jim, did you ever read *Trilby*?”

Sworsky’s round, freckled face lifted to regard him. “Years ago,” he answered. “What of it?”

“Tell me something. Is it possible—even theoretically possible—to do what Svengali did? Change emotional attitudes, just like that.” Fraser snapped his fingers.

“I don’t know,” said Sworsky. “Nuclear cross-sections are more in my line. But offhand, I should imagine it might be done... sometime in the far future. Thought-habits, associational-patterns, the labeling of this as good and that as bad, seem to be matters of established neural paths. If you could selectively alter the polarization of individual neurones—But it’s a pretty remote prospect; we hardly know a thing about the brain today.”

He studied his friend sympathetically. “I know it’s tough to get jilted,” he said, “but don’t go off your trolley about it.”

“I could stand it if someone else had gotten her in the usual kind of way,” said Fraser thinly. “But this—Look, let me tell you all I’ve found out.”

Sworsky shook his head at the end of the story. “That’s a mighty wild speculation,” he murmured. “I’d forget it if I were you.”

“Did you know Kennedy’s old partner? Gavotti, at Chicago.”

“Sure, I met him a few times. Nice old guy, very unworldly, completely wrapped up in his work. He got interested in neurology from the physics angle toward the end of his life, and contributed a lot to cybernetics. What of it?”

“I don’t know,” said Fraser; “I just don’t know. But do me a favor, will you, Jim? Judy won’t see me at all, but she knows you and likes you. Ask her to dinner or something. Insist that she come. Then you and your wife find out—whatever you can. Just exactly how she feels about the whole business. What her attitudes are toward everything.”

“The name is Sworsky, not Holmes. But sure, I’ll do what I can, if you’ll promise to try and get rid of this fixation. You ought to see a head-shrinker yourself, you know.”

In vino veritas—sometimes too damn much *veritas*.

Toward the end of the evening, Judy was talking freely, if not quite coherently. “I cared a lot for Colin,” she said. “It was pretty wonderful having him around. He’s a grand guy. Only Matt—I don’t know. Matt hasn’t got half of what Colin has; Matt’s a single-track mind. I’m afraid I’m just going to be an ornamental convenience to him. Only if you’ve ever been so you got all dizzy when someone was around, and thought about him all the time he was away—well, that’s how he is. Nothing else matters.”

“Colin’s gotten a funny obsession,” said Sworsky cautiously. “He thinks Kennedy hypnotized you for Snyder. I keep telling him it’s impossible, but he can’t get over the idea.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” she said with too much fervor. “It’s nothing like that. I’ll tell you just what happened. We had those two measuring sessions; it was kind of dull but nothing else. And then the third time Kennedy did put me under hypnosis—he called it that, at least. I went to sleep and woke up

about an hour later and he sent me home. I felt all good inside, happy, and shlo—slowly I began to see what Matt meant to me.

“I called him up that evening. He said Kennedy’s machine *did* speed up people’s minds for a short while, sometimes, so they decided quick-like what they’d’ve worked out anyway. Kennedy is—I don’t know. It’s funny how ordinary he seemed at first. But when you get to know him, he’s like—God, almost. He’s strong and wise and good. He—” Her voice trailed off and she sat looking foolishly at her glass.

“You know,” said Sworsky, “perhaps Colin is right after all.”

“Don’t say that!” She jumped up and slapped his face. “Kennedy’s *good*, I tell you! All you little lice sitting here making sly remarks behind his back, and he’s so, much bigger than all of you and—” She broke into tears and stormed out of the apartment.

Sworsky reported the affair to Fraser. “I wonder,” he said. “It doesn’t seem natural, I’ll agree. But what can anybody do? The police?”

“I’ve tried,” said Fraser dully. “They laughed. When I insisted, I damn near got myself juggled. That’s no use. The trouble is, none of the people who’ve been under the machine will testify against Kennedy. He fixes it so they worship him.”

“I still think you’re crazy. There *must* be a simpler hypothesis; I refuse to believe your screwy notions without some real evidence. But what are you going to do now?”

“Well,” said Fraser with a tautness in his voice, “I’ve got several thousand dollars saved up, and Juan Martinez will help. Ever hear the fable about the lion? He licked hell out of the bear and the tiger and the rhinoceros, but a little gnat finally drove him nuts. Maybe I can be the gnat.” He shook his head. “But I’ll have to hurry. The wedding’s only six weeks off.”

III

It can be annoying to be constantly shadowed; to have nasty gossip about you spreading through the places where you work and live; to find your

tires slashed; to be accosted by truculent drunks when you stop in for a quick one; to have loud horns blow under your window every night. And it doesn't do much good to call the police; your petty tormentors always fade out of sight.

Fraser was sitting in his room some two weeks later, trying unsuccessfully to concentrate on matrix algebra, when the phone rang. He never picked it up without a fluttering small hope that it might be Judy, and it never was. This time it was a man's voice: "Mr. Fraser?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "Wha'dya want?"

"This is Robert Kennedy. I'd like to talk to you."

Fraser's heart sprang in his ribs, but he held his voice stiff. "Go on, then. Talk."

"I want you to come up to my place. We may be having a long conversation."

"Mmmm—well—" It was more than he had allowed himself to hope for, but he remained curt: "Okay. But a full report of this business, and what I think you're doing, is in the hands of several people. If anything should happen to me—"

"You've been reading too many hard-boileds," said Kennedy. "Nothing will happen. Anyway, I have a pretty good idea who those people are; I can hire detectives of my own, you know."

"I'll come over, then." Fraser hung up and realized, suddenly, that he was sweating.

The night air was cool as he walked down the street. He paused for a moment, feeling the city like a huge impersonal machine around him, grinding and grinding. Human civilization had grown too big, he thought. It was beyond anyone's control; it had taken on a will of its own and was carrying a race which could no longer guide it. Sometimes—reading the papers, or listening to the radio, or just watching the traffic go by like a river of steel—a man could feel horribly helpless.

He took the subway to Kennedy's address, a swank apartment in the lower Fifties. He was admitted by the psychiatrist in person; no one else was around.

"I assume," said Kennedy, "that you don't have some wild idea of pulling a gun on me. That would accomplish nothing except to get you in trouble."

"No," said Fraser, "I'll be good." His eyes wandered about the living room. One wall was covered with books which looked used; there were

some quality reproductions, a Capehart, and fine, massive furniture. It was a tasteful layout. He looked a little more closely at three pictures on the mantel: a middle-aged woman and two young men in uniform.

“My wife,” said Kennedy, “and my boys. They’re all dead. Would you like a drink?”

“No. I came to talk.”

“I’m not Satan, you know,” said Kennedy. “I like books and music, good wine, good conversation. I’m as human as you are, only I have a purpose.”

Fraser sat down and began charging his pipe. “Go ahead,” he said. “I’m listening.”

Kennedy pulled a chair over to face him. The big smooth countenance behind the rimless glasses held little expression. “Why have you been annoying me?” he asked.

“I?” Fraser lifted his brows.

Kennedy made an impatient gesture. “Let’s not chop words. There are no witnesses tonight. I intend to talk freely, and want you to do the same. I know that you’ve got Martinez sufficiently convinced to help you with this very childish persecution-campaign. What do you hope to get out of it?”

“I want my girl back,” said Fraser tonelessly. “I was hoping my nuisance-value—”

Kennedy winced a bit. “You know, I’m damned sorry about that. It’s the one aspect of my work which I hate. I’d like you to believe that I’m not just a scientific procurer. Actually, I have to satisfy the minor desires of my clients, so they’ll stay happy and agree to my major wishes. It’s the plain truth that those women have been only the minutest fraction of my job.”

“Nevertheless, you’re a freewheeling son, doing something like that—”

“Really, now, what’s so horrible about it? Those girls are in love—the normal, genuine article. It’s not any kind of zombie state, or whatever your overheated imagination has thought up. They’re entirely sane, unharmed, and happy. In fact, happiness of that kind is so rare in this world that if I wanted to, I could pose as their benefactor.”

“You’ve got a machine,” said Fraser; “it changes the mind. As far as I’m concerned, that’s as gross a violation of liberty as throwing somebody into a concentration camp.”

“How free do you think anyone is? You’re born with a fixed heredity. Environment molds you like clay. Your society teaches you what and how to think. A million tiny factors, all depending on blind, uncontrollable chance, determine the course of your life—including your love-life. . . . Well, we needn’t waste any time on philosophy. Go on, ask some questions. I admit I’ve hurt you—unwittingly, to be sure—but I do want to make amends.”

“Your machine, then,” said Fraser. “How did you get it? How does it work.”

“I was practicing in Chicago,” said Kennedy, “and collaborating on the side with Gavotti. How much do you know of cybernetics? I don’t mean computers and automata, which are only one aspect of the field; I mean control and communication, in the animal as well as in the machine.”

“Well, I’ve read Wiener’s books, and studied Shannon’s work, too.” Despite himself, Fraser was thawing, just a trifle. “It’s exciting stuff. Communications-theory seems to be basic, in biology and psychology as well as in electronics.”

“Quite. The future may remember Wiener as the Galileo of neurology. If Gavotti’s work ever gets published, he’ll be considered the Newton. So far, frankly, I’ve suppressed it. He died suddenly, just when his machine was completed and he was getting ready to publish his results. Nobody but I knew anything more than rumors; he was inclined to be secretive till he had a *fait accompli* on hand. I realized what an opportunity had been given me, and took it; I brought the machine here without saying much to anyone.”

Kennedy leaned back in his chair. “I imagine it was mostly luck which took Gavotti and me so far,” he went on. “We made a long series of improbably good guesses, and thus telescoped a century of work into a decade. If I were religious, I’d be down on my knees, thanking the Lord for putting this thing of the future into my hands.”

“Or the devil,” said Fraser.

Briefly, anger flitted across Kennedy’s face. “I grant you, the machine is a terrible power, but it’s harmless to a man if it’s used properly—as I have used it. I’m not going to tell you just how it works; to be perfectly honest, I only understand a fraction of its theory and its circuits myself. But look, you know something of encephalography. The various basic rhythms of the brain have been measured. The standard method is already so sensitive that it can detect abnormalities like a developing tumor or a strong emotional

disturbance, that will give trouble unless corrected. Half of Gavotti's machine is a still more delicate encephalograph. It can measure and analyze the minute variations in electrical pulses corresponding to the basic emotional states. It won't read thoughts, no; but once calibrated for a given individual, it will tell you if he's happy, sorrowful, angry, disgusted, afraid—any fundamental neuro-glandular condition, or any combination of them."

He paused. "All right," said Fraser. "What else does it do?"

"It does *not* make monsters," said Kennedy. "Look, the specific emotional reaction to a given stimulus is, in the normal individual, largely a matter of conditioned reflex, instilled by social environment or the accidental associations of his life.

"Anyone in decent health will experience fear in the presence of danger; desire in the presence of a sexual object, and so on. That's basic biology, and the machine can't change that. But most of our evaluations are learned. For instance, to an American the word 'mother' has powerful emotional connotations, while to a Samoan it means nothing very exciting. You had to develop a taste for liquor, tobacco, coffee—in fact most of what you consume. If you're in love with a particular woman, it's a focusing of the general sexual libido on her, brought about by the symbolizing part of your mind: she *means* something to you. There are cultures without romantic love, you know. And so on. All these specific, conditioned reactions can be changed."

"How?"

Kennedy thought for a moment "The encephalographic part of the machine measures the exact pulsations in the individual corresponding to the various emotional reactions. It takes me about four hours to determine those with the necessary precision; then I have to make statistical analyses of the data, to winnow out random variations. Thereafter I put the subject in a state of light hypnosis—that's only to increase suggestibility, and make the process faster. As I pronounce the words and names I'm interested in, the machine feeds back the impulses corresponding to the emotions I want: a sharply-focused beam on the brain center concerned.

“For instance, suppose you were an alcoholic and I wanted to cure you. I’d put you in hypnosis and stand there whispering ‘wine, whisky, beer, gin,’ and so on; meanwhile, the machine would be feeding the impulses corresponding to your reactions of hate, fear, and disgust into your brain. You’d come out unchanged, except that your appetite for alcohol would be gone; you could, in fact, come out hating the stuff so much that you’d join the Prohibition Party—though, in actual practice, it would probably be enough just to give you a mild aversion.”

“Mmmm—I see. Maybe.” Fraser scowled. “And the—subject—doesn’t remember what you’ve done?”

“Oh, no. It all takes place on the lower subconscious levels. A new set of conditioned neural pathways is opened, you see, and old ones are closed off. The brain does that by itself, through its normal symbolizing mechanism. All that happens is that the given symbol—such as liquor—becomes reflectively associated with the given emotional state, such as dislike.”

Kennedy leaned forward with an air of urgency. “The end result is in no way different from ordinary means of persuasion. Propaganda does the same thing by sheer repetition. If you’re courting a girl, you try to identify yourself in her mind with the things she desires, by appropriate behavior. . . . I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have used that example. . . . The machine is only a direct, fast way of doing this, producing a more stable result.”

“It’s still—tampering,” said Fraser. “How do you know you’re not creating side-effects, doing irreparable long-range damage?”

“Oh, for Lord’s sake!” exploded Kennedy. “Take your mind off that shelf, will you? I’ve told you how delicate the whole thing is. A few microwatts of power more or less, a frequency-shift of less than one percent, and it doesn’t work at all. There’s no effect whatsoever.” He cooled off fast, adding reflectively: “On the given subject, that is. It might work on someone else. These pulsations are a highly individual matter; I have to calibrate every case separately.”

There was a long period of silence. Then Fraser strained forward and said in an ugly voice:

“All right You’ve told me how you do it. Now tell me *why*. What possible reason or excuse, other than your own desire to play God? This thing could be the greatest psychiatric tool in history, and you’re using it to—pimp!”

“I told you that was unimportant,” said Kennedy quietly. “I’m doing much more. I set up in practice here in New York a couple of years ago. Once I had a few chance people under control—no, I tell you again, I didn’t make robots of them. I merely associated myself, in their own minds, with the father-image. That’s something I do to everyone who comes under the machine, just as a precaution if nothing else, Kennedy is all-wise, all-powerful; Kennedy can do no wrong. It isn’t a conscious realization; to the waking mind, I am only a shrewd adviser and a damn swell fellow. But the subconscious mind knows otherwise. It wouldn’t *let* my subjects act against me; it wouldn’t even let them want to.

“Well, you see how it goes. I got those first few people to recommend me to certain selected friends, and these in turn recommended me to others. Not necessarily as a psychiatrist; I have variously been a doctor, a counsellor, or merely a research-man looking for data. But I’m building up a group of the people I want. People who’ll back me up, who’ll follow my advice—not with any knowledge of being dominated, but because the workings of their own subconscious minds will lead them inevitably to think that my advice is the only sound policy to follow and my requests are things any decent man must grant.”

“Yeah,” said Fraser. “I get it. Big businessmen. Labor-leaders. Politicians. Military men. And Soviet spies!”

Kennedy nodded. “I have connections with the Soviets; their agents think I’m on their side. But it isn’t treason, though I may help them out from time to time.

“That’s why I have to do these services for my important clients, such as getting them the women they want—or, what I actually do more often, influencing their competitors and associates. You see, the subconscious mind knows I am all-powerful, but the conscious mind doesn’t. It has to be satisfied by occasional proofs that I *am* invaluable; otherwise conflicts would set in, my men would become unstable and eventually psychotic, and be of no further use to me.

“Of course,” he added, almost pedantically, “my men don’t know how I persuade these other people—they only know that I do, somehow, and their regard for their own egos, as well as for me, sets up a bloc which prevents

them from reasoning out the fact that they themselves are dominated. They're quite content to accept the results of my help, without inquiring further into the means than the easy rationalization that I have a 'persuasive personality.'

"I don't like what I'm doing, Fraser. But it's got to be done."

"You still haven't said *what's* got to be done," answered the engineer coldly.

"I've been given something unbelievable," said Kennedy. His voice was very soft now. "If I'd made it public, can you imagine what would have happened? Psychiatrists would use it, yes; but so would criminals, dictators, power-hungry men of all kinds. Even in this country, I don't think libertarian principles could long survive. It would be too simple—

"And yet it would have been cowardly to break the machine and burn Gavotti's notes. Chance has given me the power to be more than a chip in the river—a river that's rapidly approaching a waterfall, war, destruction, tyranny, no matter who the Pyrrhic victor may be. I'm in a position to do something for the causes in which I believe."

"And what are they?" asked Fraser.

Kennedy gestured at the pictures on the mantel. "Both my sons were killed in the last war. My wife died of cancer—a disease which would be licked now if a fraction of the money spent on armaments had been diverted to research. That brought it home to me; but there are hundreds of millions of people in worse cases. And war isn't the only evil—there is poverty, oppression, inequality, want and suffering. It could be changed.

"I'm building up my own lobby, you might say. In a few more years, I hope to be the indispensable adviser of all the men who, between them, really run this country. And yes, I have been in touch with Soviet agents—have even acted as a transmitter of stolen information. The basic problem of spying, you know, is not to get the information in the first place as much as to get it to the homeland. Treason? No. I think not. I'm getting my toehold in world communism. I already have some of its agents; sooner or later, I'll get to the men who really matter. Then communism will no longer be a menace."

He sighed. "It's a hard row to hoe. It'll take my lifetime, at least; but what else have I got to give my life to?"

Fraser sat quiet. His pipe was cold, he knocked it out and began filling it afresh. The scratching of his match seemed unnaturally loud. "It's too

much,” he said. “It’s too big a job for one man to tackle. The world will stumble along somehow, but you’ll just get things into a worse mess.”

“I’ve got to try,” said Kennedy.

“And I still want my girl back.”

“I can’t do that; I need Snyder too much. But I’ll make it up to you somehow.” Kennedy sighed. “Lord, if you knew how much I’ve wanted to tell all this!”

With sudden wariness: “Not that it’s to be repeated. In fact, you’re to lay off me; call off your dogs. Don’t try to tell anyone else what I’ve told you. You’d never be believed and I already have enough power to suppress the story, if you should get it out somehow. And if you give me any more trouble at all, I’ll see to it that you—stop.”

“Murder?”

“Or commitment to an asylum. I can arrange that too.”

Fraser sighed. He felt oddly unexcited, empty, as if the interview had drained him of his last will to resist. He held the pipe loosely in his fingers, letting it go out.

“Ask me a favor,” urged Kennedy. “I’ll do it, if it won’t harm my own program. I tell you, I want to square things.”

“Well—”

“Think about it. Let me know.”

“All right.” Fraser got up. “I may do that.” He went out the door without saying goodnight.

IV

He sat with his feet on the table, chair tilted back and teetering dangerously, hands clasped behind his head, pipe filling the room with blue fog. It was his usual posture for attacking a problem.

And damn it, he thought wearily, this was a question such as he made his living on. An industrial engineer comes into the office. We want this and that—a machine for a very special purpose, let’s say. What should we do, Mr. Fraser? Fraser prowls around the plant, reads up on the industry, and

then sits down and thinks. The elements of the problem are such-and-such; how can they be combined to yield a solution?

Normally, he uses the mathematical approach, especially in machine design. Most practicing-engineers have a pathetic math background—they use ten pages of elaborate algebra and rusty calculus to figure out something that three vector equations would solve. But you have to get the logical basics straight first, before you can set up your equations.

All right, what is the problem? To get Judy back. That means forcing Kennedy to restore her normal emotional reactions—no, he didn't want her thrust into love of him; he just wanted her as she had been.

What are the elements of the problem? Kennedy acts outside the law, but he has blocked all official channels. He even has connections extending through the Iron Curtain.

Hmmmm—appeal to the F.B.I.? Kennedy couldn't have control over them—*yet*. However, if Fraser tried to tip off the F.B.I., they'd act cautiously, if they investigated at all. They'd have to go slow. And Kennedy would find out in time to do something about it.

Martinez could help no further. Sworsky had closer contact with Washington. He'd been so thoroughly cleared that they'd be inclined to trust whatever he said. But Sworsky doubted the whole story; like many men who'd suffered through irresponsible Congressional charges, he was almost fanatic about having proof before accusing anyone of anything. Moreover, Kennedy knew that Sworsky was Fraser's friend; he'd probably be keeping close tabs on the physicist and ready to block any attempts he might make to help. With the backing of a man like Snyder, Kennedy could hire as many detectives as he wanted.

In fact, whatever the counterattack, it was necessary to go warily. Kennedy's threat to get rid of Fraser if the engineer kept working against him was not idle mouthing. He could do it—and, being a fanatic, would.

But Kennedy, like the demon of legend, would grant one wish—just to salve his own conscience. Only what should the wish be? Another woman? Or merely to be reconciled, artificially, to an otherwise-intolerable situation?

Judy, Judy, Judy!

Fraser swore at himself. Damn it to hell, this was a problem in logic. No room for emotion. Of course, it might be a problem without a solution. There are plenty of those.

He squinted, trying to visualize the office. He thought of burglary, stealing evidence—silly thought. But let's see, now. What was the layout, exactly? Four suites on one floor of the skyscraper, three of them unimportant offices of unimportant men. And—

Oh, Lord!

Fraser sat for a long while, hardly moving. Then he uncoiled himself and ran, downstairs and into the street and to the nearest pay phone. His own line might be tapped—

“Hello, hello, Juan? ... Yes, I know I got you out of bed, and I'm not sorry. This is too bloody important. ... Okay, okay. ... Look, I want a complete report on the Messenger Advertising Service. ... When? Immediately, if not sooner. And I mean *complete*. ... That's right, Messenger. ... Okay, fine. I'll buy you a drink sometime.”

“Hello, Jim? Were you asleep too? ... Sorry. ... But look, would you make a list of all the important men you know fairly well? I need it bad. ... No, don't come over. I think I'd better not see you for a while. Just mail it to me. ... All right, so I am paranoid. ...”

Jerome K. Ferris was a large man, with a sense of his own importance that was even larger. He sat hunched in the chair, his head dwarfed by the aluminum helmet, his breathing shallow. Around him danced and flickered a hundred meters, indicator lights, tubes. There was a low humming in the room, otherwise it was altogether silent, blocked and shielded against the outside world. The fluorescent lights were a muted glow.

Fraser sat watching the greenish trace on the huge oscilloscope screen. It was an intricate set of convolutions, looking more like a plate of spaghetti than anything else. He wondered how many frequencies were involved. Several thousand, at the very least.

“Fraser,” repeated Kennedy softly into the ear of the hypnotized man. “Colin Fraser. Colin Fraser.” He touched a dial with infinite care. “Colin Fraser. Colin Fraser.”

The oscilloscope flickered as he readjusted, a new trace appeared. Kennedy waited for a while, then: “Robert Kennedy. Sentiment, Inc. Robert Kennedy. Sentiment, Inc. Robert Kennedy. Sentiment—”

He turned off the machine, its murmur and glow died away. Facing Fraser with a tight little smile, he said: "All right. Your job is done. Are we even now?"

"As even, as we'll ever get, I suppose," said Fraser.

"I wish you'd trust me," said Kennedy with a hint of wistfulness. "I'd have done the job honestly; you didn't have to watch."

"Well, I was interested," said Fraser.

"Frankly, I still don't see what you stand to gain by the doglike devotion of this Ferris. He's rich, but he's too weak and shortsighted to be a leader. I'd never planned on conditioning him for my purposes."

"I've explained that," said Fraser patiently. "Ferris is a large stockholder in a number of corporations. His influence can swing a lot of business my way."

"Yes, I know. I didn't grant your wish blindly, you realize. I had Ferris studied; he's unable to harm me." Kennedy regarded Fraser with hard eyes. "And just in case you still have foolish notions, please remember that I gave him the father-conditioning with respect to myself. He'll do a lot for you, but not if it's going to hurt me in any way."

"I know when I'm licked," said Fraser bleakly; "I'm getting out of town as soon as I finish those courses I'm signed up for."

Kennedy snapped his fingers. "All right, Ferris, wake up now."

Ferris blinked. "What's been happening?" he asked.

"Nothing much," said Kennedy, unbuckling the electrodes. "I've taken my readings. Thank you very much for the help, sir. I'll see that you get due credit when my research is published."

"Ah—yes. Yes." Ferris puffed himself out. Then he put an arm around Fraser's shoulder. "If you aren't busy," he said, "maybe we could go have lunch."

"Thanks," said Fraser. "I'd like to talk to you about a few things."

He lingered for a moment after Ferris had left the room. "I imagine this is goodbye for us," he said.

"Well, so long, at least. We'll probably hear from each other again." Kennedy shook Fraser's hand. "No hard feelings? I did go to a lot of trouble for you—wangling your introduction to Ferris when you'd named him, and having one of my men persuade him to come here. And right when I'm so infernally busy, too."

“Sure,” said Fraser. “It’s all right. I can’t pretend to love you for what you’ve done, but you aren’t a bad sort.”

“No worse than you,” said Kennedy with a short laugh. “You’ve used the machine for your own ends, now.”

“Yeah,” said Fraser. “I guess I have.”

Sworsky asked, “Why do you insist on calling me from drugstores? And why at my office? I’ve got a home phone, you know.”

“I’m not sure but that our own lines are tapped,” said Fraser. “Kennedy’s a smart cookie, and don’t you forget it. I think he’s about ready to dismiss me as a danger, but you’re certainly being watched; you’re on his list.”

“You’re getting a persecution-complex. Honest, Colin, I’m worried.”

“Well, bear with me for a while. Now, have you had any information on Kennedy since I called last?”

“Hm, no. I did mention to Thomson, as you asked me to, that I’d heard rumors of some revolutionary encephalographic techniques and would be interested in seeing the work. Why did you want me to do that?”

“Thomson,” said Fraser, “is one of Kennedy’s men. Now look, Jim, before long you’re going to be invited to visit Kennedy. He’ll give you a spiel about his research and ask to measure your brain waves. I want you to say yes. Then I want to know the exact times of the three appointments he’ll give you—the first two, at least.”

“Hmmm—if Kennedy’s doing what you claim—”

“Jim, it’s a necessary risk, but *I’m* the one who’s taking it. You’ll be okay, I promise you; though perhaps later you’ll read of me being found in the river. You see, I got Kennedy to influence a big stockowner for me. One of the lesser companies in which he has a loud voice is Messenger. I don’t suppose Kennedy knows that. I hope not!”

Sworsky looked as if he’d been sandbagged. He was white, and the hand that poured a drink shook.

“Lord,” he muttered. “Lord, Colin, you were right.”

Fraser’s teeth drew back from his lips. “You went through with it, eh?”

“Yes. I let the son hypnotize me, and afterward I walked off with a dreamy expression, as you told me to. Just three hours ago, he dropped around here in person. He gave me a long rigmarole about the stupidity of military secrecy, and how the Soviet Union stands for peace and justice. I hope I acted impressed; I’m not much of an actor.”

“You don’t have to be. Just so you didn’t overdo it. To one of Kennedy’s victims, obeying his advice is so natural that it doesn’t call for any awestruck wonderment.”

“And he wanted data from me! Bombardment cross-sections. Critical values. Resonance levels. My Lord, if the Russians found that out through spies it’d save them three years of research. This is an F.B.I. case, all right.”

“No, not yet.” Fraser laid an urgent hand on Sworsky’s arm. “You’ve stuck by me so far, Jim. Go along a little further.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Why—” Fraser’s laugh jarred out. “Give him what he wants, of course.”

Kennedy looked up from his desk, scowling. “All right, Fraser,” he said. “You’ve been a damned nuisance, and it’s pretty patient of me to see you again. But this is the last time. Wha’d’you want?”

“It’s the last time I’ll need to see you, perhaps.” Fraser didn’t sit down. He stood facing Kennedy. “You’ve had it, friend; straight up.”

“What do you mean?” Kennedy’s hand moved toward his buzzer.

“Listen before you do anything,” said Fraser harshly. “I know you tried to bring Jim Sworsky under the influence. You asked him for top-secret data. A few hours ago, you handed the file he brought you on to Bryce, who’s no doubt at the Amtorg offices this minute. That’s high treason, Kennedy; they execute people for doing that.”

The psychologist slumped back.

“Don’t try to have your bully boys get rid of me,” said Fraser. “Sworsky is sitting by the phone, waiting to call the F.B.I. I’m the only guy who can stop him.”

“But—” Kennedy’s tongue ran around his lips. “But he committed treason himself. He gave me the papers!”

Fraser grinned. “You don’t think those were authentic, do you? I doubt if you’ll be very popular in the Soviet Union either, once they’ve tried to build

machines using your data.”

Kennedy looked down at the floor. “How did you do it?” he whispered.

“Remember Ferris? The guy you fixed up for me? He owns a share of your next-door neighbor, the Messenger Advertising Service. I fed him a song and dance about needing an office to do some important work, only my very whereabouts had to be secret. The Messenger people were moved out without anybody’s knowing. I installed myself there one night, also a simple little electric oscillator.

“Encephalography is damn delicate work; it involves amplifications up to several million. The apparatus misbehaves if you give it a hard look. Naturally, your lab and the machine were heavily shielded, but even so, a radio emitter next door would be bound to throw you off. My main trouble was in lousing you up just a little bit, not enough to make you suspect anything.

“I only worked at that during your calibrating sessions with Sworsky. I didn’t have to be there when you turned the beam on him, because it would be calculated from false data and be so far from his pattern as to have no effect. You told me yourself how precise an adjustment was needed. Sworsky played along, then. Now we’ve got proof—not that you meddled with human lives, but that you are a spy.”

Kennedy sat without moving. His voice was a broken mumble. “I was going to change the world. I had hopes for all humankind. And you, for the sake of one woman—”

“I never trusted anybody with a messiah complex. The world is too big to change single-handed; you’d just have bungled it up worse than it already is. A lot of dictators started out as reformers and ended up as mass-executioners; you’d have done the same.”

Fraser leaned over his desk. “I’m willing to make a deal, though,” he went on. “Your teeth are pulled; there’s no point in turning you in. Sworsky and Martinez and I are willing just to report on Bryce, and let you go, if you’ll change back all your subjects. We’re going to read your files, and watch and see that you do it. Every one.”

Kennedy bit his lip. “And the machine—?”

“I don’t know. We’ll settle that later. Okay, God, here’s the phone number of Judy Harkness. Ask her to come over for a special treatment. At once.”

A month later, the papers had a story about a plausible maniac who had talked his way into the Columbia University laboratories, where Gavotti's puzzling machine was being studied, and pulled out a hammer and smashed it into ruin before he could be stopped. Taken to jail, he committed suicide in his cell. The name was Kennedy.

Fraser felt vague regret, but it didn't take him long to forget it; he was too busy making plans for his wedding.

THE CHAPTER ENDS

I

“No,” said the old man.

“But you don’t realize what it means,” said Jorun. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

The old man, Kormt of Huerdar, Gerlaug’s son, and Speaker for Solis Township, shook his head till the long, grizzled locks swirled around his wide shoulders. “I have thought it through,” he said. His voice was deep and slow and implacable. “You gave me five years to think about it. And my answer is no.”

Jorun felt a weariness rise within him. It had been like this for days now, weeks, and it was like trying to knock down a mountain. You beat on its rocky flanks till your hands were bloody, and still the mountain stood there, sunlight on its high snowfields and in the forests that rustled up its slopes, and it did not really notice you. You were a brief thin buzz between two long nights, but the mountain was forever.

“You haven’t thought at all,” he said with a rudeness born of exhaustion. “You’ve only reacted unthinkingly to a dead symbol. It’s not a human reaction, even, it’s a verbal reflex.”

Kormt’s eyes, meshed in crow’s-feet, were serene and steady under the thick gray brows. He smiled a little in his long beard, but made no other reply. Had he simply let the insult glide off him, or had he not understood it at all? There was no real talking to these peasants; too many millennia lay between, and you couldn’t shout across that gulf.

“Well,” said Jorun, “the ships will be here tomorrow or the next day, and it’ll take another day or so to get all your people aboard. You have that long

to decide, but after that it'll be too late. Think about it, I beg of you. As for me, I'll be too busy to argue further."

"You are a good man," said Kormt, "and a wise one in your fashion. But you are blind. There is something dead inside you."

He waved one huge gnarled hand. "Look around you, Jorun of Fulkhis. This is *Earth*. This is the old home of all humankind. You cannot go off and forget it. Man cannot do so. It is in him, in his blood and bones and soul; he will carry Earth within him forever."

Jorun's eyes traveled along the arc of the hand. He stood on the edge of the town. Behind him were its houses—low, white, half-timbered, roofed with thatch or red tile, smoke rising from the chimneys; carved galleries overhung the narrow, cobbled, crazily-twisting streets; he heard the noise of wheels and wooden clogs, the shouts of children at play. Beyond that were trees and the incredible ruined walls of Sol City. In front of him, the wooded hills were cleared and a gentle landscape of neat fields and orchards rolled down toward the distant glitter of the sea: scattered farm buildings, drowsy cattle, winding gravel roads, fence-walls of ancient marble and granite, all dreaming under the sun.

He drew a deep breath. It was pungent in his nostrils. It smelled of leaf-mould, plowed earth baking in the warmth, summery trees and gardens, a remote ocean odor of salt and kelp and fish. He thought that no two planets ever had quite the same smell, and that none was as rich as Terra's.

"This is a fair world," he said slowly.

"It is the only one," said Kormt. "Man came from here; and to this, in the end, he must return."

"I wonder—" Jorun sighed. "Take me; not one atom of my body was from this soil before I landed. My people lived on Fulkhis for ages, and changed to meet its conditions. They would not be happy on Terra."

"The atoms are nothing," said Kormt. "It is the form which matters, and that was given to you by Earth."

Jorun studied him for a moment. Kormt was like most of this planet's ten million or so people—a dark, stocky folk, though there were more blond and red-haired throwbacks here than in the rest of the Galaxy. He was old for a primitive untreated by medical science—he must be almost two hundred years old—but his back was straight, and his stride firm. The coarse, jut-nosed face held an odd strength. Jorun was nearing his

thousandth birthday, but couldn't help feeling like a child in Kormt's presence.

That didn't make sense. These few dwellers on Terra were a backward and impoverished race of peasants and handicraftsmen; they were ignorant and unadventurous; they had been static for more thousands of years than anyone knew. What could they have to say to the ancient and mighty civilization which had almost forgotten their little planet?

Kormt looked at the declining sun. "I must go now," he said. "There are the evening chores to do. I will be in town tonight if you should wish to see me."

"I probably will," said Jorun. "There's a lot to do, readying the evacuation, and you're a big help."

The old man bowed with grave courtesy, turned, and walked off down the road. He wore the common costume of Terran men, as archaic in style as in its woven-fabric material: hat, jacket, loose trousers, a long staff in his hand. Contrasting the drab blue of Kormt's dress, Jorun's vivid tunic of shifting rainbow hues was like a flame.

The psychotechnician sighed again, watching him go. He liked the old fellow. It would be criminal to leave him here alone, but the law forbade force—physical or mental—and the Integrator on Corazuno wasn't going to care whether or not one aged man stayed behind. The job was to get the *race* off Terra.

A lovely world. Jorun's thin mobile features, pale-skinned and large-eyed, turned around the horizon. *A fair world we came from.*

There were more beautiful planets in the Galaxy's swarming myriads—the indigo world-ocean of Loa, jeweled with islands; the heaven-defying mountains of Sharang; the sky of Jareb, that seemed to drip light—oh, many and many, but there was only one Earth.

Jorun remembered his first sight of this world, hanging free in space to watch it after the gruelling ten-day run, thirty thousand light-years, from Corazuno. It was blue as it turned before his eyes, a burnished turquoise shield blazoned with the living green and brown of its lands, and the poles were crowned with a flimmering haze of aurora. The belts that streaked its face and blurred the continents were cloud, wind and water and the gray

rush of rain, like a benediction from heaven. Beyond the planet hung its moon, a scarred golden crescent, and he had wondered how many generations of men had looked up to it, or watched its light like a broken bridge across moving waters. Against the enormous cold of the sky—utter black out to the distant coils of the nebulae, thronging with a million frosty points of diamond-hard blaze that were the stars—Earth had stood as a sign of haven. To Jorun, who came from Galactic center and its uncountable hosts of suns, heaven was bare, this was the outer fringe where the stars thinned away toward hideous immensity. He had shivered a little, drawn the envelope of air and warmth closer about him, with a convulsive movement. The silence drummed in his head. Then he streaked for the north-pole rendezvous of his group.

Well, he thought now, we have a pretty routine job. The first expedition here, five years ago, prepared the natives for the fact they'd have to go. Our party simply has to organize these docile peasants in time for the ships. But it had meant a lot of hard work, and he was tired. It would be good to finish the job and get back home.

Or would it?

He thought of flying with Zarek, his teammate, from the rendezvous to this area assigned as theirs. Plains like oceans of grass, wind-rippled, darkened with the herds of wild cattle whose hoofbeats were a thunder in the earth; forests, hundreds of kilometers of old and mighty trees, rivers piercing them in a long steel gleam; lakes where fish leaped; spilling sunshine like warm rain, radiance so bright it hurt his eyes, cloud-shadows swift across the land. It had all been empty of man, but still there was a vitality here which was almost frightening to Jorun. His own grim world of moors and crags and spindrift seas was a niggard beside this; here life covered the earth, filled the oceans, and made the heavens clangerous around him. He wondered if the driving energy within man, the force which had raised him to the stars, made him half-god and half-demon, if that was a legacy of Terra.

Well—man had changed; over the thousands of years, natural and controlled adaptation had fitted him to the worlds he had colonized, and most of his many races could not now feel at home here. Jorun thought of his own party: round, amber-skinned Chuli from a tropic world, complaining bitterly about the cold and dryness; gay young Cluthe, gangling and bulge-chested; sophisticated Taliuvenna of the flowing dark

hair and the lustrous eyes—no, to them Earth was only one more planet, out of thousands they had seen in their long lives.

And I'm a sentimental fool.

II

He could have willed the vague regret out of his trained nervous system, but he didn't want to. This was the last time human eyes would ever look on Earth, and somehow Jorun felt that it should be more to him than just another psychotechnic job.

"Hello, good sir."

He turned at the voice and forced his tired lips into a friendly smile. "Hello, Julith," he said. It was a wise policy to learn the names of the townspeople, at least, and she was a great-great-granddaughter of the Speaker.

She was some thirteen or fourteen years old, a freckle-faced child with a shy smile, and steady green eyes. There was a certain awkward grace about her, and she seemed more imaginative than most of her stolid race. She curtsied quaintly for him, her bare foot reaching out under the long smock which was daily female dress here.

"Are you busy, good sir?" she asked.

"Well, not too much," said Jorun. He was glad of a chance to talk; it silenced his thoughts. "What can I do for you?"

"I wondered—" She hesitated, then, breathlessly: "I wonder if you could give me a lift down to the beach? Only for an hour or two. It's too far to walk there before I have to be home, and I can't borrow a car, or even a horse. If it won't be any trouble, sir."

"Mmmm—shouldn't you be at home now? Isn't there milking and so on to do?"

"Oh, I don't live on a farm, good sir. My father is a baker."

"Yes, yes, so he is. I should have remembered." Jorun considered for an instant. There was enough to do in town, and it wasn't fair for him to play

hooky while Zarek worked alone. “Why do you want to go to the beach, Julith?”

“We’ll be busy packing up,” she said. “Starting tomorrow, I guess. This is my last chance to see it.”

Jorun’s mouth twisted a little. “All right,” he said; “I’ll take you.”

“You are very kind, good sir,” she said gravely.

He didn’t reply, but held out his arm, and she clasped it with one hand while her other arm gripped his waist. The generator inside his skull responded to his will, reaching out and clawing itself to the fabric of forces and energies which was physical space. They rose quietly, and went so slowly seaward that he didn’t have to raise a windscreen.

“Will we be able to fly like this when we get to the stars?” she asked.

“I’m afraid not, Julith,” he said. “You see, the people of my civilization are born this way. Thousands of years ago, men learned how to control the great basic forces of the cosmos with only a small bit of energy. Finally they used artificial mutation—that is, they changed themselves, slowly, over many generations, until their brains grew a new part that could generate this controlling force. We can now even, fly between the stars, by this power. But your people don’t have that brain, so we had to build spaceships to take you away.”

“I see,” she said.

“Your great-great-great-grandchildren can be like us, if your people want to be changed thus,” he said.

“They didn’t want to change before,” she answered. “I don’t think they’ll do it now, even in their new home.” Her voice held no bitterness; it was an acceptance.

Privately, Jorun doubted it. The psychic shock of this uprooting would be bound to destroy the old traditions of the Terrans; it would not take many centuries before they were culturally assimilated by Galactic civilization.

Assimilated—nice euphemism. Why not just say—eaten?

They landed on the beach. It was broad and white, running in dunes from the thin, harsh, salt-streaked grass to the roar and tumble of surf. The sun was low over the watery horizon, filling the damp, blowing air with gold. Jorun could almost look directly at its huge disc.

He sat down. The sand gritted tinily under him, and the wind ruffled his hair and filled his nostrils with its sharp wet smell. He picked up a conch and turned it over in his fingers, wondering at the intricate architecture of it.

“If you hold it to your ear,” said Julith, “you can hear the sea.” Her childish voice was curiously tender around the rough syllables of Earth’s language.

He nodded and obeyed her hint. It was only the small pulse of blood within him—you heard the same thing out in the great hollow silence of space—but it did sing of restless immensities, wind and foam, and the long waves marching under the moon.

“I have two of them myself,” said Julith. “I want them so I can always remember this beach. And my children and their children will hold them, too, and hear our sea talking.” She folded his fingers around the shell. “You keep this one for yourself.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I will.” The combers rolled in, booming and spouting against the land. The Terrans called them the horses of God. A thin cloud in the west was turning rose and gold.

“Are there oceans on our new planet?” asked Julith.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s the most Earth-like world we could find that wasn’t already inhabited. You’ll be happy there.”

But the trees and grasses, the soil and the fruits thereof, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the waters beneath, form and color, smell and sound, taste and texture, everything is different. Is alien. The difference is small, subtle, but it is the abyss of two billion years of separate evolution, and no other world can ever quite be Earth.

Julith looked straight at him with solemn eyes. “Are you folk afraid of Hulduvians?” she asked.

“Why, no,” he said. “Of course not.”

“Then why are you giving Earth to them?” It was a soft question, but it trembled just a little.

“I thought all your people understood the reason by now,” said Jorun. “Civilization—the civilization of man and his nonhuman allies—has moved inward, toward the great star-clusters of Galactic center. This part of space means nothing to us any more; it’s almost a desert. You haven’t seen starlight till you’ve been by Sagittarius. Now the Hulduvians are another civilization. They are not the least bit like us; they live on big, poisonous worlds like Jupiter and Saturn. I think they would seem like pretty nice

monsters if they weren't so alien to us that neither side can really understand the other. They use the cosmic energies too, but in a different way—and their way interferes with ours just as ours interferes with theirs. Different brains, you see.

“Anyway, it was decided that the two civilizations would get along best by just staying away from each other. If they divided up the Galaxy between them, there would be no interference; it would be too far from one civilization to the other. The Hulduvians were, really, very nice about it. They're willing to take the outer rim, even if there are fewer stars, and let us have the center.

“So by the agreement, we've got to have all men and manlike beings out of their territory before they come to settle it, just as they'll move out of ours. Their colonists won't be coming to Jupiter and Saturn for centuries yet; but even so, we have to clear the Sirius Sector now, because there'll be a lot of work to do elsewhere. Fortunately, there are only a few people living in this whole part of space. The Sirius Sector has been an isolated, primi—ah—quiet region since the First Empire fell, fifty thousand years ago.”

Julith's voice rose a little. “But those people are *us*!”

“And the folk of Alpha Centauri and Procyon and Sirius and—oh, hundreds of other stars. Yet all of you together are only one tiny drop in the quadrillions of the Galaxy. Don't you see, Julith, you have to move for the good of all of us?”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I know all that.”

She got up, shaking herself. “Let's go swimming.”

Jorun smiled and shook his head. “No, I'll wait for you if you want to go.”

She nodded and ran off down the beach, sheltering behind a dune to put on a bathing-suit. The Terrans had a nudity taboo, in spite of the mild interglacial climate; typical primitive irrationality. Jorun lay back, folding his arms behind his head, and looked up at the darkening sky. The evening star twinkled forth, low and white on the dusk-blue horizon. Venus—or was it Mercury? He wasn't sure. He wished he knew more about the early history of the Solar System, the first men to ride their thunderous rockets

out to die on unknown hell-worlds—the first clumsy steps toward the stars. He could look it up in the archives of Corazuno, but he knew he never would. Too much else to do, too much to remember. Probably less than one percent of mankind's throngs even knew where Earth was, today—though, for a while, it had been quite a tourist-center. But that was perhaps thirty thousand years ago.

Because this world, out of all the billions, has certain physical characteristics, he thought, my race has made them into standards. Our basic units of length and time and acceleration, our comparisons by which we classify the swarming planets of the Galaxy, they all go back ultimately to Earth. We bear that unspoken memorial to our birthplace within our whole civilization, and will bear it forever. But has she given us more than that? Are our own selves, bodies and minds and dreams, are they also the children of Earth?

Now he was thinking like Kormt, stubborn old Kormt who clung with such a blind strength to this land simply because it was his. When you considered all the races of this wander-footed species—how many of them there were, how many kinds of man between the stars! And yet they all walked upright; they all had two eyes and a nose between and a mouth below; they were all cells of that great and ancient culture which had begun here, eons past, with the first hairy half-man who kindled a fire against night. If Earth had not had darkness and cold and prowling beasts, oxygen and cellulose and flint, that culture might never have gestated.

I'm getting unlogical. Too tired, nerves worn too thin, psychosomatic control slipping. Now Earth is becoming some obscure mother-symbol for me.

Or has she always been one, for the whole race of us?

A seagull cried harshly overhead and soared from view.

The sunset was smoldering away and dusk rose like fog out of the ground. Julith came running back to him, her face indistinct in the gloom. She was breathing hard, and he couldn't tell if the catch in her voice was laughter or weeping.

"I'd better be getting home," she said.

III

They flew slowly back. The town was a yellow twinkle of lights, warmth gleaming from windows across many empty kilometers. Jorun set the girl down outside her home.

“Thank you, good sir,” she said, curtsying. “Won’t you come in to dinner?”

“Well—”

The door opened, etching the girl black against the ruddiness inside. Jorun’s luminous tunic made him like a torch in the dark. “Why, it’s the star-man,” said a woman’s voice.

“I took your daughter for a swim,” he explained. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“And if we did, what would it matter?” grumbled a bass tone. Jorun recognized Kormt; the old man must have come as a guest from his farm on the outskirts. “What could we do about it?”

“Now, Granther, that’s no way to talk to the gentleman,” said the woman. “He’s been very kind. Won’t you come eat with us, good sir?”

Jorun refused twice, in case they were only being polite, then accepted gladly enough. He was tired of cookery at the inn where he and Zarek boarded. “Thank you.”

He entered, ducking under the low door. A single long, smoky-raftered room was kitchen, diningroom, and parlor; doors led off to the sleeping quarters. It was furnished with a clumsy elegance, skin rugs, oak wainscoting, carved pillars, glowing ornaments of hammered copper. A radium clock, which must be incredibly old, stood on the stone mantel, above a snapping fire; a chemical-powered gun, obviously of local manufacture, hung over it. Julith’s parents, a plain, quiet peasant couple, conducted him to the end of the wooden table, while half a dozen children watched him with large eyes. The younger children were the only Terrans who seemed to find this removal an adventure.

The meal was good and plentiful: meat, vegetables, bread, beer, milk, ice cream, coffee, all of it from the farms hereabouts. There wasn’t much trade between the few thousand communities of Earth; they were practically self-sufficient. The company ate in silence, as was the custom here. When they were finished, Jorun wanted to go, but it would have been rude to leave immediately. He went over to a chair by the fireplace, across from the one in which Kormt sprawled.

The old man took out a big-bowled pipe and began stuffing it. Shadows wove across his seamed brown face, his eyes were a gleam out of darkness. "I'll go down to City Hall with you soon," he said; "I imagine that's where the work is going on."

"Yes," said Jorun, "I can relieve Zarek at it. I'd appreciate it if you did come, good sir. Your influence is very steadying on these people."

"It should be," said Kormt. "I've been their Speaker for almost a hundred years. And my father Gerlaug was before me, and his father Kormt was before him." He took a brand from the fire and held it over his pipe, puffing hard, looking up at Jorun through tangled brows. "Who was your great-grandfather?"

"Why—I don't know. I imagine he's still alive somewhere, but—"

"I thought so. No marriage. No family. No home. No tradition." Kormt shook his massive head, slowly, "I pity you Galactics!"

"Now please, good sir—" Damn it all, the old clodhopper could get as irritating as a faulty computer. "We have records that go back to before man left this planet. Records of everything. It is you who have forgotten."

Kormt smiled and puffed blue clouds at him. "That's not what I meant."

"Do you mean you think it is good for men to live a life that is unchanging, that is just the same from century to century—no new dreams, no new triumphs, always the same grubbing rounds of days? I cannot agree."

Jorun's mind flickered over history, trying to evaluate the basic motivations of his opponent. Partly cultural, partly biological, that must be it. Once Terra had been the center of the civilized universe. But the long migration starward, especially after the fall of the First Empire, drained off the most venturesome elements of the population. That drain went on for thousands of years. Sol was backward, ruined and impoverished by the remorseless price of empire, helpless before the storms of barbarian conquest that swept back and forth between the stars. Even after peace was restored, there was nothing to hold a young man or woman of vitality and imagination here—not when you could go toward Galactic center and join the new civilization building out there. Space-traffic came ever less frequently to Sol; old

machines rusted away and were not replaced; best to get out while there was still time.

Eventually there was a fixed psychosomatic type, one which lived close to the land, in primitive changeless communities and isolated farmsteads—a type content to gain its simple needs by the labor of hand, horse, or an occasional battered engine. A culture grew up which increased that rigidity. So few had visited Earth in the last several thousand years—perhaps one outsider a century, stopping briefly off on his way to somewhere else—that there was no challenge or encouragement to alter. The Terrans didn't *want* more people, more machines, more anything; they wished only to remain as they were.

You couldn't call them stagnant. Their life was too healthy, their civilization too rich in its own way—folk art, folk music, ceremony, religion, the intimacy of family life which the Galactics had lost—for that term. But to one who flew between the streaming suns, it was a small existence.

Kormt's voice broke in on his reverie. "Dreams, triumphs, work, deeds, love and life and finally death and the long sleep in the earth," he said. "Why should we want to change them? They never grow old; they are new for each child that is born."

"Well," said Jorun, and stopped. You couldn't really answer that kind of logic. It wasn't logic at all, but something deeper.

"Well," he started over, after a while, "as you know, this evacuation was forced on us, too. We don't want to move you, but we must."

"Oh, yes," said Kormt. "You have been very nice about it. It would have been easier, in a way, if you'd come with fire and gun and chains for us, like the barbarians did long ago. We could have understood you better then."

"At best, it will be hard for your people," said Jorun. "It will be a shock, and they'll need leaders to guide them through it. You have a duty to help them out there, good sir."

"Maybe." Kormt blew a series of smoke rings at his youngest descendant, three years old, who crowed with laughter and climbed up on his knee. "But they'll manage."

"You can't seem to realize," said Jorun, "that you are the *last man on Earth* who refuses to go. You will be *alone*. For the rest of your life! We couldn't come back for you later under any circumstances, because there'll

be Hulduvian colonies between Sol and Sagittarius which we would disturb in passage. You'll be alone, I say!"

Kormt shrugged. "I'm too old to change my ways; there can't be many years left me, anyway. I can live well, just off the food-stores that'll be left here." He ruffled the child's hair, but his face drew into a scowl. "Now, no more of that, good sir, if you please; I'm tired of this argument."

Jorun nodded and fell into the silence that held the rest. Terrans would sometimes sit for hours without talking, content to be in each other's nearness. He thought of Kormt, Gerlaug's son, last man on Earth, altogether alone, living alone and dying alone; and yet, he reflected, was that solitude any greater than the one in which all men dwelt all their days?

Presently the Speaker set the child down, knocked out his pipe, and rose. "Come, good sir," he said, reaching for his staff. "Let us go."

They walked side by side down the street, under the dim lamps and past the yellow windows. The cobbles gave back their footfalls in a dull clatter. Once in a while they passed someone else, a vague figure which bowed to Kormt. Only one did not notice them, an old woman who walked crying between the high walls.

"They say it is never night on your worlds," said Kormt.

Jorun threw him a sidelong glance. His face was a strong jutting of highlights from sliding shadow. "Some planets have been given luminous skies," said the technician, "and a few still have cities, too, where it is always light. But when every man can control the cosmic energies, there is no real reason for us to live together; most of us dwell far apart. There are very dark nights on my own world, and I cannot see any other home from my own—just the moors."

"It must be a strange life," said Kormt. "Belonging to no one."

They came out on the market-square, a broad paved space walled in by houses. There was a fountain in its middle, and a statue dug out of the ruins had been placed there. It was broken, one arm gone—but still the white slim figure of the dancing girl stood with youth and laughter, forever under the sky of Earth. Jorun knew that lovers were wont to meet here, and briefly, irrationally, he wondered how lonely the girl would be in all the millions of years to come.

The City Hall lay at the farther end of the square, big and dark, its eaves carved with dragons, and the gables topped with wing-spreading birds. It was an old building; nobody knew how many generations of men had gathered here. A long, patient line of folk stood outside it, shuffling in one by one to the registry desk; emerging, they went off quietly into the darkness, toward the temporary shelters erected for them.

Walking by the line, Jorun picked faces out of the shadows. There was a young mother holding a crying child, her head bent over it in a timeless pose, murmuring to soothe it. There was a mechanic, still sooty from his work, smiling wearily at some tired joke of the man behind him. There was a scowling, black-browed peasant who muttered a curse as Jorun went by; the rest seemed to accept their fate meekly enough. There was a priest, his head bowed, alone with his God. There was a younger man, his hands clenching and unclenching, big helpless hands, and Jorun heard him saying to someone else: “—if they could have waited till after harvest. I hate to let good grain stand in the field.”

Jorun went into the main room, toward the desk at the head of the line. Hulking hairless Zarek was patiently questioning each of the hundreds who came hat in hand before him: name, age, sex, occupation, dependents, special needs or desires. He punches the answers out on the recorder machine, half a million lives were held in its electronic memory.

“Oh, there you are,” his bass rumbled. “Where’ve you been?”

“I had to do some concy work,” said Jorun. That was a private code term, among others: concy, conciliation, anything to make the evacuation go smoothly. “Sorry to be so late. I’ll take over now.”

“All right. I think we can wind the whole thing up by midnight.” Zarek smiled at Kormt. “Glad you came, good sir. There are a few people I’d like you to talk to.” He gestured at half a dozen seated in the rear of the room. Certain complaints were best handled by native leaders.

Kormt nodded and strode over to the folk. Jorun heard a man begin some long-winded explanation: he wanted to take his own plow along, he’d made it himself and there was no better plow in the universe, but the star-man said there wouldn’t be room.

“They’ll furnish us with all the stuff we need, son,” said Kormt.

“But it’s *my* plow!” said the man. His fingers twisted his cap.

Kormt sat down and began soothing him.

The head of the line waited a few meters off while Jorun took Zarek’s place. “Been a long grind,” said the latter. “About done now, though. And will I be glad to see the last of this planet!”

“I don’t know,” said Jorun. “It’s a lovely world. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more beautiful one.”

Zarek snorted. “Me for Thonnvar! I can’t wait to sit on the terrace by the Scarlet Sea, fern-trees and red grass all around, a glass of oehl in my hand and the crystal geysers in front of me. You’re a funny one, Jorun.”

The Fulkhisian shrugged slender shoulders. Zarek clapped him on the back and went out for supper and sleep. Jorun beckoned to the next Terran and settled down to the long, almost mindless routine of registration. He was interrupted once by Kormt, who yawned mightily and bade him goodnight; otherwise it was a steady, half-conscious interval in which one anonymous face after another passed by. He was dimly surprised when the last one came up. This was a plump, cheerful, middle-aged fellow with small shrewd eyes, a little more colorfully dressed than the others. He gave his occupation as merchant—a minor tradesman, he explained, dealing in the little things it was more convenient for the peasants to buy than to manufacture themselves.

“I hope you haven’t been waiting too long,” said Jorun. Concy statement.

“Oh, no.” The merchant grinned. “I knew those dumb farmers would be here for hours, so I just went to bed and got up half an hour ago, when it was about over.”

“Clever.” Jorun rose, sighed, and stretched. The big room was cavernously empty, its lights a harsh glare. It was very quiet here.

“Well, sir, I’m a middling smart chap, if I say it as shouldn’t. And you know, I’d like to express my appreciation of all you’re doing for us.”

“Can’t say we’re doing much.” Jorun locked the machine.

“Oh, the apple-knockers may not like it, but really, good sir, this hasn’t been any place for a man of enterprise. It’s dead. I’d have got out long ago if there’d been any transportation. Now, when we’re getting back into civilization, there’ll be some real opportunities. I’ll make my pile inside of five years, you bet.”

Jorun smiled, but there was a bleakness in him. What chance would this barbarian have even to get near the gigantic work of civilization—let alone

comprehend it or take part in it. He hoped the little fellow wouldn't break his heart trying.

"Well," he said, "goodnight, and good luck to you."

"Goodnight, sir. We'll meet again, I trust."

Jorun switched off the lights and went out into the square. It was completely deserted. The moon was up now, almost full, and its cold radiance dimmed the lamps. He heard a dog howling far off. The dogs of Earth—such as weren't taken along—would be lonely, too.

Well, he thought, the job's over. Tomorrow, or the next day, the ships come.

IV

He felt very tired, but didn't want to sleep, and willed himself back to alertness. There hadn't been much chance to inspect the ruins, and he felt it would be appropriate to see them by moonlight.

Rising into the air, he ghosted above roofs and trees until he came to the dead city. For a while he hovered in a sky like dark velvet, a faint breeze murmured around him, and he heard the remote noise of crickets and the sea. But stillness enveloped it all, there was no real sound.

Sol City, capital of the legendary First Empire, had been enormous. It must have sprawled over forty or fifty thousand square kilometers when it was in its prime, when it was the gay and wicked heart of human civilization and swollen with the lifeblood of the stars. And yet those who built it had been men of taste, they had sought out genius to create for them. The city was not a collection of buildings; it was a balanced whole, radiating from the mighty peaks of the central palace, through colonnades and parks and leaping skyways, out to the temple-like villas of the rulers. For all its monstrous size, it had been a fairy sight, a woven lace of polished metal and white, black, red stone, colored plastic, music and light—everywhere light.

Bombarded from space; sacked again and again by the barbarian hordes who swarmed maggot-like through the bones of the slain Empire;

weathered, shaken by the slow sliding of Earth's crust; pried apart by patient, delicate roots; dug over by hundreds of generations of archaeologists, treasure-seekers, the idly curious; made a quarry of metal and stone for the ignorant peasants who finally huddled about it—still its empty walls and blind windows, crumbling arches and toppled pillars held a ghost of beauty and magnificence which was like a half-remembered dream. A dream the whole race had once had.

And now we're waking up.

Jorun moved silently over the ruins. Trees growing between tumbled blocks dappled them with moonlight and shadow; the marble was very white and fair against darkness. He hovered by a broken caryatid, marveling at its exquisite leaping liveness; that girl had borne tons of stone like a flower in her hair. Further on, across a street that was a lane of woods, beyond a park that was thick with forest, lay the nearly complete outline of a house. Only its rain-blurred walls stood, but he could trace the separate rooms: here a noble had entertained his friends, robes that were fluid rainbows, jewels dripping fire, swift cynical interplay of wits like sharpened swords rising above music and the clear sweet laughter of dancing-girls; here people whose flesh was now dust had slept and made love and lain side-by-side in darkness to watch the moving pageant of the city; here the slaves had lived and worked and sometimes wept; here the children had played their ageless games under willows, between banks of roses. Oh, it had been a hard and cruel time; it was well gone but it had lived. It had embodied man, all that was noble and splendid and evil and merely wistful in the race, and now its late children had forgotten.

A cat sprang up on one of the walls and flowed noiselessly along it, hunting. Jorun shook himself and flew toward the center of the city, the imperial palace. An owl hooted somewhere, and a bat fluttered out of his way like a small damned soul blackened by hellfire. He didn't raise a windscreen, but let the air blow around him, the air of Earth.

The palace was almost completely wrecked, a mountain of heaped rocks, bare bones of "eternal" metal gnawed thin by steady ages of wind and rain and frost, but once it must have been gigantic. Men rarely built that big nowadays, they didn't need to; and the whole human spirit had changed,

become ever more abstract, finding its treasures within itself. But there had been an elemental magnificence about early man and the works he raised to challenge the sky.

One tower still stood—a gutted shell, white under the stars, rising in a filigree of columns and arches which seemed impossibly airy, as if it were built of moonlight. Jorun settled on its broken upper balcony, dizzily high above the black-and-white fantasy of the ruins. A hawk flew shrieking from its nest, then there was silence.

No—wait—another yell, ringing down the star ways, a dark streak across the moon’s face. “*Hai-ah!*” Jorun recognized the joyful shout of young Cluthe, rushing through heaven like a demon on a broomstick, and scowled in annoyance. He didn’t want to be bothered now.

Well, they had as much right here as he. He repressed the emotion, and even managed a smile. After all, he would have liked to feel gay and reckless at times, but he had never been able to. Jorun was little older than Cluthe—a few centuries at most—but he came of a melancholy folk; he had been born old.

Another form pursued the first. As they neared, Jorun recognized Taliuvenna’s supple outline. Those two had been teamed up for one of the African districts, but—

They sensed him and came wildly out of the sky to perch on the balcony railing and swing their legs above the heights. “How’re you?” asked Cluthe. His lean face laughed in the moonlight. “Whoo-oo, what a flight!”

“I’m all right,” said Jorun. “You through in your sector?”

“Uh-huh. So we thought we’d just duck over and look in here. Last chance anyone’ll ever have to do some sightseeing on Earth.”

Taliuvenna’s full lips drooped a bit as she looked over the ruins. She came from Yunith, one of the few planets where they still kept cities, and was as much a child of their soaring arrogance as Jorun of his hills and tundras and great empty seas. “I thought it would be bigger,” she said.

“Well, they were building this fifty or sixty thousand years ago,” said Cluthe. “Can’t expect too much.”

“There is good art left here,” said Jorun. “Pieces which for one reason or another weren’t carried off. But you have to look around for it.”

“I’ve seen a lot of it already, in museums,” said Taliuvenna. “Not bad.”

“C’mon, Tally,” cried Cluthe. He touched her shoulder and sprang into the air. “Tag! You’re it!”

She screamed with laughter and shot off after him. They rushed across the wilderness, weaving in and out of empty windows and broken colonnades, and their shouts woke a clamor of echoes.

Jorun sighed. *I'd better go to bed*, he thought. *It's late.*

The spaceship was a steely pillar against a low gray sky. Now and then a fine rain would drizzle down, blurring it from sight; then that would end, and the ship's flanks would glisten as if they were polished. Clouds scudded overhead like flying smoke, and the wind was loud in the trees.

The line of Terrans moving slowly into the vessel seemed to go on forever. A couple of the ship's crew flew above them, throwing out a shield against the rain. They shuffled without much talk or expression, pushing carts filled with their little possessions. Jorun stood to one side, watching them go by, one face after another—scored and darkened by the sun of Earth, the winds of Earth, hands still grimy with the soil of Earth.

Well, he thought, *there they go. They aren't being as emotional about it as I thought they would. I wonder if they really do care.*

Julith went past with her parents. She saw him and darted from the line and curtsied before him.

"Goodbye, good sir," she said. Looking up, she showed him a small and serious face. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Well," he lied, "I might look in on you sometime."

"Please do! In a few years, maybe, when you can."

It takes many generations to raise a people like this to our standard. In a few years—to me—she'll be in her grave.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy," he said.

She gulped. "Yes," she said, so low he could barely hear her. "Yes, I know I will." She turned and ran back to her mother. The raindrops glistened in her hair.

Zarek came up behind Jorun. "I made a last-minute sweep of the whole area," he said. "Detected no sign of human life. So it's all taken care of, except your old man."

"Good," said Jorun tonelessly.

"I wish you could do something about him."

"So do I."

Zarek strolled off again.

A young man and woman, walking hand in hand, turned out of the line not far away and stood for a little while. A spaceman zoomed over to them. "Better get back," he warned. "You'll get rained on."

"That's what we wanted," said the young man.

The spaceman shrugged and resumed his hovering. Presently the couple re-entered the line.

The tail of the procession went by Jorun and the ship swallowed it fast. The rain fell harder, bouncing off his force-shield like silver spears. Lightning winked in the west, and he heard the distant exuberance of thunder.

Kormt came walking slowly toward him. Rain streamed off his clothes and matted his long gray hair and beard. His wooden shoes made a wet sound in the mud. Jorun extended the force-shield to cover him. "I hope you've changed your mind," said the Fulkhisian.

"No, I haven't," said Kormt. "I just stayed away till everybody was aboard. Don't like goodbyes."

"You don't know what you're doing," said Jorun for the—thousandth?—time. "It's plain madness to stay here alone."

"I told you I don't like goodbyes," said Kormt harshly.

"I have to go advise the captain of the ship," said Jorun. "You have maybe half an hour before she lifts. Nobody will laugh at you for changing your mind."

"I won't." Kormt smiled without warmth. "You people are the future, I guess. Why can't you leave the past alone? I'm the past." He looked toward the far hills, hidden by the noisy rain. "I like it here, Galactic. That should be enough for you."

"Well, then—" Jorun held out his hand in the archaic gesture of Earth. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye." Kormt took the hand with a brief, indifferent clasp. Then he turned and walked off toward the village. Jorun watched him till he was out of sight.

The technician paused in the airlock door, looking over the gray landscape and the village from whose chimneys no smoke rose. *Farewell, my mother*, he thought. And then, surprising himself: *Maybe Kormt is doing the right thing after all.*

He entered the ship and the door closed behind him.

Toward evening, the clouds lifted and the sky showed a clear pale blue—as if it had been washed clean—and the grass and leaves glistened. Kormt came out of the house to watch the sunset. It was a good one, all flame and gold. A pity little Julith wasn't here to see it; she'd always liked sunsets. But Julith was so far away now that if she sent a call to him, calling with the speed of light, it would not come before he was dead.

Nothing would come to him. Not ever again.

He tamped his pipe with a horny thumb and lit it and drew a deep cloud into his lungs. Hands in pockets, he strolled down the wet streets. The sound of his clogs was unexpectedly loud.

Well, son, he thought, now you've got a whole world all to yourself, to do with just as you like. You're the richest man who ever lived.

There was no problem in keeping alive. Enough food of all kinds was stored in the town's freeze-vault to support a hundred men for the ten or twenty years remaining to him. But he'd want to stay busy. He could maybe keep three farms from going to seed—watch over fields and orchards and livestock, repair the buildings, dust and wash and light up in the evening. A man ought to keep busy.

He came to the end of the street, where it turned into a graveled road winding up toward a high hill, and followed that. Dusk was creeping over the fields, the sea was a metal streak very far away and a few early stars blinked forth. A wind was springing up, a soft murmurous wind that talked in the trees. But how quiet things were!

On top of the hill stood the chapel, a small steeped building of ancient stone. He let himself in the gate and walked around to the graveyard behind. There were many of the demure white tombstones—thousands of years of Solis Township men and women who had lived and worked and begotten, laughed and wept and died. Someone had put a wreath on one grave only this morning; it brushed against his leg as he went by. Tomorrow it would be withered, and weeds would start to grow. He'd have to tend the chapel yard, too. Only fitting.

He found his family plot and stood with feet spread apart, fists on hips, smoking and looking down at the markers Gerlaug Kormt's son, Tarna Huwan's daughter, these hundred years had they lain in the earth. Hello, Dad, hello, Mother. His fingers reached out and stroked the headstone of his wife. And so many of his children were here, too; sometimes he found it

hard to believe that tall Gerlaug and laughing Stamm and shy, gentle Huwan were gone. He'd outlived too many people.

I had to stay, he thought. This is my land, I am of it and I couldn't go. Someone had to stay and keep the land, if only for a little while. I can give it ten more years before the forest comes and takes it.

Darkness grew around him. The woods beyond the hill loomed like a wall. Once he started violently, he thought he heard a child crying. No, only a bird. He cursed himself for the senseless pounding of his heart.

Gloomy place here, he thought. Better get back to the house.

He groped slowly out of the yard, toward the road. The stars were out now. Kormt looked up and thought he had never seen them so bright. Too bright; he didn't like it.

Go away, stars, he thought. You took my people, but I'm staying here. This is my land. He reached down to touch it, but the grass was cold and wet under his palm.

The gravel scrunched loudly as he walked, and the wind mumbled in the hedges, but there was no other sound. Not a voice called; not an engine turned; not a dog barked. No, he hadn't thought it would be so quiet.

And dark. No lights. Have to tend the street lamps himself—it was no fun, not being able to see the town from here, not being able to see anything except the stars. Should have remembered to bring a flashlight, but he was old and absentminded, and there was no one to remind him. When he died, there would be no one to hold his hands; no one to close his eyes and lay him in the earth—and the forests would grow in over the land and wild beasts would nuzzle his bones.

But I knew that. What of it? I'm tough enough to take it.

The stars flashed and flashed above him. Looking up, against his own will, Kormt saw how bright they were, how bright and quiet. And how very far away! He was seeing light that had left its home before he was born.

He stopped, sucking in his breath between his teeth. "No," he whispered.

This was his land. This was Earth, the home of man; it was his and he was its. This was the *land*, and not a single dust-mote, crazily reeling and spinning through an endlessness of dark and silence, cold and immensity. Earth could not be so alone!

The last man alive. The last man in all the world!

He screamed, then, and began to run. His feet clattered loud on the road; the small sound was quickly swallowed by silence, and he covered his face

against the relentless blaze of the stars. But there was no place to run to, no place at all.

THE SENSITIVE MAN

I

The Mermaid Tavern had been elaborately decorated. Great blocks of hewn coral for pillars and booths, tarpon and barracuda on the walls, murals of Neptune and his court—including an outsize animated picture of a mermaid ballet, quite an eye-catcher. But the broad quartz windows showed merely a shifting greenish-blue of seawater, and the only live fish visible were in an aquarium across from the bar. Pacific Colony lacked the grotesque loveliness of the Florida and Cuba settlements. Here they were somehow a working city, even in their recreations.

The sensitive man paused for a moment in the foyer, sweeping the big circular room with a hurried glance. Less than half the tables were filled. This was an hour of interregnum, while the twelve to eighteen hundred shift was still at work and the others had long finished their more expensive amusements. There would always be a few around, of course—Dalgetty typed them as he watched.

A party of engineers, probably arguing about the compression strength of the latest submarine tank to judge from the bored expressions of the three or four rec girls who had joined them. A biochemist, who seemed to have forgotten his plankton and seaweed for the time being and to have focused his mind on the pretty young clerk with him. A couple of hard-handed caissoniers, settling down to some serious drinking.

A maintenance man, a computerman, a tank pilot, a diver, a sea rancher, a bevy of stenographers, a bunch of very obvious tourists, more chemists and metallurgists—the sensitive man dismissed them all. There were others he couldn't classify with any decent probability but after a second's hesitation

he decided to ignore them too. That left only the group with Thomas Bancroft.

They were sitting in one of the coral grottos, a cave of darkness to ordinary vision. Dalgetty had to squint to see in and the muted light of the tavern was a harsh glare when his pupils were so distended. But, yes—it was Bancroft all right and there was an empty booth adjoining his.

Dalgetty relaxed his eyes to normal perception. Even in the short moment of dilation the fluoros had given him a headache. He blocked it off from consciousness and started across the floor.

A hostess stopped him with a touch on the arm as he was about to enter the vacant cavern. She was young, an iridescent mantrap in her brief uniform. With all the money flowing into Pacific Colony they could afford decorative help here.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “Those are kept for parties. Would you like a table?”

“I’m a party,” he answered, “or can soon become one.” He moved aside a trifle so that none of the Bancroft group should happen to look out and see him. “If you could arrange some company for me. . . .” He fumbled out a C-note, wondering just how such things could be done gracefully.

“Why, of course, sir.” She took it with a smoothness he envied and handed him a stunning smile in return. “Just make yourself comfortable.”

Dalgetty stepped into the grotto with a fast movement. This wasn’t going to be simple. The rough red walls closed in on top of him, forming a space big enough for twenty people or so. A few strategically placed fluoros gave an eerie undersea light, just enough to see by—but no one could look in. A heavy curtain could be drawn if one wanted to be absolutely secluded. Privacy—*uh-huh!*

He sat down at the driftwood table and leaned back against the coral. Closing his eyes he made an effort of will. His nerves were already keyed up to such a tautness that it seemed they must break and it took only seconds to twist his mind along the paths required.

The noise of the tavern rose from a tiny mumble to a clattering surf, to a huge and saw-edged wave. Voices dinned in his head, shrill and deep, hard and soft, a senseless stream of talking, jumbled together into words, words, words. Somebody dropped a glass and it was like a bomb going off.

Dalgetty winced, straining his ear against the grotto side. Surely enough of their speech would come to him, even through all that rock! The noise

level was high but the human mind, if trained in concentration, is an efficient filter. The outside racket receded from Dalgetty's awareness and slowly he gathered in the trickle of sound.

First man: "—no matter. What can they do?"

Second man: "Complain to the government. Do you want the F.B.I. on our trail? I don't."

First man: "Take it easy. They haven't yet done so and it's been a good week now since—"

Second man: "How do you know they haven't?"

Third man—heavy, authoritative voice. Yes, Dalgetty remembered it now from TV speeches—it was Bancroft himself: "*I* know. I've got enough connections to be sure of that."

Second man: "Okay, so they haven't reported it. But why not?"

Bancroft: "You know why. They don't want the government mixing into this any more than we do."

Woman: "Well, then, are they just going to sit and take it? No, they'll find some way to—"

"HELLO, THERE, MISTER!!!"

Dalgetty jumped and whirled around. His heart began to race, until he felt his ribs tremble and he cursed his own tension.

"WHY, WHAT'S THE MATTER, MISTER? YOU LOOK—"

Effort again, forcing the volume down, grasping the thunderous heart in fingers of command and dragging it toward rest. He focused his eyes on the girl who had entered. It was the rec girl, the one he had asked for because he had to sit in this booth.

Her voice was speaking on an endurable level now. Another pretty little bit of fluff. He smiled shakily. "Sit down, sweet. I'm sorry. My nerves are shot. What'll you have?"

"A daiquiri, please." She smiled and placed herself beside him. He dialed on the dispenser—the cocktail for her, a scotch and soda for himself.

"You're new here," she said. "Have you just been hired or are you a visitor?" Again the smile. "My name's Glenna."

"Call me Joe," said Dalgetty. His first name was actually Simon. "No, I'll only be here a short while."

"Where you from?" she asked. "I'm clear from New Jersey myself."

"Proving that nobody is ever born in California." He grinned. The control was asserting itself, his racing emotions were checked and he could think

clearly again. "I'm—uh—just a floater. Don't have any real address right now."

The dispenser ejected the drinks on a tray and flashed the charge—\$20. Not bad, considering everything. He gave the machine a fifty and it made change, a five-buck coin and a bill.

"Well," said Glenna, "here's to you."

"And you." He touched glasses, wondering how to say what he had to say. Damn it, he couldn't sit here just talking or necking, he'd come to listen but. . . . A sardonic montage of all the detective shows he had ever seen winked through his mind. The amateur who rushes in and solves the case, *heigh-ho*. He had never appreciated all the detail involved till now.

There was hesitation in him. He decided that a straightforward approach was his best bet. Deliberately then he created a cool confidence. Subconsciously he feared this girl, alien as she was to his class. All right, force the reaction to the surface, recognize it, suppress it. Under the table his hands moved in the intricate symbolic pattern which aided such emotion-harnessing.

"Glenna," he said, "I'm afraid I'll be rather dull company. The fact is I'm doing some research in psychology, learning how to concentrate under different conditions. I wanted to try it in a place like this, you understand." He slipped out a 2-C bill and laid it before her. "If you'd just sit here quietly it won't be for more than an hour I guess."

"Huh?" Her brows lifted. Then, with a shrug and a wry smile, "Okay, you're paying for it." She took a cigarette from the flat case at her sash, lit it and relaxed. Dalgetty leaned against the wall and closed his eyes again.

The girl watched him curiously. He was of medium height, stockily built, inconspicuously dressed in a blue short-sleeved tunic, gray slacks and sandals. His square snub-nosed face was lightly freckled, with hazel eyes and a rather pleasant shy smile. The rusty hair was close-cropped. A young man, she guessed, about twenty-five, quite ordinary and uninteresting except for the wrestler's muscles and, of course, his behavior.

Oh, well, it took all kinds.

Dalgetty had a moment of worry. Not because the yarn he had handed her was thin but because it brushed too close to the truth. He thrust the

unsureness out of him. Chances were she hadn't understood any of it, wouldn't even mention it. At least not to the people he was hunting.

Or who were hunting him?

Concentration, and the voices slowly came again: "—maybe. But I think they'll be more stubborn than that."

Bancroft: "Yes. The issues are too large for a few lives to matter. Still, Michael Tighe is only human. He'll talk."

The woman: "He can be made to talk, you mean?" She had one of the coldest voices Dalgetty had ever heard.

Bancroft: "Yes. Though I hate to use extreme measures."

Man: "What other possibilities have we got? He won't say anything unless he's forced to. And meanwhile his people will be scouring the planet to find him. They're a shrewd bunch."

Bancroft, sardonically: "What can they do, please? It takes more than an amateur to locate a missing man. It calls for all the resources of a large police organization. And the last thing they want, as I've said before, is to bring the government in on this."

The woman: "I'm not so sure of that, Tom. After all, the Institute is a legal group. It's government sponsored and its influence is something tremendous. Its graduates—"

Bancroft: "It educates a dozen different kinds of psychotechnicians, yes. It does research. It gives advice. It publishes findings and theories. But believe me the Psychotechnic Institute is like an iceberg. Its real nature and purpose are hidden way under water. No, it isn't doing anything illegal that I know of. Its aims are so large that they transcend law altogether."

Man: "What aims?"

Bancroft: "I wish I knew. We've only got hints and guesses, you know. One of the reasons we've snatched Tighe is to find out more. I suspect that their real work requires secrecy."

The woman, thoughtfully: "Y-y-yes, I can see how that might be. If the world at large were aware of being—manipulated—then manipulation might become impossible. But just where does Tighe's group want to lead us?"

Bancroft: "I don't know, I tell you. I'm not even sure that they do want to—take over. Something even bigger than that." A sigh. "Let's face it, Tighe is a crusader too. In his own way he's a very sincere idealist. He just

happens to have the wrong ideals. That's one reason why I'd hate to see him harmed."

Man: "But if it turns out that we've got to—"

Bancroft: "Why, then we've got to, that's all. But I won't enjoy it."

Man: "Okay, you're the leader, you say when. But I warn you not to wait too long. I tell you the Institute is more than a collection of unworldly scientists. They've got *someone* out searching for Tighe and if they should locate him there could be real trouble."

Bancroft, mildly: "Well, these are troubled times, or will be shortly. We might as well get used to that."

The conversation drifted away into idle chatter. Dalgetty groaned to himself. Not once had they spoken of the place where their prisoner was kept.

All right, little man, what next? Thomas Bancroft was big game. His law firm was famous. He had been in Congress and the Cabinet. Even with the Labor Party in power he was a respected elder statesman. He had friends in government, business, unions, guilds and clubs and leagues from Maine to Hawaii. He had only to say the word and Dalgetty's teeth would be kicked in some dark night. Or, if he proved squeamish, Dalgetty might find himself arrested on a charge like conspiracy and tied up in court for the next six months.

By listening in he had confirmed the suspicion of Ulrich at the Institute that Thomas Bancroft was Tighe's kidnapper—but that was no help. If he went to the police with that story they would (a) laugh, long and loud—(b) lock him up for psychiatric investigation—(c) worst of all, pass the story on to Bancroft, who would thereby know what the Institute's children could do and would take appropriate countermeasures.

II

Of course, this was just the beginning. The trail was long. But time was hideously short before they began turning Tighe's brain inside out. And there were wolves along the trail.

For a shivering instant, Simon Dalgetty realized what he had let himself in for.

It seemed like forever before the Bancroft crowd left. Dalgetty's eyes followed them out of the bar—four men and the woman. They were all quiet, mannerly, distinguished-looking, in rich dark slack suits. Even the hulking bodyguard was probably a college graduate, Third Class. You wouldn't take them for murderers and kidnappers and the servants of those who would bring back political gangsterism. But then, reflected Dalgetty, they probably didn't think of themselves in that light either.

The enemy—the old and protean enemy, who had been fought down as Fascist, Nazi, Shintoist, Communist, Atomist, Americanist and God knew what else for a bloody century—had grown craftier with time. Now he could fool even himself.

Dalgetty's senses went back to normal. It was a sudden immense relief to be merely sitting in a dimly-lit booth with a pretty girl, to be no more than human for a while. But his sense of mission was still dark within him.

"Sorry I was so long," he said. "Have another drink."

"I just had one." She smiled.

He noticed the \$10-figure glowing on the dispenser and fed it two coins. Then, his nerves still vibrating, he dialed another whiskey for himself.

"You know those people in the next grotto?" asked Glenna. "I saw you watching them leave."

"Well, I know Mr. Bancroft by reputation," he said. "He lives here, doesn't he?"

"He's got a place over on Gull Station," she said, "but he's not here very much, mostly on the mainland, I guess."

Dalgetty nodded. He had come to Pacific Colony two days before, had been hanging around in the hope of getting close enough to Bancroft to pick up a clue. Now he had done so and his findings were worth little. He had merely confirmed what the Institute already considered highly probable without getting any new information.

He needed to think over his next move. He drained his drink. "I'd better jet off," he said.

"We can have dinner in here if you want," said Glenna.

"Thanks, I'm not hungry." That was true enough. The nervous tension incidental to the use of his powers raised the devil with appetite. Nor could he be too lavish with his funds. "Maybe later."

“Okay, Joe, I might be seeing you.” She smiled. “You’re a funny one. But kind of nice.” Her lips brushed his and then she got up and left. Dalgetty went out the door and punched for a topside elevator.

It took him past many levels. The tavern was under the station’s caissons near the main anchor cable, looking out into deep water. Above it were storehouses, machine rooms, kitchens, all the paraphernalia of modern existence. He stepped out of a kiosk onto an upper deck, thirty feet above the surface. Nobody else was there and he walked over to the railing and leaned on it, looking across the water and savoring loneliness.

Below him the tiers dropped away to the main deck, flowing lines and curves, broad sheets of clear plastic, animated signs, the grass and flowerbeds of a small park, people walking swiftly or idly. The huge gyro-stabilized bulk did not move noticeably to the long Pacific swell. Pelican Station was the colony’s “downtown,” its shops and theaters and restaurants, service and entertainment.

Around it the water was indigo blue in the evening light, streaked with arabesques of foam, and he could hear waves rumble against the sheer walls. Overhead the sky was tall with a few clouds in the west turning aureate. The hovering gulls seemed cast in gold. A haziness in the darkened east betokened the southern California coastline. He breathed deeply, letting nerves and muscles and viscera relax, shutting off his mind and turning for a while into an organism that merely lived and was glad to live.

Dalgetty’s view in all directions was cut off by the other stations, the rising streamlined hulks which were Pacific Colony. A few airy flex-strung bridges had been completed to link them, but there was still an extensive boat traffic. To the south he could see a blackness on the water that was a sea ranch. His trained memory told him, in answer to a fleeting question, that according to the latest figures eighteen-point-three percent of the world’s food supply was now being derived from modified strains of seaweed. The percentage would increase rapidly, he knew.

Elsewhere were mineral-extracting plants, fishery bases, experimental and pure-research stations. Below the floating city, digging into the continental shelf, was the underwater settlement—oil wells to supplement the industrial synthesizing process, mining, exploration in tanks to find new resources, a slow growth outward as men learned how to go deeper into cold and darkness and pressure. It was expensive but an overcrowded world had little choice.

Venus was already visible, low and pure on the dusking horizon. Dalgetty breathed the wet pungent sea-air into his lungs and thought with some pity of the men out there—and on the Moon, on Mars, between worlds. They were doing a huge and heartbreaking job—but he wondered if it were bigger and more meaningful than this work here in Earth's oceans.

Or a few pages of scribbled equations, tossed into a desk drawer at the Institute. Enough. Dalgetty brought his mind to heel like a harshly trained dog. He was also here to work.

The forces he must encounter seemed monstrous. He was one man, alone against he knew not what kind of organization. He had to rescue one other man before—well, before history was changed and spun off on the wrong course, the long downward path. He had his knowledge and abilities but they wouldn't stop a bullet. Nor did they include education for this kind of warfare. War that was not war, politics that were not politics but a handful of scrawled equations and a bookful of slowly gathered data and a brainful of dreams.

Bancroft had Tighe—somewhere. The Institute could not ask the government for help, even if to a large degree the Institute was the government. It could, perhaps, send Dalgetty a few men but it had no goon squads. And time was like a hound on his heels.

The sensitive man turned, suddenly aware of someone else. This was a middle-aged fellow, gaunt and gray-haired, with an intellectual cast of feature. He leaned on the rail and said quietly, "Nice evening, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Dalgetty. "Very nice."

"It gives me a feeling of real accomplishment, this place," said the stranger.

"How so?" asked Dalgetty, not unwilling to make conversation.

The man looked out over the sea and spoke softly as if to himself. "I'm fifty years old. I was born during World War Three and grew up with the famines and the mass insanities that followed. I saw fighting myself in Asia. I worried about a senselessly expanding population pressing on senselessly diminished resources. I saw an America that seemed equally divided between decadence and madness.

“And yet I can stand now and watch a world where we’ve got a functioning United Nations, where population increase is leveling off and democratic government spreading to country after country, where we’re conquering the seas and even going out to other planets. Things have changed since I was a boy but on the whole it’s been for the better.”

“Ah,” said Dalgetty, “a kindred spirit. Though I’m afraid it’s not quite that simple.”

The man arched his brows. “So you vote conservative?”

“The Labor Party *is* conservative,” said Dalgetty. “As proof of which it’s in coalition with the Republicans and the Neofederalists as well as some splinter groups. No, I don’t care if it stays in, or if the Conservatives prosper or the Liberals take over. The question is—who shall control the group in power?”

“Its membership, I suppose,” said the man.

“But just who is its membership? You know as well as I do that the great failing of the American people has always been their lack of interest in politics.”

“What? Why, they vote, don’t they? What was the last percentage?”

“Eight-eight-point-three-seven. Sure they vote—once the ticket has been presented to them. But how many of them have anything to do with nominating the candidates or writing the platforms? How many will actually take time out to *work* at it—or even to write their Congressmen? ‘Ward heeler’ is still a term of contempt.

“All too often in our history the vote has been simply a matter of choosing between two well-oiled machines. A sufficiently clever and determined group can take over a party, keep the name and the slogans and in a few years do a complete behind-the-scenes *volte-face*.” Dalgetty’s words came fast, this was one facet of a task to which he had given his life.

“Two machines,” said the stranger, “or four or five as we’ve got now, are at least better than one.”

“Not if the same crowd controls all of them,” Dalgetty said grimly.

“But—”

“‘If you can’t lick ’em, join ’em.’ Better yet, join all sides. Then you *can’t* lose.”

“I don’t think that’s happened yet,” said the man.

“No it hasn’t,” said Dalgetty, “not in the United States, though in some other countries—never mind. It’s still in process of happening, that’s all. The lines today are drawn not by nations or parties, but by—philosophies, if you wish. Two views of man’s destiny, cutting across all national, political, racial and religious lines.”

“And what are those two views?” asked the stranger quietly.

“You might call them libertarian and totalitarian, though the latter don’t necessarily think of themselves as such. The peak of rampant individualism was reached in the nineteenth century, legally speaking. Though in point of fact social pressure and custom were more strait-jacketing than most people today realize.

“In the twentieth century that social rigidity—in manners, morals, habits of thought—broke down. The emancipation of women, for instance, or the easy divorce or the laws about privacy. But at the same time legal control began tightening up again. Government took over more and more functions, taxes got steeper, the individual’s life got more and more bound by regulations saying ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt not.’

“Well, it looks as if war is going out as an institution. That takes off a lot of pressure. Such hampering restrictions as conscription to fight or work, or rationing, have been removed. What we’re slowly attaining is a society where the individual has maximum freedom, both from law *and* custom. It’s perhaps farthest advanced in America, Canada, and Brazil, but it’s growing the world over.

“But there are elements which don’t like the consequences of genuine libertarianism. And the new science of human behavior, mass and individual, is achieving rigorous formulation. It’s becoming the most powerful tool man has ever had—for whoever controls the human mind will also control all that man can do. That science can be used by anyone, mind you. If you’ll read between the lines you’ll see what a hidden struggle is shaping up for control of it as soon as it reaches maturity and empirical useability.”

“Ah, yes,” said the man. “The Psychotechnic Institute.”

Dalgetty nodded, wondering why he had jumped into such a lecture. Well, the more people who had some idea of the truth the better—though it wouldn’t do for them to know the whole truth either. Not yet.

“The Institute trains so many for governmental posts and does so much advisory work,” said the man, “that sometimes it looks almost as if it were quietly taking over the whole show.”

Dalgetty shivered a little in the sunset breeze and wished he’d brought his cloak. He thought wearily, *Here it is again. Here is the story they are spreading, not in blatant accusations, not all at once, but slowly and subtly, a whisper here, a hint there, a slanted news story, a supposedly dispassionate article. ... Oh, yes, they know their applied semantics.*

“Too many people fear such an outcome,” he declared. “It just isn’t true. The Institute is a private research organization with a Federal grant. Its records are open to anyone.”

“All the records?” The man’s face was vague in the gathering twilight.

Dalgetty thought he could make out a skeptically lifted brow. He didn’t reply directly but said, “There’s a foggy notion in the public mind that a group equipped with a complete science of man—which the Institute hasn’t got by a long shot—could ‘take over’ at once and, by manipulations of some unspecified but frightfully subtle sort, rule the world. The theory is that if you know just what buttons to push and so on, men will do precisely as you wish without knowing that they’re being guided. The theory happens to be pure jetwash.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the man. “In general terms it sounds pretty plausible.”

Dalgetty shook his head. “Suppose I were an engineer,” he said, “and suppose I saw an avalanche coming down on me. I might know exactly what to do to stop it—where to plant my dynamite, where to build my concrete wall and so on. Only the knowledge wouldn’t help me. I’d have neither the time nor the strength to use it.

“The situation is similar with regard to human dynamics, both mass and individual. It takes months or years to change a man’s convictions and when you have hundreds of millions of men. ...” He shrugged. “Social currents are too large for all but the slightest, most gradual control. In fact perhaps the most valuable results obtained to date are not those which show what can be done but what cannot.”

“You speak with the voice of authority,” said the man.

“I’m a psychologist,” said Dalgetty truthfully enough. He didn’t add that he was also a subject, observer and guinea pig in one. “And I’m afraid I talk too much. Go from bad to voice.”

“Ouch,” said the man. He leaned his back against the rail and his shadowy hand extended a pack. “Smoke?”

“No, thanks, I don’t.”

“You’re a rarity.” The brief lighter-flare etched the stranger’s face against the dusk.

“I’ve found other ways of relaxing.”

“Good for you. By the way I’m a professor myself. English Lit at Colorado.”

“Afraid I’m rather a roughneck in that respect,” said Dalgetty. For a moment he had a sense of loss. His thought processes had become too far removed from the ordinary human for him to find much in fiction or poetry. But music, sculpture, painting—there was something else. He looked over the broad glimmering water, at the stations dark against the first stars, and savored the many symmetries and harmonies with a real pleasure. You needed senses like his before you could know what a lovely world this was.

“I’m on vacation now,” said the man. Dalgetty did not reply in kind. After a moment—“You are too, I suppose?”

Dalgetty felt a slight shock. A personal question from a stranger—well, you didn’t expect otherwise from someone like the girl Glenna but a professor should be better conditioned to privacy customs.

“Yes,” he said shortly. “Just visiting.”

“By the way, my name is Tyler, Harmon Tyler.”

“Joe Thomson.” Dalgetty shook hands with him.

“We might continue our conversation if you’re going to be around for awhile,” said Tyler. “You raised some interesting points.”

Dalgetty considered. It would be worthwhile staying as long as Bancroft did, in the hope of learning some more. “I may be here a couple of days yet,” he said.

“Good,” said Tyler. He looked up at the sky. It was beginning to fill with stars. The deck was still empty. It ran around the dim upthrusting bulk of a weather-observation tower which was turned over to its automatics for the night and there was no one else to be seen. A few fluoros cast wan puddles of luminance on the plastic flooring.

Glancing at his watch, Tyler said casually, “It’s about nineteen-thirty hours now. If you don’t mind waiting till twenty hundred I can show you something interesting.”

“What’s that?”

“Ah, you’ll be surprised.” Tyler chuckled. “Not many people know about it. Now, getting back to that point you raised earlier...”

The half hour passed swiftly. Dalgetty did most of the talking.

“—and mass action. Look, to a rather crude first approximation a state of semantic equilibrium on a worldwide scale, which of course has never existed, would be represented by an equation of the form—”

“Excuse me.” Tyler consulted the shining dial again. “If you don’t mind stopping for a few minutes I’ll show you that odd sight I was talking about.”

“Eh? Oh-oh, sure.”

Tyler threw away his cigarette. It was a tiny meteor in the gloom. He took Dalgetty’s arm. They walked slowly around the weather tower.

The men came from the opposite side and met them halfway. Dalgetty had hardly seen them before he felt the sting in his chest.

A needle gun!

The world roared about him. He took a step forward, trying to scream, but his throat locked. The deck lifted up and hit him and his mind whirled toward darkness.

From somewhere will rose within him, trained reflexes worked, he summoned all that was left of his draining strength and fought the anesthetic. His wrestling with it was a groping in fog. Again and again he spiraled into unconsciousness and rose strangling. Dimly, through nightmare, he was aware of being carried. Once someone stopped the group in a corridor and asked what was wrong. The answer seemed to come from immensely far away. “I dunno. He passed out—just like that. We’re taking him to a doctor.”

There was a century spent going down some elevator. The boathouse walls trembled liquidly around him. He was carried aboard a large vessel, it was not visible through the gray mist. Some dulled portion of himself thought that this was obviously a private boathouse, since no one was trying to stop—trying to stop—trying to stop....

Then the night came.

III

He woke slowly, with a dry retch, and blinked his eyes open. Noise of air, he was flying, it must have been a triphibian they took him onto. He tried to force recovery but his mind was still too paralyzed.

“Here. Drink this.”

Dalgetty took the glass and gulped thirstily. It was coolness and steadiness spreading through him. The vibratto within him faded, and the headache dulled enough to be endurable. Slowly he looked around, and felt the first crawl of panic.

No! He suppressed the emotion with an almost physical thrust. Now was the time for calm and quick wit and—

A big man near him nodded and stuck his head out the door. “He’s okay now, I guess,” he called. “Want to talk to him?”

Dalgetty’s eyes roved the compartment. It was a rear cabin in a large airboat, luxuriously furnished with reclining seats and an inlaid table. A broad window looked out on the stairs.

Caught! It was pure bitterness, an impotent rage at himself. *Walked right into their arms!*

Tyler came into the room, followed by a pair of burly stone-faced men. He smiled. “Sorry,” he murmured, “but you’re playing out of your league, you know.”

“Yeah.” Dalgetty shook his head. Wryness twisted his mouth. “I don’t league it much either.”

Tyler grinned. It was a sympathetic expression. “You punsters are incurable,” he said. “I’m glad you’re taking it so well. We don’t intend any harm to you.”

Skepticism was dark in Dalgetty but he managed to relax. “How’d you get onto me?” he asked.

“Oh, various ways. You were pretty clumsy, I’m afraid.” Tyler sat down across the table. The guards remained standing. “We were sure the Institute would attempt a counterblow and we’ve studied it and its personnel thoroughly. You were recognized, Dalgetty—and you’re known to be very close to Tighe. So you walked after us without even a face-mask. . . .

“At any rate, you were noticed hanging around the colony. We checked back on your movements. One of the rec girls had some interesting things to tell of you. We decided you’d better be questioned. I sounded you out as much as a casual acquaintance could and then took you to the rendezvous.” Tyler spread his hands. “That’s all.”

Dalgetty sighed and his shoulders slumped under a sudden enormous burden of discouragement. Yes, they were right. He was out of his orbit. “Well,” he said, “what now?”

“Now we have you *and* Tighe,” said the other. He took out a cigarette. “I hope you’re somewhat more willing to talk than he is.”

“Suppose I’m not?”

“Understand this.” Tyler frowned. “There are reasons for going slow with Tighe. He has hostage value, for one thing. But you’re nobody. And while we aren’t monsters I for one have little sympathy to spare for your kind of fanatic.”

“Now there,” said Dalgetty with a lift of sardonicism, “is an interesting example of semantic evolution. This being, on the whole, an easygoing tolerant period, the word ‘fanatic’ has come to be simply an epithet—a fellow on the other side.”

“That will do,” snapped Tyler. “You won’t be allowed to stall. There are questions we want answered.” He ticked the points off on his fingers. “What are the Institute’s ultimate aims? How is it going about attaining them? How far has it gotten? Precisely what has it learned, in a scientific way, that it hasn’t published? How much does it know about us?” He smiled thinly. “You’ve always been close to Tighe. He raised you, didn’t he? You should know just as much as he.”

Yes, thought Dalgetty, Tighe raised me. He was all the father I ever had, really. I was an orphan and he took me in and he was good.

Sharp in his mind rose the image of the old house. It had lain on broad wooded grounds in the fair hills of Maine, with a little river running down to a bay winged with sailboats. There had been neighbors—quiet-spoken folk with something more real about them than most of today’s rootless world knew. And there had been many visitors—men and women with minds like flickering sword-blades.

He had grown up among intellects aimed at the future. He and Tighe had traveled a lot. They had often been in the huge pylon of the main Institute building. They had gone over to Tighe’s native England once a year at least. But always the old house had been dear to them.

It stood on a ridge, long and low and weathered gray like a part of the earth. By day it had rested in a green sun-dazzle of trees or a glistering purity of snow. By night you heard the boards creaking and the lonesome sound of wind talking down the chimney. Yes, it had been good.

And there had been the wonder of it. He loved his training. The horizonless world within himself was a glorious thing to explore. And that had oriented him outward to the real world—he had felt wind and rain and sunlight, the pride of high buildings and the surge of a galloping horse, thresh of waves and laughter of women and smooth mysterious purr of great machines, with a fullness that made him pity those deaf and dumb and blind around him.

Oh yes, he loved those things. He was in love with the whole turning planet and the big skies overhead. It was a world of light and strength and swift winds and it would be bitter to leave it. But Tighe was locked in darkness.

He said slowly, “All we ever were was a research and educational center, a sort of informal university specializing in the scientific study of man. We’re not any kind of political organization. You’d be surprised how much we differ in our individual opinions.”

“What of it?” shrugged Tyler. “This is something larger than politics. Your work, if fully developed, would change our whole society, perhaps the whole nature of man. We *know* you’ve learned more things than you’ve made public. Therefore you’re reserving that information for uses of your own.”

“And you want it for your purposes?”

“Yes,” said Tyler. After a moment, “I despise melodrama but if you don’t cooperate you’re going to get the works. And we’ve got Tighe too, never forget that. One of you ought to break down if he watches the other being questioned.”

We’re going to the same place! We’re going to Tighe!

The effort to hold face and voice steady was monstrous. “Just where are we bound?”

“An island. We should be there soon. I’ll be going back again myself but Mr. Bancroft is coming shortly. That should convince you just how important this is to us.”

Dalgetty nodded. “Can I think it over for awhile? It isn’t an easy decision for me.”

“Sure. I hope you decide right.”

Tyler got up and left with his guards. The big man who had handed him the drink earlier sat where he had been all the time. Slowly the psychologist

began to tighten himself. The faint drone of turbines and whistle of jets and sundered air began to enlarge.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“CAN’T TELL YOU THAT. SHUDDUP, WILL YOU?”

“But surely. . . .”

The guard didn’t answer. But he was thinking. *Ree-villa-ghee-gay-doe—never would p’rnounce that damn Spig name ... cripes, what a Godforsaken hole! ... Mebbe I can work a trip over to Mexico. ... That little gal in Guada. ...*

Dalgetty concentrated. Revilla—he had it now. Islas de Revillagigedo a small group some 350 or 400 miles off the Mexican coast, little visited with very few inhabitants. His eidetic memory went to work, conjuring an image of a large-scale map he had once studied. Closing his eyes he laid off the exact distance, latitude and longitude, individual islands.

Wait, there was one a little further west, a speck on the map, not properly belonging to the group. And—he riffled through all the facts he had ever learned pertaining to Bancroft. Wait now, Bertrand Meade, who seemed to be the kingpin of the whole movement—yes, Meade owned that tiny island.

So that’s where we’re going! He sank back, letting weariness overrun him. It would be awhile yet before they arrived.

Dalgetty sighed and looked out at the stars. Why had men arranged such clumsy constellations when the total pattern of the sky was a big and lovely harmony? He knew his personal danger would be enormous once he was on the ground. Torture, mutilation, even death.

Dalgetty closed his eyes again. Almost at once he was asleep.

IV

They landed on a small field while it was still dark. Hustled out into a glare of lights Dalgetty did not have much chance to study his surroundings. There were men standing on guard with magnum rifles, tough-looking professional goons in loose gray uniforms. Dalgetty followed obediently

across the concrete, along a walk and through a garden to the looming curved bulk of a house.

He paused just a second as the door opened for them and stood looking out into darkness. The sea rolled and hissed there on a wide beach. He caught the clean salt smell of it and filled his lungs. It might be the last time he ever breathed such air.

“Get along with you.” An arm jerked him into motion again.

Down a bare coldly-lit hallway, down an escalator, into the guts of the island. Another door, a room beyond it, an ungentle shove. The door clashed to behind him.

Dalgetty looked around. The cell was small, bleakly furnished with bunk, toilet and washstand, had a ventilator grille in one wall. Nothing else. He tried listening with maximum sensitivity but there were only remote confused murmurs.

Dad! he thought. *You're here somewhere too.*

He flopped on the bunk and spent a moment analyzing the aesthetics of the layout. It had a certain pleasing severity, the unconscious balance of complete functionalism. Soon Dalgetty went back to sleep.

A guard with a breakfast tray woke him. Dalgetty tried to read the man's thoughts but there weren't any to speak of. He ate ravenously under a gun muzzle, gave the tray back and returned to sleep. It was the same at lunch time.

His time-sense told him that it was 1435 hours when he was roused again. There were three men this time, husky specimens. “Come on,” said one of them. “Never saw such a guy for pounding his ear.”

Dalgetty stood up, running a hand through his hair. The red bristles were scratchy on his palm. It was a cover-up, a substitute symbol to bring his nervous system back under full control. The process felt as if he were being tumbled through a huge gulf.

“Just how many of your fellows are there here?” he asked.

“Enough. Now get going!”

He caught the whisper of thought—*fifty of us guards, is it? Yeah, fifty, I guess.*

Fifty! Dalgetty felt taut as he walked out between two of them. Fifty goons. And they were trained, he knew that. The Institute had learned that Bertrand Meade's private army was well-drilled. Nothing obtrusive about

it—officially they were only servants and bodyguards—but they knew how to shoot.

And he was alone in mid-ocean with them. He was alone and no one knew where he was and anything could be done to him. He felt cold, walking down the corridor.

There was a room beyond with benches and a desk. One of the guards gestured to a chair at one end. “Sit,” he grunted.

Dalgetty submitted. The straps went around his wrists and ankles, holding him to the arms and legs of the heavy chair. Another buckled about his waist. He looked down and saw that the chair was bolted to the floor. One of the guards crossed to the desk and started up a tape recorder.

A door opened in the far end of the room. Thomas Bancroft came in. He was a big man, fleshy but in well-scrubbed health, his clothes designed with quiet good taste. The head was white-maned, leonine, with handsome florid features and sharp blue eyes. He smiled ever so faintly and sat down behind the desk.

The woman was with him—Dalgetty looked harder at her. She was new to him. She was medium tall, a little on the compact side, her blond hair cut too short, no makeup on her broad Slavic features. Young, in hard condition, moving with a firm masculine stride. With those tilted gray eyes, that delicately curved nose and wide sullen mouth, she could have been a beauty had she wanted to be.

One of the modern type, thought Dalgetty. A flesh-and-blood machine, trying to outmale men, frustrated and unhappy without knowing it and all the more bitter for that.

Briefly there was sorrow in him, an enormous pity for the millions of mankind. They did not know themselves, they fought themselves like wild beasts, tied up in knots, locked in nightmare. Man could be so much if he had the chance.

He glanced at Bancroft. “I know you,” he said, “but I’m afraid the lady has the advantage of me.”

“My secretary and general assistant, Miss Casimir.” The politician’s voice was sonorous, a beautifully controlled instrument. He leaned across the desk. The recorder by his elbow whirled in the flat soundproofed stillness.

“Mr. Dalgetty,” he said, “I want you to understand that we aren’t fiends. There are things too important for ordinary rules though. Wars have been

fought over them in the past and may well be fought again. It will be easier for all concerned if you cooperate with us now. No one need ever know that you have done so.”

“Suppose I answer your questions,” said Dalgetty. “How do you know I’ll be telling the truth?”

“Neoscopamine, of course. I don’t think you’ve been immunized. It confuses the mind too much for us to interrogate you about these complex matters under its influence but we will surely find out if you have been answering our present questions correctly.”

“And what then? Do you just let me go?”

Bancroft shrugged. “Why shouldn’t we? We may have to keep you here for awhile but soon you will have ceased to matter and can safely be released.”

Dalgetty considered. Not even he could do much against truth drugs. And there were still more radical procedures, prefrontal lobotomy for instance. He shivered. The leatherite straps felt damp against his thin clothing.

He looked at Bancroft. “What do you really want?” he asked. “Why are you working for Bertrand Meade?”

Bancroft’s heavy mouth lifted in a smile. “I thought you were supposed to answer the questions,” he said.

“Whether I do or not depends on whose questions they are,” said Dalgetty. *Stall for time! Put it off, the moment of terror, put it off!* “Frankly, what I know of Meade doesn’t make me friendly. But I could be wrong.”

“Mr. Meade is a distinguished executive.”

“Uh-huh. He’s also the power behind a hell of a lot of political figures, including you. He’s the real boss of the Actionist movement.”

“What do you know of that?” asked the woman sharply.

“It’s a complicated story,” said Dalgetty, “but essentially Actionism is a—a *Weltanschauung*. We’re still recovering from the World Wars and their aftermath. People everywhere are swinging away from great vague capitalized causes toward a cooler and clearer view of life.

“It’s analogous to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which also followed a period of turmoil between conflicting fanaticisms. A belief in reason is growing up even in the popular mind, a spirit of moderation and tolerance. There’s a wait-and-see attitude toward everything, including the sciences and particularly the new half-finished science of psychodynamics. The world wants to rest for awhile.

“Well, such a state of mind has its own drawbacks. It produces wonderful structures of thought but there’s something cold about them. There is so little real passion, so much caution—the arts, for instance, are becoming ever more stylized. Old symbols like religion and the sovereign state and a particular form of government, for which men once died, are openly jeered at. We can formulate the semantic condition at the Institute in a very neat equation.

“And you don’t like it. Your kind of man needs something big. And mere concrete bigness isn’t enough. You could give your lives to the sciences or to interplanetary colonization or to social correction, as many people are cheerfully doing—but those aren’t for you. Down underneath you miss the universal father-image.

“You want an almighty Church or an almighty State or an almighty *anything*, a huge misty symbol which demands everything you’ve got and gives in return only a feeling of belonging.” Dalgetty’s voice was harsh. “In short, you can’t stand on your own psychic feet. You can’t face the truth that man is a lonely creature and that his purpose must come from within himself.”

Bancroft scowled. “I didn’t come here to be lectured,” he said.

“Have it your way,” answered Dalgetty. “I thought you wanted to know what I knew of Actionism. That’s it in unprecise verbal language. Essentially you want to be a Leader in a Cause. Your men, such as aren’t merely hired, want to be Followers. Only there isn’t a Cause around, these days, except the commonsense one of improving human life.”

The woman, Casimir, leaned over the desk. There was a curious intensity in her eyes. “You just pointed out the drawbacks yourself,” she said. “This *is* a decadent period.”

“No,” said Dalgetty. “Unless you insist on loaded connotations. It’s a necessary period of rest. Recoil time for a whole society—well, it all works out neatly in Tighe’s formulation. The present state of affairs should continue for about seventy-five years, we feel at the Institute. In that time, reason can—we hope—be so firmly implanted in the basic structure of society that when the next great wave of passion comes it won’t turn men against each other.

“The present is, well, analytic. While we catch our breath we can begin to understand ourselves. When the next synthetic—or creative or crusading period, if you wish—comes, it will be saner than all which have gone

before. And man can't afford to go insane again. Not in the same world with the lithium bomb."

Bancroft nodded. "And you in the Institute are trying to control this process," he said. "You're trying to stretch out the period of—damn it, of decadence! Oh, I've studied the modern school system too, Dalgetty. I know how subtly the rising generation is being indoctrinated—through policies formulated by *your* men in the government."

"Indoctrinated? Trained, I would say. Trained in self-restraint and critical thinking." Dalgetty grinned with one side of his mouth. "Well, we aren't here to argue generalities. Specifically Meade feels he has a mission. He is the natural leader of America—ultimately, through the U.N., in which we are still powerful, the world. He wants to restore what he calls 'ancestral virtues'—you see, I've listened to his speeches and yours, Bancroft.

"These virtues consist of obedience, physical *and* mental, to 'constituted authority'—of 'dynamism,' which operationally speaking means people ought to jump when he gives an order—of. . . . Oh, why go on? It's the old story. Power hunger, the recreation of the Absolute State, this time on a planetary scale.

"With psychological appeals to some and with promises of reward to others he's built up quite a following. But he's shrewd enough to know that he can't just stage a revolution. He has to make people want him. He has to reverse the social current until it swings back to authoritarianism—with him riding the crest.

"And that of course is where the Institute comes in. Yes, we have developed theories which make at least a beginning at explaining the facts of history. It was a matter not so much of gathering data as of inventing a rigorous self-correcting symbology and our paramathematics seems to be just that. We haven't published all of our findings because of the uses to which they could be put. If you know exactly how to go about it you can shape world society into almost any image you want—in fifty years or less! You want that knowledge of ours for your purposes!"

Dalgetty fell silent. There was a long quietness. His own breathing seemed unnaturally loud.

"All right." Bancroft nodded again, slowly. "You haven't told us anything we don't know."

"I'm well aware of that," said Dalgetty.

“Your phrasing was rather unfriendly,” said Bancroft. “What you don’t appreciate is the revolting stagnation and cynicism of this age.”

“Now you’re using the loaded words,” said Dalgetty. “Facts just *are*. There’s no use passing moral judgments on reality, the only thing you can do is try to change it.”

“Yes,” said Bancroft. “All right then, we’re trying. Do you want to help us?”

“You could beat the hell out of me,” said Dalgetty, “but it wouldn’t teach you a science that it takes years to learn.”

“No, but we’d know just what you have and where to find it. We have some good brains on our side. Given your data and equations they can figure it out.” The pale eyes grew wholly chill. “You don’t seem to appreciate your situation. You’re a prisoner, understand?”

Dalgetty braced his muscles. He didn’t reply.

Bancroft sighed. “Bring him in,” he said.

One of the guards went out. Dalgetty’s heart stumbled. *Dad*, he thought. It was anguish in him. Casimir walked over to stand in front of him. Her eyes searched his.

“Don’t be a fool,” she said. “It hurts worse than you know. Tell us.”

He looked up at her. *I’m afraid*, he thought. *God knows I’m afraid*. His own sweat was acrid in his nostrils. “No,” he said.

“I tell you they’ll do everything!” She had a nice voice, low and soft, but it roughened now. Her face was colorless with strain. “Go on man, don’t condemn yourself to—mindlessness!”

There was something strange here. Dalgetty’s senses began to reach out. She was leaning close and he knew the signs of horror even if she tried to hide them. *She’s not so hard as she makes out—but then why is she with them?*

He threw a bluff. “I know who you are,” he said. “Shall I tell your friends?”

“No, you don’t!” She stepped back, rigid, and his whetted senses caught the fear-smell. In a moment there was control and she said, “All right then, have it your way.”

And underneath, the thought, slowed by the guiness of panic, *Does he know I’m F.B.I.?*

F.B.I.! He jerked against the straps. Ye gods!

Calmness returned to him as she walked to her chief but his mind whirled. Yes, why not? Institute men had little connection with the Federal detectives, who, since the abolition of a discredited Security, had resumed a broad function. They might easily have become dubious about Bertrand Meade on their own, have planted operatives with him. They had women among them too and a woman was always less conspicuous than a man.

He felt a chill. The last thing he wanted was a Federal agent here.

The door opened again. A quartet of guards brought in Michael Tighe. The Briton halted, staring before him. "*Simon!*" It was a harsh sound, full of pain.

"Have they hurt you, Dad?" asked Dalgetty very gently.

"No, no—not till now." The gray head shook. "But you. . . ."

"Take it easy, Dad," said Dalgetty.

The guards hustled Tighe over to a front-row bench and sat him down. Old man and young locked eyes across the bare space.

Tighe spoke to him in the hidden way. *What are you going to do? I can't sit and let them—*

Dalgetty could not reply unheard but he shook his head. "I'll be okay," he answered aloud.

Do you think you can make a break? I'll try to help you.

"No," said Dalgetty. "Whatever happens you lie low. That's an order."

He blocked off sensitivity as Bancroft snapped, "Enough. One of you is going to yield. If Dr. Tighe won't, then we'll work on him and see if Mr. Dalgetty can hold out."

He waved his hand as he took out a cigar. Two of the goons stepped up to the chair. They had rubberite hoses in their hands.

The first blow thudded against Dalgetty's ribs. He didn't feel it—he had thrown up a nerve bloc—but it rattled his teeth together. And while he was insensitive he'd be unable to listen in on. . . .

Another thud, and another. Dalgetty clenched his fists. What to do, what to do? He looked over to the desk. Bancroft was smoking and watching as dispassionately as if it were some mildly interesting experiment. Casimir had turned her back.

"Something funny here, chief." One of the goons straightened. "I don't think he's feeling nothing."

"Doped?" Bancroft frowned. "No, that's hardly possible." He rubbed his chin, regarding Dalgetty with wondering eyes. Casimir wheeled around to

stare. Sweat filmed Michael Tighe's face, glistening in the chill white light.

"He can still be hurt," said the guard.

Bancroft winced. "I don't like outright mutilation," he said. "But still—I've warned you, Dalgetty."

"*Get out, Simon,*" whispered Tighe. "*Get out of here.*"

Dalgetty's red head lifted. Decision crystalized within him. He would be no use to anyone with a broken leg, a crushed foot, an eye knocked out, seared lungs—and Casimir was F.B.I., she might be able to do something at this end in spite of all.

He tested the straps. A quarter inch of leatherite—he could snap them but would he break his bones doing it?

Only one way to find out, he thought bleakly.

"I'll get a blowtorch," said one of the guards in the rear of the room. His face was wholly impassive. Most of these goons must be moronic, thought Dalgetty. Most of the guards in the twentieth-century extermination camps had been. No inconvenient empathy with the human flesh they broke and flayed and burned.

He gathered himself. This time it was rage, a cloud of fury rising in his mind, a ragged red haze across his vision. That they would *dare*!

He snarled as the strength surged up in him. He didn't even feel the straps as they popped across. The same movement hurtled him across the room toward the door.

Someone yelled. A guard leaped in his path, a giant of a man. Dalgetty's fist sprang before him, there was a cracking sound and the goon's head snapped back against his own spine. Dalgetty was already past him. The door was shut in his face. Wood crashed as he went through it.

A bullet wailed after him. He dodged down the corridor, up the nearest steps, the walls blurred with his own speed. Another slug smacked into the paneling beside him. He rounded a corner, saw a window and covered his eyes with an arm as he leaped.

The plastic was tough but a hundred and seventy pounds hit it at fifteen feet per second. Dalgetty went through!

Sunlight flamed in his eyes as he hit the ground. Rolling over and bouncing to his feet he set out across lawn and garden. As he ran his vision swept the landscape. In that state of fear and wrath he could not command much thought but his memory stored the data for reexamination.

V

The house was a rambling two-story affair, all curves and planes between palm trees, the island sloping swiftly from its front to a beach and dock. On one side was the airfield, on another the guard barracks. To the rear, in the direction of Dalgetty's movement, the ground became rough and wild, stones and sand and saw-grass and clumps of palmettos, climbing upward for a good two miles. On every side, he could see the infinite blue sparkle of ocean. Where could he hide?

He didn't notice the slashing blades through which he raced and the dry gulping of his lungs was something dreadfully remote. But when a bullet went past one ear, he heard that and drew more speed from some unknown depth. A glance behind revealed his pursuers boiling out of the house, men in gray with the hot sunlight blinking off their guns.

He ducked around a thicket, flopped and belly-crawled over a rise of land. On the farther side he straightened again and ran up the long slope. Another slug and another. They were almost a mile behind now but their guns had a long reach. He bent low, zigzagging as he ran. The bullets kicked up spurts of sand around him.

A six-foot bluff loomed in his path, black volcanic rock shining like wet glass. He hit it at full speed. He almost *walked* up its face and in the instant when his momentum was gone caught a root and yanked himself to the top. Again he was out of their sight. He sprang around another hulk of stone and skidded to a halt. At his feet, a sheer cliff dropped nearly a hundred feet to a white smother of surf.

Dalgetty gulped air, working his lungs like a bellows. A long jump down, he thought dizzily. If he didn't crack his skull open on a reef he might well be clawed under by the sea. But there was no other place for him to go.

He made a swift estimate. He had run the upward two miles in a little over nine minutes, surely a record for such terrain. It would take the pursuit another ten or fifteen to reach him. But he couldn't double back without being seen and this time they'd be close enough to fill him with lead.

Okay, son, he told himself. *You're going to duck now, in more than one sense.*

His light waterproof clothes, tattered by the island growth, would be no hindrance down there, but he took off his sandals and stuck them in his belt pouch. Praise all gods, the physical side of his training had included water sports. He moved along the cliff edge, looking for a place to dive. The wind whined at his feet.

There—down there. No visible rocks though the surf boiled and smoked. He willed full energy back into himself, bent his knees, jackknifed into the air.

The sea was a hammer blow against his body. He came up threshing and tumbling, gasped a mouthful of air that was half salt spray, was pulled under again. A rock scraped his ribs. He took long strokes, always upward to the blind white shimmer of light. He got to the crest of one wave and rode it in, surfing over a razorback reef.

Shallow water. Blinded by the steady rain of salt mist, deafened by the roar and crash of the sea, he groped toward shore. A narrow pebbly beach ran along the foot of the cliff. He moved along it, hunting a place to hide.

There—a sea-worn cave, some ten feet inward, with a yard or so of fairly quiet water covering its bottom. He splashed inside and lay down, exhaustion clamping a hand on him.

It was noisy. The hollow resonance of sound filled the cave like the inside of a drum but he didn't notice. He lay on the rocks and sand, his mind spiraling toward unconsciousness, and let his body make its own recovery.

Presently he regained awareness and looked about him. The cave was dim, with only a filtered greenish light to pick out black wall's and slowly swirling water. Nobody could see much below the surface—good. He studied himself. Lacerated clothes, bruised flesh and a long bleeding gash in one side. That was not good. A stain of blood on the water would give him away like a shout.

Grimacing, he pressed the edges of the wound together and willed that the bleeding stop. By the time a good enough clot was formed for him to relax his concentration the guards were scrambling down to find him. He didn't have many minutes left. Now he had to do the opposite of energizing. He had to slow metabolism down, ease his heartbeat, lower his body temperature, dull his racing brain.

He began to move his hands, swaying back and forth, muttering the autohypnotic formulas. His incantations, Tighe had called them. But they

were only stylized gestures leading to conditioned reflexes deep in the medulla. *Now I lay me down to sleep. . .*

Heavy, heavy—his eyelids were drooping; the wet walls receding into a great darkness, a hand cradling his head. The noise of surf dimmed, became a rustle, the skirts of the mother he had never known, come in to bid him goodnight. Coolness stole over him like veils dropping one by one inside his head. There was winter outside and his bed was snug.

When Dalgetty heard the nearing rattle of boots—just barely through the ocean and his own drowsiness—he almost forgot what he had to do. No, yes, now he knew. Take several long, deep breaths, oxygenate the bloodstream, then fill the lungs once and slide down under the surface.

He lay there in darkness hardly conscious of the voices, dimly perceived.

“A cave here—a place for him to hide.”

“Nah, I don’t see nothing.”

Scrunch of feet on stone. “Ouch! Stubbed my damn toe. Nah, it’s a closed cave. He ain’t in here.”

“Hm? Look at this, then. Bloodstains on this rock, right? He’s *been* here, at least.”

“Under water?” Rifle butts probed but could not sound the inlet.

The woman’s voice. “If he is hiding down below he’ll have to come up for air.”

“When? We gotta search this whole damn beach. Here, I’ll just give the water a burst.”

Casimir, sharply—“Don’t be a fool. You won’t even know if you hit him. Nobody can hold his breath more than three minutes.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Joe. How long we been in here?”

“One minute, I guess. Give him a couple more. Cripes! D’ja see how he ran? He ain’t human!”

“He’s killable, though. Me, I think he’s just rolling around in the surf out there. This could be fish blood. A ’cuda chased another fish in here and bit it.”

Casimir: “Or if his body drifted in, it’s safely under. Got a cigarette?”

“Here y’are, Miss. But say, I never thought to ask. How come you come with us?”

Casimir: “I’m as good a shot as you are, buster, and I want to be sure this job’s done right.”

Pause.

Casimir: “Almost five minutes. If he can come up now he’s a seal. Especially with his body oxygen-starved after all that running.”

In the slowness of Dalgetty’s brain there was a chill wonder about the woman. He had read her thought, she was F.B.I., but she seemed strangely eager to hunt him down.

“Okay, le’s get outta here.”

Casimir: “You go on. I’ll wait here just in case and come up to the house pretty soon. I’m tired of following you around.”

“Okay. Le’s go, Joe.”

It was another four minutes or so before the pain and tension in his lungs became unendurable. Dalgetty knew he would be helpless as he rose, still in his semi-hibernating state, but his body was shrieking for air. Slowly he broke the surface.

The woman gasped. Then the automatic jumped into her hand and leveled between his eyes. “All right, friend. Come on out.” Her voice was very low and shook a trifle but there was grimness in it.

Dalgetty climbed onto the ledge beside her and sat with his legs dangling, hunched in the misery of returning strength. When full wakefulness was achieved he looked at her and found she had moved to the farther end of the cave.

“Don’t try to jump,” she said. Her eyes caught the vague light in a wide glimmer, half frightened. “I don’t know what to make of you.”

Dalgetty drew a long breath and sat upright, bracing himself on the cold slippery stone. “I know who you are,” he said.

“Who, then?” she challenged.

“You’re an F.B.I. agent planted on Bancroft.”

Her gaze narrowed, her lips compressed. “What makes you think so?”

“Never mind—you are. That gives me a certain hold on you, whatever your purposes.”

The blond head nodded. “I wondered about that. That remark you made to me down in the cell suggested—well, I couldn’t take chances. Especially when you showed you were something extraordinary by snapping those straps and bursting the door open. I came along with the search party in hope of finding you.”

He had to admire the quick mind behind the wide smooth brow. “You damn near did—for them,” he accused her.

"I couldn't do anything suspicious," she answered. "But I figured you hadn't leaped off the cliff in sheer desperation. You must have had some hiding place in mind and under water seemed the most probable. In view of what you'd already done I was pretty sure you could hold your breath abnormally long." Her smile was a little shaky. "Though I didn't think it would be *inhumanly* long."

"You've got brains," he said, "but how much heart?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you going to throw Dr. Tighe and me to the wolves now? Or will you help us?"

"That depends," she answered slowly. "What are you here for?"

His mouth twisted ruefully. "I'm not here on purpose at all," Dalgetty confessed. "I was just trying to get a clue to Dr. Tighe's whereabouts. They outsmarted me and brought me here. Now I *have* to rescue him." His eyes held hers. "Kidnapping is a Federal offense. It's your duty to help me."

"I may have higher duties," she countered. Leaning forward, tautly, "But how do you expect to do this?"

"I'm damned if I know." Dalgetty looked moodily out at the beach and the waves and the smoking spindrift. "But that gun of yours would be a big help."

She stood for a moment, scowling with thought. "If I don't come back soon they'll be out hunting for me."

"We've got to find another hiding place," he agreed. "Then they will assume I survived after all and grabbed you. They'll be scouring the whole island for us. If we haven't been located before dark they'll be spread thin enough to give us a chance."

"It makes more sense for me to go back now," she said. "Then I can be on the inside to help you."

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. Quit making like a stereoshow detective. If you leave me your gun, claiming you lost it, that's sure to bring suspicion on you the way they're excited right now. If you don't I'll still be on the outside and unarmed—and what could you do, one woman alone in that nest? Now we're two with a shooting iron between us. I think that's a better bet."

After a while, she nodded. "Okay, you win. Assuming"—the half-lowered gun was raised again with a jerking motion—"that I will aid you. Who are you? *What* are you, Dalgetty?"

He shrugged. "Let's say I'm Dr. Tighe's assistant and have some unusual powers. You know the Institute well enough to realize this isn't just a feud between two gangster groups."

"I wonder..." Suddenly she clanked the automatic back into its holster. "All right. For the time being only though!"

Relief was a wave rushing through him. "Thank you," he whispered. Then, "Where can we go?"

"I've been swimming around here in the quieter spots," she said. "I know a place. Wait here."

She stepped across the cave and peered out its mouth. Someone must have hailed her, for she waved back. She stood leaning against the rock and Dalgetty saw how the sea-spray gleamed in her hair. After a long five minutes she turned to him again.

"All right," she said. "The last one just went up the path. Let's go." They walked along the beach. It trembled underfoot with the rage of the sea. There was a grinding under the snort and roar of surf as if the world's teeth ate rock.

The beach curved inward, forming a small bay sheltered by outlying skerries. A narrow path ran upward from it but it was toward the sea that the woman gestured. "Out there," she said. "Follow me." She took off her shoes as he had done and checked her holster: the gun was waterproof, but it wouldn't do to have it fall out. She waded into the sea and struck out with a powerful crawl.

VI

They climbed up on one of the hogback rocks some ten yards from shore. This one rose a good dozen feet above the surface. It was cleft in the middle, forming a little hollow hidden from land and water alike. They crawled into this and sat down, breathing hard. The sea was loud at their backs and the air felt cold on their wet skins.

Dalgetty leaned back against the smooth stone, looking at the woman, who was unemotionally counting how many clips she had in her pouch. The

thin drenched tunic and slacks showed a very nice figure. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Casimir,” she answered, without looking up.

“First name, I mean. Mine is Simon.”

“Elena, if you must know. Four packs, a hundred rounds plus ten in the chamber now. If we have to shoot them all, we’d better be good. These aren’t magnums, so you have to hit a man just right to put him out of action.”

“Well,” shrugged Dalgetty, “we’ll just have to lumber along as best we can. I oak we don’t make ashes of ourselves.”

“Oh, *no!*” He couldn’t tell whether it was appreciation or dismay. “At a time like this too.”

“It doesn’t make me very popular,” he agreed. “Everybody says to elm with me. But, as they say in France, ve are alo-o-one now, mon cherry, and tree’s a crowd.”

“Don’t get ideas,” she snapped.

“Oh, I’ll get plenty of ideas, though I admit this isn’t the place to carry them out.” Dalgetty folded his arms behind his head and blinked up at the sky. “Man, could I use a nice tall mint julep right now.”

Elena frowned. “If you’re trying to convince me you’re just a simple American boy you might as well quit,” she said thinly. “That sort of—of emotional control, in a situation like this, only makes you less human.”

Dalgetty swore at himself. She was too damn quick, that was all. And her intelligence might be enough for her to learn. ...

Will I have to kill her?

He drove the thought from him. He could overcome his own conditioning about anything, including murder, if he wanted to, but he’d never want to. No, that was out. “How did you get here?” he asked. “How much does the F.B.I. know?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Well, it’d be nice to know if we can expect reinforcements.”

“We can’t.” Her voice was bleak. “I might as well let you know. The Institute could find out anyway through its government connections—the damned octopus!” he looked into the sky. Dalgetty’s gaze followed the curve of her high cheekbones. Unusual face—you didn’t often see such an oddly pleasing arrangement. The slight departure from symmetry. ...

“We’ve wondered about Bertrand Meade for some time, as every thinking person has,” she began tonelessly. “It’s too bad there are so few thinking people in the country.”

“Something the Institute is trying to correct,” Dalgetty put in.

Elena ignored him. “It was finally decided to work agents into his various organizations. I’ve been with Thomas Bancroft for about two years now. My background was carefully faked and I’m a useful assistant. But even so it was only a short while back that I got sufficiently into his confidence to be given some inkling of what’s going on. As far as I know no other F.B.I. operative has learned as much.”

“And what have you found out?”

“Essentially the same things you were describing in the cell, plus more details on the actual work they’re doing. Apparently the Institute was onto Meade’s plans long before we were. It doesn’t speak well for your purposes, whatever they are, that you haven’t asked us for help before this.

“The decision to kidnap Dr. Tighe was taken only a couple of weeks ago. I haven’t had a chance to communicate with my associates in the force. There’s always someone around, watching. The setup’s well arranged, so that even those not under suspicion don’t have much chance to work unobserved, once they’ve gotten high enough to know anything important. Everybody spies on everybody else and submits periodic reports.”

She gave him a harsh look. “So here I am. No official person knows my whereabouts and if I should disappear it would be called a deplorable accident. Nothing could be proved and I doubt if the F.B.I. would ever get another chance to do any effective spying.”

“But you have proof enough for a raid,” he ventured.

“No, we haven’t. Up till the time I was told Dr. Tighe was going to be snatched I didn’t know for certain that anything illegal was going on. There’s nothing in the law against like-minded people knowing each other and having a sort of club. Even if they hire tough characters and arm them the law can’t protest. The Act of Nineteen Ninety-nine effectively forbids private armies but it would be hard to prove Meade has one.”

“He doesn’t really,” said Dalgetty. “Those goons aren’t much more than what they claim to be—bodyguards. This whole fight is primarily on a—mental level.”

“So I gather. And can a free country forbid debate or propaganda? Not to mention that Meade’s people include some powerful men in the government

itself. If I could get away from here alive we'd be able to hang a kidnapping charge on Thomas Bancroft, with assorted charges of threat, mayhem and conspiracy, but it wouldn't touch the main group." Her fists clenched. "It's like fighting shadows."

"You war against the sunset-glow. The judgment follows fast my lord!" quoted Dalgetty. *Heriots' Ford* was one of the few poems he liked. "Getting Bancroft out of the way would be something," he added. "The way to fight Meade is not to attack him physically but to change the conditions under which he must work."

"Change them to what?" Her eyes challenged his. He noticed that there were small gold flecks in the gray. "What does the Institute want?"

"A sane world," he replied.

"I've wondered," she said. "Maybe Bancroft is more nearly right than you. Maybe I should be on his side after all."

"I take it you favor libertarian government," he said. "In the past it's always broken down sooner or later and the main reason has been that there aren't enough people with the intelligence, alertness and toughness to resist the inevitable encroachments of power on liberty."

"The Institute is trying to do two things—create such a citizenry and simultaneously to build up a society which itself produces men of that kind and reinforces those traits in them. It can be done, given time. Under ideal conditions we estimate it would take about three hundred years for the whole world. Actually it'll take longer."

"But just what kind of person is needed?" Elena asked coldly. "Who decides it? *You* do. You're just the same as all other reformers, including Meade—hell bent to change the whole human race over to your particular ideal, whether they like it or not."

"Oh, they'll like it," he smiled. "That's part of the process."

"It's a worse tyranny than whips and barbed wire," she snapped.

"You've never experienced those then."

"You *have* got that knowledge," she accused. "You have the data and the equations to be—sociological engineers."

"In theory," he said. "In practice it isn't that easy. The social forces are so great that—well, we could be overwhelmed before accomplishing anything."

And there are plenty of things we still don't know. It will take decades, perhaps centuries, to work out a complete dynamics of man. We're one step beyond the politician's rule of thumb but not up to the point where we can use slide rules. We have to feel our way."

"Nevertheless," she said, "you've got the beginnings of a knowledge which reveals the true structure of society and the processes that make it. Given that knowledge man could in time build his own world-order the way he desired it, a stable culture that wouldn't know the horrors of oppression or collapse. But you've hidden away the very fact that such information exists. You're using it in secret."

"Because we have to," Dalgetty said. "If it were generally known that we're putting pressure on here and there and giving advice slanted just the way *we* desire, the whole thing would blow up in our faces. People don't like being shoved around."

"And still you're doing it!" One hand dropped to her gun. "You, a clique of maybe a hundred men..."

"More than that. You'd be surprised how many are with us."

"You've decided *you* are the almighty arbiters. Your superior wisdom is going to lead poor blind mankind up the road to heaven. I say it's down the road to hell! The last century saw the dictatorship of the elite and the dictatorship of the proletariat. This one seems to be birthing the dictatorship of the intellectuals. I don't like any of them!"

"Look, Elena." Dalgetty leaned on one elbow and faced her. "It isn't that simple. All right, we've got some special knowledge. When we first realized we were getting somewhere in our research we had to decide whether to make our results public or merely give out selected less important findings. Don't you see, no matter what we did it would have been us, the few men, who decided? Even destroying all our information would have been a decision."

His voice grew more urgent. "So we made what I think was the right choice. History shows as conclusively as our own equations that freedom is not a 'natural' condition of man. It's a metastable state at best, all too likely to collapse into tyranny. The tyranny can be imposed from outside by the better-organized armies of a conqueror, or it can come from within—through the will of the people themselves, surrendering their rights to the father-image, the almighty leader, the absolute state.

“What use does Bertrand Meade want to make of our findings if he can get them? To bring about the end of freedom by working on the people till they themselves desire it. And the damnable part of it is that Meade’s goal is much more easily attained than ours.

“So suppose we made our knowledge public. Suppose we educated anyone who desired it in our techniques. Can’t you see what would happen? Can’t you see the struggle that would be waged for control of the human mind? It could start as innocuously as a businessman planning a more effective advertising campaign. It would end in a welter of propaganda, counter-propaganda, social and economic manipulations, corruption, competition for the key offices—and so, ultimately, there would be violence.

“All the psychodynamic tensors ever written down won’t stop a machine-gun. Violence riding over a society thrown into chaos, enforced peace—and the peacemakers, perhaps with the best will in the world, using the Institute techniques to restore order. Then one step leads to another, power gets more and more centralized and it isn’t long before you have the total state back again. Only this total state could *never* be overthrown!”

Elena Casimir bit her lip. A stray breeze slid down the rock wall and rumbled her bright hair. After a long while she said, “Maybe you’re right. But America today has, on the whole, a good government. You could let them know.”

“Too risky. Sooner or later someone, probably with very idealistic motives, would force the whole thing into the open. So we’re keeping hidden the very fact that our most important equations exist—which is why we didn’t ask for help when Meade’s detectives finally learned that they know.”

“How do you know your precious Institute won’t become just such an oligarchy as you describe?”

“I don’t,” Simon said, “but it’s improbable. You see, the recruits who are eventually taught everything we know are pretty thoroughly indoctrinated with our own present-day beliefs. And we’ve learned enough individual psych to do some real indoctrinating! They’ll pass it on to the next generation and so on.

“Meanwhile we hope the social structure and the mental climate is being modified in such a way that eventually it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to impose absolute control by any means. For as I

said before, even an ultimately developed psychodynamics can't do everything. Ordinary propaganda, for instance, is quite ineffective on people trained in critical thinking.

"When enough people the world over are sane we can make the knowledge general. Meanwhile we've got to keep it under wraps and quietly prevent anyone else from learning the same things independently. Most such prevention, by the way, consists merely of recruiting promising researchers into our own ranks."

"The world's too big," she said very softly. "You can't foresee all that'll happen. Too many things could go wrong."

"Maybe. It's a chance we've got to take." His own gaze was somber.

They sat for awhile in stillness. Then she said, "It all sounds very pretty. But—what are you, Dalgetty?"

"Simon," he corrected.

"What are you?" she repeated. "You've done things I wouldn't have believed were possible. *Are you human?*"

"I'm told so." He smiled.

"Yes? I wonder! How is it possible that you—"

He wagged a finger. "Ah-ah! Right of privacy." And with swift seriousness, "You know too much already. I have to assume you can keep it secret all your life."

"That remains to be seen," Elena said, not looking at him.

VII

Sundown burned across the waters and the island rose like a mountain of night against the darkening sky. Dalgetty stretched cramped muscles and peered over the bay.

In the hours of waiting there had not been much said between him and the woman. He had dropped a few questions, with the careful casualness of the skilled analyst, and gotten the expected reactions. He knew a little more about her—a child of the strangling dying cities and shadowy family life of the 1980's, forced to armor herself in harshness, finding in the long training

for her work and now in the job itself an ideal to substitute for the tenderness she had never known.

He felt pity for her but there was little he could do to help just now. To her own queries he gave guarded replies. It occurred to him briefly that he was, in his way, as lonesome as she. *But of course I don't mind—or do I?*

Mostly they tried to plan their next move. For the time, at least, they were of one purpose. She described the layout of house and grounds and indicated the cell where Michael Tighe was ordinarily kept. But there was not much they could do to think out tactics. “If Bancroft gets alarmed enough,” she said, “he’ll have Dr. Tighe flown elsewhere.”

He agreed. “That’s why we’d better hit tonight, before he can get that worried.” The thought was pain within him. *Dad, what are they doing to you now?*

“There’s also the matter of food and drink.” Her voice was husky with thirst and dull with the discouragement of hunger. “We can’t stay out here like this much longer.” She gave him a strange glance. “Don’t you feel weak?”

“Not now,” he said. He had blocked off the sensations.

“They—*Simon!*” She grabbed his arm. “A boat—hear?”

The murmur of jets drifted to him through the beating waves. “Yeah. Quick—underneath!”

They scrambled over the hogback and slid down its farther side. The sea clawed at Dalgetty’s feet and foam exploded over his head. He hunched low, throwing one arm about her as she slipped. The airboat murmured overhead, hot gold in the sunset light. Dalgetty crouched, letting the breakers run coldly around him. The ledge where they clung was worn smooth, offered little to hold onto.

The boat circled, its jets thunderous at low speed. *They’re worried about her now. They must be sure I’m still alive.*

White water roared above his head. He breathed a hasty gasp of air before the next comber hit him. Their bodies were wholly submerged, their faces shouldn’t show in that haze of foam—but the jet was soaring down and there would be machine-guns on it.

Dalgetty’s belly muscles stiffened, waiting for the tracers to burn through him.

Elena’s body slipped from his grasp and went under. He hung there, not daring to follow. A stolen glance upward—yes, the jet was out of sight

again, moving back toward the field. He dove off the ledge and struck into the waves. The girl's head rose over them as he neared. She twisted from him and made her own way back to the rock. But when they were in the hollow again her teeth rattled with chill and she pressed against him for warmth.

"Okay," he said shakily. "Okay, we're all right now. You are hereby entitled to join our Pacific wet-erans' club."

Her laugh was small under the boom of breakers and hiss of scud. "You're trying hard, aren't you?"

"I—*oh*, oh! Get *down*!"

Peering over the edge Dalgetty saw the men descending the path. There were half a dozen, armed and wary. One had a WT radio unit on his back. In the shadow of the cliff they were almost invisible as they began prowling the beach.

"Still hunting us!" Her voice was a groan.

"You didn't expect otherwise, did you? I'm just hoping they don't come out here. Does anybody else know of this spot?" He held his lips close to her ear.

"No, I don't believe so," she breathed. "I was the only one who cared to go swimming at this end of the island. But..."

Dalgetty waited, grimly. The sun was down at last, the twilight thickening. A few stars twinkled to life in the east. The goons finished their search and settled in a line along the beach.

"Oh-oh," muttered Dalgetty. "I get the idea. Bancroft's had the land beaten for me so thoroughly he's sure I must be somewhere out to sea. If I were he I'd guess I'd swum far out to be picked up by a waterboat. So—he's guarding every possible approach against a landing party."

"What can we do?" whispered Elena. "Even if we can swim around their radius of sight we can't land just anywhere. Most of the island is vertical cliff. Or can you...?"

"No," he said. "Regardless of what you may think I don't have vacuum cups on my feet. But how far does that gun of yours carry?"

She stole a glance over the edge. Night was sweeping in. The island was a wall of blackness and the men at its foot were hidden. "You can't *see*!" she protested.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Oh yes I can, honey. But whether I'm a good enough shot to... We'll have to try it, that's all."

Her face was a white blur and fear of the unknown put metal in her voice. “Part seal, part cat, part deer, part what else? I don’t think you’re human, Simon Dalgetty.”

He didn’t answer. The abnormal voluntary dilation of pupils hurt his eyes.

“What else has Dr. Tighe done?” Her tone was chill in the dark. “You can’t study the human mind without studying the body too. What’s he done? Are you the mutant they’re always speculating about? Did Dr. Tighe create or find homo superior?”

“If I don’t plug that radio com-set before they can use it,” he said, “I’ll be homogenized.”

“You can’t laugh it off,” she said through taut lips. “If you aren’t of our species I have to assume you’re our enemy—till you prove otherwise!” Her fingers closed hard on his arm. “Is that what your little gang at the Institute is doing? Have they decided that mere humanity isn’t good enough to be civilized? Are they preparing the way for your kind to take over?”

“Listen,” he said wearily. “Right now we’re two people, very mortal indeed, being hunted. So shut up!”

He took the pistol from her holster and slipped a full clip into its magazine. His vision was at high sensitivity now, her face showed white against the wet rock with gray highlights along its strong cheekbones beneath the wide frightened eyes. Beyond the reefs the sea was gunmetal under the stars, streaked with foam and shadow.

Ahead of him, as he rose to his feet, the line of guards stood out as paler darkneses against the vertiginous island face. They had mounted a heavy machine-gun to point seaward and a self-powered spotlight, not turned on, rested nearby. Those two things could be dangerous but first he had to find the radio set that could call the whole garrison down on them.

There! It was a small hump on the back of one man, near the middle of the beach. He was pacing restlessly up and down with a tommy-gun in his hands. Dalgetty raised the pistol with slow hard-held concentration, wishing it were a rifle. *Remember your target practice now, arm loose, fingers extended, don’t pull the trigger but squeeze—because you’ve got to be right the first time!*

He shot. The weapon was a military model, semi-noiseless and with no betraying streak of light. The first bullet spun the goon on his heels and sent

him lurching across sand and rock. Dalgetty worked the trigger, spraying around his victim, a storm of lead that *must* ruin the sender.

Chaos on the beach! If that spotlight went on with his eyes at their present sensitivity, he'd be blind for hours. He fired carefully, smashing lens and bulb. The machine-gun opened up, stuttering, wildly into the dark. If someone elsewhere on the island heard that noise—Dalgetty shot again, dropping the gunner over his weapon.

Bullets spanged around him, probing the darkness. One down, two down, three down. A fourth was running along the upward path. Dalgetty fired and missed, fired and missed, fired and missed. He was getting out of range, carrying the alarm—*there!* He fell slowly, like a jointed doll, rolling down the trail. The two others were dashing for the shelter of a cave, offering no chance to nail them.

Dalgetty scrambled over the rock, splashed into the bay and struck out for the shore. Shots raked the water. He wondered if they could hear his approach through the sea-noise. Soon he'd be close enough for normal night vision. He gave himself wholly to swimming.

His feet touched sand and he waded ashore, the water dragging at him. Crouching, he answered the shots coming from the cave. The shriek and yowl were everywhere around him now. It seemed impossible that they should not hear up above. He tensed his jaws and crawled toward the machine-gun. A cold part of him noticed that the fire was in a random pattern. They couldn't see him then.

The man lying by the gun was still alive but unconscious. That was enough. Dalgetty crouched over the trigger. He had never handled a weapon like this but it must be ready for action—only minutes ago it had tried to kill him. He sighted on the cave mouth and cut loose.

Recoil made the gun dance till he caught onto the trick of using it. He couldn't see anyone in the cave but he could bounce lead off its walls. He shot for a full minute before stopping. Then he crawled away at an angle till he reached the cliff. Sliding along this he approached the entrance and waited. No sound came from inside.

He risked a quick glance. Yes, it had done the job. He felt a little sick.

Elena was climbing out of the water when he returned. There was a strangeness in the look she gave him. "All taken care of?" she asked tonelessly.

He nodded, remembered she could hardly see the movement, said aloud, “Yes, I think so. Grab some of this hardware and let’s get moving.”

With his nerves already keyed for night vision it was not difficult to heighten other perceptions and catch her thinking ... *not human. Why should he mind if he kills human beings when he isn’t one himself?*

“But I do mind,” he said gently. “I’ve never killed a man before and I don’t like it.”

She jerked away from him. It had been a mistake, he realized. “Come on,” he said. “Here’s your pistol. Better take a tommy-gun too if you can handle it.”

“Yes,” she said. He had lowered his reception again, her voice fell quiet and hard. “Yes, I can use one.”

On whom? he wondered. He picked up an automatic rifle from one of the sprawled figures. “Let’s go,” he said. Turning, he led the way up the path. His spine prickled with the thought of her at his back, keyed to a pitch of near-hysteria.

“We’re out to rescue Michael Tighe, remember,” he whispered over his shoulder. “I’ve had no military experience and I doubt that you’ve ever done anything like this either, so we’ll probably make every mistake in the books. But we’ve got to get Dr. Tighe.”

She didn’t answer.

At the top of the path Dalgetty went down on his stomach again and slithered up over the crest. Slowly he raised his head to peer in front of him. Nothing moved, nothing stirred. He stooped low as he walked forward.

The thickets fenced off vision a few yards ahead. Beyond them, at the end of the slope, he could glimpse lights. Bancroft’s place must be one glare of radiance. How to get in there without being seen? He drew Elena close to him. For a moment she stiffened at his touch, then she yielded. “Any ideas?” he asked.

“No,” she replied.

“I could play dead,” he began tentatively. “You could claim to have been caught by me, to have gotten your gun back and killed me. They might lose suspicion then and carry me inside.”

“You think you could fake *that*?” She pulled away from him again.

“Sure. Make a small cut and force it to bleed enough to look like a bullet wound—which doesn’t usually bleed much, anyway. Slow down heartbeat and respiration till their ordinary senses couldn’t detect them. Near-total

muscular relaxation, including even those unromantic aspects of death which are so rarely mentioned. Oh yes.”

“Now I know you aren’t human,” she said. There was a shudder in her voice. “Are you a synthetic thing? Did they make you in the laboratory, Dalgetty?”

“I just want your opinion of the idea,” he muttered with a flicker of anger.

It must have taken an effort for Elena to wrench clear of her fear of him. But then she shook her head. “Too risky. If I were one of those fellows, with all you’ve already done to make me wonder about you, the first thing I’d do on finding your supposed corpse would be to put a bullet through its brain—and maybe a stake through its heart. Or can you survive that too?”

“No,” he admitted. “All right, it was just a thought. Let’s work a bit closer to the house.”

They went through brush and grass. It seemed to him that an army would make less noise. Once his straining ears caught a sound of boots and he yanked Elena into the gloom under a palmetto. Two guards tramped by, circling the land on patrol. Their forms loomed huge and black against the stars.

Near the edge of the grounds Dalgetty and Elena crouched in the long stiff grass and looked at the place they must enter. The man had had to lower his visual sensitivity as they approached the light. There were floodlights harsh on dock, airfield, barracks and lawn, with parties of guards moving around each section. Light showed in only one window of the house, on the second story. Bancroft must be there, pacing and peering out into the night where his enemy stirred. Had he called by radio for reinforcements?

At least no airboat had arrived or left. Dalgetty knew he would have seen one in the sky. Dr. Tighe was here yet—if he lived.

Decision grew in the man. There was a wild chance. “Are you much of an actress, Elena?” he whispered.

“After two years as a spy I’d better be.” Her face bore a hint of puzzlement under the tension as she looked at him. He could guess her thought—*For a superman, he asks some simple-minded questions. But then what is he? Or is he only dissembling?*

He explained his idea. She scowled. “I know it’s crazy,” he told her, “but have you anything better to offer?”

“No. If you can handle your part. . . .”

“And you yours.” He gave her a bleak look, but there was an appeal in it. Suddenly his half-glimpsed face looked strangely young and helpless. “I’ll be putting my life in your hands. If you don’t trust me you can shoot. But you’ll be killing a lot more than me.”

“Tell me what you are,” she said. “How can I know what the ends of the Institute are when they’re using such means as you? Mutant or android or”—she caught her breath—“or actually a creature from outer space, the stars. Simon Dalgetty, what are you?”

“If I answered that,” he said with desolation in his voice, “I’d probably be lying anyway. You’ve got to trust me this far.”

She sighed. “All right.” He didn’t know if she was lying too.

He laid the rifle down and folded his hands on top of his head. She walked behind him, down the slope toward the light, her submachine-gun at his back.

As he walked he was building up a strength and speed no human ought to possess.

One of the sentries pacing through the garden came to a halt. His rifle swung up, and the voice was a hysterical yammer: “Who goes?”

“It’s me, Buck,” cried Elena. “Don’t get trigger-happy. I’m bringing in the prisoner.”

“Huh?”

Dalgetty shuffled into the light and stood slumped, letting his jaw hang slack as if he were near falling with weariness.

“You *got* him!” The goon sprang forward.

“Don’t holler,” said Elena. “I got this one, all right, but there are others. You keep on your beat. I got his weapons from him. He’s harmless now. Is Mr. Bancroft in the house?”

“Yeah, yeah—sure.” The heavy face peered at Dalgetty with more than a tinge of fear. “But lemme go along. Yuh know what he done last time.”

“Stay on your post!” she snapped. “You’ve got your orders. I can handle him.”

VIII

It might not have worked on most men but these goons were not very bright. The guard nodded, gulped and resumed his pacing. Dalgetty walked on up the path toward the house.

A man at the door lifted his rifle. “Halt, there! I’ll have to call Mr. Bancroft first.” The sentry went inside and thumbed an intercom switch.

Dalgetty, poised in a nervous tautness that could explode into physical strength, felt a clutch of fear. The whole thing was so fiendishly uncertain—anything could happen.

Bancroft’s voice drifted out. “That you, Elena? Good work, girl! How’d you do it?” The warmth in his tone, under the excitement, made Dalgetty wonder briefly just what the relationship between those two had been.

“I’ll tell you upstairs, Tom,” she answered. “This is too big for anyone else to hear. But keep the patrols going. There are more like this creature around the island.”

Dalgetty could imagine the primitive shudder in Thomas Bancroft, instinct from ages when the night was prowling terror about a tiny circle of fire. “All right. If you’re sure he won’t—”

“I’ve got him well covered.”

“I’ll send over half a dozen guards just the same. Hold it.”

The men came running from barracks, where they must have been waiting for a call to arms, and closed in. It was a ring of tight faces and wary eyes and pointing guns. They feared him and the fear made them deadly. Elena’s countenance was wholly blank.

“Let’s go,” she said.

A man walked some feet ahead of the prisoner, casting glances behind him all the time. There was one on either side, the rest were at the rear. Elena walked among them, her weapon never wavering from his back. They went down the long handsome corridor and stood on the purring escalator. Dalgetty’s eyes roved with a yearning in them—how much longer, he wondered, would he be able to see anything at all?

The door to Bancroft’s study was ajar and Tighe’s voice drifted out. It was a quiet drawl, unshaken despite the blow it must have been to hear of Dalgetty’s recapture. Apparently he was continuing a conversation begun earlier:

“... science goes back a long way, actually. Francis Bacon speculated about a genuine science of man. Poole did some work along those lines as

well as inventing the symbolic logic which was to be such a major tool in solving the problem.

“In the last century a number of lines of attack were developed. There was already the psychology of Freud and his successors, of course, which gave the first real notion of human semantics. There were the biological, chemical and physical approaches to man as a mechanism. Comparative historians like Spengler, Pareto and Toynbee realized that history did not merely happen but had some kind of pattern.

“Cybernetics developed such concepts as homeostasis and feedback, concepts which were applicable to individual man and to society as a whole. Games theory, the principle of least effort and Haeml’s generalized epistemology pointed toward basic laws and the analytical approach.

“The new symbologies in logic and mathematics suggested formulations—for the problem was no longer one of gathering data so much as of finding a rigorous symbolism to handle them and indicate new data. A great deal of the Institute’s work has lain simply in collecting and synthesizing all these earlier findings.”

Dalgetty felt a rush of admiration. Trapped and helpless among enemies made ruthless by ambition and fear, Michael Tighe could still play with them. He must have been stalling for hours, staving off drugs and torture by revealing first one thing and then another—but subtly, so that his captors probably didn’t realize he was only telling them what they could find in any library.

The party entered a large room, furnished with wealth and taste, lined with bookshelves. Dalgetty noticed an intricate Chinese chess set on the desk. So Bancroft or Meade played chess—that was something they had in common, at least, on this night of murder.

Tighe looked up from the armchair. A couple of guards stood behind him, their arms folded, but he ignored them. “Hello, son,” he murmured. There was pain in his eyes. “Are you all right?”

Dalgetty nodded mutely. There was no way to signal the Englishman, no way to let him hope.

Bancroft stepped over to the door and locked it. He gestured at the guards, who spread themselves around the walls, their guns aimed inward.

He was shaking ever so faintly and his eyes glittered as with fever. "Sit down," he said. "*There!*"

Dalgetty took the indicated armchair. It was deep and soft. It would be hard to spring out of quickly. Elena took a seat opposite him, poised on its edge, the tommy-gun in her lap. It was suddenly very still in the room.

Bancroft went over to the desk and fumbled with a humidor. He didn't look up. "So you caught him," he said.

"Yes," replied Elena. "After he caught me first."

"How did you—turn the tables?" Bancroft took out a cigar and bit the end off savagely. "What happened?"

"I was in a cave, resting," she said tonelessly. "He rose out of the water and grabbed me. He'd been hiding underneath longer than anybody would have thought possible. He forced me out to a rock in the bay there—you know it? We hid till sundown, when he opened up on your men on that beach. He killed them all.

"I'd been tied but I'd managed to rub the strips loose. It was just a piece off his shirt he tied me with. While he was shooting I grabbed a stone and clipped him behind the ear. I dragged him to shore while he was still out, took one of the guns lying there and marched him here."

"Good work." Bancroft inhaled raggedly. "I'll see that you get a proper bonus for this, Elena. But what else? You said..."

"Yes." Her gaze was steady on him. "We talked, out there in the bay. He wanted to convince me I should help him. Tom—he isn't human."

"Eh?" Bancroft's heavy form jerked. With an effort he steadied himself. "What do you mean?"

"That muscular strength and speed, and telepathy. He can see in the dark and hold his breath longer than any man. No, he isn't human."

Bancroft looked at Dalgetty's motionless form. The prisoner's eyes clashed with his and it was he who looked away again. "A telepath, did you say?"

"Yes," she answered. "Do you want to prove it, Dalgetty?"

There was stillness in the room. After a moment Dalgetty spoke. "You were thinking, Bancroft, 'All right, damn you, can you read my mind? Go ahead and try it and you'll know what I'm thinking about you.' The rest was obscenities."

"A guess," said Bancroft. There was sweat on his cheeks. "Just a good guess. Try again."

Another pause, then, “‘Ten, nine, seven, A, B, M, Z, Z . . .’ Shall I keep on?” Dalgetty asked quietly.

“No,” muttered Bancroft. “No, that’s enough. What are you?”

“He told me,” put in Elena. “You’re going to have trouble believing it. I’m not sure if I believe it myself. But he’s from another star.”

Bancroft opened his lips and shut them again. The massive head shook in denial.

“He is—from Tau Ceti,” said Elena. “They’re way beyond us. It’s the thing people have been speculating about for the last hundred years.”

“Longer, my girl,” said Tighe. There was no emotion in his face or voice save a dry humor, but Dalgetty knew what a flame must suddenly be leaping up inside him. “Read Voltaire’s *Micromegas*.”

“I’ve read such fiction,” said Bancroft harshly. “Who hasn’t? All right, why are they here, what do they want?”

“You could say,” spoke Dalgetty, “that we favor the Institute.”

“But you’ve been raised from childhood. . . .”

“Oh yes. My people have been on Earth a long time. Many of them are born here. Our first spaceship arrived in Nineteen Sixty-five.” He leaned forward in the chair. “I expected Casimir to be reasonable and help me rescue Dr. Tighe. Since she hasn’t done so I must appeal to your own common sense. We have crews on Earth. We know where all our people are at any given time. If necessary I can die to preserve the secret of our presence but in that case you will die too, Bancroft. The island will be bombed.”

“I . . .” The chief looked out the window into the enormity of night. “You can’t expect me to—to accept this as if. . . .”

“I’ve some things to tell you which may change your mind,” said Dalgetty. “They will certainly prove my story. Send your men out though. This is only for your ears.”

“And have you jump me!” snapped Bancroft.

“Casimir can stay,” said Dalgetty, “and anyone else you are absolutely certain can keep a secret and control his own greed.”

Bancroft paced once around the room. His eyes flickered back and forth over the watching men. Frightened faces, bewildered faces, ambitious faces—it was a hard decision and Dalgetty knew grimly that his life rested on his and Elena’s estimate of Thomas Bancroft’s character.

“All right! Humphrey, Zimmermann, O’Brien, stay in here. If that bird moves shoot him. The rest of you wait just outside.” They filed out. The door closed behind them. The three guards left posted themselves with smooth efficiency, one at the window and one at either adjoining wall. There was a long quiet.

Elena had to improvise the scheme and think it at Dalgetty. He nodded. Bancroft planted himself before the chair, legs spread wide as if braced for a blow, fists on hips.

“All right,” he said. “What do you want to tell me?”

“You’ve caught me,” said Dalgetty, “so I’m prepared to bargain for my life and Dr. Tighe’s freedom. Let me show you—” He made a move as if to rise.

“Stay where you are!” snapped Bancroft, and three guns swiveled around to point at the prisoner. Elena backed away until she stood beside the one near the desk.

“As you will.” Dalgetty leaned back again, casually shoving his chair a couple of feet. He was now facing the window and, as far as he could tell, sitting exactly on a line between the man there and the man at the farther wall. “The Union of Tau Ceti is interested in seeing that the right kind of civilizations develop on other planets. You could be of value to us, Thomas Bancroft, if you can be persuaded to our side, and the rewards are considerable.” His glance went for a moment to the girl and she nodded imperceptibly. “For example. . . .”

The power rushed up in him. Elena clubbed her gun butt and struck the man next to her behind the ear. In the fractional second before the others could understand and react Dalgetty was moving.

The impetus which launched him from the chair sent that heavy padded piece of furniture sliding across the floor to hit the man behind him with a muffled thud. His left fist took Bancroft on the jaw as he went by. The guard at the window had no time to swing his gun back from Elena and squeeze trigger before Dalgetty’s hand was on his throat. His neck snapped.

Elena stood over her victim even as he toppled and aimed at the man across the room. The armchair had knocked his rifle aside. “Drop that or I shoot,” she said.

Dalgetty snatched up a gun for himself, leveling it at the door. He more than half expected those outside to come rushing in, expected hell would explode. But the thick oak panels must have choked off sound.

Slowly, the man behind the chair let his rifle fall to the floor. His mouth was stretched wide with supernatural fear.

“My God!” Dr. Tighe’s long form was erect, shaking, his calm broken into horror. “Simon, the risk. . . .”

“We didn’t have anything to lose, did we?” Dalgetty’s voice was thick but the abnormal energy was receding from him. He felt a surge of weariness and knew that soon the payment must be made for the way he had abused his body. He looked down at the corpse before him. “I didn’t mean to do that,” he whispered.

Tighe collected himself with an effort of disciplined will and stepped over to Bancroft. “He’s alive, at least,” he said. “Oh my God, Simon! You could have been killed so easily.”

“I may yet. We aren’t out of the woods by any means. Find something to tie these two others up with, will you, Dad?”

The Englishman nodded. Elena’s slugged guard was stirring and groaning. Tighe bound and gagged him with strips torn from his tunic. Under the submachine-gun the other submitted meekly enough. Dalgetty rolled them behind a sofa with the one he had slain.

Bancroft was wakening too. Dalgetty located a flask of bourbon and gave it to him. Clearing eyes looked up with the same terror. “Now what?” mumbled Bancroft. “You can’t get away—”

“We can damn well try. If it had come to fighting with the rest of your gang we’d have used you as a hostage but now there’s a neater way. On your feet! Here, straighten your tunic, comb your hair. Okay, you’ll do just as you’re told, because if anything goes wrong we’ll have nothing at all to lose by shooting you.” Dalgetty rapped out his orders.

Bancroft looked at Elena and there was more than physical hurt in his eyes. “Why did you do it?”

“F.B.I.,” she said.

He shook his head, still stunned, and shuffled over to the desk visiphone and called the hangar. “I’ve got to get to the mainland in a hurry. Have the speedster ready in ten minutes. No, just the regular pilot, nobody else. I’ll have Dalgetty with me but it’s okay. He’s on our side now.”

They went out the door. Elena cradled her tommy-gun under one arm. “You can go back to the barracks, boys,” said Bancroft wearily to the men outside. “It’s all been settled.”

A quarter hour later Bancroft’s private jet was in the air. Five minutes after that he and the pilot were bound and locked in a rear compartment. Michael Tighe took the controls. “This boat has legs,” he said. “Nothing can catch us between here and California.”

“All right.” Dalgetty’s tones were flat with exhaustion. “I’m going back to rest, Dad.” Briefly his hand rested on the older man’s shoulder. “It’s good to have you back,” he said.

“Thank you, son,” said Michael Tighe. “I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to be free again.”

IX

Dalgetty found a reclining seat and eased himself into it. One by one he began releasing the controls over himself—sensitivities, nerve blocs, glandular stimulation. Fatigue and pain mounted within him. He looked out at the stars and listened to the dark whistle of air with merely human senses.

Elena Casimir came to sit beside him and he realized that his job wasn’t done. He studied the strong lines of her face. She could be a hard foe but just as stubborn a friend.

“What do you have in mind for Bancroft?” he asked.

“Kidnapping charges for him and that whole gang,” she said. “He won’t wriggle out of it, I can guarantee you.” Her eyes rested on him, unsure, a little frightened. “Federal prison psychiatrists have Institute training,” she murmured. “You’ll see that his personality is reshaped *your* way, won’t you?”

“As far as possible,” Simon said. “Though it doesn’t matter much. Bancroft is finished as a factor to be reckoned with. There’s still Bertrand Meade himself, of course. Even if Bancroft made a full confession I doubt that we could touch him. But the Institute has now learned to take

precautions against extralegal methods—and within the framework of the law we can give him cards and spades and still defeat him.”

“With some help from my department,” Elena said. There was a touch of steel in her voice. “But the whole story of this rescue will have to be played down. It wouldn’t do to have too many ideas floating around in the public mind, would it?”

“That’s right,” he admitted. His head felt heavy, he wanted to rest it on her shoulder and sleep for a century. “It’s up to you really. If you submit the right kind of report to your superiors it can all be worked out. Everything else will just be detail. But otherwise you’ll ruin everything.”

“I don’t know.” She looked at him for a long while. “I don’t know if I should or not. You may be correct about the Institute and the justice of its aims and methods. But how can I be sure, when I don’t know what’s behind it? How do I know there wasn’t more truth than fiction in that Tau Ceti story, that you aren’t really the agent of some nonhuman power quietly taking over all our race?”

At another time Dalgetty might have argued, tried to veil it from her, tried to trick her once again. But now he was too weary. There was a great surrender in him. “I’ll tell you if you wish,” he said, “and after that it’s in your hands. You can make us or break us.”

“Go on then.” Her tone withdrew into wariness.

“I’m human,” he said. “I’m as human as you are. Only I’ve had rather special training, that’s all. It’s another discovery of the Institute for which we don’t feel the world is ready. It’d be too big a temptation for too many people, to create followers like me.” He looked away, into the windy dark. “The scientist is also a member of society and has a responsibility toward it. This—restraint—of ours is one way in which we meet that obligation.”

She didn’t speak, but suddenly one hand reached over and rested on his. The impulsive gesture brought warmth flooding through him.

“Dad’s work was mostly in mass-action psych,” he said, making his tone try to cover what he felt, “but he has plenty of associates trying to understand the individual human being as a functioning mechanism. A lot’s been learned since Freud, both from the psychiatric and the neurological angle. Ultimately, those two are interchangeable.

“Some thirty years ago one of the teams which founded the Institute learned enough about the relationship between the conscious, subconscious

and involuntary minds to begin practical tests. Along with a few others I was a guinea pig. And their theories worked.

“I needn’t go into the details of my training. It involved physical exercises, mental practice, some hypnotism, diet and so on. It went considerably beyond the important Synthesis education which is the most advanced thing known to the general public. But its aim—only partially realized as yet—its aim was simply to produce the completely integrated human being.”

Dalgetty paused. The wind flowed and muttered beyond the wall.

“There is no sharp division between conscious and subconscious or even between those and the centers controlling involuntary functions,” he said. “The brain is a continuous structure. Suppose, for instance, that you become aware of a runaway car bearing down on you.

“Your heartbeat speeds up, your adrenalin output increases, your sight sharpens, your sensitivity to pain drops—it’s all preparation for fight or flight. Even without obvious physical necessity the same thing can happen on a lesser scale—for example when you read an exciting story. And psychotics, especially hysterics, can produce some of the damndest physiological symptoms you ever saw.”

“I begin to understand,” she whispered.

“Rage or fear brings abnormal strength and fast reaction. But the psychotic can do more than that. He can show physical symptoms like burns, stigmata or—if female—false pregnancy. Sometimes he becomes wholly insensitive in some part of his body via a nerve bloc. Bleeding can start or stop without apparent cause. He can go into a coma or he can stay awake for days without getting sleepy. He can—”

“Read minds?” It was a defiance.

“Not that I know of.” Simon chuckled. “But human sense organs are amazingly good. It only takes three or four quanta to stimulate the visual purple—a little more actually because of absorption by the eyeball itself. There have been hysterics who could hear a watch ticking twenty feet away that the normal person could not hear at one foot. And so on.

“There are excellent reasons why the threshold of perception is relatively high in ordinary people—the stimuli of usual conditions would be blinding and deafening, unendurable, if there weren’t a defense.” He grimaced. “I *know!*”

“But the telepathy?” Elena persisted.

“It’s been done before,” he said. “Some apparent cases of mindreading in the last century were shown to be due to extremely acute hearing. Most people sub-vocalize their surface thoughts. With a little practice a person who can hear those vibrations can learn to interpret them. That’s all.” He smiled with one side of his mouth. “If you want to hide your thoughts from me just break that habit, Elena.”

She looked at him with an emotion he could not quite recognize. “I see,” she breathed. “And your memory must be perfect too, if you can pull any datum out of the subconscious. And you can—do everything, can’t you?”

“No,” he said. “I’m only a test case. They’ve learned a great deal by observing me but the only thing that makes me unusual is that I have conscious control of certain normally subconscious and involuntary functions. Not all of them by a long shot. And I don’t use that control any more than necessary.

“There are sound biological reasons why man’s mind is so divided and plenty of penalties attached to a case like mine. It’ll take me a couple of months to get back in shape after this bout. I’m due for a good old-fashioned nervous breakdown and while it won’t last long it won’t be much fun while it does last.”

The appeal rose in his eyes as he watched Elena. “All right,” he said. “Now you have the story. What are you going to do about it?”

For the first time she gave him a real smile. “Don’t worry,” she said, “Don’t worry, Simon.”

“Will you come hold my hand while I’m recuperating?” he asked anxiously.

“I’m holding it now, you fool,” Elena answered.

Dalgetty chuckled happily. Then he went to sleep.

SNOWBALL

It did not come out of some government laboratory employing a thousand bright young technicians whose lives had been checked back to the crib; it was the work of one man and one woman. This is not the reversal of history you might think, for the truth is that all the really basic advances have been made by one or a few men, from the first to steal fire out of a volcano to $E=mc^2$. Later, the bright young technicians get hold of it, and we have transoceanic airplanes and nuclear bombs; but the idea is always born in loneliness.

Simon Arch was thirty-two years old. He came from upstate Massachusetts, the son of a small-town doctor, and his childhood and adolescence were normal enough aside from tinkering with mathematics and explosive mixtures. In spite of shyness and an overly large vocabulary, he was popular, especially since he was a good basketball player. After high school, he spent a couple of tedious years in the tail-end of World War II clerking for the Army, somehow never getting overseas; weak eyes may have had something to do with that. In his spare time he read a great deal, and after the war he entered M.I.T. with a major in physics. Everybody and his dog was studying physics then, but Arch was better than average, and went on through a series of graduate assistantships to a Ph.D. He married one of his students and patented an electronic valve. Its value was limited to certain special applications, but the royalties provided a small independent income and he realized his ambition: to work for himself.

He and Elizabeth built a house in Westfield, which lies some fifty miles north of Boston and has a small college—otherwise it is only a shopping center for the local farmers. The house had a walled garden and a separate laboratory building. Equipment for the lab was expensive enough to make the Arches postpone children; indeed, after its requirements were met, they had little enough to live on, but they made sarcastic remarks about the

installment-buying rat race and kept out of it. Besides, they had hopes for their latest project: there might be real money in that.

Colin Culquhoun, professor of physics at Westfield, was Arch's closest friend—a huge, red-haired, boisterous man with radical opinions on politics which were always good for an argument. Arch, tall and slim and dark, with horn-rimmed glasses over black eyes and a boyishly smooth face, labelled himself a reactionary.

“Dielectrics, eh?” rumbled Culquhoun one sunny May afternoon. “So that's your latest kick, laddie. What about it?”

“I have some ideas on the theory of dielectric polarization,” said Arch. “It's still not too well understood, you know.”

“Yeh?” Culquhoun turned as Elizabeth brought in a tray of dewed glasses. “Thank'ee kindly.” One hairy hand engulfed a goblet and he drank noisily. “Ahhhh! Your taste in beer is as good as your taste in politics is moldy. Go on.”

Arch looked at the floor. “Maybe I shouldn't,” he said, feeling his old nervousness rise within him. “You see, I'm operating purely on a hunch. I've got the math pretty well whipped into shape, but it all rests on an unproven postulate about the nature of the electric field. I've tried to fit it in with both relativity and quantum mechanics and—well, like I said, it's all just a notion of mine which demands experimental proof before I can even think about publishing.”

“What sort of proof?”

“It's this way. By far the best dielectric found to date is a mixture of barium and strontium titanates. Under optimum conditions, the dielectric constant goes up to 11,600, though the loss rate is still pretty high. There's a partial explanation for this on the basis of crystal theory, the dipole moment increases under an electric field. ... Well, you know all that. My notion involves an assumption about the nature of the crystalline ionic bond; I threw in a correction for relativistic and quantum effects which *looks* kosher but really hasn't much evidence to back it up. So—uh—”

Elizabeth sat down and crossed trim legs. She was a tall and rather spectacular blonde, her features so regular as to look almost cold till you got to know her. “Our idea suggests it should be possible to fit a crystalline system into an organic grid in such a way that a material can be made with just about any desired values of dielectricity and resistivity,” she said.

“Constants up in the millions if you want. Physically and chemically stable.

The problem is to find the conditions which will produce such an unorthodox linkage. We've been cooking batches of stuff for weeks now."

Culquhoun lifted shaggy brows. "Any luck?"

"Not so far," she laughed. "All we've gotten is smelly, sticky messes. The structure we're after just doesn't want to form. We're trying different catalysts now, but it's mostly cut and try; neither of us is enough of a chemist to predict what'll work."

"Come along and see," offered Arch.

They went through the garden and into the long one-room building beyond. Culquhoun looked at the instruments with a certain wistfulness; he had trouble getting money to keep up any kind of lab. But the heart of the place was merely a secondhand gas stove, converted by haywiring into an airtight, closely regulated oven. It was hot in the room. Elizabeth pointed to a stack of molds covered with a pitchy tar. "Our failures," she said. "Maybe we could patent the formula for glue. It certainly sticks tightly enough."

Arch checked the gauges. "Got a while to go yet," he said. "The catalyst this time is powdered ferric oxide—plain rust to you. The materials include aluminum oxide, synthetic rubber, and some barium and titanium compounds. I must admit that part of it is cheap."

They wandered back toward the house. "What'll you do with the material if it does come out?" asked Culquhoun.

"Oh—it'd make damn good condensers," said Arch. "Insulation, too. There ought to be a lot of money in it. Really, though, the theory interests me more. Care to see it?"

Culquhoun nodded, and Arch pawed through the papers on his desk. The top was littered with his stamp collection, but an unerring instinct seemed to guide his hand to the desired papers. He handed over an untidy manuscript consisting chiefly of mathematical symbols. "But don't bother with it now," he said. "I blew us to a new Bach the other day—'St. Matthew Passion.'"

Culquhoun's eyes lit up, and for a while the house was filled with a serene strength which this century had forgotten. "Mon, mon," whispered the professor at last. "What he could have done with the bagpipes!"

"Barbarian," said Elizabeth.

As it happened, that one test batch was successful. Arch took a slab of darkly shining material from the lab oven and sawed it up for tests. It met them all. Heat and cold had little effect, even on the electric properties. Ordinary chemicals did not react. The dielectric constant was over a million, and the charge was held without appreciable leakage.

“Why doesn’t it arc over?” wondered Elizabeth.

“Electric field’s entirely inside the slab,” said Arch absently. “You need a solid conductor, like a wire, between the poles to discharge it. The breakdown voltage is so high that you might as well forget about it.” He lifted a piece about ten inches square and two inches thick. “You could charge this hunk up with enough juice to run our house for a couple of years, I imagine; of course, it’d be D.C., so you’d have to drain it through a small A.C. generator. The material itself costs, oh, I’d guess fifty cents, a dollar maybe if you include labor.” He hesitated. “You know, it occurs to me we’ve just killed the wet-cell battery.”

“Good riddance,” said Elizabeth. “The first thing you do, my boy, is make a replacement for that so-called battery in our car. I’m tired of having the clunk die in the middle of traffic.”

“Okay,” said Arch mildly. “Then we see about patents. But—honey, don’t you think this deserves a small celebration of sorts?”

Arch spent a few days drawing up specifications and methods of manufacture. By giving the subject a little thought, he discovered that production could be fantastically cheap and easy. If you knew just what was needed, you had only to mix together a few chemicals obtainable in any drugstore, bake them in your oven for several hours, and saw the resulting chunk into pieces of suitable size. By adding resistances and inductances, which could be made if necessary from junkyard wire, you could bleed off the charge at any desired rate.

Culquhoun’s oldest son Robert dropped over to find Arch tinkering with his rickety ’48 Chevrolet. “Dad says you’ve got a new kind of battery,” he remarked.

“Uh. . . . Yes. I’ll make him one if he wants. All we’ll need to charge it is a rectifier and a voltmeter. Need a regulator for the discharge, of course.” Arch lifted out his old battery and laid it on the grass.

“I’ve got a better idea, sir,” said the boy. “I’d like to buy a *big* piece of the stuff from you.”

“Whatever for?” asked Arch.

“Run my hot rod off it,” said Bob from the lofty eminence of sixteen years. “Shouldn’t be too hard, should it? Rip out the engine; use the big condenser to turn a D.C. motor—it’d be a lot cheaper than gas, and no plugged fuel lines either.”

“You know,” said Arch, “I never thought of that.”

He lifted the ridiculously small object which was his new current source and placed it inside the hood. He had had to add two pieces of strap iron to hold it in position. “Why a regular motor?” he mused. “If you have D.C. coming out at a controlled rate, you could use it to turn your main drive shaft by a very simple and cheap arrangement.”

“Oh, sure,” said Robert scornfully. “That’s what I meant. Any backyard mechanic could fix that up—if he didn’t electrocute himself first. But how about it, Dr. Arch? How much would you want for a piece like that?”

“I haven’t the time,” said the physicist. “Tell you what, though, I’ll give you a copy of the specs and you can make your own. There’s nothing to it, if your mother will let you have the oven for a day. Cost you maybe five dollars for materials.”

“Sell it for twenty-five,” said Bob dreamily. “Look, Dr. Arch, would you like to go into business with me? I’ll pay you whatever royalty seems right.”

“I’m going to Boston with just that in mind,” said Arch, fumbling with the cables. “However, go ahead. Consider yourself a licensee. I want ten percent of the selling price, and I’ll trust a Scotch Yankee like you to make me a million.”

He had no business sense. It would have saved him much grief if he had.

The countryside looked clean, full of hope and springtime. Now and then a chrome-plated monster of an automobile whipped past Arch’s sedately chugging antique. He observed them with a certain contempt, an engineer’s eye for the Goldbergian inefficiency of a mechanism which turned this rod to push that cam to rotate such and such a gear, and needed a cooling system to throw away most of the energy generated. Bob Culquhoun, he

reflected, had a saner outlook. Not only was electricity cheaper in the first place, but the wasted power would be minimal and the “prime mover”—the capacitor itself—simply would not wear out.

Automobiles could be sold for perhaps five hundred dollars and built to last, not to run up repair bills till the owner was driven to buying a new model. The world’s waning resources of petroleum could go into something useful: generating power at central stations, forming a base for organic syntheses; they would stretch out for centuries more. Coal could really come back into its own.

Hm... wait. There was no reason why you couldn’t power every type of vehicle with capacitors. Aircraft could stay aloft a month at a time if desired—a year if nothing wore out; ships could be five years at sea. You wouldn’t need those thousands of miles of power line littering the countryside and wasting the energy they carried; you could charge small capacitors for home use right at the station and deliver them to the consumer’s doorstep at a fraction of the present cost.

Come to think of it, there was a lot of remote power, in waterfalls for instance, unused now because the distance over which lines would have to be strung was too great. Not any longer! And the sunlight pouring from this cloudless sky—to dilute to run a machine of any size. But you could focus a lot of it on a generator whose output voltage was jacked up, and charge capacitors with thousands of kilowatt-hours each. Generators everywhere could be made a lot smaller, because they wouldn’t have to handle peak loads but only meet average demand.

This thing is bigger than I realized, he thought with a tingle of excitement. *My God, in a year I may be a millionaire!*

He got into Boston, only losing his way twice, which is a good record for anyone, and found the office of Addison, his patent attorney. It didn’t take him long to be admitted.

The dusty little man riffled through the pages. “It looks all right,” he said unemotionally. Nothing ever seemed to excite him. “For a change, this seems to be something which can be patented, even under our ridiculous laws. Not the law of nature you’ve discovered, of course, but the process—” He peered up, sharply. “Is there any alternative process?”

“Not that I know of,” said Arch. “On the basis of theory, I’m inclined to doubt it.”

“Very well, very well. I’ll see about putting it through. Hm—you say it’s quite simple and cheap? Better keep your mouth shut for a while, till the application has been approved. Otherwise everybody will start making it, and you’ll have a devil of a time collecting your royalties. A patent is only a license to sue, you know, and you can’t sue fifty million bathtub chemists.”

“Oh,” said Arch, taken aback. “I—well, I’ve told some of my neighbors, of course. One of the local teenagers is going to make a car powered by—”

Addison groaned. “You would! Can’t you shoot the boy?”

“I don’t want to. For a person his age, he’s quite inoffensive.”

“Oh, well, you didn’t want a hundred million dollars anyway, did you? I’ll try to rush this for you, that may help.”

Arch went out again, some of the elation taken from him. But what the hell, he reflected. If he could collect on only one percent of all the capacitite which was going to be manufactured, he’d still have an unreasonable amount of money. And he wanted to publish as soon as possible in all events: he had the normal human desire for prestige.

He got a hamburger and coffee at a diner and went home. Nothing happened for a month except an interview in the local paper. Bob finished his hot rod and drove it all over town. The boy was a little disappointed at the quietness of the machine, but the interest it attracted was compensation. He began to build another: twenty-five dollars for an old chassis, another twenty-five or so for materials, tack on a hundred for labor and profits—the clunk might not look like much, but it would run for a year without fuel worries and would never need much repair or replacement. He also discovered, more or less clandestinely, that such a car would go up to 200 miles an hour on the straightaway. After selling it, he realized he could command a much bigger price, and set happily to work on another.

The physics journal to which Arch sent his manuscript was interested enough to rush printing. Between the time he submitted it and the time it came out some five weeks later, he found himself in lively correspondence with the editor.

“College will soon be letting out all over the country,” said Elizabeth. “Stand by to repel boarders!”

“Mmmm... yes, I suppose so.” Arch added up the cost of entertaining a rush of colleagues, but his worry was only a flicker across a somewhat bashful glow of pride. After all—he had done a big thing. His polarization theory cut a deep swath into what mystery remained about the atom. There might even be a Nobel Prize in it.

It was on the day of publication that his phone rang. He looked up from his stamps, swore, and lifted it. “Hello?”

“Dr. Arch?” The voice was smooth and cultivated, just a trace of upper-class New York accent. “How do you do, sir. My name is Gilmer, Linton Gilmer, and I represent several important corporations in the electricity field.” He named them, and Arch barely suppressed a whistle. “Dr. Bowyer of the *Journal* staff mentioned your work to one of his friends in an industrial research lab. He was quite excited, and you can understand that we are too. I believe I have some good news for you, if I may come to see you.”

“Eh—oh. Oh, sure!” Visions whirled across Arch’s eyes. Money! It represented a hi-fi set, a threepenny black, an automatic dishwasher, a reliable car, a new oscilloscope, a son and heir. “Come on up, b-by all means—Yes, right away if you like—Okay, I—I’ll be seeing you—” He set the receiver down with a shaking hand and bawled: “Betty! Company coming!”

“Oh, damn!” said his wife, sticking a grease-smudged face in the door. She had been tinkering with the lab oven. “And the house in such a mess! So am I, for that matter. Hold the fort when he comes, darling.” She still didn’t know who “he” was, but whirled off in a cloud of profanity.

Arch thought about putting on a decent suit and decided to hell with it. Let them come to him and accept him as he was; he had the whip hand, for once in his life. He contented himself with setting out beer and clearing the littered coffee table.

Linton Gilmer was a big man, with a smooth well-massaged face, wavy gray hair, and large soft hands. His presence seemed to fill the room, hardly leaving space for anyone else.

“Very pleased to meet you, Dr. Arch... brilliant achievement.... We borrowed proof sheets from the *Journal* and made tests for ourselves, of course. I’m sure you don’t mind. Thank you.” He seemed just a trifle shocked at being offered beer rather than Johnny Walker Black at four

o'clock in the afternoon, but accepted gracefully. Arch felt excessively gauche.

"What did you want to s-see me about?" asked the physicist.

"Oh, well, sir, let's get acquainted first," said Gilmer heartily. "No rush. No hurry. I envy you scientific fellows. The unending quest, thrill of discovery, yes, science was my first love, but I'm afraid I sort of got steered off into the business administration end. I know you scientists don't think much of us poor fellows behind the desks, you should hear how our boys gripe when we set the appropriations for their projects, but somebody has to do that, ha." Gilmer made a bridge of plump fingers. "I do think, though, Dr. Arch, that this hostility is coming to an end. We're both part of the team, you know; scientist and businessman both work inside our free enterprise system to serve the American public. And more and more scientists are coming to recognize this."

Arch shifted uneasily in his chair. He couldn't think of any response. But it was simple to converse with Gilmer: you just sat back, let him flow, and mumbled in the pauses.

Some data began to emerge: "—we didn't want to trouble you with a dozen visitors, so it was agreed that I would represent the combine to, ah, sound you out, if I may so phrase it."

Arch felt the stir of resentment which patronizing affability always evoked in him. He tried to be courteous: "Excuse me, but isn't that sort of thing against the antitrust laws?"

"Oh, no!" Gilmer laughed. "Quite the opposite, I assure you. If one company tried to corner this product, or if all of them went together to drive the price up, that would be illegal, of course. But we all believe in healthy competition, and only want information at the moment. Negotiations can come later."

"Okay," said Arch. "I suppose you know I've already applied for a patent."

"Oh, yes, of course. Very shrewd of you. I like to deal with a good businessman. I think you're more broadminded than some of your colleagues, and can better understand the idea of teamwork between business and science." Gilmer looked out the French doors to the building in the rear. "Is that your laboratory? I admire a man who can struggle against odds. You have faith, and deserve to be rewarded for it. How would you like to work with some real money behind you?"

Arch paused. "You mean, take a job on somebody's staff?"

"Not as a lab flunky," said Gilmer quickly. "You'd have a free hand. American business recognizes ability. You'd plan your own projects, and head them yourself. My own company is prepared to offer you twenty thousand a year to start."

Arch sat without moving.

"After taxes," said Gilmer.

"How about this—capacitite, I call it?"

"Naturally, development and marketing would be in the hands of the company, or of several companies," said Gilmer. "You wouldn't want to waste your time on account books. You'd get proper payment for the assignment, of course—"

Elizabeth entered, looking stunning. Gilmer rose with elaborate courtesy, and the discussion veered to trivialities for awhile.

Then the girl lit a cigarette and watched them through a haze of smoke. "Your time is valuable, Mr. Gilmer," she said abruptly. "Why don't you make an offer and we'll talk about that?"

"Oh, no hurry, Mrs. Arch. I was hoping you would be my guests tonight—"

"No, thanks. With all due regard for you, I don't want to be put under a moral obligation before business is discussed."

Gilmer chuckled amiably and repeated the idea he had broached.

"I like Westfield," said Elizabeth. "I don't like New York. It isn't fit for human consumption."

"Oh, I quite agree," said Gilmer. "Once a year I have to break loose—cabin up in Maine, hunting, fishing, back to Nature—you really must come up sometime soon. Your objection can be answered easily enough. We could set up a laboratory for you here, if you really insist. You see, we're prepared to be very generous."

Arch shook his head. "No," he said harshly. "No, thanks. I like being independent."

Gilmer raised his brows. "I understand that. But after all, the only difference would be—"

Arch grinned. He was enjoying himself now. On a dark day some years ago, he had tried to raise a bank loan and had failed for lack of collateral and credit rating and his refusal to subject any friend to cosigning. Ever

since, he had indulged daydreams about having finance come crawling to him. The reality was intoxicating.

“No,” he repeated. “That’s all I want to say about it, too. The income from capacitite will be quite enough for us. If you want to discuss a license to manufacture, go ahead.”

“Hrm! As you wish.” Gilmer smoothed the coldness out of his voice. “Maybe you’ll change your mind later. If so, feel free to call on me anytime. Now, for an assignment of rights, I think a sum of fifty thousand dollars could be arranged—”

Elizabeth drooped lids over startlingly blue eyes. “As an initial payment, perhaps,” she said gently. “But think what a royalty of, say, ten cents a pound would add up to even in a year.”

“Oh, yes, that would be negotiated too,” said Gilmer. “However, you realize manufacture could not start immediately, and would in any case be on a smaller scale than you perhaps think.”

“Eh?” Arch sat bolt upright. “What do you mean? Why, this stuff is going to revolutionize not only electronics, but all power—dammit, everything!”

“Dr. Arch,” said Gilmer regretfully, “you must not have considered the matter of capital investment. Do you know how many billions of dollars are sunk in generators, dams, lines, motors—”

“Gasoline,” said Elizabeth. “We’ve thought of that angle too.”

“We *can’t* throw all that in the discard!” went on Gilmer earnestly. He seemed more human, all at once. “It may take twenty years to recover the investment in, say, a local transmission network. The company would go broke overnight if that investment were suddenly made valueless. Millions of people would be thrown out of work. Millions more would lose their savings in stocks and bonds—”

“I always said stocks were a mug’s game,” interrupted Arch. “If the two or three shares owned by the widow and orphan you’re leading up to go blooey, it won’t break her. For years, now, I’ve had ads dinning the wonders of the present economic system into my ears. One of its main features, I’m told, is progress. All right, here’s a chance to leap a hundred years ahead. Let’s see you take it.”

Gilmer’s pink cheeks reddened. “I’m afraid you still don’t understand,” he replied. “We have a responsibility. The world is watching us. Just imagine what those British Socialists would say if—”

“If you’re against socialism,” said Elizabeth with a laugh, “why not start at home? Public schools and federal highways, for instance. I fail to see where personal liberty is necessarily tied to any particular method of distribution.”

Gilmer seemed, for a moment, to lose his temper. “This is no place for radicals,” he said thickly. “We’ve all got to have faith and put our shoulders to the wheel. We—” He paused, swallowed, and smiled rather stiffly. “Excuse me. I didn’t mean to get worked up. There are a lot of stories about wonderful new inventions which the greedy corporations have bought up and hidden away. They simply are not true. All I’m after is a gradual introduction of this material.”

“I know those wonderful inventions are pure rumor,” said Arch. “But I also know that just about everything I buy is made to wear out so I’ll have to buy some more. It’s cheaper, yes, but I’d rather pay twice as much to start with and have my purchase last ten times as long. Why can’t I buy a decent kitchen knife? There’s not one that keeps its edge. My wife finally made eyes at the butcher and got one of his old knives; *it* lasts.

“A big thing like capacitite represents a chance to change our whole philosophy into something more rational. That’s what I’m after—not just money. There needn’t be any unemployment. Capacitite makes increased production possible, so why not—well, why not drop the work day to four hours for the same wages? Then you can employ twice as many people.”

“It is not your or my place to make carping criticisms,” retorted Gilmer. “Fundamental changes aren’t as easy as you think. Dr. Arch, I’m sorry to say that unless you’ll agree to proper terms, none of the companies I represent will be interested in your material.”

“All right,” snapped Arch. “I can make it myself. Make it by the ton if I like, and sell it for a dollar a pound.”

“You may find yourself undersold.”

“My patent—”

“It hasn’t gone through yet. That takes time, plenty of time if you don’t want to cooperate. And even if it is granted, which I by no means guarantee, you’ll have to sue infringers; and do you know how crowded court calendars are? And how expensive a series of appeals can make such a suit?”

“Okay,” said Elizabeth sweetly. “Go ahead and make it. You just got through telling us why you can’t.”

Gilmer looked out the window. "This is a great country," he said, with more sincerity than Arch had expected. "No country on earth has ever been so rich and happy. Do you know how it got that way?"

"By progressing," said Arch. "For your information, I am not a leftist; I'll bet I'm far to the right of you. So far, that I still believe in full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes."

Gilmer rose, with a certain dignity. "I'm afraid tempers are getting a little short," he said quietly. "I beg of you to reconsider. We'll fight for the public interest if we must, but we'd rather cooperate. May I leave my card? You can always get in touch with me."

He made his farewells and left. Arch and Elizabeth looked somewhat blankly at each other.

"Well, Killer," said the girl at last, "I hope we haven't taken too big a chaw to swallow."

Culquhoun dropped over in the evening and listened to their account. He shook his head dubiously. "You're up against it, laddie," he said. "They'll defend their coffers to the bitter end."

"It isn't that." Arch stared moodily into the darkness. "I don't think they're a bunch of monsters—no more than anybody else. They just believe in the status quo. So do you, you know."

"How?" Culquhoun bristled. "I'll admit I'm not the hellfire revolutionary of my undergraduate days, but I still think a basic change is called for."

"Not basic," said Arch. "You just want to change part of the mechanism. But you'd keep the same ant-heap industrial society. I believe the heart went out of this land after the Civil War, and the death warrant was signed about 1910. Before then, a man was still an individual; he worked for himself, at something he understood, and wasn't afraid to stand up and spit in the eye of the world. Now he spends his daily routine on an assembly line or behind a desk or counter, doing the same thing over and over for someone else. In the evening he watches the same pap on his television, and if something goes wrong he whines his way to the apartment superintendent or the VA or the Social Security office."

"Look at the progress of euphemism. Old people are Senior Citizens. Draft becomes Selective Service. Graveyard to cemetery to memorial park."

We've become a race of dependents. And we can't break away: there isn't any frontier left, there isn't any alternative society, one man can't compete with a corporation. Or with a commissar, for that matter.

"What we need is not to go back to living in log cabins, but to make the means of sustenance and the sources of energy so cheap that every man can have them in sufficient quantity to live and work. I don't know—maybe I'm being vainglorious, but it does seem as if capacitite is a long step in that direction."

"I warn you, you're talking good Marxism," said Culquhoun with a grin. "The means of production determine the type of society."

"Which is pure hogwash," answered Arch. "Egypt and Assyria had identical technologies. So did Athens and Sparta. So do America and Russia. The means of production only determine the *possible* societies, and there are always many possibilities.

"I'd like to see the possibility of individualism available again to the American people. If they're too far gone to accept it, to hell with them."

The government can work fast when it wants to. It was just the following afternoon when the phone rang again. Elizabeth came out to the lab, where Arch and Bob Culquhoun were preparing a batch of capacitite, with a strained look on her face. "Come inside, dear," she said thinly. "I've got some bad news." When he was in the house, she added: "Two F.B.I. men are on their way here."

"What the devil?" Arch felt a gulp of fear. It was irrational he told himself. The F.B.I. was no Gestapo; on the whole, he approved of it. Maybe some friend had given his name as a security reference. "All right. We'll see what they want."

"I'm going to start some coffee," said Elizabeth. "Lucky we've got a cake too."

"Huh?"

"You'll see." She patted his cheek and managed a smile. "You're too innocent, sweetheart."

Sagdahl and Horrisford turned out to be hard young men with carefully expressionless faces. They introduced themselves very politely, and Arch led the way into the living room. Horrisford took out a notebook.

“Well,” said Arch a little huskily, “what can I do for you?”

“You can answer some questions, if you please,” said Sagdahl tonelessly. “You don’t have to answer any, and whatever you say can be used in evidence.”

“I haven’t broken any laws that I know of,” said Arch feebly.

“That remains to be seen. This is an investigation.”

“Whatever *for*?”

“Dr. Arch,” said Sagdahl patiently, “yesterday you published an article on a discovery of potential military importance. It has upset a great many plans. Worse, it has been released with no discretion whatsoever, and the consequences aren’t easy to foresee. If we’d had any inkling, it would never have been published openly. As it is, you went outside regular channels and—”

“I didn’t have to go through channels,” said Arch. “I’ve never gotten any confidential data, or even applied for a clearance. I work for myself and—” He saw Horrisford busily writing, and his words dried up.

The realization was appalling. The military applications of capacitite had crossed his mind only vaguely and been dismissed with an escapist shrug.

“Let’s get down to business,” said Sagdahl. “Everything will be a lot easier if you cooperate. Now, where were you born?”

Arch hadn’t imagined anyone could be so thorough about tracking down a man’s entire life. He answered frankly, feeling he had nothing to hide. Of course, there *had* been his roommate at M.I.T., and the roommate had had a girl friend one of whose other friends was a Communist, and...

“I see. Now, when you graduated—”

Elizabeth entered from the kitchen with a tray. “Pardon me,” she smiled. “I think refreshments are in order.”

Sagdahl’s face didn’t change, but his eyes bugged slightly. Elizabeth put a coffee cup in his hand and a plate of cake on one knee. He looked unhappy, but mumbled dutiful thanks.

“Oh, it’s a pleasure,” said Elizabeth blandly. “You boys are doing your duty, and really, this is very exciting.”

Sagdahl got down a mouthful of cake. Valiantly, he tried to resume the staccato flow: “Now, when you graduated, Dr. Arch, you took a vacation, you say. Where was that?”

“Up in Quebec. About three months. Just driving around and—”

“I see. Then you returned to school for a master’s degree, right? Did you at this time know a Joseph Barrett?”

“Well, yes, I shared an office with him.”

“Did you ever discuss politics with him?”

“Drink your coffee before it gets cold,” said Elizabeth. “There’s plenty more.”

“Oh—thanks. Now, about this Barrett?”

“We argued a lot. You see, I’m frankly a reactionary—”

“Were you associated with any political-action group?”

“Mr. Horrisford,” said Elizabeth reproachfully, “you haven’t touched your cake.”

“No, I wasn’t that interested,” said Arch. “Didn’t even bother to vote in ’50.”

“Here, Mr. Sagdahl, do have some more cake.”

“Thanks!—You met some of Barrett’s friends?”

“Yes, I was at some parties and—”

“Excuse me, I’ll just warm your coffee.”

“Did you at this time know anyone who had worked in the Manhattan Project?”

“Of course. They were all over the place. But I never was told anything restricted, never asked for—”

“Please, Mr. Horrisford! It’s my favorite recipe.”

“Ummm. Thank you, but—”

“You met your future wife when?”

“In—”

“Excuse me, there’s the phone... Hello. Mrs. Arch speaking... Oh?... Yes, I’ll see... Pardon me. There’s a man from the Associated Press in town. He wants to see you, dear.”

Sagdahl flinched. “Stall him off,” he groaned. “Please.”

“Can’t do that forever,” said Arch. “Not under the circumstances.”

“I realize that, Dr. Arch.” Sagdahl clenched his jaw. “But this is unprecedented. As an American citizen, you’ll want to—”

“Certainly we’ll cooperate,” said Elizabeth brightly. “But what shall I tell the AP man? That we’re not supposed to say anything to anyone?”

“No! That won’t do, not now. But—are all the technical details of this public?”

“Why, yes,” said Arch. “Anybody can make capacitite.”

“If you issued a denial—”

“Too late, I’m afraid. Somebody’s bound to try it anyway.”

Sagdahl looked grim. “You can be held incommunicado,” he said. “This is a very serious matter.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth. “The AP man will think so too, if he can’t get a story.”

“Well—”

“Oh, dear! My Russell Wright coffee cup!”

Nothing happened overnight. That was the hardest thing to believe. By all the rules, life should have been suddenly and dramatically transformed; but instead, there were only minor changes, day by day, small incidents. Meanwhile you ate, slept, worked, paid bills, made love and conversation, as you had always done.

The F.B.I. held its hand as yet, but some quiet men checked into the town’s one hotel, and there was usually one of them hanging around Arch’s house, watching. Elizabeth would occasionally invite him in for a snack—she grew quite fond of them.

The newspapers ran feature articles, and for a while the house was overrun with reporters—then that too faded away. Editorials appeared, pointing out that capacitite had licked one of the Soviet Union’s major problems, fuel; and a syndicated columnist practically called for Arch’s immediate execution. He found some of his neighbors treating him coldly. The situation distressed him, too. “I never thought—” he began.

“Exactly,” rumbled Culquhoun. “People like you are one reason science is coming to be considered a Frankenstein. Dammit, man, the researcher has to have a social conscience like the rest of us.”

Arch smiled wearily. “But I do,” he said. “I gave considerable thought to the social effects. I just imagined that they’d be good. That’s been the case with every major innovation, in the long run.”

“You’ve committed a crime,” said Culquhoun. “Idealism. It doesn’t fit the world we inhabit.”

Arch flushed angrily. “What was I supposed to do?” he snapped. “Burn my results and forget them? If the human race is too stupid to use the obvious advantages, that’s its own fault.”

“You’re making a common error, dear,” said Elizabeth. “You speak of the human race. There isn’t any. There are only individual people and groups of people, with their own conflicting interests.”

For a while, there was a big campaign to play down the effects of capacitite. It wasn’t important. It meant nothing, as our eminent columnist has so lucidly shown. Then the attempt switched: capacitite was dangerous. So-and-so had been electrocuted working with it. There was cumulative poisoning... Such propaganda didn’t work, not when some millions of people were seeing for themselves.

Petroleum stock began sagging. It didn’t nosedive—the S.E.C. and a valiantly buying clique saw to that—but it slipped down day by day.

Arch happened to drop in at Hinkel’s garage. The old man looked up from a car on which he was laboring and smiled. “Hello, there,” he said. “Haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“I—well—” Arch looked guiltily at the oil-stained floor. “I’m afraid—your business—”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’ve got more business than I can handle. Everybody in town seems to want his car converted over to your type of engine. That young Bob is turning out the stuff like a printing press gone berserk.”

Arch couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “But—aren’t your gasoline sales dropping?”

“To be sure. But cars still need lubrication and—Look, you know the old watermill down by Ronson’s farm? I’m buying that, putting in a generator and a high-voltage transformer and rectifier. I’ll be selling packaged power. A lot easier than running a gas pump, at my age.”

“Won’t the power company be competing?”

“Eventually. Right now, they’re still waiting for orders from higher up, I guess. Some people can charge their capacitors right at home, but most would rather not buy the special equipment. They’ll come to me, and by the time the power outfit gets wise to itself, I’ll ’ve come in on the ground floor.”

“Thanks,” said Arch, a little shakily. “It makes me feel a lot better.”

If only everybody had that Yankee adaptability, he thought as he walked home. But he saw now, as he wished he had seen earlier, that society had gone too far. With rare exceptions, progress was no longer a matter of individual readjustments. It was a huge and clumsy economic system which

had to make the transformation ... a jerry-built system whose workings no one understood, even today.

He wanted to call up Gilmer and make what terms he could, but it was too late. The snowball was rolling.

He sighed his way into an armchair and picked up the paper.

Item: the bill before Congress to make capacitite a government monopoly like uranium, and to enforce all security restrictions on it, had been sent back to committee and would probably not pass. A few senators had had the nerve to point out that security was pointless when everybody could already make the stuff.

Item: the government was setting up a special laboratory to study the military applications. Arch could think of several for himself. Besides simplifying logistics, it could go into cheap and horrible weapons. A bomb loaded with several thousand coulombs, set to discharge instantaneously on striking—

Item: a well-known labor leader had denounced the innovation as a case of business blundering which was going to take bread from the working man. A corporation spokesman declared that it was all a leftist trick designed to cripple the private enterprise system.

Item: *Pravda* announced that Soviet scientists had discovered capacitite ten years ago and that full-scale production had long been under way for peaceful purposes only, such as making the Red Army still more invincible.

Item: two more men in America electrocuted due to incautious experiments. Nevertheless, capacitite was being manufactured in thousands of homes and workshops. Bills in various state legislatures to ban vehicles so powered were meeting indignant opposition everywhere save in Texas.

Arch reflected wryly that he wasn't getting paid for any of this. All he'd gotten out of it so far was trouble. Trouble with the authorities, with crank letters, with his own conscience. There were, to be sure, some royalties from Bob Culquhoun, who was becoming quite an entrepreneur and hiring adults to take over when school opened in fall.

Speaking of tigers by the tail—

Autumn, the New England fall of rain and chill whistling wind, smoky days and flame-like leaves and the far wild honking of southbound geese. The

crash came in late September: a reeling market hit bottom and stayed there. Gasoline sales were down twenty-five percent already, and the industry was laying men off by the hundreds of thousands. That cut out their purchasing power and hit the rest of the economy.

“It’s what you’d expect, laddie,” said Culquhoun. They were over at his house. Outside, a slow cold rain washed endlessly down the windows.

“Over production—over-capitalization—I could have predicted all this.”

“Damn it to hell, it doesn’t make *sense*!” protested Arch. “A new energy source should make everything cheaper for everybody—more production available for less work.” He felt a nervous tic beginning in one cheek.

“Production for use instead of for profit—”

“Oh, dry up, will you? Any system is a profit system. It has to show a profit in some terms or other, or it would just be wasted effort. And the profit has to go to individuals, not to some mythical state. The state doesn’t eat—people do.”

“Would you have the oil interests simply write off their investment?”

“No, of course not. Why couldn’t they—Look. Gasoline can still run generators. Oil can still lubricate. Byproducts can still be synthesized. It’s a matter of shifting the emphasis of production, that’s all. All that’s needed is a little common sense.”

“Which is a rather scarce commodity.”

“There,” said Arch gloomily, “we find ourselves in agreement.”

“The trouble is,” said Bob earnestly, “we’re faced with a real situation, not a paper problem. It calls for a real solution. For an idea.”

“There aren’t any ideas,” said Elizabeth. “Not big sweeping ones to solve everything overnight. Man doesn’t work that way. What happens is that somebody solves his own immediate, personal problems, somebody else does the same, and eventually society as a whole fumbles its way out of the dilemma.”

Arch sighed. “This is getting over my head,” he admitted. “Thanks for small blessings: the thing has grown so big that I, personally, am becoming forgotten.”

He rose. “I’m kind of tired tonight,” he went on. “Maybe we better be running along. Thanks for the drinks and all.”

He and his wife slipped into their raincoats and galoshes for the short walk home. The street outside was dark, a rare lamp glowing off slick wet concrete. Rain misted his face and glasses, he had trouble seeing.

“Poor darling,” Elizabeth took his arm. “Don’t worry. We’ll get through all right.”

“I hope so,” he said fervently. No money had come in for some time now. Bob’s enterprise was levelling off as initial demand was filled, and a lurching industry wasn’t buying many electronic valves. The bank account was getting low.

He saw the figure ahead as a vague shadow against the night. It stood waiting till they came up, and then stepped in their path. The voice was unfamiliar: “Arch?”

“Yes—”

He could see only that the face was heavy and unshaven, with something wild about the mouth. Then his eyes dropped to the revolver barrel protruding from the slicker. “What the devil—”

“Don’t move, you.” It was a harsh, broken tone. “Right now I’m aiming at your wife. I’d as soon shoot her, too.”

Fear leaped crazily in Arch’s breast. He stood unable to stir, coldness crawling in his guts. He tried to speak, and couldn’t.

“Not a word, you—. Not another word. You’ve said too goddam much already.” The gun poked forward, savagely. “I’m going to kill you. You did your best to kill me.”

Elizabeth’s face was white in the gloom. “What do you mean?” she whispered. “We never saw you before.”

“No. But you took away my job. I was in the breadlines back in the thirties. I’m there again, and it’s your fault, you—Got any prayers to say?”

A gibbering ran through Arch’s brain. He stood motionless, thinking through a lunatic mind-tilt that there must be some way to jump that gun, the heroes of stories always did it, that might—

Someone moved out of the night into the wan radiance. An arm went about the man’s throat, another seized his gun wrist and snapped it down. The weapon went off, sounding like the crack of doom in the stillness.

They struggled on the slippery sidewalk, panting, the rain running over dimly glimpsed faces. Arch’s paralysis broke, he moved in and circled around, looking for a chance to help. There! Crouching, he got hold of the assassin’s ankle and clung.

There was a meaty smack above him, and the body sagged.

Elizabeth held her hand over her mouth, as if to force back a scream. “Mr. Horrisford,” she whispered.

“The same,” said the F.B.I. man. “That was a close one. You can be thankful you’re an object of suspicion, Arch. What was he after?”

Arch stared blankly at his rescuer. Slowly, meaning penetrated. “Unemployed—” he mumbled. “Bitter about it—”

“Yeah. I thought so. You may be having more trouble of that sort. This depression, people have someone concrete to blame.” Horrisford stuck the gun in his pocket and helped up his half-conscious victim. “Let’s get this one down to the lockup. Here, you support him while I put on some handcuffs.”

“But I wanted to help his kind,” said Arch feebly.

“You didn’t,” said Horrisford. “I’d better arrange for a police guard.”

Arch spent the following day in a nearly suicidal depression. Elizabeth tried to pull him out of it, failed, and went downtown after a fifth of whiskey. That helped. The hangover helped too. It’s hard to concentrate on remorse when ten thousand red-hot devils are building an annex to Hell in your skull. Toward evening, he was almost cheerful again. A certain case-hardening was setting in.

After dark, there was a knock on the door. When he opened it, Horrisford and a stranger stood there.

“Oh—come in,” he said. “Excuse the mess. I—haven’t been feeling so well.”

“Anyone here?” asked the agent.

“Just my wife.”

“She’ll be all right,” said the stranger impatiently. He was a big, stiff, gray-haired man. “Bring her in, please. This is important.”

They were settled in the living room before Horrisford performed the introductions. “Major General Brackney of Strategic Services.” Arch’s hand was wet as he acknowledged the handclasp.

“This is most irregular,” said the general. “However, we’ve put through a special check on you. A fast but very thorough check. In spite of your errors of judgment, the F.B.I. is convinced of your essential loyalty. Your discretion is another matter.”

“I can keep my mouth shut, if that’s what you mean,” said Arch.

“Yes. You kept one secret for ten years,” said Horrisford. “The business of Mrs. Ramirez.”

Arch started. “How the deuce—? That was a personal affair. I’ve never told a soul, not even my wife!”

“We have our little ways.” Horrisford grinned, humanly enough. “The point is that you could have gained somewhat by blabbing, but didn’t. It speaks well for you.”

General Brackney cleared his throat. “We want your help on a certain top-secret project,” he said. “You still know more about capacitite than anybody else. But if one word of this leaks out prematurely, it means war. Atomic war. It also means that all of us, and you particularly, will be crucified.”

“I—”

“You’re an independent so-and-so, I realize. What we have in mind is a scheme to prevent such a war. We want you in on it both for your own value and because we can’t protect you forever from Soviet agents.” Brackney’s smile had no humor. “Didn’t know that, did you? It’s one reason you’re being co-opted, in spite of all you’ve done.

“I can’t say more till you take the oath, and once you’ve done that you’re under all the usual restrictions. Care to help out?”

Arch hesitated. He had little faith in government... any government. Still—

Horrisford of the F.B.I. had saved his life.

“I’m game,” he said.

Elizabeth nodded. The oath was administered.

Brackney leaned back and lit a cigar. “All right,” he said. “I’ll come to the point.

“Offhand, it looks as if you’ve done a grave disservice to your country. It’s been pointed out in the press that transporting fuel is the major problem of logistics. In fact, for the Russians it’s *the* problem, since they can live off the countries they invade to a degree we can’t match. You’ve solved that for them, and once they convert their vehicles we can expect them to start rolling. They and their allies—especially the Chinese. This discovery is going to make them a first-class power.”

“I’ve heard that,” said Arch thinly.

“However, we also know that the communist regimes are not popular. Look at the millions of refugees, look at all the prisoners who refused

repatriation, look at the Ukrainian insurrection—I needn't elaborate. The trouble has been that the people aren't armed. To say anything at home means the concentration camp.

"Now, then. Basically, the idea is this. We've got plants set up to turn out capacitite in trainload lots. We can, I think, make weapons capable of stopping a tank for a couple of dollars apiece. Do you agree?"

"Why—yes," said Arch. "I've been considering it lately. A rifle discharging its current through magnetic coils to drive a steel-jacketed bullet—the bullet could be loaded with electricity too. Or a Buck Rogers energy gun: a hand weapon with a blower run off the capacitor, sucking in air at the rear and spewing it out between two electrodes like a gigantic arc-welding flame. Or—yes, there are all kinds of possibilities."

Brackney nodded with an air of satisfaction. "Good. I see you do have the kind of imagination we need.

"Now, we'll be giving nothing away, because they already know how to make the stuff and can think up anything we can. But, we have a long jump as far as production facilities are concerned.

"The idea is this. We want to make really enormous quantities of such weapons. By various means—through underground channels, by air if necessary—we want to distribute them to all the Iron Curtain countries. The people will be armed, and hell is going to break loose!

"We want you in on it as design and production consultants. Leave tomorrow, be gone for several months probably. It's going to have to be highly organized, so it can be sprung as a surprise; otherwise the Soviet bosses, who are no fools, will hit. But your part will be in production. Are you game?"

"It's—astonishing," said Elizabeth. "Frankly, I didn't think the government had that much imagination."

"We're probably exceeding our authority," admitted Brackney. "By rights, of course, Congress should be consulted, but this is like the Louisiana Purchase: there's no time to do so."

It was the historical note which decided Arch. Grade-school history, yes—but it didn't fit in with his preconceptions of the red-necked militarist. Suddenly, almost hysterically, he was laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked Horrisford sharply.

"The idea—what old Clausewitz would say—winning wars by arming the enemy! Sure—sure, I'm in. Gladly!"

Six months on a secret reservation in Colorado which nobody but the top brass left, six months of the hardest, most concentrated work a man could endure, got Arch out of touch with the world. He saw an occasional newspaper, was vaguely aware of trouble on the outside, but there was too much immediately at hand for him to consider the reality. Everything outside the barbed-wire borders of his universe grew vague.

Designing and testing capacitite weapons was harder than he had expected, and took longer: though experienced engineers assured him the project was moving with unprecedented speed and ease. Production details were out of his department, but the process of tooling up and getting mass output going was not one for overnight solution.

The magnetic rifle; the arc gun; the electric bomb and grenade; the capacitite land mine, set to fry the crew of any tank which passed over—he knew their hideous uses, but there was a cool ecstasy in working with them which made him forget, most of the time. And after all, the idea was to arm men who would be free.

In March, General Brackney entered the Quonset hut which Arch and Elizabeth had been inhabiting and sat down with a weary smile. “I guess you’re all through now,” he said.

“About time,” grumbled the girl. “We’ve been sitting on our hands here for a month, just puttering.”

“The stuff had to be shipped out,” said the general mildly. “We didn’t dare risk having the secret revealed. But we’re rolling overseas, it’s too late to stop anything.” He shrugged. “Naturally, the government isn’t admitting its part in this. Officially, the weapons were manufactured by independent operators in Europe and Asia, and you’ll have to keep quiet about the truth for a long time—not that the comrades won’t be pretty sure, but it just can’t be openly admitted. However, there are no security restrictions on the gadgets themselves, as of today.”

“That surprises me,” said Arch.

“It’s simple enough. Everything is so obvious, really—any handyman can make the same things for himself. A lot have been doing it, too. No secrets exist to be given away, that’s all.” Brackney hesitated. “We’ll fly you back home anytime you wish. But if you want to stay on a more permanent basis, we’ll be glad to have you.”

“No, thanks!” Elizabeth’s eyes went distastefully around the sleazy interior of the shack.

“This has all been temporary,” said the general. “We were in such a hell of a hurry. Better housing will be built now.”

“Nevertheless, no,” said Arch.

Brackney frowned. “I can’t stop you, of course. But I don’t think you realize how tough it’s getting outside, and how much worse it’s going to get. A revolution is starting, in more senses than one, and you’ll be safer here.”

“I heard something about that,” agreed Arch. “Discontented elements making their own weapons, similar to ours—what of it?”

“Plenty,” said the officer with a note of grimness. “It’s an ugly situation. A lot of people are out of work, and even those who still have jobs don’t feel secure in them. There are a dozen crank solutions floating around, everything from new political theories to new religious sects, and each one is finding wider acceptance than I’d have believed possible.”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” said Arch. “There’s a queer strain of the True Believer in American culture. You know how many utopian colonies we’ve had throughout our history? And the single tax party, and prohibition, and communism in the thirties. People in this country want something concrete to believe in, and all but a few of the churches have long ago degenerated into social clubs.”

“Whatever the cause,” said Brackney, “there are all these new groups, clashing with the old authorities and with each other. And the underworld is gleefully pitching in, and getting a lot of recruits from the ranks of hungry, frightened, embittered people.

“The regular armed forces have to be mobilized to stop anything the Soviets may try. The police and the National Guard have their hands full in the big cities. The result is, that authority is breaking down everywhere else. There’s real trouble ahead, I tell you.”

“All right,” said Arch. “That’s as may be. But our town is a collection of pretty solid folk—and we want to go home.”

“On your heads be it. There’ll be a plane at six tomorrow.”

—The fact did not strike home till they were stopping over at Idlewild and saw uniformed men and machine-gun emplacements. In the coffee shop, Arch asked the counterman just how bad things really were.

“Rough,” he answered. “See this?” He flipped back his jacket, showing a homemade capacitite pistol in a holster.

“Oh, look now—”

“Mister, I live in Brooklyn. I don’t get home till after dark, and the police cordons don’t go closer than six blocks to my place. I’ve had to shoot twice already in the past couple months.”

“Bandits?”

“In gangs, mister. If I could work somewhere closer to home, I’d be off like a shot.”

Arch set down his cup. Suddenly he didn’t want any more coffee. *My God*, he thought, *am I responsible for that?*

A smaller plane carried them to Boston, where they caught a bus for Westfield. The driver had an automatic rifle by his seat. Arch huddled into himself, waiting for he knew not what; but the trip was uneventful.

The town didn’t seem to have changed much. Most of the cars were converted, but it didn’t show externally. The drug store still flashed neon at a drowsy sidewalk, the Carnegie library waited rather wistfully for someone to come in, the dress shop had the same old dummies in the window.

Elizabeth pointed at them. “Look,” she said. “See those clothes?”

“They’re dresses,” said Arch moodily. “What about them?”

“No style change in six months, that’s all,” said Elizabeth. “It gives me the creeps.”

They walked along streets banked with dirty, half-melted snow, under a leaden sky and a small whimpering wind. Their house had not changed when they entered, someone had been in to dust and it looked like the home they remembered. Arch sank tiredly into his old armchair and accepted a drink. He studied the newspaper he’d bought at the depot. Screaming headlines announced revolt in Russia—mass uprisings in the Siberian prison camps—announcements from the Copenhagen office of the Ukrainian nationalist movement—It all seemed very far away. The fact that there were no new dress styles was somehow closer and more eerie.

A thunderous knock at the door informed him that Culquhoun had noticed their lights. “Mon, it’s guid to see ye again!” The great paw engulfed his hand. “Where’ve ye been a’ the while?”

“Can’t tell you that,” said Arch.

“Aweel, you’ll permit me to make my own guesses, then.” Culquhoun cocked an eye at the paper. “Who do they think they’re fooling, anyhow?”

We can look for the Russian bombers any day now.”

Arch considered his reply. That aspect had been thoroughly discussed at the project, but he wasn't sure how much he could tell. “Quite possibly,” he said at last. “But with their internal troubles, they won't be able to make many raids, or any big ones—and the little they will be able to throw at us should be stopped while they're still over northern Canada.”

“Let's hope so,” nodded Culquhoun. “But the people in the large cities won't want to take the chance. There's going to be an exodus of considerable dimensions in the next few days, with all that that implies.” He paused, frowning. “I've spent the last couple of months organizing a kind of local militia. Bob has been making capacitite guns, and there are about a hundred of us trying to train ourselves. Want in on it?”

“They'd probably shoot me first,” whispered Arch.

The red head shook, bear-like. “No. There's less feeling against you locally than you seem to think. After all, few if any of the people in this area have been hurt—they're farmers, small shopkeepers trading in the essentials, students, college employees. Many of them have actually benefited. You have your enemies here, but you have more friends.”

“I think,” said Arch thinly, “that I'm becoming one of my own enemies.”

“Ah, foosh, mon! If you hadn't brought the stuff out, somebody else would have. It's not your fault that we don't have the kind of economy to absorb it smoothly.”

“All right,” said Arch without tone. “I'll join your minute men. There doesn't seem to be anything else to do.”

The wave of automobiles began coming around noon of the next day. Westfield lay off the main highway, so it didn't get the full impact of the jam which tied up traffic from Philadelphia to Boston; but there were some thousands of cars which passed through.

Arch stood in the ranks of men who lined Main Street. The gun felt awkward in his hands. Breath smoked from his nostrils, and the air was raw and damp. On one side of him was Mr. Hinkel, bundled up so that only the glasses and a long red nose seemed visible; on the other was a burly farmer whom he didn't know.

Outside the city limits a sign had been planted, directing traffic to keep moving and to stay on the highway. There were barriers on all the side streets. Arch heard an occasional argument when someone tried to stop, to be urged on by a guard and by the angry horns behind him.

“But what’ll they do?” he asked blindly. “Where will they stay? My God, there are women and children in those cars!”

“Women and children here in town too,” said Hinkel. “We’ve got to look after our own. It won’t kill these characters to go a few days without eating. Every house here is filled already—there’ve been refugees trickling in for weeks.”

“We could bunk down a family in our place,” ventured Arch.

“Save that space,” answered Hinkel. “It’ll be needed later.”

Briefly, a certain pride rose through the darkness of guilt which lay in Arch. These were the old Americans, the same folk who had stood at Concord and gone west into Indian country. They were a survivor type.

But most of their countrymen weren’t, he realized sickly. Urban civilization had become too big, too specialized. There were people in the millions who had never pitched a tent, butchered a pig, fixed a machine. What was going to become of them?

Toward evening, he was relieved and slogged home, too numb with cold and weariness to think much. He gulped down the dinner his wife had ready and tumbled into bed.

It seemed as if he had not slept at all when the phone was ringing. He groped toward it, cursing as he tried to unglue his eyes. Culquhoun’s voice rattled at him:

“You and Betty come up to the college, Somerset Hall, right away. There’s hell to pay.”

“How—?”

“Our lookout on the water tower has seen fires starting to the south. Something’s approaching, and it doesn’t look friendly.”

Sleep drained from Arch and he stood in a grayness where Satan jeered at him: “*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice!*” Slowly, he nodded. “We’ll be right along.”

The campus was jammed with townspeople. In the vague pre-dawn light, Arch saw them as a moving river of white, frightened faces. Farmer, merchant, laborer, student, teacher, housewife, they had all receded into a muttering anonymity through which he pushed toward the steps of the hall.

The irregular militia was forming ranks there, with Culquhoun's shaggy form dominating the scene.

"There you are," he snapped. "Betty, can you help take charge of the women and children and old people? Get them inside—this one building ought to hold them all, with some crowding. Kind of circulate around, keep them calm. We'll pass out coffee and doughnuts as soon as the Salvation Army bunch can set up a canteen."

"What's the plan?" asked a guardsman. To Arch, his voice had a dim dreamlike quality, none of this was real, it couldn't be.

"I don't know what those arsonists intend or where they're bound," said Culquhoun, "but we'd better be ready to meet them. The traffic through town stopped completely a few hours ago—I think there's a gang of highwaymen operating."

"Colin, it can't be! Plain people like us—"

"Hungry, frightened, angry, desperate, confused people. A mob has nothing to do with the individuals in it, my friend. And one small push is enough to knock down a row of dominoes. Once lawlessness really gets started, a lot of others are driven into it in self-defense."

They waited. The sun came up, throwing a pale bleak light over the late snow and the naked trees. The canteen handed out a sort of breakfast. Little was said.

At nine-thirty, a boy on a clumsy plowhorse came galloping up toward them. "About a hundred, marching down the highway," he panted. "They threw a couple shots at me."

"Stay here," said Culquhoun. "I'm going down to see if we can't parley. I'll want about ten men with me. Volunteers?"

Arch found himself among the first. It didn't matter much what happened to him, now when the work of his hands was setting aflame homes all across the land. They trudged down the hillside and out toward the viaduct leading south. Culquhoun broke into a deserted house and stationed them in its entrance hall.

Peering out, Arch saw the ragged column moving in. They were all men, unshaven and dirty. A few trucks accompanied them, loaded with a strange mass of plunder, but most were on foot and all were armed.

Culquhoun bound a towel to his rifle barrel and waved it through the front door. After what seemed like a long time, a voice outside said: "Okay, if yuh wanna talk, go ahead."

“Cover me,” murmured Culquhoun, stepping onto the porch. Looking around his shoulder, Arch made out three of the invaders, with their troop standing in tired, slumped attitudes some yards behind. They didn’t look fiendish, merely worn and hungry.

“Okay, pal,” said the leader. “This is O’Farrell’s bunch, and we’re after food and shelter. What can yuh do for us?”

“Food and shelter?” Culquhoun glanced at the trucks. “You seem to’ve been helping yourselves pretty generously already.”

O’Farrell’s face darkened. “What’d yuh have us do? Starve?”

“You’re from the Boston area, I suppose. You could have stayed there.”

“And been blown off the map!”

“It hasn’t happened yet,” said Culquhoun mildly. “It’s not likely to happen, either. They have organized relief back there, you didn’t have to starve. But no, you panicked and then you turned mean.”

“It’s easy enough for yuh to say so. *Yuh’re* safe. We’re here after our proper share, that’s all.”

“Your proper share is waiting in Boston,” said Culquhoun with a sudden chill. “Now, if you want to proceed through our town, we’ll let you; but we don’t want you to stay. Not after what you’ve been doing lately.”

O’Farrell snarled and brought up his gun. Arch fired from behind Culquhoun. The leader spun on his heel, crumpled, and sagged with a shriek. Arch felt sick.

His nausea didn’t last. It couldn’t, with the sudden storm of lead which sleeted against the house. Culquhoun sprang back, closing the door. “Out the rear!” he snapped. “We’ll have to fight!”

They retreated up the hill, crouching, zigzagging, shooting at the disorderly mass which milled in slow pursuit. Culquhoun grinned savagely. “Keep drawing ’em on, boys,” he said as he knelt in the slush and snapped a shot. “If they spread through town, we’ll have hell’s own time routing ’em all out—but this way—”

Arch didn’t know if he was hitting anything. He didn’t hear the bullets which must be whining around him—another cliché that just wasn’t true, he thought somewhere in the back of his head. A fight wasn’t something you could oversee and understand. It was cold feet, clinging mud, whirling roaring confusion, it was a nightmare that you couldn’t wake up from.

Then the rest of the Westfield troop were there, circling around to flank the enemy and pumping death. It was a rout—in minutes, the gang had

stampeded.

Arch leaned on his rifle and felt vomit rising in his throat. Culquhoun clapped his shoulder. “Ye did richt well, laddie,” he rumbled. “No bad at all.”

“What’s happening?” groaned Arch. “What’s become of the world?”

Culquhoun took out his pipe and began tamping it. “Why, a simple shift of the military balance of power,” he answered. “Once again we have cheap, easily operated weapons which everyone can own and which are the equal of anything it’s practical for a government to use. Last time it was the flintlock musket, right? And we got the American and French Revolutions. This time it’s capacitite.

“So the Soviet dictatorship is doomed. But we’ve got a rough time ahead of us, because there are enough unstable elements in our own society to make trouble. Our traditional organizations just aren’t prepared to handle them when they’re suddenly armed.

“We’ll learn how fast enough, I imagine. There’s going to be order again, if only because the majority of people are decent, hardworking fellows who won’t put up with much more of this sort of thing. But there has to be a transition period, and what counts is surviving that.”

“If I hadn’t—Colin, it’s enough to make a man believe in demoniac possession.”

“Nonsense!” snorted the other. “I told you before, if you hadn’t invented this stuff, somebody else would have. It wasn’t you that made it by the ton, all over the country. It wasn’t you that thought up this notion of finishing the Iron Curtain governments—a brilliant scheme, I might add, well worth whatever price we have to pay at home.

“But it *is* you, my boy, who’s going to have to get us tooled up to last the transition. Can you do it?”

Fundamental changes are seldom made consciously. Doubtless the man in the fifth-century Roman street grumbled about all these barbarian immigrants, but he did not visualize the end of an empire. The Lancashire industrialist who fired his craftsmen and installed mechanical looms was simply making a profitable investment. And Westfield, Massachusetts, was only adopting temporary survival measures.

They didn't even look overwhelmingly urgent. Government had not broken down: if anything, it was working abnormally hard. News came through—ferocious air battles over the Canadian tundras; the Soviet armies rolling westward into Europe and southward into Asia, then pushed back with surprising ease and surrendering en masse as their own states collapsed behind them—it was turning out to be a war as remote and half-forgotten as Korea, and a much easier one, which lasted a few months and then faded into a multi-cornered struggle between communists, neo-czarists, and a dozen other elements. By Christmas time, a shaky democratic confederation in Moscow was negotiating with Ukrainia, the Siberian Convict Republic, and the Tartar Alliance. China was in chaos and eastern Europe was free.

And while the great powers were realizing that they were no longer great, now that a vast capital investment in armament had stopped paying off; and while they sought to forestall world upheaval by setting up a genuine international army with strength to enforce the peace—life went on. People still had to eat.

Arch stood by Hinkel's watermill in the early spring. The ground glistened and steamed with wetness underfoot, sunlit clouds raced through a pale windy sky, and a mist of green was on the trees. Near him the swollen millstream roared and brawled, the wheel flashed with its own swiftness, and a stack of capacitors lay awaiting their charges.

"All right," he said. "We've got your generator going. But it isn't enough, you know. It can't supply the whole country; and power lines to the outside are down."

"So what do we do?" asked Hinkel. He felt too proud of his new enterprise to care much about larger issues at the moment.

"We find other sources to supplement," said Arch. "Sunlight, now. Approximately one horsepower per square yard, if you could only get at it." He raised a face grown thin with overwork and with the guilt that always haunted him these days, up to the sky. The sun felt warm and live on his skin. "Trouble is, the potential's so low. You've got to find a way to get a high voltage out of it before you can charge a capacitor decently. Now let me think—"

He spent most of his waking hours thinking. It helped hold off the memory of men lying dead on a muddy hillside.

When power was short, you couldn't go back to oxcarts and kerosene lamps. There weren't enough of either. The local machine shop made and

sold quantities of home charging units, small primitive generators which could be turned by any mechanical source, and treadmills were built to drive them. But this was only an unsatisfactory expedient. Accompanied by several armed guards, Arch made a trip to Boston.

The city looked much quieter than he remembered, some of the streets deserted even at midday, but a subdued business went on. Food was still coming in to the towns, and manufactured goods flowing out; there was still trade, mail, transportation. They were merely irregular and slightly dangerous.

Stopping at M.I.T. Arch gave certain of his problems to the big computer, and then proceeded to an industrial supply house. The amount of selenium he ordered brought a gasp and a hurried conference.

“It will take some time to get all this together,” said a vice-president. “Especially with conditions as they are.”

“I know,” said Arch. “We’re prepared to make up truck convoys and furnish guards; what we want you for is negotiation.”

The vice-president blinked. “But . . . good heavens, man! Is your whole community in on this?”

“Just about. We have to be. There’s little help coming in from outside, so our area is thrown back on itself.”

“Ah—the cost of this operation—”

“Oh, we can meet that. Special assessment, voted at the last town meeting. They don’t care very much, because money has little value when you can’t buy more than the rationed necessities. And they’re getting tired of going on short rations of power.”

“I shouldn’t say this, because your proposal is a fine deal for us, but have you stopped to think? Both the REA and the private power concerns will be restoring service eventually, just as soon as civil order has been recreated.”

Arch nodded. “I know. But there are two answers to that. In the first place, we don’t know when that’ll be, and if we don’t have adequate energy sources by winter we’ll be up the creek. Also, we’re building a sun-power plant which will cost almost nothing to operate. In the long run, and not so terribly long at that, it’ll pay off.”

Bob Culquhoun, who went on the selenium convoy, reported an adventurous journey through hundreds of miles where gangs of extremists still ruled. “But they seem to be settling down,” he added. “Nobody likes to be a bandit, and anyhow the state militias are gradually subduing ’em. Most

of the rural communities, though, are striking out on their own like us. There's going to be a big demand for selenium." Wistfulness flickered in his eyes. "Wonder if I can raise enough money to buy some stock?"

"It'll take time," said Elizabeth. "I know the sun-power generator is simple, but you still can't design and build one overnight."

As a matter of fact, fall had come again before Westfield's plant was in full operation. It didn't look impressive: great flat screens on top of hastily constructed buildings, and inside these the apparatus to raise voltage and charge capacitors. But in conjunction with the watermill, it furnished more than enough electricity to run the county's machines.

Arch was kept busy all that summer, directing, advising, helping. It seemed that everybody had some scheme of his own for using capacitite. Energy cost nothing, and machinery could be built from junkyard scrap if nothing else. Westfield was suddenly acquiring her own looms, mills, even a small foundry. Bob led a gang of young hellions who made an airplane and kept it aloft for days at a time. His father promptly confiscated it for the use of the civic guard, and after that there were no more surprise brushes with roving outlaws.

An eyewitness report was brought in from the air—a clash between state troops and one of the robber bands which still existed to the north. The gangmen had their own trucks and jeeps, their own guns, all operating off accumulators which could be charged at any of a thousand watermills. A rifleman could stop a tank, and aircraft were of limited value against guerrillas who crouched in brush and weeds. The battle was a draw, with both sides finally retreating.

Arch shuddered, alone with Elizabeth, and crept into her arms. "Did I do that?" he asked through his tears. "Did I do it?"

"No, darling," she said. One hand ruffled his disordered hair. "Can't you forget that side of it? Think of what you have done, with your own hands—built this town up again, given its people more than they ever had before."

He set his teeth. "I'll try," he said.

Somewhat later, the government offered amnesty to those outlaws who would lay down their arms and come home. It had the desired effect; they had had enough of warring and insecurity. But Culquhoun scowled. "'Tis a vurra bad precedent," he said. "Only a weak government makes such a move."

Oddly, Arch felt a lightening within himself. “Maybe a weak government is what we need,” he answered.

News: Several southern states threaten secession unless court decisions concerning racial equality are withdrawn.

News: Uprisings in these same states. The Negro has had enough.

News: Capitulation of state governments. Constitutional conventions, transfer of power from state to local authorities.

News: The depression is not ending, but transforming itself: out-of-work men are starting to produce things for themselves with the help of capacitite-driven machinery often made at home, trading their surplus for whatever else they need. A mobile reclamation unit appears, costing little to operate, and families begin to irrigate and colonize desert areas. Big business, big labor, big government talk much and do nothing effective—their day is past, but they simply cannot understand the new forces at work.

News: More and more city areas are becoming empty as their inhabitants take advantage of cheap, fast transportation and move into the rapidly expanding suburbs and even into the country. This migration is possible because with present energy sources, plastic board for home construction can be manufactured at very low cost.

News: There is a great deal of debate in Washington about redistricting to meet the new population pattern. It doesn’t seem too important, though, because a land of nearly self-sufficient communities, such as this is becoming, is much less dependent on central government.

News: Experiment and innovation in dress, work habits, manners and morals, grows ever more common. The basic cause of this is that few men need now be afraid of what the neighbors or the boss thinks. If you don’t like it where you are, you can easily go elsewhere and start over.

None of this happened at once. It would take a century or more for the change to complete itself. But even in the second year, the trend was obvious.

Snow whirled against the house, blindly, as if the world drew into itself and nothing lay beyond these walls. The muted skirl of wind came through,

lonesome and shivering. But inside, there was warmth and a calm light.

Arch sat with a whiskey and soda in his hand, looking across the floor at his wife. He felt tired, but there was a relaxation in him, a sense of labor finished.

Not fully—there would be much to do yet. But power was there, machinery was there, food stored away; they would last the winter, and there would be another springtime.

“It’s settling down,” Elizabeth told him, putting her news magazine aside. “For once, I agree with the editor of this rag. The crisis is over, and now it’s a matter of readjustment. The world is never going to be the same, but it’ll be a better one . . . cleaner.”

“Perhaps,” said Arch. He didn’t feel so sharply the horror of guilt, not any more.

“Look around you,” she invited. “Look what you’ve done. I’m afraid, dear, that you’re going to be rediscovered. It won’t take long before people suddenly wake up to the fact that your invention did all this for them. Brace yourself—you’re going to be famous for life.”

Arch winced. “But I didn’t!” he protested. “They did it for themselves. One man never could—”

“I quite agree,” she smiled. “One man can neither make nor destroy a society. So why not give that conscience of yours a rest?”

“There’s been suffering,” he said, enough alcohol in him to break down his reserve. “People have died.”

“A lot of them needed killing,” she said earnestly. “Look what we’ve got. An end to dictatorship. Removal of the atomic-war threat. Cheap energy for a million new projects. A four-hour work day in prospect. Government, which was getting too big and officious in all countries, cut down to size again. The plain man standing on his own feet and working for himself. Natural resources conserved. If you must take either credit or blame, Si, then balance your books!”

“I know,” he said. “I know all that, up in my conscious mind. But down underneath—I’ll always see those houses burning, and those men shooting at each other.”

“You—” She hesitated. “I know what you need. Your trouble, my boy, is that underneath that Yankee conservatism, you’re a hopeless romantic. Your mind dwells on the sudden and dramatic. Now the positive benefits of capacitite aren’t anywhere near as quick and spectacular as the temporary

evils were. What you have to do, to satisfy those Puritan chromosomes, is to produce something really big and fancy, something of immediate, large value.”

He chuckled, lifted out of his dark mood in spite of himself. “I imagine you’re right, Dr. Freud,” he said. “But what?”

“I don’t know.” She frowned with worry for him. “But think, man. We have leisure now—in another year or so, well, we won’t be the millionaires we once dreamed of, but like everybody else we’ll have real security and real time to ourselves. You could use that time to work on *something*.”

“Hm—” Automatically, his brain turned to practicalities. “Let’s see, now. Capacitite offers a way of concentrating energy enormously . . . a very small packet will hold a hell of a lot—*My God!*” His yell shook the windows as he leaped to his feet.

“What the devil—something wrong?” Elizabeth got up too.

“No!” He was running toward the phone. “Got to get hold of Colin—M.I.T.—don’t you see, darling?” His hands trembled as he dialed, but there was laughter in his voice. “Don’t you see it? Spaceships!”

OUT OF THE IRON WOMB

I

The most dangerous is not the outlawed murderer, who only slays men, but the rebellious philosopher: for he destroys worlds.

Darkness and the chill glitter of stars. Bo Jonsson crouched on a whirling speck of stone and waited for the man who was coming to kill him.

There was no horizon. The flying mountain on which he stood was too small. At his back rose a cliff of jagged rock, losing its own blackness in the loom of shadows; its teeth ate raggedly across the Milky Way. Before him, a tumbled igneous wilderness slanted crazily off, with one long thin crag sticking into the sky like a grotesque bowsprit.

There was no sound except the thudding of his own heart, the harsh rasp of his own breath, locked inside the stinking metal skin of his suit. Otherwise... no air, no heat, no water or life or work of man, only a granite nakedness spinning through space out beyond Mars.

Stooping, awkward in the clumsy armor, he put the transparent plastic of his helmet to the ground. Its cold bit at him even through the insulating material. He might be able to hear the footsteps of his murderer conducted through the ground.

Stillness answered him. He gulped a heavy lungful of tainted air and rose. The other might be miles away yet, or perhaps very close, catfooting too softly to set up vibrations. A man could do that when gravity was feeble enough.

The stars blazed with a cruel wintry brilliance, over him, around him, light-years to fall through emptiness before he reached one. He had been alone among them before; he had almost thought them friends. Sometimes,

on a long watch, a man found himself talking to Vega or Spica or dear old Beetle Juice, murmuring what was in him as if the remote sun could understand. But they didn't care, he saw that now. To them, he did not exist, and they would shine carelessly long after he was gone into night.

He had never felt so alone as now, when another man was on the asteroid with him, hunting him down.

Bo Jonsson looked at the wrench in his hand. It was long and massive, it would have been heavy on Earth, but it was hardly enough to unscrew the stars and reset the machinery of a universe gone awry. He smiled stiffly at the thought. He wanted to laugh too, but checked himself for fear he wouldn't be able to stop.

Let's face it, he told himself. *You're scared. You're scared sweatless.* He wondered if he had spoken it aloud.

There was plenty of room on the asteroid. At least two hundred square miles, probably more if you allowed for the rough surface. He could skulk around, hide... and suffocate when his tanked air gave out. He had to be a hunter, too, and track down the other man, before he died. And if he found his enemy, he would probably die anyway.

He looked about him. Nothing. No sound, no movement, nothing but the streaming of the constellations as the asteroid spun. Nothing had ever moved here, since the beginning of time when moltenness congealed into death. Not till men came and hunted each other.

Slowly he forced himself to move. The thrust of his foot sent him up, looping over the cliff to drift down like a dead leaf in Earth's October. Suit, equipment, and his own body, all together, weighed only a couple of pounds here. It was ghostly, this soundless progress over fields which had never known life. It was like being dead already.

Bo Jonsson's tongue was dry and thick in his mouth. He wanted to find his enemy and give up, buy existence at whatever price it would command. But he couldn't do that. Even if the other man let him do it, which was doubtful, he couldn't. Johnny Malone was dead.

Maybe that was what had started it all—the death of Johnny Malone.

There are numerous reasons for basing on the Trojan asteroids, but the main one can be given in a single word: stability. They stay put in Jupiter's orbit,

about sixty degrees ahead and behind, with only minor oscillations; spaceships need not waste fuel coming up to a body which has been perturbed a goodly distance from where it was supposed to be. The trailing group is the jumping-off place for trans-Jovian planets, the leading group for the inner worlds—that way, their own revolution about the sun gives the departing ship a welcome boost, while minimizing the effects of Jupiter’s drag.

Moreover, being dense clusters, they have attracted swarms of miners, so that Achilles among the leaders and Patroclus in the trailers have a permanent boom town atmosphere. Even though a spaceship and equipment represent a large investment, this is one of the last strongholds of genuinely private enterprise: the prospector, the mine owner, the rockhound dreaming of the day when his stake is big enough for him to start out on his own—a race of individualists, rough and noisy and jealous, but living under iron rules of hospitality and rescue.

The Last Chance on Achilles has another name, which simply sticks an *r* in the official one; even for that planetoid, it is a rowdy bar where Guardsmen come in trios. But Johnny Malone liked it, and talked Bo Jonsson into going there for a final spree before checkoff and departure. “Nothing to compare,” he insisted. “Every place else is getting too fantangling civilized, except Venus, and I don’t enjoy Venus.”

Johnny was from Luna City himself: a small, dark man with the quick nervous movements and dipped accent of that roaring commercial metropolis. He affected the latest styles, brilliant colors in the flowing tunic and slacks, a beret cocked on his sleek head. But somehow he didn’t grate on Bo, they had been partners for several years now.

They pushed through a milling crowd at the bar, rockhounds who watched one of Achilles’ three live ecdysiasts with hungry eyes, and by some miracle found an empty booth. Bo squeezed his bulk into one side of the cubicle while Johnny, squinting through a reeking smoke-haze, dialed drinks. Bo was larger and heavier than most spacemen—he’d never have gotten his certificate before the ion drive came in—and was usually content to let others talk while he listened. A placid blond giant, with amiable blue eyes in a battered brown face, he did not consider himself bright, and always wanted to learn.

Johnny gulped his drink and winced. “Whiskey, they call it yet! Water, synthetic alcohol, and a dash of caramel they have the gall to label whiskey

and charge for!”

“Everything’s expensive here,” said Bo mildly. “That’s why so few rockhounds get rich. They make a lot of money, but they have to spend it just as fast to stay alive.”

“Yeh... yeh... wish they’d spend some of it on us.” Johnny grinned and fed the dispenser another coin. It muttered to itself and slid forth a tray with a glass. “C’mon, drink up, man. It’s a long way home, and we’ve got to fortify ourselves for the trip. A bottle, a battle, and a wench is what I need. Most especially the wench, because I don’t think the eminent Dr. McKittrick is gonna be interested in sociability, and it’s close quarters aboard the *Dog*.”

Bo kept on sipping slowly. “Johnny,” he said, raising his voice to cut through the din, “you’re an educated man. I never could figure out why you want to talk like a jumper.”

“Because I am one at heart. Look, Bo, why don’t you get over that inferiority complex of yours? A man can’t run a spaceship without knowing more math and physical science than the average professor on Earth. So you had to work your way through the Academy and never had a chance to fan yourself with a lily white hand while somebody tootled Mozart through a horn. So what?” Johnny’s head darted around, birdlike. “If we want some women we’d better make our reservations now.”

“I don’t, Johnny,” said Bo. “I’ll just nurse a beer.” It wasn’t morals so much as fastidiousness; he’d wait till they hit Luna.

“Suit yourself. If you don’t want to uphold the honor of the Sirius Transportation Company—”

Bo chuckled. The Company consisted of (a) the *Sirius*; (b) her crew, himself and Johnny; (c) a warehouse, berth, and three other part owners back in Luna City. Not exactly a tramp ship, because you can’t normally stop in the middle of an interplanetary voyage and head for somewhere else; but she went wherever there was cargo or people to be moved. Her margin of profit was not great in spite of the charges, for a space trip is expensive; but in a few more years they’d be able to buy another ship or two, and eventually Fireball and Triplanetary would be getting some competition. Even the public lines might have to worry a little.

Johnny put away another couple of shots and rose. Alcohol cost plenty, but it was also more effective in low-gee. “’Scuse me,” he said. “I see a target. Sure you don’t want me to ask if she has a friend?”

Bo shook his head and watched his partner move off, swift in the puny gravity—the Last Chance didn't centrifuge like some of the tommicker places downtown. It was hard to push through the crowd without weight to help, but Johnny faded along and edged up to the girl with his highest-powered smile. There were several other men standing around her, but Johnny had The Touch. He'd be bringing her back here in a few minutes.

Bo sighed, feeling a bit lonesome. If he wasn't going to make a night of it, there was no point in drinking heavily. He had to make the final inspection of the ship tomorrow, and grudged the cost of anti-hangover tablets. Besides what he was putting back into the business, he was trying to build a private hoard; some day, he'd retire and get married and build a house. He already had the site picked out, on Kullen overlooking the Sound, back on Earth. Man, but it was a long time since he'd been on Earth!

A sharp noise slashed through the haze of talk and music Bo looked up. There was a tall black haired man, Venusian to judge by his kilts, arguing with Johnny. His face was ugly with anger.

Johnny made some reply. Bo heaved up his form and strode toward the discussion, casually picking up anyone in the way and setting him aside. Johnny liked a fight, but this Venusian was big.

As he neared, he caught words: “—my girl, dammit.”

“Like hell I am!” said the girl. “I never saw you before—”

“Run along and play, son,” said Johnny. “Or do you want me to change that diaper of yours?”

That was when it happened. Bo saw the little needler spit from the Venusian's fingers. Johnny stood there a moment, looking foolishly at the dart in his stomach. Then his knees buckled and he fell with a nightmare slowness.

The Venusian was already on the move. He sprang straight up, slammed a kick at the wall, and arced out the door into the dome corridor beyond. *A spaceman, that. Knows how to handle himself in low-gee.* It was the only clear thought which ran in the sudden storm of Bo's head.

The girl screamed. A man cursed and tried to follow the Venusian. He tangled with another. “Get outta my way!” A roar lifted, someone slugged, someone else coolly smashed a bottle against the bar and lifted the jagged end. There was the noise of a fist meeting flesh.

Bo had seen death before. That needle wasn't anesthetic, it was poison. He knelt in the riot with Johnny's body in his arms.

II

Suddenly the world came to an end. There was a sheer drop-off onto the next face of the rough cube which was the asteroid. Bo lay on his belly and peered down the cliff, it ran for a couple of miles and beyond it were the deeps of space and the cold stars. He could dimly see the tortured swirl of crystallization patterns in the smooth bareness. No place to hide; his enemy was not there.

He turned the thought over in a mind which seemed stiff and slow. By crossing that little plain he was exposing himself to a shot from one of its edges. On the other hand, he could just as well be bushwhacked from a ravine as he jumped over. And this route was the fastest for completing his search scheme.

The Great Bear slid into sight, down under the world as it turned. He had often stood on winter nights, back in Sweden, and seen its immense sprawl across the weird flicker of aurora; but even then he wanted the spaceman's experience of seeing it from above. Well, now he had his wish, and much good it had done him.

He went over the edge of the cliff, cautiously, for it wouldn't take much of an impetus to throw him off this rock entirely. Then his helpless and soon frozen body would be just another meteor for the next million years. The vague downward sensation of gravity shifted insanely as he moved; he had the feeling that the world was tilting around him. Now it was the precipice which was a scarred black plain underfoot, reaching to a saw-toothed bluff at its farther edge.

He moved with flat low-gee bounds. Besides the danger of springing off the asteroid entirely, there was its low acceleration to keep a man near the ground; jump up a few feet and it would take you a while to fall back. It was utterly silent around him. He had never thought there could be so much stillness.

He was halfway across when the bullet came. He saw no flash, heard no crack, but suddenly the fissured land before him exploded in a soundless shower of chips. The bullet ricocheted flatly, heading off for outer space. No meteor gravel, that!

Bo stood unmoving an instant, fighting the impulse to leap away. He was a spaceman, not a rockhound; he wasn't used to this environment, and if he jumped high he could be riddled as he fell slowly down again. Sweat was cold on his body. He squinted, trying to see where the shot had come from.

Suddenly he was zigzagging off across the plain toward the nearest edge. Another bullet pocked the ground near him. The sun rose, a tiny heatless dazzle blinding in his eyes.

Fire crashed at his back. Thunder and darkness exploded before him. He lurched forward, driven by the impact. Something was roaring, echoes clamorous in his helmet. He grew dimly aware that it was himself. Then he was falling, whirling down into the black between the stars.

There was a knife in his back, it was white-hot and twisting between the ribs. He stumbled over the edge of the plain and fell, waking when his armor bounced a little against stone.

Breath rattled in his throat as he turned his head. There was a white plume standing over his shoulder, air streaming out through the hole and freezing its moisture. The knife in him was not hot, it was cold with an ultimate cold.

Around him, world and stars rippled as if seen through heat, through fever. He hung on the edge of creation by his fingertips, while chaos shouted beneath.

Theoretically, one man can run a spaceship, but in practice two or three are required for nonmilitary craft. This is not only an emergency reserve, but a preventive of emergencies, for one man alone might get too tired at the critical moments. Bo knew he wouldn't be allowed to leave Achilles without a certified partner, and unemployed spacemen available for immediate hiring are found once in a Venusian snowfall.

Bo didn't care the first day. He had taken Johnny out to Helmet Hill and laid him in the barren ground to wait, unchanging now, till Judgement Day. He felt empty then, drained of grief and hope alike, his main thought a dull dread of having to tell Johnny's father when he reached Luna. He was too slow and clumsy with words; his comforting hand would only break the old man's back. Old Malone had given six sons to space, Johnny was the last; from Saturn to the sun, his blood was strewn for nothing.

It hardly seemed to matter that the Guards office reported itself unable to find the murderer. A single Venusian should have been easy to trace on Achilles, but he seemed to have vanished completely.

Bo returned to the transient quarters and dialed Valeria McKittrick. She looked impatiently at him out of the screen. "Well," she said, "what's the matter? I thought we were blasting today."

"Hadn't you heard?" asked Bo. He found it hard to believe she could be ignorant, here where everybody's life was known to everybody else. "Johnny's dead. We can't leave."

"Oh... I'm sorry. He was such a nice little man—I've been in the lab all the time, packing my things, and didn't know." A frown crossed her clear brow. "But you've got to get me back. I've engaged passage to Luna with you."

"Your ticket will be refunded, of course," said Bo heavily. "But you aren't certified, and the *Sirius* is licensed for no less than two operators."

"Well... damn! There won't be another berth for weeks, and I've *got* to get home. Can't you find somebody?"

Bo shrugged, not caring much. "I'll circulate an ad if you want, but—"

"Do so, please. Let me know." She switched off.

Bo sat for a moment thinking about her. Valeria McKittrick was worth considering. She wasn't beautiful in any conventional sense but she was tall and well built; there were good lines in the strong high boned face, and her hair was a cataract of spectacular red. And brains, too... you didn't get to be a physicist with the Union's radiation labs for nothing. He knew she was still young, and that she had been on Achilles for about a year working on some special project and was now ready to go home.

She was human enough, had been to most of the officers' parties and danced and laughed and flirted mildly, but even the dumbest rockhound gossip knew she was too lost in her work to do more. Out here a woman was rare, and a virtuous woman unheard-of; as a result, unknown to herself, Dr. McKittrick's fame had spread through more thousands of people and millions of miles than her professional achievements were ever likely to reach.

Since coming here, on commission from the Lunar lab, to bring her home, Bo Jonsson had given her an occasional wistful thought. He liked intelligent women, and he was getting tired of rootlessness. But of course it would be a catastrophe if he fell in love with her because she wouldn't look

twice at a big dumb slob like him. He had sweated out a couple of similar affairs in the past and didn't want to go through another.

He placed his ad on the radinews circuit and then went out to get drunk. It was all he could do for Johnny now, drink him a final wassail. Already his friend was cold under the stars. In the course of the evening he found himself weeping.

He woke up many hours later. Achilles ran on Earth time but did not rotate on it; officially, it was late at night, actually the shrunken sun was high over the domes. The man in the upper bunk said there was a message for him; he was to call one Einar Lundgard at the Comet Hotel soonest.

The Comet! Anyone who could afford a room to himself here, rather than a kip in the public barracks, was well fueled. Bo swallowed a tablet and made his way to the visi and dialed. The robo-clerk summoned Lundgard down to the desk.

It was a lean, muscular face under close cropped brown hair which appeared in the screen. Lundgard was a tall and supple man, somehow neat even without clothes. "Jonsson," said Bo. "Sorry to get you up, but I understood—"

"Oh, yes. Are you looking for a spaceman? I heard your ad and I'm available."

Bo felt his mouth gape open. "Huh? I never thought—"

"We're both lucky, I guess." Lundgard chuckled. His English had only the slightest trace of accent, less than Bo's. "I thought I was stashed here too for the next several months."

"How does a qualified spaceman happen to be marooned?"

"I'm with Fireball, was on the *Drake*—heard of what happened to her?"

Bo nodded, for every spaceman knows exactly what every spaceship is doing at any given time. The *Drake* had come to Achilles to pick up a cargo of refined thorium for Earth; while she lay in orbit, she had somehow lost a few hundred pounds of reaction-mass water from a cracked gasket. Why the accident should have occurred, nobody knew ... spacemen were not careless about inspections, and what reason would anyone have for sabotage? The event had taken place about a month ago, when the *Sirius* was already enroute here; Bo had heard of it in the course of shop talk.

"I thought she went back anyway," he said.

Lundgard nodded. "She did. It was the usual question of economics. You know what refined fuel water costs in the Belt; also, the delay while we got

it would have carried Earth and Achilles past optimum position, which'd make the trip home that much more expensive. Since we had one more man aboard than really required, it was cheaper to leave him behind; the difference in mass would make up for the fuel loss. I volunteered, even suggested the idea, because... well, it happened during my watch, and even if nobody blamed me I couldn't help feeling guilty."

Bo understood that kind of loyalty. You couldn't travel space without men who had it.

"The Company beamed a message: I'd stay here till their schedule permitted an undermanned ship to come by, but that wouldn't be for maybe months," went on Lundgard. "I can't see sitting on this lump that long without so much as a chance at planetfall bonus. If you'll take me on, I'm sure the Company will agree; I'll get a message to them on the beam right away."

"Take us a while to get back," warned Bo. "We're going to stop off at another asteroid to pick up some automatic equipment, and won't go into hyperbolic orbit till after that. About six weeks from here to Earth, all told."

"Against six months here?" Lundgard laughed; it emphasized the bright charm of his manner. "Sunblaze. I'll work for free."

"No need to. Bring your papers over tomorrow, huh?"

The certificate and record were perfectly in order, showing Einar Lundgard to be a Spacetech i/c with eight years' experience, qualified as engineer, astronaut, pilot, and any other of the thousand professions which have run into one. They registered articles and shook hands on it. "Call me Bo. It really is my name... Swedish."

"Another squarehead, eh?" grinned Lundgard. "I'm from South America myself."

"Notice a year's gap here," said Bo, pointing to the service record. "On Venus."

"Oh, yes. I had some fool idea about settling but soon learned better. I tried to farm, but when you have to carve your own land out of howling desert—Well, let's start some math, shall we?"

They were lucky, not having to wait their turn at the station computer; no other ship was leaving immediately. They fed it the data and requirements, and got back columns of numbers: fuel requirements, acceleration times, orbital elements. The figures always had to be modified, no trip ever turned

out just as predicted, but that could be done when needed with a slipstick and the little ship's calculator.

Bo went at his share of the job doggedly, checking and re-checking before giving the problem to the machine; Lundgard breezed through it and spent his time while waiting for Bo in swapping dirty limericks with the tech. He had some good ones.

The *Sirius* was loaded, inspected, and cleared. A "scooter" brought her three passengers up to her orbit, they embarked, settled down, and waited. At the proper time, acceleration jammed them back in a thunder of rockets.

Bo relaxed against the thrust, thinking of Achilles falling away behind them. "So long," he whispered. "So long, Johnny."

III

In another minute, he would be knotted and screaming from the bends, and a couple of minutes later he would be dead.

Bo clamped his teeth together, as if he would grip consciousness in his jaws. His hands felt cold and heavy, the hands of a stranger, as he fumbled for the supply pouch. It seemed to recede from him, down a hollow infinite corridor where echoes talked in a language he did not know.

"Damn," he gasped. "Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn."

He got the pouch open somehow. The stars wheeled around him. There were stars buzzing in his head, like cold white fireflies, buzzing and buzzing in the enormous ringing emptiness of his skull. Pain jagged through him, he felt his eardrums popping as pressure dropped.

The plastic patch stuck to his metal gauntlet. He peeled it off, trying not to howl with the fury ripping in his nerves. His body was slow, inert, a thing to fight. There was no more feeling in his back, was he dead already?

Redness flamed before his eyes, red like Valeria's hair blowing across the stars. It was sheer reflex which brought his arm around to slap the patch over the hole in his suit. The adhesive gripped, drying fast in the sucking vacuum. The patch bellied out from internal air pressure, straining to break loose and kill him.

Bo's mind wavered back toward life. He opened the valves wide on his tanks, and his thermostatic capacitors pumped heat back into him. For a long time he lay there, only lungs and heart had motion. His throat felt withered and flayed, but the rasp of air through it was like being born again.

Born, spewed out of an iron womb into a hollowness of stars and cold, to lie on naked rock while the enemy hunted him. Bo shuddered and wanted to scream again.

Slowly he groped back toward awareness. His frostbitten back tingled as it warmed up again, soon it would be afire. He could feel a hot trickling of blood, but it was along his right side. The bullet must have spent most of its force punching through the armor, caromed off the inside, scratched his ribs, and fallen dead. Next time he probably wouldn't be so lucky. A magnetic-driven .30 slug would go through a helmet, splashing brains as it passed.

He turned his head, feeling a great weariness, and looked at the gauges. This had cost him a lot of air. There was only about three hours worth left. Lundgard could kill him simply by waiting.

It would be easy to die. He lay on his back, staring up at the stars and the spilling cloudy glory of the Milky Way. A warmth was creeping back into numbed hands and feet; soon he would be warm all over, and sleepy. His eyelids felt heavy, strange that they should be so heavy on an asteroid.

He wanted terribly to sleep.

There wasn't much room in the *Sirius*, the only privacy was gained by drawing curtains across your bunk. Men without psych training could get to hate each other on a voyage. Bo wondered if he would reach Luna hating Einar Lundgard.

The man was competent, a willing worker, tempering his cheerfulness with tact, always immaculate in the neat blue and white of the Fireball Line which made Bo feel doubly sloppy in his own old gray coverall. He was a fine conversationalist with an enormous stock of reminiscence and ideas, witty above a certain passion of belief. It seemed as if he and Valeria were always talking, animated voices like a sound of life over the mechanical ship-murmurs, while Bo sat dumbly in a corner wishing he could think of something to say.

The trouble was, in spite of all his efforts, he was doing a cometary dive into another bad case of one-sided love. When she spoke in that husky voice of hers, gray gleam of eyes under hair that floated flaming in null-gee, the beauty he saw in her was like pain. And she was always around. It couldn't be helped. Once they had gone into free fall he could only polish so much metal and tinker with so many appliances; after that they were crowded together in a long waiting.

—"And why were you all alone in the Belt?" asked Lundgard. "In spite of all the romantic stories about the wild free life of the rockhound, it's the dulllest place in the System."

"Not to me," she smiled. "I was working. There were experiments to be done, factors to be measured, away from solar radiation. There are always ions around inside the orbit of Mars to jumble up a delicate apparatus."

Bo sat quiet, trying to keep his eyes off her. She looked good in shorts and half-cape. Too good.

"It's something to do with power beaming, isn't it?" Lundgard's handsome face creased in a frown. "Afraid I don't quite understand. They've been beaming power on the planets for a long time now."

"So they have," she nodded. "What we're after is an interplanetary power beam. And we've got it." She gestured to the baggage rack and a thick trunk full of papers she had put there. "That's it. The basic circuits, factors, and constants. Any competent engineer could draw up a design from them."

"Hmmm... precision work, eh?"

"Obviously! It was hard enough to do on, say, Earth—you need a *really* tight beam in just the right frequencies, a feedback signal to direct each beam at the desired outlet, relay stations—oh, yes, it was a ten-year research project before they could even think about building. An interplanetary beam has all those problems plus a number of its own. You have to get the dispersion down to a figure so low it hardly seems possible. You can't use feedback because of the time lag, so the beams have to be aimed *exactly* right—and the planets are always moving, at miles per second. An error of one degree would throw your beam almost two million miles off in crossing one A.U. And besides being so precise, the beam has to carry a begawatt at least to be worth the trouble. The problem looked insoluble till someone in the Order of Planetary Engineers came up with an idea for a trick control circuit hooked into a special computer. My lab's been working together with the Order on it, and I was making certain final

determinations for them. It's finished now ... twelve years of work and we're done." She laughed. "Except for building the stations and getting the bugs out!"

Lundgard cocked an oddly sardonic brow. "And what do you hope for from it?" he asked. "What have the psychotechs decided to do with this thing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she cried. "Power! Nuclear fuel is getting scarcer every day, and civilization is finished if we can't find another energy source. The sun is pouring out more than we'll ever need, but sheer distance dilutes it below a useful level by the time it gets to Venus.

"We'll build stations on the hot side of Mercury. Orbital stations can relay. We can get the beams as far out as Mars without too much dispersion. It'll bring down the rising price of atomic energy, which is making all other prices rise, and stretch our supply of fissionables for centuries more. No more fuel worries, no more Martians freezing to death because a converter fails, no more clan feuds on Venus starting over uranium beds—" The excited flush on her cheeks was lovely to look at.

Lundgard shook his head. There was a sadness in his smile. "You're a true child of the New Enlightenment," he said. "Reason will solve everything. Science will find a cure for all our ills. Give man a cheap energy source and leave him forever happy. It won't work, you know."

Something like anger crossed her eyes. "What are you?" she asked. "A Humanist?"

"Yes," said Lundgard quietly.

Bo started. He'd known about the anti-psychotechnic movement which was growing on Earth, seen a few of its adherents, but—

"I never thought a spaceman would be a Humanist," he stammered.

Lundgard shrugged wryly. "Don't be afraid. I don't eat babies. I don't even get hysterics in an argument. All I've done is use the scientific method, observing the world without preconceptions, and learned by it that the scientific method doesn't have all the answers."

"Instead," said Valeria, scornfully, "we should all go back to church and pray for what we want rather than working for it."

"Not at all," said Lundgard mildly. "The New Enlightenment is—or was, because it's dying—a very natural state of mind. Here Earth had come out

of the World Wars, racked and ruined, starving and chaotic, and all because of unbridled ideology. So the physical scientists produced goods and machines and conquered the planets; the biologists found new food sources and new cures for disease; the psychotechs built up their knowledge to a point where the socioeconomic unity could really be planned and the plan worked. Man was unified, war had sunken to an occasional small ‘police action,’ people were eating and had comfort and security—all through applied, working science. Naturally they came to believe reason would solve their remaining problems. But this faith in reason was itself an emotional reaction from the preceding age of unreason.

“Well, we’ve had a century of enlightenment now, and it has created its own troubles which it cannot solve. No age can handle the difficulties it raises for itself; that’s left to the next era. There are practical problems arising, and no matter how desperately the psychotechs work they aren’t succeeding with them.”

“What problems?” asked Bo, feeling a little bewildered.

“Man, don’t you ever see a newscast?” challenged Lundgard. “The Second Industrial Revolution, millions of people thrown out of work by the new automata. They aren’t going hungry, but they are displaced and bitter. The economic center of Earth is shifting to Asia, the political power with it, and hundreds of millions of Asians are skeptical aboard this antiseptic New Order the West has been bringing them: cultural resistance, and not all the psychotechnic propaganda in the System can shake it off. The men of Mars, Venus, the Belt, the Jovian moons are developing their own civilizations—inevitably, in alien environments; their own ways of living and thinking, which just don’t fit into the neat scheme of an Earth-dominated Solar Union. The psychotechs themselves are being driven to oligarchic, unconstitutional acts; they have no choice, but it’s making them enemies.

“And then there’s the normal human energy and drive. Man can only be safe and sane and secure for so long, then he reacts. This New Enlightenment is really a decadent age, a period where an exhausted civilization has been resting under a holy status quo. It can’t last. Man always wants something new.”

“You Humanists talk a lot about ‘man’s right to variability,’” said Valeria. “If you really carry off that revolution your writings advocate you’ll just trade one power group for another—and more fanatic, less lawful, than the present one.”

“Not necessarily,” said Lundgard. “After all, the Union will probably break up. It can’t last forever. All we want to do is hasten the day because we feel that it’s outlived its usefulness.”

Bo shook his head. “I can’t see it,” he said heavily. “I just can’t see it. All those people—the Lunarites, the violent clansmen on Venus, the stiff correct Martians, the asteroid rockhounds, even those mysterious Jovians—they all came from Earth. It was Earth’s help that made their planets habitable. We’re all men, all one race.”

“A fiction,” said Lundgard. “The human race is a fiction. There are only small groups with their own conflicting interests.”

“And if those conflicts are allowed to break into war—” said Valeria. “Do you know what a lithium bomb can do?”

There was a reckless gleam in Lundgard’s eyes. “If a period of interplanetary wars is necessary, let’s get it over with,” he answered. “Enough men will survive to build something better. This age has gotten stale. It’s petrifying. There have been plenty of shakeups in history—the fall of Rome, the Reformation, the Napoleonic Wars, the World Wars. It’s been man’s way of progressing.”

“I don’t know about all those,” said Bo slowly. “I just know I wouldn’t want to live through such a time.”

“You’re soft,” said Lundgard. “Down underneath you’re soft.” He laughed disarmingly. “Pardon me. I didn’t mean anything personal. I’ll never convince you and you’ll never convince me, so let’s keep it friendly. I hope you’ll have some free time on Luna, Valeria. I know a little grill where they serve the best synthosteaks in the System.”

“All right,” she smiled. “It’s a date.”

Bo mumbled some excuse and went aft. He was still calling her Dr. McKittrick.

IV

You can’t just lie here and let him come kill you.

There was a picture behind his eyes; he didn't know if it was a dream or a long buried memory. He stood under an aspen which quivered and rustled as if it laughed to itself softly, softly, when the wind embraced it. And the wind was blowing up a red granite slope, wild and salt from the Sound, and there were towering clouds lifting over Denmark to the west. The sunlight rained and streamed through aspen leaves, broken, shaken, falling in spatters against the earth, and he, Bo Jonsson, laughed with the wind and the tree and the far watery glitter of the Sound.

He opened his eyes, wearily, like an old man. Orion was marching past, and there was a blaze on crags five miles off which told of the rising sun. The asteroid spun swiftly; he had been here for many of its days now, and each day burdened him like a year.

Got to get out of here, he knew.

He sat up, pain tearing along his furrowed breast. Somehow he had kept the wrench with him, he stared at it in a dull wonder.

Where to go, where to hide, what to do?

Thirst nagged him. Slowly he uncoiled the tube which led from the electrically heated canteen welded to his suit, screwed its end into the helmet nipple, thumbed down the clamp which closed it, and sucked hard. It helped a little.

He dragged himself to his feet and stood swaying, only the near-weightlessness kept him erect. Turning his head in its transparent cage, he saw the sun rise, and bright spots danced before him when he looked away.

His vision cleared, but for a moment he thought the shadow lifting over a nearby ridge was a wisp of unconsciousness. Then he made out the bulky black-painted edge of it, gigantic against the Milky Way, and it was Lundgard, moving unhurriedly up to kill him.

A dark laughter was in his radio earphones. "Take it easy, Bo. I'll be there in a minute."

He backed away, his heart a sudden thunder, looking for a place to hide. Down! Get down and don't stand where he can see you! He crouched as much as the armor would allow and broke into a bounding run.

A slug spat broken stone near his feet. The powdery dust hung for minutes before settling. Breath rattled in his throat. He saw the lip of a meteoric crater and dove.

Crouching there, he heard Lundgard's voice again: "You're somewhere near. Why not come out and finish it now?"

The radio was non-directional, so he snapped back: “A gun against a monkey wrench?”

Lundgard’s coolness broke a little; there was almost a puzzled note: “I hate to do this. Why can’t you be reasonable? I don’t want to kill you.”

“The trouble,” said Bo harshly, “is that I want to kill you.”

“Behold the man of the New Enlightenment!” Bo could imagine Lundgard’s grin. It would be tight, and there would be sweat on the lean face, but the amusement was genuine. “Didn’t you believe sweet reasonableness could solve everything? This is only the beginning, Bo, just a small preliminary hint that the age of reason is dying. I’ve already converted you to my way of thinking, by the very fact you’re fighting me. Why not admit it?”

Bo shook his head—futile gesture, looked in darkness where he lay. There was a frosty blaze of stars when he looked up.

It was more than himself and Johnny Malone, more even than the principle of the thing and the catastrophe to all men which Lundgard’s victory meant. There was something deep and primitive which would not let him surrender, even in the teeth of annihilation. Valeria’s image swayed before him.

Lundgard was moving around, peering over the shadowy tumble of blackened rock in search of any trace. There was a magnetic rifle in his hands. Bo strained his helmet to the crater floor, trying to hear ground vibrations, but there was nothing. He didn’t know where Lundgard was, only that he was very near.

Blindly, he bundled his legs and sprang out of the pit.

They found the asteroid where Valeria had left her recording instruments. It was a tiny drifting fragment of a world which had never been born, turning endlessly between the constellations; the *Sirius* moored fast with grapples, and Valeria donned a spacesuit and went out to get her apparatus. Lundgard accompanied her. As there was only work for two, Bo stayed behind.

He slumped for a while in the pilot chair, letting his mind pace through a circle of futility. Valeria, Valeria, Valeria—O strong and fair and never to be forgotten, would he ever see her again after they made Luna?

This won't do, he told himself dully. I should at least keep busy. Thank God for work.

He wasn't much of a thinker, he knew that, but he had cleverness in his hands. It was satisfying to watch a machine come right under his tools. Working, he could see the falseness of Lundgard's philosophy. The man could quote history all he wanted; weave a glittering circle of logic around Bo's awkward brain, but it didn't change facts. Maybe this century was headed for trouble; maybe psychotechnic government was only another human self-limitation and should be changed for something else; nevertheless, the truth remained that most men were workers who wished no more than peace in which to create as best they could. All the high ideals in the universe weren't worth breaking the Union for and smashing the work of human hands in a single burst of annihilating flame.

I can feel it, down inside me. But why can't I say it?

He got up and went over to the baggage rack, remembering that Lundgard had dozens of book-reels along and that reading would help him not to think about what he could never have.

On a planet Bo would not have dreamed of helping himself without asking first. But custom is different in space, where there is no privacy and men must be a unit if they are to survive. He was faintly surprised to see that Lundgard's personal suitcase was locked; but it would be hours, probably, before the owner got back: dismantling a recorder setup took time. A long time, in which to talk and laugh with Valeria. In the chill spatial radiance, her hair would be like frosty fire.

Casually, Bo stooped across to Lundgard's sack-hammock and took his key ring off the hook. He opened the suitcase and lifted out some of the reels in search of a promising title.

Underneath them were neatly folded clothes, Fireball uniforms and fancy dress pajamas. A tartan edge stuck out from below, and Bo lifted a coat to see what clan that was. Probably a souvenir of Lundgard's Venusian stay—

Next to the kilt was a box which he recognized. L-masks came in such boxes.

How the idea came to him, he did not know. He stood there for minutes, looking at the box without seeing it. The ship was very quiet around him. He had a sudden feeling that the walls were closing in.

When he opened the box, his hands shook, and there was sweat trickling along his ribs.

The mask was of the latest type, meant to fit over the head, snug around the cheeks and mouth and jaws. It was like a second skin, reflecting expression, not to be told from a real face. Bo saw the craggy nose and the shock of dark hair, limp now, but—

Suddenly he was back on Achilles, with riot roaring around him and Johnny Malone's body in his arms.

No wonder they never found that Venusian. There never was any.

Bo felt a dim shock when he looked at the chronometer. Only five minutes had gone by while he stood there. Only five minutes to turn the cosmos inside out.

Very slowly and carefully he repacked the suitcase and put it in the rack and sat down to think.

What to do?

Accuse Lundgard to his face—no, the man undoubtedly carried that needler. And there was Valeria to think of. A ricocheting dart, a scratch on her, no! It took Bo a long time to decide; his brain seemed viscous. When he looked out of a port to the indifferent stars, he shuddered.

They came back, shedding their spacesuits in the airlock; frost whitened the armor as moisture condensed on chilled surfaces. The metal seemed to breathe cold. Valeria went efficiently to work, stowing the boxed instruments as carefully as if they were her children. There was a laughter on her lips which turned Bo's heart around inside him.

Lundgard leaned over the tiny desk where he sat. "What y' doing?" he asked.

"Recalculating our orbit to Luna," said Bo. "I want to go slow for a few million miles before going up to hyperbolic speed."

"Why? It'll add days to the trip, and the fuel—"

"I... I'm afraid we might barge into Swarm 770. It's supposed to be near here now and, uh, the positions of those things are never known for sure... perturbations..." Bo's mouth felt dry.

"You've got a megamile of safety margin or your orbit would never have been approved," argued Lundgard.

"Hell damn it, I'm the captain!" yelled Bo.

“All right, all right... take it easy, skipper.” Lundgard shot a humorous glance at Valeria. “I certainly don’t mind a few extra days in... the present company.”

She smiled at him. Bo felt ill.

His excuse was thin; if Lundgard thought to check the ephemeris, it would fall to ruin. But he couldn’t tell the real reason.

An iron-drive ship does not need to drift along the economical Hohmann “A” orbit of the big freighters; it can build up such furious speed that the sun will swing it along a hyperbola rather than an ellipse, and can still brake that speed near its destination. But the critical stage of acceleration has to be just right, or there will not be enough fuel to stop completely; the ship will be pulled into a cometary orbit and run helpless, the crew probably starving before a rescue vessel can locate them. Bo dared not risk the trouble exploding at full drive; he would drift along, capture and bind Lundgard at the first chance, and then head for Earth. He could handle the *Sirius* alone even if it was illegal; he could not handle her if he had to fight simultaneously.

His knuckles were white on the controls as he loosed the grapples and nudged away from the asteroid with a whisper of power. After a few minutes of low acceleration, he cut the rockets, checked position and velocity, and nodded. “On orbit,” he said mechanically. “It’s your turn to cook, Ei... Einar.”

Lundgard swooped easily through the air into the cubbyhole which served for a galley. Cooking in free fall is an art which not all spacemen master, but he could—his meals were even good. Bo felt a helpless kind of rage at his own clumsy efforts.

He crouched in midair, dark of mind, a leg hooked around a stanchion to keep from drifting.

When someone touched him, his heart jumped and he whirled around.

“What’s the matter, Bo?” asked Valeria. “You look like doomsday.”

“I... I...” He gulped noisily and twisted his mouth into a smile. “Just feeling a little off.”

“It’s more than that, I think.” Her eyes were grave. “You’ve seemed so unhappy the whole trip. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Thanks... Dr. McKittrick... but—”

“Don’t be so formal,” she said, almost wistfully. “I don’t bite. Too many men think I do. Can’t we be friends?”

“With a thickheaded clinker like me?” His whisper was raw.

“Don’t be silly. It takes brains to be a spaceman. I like a man who knows when to be quiet.” She lowered her eyes, the lashes were long and sooty black. “There’s something solid about you, something so few people seem to have these days. I wish you wouldn’t go feeling so inferior.”

At any other time it would have been a sunburst in him. Now he thought of death, and mumbled something and looked away. A hurt expression crossed her face. “I won’t bother you,” she said gently, and moved off.

The thing was to fall on Lundgard while he slept—

The radar alarm buzzed during a dinner in which Lundgard’s flow of talk had battered vainly against silence and finally given up. Bo vaulted over to the control panel and checked. No red light glowed, and the autopilot wasn’t whipping them out of danger, so they weren’t on a collision course. But the object was getting close. Bo calculated it was an asteroid on an orbit almost parallel to their own, relative speed only a few feet per second; it would come within ten miles or so. In the magnifying periscope, it showed as a jagged dark cube, turning around itself and flashing hard glints of sunlight off mica beds—perhaps six miles square, all crags and cracks and fracture faces, heatless and lifeless and kindless.

V

Lundgard yawned elaborately after dinner. “Excuse,” he said. “Unless somebody’s for chess?” His hopeful glance met the grimness of Bo and the odd sadness of Valeria, and he shrugged. “All right, then. Pleasant dreams.”

After ten minutes—*now!*

Bo uncoiled himself. “Valeria,” he whispered, as if the name were holy.

“Yes?” She arched her brows expectantly.

“I can’t stop to explain now. I’ve got to do something dangerous. Get back aft of the gyro housing.”

“What?”

“Get back!” Command blazed frantically in him. “And stay there, whatever happens.”

Something like fear flickered in her eyes. It was a very long way to human help. Then she nodded, puzzled but with an obedience which held gallantry, and slipped out of sight behind the steel pillar.

Bo launched himself across the room in a single null-gee bound. One hand ripped aside Lundgard's curtain, the other got him by the throat.

"What the hell—"

Lundgard exploded into life. His fist crashed against Bo's cheek. Bo held on with one hand and slugged with the other. Knuckles bounced on rubbery muscle. Lundgard's arm snaked for the tunic stretched on his bunk wall; his body came lithely out of the sack. Bo snatched for that wrist. Lundgard's free hand came around, edged out to slam him in the larynx.

Pain ripped through Bo. He let go and sailed across the room. Lundgard was pulling out his needler.

Bo hit the opposite wall and rebounded—not for the armed man, but for the control panel. Lundgard spat a dart at him. It burst on the viewport over his shoulder, and Bo caught the acrid whiff of poison. Then the converter was roaring to life and whining gyros spun the ship around.

Lundgard was hurled across the room. He collected himself, catlike, grabbed a stanchion, and raised the gun again. "I've got the drop," he said. "Get away from there or you're a dead man."

It was as if someone else had seized Bo's body. Decision was like lightning through him. He had tried to capture Lundgard, and failed, and venom crouched at his back. But the ship was pointed for the asteroid now, where it hung gloomily a dozen miles off, and the rockets were ready to spew.

"If you shoot me," said Bo, "I'll live just long enough to pour on the juice. We'll hit that rock and scatter from hell to breakfast."

Valeria emerged. Lundgard swung the needler to cover her. "Stay where you are!" he rapped.

"What's happening?" she said fearfully.

"I don't know," said Lundgard. "Bo's gone crazy—attacked me—"

Wrath boiled black in the pilot. He snarled, "You killed my partner. You must'a been fixing to kill us too."

"What do you mean?" whispered Valeria.

"How should I know?" said Lundgard. "He's jumped his orbit, that's all. Look, Bo, be reasonable. Get away from that panel—"

“Look in his suitcase, Valeria.” Bo forced the words out of a tautened throat. “A Venusian shot my partner. You’ll find his face and his clothes in Lundgard’s things. I’d know that face in the middle of the sun.”

She hung for a long while, not moving. Bo couldn’t see her. His eyes were nailed to the asteroid, keeping the ship’s nose pointed at it.

“Is that true, Einar?” she asked finally.

“No,” he said. “Of course not. I do have Venusian clothes and a mask, but—”

“Then why are you keeping me covered too?”

Lundgard didn’t answer at once. The only noise was the murmur of machinery and the dense breathing of three pairs of lungs. Then his laugh jarred forth.

“All right,” he said. “I hadn’t meant it to come yet, or to come this way, but all right.”

“Why did you kill Johnny?” Tears stung Bo’s eyes. “He never hurt you.”

“It was necessary.” Lundgard’s mouth twitched. “But you see, we knew you were going to Achilles to pick up Valeria and her data. We needed to get a man aboard your ship, to take over when her orbit brought her close to our asteroid base. You’ve forced my hand—I wasn’t going to capture you for days yet. I sabotaged the *Drake*’s fuel tanks to get myself stranded there, and shot your friend to get his berth. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Horror rode Valeria’s voice.

“I’m a Humanist. I’ve never made a secret of that. What our secret is, is that some of us aren’t content just to talk revolution. We want to give this rotten, over-mechanized society the shove that will bring on its end. We’ve built up a small force, not much as yet, not enough to accomplish anything lasting. But if we had a solar power beam it would make a big difference. It could be adapted to direct military uses, as well as supplying energy to our machines. A lens effect, a concentration of solar radiation strong enough to burn. Well, it seems worth trying.”

“And what do you intend for us?”

“You’ll have to be kept prisoners for a while, of course,” said Lundgard. “It won’t be onerous. We aren’t beasts.”

“No,” said Bo. “Just murderers.”

“Save the dramatics,” snapped Lundgard. “I have the gun. Get away from those controls.”

Bo shook his head. There was a wild hammering in his breast, but his voice surprised him with steadiness: “No. I’ve got the upper hand. I can kill you if you move. Yell if he tries anything, Valeria.”

Lundgard’s eyes challenged her. “Do you want to die?” he asked.

Her head lifted. “No,” she said, “but I’m not afraid to. Go ahead if you must, Bo. It’s all right.”

Bo felt cold. He knew he wouldn’t. He was bluffing. In the final showdown he could not crash her. He had seen too many withered space drained mummies in his time. But maybe Lundgard didn’t realize that.

“Give up,” he said. “You can’t gain a damn thing. I’m not going to see a billion people burned alive just to save our necks. Make a bargain for your life.”

“No,” said Lundgard with a curious gentleness. “I have my own brand of honor. I’m not going to surrender to you. You can’t sit there forever.”

Impasse. The ship floated through eternal silence while they waited.

“All right,” said Bo. “I’ll fight you for the power beam.”

“How’s that?”

“I can throw this ship into orbit around the asteroid. We can go down there and settle the thing between us. The winner can jump up here again with the help of a jet of tanked air. The lump hasn’t got much gravity.”

Lundgard hesitated. “And how do I know you’ll keep your end of the bargain?” he asked. “You could let me go through the airlock, then close it and blast off.”

Bo had had some such thought, but he might have known it wouldn’t work. “What do you suggest?” he countered, never taking his eyes off the planetoid. “Remember, I don’t trust you either.”

Lundgard laughed suddenly, a hard yelping bark. “I know! Valeria, go aft and remove all the control-rod links and spares. Bring them back here. I’ll go out first, taking half of them with me, and Bo can follow with the other half. He’ll have to.”

“I—no! I won’t,” she whispered. “I can’t let you—”

“Go ahead and do it,” said Bo. He felt a sudden vast weariness. “It’s the only way we can break this deadlock.”

She wept as she went toward the engine room.

Lundgard's thought was good. Without linked control-rods, the converter couldn't operate five minutes, it would flare up and melt itself and kill everyone aboard in a flood of radiation. Whoever won the duel could quickly reinstall the necessary parts.

There was a waiting silence. At last Lundgard said, almost abstractedly: "*Holmgang*. Do you know what that means, Bo?"

"No."

"You ought to. It was a custom of our ancestors back in the early Middle Ages—the Viking time. Two men would go off to a little island, a *holm*, to settle their differences; one would come back. I never thought it could happen out here." He chuckled bleakly. "Valkyries in spacesuits?"

The girl came back with the links tied in two bundles. Lundgard counted them and nodded. "All right." He seemed strangely calm, an easy assurance lay over him like armor. Bo's fear was cold in his belly, and Valeria wept still with a helpless horror.

The pilot used a safe two minutes of low blast to edge up to the asteroid. "I'll go into the airlock and put on my spacesuit," said Lundgard. "Then I'll jump down and you can put the ship in orbit. Don't try anything while I'm changing, because I'll keep this needler handy."

"It won't work against a spacesuit," said Bo.

Lundgard laughed. "I know," he said. He kissed his hand to Valeria and backed into the lock chamber. The outer valve closed behind him.

"Bo!" Valeria grabbed the pilot by the shoulders, and he looked around into her face. "You can't go out there, I won't let you, I—"

"If I don't," he said tonelessly, "we'll orbit around here till we starve."

"But you could be killed!"

"I hope not. For your sake, mostly, I hope not," he said awkwardly. "But he won't have any more weapon than me, just a monkey wrench." There was a metal tube welded to the leg of each suit for holding tools; wrenches, the most commonly used, were simply left there as a rule. "I'm bigger than he is."

"But—" She laid her head on his breast and shuddered with crying. He tried to comfort her.

"All right," he said at last. "All right. Lundgard must be through. I'd better get started."

"Leave him!" she blazed. "His air won't last many hours. We can wait."

“And when he sees he’s been tricked, you think he won’t wreck those links? No. There’s no way out.”

It was as if all his life he had walked on a road which had no turnings, which led inevitably to this moment.

He made some careful calculations from the instrument readings, physical constants of the asteroid, and used another minute’s maneuvering to assume orbital velocity. Alarm lights blinked angry eyes at him, the converter was heating up. No more traveling till the links were restored.

Bo floated from his chair toward the lock. “Goodbye, Valeria,” he said, feeling the bloodless weakness of words. “I hope it won’t be for long.”

She threw her arms about him and kissed him. The taste of tears was still on his lips when he had dogged down his helmet.

Opening the outer valve he moved forth, magnetic boots clamping to the hull. A gulf of stars yawned around him, a cloudy halo about his head. The stillness was smothering.

When he was “over” the asteroid he gauged his position with a practiced eye and jumped free. Falling, he thought mostly of Valeria.

As he landed he looked around. No sign of Lundgard. The man could be anywhere in these square miles of cosmic wreckage. He spoke tentatively into his radio, in case Lundgard should be within the horizon: “Hello, are you there?”

“Yes. I’m coming.” There was a sharp cruel note of laughter. “Sorry to play this dirty, but there are bigger issues at stake than you or me. I’ve kept a rifle in my tool-tube all the time... just in case. Goodbye, Bo.”

A slug smashed into the pinnacle behind him. Bo turned and ran.

VI

As he rose over the lip of the crater, his head swung, seeking his enemy. There!

It was almost a reflex which brought his arm back and sent the wrench hurtling across the few yards between. Before it had struck, Bo’s feet lashed against the pit edge, and the kick arced him toward Lundgard.

Spacemen have to be good at throwing things. The wrench hit the lifted rifle in a soundless shiver of metal, tore it loose from an insecure gauntleted grasp and sent it spinning into shadow. Lundgard yelled, spun on his heel, and dove after it. Then the flying body of Bo Jonsson struck him.

Even in low-gee, matter has all its inertia. The impact rang and boomed within their armor, they swayed and fell to the ground, locking arms and hammering futilely at helmets. Rolling over, Bo got on top, his hands closed on Lundgard's throat—where the throat should have been, but plastic and alloy held fast; instinct had betrayed him.

Lundgard snarled, doubled his legs and kicked. Bo was sent staggering back. Lundgard crawled erect and turned to look for the rifle. Bo couldn't see it either in the near-solid blackness where no light fell, but his wrench lay as a dark gleam. He sprang for that, closed a hand on it, bounced up, and rushed at Lundgard. A swing shocked his own muscles with its force, and Lundgard lurched.

Bo moved in on him. Lundgard reached into his tool-tube and drew out his own wrench. He circled, his panting hoarse in Bo's earphones.

"This ... is the way ... it was supposed to be," said Bo.

He jumped in, his weapon whirling down to shiver again on the other helmet. Lundgard shook a dazed head and countered. The impact roared and echoed in Bo's helmet, on into his skull. He smashed heavily. Lundgard's lifted wrench parried the blow, it slid off. Like a fencer, Lundgard snaked his shaft in and the reverberations were deafening.

Bo braced himself and smote with all his power. The hit sang back through iron and alloy, into his own bones. Lundgard staggered a little, hunched himself and struck in return.

They stood with feet braced apart, trading fury, a metal rain on shivering plastic. The stuff was almost unbreakable, but not quite, not for long when such violence dinned on it. Bo felt a lifting wild glee, something savage he had never known before leaped up in him and he bellowed. He was stronger, he could hit harder. Lundgard's helmet would break first!

The Humanist retreated, using his wrench like a sword, stopping the force of blows without trying to deal more of his own. His left hand fumbled at his side. Bo hardly noticed. He was pushing in, hewing, hewing. Again the shrunken sun rose, to flash hard light off his club.

Lundgard grinned, his face barely visible as highlight and shadow behind the plastic. His raised tool turned one hit, it slipped along his arm to rap his

flank. Bo twisted his arm around, beat the other wrench aside for a moment, and landed a crack like a thunderbolt.

Then Lundgard had his drinking hose free, pointing in his left hand. He thumbed down the clamp, exposing water at fifty degrees to naked space.

It rushed forth, driven by its own vapor pressure, a stream like a lance in the wan sunshine. When it hit Bo's helmet, most of it boiled off... cooling the rest, which froze instantly.

Blindness clamped down on Bo. He leaped away, cursing, the front of his helmet so frosted he could not see before him. Lundgard bounced around, playing the hose on him. Through the rime-coat, Bo could make out only a grayness.

He pawed at it, trying to wipe it off, knowing that Lundgard was using this captured minute to look for the rifle. As he got some of the ice loose, he heard a sharp yell of victory—found!

Turning, he ran again.

Over that ridge! Down on your belly! A slug pocked the stone above him. Rolling over, he got to his feet and bounded off toward a steep rise, still wiping blindness off his helmet. But he could not wipe the bitter vomit taste of defeat out of his mouth.

His breathing was a file that raked in his throat. Heart and lungs were ready to tear loose, and there was a cold knot in his guts. Fleeing up the high, ragged slope, he sobbed out his rage at himself and his own stupidity.

At the top of the hill he threw himself to the ground and looked down again over a low wall of basalt. It was hard to see if anything moved down in that valley of night. Then the sun threw a broken gleam off polished metal, the rifle barrel, and he saw Einar Lundgard walking around, looking for him.

The voice came dim in his earphones. "Why don't you give up, Bo? I tell you, I don't want to kill you."

"Yeh." Bo panted wearily. "I'm sure."

"Well, you can never tell," said Lundgard mildly. "It would be rather a nuisance to have to keep not only the fair Valeria, but you, tied up all the way to base. Still, if you'll surrender by the time I've counted ten—"

"Look here," said Bo desperately, "I've got half the links. If you don't give up I'll hammer 'em all flat and let you starve."

"And Valeria?" The voice jeered at him. He knew his secret was read. "I shouldn't have let you bluff me in the first place. It won't happen a second

time. All right: one, two, three—”

Bo could get off this asteroid with no more than the power of his own legs; a few jets from the emergency blow valve at the bottom of an air tank would correct his flight as needed to bring him back to the *Sirius*. He wanted to get up there, and inside warm walls, and take Valeria in his hands and never let her go again. He wanted to live.

“—six, seven, eight—”

He looked at his gauges. A lot of oxy-helium mixture was gone from the tanks, but they were big and there was still several atmospheres’ pressure in each. A couple of hours’ life. If he didn’t exert himself too much. They screwed directly into valves in the back of his armor, and—

“—ten. All right, Bo.” Lundgard started moving up the slope, light and graceful as a bird. It was wide and open, no place to hide and sneak up behind him.

Figures reeled through Bo’s mind, senselessly. Mass of the asteroid, effective radius, escape velocity only a few feet per second, and he was already on one of the highest points. Brains! he thought with a shattering sorrow. A lot of good mine have done me!

He prepared to back down the other side of the hill, run as well as he could, as long as he could, until a bullet splashed his blood or suffocation thickened it. But I want to fight! he thought through a gulp of tears. I want to stand up and fight!

Orbital velocity equals escape velocity divided by the square root of two.

For a moment he lay there, rigid, and his eyes stared at death walking up the slope but did not see it.

Then, in a crazy blur of motion, he brought his wrench around, closed it on a nut at one side, and turned.

The right hand air tank unscrewed easily. He held it in his hands, a three foot cylinder, blind while calculation raced through his head. What would the centrifugal and Coriolis forces be? It was the roughest sort of estimate. He had neither time nor data, but—

Lundgard was taking it easy, stopping to examine each patch of shadow thrown by some gaunt crag, each meteor scar where a man might hide. It would take him several minutes to reach the hilltop.

Bo clutched the loosened tank in his arms, throwing one leg around it to make sure, and faced away from Lundgard. He hefted himself, as if his body were a machine he must use. Then, carefully, he jumped off the top of the hill.

It was birdlike, dreamlike, thus to soar noiseless over iron desolation. The sun fell behind him. A spearhead pinnacle clawed after his feet. The Southern Cross flamed in his eyes.

Downward—get rid of that downward component of velocity. He twisted the tank, pointing it toward the surface, and cautiously opened the blow valve with his free hand. Only a moment's exhaust, everything gauged by eye. Did he have an orbit now?

The ground dropped sharply off to infinity, and he saw stars under the keel of the world. He was still going out, away. Maybe he had miscalculated his jump, exceeded escape velocity after all, and was headed for a long cold spin toward Jupiter. It would take all his compressed air to correct such a mistake.

Sweat prickled in his armpits. He locked his teeth and refused to open the valve again.

It was like endless falling, but he couldn't yet be sure if the fall was toward the asteroid or the stars. The rock spun past him. Another face came into view. Yes, by all idiot gods, its gravity was pulling him around!

He skimmed low over the bleakness of it, seeing darkness and starlit death sliding beneath him. Another crag loomed suddenly in his path, and he wondered in a harsh clutch of fear if he was going to crash. Then it ghosted by, a foot from his flying body. He thought he could almost sense the chill of it.

He was a moon now, a satellite skimming low above the airless surface of his own midget world. The fracture plain where Lundgard had shot at him went by, and he braced himself. Up around the tiny planet, and there was the hill he had left, stark against Sagittarius. He saw Lundgard, standing on its heights and looking the way he had gone. Carefully, he aimed the tank and gave himself another small blast to correct his path. There was no noise to betray him, the asteroid was a grave where all sound was long buried and frozen.

He flattened, holding his body parallel to the tank in his arms. One hand still gripped the wrench, the other reached to open the blow valve wide.

The surge almost tore him loose. He had a careening lunatic moment of flight in which the roar of escaping gas boiled through his armor and he clung like a troll to a runaway witch's broom. The sun was blinding on one side of him.

He struck Lundgard with an impact of velocity and inertia which sent him spinning down the hill. Bo hit the ground, recoiled, and sprang after his enemy. Lundgard was still rolling. As Bo approached, he came to a halt, lifted his rifle dazedly, and had it knocked loose with a single blow of the wrench.

Lundgard crawled to his feet while Bo picked up the rifle and threw it off the asteroid. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know," said Bo. "I should just shoot you down, but I want you to surrender."

Lundgard drew his wrench. "No," he said.

"All right," said Bo. "It won't take long."

When he got up to the *Sirius*, using a tank Lundgard would never need, Valeria had armed herself with a kitchen knife. "It wouldn't have done much good," he said when he came through the airlock. She fell into his arms, sobbing, and he tried to comfort her. "It's all over. All taken care of. We can go home now."

He himself was badly in need of consolation. The inquiry on Earth would clear him, of course, but he would always have to live with the memory of a man stretched dead under a wintry sky. He went aft and replaced the links. When he came back, Valeria had recovered herself, but as she watched his methodical preparations and listened to what he had to tell, there was that in her eyes which he hardly dared believe.

Not him. Not a big dumb slob like him.

CATALYSIS

When you looked outside, it was into darkness.

Going out yourself, you could let your eyes accommodate. At high noon, the sun was a sharp spark in a dusky heaven, and its light amounted to about one-ninth of one percent of what Earth gets. The great fields of ice and frozen gases reflected enough to help vision, but upthrust crags and cliffs of naked rock were like blackened teeth.

Seventy hours later, when Triton was on the other side of the primary that it always faced, there was a midnight thick enough to choke you. The stars flashed and glittered, a steely twinkle through a gaunt atmosphere mostly hydrogen—strange, to see the old lost constellations of Earth, here on the edge of the deep. Neptune was at the full, a giant sprawling across eight degrees of sky, bluish gray and smoky banded, but it caught so little sunlight that men groped in blindness. They set up floodlights, or had lamps glaring from their tracs, to work at all.

But nearly everything went on indoors. Tunnels connected the various buildings on the Hill, instruments were of necessity designed to operate in the open without needing human care, men rarely had occasion to go out any more. Which was just as well, for it takes considerable power and insulation to keep a man alive when the temperature hovers around 60 degrees Kelvin.

And so you stood at a meter-thick port of insulglas, and looked out, and saw only night.

Thomas Gilchrist turned away from the view with a shudder. He had always hated cold, and it was as if the bitterness beyond the lab-dome had seeped in to touch him. The cluttered gleam of instruments in the room, desk piled high with papers and microspools, the subdued chatter of a computer chewing a problem, were comforting.

He remembered his purpose and went with a long low-gravity stride to check the mineralogical unit. It was busily breaking down materials fetched in by the robosamplers, stones never found on Earth—because Earth is not the Mercury-sized satellite of an outer planet, nor has it seen some mysterious catastrophe in an unknown time back near the beginning of things. Recording meters wavered needles across their dials, data tapes clicked out, he would soon have the basic information. Then he would try to figure out how the mineral could have been formed, and give his hypothesis to the computer for mathematical analysis of possibility, and start on some other sample.

For a while Gilchrist stood watching the machine. A cigarette smoldered forgotten between his fingers. He was a short, pudgy young man, with unkempt hair above homely features. Pale-blue eyes blinked nearsightedly behind contact lenses, his myopia was not enough to justify surgery. Tunic and slacks were rumpled beneath the gray smock.

Behold the bold pioneer! he thought. His self-deprecating sarcasm was mildly nonsane, he knew, but he couldn't stop—it was like biting an aching tooth. Only a dentist could fix the tooth in an hour, while a scarred soul took years to heal. It was like his eyes, the trouble wasn't bad enough to require long expensive repair, so he limped through life.

Rafael Alemán came in, small and dark and cheerful. "'Allo," he said. "How goes it?" He was one of the Hill's organic chemists, as Gilchrist was the chief physical chemist, but his researches into low-temperature properties were turning out so disappointingly that he had plenty of time to annoy others. Nevertheless, Gilchrist liked him, as he liked most people.

"So-so. It takes time."

"Time we have enough of, *mi amigo*," said Alemán. "Two years we 'ave been here, and three years more it will be before the ship comes to relieve us." He grimaced. "Ah, when I am back to Durango Unit, how fast my savings will disappear!"

"You didn't have to join the Corps, and you didn't have to volunteer for Triton Station," Gilchrist pointed out.

The little man shrugged, spreading slender hands. "Confidential, I will tell you. I had heard such colorful tales of outpost life. But the only result is that I am now a married man—not that I have anything but praise for my dear Mei-Hua, but it is not the abandonment one had hoped for."

Gilchrist chuckled. Outer-planet stations did have a slightly lurid reputation, and no doubt it had been justified several years ago.

After all—The voyage was so long and costly that it could not be made often. You established a self-sufficient colony of scientists and left it there to carry on its researches for years at a time. But self-sufficiency includes psychic elements, recreation, alcohol, entertainment, the opposite sex. A returning party always took several children home.

Scientists tended to be more objective about morals, or at least more tolerant of the other fellow's, than most; so when a hundred or so people were completely isolated, and ordinary amusements had palled, it followed that there would be a good deal of what some would call sin.

"Not Triton," said Gilchrist. "You forget that there's been another cultural shift in the past generation—more emphasis on the stable family. And I imagine the Old Man picked his gang with an eye to such attitudes. Result—the would-be rounders find themselves so small a minority that it has a dampening effect."

"Sí. I know. But you 'ave never told me your real reason for coming here, Thomas."

Gilchrist felt his face grow warm. "Research," he answered shortly. "There are a lot of interesting problems connected with Neptune."

Alemán cocked a mildly skeptical eyebrow but said nothing. Gilchrist wondered how much he guessed.

That was the trouble with being shy. In your youth, you acquired bookish tastes; only a similarly oriented wife would do for you, so you didn't meet many women and didn't know how to behave with them anyhow. Gilchrist, who was honest with himself, admitted he'd had wistful thoughts about encountering the right girl here, under informal conditions where—

He had. And he was still helpless.

Suddenly he grinned. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I also came because I don't like cold weather."

"Came to *Neptune*?"

"Sure. On Earth, you can stand even a winter day, so you have to. Here, since the local climate would kill you in a second or two, you're always well protected from it." Gilchrist waved at the viewport. "Only I wish they didn't have that bloody window in my lab. Every time I look out, it reminds me that just beyond the wall nitrogen is a solid."

“Yo comprendo,” said Alemán. “The power of suggestion. Even now, at your words, I feel a chill.”

Gilchrist started with surprise. “You know, somehow I have the same—Just a minute.” He went over to a workbench. His inframicroscope had an air thermometer attached to make temperature corrections.

“What the devil,” he muttered. “It *is* cooled off. Only 18 degrees in here. It’s supposed to be 21.”

“Some fluctuation, in temperature as in ozone content and humidity,” reminded Alemán. “That is required for optimum health.”

“Not this time of day, it shouldn’t be varying.” Gilchrist was reminded of his cigarette as it nearly burned his fingers. He stubbed it out and took another and inhaled to light it.

“I’m going to raise Jahangir and complain,” he said. “This could play merry hell with exact measurements.”

Alemán trotted after him as he went to the door. It was manually operated, and the intercoms were at particular points instead of every room. You had to forego a number of Earthside comforts here.

There was a murmuring around him as he hurried down the corridor. Some doors stood open, showing the various chemical and biological sections. The physicists had their own dome, on the other side of the Hill, and even so were apt to curse the stray fields generated here. If they had come this far to get away from solar radiations, it was only reasonable, as anyone but a chemist could see, that—

The screen stood at the end of the hall, next to the tunnel stairs. Gilchrist checked himself and stood with a swift wild pulse in his throat. Catherine Bardas was using it.

He had often thought that the modern fashion of outbreeding yielded humans more handsome than any pure racial type could be. When a girl was half Greek and half Amerind, and a gifted biosynthesizer on top of it, a man like him could only stare.

Mohammed Jahangir’s brown, bearded face registered more annoyance than admiration as he spoke out of the screen. “Yes. Dr. Bardas,” he said with strained courtesy. “I know. My office is being swamped with complaints.”

“Well, what’s the trouble?” asked the girl. Her voice was low and gentle, even at this moment.

“I’m not sure,” said the engineer. “The domes’ temperature is dropping, that’s all. We haven’t located the trouble yet, but it can’t be serious.”

“All I’m asking,” said Catherine Bardas patiently, “is how much longer this will go on and how much lower it’s going to get. I’m trying to synthesize a cell, and it takes precisely controlled conditions. If the air temperature drops another five degrees, my thermostat won’t be able to compensate.”

“Oh, well . . . I’m sure you can count on repair being complete before that happens.”

“All right,” said Catherine sweetly. “If not, though, I’ll personally bung you out the main airlock *sans* spacesuit.”

Jahangir laughed and cut off. The light of fluorotubes slid blue-black off the girl’s shoulder-length hair as she turned around. Her face was smooth and dark, with high cheekbones and a lovely molding of lips and nose and chin.

“Oh—hello, Tom,” she smiled. “All through here.”

“Th-th-th—Never mind,” he fumbled. “I was only g-going to ask about it myself.”

“Well—” She yawned and stretched with breathtaking effect. “I suppose I’d better get back and—”

“Ah, why so, señorita?” replied Alemán. “If the work does not need your personal attention just now, come join me in a leetle drink. It is near dinnertime anyhow.”

“All right,” she said. “How about you, Tom?”

He merely nodded, for fear of stuttering, and accompanied them down the stairs and into the tunnel. Half of him raged at his own timidity—why hadn’t he made that suggestion?

The passages connecting the domes were all alike, straight featureless holes lined with plastic. Behind lay insulation and the pipes of the common heating system, then more insulation, finally the Hill itself. That was mostly porous iron, surprisingly pure though it held small amounts of potassium and aluminum oxides. The entire place was a spongy ferrous outcropping. But then, Triton was full of geological freaks.

“How goes your work?” asked Alemán sociably.

“Oh, pretty well,” said Catherine. “I suppose you know we’ve synthesized virus which can live outside. Now we’re trying to build bacteria to do the same.”

On a professional level, Gilchrist was not a bad conversationalist. His trouble was that not everyone likes to talk shop all the time. “Is there any purpose in that, other than pure research to see if you can do it?” he inquired. “I can’t imagine any attempt ever being made to colonize this moon.”

“Well, you never know,” she answered. “If there’s ever any reason for it, oxide-reducing germs will be needed.”

“As well as a nuclear heating system for the whole world, and—What do your life forms use for energy, though? Hardly enough sunlight, I should think.”

“Oh, but there is, for the right biochemistry with the right catalysts— analogous to our own enzymes. It makes a pretty feeble type of life, of course, but I hope to get bacteria which can live off the local ores and frozen gases by exothermic reactions. Don’t forget, when it’s really cold a thermal engine can have a very high efficiency; and all living organisms are thermal engines of a sort.”

They took the stairs leading up into the main dome: apartments, refectories, social centers, and offices. Another stair led downward to the central heating plant in the body of the Hill. Gilchrist saw an engineer going that way with a metering kit and a worried look.

The bar was crowded, this was cocktail hour for the swing shift and— popular opinion to the contrary—a scientist likes his meals regular and only lives off sandwiches brought to the lab when he must. They found a table and sat down. Nobody had installed dial units, so junior technicians earned extra money as waiters. One of them took their orders and chits.

The ventilators struggled gallantly with the smoke. It hazed the murals with which some homesick soul had tried to remember the green Earth. A couple of astronomers at the next table were noisily disputing theories.

“—Dammit, Pluto’s got to be an escaped satellite of Neptune. Look at their orbits ... and Pluto is where Neptune should be according to Bode’s Law.”

“I know. I’ve heard that song before. I suppose you favor the Invader theory?”

“What else will account for the facts? A big planet comes wandering in, yanks Neptune sunward and frees Pluto; but Neptune captures a satellite of the Invader. Triton’s got to be a captured body, with this screwy retrograde orbit. And Nereid—”

“Have you ever analyzed the mechanics of that implausible proposition? Look here—” A pencil came out and began scribbling on the long-suffering table top.

Catherine chuckled. “I wonder if we’ll ever find out,” she murmured.

Gilchrist rubbed chilled fingers together. Blast it, the air was still cooling off! “It’d be interesting to land a ship on Nep himself and check the geology,” he said. “A catastrophe like that would leave traces.”

“When they can build a ship capable of landing on a major planet without being squeezed flat by the air pressure, that’ll be the day. I think we’ll have to settle for telescopes and spectroscopes for a long, long time to come—”

The girl’s voice trailed off, and her dark fine head poised. The loudspeaker was like thunder.

“DR. VESEY! DR. VESEY! PLEASE CONTACT ENGINEERING OFFICE!
DR. VESEY, PLEASE CONTACT DR. JAHANGIR! OVER.”

For a moment, there was silence in the bar.

“I wonder what the trouble is,” said Alemán.

“Something to do with the heating plant, I suppose—” Again Catherine’s tones died, and they stared at each other.

The station was a magnificent machine; it represented an engineering achievement which would have been impossible even fifty years ago. It kept a hundred human creatures warm and moist, it replenished their air and synthesized their food and raised a wall of light against darkness. But it had not the equipment to call across nearly four and a half billion kilometers of vacuum. It had no ship of its own, and the great Corps vessel would not be back for three years.

It was a long way to Earth.

Dinner was a silent affair that period. There were a few low-voiced exchanges, but they only seemed to deepen the waiting stillness.

And the cold grew apace. You could see your breath, and your thin garments were of little help.

The meal was over, and the groups of friends were beginning to drift out of the refectory, when the intercoms woke up again. This chamber had a vision screen. Not an eye stirred from Director Samuel Vesey as he looked out of it.

His lips were firm and his voice steady, but there was a gleam of sweat on the ebony skin—despite the cold. He stared directly before him and spoke:

“Attention, all personnel. Emergency situation. Your attention, please.”

After a moment, he seemed to relax formality and spoke as if face to face. “You’ve all noticed our trouble. Something has gone wrong with the heating plant, and Dr. Jahangir’s crew haven’t located the trouble so far.

“Now there’s no reason for panic. The extrapolated curve of temperature decline indicates that, at worst, it’ll level off at about zero Centigrade. That won’t be fun, but we can stand it till the difficulty has been found. Everyone is advised to dress as warmly as possible. Food and air plant crews are going on emergency status. All projects requiring energy sources are cancelled till further notice.

“According to the meters, there’s nothing wrong with the pile. It’s still putting out as much heat as it always has. But somehow, that heat isn’t getting to us as it should. The engineers are checking the pipes now.

“I’ll have a stat of the findings made up and issued. Suggestions are welcome, but please take them to my office—the engineers have their own work to do. Above all, don’t panic! This is a nuisance, I know, but there’s no reason to be afraid.

“All personnel not needed at once, stand by. The following specialists please report to me—”

He read off the list, all physicists, and closed his talk with a forced grin and thumbs up.

As if it had broken a dam, the message released a babble of words. Gilchrist saw Catherine striding out of the room and hastened after her.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Where do you think?” she replied. “To put on six layers of clothes.”

He nodded. “Best thing. I’ll come along, if I may—my room’s near yours.”

A woman, still in her smock, was trying to comfort a child that shivered and cried. A Malayan geologist stood with teeth clattering in his jaws. An engineer snarled when someone tried to question him and ran on down the corridor.

“What do you think?” asked Gilchrist inanely.

“I don’t have any thoughts about the heating plant,” said Catherine. Her voice held a thin edge. “I’m too busy worrying about food and air.”

Gilchrist's tongue was thick and dry in his mouth. The biochemistry of food creation and oxygen renewal died when it got even chilly.

Finished dressing, they looked at each other in helplessness. Now what?

The temperature approached its minimum in a nosedive. There had always been a delicate equilibrium; it couldn't be otherwise, when the interior of the domes was kept at nearly 240 degrees above the surrounding world. The nuclear pile devoted most of its output to maintaining that balance, with only a fraction going to the electric generators.

Gilchrist thrust hands which were mottled blue with cold into his pockets. Breath smoked white before him. Already a thin layer of hoarfrost was on ceiling and furniture.

"How long can we stand this?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Catherine. "Not too long, I should think, since nobody has adequate clothes. The children should... suffer... pretty quickly. Too much drain on body energy." She clamped her lips together. "Use your mental training. You can ignore this till it begins actually breaking down your physique."

Gilchrist made an effort, but couldn't do it. He could stop shivering, but the chill dank on his skin, and the cold sucked in by his nose, were still there in his consciousness, like a nightmare riding him.

"They'll be dehumidifying the air," said Catherine. "That'll help some." She began walking down the hall. "I want to see what they're doing about the food and oxy sections."

A small mob had had the same idea. It swirled and mumbled in the hall outside the service rooms. A pair of hard-looking young engineers armed with monkey wrenches stood guard.

Catherine wormed her way through the crowd and smiled at them. Their exasperation dissolved, and one of them, a thickset redhead by the name of O'Mallory, actually grinned. Gilchrist, standing moodily behind the girl, could hardly blame him.

"How's it going in there?" she asked.

"Well, now, I suppose the Old Man *is* being sort of slow about his bulletins," said O'Mallory. "It's under control here."

"But what are they doing?"

“Rigging electric heaters, of course. It’ll take all the juice we have to maintain these rooms at the right temperature, so I’m afraid they’ll be cutting off light and power to the rest of the Hill.”

She frowned. “It’s the only thing, I suppose. But what about the people?”

“They’ll have to jam together in the refectories and clubrooms. That’ll help keep ’em warm.”

“Any idea what the trouble is?”

O’Mallory scowled. “We’ll get it fixed,” he said.

“That means you don’t know.” She spoke it calmly.

“The pile’s all right,” he said. “We telemetered it. I’d’a done that myself, but you know how it is—” He puffed himself up a trifle. “They need a couple husky chaps to keep the crowd orderly. Anyhow, the pile’s still putting out just as it should, still at 500 degrees like it ought to be. In fact, it’s even a bit warmer than that; why, I don’t know.”

Gilchrist cleared his throat. “Th-th-then the trouble is with the ... heating pipes,” he faltered.

“How did you ever guess?” asked O’Mallory with elaborate sarcasm.

“Lay off him,” said Catherine. “We’re all having a tough time.”

Gilchrist bit his lip. It wasn’t enough to be a tongue-tied idiot, he seemed to need a woman’s protection.

“Trouble is, of course,” said O’Mallory, “the pipes are buried in insulation, behind good solid plastic. They’ll be hard to get at.”

“Whoever designed this farce ought to have to live in it,” said his companion savagely.

“The same design’s worked on Titan with no trouble at all,” declared O’Mallory.

Catherine’s face took on a grimness. “There never was much point in making these outer-planet domes capable of quick repair,” she said. “If something goes wrong, the personnel are likely to be dead before they can fix it.”

“Now, now, that’s no way to talk,” smiled O’Mallory. “Look, I get off duty at 0800. Care to have a drink with me then?”

Catherine smiled back. “If the bar’s operating, sure.”

Gilchrist wandered numbly after her as she left.

The cold gnawed at him. He rubbed his ears, unsure about frostbite. Odd how fast you got tired—It was hard to think.

“I’d better get back to my lab and put things away before they turn off the electricity to it,” he said.

“Good idea. Might as well tidy up in my own place.” Something flickered darkly in the girl’s eyes. “It’ll take our minds off—”

Off gloom, and cold, and the domes turned to blocks of ice, and a final night gaping before all men. Off the chasm of loneliness between the Hill and the Earth.

They were back in the chemical section when Alemán came out of his lab. The little man’s olive skin had turned a dirty gray.

“What is it?” Gilchrist stopped, and something knotted hard in his guts.

“*Madre de Díos*—” Alemán licked sandy lips. “We are finished.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Catherine.

“You do not understand!” he shrieked. “Come here!”

They followed him into his laboratory. He mumbled words about having checked a hunch, but it was his hands they watched. Those picked up a Geiger counter and brought it over to a wall and traced the path of a buried heating pipe.

The clicking roared out.

“Beta emission,” said Gilchrist. His mouth felt cottony.

“How intense?” whispered Catherine.

Gilchrist set up an integrating counter and let it run for a while. “Low,” he said. “But the dosage is cumulative. A week of this, and we’ll begin to show the effects. A month, and we’re dead.”

“There’s always some small beta emission from the pipes,” said the girl. “A little tritium gets formed down in the pile room. It’s... never been enough to matter.”

“Somehow, the pile’s beginning to make more H-3, then.” Gilchrist sat down on a bench and stared blankly at the floor.

“The laws of nature—” Alemán had calmed down a bit, but his eyes were rimmed with white.

“Yes?” asked Catherine when he stopped. She spoke mostly to fend off the silence.

“I ’ave sometimes thought... what we know in science is so leetle. It may be the whole universe, it has been in a... a most improbable state for the

past few billion years.” Alemán met her gaze as if pleading to be called a liar. “It may be that what we thought to be the laws of nature, those were only a leetle statistical fluctuation.”

“And now we’re going back onto the probability curve?” muttered Gilchrist. He shook himself. “No, damn it. I won’t accept that till I must. There’s got to be some rational explanation.”

“Leakage in the pipes?” ventured Catherine.

“We’d know that. Nor does it account for the radiation. No, it’s—” His voice twisted up on him, and he groped out a cigarette. “It’s something natural.”

“What is natural?” said Alemán. “How do we know, leetle creeping things as we are, living only by the grace of God? We ’ave come one long way from home.” His vision strayed to the viewport with a kind of horror.

Yes, thought Gilchrist in the chilled darkness of his mind, yes, we have come far. Four and a half billion kilometers further out from the sun. The planet-sized moon of a world which could swallow ours whole without noticing. A thin hydrogen atmosphere, glaciers of nitrogen which turn to rivers when it warms up, ammonia snow, and a temperature not far above absolute zero. What do we know? What is this arrogance of ours which insists that the truth on Earth is also the truth on the rim of space?

No!

He stood up, shuddering with cold, and said slowly: “We’d better go see Dr. Vesey. He has to know, and maybe they haven’t thought to check the radiation. And then—”

Catherine stood waiting.

“Then we have to think our way out of this mess,” he finished lamely. “Let’s, uh, start from the beginning. Think back how th-th-the heating plant works.”

Down in the bowels of the Hill was a great man-made cave. It had been carved out of the native iron, with rough pillars left to support the roof; walls and ceiling were lined with impermeable metal, but the floor was in its native state—who cared if there was seepage downward?

The pile sat there, heart and life of the station.

It was not a big one, just sufficient to maintain man on Triton. Part of its energy was diverted to the mercury-vapor turbines which furnished electricity. The rest went to heat the domes above.

Now travel across trans-Jovian spaces is long and costly; even the smallest saving means much. Very heavy insulation against the haze of neutrons which the pile emitted could scarcely be hauled from Earth, nor had there been any reason to spend time and labor manufacturing it on Triton.

Instead, pumps sucked in the hydrogen air and compressed it to about 600 atmospheres. There is no better shield against high-energy neutrons; they bounce off the light molecules and slow down to a speed which makes them perfectly harmless laggards which don't travel far before decaying into hydrogen themselves. This, as well as the direct radiation of the pile, turned the room hot—some 500 degrees.

So what was more natural than that the same hydrogen should be circulated through pipes of chrome-vanadium steel, which is relatively impenetrable even at such temperatures, and heat the domes?

There was, of course, considerable loss of energy as the compressed gas seeped through the Hill and back into the satellite's atmosphere. But the pumps maintained the pressure. It was not the most efficient system which could have been devised; it would have been ludicrous on Earth. But on Triton, terminal of nowhere, men had necessarily sacrificed some engineering excellence to the stiff requirements of transportation and labor.

And after all, it had worked without a hitch for many years on Saturn's largest moon. It had worked for two years on Neptune's—

Samuel Vesey drummed on his desk with nervous fingers. His dark countenance was already haggard, the eyes sunken and feverish.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it was news to me."

Jahangir put down the counter. The office was very quiet for a while.

"Don't spread the word," said Vesey. "We'll confine it to the engineers. Conditions are bad enough without a riot breaking loose. We can take several days of this radiation without harm, but you know how some people are about it."

“You’ve not been very candid so far,” snapped Catherine. “Just exactly what have you learned?”

Jahangir shrugged. There was a white frost rimming his beard. “There’ve been no bulletins because there’s no news,” he replied. “We checked the pile. It’s still putting out as it should. The neutron flux density is the same as ever. It’s the gas there and in our pipes which has gotten cold and... radioactive.”

“Have you looked directly in the pile room—actually entered?” demanded Alemán.

Jahangir lifted his shoulders again. “My dear old chap,” he murmured. “At a temperature of 500 and a pressure of 600?” After a moment, he frowned. “I do have some men modifying a trac so it could be driven in there for a short time. But I don’t expect to find anything. It’s mostly to keep them busy.”

“How about the pipes, then?” asked Gilchrist.

“Internal gas pressure and velocity of circulation is just about what it always has been. According to the meters, anyway, which I don’t think are lying. I don’t want to block off a section and rip it out except as a last resort. It would just be wasted effort, I’m sure.” Jahangir shook his turbanned head. “No, this is some phenomenon which we’ll have to think our way through, not bull through.”

Vesey nodded curtly. “I suggest you three go back to the common rooms,” he said. “We’ll be shunting all the power to food and oxy soon. If you have any further suggestions, pass them on... otherwise, sit tight.”

It was dismissal.

The rooms stank.

Some ninety human beings were jammed together in three long chambers and an adjacent kitchen. The ventilators could not quite handle that load.

They stood huddled together, children to the inside, while those on the rim of the pack hugged their shoulders and clenched teeth between blue lips. Little was said. So far there was calm of a sort—enough personnel had had intensive mind training to be a steadying influence; but it was a thin membrane stretched near breaking.

As he came in, Gilchrist thought of a scene from Dante's hell. Somewhere in that dense mass, a child was sobbing. The lights were dim—he wondered why—and distorted faces were whittled out of thick shadow.

"G-g-get inside... in front of me," he said to Catherine.

"I'll be all right," answered the girl. "It's a fact that women can stand cold better than men."

Alemán chuckled thinly. "But our Thomas is well padded against it," he said.

Gilchrist winced. He himself made jokes about his figure, but it was a cover-up. Then he wondered why he should care; they'd all be dead anyway, before long.

A colleague, Danton, turned empty eyes on them as they joined the rest. "Any word?" he asked.

"They're working on it," said Catherine shortly.

"God! Won't they hurry up? I've got a wife and kid. And we can't even sleep, it's so cold."

Yes, thought Gilchrist, that would be another angle. Weariness to eat away strength and hope... radiation would work fast on people in a depressed state.

"They could at least give us a heater in here!" exclaimed Danton. His tone was raw. Shadows muffled his face and body.

"All the juice we can spare is going to the food and air plants. No use being warm if you starve or suffocate," said Catherine.

"I know, I know. But—Well, why aren't we getting more light? There ought to be enough current to heat the plants and still furnish a decent glow in here."

"Something else—" Gilchrist hesitated. "Something else is operating, then, and sucking a lot of power. I don't know what."

"They say the pile itself is as hot as ever. Why can't we run a pipe directly from it?"

"And get a mess of fast neutrons?" Catherine's voice died. After all... they were being irradiated as they stood here and trembled.

"We've got batteries!" It was almost a snarl from Danton's throat. "Batteries enough to keep us going comfortably for days. Why not use them?"

"And suppose the trouble hasn't been fixed by the time they're drained?" challenged Gilchrist.

“Don’t say that!”

“Take it easy,” advised another man.

Danton bit his lip and faced away, mumbling to himself.

A baby began to cry. There seemed no way of quieting it.

“Turn that bloody brat off!” The tone came saw-toothed from somewhere in the pack.

“Shut up!” A woman’s voice, close to hysteria.

Gilchrist realized that his teeth were rattling. He forced them to stop. The air was foul in his nostrils.

He thought of beaches under a flooding sun, of summer meadows and a long sweaty walk down dusty roads, he thought of birds and blue sky. But it was no good. None of it was real.

The reality was here, just beyond the walls, where Neptune hung ashen above glittering snow that was not snow, where a thin poisonous wind whimpered between barren snags, where the dark and the cold flowed triumphantly close. The reality would be a block of solid gas, a hundred human corpses locked in it like flies in amber, it would be death and the end of all things.

He spoke slowly, through numbed lips: “Why has man always supposed that God cared?”

“We don’t know if He does or not,” said Catherine. “But man cares, isn’t that enough?”

“Not when the next nearest man is so far away,” said Alemán, trying to smile. “I will believe in God; man is too small.”

Danton turned around again. “Then why won’t He help us now?” he cried. “Why won’t He at least save the children?”

“I said God cared,” answered Alemán quietly, “not that He will do our work for us.”

“Stow the theology, you two,” said Catherine. “We’re going to pieces in here. Can’t somebody start a song?”

Alemán nodded. “Who has a guitar?” When there was no response, he began singing a capella:

*La cucaracha, la cucaracha,
Ya no quiere caminar—*

Voices joined in, self-consciously. They found themselves too few, and the song died.

Catherine rubbed her fingers together. “Even my pockets are cold now,” she said wryly.

Gilchrist surprised himself; he took her hands in his. “That may help,” he said.

“Why, thank you, Sir Galahad,” she laughed. “You—Oh. Hey, there!”

O’Mallory, off guard detail now that everyone was assembled here, came over. He looked even bulkier than before in half a dozen layers of clothing. Gilchrist, who had been prepared to stand impotently in the background while the engineer distributed blarney, was almost relieved to see the fear on him. *He* knew!

“Any word?” asked Catherine.

“Not yet,” he muttered.

“Why ’ave we so leetle light?” inquired Alemán. “What is it that draws the current so much? Surely not the heaters.”

“No. It’s the pump. The air-intake pump down in the pile room.”

O’Mallory’s voice grew higher. “It’s working overtime, sucking in more hydrogen. Don’t ask me why! I don’t know! Nobody does!”

“Wait,” said Catherine eagerly. “If the room’s losing its warm gas, and having to replace it from the cold stuff outside, would that account for the trouble we’re having?”

“No,” said O’Mallory dully. “We can’t figure out where the hydrogen’s disappearing to, and anyway it shouldn’t make that much difference. The energy output down there’s about what it’s supposed to be, you know.”

Gilchrist stood trying to think. His brain felt gelid.

But damn it, damn it, damn it, there must be a rational answer. He couldn’t believe they had blundered into an ugly unknown facet of the cosmos. Natural law was the same, here or in the farthest galaxy—it had to be.

Item, he thought wearily. The pile was operating as usual, except that somehow hydrogen was being lost abnormally fast and therefore the pump had to bring in more from Triton’s air. But—

—Item. That couldn’t be due to a leak in the heating pipes, because they were still at their ordinary pressure.

—Item. The gas in the pipes included some radioactive isotope. Nevertheless—

—Item. It could not be hydrogen-3, because the pile was working normally and its neutron leakage just wasn't enough to produce that much. Therefore, some other element was involved.

Carbon? There was a little methane vapor in Triton's atmosphere. But not enough. Anyway, carbon-13 was a stable isotope, and the pile-room conditions wouldn't produce carbon-14. Unless—

Wait a minute! Something flickered on the edge of awareness.

Danton had buttonholed O'Mallory. "We were talking about using the battery banks," he said.

The engineer shrugged. "And what happens after they're used up? No, we're keeping them as a last resort." His grin was hideous. "We could get six or seven comfortable days out of them."

"Then let's have them! If you thumb-fingered idiots haven't fixed the system by then, you deserve to die."

"And you'll die right along with us, laddybuck." O'Mallory bristled. "Don't think the black gang's loafing. We're taking the cold and the radiation as much as you are—"

"Radiation?"

Faces turned around. Gilchrist saw eyes gleam white. The word rose in a roar, and a woman screamed.

"Shut up!" bawled O'Mallory frantically. "Shut up!"

Danton shouted and swung at him. The engineer shook his head and hit back. As Danton lurched, a man rabbit-punched O'Mallory from behind.

Gilchrist yanked Catherine away. The mob spilled over, a sudden storm. He heard a table splinter.

Someone leaped at him. He had been an educated man, a most scientific and urbane man, but he had just been told that hard radiation was pouring through his body and he ran about and howled. Gilchrist had a glimpse of an unshaven face drawn into a long thin box with terror, then he hit. The man came on, ignoring blows, his own fists windmilling. Gilchrist lowered his head and tried clumsily to take the fury on his arms. Catherine, he thought dizzily, Catherine was at least behind him.

The man yelled. He sat down hard and gripped his stomach, retching. Alemán laughed shortly. "A good kick is advisable in such unsporting circumstances, *mi amigo*."

"Come on," gasped Catherine. "We've got to get help."

They fled down a tunnel of blackness. The riot noise faded behind, and there was only the hollow slapping of their feet.

Lights burned ahead, Vesey's office. A pair of engineer guards tried to halt them. Gilchrist choked out an explanation.

Vesey emerged and swore luridly, out of hurt and bewilderment at his own people. "And we haven't a tear gas bomb or a needler in the place!" He brooded a moment, then whirled on Jahangir, who had come out behind him. "Get a tank of compressed ammonia gas from the chem section and give 'em a few squirts if they're still kicking up when you arrive. That ought to quiet them without doing any permanent damage."

The chief nodded and bounded off with his subordinates. In this gravity, one man could carry a good-sized tank.

Vesey beat a fist into his palm. There was agony on his face.

Catherine laid a hand on his arm. "You've no choice," she said gently. "Ammonia is rough stuff, but it would be worse if children started getting trampled."

Gilchrist, leaning against the wall, straightened. It was as if a bolt had snapped home within him. His shout hurt their eardrums.

"*Ammonia!*"

"Yes," said Vesey dully. "What about it?" Breath smoked from his mouth, and his skin was rough with gooseflesh.

"I—I—I—It's your ... y-y-your *answer!*"

They had set up a heater in his laboratory so he could work, but the test was quickly made. Gilchrist turned from his apparatus and nodded, grinning with victory. "That settles the matter. This sample from the pile room proves it. The air down there is about half ammonia."

Vesey looked red-eyed at him. There hadn't been much harm done in the riot, but there had been a bad few minutes. "How's it work?" he asked. "I'm no chemist."

Alemán opened his mouth, then bowed grandly. "You tell him, Thomas. It is your moment."

Gilchrist took out a cigarette. He would have liked to make a cavalier performance of it, with Catherine watching, but his chilled fingers were clumsy and he dropped the little cylinder. She laughed and picked it up for him.

“Simple,” he said. With technicalities to discuss, he could speak well enough, even when his eyes kept straying to the girl. “What we have down there is a Haber process chamber. It’s a method for manufacturing ammonia out of nitrogen and hydrogen—obsolete now, but still of interest to physical chemists like myself.

“I haven’t tested this sample for nitrogen yet, but there’s got to be some, because ammonia is NH_3 . Obviously, there’s a vein of solid nitrogen down under the Hill. As the heat from the pile room penetrated downward, this slowly warmed up. Some of it turned gaseous, generating terrific pressure; and finally that pressure forced the gas up into the pile room.

“Now, when you have a nitrogen-hydrogen mixture at 500 degrees and 600 atmospheres, in the presence of a suitable catalyst, you get about a 45 percent yield of ammonia—”

“You looked that up,” said Catherine accusingly.

He chuckled. “My dear girl,” he said, “there are two ways to know a thing: you can know it, or you can know where to look it up. I prefer the latter.” After a moment: “Naturally, this combination decreases the total volume of gas; so the pump has to pull in more hydrogen from outside to satisfy its barostat, and more nitrogen is welling from below all the time. We’ve been operating quite an efficient little ammonia factory down there, though it should reach equilibrium as to pressure and yield pretty soon.

“The Haber process catalyst, incidentally, is spongy iron with certain promoters—potassium and aluminum oxides are excellent ones. In other words, it so happened that the Hill is a natural Haber catalyst, which is why we’ve had this trouble.”

“And I suppose the reaction is endothermic and absorbs heat?” asked Catherine.

“No... as a matter of fact, it’s exothermic, which is why the pile is actually a little hotter than usual, and that in spite of having to warm up all that outside air. But ammonia does have a considerably higher specific heat than hydrogen. So, while the gas in our pipes has the same caloric content, it has a lower temperature.”

“Ummm—” Vesey rubbed his chin. “And the radiation?”

“Nitrogen plus neutrons gives carbon-14, a beta emitter.”

“All right,” said Catherine. “Now tell us how to repair the situation.”

Her tone was light—after all, the answer was obvious—but it didn’t escape Gilchrist that she *had* asked him to speak. Or was he thinking wishfully?

“We turn off the pile, empty the pipes, and go into the room in spacesuits,” he said. “Probably the simplest thing would be to drill an outlet for the nitrogen vein and drop a thermite bomb down there... that should flush it out in a hurry. Or maybe we can lay an impermeable floor. In any event, it shouldn’t take more than a few days, which the batteries will see us through. Then we can go back to operation as usual.”

Vesey nodded. “I’ll put Jahangir on it right away.” He stood up and extended his hand. “As for you, Dr. Gilchrist, you’ve saved all our lives and—”

“Shucks.” His cheeks felt hot. “It was my own neck too.”

Before his self-confidence could evaporate, he turned to Catherine. “Since we can’t get back to work for a few days, how about going down to the bar for a drink? I believe it’ll soon be functioning again. And, uh, there’ll doubtless be a dance to celebrate later—”

“I didn’t know you could dance,” she said.

“I can’t,” he blurted.

They went out together. It is not merely inorganic reactions which require a catalyst.

WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT?

“The chickens got out of the coop and flew away three hundred years ago,” said Barwell. “Now they’re coming home to roost.”

He hiccuped. His finger wobbled to the dial and clicked off another whisky. The machine pondered the matter and flashed an apologetic sign: *Please deposit your money.*

“Oh, damn,” said Barwell. “I’m broke.”

Radek shrugged and gave the slot a two-credit piece. It slid the whisky out on a tray with his change. He stuck the coins in his pouch and took another careful sip of beer.

Barwell grabbed the whisky glass like a drowning man. He *would* drown, thought Radek, if he sloshed much more into his stomach.

There was an Asian whine to the music drifting past the curtains into the booth. Radek could hear the talk and laughter well enough to catch their raucous overtones. Somebody swore as dice rattled wrong for him. Somebody else shouted coarse good wishes as his friend took a hostess upstairs.

He wondered why vice was always so cheerless when you went into a place and paid for it.

“I am going to get drunk tonight,” announced Barwell. “I am going to get so high in the stony sky you’ll need radar to find me. Then I shall raise the red flag of revolution.”

“And tomorrow?” asked Radek quietly.

Barwell grimaced. “Don’t ask me about tomorrow. Tomorrow I will be among the great leisure class—to hell with euphemisms—the unemployed. Nothing I can do that some goddam machine can’t do quicker and better. So a benevolent state will feed me and clothe me and house me and give me a little spending money to have fun on. This is known as citizen’s credit.

They used to call it a dole. Tomorrow I shall have to be more systematic about the revolution—join the League or something.”

“The trouble with you,” Radek needled him, “is that you can’t adapt. Technology has made the labor of most people, except the first-rank creative genius, unnecessary. This leaves the majority with a void of years to fill somehow—a sense of uprootedness and lost self-respect—which is rather horrible. And in any case, they don’t like to think in scientific terms... it doesn’t come natural to the average man.”

Barwell gave him a bleary stare out of a flushed, sagging face. “I s’pose you’re one of the geniuses,” he said. “You got work.”

“I’m adaptable,” said Radek. He was a slim youngish man with dark hair and sharp features. “I’m not greatly gifted, but I found a niche for myself. Newsmen. I do legwork for a major commentator. Between times, I’m writing a book—my own analysis of contemporary historical trends. It won’t be anything startling, but it may help a few people think more clearly and adjust themselves.”

“And so you *like* this rotten Solar Union?” Barwell’s tone became aggressive.

“Not everything about it no. So there is a wave of antiscientific reaction, all over Earth. Science is being made the scapegoat for all our troubles. But like it or not, you fellows will have to accept the fact that there are too many people and too few resources for us to survive without technology.”

“Some technology, sure,” admitted Barwell. He took a ferocious swig from his glass. “Not this hell-born stuff we’ve been monkeying around with. I tell you, the chickens have finally come home to roost.”

Radek was intrigued by the archaic expression. Barwell was no moron: he’d been a correlative clerk at the Institute for several years, not a position for fools. He had read, actually read books, and thought about them.

And today he had been fired. Radek chanced across him drinking out a vast resentment and attached himself like a reverse lamprey—buying most of the liquor. There might be a story in it, somewhere. There might be a lead to what the Institute was doing.

Radek was not antiscientific, but neither did he make gods out of people with technical degrees. The Institute *must* be up to something unpleasant... otherwise, why all the mystery? If the facts weren’t uncovered in time, if whatever they were brewing came to a head, it could touch off the final convulsion of lynch law.

Barwell leaned forward, his finger wagged. “Three hundred years now. I think it’s three hundred years since X-rays came in. Damn scientists, fooling around with X-rays, atomic energy, radioactives... sure, safe levels, established tolerances, but what about the long-range effects? What about cumulative genetic effects? Those chickens are coming home at last.”

“No use blaming our ancestors,” said Radek. “Be rather pointless to go dance on their graves, wouldn’t it?”

Barwell moved closer to Radek. His breath was powerful with whisky. “But are they in those graves?” he whispered.

“Huh?”

“Look. Been known for a long time, ever since first atomic energy work... heavy but nonlethal doses of radiation shorten lifespan. You grow old faster if you get a strong dose. Why d’you think with all our medicines we’re not two, three hundred years old? Background count’s gone up, that’s why! Radioactives in the air, in the sea, buried under the ground. Gamma rays, not *entirely* absorbed by shielding. Sure, sure, they tell us the level is still harmless. But it’s more than the level in nature by a good big factor—two or three.”

Radek sipped his beer. He’d been drinking slowly, and the beer had gotten warmer than he liked, but he needed a clear head. “That’s common knowledge,” he stated. “The lifespan hasn’t been shortened any, either.”

“Because of more medicines... more ways to help cells patch up radiation damage. All but worst radiation sickness been curable for a long time.” Barwell waved his hand expansively. “They knew, even back then,” he mumbled. “If radiation shortens life, radiation sickness cures ought to prolong it. Huh? Reas’nable? Only the goddam scientists... population problem... social stasis if ever’body lived for centuries... kept it secret. Easy t’ do. Change y’r name and face ever’ ten, twen’y years—keep to y’rself, don’t make friends among the short-lived, you might see ’em grow old and die, might start feelin’ sorry for ’em an’ that would never do, would it—?”

Coldness tingled along Radek’s spine. He lifted his mug and pretended to drink. Over the rim, his eyes stayed on Barwell.

“Tha’s why they fired me. I know. I know. I got ears. I overheard things. I read... notes not inten’ed for me. They fired me. ’S a wonder they didn’ murder me.” Barwell shuddered and peered at the curtains, as if trying to look through them. “Or d’y’ think—maybe—”

“No,” said Radek. “I don’t. Let’s stick to the facts. I take it you found mention of work on—shall we say—increasing the lifespan. Perhaps a mention of successes with rats and guinea pigs. Right? So what’s wrong with that? They wouldn’t want to announce anything till they were sure, or the hysteria—”

Barwell smiled with an irritating air of omniscience. “More’n that, friend. More’n that. Lots more.”

“Well, what?”

Barwell peered about him with exaggerated caution. “One thing I found in files... plans of whole buildin’s an’ groun’s—great, great big room, lotsa rooms, way way underground. Secret. Only th’ kitchen was makin’ food an’ sendin’ it down there—human food. Food for people I never saw, people who never came up—” Barwell buried his face in his hands. “Don’ feel so good. Whirlin’—”

Radek eased his head to the table. Out like a spent credit. The newsman left the booth and addressed a bouncer. “Chap in there has had it.”

“Uh-huh. Want me to help you get him to your boat?”

“No. I hardly know him.” A bill exchanged hands. “Put him in your dossroom to sleep it off, and give him breakfast with my compliments. I’m going out for some fresh air.”

The rec house stood on a Minnesota bluff, overlooking the Mississippi River. Beyond its racket and multicolored glare, there was darkness and wooded silence. Here and there the lights of a few isolated houses gleamed. The river slid by, talking, ruffled with moonlight. Luna was nearly full; squinting into her cold ashen face, Radek could just see the tiny spark of a city. Stars were strewn carelessly over heaven, he recognized the ember that was Mars.

Perhaps he ought to emigrate. Mars, Venus, even Luna... there was more hope on them than Earth had. No mechanical packaged cheer: people had work to do, and in their spare time made their own pleasures. No civilization cracking at the seams because it could not assimilate the technology it must have; out in space, men knew very well that science had carried them to their homes and made those homes fit to dwell on.

Radek strolled across the parking lot and found his airboat. He paused by its iridescent teardrop to start a cigarette.

Suppose the Institute of Human Biology was more than it claimed to be, more than a set of homes and laboratories where congenial minds could live and do research. It published discoveries of value—but how much did it not publish? Its personnel kept pretty aloof from the rest of the world, not unnatural in this day of growing estrangement between science and public... but did they have a deeper reason than that?

Suppose they did keep immortals in those underground rooms.

A scientist was not ordinarily a good political technician. But he might think he could be. He might react emotionally against a public beginning to throw stones at his house and consider taking the reins... for the people's own good, of course. A lot of misery had been caused the human race for its own alleged good.

Or if the scientist knew how to live forever, he might not think Joe Smith or Carlos Ibáñez or Wang Yuan or Johannes Umfanduma good enough to share immortality with him.

Radek took a long breath. The night air felt fresh and alive in his lungs after the tavern staleness.

He was not currently married, but there was a girl with whom he was thinking seriously of making a permanent contract. He had friends, not lucent razor minds but decent, unassuming, kindly people, brave with man's old quiet bravery in the face of death and ruin and the petty tragedies of everyday. He liked beer and steaks, fishing and tennis, good music and a good book and the exhilarating strain of his work. He liked to live.

Maybe a system for becoming immortal, or at least living many centuries, was not desirable for the race. But only the whole race had authority to make that decision.

Radek smiled at himself, twistedly, and threw the cigarette away and got into the boat. Its engine murmured, sucking 'cast power; the riding lights snapped on automatically and he lifted into the sky. It was not much of a lead he had, but it was as good as he was ever likely to get.

He set the autopilot for southwest Colorado and opened the jets wide. The night whistled darkly around his cabin. Against wan stars, he made out the lamps of other boats, flitting across the world and somehow intensifying the loneliness.

Work to do. He called the main office in Dallas Unit and taped a statement of what he knew and what he planned. Then he dialed the nearest library and asked the robot for information on the Institute of Human Biology.

There wasn't a great deal of value to him. It had been in existence for about 250 years, more or less concurrently with the Psychotechnic Institute and for quite a while affiliated with that organization. During the Humanist troubles, when the Psychotechs were booted out of government on Earth and their files ransacked, it had dissociated itself from them and carried on unobtrusively. (How much of their secret records had it taken along?) Since the Restoration, it had grown, drawing in many prominent researchers and making discoveries of high value to medicine and bioengineering. The current director was Dr. Marcus Lang, formerly of New Harvard, the University of Luna, and—No matter. He'd been running the show for eight years, after his predecessor's death.

Or had Tokogama really died?

He couldn't be identical with Lang—he had been a short Japanese and Lang was a tall Negro, too big a jump for any surgeon. Not to mention their simultaneous careers. But how far back could you trace Lang before he became fakeable records of birth and schooling? What young fellow named Yamatsu or Hideki was now polishing glass in the labs and slated to become the next director?

How fantastic could you get on how little evidence?

Radek let the text fade from the screen and sat puffing another cigarette. It was a while before he demanded references on the biology of the aging process.

That was tough sledding. He couldn't follow the mathematics or the chemistry very far. No good popularizations were available. But a newsman got an ability to winnow what he learned. Radek didn't have to take notes, he'd been through a mind-training course; after an hour or so, he sat back and reviewed what he had gotten.

The living organism was a small island of low entropy in a universe tending constantly toward gigantic disorder. It maintained itself through an intricate set of hemostatic mechanisms. The serious disruption of any of these brought the life-processes to a halt. Shock, disease, the bullet in the lungs or the ax in the brain—death.

But hundreds of thousands of autopsies had never given an honest verdict of “death from old age.” It was always something else, cancer, heart failure, sickness, stroke... age was at most a contributing cause, decreasing resistance to injury and power to recover from it.

One by one, the individual causes had been licked. Bacteria and protozoa and viruses were slaughtered in the body. Cancers were selectively poisoned. Cholesterol was dissolved out of the arteries. Surgery patched up damaged organs, and the new regeneration techniques replaced what had been lost... even nervous tissue. Offhand, there was no more reason to die, unless you met murder or an accident.

But people still grew old. The process wasn't as hideous as it had been. You needn't shuffle in arthritic feebleness. Your mind was clear, your skin wrinkled slowly. Centenarians were not uncommon these days. But very few reached 150. Nobody reached 200. Imperceptibly, the fires burned low... vitality was diminished, strength faded, hair whitened, eyes dimmed. The body responded less and less well to regenerative treatment. Finally it did not respond at all. You got so weak that some small thing you and your doctor could have laughed at in your youth, took you away.

You still grew old. And because you grew old, you still died.

The unicellular organism did not age. But “age” was a meaningless word in that particular case. A man could be immortal via his germ cells. The microorganism could too, but it gave the only cell it had. Personal immortality was denied to both man and microbe.

Could sheer mechanical wear and tear be the reason for the decline known as old age? Probably not. The natural regenerative powers of life were better than that. And observations made in free fall, where strain was minimized, indicated that while null-gravity had an alleviating effect, it was no key to living forever.

Something in the chemistry and physics of the cells themselves, then. They did tend to accumulate heavy water—that had been known for a long time. Hard to see how that could kill you... the percentage increase in a lifetime was so small. It might be a partial answer. You might grow old more slowly if you drank only water made of pure isotopes. But you wouldn't be immortal.

Radek shrugged. He was getting near the end of his trip. Let the Institute people answer his questions.

The Four Corners country is so named because four of the old American states met there, back when they were still significant political units. For a while, in the 20th century, it was overrun with uranium hunters, who made small impression on its tilted emptiness. It was still a favorite vacation area, and the resorts were lost in that great huddle of mountains and desert. You could have a lot of privacy here.

Gliding down over the moon-ghostly Pueblo ruins of Mesa Verde, Radek peered through the windscreen. There, ahead. Lights glowed around the walls, spread across half a mesa. Inside them was a parkscape of trees, lawns, gardens, arbors, cottage units ... the Institute housed its people well. There were four large buildings at the center, and Radek noted gratefully that several windows were still shining in them. Not that he had any compunctions about getting the great Dr. Lang out of bed, but—

He ignored the public landing field outside the walls and set his boat down in the paved courtyard.

As he climbed out, half a dozen guards came running. They were husky men in blue uniforms, armed with stunners, and the dim light showed faces hinting they wouldn't be sorry to feed him a beam. Radek dropped to the ground, folded his arms, and waited. The breath from his nose was frosty under the moon.

"What the hell do you want?"

The nearest guard pulled up in front of him and laid a hand on his shock gun. "Who the devil are you? Don't you know this is private property? What's the big idea, anyway?"

"Take it easy," advised Radek. "I have to see Dr. Lang at once. Emergency."

"You didn't call for an appointment, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"All right, then—"

"I didn't think he'd care to have me give my reasons over a radio. This is confidential and urgent."

The men hesitated, uncertain before such an outrageous violation of all civilized canons. "I dunno, friend ... he's busy ... if you want to see Dr. McCormick—"

"Dr. Lang. Ask him if I may. Tell him I have news about his longevity process."

"His what?"

Radek spelled it out and watched the man go. Another one made some ungracious remark and frisked him with needless ostentation. A third was more urbane: "Sorry to do this, but you understand we've got important work going on. Can't have just anybody busting in."

"Sure, that's all right." Radek shivered in the thin chill air and pulled his cloak tighter about him.

"Viruses and stuff around. If any of that got loose—You understand."

Well, it wasn't a bad cover-up. None of these fellows looked very bright. I.Q. treatments could do only so much, thereafter you got down to the limitations of basic and unalterable brain microstructure. And even among the more intellectual workers ... how many Barwells were there, handling semi-routine tasks but not permitted to know what really went on under their feet? Radek had a brief irrational wish that he'd worn boots instead of sandals.

The first guard returned. "He'll see you," he grunted. "And you better make it good, because he's one mad doctor."

Radek nodded and followed two of the men. The nearest of the large square buildings seemed given over to offices. He was led inside, down a short length of glow-lit corridor, and halted while the scanner on a door marked, LANG, DIRECTOR observed him.

"He's clean, boss," said one of the escort.

"All right," said the annunciator. "Let him in. But you two stay just outside."

It was a spacious office, but austere furnished. A telewindow reflected green larches and a sun-spattered waterfall, somewhere on the other side of the planet. Lang sat alone behind the desk, his hands engaged with some papers that looked like technical reports. He was a big, heavy-shouldered man, his hair gray, his chocolate face middle-aged and tired.

He did not rise. "Well?" he snapped.

"My name is Arnold Radek. I'm a news service operator ... here's my card, if you wish to see it."

"Pharaoh had it easy," said Lang in a chill voice. "Moses only called the seven plagues down on him. I have to deal with your sort."

Radek placed his fingertips on the desk and leaned forward. He found it unexpectedly hard not to be stared down by the other. "I know very well I've laid myself open to a lawsuit by coming in as I did," he stated.

"Possibly, when I'm through, I'll be open to murder."

“Are you feeling well?” There was more contempt than concern in the deep tone.

“Let me say first off, I believe I have information about a certain project of yours. One you badly want to keep a secret. I’ve taped a record at my office of what I know and where I’m going. If I don’t get back before 1000 hours, Central Time, and wipe that tape, it’ll be heard by the secretary.”

Lang took an exasperated breath. His fingernails whitened on the sheets he still held. “Do you honestly think we would be so . . . I won’t say unscrupulous . . . so *stupid* as to use violence?”

“No,” said Radek. “Of course not. All I want is a few straight answers. I know you’re quite able to lead me up the garden path, feed me some line of pap and hustle me out again—but I won’t stand for that. I mentioned my tape only to convince you that I’m in earnest.”

“You’re not drunk,” murmured Lang. “But there are a lot of people running loose who ought to be in a mental hospital.”

“I know.” Radek sat down without waiting for an invitation. “Antiscientific fanatics. I’m not one of them. You know Darrell Burkhardt’s news commentaries? I supply a lot of his data and interpretations. He’s one of the leading friends of genuine science, one of the few you have left.” Radek gestured at the card on the desk. “Read it, right there.”

Lang picked the card up and glanced at the lettering and tossed it back. “Very well. That’s still no excuse for breaking in like this. You—”

“It can’t wait,” interrupted Radek. “There are a lot of lives at stake. Every minute we sit here, there are perhaps a million people dying, perhaps more; I haven’t the figures. And everyone else is dying all the time, millimeter by millimeter, we’re all born dying. Every minute you hold back the cure for old age, you murder a million human beings.”

“This is the most fantastic—”

“Let me finish! I get around. And I’m trained to look a little bit more closely at the facts everybody knows, the ordinary commonplace facts we take for granted and never think to inquire about because they are so ordinary. I’ve wondered about the Institute for a long time. Tonight I talked at great length with a fellow named Barwell . . . remember him? A clerk here. You fired him this morning for being too nosy. He had a lot to say.”

“Hm.” Lang sat quiet for a while. He didn’t rattle easily—he couldn’t be snowed under by fast, aggressive talk. While Radek spat out what clues he

had, Lang calmly reached into a drawer and got out an old-fashioned briar pipe, stuffed it and lit it.

“So what do you want?” he asked when Radek paused for breath.

“The truth, damn it!”

“There are privacy laws. It was established long ago that a citizen is entitled to privacy if he does nothing against the common weal—”

“And you are! You’re like a man who stands on a river bank and has a lifebelt and won’t throw it to a man drowning in the river.”

Lang sighed. “I won’t deny we’re working on longevity,” he answered. “Obviously we are. The problem interests biologists throughout the Solar System. But we aren’t publicizing our findings as yet for a very good reason. You know how people jump to conclusions. Can you imagine the hysteria that would arise in this already unstable culture if there seemed to be even a prospect of immortality? You yourself are a prime case... on the most tenuous basis of rumor and hypothesis, you’ve decided that we have found a vaccine against old age and are hoarding it. You come bursting in here in the middle of the night, demanding to be made immortal immediately if not sooner. And you’re comparatively civilized... there are enough lunatics who’d come here with guns and start shooting up the place.”

Radek smiled bleakly. “Of course. I know that. And you ought to know the outfit I work for is reputable. If you have a good lead on the problem, but haven’t solved it yet, you can trust us not to make that fact public.”

“All right.” Lang mustered an answering smile, oddly warm and charming. “I don’t mind telling you, then, that we do have some promising preliminary results—but, and this is the catch, we estimate it will take at least a century to get anywhere. Biochemistry is an inconceivably complex subject.”

“What sort of results are they?”

“It’s highly technical. Has to do with enzymes. You may know that enzymes are the major device through which the genes govern the organism all through life. At a certain point, for instance, the genes order the body to go through the changes involved in puberty. At another point, they order that gradual breakdown we know as aging.”

“In other words,” said Radek slowly, “the body has a built-in suicide mechanism?”

“Well... if you want to put it that way—”

“I don’t believe a word of it. It makes a lot more sense to imagine that there’s something which causes the breakdown—a virus, maybe—and the body fights it off as long as possible but at last it gets the upper hand. The whole key to evolution is the need to survive. I can’t see life evolving its own anti-survival factor.”

“But nature doesn’t care about the individual, friend Radek. Only about the species. And the species with a rapid turnover of individuals can evolve faster, become more effective—”

“Then why does man, the fastest-evolving metazoan of all, have one of the longest lifespans? He does, you know . . . among mammals, at any rate. Seems to me our bodies must be all-around better than average, better able to fight off the death virus. Fish live a longer time, sure—and maybe in the water they aren’t so exposed to the disease. May flies are short-lived; have they simply adapted their life cycle to the existence of the virus?”

Lang frowned. “You appear to have studied this subject enough to have some mistaken ideas about it. I can’t argue with a man who insists on protecting his cherished irrationalities with fancy verbalisms.”

“And you appear to think fast on your feet, Dr. Lang.” Radek laughed. “Maybe not fast enough. But I’m not being paranoid about this. You can convince me.”

“How?”

“Show me. Take me into those underground rooms and show me what you actually have.”

“I’m afraid that’s impos—”

“All right.” Radek stood up. “I hate to do this, but a man must either earn a living or go on the public freeloading roll . . . which I don’t want to do. The facts and conjectures I already have will make an interesting story.”

Lang rose too, his eyes widening. “You can’t prove anything!”

“Of course I can’t. You’re sitting on all the proof.”

“But the public reaction! God in Heaven, man, those people can’t *think*!”

“No . . . they can’t, can they?” He moved toward the door. “Goodnight.”

Radek’s muscles were taut. In spite of everything that had been said, a person hounded to desperation could still do murder.

There was a great quietness as he neared the door. Then Lang spoke. The voice was defeated, and when Radek looked back it was an old man who stood behind the desk.

“You win. Come along with me.”

They went down an empty hall, after dismissing the guards, and took an elevator below ground. Neither of them said anything. Somehow, the sag of Lang's shoulders was a gnawing in Radek's conscience.

When they emerged, it was to transfer past a sentry, where Lang gave a password and okayed his companion, to another elevator which purred them still deeper.

"I—" The newsman cleared his throat, awkwardly. "I repeat what I implied earlier. I'm here mostly as a citizen interested in the public welfare... which includes my own, of course, and my family's if I ever have one. If you can show me valid reasons for not breaking this story, I won't. I'll even let you hypnocondition me against doing it, voluntarily or otherwise."

"Thanks," said the director. His mouth curved upward, but it was a shaken smile. "That's decent of you, and we'll accept... I think you'll agree with our policy. What worries me is the rest of the world. If you could find out as much as you did—"

Radek's heart jumped between his ribs. "Then you do have immortality!"

"Yes. But I'm not immortal. None of our personnel are, except—Here we are."

There was a hidden susurrus of machinery as they stepped out into a small bare entryroom. Another guard sat there, beside a desk. Past him was a small door of immense solidity, the door of a vault.

"You'll have to leave everything metallic here," said Lang. "A steel object could jump so fiercely as to injure you. Your watch would be ruined. Even coins could get uncomfortably hot... eddy currents, you know. We're about to go through the strongest magnetic field ever generated."

Silently, dry-mouthed, Radek piled his things on the desk. Lang operated a combination lock on the door. "There are nervous effects too," he said. "The field is actually strong enough to influence the electric discharges of your synapses. Be prepared for a few nasty seconds. Follow me and walk fast."

The door opened on a low, narrow corridor several meters long. Radek felt his heart bump crazily, his vision blurred, there was panic screaming in his brain and a sweating tingle in his skin. Stumbling through nightmare, he made it to the end.

The horror faded. They were in another room, with storage facilities and what resembled a spaceship's airlock in the opposite wall. Lang grinned shakily. "No fun, is it?"

"What's it for?" gasped Radek.

"To keep charged particles out of here. And the whole set of chambers is 500 meters underground, sheathed in ten meters of lead brick and surrounded by tanks of heavy water. This is the only place in the Solar System, I imagine, where cosmic rays never come."

"You mean—"

Lang knocked out his pipe and left it in a gaboon. He opened the lockers to reveal a set of airsuits, complete with helmets and oxygen tanks. "We put these on before going any further," he said.

"Infection on the other side?"

"We're the infected ones. Come on, I'll help you."

As they scrambled into the equipment, Lang added conversationally: "This place has to have all its own stuff, of course ... its own electric generators and so on. The ultimate power source is isotopically pure carbon burned in oxygen. We use a nuclear reactor to create the magnetic field itself, but no atomic energy is allowed inside it." He led the way into the airlock, closed it, and started the pumps. "We have to flush out all the normal air and substitute that from the inner chambers."

"How about food? Barwell said food was prepared in the kitchens and brought here."

"Synthesized out of elements recovered from waste products. We do cook it topside, taking precautions. A few radioactive atoms get in, but not enough to matter as long as we're careful. We're so cramped for space down here we have to make some compromises."

"I think—" Radek fell silent. As the lock was evacuated, his unjointed airsuit spreadeagled and held him prisoner, but he hardly noticed. There was too much else to think about, too much to grasp at once.

Not till the cycle was over and they had gone through the lock did he speak again. Then it came harsh and jerky: "I begin to understand. How long has this gone on?"

"It started about 200 years ago ... an early Institute project." Lang's voice was somehow tinny over the helmet phone. "At that time, it wasn't possible to make really pure isotopes in quantity, so there were only limited results, but it was enough to justify further research. This particular set of chambers

and chemical elements is 150 years old. A spectacular success, a brilliant confirmation, from the very beginning... and the Institute has never dared reveal it. Maybe they should have, back then—maybe people could have taken the news—but not now. These days the knowledge would whip men into a murderous rage of frustration; they wouldn't believe the truth, they wouldn't dare believe, and God alone knows what they'd do."

Looking around, Radek saw a large, plastic-lined room, filled with cages. As the lights went on, white rats and guinea pigs stirred sleepily. One of the rats came up to nibble at the wires and regard the humans from beady pink eyes.

Lang bent over and studied the label. "This fellow is, um, 66 years old. Still fat and sassy, in perfect condition, as you can see. Our oldest mammalian inmate is a guinea pig: a hundred and forty-five years. This one here."

Lang stared at the immortal beast for a while. It didn't look unusual... only healthy. "How about monkeys?" he asked.

"We tried them. Finally gave it up. A monkey is an active animal—it was too cruel to keep them penned up forever. They even went insane, some of them."

Footfalls were hollow as Lang led the way toward the inner door. "Do you get the idea?"

"Yes... I think I do. If heavy radiation speeds up aging—then natural radioactivity is responsible for normal aging."

"Quite. A matter of cells being slowly deranged, through decades in the case of man—the genes which govern them being mutilated, chromosomes ripped up, nucleoplasm and cytoplasm irreversibly damaged. And, of course, a mutated cell often puts out the wrong combination of enzymes, and if it regenerates at all it replaces itself by one of the same kind. The effect is cumulative, more and more defective cells every hour. A steady bombardment, all your life... here on Earth, seven cosmic rays per second ripping through you, and you yourself are radioactive, you include radiocarbon and radiopotassium and radiophosphorus... Earth and the planets, the atmosphere, everything radiates. Is it any wonder that at last our organic mechanism starts breaking down? The marvel is that we live as long as we do."

The dry voice was somehow steadying. Radek asked: "And this place is insulated?"

"Yes. The original plant and animal life in here was grown exogenetically from single-cell zygotes, supplied with air and nourishment built from pure stable isotopes. The Institute had to start with low forms, naturally; at that time, it wasn't possible to synthesize proteins to order. But soon our workers had enough of an ecology to introduce higher species, eventually mammals. Even the first generation was only negligibly radioactive. Succeeding generations have been kept almost absolutely clean. The lamps supply ultraviolet, the air is recycled... well, in principle it's no different from an ecological-unit spaceship."

Radek shook his head. He could scarcely get the words out: "People? Humans?"

"For the past 120 years. Wasn't hard to get germ plasm and grow it. The first generation reproduced normally, the second could if lack of space didn't force us to load their food with chemical contraceptive." Behind his faceplate, Lang grimaced. "I'd never have allowed it if I'd been director at the time, but now I'm stuck with the situation. The legality is very doubtful. How badly do you violate a man's civil rights when you keep him a prisoner but give him immortality?"

He opened the door, an archaic manual type. "We can't do better for them than this," he said. "The volume of space we can enclose in a magnetic field of the necessary strength is already at an absolute maximum."

Light sprang automatically from the ceiling. Radek looked in at a dormitory. It was well-kept, the furniture ornamental. Beyond it he could see other rooms... recreation, he supposed vaguely.

The score of hulks in the beds hardly moved. Only one woke up. He blinked, yawned, and shuffled toward the visitors, quite nude, his long hair tangled across the low forehead, a loose grin on the mouth.

"Hello, Bill," said Lang.

"Uh... got sumpin? Got sumpin for Bill?" A hand reached out, begging. Radek thought of a trained ape he had once seen.

"This is Bill." Lang spoke softly, as if afraid his voice would snap. "Our oldest inhabitant. One hundred and nineteen years old, and he has the physique of a man of 20. They mature, you know, reach their peak and never fall below it again."

"Got sumpin, doc, huh?"

“I’m sorry, Bill,” said Lang. “I’ll bring you some candy next time.”

The moron gave an animal sigh and shambled back. On the way, he passed a sleeping woman, and edged toward her with a grunt. Lang closed the door.

There was another stillness.

“Well,” said Lang, “now you’ve seen it.”

“You mean . . . you don’t mean immortality makes you like that?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. But my predecessors chose low-grade stock on purpose. Remember those monkeys. How long do you think a normal human could remain sane, cooped up in a little cave like this and never daring to leave it? That’s the only way to be immortal, you know. And how much of the race could be given such elaborate care, even if they could stand it? Only a small percentage. Nor would they live forever—they’re already contaminated, they were born radioactive. And whatever happens, who’s going to remain outside and keep the apparatus in order?”

Radek nodded. His neck felt stiff, and within the airtight suit he stank with sweat. “I’ve got the idea.”

“And yet—if the facts were known—if my questions had to be answered—how long do you think a society like ours would survive?”

Radek tried to speak, but his tongue was too dry.

Lang smiled grimly. “Apparently I’ve convinced you. Good. Fine.” Suddenly his gloved hand shot out and gripped Radek’s shoulder. Even through the heavy fabric, the newsman could feel the bruising fury of that clasp.

“But you’re only one man,” whispered Lang. “An unusually reasonable man for these days. There’ll be others.

“What are we going to *do*?”

THE VALOR OF CAPPEN VARRA

The wind came from the north with sleet on its back. Raw shuddering gusts whipped the sea till the ship lurched and men felt driven spindrift stinging their faces. Beyond the rail there was winter night, a moving blackness where the waves rushed and clamored; straining into the great dark, men sensed only the bitter salt of sea-scud, the nettle of sleet and the lash of wind.

Cappen lost his footing as the ship heaved beneath him, his hands were yanked from the icy rail and he went stumbling to the deck. The bilge water was new coldness on his drenched clothes. He struggled back to his feet, leaning on a rower's bench and wishing miserably that his quaking stomach had more to lose. But he had already chucked his share of stockfish and hardtack, to the laughter of Svearek's men, when the gale started.

Numb fingers groped anxiously for the harp on his back. It still seemed intact in its leather case. He didn't care about the sodden wadmál breeks and tunic that hung around his skin. The sooner they rotted off him, the better. The thought of the silks and linens of Croy was a sigh in him.

Why had he come to Norren?

A gigantic form, vague in the whistling dark, loomed beside him and gave him a steadying hand. He could barely hear the blond giant's bull tones: "Ha, easy there, lad. Methinks the sea horse road is too rough for yer feet."

"Ulp," said Cappen. His slim body huddled on the bench, too miserable to care. The sleet pattered against his shoulders and the spray congealed in his red hair.

Torbek of Norren squinted into the night. It made his leathery face a mesh of wrinkles. "A bitter feast Yolner we hold," he said. "'Twas a madness of the king's, that he would guest with his brother across the water.

Now the other ships are blown from us and the fire is drenched out and we lie alone in the Wolf's Throat."

Wind piped shrill in the rigging. Cappen could just see the longboat's single mast reeling against the sky. The ice on the shrouds made it a pale pyramid. Ice everywhere, thick on the rails and benches, sheathing the dragon head and the carved sternpost, the ship rolling and staggering under the great march of waves, men bailing and bailing in the half-frozen bilge to keep her afloat, and too much wind for sail or oars. Yes—a cold feast!

"But then, Svearek has been strange since the troll took his daughter, three years ago," went on Torbek. He shivered in a way the winter had not caused. "Never does he smile, and his once open hand grasps tight about the silver and his men have poor reward and no thanks. Yes, strange—" His small frost-blue eyes shifted to Cappen Varra, and the unspoken thought ran on beneath them: Strange, even, that he likes you, the wandering bard from the south. Strange, that he will have you in his hall when you cannot sing as his men would like.

Cappen did not care to defend himself. He had drifted up toward the northern barbarians with the idea that they would well reward a minstrel who could offer them something more than their own crude chants. It had been a mistake; they didn't care for roundels or sestinas, they yawned at the thought of roses white and red under the moon of Caronne, a moon less fair than my lady's eyes. Nor did a man of Croy have the size and strength to compel their respect; Cappen's light blade flickered swiftly enough so that no one cared to fight him, but he lacked the power of sheer bulk. Svearek alone had enjoyed hearing him sing, but he was niggardly and his brawling thorp was an endless boredom to a man used to the courts of southern princes.

If he had but had the manhood to leave—But he had delayed, because of a lusty peasant wench and a hope that Svearek's coffers would open wider; and now he was dragged along over the Wolf's Throat to a midwinter feast which would have to be celebrated on the sea.

"Had we but fire—" Torbek thrust his hands inside his cloak, trying to warm them a little. The ship rolled till she was almost on her beam ends; Torbek braced himself with practiced feet, but Cappen went into the bilge again.

He sprawled there for a while, his bruised body refusing movement. A weary sailor with a bucket glared at him through dripping hair. His shout

was dim under the hoot and skirl of wind: “If ye like it so well down here, then help us bail!”

“’Tis not yet my turn,” groaned Cappen, and got slowly up.

The wave which had nearly swamped them had put out the ship’s fire and drenched the wood beyond hope of lighting a new one. It was cold fish and sea-sodden hardtack till they saw land again—if they ever did.

As Cappen raised himself on the leeward side, he thought he saw something gleam, far out across the wrathful night. A wavering red spark—He brushed a stiffened hand across his eyes, wondering if the madness of wind and water had struck through into his own skull. A gust of sleet hid it again. But—

He fumbled his way aft between the benches. Huddled figures cursed him wearily as he stepped on them. The ship shook herself, rolled along the edge of a boiling black trough, and slid down into it; for an instant, the white teeth of combers grinned above her rail, and Cappen waited for an end to all things. Then she mounted them again, somehow, and wallowed toward another valley.

King Svearek had the steering oar and was trying to hold the longboat into the wind. He had stood there since sundown, huge and untiring, legs braced and the bucking wood cradled in his arms. More than human he seemed, there under the icicle loom of the sternpost, his gray hair and beard rigid with ice. Beneath the horned helmet, the strong moody face turned right and left, peering into the darkness. Cappen felt smaller than usual when he approached the steersman.

He leaned close to the king, shouting against the blast of winter: “My lord, did I not see firelight?”

“Aye. I spied it an hour ago,” grunted the king. “Been trying to steer us a little closer to it.”

Cappen nodded, too sick and weary to feel reproved. “What is it?”

“Some island—there are many in this stretch of water—now shut up!”

Cappen crouched down under the rail and waited.

The lonely red gleam seemed nearer when he looked again. Svearek’s tones were lifting in a roar that hammered through the gale from end to end of the ship: “Hither! Come hither to me, all men not working!”

Slowly, they groped to him, great shadowy forms in wool and leather, bulking over Cappen like storm-gods. Svearek nodded toward the flickering glow. “One of the islands, somebody must be living there. I cannot bring

the ship closer for fear of surf, but one of ye should be able to take the boat thither and fetch us fire and dry wood. Who will go?"

They peered overside, and the uneasy movement that ran among them came from more than the roll and pitch of the deck underfoot.

Beorna the Bold spoke at last, it was hardly to be heard in the noisy dark: "I never knew of men living hereabouts. It must be a lair of trolls."

"Aye, so ... aye, they'd but eat the man we sent ... out oars, let's away from here though it cost our lives ..." The frightened mumble was low under the jeering wind.

Svearek's face drew into a snarl. "Are ye men or puling babes? Hack yer way through them, if they be trolls, but bring me fire!"

"Even a she-troll is stronger than fifty men, my king," cried Torbek. "Well ye know that, when the monster woman broke through our guards three years ago and bore off Hildigund."

"Enough!" It was a scream in Svearek's throat. "I'll have yer craven heads for this, all of ye, if ye gang not to the isle!"

They looked at each other, the big men of Norren, and their shoulders hunched bear-like. It was Beorna who spoke it for them: "No, that ye will not. We are free housecarls, who will fight for a leader—but not for a madman."

Cappen drew back against the rail, trying to make himself small.

"All gods turn their faces from ye!" It was more than weariness and despair which glared in Svearek's eyes, there was something of death in them. "I'll go myself, then!"

"No, my king. That we will not find ourselves in."

"I am the king!"

"And we are yer housecarls, sworn to defend ye—even from yerself. Ye shall not go."

The ship rolled again, so violently that they were all thrown to starboard. Cappen landed on Torbek, who reached up to shove him aside and then closed one huge fist on his tunic.

"Here's our man!"

"Hi!" yelled Cappen.

Torbek hauled him roughly back to his feet. "Ye cannot row or bail yer fair share," he growled, "nor do ye know the rigging or any skill of a sailor—'tis time ye made yerself useful!"

“Aye, aye—let little Cappen go—mayhap he can sing the trolls to sleep—” The laughter was hard and barking, edged with fear, and they all hemmed him in.

“My lord!” bleated the minstrel. “I am your guest—”

Svearek laughed unpleasantly, half crazily. “Sing them a song,” he howled. “Make a fine roun—whatever ye call it—to the troll-wife’s beauty. And bring us some fire, little man, bring us a flame less hot than the love in yer breast for yer lady!”

Teeth grinned through matted beards. Someone hauled on the rope from which the ship’s small boat trailed, dragging it close. “Go, ye scut!” A horny hand sent Cappen stumbling to the rail.

He cried out once again. An ax lifted above his head. Someone handed him his own slim sword, and for a wild moment he thought of fighting. Useless—too many of them. He buckled on the sword and spat at the men. The wind tossed it back in his face, and they raved with laughter.

Over the side! The boat rose to meet him, he landed in a heap on drenched planks and looked up into the shadowy faces of the northmen. There was a sob in his throat as he found the seat and took out the oars.

An awkward pull sent him spinning from the ship, and then the night had swallowed it and he was alone. Numbly, he bent to the task. Unless he wanted to drown, there was no place to go but the island.

He was too weary and ill to be much afraid, and such fear as he had was all of the sea. It could rise over him, gulp him down, the gray horses would gallop over him and the long weeds would wrap him when he rolled dead against some skerry. The soft vales of Caronne and the roses in Croy’s gardens seemed like a dream. There was only the roar and boom of the northern sea, hiss of sleet and spindrift, crazed scream of wind, he was alone as man had ever been and he would go down to the sharks alone.

The boat wallowed, but rode the waves better than the longship. He grew dully aware that the storm was pushing him toward the island. It was becoming visible, a deeper blackness harsh against the night.

He could not row much in the restless water, he shipped the oars and waited for the gale to capsize him and fill his mouth with the sea. And when it gurgled in his throat, what would his last thought be? Should he dwell on the lovely image of Ydris in Seilles, she of the long bright hair and the singing voice? But then there had been the tomboy laughter of dark Falkny, he could not neglect her. And there were memories of Elvanna in her castle

by the lake, and Sirann of the Hundred Rings, and beauteous Vardry, and hawk-proud Lona, and—No, he could not do justice to any of them in the little time that remained. What a pity it was!

No, wait, that unforgettable night in Nienne, the beauty which had whispered in his ear and drawn him close, the hair which had fallen like a silken tent about his cheeks... ah, that had been the summit of his life, he would go down into darkness with her name on his lips... But hell! What *had* her name been, now?

Cappen Varra, minstrel of Croy, clung to the bench and sighed.

The great hollow voice of surf lifted about him, waves sheeted across the gunwale and the boat danced in madness. Cappen groaned, huddling into the circle of his own arms and shaking with cold. Swiftly, now, the end of all sunlight and laughter, the dark and lonely road which all men must tread. *O Ilwarra of Syr, Aedra in Tholis, could I but kiss you once more—*

Stones grated under the keel. It was a shock like a sword going through him. Cappen looked unbelievably up. The boat had drifted to land—he was alive!

It was like the sun in his breast. Weariness fell from him, and he leaped overside, not feeling the chill of the shallows. With a grunt, he heaved the boat up on the narrow strand and knotted the painter to a fang-like jut of reef.

Then he looked about him. The island was small, utterly bare, a savage loom of rock rising out of the sea that growled at its feet and streamed off its shoulders. He had come into a little cliff-walled bay, somewhat sheltered from the wind. He was here!

For a moment he stood, running through all he had learned about the trolls which infested these northlands. Hideous and soulless dwellers underground, they knew not old age; a sword could hew them asunder, but before it reached their deep-seated life, their unhuman strength had plucked a man apart. Then they ate him—

Small wonder the northmen feared them. Cappen threw back his head and laughed. He had once done a service for a mighty wizard in the south, and his reward hung about his neck, a small silver amulet. The wizard had told him that no supernatural being could harm anyone who carried a piece of silver.

The northmen said that a troll was powerless against a man who was not afraid; but, of course, only to see one was to feel the heart turn to ice. They

did not know the value of silver, it seemed—odd that they shouldn't, but they did not. Because Cappen Varra did, he had no reason to be afraid; therefore he was doubly safe, and it was but a matter of talking the troll into giving him some fire. If indeed there was a troll here, and not some harmless fisherman.

He whistled gaily, wrung some of the water from his cloak and ruddy hair, and started along the beach. In the sleety gloom, he could just see a hewn-out path winding up one of the cliffs and he set his feet on it.

At the top of the path, the wind ripped his whistling from his lips. He hunched his back against it and walked faster, swearing as he stumbled on hidden rocks. The ice-sheathed ground was slippery underfoot, and the cold bit like a knife.

Rounding a crag, he saw redness glow in the face of a steep bluff. A cave mouth, a fire within—he hastened his steps, hungering for warmth, until he stood in the entrance.

“Who comes?”

It was a hoarse bass cry that rang and boomed between walls of rock; there was ice and horror in it, for a moment Cappen's heart stumbled. Then he remembered the amulet and strode boldly inside.

“Good evening, mother,” he said cheerily.

The cave widened out into a stony hugeness that gaped with tunnels leading further underground. The rough, soot-blackened walls were hung with plundered silks and cloth-of-gold, gone ragged with age and damp; the floor was strewn with stinking rushes, and gnawed bones were heaped in disorder. Cappen saw the skulls of men among them. In the center of the room, a great fire leaped and blazed, throwing billows of heat against him; some of its smoke went up a hole in the roof, the rest stung his eyes to watering and he sneezed.

The troll-wife crouched on the floor, snarling at him. She was quite the most hideous thing Cappen had ever seen: nearly as tall as he, she was twice as broad and thick, and the knotted arms hung down past bowed knees till their clawed fingers brushed the ground. Her head was beast-like, almost split in half by the tusked mouth, the eyes wells of darkness, the nose an ell long; her hairless skin was green and cold, moving on her bones. A tattered shift covered some of her monstrousness, but she was still a nightmare.

“Ho-ho, ho-ho!” Her laughter roared out, hungry and hollow as the surf around the island. Slowly, she shuffled closer. “So my dinner comes walking in to greet me, ho, ho, ho! Welcome, sweet flesh, welcome, good marrow-filled bones, come in and be warmed.”

“Why, thank you, good mother.” Cappen shucked his cloak and grinning at her through the smoke. He felt his clothes steaming already. “I love you too.”

Over her shoulder, he suddenly saw the girl. She was huddled in a corner, wrapped in fear, but the eyes that watched him were as blue as the skies over Caronne. The ragged dress did not hide the gentle curves of her body, nor did the tear-streaked grime spoil the lilt of her face. “Why, ’tis springtime in here,” cried Cappen, “and Primavera herself is strewing flowers of love.”

“What are you talking about, crazy man?” rumbled the troll-wife. She turned to the girl. “Heap the fire, Hildigund, and set up the roasting spit. Tonight I feast!”

“Truly I see heaven in female form before me,” said Cappen.

The troll scratched her misshapen head.

“You must surely be from far away, moonstruck man,” she said.

“Aye, from golden Croy am I wandered, drawn over dolorous seas and empty wild lands by the fame of loveliness waiting here; and now that I have seen you, my life is full.” Cappen was looking at the girl as he spoke, but he hoped the troll might take it as aimed her way.

“It will be fuller,” grinned the monster. “Stuffed with hot coals while yet you live.” She glanced back at the girl. “What, are you not working yet, you lazy tub of lard? Set up the spit, I said!”

The girl shuddered back against a heap of wood. “No,” she whispered. “I cannot—not... not for a man.”

“Can and will, my girl,” said the troll, picking up a bone to throw at her. The girl shrieked a little.

“No, no, sweet mother. I would not be so ungallant as to have beauty toil for me.” Cappen plucked at the troll’s filthy dress. “It is not meet—in two senses. I only came to beg a little fire; yet will I bear away a greater fire within my heart.”

“Fire in your guts, you mean! No man ever left me save as picked bones.”

Cappen thought he heard a worried note in the animal growl. “Shall we have music for the feast?” he asked mildly. He unslung the case of his harp and took it out.

The troll-wife waved her fists in the air and danced with rage. “Are you mad? I tell you, you are going to be eaten!”

The minstrel plucked a string on his harp. “This wet air has played the devil with her tone,” he murmured sadly.

The troll-wife roared wordlessly and lunged at him. Hildigund covered her eyes. Cappen tuned his harp. A foot from his throat, the claws stopped.

“Pray do not excite yourself, mother,” said the bard. “I carry silver, you know.”

“What is that to me? If you think you have a charm which will turn me, know that there is none. I’ve no fear of your metal!”

Cappen threw back his head and sang:

“A lovely lady full oft lies.
The light that lies within her eyes
And lies and lies, in no surprise.
All her unkindness can devise
To trouble hearts that seek the prize
Which is herself, are angel lies—”

“*Aaaarrrgh!*” It was like thunder drowning him out. The troll-wife turned and went on all fours and poked up the fire with her nose.

Cappen stepped softly around her and touched the girl. She looked up with a little whimper.

“You are Svearek’s only daughter, are you not?” he whispered.

“Aye—” She bowed her head, a strengthless despair weighting it down. “The troll stole me away three winters ago. It has tickled her to have a princess for slave—but soon I will roast on her spit, even as ye, brave man—”

“Ridiculous. So fair a lady is meant for another kind of, um, never mind! Has she treated you very ill?”

“She beats me now and again—and I have been so lonely, naught here at all save the troll-wife and I—” The small work-roughened hands clutched desperately at his waist, and she buried her face against his breast.

“Can ye save us?” she gasped. “I fear ’tis for naught ye ventured yer life, bravest of men. I fear we’ll soon both sputter on the coals.”

Cappen said nothing. If she wanted to think he had come especially to rescue her, he would not be so ungallant to tell her otherwise.

The troll-wife’s mouth gashed in a grin as she walked through the fire to him. “There is a price,” she said. “If you cannot tell me three things about myself which are true beyond disproving, not courage nor amulet nor the gods themselves may avail to keep that red head on your shoulders.”

Cappen clapped a hand to his sword. “Why, gladly,” he said; this was a rule of magic he had learned long ago, that three truths were the needful armor to make any guardian charm work. “Imprimis, yours is the ugliest nose I ever saw poking up a fire. Secundus, I was never in a house I cared less to guest at. Tertius, ever among trolls you are little liked, being one of the worst.”

Hildigund moaned with terror as the monster swelled in rage. But there was no movement. Only the leaping flames and the eddying smoke stirred.

Cappen’s voice rang out, coldly: “Now the king lies on the sea, frozen and wet, and I am come to fetch a brand for his fire. And I had best also see his daughter home.”

The troll shook her head, suddenly chuckling. “No. The brand you may have, just to get you out of this cave, foulness; but the woman is in my thrall until a man sleeps with her—here—for a night. And if he does, I may have him to break my fast in the morning!”

Cappen yawned mightily. “Thank you, mother. Your offer of a bed is most welcome to these tired bones, and I accept gratefully.”

“You will die tomorrow!” she raved. The ground shook under the huge weight of her as she stamped. “Because of the three truths, I must let you go tonight; but tomorrow I may do what I will!”

“Forget not my little friend, mother,” said Cappen, and touched the cord of the amulet.

“I tell you, silver has no use against me—”

Cappen sprawled on the floor and rippled fingers across his harp. “*A lovely lady full oft lies—*”

The troll-wife turned from him in a rage. Hildigund ladled up some broth, saying nothing, and Cappen ate it with pleasure, though it could have used more seasoning.

After that he indited a sonnet to the princess, who regarded him wide-eyed. The troll came back from a tunnel after he finished, and said curtly: "This way." Cappen took the girl's hand and followed her into a pitchy, reeking dark.

She plucked an arras aside to show a room which surprised him by being hung with tapestries, lit with candles, and furnished with a fine broad featherbed. "Sleep here tonight, if you dare," she growled. "And tomorrow I shall eat you—and you, worthless lazy she-trash, will have the hide flayed off your back!" She barked a laugh and left them.

Hildigund fell weeping on the mattress. Cappen let her cry herself out while he undressed and got between the blankets. Drawing his sword, he laid it carefully in the middle of the bed.

The girl looked at him through jumbled fair locks. "How can ye dare?" she whispered. "One breath of fear, one moment's doubt, and the troll is free to rend ye."

"Exactly." Cappen yawned. "Doubtless she hopes that fear will come to me lying wakeful in the night. Wherefore 'tis but a question of going gently to sleep. O Svearek, Torbek, and Beorna, could you but see how I am resting now!"

"But... the three truths ye gave her... how knew ye...?"

"Oh, those. Well, see you, sweet lady, Primus and Secundus were my own thoughts, and who is to disprove them? Tertius was also clear, since you said there had been no company here in three years—yet are there many trolls in these lands, ergo even they cannot stomach our gentle hostess." Cappen watched her through heavy-lidded eyes.

She flushed deeply, blew out the candles, and he heard her slip off her garment and get in with him. There was a long silence.

Then: "Are ye not—"

"Yes, fair one?" he muttered through his drowsiness.

"Are ye not... well, I am here and ye are here and—"

"Fear not," he said. "I laid my sword between us. Sleep in peace."

"I... would be glad—ye have come to deliver—"

"No, fair lady. No man of gentle breeding could so abuse his power. Goodnight." He leaned over, brushing his lips gently across hers, and lay down again.

"Ye are... I never thought man could be so noble," she whispered.

Cappen mumbled something. As his soul spun into sleep, he chuckled. Those unresting days and nights on the sea had not left him fit for that kind of exercise. But, of course, if she wanted to think he was being magnanimous, it could be useful later—

He woke with a start and looked into the sputtering glare of a torch. Its light wove across the crags and gullies of the troll-wife's face and shimmered wetly off the great tusks in her mouth.

"Good morning, mother," said Cappen politely.

Hildigund thrust back a scream.

"Come and be eaten," said the troll-wife.

"No, thank you," said Cappen, regretfully but firmly. "'Twould be ill for my health. No, I will but trouble you for a firebrand and then the princess and I will be off."

"If you think that stupid bit of silver will protect you, think again," she snapped. "Your three sentences were all that saved you last night. Now I hunger."

"Silver," said Cappen didactically, "is a certain shield against all black magics. So the wizard told me, and he was such a nice white-bearded old man I am sure even his attendant devils never lied. Now please depart, mother, for modesty forbids me to dress before your eyes."

The hideous face thrust close to his. He smiled dreamily and tweaked her nose—hard.

She howled and flung the torch at him. Cappen caught it and stuffed it into her mouth. She choked and ran from the room.

"A new sport—trollbaiting," said the bard gaily into the sudden darkness. "Come, shall we not venture out?"

The girl trembled too much to move. He comforted her, absentmindedly, and dressed in the dark, swearing at the clumsy leggings. When he left, Hildigund put on her clothes and hurried after him.

The troll-wife squatted by the fire and glared at them as they went by. Cappen hefted his sword and looked at her. "I do not love you," he said mildly, and hewed out.

She backed away, shrieking as he slashed at her. In the end, she crouched at the mouth of a tunnel, raging futilely. Cappen pricked her with his blade.

“It is not worth my time to follow you down underground,” he said, “but if ever you trouble men again, I will hear of it and come and feed you to my dogs. A piece at a time—a very small piece—do you understand?”

She snarled at him.

“An *extremely* small piece,” said Cappen amiably. “Have you heard me?”

Something broke in her. “Yes,” she whimpered. He let her go, and she scuttled from him like a rat.

He remembered the firewood and took an armful; on the way, he thoughtfully picked up a few jeweled rings which he didn’t think she would be needing and stuck them in his pouch. Then he led the girl outside.

The wind had laid itself, a clear frosty morning glittered on the sea and the longship was a distant sliver against white-capped blueness. The minstrel groaned. “What a distance to row! Oh, well—”

They were at sea before Hildigund spoke. Awe was in the eyes that watched him. “No man could be so brave,” she murmured. “Are ye a god?”

“Not quite,” said Cappen. “No, most beautiful one, modesty grips my tongue. ’Twas but that I had the silver and was therefore proof against her sorcery.”

“But the silver was no help!” she cried.

Cappen’s oar caught a crab. “What?” he yelled.

“No—no—why, she told ye so her own self—”

“I thought she lied. I *know* the silver guards against—”

“But she used no magic! Trolls have but their own strength!”

Cappen sagged in his seat. For a moment he thought he was going to faint. Then only his lack of fear had armored him; and if he had known the truth, that would not have lasted a minute.

He laughed shakily. Another score for his doubts about the overall value of truth!

The longship’s oars bit water and approached him. Indignant voices asking why he had been so long on his errand faded when his passenger was seen. And Svearek the king wept as he took his daughter back into his arms.

The hard brown face was still blurred with tears when he looked at the minstrel, but the return of his old self was there too. “What ye have done,

Cappen Varra of Croy, is what no other man in the world could have done.”

“Aye—aye—” The rough northern voices held adoration as the warriors crowded around the slim red-haired figure.

“Ye shall have her whom ye saved to wife,” said Svearek, “and when I die ye shall rule all Norren.”

Cappen swayed and clutched the rail.

Three nights later he slipped away from their shore camp and turned his face southward.

INNOCENT AT LARGE

By Poul and Karen Anderson

The visiphone chimed when Peri had just gotten into her dinner gown. She peeled it off again and slipped on a casual bathrobe: a wisp of translucence which had set the president of Antarctic Enterprise—or had it been the chairman of the board?—back several thousand dollars. Then she pulled a lock of lion-colored hair down over one eye, checked with a mirror, rumbled it a tiny bit more and wrapped the robe loosely on top and tight around the hips.

After all, some of the men who knew her private number were important.

She undulated to the phone and pressed its Accept. “Hello-o, there,” she said automatically. “So sorry to keep you waiting. I was just taking a bath and—Oh. It’s you.”

Gus Doran’s prawnlike eyes popped at her. “Holy Success,” he whispered in awe. “You sure the wires can carry that much voltage?”

“Well, hurry up with whatever it is,” snapped Peri. “I got a date tonight.”

“I’ll say you do! With a Martian!”

Peri narrowed her silver-blue gaze and looked icily at him. “You must have heard wrong, Gus. He’s the heir apparent of Indonesia, Inc., that’s who, and if you called up to ask for a piece of him, you can just blank right out again. I saw him first!”

Doran’s thin sharp face grinned. “You break that date, Peri. Put it off or something. I got this Martian for you, see?”

“So? Since when has all Mars had as much spending money as one big-time marijuana rancher? Not to mention the heir ap—”

“Sure, sure. But how much are those boys going to spend on any girl, even a high-level type like you? Listen, I need you just for tonight, see? This Martian is strictly from gone. He is here on official business, but he is a yokel and I do mean hayseed. Like he asked me what the Christmas decorations in all the stores were! And here is the solar nexus of it, Peri, kid.”

Doran leaned forward as if to climb out of the screen. “He has got a hundred million dollars expense money, and they are not going to audit his accounts at home. One hundred million good green certificates, legal tender anywhere in the United Protectorates. And he has about as much backbone as a piece of steak alga. Kid, if I did not happen to have experience otherwise with a small nephew, I would say this will be like taking candy from a baby.”

Peri’s peaches-and-cream countenance began to resemble peaches and cream left overnight on Pluto. “Badger?” she asked.

“Sure. You and Sam Wendt handle the routine. I will take the go-between angle, so he will think of me as still his friend, because I have other plans for him too. But if we can’t shake a million out of him for this one night’s work, there is something akilter. And your share of a million is three hundred thirty-three—”

“Is five hundred thousand flat,” said Peri. “Too bad I just got an awful headache and can’t see Mr. Sastro tonight. Where you at, Gus?”

The gravity was not as hard to take as Peter Matheny had expected. Three generations on Mars might lengthen the legs and expand the chest a trifle, but the genes had come from Earth and the organism readjusts. What set him gasping was the air. It weighed like a ton of wool and had apparently sopped up half the Atlantic Ocean. Ears trained to listen through the Martian atmosphere shuddered from the racket conducted by Earth’s. The passport official seemed to bellow at him.

“Pardon me for asking this. The United Protectorates welcome all visitors to Earth and I assure you, sir, an ordinary five-year visa provokes no

questions. But since you came on an official courier boat of your planet, Mr. Matheny, regulations force me to ask your business.”

“Well—recruiting.”

The official patted his comfortable stomach, iridescent in neolon, and chuckled patronizingly. “I am afraid, sir, you won’t find many people who wish to leave. They wouldn’t be able to see the Teamsters Hour on Mars, would they?”

“Oh, we don’t expect immigration,” said Matheny shyly. He was a fairly young man, but small, with a dark-thatched, snub-nosed, gray-eyed head that seemed too large for his slender body. “We learned long ago that no one is interested any more in giving up even second-class citizenship on Earth to live in the Republic. But we only wanted to hire—uh, I mean engage—an, an advisor. We’re not businessmen. We know our export trade hasn’t a chance among all your corporations unless we get some—a five-year contract...?”

He heard his words trailing off idiotically, and swore at himself.

“Well, good luck.” The official’s tone was skeptical. He stamped the passport and handed it back. “There, now, you are free to travel anywhere in the Protectorates. But I would advise you to leave the capital and get into the sticks—um, I mean the provinces. I am sure there must be tolerably competent sales executives in Russia or Congolese Belgium or such regions. Frankly, sir, I do not believe you can attract anyone out of Newer York.”

“Thanks,” said Matheny, “but, you see, I—we need—that is... Oh, well. Thanks. Goodbye.”

He backed out of the office.

A dropshaft deposited him on a walkway. The crowd, a rainbow of men in pajamas and robes, women in Neo-Sino dresses and goldleaf hats, swept him against the rail. For a moment, squashed to the wire, he stared a hundred feet down at the river of automobiles. *Phobos!* he thought wildly. *If the barrier gives, I’ll be sliced in two by a dorsal fin before I hit the pavement!*

The August twilight wrapped him in heat and stickiness. He could see neither stars nor even moon through the city’s blaze. The forest of

multicolored towers, cataracting half a mile skyward across more acreage than his eyes reached, was impressive and all that, but—he used to stroll out in the rock garden behind his cottage and smoke a pipe in company with Orion. On summer evenings, that is, when the temperature wasn't too far below zero.

Why did they tap me for this job? he asked himself in a surge of homesickness. *What the hell is the Martian Embassy here for?*

He, Peter Matheny, was no more than a peaceful professor of sociodynamics at Devil's Kettle University. Of course, he had advised his government before now—in fact, the Red Ankh Society had been his idea—but still he was at ease only with his books and his chess and his mineral collection, a faculty poker party on Tenthday night and an occasional trip to Swindletown—

My God, thought Matheny, here I am, one solitary outlander in the greatest commercial empire the human race has ever seen, and I'm supposed to find my planet a con man!

He began walking, disconsolately, at random. His lizardskin shirt and black culottes drew glances, but derisive ones: their cut was forty years out of date. He should find himself a hotel, he thought drearily, but he wasn't tired; the spaceport would pneumo his baggage to him whenever he did check in. The few Martians who had been to Earth had gone into ecstasies over the automation which put any service you could name on a twenty-four-hour basis. But it would be a long time before Mars had such machines. If ever.

The city roared at him.

He fumbled after his pipe. *Of course, he told himself, that's why the Embassy can't act. I may find it advisable to go outside the law. Please, sir, where can I contact the underworld?*

He wished gambling were legal on Earth. The Constitution of the Martian Republic forbade sumptuary and moral legislation; quite apart from the rambunctious individualism which that document formulated, the article was a practical necessity. Life was bleak enough on the deserts, without being denied the pleasure of trying to bottom-deal some friend who was happily trying to mark the cards. Matheny would have found a few spins of roulette soothing: it was always an intellectual challenge to work out the system by which the management operated a wheel. But more, he would have been among people he understood.

The frightful thing about the Earthman was the way he seemed to exist only in organized masses. A gypsy snake oil peddler, plodding his syrtosaur wagon across Martian sands, just didn't have a prayer against, say, the Grant, Harding & Adams Public Relations Agency.

Matheny puffed smoke and looked around. His feet ached from the weight on them. Where could a man sit down? It was hard to make out any individual sign through all that flimmering neon. His eye fell on one that was distinguished by relative austerity.

THE CHURCH OF CHOICE
Enter, Play, Pray

That would do. He took an upward slideramp through several hundred feet of altitude, stepped past an aurora curtain, and found himself in a marble lobby next to an inspirational newsstand.

"Ah, brother, welcome," said a red-haired usherette in demure black leotards. "The peace that passeth all understanding be with you. The restaurant is right up those stairs."

"I—I'm not hungry," stammered Matheny. "I just wanted to sit in—"

"To your left, sir."

The Martian crossed the lobby. His pipe went out in the breeze from an animated angel. Organ music sighed through an open doorway. The series of rooms beyond was dim, Gothic, interminable.

"Get your chips right here, sir," said the girl in the booth.

"Hm?" said Matheny.

She explained. He bought a few hundred-dollar tokens, dropped a fifty-buck coin down a slot marked CONTRIBUTIONS, and sipped the martini he got back while he strolled around studying the games. He stopped, frowned. Bingo? No, he didn't want to bother learning something new. He decided that the roulette wheels were either honest or too deep for him. He'd have to relax with a crap game instead.

He had been standing at the table for some time before the rest of the congregation really noticed him. Then it was with awe. The first few passes he had made were unsuccessful. Earth gravity threw him off. But when he got the rhythm of it, he tossed a row of sevens. It was a customary form of

challenge on Mars. Here, though, they simply pushed chips toward him. He missed a throw, as anyone would at home: simple courtesy. The next time around, he threw for a seven just to get the feel. He got a seven. The dice had not been substituted on him.

“I say!” he exclaimed. He looked up into eyes and eyes, all around the green table. “I’m sorry. I guess I don’t know your rules.”

“You did all right, brother,” said a middle-aged lady with an obviously surgical bodice.

“But—I mean—when do we start actually *playing*? What happened to the cocked dice?”

The lady drew herself up and jutted an indignant brow at him. “Sir! This is a church!”

“Oh—I see—excuse me, I, I, I—” Matheny backed out of the crowd, shuddering. He looked around for some place to hide his burning ears.

“You forgot your chips, pal,” said a voice.

“Oh. Thanks. Thanks ever so much. I, I, that is—” Matheny cursed his knotting tongue. *Damn it, just because they’re so much more sophisticated than I, do I have to talk like a leaky boiler?*

The helpful Earthman was not tall. He was dark and chisel-faced and sleekly pomaded, dapper in blue pajamas with a red zigzag, a sleighbell cloak and curly-toed slippers.

“You’re from Mars, aren’t you?” he asked in the friendliest tone Matheny had yet heard.

“Yes. Yes, I am. M-my name’s Peter Matheny. I, I—” He stuck out his hand to shake and chips rolled over the floor. “Damn! Oh, excuse me, I forgot this was a church. Never mind the chips. No, please. I just want to g-get the hell out of here.”

“Good idea. How about a drink? I know a bar downshaft.”

Matheny sighed. “A drink is what I need the very most.”

“My name’s Doran. Gus Doran. Call me Gus.”

They walked back to the deaconette’s booth and Matheny cashed what remained of his winnings.

“I don’t want to—I mean if you’re busy tonight, Mr. Doran—”

“Nah. I am not doing one thing in particular. Besides, I have never met a Martian. I am very interested.”

“There aren’t many of us on Earth,” agreed Matheny. “Just a small embassy staff and an occasional like me.”

“I should think you would do a lot of traveling here. The old mother planet and so on.”

“We can’t afford it,” said Matheny. “What with gravitation and distance, such voyages are much too expensive for us to make them for pleasure. Not to mention our dollar shortage.” As they entered the shaft, he added wistfully: “You Earth people have that kind of money, at least in your more prosperous brackets. Why don’t you send a few tourists to us?”

“I always wanted to,” said Doran. “I would like to see the what they call City of Time, and so on. As a matter of fact, I have given my girl one of those Old Martian rings last Ike’s Birthday and she was just gazoo about it. A jewel dug out of the City of Time, like, made a million years ago by a, uh, extinct race . . . I tell you, she *appreciated* me for it!” He winked and nudged.

“Oh,” said Matheny.

He felt a certain guilt. Doran was too pleasant a little man to deserve—

“Of course,” Matheny said ritually, “I agree with all the archeologists it’s a crime to sell such scientifically priceless artifacts, but what can we do? We must live, and the tourist trade is almost nonexistent.”

“Trouble with it is, I hear Mars is not so comfortable,” said Doran. “I mean, do not get me wrong, I don’t want to insult you or anything, but people come back saying you have given the planet just barely enough air to keep a man alive. And there are no cities, just little towns and villages and ranches out in the bush. I mean you are being pioneers and making a new nation and all that, but people paying half a megabuck for their ticket expect some comfort and, uh, you know.”

“I do know,” said Matheny. “But we’re poor—a handful of people trying to make a world of dust and sand and scrub thorn into fields and woods and seas. We can’t do it without substantial help from Earth, equipment and supplies—which can only be paid for in Earth dollars—and we can’t export enough to Earth to earn those dollars.”

By that time, they were entering the Paul Bunyan Knotty Pine Bar & Grill, on the 73rd Level. Matheny's jaw clanked down.

"Whassa matter?" asked Doran. "Ain't you ever seen a ecdysiastic technician before?"

"Uh, yes, but—well, not in a 3-D image under ten magnifications."

Matheny followed Doran past a sign announcing that this show was for purely artistic purposes, into a booth. There a soundproof curtain reduced the noise level enough so they could talk in normal voices.

"What'll you have?" asked Doran. "It's on me."

"Oh, I couldn't let you. I mean—"

"Nonsense. Welcome to Earth! Care for a thyle and vermouth?"

Matheny shuddered. "Good Lord, no!"

"Huh? But they make thyle right on Mars, don't they?"

"Yes. And it all goes to Earth and sells at 2000 dollars a fifth. But you don't think we'd *drink* it, do you? I mean—well, I imagine it doesn't absolutely *ruin* vermouth. But we don't see those Earthside commercials about how sophisticated people like it so much."

"Well, I'll be a socialist creeper!" Doran's face split in a grin. "You know, all my life I've hated the stuff and never dared admit it!" He raised a hand. "Don't worry, I won't blabbo. But I am wondering, if you control the thyle industry and sell all those relics at fancy prices, why do you call yourselves poor?"

"Because we are," said Matheny. "By the time the shipping costs have been paid on a bottle, and the Earth wholesaler and jobber and sales engineer and so on, down to the retailer, have taken their percentage, and the advertising agency has been paid, and about fifty separate Earth taxes—there's very little profit going back to the distillery on Mars. The same principle is what's strangling us on everything. Old Martian artifacts aren't really rare, for instance, but freight charges and the middlemen here put them out of the mass market."

"Have you not got some other business?"

"Well, we do sell a lot of color slides, postcards, baggage labels and so on to people who like to act cosmopolitan, and I understand our travel posters are quite popular as wall decoration. But all that has to be printed on

Earth, and the printer and distributor keep most of the money. We've sold some books and show tapes, of course, but only one has been really successful—*I Was a Slave Girl on Mars*.

"Our most prominent novelist was co-opted to ghostwrite that one. Again, though, local income taxes took most of the money; authors never have been protected the way a businessman is. We do make a high percentage of profit on those little certificates you see around—you know, the title deeds to one square inch of Mars—but expressed absolutely, in dollars, it doesn't amount to much when we start shopping for bulldozers and thermonuclear power plants."

"How about postage stamps?" inquired Doran. "Philately is a big business, I have heard."

"It was our mainstay," admitted Matheny, "but it's been overworked. Martian stamps are a drug on the market. What we'd like to operate is a sweepstakes, but the anti-gambling laws on Earth forbid that."

Doran whistled. "I got to give your people credit for enterprise, anyway!" He fingered his mustache. "Uh, pardon me, but have you tried to, well, attract capital from Earth?"

"Of course," said Matheny bitterly. "We offer the most liberal concessions in the Solar System. Any little mining company or transport firm or—or anybody—who wanted to come and actually invest a few dollars in Mars—why, we'd probably give him the President's daughter as security. No, the Minister of Ecology has a better-looking one. But who's interested? We haven't a thing that Earth hasn't got more of. We're only the descendants of a few scientists, a few political malcontents, oddballs who happen to prefer elbow room and a bill of liberties to the incorporated state—what could General Nucleonics hope to get from Mars?"

"I see. Well, what are you having to drink?"

"Beer," said Matheny without hesitation.

"Huh? Look, pal, this is on me."

"The only beer on Mars comes forty million miles, with interplanetary freight charges tacked on," said Matheny. "Heineken's!"

Doran shrugged, dialed the dispenser and fed it coins.

“This is a real interesting talk, Pete,” he said. “You are being very frank with me. I like a man that is frank.”

Matheny shrugged. “I haven’t told you anything that isn’t known to every economist.”

Of course I haven’t. I’ve not so much as mentioned the Red Ankh, for instance. But, in principle, I have told him the truth, told him of our need; for even the secret operations do not yield us enough.

The beer arrived. Matheny engulfed himself in it. Doran sipped at a whiskey sour and unobtrusively set another full bottle in front of the Martian.

“Ahhh!” said Matheny. “Bless you, my friend.”

“A pleasure.”

“But now you must let me buy you one.”

“That is not necessary. After all,” said Doran with great tact, “with the situation as you have been describing—”

“Oh, we’re not *that* poor! My expense allowance assumes I will entertain quite a bit.”

Doran’s brows lifted a few minutes of arc. “You’re here on business, then?”

“Yes. I told you we haven’t any tourists. I was sent to hire a business manager for the Martian export trade.”

“What’s wrong with your own people? I mean, Pete, it is not your fault there are so many rackets—uh, taxes—and middlemen and agencies and et cetera. That is just the way Earth is set up these days.”

Matheny’s finger stabbed in the general direction of Doran’s pajama top. “Exactly. And who set it up that way? Earthmen. We Martians are babes in the desert. What chance do we have to earn dollars on the scale we need them, in competition with corporations which could buy and sell our whole planet before breakfast? Why, we couldn’t afford three seconds of commercial time on a Lullaby Pillow ’cast. What we need, what we have to hire, is an executive who knows Earth, who’s an Earthman himself. Let him tell us what will appeal to your people, and how to dodge the tax bite and—and—well, you see how it goes, that sort of, uh, thing.”

Matheny felt his eloquence running down and grabbed for the second bottle of beer.

“But where do I start?” he asked plaintively, for his loneliness smote him anew. “I’m just a college professor at home. How would I even get to see—”

“It might be arranged,” said Doran in a thoughtful tone. “It just might. How much could you pay this fellow?”

“A hundred megabucks a year, if he’ll sign a five-year contract. That’s Earth years, mind you.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Pete,” said Doran, “but while that is not bad money, it is not what a high-powered sales scientist gets in Newer York. Plus his retirement benefits, which he would lose if he quit where he is now at. And I am sure he would not want to settle on Mars permanently.”

“I could offer a certain amount of, uh, lagniappe,” said Matheny. “That is, well, I can draw up to a hundred megabucks myself for, uh, expenses and, well... let me buy you a drink!”

Doran’s black eyes frogged at him. “You might at that,” said the Earthman very softly. “Yes, you might at that.”

Matheny found himself warming. Gus Doran was an authentic bobber. A hell of a swell chap. He explained modestly that he was a freelance business consultant and it was barely possible that he could arrange some contacts....

“No, no, no commission, all done in the interest of interplanetary friendship... well, anyhow, let’s not talk business now. If you have got to stick to beer, Pete, make it a chaser to akvavit. What is akvavit? Well, I will just take and show you.”

A hell of a good bloke. He knew some very funny stories, too, and he laughed at Matheny’s, though they were probably too rustic for a big-city taste like his.

“What I really want,” said Matheny, “what I really want—I mean what Mars really needs, get me?—is a confidence man.”

“A what?”

“The best and slickest one on Earth, to operate a world-size con game for us and make us some real money.”

“Con man? Oh. A slipstring.”

“A con by any other name,” said Matheny, pouring down an akvavit.

Doran squinted through cigarette smoke. "You are interesting me strangely, my friend. Say on."

"No." Matheny realized his head was a bit smoky. The walls of the booth seemed odd, somehow. They were just leatheroid walls, but they had an odd quality.

"No, sorry, Gus," he said. "I spoke too much."

"Okay. Forget it. I do not like a man that pries. But look, let's bomb out of here, how about it? Go have a little fun."

"By all means." Matheny disposed of his last beer. "I could use some gaiety."

"You have come to the right town then. But let us get you a hotel room first and some more up-to-date clothes."

"*Allez*," said Matheny. "If I don't mean *allons*, or maybe *alors*."

The drop down to cab-ramp level and the short ride afterward sobered him; the room rate at the Jupiter-Astoria sobered him still more.

Oh, well, he thought, *if I succeed in this job, no one at home will quibble*.

And the chamber to which he and Doran were shown was spectacular enough, with a pneumo direct to the bar and a full-wall transparency to show the vertical incandescence of the towers.

"Whoof!" Matheny sat down. The chair slithered sensuously about his contours. He jumped. "What the dusty hell—Oh." He tried to grin, but his face burned. "I see."

"That is a sexy type of furniture, all right," agreed Doran. He lowered himself into another chair, cocked his feet on the 3-D and waved a cigarette. "Which speaking of, what say we get some girls? It is not too late to catch them at home. A date here will usually start around 2100 hours earliest."

"What?"

"You know. Dames. Like a certain blonde warhead with twin radar and swivel mounting, and she just loves exotics. Such as you."

"Me?" Matheny heard his voice climb to a schoolboy squeak. "Me? Exotic? Why, I'm just a little college professor. I g-g-g, that is—" His tongue got stuck on his palate. He pulled it loose and moistened uncertain lips.

"You are from Mars. Okay? So you fought bushcats barehanded in an abandoned canal."

"What's a bushcat? And we don't have canals. The evaporation rate—"

“Look, Pete,” said Doran patiently. “She don’t have to know that, does she?”

“Well—well, no. I guess not No.”

“Let’s order you some clothes on the pneumo,” said Doran. “I recommend you buy from Schwartzherz. Everybody knows he is expensive.”

While Matheny jittered about, shaving and showering and struggling with his new raiment, Doran kept him supplied with akvavit and beer.

“You said one thing, Pete,” Doran remarked. “About needing a slipstring. A con man, you would call it.”

“Forget that. Please. I spoke out of turn.”

“Well, you see, maybe a man like that is just what Mars does need. And maybe I have got a few contacts.”

“What?” Matheny gaped out of the bathroom.

Doran cupped his hands around a fresh cigarette, not looking at him. “I am not that man,” he said frankly. “But in my line I get a lot of contacts, and not all of them go topside. See what I mean? Like if, say, you wanted somebody terminated and could pay for it, I could not do it. I would not want to know anything about it. But I could tell you a phone number.”

He shrugged and gave the Martian a sidelong glance. “Sure, you may not be interested. But if you are, well, Pete, I was not born yesterday. I got tolerance. Like the book says, if you want to get ahead, you have got to think positively.”

Matheny hesitated. If only he hadn’t taken that last shot! It made him want to say yes, immediately, without reservations. And therefore maybe he became overcautious.

They had instructed him on Mars to take chances if he must.

“I could tell you a thing or two that might give you a better idea,” he said slowly. “But it would have to be under security.”

“Okay by me. Room service can send us up an oath box right now.”

“What? But—but—” Matheny hung onto himself and tried to believe that he had landed on Earth less than six hours ago.

In the end, he did call room service and the machine was trundled in. Doran swallowed the pill and donned the conditioner helmet without an

instant's hesitation.

"I shall never reveal to any person unauthorized by yourself whatever you may tell me under security, now or at any other time," he recited. Then, cheerfully: "And that formula, Pete, happens to be the honest-to-zebra truth."

"I know." Matheny stared, embarrassed, at the carpet. "I'm sorry to—to—I mean of course I trust you, but—"

"Forget it. I take a hundred security oaths a year, in my line of work. Maybe I can help you. I like you, Pete, damn if I don't. And, sure, I might stand to get an agent's cut, if I arrange—Go ahead, boy, go ahead." Doran crossed his legs and leaned back.

"Oh, it's simple enough," said Matheny. "It's only that we already are operating con games."

"On Mars, you mean?"

"Yes. There never were any Old Martians. We erected the ruins fifty years ago for the Billingsworth Expedition to find. We've been manufacturing relics ever since."

"*Huh?* Well, why, but—"

"In this case, it helps to be at the far end of an interplanetary haul," said Matheny. "Not many Terrestrial archeologists get to Mars and they depend on our people to—Well, anyhow—"

"I will be clopped! Good for you!"

Doran blew up in laughter. "That is one thing I would never spill, even without security. I told you about my girl friend, didn't I?"

"Yes, and that calls to mind the Little Girl," said Matheny apologetically. "She was another official project."

"Who?"

"Remember Junie O'Brien? The little golden-haired girl on Mars, a mathematical prodigy, but dying of an incurable disease? She collected Earth coins."

"Oh, that. Sure, I remember—Hey! You didn't!"

"Yes. We made about a billion dollars on that one."

"I will be double damned. You know, Pete, I sent her a hundred-buck piece myself. Say, how is Junie O'Brien?"

“Oh, fine. Under a different name, she’s now our finance minister.” Matheny stared out the wall, his hands twisting nervously behind his back. “There were no lies involved. She really does have a fatal disease. So do you and I. Every day we grow older.”

“Uh!” exclaimed Doran.

“And then the Red Ankh Society. You must have seen or heard their ads. ‘What mysterious knowledge did the Old Martians possess? What was the secret wisdom of the Ancient Aliens? Now the incredibly powerful semantics of the Red Ankh (not a religious organization) is available to a select few—’ That’s our largest dollar-earning enterprise.”

He would have liked to say it was his suggestion originally, but it would have been too presumptuous. He was talking to an Earthman, who had heard everything already.

Doran whistled.

“That’s about all, so far,” confessed Matheny. “Perhaps a con is our only hope. I’ve been wondering, maybe we could organize a Martian bucket shop, handling Martian securities, but—well, I don’t know.”

“I think—” Doran removed the helmet and stood up.

“Yes?” Matheny faced around, shivering with his own tension.

“I may be able to find the man you want,” said Doran. “I just may. It will take a few days and might get a little expensive.”

“You mean. . . Mr. Doran—Gus—you could actually—”

“I cannot promise anything yet except that I will try. Now you finish dressing. I will be down in the bar. And I will call up this girl I know. We deserve a celebration!”

Peri was tall. Peri was slim. Peri smoldered when she walked and exploded when she stretched. Her apartment was ivory and ebony, her sea-green dress was poured on, and the Neo-Sino mode had obviously been engineered to her personal specifications.

She waved twelve inches of jade cigarette holder, lifted her glass and murmured throatily: “To you, Pete. To Mars.”

“I, I, I,” stammered Matheny. He raised his own glass. It slopped over. “Oh, damn! I mean . . . gosh, I’m so sorry, I—”

“No harm done. You aren’t used to our gravity yet.” Peri extended a flawless leg out of her slit skirt and turned it about on the couch, presumably in search of a more comfortable position. “And it must seem terribly cramped here on Earth, Pete,” she continued. “After roaming the desert, hunting, sleeping under the twin moons. Two moons! Why, what girl could resist that?”

“Uh, well, as a matter of fact, the moons are barely visible,” floundered Matheny.

“Must you spoil my dreams?” she said. “When I think of Mars, the frontier, where men are still men, why, my breast swells with emotion.”

“Uh, yes.” Matheny gulped. “Swell. Yes.”

She leaned closer to his chair. “Now that I’ve got you, don’t think you’ll get away,” she smiled. “A live Martian, trapped!”

Doran looked at his watch. “Well,” he said, “I have got to get up tomorrow, so I had better run along now.”

“Ta-ta,” said Peri. Matheny rose. She pulled him down beside her. “Oh, no, you don’t, Mars lad. I’m not through with you yet!”

“But, but, but,” said Matheny.

Doran chuckled. “I’ll meet you on the Terrace at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow,” he said. “Have fun, Pete.”

The door closed on him.

Peri slithered toward her guest. He felt a nudge and looked down. She had not actually touched him with her hands. “Gus is a good squiff,” she said, “but I wondered if he’d ever go.”

“Why, why ... what do you mean?” croaked Matheny.

“Haven’t you guessed?”

She kissed him. It was rather like being caught in a nuclear turbine with soft blades.

Matheny, said Matheny, you represent your planet.

Matheny, said Matheny, shut up.

Time passed.

“Have another drink,” said Peri, “while I slip into something more comfortable.”

Her idea of comfort was modest in one sense of the word: a nightdress or something, like a breath of smoke, and a seat on Matheny’s lap.

“If you kiss me like that just once more,” she breathed, “I’ll forget I’m a nice girl.”

Matheny kissed her like that.

The door crashed open. A large man stood there, breathing heavily. "What are you doing with my wife?" he bawled.

"Sam!" screamed Peri. "I thought you were in Australia!"

"And he said he might settle out of court," finished Matheny. He stared in a numb fashion at his beer. "He'll come to my hotel room this afternoon. What am I going to do?"

"It is a great shame," said Doran. "I never thought. . . . You know, he told everybody he would be gone on business for weeks yet. Pete, I am more sorry than I can express."

"If he thinks I'll pay his miserable blackmail," bristled Matheny, "he can take his head and stick—"

Doran shook his own. "I am sorry, Pete, but I would pay if I was you. He does have a case. It is too bad he just happened to be carrying that loaded camera, but he is a photographer and our laws on Earth are pretty strict about unlicensed correspondents. You could be very heavily fined as well as deported, plus all the civil-damage claims and the publicity. It would ruin your mission and even make trouble for the next man Mars sent."

"But," stuttered Matheny, "b-but it's a badger game!"

"Look," said Doran. He leaned over the table and gripped the Martian's shoulder. "I am your friend, see? I feel real bad this happened. In a way, it is my fault and I want to help you. So let me go talk to Sam Wendt. I will cool him off if I can. I will talk down his figure. It will still cost you, Pete, but you can pad your expense account, can't you? So we will both come see you today. That way there will be two people on your side, you and me, and Sam will not throw his weight around so much. You pay up in cash and it will be the end of the affair. I will see to that, pal!"

Matheny stared at the small dapper man. His aloneness came to him like a blow in the stomach. *Et tu, Brute*, he thought.

He bit his lip. "Thanks, Gus," he said. "You are a real friend."

Sam blocked the doorway with his shoulders as he entered the room. Doran followed like a diminutive tug pushing a very large liner. They closed the

door. Matheny stood up, avoiding Sam's glare.

"Okay, louse," said Sam. "You got a better pal here than you deserve, but he ain't managed to talk me into settling for nothing."

"Let me get this—I mean—well," said Matheny. "Look, sir, you claim that I, I mean that your wife and I were, uh, well, we weren't. I was only visiting—"

"Stow it, stow it." Sam towered over the Martian. "Shoot it to the Moon. You had your fun. It'll cost you. One million dollars."

"*One mil*—But—but—Gus," wailed Matheny, "this is out of all reason! I thought you said—"

Doran shrugged. "I am sorry, Pete. I could not get him any farther down. He started asking fifty. You better pay him."

"No!" Matheny scuttled behind a chair. "No, look here! I, Peter Matheny of the Martian Republic, declare you are blackmailing me!"

"I'm asking compensation for damages," growled Sam. "Hand it over or I'll go talk to a lawyer. That ain't blackmail. You got your choice, don't you?"

Matheny wilted. "Yes."

"A megabuck isn't so bad, Pete," soothed Doran. "I personally will see that you earn it back in—"

"Oh, never mind." Tears stood in Matheny's eyes. "You win." He took out his checkbook.

"None of that," rapped Sam. "Cash. Now."

"But you claimed this was a legitimate—"

"You heard me."

"Well—could I have a receipt?" begged Matheny.

Sam grinned.

"I just thought I'd ask," said Matheny. He opened a drawer and counted out one hundred ten-kilo-buck bills. "There! And, and, and I hope you choke on it!"

Sam stuffed the money in a pocket and lumbered out.

Doran lingered. "Look here, Pete," he said, "I will make this up to you. Honest. All you have got to do is trust me."

"Sure." Matheny slumped on the bed. "Not your fault. Let me alone for a while, will you?"

"Listen, I will come back in a few hours and buy you the best dinner in all the Protectorates and—"

“Sure,” said Matheny. “Sure.”

Doran left, closing the door with great gentleness.

He returned at 1730, entered, and stopped dead. The floor space was half taken up by a screen and a film projector.

“What happened, Pete?” he asked uncertainly.

Matheny smiled. “I took some tourist movies,” he said. “Self-developing soundtrack film. Sit down and I’ll show you.”

“Well, thanks, but I am not so much for home movies.”

“It won’t take long. Please.”

Doran shrugged, found a chair and took out a cigarette. “You seem pretty well cheered up now,” he remarked. “That is a spirit I like to see. You have got to have faith.”

“I’m thinking of a sideline business in live photography,” said the Martian. “Get back my losses of today, you know.”

“Well, now, Pete, I like your spirit, like I say. But if you are really interested in making some of that old baroom, and I think you are, then listen—”

“I’ll sell prints to people for home viewing,” went on Matheny. “I’d like your opinion of this first effort.”

He dimmed the transparency and started the projector. The screen sprang into colored motion. Sam Wendt blocked the doorway with his shoulders.

“Who knows, I might even sell you one of the several prints I made today,” said Matheny.

“Okay, louse,” said Sam.

“Life is hard on Mars,” commented Matheny in an idle tone, “and we’re an individualistic culture. The result is pretty fierce competition, though on a person-to-person rather than organizational basis. All friendly enough, but—Oh, by the way, how do you like our Martian camera technology? I wore this one inside my buttonhole.”

Doran in the screen shrugged and said: “I am sorry, Pete.” Doran in the chair stubbed out his cigarette, very carefully, and asked, “How much do you want for that film?”

“Would a megabuck be a fair price?” inquired Matheny.

“Uh... huh.”

“Of course, I am hoping Sam will want a copy too.”

Doran swallowed. “Yeah. Yes, I think I can talk him into it.”

“Good.” Matheny stopped the projector. He sat down on the edge of the table, swinging one leg, and lit his pipe. Its bowl glowed in the dimness like the eye of a small demon. “By the way,” he said irrelevantly, “if you check the newscast tapes, you’ll find I was runner-up in last year’s all-Martian pistol contest. It’s a tough contest to win. There are no bad shots on Mars—survival of the fittest, you know.”

Doran wet his lips. “Uh, no hard feelings. No, none at all. But say, in case you are, well, you know, looking for a slipstring, what I came here for was to tell you I have located the very guy you want. Only he is in jail right now, see, and it will cost—”

“Oh, no!” groaned Matheny. “Not the Syrtis Prospector! Kids are taught that swindle in kindergarten.”

Doran bowed his head. “We call it the Spanish Prisoner here,” he said. He got up. “I will send the price of those films around in the morning.”

“You’ll call your bank and have the cash pneumoed here tonight,” said Matheny. “Also Sam’s share. I daresay he can pay you back.”

“No harm in trying, was there?” asked Doran humbly.

“None at all.” Matheny chuckled. “In fact, I’m grateful to you. You helped me solve my major problem.”

“Huh? I did what? How?”

“I’ll have to investigate further, but I’m sure my hunch will be confirmed. You see, we Martians have stood in awe of Earthmen. And since for a long time there’s been very little contact between the two planets except the purely official, impersonal sort, there’s been nothing to disabuse us. It’s certainly true that our organizations can’t compete with yours, because your whole society is based on organizations. But now, by the same token, I wonder if your individuals can match ours. Ever hear of the Third Moon? No? The whipsaw play? The aqueduct squeeze? Good Lord, can’t you even load a derrel set?”

Matheny licked his chops. “So there’s our Martian export to Earth. Martian con men. I tell you this under security, of course—not that anyone

would believe you, till our boys walk home with the shirt off the Terrestrial back.”

He waved an imperious pipestem. “Hurry up and pay me, please. I’ve a date tonight with Peri. I just called her up and explained the situation and she really *does* seem to like Martians.”

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

“Well, yes,” Amspaugh admitted, “it was a unique war in many ways, including its origin. However, there are so many analogies to other colonial revolutions—” His words trailed off as usual.

“I know. Earth’s mercantile policies and so forth,” said Lindgren. He fancies himself a student of interplanetary history. This has led to quite a few arguments since Amspaugh, who teaches in that field, joined the Club. Mostly they’re good. I went to the bar and got myself another drink, listening as the mine owner’s big voice went on:

“But what began it? When did the asterites first start realizing they weren’t pseudopods of a dozen Terrestrial nations, but a single nation in their own right? There’s the root of the revolution. And it can be pinned down, too.”

“‘Ware metaphor!” cried someone at my elbow. I turned and saw Missy Blades. She’d come quietly into the lounge and started mixing a gin and bitters.

The view window framed her white head in Orion as she moved toward the little cluster of seated men. She took a fat cigar from her pocket, struck it on her shoe sole, and added her special contribution to the blue cloud in the room after she sat down.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I couldn’t help that. Please go on.” Which I hope relieves you of any fear that she’s an Unforgettable Character. Oh, yes, she’s old as Satan now; her toil and guts and conniving make up half the biography of the Sword; she manned a gun turret at Ceres, and was mate of the *Tyrfing* on some of the earliest Saturn runs when men took their lives between their teeth because they needed both hands free; her sons and grandsons fill the Belt with their brawling ventures; she can drink any ordinary man to the deck; she’s one of the three women ever admitted to the Club. But she’s also one of the few genuine ladies I’ve known in my life.

“Uh, well,” Lindgren grinned at her. “I was saying, Missy, the germ of the revolution was when the Stations armed themselves. You see, that meant more than police powers. It implied a degree of sovereignty. Over the years, the implication grew.”

“Correct.” Orloff nodded his bald head. “I remember how the Governing Commission squalled when the Station managers first demanded the right. They foresaw trouble. But if the Stations belonging to one country put in space weapons, what else could the others do?”

“They should have stuck together and all been firm about refusing to allow it,” Amspaugh said. “From the standpoint of their own best interests, I mean.”

“They tried to,” Orloff replied. “I hate to think how many communications we sent home from our own office, and the others must have done the same. But Earth was a long way off. The Station bosses were close. Inverse square law of political pressure.”

“I grant you, arming each new little settlement proved important,” Amspaugh said. “But really, it expressed nothing more than the first inchoate stirrings of asteroid nationalism. And the origins of that are much more subtle and complex. For instance ... er...”

“You’ve got to have a key event somewhere,” Lindgren insisted. “I say that this was it.”

A silence fell, as will happen in conversation. I came back from the bar and settled myself beside Missy. She looked for a while into her drink, and then out to the stars. The slow spin of our rock had now brought the Dippers into view. Her faded eyes sought the Pole Star—but it’s Earth’s, not our own any more—and I wondered what memories they were sharing. She shook herself the least bit and said:

“I don’t know about the sociological ins and outs. All I know is, a lot of things happened, and there wasn’t any pattern to them at the time. We just slogged through as best we were able, which wasn’t really very good. But I can identify one of those wriggling roots for you, Sigurd. I was there when the question of arming the Stations first came up. Or, rather, when the incident occurred that led directly to the question being raised.”

Our whole attention went to her. She didn’t dwell on the past as often as we would have liked.

A slow, private smile crossed her lips. She looked beyond us again. “As a matter of fact,” she murmured, “I got my husband out of it.” Then quickly,

as if to keep from remembering too much:

“Do you care to hear the story? It was when the Sword was just getting started. They’d established themselves on SSC 45—oh, never mind the catalogue number. Sword Enterprises, because Mike Blades’ name suggested it—what kind of name could you get out of Jimmy Chung, even if he was the senior partner? It’d sound too much like a collision with a meteorite—so naturally the asteroid also came to be called the Sword. They began on the borrowed shoestring that was usual in those days. Of course, in the Belt a shoestring has to be mighty long, and finances got stretched to the limit. The older men here will know how much had to be done by hand, in mortal danger, because machines were too expensive. But in spite of everything, they succeeded. The Station was functional and they were ready to start business when—”

It was no coincidence that the Jupiter craft were arriving steadily when the battleship came. Construction had been scheduled with this in mind, that the Sword should be approaching conjunction with the king planet, making direct shuttle service feasible, just as the chemical plant went into service. We need not consider how much struggle and heartbreak had gone into meeting that schedule. As for the battleship, she appeared because the fact that a Station in just this orbit was about to commence operations was news important enough to cross the Solar System and push through many strata of bureaucracy. The heads of the recently elected North American government became suddenly, fully aware of what had been going on.

Michael Blades was outside, overseeing the installation of a receptor, when his earplug buzzed. He thrust his chin against the tuning plate, switching from gang to interoffice band. “Mike?” said Avis Page’s voice, “You’re wanted up front.”

“Now?” he objected. “Whatever for?”

“Courtesy visit from the NASS *Altair*. You’ve lost track of time, my boy.”

“What the ... the jumping blue blazes are you talking about? We’ve had our courtesy visit. Jimmy and I both went over to pay our respects, and we had Rear Admiral Hulse here to dinner. What more do they expect, for Harry’s sake?”

“Don’t you remember? Since there wasn’t room to entertain his officers, you promised to take them on a personal guided tour later. I made the appointment the very next watch. Now’s the hour.”

“Oh, yes, it comes back to me. Yeah. Hulse brought a magnum of champagne with him, and after so long a time drinking recycled water, my capacity was shot to pieces. I got a warm glow of good fellowship on, and offered—Let Jimmy handle it, I’m busy.”

“The party’s too large, he says. You’ll have to take half of them. Their gig will dock in thirty minutes.”

“Well, depute somebody else.”

“That’d be rude, Mike. Have you forgotten how sensitive they are about rank at home?” Avis hesitated. “If what I believe about the mood back there is true, we can use the good will of high-level Navy personnel. And any other influential people in sight.”

Blades drew a deep breath. “You’re too blinking sensible. Remind me to fire you after I’ve made my first ten million bucks.”

“What’ll you do for your next ten million, then?” snipped his secretary-file clerk-confidante-adviser-et cetera.

“Nothing. I’ll just squander the first.”

“Goody! Can I help?”

“Uh... I’ll be right along.” Blades switched off. His ears felt hot, as often of late when he tangled with Avis, and he unlimbered only a few choice oaths.

“Troubles?” asked Carlos Odonaju.

Blades stood a moment, looking around, before he answered. He was on the wide end of the Sword, which was shaped roughly like a truncated pyramid. Beyond him and his half dozen men stretched a vista of pitted rock, jutting crags, gulf-black shadows, under the glare of floodlamps. A few kilometers away, the farthest horizon ended, chopped off like a cliff. Beyond lay the stars, crowding that night which never ends. It grew very still while the gang waited for his word. He could listen to his own lungs and pulse, loud in the spacesuit; he could even notice its interior smell, blend of plastic and oxygen cycle chemicals, flesh and sweat. He was used to the sensation of hanging upside down on the surface, grip-soled boots holding him against that fractional gee by which the asteroid’s rotation overcame its feeble gravity. But it came to him that this was an eerie bat-fashion way for an Oregon farm boy to stand.

Oregon was long behind him, though, not only the food factory where he grew up but the coasts where he had fished and the woods where he had tramped. No loss. There'd always been too many tourists. You couldn't escape from people on Earth. Cold and vacuum and raw rock and everything, the Belt was better. It annoyed him to be interrupted here.

Could Carlos take over as foreman? N-no, Blades decided, not yet. A gas receptor was an intricate piece of equipment. Carlos was a good man of his hands. Every one of the hundred-odd in the Station necessarily was. But he hadn't done this kind of work often enough.

"I have to quit," Blades said. "Secure the stuff and report back to Buck Meyers over at the dock, the lot of you. His crew's putting in another recoil pier, as I suppose you know. They'll find jobs for you. I'll see you here again on your next watch."

He waved—being half the nominal ownership of this place didn't justify snobbery, when everyone must work together or die—and stepped off toward the nearest entry lock with that flowing spaceman's pace which always keeps one foot on the ground. Even so, he didn't unshackle his inward-reeling lifeline till he was inside the chamber.

On the way he topped a gaunt ridge and had a clear view of the balloons that were attached to the completed receptors. Those that were still full bulked enormous, like ghostly moons. The Jovian gases that strained their tough elastomer did not much blur the stars seen through them; but they swelled high enough to catch the light of the hidden sun and shimmer with it. The nearly discharged balloons hung thin, straining outward. Two full ones passed in slow orbit against the constellations. They were waiting to be hauled in and coupled fast, to release their loads into the Station's hungry chemical plant. But there were not yet enough facilities to handle them at once—and the *Pallas Castle* would soon be arriving with another—Blades found that he needed a few extra curses.

Having cycled through the air lock, he removed his suit and stowed it, also the heavy gloves which kept him from frostbite as he touched its space-cold exterior. Tastefully clad in a Navy surplus Long John, he started down the corridors.

Now that the first stage of burrowing within the asteroid had been completed, most passages went through its body, rather than being plastic tubes snaking across the surface. Nothing had been done thus far about facing them. They were merely shafts, two meters square, lined with doorways, ventilator grilles, and fluoropanel. They had no thermocoils. Once the nickel-iron mass had been sufficiently warmed up, the waste heat of man and his industry kept it that way. The dark, chipped-out tunnels throbbed with machine noises. Here and there a girlie picture or a sentimental landscape from Earth was posted. Men moved busily along them, bearing tools, instruments, supplies. They were from numerous countries, those men, though mostly North Americans, but they had acquired a likeness, a rangy leathery look and a free-swinging stride, that went beyond their colorful coveralls.

“Hi, Mike. . . . How’s she spinning? . . . Hey, Mike, you heard the latest story about the Martian and the bishop? . . . Can you spare me a minute? We got troubles in the separator manifolds. . . . What’s the hurry, Mike, your batteries overcharged?” Blades waved the hails aside. There was need for haste. You could move fast indoors, under the low weight which became lower as you approached the axis of rotation, with no fear of tumbling off. But it was several kilometers from the gas receptor end to the people end of the asteroid.

He rattled down a ladder and entered his cramped office out of breath. Avis Page looked up from her desk and wrinkled her freckled snub nose at him. “You ought to take a shower, but there isn’t time,” she said. “Here, use my antistinker.” She threw him a spray cartridge with a deft motion. “I got your suit and beardex out of your cabin.”

“Have I no privacy?” he grumbled, but grinned in her direction. She wasn’t much to look at—not ugly, just small, brunette, and unspectacular—but she was a supernova of an assistant. Make somebody a good wife some day. He wondered why she hadn’t taken advantage of the situation here to snaffle a husband. A dozen women, all but two of them married, and a hundred men, was a ratio even more lopsided than the norm in the Belt. Of course with so much work to do, and with everybody conscious of the need to maintain cordial relations, sex didn’t get much chance to rear its lovely head. Still—

She smiled back with the gentleness that he found disturbing when he noticed it. “Shoo,” she said. “Your guests will be here any minute. You’re to

meet them in Jimmy's office."

Blades ducked into the tiny washroom. He wasn't any 3V star himself, he decided as he smeared cream over his face: big, homely, red-haired. *But not something you'd be scared to meet in a dark alley, either*, he added smugly. In fact, there had been an alley in Aresopolis. . . . Things were expected to be going so smoothly by the time they approached conjunction with Mars that he could run over to that sinful ginful city for a vacation. Long overdue . . . whoooo! He wiped off his whiskers, shucked the zipskin, and climbed into the white pants and high-collared blue tunic that must serve as formal garb.

Emerging, he stopped again at Avis' desk. "Any message from the *Pallas*?" he asked.

"No," the girl said. "But she ought to be here in another two watches, right on sked. You worry too much, Mike."

"Somebody has to, and I haven't got Jimmy's Buddhist ride-with-the-punches attitude."

"You should cultivate it." She grew curious. The brown eyes lingered on him. "Worry's contagious. You make me fret about you."

"Nothing's going to give me an ulcer but the shortage of booze on this rock. Uh, if Bill Mbolo should call about those catalysts while I'm gone, tell him—" He ran off a string of instructions and headed for the door.

Chung's hangout was halfway around the asteroid, so that one chief or the other could be a little nearer the scene of any emergency. Not that they spent much time at their desks. Shorthanded and undermechanized, they were forever having to help out in the actual construction. Once in a while Blades found himself harking wistfully back to his days as an engineer with Solar Metals: good pay, interesting if hazardous work on flying mountains where men had never trod before, and no further responsibilities. But most asterites had the dream of becoming their own bosses.

When he arrived, the *Altair* officers were already there, a score of correct young men in white dress uniforms. Short, squat, and placid looking, Jimmy Chung stood making polite conversation. "Ah, there," he said, "Lieutenant Ziska and gentlemen, my partner, Michael Blades, Mike, may I present—"

Blades' attention stopped at Lieutenant Ziska. He heard vaguely that she was the head quartermaster officer. But mainly she was tall and blond and blue-eyed, with a bewitching dimple when she smiled, and filled her gown the way a Cellini Venus doubtless filled its casting mold.

"Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Blades," she said as if she meant it. Maybe she did! He gulped for air.

"And Commander Leibknecht," Chung said across several light-years. "Commander Leibknecht. *Commander Leibknecht.*"

"Oh. Sure. 'Scuse." Blades dropped Lieutenant Ziska's hand in reluctant haste. "Hardjado, C'mander Leibfraumilch."

Somehow the introductions were gotten through. "I'm sorry we have to be so inhospitable," Chung said, "but you'll see how crowded we are. About all we can do is show you around, if you're interested."

"Of course you're interested," said Blades to Lieutenant Ziska. "I'll show you some gimmicks I thought up myself."

Chung scowled at him. "We'd best divide the party and proceed along alternate routes," he said, "We'll meet again in the mess for coffee, Lieutenant Ziska, would you like to—"

"Come with me? Certainly," Blades said.

Chung's glance became downright murderous. "I thought—" he began.

"Sure." Blades nodded vigorously. "You being the senior partner, you'll take the highest ranking of these gentlemen, and I'll be in Scotland before you. C'mon, let's get started. May I?" He offered the quartermistress his arm. She smiled and took it. He supposed that eight or ten of her fellows trailed them.

The first disturbing note was sounded on the verandah.

They had glanced at the cavelike dormitories where most of the personnel lived; at the recreation dome topside which made the life tolerable; at kitchen, sick bay, and the other service facilities; at the hydroponic tanks and yeast vats which supplied much of the Station's food; at the tiny cabins scooped out for the top engineers and the married couples. Before leaving this end of the asteroid, Blades took his group to the verandah. It was a clear dome jutting from the surface, softly lighted, furnished as a primitive officers' lounge, open to a view of half the sky.

“Oh-h,” murmured Ellen Ziska. Unconsciously she moved closer to Blades.

Young Lieutenant Commander Gilbertson gave her a somewhat jaundiced look. “You’ve seen deep space often enough before,” he said.

“Through a port or a helmet.” Her eyes glimmered enormous in the dusk. “Never like this.”

The stars crowded close in their wintry myriads. The galactic belt glistened, diamond against infinite darkness. Vision toppled endlessly outward, toward the far mysterious shimmer of the Andromeda Nebula; silence was not a mere absence of noise, but a majestic presence, the seething of suns.

“What about the observation terrace at Leyburg?” Gilbertson challenged.

“That was different,” Ellen Ziska said. “Everything was safe and civilized. This is like being on the edge of creation.”

Blades could see why Goddard House had so long resisted the inclusion of female officers on ships of the line, despite political pressure at home and the Russian example abroad. He was glad they’d finally given in. Now if only he could build himself up as a dashing, romantic type... But how long would the *Altair* stay? Her stopover seemed quite extended already, for a casual visit in the course of a routine patrol cruise. He’d have to work fast.

“Yes, we are pretty isolated,” he said. “The Jupiter ships just unload their balloons, pick up the empties, and head right back for another cargo.”

“I don’t understand how you can found an industry here, when your raw materials only arrive at conjunction,” Ellen said.

“Things will be different once we’re in full operation,” Blades assured her. “Then we’ll be doing enough business to pay for a steady input, transshipped from whatever depot is nearest Jupiter at any given time.”

“You’ve actually built this simply to process... gas?” Gilbertson interposed. Blades didn’t know whether he was being sarcastic or asking a genuine question. It was astonishing how ignorant Earthsiders, even space-traveling Earthsiders, often were about such matters.

“Jovian gas is rich stuff,” he explained. “Chiefly hydrogen and helium, of course; but the scoopships separate out most of that during a pickup. The rest is ammonia, water, methane, a dozen important organics, including some of the damn... doggonedest metallic complexes you ever heard of. We need them as the basis of a chemosynthetic industry, which we need for survival, which we need if we’re to get the minerals that were the reason for

colonizing the Belt in the first place.” He waved his hand at the sky. “When we really get going, we’ll attract settlement. This asteroid has companions, waiting for people to come and mine them. Homeships and orbital stations will be built. In ten years there’ll be quite a little city clustered around the Sword.”

“It’s happened before,” nodded tight-faced Commander Warburton of Gunnery Control.

“It’s going to happen a lot oftener,” Blades said enthusiastically. “The Belt’s going to grow!” He aimed his words at Ellen. “This is the real frontier. The planets will never amount to much. It’s actually harder to maintain human-type conditions on so big a mass, with a useless atmosphere around you, than on a lump in space like this. And the gravity wells are so deep. Even given nuclear power, the energy cost of really exploiting a planet is prohibitive. Besides which, the choice minerals are buried under kilometers of rock. On a metallic asteroid, you can find almost everything you want directly under your feet. No limit to what you can do.”

“But your own energy expenditure—” Gilbertson objected.

“That’s no problem.” As if on cue, the worldlet’s spin brought the sun into sight. Tiny but intolerably brilliant, it flooded the dome with harsh radiance. Blades lowered the blinds on that side. He pointed in the opposite direction, toward several sparks of equal brightness that had manifested themselves.

“Hundred-meter parabolic mirrors,” he said. “Easy to make; you spray a thin metallic coat on a plastic backing. They’re in orbit around us, each with a small geegee unit to control drift and keep it aimed directly at the sun. The focused radiation charges heavy-duty accumulators, which we then collect and use for our power source in all our mobile work.”

“Do you mean you haven’t any nuclear generator?” asked Warburton.

He seemed curiously intent about it. Blades wondered why, but nodded. “That’s correct. We don’t want one. Too dangerous for us. Nor is it necessary. Even at this distance from the sun, and allowing for assorted inefficiencies, a mirror supplies better than five hundred kilowatts, twenty-four hours a day, year after year, absolutely free.”

“Hm-m-m. Yes.” Warburton’s lean head turned slowly about, to rake Blades with a look of calculation. “I understand that’s the normal power system in Stations of this type. But we didn’t know if it was used in your case, too.”

Why should you care? Blades thought.

He shoved aside his faint unease and urged Ellen toward the dome railing. "Maybe we can spot your ship, Lieutenant, uh, Miss Ziska. Here's a telescope. Let me see, her orbit ought to run about so. . . ."

He hunted until the *Altair* swam into the viewfield. At this distance the spheroid looked like a tiny crescent moon, dully painted; but he could make out the sinister shapes of a rifle turret and a couple of missile launchers. "Have a look," he invited. Her hair tickled his nose, brushing past him. It had a delightful sunny odor.

"How small she seems," the girl said, with the same note of wonder as before. "And how huge when you're aboard."

Big, all right, Blades knew, and loaded to the hatches with nuclear hellfire. But not massive. A civilian spaceship carried meteor plating, but since that was about as useful as wet cardboard against modern weapons, warcraft sacrificed it for the sake of mobility. The self-sealing hull was thin magnesium, the outer shell periodically renewed as cosmic sand eroded it.

"I'm not surprised we orbited, instead of docking," Ellen remarked. "We'd have butted against your radar and bellied into your control tower."

"Well, actually, no," said Blades. "Even half finished, our dock's big enough to accommodate you, as you'll see today. Don't forget, we anticipate a lot of traffic in the future. I'm puzzled why you didn't accept our invitation to use it."

"Doctrine!" Warburton clipped.

The sun came past the blind and touched the officers' faces with incandescence. Did some look startled, one or two open their mouths as if to protest and then snap them shut again at a warning look? Blades' spine tingled. *I never heard of any such doctrine*, he thought, *least of all when a North American ship drops in on a North American Station*.

"Is... er... is there some international crisis brewing?" he inquired.

"Why, no." Ellen straightened from the telescope. "I'd say relations have seldom been as good as they are now. What makes you ask?"

"Well, the reason your captain didn't—"

"Never mind," Warburton said. "We'd better continue the tour, if you please."

Blades filed his misgivings for later reference. He might have fretted immediately, but Ellen Ziska's presence forbade that. A sort of Pauli exclusion principle. One can't have two spins simultaneously, can one? He gave her his arm again. "Let's go on to Central Control," he proposed. "That's right behind the people section."

"You know, I can't get over it," she told him softly. "This miracle you've wrought. I've never been more proud of being human."

"Is this your first long space trip?"

"Yes, I was stationed at Port Colorado before the new Administration reshuffled armed service assignments."

"They did? How come?"

"I don't know. Well, that is, during the election campaign the Social Justice Party did talk a lot about old-line officers who were too hidebound to carry out modern policies effectively. But it sounded rather silly to me."

Warburton compressed his lips. "I do not believe it is proper for service officers to discuss political issues publicly," he said like a machine gun.

Ellen flushed. "S-sorry, commander."

Blades felt a helpless anger on her account. He wasn't sure why. What was she to him? He'd probably never see her again. A hell of an attractive target, to be sure; and after so much celibacy he was highly vulnerable; but did she really matter?

He turned his back on Warburton and his eyes on her—a five thousand percent improvement—and diverted her from her embarrassment by asking, "Are you from Colorado, then, Miss Ziska?"

"Oh, no. Toronto."

"How'd you happen to join the Navy, if I may make so bold?"

"Gosh, that's hard to say. But I guess mostly I felt so crowded at home. So, pigeonholed. The world seemed to be nothing but neat little pigeonholes."

"Uh-huh. Same here. I was also a square pigeon in a round hole." She laughed. "Luckily," he added, "Space is too big for compartments."

Her agreement lacked vigor. The Navy must have been a disappointment to her. But she couldn't very well say so in front of her shipmates.

Hm-m-m... if she could be gotten away from them—"How long will you be here?" he inquired. His pulse thuttered.

"We haven't been told," she said.

“Some work must be done on the missile launchers,” Warburton said. “That’s best carried out here, where extra facilities are available if we need them. Not that I expect we will.” He paused. “I hope we won’t interfere with your own operations.”

“Far from it.” Blades beamed at Ellen. “Or, more accurately, this kind of interference I don’t mind in the least.”

She blushed and her eyelids fluttered. Not that she was a fluffhead, he realized. But to avoid incidents, Navy regulations enforced an inhuman correctness between personnel of opposite sexes. After weeks in the black, meeting a man who could pay a compliment without risking court-martial must be like a shot of adrenalin. Better and better!

“Are you sure?” Warburton persisted. “For instance, won’t we be in the way when the next ship comes from Jupiter?”

“She’ll approach the opposite end of the asteroid,” Blades said. “Won’t stay long, either.”

“How long?”

“One watch, so the crew can relax a bit among those of us who’re off duty. It’d be a trifle longer if we didn’t happen to have an empty bag at the moment. But never very long. Even running under thrust the whole distance, Jupe’s a good ways off. They’ve no time to waste.”

“When is the next ship due?”

“The *Pallas Castle* is expected in the second watch from now.”

“Second watch. I see.” Warburton stalked on with a brooding expression on his Puritan face.

Blades might have speculated about that, but someone asked him why the Station depended on spin for weight. Why not put in an internal field generator, like a ship? Blades explained patiently that an Emett large enough to produce uniform pull through a volume as big as the Sword was rather expensive. “Eventually, when we’re a few megabucks ahead of the game—”

“Do you really expect to become rich?” Ellen asked. Her tone was awed. No Earthsider had that chance any more, except for the great corporations. “*Individually* rich?”

“We can’t fail to. I tell you, this is a frontier like nothing since the Conquistadores. We could very easily have been wiped out in the first couple of years—financially or physically—by any of a thousand accidents. But now we’re too far along for that. We’ve got it made, Jimmy and I.”

“What will you do with your wealth?”

“Live like an old-time sultan,” Blades grinned. Then, because it was true as well as because he wanted to shine in her eyes: “Mostly, though, we’ll go on to new things. There’s so much that needs to be done. Not simply more asteroid mines. We need farms; timber; parks; passenger and cargo liners; every sort of machine. I’d like to try getting at some of that water frozen in the Saturnian System. Altogether, I see no end to the jobs. It’s no good our depending on Earth for anything. Too expensive, too chancy. The Belt has to be made completely self-sufficient.”

“With a nice rakeoff for Sword Enterprises,” Gilbertson scoffed.

“Why, sure. Aren’t we entitled to some return?”

“Yes. But not so out of proportion as the Belt companies seem to expect. They’re only using natural resources that rightly belong to the people, and the accumulated skills and wealth of an entire society.”

“Huh! The People didn’t do anything with the Sword. Jimmy and I and our boys did. No Society was around here grubbing nickel-iron and riding out gravel storms; we were.”

“Let’s leave politics alone,” Warburton snapped. But it was mostly Ellen’s look of distress which shut Blades up.

To everybody’s relief, they reached Central Control about then. It was a complex of domes and rooms, crammed with more equipment than Blades could put a name to. Computers were in Chung’s line, not his. He wasn’t able to answer all of Warburton’s disconcertingly sharp questions.

But in a general way he could. Whirling through vacuum with a load of frail humans and intricate artifacts, the Sword must be at once machine, ecology, and unified organism. Everything had to mesh. A failure in the thermodynamic balance, a miscalculation in supply inventory, a few mirrors perturbed out of proper orbit, might spell Ragnarok. The chemical plant’s purifications and syntheses were already a network too large for the human mind to grasp as a whole, and it was still growing. Even where men could have taken charge, automation was cheaper, more reliable, less risky of lives. The computer system housed in Central Control was not only the brain, but the nerves and heart of the Sword.

“Entirely cryotronic, eh?” Warburton commented. “That seems to be the usual practice at the Stations. Why?”

“The least expensive type for us,” Blades answered. “There’s no problem in maintaining liquid helium here.”

Warburton’s gaze was peculiarly intense. “Cryotronic systems are vulnerable to magnetic and radiation disturbances.”

“Uh-huh. That’s one reason we don’t have a nuclear power plant. This far from the sun, we don’t get enough emission to worry about. The asteroid’s mass screens out what little may arrive. I know the TIMM system is used on ships; but if nothing else, the initial cost is more than we want to pay.”

“What’s TIMM?” inquired the *Altair*’s chaplain.

“Thermally Integrated Micro-Miniaturized,” Ellen said crisply. “Essentially, ultraminiaturized ceramic-to-metal-seal vacuum tubes running off thermionic generators. They’re immune to gamma ray and magnetic pulses, easily shielded against particule radiation, and economical of power.” She grinned. “Don’t tell me there’s nothing about them in Leviticus, Padre!”

“Very fine for a ship’s autopilot,” Blades agreed. “But as I said, we needn’t worry about rad or mag units here, we don’t mind sprawling a bit, and as for thermal efficiency, we want to waste some heat. It goes to maintain internal temperature.”

“In other words, efficiency depends on what you need to effish,” Ellen bantered. She grew grave once more and studied him for a while before she mused, “The same person who swung a pick, a couple of years ago, now deals with something as marvelous as this. . . .” He forgot about worrying.

But he remembered later, when the gig had left and Chung called him to his office. Avis came too, by request. As she entered, she asked why.

“You were visiting your folks Earthside last year,” Chung said. “Nobody else in the Station has been back as recently as that.”

“What can I tell you?”

“I’m not sure. Background, perhaps. The feel of the place. We don’t really know, out in the Belt, what’s going on there. The beamcast news is hardly a trickle. Besides, you have more common sense in your left little toe than that big mick yonder has on his entire copperplated head.”

They seated themselves in the cobwebby low-gee chairs around Chung's desk. Blades took out his pipe and filled the bowl with his tobacco ration for today. Wouldn't it be great, he thought dreamily, if this old briar turned out to be an Aladdin's lamp, and the smoke condensed into a blonde she-Canadian—?

"Wake up, will you?" Chung barked.

"Huh?" Blades started. "Oh. Sure. What's the matter? You look like a fish on Friday."

"Maybe with reason. Did you notice anything unusual with that party you were escorting?"

"Yes, indeed."

"What?"

"About one hundred seventy-five centimeters tall, yellow hair, blue eyes, and some of the smoothest fourth-order curves I ever—"

"Mike, stop that!" Avis sounded appalled. "This is serious."

"I agree. She'll be leaving in a few more watches."

The girl bit her lip. "You're too old for that mooncalf rot and you know it."

"Agreed again. I feel more like a bull." Blades made pawing motions on the desktop.

"There's a lady present," Chung said.

Blades saw that Avis had gone quite pale. "I'm sorry," he blurted. "I never thought... I mean, you've always seemed like—"

"One of the boys," she finished for him in a brittle tone. "Sure. Forget it. What's the problem, Jimmy?"

Chung folded his hands and stared at them. "I can't quite define that," he answered, word by careful word. "Perhaps I've simply gone spacedizzy. But when we called on Admiral Hulse, and later when he called on us, didn't you get the impression of, well, wariness? Didn't he seem to be watching and probing, every minute we were together?"

"I wouldn't call him a cheerful sort," Blades nodded. "Stiff as molasses on Pluto. But I suppose... supposed he's just naturally that way."

Chung shook his head. "It wasn't a normal standoffishness. You've heard me reminisce about the time I was on Vesta with the North American technical representative, when the Convention was negotiated."

"Yes, I've heard that story a few times," said Avis dryly.

“Remember, that was right after the Europa Incident. We’d come close to a space war—undeclared, but it would have been nasty. We were still close. Every delegate went to that conference cocked and primed.

“Hulse had the same manner.”

A silence fell. Blades said at length, “Well, come to think of it, he did ask some rather odd questions. He seemed to twist the conversation now and then, so he could find things out like our exact layout, emergency doctrine, and so forth. It didn’t strike me as significant, though.”

“Nor me,” Chung admitted. “Taken in isolation, it meant nothing. But these visitors today—Sure, most of them obviously didn’t suspect anything untoward. But that Liebknecht, now. Why was he so interested in Central Control? Nothing new or secret there. Yet he kept asking for details like the shielding factor of the walls.”

“So did Commander Warburton,” Blades remembered. “Also, he wanted to know exactly when the *Pallas* is due, how long she’ll stay... hm-m-m, yes, whether we have any radio linkage with the outside, like to Ceres or even the nearest Commission base—”

“Did you tell him that we don’t?” Avis asked sharply.

“Yes. Shouldn’t I have?”

“It scarcely makes any difference,” Chung said in a resigned voice. “As thoroughly as they went over the ground, they’d have seen what we do and do not have installed so far.”

He leaned forward. “Why are they hanging around?” he asked. “I was handed some story about overhauling the missile system.”

“Me, too,” Blades said.

“But you don’t consider a job complete till it’s been tested. And you don’t fire a test shot, even a dummy, this close to a Station. Besides, what could have gone wrong? I can’t see a ship departing Earth orbit for a long cruise without everything being in order. And they didn’t mention any meteorites, any kind of trouble, en route. Furthermore, why do the work here? The Navy yard’s at Ceres. We can’t spare them any decent amount of materials or tools or help.”

Blades frowned. His own half-formulated doubts shouldered to the fore, which was doubly unpleasant after he’d been considering Ellen Ziska.

“They tell me the international situation at home is OK,” he offered.

Avis nodded. “What newsfaxes we get in the mail indicate as much,” she said. “So why this hanky-panky?” After a moment, in a changed voice:

“Jimmy, you begin to scare me a little.”

“I scare myself,” Chung said.

“Every morning when you debeard,” Blades said; but his heart wasn’t in it. He shook himself and protested: “Damnation, they’re our own countrymen. We’re engaged in a lawful business. Why should they do anything to us?”

“Maybe Avis can throw some light on that,” Chung suggested.

The girl twisted her fingers together. “Not me,” she said. “I’m no politician.”

“But you were home not so long ago. You talked with people, read the news, watched the 3V. Can’t you at least give an impression?”

“N-no—Well, of course the preliminary guns of the election campaign were already being fired. The Social Justice Party was talking a lot about ... oh, it seemed so ridiculous that I didn’t pay much attention.”

“They talked about how the government had been pouring billions and billions of dollars into space, while overpopulation produced crying needs in America’s back yard,” Chung said. “We know that much, even in the Belt. We know the appropriations are due to be cut, now the Essjays are in. So what?”

“We don’t need a subsidy any longer,” Blades remarked. “It’d help a lot, but we can get along without if we have to, and personally, I prefer that. Less government money means less government control.”

“Sure,” Avis said. “There was more than that involved, however. The Essjays were complaining about the small return on the investment. Not enough minerals coming back to Earth.”

“Well, for Jupiter’s sake,” Blades exclaimed, “what do they expect? We have to build up our capabilities first.”

“They even said, some of them, that enough reward never would be gotten. That under existing financial policies, the Belt would go in for its own expansion, use nearly everything it produced for itself and export only a trickle to America. I had to explain to several of my parents’ friends that I wasn’t really a socially irresponsible capitalist.”

“Is that all the information you have?” Chung asked when she fell silent.

“I... I suppose so. Everything was so vague. No dramatic events. More of an atmosphere than a concrete thing.”

“Still, you confirm my own impression,” Chung said. Blades jerked his undisciplined imagination back from the idea of a Thing, with bug eyes and tentacles, cast in reinforced concrete, and listened as his partner summed up:

“The popular feeling at home has turned against private enterprise. You can hardly call a corporate monster like Systemic Developments a private enterprise! The new President and Congress share that mood. We can expect to see it manifested in changed laws and regulations. But what has this got to do with a battleship parked a couple of hundred kilometers from us?”

“If the government doesn’t want the asterites to develop much further—” Blades bit hard on his pipestem. “They must know we have a caviar mine here. We’ll be the only city in this entire sector.”

“But we’re still a baby,” Avis said. “We won’t be important for years to come. Who’d have it in for a baby?”

“Besides, we’re Americans, too,” Chung said. “If that were a foreign ship, the story might be different—Wait a minute! Could they be thinking of establishing a new base here?”

“The Convention wouldn’t allow,” said Blades.

“Treaties can always be renegotiated, or even denounced. But first you have to investigate quietly, find out if it’s worth your while.”

“Hoo hah, what lovely money that’d mean!”

“And lovely bureaucrats crawling out of every file cabinet,” Chung said grimly. “No, thank you. We’ll fight any such attempt to the last lawyer. We’ve got a good basis, too, in our charter. If the suit is tried on Ceres, as I believe it has to be, we’ll get a sympathetic court as well.”

“Unless they ring in an Earthside judge,” Avis warned.

“Yeah, that’s possible. Also, they could spring proceedings on us without notice. We’ve got to find out in advance, so we can prepare. Any chance of pumping some of those officers?”

“’Fraid not,” Avis said. “The few who’d be in the know are safely back on shipboard.”

“We could invite ’em here individually,” said Blades. “As a matter of fact, I already have a date with Lieutenant Ziska.”

“What?” Avis’ mouth fell open.

“Yep,” Blades said complacently. “End of the next watch, so she can observe the *Pallas* arriving. I’m to fetch her on a scooter.” He blew a fat smoke ring. “Look, Jimmy, can you keep everybody off the porch for a while then? Starlight, privacy, soft music on the piccolo—who knows what I might find out?”

“You won’t get anything from *her*,” Avis spat. “No secrets or, or anything.”

“Still, I look forward to making the attempt. C’mon, pal, pass the word. I’ll do as much for you sometime.”

“Times like that never seem to come for me,” Chung groaned.

“Oh, let him play around with his suicide blonde,” Avis said furiously. “We others have work to do. I... I’ll tell you what, Jimmy. Let’s not eat in the mess tonight. I’ll draw our rations and fix us something special in your cabin.”

A scooter was not exactly the ideal steed for a knight to convey his lady. It amounted to little more than three saddles and a locker, set atop an accumulator-powered gyrogravitic engine, sufficient to lift you off an asteroid and run at low acceleration. There were no navigating instruments. You locked the autopilot’s radar-gravitic sensors onto your target object and it took you there, avoiding any bits of debris which might pass near; but you must watch the distance indicator and press the deceleration switch in time. If the ’pilot was turned off, free maneuver became possible, but that was a dangerous thing to try before you were almost on top of your destination. Stereoscopic vision fails beyond six or seven meters, and the human organism isn’t equipped to gauge cosmic momenta.

Nevertheless, Ellen was enchanted. “This is like a dream,” her voice murmured in Blades’ earplug. “The whole universe, on every side of us. I could almost reach out and pluck those stars.”

“You must have trained in powered spacesuits at the Academy,” he said for lack of a more poetic rejoinder.

“Yes, but that’s not the same. We had to stay near Luna’s night side, to be safe from solar particles, and it bit a great chunk out of the sky. And then everything was so—regulated, disciplined—we did what we were ordered to do, and that was that. Here I feel free. You can’t imagine how free.”

Hastily: “Do you use this machine often?”

“Well, yes, we have about twenty scooters at the Station. They’re the most convenient way of flitting with a load: out to the mirrors to change accumulators, for instance, or across to one of the companion rocks where we’re digging some ores that the Sword doesn’t have. That kind of work.” Blades would frankly rather have had her behind him on a motorskimmer, hanging on as they careened through a springtime countryside. He was glad when they reached the main forward air lock and debarked.

He was still gladder when the suits were off. Lieutenant Ziska in dress uniform was stunning, but Ellen in civvies, a fluffy low-cut blouse and close-fitting slacks, was a hydrogen blast. He wanted to roll over and pant, but settled for saying, “Welcome back” and holding her hand rather longer than necessary.

With a shy smile, she gave him a package. “I drew this before leaving,” she said. “I thought, well, your life is so austere—”

“A demi of Sandeman,” he said reverently. “I won’t tell you you shouldn’t have, but I will tell you you’re a sweet girl.”

“No, really.” She flushed. “After we’ve put you to so much trouble.”

“Let’s go crack this,” he said. “The *Pallas* has called in, but she won’t be visible for a while yet.”

They made their way to the verandah, picking up a couple of glasses enroute. Bless his envious heart, Jimmy had warned the other boys off as requested. *I hope Avis cooks him a Cordon Bleu dinner*, Blades thought. *Nice kid, Avis, if she’d quit trying to ... what? ... mother me?* He forgot about her, with Ellen to seat by the rail.

The Milky Way turned her hair frosty and glowed in her eyes. Blades poured the port with much ceremony and raised his glass. “Here’s to your frequent return,” he said.

Her pleasure dwindled a bit. “I don’t know if I should drink to that. We aren’t likely to be back, ever.”

“Drink anyway. Gling, glang, gloria!” The rims tinkled together. “After all,” said Blades, “this isn’t the whole universe. We’ll both be getting around. See you on Luna?”

“Maybe.”

He wondered if he was pushing matters too hard. She didn’t look at ease. “Oh, well,” he said, “if nothing else, this has been a grand break in the monotony for us. I don’t wish the Navy ill, but if trouble had to develop, I’m thankful it developed here.”

“Yes—”

“How’s the repair work progressing? Slowly, I hope.”

“I don’t know.”

“You should have some idea, being in QM.”

“No supplies have been drawn.”

Blades stiffened.

“What’s the matter?” Ellen sounded alarmed.

“Huh?” *A fine conspirator I make, if she can see my emotions on me in neon capitals!* “Nothing. Nothing. It just seemed a little strange, you know. Not taking any replacement units.”

“I understand the work is only a matter of making certain adjustments.”

“Then they should’ve finished a lot quicker, shouldn’t they?”

“Please,” she said unhappily. “Let’s not talk about it. I mean, there are such things as security regulations.”

Blades gave up on that tack. But Chung’s idea might be worth probing a little. “Sure,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.” He took another sip as he hunted for suitable words. A beautiful girl, a golden wine ... and vice versa ... why couldn’t he simply relax and enjoy himself? Did he have to go fretting about what was probably a perfectly harmless conundrum? ... Yes. However, recreation might still combine with business.

“Permit me to daydream,” he said, leaning close to her. “The Navy’s going to establish a new base here, and the *Altair* will be assigned to it.”

“Daydream indeed!” she laughed, relieved to get back to a mere flirtation. “Ever hear about the Convention of Vesta?”

“Treaties can be renegotiated,” Blades plagiarized.

“What do we need an extra base for? Especially since the government plans to spend such large sums on social welfare. They certainly don’t want to start an arms race besides.”

Blades nodded. *Jimmy's notion did seem pretty thin*, he thought with a slight chill, *and now I guess it's completely whiffed*. Mostly to keep the conversation going, he shrugged and said, "My partner—and me, too, aside from the privilege of your company—wouldn't have wanted it anyhow. Not that we're unpatriotic, but there are plenty of other potential bases, and we'd rather keep government agencies out of here."

"Can you, these days?"

"Pretty much. We're under a new type of charter, as a private partnership. The first such charter in the Belt, as far as I know, though there'll be more in the future. The Bank of Ceres financed us. We haven't taken a nickel of federal money."

"Is that possible?"

"Just barely. I'm no economist, but I can see how it works. Money represents goods and labor. Hitherto those have been in mighty short supply out here. Government subsidies made up the difference, enabling us to buy from Earth. But now the asterites have built up enough population and industry that they have some capital surplus of their own, to invest in projects like this."

"Even so, frankly, I'm surprised that two men by themselves could get such a loan. It must be huge. Wouldn't the bank rather have lent the money to some corporation?"

"To tell the truth, we have friends who pulled wires for us. Also, it was done partly on ideological grounds. A lot of asterites would like to see more strictly homegrown enterprises, not committed to anyone on Earth. That's the only way we can grow. Otherwise our profits—our net production, that is—will continue to be siphoned off for the mother country's benefit."

"Well," Ellen said with some indignation, "that was the whole reason for planting asteroid colonies. You can't expect us to set you up in business, at enormous cost to ourselves—things we might have done at home—and get nothing but 'Ta' in return."

"Never fear, we'll repay you with interest," Blades said. "But whatever we make from our own work, over and above that, ought to stay here with us."

She grew angrier. "Your kind of attitude is what provoked the voters to elect Social Justice candidates."

"Nice name, that," mused Blades. "Who can be against social justice? But you know, I think I'll go into politics myself. I'll organize the North

American Motherhood Party.”

“You wouldn’t be so flippant if you’d go see how people have to live back there.”

“As bad as here? *Whew!*”

“Nonsense. You know that isn’t true. But bad enough. And you aren’t going to stick in these conditions. Only a few hours ago, you were bragging about the millions you intend to make.”

“Millions *and* millions, if my strength holds out,” leered Blades, thinking of the alley in Aresopolis. But he decided that that was then and Ellen was now, and what had started as a promising little party was turning into a dismal argument about politics.

“Let’s not fight,” he said. “We’ve got different orientations, and we’d only make each other mad. Let’s discuss our next bottle instead... at the Coq d’Or in Paris, shall we say? Or Morraine’s in New York.”

She calmed down, but her look remained troubled. “You’re right, we are different,” she said low. “Isolated, living and working under conditions we can hardly imagine on Earth—and you can’t really imagine our problems—yes, you’re becoming another people. I hope it will never go so far that—No. I don’t want to think about it.” She drained her glass and held it out for a refill, smiling. “Very well, sir, when do you next plan to be in Paris?”

An exceedingly enjoyable while later, the time came to go watch the *Pallas Castle* maneuver in. In fact, it had somehow gotten past that time, and they were late; but they didn’t hurry their walk aft. Blades took Ellen’s hand; and she raised no objection. Schoolboyish, no doubt—however, he had reached the reluctant conclusion that for all his dishonorable intentions, this affair wasn’t likely to go beyond the schoolboy stage. Not that he wouldn’t keep trying.

As they glided through the refining and synthesizing section, which filled the broad half of the asteroid, the noise of pumps and regulators rose until it throbbed in their bones. Ellen gestured at one of the pipes which crossed the corridor overhead. “Do you really handle that big a volume at a time?” she asked above the racket.

“No,” he said. “Didn’t I explain before? The pipe’s thick because it’s so heavily armored.”

“I’m glad you don’t use that dreadful word ‘cladded.’ But why the armor? High pressure?”

“Partly. Also, there’s an inertrans lining. Jupiter gas is hellishly reactive at room temperature. The metallic complexes especially; but think what a witch’s brew the stuff is in every respect. Once it’s been refined, of course, we have less trouble. That particular pipe is carrying it raw.”

They left the noise behind and passed on to the approach control dome at the receptor end. The two men on duty glanced up and immediately went back to their instruments. Radio voices were staccato in the air. Blades led Ellen to an observation port.

She drew a sharp breath. Outside, the broken ground fell away to space and the stars. The ovoid that was the ship hung against them, lit by the hidden sun, a giant even at her distance but dwarfed by the balloon she towed. As that bubble tried ponderously to rotate, rainbow gleams ran across it, hiding and then revealing the constellations. Here, on the asteroid’s axis, there was no weight, and one moved with underwater smoothness, as if disembodied. “Oh, a fairy tale,” Ellen sighed.

Four sparks flashed out of the boat blisters along the ship’s hull. “Scoopships,” Blades told her. “They haul the cargo in, being so much more maneuverable. Actually, though, the mother vessel is going to park her load in orbit, while those boys bring in another one ... see, there it comes into sight. We still haven’t got the capacity to keep up with our deliveries.”

“How many are there? Scoopships, that is.”

“Twenty, but you don’t need more than four for this job. They’ve got terrific power. Have to, if they’re to dive from orbit down into the Jovian atmosphere, ram themselves full of gas, and come back. There they go.”

The *Pallas Castle* was wrestling the great sphere she had hauled from Jupiter into a stable path computed by Central Control. Meanwhile the scoopships, small only by comparison with her, locked onto the other balloon as it drifted close. Energy poured into their drive fields. Spiraling downward, transparent globe and four laboring spacecraft vanished behind the horizon. The *Pallas* completed her own task, disengaged her towbars, and dropped from view, headed for the dock.

The second balloon rose again, like a huge glass moon on the opposite side of the Sword. Still it grew in Ellen’s eyes, kilometer by kilometer of approach. So much mass wasn’t easily handled, but the braking curve looked disdainfully smooth. Presently she could make out the scoopships in

detail, elongated teardrops with the intake gates yawning in the blunt forward end, cockpit canopies raised very slightly above.

Instructions rattled from the men in the dome. The balloon veered clumsily toward the one free receptor. A derricklike structure released one end of a cable, which streamed skyward. Things that Ellen couldn't quite follow in this tricky light were done by the four tugs, mechanisms of their own extended to make their tow fast to the cable.

They did not cast loose at once, but continued to drag a little, easing the impact of centrifugal force. Nonetheless a slight shudder went through the dome as slack was taken up. Then the job was over. The scoopships let go and flitted off to join their mother vessel. The balloon was winched inward. Spacesuited men moved close, preparing to couple valves together.

"And eventually," Blades said into the abrupt quietness, "that cargo will become food, fabric, vitryl, plastiboard, reagents, fuels, a hundred different things. That's what we're here for."

"I've never seen anything so wonderful," Ellen said raptly. He laid an arm around her waist.

The intercom chose that precise moment to blare: "Attention! Emergency! All hands to emergency stations! Blades, get to Chung's office on the double! All hands to emergency stations!"

Blades was running before the siren had begun to howl.

Rear Admiral Barclay Hulse had come in person. He stood as if on parade, towering over Chung. The asterite was red with fury. Avis Page crouched in a corner, her eyes terrified.

Blades barreled through the doorway and stopped hardly short of a collision. "What's the matter?" he puffed.

"Plenty!" Chung snarled. "These incredible thumble-fumbed oafs—" His voice broke. *When he gets mad, it means something!*

Hulse nailed Blades with a glance. "Good day, sir," he clipped. "I have had to report a regrettable accident which will require you to evacuate the Station. Temporarily, I hope."

"Huh?"

"As I told Mr. Chung and Miss Page, a nuclear missile has escaped us. If it explodes, the radiation will be lethal, even in the heart of the asteroid."

"What... what—" Blades could only gobble at him.

"Fortunately, the *Pallas Castle* is here. She can take your whole complement aboard and move to a safe distance while we search for the

object.”

“How the *devil*?”

Hulse allowed himself a look of exasperation. “Evidently I’ll have to repeat myself to you. Very well. You know we have had to make some adjustments on our launchers. What you did not know was the reason. Under the circumstances, I think it’s permissible to tell you that several of them have a new and secret, experimental control system. One of our missions on this cruise was to carry out field tests. Well, it turned out that the system is still full of, ah, bugs. Gunnery Command has had endless trouble with it, has had to keep tinkering the whole way from Earth.

“Half an hour ago, while Commander Warburton was completing a reassembly—lower ranks aren’t allowed in the test turrets—something happened. I can’t tell you my guess as to what, but if you want to imagine that a relay got stuck, that will do for practical purposes. A missile was released under power. Not a dummy—the real thing. And release automatically arms the war head.”

The news was like a hammerblow. Blades spoke an obscenity. Sweat sprang forth under his arms and trickled down his ribs.

“No such thing was expected,” Hulse went on. “It’s an utter disaster, and the designers of the system aren’t likely to get any more contracts. But as matters were, no radar fix was gotten on it, and it was soon too far away for gyrogravitic pulse detection. The thrust vector is unknown. It could be almost anywhere now.

“Well, naval missiles are programmed to reverse acceleration if they haven’t made a target within a given time. This one should be back in less than six hours. If it first detects our ship, everything is all right. It has optical recognition circuits that identify any North American warcraft by type, disarm the war head, and steer it home. But, if it first comes within fifty kilometers of some other mass—like this asteroid or one of the companion rocks—it will detonate. We’ll make every effort to intercept, but space is big. You’ll have to take your people to a safe distance. They can come back even after a blast, of course. There’s no concussion in vacuum, and the fireball won’t reach here. It’s principally an antipersonnel weapon. But you must not be within the lethal radius of radiation.”

“The hell we can come back!” Avis cried.

“I beg your pardon?” Hulse said.

“You imbecile! Don’t you know Central Control here is cryotronic?”

Hulse did not flicker an eyelid. “So it is,” he said expressionlessly. “I had forgotten.”

Blades mastered his own shock enough to grate: “Well, we sure haven’t. If that thing goes off, the gamma burst will kick up so many minority carriers in the transistors that the *p*-type crystals will act *n*-type, and the *n*-type act *p*-type, for a whole couple of microseconds. Every one of ’em will flip simultaneously! The computers’ memory and program data systems will be scrambled beyond hope of reorganization.”

“Magnetic pulse, too,” Chung said. “The fireball plasma will be full of inhomogeneities moving at several percent of light speed. Their electromagnetic output, hitting our magnetic core units, will turn them from super to ordinary conduction. Same effect, total computer amnesia. We haven’t got enough shielding against it. Your TIMM systems can take that kind of a beating. Ours can’t!”

“Very regrettable,” Hulse said. “You’d have to reprogram everything—”

“Reprogram what?” Avis retorted. Tears started forth in her eyes. “We’ve told you what sort of stuff our chemical plant is handling. We can’t shut it down on that short notice. It’ll run wild. There’ll be sodium explosions, hydrogen and organic combustion, n-n-nothing left here but wreckage!”

Hulse didn’t unbend a centimeter. “I offer my most sincere apologies. If actual harm does occur, I’m sure the government will indemnify you. And, of course, my command will furnish what supplies may be needed for the *Pallas Castle* to transport you to the nearest Commission base. At the moment, though, you can do nothing but evacuate and hope we will be able to intercept the missile.”

Blades knotted his fists. A sudden comprehension rushed up in him and he bellowed, “There isn’t going to be an interception! This wasn’t an accident!”

Hulse backed a step and drew himself even straighter. “Don’t get overwrought,” he advised.

“You louse-bitten, egg-sucking, bloated faggot-porter! How stupid do you think we are? As stupid as your Essjay bosses? By heaven, we’re staying! Then see if you have the nerve to murder a hundred people!”

“Mike... Mike—” Avis caught his arm.

Hulse turned to Chung. “I’ll overlook that unseemly outburst,” he said. “But in light of my responsibilities and under the provisions of the Constitution, I am hereby putting this asteroid under martial law. You will have all personnel aboard the *Pallas Castle* and at a minimum distance of a thousand kilometers within four hours of this moment, or be subject to arrest and trial. Now I have to get back and commence operations. The *Altair* will maintain radio contact with you. Good day.” He bowed curtly, spun on his heel, and clacked from the room.

Blades started to charge after him. Chung caught his free arm. Together he and Avis dragged him to a stop. He stood cursing the air ultraviolet until Ellen entered.

“I couldn’t keep up with you,” she panted. “What’s happened, Mike?”

The strength drained from Blades. He slumped into a chair and covered his face.

Chung explained in a few harsh words. “Oh-h-h,” Ellen gasped. She went to Blades and laid her hands on his shoulders. “My poor Mike!”

After a moment she looked at the others. “I should report back, of course,” she said, “but I won’t be able to before the ship accelerates. So I’ll have to stay with you till afterward. Miss Page, we left about half a bottle of wine on the verandah. I think it would be a good idea if you went and got it.”

Avis bridled. “And why not you?”

“This is no time for personalities,” Chung said. “Go on, Avis. You can be thinking what records and other paper we should take, while you’re on your way. I’ve got to organize the evacuation. As for Miss Ziska, well, Mike needs somebody to pull him out of his dive.”

“Her?” Avis wailed, and fled.

Chung sat down and flipped his intercom to Phone Central. “Get me Captain Janichevski aboard the *Pallas*,” he ordered. “Hello, Adam? About that general alarm—”

Blades raised a haggard countenance toward Ellen's. "You better clear out, along with the women and any men who don't want to stay," he said. "But I think most of them will take the chance. They're on a profit-sharing scheme, they stand to lose too much if the place is ruined."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a gamble, but I don't believe Hulse's sealed orders extend to murder. If enough of us stay put, he'll have to catch that thing. He jolly well knows its exact trajectory."

"You forget we're under martial law," Chung said, aside to him. "If we don't go freely, he'll land some PP's and march us off at gunpoint. There isn't any choice. We've had the course."

"I don't understand," Ellen said shakily.

Chung went back to his intercom. Blades fumbled out his pipe and rolled it empty between his hands. "That missile was shot off on purpose," he said.

"What? No, you must be sick, that's impossible!"

"I realize you didn't know about it. Only three or four officers have been told. The job had to be done very, very secretly, or there'd be a scandal, maybe an impeachment. But it's still sabotage."

She shrank from him. "You're not making sense."

"Their own story doesn't make sense. It's ridiculous. A new missile system wouldn't be sent on a field trial clear to the Belt before it'd had enough tests closer to home to get the worst bugs out. A warhead missile wouldn't be stashed anywhere near something so unreliable, let alone be put under its control. The testing ship wouldn't hang around a civilian Station while her gunnery chief tinkered. And Hulse, Warburton, Liebknecht, they were asking in *such* detail about how radiation-proof we are."

"I can't believe it. Nobody will."

"Not back home. Communication with Earth is so sparse and garbled. The public will only know there was an accident; who'll give a hoot about the details? We couldn't even prove anything in an asteroid court. The Navy would say, 'Classified information!' and that'd stop the proceedings cold. Sure, there'll be a board of inquiry—composed of naval officers. Probably honorable men, too. But what are they going to believe, the sworn word of their Goddard House colleague, or the rantings of an asterite bum?"

"Mike, I know this is terrible for you, but you've let it go to your head." Ellen laid a hand over his. "Suppose the worst happens. You'll be compensated for your loss."

“Yeah. To the extent of our personal investment. The Bank of Ceres still has nearly all the money that was put in. We didn’t figure to have them paid off for another ten years. They, or their insurance carrier, will get the indemnity. And after our fiasco, they won’t make us a new loan. They were just barely talked into it, the first time around. I daresay Systemic Developments will make them a nice juicy offer to take this job over.”

Ellen colored. She stamped her foot. “You’re talking like a paranoiac. Do you really believe the government of North America would send a battleship clear out here to do you dirt?”

“Not the whole government. A few men in the right positions is all that’s necessary. I don’t know if Hulse was bribed or talked into this. But probably he agreed as a duty. He’s the prim type.”

“A duty—to destroy a North American business?”

Chung finished at the intercom in time to answer: “Not permanent physical destruction, Miss Ziska. As Mike suggested, some corporation will doubtless inherit the Sword and repair the damage. But a private, purely asterite business ... yes, I’m afraid Mike’s right. We are the target.”

“In mercy’s name, why?”

“From the highest motives, of course,” Chung sneered bitterly. “You know what the Social Justice Party thinks of private capitalism. What’s more important, though, is that the Sword is the first Belt undertaking not tied to Mother Earth’s apron strings. We have no commitments to anybody back there. We can sell our output wherever we like. It’s notorious that the asterites are itching to build up their own self-sufficient industries. Quite apart from sentiment, we can make bigger profits in the Belt than back home, especially when you figure the cost of sending stuff in and out of Earth’s gravitational well. So certainly we’d be doing most of our business out here.

“Our charter can’t simply be revoked. First a good many laws would have to be revised, and that’s politically impossible. There is still a lot of individualist sentiment in North America, as witness the fact that businesses do get launched and that the Essjays did have a hard campaign to get elected. What the new government wants is something like the Eighteenth Century English policy toward America. Keep the colonies as a source of

raw materials and as a market for manufactured goods, but don't let them develop a domestic industry. You can't come right out and say that, but you can let the situation develop naturally.

"Only ... here the Sword is, obviously bound to grow rich and expand in every direction. If we're allowed to develop, to reinvest our profits, we'll become the nucleus of independent asterite enterprise. If, on the other hand, we're wiped out by an unfortunate accident, there's no nucleus; and a small change in the banking laws is all that's needed to prevent others from getting started. Q.E.D."

"I daresay Hulse does think he's doing his patriotic duty," said Blades. "He wants to guarantee North America our natural resources—in the long run, maybe, our allegiance. If he has to commit sabotage, too bad, but it won't cost him any sleep."

"No!" Ellen almost screamed.

Chung sagged in his chair. "We're very neatly trapped," he said like an old man. "I don't see any way out. Think you can get to work now, Mike? You can assign group leaders for the evacuation—"

Blades jumped erect. "I can fight!" he growled.

"With what? Can openers?"

"You mean you're going to lie down and let them break us?"

Avis came back. She thrust the bottle into Blades' hands as he paced the room. "Here you are," she said in a distant voice.

He held it out toward Ellen. "Have some," he invited.

"Not with you ... you subversive!"

Avis brightened noticeably, took the bottle and raised it. "Then here's to victory," she said, drank, and passed it to Blades.

He started to gulp; but the wine was too noble, and he found himself savoring its course down his throat. *Why, he thought vaguely, do people always speak with scorn about Dutch courage? The Dutch have real guts. They fought themselves free of Spain and free of the ocean itself; when the French or Germans came, they made the enemy sea their ally—*

The bottle fell from his grasp. In the weak acceleration, it hadn't hit the floor when Avis rescued it. "Gimme that, you big butterfingers," she exclaimed. Her free hand clasped his arm. "Whatever happens, Mike," she said to him, "we're not quitting."

Still Blades stared beyond her. His fists clenched and unclenched. The noise of his breathing filled the room. Chung looked around in

bewilderment; Ellen watched with waxing horror; Avis' eyes kindled.

"Holy smoking seegars," Blades whispered at last. "I really think we can swing it."

Captain Janichevski recoiled. "You're out of your skull!"

"Probably," said Blades. "Fun, huh?"

"You can't do this."

"We can try."

"Do you know what you're talking about? Insurrection, that's what. Quite likely piracy. Even if your scheme worked, you'd spend the next ten years in Rehab—at least."

"Maybe, provided the matter ever came to trial. But it won't."

"That's what you think. You're asking me to compound the felony, and misappropriate the property of my owners to boot." Janichevski shook his head. "Sorry, Mike. I'm sorry as hell about this mess. But I won't be party to making it worse."

"In other words," Blades replied, "you'd rather be party to sabotage. I'm proposing an act of legitimate self-defense."

"If there actually is a conspiracy to destroy the Station."

"Adam, you're a spaceman. You know how the Navy operates. Can you swallow that story about a missile getting loose by accident?"

Janichevski bit his lip. The sounds from outside filled the captain's cabin, voices, footfalls, whirr of machines and clash of doors, as the *Pallas Castle* readied for departure. Blades waited.

"You may be right," said Janichevski at length, wretchedly. "Though why Hulse should jeopardize his career—"

"He's not. There's a scapegoat groomed back home, you can be sure. Like some company that'll be debarred from military contracts for a while... and get nice fat orders in other fields. I've kicked around the System enough to know how that works."

"If you're wrong, though... if this is an honest blunder... then you risk committing treason."

"Yeah. I'll take the chance."

"Not I. No. I've got a family to support," Janichevski said.

Blades regarded him bleakly. "If the Essjays get away with this stunt, what kind of life will your family be leading, ten years from now? It's not simply that we'll be high-class peons in the Belt. But tied hand and foot to a shortsighted government, how much progress will we be able to make?"

Other countries have colonies out here too, remember, and some of them are already giving their people a freer hand than we've got. Do you want the Asians, or the Russians, or even the Europeans, to take over the asteroids?"

"I can't make policy."

"In other words, mama knows best. Believe, obey, anything put out by some bureaucrat who never set foot beyond Luna. Is that your idea of citizenship?"

"You're putting a mighty fine gloss on bailing yourself out!" Janichevski flared.

"Sure, I'm no idealist. But neither am I a slave," Blades hesitated.

"We've been friends too long, Adam, for me to try bribing you. But if worst comes to worst, we'll cover for you ... somehow ... and if contrariwise we win, then we'll soon be hiring captains for our own ships and you'll get the best offer any spaceman ever got."

"No. Scram. I've work to do."

Blades braced himself. "I didn't want to say this. But I've already informed a number of my men. They're as mad as I am. They're waiting in the terminal. A monkey wrench or a laser torch makes a pretty fair weapon. We can take over by force. That'll leave you legally in the clear. But with so many witnesses around, you'll have to prefer charges against us later on."

Janichevski began to sweat.

"We'll be sent up," said Blades. "But it will still have been worth it."

"Is it really that important to you?"

"Yes. I admit I'm no crusader. But this is a matter of principle."

Janichevski stared at the big red-haired man for a long while. Suddenly he stiffened. "OK. On that account, and no other, I'll go along with you."

Blades wobbled on his feet, near collapse with relief. "Good man!" he croaked.

"But I will not have any of my officers or crew involved."

Blades rallied and answered briskly, "You needn't. Just issue orders that my boys are to have access to the scoopships. They can install the equipment, jockey the boats over to the full balloons, and even couple them on."

Janichevski's fears had vanished once he made his decision, but now a certain doubt registered. "That's a pretty skilled job."

“These are pretty skilled men. It isn’t much of a maneuver, not like making a Jovian sky dive.”

“Well, OK, I’ll take your word for their ability. But suppose the *Altair* spots those boats moving around?”

“She’s already several hundred kilometers off, and getting farther away, running a search curve which I’m betting my liberty—and my honor; I certainly don’t want to hurt my own country’s Navy—I’m betting that search curve is guaranteed not to find the missile in time. They’ll spot the *Pallas* as you depart—oh, yes, our people will be aboard as per orders—but no finer detail will show in so casual an observation.”

“Again, I’ll take your word. What else can I do to help?”

“Nothing you weren’t doing before. Leave the piratics to us. I’d better get back.” Blades extended his hand. “I haven’t got the words to thank you, Adam.”

Janichevski accepted the shake. “No reason for thanks. You dragooned me.” A grin crossed his face. “I must confess though, I’m not sorry you did.”

Blades left. He found his gang in the terminal, two dozen engineers and rockjacks clumped tautly together.

“What’s the word?” Carlos Odonaju shouted.

“Clear track,” Blades said. “Go right aboard.”

“Good. Fine. I always wanted to do something vicious and destructive,” Odonaju laughed.

“The idea is to prevent destruction,” Blades reminded him, and proceeded toward the office.

Avis met him in Corridor Four. Her freckled countenance was distorted by a scowl. “Hey, Mike, wait a minute,” she said, low and hurriedly. “Have you seen La Ziska?”

“The lieutenant? Why, no. I left her with you, remember, hoping you could calm her down.”

“Uh-huh. She was incandescent mad. Called us a pack of bandits and— But then she started crying. Seemed to break down completely. I took her to your cabin and went back to help Jimmy. Only, when I checked there a minute ago, she was gone.”

“What? Where?”

“How should I know? But that she-devil’s capable of anything to wreck our chances.”

“You’re not being fair to her. She’s got an oath to keep.”

“All right,” said Avis sweetly. “Far be it from me to prevent her fulfilling her obligations. Afterward she may even write you an occasional letter. I’m sure that’ll brighten your Rehab cell no end.”

“What can she do?” Blades argued, with an uneasy sense of whistling in the dark. “She can’t get off the asteroid without a scooter, and I’ve already got Sam’s gang working on all the scooters.”

“Is there no other possibility? The radio shack?”

“With a man on duty there. That’s out.” Blades patted the girl’s arm.

“OK, I’ll get back to work. But... I’ll be so glad when this is over, Mike!”

Looking into the desperate brown eyes, Blades felt a sudden impulse to kiss their owner. But no, there was too much else to do. Later, perhaps. He cocked a thumb upward. “Carry on.”

Too bad about Ellen, he thought as he continued toward his office. What an awful waste, to make a permanent enemy of someone with her kind of looks. And personality—Come off that stick, you clabberhead! She’s probably the marryin’ type anyway.

In her shoes, though, what would I do? Not much; they’d pinch my feet. But—damnation, Avis is right. She’s not safe to have running around loose. The radio shack? Sparks is not one of the few who’ve been told the whole story and co-opted into the plan. She could—

Blades cursed, whirled, and ran.

His way was clear. Most of the men were still in their dorms, preparing to leave. He traveled in huge low-gravity leaps.

The radio shack rose out of the surface near the verandah. Blades tried the door. It didn’t budge. A chill went through him. He backed across the corridor and charged. The door was only plastiboard—

He hit with a thud and a grunt, and rebounded with a numbed shoulder. But it looked so easy for the cops on 3V!

No time to figure out the delicate art of forcible entry. He hurled himself against the panel, again and again, heedless of the pain that struck in flesh and bone. When the door finally, splinteringly gave way, he stumbled clear

across the room beyond, fetched up against an instrument console, recovered his balance, and gaped.

The operator lay on the floor, swearing in a steady monotone. He had been efficiently bound with his own blouse and trousers, which revealed his predilection for maroon shorts with zebra stripes. There was a lump on the back of his head, and a hammer lay close by. Ellen must have stolen the tool and come in here with the thing behind her back. The operator would have had no reason to suspect her.

She had not left the sender's chair, not even while the door was under attack. Only a carrier beam connected the Sword with the *Altair*. She continued doggedly to fumble with dials and switches, trying to modulate it and raise the ship.

"Praises be ... you haven't had advanced training ... in radio," Blades choked. "That's ... a long-range set ... pretty special system—" He weaved toward her. "Come along, now."

She spat an unladylike refusal.

Theoretically, Blades should have enjoyed the tussle that followed. But he was in poor shape at the outset. And he was a good deal worse off by the time he got her pinioned.

"OK," he wheezed. "Will you come quietly?"

She didn't deign to answer, unless you counted her butting him in the nose. He had to yell for help to frogmarch her aboard ship.

"Pallas Castle calling NASS Altair. Come in, Altair."

The great ovoid swung clear in space, among a million cold stars. The asteroid had dwindled out of sight. A radio beam flickered across emptiness. Within the hull, the crew and a hundred refugees sat jammed together. The air was thick with their breath and sweat and waiting.

Blades and Chung, seated by the transmitter, felt another kind of thickness, the pull of the internal field. Earth-normal weight dragged down every movement; the enclosed cabin began to feel suffocatingly small. *We'd get used to it again pretty quickly*, Blades thought. *Our bodies would, that is. But our own selves, tied down to Earth forever—no.*

The vision screen jumped to life. "NASS *Altair* acknowledging *Pallas Castle*," said the uniformed figure within.

“OK, Charlie, go outside and don’t let anybody else enter,” Chung told his own operator.

The spaceman gave him a quizzical glance, but obeyed. “I wish to report that evacuation of the Sword is now complete,” Chung said formally.

“Very good, sir,” the Navy face replied. “I’ll inform my superiors.”

“Wait, don’t break off yet. We have to talk with your captain.”

“Sir? I’ll switch you over to—”

“None of your damned chains of command,” Blades interrupted. “Get me Rear Admiral Hulse direct, toot sweet, or I’ll eat out whatever fraction of you he leaves unchewed. This is an emergency. I’ve got to warn him of an immediate danger only he can deal with.”

The other stared, first at Chung’s obvious exhaustion, then at the black eye and assorted bruises, scratches, and bites that adorned Blades’ visage. “I’ll put the message through Channel Red at once, sir.” The screen blanked.

“Well, here we go,” Chung said. “I wonder how the food in Rehab is these days.”

“Want me to do the talking?” Blades asked. Chung wasn’t built for times as hectic as the last few hours, and was worn to a nubbin. He himself felt immensely keyed up. He’d always liked a good fight.

“Sure.” Chung pulled a crumpled cigarette from his pocket and began to fill the cabin with smoke. “You have a larger stock of rudeness than I.”

Presently the screen showed Hulse, rigid at his post on the bridge. “Good day, gentlemen,” he said. “What’s the trouble?”

“Plenty,” Blades answered. “Clear everybody else out of there; let your ship orbit free a while. And seal your circuit.”

Hulse reddened. “Who do you think you are?”

“Well, my birth certificate says Michael Joseph Blades. I’ve got some news for you concerning that top-secret gadget you told us about. You wouldn’t want unauthorized personnel listening in.”

Hulse leaned forward till he seemed about to fall through the screen. “What’s this about a hazard?”

“Fact. The *Altair* is in distinct danger of getting blown to bits.”

“Have you gone crazy? Get me the captain of the *Pallas*.”

“Very small bits.”

Hulse compressed his lips. “All right, I’ll listen to you for a short time. You had better make it worth my while.”

He spoke orders. Blades scratched his back while he waited for the bridge to be emptied and wondered if there was any chance of a hot shower in the near future.

“Done,” said Hulse. “Give me your report.”

Blades glanced at the telltale. “You haven’t sealed your circuit, admiral.”

Hulse said angry words, but complied. “Now will you talk?”

“Sure. This secrecy is for your own protection. You risk court-martial otherwise.”

Hulse suppressed a retort.

“OK, here’s the word.” Blades met the transmitted glare with an almost palpable crash of eyeballs. “We decided, Mr. Chung and I, that any missile rig as haywire as yours represents a menace to navigation and public safety. If you can’t control your own nuclear weapons, you shouldn’t be at large. Our charter gives us local authority as peace officers. By virtue thereof and so on and so forth, we ordered certain precautionary steps taken. As a result, if that war head goes off, I’m sorry to say that NASS *Altair* will be destroyed.”

“Are you... have you—” Hulse congealed. In spite of everything, he was a competent officer, Blades decided. “Please explain yourself,” he said without tone.

“Sure,” Blades obliged. “The Station hasn’t got any armament, but trust the human race to juryrig that. We commandeered the scoopships belonging to this vessel and loaded them with Jovian gas at maximum pressure. If your missile detonates, they’ll dive on you.”

Something like amusement tinged Hulse’s shocked expression. “Do you seriously consider that a weapon?”

“I seriously do. Let me explain. The ships are orbiting free right now, scattered through quite a large volume of space. Nobody’s aboard them. What is aboard each one, though, is an autopilot taken from a scooter, hooked into the drive controls. Each ’pilot has its sensors locked onto your ship. You can’t maneuver fast enough to shake off radar beams and mass detectors. You’re the target object, and there’s nothing to tell those idiot computers to decelerate as they approach you.

“Of course, no approach is being made yet. A switch has been put in every scooter circuit, and left open. Only the meteorite evasion units are operative right now. That is, if anyone tried to lay alongside one of those scoopships, he’d be detected and the ship would skitter away. Remember, a scoopship hasn’t much mass, and she does have engines designed for diving in and out of Jupe’s gravitational well. She can out-accelerate either of our vessels, or any boat of yours, and out-dodge any of your missiles. You can’t catch her.”

Hulse snorted. “What’s the significance of this farce?”

“I said the autopilots were switched off at the moment, as far as heading for the target is concerned. But each of those switches is coupled to two other units. One is simply the sensor box. If you withdraw beyond a certain distance, the switches will close. That is, the ’pilots will be turned on if you try to go beyond range of the beams now locked onto you. The other unit we’ve installed in every boat is an ordinary two-for-a-dollar radiation meter. If a nuclear weapon goes off, anywhere within a couple of thousand kilometers, the switches will also close. In either of those cases, the scoopships will dive on you.

“You might knock out a few with missiles, before they strike. Undoubtedly you can punch holes in them with laser guns. But that won’t do any good, except when you’re lucky enough to hit a vital part. Nobody’s aboard to be killed. Not even much gas will be lost, in so short a time.

“So to summarize, chum, if that rogue missile explodes, your ship will be struck by ten to twenty scoopships, each crammed full of concentrated Jovian air. They’ll pierce that thin hull of yours, but since they’re already pumped full beyond the margin of safety, the impact will split them open and the gas will whoosh out. Do you know what Jovian air does to substances like magnesium?

“You can probably save your crew, take to the boats and reach a Commission base. But your nice battleship will be *ganz kaput*. Is your game worth that candle?”

“You’re totally insane! Releasing such a thing—”

“Oh, not permanently. There’s one more switch on each boat, connected to the meteorite evasion unit and controlled by a small battery. When those batteries run down, in about twenty hours, the ’pilots will be turned off completely. Then we can spot the scoopships by radar and pick ’em up. And you’ll be free to leave.”

“Do you think for one instant that your fantastic claim of acting legally will stand up in court?”

“No, probably not. But it won’t have to. Obviously you can’t make anybody swallow your yarn if a *second* missile gets loose. And as for the first one, since it’s failed in its purpose, your bosses aren’t going to want the matter publicized. It’d embarrass them to no end, and serve no purpose except revenge on Jimmy and me—which there’s no point in taking, since the Sword would still be privately owned. You check with Earth, admiral, before shooting off your mouth. They’ll tell you that both parties to this quarrel had better forget about legal action. Both would lose.

“So I’m afraid your only choice is to find that missile before it goes off.”

“And yours? What are your alternatives?” Hulse had gone gray in the face, but he still spoke stoutly.

Blades grinned at him. “None whatsoever. We’ve burned our bridges. We can’t do anything about those scoopships now, so it’s no use trying to scare us or arrest us or whatever else may occur to you. What we’ve done is establish an automatic deterrent.”

“Against an, an attempt... at sabotage... that only exists in your imagination!”

Blades shrugged. “That argument isn’t relevant any longer. I do believe the missile was released deliberately. We wouldn’t have done what we did otherwise. But there’s no longer any point in making charges and denials. You’d just better retrieve the thing.”

Hulse squared his shoulders. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Well, you can send a man to the Station. He’ll find the scooters lying gutted. Send another man over here to the *Pallas*. He’ll find the scoopships gone. I also took a few photographs of the autopilots being installed and the ships being cast adrift. Go right ahead. However, may I remind you that the fewer people who have an inkling of this little intrigue, the better for all concerned.”

Hulse opened his mouth, shut it again, stared from side to side, and finally slumped the barest bit. “Very well,” he said, biting off the words syllable by syllable. “I can’t risk a ship of the line. Of course, since the rogue is still farther away than your deterrent allows the *Altair* to go, we shall have to wait in space a while.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I shall report the full story to my superiors at home... but unofficially.”

“Good. I’d like them to know that we asterites have teeth.”

“Signing off, then.”

Chung stirred. “Wait a bit,” he said. “We have one of your people aboard, Lieutenant Ziska. Can you send a gig for her?”

“She didn’t collaborate with us,” Blades added. “You can see the evidence of her loyalty, all over my mug.”

“Good girl!” Hulse exclaimed savagely. “Yes, I’ll send a boat. Signing off.”

The screen blanked. Chung and Blades let out a long, ragged breath. They sat a while trembling before Chung muttered, “That skunk as good as admitted everything.”

“Sure,” said Blades, “But we won’t have any more trouble from him.”

Chung stubbed out his cigarette. Poise was returning to both men. “There could be other attempts, though, in the next few years.” He scowled. “I think we should arm the Station. A couple of laser guns, if nothing else. We can say it’s for protection in case of war. But it’ll make our own government handle us more carefully, too.”

“Well, you can approach the Commission about it.” Blades yawned and stretched, trying to loosen his muscles. “Better get a lot of other owners and supervisors to sign your petition, though.” The next order of business came to his mind. He rose. “Why don’t you go tell Adam the good news?”

“Where are you bound?”

“To let Ellen know the fight is over.”

“Is it, as far as she’s concerned?”

“That’s what I’m about to find out. Hope I won’t need an armored escort.” Blades went from the cubicle, past the watchful radioman, and down the deserted passageway beyond.

The cabin given her lay at the end, locked from outside. The key hung magnetically on the bulkhead. Blades unlocked the door and tapped it with his knuckles.

“Who’s there?” she called.

“Me,” he said. “May I come in?”

“If you must,” she said freezingly.

He opened the door and stepped through. The overhead light shimmered off her hair and limned her figure with shadows. His heart bumped. “You, uh, you can come out now,” he faltered. “Everything’s OK.”

She said nothing, only regarded him from glacier-blue eyes.

“No harm’s been done, except to me and Sparks, and we’re not mad,” he groped. “Shall we forget the whole episode?”

“If you wish.”

“Ellen,” he pleaded, “I had to do what seemed right to me.”

“So did I.”

He couldn’t find any more words.

“I assume that I’ll be returned to my own ship,” she said. He nodded. “Then, if you will excuse me, I had best make myself as presentable as I can. Good day, Mr. Blades.”

“What’s good about it?” he snarled, and slammed the door on his way out.

Avis stood outside the jampacked saloon. She saw him coming and ran to meet him. He made swab-O with his fingers and joy blazed from her.

“Mike,” she cried, “I’m so happy!”

The only gentlemanly thing to do was hug her. His spirits lifted a bit as he did. She made a nice armful. Not bad looking, either.

“Well,” said Amspaugh. “So that’s the inside story. How very interesting. I never heard it before.”

“No, obviously it never got into any official record,” Missy said. “The only announcement made was that there’d been a near accident, that the Station tried to make counter-missiles out of scoopships, but that the quick action of NASS *Altair* was what saved the situation. Her captain was commended. I don’t believe he ever got a further promotion, though.”

“Why didn’t you publicize the facts afterwards?” Lindgren wondered. “When the revolution began, that is. It would’ve made good propaganda.”

“Nonsense,” Missy said. “Too much else had happened since then. Besides, neither Mike nor Jimmy nor I wanted to do any cheap emotion-fanning. We knew the asterites weren’t any little pink-bottomed angels, nor the people back sunward a crew of devils. There were rights and wrongs on both sides. We did what we could in the war, and hated every minute of it,

and when it was over we broke out two cases of champagne and invited as many Earthsiders as we could get to the party. They had a lot of love to carry home for us.”

A stillness fell. She took a long swallow from her glass and sat looking out at the stars.

“Yes,” Lindgren said finally, “I guess that was the worst, fighting against our own kin.”

“Well, I was better off in that respect than some,” Missy conceded. “I’d made my commitment so long before the trouble that my ties were nearly all out here. Twenty years is time enough to grow new roots.”

“Really?” Orloff was surprised. “I haven’t met you often before, Mrs. Blades, so evidently I’ve had a false impression. I thought you were a more recent immigrant than that.”

“Shucks, no,” she laughed. “I only needed six months after the *Altair* incident to think things out, resign my commission and catch the next Belt-bound ship. You don’t think I’d have let a man like Mike get away, do you?”



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