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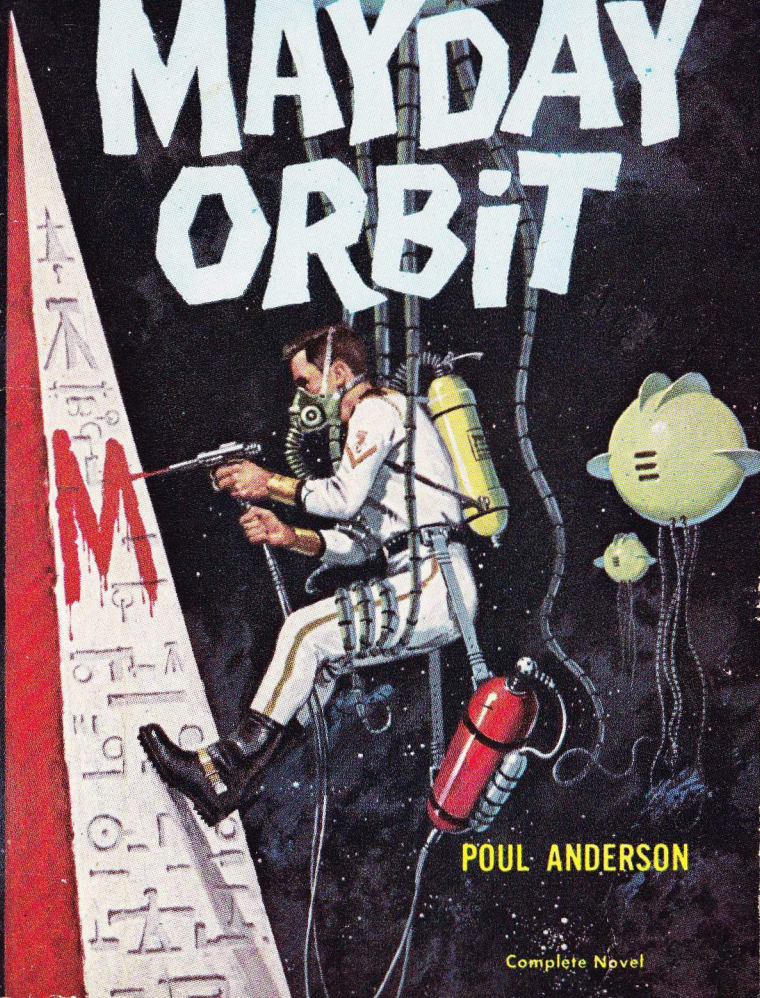
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Shout it to the Stars

MAYDAY ORBIT



POUL ANDERSON

Complete Novel

PLANET OF THE GOLDEN HORDE

The squad's eyes registered the girl's blaster even as their chief spoke. Someone yelled. Bourtai fired into the thick of them. Ionic lightning crashed. Captain Sir Dominic Flandry dropped.

A bolt sizzled where he had been. He fired, wide-beamed, the energy too diluted to kill even at short range but scorching four men at once. As their screams lifted, he bounced back to his feet, overlapped the fallen frontline, stiff-armed a warrior beyond, and hit the landing. . . .

This was the beginning of Flandry's hair-raising mission to Altai, one of the neutral planets between the two warring galactic cultures. But it also looked like the end of the adventure, for beyond his escape lay the man-killing frozen wastes of an ultra-polar zone.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

POUL ANDERSON was born in Bristol, Pennsylvania, and was graduated as a physics major from the University of Minnesota. Writing was a hobby of his, and he sold a few stories while in college. With jobs hard to find after graduation, he continued to write and found to his surprise that he was not a scientist at all, but-a born writer. Best known for his science-fiction, he has also written mysteries, non-fiction, and historical novels.

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MAYDAY ORBIT

by

POUL ANDERSON

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MAYDAY ORBIT

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NO MAN'S WORLD

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I

SEEN ON APPROACH, against crystal darkness and stars crowded into foreign constellations, Altai was beautiful. A good half of either hemisphere was polar cap. There the snowfields were tinged rosy by sunlight, while ice shimmered blue and green. The tropical belt of steppe and tundra shaded from bronze to tarnished gold, strewn with quick-silver lakes. Three planetary radii out in space there spun a double ring, meteoric dust, subtle rainbow iridescence girdling the equator. Beyond hung two moons like copper coins among the stars.

Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, field agent, Naval Intelligence Corps of the Terrestrial Empire, pulled his gaze reluctantly back to the spaceship's bridge. "I see where the name comes from," he remarked. In the language of this planet's human colonists, which he had learned electronically from a Betelgeusean trader, Altai meant Golden. "But Krasna is a misnomer for the sun. It isn't really red, to the human eye, anyhow. Not nearly as red as your home star. More of an orange-yellow, I'd say."

The blue visage of Zalut, who commanded the battered merchant vessel, twisted into the grimace which was his

race's equivalent of a shrug. He was moderately humanoid, though only half as tall as a man, stout, hairless, clad in a metal, mesh tunic. "I zuppose it was de, you zay, contrazt." He spoke Terrestrial Anglic with an unnecessarily thick accent, as if to show that the independence of the Betelgeusean System—buffer state between the hostile realms of Terra and Merseia—did not mean it had nothing to contribute to the mainstream of interstellar culture.

Flandry would rather have practiced his Altaian, especially since Zalat's Anglic vocabulary was so small as to limit conversation to platitudes. But he deferred. As the sole passenger of alien species, with special dietary requirements, he depended on the captain's good will. Also, he wanted the Betelgeuseans to take him at face value. Officially, his job was only to re-establish contact between Altai and the rest of humankind. The mission was so unimportant that Terra didn't even give him a ship of his own, but let him negotiate passage as best he might. So, he let Zalat chatter.

"After all," the skipper continued, "Altai was first colonized more dan zeven hoondert Terra-years a-pazt: in de vererry dawn, you zay, of interztellar travel. Little was known about w'at to eggzpect. Krazna muzt have zeemed deprezzingly cold and red, after Zol. Now-to-days, we have more aztronautical zophizticazhion."

Flandry looked back at the stars: more than he could count, more than he could imagine. An estimated four million of them, included in that vague sphere called the Terrestrial Empire, was an insignificant portion of this one spiral arm of this one commonplace galaxy. Even if you added the nonhuman empires, the sovereign suns like Betelgeuse, and

the reports of a few explorers who had gone extremely far in the old days, that part of the universe known to man was terrifyingly small. And it would always remain so.

"Just how often do you come here?" he asked, largely to drown out the silence.

"About onze a Terra-year," answered Zalat. "However, dere is oder merchantz on diz route bezides me. I have de fur trade, but Altai alzo produzes gemz, mineralz, hidez, variouz organic productz, even dried meatz, w'ich are in zome demand at home. Zo dere is usually a Betelgeuzean zhip or two at Ulan Baligh."

"Will you be here long?"

"I hope not. It is a tediouz plaze for a nonhuman. One pleazure houze for uz has been eztablized, but—" Zalat made another face "—wid de dizturbanzez going on, dough, fur trapping and caravans have been much hampered. Lazt time I had to wait a mont' for a full cargo. Diz time may be worze."

Oh-ho, thought Flandry. But aloud he merely said, "If the metals and machinery you bring in exchange are as valuable as you claim, I wonder why some Altaians don't acquire spaceships and start trading on their own."

"Dey have not a mercantile kind of zivilizazhion," Zalat replied. "Remember, we Betelgeuzeanz have been coming here for lezz dan a zentury. Before den, Altai was izolated. De original zhips dat brought de coloniztz were long ago worn out. Dey demzelves had never been interezted enough in re-eztablizing galactic contact to build new craft. Remember, deir planet is zo poor in heavy metalz dat zuch konztruction would be verry eggzpenzive for dem.

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"Now-to-days, might be, zom of de younger Altaian malez have zome wizh to try zuch an enterprize. But lately de Kha Khan has forbidden any of his zubjectz from leaving de planet, eggzept a few truzted and verry cloze-mout' perzonal reprezentativez in de Betelgeuzean Zyztem. Diz prohibizhion is one reazon for de inzurreczhionz againzt him."

"Yeh." Flandry gave the ice fields a hard look. "Anybody who wants to get off that ball of permafrost, and can't, has my sympathy. If it were my planet, I think I'd look around for an enemy to sell it to."

But still I'm going there, he reflected. Talk about your unsung heroes! The more the Empire cracks and crumbles, the more frantically a few of us have to scurry around patching it. Otherwise the Long Night might come in our own sacrosanct lifetimes.

And in this particular instance, his mind ran on, I have reason to believe that an enemy is trying to buy the planet.

II

FROM the polar snows of Altai, broad, shallow rivers wound southward over the steppes. Where two of them Zeya and Talyma, met at Ozero Rurik, the city named Ulan Baligh was founded by the first colonists. It had never been large; today, the only permanent, human settlement on the planet, it had some twenty thousand residents. But the number

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of people in its environs was usually greater than this. For tribesmen were always arriving here to trade or confer or attend the rites in the Prophet's Tower. They walled the southern edge of town with tents and trucks; their encampments spilled around the primitive spaceport and raised smoke for kilometers along the lakeshore.

As his ship descended, Captain Flandry was more interested in something less picturesque. He had bribed an engineer to let him use a magnifying viewport in the after turret. Through this he saw that monorail tracks wove a spider strand around Ulan Baligh, that flatcars upon them held cradled missiles, that some very modern military aircraft lazed on their gravebeams in the sky, that tanks and beetle-cars prowled about in quantity, that the barracks and emplacements for an armored brigade were under construction west of the city, that a squat building near the central market place must house a negagrav generator powerful enough to shield the entire urban area; all of this was new. None of it had been built in any factories controlled by the Terrestrial Empire.

"However, the stuff could well have been supplied by my little green chums," he murmured to himself. "If the Merseians got a base here in the buffer region, outflanking us at Catawrayannis . . . well, it wouldn't be decisive by itself. But it would strengthen their hand quite a bit. And eventually, when their hand looks strong enough, they're going to start the big war."

Not for the first time, he suppressed a bitterness over his own people, too rich to spend treasure in an open attack on the menace—most of them even denying that any menace

existed, for what power would dare break the Pax Terrestria? After all, he thought wryly, he enjoyed his furloughs home precisely because Terra was decadent.

But at this moment Terra was also some 300 light-years distant; and he had work on hand.

Through his mind flickered a review of those hints Intelligence had gathered in the Betelgeuse region. Traders had casually mentioned curious goings-on at some place named Altai. They had little specific information to relate, for they took no interest in the affairs of the place except insofar as their commerce with it was affected. The information they did reveal, when Terra's men stood them drinks, led to the Imperial archives, where the planet was identified as an ancient human colony far off the regular space lanes, not so much lost as overlooked.

A proper investigation would have required several months and several hundred agents. Being spread horribly thin over far too many stars, Intelligence sent just one man. At the Terran Embassy on Betelgeuse VI, Flandry was given a slim dossier on Altai, a stingy advance on an expense account, and an order to learn just what the devil was going on out there. After which, overworked men and machines forgot about him. They would remember when he reported back, or if they got news he had died in some unusual fashion. But if neither of these things happened, Altai might well lie obscure for another decade.

Which could be a trifle too long, Flandry thought.

Elaborately casual, he strolled from the turret back to his cabin. The Altaians must not suspect he had seen their new military installations. Or, if they did come to suspect his

knowledge, they must not realize that *he* realized the equipment was there for any other purpose than suppressing a local rebellion. The Khan had been careless in not hiding this evidence of out-world connection, doubtless because he had not expected a Terran investigator would show up. He would certainly not be so careless as to knowingly let the investigator take significant information home again.

At the cabin, Flandry dressed with his normal care. According to report, the Altaians were people after his own heart: they liked color on their clothes, in great gobs. He chose a shimmerite blouse, green, embroidered vest, purple trousers with a gold stripe tucked into tooled-leather half boots, crimson sash and cloak, black beret slanted rakishly over his sleek seal-brown hair. He himself was a tall well-muscled man; his long face bore high cheekbones and a straight nose, gray eyes and a neat mustache. But then, he patronized Terra's best biosculptor.

The spaceship landed at one end of the concrete field. Another Betelgeusean ship was cradled opposite, confirming Zalat's remark about the interstellar trade. Not precisely brisk—maybe two dozen ships per standard year—but continuous; and, by now, doubtless important to the local economy.

As he stepped from the debarkation lock, Flandry felt the exhilaration of a gravity only three-fourths Terrestrial. But it was quickly lost when the air stung him. Ulan Baligh lay at eleven degrees north latitude. With an axial tilt about like Terra's, a wan, dwarf sun, and no oceans to moderate the climate, Altai knew seasons almost to the equator. The northern hemisphere was past autumnal equinox,

approaching winter. A wind streaking off the pole sheathed Flandry in chill, hooted around his ears and snatched the beret from his head.

He grabbed it back, swore, and confronted the portmaster with less dignity than he had planned. "Greeting," he said with the formal idiom he had learned. "May peace dwell in your yurt. This person is named Dominic Flandry and ranges the Empire of Terra."

The Altaian blinked narrow, black eyes. Otherwise, his face remained a mask. It was a wide, rather flat countenance, but not purely mongoloid. Hook nose, thick, short beard, and light skin bespoke a caucasoid admixture as much as did the hybrid language. His frame was short and heavy-set. He was dressed in a wide-brimmed fur hat with a chinstrap, a leather jacket lacquered in some complicated pattern, pants of thick felt and fleece-lined boots. An old-style machine pistol was holstered at his left hip, a broad knife on his right.

"We have not had any such visitors. . . ." He paused, collected himself, and bowed. "Be welcome, all guests who come with honest words," he said ritually. "This person is named Pyotr Gutchluk, of the Kha Khan's sworn men." He turned to Zalut. "Captain, you and your crew may proceed directly to the yamen. I shall see you there later about the legal formalities. First, I must personally conduct so distinguished a guest as this to the palace."

He clapped his hands. Two servants appeared, similar in dress and looks to himself. Their eyes glittered, seldom leaving the Terran. However wooden they kept their faces here, this was a thunderbolt in their lives. Flandry's lug-

gage was loaded onto a small electrotruck of antique design. "Of course," Pyotr Gutchluk said, half inquiringly, "so great an orluk as yourself would prefer a varyak to a tul-yak."

"Of course," said Flandry, wishing his language education had included those words.

A varyak turned out to be a local breed of motorcycle. A massive-two-wheeler, smoothly powered from a bank of energy capacitors, it had a jumpseat and luggage rack aft, a machine-gun mount forward. (But no actual weapon in this case, he noted.) The steering was by a crossbar which the knees guided. Other apparatus, including a two-way radio, were controlled from a manual panel behind the windscreen. When the vehicle was slow or stationary, an outrigger wheel could be lowered on the left for support. Pyotr Gutchluk offered Flandry a goggled crash helmet from a saddlebag, hopped aboard his own machine, and took off at 200 kilometers an hour.

The Terran accelerated to keep up. The wind slashed over the screen, into his face, and nearly tore him loose. He started to slow down. But for Imperial prestige, kept a stiff upper lip and somehow managed to stay on Gutchluk's tail.

As they roared into the city, he acquired the knack. Finally he could even look around. Quite a view they had here.

Ulan Baligh formed a crescent along the flat shores of a bay in the lake. Beyond, the waters lapped indigo. Overhead were deep-blue sky and the rings. Pale by day, they were a frosty halo above the orange sun. Gutchluk was taking an overhead road suspended from pylons that were cast

like dragons holding the cables in their teeth. It seemed for official use only; no one else was upon it save an occasional varyak patrol. Below him, Flandry saw steeply-curved red tile roofs above ancient stone walls, tinged ruddy by the sun. All buildings were large; residential ones held several families each, commercial ones were jammed with tiny shops. The streets were wide, clean-swept, full of nomads and wind. Most traffic was pedestrian.

Ahead loomed the palace walls. Flandry glimpsed gardens within, and the royal house at the center. It was a giant version of the city tenements, but gaudily painted, with wooden dragons forming colonnades and bronze dragons on the roof. However, it was overshadowed by the Prophet's Tower, a kilometer or so away. Everything else was, too.

From the vague Betelgeusean descriptions, Flandry had deduced that most Altaians professed a sort of Moslem-Buddhist synthesis, codified centuries ago by the Prophet Subotai. The religion had only this one temple, but that was enough. A sheer two kilometers it reared up into the thin hurried air as if it would spear a moon. Basically a pagoda shape, blinding-red in color, it had one flat side facing north. That wall was a single tablet on which, in a contorted Sino-Cyrillic alphabet, the words of the Prophet were inlaid, holy forever. Even Flandry, who had scant reverence in his heart, felt a moment's awe. A stupendous will had raised that spire above these plains.

The elevated road swooped downward again. Gutchluk's varyak slammed to a halt outside the palace gates. Flandry, taller than any local man, had some trouble with his steer-

ing bar. He almost crashed into the wrought, bronze bars. He untangled his legs and veered barely in time. The swerve nearly threw him. High on the wall, a guard leaned on his portable rocket launcher and laughed. Flandry heard him. Damn! That couldn't be permitted. He continued riding in a curve. The ring he steered around Gutchluk was so tight that both could easily have been killed. At the last moment he slapped down the third wheel and let the cycle slow to a halt. While it was still moving, he jumped up onto the saddle and took a bow.

"By the Ice People!" exclaimed the portmaster. Sweat shone on his face. He wiped it off with a shaky hand. "They breed reckless men on Terra."

"Oh, no," said Flandry. He wished he dared mop his own wet skin. "A bit demonstrative, perhaps, but never reckless. We always know exactly what we're doing."

Once again he had occasion to thank loathed hours of calisthenics and judo practice for a responsive body. As the gates opened, Flandry putt-putted through under the awed gaze of the Khan's soldiers.

The gardens surrounding the driveway were of rocks, arched bridges, dwarf trees and mutant lichen. Nothing that needed much warmth or water would grow on Altai. Flandry noticed the dryness of his own nose and throat. This air snatched moisture from him as greedily as it did heat. Once inside the palace, he was more grateful for its Terra-like atmosphere than he wished to admit.

A white-bearded man in a fur-trimmed robe made a deep bow. "The Kha Khan himself bids you welcome, Orluk Flandry," he said. "He will see you at once."

"But the gifts I brought for him—"

"No matter now, my lord." The chamberlain bowed again, turned and led the way. They passed through vaulted corridors hung with gaily colored tapestries. But the palace was very silent. Servants scurried about whispering; guards in dragon-faced, leather tunics and goggled helmets bore modern blasters at attention; tripods fumed incense. The entire sprawling house seemed to crouch, watchful.

I imagine I have upset them somewhat, Flandry thought. Here, I suspect, they've got a cozy little conspiracy going, with beings sworn to lay all Terra waste, and suddenly a Terran officer drops in, for the first time in five or six hundred years. So what do they do next? It's their move.

Oleg Yesukai, Kha Khan of all the Tribes, was bigger than most Altaians. His long, sharp face bore a reddish, fork beard. Gold rings, thickly embroidered robe, silver trim on his fur cap, were worn with an air of impatient concession to tedious custom. The hand which Flandry, kneeling, touched to his brow, was hard and muscular; the gun at the royal waist had seen use.

This private audience chamber was draped in red, its furniture inlaid and grotesquely carved, but it also held an up-to-date Betelgeusean graphone and a desk buried under official papers.

"Be seated," said the Khan. He himself took a low-legged chair and opened a cigar box of carved bone. A hard smile bent his mouth. "Now that we've gotten rid of my damn fool courtiers, we need no longer act as if you were a subject." He took a crooked purple stogie from the box. "I

would offer you one of these, but it might make you ill. In thirty-odd generations, eating food grown from Altaian soil, we have probably changed our metabolism a bit."

"Your majesty is most gracious." Flandry inhaled a cigarette of his own and relaxed as much as the straight-backed chair permitted.

Oleg Khan spoke a stockbreeder's pungent obscenity. "Gracious? Ha! See here, Terran. Fifteen years old, my father became an outlaw on the tundra." (He meant local years, a third again as long as those of home. Altai was about one A. U. distant from Krasna, but the sun was less massive than Sol.) "By the time he was thirty, he had seized Ulan Baligh with 50,000 warriors and deposited old Tuli Khan naked on the arctic snows. So as not to shed royal blood, you understand. But he never would live in the city. And his sons were raised in the ordu—the encampment—as he had been. We practiced war against the Tebtengri as he had known war, but we had to master reading, writing, and science as well. Let us not bother with graciousness, Orluk Flandry. I never had time to learn any."

The out-worlder waited passively. That seemed to disconcert Oleg, who smoked for a minute in short ferocious drags, then leaned forward and said, "Well, why does your government finally deign to notice us?"

"I had the impression, your majesty," answered Flandry in a mild voice, "that the original colonists of Altai came this far from Sol in order to escape notice."

"True. True. Don't believe that rat crud in the hero songs. Our ancestors came here because they were weak, not strong. Planets where men could settle at all were rare

enough to make each one a prize. By going far afield and picking a wretched icy desert, a few shiploads of Central Asians avoided having to fight for their new home. They didn't plan to become herdsmen, either. They tried to farm. But that proved impossible. Too cold and dry, among other things. Nor could they build an industrial, food-synthesizing society; not enough heavy metals, fossil fuels, fissionables. This is a low-density planet, you know. Step by step, over generations, with only dim traditions to guide them, they were forced to evolve a nomadic life. That was suitable to Altai, and their numbers increased. Of course, legends have grown up. Most of my people still believe Terra is some kind of lost utopia and our ancestors were hardy warriors." Oleg's rust-colored eyes narrowed upon Flandry. He stroked his beard. "I've read enough, thought enough, to have a fair idea of what your Empire really is—and what it can and cannot do. So, why this visit, at this exact moment?"

"We have remained absent for two main reasons, your majesty," said Flandry. "First, we are no longer interested in conquest for the mere sake of conquest. Second, our merchants have avoided this entire sector. You see, it lies far from our heartland stars; the Betelgeuseans, close to their own base, could compete on unequal terms; the risk of meeting some prowling warship of our Merseian enemies is unattractive. In short, there has been no occasion, military or civilian, to search out Altai." He slipped smoothly into prevarication gear. "However, the Emperor does not wish any members of the human family cut off. At the very least, I bring you his brotherly greetings." (That was subversive. The word should have been "fatherly." But Oleg

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Khan would not take kindly to being patronized.) "At most, if Altai wishes to rejoin us, for mutual protection and other benefits, there are many possibilities we might discuss. Joining the Empire does not necessarily mean becoming a mere province. You might, for example, prefer simply having an Imperial resident, to offer help and advice . . ."

He let the proposal trail off, since in point of fact a resident's advice tended to be, "I suggest you do thus and so, lest I call in the Marines."

The Altaian king surprised him by not getting huffy about sovereign status. Instead, amiable as a tiger, Oleg Yesukai answered:

"If you are distressed about our internal difficulties of the moment, pray do not be. Nomadism necessarily means tribalism, which easily brings feud and war. I have mentioned that my father seized power from the Nuru Bator clan. We in turn have gur-khans who rebel against us. As anyone can tell you, that alliance called the Tebtengri Shamanate is giving us considerable trouble. But such is nothing new in Altaian history. Indeed, I have a firmer hold on more of the planet than any Kha Khan since the Prophet's time. In a little while I shall bring every last tribe to heel."

"With the help of imported armament?" Flandry elevated his brows a millimeter. Risky though it was to admit having seen the evidence, it might be still more suspicious not to. Of course, he needn't reveal how much he had observed. Since the other man remained unruffled, Flandry continued, "The Imperium would gladly send a technical mission."

"I do not doubt it." Oleg's response was dry.

"May I respectfully ask what planet supplies the assistance your majesty is now receiving?"

"Your question is impertinent, as well you know. I do not take offense, but I decline to answer. Confidentially: the old mercantile treaties between Altai and Betelgeuse guarantee that the blueface traders shall have monopolies in certain of our export items. This other race, the one which sells us weapons, is taking payment in the same articles. I am not violating an oath, for I do not consider myself bound by obligations which the Nuru Bator dynasty assumed. However, it would at the present time be inexpedient that Betelgeuse discover the facts."

It was a good spur-of-the-moment lie: so good that Flandry hoped Oleg would believe he had fallen for it. He assumed a fatuous smirk. "I quite understand, great Khan. You may rely on Terrestrial discretion."

"I hope so," said Oleg humorously. "Our traditional punishment for spies involves a method to keep them alive for days after they have been flayed."

Flandry's gulp was calculated, but not altogether faked. "May I respectfully remind your majesty," he said, "just in case some of your less educated subjects should act impulsively, that the Imperial Navy is under orders to redress any wrong suffered by any Terran national anywhere in the universe."

"Very rightly," said Oleg. His tone was so sardonic that he must have realized that that famous rule had become a dead letter, except as an occasional excuse for bombarding some world that got obstreperous without being able to fight back. Between the traders, his own agents in the Betel-

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geusean System, and whoever was selling him arms, the Kha Khan had become as unmercifully well-informed about galactic politics as any Terran aristocrat. Or Merseian.

The realization was chilling. Flandry had perforce gone blind into his assignment. Only now, piece by piece, did he see how big and dangerous it was.

"A sound policy," continued Oleg. "But let us be frank, Orluk. If you should suffer, let us say, accidental harm in my dominions— and *if* your superiors should misinterpret the circumstances, though I am sure they would not—I should be forced to invoke assistance which is quite readily available."

Merseia isn't far, thought Flandry; and Intelligence knows that at this time they have massed a lot of naval units at their nearest base. If I want to hoist Terran vintages again, I'd better start acting the fool as never before in a gloriously misspent life.

Aloud, a hint of bluster: "Betelgeuse has treaties with the Imperium, Your Majesty. They would not interfere in a purely interhuman dispute!" And then, as if appalled at his own boldness: "But there won't be any. Certainly there won't. The, uh, conversation has, uh, taken an undesirable turn. Most unfortunate, Your Majesty! No offense intended! I was, ah, I am interested in unusual human colonies. An archivist mentioned your, ah, your beautiful planet to me. As long as I was coming here, it was suggested I might as well carry official greetings to . . ."

And so on and so on.

Oleg Yesukai grinned.

III

ALTAI rotated once in 35 hours. The settlers had adapted, and Flandry was used to postponing sleep. He spent the afternoon touring Ulan Baligh, asking silly questions of his guides, which he felt sure they would relay to the Khan. Four or five meals were normally eaten during the long day, and he was invited to dine at the town houses of chieftains belonging to Clan Yesukai. This gave him a further chance to build up his role: a Terran fop who had wangled this assignment from an uninterested Imperium, simply for a lark. A visit to one of the joyhouses that was operated for transient nomads helped reinforce the impression. Also, it was fun.

Emerging after sunset, he saw the Prophet's Tower had become luminous. It lifted like a bloody lance over brawling, flicker-lit streets, up toward the wintry, steppe stars. The tablet wall was white, the words thereon in jet: two kilometers of precepts for a stern and bitter way of life. "I say," he exclaimed, "we haven't done that yet. Let's go."

The chief guide, a burly, gray warrior leathered by decades of wind and frost, looked uneasy. "We must hasten back to the palace, Orluk," he said. "The Kha Khan has ordered a banquet in your honor."

"Oh, fine. Fine! Though I don't know how much of an

orgy I'm in shape for . . . after this bout we just had. Eh, what?" Flandry nudged the man's ribs with an indecent thumb. "Still, a peek inside, really I must. It's unbelievable, that skyscraper, don't you know? You could make it one of the galaxy's great tourist attractions."

"We would have to cleanse ourselves before we could enter, Orluk."

A young man added bluntly: "In no case could it be allowed. You are not an initiate. And there is no holier spot amidst all the suns."

"Oh, well, in that case—Sorry, no offense, I hope. Mind if I photograph it tomorrow?"

"Yes," said the young man. "There is no law against it, perhaps, but we could not be responsible for what some tribesman who saw you with your camera might do. None but the Tebtengri would look on the Tower with anything but reverent eyes."

"Teb—"

"Rebels and heathen, far in the north." The older man touched brow and lips, a sign to ward off evil. "Brewers of bad luck at Trengri Nor and traffickers with the Ice People. Far worse, even, than the wild Voiskoye; for the Tebtengri know right from wrong, yet freely choose wrong. It is not well to speak of them, only to exterminate them. Now we must hasten, Orluk."

"Oh, yes. To be sure." Flandry scrambled into the tul-yak lent him, an open motor carriage with a dragon figure-head.

While he was being driven to the palace, he weighed what he knew in an uncomfortable balance. Something was going

on, much bigger than a civil war. Oleg Khan had no intention that Terra should hear about it. A Terran agent who actually learned a bit of truth must not go home alive; only a well-born idiot could safely be allowed return passage. Whether or not Flandry could convince the Altaians he was that idiot, remained to be seen. It wouldn't be easy, for certainly he must probe deeper than he had yet done.

If somehow I do manage to swirl my cloak, twiddle my mustache, and gallop off to call an Imperial task force, Oleg may summon his own friends, who are obviously not a private gun-selling concern, as he wants me to believe. All Altai couldn't produce enough trade goods to pay for the stuff I saw from the spaceship. So . . . if the friends get here ahead of my task force, and decide to protect this military investment of theirs, there's going to be a fight. And with them dug in on the surface, as well as cruising local space, they'll have the advantage. The Navy won't thank me if I drag them into a losing campaign.

He kindled a fresh cigarette and wondered miserably why he hadn't told HQ, when this job was first laid before him, that he was down with Twonk's Disease.

At his guest suite in the palace he found a valet waiting. But the little man was rather puzzled by Terran garments. Flandry spent a half-hour choosing his own ensemble. At last, much soothed, he went back into the hallway. An honor guard awaited him with bared daggers in their hands. He was escorted to an immense feasting chamber, where he was placed at the Khan's right.

There was no table. A hundred men sat crosslegged on either side of a great stone trough stretching the length of

the room. Broth, reminiscent of won-ton soup but with a sharper taste, was poured into this from wheeled kettles. When next the Khan signalled, the soup was drained through traps, spigots flushed the trough clean, and solid dishes were shoveled in. They weren't bad, although rather greasy by Terrestrial standards. Meanwhile each man's cup of hot, powerfully alcoholic herb tea was kept full. A small orchestra caterwauled on pipes and drums, and some fairly spectacular performances were given by varyak riders, knife dancers, acrobats, and marksmen. At the meal's end, an old tribal bard stood up and chanted lays; a plump and merry man from the downtown bazaars related his original stories; gifts from the Khan were distributed to all present; and the affair broke up. Not a word of conversation had been spoken.

Not quite sober, Flandry followed his guards back to his apartment. The valet bade him goodnight and closed the thick fur drapes which served for internal doors.

A radiant globe illuminated the room, but seemed feeble compared with the light filling the balcony window. Flandry opened this and looked out in wonder.

Beneath him lay the darkened city; roofs curved and thinly hoar-frosted; streets like black rivers. Beyond twinkling, red campfires, Ozero Rurik stretched out to an unseen horizon, a polished ebony sheet crossed by double moonshivers. On his left the Prophet's Tower stood as a perpetual flame, crowned with constellations. Both satellites were near the full, ruddy discs, broader to the eye than Luna, haloed with ice crystals. Their light drenched the plain, turned the Zeya and Talyma into ribbons of molten glass. But the rings dominated them, bridging the southern sky

with rainbows. Second by second, thin firestreaks crossed heaven, as meteorites from that huge twin band hurtled into the atmosphere.

Flandry was not much for gaping at landscapes. But this time he let minutes pass before he realized how frigid the air was.

He turned back to the comparative warmth of the suite. As he closed the window, a woman entered from the bedroom.

He had expected some such hospitality. She was taller than most Altaian females. Long, blue-black hair fell down her back; lustrous, tilted eyes with a greenish hue, rare on this planet, regarded him unwinkingly. Otherwise, she was hidden by veil and gold-stiffened cloak. She advanced till she was very near him, and he waited for some conventional token of submission.

Instead, she continued to watch him for close to a minute. It grew so still in the room that he heard the wind blowing waves ashore. Shadows lay thick in the corners. Dragons and warriors on the tapestries appeared to stir.

Finally, in a low uneven voice, she said: "Orluk, are you indeed a spy from the Mother of Men?"

"Spy?" Flandry thought horrifyingly about *agents provocateurs*. "Good cosmos, no! I mean, that is to say, nothing of the sort!"

She laid a hand on his wrist. The fingers were cold, and clasped him with frantic strength. Her other hand slipped the veil aside. He looked upon a broad, fair-skinned face, delicately arched nose, full mouth and firm chin: handsome

rather than pretty. She whispered so fast and fiercely he had trouble following her:

"Whatever you are, you must listen! If you are no warrior yourself, then give the word when you go home to those who are. I am Bourtai Ivanskaya of the Tumurji folk, who belonged to the Tebtengri Shamanate. Surely you have heard speak of them, enemies to Oleg, driven into the north but still at war with them. My father was a noyon—a division commander—well known to Juchi Ilyak. He fell at the battle of Rivers Meet, last year, where the Yesukai men took our whole ordu. I was brought here alive, partly as a hostage—" A flare of haughtiness: "As if that could influence my people!—and partly for the Kha Khan's harem. Since then I have gained a little more confidence. More important, I have gotten connections of my own. The harem is always a center of intrigue. Nothing is secret for very long from the harem, but much which is secret begins there . . ."

"I know," said Flandry. "I've encountered polygynous cultures before." Stunned, almost overwhelmed, he could nonetheless not resist adding: "Bedfellows make strange politics."

She blinked incomprehension and plunged on: "I heard today that a Terran envoy was landed. I thought, perhaps, he came on a hint of what Oleg Yesukai readies against the Mother of Men. Or if he does not know, he must be told! I found out what woman would be lent to him, and arranged that I myself should be substituted. Ask me not how I did that! In the past year I have wormed secrets out of more than one harem guard and thus gotten power over him. Oleg is a fool to believe it suffices to load them with antisex hor-

more on such a tour of duty. I have the right. No method is dishonorable for me. Oleg Khan is my enemy and the enemy of my dead father. All means of revenge on him are lawful. But worse, Holy Terra lies in danger. Listen, Terra man . . ."

Flandry awoke. For those few seconds, the situation had been so fantastic that he was paralyzed. Like a character in a bad stereodrama, employing a girl (it would be a girl, too, and not simply a disgruntled man!) who babbled her autobiography as prologue to some improbable revelation. Now suddenly he understood that this was real: that melodrama does happen once in a while. And if he got caught playing the hero, any role except comic relief, he was dead.

He drew himself erect, fended Bourtai off, and said in haste: "My dear young lady, I have not the slightest competence in these matters. Furthermore, I've heard far more plausible stories from far too many colonial girls hoping for a free ride to Terra. Which, I assure you, is actually not a nice place at all for a little colonial girl without funds. I don't wish to offend local pride, but the idea that a single backward planet could offer any threat to the Imperium would be funny if it weren't so yawn worthy. I beg you, spare me."

Bourtai stepped back. The cloak fell open. She wore a translucent gown which revealed a figure somewhat stocky for Terran taste, but nonetheless full and supple. He would have enjoyed watching that, except for the bewildered pain on her face.

"But my lord Orluk," she stammered, "I swear to you by the Mother of us both—"

You poor romantic, it cried in him, *what do you think I*

am—a visiting god? If you're such a yokel that you never heard of planting microphones in a guest room, Oleg Khan is not. Shut up before you kill us!

Aloud, he got out a delighted gaffaw. "Well, by Sirius, I do call this thoughtful. Furnishing me with a beautiful lady spy atop everything else. But honestly, darling, you can drop the pretense now. Let's play some more adult games, eh, what?"

He reached for her. She writhed free, ran across the chamber, dodged his pursuit and shouted through swift tears:

"No, you fool, you blind, brainless cackler, you will listen! You will listen if I must knock you to the floor and sit on your head—and tell them, tell them when you come home, ask them only to send a real spy and learn for themselves!"

Flandry cornered her. He grabbed both flailing wrists and tried to stop her mouth with a kiss. She brought her forehead hard against his nose. He staggered back, shocked with the pain, and heard her yell:

"They are Merseians: great, green-skinned, long-tailed monsters, the Merseians, I tell you. They come here in secret from a secret landing field. But I have seen them myself, walking these halls after dark. I have heard from other girls to whom this or that drunken orkhon babbled. I have crept like a rat in the walls and listened myself. They are called Merseians—the most terrible enemy your race and mine have yet known, and—"

Flandry sat down on a couch, wiped blood off his mustache, and said weakly: "Never mind that for now. How do

we get out of here? Before the guards come to shoot us, I mean."

Bourtai fell silent, and he realized he had spoken in Anglic. He realized further that they wouldn't be shot unless their capture looked impossible. They would be questioned gruesomely.

He didn't know if there were lenses as well as microphones in the walls. Nor did he know if the bugs passed information on to some watchful human, or merely made a record that would be studied in the morning.

He sprang to his feet and reached Bourtai in a single bound. She reacted with feline speed. A hand cracked toward his larynx. He had already dropped his head, and took the blow on the hard top of his skull. His own hands gripped the borders of her cloak and crossed forearms at her throat. Before she could jab him in the solar plexus, he yanked her too close. She reached up thumbs to scoop out his eyeballs. He rolled his head and was merely scratched on the nose. After the Danish kiss he had just got, that hurt. He yipped, but didn't let go. A second later, her breath clamped off, she went limp.

He whirled her around, got an arm lock, and let her sag against him. She stirred. So brief an oxygen starvation had brought no more than a moment's unconsciousness. He buried his face in her dark, flowing hair, like a lover. It had a warm, somehow summery smell. He found an ear and breathed softly:

"You little gristlehead, did it ever occur to you that the Khan is suspicious of me? That there must be listeners? Now our forlorn chance is to crash out of here. Steal a

Betelgeusean spaceship, maybe. First, though, I must pretend I am arresting you. That may put them off guard. They may not arrive here too swiftly and alertly for us. Understand? Can you play the part?"

She grew rigid. He felt her almost invisible nod. The supple young body leaning on him eased into a smoothness of controlled nerve and muscle. He had seldom known a woman this competent in a physical emergency. Unquestionably, Bourtai Ivanskaya had had military training.

She was going to need it.

Aloud, Flandry huffed: "Well, I've certainly never heard anything more ridiculous! There aren't any Merseians in this stellar neighborhood. I checked very carefully before setting out. Wouldn't want to come across them, don't you know, and spend perhaps a year in some dreary Merseian jail while the pater negotiated my release. Eh, what? Really now, you've been talking perfect rot, every word." He hemmed and hawed a bit. "I think I'd better turn you in, madame. Come along, now, no tricks."

He marched her out the door, into the pillared corridor. One end opened on a window, but there was a sheer twenty-meter drop to a night-frozen fishpond. The other end stretched into dusk, lit by infrequent bracketed lamps. Flandry hustled Bourtai in that direction. Presently they came to a staircase, sweeping wide and grandly downward. A pair of sentries stood posted there in helmets, leather jackets, guns and knives. One of them took aim and barked, "Halt! What are you doing?"

"This girl, don't you know," panted Flandry. He nudged Bourtai. She gave some realistic squirmings. "Started to bab-

ble all sorts of wild nonsense. Who's in charge here? She thought I'd help her overthrow the Kha Khan. Imagine!"

"What?" The other soldier trod close.

"The Tebtengri will avenge me," snarled Bourtai. "The Ice People will house in the ruins of this palace and kick your bones from underfoot, you scum!"

Flandry thought she was overacting, but the guards both looked shocked. The nearer one sheathed his blaster. "I shall hold her, Orluk," he said. "Boris, run and fetch the commander."

As he stepped close, Flandry released the girl. With steel on his pate and stiff leather on his torso, the sentry wasn't very vulnerable. Except—Flandry's right hand rocketed upward. The heel of it struck the guard under the nose. He lurched backward, caromed off the balustrade, and flopped dead on the stairs. The other, who had half turned to go, spun about. He snatched for his weapon. Bourtai put a leg behind his ankles and pushed. Down he went. Flandry pounced. They rolled over, clawing for a grip. The guard yelped. Flandry glimpsed Bourtai over his opponents shoulder. She had taken the knife off the first warrior and circled about, looking for a chance. Flandry relaxed and let his enemy get on top. Bourtai grabbed the man under the chin, yanked his head back, and slashed.

Flandry scrambled from beneath. "Get their blasters," he gasped. "Here, give me one. Quick! We've made more racket than I had expected. Do you know the best escape route? Lead on, then!"

Bourtai raced barefooted down the steps. Her gold cloth

cloak and frail gown streamed behind her. Insanely, Flandry followed her down one flight, two flights.

Boots clatted on marble. Rounding yet another spiral curve, Flandry saw a squad of soldiers quick-stepping upward. The leader hailed him: "Do you have the prisoner secure, Orluk?"

So there had been a human operator at the bug. Of course, even if he surrendered Bourtai, Flandry could not save his own skin. Harmless fop or no, he had heard too much. But they didn't realize he realized that.

The squad's eyes registered the girl's blaster even as their chief spoke. Someone yelled. Bourtai fired into the thick of them. Ionic lightning crashed. Flandry dropped. A bolt sizzled where he had been. He fired, wide-beam, the energy too diluted to kill even at short range but scorching four men at once. As their screams lifted, he bounced back to his feet, overlapped the fallen frontline, stiff-armed a warrior beyond, and hit the landing.

From here, a wide bannister curled to the ground floor. Flandry whooped, seated himself, and slid. At the bottom was a sort of lobby. Glass doors opened on the garden. The moons and rings were so bright out there that no headlights were used on the half-dozen varyaks roaring toward this entrance. Mounted guardsmen were attracted by the noise of the fight.

Flandry stared around. Two meters up, the doorway was flanked by arched windows. He signaled Bourtai, crouched beneath one and made a stirrup with his hands. She climbed to the sill, broke the window glass with her gun butt, and fired into the troop. Flandry took shelter behind a column.

The remnant of the infantry squad came stumbling down the stairs in pursuit of him. He blasted. In a hopelessly exposed position, they retreated back upward, out of sight.

A varyak leaped through the doors. The soldier aboard shielded his face against flying glass with his arms. Flandry shot him before he had uncovered himself. The varyak veered, crashed into the jamb, and toppled across the entrance. The next one hurtled over it. The rider balanced himself with a trained body while he blazed at the Terran. Bourtai got him from above.

She sprang down unassisted. "I got two more when I first fired," she said. "A third pair escaped. They're out there somewhere, calling for help."

"We'll have to chance it. Where are the nearest gates?"

"They will be closed. We cannot burn through the lock before—"

"I'll find a means. Quick, help me right these two varyaks here. . . . Up in the saddle with you. Can you guide the other one also? Follow me, then, slowly. I'll draw their fire and we'll see what happens." Flandry hastened out into the garden. He didn't feel the cold. He dragged the corpses from the varyaks near the palace, put both machines back on their wheels, and mounted one himself. Bourtai put-putted near. He gestured her to take along the fourth vehicle. By leaning low, she could reach the steering bars with her hands. They accelerated down the path.

So far, energy weapons had fulfilled their traditional military function, giving more value to speed and purposefulness in action than to mere numbers. But there was a limit.

Two people couldn't stave off hundreds for very long. He must get clear.

Flame sought him. He lacked skill to evade such fire by tricky riding. Instead, he crouched low in the saddle and plunged straight forward, hoping he wouldn't be pierced. A bolt singed one leg, slightly but savagely painful. He glanced behind. From two side paths, the surviving pair of patrolmen steered in pursuit.

Ahead loomed a high-arched little bridge. His cycle snorted up and over. Just beyond the hump, he left the saddle. He hit the planks, judoka style, with relaxed muscles and face cushioned by one arm. Even so, he bumped his nose. For a moment tears blinded him and he used bad words. Then he crouched in the gloom along the railing.

His varyak careened on without him. Unsuspecting in this dim light, the two guardsmen roared by. Flandry shot them both as they went past.

The uproar was rising throughout the garden, up on the walls. One by one the palace windows lit, until scores of dragon eyes glared into the night. Flandry ran from the bridge and disentangled the three crashed varyaks from a hedge. "Bring the rest!" he shouted to Bourtai. She came, not with the two machines beside her, but trailing behind. Tethers ran to their guide bars. He realized, of course, that would be standard equipment. If these things were commonly used by nomads, there'd be times when a string of riderless pack vehicles was required.

"One for you and one for me," he muttered. Here, beneath an overleaning rock, they were a pair of shadows. Moonlight beyond made the garden a fog of coppery light. The outer

wall reared against that view and cut it off, brutally black, merlons raised across Altai's rings like bared teeth. "The rest we use to ram down the gates. Can do?"

"Must do," she said. With quick skillful fingers she set the varyak control panels and hauled stuff from the saddlebags. "Here extra clothing and helmets are always kept. If a man got wet and tried to drive far across the steppe without changing clothes, he'd freeze. Just put on the helmet now. We can dress properly later."

"We won't need clothes anyway, for a short dash to the spaceport."

"Do you think that field is not now crawling with Yesukai men?"

"Oh, hell," said Flandry.

He buckled on the headgear, snapped down the goggles, and mounted anew. Bourtai ran along the varyak line, flipping switches. The riderless machines took off. Gravel spurted from their wheels, into Flandry's abused face. He followed the girl this time.

Three warriors raced down a crosspath. Briefly they were stark under the moons. Then the murk ate them again. They had not seen their quarry. The household troops must be in one gorgeous confusion, Flandry thought. He must escape before that hysteria faded and a systematic hunt was organized.

The gateway loomed before his vision. Heavy bars screened off a plaza that was death-white in the night radiance. He saw his runaway varyaks only as meteoric gleams. Sentries atop the wall had a better view. Blasters thundered and ma-

chine guns raved. But there were no riders to drop from those saddles.

The first varyak hit with a doomsday clangor. It rebounded in four pieces. Flandry sensed a chunk of red-hot metal buzz past his ear. The next one crashed, and the bars buckled. The third smote and collapsed across a narrow opening. The fourth flung the gates wide. "Now!"

At 200 KPH, Bourtai and Flandry made for the gateway. They had a few seconds before the men above recovered enough from their astonishment to start shooting again. Bourtai hit the toppled wrecks. Her machine climbed the pile, took off, and soared halfway across the plaza. Flandry saw her balance herself as precisely as a bird, land on two wheels, and vanish in an alley beyond the square. Then it was his turn. He wondered fleetingly what the chances were of surviving a broken neck, and hoped he would not. Not with the Khan's interrogation chambers waiting. He knew he couldn't match Bourtai's performance. He slammed down the third wheel in mid-air. The impact when he hit the ground was less violent than expected. For an instant he teetered, almost rolling over. Then he came down on his outrigger. Fire spattered off stone behind him. He retracted the extra wheel and gunned his motor.

A glance north, past the Tower toward the spaceport, showed him airboats aloft in a hornet swarm. He had no prayer of hijacking a Betelgeusean ship. Nor was there any use in fleeing to Zalut in the yamen. Where, then, beneath these unmerciful autumnal stars?

Bourtai was a glimpse in moonlight, half a kilometer ahead of him down a narrow, lighted street. He let her keep the

lead and concentrated grimly on avoiding accidents. It seemed like an eye-blink, and it seemed like forever, before they had left the city and were out on the open steppe.

IV

WIND lulled in long grasses, the whispering ran for kilometers, on and on beyond the world's edge, pale yellow-green in a thousand subtle hues rippled by the wind's footsteps. Here and there some frost-nipped bush thrust up red spikes; the grasses swirled around them like a sea. High overhead reached the sky: an infinite vault full of wind and deep-blue chill. Krasna burned low in the west, dull orange, painting the steppe with ruddy light and fugitive shadows. The rings were an ice bridge to the south. Northward the sky had a bleak, greenish shimmer which Bourtai said was reflection off an early snowfall.

Flandry crouched in grass as tall as himself. When he ventured a peek, he saw the airboat that hunted him. It moved in lazy spirals, but the mathematics that guided it and its cohorts wove a net around this planet. To his eyes, even through binoculars taken from a saddlebag, the boat was so far as to be, a mere metallic flash. But he knew it probed for him with telescopes, ferrous detectors, infrared amplifiers—every means known to Altaian technology.

He would not have believed he could escape the Khan's searching craft for this long. Two planetary days, was it? Memory had faded. He knew only a fever dream: bounding north on furious wheels, bleeding skin from the air; sleeping a few seconds at a time in the saddle; wolfing jerked meat from the varyak's emergency supplies as he rode; stopping to refill canteens at waterholes Bourtai found by signs invisible to him. He knew only how he ached, to the nucleus of his inmost cell, and how his brain was gritty with weariness.

But the plain was unbelievably huge. Between the northern and southern ice caps, it covered almost twice the land area of Terra; for Altai had no oceans. The grass was not everywhere as tall as in this immediate vicinity, but it was always high enough to veil prey from sky-borne eyes. The fugitives had driven through several herds of grazing animals to break their trail. They had dodged and woven under Bourtai's guidance, and she had a hunter's knowledge of how to confuse pursuit.

Now, though, the chase seemed near an end.

Flandry glanced at the girl. She sat crosslegged, impassive. Her own exhaustion was shown by little except the darkening under her eyes. In stolen clothes, hair braided under the helmet, she might have been a boy. But the grease smeared on her face for weather protection had not much affected her haughty, good looks.

He hefted his gun. "Think that chap upstairs will spot us?" he asked. He didn't speak lowly, but the blowing immensities around reduced his voice to nothing.

"Not yet," she answered. "He is at extreme detector range."

He cannot swoop down at every dubious flicker on his gauges, or he would never cover the territory he must."

"So . . . ignore him and he'll go away?"

"I fear not," she said, troubled. "The Khan's troopers are no fools. I'm familiar with that search pattern. That man and his fellows will circle about, patrolling where they are until nightfall. The net they have established by now is certain to enmesh us, as they know. If we ride further after dark, we must turn on the heaters of our varyaks or freeze to death. But those heaters will make us a torch to the infrared spotters."

Flandry rubbed his chin. Altaian garments were ridiculously short on him, which was bad for morale. He thanked his elegant gods for antibeard enzyme . . . and wished he dared smoke. "What do you advise?" he asked.

She shrugged. "We must stay here. There are sleeping bags in the equipment, you know. They are well enough insulated to keep us alive if we fasten them together to make a double unit. Our body radiation won't be so strong as to betray us . . . unless the temperature drops very far."

"How close are we to your friends?"

Bourtai rubbed tired, hazel eyes. "I cannot say. They move about, under the Khrebet and along the Kara Gobi fringe. At this time of year, they will be drifting southward, so we are probably not terribly far from some Tebtengrian ordu. Still, distances are never small on the steppe." After a moment: "The Khan's folk know, as well as we do, that our varyaks' energy cells are nigh exhausted. If we live the night, tomorrow we shall have to walk. At that rate, we will probably be caught in a storm and frozen before we can find help."

Flandry glanced at the battered, dusty vehicles. Wonderfully durable gadgets, he thought in a vague way. Largely handmade, of course, using small power tools; but made with the care and craftsmanship feasible in a nonmercantile economy. The radios could doubtlessly call several hundred kilometers. The first such signal would bring that aircraft overhead down like a stooping falcon.

He eased himself onto his back and lay, letting his muscles throb. The ground was cold beneath. After a moment Bourtai followed suit, snuggling close with a trustfulness that touched him.

"If we do not escape, well, such is the space-time pattern," she said, more calmly than he could have managed. "But if we do, what then is your plan, Orluk?"

"Get word to Terra, I suppose. Don't ask me how."

"Will not your friends come to avenge you when you do not return?"

"No. The Khan need only tell the Betelgeuseans that I, regrettably, died in some accident or riot or whatever, and will be cremated with full honors. The evidence is easy enough for him to fake. Any mutilated corpse about my size would do; one human looks so much like another to the untrained nonhuman. The Betelgeuseans will pass the word on to my organization. Naturally, some of my colleagues will suspect foul play, but they have so much else to do that the suspicion probably won't be strong enough to act on. The most they will do is send another agent like myself. And this time, expecting him, the Khan can make preparations. He can camouflage his new military stuff, make sure

our man talks only to the right people and sees only the right things. What can one man do against a planet?"

"You have done somewhat already."

"But I told you, I caught Oleg by surprise."

"You will do more," she continued serenely. "For instance, why can't you smuggle a letter out with the help of some Betelgeusean? We Tebtengri can get agents into Ulan Baligh to contact the spacemen."

"I imagine that has occurred to the Khan. He will make damn sure that no person he is not absolutely certain of has any contact with any out-worlder. And he'll have all export material searched with care before it leaves Altai."

"Write a letter in the Terran language. He won't recognize what it says."

"He'll get it translated."

"Oh, no." Bourtai raised herself on one elbow. "There is not a human on Altai except yourself who reads the Anglic. Some Betelgeuseans do, of course, but no tribesmen. The language evolved after we lost contact with the mainstream of humanity, and there has been no pressing reason for anyone to learn it. Oleg himself reads only Altaian and the principal Betelgeusean language, Alzfarian. I know that for a fact. He mentioned it to me one night recently."

She spoke of the past year in a cool tone. Flandry gathered that in this culture it was no disgrace to have been a harem slave.

"Even worse," he said. "I can just see Oleg's agents permitting a letter they couldn't read to go out. Nor would they trust a Betelgeusean to translate it for them; the letter might offer a substantial bribe to fake that job. No, from now on

until they know I'm dead, I don't expect they'll let anything they are not absolutely sure about come near a spaceship, or near a spacefarer."

Bourtai sat straight. Sudden, startling tears blurred her gaze. "But you cannot be helpless!" she cried. "You are from *Terral*"

He didn't want to disillusion her. "We'll see. First, let's get out of the immediate mess." Hastily, he plucked a stalk of grass and chewed. "This tastes almost like home. Remarkable similarity."

"Oh, but it is of Terrestrial origin." Bourtai's dismay changed mercurially to simple astonishment, that he should not know what was so everyday to her. "The first colonists here found the steppe a virtual desert. Only sparse plant forms grew, poisonous to man. All other native life had retreated into the Arctic and Antarctic. Our ancestors used genetic engineering on the seeds and small animals they had with them. They created strains adapted to local conditions, and released them. Terrestroid ecology soon took over the whole tropic belt."

Flandry noticed once again that Bourtai was no simple barbarian. She came from a genuine and fairly sophisticated civilization, even if it was on wheels. It would be an interesting culture to visit . . . if he survived, which was dubious.

Krasna was obviously an old sun, middle Population Two, which had drifted from the galactic nucleus into this spiral arm. Since the heavy elements are formed within the stars, scattered through space by nova-type processes, and accumulated in the next stellar generation, the most ancient

stars have no planets. Krasna must be among the oldest ones which did; and it and its worlds were very poor in substances of middle and high atomic number. Which included many industrial metals.

Being smaller than Sol, Krasna had matured very slowly. In the first billion years or so, internal heat had given Altai a more or less Terrestroid surface temperature. Protoplasmic life had evolved in shallow seas. Probably the first crude land forms had emerged. But then radioactivity was used up. Residual heat bled into space. At last only the dull sun furnished warmth. Altai froze. The process was slow enough that life did not become extinct, but adapted.

Eventually equilibrium was reached. Altai lay ice-bound from pole to pole. An old, old world: so old that one moon had finally come within the Roche limit, shattered and formed rings; so old that its sun had completed the first stage of hydrogen burning and moved into another set of nuclear reactions. And these were more intense. Krasna grew hotter and brighter. For the next several million years, it would continue to increase its output. In the end, Altai's seas, liquid once more, would boil; beyond that, the planet itself would boil, as Krasna became nova; and beyond that lay the the white dwarf condition, where the star sank back down into ultimate darkness.

But as yet the process was scarcely begun. Only the tropics had reached a temperature that men—children of a more massive and brilliant sun—could endure. Most of the planet's water fled the equatorial belt and snowed down on the still frigid poles, leaving dry plains where a few plants

struggled to re-adapt, but were destroyed by this invading green grass.

Flandry's mind touched the remote future of Terra, and recoiled. A gelid breeze slid around him. He grew aware of how stiff and chilly he was. And night had not even fallen!

He groaned back to a sitting position. Bourtai sat calm. He envied her fatalism. But it was not in him to accept the chance of freezing while he cowered in a sack—or to walk, if he survived the dark hours, across hundreds of parched kilometers, through a cold that strengthened day by autumnal day.

His mind scuttered about, a trapped weasel seeking any bolthole. Fire, fire, my chance of immortality for a fire—*Hoy, there!*

He sprang to his feet, remembered the aircraft, and hit dirt again so fast that he bumped his bruised nose. The girl listened wide-eyed to his streaming, sputtering Anglic. When he had finished, she sketched a reverent sign. "I also pray the Spirit of the Mother that She guide us," said Bourtai.

Flandry showed his teeth in what was possibly a grin. "I, uh, wasn't exactly praying, my dear. No, I think I've a plan. Wild, but—Now, listen."

"No!" she exclaimed when he had finished.

The violence of her rejection startled him. "Not even to save our lives?" he asked.

"Would it? I don't see how."

"Well, I can't guarantee anything, of course," Flandry said. His lips moved upward, one-sidedly. "Or, rather, I

can. I can promise you this scheme will give us the whole world and a new pair of skates. Because if it fails, I won't be available for scolding purposes anyway." He sat up, hugged his knees and squinted across pale, rippling kilometers. The sun seemed to topple nightward. "How it works will be simple enough. As soon as darkness comes, I'll about on my varyak setting fires. The capacitors have a few kilometers left in them. This grass is so dry the whole prairie will flare up like a tinderbox. So we'll have smoke to screen us from view and warmth to blanket the radiation from our heaters."

"But do you not understand, Orluk? Just because the grass burns so easily, a steppe fire is the most dreaded thing on Altai. All other work, all fighting, even, stops when one is seen. Every person is law-bound to do nothing but quench it." The girl shivered. "And you would set one deliberately!"

"Uh-huh. Because I figured your custom must be just as you've described. Don't you see? The Khan's hunters will drop the search for us while they tackle the blaze. I suppose your usual method is to drop foam bombs from the air?" She nodded. "Well, then, if any of your people are in the neighborhood—which means within several hundred kilometers, since they're bound to have sky patrols watching for a possible Khanist raid—and if they're close enough to spot the fire, they'll send aircraft to help, won't they? Sure. When they arrive, we'll break radio silence and holler for them to pick us up. I think, given your name, they will. They can probably snatch us and escape, don't you agree? If they act fast. Until they show, we'll duck and dodge about, using the fire for cover. Once rescued, we'll be streaked northward to

temporary safety, anyhow. Right? Yes, yes, the idea depends on several assumptions which may be dead wrong. But they don't look too improbable, do they?"

"No-no. But the law of Altai—"

"Law be damned. We won't burn off more than a few hundred hectares. Couple thousand at worst. In exchange for which, Altai gets a chance to call on Holy Mother Terra for her liberation." As she still hesitated, he leaned closer and murmured: "Rather more important to me, personally, you get a chance to live and be free."

"What?" She looked at him blankly. He smiled. A slow blush stained her cheeks; the tilted, green eyes dropped.

He caught her hands between his. "I never spurned any good luck that came my way," he said. "And who ever had such good luck as to meet Bourtai Ivanskaya?"

"What? But no, you are an orluk of Terra; I am only . . ." Her stammering died out. She wasn't used to courtliness; didn't know what it meant. She trembled harder. He drew her close to him and kissed her.

Little more than that happened. For one thing, he was too tired and hungry. But before long she sighed and whispered, "As you think best, Dominic . . ."

Krasna touched the horizon, hung red and bloated for minutes, and was gone. Night fell with pyrotechnic swiftness. Stars sprang forth, the rings became a cold blaze, the wind grew fangs.

Flandry mounted his varyak. There was a tiny *scrit*, and a faggot of twisted straw in Bourtai's hand blossomed flame. She gave it to him. He kicked the motor into life whirled off. The grasses rustled, invisible, as he parted them.

Several meters away, he leaned over and put the torch to the ground. A sheaf of red and yellow tongues licked up.

He roared in a spiral, sowing his fires. By the time he rejoined the girl, they were coalescing into one. She bestrode her own machine, mute and unhappy. He must turn on her heater for her. The warmth from his needed a while to penetrate the numbness in his feet.

The fire arose and bellowed. A curtain of light spread across the world, wavering, climbing, showering sparks like refugee stars. Smoke blotted out the rings and half of heaven. Flandry felt heat gusts and smelled bitterness. He guided himself and the girl in slow pursuit, over hot, charred ground where their shadows wobbled grotesquely on stubble.

The airboat swooped low. Momentarily, its teardrop form was outlined against orange and raw gold. Flandry's muscles braced themselves for a bullet storm. The craft buzzed up again, out of sight. He hadn't been noticed. He wasn't important . . . now.

Bourtai fumbled with her radio receiver. The uneven light made her face leap from the murk. Then, as the nearest flames guttered, she vanished. Only the metal highlights on her varyak remained.

Voices trickled through the crackle and cough: "—come in, Ulan Baligh . . . Our position is . . . Units from Jagatai Station . . . Stand by . . . Prepare for . . . Windage . . . Danger . . ." She tuned them out, searching. The time seemed long before a new tone on a different band reached Flandry's ears.

"Aye, Noyon, it's wildfire indeed. I see one Khanist vessel hovering. . . . Hold, a flock of them just registered on

my radar screen, hither bound. Too small a squadron to stop the thing by itself. But they're calling for reinforcements. I think they can handle the burn well enough."

The answer was faint with remoteness, mangled by static, but prideful. "None shall say the Mangu Tuman withheld aid against the common enemy. Call them and say a flight of ours will shortly be on its way under command of myself, Arghun Tiliksky."

"Must I tell that, Noyon? They might decide that shooting you down was worth violating the Yassa."

"They would not dare. Every man on Altai would call for their deaths." With a dryness Flandry liked, the distant voice added, "Besides, I doubt if one officer of one ordu in the Tebtengri Shamanate is quite such a prize. Expect us within half an hour. Signing off."

Half an hour, Flandry's mind repeated. He didn't listen to the interchange between rebel scout and Khanist pilot. Their arrangement of truce was brief, formal, and cold. He concentrated on staying near enough to the fire for its infrared radiation to screen his own, without getting so close that he would be seen.

That took a little precision. The blaze grew with horrible speed. Now it lit the whole plain, and small animals fled squealing between his varyak wheels. The first firefighting squadron arrived and swooped beneath the smoke for a closer look. The thunder of their passage reverberated in his head. They rushed back beyond sight, and the bombs started falling. Where one struck, whiteness fountained, spread, and congealed in a sticky layer. A drop of this hit

Flandry's right hand. He spent several profane minutes ungluing his fingers.

Driven by a strong wind, the conflagration was immune to backfires. The aircraft laid a foam barrier across its path. It halted, sputtered, shook loose defiant banners, and outflanked the obstacle. Flandry could have sworn it whooped in derision.

Bourtai's hand sought his and squeezed tight, as they drove across ashen wasteland and glowing coals. "Said I not?" she asked thinly. "Said I not?" He muttered what comfort he could. Cinders blew up to streak their faces and stop their nostrils.

Another team from a more distant station appeared. Presently, the fire was contained to the south as well as to the north. But eastward it overleaped a foam line too thin, curved about and established its private sunrise. The first squadron, having discharged all bombs, went back after more. Their dwindling noise was scarcely audible above the roar on the steppe.

Bourtai rose in her saddle. Her eyes turned skyward. "Listen!" After a moment, Flandry heard the sound too. It was the whistle of aircraft in a hurry, coming down from the north. His heart fluttered. The girl, cooler than he when action was imminent, tuned her receiver.

"Do you know these Mangu Tuman people?" he asked stupidly.

"A little. They and mine, like all the Tebtengrian tribes, have met at Kievka Fair. And sometimes other occasions." Curt orders rattled from the loud-speaker. "That is the frequency to call them on."

Flandry saw midget shapes sweep across the wall of flame, several kilometers away. The Tebtengri didn't work in the sedate style of Oleg's men, who hovered far above. They dive-bombed. His gaze shifted from them to the opposite horizon. The pattern grew slowly in his brain, pieced together from glimpses caught through roiling smoke and gushing lambencies.

"They're taking the eastern front, leaving the Khan's units to work inward from north and south," he said. "Hm. That means, to get close enough for a speedy rescue operation, we must go clear around and re-approach the fire from the east. We'd better get started. I don't think, with the force they now have, the men will need much longer to put it out."

The girl's brief smile flashed white in her sooty, shadowed countenance. Her machine streaked off. He took a backward spurt of dust in his mouth, spat it out with an obscene remark, and tried to pull alongside. But she was too fast. He could barely see her, in snatches, now a silhouette against the blaze, now a flying gleam in darkness. The varyak motors droned, louder even than the burning they neared. Wheels hit stones and holes, bounced, swayed, and pounded on.

Across the south edge! Bending north again, they steered close for concealment. The full furnace heat billowed over them; smoke stank and stung, grass crackled, flames whirled with a great hollow bawling. The earth under the fire glowed white, overlaid with a tinge of hellish blue; and then red and tawny sheets flowered up to the smoke roof. Boom went a bomb; foam jetted and clung, pale amidst flying sparks. Flandry's front wheel crossed a tentacle of the spreading

suppressor. His machine slewed around. He put down the outrigger wheel before he was thrown, gunned his engine, and pulled clear. Bourtai was lost to sight. He proceeded half blind.

Wasn't it time for her to signal the newcomers? He squinted with bloodshot eyes at his instrument panel, dialed the radio, heard a babble of commands and reports. "Come on, lass" he shouted uselessly into the racket. "Don't be shy. Come on!"

Suddenly her voice was crisp from the speaker.

"Attention, men of the Mangu Tuman. Attention. I give the Tebtengri call for help, *ya-u-la, freemen aid a freeman*. I, Bourtai, daughter of the noyon Ivan Ogotai, who fell with the Tumurji at Rivers Meet. *Ya-u-lal* I, escaped from captivity in Ulan Baligh, am now driving along the east face of the wildfire. Behind me is a man from Holy Mother Terra. This I declare true: he is from Terra Herself; hunted by the Khan as I am hunted. He aided my escape and he will aid Altai to liberty. Send a boat and pick us up before Oleg's men do. I shall maintain a signal on this band for your guidance. *Ya-u-la!* Hear Bourtai Ivanskaya of the Tumurji."

Flandry threw a glance over his shoulder. If the enemy had someone listening on this frequency that the Tebtengri employed, fun and games must be expected.

A craft rushed from the hidden sky. A moment it poised, listening with directional antennae. The red light picked out Oleg's emblem on the flanks. Down near ground level, it streaked after the girl.

Flandry whipped his varyak around and darted toward darkness. The airboat boomed unheedingly past him. A

momentary flare-up in the background lined Bourtai. The Khanist pilot saw her too. A blaster beam stabbed. She made her wheels sprint. The incandescent lance turned in chase. Flandry converged on her. She saw him and tried to wave him away. He waved back: This way, follow me!

Another vessel, smaller and with a strange insigne, appeared. Its gun drew a line across the line of the first beam. A voice rapped from Flandry's radio: "Lackey of the usurper, is this how you observe the holy truce?"

Both ceased fire. The vessels circled each other like hostile dogs, a few meters above the earth. "I made no move against you or yours," said Oleg's pilot. "I am after certain outlaws. Stand aside, or you yourself will have broken the peace."

Flandry and Bourtai edged close together and rolled not too slowly from the scene. A smoky veil descended. The boats were hidden. "If those two keep arguing," Flandry called to her, "and meanwhile another Tebtengrian homes on your signal—"

"Yaaah!" she screamed.

He twisted about. His eyes strained and watered in a universe of turbulent smoke. Enough light came through, painting it blood color, for a few meters' vision. He saw Bourtai's varyak roll over, hit the ground and bounce in a cinder cloud. The girl had thrown herself clear. She struck, curled into a ball, and tumbled through the grass.

That which had pounced on her and had upset the vehicle sprang in pursuit. Flandry had an instant's glimpse of a shaggy head and monstrous body, legs too long even for

that height. He yanked his gun from the holster and whipped his machine around.

The demon shape bounded over grass already scorching. Bourtai lay motionless. Dead, or just the wind knocked from her? The creature stooped above. Flandry lowered his third wheel, halted, and took aim.

A hand as big as his head plucked the blaster from him.

He didn't stop to look behind. His foot kicked the accelerator. The motor snorted. The varyak stayed where it was.

Flandry leaped off. Two giants held the vehicle fast. A third, looming out of acrid black clouds, snatched at him. He glimpsed eyes and teeth, ducked and started running. The one who held Bourtai straightened, tucking her casually beneath an arm. Flandry couldn't rescue her. Wouldn't another Tebtengrian boat ever show?

Yes, by heaven! At sight's edge he spied the shape. It dipped low and hung quiet. The pilot must be staring into unrestful gloom with eyes not adapted. Flandry dashed in that direction. Breath was anguish in his dried lungs.

The ground thudded behind him. The strider caught up, took him by the waist, and flung him over one hairy shoulder.

Upside down, he saw the other savages. There were four in all. Two squatted by the varyaks, deftly lashing them to long, thick poles. Grunting, they lifted one machine between them, the carrying rod supported on their collarbones. The two who bore the prisoners picked up the remaining varyak with their free hands. Bourtai's transmitter must have gone dead when she was knocked over, for the Tebtengrian vessel did not follow. As the giants trotted northeastward, Flandry's bobbing eyes saw the flyer hover a minute more, then lift

again and vanish. A moment afterward, a Khanist boat arrived. It didn't stay either.

Smoke blotted out vision. When he could see again, Flandry found himself being carried across the steppe at some ten kilometers per hour. The fire was already remote from him, dwindling and dying in the night.

The varyak heaters were still in operation, blowing enough warm air across him to maintain life. He wondered if it made any important difference.

V

SEVERAL times in that long night the savages halted for a rest. On the first occasion, they tied the humans' ankles together and their hands behind their backs, crowded around one varyak and baked themselves. Dumped in the grass, Flandry tried at once to worm free. But the thongs were too skillfully knotted. He struggled to his feet. "Bourtail" he called, low and hoarse. "Can you hear me?"

"Aye." He saw her rise like him, half visible beneath one gibbous moon. The steppe was a lake, hoarfrost tinged copper, shadows running mysteriously before the wind. It whispered and rustled. "Aye, Dominic. Are you hurt?"

"Mostly in my pride . . . so far. I was afraid you . . . when you went off your saddle at such a speed . . ."

She achieved a chuckle. "Any nomad child learns that art."

They inched toward each other. "Who are those gargantuas?" he asked.

"Voiskoye." She had come close enough that he could read grimness in her expression.

"That doesn't tell me much, you know."

"Wild ones. Long ago, in the early days on Altai, when chaos often prevailed as folk sought a means of living suitable to this planet, a small band of criminals fled onto the steppes, which were then sparsely populated. Somehow they survived. The first generation or two lived largely by raiding lonely farmsteads; and they stole women. Then Altaians ceased to farm, while the Voiskoye learned to live as hunters. They still do so. Because their numbers are not great and the plains are very large, no one has troubled much about them. Sometimes they steal or kidnap, sometimes they barter, but most times they are never seen. I did not know there was a band hereabouts. They must have come toward the fire hoping to kill any game animals stampeded in their direction. Then they saw us and—" She drooped against him. The dark head bowed with weariness.

Flandry made himself ignore his own aches and consider the giants. There was sufficient light. They seemed more caucasoid than the average Altaian, probably because their ancestors had happened to be. Within a mane of black hair and a waist-length tangle of beard, their features were big-nosed, heavy-browed, almost acromegalic. He noticed again that a disproportionate percentage of their incredible height—two and a quarter meters—was thigh and shank. But the

torsos were stocky rather than lean. They wore shaggy tunics, nothing else save necklaces of teeth or bone. Their accoutrements included flint-headed axes, boomerangs, and knives obviously forged from steel scraps. While they appreciated the varyak heater, they didn't actually seem to mind the chill that gnawed at him.

He wondered what they lived on. No, wait, that was easy. (If only this headache would go away and let him think!) Just as Terrestrial vegetation had overrun the planetary tropics, so would those Terrestrial animals that the nomads herded. Some, drifting free, would revert to a wild state. . . . Yes, he could remember dully how Bourtai had passed through a flock of big queer-looking creatures to break their trail, ages ago. . . . Giant forms would soon develop. A fresh biological type in an environment with lots of unfilled ecological niches can evolve explosively.

Even man. Take a few dozen hunters. Keep their descendants inbred, to intensify any traits they may possess; but breed them fast, seven generations per century, and subject them to merciless natural selection. Besides metabolic adjustment to diet, temperature, and the rest, you will soon get a changed body. Size is advantageous for conserving heat as well as for running down prey. Under such conditions, nature will not need much more time to create a new breed of man than man does to create a new breed of dog.

The question must be asked: "What do they want us for?"

"The varyaks for metal, of course," Bourtai mumbled.

MAYDAY ORBIT

"That's an evasion, sweetheart, as well you know. What do they want *us* for?"

She hunched into herself. "They are said to be cannibals."

"But too seldom encountered for anyone to be sure, eh? Well, we aren't in their kitchen yet. Brrrr! I could almost welcome a nice hot casserole. Come on, let's go defrost."

He must cheer her up before she troubled to stump with him to the other varyak. That passive resignation, which is the other face of a stoic culture, was upon her. At length they huddled above its heater and felt iciness depart.

"Hm," Flandry said, "the radio on this one still looks workable." He wriggled into position for some knob twiddling. If he could raise the Mangu Tuman!

A hand pulled him aside. A broad coarse visage grinned down. "Hey!" Flandry wailed. "You aren't supposed to understand about radios."

The giant squatted beside the girl. Flandry crawled back. When he attempted the dials again, he was casually pushed off.

"They may not understand machines," Bourtai said bleakly, "but they know that machines are dangerous to them. Guns kill, boats fly off. You will be given no chance."

"Reckon not," Flandry sighed. He experimented with talking to his captor, but soon learned that the Voiskoye language had drifted too far from basic Altaian. Exhausted, he slumped and fell into an uneasy sleep.

When the trek resumed, he did by signs persuade them to carry him and Bourtai piggyback, rather than feed sack fashion. That was some help. So was the biltong given them to chew and the water from a leather bag. Nonethe-

less, he had never spent a more miserable twenty hours.

They reached camp a while after sunrise. Flandry was put on the ground and untied. "Ooff!" he groaned, and sat. His ankles wouldn't bear him. But he scanned the scene alertly.

Grass had been trampled over a large circle. Pup tents of hide surrounded one big tepee on which various cabalistic designs were crudely drawn in clay pigment. Fires burned in shallow trenches; skins and strips of flesh hung on poles to dry. Utensils were earthen; tools were mainly wood, stone, and bone. In general, the camp looked paleolithic. However, through the open flap of the tepee Flandry glimpsed cloth and metal.

Two hulking women stood guard over the prisoners. Otherwise the tribe, perhaps a hundred adults and three times as many naked children, crowded about the varyaks. Ah, that was a marvel! The four hunters who had brought this prize were cheered, slapped on the back, danced around and presented with necklaces. At the height of festivities, one came from the tepee and painted their faces.

Flandry watched him narrowly. The chief or medicine man, or whatever he was, had outlived most of his followers, judging by his grizzled locks. (Probably few Voiskoye reached forty. Hunger, accident, disease, and blizzard devoured them.) He was shorter and less powerfully built than the average, though still overtopping a Terrestrial. His garment was fringed with tails and ornamented with beads. He wore a headdress not unlike an ancient shako. Cicatrices decorated his breast, and shrewdness marked his features. It was soon obvious that he had waited in his tent

and had begun by rewarding the heroes for purely ceremonial reasons. His glance kept straying toward the captives. When at last he could leave his people to jabber at the machines and prepare for a banquet, he approached Flandry with evident eagerness.

Hunkering down, he said in accented basso Altaian: "What kind Izgnannikh you?"

"What kind what?" Having recovered some strength, the Altaian leaned forward. Bourtai looked on with hopeless eyes.

"You . . . two *Izgnanniki*. Not so? Herders, ordu folk, what you call yourself. We say *Izgnanniki*. She there common sort. Never see one like you. How?"

"I," said Flandry with what he hoped was impressiveness, "am from Holy Mother Terra."

He met neither disbelief nor acceptance. A mask appeared to drop over the heavy face. For entire minutes the giant peered at him. Only one hand moved, stroking the long beard.

Finally, very slowly: "*Izgnanniki* tell 'bout Terra. Say men come from star name Terra. Not so? Ha. You look *ata-moi*—what say—strange." A thick finger pointed at the foreign shape of hair, eyes, nose, smooth chin. "You name?"

"Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, Intelligence Corps, Imperial Terrestrial Navy," he intoned with full magniloquence.

The Voisko jumped to his feet, pulled a carved bone from the pouch at his waist and shook it toward the sun and the man. "You no make *zaporo!*" he roared furiously. "I kill. Kill now. *Zaporo* for me. Me only. *Nyennekh, nyennekh, shviska upolyanski!*"

"What does he mean?" Bourtai whispered.

"He thinks I tried to—" Flandry discovered that Altaian, like many languages postdating the origin of space travel, had no word for "magic" or any related concept—"he believes certain phrases and rituals have special powers to help or harm. See, he's warding off the hypothetical effects of what I said. It must have sounded like a strong formula to him. If they do eat us, I daresay they'll believe they're gaining any special potencies we may have."

She spat her contempt.

"No *zaporo*," Flandry soothed the giant. "Only my name. See, nothing happened. I only told you my name."

"*Zaporo* mine," the other growled, somewhat mollified. "I make *zaporo*, good for us, bad for enemies. I tribemaster. You understand?" The shrewdness returned. "If you not make big *zaporo*, you not from Terra. Not so?"

Since the Voisko didn't squat again, Flandry rose too. He had recovered that much from the trip here. Being used to nonhuman races taller than man, he was put at no psychological disadvantage by having to look up at the witch doctor. He twirled his mustache and murmured. "Well, I never said I couldn't, just that I didn't. On that occasion."

"You caught like animal," the Voisko scoffed. "Terra man be caught like animal? Not so."

"I was taken by surprise," Flandry said. "And naturally, your hunters were full of the *zaporo* you had given them. I own to not being all-powerful. But . . . we do have certain tricks where I come from."

An awkward delay ensued, since his interlocutor's rusty Altaian failed. The whole idea must be rephrased and

threshed out, which Flandry thought rather spoiled the effect. However, such slowness did help drive the concept home, that anyone who claimed to be a Terran should be handled with care.

"My name Kazar," the chief told him. "Not real name. Real name secret so enemies not make *zaporo* on me. Name I use, Kazar. Name you use, Vlanary. Not so? We talk."

"Uh, how do you happen to know Izgnannikh speech?"

Kazar scowled. "Years ago, me young, just old 'nough be called man. Hard winter. Many starve. Go with father and other men, take Izgnanniki animals. Herdsmen see us. Shoot guns. Most Voiskoye killed. Me captured. Live with herds-men three years. Do what herds-men tell me do. Jahangir, they name."

"A tribe now supporting Oleg Yesukai," Bourtai chimed in. "I have heard of them. They are poorer than most, which has made them hard. They would not be above enslaving a prisoner. Especially one who we hardly regard as human."

Kazar brooded darkly at her. "Jahangir beat me. Me do dirty work. Escape. Come home. Now me kill Izgnanniki where can."

"Whoa!" Flandry stepped between him and the girl. "Not this one. Haven't you heard? There's a war among the nomads. Her people are fighting the same ones who captured you."

"Yes, me know 'bout shooting on steppes, in sky. Me see Izgnanniki dead mark by Izgnannikh weapons."

"So we're friends together, eh?" Flandry beamed.

The lion head shook. "No. All Izgnanniki enemies to Voiskoye."

He's doubtlessly right, Flandry realized. Not being worth cultivating as allies, the savages were considered and treated as dangerous nuisances by both nomad factions. "You know about radios?" he said. "Let me radio this woman's people to come get her and me. They'll be pleased. It would be worth a lot of metal to them."

For a moment Kazar hesitated. Then, decisively, with a chopping motion of one huge hand: "No. Izgnanniki hear we have you, they come. We give you. They give metal? Not so. They shoot!"

Bourtai's anger flashed. She jumped to her feet. "What's that? Do you mean the Tebtengri would break an oath? Why, you louse-bitten rat, if you even knew what 'oath' means—"

Kazar reached past Flandry and cuffed. Bourtai rolled over. Flandry glared, decided resistance was useless, and knelt by the girl. She sat up, holding her head. The bruise on her temple began to turn blue. "You all right?" he breathed. It was astonishing how anxious he felt.

She nodded numbly. A female or two snarled and edged toward her. Kazar waved them back. "You keep still," the chief ordered her.

The Terran climbed erect. His full weariness struck home. He could only croak: "You get no use from me if you harm the woman. Understand?"

Kazar shrugged. "You earn you keep and her keep, we feed both. Or you feed us," he added with a bark of laughter.

"We'll need our sleeping bags back, and a tent."

Kazar nodded impatiently. "So, so. Your bags good for only babies. You try run away, we track. Good trackers, us."

"I don't doubt that," Flandry said. The thought of being hunted across the steppe by leaping, baying trolls brought the sweat to his skin. Yes, he was effectively jailed.

"So what you do for Voiskoye?"

"Good Lord, let me think! I've got sand in my synapses," Flandry muttered in Anglic.

His dulled gaze went around and around the camp. Could he only get at a radio—the Mangu Tuman were half an hour from here by airboat. If he called them, they'd surely send a scout, at least, to investigate. And one scout craft with a blaster cannon would have this whole gang at its mercy....

Half a bloody hour!

"I can make you some Terran *zaporo*," he said thickly. "Good *zaporo*. Full bellies, warm weather, many children, beer and skittles. But I need Terran type equipment to do it."

Kazar's grin was doubly wolfish; the Voiskoye were starting to evolve carnivore teeth. "I know what gun look like," he said. "Also radio. You not come near stuff."

"I didn't mean that. But I must have—"

"You get stuff you need," the chief said. "But only for what I understand. You not make something I not understand first. You tell me what you need and why. If I understand, I give."

Flandry stared into the deep-set eyes. Not for the first time, he realized that technological backwardness did not

imply stupidity. Kazar had picked up more sophistication among the nomads than one might have expected.

"I'm too tired to think," Flandry protested. "Let me sleep a while."

"Like little baby. Izgnanniki worms." Kazar spoke a command. "You have food, then sleep, so? After sleep, tell me what you do for us."

The prospect of becoming food himself if he didn't propose something acceptable was no immediate worry to Flandry. He was too exhausted. He was hardly in the bag with Bourtai, under a pup tent assigned them, than unconsciousness hit him. The noisy revels outside never touched his dreams.

But he had a well-trained subconscious. When he awoke, hours later, it was with a shout. Bourtai blinked her bewilderment. He leaned over and planted a kiss on her mouth.

"Kid, I do believe I've got an ideal!"

"W-will it serve us?"

"Diabolically."

VI

KRASNA stood at late afternoon, a fire coal in the pale sky. The camp looked nearly deserted. Gnawed bones and pits filled with white ashes told of the feast, which most tribes-

people were now sleeping off in their tents. A few children and older females moved sullenly about, cleaning up the mess, or carrying on the endless chores of the primitive. Several males were also awake, crosslegged on the ground, chipping flints or shaping wood. They followed Flandry and Bourtai with incurious gaze. The average I. Q. here couldn't amount to much; Kazar was exceptional.

His tepee stood open on stacks of woven fabrics, glassware, plunder and salvage of civilization. Metal predominated—broken tools and firearms, utensils, ornaments, scraps of this and that piled in a junk heap for reclaiming by Voiskoye smiths. Flandry saw the two varyaks on top. One was already half dismantled.

The chief squatted before it, plying wrench and chisel with skill as well as strength. His shaggy head jerked as Flandry blocked the doorway. Mates and children slunk outside. "You come," he invited. "You tell what you got for us."

Flandry accepted. Bourtai crouched near the flap, increasingly ill at ease. *Well*, the man thought, *being a potential fricasee isn't any too relaxing for her*. The notion didn't bother him. After he was through with his body, it might as well make payment in kind for all the filets and chops it had enjoyed. Not that he didn't want to remain alive. There were so many recipes he had never even tasted. . . .

"Well?" growled Kazar.

Flandry reached for the varyak. With the control panel off, its innards looked forlornly out at him. Kazar knocked his hand aside. "Not touch!"

"Look," said Flandry, as aggrieved as possible, "if you

don't want my Terran *zaporo*, tell me. I must have some apparatus. Like your carved bones, or those pictures on your tent, or the signs scarred onto your breast. You will simply have to trust me with a few wires and such."

"First you tell me how work."

"Very well." Flandry rubbed his chin and stared solemnly upward. "We have a number of things on Terra that could be valuable to you. You probably have trouble finding water, don't you? What do you do on a dry plain like this?"

"Waterhole one day off. Send women with bags."

"Why not camp closer?"

"Animals come drink. We camp near, animals go drink someplace else. Better we stay far, send men to hunt, women to carry water. Not so?"

"Yes. But handiest yet would be to dig a well. You know, a hole in the ground."

Kazar nodded. "We do that sometimes. Cannot dig deep. Not have tools. Loose dirt cave in if we dig deep. When we think water not deep below, we dig. If not sure water not deep, we not dig."

"Ah-ha! I figured as much. Well, friend, your troubles are over. I can build you a thing that shows where water lies no deeper than two man-heights. Good pure water too, not the bitter stuff you must often come upon."

Something like enthusiasm touched the hairy face. "You not tell true, you die for sure," Kazar promised. "How you *zaporo* work? I try make *zaporo* for find water, long ago. Not work. You tell how."

"Well," Flandry drawled, "I suspect you didn't have

quite the right concept. We Terrans have made the dowsing rod obsolete. Let's just consider the laws governing magic. That's what we call *zaporos* on Terra: magic. You know there are many different magics, for hunting, for good luck and good health, to harm enemies, and so on. But there are really only two kinds, aren't there? One, you use a thing which has once touched, or been part of, another thing. For instance, you use a man's name, part of himself, to make magic on him. Or better yet, some of his hair or nails or blood—

"Not speak!" Kazar exclaimed. "Woman listen!"

"No matter. I assure you, Terran magic is too strong to be bothered by a woman's presence. In fact, some of our feared magicians are women. Well, that's one sort of magic: what at home we call the contagious kind. The other sort is working on a thing by using a likeness of that thing. For instance, you help your hunters catch game by sticking spears in a clay image of the kind of animal they're after. Correct? That's what we Terrans call sympathetic magic."

Much impressed, Kazar nodded. "You know much *zaporos*. Me learn many ways, many . . . what word? . . . many secrets. But me never think 'bout *zaporos* being two kinds."

"Not your fault," said the other condescendingly. "You never had a scientific education. Very well, how shall we find water? Since we have no part of the spring we want to locate, we can't use contagious magic. So we must use sympathetic magic. We must make a symbol—a sign, you understand?—of water, and of a man finding it. The apparatus I shall have to construct is the symbol on which we operate. Savvy?"

"Here's how it works." With his forefinger, he sketched in the dust. "First we construct a picture of the territory in which we are. We can do that with wires attached to a plank, forming more or less of a square. But where ground water exists near the surface, there will be plant growth, so we must symbolize that." He drew a series of loops with an arrow through it. "Thus, brush and twigs." Pointing to a variable inductance from the varyak's radio: "That will serve in the actual model. Do you see how it is changed in shape by turning a dial? In using this model, one adjusts the shape of the brush symbol until it is close to the actual shape of any growth in the area."

"That belong radio," Kazar said suspiciously.

"Yes, I know. But *you* know what a radio looks like. How could a single part of it serve the same function? Can a bone be the whole animal? Use your common sense." Flandry drew in two pairs of parallel lines, also pierced, at separate points. "These are pictures of the water covered by the earth, as seen through two eyes. In the model those will be used." He indicated a pair of variable condensers. "You can see how they are adjustable to local contours."

He had to stop often to explain his reasoning in Kazar's more limited vocabulary and to prove this or that lemma to the chief's satisfaction. But in synopsis, he rolled on: "What, however, is land without the sun? The omnipotent, life-giving sun, ah, yes, we must include that in our hookup. You know that energy cells power a varyak, so I will take one. It isn't quite exhausted yet. With the help of a coil it'll make a spark across this gap when this key is closed. The creation of the spark stands for the rising of the sun, life and

hope and rebirth and so forth. As the sun draws water from the earth, so will our model seek water lying within the earth.

"One more thing. We must symbolize the act of seeking view, so must our machine. Therefore we will run a short wire into the earth, thus, and a long one heavenward, thus. The long one, which imitates a man surveying the whole world, can best be raised by a kite. D'you know what a kite is? No? Well, give Bourtai some light sticks and cord, and some of that cloth, and I'm sure she can make one for us.

"As for the operation of the machine, that's an easy matter. I shall let the woman there tap the key which controls the spark. You see what that means, of course. A female operating the sunsymbols stands for the union of the two elemental life forces. The woman has to control the spark, rather than the other way around, because we wish to get a kindly result, water flowing from the ground like milk from a mother's breast. I myself shall do the most difficult job, adjusting the various parts of the machine to symbolic conformity. You may go fly the kite. Attached to the kite string, besides the seeking-wire, there will be a flat slab. Yonder one will do." He indicated a plastic chunk broken off the varyak panel. "You must stroke the plate with your free hand while thinking hard about ground water. When the plate feels sticky, then everything is in adjustment and I can read the location of the spring off my dials."

After many more circumlocutions, Kazar got the idea and agreed that the hydrophilic machine was no hoax but constructed according to sound principles of *zaporo*. Then

he was eager to begin at once. But not so anxious that he did not watch Flandry's every motion, and inspect each item requested before he handed it over.

The job did not take many hours. As they went outside with the clumsy breadboard circuit, Bourtai murmured, "Do you really think we can—"

"I assume you know whatever telegraphic code your people employ," he answered as softly. "The nomads must have one; voice radio can't always be practical."

She nodded, took a long breath, and ran with the kite till it was aloft. Flandry thought how graceful she was. But damn, he had to concentrate on another sort of oscillations, getting this haywired rig to function. . . . "Give me some room there!" he snapped at the giants crowding about. The spectacle had drawn the whole camp to gape and gabble. Even Kazar couldn't make them stand very far off, and they jammed together on every side. Flandry would rather have been surrounded by bears.

Bourtai gave the kite string to the chief and sat down at the improvised key. When the spark leaped and crackled, blue among long evening shadows, the Voiskoye rumbled their uneasiness. Hair stirred on male scalps; unfairly big muscles grew tense. Kazar traced protective signs in the air.

The key rattled. "*Ya-u-la, freemen aid a freeman!*" in dots and dashes in the hope that someone not of the Khan's party was tuned in. There should be a receiver open to the distress band in every ordu, at all times. But the energy cell was feeble, nearly drained by the varyak's long flight. And there would be atmospherics. Flandry swung his con-

trol dials through slow circles. He didn't know closely enough the electronic properties of his neo-Hertzian set. He must try every combination, trusting he would strike the frequency he wanted among them.

Stillness descended on the tribe. Only the thin, frying noise of the spark, the clattering key, and the breeze in long grass were heard. Kazar held the kite string in one hand, crouched over the plastic plate on the ground and stroked it with the other. Suddenly, a roar: "*Tulyansk! Me stick!*"

"Ah so," Flandry nodded. If you run your fingers over any smooth surface for a while, you will get a sensation of tackiness. He hoped the sweat that sprang out on him didn't show too much. "Well, one is never certain the first time. We must continue trying. If the dials read the same repeatedly at the sticky point, then we'll know the machine is working."

After our signal is picked up, they'll have to get a directional fix on it. And then get here themselves. If they are coming.

He stretched the process out for minutes longer. But there came the time when Kazar snorted, "Too long. Get feeling over and over. You tell where dig." The tribe sensed their leader's mood and rumbled.

"Very well," Flandry yielded. "I daresay we do have a reading. Now I must interpret it. Addissababa constantinople walla walla kalamazoo woomera saskatoon saskatchewan rhine and out goes he. Follow me—no, best keep the kite in the ir. Bourtai can take it along. You may carry the rest of the apparatus."

Kazar spoke an order. A male went into the tepee and came back with a regular steel-bladed shovel. *Oh, oh*, Flandry thought. That well would get dug sooner than he had figured on.

He led them out across the steppe. Most of the tribe followed at his heels. Their silence was more ominous than their previous grunts had been. He could virtually feel their stares drilling holes in his back. As slowly and with many pauses to survey the land as he dared, he proceeded northward.

After a kilometer or two, Kazar gruffed, "You say *zaporo-ozka* find water near. Not good if water far."

"I can't find what isn't there," Flandry protested. "The nearest spring is a little distance off. In the future you can choose your campsites according to what the machine tells." But no one seemed very convinced. After several more minutes, he decided he had about exhausted their scanty patience. He stopped and stamped his feet. "Here."

"Here?" Kazar stooped, crumbled the soil between his fingers and held a pinch to his nose. "Dry. Much dry. Look there, *khru* grass, grow on driest ground."

"You'd never have thought of looking here," the Terran argued blandly. "Which proves how valuable my machine is."

Kazar gave him a hard look, rose, and signaled his shovelman. That giant got busy. Clods stormed loose. The others edged close. Their bodies were huge and black against the yellow sunset sky, their smell sharp in the nose. Bourtai seemed fragile in their midst. She held her kite like a doomed banner.

After considerable pant and thud, the shovelman spoke to Kazar. The chief said loweringly, "Ground very hard. No wetter."

"He hasn't gone deep enough," Flandry said. "I told you it might be as many as four man-heights, remember? That's Voiskoye men, naturally."

"You say two," Kazar corrected. The bristles rose on his head and shoulders. Eyes under cavernous brow ridges caught the fading light and glittered. "Me think you not tell true."

"Well, there's always the possibility that some rival magician has cast a spell on my machine." Flandry wasted more seconds explaining his words. "I'd better make a fresh magic to find out if that's the case."

"We not find water quick, you dead," Kazar stated flatly. Flandry looked heavenward.

His pious gesture was rewarded with a spark in the northern sky. Metal glared, far and far above the steppe. *Oh Lord*, he thought, *let them see the kite and understand!*

Outrunning its own noise, the airboat was almost on top of them before a Voisko yelled and pointed. Then the wake came over the plain in a prolonged thunderclap. Bourtai released the kite, jumped wildly, tore off her jacket and waved it.

The savages bawled and scattered. Kazar threw the transmitter circuit to earth. It smashed. He whirled on Flandry. "You liel" he roared, loud as the boom from the north. One hand snatched after the Terran.

Flandry ducked. Kazar dashed at him. Flandry dodged past. The giant snarled, tried to turn as swiftly, but failed.

Bourtai was still waving her coat at the sky. Kazar leaped and caught her. She yelled, twisted in his grasp, and tried to gouge his eyes. He gave her a shake, and she hung dazed. He lifted her with one hand and reached for her neck with the other.

Flandry snatched the shovel from the hole where it lay abandoned. He ran full tilt against the Voisko. The blade struck that looming belly with his weight behind. Kazar yammered ear-rippingly and let Bourtai fall. The gash in him was deep but not serious. Faster than expected, his fist smote the shovel from Flandry's grasp. It spun through the air for meters.

Flandry turned and ran. Anything to draw Kazar from Bourtai. She was sitting up, but semi-conscious. A dim part of his mind wondered what the hell ailed him, getting chivalrous at his age. The footfalls that shook the ground drew closer. He heard a bestial bellow.

There came a crack. The thud that followed jolted through Flandry's shinbones. Turning, he saw Kazar's bulk stretched monstrosously in the grass. A hole was burned from shoulder blade to breast. The airboat hovered a few meters above. A nomad stood in the open door. One hand gripped a blaster.

"Did I get him?" he called.

Flandry bent over Kazar. "Yes," he answered. "He's dead. Poor bastard. I didn't mean that to happen." He stopped and closed the staring eyes.

"Did you send that call for help?" the nomad asked.

"Yes." Flandry helped Bourtai rise. "Here we are. But who are you?"

"From the Mangu Tuman. Stand aside. I'll land and take you aboard. Best we hurry. These parts are crawling with Khanist ordus. If we're caught—" The man's grin was as harsh as the noise he made while drawing a finger across his throat.

VII

ARGHUN TILISKY thrust his head forward. A sunbeam, trickling through one small window in the kibitka, touched his face and etched it strongly against shadow. The other men who sat crosslegged in a ring on the floor became a mere background for him.

"Your deed was evil," he declared. "Nothing can justify setting a grass fire. No luck can come of it."

Flandry studied him. This noyon of the Mangu Tuman was quite young, even for these times when few Tebtengrian men reached any great age. And he was a dashing, gallant warrior, as everyone said and as he proved the night of the fire. But to some extent, Arghun was the local equivalent of a prude.

"The fire did no great harm, did it?" asked the Terran mildly.

"And the motive justified the act," said Toghrul Vavilov, Gur-Khan of the tribe. He stroked his beard and exchanged

knowing smiles with Flandry: a kindred hypocrite. "I only regret we failed to rescue you at once."

A visiting chieftain exclaimed: "Your noyon verges on blasphemy himself, Toghrul. Sir Dominic is from Terra! If a lord of Mother Terra wishes to set a blaze, for any reason or none, who may deny him?"

Flandry felt he ought to blush, but decided not to. "Be that as it may," he said, "I couldn't improve any better plan."

"So today this council has been called," added Toghrul Vavilov, as pompously as redundantly. "The chiefs of every tribe allied with our own must hear what this distinguished guest has to relate."

"But the fire!" mumbled Arghun.

Eyes went through gloom to an old man seated under the window. Furs covered frail Juchi Ilyak so thickly that his bald parchment-skinned head looked disembodied. The Grand Shaman stroked a wisp of white beard, blinked eyes that were still sharp in their web of wrinkles, and murmured with a dry little smile:

"This is not the time to dispute whether the rights of a man from Holy Terra override the Yassa by which Altai lives. The question seems rather, how shall we survive in order to raise such legal quibbles at another date?"

Arghun tossed his reddish-black hair and snorted. "Oleg's father, and the whole Nuru Bator dynasty before them, tried to conquer the Tebtengri. But still we hold the northlands. I do not think this will change overnight."

"Oh, but it will," said Flandry in his softest voice. "Unless something is done soon, it will."

He treated himself to one of his few remaining cigarettes

and leaned forward so that the light would pick out his own features. Straight gray eyes and long thin nose were exotic on this planet, hence impressive. "Let me summarize your situation as I understand it," he said. "Throughout their history, Altaians have used chemical power and stored solar energy. The only nuclear generators demanded by their way of life are a few small, stationary ones at Ulan Baligh and at the mines. Your internecine wars on Altai have also been confined to chemical and electrical energy weapons. Your economy would not have supported atomic war, even if the feuds and boundary disputes which started your fights were worth such destruction. Hence you Tebtengri always had sufficient military strength to hold the northlands. Though the rest of the planet were to ally against you, it would not be able to bring enough force to bear on these sub-arctic pastures to drive you out of them. Am I right?"

They nodded. He continued: "But that situation has now been changed. Oleg Khan is getting help from outside this planet. Some of his new toys I have seen with my own eyes. Craft that can fly flourishes around your best, or can go beyond the atmosphere to swoop down elsewhere; battle-cars whose armor your strongest chemical explosives cannot pierce; missiles that can devastate so wide an area that no amount of dispersal can save you. As yet, Oleg hasn't got much modern equipment like that. But more will arrive within the next several months. When he has enough to crush you with ease, he'll do so.

"What's still worse, from my viewpoint, he will have allies that are not human."

They stirred uneasily. Only Juchi the Shaman remained

quiet, watching Flandry with impassive eyes. A clay pipe in his hand sent bitter incense toward the roof. "We have nonhuman friends of our own," he said calmly. "Who are these creatures that Oleg has invoked?"

"Merseians," Flandry answered. "They're another starfaring, imperial race—and man stands in the path of their ambitions. For a long time now, we've been deadlocked with them, nominally at peace, actually skirmishing, subverting, assassinating, probing for weaknesses. They have decided Altai would make a useful naval base.

"Outright invasion would be expensive, especially since Terra would be sure to notice so massive an operation and would probably interfere. But there's a more subtle approach, by which Altai can be taken over under Terra's nose. The Merseians will supply Oleg with enough help that he can conquer the whole planet. In exchange, once he has done so, he will let in the Merseian engineers. Altaians will dig and die to build fortresses; this entire world will become one impregnable nest of strongholds; then, and only then, will the Merseian fleet move in, because then it will be too late if Terra realizes what has been happening!"

"Does Oleg himself know about these plans?" asked Toghrul roughly.

Flandry shrugged. "Insufficiently well, I imagine. He thinks he can drive a good bargain. Like many another puppet ruler, he'll wake up one morning and see the strings they've tied on him. But then he'll be helpless too. I've watched this sort of thing occur elsewhere."

In fact, he added to himself, I've helped bring it about now and then—on Terra's behalf.

Toghrul entwined nervous fingers. "I believe you," he said. "We have had glimpses, heard rumors, gotten bits of information from travelers and spies. What you have told us makes the puzzle fall together. . . . But what can we do? Can we summon the Terrans?"

"Aye—aye, call the Terrans, warn the Mother of Men!"

Flandry felt how passion flared in the scarred warriors beside him. He had gathered erenow that the Tebtengri had no use for Subotai the Prophet (a major reason why the southern tribes were hostile to them) but built their own religion around a hard-boiled sort of humanistic pantheism. It grew on him how strong a symbol the ancestral planet was to them.

He didn't want to tell them what Terra was actually like these days. (Or, perhaps, had always been. He suspected men are only saints and heroes in retrospect.) Indeed, he dared not speak of sottish emperors, venal nobles, faithless wives, servile commons, to this armed and burning reverence. *But luckily, there's a practical problem at hand.*

"Terra is farther from here than Merseia is," he pointed out. "Even the nearest base we've got is more distant than their nearest one. I've no reason to believe there are any Merseians on Altai at this moment; but surely Oleg has at least one fast spaceship at his disposal to inform them if anything goes wrong. Suppose we do get word of the facts to Terra, and Oleg knows we have done so. What do you think he will do?" Flandry nodded, owlishly. "Correct on the first guess! Oleg will send a message to that closest Merseian base. I know that a heavy naval force is currently stationed there, and I doubt very much if the Merseians

will abandon their investment here tamely. No, they will dispatch their ships at once to this planet, blast the Tebtengri lands with nuclear bombs, and dig in. That won't be as smooth and thorough a job as present plans call for, but it will be effective. By the time a Terran fleet of reasonable size can get here, the Merseians will be quite well entrenched. The hardest task in space warfare is to get a strong enemy off a planet firmly held. Under the present logistic circumstances, it may prove impossible. But even if, thanks to our precipitating matters ahead of the Merseian timetable, even if the Terrans do blast them loose, Altai will have been turned into a radioactive desert in the process."

Silence clapped down. Men stared at each other and back to Flandry with a horror he had seen before and which still hurt him to behold. Wherefore he continued hastily:

"So the one rational objective for us, right now, is to get a *secret* message out. If Oleg and the Merseians don't suspect that Terra knows about their scheme, they won't hurry it up. Instead of Merseia, it can be Terra which suddenly arrives here in strength, seizes Ulan Baligh, establishes underground emplacements and orbital forts. Under such circumstances, Merseia will not fight at all. They'll write Altai off. I know their basic strategy well enough to predict that much with absolute certainty. You see, they'll no longer be able to make Altai an offensive base against Terra—the cost would be out of proportion to any gain—on the other hand, Terra, in full possession of Altai, cannot use it as a base for aggression against them." He should have said *will not*; but he let these people make the heartbreaking

discovery for themselves, that Terra's only real interest was to preserve a fat status quo.

Arghun sprang to his feet. As he crouched under the low ceiling, primness dropped from him. His leonine, young face became a sun; he cried, "And Terra will have us! We will be restored to humankind!"

While the Tebtengri whooped and laughed aloud at that realization, Flandry smoked his cigarette with care. After all, he thought, provincial status needn't corrupt them. Not too much. There would be a small naval base, an Imperial governor, an enforced peace between the tribes, and a reasonable tax. Otherwise, they could live pretty much as they chose. Proselytization wasn't worth Terra's while. What freedom the Altaians lost here at home, their young men would regain simply by having access to the stars. Wasn't that so?

Juchi, the Shaman, whose office bound together all these chiefs, spoke in a whisper that pierced: "Let us have silence. We must weigh how this may be done."

Flandry waited till the men had calmed somewhat before he gave them a rueful smile. "That's a good question," he said. "Next question, please."

"The Betelgeuseans—" rumbled Toghrlul.

"I doubt if we can get our message out through them," said another gur-khan. "Were I Oleg the Damned, I would put a guard around every individual Betelgeusean, as well as every spaceship, until the danger is past. I would inspect every article of trade, every fur or hide or smoke gem, before it was loaded."

"I myself would send to Merseia at once," shivered someone else.

"No, we needn't fear that," said Flandry. "I'm sure the Merseians won't commit themselves to so hazardous an action as the immediate occupation of Altai, unless they're fairly sure that Terra does have knowledge of their project. They have too many commitments elsewhere to go off half-cocked at every hint of possible trouble."

"Besides," said Juchi, "Oleg has pride. He will not make himself a laughing stock to his masters, screaming for help because one fugitive is loose in the Khrebet."

"Anyhow," put in Toghrul, "he knows how impossible it is for Orluk Flandry to smuggle the information out. Those tribes who do not belong to our Shamanate may dislike the harsh Yesukai rule, but they are still more suspicious of us, who traffic with the Ice Dwellers and scorn their stupid Prophet. We aren't likely to get the help of any southerner. Even supposing someone would agree to brand our message on an outgoing hide, or slip a letter into a bale of pelts, or microscribe it on a gem, and even supposing such words did get past Oleg's inspectors, the cargo would still, most likely, wait months in some Betelgeusean warehouse before anyone looked at it."

"We don't have many months before Oleg overruns your country, and the Merseians arrive," finished Flandry.

He sat for a while listening to them chew desperate and impractical schemes. The air in here was hot and stuffy. All at once he could take no more. He rose. "I need a fresh breath and a chance to think," he said.

Juchi nodded grave dismissal. Arghun jumped up again. "I come too," he said.

"If the Terran desires your company," said Toghrul. "You might show him our ordu, since he came directly from his sleep to this conference."

"Thanks," said Flandry absent-mindedly.

He went out the door and down a short ladder. The kibitka in which the chiefs met was actually a large truck. Its box was fitted out as austere living quarters. On its top, as on top of all the larger and slower vehicles, the flat black plates of a solar-energy collector were tilted to face Krasna. The accumulator banks, thus charged, were auxiliary sources of power for the nomads. Such roofs made this wandering town seem like a flock of futuristic turtles scattered across the hills.

The Khrebet was not a high range. Gullied slopes, gray-green with thornbush and yellow with sere grass, climbed in the north. Somewhere beyond that horizon they were buried under the glacial cap. Downward swept a cold wind, whining about Flandry. He shivered and drew tighter about him the coat hastily sewn to his measure. The sky was very pale today, almost white; the rings stood low and wan in the south, where the hills emptied into steppe.

As far as Flandry could see, the herds of the Mangu Tuman were spread out in care of boys mounted on var-yaks. They were not cattle. Terra's higher mammals are not easily raised on other planets; rodents are tougher and more adaptable. The first colonists brought rabbits with them, which they mutated and crossbred by the usual genetic engineering methods. That ancestor could hardly

be recognized in the cow-sized grazing beasts of today. They looked more like giant dun-colored guineau pigs than anything else. Separate from them Flandry saw occasional flocks of transformed ostriches.

Arghun gestured with pride.

"Yonder kibitka houses the ordu library," he said. "Those children seated on the ground nearby are being taught the alphabet."

Flandry nodded appreciation, though he was not surprised. Obviously illiterates could not have operated the ground vehicles he saw or the negagrav aircraft patrolling overhead. Nomadism was quite compatible with a high education. Given microprint, you could carry thousands of volumes along on your travels. Arghun indicated the trucks—sometimes organized in trains—that held the camp arsenals, sickbay, machine ships, and small factories for textiles and ceramics.

The poorer families had no kibitkas but were crowded into yurts: dome-like tents of felt, mounted on motor carts. But no one seemed hungry or ill-clad. It was not an impoverished nation which carried such gleaming missiles on flatbed cars, or operated such a fleet of light tanks, or armed every adult with such efficient (if somewhat outmoded) infantry weapons. In answer to Flandry's questions, Arghun explained that the entire tribe, male and female, was a military as well as a social and economic unit. Everybody worked and everybody fought. While unequal wealth did exist, no one was allowed to go without the necessities.

"Where does your metal come from?" the Terran inquired.

"The grazing lands of each tribe include some mines,"

Arghun said. "In our yearly round with the herds, we spend some time there, digging and smelting. Elsewhere on the circuit we reap semi-wild grain planted the year before; and we tap crude oil from wells we possess and pass it through a robotic refiner plant. What we cannot produce ourselves, we trade with others to get. One reason the Tebtengri Shamanate has survived despite opposition is that between its various tribes, it has in its circumpolar lands all needful natural resources. In fact, right yonder in the Khrebet lies one of Altai's few really rich iron ore deposits."

"It sounds like a virtuous life you lead," said Flandry.

His slight shudder did not escape Arghun, who hastened to say: "Oh, we have our pleasures too, Orluk; feasts, games and sports, the arts, the great fair at Kievka Hill when the tribes meet and—" He broke off.

Bourtai came walking past a campfire. Flandry could sense her loneliness. Women in this culture were not much inferior to men. She was free to go whither she would, and was a heroine for having brought the Terran here. But her clan was slain. She had not even been given any work to do.

She saw the men and ran toward them. "What has been decided?"

"Nothing yet." Flandry caught her hands. Now that he was rested, he could appreciate her good looks. His face crinkled its best smile. "I couldn't see going in circles with a lot of men when I might be going in circles with you. So I came out here, hoping to find you. And my hopes were granted."

A flush crept up her high, flat cheeks. She wasn't used

to glibness. Her gaze fluttered downward. "I do not know what to say," she whispered.

"You need say nothing. Only be," he leered.

"No, I am no one. The daughter of a dead man . . . my dowry long ago plundered . . . and you are a Terran orluk! It is not right!"

"Do you think your dowry matters?" asked Arghun.

A strained note in his voice drew Flandry's attention. "Have you two met?" the Terran inquired.

"Yes. We spoke for a while this morning," said Arghun stiffly.

He clamped dignity back on himself like a mask. Flandry gave him a long glance, shrugged, and sighed. "Come on," he said. "We'd better return to the kurultai."

He didn't release the girl, but tucked her arm under his. She came along mutely. Through the heavy garments he could feel her tremble a little. The wind ruffled a stray lock of dark hair.

As they neared the kibitka of the council, its door opened. Juchi Ilyak stood there, thin and bent. Somehow, though, his low voice carried across meters of blustering air:

"Orluk, perhaps there is a way for us. We can at least seek wiser counsel. Dare you come with me to the Ice Flock?"

VIII

TENGRI NOR, the Ghost Lake, lay far in the north. When Flandry and Juchi stepped from their airboat, it was still day, and the rings were invisible. At night, the Shaman said, they were a glimmer, half seen on the southern horizon. Krasna looked like an ember in this air, at this time; the snowfields were tinged red. But as the sun toppled toward darkness, purple shadows glided from drift to drift.

Flandry had not often met such quietness as this. Even in space, there was always the low noise of the machinery that kept one alive. Here, the air seemed to freeze all sound. The tiniest of winds blew up fine, ice crystals, whirling and glistening above the snowbanks; but he could not hear it. His fur-muffled body and heavily greased face felt no immediate cold—not in so dry an atmosphere—but breath was whetted in his nostrils. He thought he could smell the lake, but he wasn't sure. None of his Terran senses were quite to be trusted in this winter place.

With unexpected loudness, shocking like a gunshot, he said, "Do they know we are here?"

"Oh, yes. They have our ways. They will soon come meet us." Juchi looked northward at the ruins that stood mountainous on the lakeshore. Snow had half buried those marble walls, white on white, with the sundown light bleeding across shattered colonnades. Frost from the Shaman's breath began to stiffen his beard.

"I suppose they recognize the markings on our boat,"

Flandry said. "But what if the Kha Khan sent a disguised vessel?"

"That was tried once or twice, by Oleg's father. His craft was destroyed by some means, while he was still far south of here. The dwellers are quite alert." Juchi raised his arms and began swaying on his feet. He threw back his head and closed his eyes. A high-pitched chant rose from his lips.

Flandry had no idea whether the old man was indulging superstition, practicing a ritual of courtesy, or doing what was actually needful to summon the glacier folk. He had been in too many strange places to dogmatize. He waited, his gaze ranging the scene.

Beyond the ruins, westward along the lakeshore, a forest grew. White slender trees with intricate, oddly geometric branches flashed like icicles, like jewels. Their thin, bluish leaves vibrated continuously. It seemed that they should tinkle, that this whole forest was glass. Flandry had never known a wilderness so quiet. The snow between those gleaming boles was carpeted by low, gray plants. The rocks which thrust up here and there were almost buried under such lichenous growth. Had the place been less cold and hushed, it would have suggested a tropical richness.

The lake reached out of sight, pale-blue between the snowbanks. As evening swept across the waters, the mists that hovered above were drawn white against shadow.

Juchi had explained the biochemical basis of polar life on Altai. Originally protoplasmic, terrestroid, the native forms had been forced to adapt in past ages to falling temperature. They had done so by synthesizing methanol.

A fifty-fifty mixture of methanol and water remained fluid to below minus forty degrees. When it finally did freeze, it did not expand into cell-disrupting ice crystals; it simply, and gradually, turned into slush. Vegetation and the more primitive animals remained functional till about seventy below, Centigrade; after that they did not die, but became dormant. The higher animals, being homeothermic, would not suspend animation till the air reached minus a hundred degrees.

The polar lakes and rivers were likewise charged with alcohol accumulated from aquatic species as they died. Thus they remained fluid till midwinter. The chief problem of life in the glacial regions was to find minerals. Bacteria brought up some from below the permanent ice. Wherever rock was exposed, animals would travel far to lick and gnaw it; then, returning to their forests, they contributed the heavy atoms when they died. But in general, the Altaian ecology made do without. For example, no native animal possessed bones. Instead, chitinous and cartilaginous materials had been elaborated far beyond anything seen on Terra.

Juchi's account had sounded plausible and interesting in a warm kibitka on a grassy slope, with microtexts on hand to supply quantitative details. But when he stood on million-year-old snow, watching night creep like smoke between crystal trees and cyclopean ruins, hearing the Shaman chant in an unknown language beneath a huge green sunset sky, Flandry discovered that scientific explanations were but feeble attempts at the truth.

One moon was aloft. He saw something drift across its

copper shield. The objects—a flock of white spheres, ranging in diameter from a few centimeters to a giant bigger than the airboat—came nearer. Tentacles streamed from beneath the globes. Juchi broke off his call. “Ah,” he said matter-of-factly, “the aeromedusae. The dwellers cannot be far.”

“What?” Flandry hugged himself. The cold was beginning to be felt now, as it gnawed through fur and leather toward flesh.

“Our name for them. They look like primitive organisms, but actually they are well evolved, with sense organs and brains. They electrolyze hydrogen from water to inflate themselves. Propulsion is by air forced backwards. They feed on small game which they shock insensible through those tentacles. The Ice Folk have domesticated them.”

Flandry stole a glance at a jagged wall, rearing above the gloom to catch a last sunbeam. “They did more than that, once,” he said with pity.

The Shaman frowned a little. “We humans really have no idea whether the Dwellers have degenerated or not,” he said. “I daresay intelligence appeared on Altai in the first place as a response to worsening conditions—the warming of Krasna in the past few million years, after the planet’s biosphere was adapted to lower temperatures. Superficially it would appear that the new race built a superior civilization which has subsequently collapsed. The shortage of metals and the slow shrinkage of the ice caps might have been the cause . . . And yet that is not what the Dwellers themselves assert. They show no sense of having lost a glorious past.” His slanted eyes squinted in concentration

as he sought words. "They—as nearly as I can understand them, —had deliberately abandoned their material civilization after they had found better methods."

Two beings came from the forest.

At first glance they were like dwarfish, white-furred men. Then you saw details of squat build and rubbery limbs. The feet were long and webbed, expandable to broad snowshoes or foldable to short skis. The hands had three fingers opposed by a thumb set in the middle of the wrist. The ears were feathery tufts; fine tendrils waved above each round, black eye; sad, gray monkey faces peered from a ruff of hair. Their breath did not steam like human breath, for their body temperature was well below the Centigrade zero. One of them bore a stone lamp in which an alcohol flame wavered. The other had an intricately carved, white staff. In some undefinable way, the circling medusae appeared to be guided by it.

They came near, halted, and waited. Nothing moved but the low wind, ruffling their fur and streaming the flame. Juchi stood just as quiet. Flandry made himself conform, though his teeth wanted to clap. He had seen many kinds of life, on worlds more foreign than this. But there was a strangeness here that got under his skin and crawled.

The sun went down. Thin, dustless air gave no twilight. Stars burst forth in a sudden blackness. The edge of the rings painted a remote arc. The moon threw cuprous radiance over the snow and crowded the forest with shadows.

A meteor split the sky with noiseless lightning. Juchi seemed to take that as a signal. He began talking. His voice

was like ice that tones as it contracts in midnight cold: not altogether a human voice. Flandry began to understand what a Shaman was and why he presided over the allied northland tribes. Few men indeed had the intelligence needed to master the Dwellers' language and deal with them. Yet a large part of the Tebtengri strength lay in their relationship with these beings. Metal was traded for organic fuel and curious, plastic substances from Tengri Nor; mutual defense was maintained against the Kha Khan's sky raiders.

A Dweller made reply. Juchi turned to Flandry. "I have related who you are and from whence you come, Orluk. They are not surprised. Before I spoke of your requirements, he said their—I do not know precisely what the word means, but it has something to do with communication—he said they could reach Terra herself, as far as mere distance was concerned, though only through dreams?"

Flandry stiffened. It could be. How long had men been hunting for some faster-than-light equivalent of radio? A handful of centuries. What was that, compared to the age of the universe? Or even the age of Altai? He realized suddenly, not with his mere brain but with his whole organism, how old this planet was.

"Telepathy?" he blurted. "I've never heard of telepathy with that great a range."

"No. That is not what the Dwellers mean. Were it so, they would have learned of this Merseian situation long ago, and warned us. His concept is not one that I can quite understand." Juchi added with great care: "In fact, he admitted to me that every power the Dwellers possess looks useless for our purposes."

Flandry sighed. "I might have known. A telepathic message to the Imperial Navy would have been too simple. No chance for heroics."

"The Dwellers say they freed themselves ages ago from those cumbersome buildings and engines we humans still use," Juchi told him. "They have been free to think—to follow pure thought toward some unknowable ultimate—for longer than we can imagine. But by the same token, they have lost many purely material powers. They can withstand aggression from Ulan Baligh; but against the spaceships and atomic weapons of Merseia they would be helpless."

Half seen in red moonlight, an autochthone spoke.

Juchi continued. "He says they do not fear racial death. If Merseia should exterminate them, they will accept it calmly for themselves. All things end, yet nothing ever really ends. However, it would be preferable that their lesser brethren, the beasts and plants of the ice forest, have a few more million years to live, so that they also may approach truth."

Which is a fine, resounding ploy, thought Flandry, provided it be not the simple fact.

"They, like us Tebtengri, are not unwilling to become clients of the Terrestrial Empire," said Juchi. "To them, political status means nothing. They will never have enough in common with men to be troubled by any Imperial governor. They know Terra will not gratuitously harm them—whereas Merseia would, if only by provoking that planet-wide battle of space fleets you have described. Therefore the Cold People will assist us in any way they can. But at present they know of no solution."

"Do these two speak for their whole race?" asked Flandry dubiously.

"And for the forests and the waters," Juchi said.

Flandry thought of a biosphere which was one great organism, and nodded. "If you say so, I'll take your word. But if they can't help . . ."

Juchi gave an old man's sigh, like wind over the acrid waters. "I had hoped they could. But now, have you no fresh plan of your own?"

Flandry stood a long time, feeling the chill creep inward. At last he said: "If the only spaceships on Altai are at Ulan Baligh, then evidently we must get into the city somehow, to post our message. Have these folk any means of secretly contacting a Betelgeusean?"

Juchi inquired. "No," he translated the answer. "Not if the traders are closely guarded; and their awareness tells them that that is so."

The lamp bearer stooped forward so that the dull-blue fire brought his countenance out of darkness. Could as human an emotion as sorrow really be read into those eyes? Words droned. Juchi listened.

"They can get us into the city, undetected, on any night which is cold enough," he said. "The medusae can carry us through the air. They can actually see and avoid radar beams. A medusa is too cold to show on an infrared scope, and of course would not activate a metal detector. A single man borne in its tentacles would be too small to register on any grounded instrument." The Shaman paused. "But what use is that? If we want to get anyone into Ulan Baligh, he can simply walk in, disguised."

"An airboat, naturally, would be stopped at some traffic-control point outside town and investigated . . ." Flandry's voice trailed off. He raised his face to the glittering sky, took the moonlight full in his eyes and was briefly dazzled. Tension tingled along his nerves.

When at last he spoke, it was very slowly. And it was a mere recapitulation, intended to soothe the hammering within himself. "Do you remember, Juchi, that we talked about the possibility of radioing some Betelgeusean ship as it was still rising through the atmosphere? You said the Tebtengri have no set powerful enough to broadcast that far; in any event, a broadcast would spill the beans, since the Khanists would hear too. Nor could we cast a tight beam, since we'd have no means of tracking the ship. It'd go beyond our range in seconds, even if we did lock a beam onto it."

"Aye, I remember."

"Well, let's suppose a spaceship, a friendly spaceship, approached close to this planet without actually landing. Could the Ice Dwellers communicate with it?"

Juchi asked and reported: "No. They have no radio sets whatsoever. Even if they did, their 'casting would be as liable to detection as ours. The risk looks great, Orluk. A ship could not come near without the Khan knowing; there are detector satellites in orbit. Even the tightest beam to such a vessel, shot up from the ground, would suffer some atmospheric dispersion. The risk that the Khanists could also receive our message looks great."

"M-m-m, yes. No harm in asking." Flandry's gaze continued to search skyward till he found Betelgeuse like a

torch among the constellations. "Could we know there was such a ship in the neighborhood?"

"I daresay, since it could not approach undetected, it would radio Ulan Baligh spaceport in the usual way. Anything else would be so suspicious that a patrol would be sent immediately." Juchi conferred with the nonhumans. "Yes," he said, "we could be apprised of the vessel's presence. Our friends here suggest that we place men, carried by medusae, unnoticeably far above Ulan Baligh. They can carry receivers. By thus intercepting the space radio beam, they can listen to the conversation between the ship and the portmaster. Would that serve?"

Flandry breathed out in a great freezing gust. "It might."

Suddenly and joyously, he laughed.

Perhaps no such sound had ever before rung across Tengri Nor. The Dwellers started back, like frightened small animals. Juchi stood in shadow. For that instant, only Captain Dominic Flandry of Imperial Terra had light upon him. He stood with his head raised into the copper moonglow, and laughed like a boy.

"By heaven," he shouted, "we're going to try it!"

IX

AN AUTUMN gale came down off the pole. It gathered snow on its way across the steppe and struck Ulan Baligh near

midnight. In minutes the high, red roofs were lost to sight. Close by a lighted window, a man could see horizontal white streaks, whirling out of darkness toward darkness. But if he removed himself a few meters, pushing through drifts already knee-deep, the light was gone. He stood blind, buffeted by the storm, and heard it rave.

Flandry descended from the upper atmosphere. That cold had smitten so deep he thought he might never be warm again. In spite of an oxygen tank, his lungs were starving. He saw the blizzard from above as a moon-dappled, black blot. The early ice floes on Ozero Rurik were dashed to and fro along its southern fringe. Tentacles enmeshed him; he sat under a giant balloon that rushed earthward from the sky. Behind him trailed a flock of other medusae, twisting along air currents he could not feel, to avoid radar beams he could not see. Ahead of him flew a single globe, bearing a Dweller who huddled against a cake of ice; for the tropical storm was hell's own sulfurous wind to the polar native.

Once the snowfall enclosed him, even Flandry could sense how much warmer the air had become. Still chilly enough to kill him, though. He squinted into a nothingness that yelled. Once his numbed, dangling feet struck a roof-tree. The blow came as if from far away. Pale at first, strengthening as he neared, the red luminescence of the Prophet's Tower shafted upward beyond sight.

Flandry groped for the nozzle at his shoulder. The radiant spire enabled him to just barely see through the driven flakes. Another medusa crowded close, bearing a pressure

tank of paint. Somehow, Flandry reached across the gap and made his hose fast.

Now, artic intelligence, do you understand what I want you to do? Can you guide this horse of mine for me?

The wind yammered reply. Deeper and steadier, he heard noises like blasting: the powerful breaths by which his medusa propelled itself. A gust threw him toward the tablet wall. His carrier wobbled in mid-air, fighting to maintain position. An inlaid letter loomed before him, big as a house, black upon shining white. He aimed his hose and squirted.

Damn! The green jet was flung aside in a flaw of wind. He corrected his aim and saw the paint strike. It remained liquid even at this temperature. No matter, it was sticky enough, and would be dry before morning. The first tankful was quickly expended. Flandry coupled to another one, carried by another medusa. Blue this time. All the Tebtengri had contributed all the squirtable paint they had—every hue in God's rainbow. Flandry could but hope there would be enough.

There was. He nearly fainted from cold and weariness before the end of the job. Even so, when the last huge stroke was done—each character was 150 meters tall—he could not resist adding an exclamation point at the very bottom.

"Let's go," he whispered. Somehow, the Dweller knew and pointed his staff. The medusa flock sprang back through the clouds.

Flandry had a moment's glimpse of a military airboat. It had detached itself from the squadron patrolling above the

spaceport. Maybe the pilot was going off duty. As the medusae topped the storm, entering clear moonlight and ringlight, the craft veered. Its guns stabbed blue bolts into the living globes. Flandry reached for the futile blaster at his hip. His fingers were like wood, he couldn't close them!

The medusae, all but his and the Dweller's, whipped about. They swarmed around the vessel, laid tentacles fast and clung. The metal was nearly buried in their cluster. Electric fires crawled forth; sparks dripped. These creatures could build potential enough to break hydrogen from the water molecule. Flandry recalled that a metallic fuselage was a Faraday cage, immune to lightning. But when concentrated electric discharges burned holes, shattered glassite, spot-welded control circuits—the boat staggered. The medusae detached themselves. The boat plummeted.

Flandry relaxed and let his animal bear him northward.

The town seethed. There had been rioting in the Street of Gunsmiths, and blood still dappled the new-fallen snow. Armed men tramped on guards around palace and spaceport. Outside their formations, the mobs hooted. From the lakeshore encampments came war music. Pipes squealed, gongs crashed, the young warriors rode their varyaks in breakneck circles and cursed.

Oleg Khan looked out the window of his tower room. "It shall be made good to you," he muttered. "Oh, yes, my people, you shall have satisfaction."

Turning to the Betelgeusean who had just been fetched, he glared into the blue visage. "You have seen?"

"Yes, your majesty." Zalat's Altaian, usually fluent and

little accented, grew thick. He was a badly shaken being. Only the prompt arrival of the royal household troops had saved his ship from destruction by a thousand shrieking fanatics. "I swear we had nothing to do with . . . we are innocent as—"

"Of course! Of course!" Oleg Yesukai brought one palm down in an angry slicing motion. "I am not one of those ignorant rodent herders out there. Every Betelgeusean has been under constant surveillance since—" He checked himself.

"I know that, your majesty," faltered Zalat. "But I am still unsure as to your reason."

"Did I not make it plain to you? You know the Terran visitor was killed by Tebtengri agents, the very day he arrived. It bears out what I have long suspected, the north-land tribes have become religiously xenophobic. Since they doubtless have other operatives in the city, they may well try to murder you Betelgeuseans as well. Thus it is best that you be closely guarded and have contact only with men who we know are loyal, until the situation is under full control."

Somewhat calmed by his own words, Oleg sat down, stroked his beard and watched Zalat from narrowed eyes. "I regret you were so nearly lynched this morning," he said smoothly. "Because you are out-worlders, and the defiling symbols are not in the Altaian alphabet, the mob jumped to the conclusion that it was some dirty word in your language. I, of course, know better. From studying the wreckage of a patrol craft lost last night, my technicians have deduced that the outrage involved the arctic devilfolk, doubtlessly in

concert with the Tebtengri. Such a vile deed would not trouble those tribes in the least; they are not followers of the Prophet. But what puzzles me is—I admit this frankly, though confidentially—*why?* A daring, grueling task . . . merely to give us a wanton insult?”

He glanced back at the window. From this angle, the Tower looked normal. You had to be on the north to see what had been done: the tablet wall disfigured by more than a kilometer of paint. But from that side, the fantastic desecration was visible across entire horizons.

The Kha Khan doubled a fist. “It shall be repaid them,” he said. “This has rallied the orthodox tribes behind me as no other thing imaginable. When their children are boiled before their eyes, the Tebtengri will realize what they have done.”

Zalat hesitated. “Your majesty—”

“Yes?” Oleg snarled.

“Those symbols . . . on the Tower . . . they are letters of the Terran alphabet.”

“*What?*”

“I know the Anglic language somewhat. Most Betelgeuseans do. But how could those Tebtengri ever have learned—”

Oleg, who knew the answer to that, interrupted by seizing the captain’s tunic and shaking him. “*What does it say?*” he yelled.

“That’s the strangest part, your majesty,” stammered Zalat. “It doesn’t mean anything. The word makes no sense.”

“Well, what sound does it spell, then? Speak before I have your teeth pulled!”

"May Day," choked Zalat. "Just May Day, your majesty."

Oleg let him go. For a while there was silence. At last the Khan said: "Is that a nonsense phrase, or an actual Terran word?"

"Well . . . I suppose it could be a word. I don't claim to be intimate with, uh, with every slang phrase or idiom or technicality in the language. Uh, well, May is the name of a month in the Terran calendar, and Day means 'diurnal period.'" Zalat rubbed his yellow eyes, searching for logic. "Perhaps May Day means the first day of May."

Oleg nodded slowly. "That sounds reasonable. The Altaian calendar, which is modified from the ancient Terran, has a similar name for a month of what is locally springtime. Mayday . . . could it mean our Day of the Spring Festival? Perhaps."

He got up, returned to the window and brooded across the city. "It's long until May," he said. "If that was an incitement to anything it's foredoomed. We are going to break the Tebtengri this very winter. By next Spring Festival Day—" He cleared his throat and finished curtly: "By then, certain other projects will be well under way."

"How could it be an incitement anyhow, your majesty?" argued Zalat, emboldened. "Who in Ulan Baligh could read it?"

"True. I can only conjecture, some wild act of defiance or superstition, hoping to change our luck for the worse." The Khan turned on his heel. "You are leaving shortly, captain, are you not?"

"Yes, your majesty. As soon as your inspectors have finished checking our cargo."

"You shall convey a message. No other traders are to come here for one year. We will have troubles enough, suppressing the Tebtengri and their aboriginal allies, without keeping guard on foreigners." Oleg shrugged. "Besides, there would be no reason for merchants to visit us. The coming war will disrupt the caravans. Afterward, when things are set in order . . . perhaps."

Privately, he doubted that trade would ever be resumed. By summer, the Merseian engineers would be here and work would have started on the great naval base. A year from now, Altai would be firmly in the Merseian Empire. And, as its viceroy, the Kha Khan would have no time for commerce. Instead he would be leading his warriors to battles in the stars, more glorious and full of booty than any ancient hero had dreamed.

X

WINTER came early to the northlands. Snow fell and lay endlessly on the plains, under a sky like blue steel. The Mangu Tuman proceeded on their migratory cycle. Wagons and herds and people were a hatful of dust strewn across immensity. Here and there a fire sent a thin smoke-streak vertically into the windless air. Krasna hung low in the southwest, a frosty red-gold wheel.

Three persons glided from the main ordu. They were on skis, rifles slung behind their parkas, hands gripping tethers which led to a small negagrav tow unit. It flew swiftly, pulling them, so that the skis sang on the thin crisp snow.

Arghun Tiliksky said hard-voiced: "I can appreciate, Orluk Flandry, that you and Juchi Ilyak keep secret the reason for that Tower escapade, five weeks ago. What no man knows, no man can reveal if captured. Yet you seem quite blithe about the consequences. Have you not heard what our spies and scouts relate? Infuriated warriors flock to Oleg Yesukai, who has pledged to annihilate us before next thaw. Never before was so great and firm an army gathered against us. In consequence, the whole Tebtengrian alliance cannot spread around the arctic circle as hitherto, but must remain close together. And there is not enough forage under the snow for so many herds in so small an area. I say to you, the Khan need not invade. He need only wait. By spring, famine will have done half his work for him!"

"Let's hope he plans on that," said Flandry. "Less strenuous than fighting, isn't it?"

Arghun's angry young face swung toward him. The noyon clipped: "I do not share the common awe of everything Terran. You are as human as I. In this environment, where you are untrained, you are more fallible. I warn you plainly, unless you here and now give me good reason to do otherwise, I shall request a kurultai. And at it I will argue that we cease this waiting—that we strike now at Ulan Baligh, while we still have full bellies."

Bourtai cried aloud, "No! That would be asking for ruin.

They outnumber us, the Khanists, three or four to one. And I have seen some of the new engines the Merseians brought them. If we invaded the south, it would be like animals invading a butcher's corral."

"It would be quick, at least." Arghun glared at Flandry. "Well?"

The Terran sighed. He might have expected this. In the past weeks, Bourtai had always been near him, and Arghun had always been near her. The noyon had given him surly words before now. He might have known that this invitation to hunt sataru—mutant ostriches escaped from the herds and gone wild—masked something else. Well, Arghun was decent to warn him.

"If you don't trust me," he said, "though cosmos knows I've fought and bled and had my nose frostbitten in your cause, can't you trust Juchi Ilyak? He and the Dwellers know my scheme. They will assure you that our success depends on hanging back and avoiding battle as long as possible."

"Juchi grows old," said Arghun. "His mind is feeble—Hoy, there!"

He yanked a guide line. The negagrav unit purred to a stop and hung in mid-air, halfway along a slope. Politics dropped from Arghun; he pointed at the snow with a hunting dog's eagerness. "Spoor," he hissed. "We go by muscle power now, to sneak close. The birds can outrun this motor if they hear it. You go straight up this hill, Orluk Flandry. Bourtai and I will encircle it to right and left."

The Altaians had slipped their reins and skied noiselessly from him before Flandry quite understood what had hap-

pened. Looking down, he saw big splay tracks: a pair of sataru. He started after them. How the deuce did you manage these footsticks, anyway? Waddling across the snow, he tangled them and tripped. His nose grazed a boulder. He sat up, swearing in eighteen languages and Old Martian phonoglyphs.

"This they call fun?" He tottered erect. Snow had gotten under his parka hood. It began to melt and trickle over his ribs. "Great greasy comets," said Flandry, "I might have been sitting in the Everest House with a bucket of champagne, lying to some beautiful wench about my exploits . . . but no, I had to come out here and experience them!"

Slowly, he dragged himself up the hill. At the brow he crouched and peered through an unnecessarily cold and thorny screen of brush. No two-legged birds, only a steep slant back down to the plain. . . . Wait!

He saw blood and the dismembered sataru an instant before he himself was attacked.

The beasts seemed to rise from weeds and snowdrifts, as if the earth had spewed them forth. A dozen white, scuttering shapes, big as police dogs, rushed in upon them. Flandry glimpsed long, sharp noses, alert, black eyes that hated him, high backs and hairless tails. He yanked his rifle loose and fired. The slug bowled over the nearest animal. It rolled halfway downhill, gathered its muscles, and crawled back with a shattered spine to fight some more.

Flandry didn't notice. The next was at him. He shot it point blank. Flesh and bone exploded. One of its fellows stopped to rip the meat. But the rest continued their charge. Flandry took aim at a third. A heavy body landed between

his shoulders. He went down on his face. Jaws worried his leather coat.

Somehow he rolled over. One arm shielded him. His rifle had fallen out of his grip. A beast fumbled it in forepaws almost like hands. He groped for the dagger at his belt. Two animals were upon him. Chisel teeth slashed. He managed to kick one of them on the nose. It squealed and bounced away. But two more attacked in its place.

Someone yelled. The sound was nearly smothered by Flandry's heartbeat. He drove his knife into a hard shoulder. The beast writhed free, leaving him weaponless. The others piled on him. He fought with boots and knees, fists and elbows, in a cloud of kicked-up snow. An animal jumped in the air, came down on his midriff. The wind whoofed out of him. His face-defending arm dropped. A creature went for his throat.

Arghun arrived behind. The Altaian seized that animal by the neck. Steel flashed in his free hand. In one expert movement he disemboweled the beast and flung it aside. Several of the pack left Flandry, fell upon the still snarling body and fed. Arghun booted another exactly behind the ear. It dropped as if poleaxed. One jumped the rear to get on his back. He stooped, his left hand made a judo heave, and as the animal soared over his head he ripped its stomach with his knife.

"Up, man!" He hoisted the Terran. The pack chattered around them. But then Bourtai began to shoot. She dropped them right and left. The largest of the animals whistled. At that signal, the survivors bounded off and were out of sight in seconds.

Arghun sank down gasping. Bourtai flew to Flandry. "Are you hurt?" she sobbed.

"Not too much." He looked at the noyon. "Thanks," he said inadequately.

"You are a guest," grunted Arghun. After a moment: "They grow bolder each year. I had never expected to be attacked this near an ordu. Something must be done about them, if we live through the winter."

"What are they?" Flandry shuddered toward relaxation.

"Gurchaku. They range the Khrebet and the northern steppes. They'll eat anything, but prefer meat. Chiefly they kill feral animals, but they also steal from our herds, and people have died under their jaws." Arghun looked grim. "They were not as large in my grandfather's day, nor as cunning."

Flandry nodded. "Rats."

"I know what rats are," said Bourtai. "But the gurchaku—"

"A new genus. Similar things have happened on other colonized planets." Flandry wished for a cigarette. He wished so hard that Bourtai had to remind him to continue. "Oh, yes. Some of the stowaway rats on your ancestors' ships remained small pests, but others moved into the wilds as the country became Terrestrialized. They changed, as the Voiskoye changed, but even faster because of having shorter generations. Yes, an early job for a Terran commissioner here will be to wipe out the gurchaku. Pity, in a way. They look like a species with interesting possibilities."

He managed a tired grin at Bourtai. "After all," he said, "if a frontier planet has beautiful girls, tradition requires that it have monsters as well."

Her blush was like fire.

They returned to camp in silence. Flandry entered the yurt given him, dressed his wounds, washed and changed clothes. Then he flopped down on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. He reflected bitterly on the assorted romancing he had heard about the High Frontier in general and the dashing adventurers of the Intelligence Corps in particular. So what did it amount to in practice? A few nasty moments with men or giant rats that wanted to kill you, stinking leather clothes, wet feet, chilblains and frostbite, unseasoned food, creaking wheels replaced by squeaking runners, temperance, chastity, early rising, weighty speech with tribal elders, not a book he could enjoy or a joke he could understand for light-years. He yawned, rolled on his stomach, and tried to sleep. After a while he gave that up and began to wish that Arghun's reckless advice would be followed. Anything to break this dreariness!

A tap on the door. He started to his feet, bumped his head on a curved ridgepole, swore, and said, "Come in." The caution of years laid a hand on his blaster.

As the door opened he saw the short winter day was near an end. A red streak lingered above one edge of the world. His overhead lamp picked out Bourtai. She entered, closed the door, and stood silently.

"Why . . . hullo." Flandry paused. "What brings you here?"

"I came to see if you were well." Her eyes did not meet his.

"Oh? Oh, yes. Yes, of course," he said stupidly. "Kind of you. I mean, uh, shall I make some tea?"

"Are you certain your bites were not serious? Did you put on an antiseptic?"

"Sure, sure. I do know a few things about taking care of myself." Automatically, Flandry added with a smile: "I could wish I didn't, though. So lovely a nurse—"

Again he saw the blood rise in her face. Suddenly he understood. He would have realized earlier, had Altaians not been basically a more shy and reticent people than his own. A heavy pulse beat in his throat. "Sit down," he invited.

She lowered herself to the floor. He joined her, sliding a practiced arm over her shoulder. She did not flinch. He let his hand glide on downward till the arm was about her waist. She leaned against him.

"Do you think we will see another springtime?" she asked. Her tone was level, devoid of self-pity, phrasing a strictly practical question.

"I have one right here with me," he said. His lips brushed her hair.

"No one speaks thus in the ordu," she breathed. "We are both cut off from our kindred, you by distance and I by death. Let us not remain lonely any longer."

He forced himself to give fair warning: "I'll return to Terra the first chance I get, and wouldn't recommend that you come along."

"I know," she murmured. "But until then!"

His mouth found hers.

There was a thump on the door.

"Go away!" said Flandry and Bourtai together. They looked surprised into each other's eyes and laughed.

"My lord," called a man's voice, "Toghrul Gur-Khan sends

me. A messages has been detected. From a Terran spaceship!"

Flandry knocked Bourtai over in his haste to get outside. But even as he ran, he thought with frustration that this job of his had been hoodooed from the outset.

XI

INVISIBLY high among the thin winds over Ulan Baligh, a warrior sat in the patient arms of a medusa. He breathed oxygen from a tank and rested numbed fingers on a radio transceiver. However thickly he was swaddled, his watch could only last four hours before he was relieved. Maybe Altaians were the sole breed of man who could endure it that long.

This night he was rewarded. His earphones crackled with a faint, distorted voice, in a language he had never heard. A return beam gabbled from the spaceport. The speaker above gave place to another, who addressed the portmaster in halting Altaian, doubtlessly learned from the Betelgeuseans.

The Tebtengrian listener dared not try any communication of his own. If detected (and the chances were that it would be) such a call would bring a nuclear missile streaking from Ulan Baligh. However, his transceiver amplified

and relayed what he heard. Kilometers away, another hovering medusa carried another set which passed the message on to still another. The long chain ended at the ordu of the Mangu Tuman. If, by some accident, the Khanists detected that re-transmission, they would not be alarmed. Radio beams often leaked, and the ionosphere might well bounce such leakage halfway round the planet.

Through his binoculars, the Tebtengrian watcher actually saw the Terran ship descend. Moonlight gleamed off sleek, armed swiftness. He whistled in awe. Still, he thought, this was only one vessel, and officially, at least, it was only paying a visit. Oleg, the Damned, had camouflaged or disguised his modern installations, weeks ago. He would receive the Terrans like butter, wine them and dine them, but they would see what he wished them to see and hear what he wished them to hear. Presently they would go home again, to report that nothing worth worrying about was happening on Altai.

The scout sighed, beat his gloved hands together, and wished his relief would soon arrive.

And near the glacial cap, Dominic Flandry turned from Toghrul's receiver. "That's that," he said. "HMS *Callisto* has landed at Ulan Baligh. We'll maintain our radio monitors, but I don't expect they'll pick up anything . . . until the moment the ship takes off again, of course."

"When will that be?" asked the Gur-Khan.

"In three or four days, I imagine," said Flandry. "We've got to be ready! Every ordu must be alerted tonight. By dawn I want them moving across the plains according to the scheme Juchi and I drew up for you."

Toghrul nodded. Arghun Tiliksky, who had also crowded into the kibitka, demanded: "What's the meaning of this? Why haven't I been told?"

"You didn't need to know before the time came," Flandry answered. "The Tebtengri warriors can get into motion, ready for battle, on five minutes' notice, under any conditions whatsoever. Or so you were assuring me, in a ten-minute speech, one evening last week. Very well, Noyon, move them!"

Arghun bristled. "Where? Why?"

"You'll be in command of the Mangu Tuman varyak division," Toghrul said. "Lead it due south for 500 kilometers, then stand by for further radio orders. The other tribal forces will be stationed elsewhere. Probably you will see a few, but maintain strict radio silence. Yurts and kibitkas, being less mobile, will proceed to positions closer by. The women and children can drive them."

"Also the herds," reminded Flandry. "Don't forget, the massed Tebtengri herds can cover quite a large area."

Arghun looked at the formation sketched on a piece of paper, which the alliance was to adopt. "But this is lunacy!" he yelled. "If Oleg knows we've spread ourselves out, straggling over half the map in this ridiculous manner, he can drive a wedge between—"

"He won't know," said Flandry. "Or if he does find out, he won't know why we're doing it—which is what counts. Now, git!"

For a moment Arghun's eyes clashed with his. Then the noyon slapped gauntlets against one thigh, whirled, and de-

parted. It was indeed very few moments before the night grew loud with varyak motors and lowing battle horns.

When that racket had faded, Toghrul tugged his beard and said to Flandry, "Well, now that we two are quite alone, can't you at least tell me how that Terran ship was fetched here?"

"Why, it came to inquire more closely into the reported death of me, a Terran citizen, on Altai," Flandry chuckled. "Or so the captain will tell Oleg, I'm sure. Oleg will believe him; it's entirely plausible. The Terrans will look around Ulan Baligh a few days and let Oleg convince them my death was merely an accident. After which they'll take off for their base again."

Toghrul stared at him, back at the map, and then suddenly broke into buffalo laughter. For a while the Gur-Khan of the Mangu Tuman and the field agent of the Imperial Terrestrial Naval Intelligence Corps joined hands and danced around the kibitka singing of the flowers that bloom in the spring.

Presently Flandry left. There wasn't going to be much sleep for anyone in the next few days. But nonetheless, he didn't plan on sleeping tonight. He rapped eagerly on his own yurt. Silence answered him. He scowled and opened the door.

A note lay on his bunk. *My beloved, the alarm signals have blown. You know Toghrul gave me weapons and a new varyak. My father taught me to ride and shoot as well as any man. It is fitting that the last of Clan Tumurji depart with the warriors.*

Flandry stared at the scrawl for a long while. Finally, he undressed and went to bed.

When he awoke in the morning, his cart was under way. A boy had taken the wheel for him. He emerged to find the whole encampment grinding across the steppe. Toghrul stood taking a navigational sight on the rings. He greeted Flandry with a gruff: "We should reach our own assigned position tomorrow." A messenger dashed up, something needed the chief's attention— one of the endless emergencies when so big a group was on the move. Flandry found himself alone.

By now he had learned not to offer the nomads his unskilled assistance. He spent the day composing scurrilous limericks about the superiors who had assigned him to this mission. The trek continued noisily through the dark. Next morning there was drifted snow to clear before camp could be made. Flandry discovered that he was at least able to wield a snow shovel. Soon he wished he wasn't.

By noon the ordu was settled—not in the compact laagers which offered maximum safety, but wavering across kilometers in a line which brought mutinous grumbling. Toghrul roared down protest and went back to his kibitka to crouch over the radio. But two incredibly tedious days passed before he sent for Flandry.

Then things happened in a hurry.

"Ship departing," the Gur-Khan said. "We've just detected the usual broadcast warning aircraft from the spaceport area." He frowned. "Will there be time before nightfall to carry out every planned maneuver?"

"That doesn't matter," Flandry assured him. "Our initial pattern is already set up. The *Callisto* skipper can't help spotting that from space, even if it weren't routine to keep a very beady eye on any suspicious planet as you leave. When he notices, the captain will linger. If he floats in orbit with radiation screens at max and generators throttled down to minimum, I doubt that they'll know in Ulan Baligh that he's still around."

His eyes went to the map on the desk. The various Tebtengrian units had confirmed their positions. The ordus lay in a heavy east-west line, 500 kilometers long across the winter-white steppe. The more mobile varyak divisions sprawled in bunches to form lines which slanted past either end of the first one, meeting in the north but far apart in the south. He stroked his mustache and waited.

"Spaceship cleared for takeoff. Stand by. Rise, spaceship Callistol"

As the relayed voice trickled weakly from the receiver, Flandry snatched a pencil and drew another figure on the map. "This is the next formation," he said. "Might as well start on it at once. The ship will have seen the present one inside of five minutes."

Toghrul bent over the microphone and rapped, "Varyak divisions of Clans Munlik, Fyodor, Kubilai, Tuli, attention. Drive due west for 100 kilometers from your present positions and stop. Belgutai, Bagdarin, Chagatai, Kassar, due east for 100 kilometers. Gleb, Temujin . . ."

Flandry rolled the pencil between his fingers. As the reports came in, over an endless hour, he marked where each

unit had halted. The whole device began to look pathetically crude.

"I have been thinking," said Toghrul after a prolonged silence.

"Nasty habit," said Flandry. "Hard to break. Try cold baths and long walks."

"What if Oleg finds out about this?"

"He's pretty sure to discover something is going on. His scouts will pick up bits of our messages. But only bits, since these are short-range transmissions. I'm depending on our own air cover to keep the enemy from getting too good a look at what we're up to. All Oleg will know is that we're shifting around on a large scale." Flandry shrugged. "If I were him, I'd decide that the Tebtengri were practicing formations against the day he attacks."

"Which is not far off." Toghrul drummed the desk top.

Flandry drew a figure on the paper. "This will be the third arrangement. I believe we can get that done too before sunset. During the night we can proceed to the fourth one, and start the fifth at dawn. I expect we'll finish in two days."

"It's going to consume an unholy amount of stored energy."

"Don't worry about that. Before the shortage gets acute, your people will be safe with the Imperium sending enough necessities to tide them over—or they'll be dead, which is still more economical."

The night that followed wore very slowly away. Now and then Flandry dozed. He paid scant heed to the sunrise; too much else must be done. Sometime later a warrior was shown in. "From Juchi Sharman," he reported, with a clumsy salute. "Air scouts watching the Ozero Rurik area report

troops are being massed and that outrider columns are starting northward."

Toghrul smote the desk with one big fist. "Are they invading us already?"

"That big a push won't get this far north for a week," Flandry said, though his guts felt cold at the news. "Or more, if we harry them from the air."

"A week. . . . When can we expect help?" said Toghrul.

"Not for three or four weeks at the earliest. The *Callisto* has to return to Catawrayannis base, where the commandant will have to patch together a task force which will have to get here. Allow four weeks, plus or minus. Can we fight a delaying action that long, without suffering too much damage?"

"We had better," said Toghrul, "or we are done."

XII

CAPTAIN FLANDRY laid the rifle butt to his shoulder. The stock felt smooth and not cold, insofar as his numbed cheek could feel anything. The metal parts, so chill that they would skin any bare fingers that touched them, stung him through his gloves.

It was hard to gauge distance in this red half-light, across this whining scud of snow. Hard to guess windage; even

trajectories were baffling on this miserable three-quarter-gee planet. He decided the enemy wasn't close enough yet, and lowered his gun.

Crouched beside him in the lee of the snowbank, the Dweller turned dark eyes upon the man. "I go now?" he asked. His Altaian was worse than Flandry's, though Juchi himself had been surprised to learn that any of the Ice Folk knew the human tongue.

"I told you already, no." The Terran's own accent was thickened by the frostbitten puffiness of his lips. "You've to cross a hundred meters of open ground to reach those trees. You'd be seen and shot before you got half way. We have to arrange a distraction first."

He peered again through the murk. Krasna had almost vanished from these polar lands for the winter, but at this moment was not yet very far below the horizon. A surly gleam in the south gave men enough light to see a little distance.

The attacking platoon had come so close that Flandry could make out individuals: blurred forms against the great, vague lake. He could see that they rode upon modified varyaks, with runners and negagrav thrust to drive them across the permasnow. It was sheer ill luck that he and his squad had blundered into them. The Tebtengri had retreated onto the polar cap and eventually into the depths of the Ice Lands. They lived off a few slaughtered and frozen animals, while their herds wandered the steppe under slight guard, while men and Dwellers skirmished, avoiding pitched battle as much as they could, fighting a guerrilla war to slow Oleg Khan's advance. Skulk, shoot, run, hide, bolt

your food, snatch a nap in a sleeping bag and tent as dank as yourself, and go forth to skulk again.

Now the rest of Flandry's party lay dead by Tengri Nor. He had escaped, but not far. With this one companion he was trapped, for the pursuers could move faster on their machines than he could afoot.

He gauged his range afresh. He got a man in his sights and jerked his head at the Dweller, who slipped away. Then he fired.

The southerner jerked in the saddle, caught at his belly, and slid to the ground. Even in this glum light, his blood was screaming red on the snow. Through the wind, Flandry heard the others yell. They scattered over a wide front. He took aim and fired once more. A miss. He wasn't accomplishing enough. He had to furnish a few seconds' diversion, so they wouldn't notice the Dweller running toward those crystalline trees at his back.

Flandry thumbed his rifle control to automatic fire. He popped up from behind the snowbank, shooting, and called, "My grandmother can lick your grandmother!"

Diving, he sensed more than heard the lead storm that went where he had been. Energy bolts crashed overhead, scythed downward and sizzled in the snow. He breathed hot steam. Surely that damned Dweller had reached the woods by now. He fired, blind in the vapors as his onward-rushing enemy. *Come on, someone, pull me out of this mess! What's the use, anyhow? The little guy babbled something about sending a message through the roots—ridiculous!* Through gun-thunder Flandry heard the first high-ringing noise. He raised his eyes in time to see the medusae attack.

They swarmed from above, hundreds upon hundreds, their tentacles full of lightning. Some were hit, burst into hydrogen flames, and sought men to burn even as they died. Others snatched warriors from the saddle, lifted them, and dropped them into the mortally cold waters of Tengri Nor. Most went efficiently about a task of electrocution. Flandry had not quite grasped what was happening before the platoon retreated. By the time he had climbed erect, the retreat was a rout.

"Holy hopping hexaflexagons," he mumbled in awe. "Now why can't I do that stunt?"

The Dweller returned, small, furry, rubbery, an unimpressive goblin who said with diffidence, "Not enough medusa to do this often. Your friends come. We wait here."

"Huh? Oh, you mean a rescue party. Yeh, I suppose one of our units would be close enough to hear the fight and join in." Flandry stamped his feet, trying to force the circulation back. "Nice haul," he said, looking over strewn weapons and vehicles. "I think we got revenge for our squad."

"Dead men just as dead on any side of fight," reproached the Dweller.

Flandry winced. "Don't remind me."

He heard the whirr of tow motors. The ski patrol that came around the woods was bigger than he had expected. He recognized Arghun and Bourtai in the lead. It came to him, with a shock, that he hadn't spoken to either one, except to say hello and goodbye, since the campaign began. Too busy. That was the trouble with war. Leave out the toil, discipline, discomfort, scant sleep, lousy food, monotony and combat, and war would be a fine institution.

He strolled to meet the newcomers as debonairly as possible for a man without cigarettes. "Hi," he said. "You missed the show."

"Dominic." Bourtai seized his hands. "You might have been killed!" she gasped.

"Occupational hazard," said Flandry. "I thought you were in charge of our western division, Arghun?"

"No more fighting there," said the noyon. "I am going about rounding up our troops."

"How's that?"

"Have you not heard?" The frank eyes widened. For a moment Arghun stood on the snow and gaped. Then a grin cracked his frozen mustache, he slapped Flandry's back and shouted: "The Terrans have arrived!"

"Huh?" Flandry felt stunned. The blow he had taken—Arghun owned a hefty set of muscles—wait, *what* had he said?

"Yesterday," chattered the Altaian. "I suppose your receivers didn't bring in the announcement, nor anyone's in that outfit you were fighting. There've been some bad atmospherics in this area. Or maybe your opponents were die-hard fanatics. There are some whom we'll have to dispose of. But that should not be difficult. You and I won't be needed."

He brought himself under control and went on more calmly: "An Imperial task force appeared out of space and demanded the surrender of the Yesukai troops as being Merseian clients. The commander at Ulan Baligh yielded without a fight; what could he have done against such power? Oleg Khan flew to the front and tried to rally his

forces. You should have been listening, the ether was lively last night! But a couple of Terran spaceships arrived and dropped a demonstration bomb squarely on his field headquarters. That was the end of that. The Khanist tribesmen are already disengaging and streaming homeward. Juchi Shaman has been asked by the Terran admiral at Ulan Baligh to come and advise him what to do next—and to bring you along!”

Flandry closed his eyes and swayed on his feet. Bourtai caught him in her arms. “What is the matter, Dominic?” she cried.

“Brandy,” he whispered. “Tobacco. India tea. Shrimp mayonnaise, with a genuine Riesling on the side. Air conditioning. . . .” He shook himself. “Sorry. My mind wandered.”

He scarcely saw how her lip trembled. Arghun did, gave the Terran a defiant look and caught the girl’s hand. She clung to his like a child.

This time Flandry did notice. His mouth twitched upward. “Bless you, my children,” he murmured.

“What?” Arghun snapped, half-angry and half-bewildered.

“When you get as old and battered as I,” Flandry told them, “you will realize that no one dies of a broken heart. In fact, that organ heals with disgusting speed. If you want to name your first-born Dominic, I will be happy to mail a silver spoon suitably engraved.”

“But—” stammered Bourtai. “But—” she gave up and held Arghun’s hand more tightly.

The noyon’s face burned. He said hastily, seeking im-

personal things, "Now will you explain your actions, Terra man?"

"Hm?" Flandry blinked. "Oh, yes. To be sure."

He started walking. The other two kept pace along the thin, blue Lake of Ghosts, under a lacework of icy leaves. The red half-day smoldered toward night. Flandry spoke with laughter reborn in his voice:

"Our problem was to send a secret message to the Terran base. The most secret one possible would, naturally, be one which nobody recognized as a message. For instance, May Day painted on the Prophet's Tower. It looked like gibberish, pure, spiteful mischief . . . but the whole city could see it. They'd talk. How they'd talk! Even if no Betelgeuseans happened to be at Ulan Baligh just then, there would soon be some who would certainly hear news so sensational no matter how closely they were guarded. And the Betelgeuseans in turn would carry the yarn home with them, where the Terrans connected with our embassy would hear it. And the Terrans would understand!

"You see, May Day is a very ancient code call of ours. It means, simply, *Help me*."

"Oh-ho," said Arghun. He slapped his thigh. His own laughter barked forth. "Yes, I see it now. Thanks, friend, for a joke to tell my grandchildren!"

"A classic," agreed Flandry with his normal modesty. "My corps was bound to send a ship to investigate. Knowing little or nothing, its men would be on the *qui vive*. In view of the message on the Tower, Oleg's tale of my accidental death would be obviously disregarded. But I figured I could trust my chums to keep their mouths shut and pretend to

be taken in by him. My problem was, how to inform them of the real situation, without Oleg knowing they had been informed.

"You can easily guess how that was done. We maneuvered the Tebtengri Shamanate over the plains, forming Terran letters big enough to be seen with the naked eye from a ship just getting into clear space. The subsequent letters could be smaller, since the *Callisto* people would use telescopes as soon as they realized what was going on. I wrote a note, short but to the point, across the whole damn steppe."

He filled his lungs with the keen air. Through all his weariness the magnificence of being alive flowed into him. He grinned and finished, "I daresay those were the biggest letters ever written. So big that you had to get off the planet to read them."

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