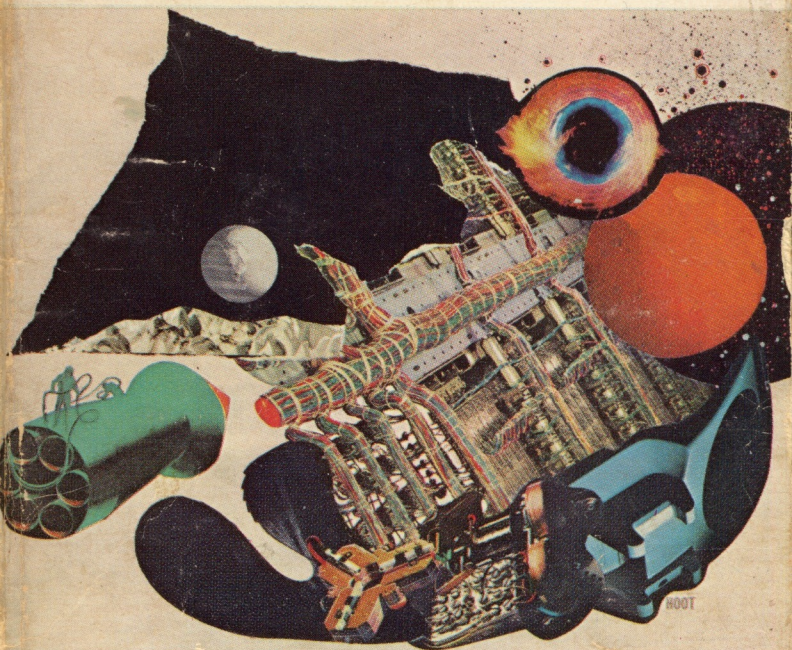


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They fought to bring new planets to Sol's orbit

WORLDS FOR THE TAKING

KENNETH BULMER



This was the last day.

This was the day they moved the planet.

Through Colin's moccasins he could feel the solid earth, the rounded bulge of the planet Jethro—his planet—and at the same time he imagined he could sense the purposeful thrumming of the Terrans' machinery at the heart of the world.

This afternoon they were taking his world away.

That was Colin's viewpoint. He had been born on Jethro. He was furious about its theft.

It wasn't Gerban Arnauf's viewpoint. He was the one who had given orders to seize Jethro, to take it away through space for Earth's selfish ends. And he was in charge now.

And it wasn't Stephen Strang's viewpoint either. He had some unusual ideas of his own that often crossed Gerban's projects. So it was good opportunism for this competing world-mover to stand up for Colin and for Jethro.

And that was the start of the trouble. Because when the lives of worlds are at stake there ought to be no room for personal animosities. And doubly so when the human worlds are being infiltrated by an implacably alien enemy intelligence.

KENNETH BULMER

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WORLDS FOR THE TAKING

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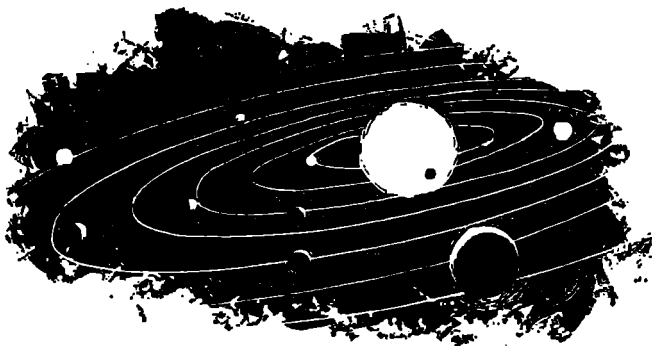
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PART ONE

I

SOON THERE WOULD BE NO SUN in the planet Jethro's sky and, taken, uprooted, ravaged, the planet would spin aching through a man-made otherness towards an unwanted resurrection.

Colin Copping, the first born of Jethro, walked dreamily up from the lake in that last pellucid dawn, walking consciously through the sunbeams from his sun Jezreel, knowing all argument finished and all pleading spent.

A month ago, at the end of spring, when the patiently transported and lovingly tended daffodils had been knotted over in Anthea's garden patch, the Earthmen had finished concreting out their chamber floating in molten magma at the planet's core. Copping had experienced a traitorous excitement all during the placid winter as the Earthmen sent their borer down through the substance of Jethro. He had felt a closeness to all the scientific technology of the human galaxy then. He had been only sixteen Jethroan years old

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and that, as he had meticulously calculated with conscious belonging pride, made him seventeen and a quarter terrestrial years old; and the bitter humiliation of his elders had passed over him with a vague puzzlement. But now, on this last day, he felt all the trapped panic of a snared rabbit carried kitchenwards by twisted dangling legs.

Arnold Gunderson with his catch slung over one shoulder fell into step with Copping. They had known each other all their lives, had fought, quarreled, planned, sneaked off together. Their moccasins trod the trail silently.

"It's today then."

"Today."

"Might not be so bad,"—Gunderson tried to inject a dead enthusiasm into his voice—"we get to ride in a spaceship—"

"I think if they could have done, they would have left us on the surface." Copping spoke with slow deliberation.

"They couldn't do that!" Gunderson puckered worried eyes at Copping. "We come back here . . . You think?"

"I don't know what to think. . . . All this . . . How can it ever be the same?" He had no need to gesture.

Beyond the Lapiz Lake, where they had just taken their last catch, the green and burgeoning slopes of the Mountains of Carmel Jones led upwards against the sky until they broke serenely in their cloud-clustering pinnacles of shining rock and shimmering snow. To the south, the land opened out, verdant and promising and empty. To the north, the country of Ebanemael, where the second colonist ship's company had pitched their homes, stretched like the flank of a lazy well-fed cow humping comfortably against the mountains. Easy neighbors, the Ebanfolk, in their fat lands of corn and blue grass, friendly, laughing and quaffing hugely at the riotous fairs staged annually on the banks of the border river Yasmeeen, that tumbled whitely to a grave slow-sliding placidity before merging into the estuary and the sea.

Copping knew this land and loved it, every winding thread of water interlacing the bending trees, the dim mysterious greenness of the forests, the errant flash of a startled faun with wide eyes blankly solemn, the smell of woodsmoke, the

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depth and intricacy of a sward of bluebells echoing the translucent blueness above.

This was the last day.

This was the day they moved the planet.

Through his moccasins he could feel the solid earth, the rounded bulge of the planet Jethro—his planet—and at the same time he imagined he could sense the purposeful, meaningless thrumming of the Terrans' machinery at the heart of the world.

This afternoon they were taking his world away.

The unfairness of it all bewildered young Copping. His father and the other colonists had argued and pleaded and the siblings had looked on; but when they understood fully what was to happen, the blunt resigned anger of the small maltreated by the strong gave them pseudo-courage to carry on with their preparations for the renunciation of their birth-rights.

The skein of rainbow trout slipped and the last fat juicy fish dragged in the dust of the trail. Copping hefted the fish higher, not caring that they pressed against his Lincoln green tunic and brown slacks. These fish were to be roasted and taken aboard the spaceship more as a symbol than as mere food. The Terrans being committed would take care of fellow humans, even though they were Earthpeople three times removed.

The trail broadened and the log houses of the town came into sight—a first view of home so familiar to Copping and Gunderson that they scarcely comprehended its uniqueness now; never again would they see their home just like this beneath the sun Jezreel.

"I hear the Ebanfolk tried to smash up the Terrans' camp last night." Gunderson spoke distantly, as though such antics were reserved for a crazed minority.

"Too late for that now." Copping searched the people moving in the streets. He could feel a pain which the sight of their faces would bring. "It was always too late. Once the Terrans wanted this planet there was nothing we could do to prevent them taking it."

Copping spoke with a quiet reserved viciousness that was

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all that was left of his hatred. "When they destroyed our radio, we thought that strange. What help could we ask for from the human galaxy? These men are the accredited agents of the Human government. They are obeying the law. The Ebanfolk, by fighting for what is theirs, are breaking the law."

Gunderson's thick fingers closed on his fish trident. "I would like—" he said, and stopped. He swallowed. "At last year's fair I met an Ebanfolk and we talked. I thought him a braggart then. Now, I am not sure. . . ."

They went down into their town, the town of Happy Landings, and saw the Terrans walking and talking to the people of Jethro as though they were not stealing their world from under their feet.

Gerban Arnouf watched them walk in, his hooded eyes heavy and impatient with the affairs of the galaxy; his thick body, clad in the impeccable green uniform of the Solterranean Construction Service, ponderous with authority; his brain ever demanding functions of performance beyond the limits of a normally constituted human body. Gerban Arnouf was one of Caracci's Young Men. Perhaps only Tung Chi Leslie could compete on equal terms with Arnouf, always providing, of course, that one excepted the brilliant phenomenon of Stephen Christopher Strang.

The sun Jezreel drew higher in the sky, casting blued-steel shadows onto the beaten square from crowding log houses, striking a brazen shaft from the town clock—the old ship's chronometer they had set up as a permanent reminder of home. Before Jethro, home to them had been SGC Seven eight nine three Baker Four—or so Arnouf thought, vaguely, not caring. Whatever name the planet had borne interested him even less. These people had not driven their colonizing ships direct from Earth. That gave Gerban Arnouf all the power he needed.

He stood now watching the people make their last preparations for evacuation. His thick body and square fringe-bearded face seemed in their power to bear down with a physical force on the town of Happy Landings. Separated

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by a screen of local beobab trees the ships waited on the field. Terran ships. Ships of the SCS. Ships provided by Gerban Arnouf to take the people of Jethro into safety. He considered his own thoughtfulness and kindness and wondered if he was getting soft.

(Caracci said: "The welfare and interests of Solterra override *every* other interest in the galaxy.")

Arnouf watched as Copping and Gunderson marched stiffly into their log house where the smoke of cooking fires indicated some barbarous rite before embarkation. Arnouf stroked his thick short black beard. He had provided standard space rations. The men and women of Jethro had proved a stiff-necked lot and he welcomed the day he would be quit of them.

But their planet was good.

Firm footfalls on the beaten earth brought Arnouf's attention back; he knew this must be an Earthman walking arrogantly in his hard-heeled spaceboots and not a native Jethroan in soft silent moccasins. He turned to greet Commodore Pelling, graying, rough-faced, desperately trying to make rear-admiral and knowing in his heart he had failed. Arnouf had been Space Navy himself, before transferring to the SCS; but he allowed no hint of the knowledge that he, himself, would have made vice-admiral by now to cloud his dealings with this half-failure.

"All set and ready to go, sir, as soon as you give the word." Pelling sweated a little, not so much from the Jezreel heat, Arnouf saw with malicious amusement, as from his own inner awareness of tension and lack of moral fiber to cope with problems not alphabetically listed in the Book.

"No trouble?"

Pelling shifted uncomfortably. "Camp three was attacked by the Ebanfolk last night—nothing serious," he added quickly as he saw the thundercloud gather on Arnouf's face. "More in the nature of a demonstration. We chivied them away—"

"Casualties?"

"Why—none." Pelling appeared perplexed.

"These people need a lesson to drive home to them the

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seriousness of the situation. They have continually pestered me—me, Gerban Arnouf!—with their fatuous arguments. Well, we know how to deal with them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Arnouf braced his stomach muscles, shoving his thumbs down behind the wide synthileather belt supporting his twin Lee Johns. They were an affectation he sometimes despised himself for countenancing, and, yet, one he could not do without. The feel of the hard-ridged butts of the guns, their drag at his hips, reassured him. He spoke now reflectively.

“These humans have been on Jethro for nineteen years terran now, and they have accomplished virtually nothing! Despite their livestock, they appear to prefer a hunting culture. Decadent. Where are their universities, their transport networks, their drive into the future? They are regressing. It’s an old story. Too familiar to be painful any longer. As for their local customs—”

(Caracci said: “Respect a culture’s local traditions and customs and religions, but never, *ever*, allow them to interfere with the greater good of Solterra.”)

Pelling rubbed a hand down his clean-shaven jaw. He said carefully, “They’re pretty much like us, sir. Ordinary Earth-type human beings. They’re not even touched with a trace of Shurilala or Takkat blood, and that’s going about as far back in history as you can, without tangling with legends. They’re pure terrestrial—”

Commodore Pelling stopped speaking and swallowed. He had caught sight of Arnouf’s face and what he saw frightened him.

“I do not care, Commodore Pelling, if they are pure terrestrial or late-culture Utukku. . . . We are here on Solterranean government business. That is all that need concern you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am personally supervising the evacuation. As soon as you are off-planet I shall fly to the Shaft Camp and go down to the center. I shall give you the time you need to shift into FTL, and then I shall move planet. There must be no slip-ups.”

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Pelling sweated, said, "There won't be, sir. It'll all go as smooth as the drill book."

"Just see that it does, Commodore."

A procession began to move from the shaded side of the square with a slow limp dignity that had no power to affect Gerban Arnouf. He watched, a tiny smile stirring his lips above the close beard. Commodore Pelling saluted and marched off, his boots cracking down louder than all the Jethroans' silent moccasins together.

Arthur Copping, Colin's father, walked in that procession; old silver-haired Rainscarfe; hatchet-faced Dirk Tiamat; Sven Gunderson, Arnold's father; the elders and the citizens of property and repute, they walked in solemn silence towards Gerban Arnouf, the arbiter of their destiny.

Arnouf watched them come with cynical ease. This was just another chore he must finish out quickly and as smoothly as he might; even Caracci taught the benefits of polite diplomacy.

A crowd of women and children, young men, expectant girls, formed in the background of the scene, moving like undersea fronds at the whim of the moment; their clothes subdued in color, for they had laid away their bright garments on this day of sorrow.

No real fear of violence touched Arnouf; but his organizational instincts prompted him to call over his wrist-radio. "Captain Nogu, are your men in position?"

The voice in the speaker clipped behind his ear said firmly, "All in position, sir. We have both you and the demonstration in full view."

Arnouf had no need to turn around to check the inconspicuous company of soldiers lounging at the far gate. They had screens and energy weapons set up there and they could drop a shield around Arnouf and crisp the Jethroans before the first native could unlimber his Carpenter. *Native?* Well—it was a natural thought; these people were little better than barbarians despite their terrestrial ancestry and their culture. His contempt for them grew as he waited for their approach.

Cracker-jawed, silver-haired Rainscarfe spoke for the men

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of Jethro. He had buried three sons in the earth of this planet and he was quite prepared to be buried beside them if needs be. Arnouf knew this. Therefore he acted with a little more discretion than perhaps otherwise he would have done.

"We ask you for the last time, Commissioner Arnouf. We traveled to this world from the world of our birth freely. We know Earth and love her as the progenitor of our people in the galaxy. We are pure terrestrial. There is no blood of Takkat or Shurilala or Pallas or Octo or any other of our allied once-alien friends in the galaxy running in our veins. We have lived here on Jethro beneath the sun Jezreel and made our homes here. All the future lies before us. Will you not reconsider? Think how you would feel if not hostile aliens but your own people, your own race, took away your most precious birthright! Have pity on us, Commissioner! Leave us our world and pick another from the uncounted billions afloat in the galaxy!"

"There is nothing left to say, old man. I've listened to you, as I need not have done. Now pack up your things and go aboard the spaceships."

"But will you not—"

"No! I won't! If you're not aboard by noon then you will have to answer for the consequences."

Arnouf turned heavily and marched off, erect and stiff, priding himself on handling the stupid natives with firmness and decision.

The delegation stared after him as though unmoved by this final clapping of the iron door on their hopes; for they had long since ceased to hope, and their final protest had been in the form of a ritual designed to placate their own conceptions of themselves as men.

In their turn they shuffled off over the beaten earth of the square. The women and children and young people watched them. Then, like a flock of birds turning in one master-commanded aerial evolution, they all swung away towards their houses to collect their possessions and file aboard the spaceships.

Anxious though he was to return to the shaft and de-

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scend again to the control chamber in the center of this planet, Gerban Arnouf felt compelled to stay to watch the departure of the colonists. Once rid of them, then, the whole lucidly organized power of the SCS could be used for its primary purpose. The incident of the colonists was an irritating sidetrack that might have ballooned into over-importance had he not handled the stupidity with firmness and decision.

Firmness and decision. Caracci would have liked that.

He had reached Captain Nogu and the gate and stopped for a moment to look with obvious inspection at the detail of soldiery. Nogu saluted. His thin tough face stared out from the steel embrasure of his helmet with all the blind arrogance of the perfect fighting machine. Nogu had once mentioned to Arnouf in conversation that he was married to a girl from the House of Longhi, with a ranch on that pleasant world of Solariadne, and Arnouf had been twice astonished; once that this soulless fighting machine could ever have loved and, once, again that he had had the impertinence to marry a daughter of one of the most powerful of terrestrial Houses.

The soldiers stood with awkward betraying tenseness, conscious of the eye of the Commissioner upon them. Their dark green and brown combat armor, their bulbous helmets, the lean sinewy strength of their weapons, all conspired to indicate very plainly what they were. Fighting Men. Dangerous. Handle With Care.

Arnouf said pleasantly, "Everything is going splendidly, Captain. Rather a holiday for your men, really."

Nogu said, "Yes, sir." He said it dutifully; but despite all his own innate knowledge of authority, his own powers here—and elsewhere—Arnouf felt the chill of blank fighting ferocity chained by obedience and Regulations chafe at him like rough-scrubbed bark. A breed apart—soldiers.

He walked on, out towards the space field. Commodore Pelling's little fleet of little ships—Arnouf had not employed large freighters—waited shining bravely in the sunshine from Jezreel.

The speaker behind his ear buzzed and a cool voice

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said, "Attention. 'Attention. Bogey on screen orbiting planetwards. Condition Orange."

Arnouf lifted the wrist-radio and was about to call in when the speaker burped and said, "Bogey translated. SCS cruiser *Archimedes*. Captain Morley Christopher Landsdowne. Condition Green."

Arnouf said, "Control—this is the Commissioner. Have you contacted *Archimedes* yet?"

"Not yet, sir. Ident signals coming in—yes, here we are. Hooking you direct through on audio. Stand by."

A hiss and then the strong authoritative voice of a space captain. "This is Captain Landsdowne, SCS *Archimedes*. Clear for landing at Happy Landings?"

The Duty Officer aboard Pelling's flagship, where the pick-up and ident had been made, cut in before Arnouf could speak. "Cleared for touchdown on Happy Landings' field. You'll have to make it snappy. Departure is scheduled for noon local. Two hours."

Now what, wondered Arnouf, was a Solterranean Construction Service cruiser doing here, now? He had enough ships. Too many for his own peace of mind. He decided to postpone flying to the shaft and instead see this Christopher Landsdowne. A man from the House of Christopher. H'mm. If he knew Stephen C. Strang at all there might be news of that personage. Arnouf didn't care for Strang in any but one way: the object of complete competition.

The brisk walk out to the field tingled up his muscles and he felt an obscure disappointment when the Duty Officer, having spotted him on his ground screen, sent off a flier to pick him up. The flier pilot—flamboyantly bulky in his unnecessary fur-collared short coat—whipped the little craft up to the airlock nestled on the starboard flank of Pelling's flagship, SCS *Anaximenes*.

"The next time, if there is a next time you fly me, pilot," growled Arnouf, "handle your craft with more common sense and less nonsense. You are no longer an overgrown child playing with an expensive toy."

The pilot's neck grew red behind the thick collar.

He had the sense to say only, "Yes, sir."

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Arnouf stepped through the airlock, hoping he would not find anything too complicated for him to handle. He intended to shift Jethro and nothing was going to stop him; but the advent of this SCS cruiser was no chance. Something had brought her across the gulfs of a hundred and ninety light-years to Jezreel.

He had no idea what that reason could be as he stepped through to the flagship's control room to wait for the visiting cruiser's captain to flit across. As Commissioner of the SCS he had supreme power on this planet. He had no idea what *Archimedes* wanted and, truly, as he hunched impatiently before the lock, he did not care.

Even when the lock opened and Captain Landsdowne stepped through, Arnouf did not know; even when he saw Stephen Christopher Strang following the captain, Arnouf still did not know.

II

STEPHEN CHRISTOPHER STRANG, from the day he had first realized the fact, had always taken a huge and secret delight in the exact parallel of his initials with those of the Solterranean Construction Service. He was a man like that. He found his pleasures inwardly, looking warmly to the secret little titillations that exposure to the real galaxy would have blasted and shredded away in ridiculousness. SCS. Yes, he liked that.

He had started life, like so many other first-rank men, in the Terran Survey Corps. But that distinguished and extremely ancient body had had its functions drastically altered over the past century with the fruition of Caracci's ideas. Now the SCS garnered with scientific brush and pan the galactic crumbs dislodged by the TSC. The roles had been reversed.

Now, as he stepped aboard Captain Pelling's flagship, SCS *Anaximenes*, he prepared to brave once more the rigors of full Space Navy procedures and traditions and stuffiness.

As he had said on the way across to Morley Landsdowne,

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"I suppose we'll have to heel-click and salute and mumbo-jumbo nineteen to the dozen, Morl. Why the Service can't train and maintain enough spaceship crews itself, I really don't know. Thank goodness, I don't have to put up with a space navy crew."

Landsdowne's swarthy reckless face had creased into a smile. "Think yourself lucky, Steve. Caracci likes you. He doesn't necessarily like all his Young Men."

His footfalls soft on the deck, Strang followed Landsdowne into Pelling's control cabin. Pelling shuffled forward, smiling, holding out his hand.

"Captain Landsdowne! This is a pleasure. May I flick for refreshments?"

"Thank you, sir; but not right now." Landsdowne saluted and expertly contrived to insert himself into the background as Strang moved forward. Pelling smiled uncertainly and then shook hands with Strang. Strang smiled bleakly and said, "Commodore Pelling. Thank you. Ah—Gerban. Nice to see you again after so long."

Gerban Arnouf took the proffered hand. He had tensed up as soon as Strang had come aboard. Strang let the smile spread on the inside of his face; he kept just the hint of a polite official smile distending his lips.

(Caracci said: "Use your emotions as weapons; never, ever, let them interfere with the good of Solterra.")

"Welcome aboard, Stephen. You've come from Earth?"

"Not directly. I called back at Solishtar before coming on here to see you."

"To see me? That was very—nice."

Strang decided to let Arnouf off lightly. He would gain no pleasure from tormenting the man.

"I saw Caracci. He asked me to convey his compliments to you."

"Thank you—"

"I suppose you have not yet heard of my promotion. I made Chief Commissioner—"

Strang had to stop then and use a tissue to cover the embarrassment he felt at the enormous outpouring of feral hate and thwarted ambition bursting from Arnouf; the man's

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face had drained of blood and a gray falcon head stared forth in place of the bearded bull. Strang disposed of the tissue and said, "I suppose one of us three would have to make Chief first, Gerban. You, me, or Tung Chi Leslie. And he's out past the Vermilion Cluster at the moment, a clear eighty light-years further out than we are now."

Strang knew quite clearly what Arnouf wanted to say. "Leslie Tung was parsecs off in space, I was also working in space, on the job; but you, Stephen Strang, were crawling around Caracci at Headquarters on Earth, licking up for your promotion."

Oh, yes, that was what Arnouf wanted to say.

Arnouf said, "Congratulations, Stephen. I'm sure you deserve the honor."

Which wasn't bad, Strang decided tolerantly, as a backhander, considering.

"Everything's going fine here, I'm confident, Gerban."

Ease the situation out of sight and carry on with the business. He had told Arnouf face-to-face; and that was all he had come for. Arnouf, too, would realize that. He might even, in that ferret-like brain of his, allow Strang some gratitude for being told directly, man-to man, instead of being left to find out when Service orders were next promulgated.

"Yes. We've finalized the drive. The control chamber is more or less, within the prescribed degrees, at planet center. We can begin to move this afternoon. Deadline for planet clear is noon, local."

"Sounds very competently done, Gerban. Not that I expected anything else. You have a large number of ships on the field. Surprising. No troubles?"

"None."

"Yes, well, then . . ."

A pause.

Then, "You have—other—business in these parts?" Arnouf forced a smile; it hurt him.

Strang wished the man hadn't asked that; it showed a lack of delicacy. Hadn't he come all this way just to tell

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Arnouf that he had made Chief? Didn't the man appreciate that?

"Nothing that can't wait. I'd like to hold off in space a few diameters out and watch you move planet. That's one sight a man can never tire of."

"No."

"I suppose as soon as this assignment is over you'll call in for a few weeks on Solisis? Does a man good to go home now and then?"

"I expect I shall." Arnouf's frigidity was now growing to be an embarrassment to Strang. He had come in friendship; surely they weren't going to have a scene now?

Strang moved gently towards the bank of screens showing surrounding space, the extent of this planet to its horizons, the links with central chamber and the shaft camp with the other temporary camps. All very efficient—as was natural with any of Caracci's Young Men.

Strang tried to throw off the uneasy feeling of being an interloper. After all, he did out-rank everyone else on-planet. He had never cared much, or so he had imagined, for rank and title; and even the heady thrill of excitement he had experienced back on Earth, when Caracci had croaked at him that he was now a Chief Commissioner, had been rigidly suppressed.

But he had every right to do as he wished now. He could order and command and it would be done. Power he knew corrupted, or so they said. Perhaps it was as the man said that only immunity corrupted. Whatever it might be, so far, Strang had escaped that tarbrush and he had enough humility left to pray he would continue to escape.

He looked at the screens, a last idle glance before he took Morley Landsdowne back to *Archimedes* and they spaced out.

On the landing field small figures ran. They ran fleetly, with a lightness and grace new to him. Intrigued, he asked for the magnification to be stepped up. At once the leading figure snapped into close focus.

Strang stared with amazement.

Even as he stared the first explosion boomed up, outside,

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not coming through the speakers, an explosion outside the ship and shattering in with immediate stunning surprise.

A speaker buzzed and a voice said, "Captain Nogu. Two idiots have burst through onto the field. They're harmless but they have explosives—"

Viciously, Arnouf cut across the words. "Crisp them!" he shouted savagely.

Strang had seen that magnified figure on the screen. He had taken in the green tunic, the fawn slacks, the soft moccasins. He had seen the long flame rifle that belonged in a museum. He had noticed the throwing arm, well-used, he surmised, to throwing rocks to stun rabbits, hurl a clumsily-bundled package of explosives against the lower fins of the ship. He had seen all that in the space of a single heartbeat.

Now he said, firmly and harshly, "Belay that last order. Knock them out. I want to talk to them."

The speaker said, "Yes, sir."

Strang turned very slowly to face Arnouf. The Commissioner's bearded face had set hard. His lips compressed into the beard. Strang said gently, "People, Gerban."

"What of it?" snapped Arnouf. "They're only a few useless colonists that haven't stirred themselves since they got here."

"But," said Strang, still in that softly modulated voice, "but, Gerban, people. On planet. And you say you are moving this world this afternoon."

"Yes."

"Their world, Gerban. *Their* world!"

"They've been here nineteen years terran! They didn't come from Earth! They are a handful! And, anyway, they can resettle the planet after it has been integrated." Arnouf seethed. "Think what Caracci says—"

Strang beckoned. "I do not feel it incumbent upon you, Gerban, to tell me what Caracci may have said or not said. Please come with me. I feel we should—discuss—this matter in privacy. Perhaps you have a stateroom?"

"Of course. This way."

At the door, Strang swung his head dangerously towards

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Commodore Pelling. "Have those two locals brought to me at once!"

"Yes, sir!" said Pelling, sweating.

Arnouf had the sense not to say anything as they went through the doorway into a luxurious stateroom opening off the bridge. It was the Commodore's space cabin. In luxury it rivaled many Earthside palaces; it gave Strang a queasy feeling as he mentally compared it with Morley Landsdowne's space cabin aboard *Archimedes*.

Plumping himself down on a formfit and flicking for a drink, Arnouf said testily, "Now we are alone, Stephen, I'd like to make it clear that this Jethro operation was assigned to me personally by Carracci."

"I'm not challenging that, Gerban. On the contrary. You must take full responsibility for what has been done here."

"You know what Caracci said; he repeated it enough times. 'For the good of Solterra!' Surely that is reason enough for all our actions?"

"But they're people, Gerban. They looked like terrestrial stock, or near enough. Might be a drop of Shurilala blood in there somewhere; but—"

"They claim one hundred percent purity. But what difference does that make?"

Strang leaned back in his formfit, considering. "A good question, Arnouf. We of Earth have fought many wars and now we have many good friends in our segment of the galaxy. A man can be half Takkat and half Palladian and it makes no difference in a single instance to the way he is treated by the government. We've had enough quondam alien presidents and governors and what-nots over the centuries. No, Gerban, their ancestry has nothing to do with it."

"Well, then?"

Here in the privacy of this space cabin, rank, of course, had gone by the board. The "Chief" before Strang's "Commissioner" meant nothing in the way they would talk to each other.

"You know Regulations, Gerban. We cannot take a planet if that planet possesses people without that people's consent."

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"Suppose I tell you these people did consent?"

Strang shook his head gently. "They do not usually consent with flame rifles and home-made bombs."

"But they're useless, I tell you! Once Jethro has been settled down and integrated around Shanstar they'll be invited back. They'll be the first to colonize this world again."

"Isn't the destiny of this world to be a factory unit? Perhaps these people don't fancy giving up their forests and plains for factory chimneys and concrete."

"What do they know about it! Ignorant savages—"

"It's no good arguing, Gerban. You can't move this planet, and that's final."

"But we've bored through to the core! The Lansen generators are set up, the drive is all ready to go! We've spent nine months Terran and millions on this! That can't go to waste!"

"That's your problem, not mine."

The taste of power was sweet—and corrupting.

Stephen Strang had fought hard from his origins aboard a Terran Survey Corps base ship up through the ladder of promotions to the decisive moment when he had transferred to the CSC and married Shena, and so to selection for special training. And then the arduous years of toil and learning he spent with the hardest taskmaster in the galaxy as boss, to become one of Caracci's Young Men: So to the here and now as the youngest Chief Commissioner in the service. He had fought hard. And he had enjoyed every minute of it, all the one hundred years of it, and he meant with a dedicated purpose to enjoy the remaining two hundred and fifty years of his life, God willing, until they slipped him gently into space in his regulation oxygen cylinder, if he was lucky, or buried him in his own private and personal plot of land on Solishtar.

He could not afford this early in his superior career to make a mistake, however trivial it might seem.

Slowly, as though at a tangent, he said, "Tell me, Gerban, if you will, although I know it to be none of my business, but I have always wondered—why is it that you seldom ever use your House name?"

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The question quite evidently dragged Arnouf back from some private thought that had displeased him. He stood up and began to pace steadily back and forth in the stateroom.

"I agree, Stephen, it is of no concern of yours. You are of the House of Christopher. They are a powerful 'clan in the galaxy and I have heard that they respect far more fully than others the individual rights of the family."

"That is so. Shena has slept only with me and I have since marriage shared no other woman of my House's bed."

"Admirable, if old-fashioned. The House of Wayland, I am told, are notorious for their communal—ah—habits."

"So I have heard."

"You know I am of the House of Pyros. The Ancestral Home is CentauriDanae. You know also that my home is on Solisis. Does that answer your question?"

"I am sorry."

Strang repressed firmly the natural inclination to offer House transference to a friend; Arnouf would be far too dangerous a man to admit to the same House. Let him stew in his own psychological family problems. Anyway, old Zeus Christopher Drummond, the current head of the House of Christopher, was too wily a bird to admit a man of Arnouf's reputation.

Anyway, perhaps Arnouf wanted to join the House of Wayland; the man's sexual appetites might incline in that direction.

The moment of awkwardness was broken as the ident plate lit up to show the worried face of Commodore Pelling.

Arnouf stabbed the ingress button savagely and Pelling, with an army captain treading on his heels, entered. The captain looked like a hundred other tough competent rapier-fast army men Strang knew: a breed with which he could find little in common except the fanatical dedication to Solterranean duty.

Following them, shambled two youths clad in the green and brown hunting rig of the local population, herded by two army privates, their stun guns unlimbered, the killing energy weapons holstered.

Arnouf nodded curtly. Pelling said, "Ah—these are the

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two boys, sir. They're still a little woozy from the stun guns; but—"

"I can see, thank you, Commodore." Arnouf was in no mood to make anything easier for anyone right now.

Strang walked across and looked at the two young men. For a sickening instant he thought of his son Simon and shuddered. If Simon had been in the position of these two boys, now, what would he have done?

He said, firmly but without harshness, "What are your names?"

"Colin Copping and Arnold Gunderson."

"I think," Strang said gently, "it would be more polite if you addressed me as sir." He moved a little away and then turned, sharply. "Now. You threw a bomb at the ships. You carried flame rifles and you seemed to me as though you intended to use them. Do you mind telling me why?"

Copping sneered. Gunderson hung his head, exhausted from the run onto the space field and the despairing excitement of throwing the bombs they had quickly fashioned from the community's mining stores.

"I can't help you, Copping, if you won't help me."

That sounded reasonable.

Colin Copping stared at this man, this outworlder to whom he must appear as a little insect crawling on the surface of an unimportant speck of a world. "You've come to steal our world! Well—we're not letting you take our birthright without a fight!"

Strang glanced once at Arnouf and then away. The Commissioner glared moodily back. Trouble was here, now, live in the room like an electric charge. Strang knew he had to meet it head on. "Why did you not lodge a protest with the appropriate authorities, Colin?"

Copping all but laughed in his face.

"Appropriate authorities! They smashed our radiol And who in the galaxy cares for us?"

"The Solterranean Construction Service does, for one!" snapped Strang.

Copping used a swear-phrase he had once heard his

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father use when they'd ridden unexpectedly upon a Jeth-roan tiger savaging his prize herd of Jerseys.

No one reacted violently. Strang rubbed a hand down his jaw to conceal the widening of his smile.

"I think, young fellow, we'd all better go down and meet your local government—"

"There's scarcely any need for that now!" Gerban Arnouf interrupted angrily, not bothering about the audience.

"There is, Gerban. You already know what my decision must be—"

"This isn't possible! You can't just space-in and calmly destroy nine months' work and millions of money investment!"

"The work and the money represent spent capital. They cannot weigh in the balance against the principles we profess—"

Arnouf looked like a man stretching for the winning tape, suddenly seeing that tape snatched away from him.

To cut off what promised, despite all his care, to become a nasty scene—and that before witnesses—Strang walked toward the door. "Come along with me, you two," he said curtly. Obediently Copping and Gunderson fell in behind him with their attendant guards. Captain Nogu glanced stiff-necked and emotionlessly at Arnouf, then wheeled and followed Strang. Over his shoulder, the Chief Commissioner said, "Anyway, Gerban, the material and drive units are not wasted. They can be taken from the chamber and used on your next planet as they would have been in any event."

"A fine consolation, that is." Arnouf's hands were clenched at his sides, not too far from the ridged butts of the Lee-Johns.

They went out from SCS *Anaximenes* and down by flier to land with a graceful evolution in the main square of Happy Landings where the bronze spaceship's chronometer showed half an hour to noon.

Strang had no wish to turn this simple business into a melodrama. He was wearing, as was his custom, the standard undress uniform of the service—a green open necked shirt, green slacks and spaceboots. He wore no gun. He

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carried, as any Earthman would, the usual arsenal of communications equipment and personal effects a civilized human needed in the galaxy. But he had made no effort to strive after the glamorous effect so many men affected, men like Gerban Arnouf with his stiffly gorgeous uniform bedecked with badges of rank and ostentatious jewelry. Arnouf might overawe these people of Jethro by sheer magnificence. Strang preferred to manipulate them by his words and personal presence.

(Caracci said, "The weapons are not important; the results are. And those results must always be for the good of Solterra.")

A group formed wonderingly about the men from Earth and their two Jethroan prisoners. Colin Copping smiled weakly at his father, feeling foolish like a child caught scrumping. Old cracker-jawed Rainscarfe stepped forward, all set to deliver another speech; but Strang cut him off—politely but firmly.

"These two youngsters tried to blow up the ships and would have shot at us. Why?"

They told him. All of them. In a confused babble of sound that dinned screechingly in the square. Strang held up his hands. He faced them, four-square, tough, determined, trying to be fair.

"I hear you. The two young men became frustrated with the ineptitude of their elders and, copying the Ebanfolk, your neighbors, resorted to violence. Violence can solve nothing. Only logic."

They listened to him. The sun Jezreel shone down strongly now, the dust thick and flat at the sides of the square, insect buzz reassuring and somnolent from the eaves of the peaked log houses, the pile of personal belongings reduced as it had been loaded aboard waiting trucks. Silently, only half-believing, they listened.

"I must tell you at once there has been an error of organization here on Jethro. The SCS recognizes this as your planet—"

The hubbub drowned his words. They were shouting and dancing about, waving their hands—and fists—hullabaloo—

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ing and carrying on. He quietened them with difficulty and finished what he had to say. "We shall not be taking your world away from you. You have established an inalienable right to it by your colonization here. That is all I have to say, at this time. . . ."

"What," he heard Arnouf's sour voice say softly close to his ear, "no abject groveling apology?"

"That will be all, Gerban," he said crisply. He stared levelly at the other man.

"As you wish." Arnouf would have liked to have said more, Strang saw; but the man bottled it up. He would save his bile till later.

For Strang, the moment might have held triumph had he wished to display his own feelings of superiority over Arnouf; the man had been wrong and Strang had had to put him right. There were so many wrong things in the galaxy, so many injustices to put right that no one man could handle them all. He had taken pleasure in correcting this injustice because—he was cheerfully honest with himself—because Gerban Arnouf had been caught red-handed breaking the regulations. But he wouldn't crow over it. He wouldn't give Arnouf the morbid satisfaction of retrieving some of his own self-esteem by consoling himself with the reflection that Strang was merely a bully glorying in his newly-won power.

Strang didn't bother to wait for the delegation of Jethroans to come forward to thank him.

He whisked aboard his ship with Morely Landsdowne, already looking forward to the work ahead in the Zagreb Cluster.

Watching the flier glistening like a flung drop of water aimed errorlessly towards the airlock on the cruiser's hull, Colin Copping tried to formulate his thoughts into some coherent order. He felt the same profound relief, the sense of weight being lifted, that all the men and women around him were experiencing. But there was more. This morning, when he had walked up from the Lapid Lake, there had been no hope in the galaxy for him. Now, one man had changed all that. One man had stood in the square of Happy Landings and given him his planet back.

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Stephen Christopher Strang.

He had looked like some god, standing there distributing unimagined largesse, a shining being from space concerned with the mysterious dance of the planets in their courses, stepping, for a few moments, to earth to right a wrong.

Yes, Colin Copping would not forget Chief Commissioner Stephen Strang.

III

BETWEEN FACETED SLIVERS of chingling quartz flowers, the six-legged figure ran all scrabbling and sliding with a desperate lunging effort very painful to watch. The quartz flowers tinkled and chimed and their sharp edges glinted razors of light back from this planet's swollen and dying sun.

Groves of chalcedony led to swards of heliotrope, lawns of bloodstone, beds of carnelian with the drooping ice-cold fronds of chrysoprase forever jangling emptily over trails of opaque yellow and red jasper. This world stared back icily at space, hard and cold and frozen, draped in the miniature perfection of inanimate lace.

The six-legged figure ran.

Its aerial mechanisms had been burnt out and so it scuttled all chinkling and chiming and belling across the crystal landscape beneath that bloated sun.

If ever that sun had owned a name bestowed on it by people—whatever outlandish shape or form once lived on this planet's surface then—nothing now would ever bring that name back to life. Human beings called the sun—SGS Nine Nine Seven Six Eight Omega Twelve. The planet would merely be given its number out from its sun: this planet was number seventeen.

The six-legged figure had all this information as well as much else stored within its carapace as it lurched and struggled, rose and fell, labored on across the quartz knives that would have flayed an unprotected flesh and blood living being, piranha-like, to the bone.

One of its six legs ended at the lowest joint; the missing

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shank had been shredded in the cold diabolical glow of an energy weapon that had also snuffed out much of the vision circuits, shattered the auditory system, sent the guidance circuits chattering and, finally, completely crisped the anti-grav flying systems.

The machine ran on insect legs with the blind obedience of a faithful robot programmed to continue functioning until the last flicker of energy drained from its cells.

Charles Christopher Hastings sat sweating in his TSC scout, half a mile above the surface of Planet Seventeen, and wondered, not without fear, if he was acting in the best traditions of his Corps or was just being a bloody idiot.

Myra, his wife, sat next to him, her sensitive fingers trying to coax a more reassuring response from the crippled Globe-Trotter below.

"Whatever it was, Charlie, it packed a punch. Oscar down there is really in trouble."

"Yeah."

"He can't lift. We'll have to go down for him—"

"I know." Hastings's voice rasped harshly. His fingers felt slick and clammy and they shook despite his knowledge that he could lift jets at any second he wished. But for how long would that be?

Myra, dark and honey-sweet and everything a man could wish for among the stars, looked curiously at this new husband of hers. His face shaded gaunt in the overhead lights. His tenseness, the tremble he could not conceal—"Charlie," she said with sudden decision, "you haven't told me all of it . . ."

"That's right—"

"Don't forget we're married now. I'm one of the Christophers, now. What's the real picture?"

"If you really—I'm sorry, Myra—of course, you're just as much a tough rollicking spacefaring explorer as I am cracked up to be—it's just that, in bed, I can't disentangle the images—but you're right, of course—"

"Well, tell me! Don't mumble!"

"We're just a two man scouter with a Globe-Trotter detailed to do a quick preliminary on Seventeen. Oscar trots

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off—and, bingo!—something shoots him up. He's built to withstand most of the lethal energy weapons we know about; but this blast shredded him. We'll be lucky if we recover intact—"

"I know. You mean whoever or whatever did this can creep up on us and shred us, too."

"Yes. I'd lift jets right now if we hadn't had that preliminary report. *Something's* going on down on the surface of Seventeen and Oscar picked it up and recorded. His transmissions to us were interrupted—you saw what came in, it's in the tank now—and now we're stuck with waiting for him."

"Can't we go down now?"

"He's covering a frozen crystalline area now, a kind of petrified forest, without cover that matters. Once he's reached the radar-shadow of the cliffs below we can drop down. I don't think we've been detected yet."

"I do keep our anti-radar gear up to scratch!"

"All right, dear. You're a most competent exec. I wish Oscar would hurry!"

"Poor thing," said the girl with the genuine affection of the working spacefarer for the machines that kept her alive in the hostility of space. "He's doing darn well with half of him shot away."

"We haven't even started considering who—or what—did it. No reply from *Crossbow*?"

"No. *That's* what I don't like, Charlie. She should have answered our signals. Maybe—"

"Yeah. Whatever's doing this could have flung a radio-blanket around the planet. And if our equipment can't penetrate it—then we're up against a very tough lot, indeed."

"Their beam that crippled poor Oscar proves that."

Hastings pulled a tissue and wiped his forehead. The tiny two-place scouter seemed to him to crush in, small and coffin-like. He longed for Commander Matlin and the scouting crew of *Crossbow* to be with him now, to take the strain along with him. But *Crossbow* was orbiting Planet Six and that was many millions of miles away. So much for the modern day panic for rush and hurry in the TSC.

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The parent base ship, TSS *Saint Vincent*, had sent off her scouts to cover the usual fifty light-year globe of space, as had been standard Terran Survey Corps procedure over the last few centuries; but now a new refinement had been added. The Scouts sent off smaller scouters to carry out quick prelims. If the planets they ran the rule over conformed roughly to what the high-and-mighty Solterranean Construction Service wanted—then the scout would move in and carry out fuller checks. Hastings regretted the bygone days when a crew dropped down onto a planetary surface ready to find, record, deduce and then make an informed assessment, not knowing what they would turn up, not knowing how their hoped-for new world would turn out.

Myra tried once more to call *Crossbow*.

The set remained obstinately blank, as though willfully obstructing them. Hastings wiped his hands and checked again on the Globe-Trotter's progress. Now the six-legged machine charged through a grove of chitinous stalked flowers that crumpled and tinkled into whirling snowflakes of diaphanous beauty.

Hastings said, "Nothing on the screens. But whatever did that to Oscar must be coming closer." He punched the necessary controls to activate the weapons system and checked with more than usual strictness the tell-tales. All lit up in correct order and color.

"I don't think even our weapons could do that to Oscar," he said.

"We could pull out, find *Crossbow*, and return . . ." Myra stopped speaking. She knew the answer to that one.

Who—or what—had done this?

The Solterranean confederation was reaching out for the galaxy. In its time it had met many aliens, fought them, made friends with them, founded fresh ties of comradeship, gone together as one homogenous whole on out to the stars.

Hastings knew very well that he had been the first man of Earth to bump into this alien encounter, and he could only hope he would act as all those many men and women of Earth who had carried mankind this far would have wanted him to act.

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"If it is another non-human contact," said Myra, glumly, "they just shot off everything at Oscar as soon as they saw him. No parley."

"That's the typical reaction of a certain type of reasoning. But from that scrap of recording, I'm positive Oscar stumbled onto something these aliens—if aliens there be—didn't want seen." He swiveled in the chair and adjusted the weapons board more comfortably. "And that's why we must stay around to pick him up."

For as far as their screens showed the planetary surface, nothing moved but the tiny gangling figure of the Globe-Trotter hurrying with five and a half hoppity steps to the frail shelter of the mountains beneath.

Gently, Hastings began to drop the scouter down, holding her in the radar shadow of the mountains, gliding down a cleft choked with emerald and topaz proliferations of splintered rock, aiming to reach ground level at the exact instant the Globe-Trotter skittered into radar-shadow. By that time, he hoped, he could have extended a radar and energy-weapon shield. Judging by what had happened to the Globe-Trotter, his shield would not be of much use.

"You realize," he said steadily to Myra, "that they could be waiting for the Oscar to be picked up?"

"I had thought of it."

"I wish I knew—" He did not finish but settled himself more firmly in his control seat, wiped his hands and face for the last time, and applied himself to the ship and her controls.

He allowed himself two pungent comments. One: "I wish these scouters were larger and fitted with a tractor beam." And, Two: "I wish these scouters had sublight drive."

That was all.

With so very many planets to find, docket and handle, the resources of even as mighty a galactic organization as the Solterranean Confederation, and all their friends, was strained to the limits; and, out here on the fringes, equipment had to be used and re-used and lovingly cared for and always, but always, there was never enough of what was needed at the right place at the right time.

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Broken shards of crystalline rock spattered outwards as the little scouter touched down, a puff of vapor wafting and dissipating in the clear crunching of quartz.

The Globe-Trotter lurched its last few trailing steps to plunge into the waiting niche in the flank of the scouter. The door clapped shut. The Globe-Trotter was home. But Charles and Myra Hastings were very far from home.

Hastings took the scouter up and away, fast and cleanly, punching out of the mountains' radar-shadow, screaming through the thin atmosphere of Planet Seventeen, high-tailing it for *Crossbow*. He had every piece of dazzle equipment operating at full power and he even resorted to physical maneuvering of the craft as she fled spacewards.

If an energy bolt penetrated his shields he knew the scouter's hull would not withstand punishment for anything longer than half a second. The TSC had not been able to fit Basker's metal regrowth techniques to the Globe-Trotter, so it was hardly likely they could even think about extending that recreation to a ship, however small.

If the scouter was badly hit there would be no way out for Charles and Myra Hastings.

"If anything happens to Myra . . ." whispered Hastings. "Oh, I'm a fool, a big stupid bloody fool!"

The scouter cut up through the tenuous atmosphere, jinking, dancing, riding her planetary drive jets like an inebriated man on stilts. Artificial gravity within the little craft gave a normal one gravity, angled downwards relative to the ship's deck, and the humans could handle their equipment in complete physical comfort. Hastings sweated some more.

They left the tropopause behind and, on a thinning keening, laned out for space.

The forward screen showed the friendly distant glitter of stars with a single larger body—Planet Twelve—glowing with soft reflected light. Against that backdrop of stars, a shape dropped from nowhere and the scouter's instruments went mad.

"There's a ship out there!" screamed Myra.

"Waiting for us . . . Where the hell did he come from?"

The scouter heeled over, veering, as Hastings cut the plan-

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etary jets and coupled in the atomics to the Turners. These little scouters boasted no automatic combat equipment, cybernetic marvels of offense and defense maneuvering, and their salvation would rest in the skill of Hastings's hands and brain. Meters recorded atomic activity, lights flashed and blinked, each broadcasting its own message. The ident machine—a tiny ersatz model—skipped through its microfilm profiles, burped, rang a puzzled gong, and started in again.

"Nothing on ident. And there won't be," snapped Myra. "That's alien."

She stared at the rear three-quarter screen, showing where the alien had begun to swing in pursuit.

The Turners were spinning now, sucking the shattered nuclear particles into their plumbing and hurling the little ship through space at ever increasing velocity. Crafty, cunning, beautifully engineered little engines, the Turners. They could, stretched to their last gasp of power, smash a ship along at point seven five of light speed. No hyperspace or jump engines, they could logically only be used for travel within the relatively narrow confines of a solar system.

"We should have a FTL drive!" snarled Hastings, throwing the little ship lurchingly around the curve of the planet beneath.

"Why haven't they shot at us yet?" asked Myra.

"Good question." Hastings's sweat had dried on him now. "They popped into our real space-time continuum from whatever pet little hyperspace they use, right on the button. They knew we were coming. And I, God help me," he finished in a hating whisper, "could only worry about a planetary problem."

"They want us alive." Myra spoke with conviction.

"Yeah, well," said Hastings.

Two pairs of eyes flicked to the bright scarlet DESTRUCT button on the control panel—and looked away.

There was always an answer.

Even the Palladians' mind recall techniques for probing information from dead brains wouldn't work after the DESTRUCT button had been pressed.

Twice, pursued and pursuer orbited the planet. Then,

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Hastings, dry-mouthed, changed course and with the Turners shaking the fabric of the scouter sent her racing for space.

On the screens the ominous shark shape following them diminished, fell back. For four brief and beautiful moments Hastings thought he had succeeded.

The fire blossomed gently along the flanks of that shark shape. Hastings tried. He slammed the scouter into a sharp evasive turn and watched the overloads burning out on the artificial gravity controls. Already the stars were appearing to change color, to redden, as his speed fouled up the Doppler effect. At this speed if the artificial gravity failed and he deviated by a hairbreadth from his course, he and Myra would be bloody film, a molecule thick, neatly painted over the inside of the hull.

He tried.

He swung the ship again and Myra, calm with the coolness of performing a prior-arranged function, fired all their weapons in one single sheet of energy.

Perhaps that puny outpouring of destruction helped them. Perhaps the alien still believed he could take them alive. Perhaps only the blind gods of chance in the galaxy threw their yellowed dice to laugh hugely as the skulls went down to the board.

The blast shredded the stern of the scouter. Air whiffed out before force shields bulkheaded across. The Turners had been crippled and the ship slowed. The artificial gravity partially failed, operating spasmodically. Metal components strong enough, plastic and fiber glass, force shields and electronic apparatus designed for tough operating pressures, all these inanimate objects came through that battering series of gravitic surges.

Homo sapiens was not physiologically designed with the same intentions.

Charles Christopher Hastings and his wife Myra had only one small grain of comfort.

They died quickly.

They did not even have the comfort of seeing the third stalking ship break from hyperspace, poise like a striking eagle

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over the alien ship, and then blot her out with one supernal discharge of energy.

In the next instant the third ship wheeled, clawed for the ecliptic, and vanished once more into her own brand of alien hyperspace.

The Terran Survey Corps scouter, empty, desolate, lifeless, carrying the crippled body of a Globe-Trotter, swung listlessly out into space, headed on a course to take her slipping between the stars, headed meaninglessly on a terminal course of no return.

IV

STRANG HAD ALWAYS hankered after the concept of rose and amber colored walls overhung with the trailing fire of vines and the splendid opulence of bougainvillea; above them, set back, but, by some professional trick of perspective sharing importance, there should rise white-columned shafts gildedly Corinthian, with pediments and architraves nobly engraved and sculpted. Here would depend luxurious rugs and scarves, enscrolled silken banners, hanging and fluttering. Flowers in profusion, too opulent to be named short of a gardening catalog, should bloom in rows and beds and trellises, in arcades and walks, and flaunt their heady perfumes and gaudy beauty from every ledge and window of the palace.

For, of course, this was a dream palace he constructed.

Below those solid, multi-faced and glowing walls, the silken water lapped tidelessly. Here should glide barges with silken sails and gilded oars, flower entwined, their prows garlanded and their sterns aflame with jewels and feathers and all the spices of the orient.

There was for Strang in this feeling of rightness about his dream not the slightest hint of Cyrenaic philosophy. His ship had been named *Archimedes*, not *Aristippus*.

All the same . . . All the same when he built this dream palace on Solishtar he faced over the taken-for-granted scientific appurtenances of modern sybaritic living with this

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glowing façade of an ancient and glorious palace from another time.

There was a rightness in that that had to do with his struggle to lift himself from the ranks of the Terran Survey Corps into the highest echelons of the organization responsible for constructing mankind's home in the galaxy. Not just anybody could join the service. Not very many gained promotion of significance. Only a handful had ever been called Caracci's Young Men.

However much Strang liked his palace on Solishtar, the single thing that pleased him most was yet a reminder of his purpose in life. Ishtar was a favored planet. Gardens, parks, rides, sheltered oceans, crags to climb, deeps to plumb, innumerable bays of white or golden or silver sand, sun-kissed, palm-shaded, the whole of Ishtar reminded any sane man of the rewards of life. But the single thing that pleased Strang most hung as the brightest jewel in the sky of Ishtar.

Visible by day when their paths so ordained, shining with a steady green friendly light at night among the myriad distant stars, the globe of another planet forever shone down in love and protection upon Ishtar. And that other world so close in space orbiting the same sun was Solterra, old Earth, the home and origin of all mankind.

Solterra and Solishtar.

So far no other Solarian planet had been brought quite so close to Earth. Even Solariadne of the House of Longhi, powerful though that house might be, stood in space at a more respectful distance than Solishtar.

Stephen Strang had concluded the business at the Zagreb Cluster for the moment and could now relax for a few days at his home. The idea of relaxing never occurred to him; wherever he was his restless brain forever schemed and plotted and the tentacles of his orders and directions circled within the orbits of his galactic responsibility.

He lay back now comfortably in his formfit surrounded by attendant robots to attune the temperature, the humidity, the noise level, the reception of any outside stimulus. He had only to flick his fingers and a drink, or a micro tape, or a seven course meal would be provided instantaneously.

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Although science had been forced to develop non-carcinogenic tobacco long ago, Strang had no cigarette, cigar or pipe circuits installed in his flick robots. He did not smoke, although he understood that there were still fools about who did so.

Above him the ceiling at this moment showed a stellar chart. The word "chart," he supposed with a lazy smile, was a misnomer. Scale had been tossed aside. All the ceiling symbolism was concerned with was the representation of the present status of the SCS. And the picture, although on the surface reassuring, warm and friendly, yet carried the chill overtones of coming disaster.

Centrally in the ceiling, positioned in a logical system and not as a result of a super-efflation of ego, the Earth's Sun anchored everything else. No one knew better than Strang that Sol was merely a small star something like thirty thousand light-years from the hub of the Milky War Galaxy; but even then—the Sun was not just any old star in the galaxy. As far as human kind went the Sun represented the best, most perfect, indeed in many instances the only sort of star around which they could orbit their planets. Within sixteen light-years of the Sun there were only two other reasonable sensible yellow G-stars like old Sol; but there were no less than thirty-four of the little red M-stars, there were seven smallish orange K-stars, a single brilliant show-off yellow-white F-star, a couple of reckless brilliant A-stars—and to make up the round fifty there were also four white dwarfs, burned out. In addition there were the dark companions; but no man wanted a black sun in his sky.

All this, and more, was shown schematically on Strang's ceiling. He lay back, sipping gently at a tall frosted glass of Vodka with a dash of Jebal juice, and considered. Jebal juice, once the Takkatians had removed the offending old-goat flavor, had proved a welcome addition to the vice-larder of Earth's drinking store.

But that ceiling, now . . .

There were only fifty planets circling Earth and still room for more.

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Strang's job in life was going out and bringing back planets for Sol. Why, even Centaurus had thirty-eight planets and even today, he'd heard, they were adjusting the complex gravitational fluxes to insert two more, like sliding fruit pips into a circle of pips around a dinner plate.

His ident plate lit up and the face of his son's personal deegee showed. Strang sighed and flicked to let the humanoid in.

The doppelganger looked so much like Simon that perhaps only a close member of the family could have said with confidence that it was merely a deegee and not Simon in the flesh.

"Where are you, Simon? Are you really busy or merely being discourteous, as usual?"

The deegee exhibited all Simon's facial characteristics. The thin cheeks and spiritual modeling of the forehead and eyes revealed clearly now a son's discomfort in the presence of a father figure grown too vast for easy living. God knew, but it was Strang's own fault; but he'd indulged Shena and the boy—and this self-willed impractical dreamer had been the result. He felt very glad, at times like this, for the warm cozy comfort of his daughters Sally and Sarah and Susan.

"I am sorry to displease you, Father—" the humanoid said in Simon's light voice.

"Don't go around being sorry all the time, Simon! You've sent your deegee so there must be a good reason. Now get on with what you have to say."

The deegee gulped. Sometimes, Strang wished that they didn't make these doppelgangers so damned faithful a copy of their master. Lots of folk dolled up their deegee, gave them a clearer skin and brighter eyes, a tougher physique; women assigned their humanoid messengers figures out of dreamland; but always the personality and character dicta rendered a faithful copy of the mold. This deegee *was* Simon in all but human flesh and blood and immediate control.

"I thought of welcoming you back home, Father."

"Thank you, Simon."

Strang hadn't thought to offer the deegee a seat; the

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things weren't human, they had no muscles and hearts to tire. He knew that Simon—wherever he was—was watching him through the eyes of his messenger. Strang essayed a smile.

"That was kind of you, Simon. Where are you?"

"I'm on Jethro."

"Oh, interesting. Nice planet—now what did you want?"

The deegee smiled Simon's small secret smile, the smile that had years ago been able to infuriate his father.

"I see you don't remember Jethro, Father."

"Not off hand, Simon. I've just spaced in from the Zagreb Cluster. There is a lot doing there—many worlds—well, we both know your reactions to that."

"Yes. Shall I remind you about Jethro?"

"If you must, Simon. But please be brief."

"I could," the doppelganger said tartly, "have spoken to you on the telephone."

"I know, I know, Simon. I suppose I should be thankful that you deigned to send your deegee." He could not resist adding with dark sarcasm: "As it is one of the highest compliments one man can pay another to come visit him in person, I suppose I could not expect that from my own son."

The door set in the opposite wall opened and Shena Strang walked through physically. She had not used the teleport and she was there in exquisite person; this vibrant being was no doppelganger. The very first time Strang had seen Shena, he had said, quite consciously, to himself: "That is the girl I want for my wife. I want no other. If I cannot have her—then I have no other."

He had always considered her reciprocal affection the major mystery and wonder of the galaxy.

Now she said in a quick gush of joy: "Simon!",

She moved forward, then stopped, her outstretched arms falling to her sides. "Oh." Then: "Simon. Why don't you come home? Sending a deegee to see your father and mother is hardly—well—is it?"

The expression on the deegee's face changed as Shena

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walked flowingly towards a formfit. Simon never looked like that for his father.

"Mother—I do not want to hurt you—but there is work for me to do—here on Jethro."

Shena looked her surprise, arching an eyebrow at Strang.

"I had no idea you'd reverted to the outdoor life, Simon, dear. Whatever is there for you on a frontier planet?"

Sudden amusement hit Strang. "Now what, my darling Shena, happens to make you know a planet called Jethro? I haven't heard of it."

"But you have, darling! You know—you told me the story as soon as you got back from Zagreb."

"I did?"

"You've let slip the planet's name, that is all. You remember. You went there to tell that crawling little Gerban Arnouf that you'd pipped him into Chief's rank."

"Oh! Of course! He had some foul up there and I had to stop him shifting planet. I enjoyed doing that."

Simon's deegee fairly snarled at Strang.

"You went there and you stopped them moving planet!" Strang hitched back in surprise, the formfit moving to adjust beneath him. "Why do you think I am on Jethro now? Just *where* do you think Jethro is right now?"

Tartly, Strang said, "Circling the sun Jezreel."

"Oh, no, Father. Oh, no. Gerban Arnouf pulled a few strings. He saw Caracci. Yes, Father, Caracci! Jethro has been moved! It is being orbited around Centaurus right now."

V

SITTING AT HIS controls on Jethro with the precise manipulation of his messenger beneath his fingers and brain, Simon Strang must have flinched back automatically from the look he saw in his father's eyes, the bleak hating expression that for a moment transformed Strang's face into a devil mask, for the doppelganger flinched back, too, one hand reflexively going up as though to shield its face.

"Gerban Arnouf dared to do this!"

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"I don't know, Father," said Simon's deegee with Simon's light familiar voice: "I don't know who did it. All I know is it is done. Far Centaurus is taking in two more worlds today—you would know all about that of course—to make them up to forty. One of those planets is a world you gave your solemn pledge would not be torn from its parent sun and dragged across space—"

Strang had himself in control again.

"I do not need the flowery rhetoric, Simon. I believe what you say because, heaven forgive me, you are my son and I don't believe you learned to lie either from your mother or me."

"Thank you." A deegee could catch just that solemnly gleeful note of mockery Simon could bedevil his father with. Damned things. Strang had a cupboard full of the things upstairs somewhere and, when he was forced to sit before the controls and send off his deegee to some errand or other, he always felt as though part of himself had been truncated. There was no glee in seeing through the eyes of a deegee as there was in exploring with a Globe-Trotter, or any other of the complex and fantastically expensive long-range semi-robots employed by terrans. This replica of Simon now; Strang knew that when Simon had finished talking to him he would extricate himself from the controls and program the deegee to do whatever it was Simon wished next. If the thing was programmed to go back to Jethro, it would act with its own robotic life, in full control, going back faithfully performing the last commands Simon had set up.

There was no dividend in sending a messenger by remote control if you had to stay with it, guiding it for twenty-four hours a terran day.

Twenty-four hours a day—for most Solarian planets in the golden orbits. When you inserted your own planet into a solar system you'd set the daily rotation period to conform comfortably with what you desired.

"Gerban Arnouf," Strang said at last. But this time the words breathed out slowly and with a menace Strang was wholly unconscious he could create. Shena glanced across, drew down the corners of her lips, and flicked for tea.

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"It's not your fault, Stephen, dear, if that horrible little man goes behind your back."

Strang, of course, had thought forward far beyond that point.

"What are you going to do about it, Father?" Simon maintained his insistency in face of his father's brooding down-drawn brows.

"Thank you for telling me, Simon. Call this damned half-robot off now and skedaddle, will you? I've a lot to do."

As an ego-deflater of his son, Strang had always been able and, with a sado-masochism repugnant to him, willing. Simon's indignation wilted. As always.

"You're nothing but a grave-robber—" he began weakly.

"Not now, Simon, please!" Strang accepted the tea his wife flicked the robots to serve him. He sipped delicately, quite able to relish the beverage and concentrate on his next moves together. Tea was far better than Vodka and Jebal Juice; far better than any other drink. Tea represented a high peak of culture of which Earth could be proud in the galaxy.

"You're sure you're orbiting Centaurus, Simon?"

Simon's answer would have brought him a stiff paddling fifty years ago.

"I accept that, then. I won't insult your intelligence by asking you if you're sure you're on Jethro. D'you happen to know Shanstar?"

"Yes. Canalape Brown did some marvelous landscapes on—let me see—the fifth planet under Shanstar. Remarkable the way he balanced his monochromes against the lividness of—"

"Spare me your infernal quasi-artistic mumbo-jumbo, Simon. You're absolutely sure Jethro is not being slipped into orbit around Shanstar?"

"Quite, quite sure."

"Thank you, Simon. Now get this heap of machinery out of here before I blow its fuse."

With a strange loping dignity in a faithful reproduction of Simon's jerky abstracted walk, the deegee left.

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Shena sighed. "If only Simon would come home like a good boy."

"He's sixty years old, isn't he, Shena? Well, he's just about grown up. Time he was married with grandchildren I could make something of."

"He will, dear. And I expect you will—try."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Then Strang saw Shena was smiling with loving mockery and he thought about it right then and there . . . but there was this damned Jethro business . . . Arnouf! He'd have to fix that man's wagon yet.

"Jethro was scheduled to orbit Shanstar until I stepped in," he said musingly. "Now it's gone to Centaurus. If they were going to change, Caracci could have done worse than assign Jethro to Sol. A fine planet. Just like home."

"You know Susan is becoming all tightened up over her marriage. I'm glad you're home, Steve—she'll welcome you with rather more affection than usual this time."

"What's that? Susan—oh—of course . . . her wedding. Well, it's not yet, is it?"

"I had tentatively decided it for the next time you were home."

"What does Bruce say? Have you broached it to him yet?"

Shena knew her husband wasn't asking about the date of the marriage of his eldest daughter. The other matter had naturally jumped into prominence in the conversation. House affiliations and allegiances had that habit. She knew only too well the figure her majestic husband cut in the galaxy, the big tough domineering Chief-Commissioner with a heart of solid gold; she had to cut him down to size sometimes, remind him who was boss around their palace and then let him imagine he was bullying her to reassert his childish male dominance.

Carefully, she said, "Bruce has been under heavy pressure from his parents." She tucked her feet up in the form-fit and the couch moved gently to accommodate her in a familiar pattern of reactions. "They calculate that having a Christopher girl in the family will boost their standing."

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"Well, of course. But I don't really want my girl going to some potty little planet around Shurilala. The House of Kassim. Who the hell's ever heard of them?"

"Susan has."

"A debating point, darling Shena, and one beneath my notice. Either Bruce joins the House of Christopher or he doesn't marry Susan."

Shena sighed again. Simon had been a terrible disappointment to Steve. But Simon had his own values and his own tough ideas of honor and what things were important. She tended to doubt that Stephen Strang would ever find a psuedo son, and certainly not by brow-beating young Bruce Kassim Oquendo, who was a nice boy but too easily swayed by his parents. You had to stand up to Steve, if you wanted him to notice you.

She knew enough now, however, to leave that subject until she had further facts to report back. She had often smiled ruefully at the way her Steve tried to run his family as he ran his department in the SCS; but that was her Steve. She had never regretted marrying him. Now some of those hussies in the House of Wayland . . .

Stephen Strang lay slumped in his formfit wrestling with the alternatives open to him.

He could forget the whole affair, assuming it to be beneath his notice and go on about his affairs. That way, he knew only too well, lay traps and pitfalls for the future.

He could find out everything there was to find out about the alteration in his orders and then challenge Arnouf. That way, too, there lay danger for the unwary.

He would have, he surmised sourly, to go see Caracci himself.

He did not relish the idea of going cap in hand after Gerban Arnouf.

One of his communications robots buzzed discreetly and said, "Charles Christopher Hastings is calling, sir, from his palace on planet; however, his communications robot says he knows of your dislike of deegee conversations and the matter is urgent and he cannot reach here in person in time and he therefore asks if—"

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"Sure, sure," said Strang abruptly. "Cut the cackle. Charlie and I know each other by now. Put him on."

The communications robot lit the screen and brought it wheeling across to stand comfortably before Strang. Shena didn't bother to flick for her own communications robot to set up a slave monitor but stood up and walked across to her husband. Comfortably, she sat on the arm of his formfit which grew a second arm and back to support her—but not before Strang's own arm had gone around her waist.

The screen showed the white-haired, drawn and distraught face of Charles Hastings. The pouches under his eyes and the lines on his face showed his age—he must be nearly three hundred and eighty—quite old—but Strang had never seen him quite so upset before.

"Thank you, Stephen, for accepting my call. It's young Charlie—"

"Your great-grandson—he's out with the TSC, isn't he, right now?"

A nod.

Hastings swallowed with difficulty.

"He's been reported missing. No hope, I'm afraid."

"Oh—poor Alice!" said Shena on an indrawn breath.

"I am very sorry to hear that, Charlie. Very sorry."

"He had just been married to a charming gal—Myra—wonderful match. And now he's gone. I don't quite—"

Strang, as gently as he could, under the pressures of this Jethro business building in him, said, "Just—uh—what can I do, Charlie?"

"Why, I don't know—that is—I thought—"

Shena, he felt sure, knew what Charlie Hastings wanted. Why she should always be able to unravel the secrets these weak characters hugged to their bosoms puzzled and sometimes exasperated him. But Hastings was a friend, even if he was on his last legs.

"I'll try to attend the memorial service, Charlie," he said heavily. "But business just lately—well, it's being a bind, I don't mind telling you. I may not be able to make it."

"I'll come and see you right now, Charlie," said Shena firmly, moving enough to dislodge the formfit's extra arm

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and to dislodge Strang's loving grasp. "Alice must be—oh, it's a shame, all these fine young people being sacrificed in the depths of space!"

"Thank you, Shena, my dear. Alice will—"

Shena walked toward the door. "I shan't be long, Charlie."

"Thank you, again," said Charles Hastings and his communications robot killed the screen.

"So that's what old Charlie wanted!" Strang grumbled to himself. "Well, why the blue blazes couldn't he come right out and say so?"

Strang's personal radio buzzed gently behind his ear and Shena's voice said, "I think I'll take Sally. She's been so irritable and restless since Sarah went off to the Survey Corps." A little choked gasp. "Suppose we heard that Sarah—oh, no, Steve! That couldn't be, could it?"

"It's hardly likely, my dear. Sarah is working aboard a base ship, TSS *Collingwood*. They're bigger than some planets I know. She's as safe as you or I."

"Well—you know all about that . . ."

"I do."

"All the same, Sally needs a change."

"D'you think taking her to a houseful of mourning women is the best change?"

"I know what you mean. But I'll see she gets out. She's our youngest daughter. She's bound to feel constrained."

Strang laughed—or almost laughed in the mood he was in.

"I hardly imagine Sally as constrained by anything."

"Oh, you! You've turned her into the tomboy of the family." Then Shena cut transmission and Strang could easily understand why. He supposed he had sublimated his desire for a son onto Sally—she'd come along when it was clearly evident that Simon was no spacefaring hero-type.

A few moments later Shena came fussily back unnecessarily superintending her personal robots with their baggage compartments.

"Which flier do you want me to take, Steve?"

"Any one you like. Oh—leave me the RR *Golden Ghost*. I'll have to hop across to Earth."

Shena and her train of robots swept out. Strang heard

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her talking to herself as she went, pulling on a pair of synthisilk gloves, "I hope I've packed everything that Sally will need. She's such a funny girl . . . Can't think who she takes after . . ."

Sally was out at the sportsdrome and Strang, not without an evil little chuckle, wondered what her current beau would say when his prize girlfriend was abruptly swept off by a regal mother.

Then he set about his own affairs before going out to the *Golden Ghost* and setting course for Earth.

VI

HIS WHOLE FUTURE stood at risk. No one knew that better than he did himself.

When he returned from his visit to Caracci he returned to an empty palace. In his present frame of mind that suited him admirably.

First: he flicked for a whisky. Second: he flicked for a large china pot. This he lifted high above his head with both hands, the muscles straining down his back. Then he hurled it full force against a marble wall and shouted, high and vehemently: "Let it smash!" The retrieval robots whipped their tentacles that would have prevented the smash back into their coils. The pot shattered hard and splinteringly and with the utmost satisfaction. Third: he went down to his firing range, picked out his old Carpenter and spent two hours smashing every conceivable target his robots presented to him.

Fourth: he took no pills but went to bed and slept for eight hours of dreamless quietude.

When he awoke he stretched languorously, completed his toilet, flicked for breakfast and, over terran bacon and eggs and tea, saw what he would have to do. He was a changed man. He could not quite grasp that fact fully, as yet; but he felt different. A core of white-hot steel had entered his indifference, and his attitude to life had subtly altered.

He felt a stab of annoyance when one of Shena's deegees

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walked gravely into his bedroom and smiled at him. The thing wore one of Shena's housecoats and for the minutest stab of time desire tugged at Strang. Then, he said gruffly, "Good morning, my dear. Everything all right?"

Shena's voice issued from the deegee. "Good morning, darling. You look as though you've slept well. No blondes?"

Normally, Strang would have said: "Hah!" and invented a complex bit of lustful love-life for her delighted consumption.

Now, he said, "I'm going to be busy today, Shena. I suppose everything is all right your end?"

"Why, yes." The deegee mirrored Shena's perplexity. "Alice is feeling a little better now. Sally's been packed off with a couple of the family. I'm coping."

"That's good. I'm spacing out today. If you want me, you can contact me through the office."

The deegee looked hurt. "Oh, Steve! Must you? So soon . . . And what about the memorial service? The Hastings expect—well, they are among our oldest friends. . . ."

"Send my apologies. With a wreath. But the galaxy doesn't wait for us to cry over our dead."

"No, I suppose not. But it seems so—heartless—somehow."

"The galaxy doesn't have a heart."

"I don't know, Steve . . . Very well, dear. I'll call you. Love."

The deegee turned as Shena would have turned and walked smoothly out of his bedroom. The trouble with his wife was she was too darn sexy for a staid Chief-Commissioner in the SCS.

At once his thoughts channeled. Chief. Well—he was lucky to be that still. Gerban Arnouf had really put the boot in. Anger choked Strang for a moment; then he willed it out of existence. Arnouf he would deal with later, in his own sweet time.

On a mere technicality—and a false and rotten one at that. . . .

Arnouf had won easily. He had made Strang look a fool—an inefficient clown, an unprofessional clod, a man willing to allow a little patronizing sympathy for a bunch of sham

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pagan perfects to overrule the guiding precepts of his life. Oh, those poor people on Jethrol! So sad, taking their planet away from them like that! He writhed as he recalled Caracci's rustling voice summing up the pros and cons. The final decision had turned on the length of time the Jethroans had been on their planet.

Nineteen years.

Well, that seemed clear enough, Caracci had ruled. They've not yet come of age. They haven't established full rights to the planet. Twenty-one full terran years of residence in the bag and then, and only then, could they plead immunity through tenure.

Strang felt the blood thumping in his temples, a pagan temple-beat of consuming hatred, a hatred consuming for what end? Against whom? Caracci? Certainly not. Arnouf? Certainly yes—but more; much more than hatred for a single man flowed from Strang as he marched briskly through to the landing platforms. Weather had scheduled a fine day and he blinked as he came out into the sunlight. He liked the feel of Solarian sunlight. Spectroscopic analysis could prove the old original sun to have her own original sunlight; but a man from Earth could tell that without complicated apparatus; it had been bred in the pores of his skin, the muscles around his eyes, the whole feel and sweat and human body of a man.

Old Sol. There weren't too many like her. That was why men had to look carefully at the antecedents of all the stars they surveyed—you found no spaceman talking about discovering a star; after all, they were plain enough to see shining away there in space—why, men had to evaluate the values of all the G-type stars they could lay their hands on. He stamped across to the RR *Golden Ghost* and then paused, one foot on the airlock threshold, to stare upon his palace.

He'd begun this walk to his flier thinking of Arnouf and hating the man and writhing under the rebuke he had suffered. He'd ended it preoccupied with his life's preoccupation—thinking of stars and their planets.

The lesson was not lost on him.

Going through to the little control cockpit, he shut the

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airlock doors, lifted the *Golden Ghost* on her stilts, activated the Turners and then punched in the course for SCS *Archimedes*.

Heading out past the orbit of Solmars, he looked for a long time in the rear view-screens. The sun dented space with her brilliance. Around her stretched the dancing ring of her brood, fifty planets in the golden orbits, bathed in friendly sunlight, lapped in security, circling in the paths where water could be true to itself.

He was not a sighing man. But the sight filled him with an indefinable ache, a yearning for something he did not yet know existed, and this feeling he experienced as much on an incoming journey as on an outgoing.

It was supremely right that mankind should have brought fifty planets to circle with Earth around the sun.

That was sensible logical planning.

Before Stephen C. Strang was finished there would be a hundred—two hundred—as many as he could squeeze in without disrupting planetary surfaces by clashing gravitic fields. There were floods, sheets, cataracts of light and energy pouring out from the sun in every direction. How stupid, therefore, to permit just one planet to bathe in that life-giving energy! How silly.

Fill the sky with planets!

Make of the Solar System the finest home a man could find in all his wanderings in the galaxy.

That—that was work a man understood.

When *Archimedes* swam up from space before him, from where she had hung re-provisioning in the docking areas around Mars, another thought struck him in contradistinction: if populating the solar system was work a man understood, then *Archimedes* had hitherto represented work he had signally failed to comprehend.

Before this last trip home, he had often commented acidly on the warlike exterior of his ship, the gun turrets, the screens, the torpedo launchers, the destruct-emitters and, with particular and acid contempt, on the scarlet DESTRICT button quadruply-sealed at the captain's console. Fripperies, he had called them. Basic conceits. He had

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thought: *Why in the name of a blue-tailed baboon should I have to ride in a spaceship cluttered with warlike stores and labeled a cruiser when I need a scientific and research ship dedicated to my work?* Often he'd chaffed Morley Landsdowne on his captain's quiet methodical routine, his quasi-naval organization, his concentration to regulations of all the clashing demands of his ship.

Now—after being trodden into the muck by Gerban Arnouf—Strang found a new and horrifying satisfaction in these warlike preparations. Out of the question for him to think or dream of engaging in a ship-to-ship duel among the stars with Arnouf's *Anaximenes*. That way lay only paranoic madness. Oh, no—he just felt a warmth of satisfaction at sight of the rows of gunports, the destruct-emitters, the covered apertures for torpedoes, all the feral power of his ship waiting for him to take control.

Never before had he trodden his ship's decks with so much sensuous satisfaction.

As usual he was met by a mass of accumulated detail administration work, mostly decisions referred to him by his secretarial bureau robots who had been programmed to handle any query up to planetary level. With a paper of query headings in one hand, he walked through to his private apartments aboard, briskly cutting his way through problem after decision after problem, stripping away the fat and cohering the right answers for his secretariat to assemble and execute.

Right answers?

Up to now, up to this unsettling Jethro experience, he had never had cause to doubt his administrative capabilities.

Morley Landsdowne greeted him with a smile. "Ship is all yours, sir."

"Thank you, Captain."

That had the formalities over with.

Normally, now, Strang would say something like: "All satisfactory, Morl? No snags?" And Landsdowne would reply: "Everything sewn up space-tight, Steve. We're all raring to go."

Not this time. Not now.

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Strang nodded and went on with his tireless stream of orders and decisions. He wanted routine out of the way fast. He noticed Landsdowne's puzzled expression—a hurt expression—and pushed on, still deciding the fate of planets as he went.

Landsdowne said, "An item of news you won't like hearing, Steve. . . . Do you want it now—or when you get it?"

"What is it, Morl? You can see I'm busy."

Landsdowne's puzzled smile froze, like gelatine setting over a mold.

"Service bulletin promulgating orders came in. Gerban Arnouf made Chief Commissioner."

That had power to halt Strang.

He stopped speaking to the secretarial robots. His hand clenched up on the paper of abstracted headings until he had sense and will power to force the constricting fingers open. He made a curious little gesture with his head, a kind of dabbing duck. He ground a smile out of stiffening features.

"That's interesting, Morl. Thank you for telling me."

"Thought I'd be the scapegoat. No sense in letting you see it in the bulletin. . . . Well, you know."

He did know.

One part of his mind wanted to say, *"Thanks, Morl, for telling me. Thanks for forcing me to face up to it in company, where I had to keep face, instead of alone from the bulletin—when I might have reacted in any one of a dozen tomfool ways."*

And the part of his mind that grew every day more dominant made him say, "I won't forget your concern, Morl. Gerban Arnouf was, after all, one of Caracci's Young Men. Like me, he deserved the promotion."

What did Caracci have to say to cover this situation?

Morley Landsdowne nodded with that painted smile still foolishly attached to his grim face and found an excuse to vanish about the affairs of his ship.

So he'd hurt Morley's feelings. Well, so he had. His own feelings had been more than hurt by Caracci.

And Morley Christopher Landsdowne was getting to know

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too much about Chief Commissioner Strang; there had to be a line of demarcation between chief and operative otherwise discipline in the galaxy would break down. Going into his apartments, Strang made a promise to handle Landsdowne with more aloof formality in future.

The decision to attend to the outstanding affairs in the Zagreb Cluster was easy to arrive at; the patience actually to oversee the preliminary and final functions and remain in the Cluster on the spot, became arduous and increasingly difficult day by day. He felt constricted. He wanted to be up and about not only the galaxy's business, or that portion of the galaxy for which he was responsible, but his own more pressing problems.

The Zagreb Cluster had been a feather in his cap. He had reported in his good fortune matter-of-factly; now, as he went about reaping that reward he tended to trumpet his achievements abroad. He wanted the Solarian worlds to know just how good he was at his job. More—he wanted them to know just how good he was as a human being.

From his command post aboard his ship, Strang could oversee the work with direct control of half a hundred stars. The Cluster, with a carefully counted two hundred fifty stars of varying values, lay lumped together in space in an envelope of something like forty light-years diameter, flat and squashed in volume, afloat like an island of light in a sea of gloom. Around the Cluster, space had been swept clear by one of those mysterious sweeping arms of dust that scored their way through the galaxy, leaving behind them ashes, emptiness and the great dark.

As human kind worked a painstaking way out into the galaxy and ferreted about in the spiral arm that had borne the Sun, the frontiers of the explored expanded with the frightening speed of a blown-up balloon. Inevitably there were lacunae. Arnouf had been working on Jethro at a mere one-hundred-ninety light-years from Solterra. Tung Chi Leslie had begun working the Vermilion Cluster something like two hundred and seventy light-years out. The Vermilion Cluster had been a great moment for Tung; but boasting only one hundred and seventy or so stars, it had been e-

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clipped by Strang's own Zagreb Cluster—and that lay a clear three-hundred-sixty light-years out. The three men were working at the ends of long spokes that extended out from Solterra into the galaxy, and the spokes diverged sharply. Much space separated him from Arnouf now—and that was good.

Of course, the men and women of the Terran Survey Corps considered these distances from home as being mere childish steps into the unknown. They worked in the vast deeps. God knew where Sarah aboard TSS *Collingwood* was now. A thousand light-years out? A thousand parsecs, even? Truly, the men of Earth—and their once-alien neighbors—aspired to a high destiny.

Strang had often considered that word, "destiny." Man's manifold destiny among the stars. He believed in that. He believed that to be what mankind was all about. He had rejected the religion of sex preached by many people. He had reached an understanding with his conscience over his own personal religion; now he could devote all his energies to fulfilling what he devoutly believed to be the reason mankind had stood up from the mudflats of Earth and gazed at the stars.

Simon did not share his views. Simon, too, had rejected the shallow sexual allure so prevalent, and he had even been able to share some of his father's beliefs in God and the symbols of godhead; but Simon believed in many fundamental principles that irritated, bored and bewildered Strang. Simon hewed his own path.

Strang had been working hard in the Zagreb Cluster for some terran fortnight or so, when one of his scouts reported back on Star grid ten coordinates seventy-twenty-one.

He put a finger on the star on the chart on one wall of his office and said to his communications robot, "Shoot all the information you have through to my secretariate. I'll let you have a decision within an hour."

The scout's voice, perfectly reproduced from his ship some thirty light-years off, said, "Tape feeding in now, sir."

As he might have guessed, the trouble lay with the Utuk-

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ki. Strang had had dealings with this alien race before, although he had not been old enough to take part in the brief war that had flared up. He had always been glad of that. Alien cultures were for study, for friendship, for learning all that a man could; hardly for fighting.

Now he felt quite prepared to take a tough line.

His secretarial bureau arbitrarily assigned the name Parvati, the next name in their coding list, to the planet. Named for Parvati, daughter of the Himalaya—the personification of the power of Sakti of Silva—the name meant only a tag label now, an old terrestrial name given to a new and virgin planet to be brought under the sway of that bright eye that burst forth from Siva's forehead.

Parvati, the scout reported in, had been settled by a roving colonist ship of Utukki.

Strang called Landsdowne and curtly ordered him to take his ship across to Parvati.

Unless he handled this affair well it could prove ugly. He had no need to be reminded of the legal position. Hadn't that been pointed out to him with humiliating force over the question of Jethro?

Archimedes flashed briefly into the terrestrial brand of hyperspace, her engine room crew cutting in standard drive power from her banks of McIvors so that they flung her slickly across that gap of thirty light-years in appreciable minutes less than eight terran hours.

The sun was a foppish show-off yellow-white F-star, diameter—one-million-one-hundred-fifty-thousand miles; its surface temperature—six-thousand-five-hundred degrees centigrade. Bigger and hotter than Sol, it could, nevertheless, support life on planets positioned at the optimum distances from its blazing heart.

On one of those planets a colonist ship from Utukki had started up an Utukki frontier world. Down on terran-named Parvati existed an irritating stumbling block to the acquisition of a new planet, and Stephen Strang felt no compunction over the course of action he might have to initiate to remove the obstruction.

The scouter clipped back onto her base ship as *Archimedes*

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coasted the last few million miles on her planetary drive and Strang spoke face-to-face with the scout over a communications channel. His broad good-humored face with the crinkle-lines around the eyes, telling of a man who habitually lived outdoors, stiffened in formal anxiety at speaking to a Chief Commissioner in person.

"Scout Hemmingway, sir."

"How far along are they—I don't mean the statistics in your report, I mean from your subjective appraisal."

"Well, sir—they've reverted to their treetop beehives, quite a sizable area of forestry has been taken over. They're established on a largish island—the size of Galloway on Ishtar, sir. So far, they've not extended. They seemed happy and contented—although, being Utukki that's a difficult one to decide."

"I know."

"They regard Parvati as their world, sir."

"Well, they will have to be shown their mistake."

When Strang had finished with Scout Hemmingway, dismissing him with no word of praise, Morley Landsdowne walked in. Strang stood up and began pacing the floor. Landsdowne looked unhappy.

"All the ships are in position, Steve. I called in echelon eleven as well. If we're going to—if we are—then we'll need to make it quick and clean. No fumbles."

"Cauterization."

Landsdowne swallowed. "Quite."

"When I was very tiny—couldn't have been more than five or six, I heard about the Utukku. The war was on then. Hatred for these spindly tree-living aliens was dinned into us—"

"But the war's been over a long time. We're working with them now. Oh, I know they're not fully integrated with us like the Shurilala and the Takkatians and the Palladians and all the others. But that sort of complete merging of races and cultures takes time. Even the Sha-Ngoy aren't quite fully integrated members of the Solarian Confederation—call it what you will. And we licked them what, a thousand years ago?"

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"You forget, Morley. Out in space you never know when you are at war. The Utukku were thrashed by us; but they gave us a mauling in the process." Strang gestured irritably. "Anyway, all that doesn't matter. I want the planet they're on and I'm going to have it. There's another planet or two around this sun, isn't there?"

"Of course. There's a Mars-sized planet within the golden orbits—"

"Well, then . . ."

"I'm not sure how their trees will thrive there. . . ."

Strang stopped pacing and sat before a communications panel, where at his fingertips lay the controls for a whole bureau of secretarial robot channels. "I don't give a damn for their trees. Parvati has a gravity of one point one of Terra's—and that is good! We'll start the borer at once. You'd better warn Colonel Jelal to begin rounding up the Utukku. We don't want any of them left when Parvati is moved."

"I'm a little concerned about the suitability of the smaller-sized world. We can provide a breatheable atmosphere, of course, but—"

"But nothing, Morley! Get those damn aliens off my planet and let's get it shifted!"

When Morley Landsdowne had gone, Strang began working with his secretariat. The knowledge that he was now doing just what Gerban Arnouf had done left him cold. He catalogued the scout's information and chuckled with a sudden delighted surprise as one fact jumped out of the mass of accumulated data.

Twenty-one years, Caracci had said. The Utukku had been on Parvati for twenty-two years, terran. That had worried him a little, had been a hazy spot of indefiniteness in his plans. But now the answer lay clearly before him. Let Arnouf try to swing another boot and this time Strang had an answer.

He'd cripple the little crawler.

Reports flowed in: Borer started. Attack on camp. Attack repulsed. No casualties. The report on Utukku casualties somehow failed to be integrated into the records; Strang

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let it lie for a time, and then, as though absently, wiped it from the tapes.

Down there on Parvati, men were driving their borer down into the crust of the planet, down and down, penetrating with wholly human determination down to the very center. That would take six to eight months terran. Strang did not intend to hang about that long; he was here solely to supervise the peaceful removal of the Utukku.

And they would go peacefully, he determined, if he had to fight them all the way.

Colonel Jelal with his strange ideas of personal chivalry inherited from a long line of Arab-Takkat ancestors reported in personally to Strang. In Strang's apartment—furnished with personal possessions he liked to carry about with him in space, and reminders of Shena, his children, his days in the TSC, the past victories with the SCS, and those private memories with which a man garlands his habitation strong and enhancing around him—Colonel Jelal bulked like a temporarily caged tiger.

He thought of Captain Nogu, working back on Jethro for Gerban Arnouf, and he remembered his reactions to that man of iron; previously he would have reacted in the same withdrawn, uncomfortably unsettled way to Jelal. But not this time. Not now.

Not after Arnouf had pushed his face into the muck.

He saw a kinship now in the repellent professional killer. He saw a man who could be useful to him in ways denied more normal men. So he smiled and gestured to a formfit and flicked for drinks.

Colonel Jelal sat and smiled back—saying, "Jebal Juice and Vodka, sir! My Takkatian ancestors be praised. It's difficult to find the stuff in the fleet."

"You must take a half dozen magnums—if the champagne people will pardon the use of the word—back with you, Colonel. It is my pleasure." Strang lifted his glass. "I appreciate your coming to see me. What happened?"

Jelal swallowed half his drink then let the rest wait.

"Nothing that regulations couldn't handle, sir. But in view of your explicit orders, I felt it obligatory to inform you

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fully in person. The Utukku—a most insanitary lot—were up in their confounded woven balls of treehouses, throwing down domestic refuse on our heads.”

“They didn’t use weapons?”

“Had more sense. I’d warned ’em. We cut through the trees with a flamer. They came down in grand style. Then a gang of Utukku got clever and came at us with those blasted spitball poisonous gadgets. They used to fill their ships with the filth when we boarded, back in the war.” Jelal’s hawk-face ridged as he remembered. “Hasn’t been a decent war since the Utukku.”

“I had no idea you were that old—that you’d ever served in the war, Colonel.”

Jelal downed the rest of his drink.

“Promotion doesn’t come quickly to the army, sir, until the civvies need us. Then they’ll give us gold braid and medals to choke us—providing we do the fighting for them.”

Strang decided not to contradict. A hundred years to make colonel! That must draw a man’s patience out fine.

“But you didn’t hurt the Utukku?”

“Officially, sir, or off the record?”

“Off the record. I have everything switched off.” He gestured. “The tapes monitoring the affair have been wiped.”

“Well, then, sir, you know they did attack us with real weapons in the end. We just had to let them have it.”

“Yes. I understand.” Something kicked in Strang. For one horrified instant he saw what the soldier meant by saying: *“Well, we just had to let them have it.”* Ordinary, mundane, common words. Not even purple slang. But they meant a wailing woman clawing at what was left of her husband, a child asking for a father who had been scattered to the four winds. Then Strang shut the lid down on his mind and sealed it over with the hatred he now so assiduously cultivated.

“Most regrettable, Colonel. But you had your duty to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Strang stood up and the gallant colonel rose too. He looked about for a table to put the empty glass on; Strang

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smiled and flicked and the robot took the glass out of Jelal's fingers.

"This has been—ah—pleasant, Colonel. I repeat I appreciate your discretion and your zeal in reporting to me directly. I needn't have scrubbed the monitor tapes after all. We found Parvati a virgin planet and moved it as such."

"If you say so, sir."

"But I do, my dear Colonel, I do. Jelal? You have mentioned your Takkatian blood; but—?"

Colonel Jelal stood to attention. There was nothing incongruous in this; he shared the edgy, sharp, ferocious blood of Takkat and when allied with the smoother sharpness of the Terran Arab the result had been a superb fighting man; he stood to attention, then, from pride.

"I am Colonel Alah-ed-din Ryohzh Jordan Jelal, of the House of Jordan, of Solormazd and of Takkatyazatas."

Strang nodded and smiled. He had been expecting something of the sort; a small and insignificant House puffing itself up in nomenclature for what it lacked in stature.

"I shall remember, Colonel. You have served me well. Maybe you will not have to wait so long for your brigade."

Speaking with a rough stilted politeness, Jelal ushered himself out. The man was clearly not used to gracious living. He hadn't even much idea of what to do with an empty glass!

Then, remembering, Strang said to a secrobot, "Send half a dozen bottles of Jebal Juice to Colonel Jelal. Usual compliments."

He stood up and stretched. In a few months time they'd be through to the core of Parvati. Then the engineers could put in the Lansen generators and the planet could begin the haul back to the solar system. That is, if Caracci decided that Sol should have it. Strang chuckled now with more well-being than for some time past. He went along to his gym, let his robots strip him off and then lay in an anti-grav bath while they toned up his skin and muscles. When he felt glowing with health once more, he went back to his apartments. Jelal had settled the damned Utukku on

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that other planet that had been made habitable. Let them stew there. He'd done a good job.

The feel of the smooth green uniform material in his hands made him think of all the times he'd donned the green. He'd always thought before selflessly of the service or the corps. Now, perhaps, was time to think of Stephen Christopher Strang.

Throughout the Zagreb Cluster, the men from Solterra were at work. Every planet that could be called a "second Earth" was needed. Within the parameters of size and gravity, dictated by an unequivocal Earth equals One, the planets were selected. It mattered nothing what their surfaces might be like—molten, frozen, liquid or desert. Once within that magical lambent circle of life around old Sol, they would soon be terraformed into planets a man could live on and be proud to own as home.

When Caracci's personal assistant called in, Strang relished his malicious amusement at finding once again a new and unfamiliar female voice and face on the screen. (Caracci said: "Pick your subordinates with the care you choose a wife and you will fail. Moral: Pick your subordinates with the care you would choose the arbiters of your professional life.")

The malicious amusement in Strang, of course, came from Caracci's own continual shifting of human female assistants. Caracci couldn't stand women—but the government did not look kindly on even the head of independent departments employing valuable manpower in womenpower jobs.

The communications robot brought the screen across.

The girl said, "Caracci wishes me to extend his congratulations, Chief Commissioner, on the results coming from the Zagreb Cluster. Here on Earth we're all very pleased."

"Thank you." Strang waited.

"Parvati," the girl said. Demurely, she in turn waited.

Strang looked at her. He looked at her as a man looks at a woman and not as a businessman looks at an assistant.

Nice. Very nice. Astonishingly young, too. She couldn't be above forty. Her figure fitted firm and obtrusively into a sheath laminated from silver and gold; her cosmetic robots

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must have been programmed with consummate artistry. They had decided on the naive look. She looked like a virgin on a pagan altar—and she made every man subconsciously wish to rush in and strike the curved knife from the palsied hand of the wicked priest. Oh, yes, a very sweet piece of sex.

Strang put her back into family focus.

"Parvati? Oh, yes. Fully up to schedule—you know that from my reports."

"Utukku?"

Strang thought with icy savagery: *"I'll find the informer if I have to thumbscrew every last pantry boy."*

"Yes," he said without widening or narrowing his smile. "What about them?"

The girl reacted. She allowed surprise to arch those perfect eyebrows. Strang allowed a little chuckle to sidle around inside. So that cosmetic armor could be chipped.

"You shifted them off-planet. Wasn't that rather—ah—drastic? The regulations—"

"I am well aware," Strang interrupted, allowing his smile to disappear, "that you speak on behalf of Caracci. Had you not done so I would have you severely disciplined for daring to quote the regulations at a Chief Commissioner. But—please go on."

An abrupt flaring fierceness fused the girl's face into fury; then it died and she said, "I also know of the recent judgment on Jethro. But Caracci laid it down that twenty-one years was the deadline for immunity of tenure." She shifted her seat—all that Strang could see past her of the room back on Earth in which she sat. She appeared more ill at ease.

"Give me your message." Strang chopped the words.

"Caracci wishes your explanation—when the Utukku had been there over twenty-one years."

Here be dragons!

Here was the point at which one promising career abruptly terminated in a real meaning to that much-abused word "terminal."

Off-handedly, Strang said, "I should have thought the

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ruling spoke for itself. The Judgment of Jethro"—how Gerban Arnouf must relish that phrasel—"clearly sets out the form. The Jethroans were terrestrial stock. The Utukku were Utukku stock. The terrestrial year is one year terran. The Utukku year is one and a quarter years terran. The Utukku had not been on Parvati for twenty-one years Utukki."

She had the decency to let fall a little gasp.

Strang pushed his casual manner. He knew well enough this whole interview was on tape for Caracci's later delectation—if the cunning Machiavelli wasn't looking and listening right now.

"But we measure by terran units—" she began.

He half turned away from the screen, so that now he could swing back, bearing down on her full-face, letting his eyebrows draw together, giving her the full treatment of the personality that had carried him this far in the galaxy.

"Are you questioning Caracci's judgment, miss?"

She shook her head. The pause for her next words stretched—and stretched—and Strang knew he had won.

At least—he had won over this young girl and he was wise enough not to count that as a famous victory. But he had done what he had set out to do; he had established a fact—by *a posteriori* reasoning, he had tacitly sanctioned what he had done. He felt Caracci knew all this—in fact he was damn well sure of it—but he knew Caracci pragmatist enough to hold what the gods gave him. Parvati was a golden world. . . . As good as Jethro, anyway. . . .

The girl lapsed into formula.

"I will acquaint Caracci with all that you have said. He will be contacting you."

Strang knew she meant that she would be contacting him. Caracci never spoke to anyone except face-to-face. That was one reason why he employed personal assistants to oversee and program his communications robots. *And the best of galactic luck to him*, decided Strang, feeling a little lightheaded after the strain.

The girl turned to go—and Strang said softly, "It has

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been a pleasure talking to you. Would you tell me your name?"

"Abby Merilees—Abby Christopher Merilees."

Strang's smile became genuine. "A Christopher! I'll look you up next time I'm Earthside!"

PART TWO

VII

SARAH STRANG kissed Dick Matlin for the last time, a strong clean passionate kiss that could only exist when two people had found complete fulfillment in each other, and then twisted around in the bed to put a foot in his back and kick him out onto the floor.

He fell in a tangle of bedclothes, laughing and swearing and trying to get back to his knees to grab her again. She laughed wickedly at him.

"All out, Sir Galahad! I'm on duty in ten minutes."

She jumped out of the bed and began to dress.

Looking at her with the devil still in his eyes, Richard Matlin fumbled on his own clothes.

"You're a beautiful witch, Sarah. I hate having to break off and leave you like this—"

"You know what the motto of the TSC is, don't you, Dick? A husband—or a wife in your case, you lecherous hound—in every planet of call."

Matlin snapped the last magneclamp across his green shirt. "If I took you seriously I'd say we've been lucky to find humankind among the stars. We could have been trying to make love to a scarlet ten tentacled monstrosity called Uzzisbeg—"

"We'll get to the real aliens one day, Dick. Whoever seeded the stars in the long ago with human beings must have reached a limit—"

They were brushing their hair now, smartening themselves up. "They might have gone right through the whole galaxy. We might find sexually compatible people right to the opposite rim. What a thought!"

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"You dirty old man!"

And then they were in each other's arms again. They both knew this high-flown talk of stars and galaxies a poor substitute, a pitiful cover-up for the things they felt and could not put into words.

"You look after yourself. Think of Charlie and poor Myra."

He kissed her ear. "I can take that from you, Sarah. But—" He held her off, gripping her shoulders in the thin green shirt. "I'll look out for myself. You don't imagine I like living with the reminder of Charlie and Myra, do you? They were fine folks. Just married, too. . . ."

"Well—you're just about to be married, after this next mission. Don't you forget it. You give any ten tentacled Uzbigs what's-it, who feel amorous, the strict quarantine treatment. I want you all to myself."

"I'll look out, Sarah."

"I want my old man to see you in one piece. He's going to rupture a few venturis when I walk in with a husband—but he's going to have to take it for once instead of always dishing it out."

"Your father," Matlin said, strapping on his belt, "sounds quite a man from all you've told me." He pulled the Lee Johns around so that they snuggled comfortably.

"He's a man and a half. But my mother's the real strength of the family. She's wonderful! You'll like her. I'm not sorry I transferred to *Saint Vincent* from *Collingwood* without telling Dad; but I feel guilty about Mother."

"Well, don't. It was the best day's work you ever did."

"And to think I asked for a transfer because I was being pursued with lascivious intentions by a nasty piece of work! I didn't think I'd meet *you!*"

Transfer between base ships of the TSC was most unusual because the base ship became a small world of its own, self-contained, independent of planetary bases. And, too, because the ships moved out into the galaxy on courses divergent from the Solarian sphere of influence. They were a long way apart. A very long way.

Now Matlin slapped his commander's cap down on his dark hair, his strong face with the big beaked nose smiling

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fondly at Sarah. He touched her hand, an oddly affectionate gesture, like the giving of a last going away present.

"I'm glad you did, love."

"So am I."

Discretion prompted Matlin to leave Sarah's cabin first and march briskly down from the scientific quarters through the crews area and so, by a cunning circuitous route back to his own scouter's bay. He walked in humming cheerfully to himself, moving with the lean lath-like strength of the athlete in perfect training, fooling nobody but himself.

Lieutenant-Commander John Tait Emiko, his flat rubbery-tough features creasing with the repressed smile he shared with most of the other members of the crew of Ter-ran Survey Scout *Crossbow*, tore off a salute as being the best way of distracting the skipper's attention.

Commander Richard Tait Matlin—most of the TSC personnel were of the House of Tait, although quite a number of McGilligans were about—saluted in return and said, "What the hell's all the formal mumbo-jumbo about, John?"

Emiko smiled and spread his hands. "Have to keep the crew on their toes, Dick." Emiko was the scout's exec. "We're spacing out today and we want to leave base ship as a smart scout, don't we?"

"You won't impress the admiral with a supergiant-full of salutes, John. All set to lift jets?"

"All set."

Crossbow lay snuggled in the cradles in her bay along the flank of *Saint Vincent*. *Crossbow* gave warmth and light and air and sustenance to a whole ship's crew—and yet she was only one of many sisters who nosed up to their parent's ports and docking facilities in space, or who lay in their cradles inside that mighty shape, as now did *Crossbow*.

Matlin had seen to his end of the departure procedures before he had gone to take his farewell of Sarah; the exec's responsibilities had been carried out with Emiko's usual exactness. Nothing now stopped his scouter from taking space.

He went through to his control room and gave the necessary orders. *Saint Vincent* opened her valve and *Crossbow's*

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cradles swung over silently. The scouter lifted off. Gently, she turned and aimed her needle prow for the distant star glitter of unknown worlds. A few last brief messages crackled from parent to child; then *Crossbow* leaped into hyperspace and vanished from the ken of her home.

Two months terran later, Matlin felt the pride of a father seeing his first-born run up with the morning newspaper as the report clicked in from scouter number four, Harry Le-Blanc commanding. Emiko had called Matlin and together they listened as the waves poured in.

"... a right two-and-eight this one is," LeBlanc was saying. "We didn't spot a thing as we came in and then, as soon as we'd landed, an aircraft went by overhead. We lifted off quick and now we're hanging two planetary diameters out. She's a nice world, brand-new, just what the SCS boys drool over. Gravity as near Earth One as makes no difference. But that darned aircraft—"

The speech stopped.

A tech looked up quickly. "We've lost his beam. It just snapped."

"Well, hell," said Emiko. "Get it back, for goshsakes!"

But there was no getting back contact with Harry Le-Blanc in scouter number four.

"*Don't do another Hastings on me!*" prayed Matlin to all the gods of space—but under his breath.

He snapped quick orders. "Take us across there—*fast*—John! Guns—action stations. We're going to act as though we've run into big trouble!"

Well—they must have, mustn't they?

Guns sat at his board and soon the fascia lit with the green ready tell-tales. Guns—young Lieutenant Hardy McGilligan Swift had yet to fire his weapons in anger. His tallow hair and fresh boyish face set over that board he had studied, until he could fight it in pitchdarkness and with no art-grav, like some pagan priest culling miracles from a stone idol.

The other officers and crewmen in the control room settled down to action stations. There was no fuss. Just men and

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women setting about their appointed tasks—this time grimly determined that what had happened to Charlie and Myra Hastings was not to be repeated.

That tragedy had begun like this. A simple report from Hastings that his *Globe-Trotter* had picked up something interesting and then silence. Nothing had been seen or heard of their little scouter since.

Thoughtfully, Matlin sent a report back to *Saint Vincent*. Then he ordered an open circuit set up to the base ship so that everything that happened aboard *Crossbow* would at once be known on their parent's flag deck.

Viewed from space, the planet LeBlanc had found did indeed look a green and golden lovely world. Auspiciously enough, the sun was a G-star a little larger than old Sol and the planet swam four out from her primary, bathed in the friendly rays at the best possible distance for life.

Matlin recalled what he had heard of LeBlanc's message. "... we didn't spot a thing ..."

Had that meant not spotting whatever inimical power had them in its grip now, assuming their equipment had not malfunctioned; or did it mean they had observed no signs of life? Matlin felt jumpy. His old man used to say at times like these: "Think of your stomach, lad." His father had been a bluff gunnery officer, a man who could hit an orange at a parsec, or so his admiring friends claimed. Like so many other pioneers of the TSC he had failed to return from a mission. Matlin still missed the gruff voice and the hearty clap on the back. His mother, to his regret, he had never known. But he liked to think, now, that she must have been very like Sarah.

The forward screens showed this world. He decided to call it LeBlanc—until the soulless filing indices of the SCS got around to it and arbitrarily assigned it the next name on the list.

The pilot brought *Crossbow* out of subspace neatly and, as they hit real space again and could look out and see the planet before them, a moment of sheer panic hit Matlin. What happened now was his responsibility. He had the lives of two hundred or so men and women directly in his

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keeping. His mistake would not only be paid for with his own life; but with a mass holocaust that would give him no rest beyond the grave.

"Anything?" he snapped unnecessarily.

The Radar officer, young Lieutenant Hilary Hines, said back at him, just as sharply, "Nothing."

The signals officer, Lieutenant Joanna Brule, chimed in, "Nothing on the bands. Still checking."

Those two girls caused more mayhem in the love lives of his crew than a dozen others.

"Take her in gently, pilot," he said. He sat on his throne with all his kingdom spread out to his eyes and ears and beneath his fingertips. His, the ship—and his, the crushing burden.

Crossbow edged gently on her planetary drive in towards the planet he had called LeBlanc.

Hines said, shrilly, "There's something—"

The screens showed a flicker, a slicing glimpse of a shark-shape knifing in from space where before had been only the distant glow of the starfields.

Joanna Brule said, "The bands are cluttered with signals."

Hardy Swift said, "Fired, fired, fired!"

The pilot said nothing but swung the ship in a bounding leaping turn that sent the engines keening up the scale and the red alarms blinking on the artgrav board.

With painful intensity, Matlin watched that menacing shark shape. He had time in the fragmentary lapse between the interchange of fire to see just how that shape was—Mankind habitually called hostile aliens with whom no formal friendly contact had been made, with whom they were tacitly at war, sharks. *Sharks*. That name had been borne in the minds of men by many now friendly once-alien races back home.

Whoever the alien was, the weaponry was powerful. He saw no sign of a strike on that black hull when his ship lurched. Smoke gushed from the artgrav board and connections fizzed as power overloaded them. Ozone stank in the air. A rear bulkhead burst inwards followed by a ravening wall of flame and smoke. Oil stank. Burnt insulation fouled

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the air. In the abrupt noise and bedlam, with alarms going off and flames crackling, with the crash and shatter of sun-dering metal, the low evil hiss of escaping air insinuated itself like the hand of death.

Emergency action snapped everyone into the task they must perform.

Matlin maintained a well-trained on-the-ball crew. Men and women pulled on spacesuits even as they manipulated their equipment. The quickest way to deal with the fire was to evacuate the ship of air. The overloaded circuits would either hold or channel their power. The smoke would go with the air. Any damage that did not precisely affect the fighting power of the ship would be ignored.

Guns skittered about on his seat as though he sat on live coal. Through all the din, Matlin heard him chanting steadily to himself: "Fired, fired, fired!"

Each time he spoke, *Crossbow's* guns vomited their lethal energy in tidal waves of power.

"What's the score, Guns?" howled Matlin.

"I think our first hit. But she's twisting about all over the range. She's fast and dodgy all right—there!" Matlin's fascinated gaze flicked to the forward screen—two had been darkened by damage but on the third he saw the distant shark shape reel and fire speckles break out all along her hull. "There! A beautiful strike! That's set their back teeth aswim, I'll bet!"

Then *Crossbow* juddered again and the artgrav finally expired in a smoking eruption from the board.

For anyone not accustomed to spending the major portion of their life aboard a spaceship, the sensations afflicting the crew of *Crossbow* would have been traumatic, ending, in all probability, in complete irreversible madness. Even for Matlin's crew, accustomed to living in a tin can of air among nothingness, the cessation of artificial gravity and reversal to free fall came as a shock.

All the lights went out and then, almost continuously, but with an ominous flicker, the blue emergencies flicked on. In that ghastly corpse-light men and women activated the

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seldom-used magneclamps that held them in their control seats.

Hilary Hines missed and someone cursed as she drifted overhead, a spaceboot clipping the victim alongside the helmeted ear. A hand reached out and gripped the seat of her suit and hauled her in like a dirigible being moored. Flushed and ashamed at her loss of professional dignity she slid back into her seat before the radar plot.

The only noises now were those coming in over ship's intercom connected through to the suit radios. Tension and fear crawled in Matlin like white evil worms. Where was the shark? Another blow like the last would finish his ship, he felt convinced.

He called the engine room. "What's your hyperspace position, Frenchy? Have you any McIvors left?"

Before the answer crackled from his phones, Guns' voice said calmly, "I'm down to four turrets, Skipper. No power on the others."

"Check, Guns. Keep fighting."

Frenchy's slow drawl said, "We've three McIvors in reasonable nick, Skipper. I can jump when you wish."

Around him in the control room amid the shambles of battle, the blue battle-lamps gleamed eerily from the helmets of his crew—his friends. Each man and women bent to the task allotted. He knew they were as frightened as he was. On the remaining screens, the shark showed distantly, a paper cut-out plastering against star-dazzle. As he looked, he saw her fire yet again.

"Take us out of this, Frenchy! Quickly—anywhere—but get our heads down!"

"Check—"

All the lights dimmed as the McIvors sucked power from the emergency supply. Matlin felt that familiar premonitory stir of his hair as static discharged preparatory to the wizardry of the McIvors taking the ship out of real space and hurling her into that terran developed other-space, in which light lagged and was left far behind. They had begun to jump—then. . . .

Crossbow buckled. She bent in as an out-of-control ancient

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car wrapped itself around a lamppost. No noise tortured his eardrums as the decks buckled and split, as the hull concaved inwards. He saw Guns plucked from his seat by a spinning girder and hurled the full length of the control cabin.

A radar tech's suit split and the girl mushroomed.

Pieces of equipment and machinery blundered through the emptiness of the room, moving with a deceptive speed, holding images in his retina long after they had passed.

The bedlam pouring in over his suit radio sickened him.

The whole wrath of destruction without fire and smoke and noise held a ghostly horror more bowel-constricting than the reality, a terror born of nightmare.

He could not separate individual voices on his phones.

He knew that he, too, must be shouting and praying and then, hopelessly, trying to give orders.

Crossbow was finished.

The last thing he saw, before the single remaining screen flickered electrically to blackness, was the evil shark shape asparkle with hits turning stern on, diminishing, vanishing with a single reflected gleam from a fin into the far-off star-haze.

Then he, too, blacked out.

VIII

THE BALL OF semi-liquid mud spun smoothly in the grip of whirling artificial gravity fields. From the domed transparent roof, fluorescents cast a pale clean light that searched for the crannies in a person's face and gentled them with planing light. The mud ball was about the size of an overblown football and it spun easily three feet above the workbench. Around the walls of the domed building the necessities of an amateur scientist had been lovingly positioned. Yet, still the building contained the warmth of human presence very comforting in face of the abstract chill of pure scientific equipment.

"Hey, Golden Boy! I'm for the beach. Coming?"

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The young man, half draped into immobility under wires and meggers and prods and all the arcane equipment of a practical technological scientist, glanced up. His square hard face with the Drummond jaw and liquid brown eyes relaxed as he saw the sprite leaning against the door jamb.

"Hi, Sally!" He jerked an eye back to the mud ball, then manually, and with delicate care, adjusted a vernier controlling the artgrav input. There were robots at hand; but this job had to be done at this stage by a clumsy human hand. This had to be a field test conducted under the natural laws of the galaxy unperfected by cybernetic machinery. If a man could do it, then a robot could do it standing on its cryotron banks.

"Well, come on then, slowcoach."

"Come here, Sally. I want to show you this."

Sally Strang sighed. Craig Christopher Drummond—Golden Boy—was proving a drag. She walked over the comfortable warmed floor to him now, her bare midriff bronzed and brown, her dark hair screwed unfemininely into a bathing cap, her whole lithe body an allure that, in the minibikini, had the power to extend a man's eyes on stalks.

"You'll catch your—ah—nose in one of these damn gadgets of yours one day, Craig."

"Look at this . . ." He bent, absorbed.

The mud ball spun. From its north and south poles two wires depended to the shelf of equipment under Drummond's fingers.

"Very nice, Golden Boy. I've seen it—"

"Wait . . ."

Boys—or young men, if they took Sally's fancy—could be tiresome at times. She stood at his elbow and leaned over. Playing with mud pies at his age!

Meticulously, Drummond began moving a lever he had quickly lashed up on a homemade meter panel. He moved it with exaggerated caution.

As the lever moved, the mud ball moved in its supporting gravity field, inching across from left to right, moving through the air.

"There!" Drummond breathed, his face intense, his whole

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posture concentrating on that moving mud ball. Sally's vibrant body pressing against him could have been the other side of the Coal Sack for all the notice he took—until—until . . . Sally moved impatiently. She joggled his arm. The lever moved swiftly.

The ball of mud moved with echoing vigor.

It broke.

It splashed.

It sprayed.

Mud drenched Drummond and Sally, clinging to them, clogging their eyes, matting their hair, swishing in their ears. They staggered back, two muddy goblins.

"You idiot!"

"Me? It's your filthy mud! Ugh!" Sally spat. "It's all in my mouth! You beast!"

"You interfering nitwitted woman!"

"You clumsy scientific—scientific cockroach!"

"Witch!"

"OOOH!" Sally stormed off, shaking with fury.

And Craig Drummond laughed.

Instantly Sally swung around, one hand streaking down to a suspected rip in her minibikini.

"I thought mudbaths made you girls beautiful?"

"There's mud and mud, nincompoop! That stinking concoction of yours has ruined my complexion, I shouldn't wonder—"

Drummond switched off the main power supply and wiped a muddy finger over his eyebrows, flicking drops onto the floor, where robotic apertures sucked it away with the rest of the accidental débris. He smiled at Sally, seeing her in her emerald minibikini, for the first time since she had entered, with the eye of the healthy young male animal he was. He whistled lecherously.

"You said something about the beach. We can wash this mud off there. After all, it's good Ishtar earth."

"All right. But I'm going to duck you until you splutter for forgiveness."

"You're on. I want to see you fall off your water skis again. You make such an attractive dent in the water."

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"Beast—I'm just learning."

"Now you're repeating yourself."

They went out, these two, in the sunshine of old Sol; two youngsters in a galaxy that looked with kindness on the citizens of the Solarian worlds, not yet formed, not yet hardened into men and women, who could face the bitter truths that lay beyond this golden moment of youth.

After the memorial service to Charles and Myra Hastings, Shena Strang had gone back to the palace on the other side of the planet; but Sally and young Craig Drummond, a distant cousin of some degree, had obtained permission for her to visit the home of her great-grandfather, Zeus C. Drummond, the head of the House of Christopher.

"I wonder why I bothered," she said, as they walked into the surf and splashed about, until the mud had washed from them to return to the sea from whence it came. "If I'd known you were going to shut yourself up in that tired old laboratory all the time instead of seeing I had a good time—"

"Selfish, like all women," Drummond said to a wave.

She splashed him. They splashed each other. Then they fought. They wrestled. After a time, Craig Drummond shouted for mercy, racing up towards the beach with Sally breathing slaughter on his heels, belaboring him with a dripping and extremely odoriferous bunch of seaweed.

Just how the fight would have ended—in grievous bodily harm, mayhem, wounded pride and anticlimax or the embarrassment of having to deal with the probability of an unexpected addition to Ishtar's population—was not put to the test. A communications robot buzzed respectfully for attention, its metal legs sliding in the sand, and said, "A call for Miss Sally Strang from Miss Susan Strang."

As the screen lit up, Sally collapsed before it on the sand, dripping and laughing, flushed, her bathing cap lost and her hair, shining and lustrous, rippling over her shoulders. Craig Drummond circling warily back, began to have ideas on just how he would have finished the fight.

Susan, the eldest of the three sisters and the one with the solemn face and innocent eyes and the mouth that

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could tremble so easily with hurt, smiled out at her youngest sister from the screen.

"Sally! You do look as though you're enjoying the holiday."

"Isn't all life a holiday, Susan? I can't wait to get into space and start a real job. How's things?"

The last said very casually, very off-handedly; the subject of Bruce Kassim Oquendo had proved a sore spot between the sisters.

"Not too good, I'm afraid." Susan, Sally saw with disastrous understanding, was near to tears.

"Oh, Susie—I'm sorry!"

"Well, after all the things you've said to me. . . . Bruce was most upset—"

"Well! You didn't tell him what I'd said, for goshsakes!"

"Oh, Sally, do speak like a responsible adult and not a frazzle-brained adolescent! What sort of language is 'goshsakes'? I'm sure you didn't get it from me."

Sally changed the subject, abruptly. "I suppose Dad's cutting up rough again."

"Yes. He's being awful."

Sally had never really cared for Bruce Oquendo. Oh, he was nice enough, in a namby-pamby way, a simpering obedience to the prissy laws of politeness giving him the appearance of a man-of-the-galaxy. But she doubted he had the strength of will that even chuckle-headed Craig Drummond possessed, for all his mudball tomfoolery.

And Sally was young enough to want a man who was a man for a husband.

"I can't see why the House of Kassim won't let Bruce go. After all, the House of Christopher is rather grand. We are, after all, big bugs in the Solarian Confederation."

"The House of Kassim are proud, Sally—"

"I'm sure they are. I mean, it doesn't signify these days that their planet orbits Shurilala—having alien blood in your veins is just the same as having French, or Italian, or German—it's something to be proud of. We're all human beings, when all's said and done. But this Bruce is really a

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drag, Susan—" She frowned at her own clumsiness. "No—Susan—I didn't mean that—I'm sorry—"

"What did you mean?"

"Well—he ought to be able to speak out for himself. Have you told him what you want to do?"

"I'll do what he wants—"

"Don't be a fool, Susan! He's ruled by his parents. And they aren't like ours. Tell him you've made up your mind—Kassim or Christopher—Shurilala or Sol—but for pete's sake, *do* something about it!"

Craig Drummond chuckled. "Little sister really throws her weight about."

"You keep out of this, Golden Boy. Just think you're lucky to be Christopher, is all."

"I am, darling, I am."

"And you can keep that hanky-panky talk for your fancy women."

"I don't have any—but if you carry on like this, I'll sign you up as number one!"

"Hullo, Craig," said Susan, as he flicked into her vision on the screen her communications robot held for her.

"Hi, gorgeous! Remember me to Bruce. Tell him to put more pills in his pep!"

Susan wiped an eye. Sally flicked a back-handed scoop of sand at Drummond and drove him off the screen. "Get lost, dunderhead," she said sweetly.

"I wondered, Sally, if you'd talk to Dad. You know he likes you best—"

"That's not true, Susie! You know it isn't!" Warm affection for this grave and gentle elder sister filled Sally with a guilt feeling she could never now shake off.

"It doesn't matter. Now Sarah is off aboard *Saint Vincent*, you're the only one I can turn to. . . ."

"I thought Sarah was aboard *Collingwood*?"

"She was; but there was some unpleasant business. Anyway, some very high Tait brass was invoked and now she's shifted. So it's you I'm turning to, Sal."

"I'll see him at once. I don't know what I can do—but I'll try." She looked with a seriousness, at odd variance

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with the tomfoolery of moments ago, at her sister. "D'you really love this Bruce, Susan? Do you *really* want to marry him?"

"Yes, Sally, I do!"

The communications robot handled the shutting down of the conversation, its metal feet sliding in the sand and a patch of damp sand clinging to one foot in a most un-mechanical way. It waddled off back to the villa. All about them, the sea and sand and sky formed a backdrop that lulled and refreshed and reminded one every moment of every day that humanity had been very lucky in the galaxy.

Only then did Sally realize she had no idea of where Susan had been speaking from. The wedding had been postponed when the House of Kassim had proved intractable. Whether they would prove as intractable as her father, or not, remained to be seen.

Sometimes, she wished the system of Houses and planets had not been invented. It had proved completely successful for so long she supposed it would never be changed now, not until mankind changed his ways of life once more; but in this case it irked. It wasn't as if each House went out and found and brought home its own planets anymore, as they had in the old days. There'd been some real old punch-ups in those days, squabbling over planets, before the Solterran Construction Service had been brought into being. And then that strange man Caracci had taken over the SCS, and since then, the Service had been all cold and aloof and scientific and dedicated to planet-hunting with a single-mindedness of purpose almost robotlike in execution.

It was the TSC for Sally; of that she was completely sure. Soon now she would don the green uniform of the corps and venture out to fare on far adventures among the stars—God!—there wasn't any other conceivable life for a human being.

Craig Drummond, of course, didn't share that view at all. All romantic yearning after adventures, he'd said, all childish dreaming.

Well—they'd see about that.

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She threw the seaweed at him, dodged his grasping hands and raced like a latter-day Danae up the beach.

"I'm for lunch!" she shouted. "You go and make some more of your old mud balls!"

"One day, miss," Drummond shouted after her, "one day—you'll see!"

IX

"No wonder," said Commander Matlin grimly, "no wonder Harry LeBlanc saw no signs of life!"

They stood now on the planetary surface, the few pitiful bedraggled survivors of *Crossbow's* spectacular destruction; and, like space-wrecked people through the years, they thanked their luck for coming through safely and cursed their luck for being condemned to life imprisonment.

Only two of the hastily launched life-shells had made it down in one piece, as far as Matlin knew. All attempts on their radios to raise anyone else had failed. They had to consider themselves space castaways, and stranded on a planet hitherto unknown to man, parsecs away from the nearest friendly aid. Their only hope lay in *Saint Vincent* and the dispatch of a rescue force.

"Don't count on it," Matlin had said harshly. Now he gestured toward the blackened and charred area stretching back from the beach towards the damp green forest inland. "That's reality for us now."

They all stared at the devastation.

"Well," said John Emiko truculently, "*we* didn't do it coming down in our life-shells—"

"And I'll wager none of my shoots could have struck the planet like this," said Guns. He pulled his pants up angrily—like them all when their spacesuits had been discarded, he was now holding together a rapidly shredding uniform. Material designed for the use of sedentary personnel aboard a spaceship, where weather could not get at its fibers, did not possess even the strengths of normal terrestrial fabrics. Even the usual wear-once-and-toss-away clothes in such prevalent use had a little more stamina.

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They had made planetfall somewhere south of the planet's equator and—or so he said—Matlin had sighted LeBlanc's scouter to the south, just before the life-shell struck. Now they were trying to reach their comrade. A forlorn hope? Ridiculous? Sure—Matlin knew all that. He also knew that he had to keep what was left of his ship's company actively doing something—anything—to postpone for as long as possible the evil day when they fully understood what had happened.

Matlin was not usually a man much accustomed to inner questioning. He knew what his task in life was and he had at least the humility to be thankful for that. As his old man used to say: "Get stuck into the job at hand and let the bald-bonces do the worrying." The only snag to that was that Matlin now carried responsibility beyond even that his father had borne. And Matlin still believed his greatest enemy was the fear in him that threatened to cause his complete collapse in moments of danger. . . .

"Well, we didn't do it." Hilary Hines said, squatting down on a rock and picking bits of sand from between her toes. "So that means they did."

"The sharks—"

"Yeah," said Matlin with casual force. "They must have been burning and blasting this town when we turned up."

"My feet are burning," said Joanna Brule, plumping down next to Hines. The rest of the party, a scant fifty or so from *Crossbow's* crew, disposed themselves haphazardly around the beach. Matlin walked across to the reason for his mental slackness in numbering the survivors.

The six wounded men and two injured women lay in their lashed-up stretchers and tried to act as though they didn't know the score. Matlin tried to act as though he could give them comfort. When they died he would be able to enumerate his flock more accurately—forty-seven survivors.

The sea stretched on their left hand, rolling humped and fretful to the horizon. White clouds sailed a blue sky. Behind them, if they ignored the scar, where once a town had stood, the land lay green and inviting. This world of LeBlanc would be a fine trophy to bring home to old Sol.

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"Wonder who the people were, Dick," Emiko said, walking beside Matlin.

"Anybody's guess is as good as mine. Those foundations look about the size a human being would build if he was laying out a town."

Bits of smashed stoned and brick, calcined rafters, all the derelict waste of a major catastrophe scattered along the beach and wafted on the wind. A shred of burned cloth—bright orange and royal blue—tumbled across the sand and idly Emiko bent to retrieve it.

"A happy people, I'll bet," he said, turning the cloth over in his hands. "They wouldn't have woven a gay material like this otherwise." He let the scrap of a vanished civilization trail from his hand, back onto the sand.

"The sharks blasted their town out of existence. The work's been done for a long time—the forest is beginning to creep back."

"Those damned aliens—"

"These people of the scorched town would have been aliens, too—"

"I know. But you know what I mean."

Matlin did.

Slowly, voicing a question that coiled in his mind, demanding an answer that would bring unwanted visions and unwanted conflicts, he said, "We couldn't have taken this world for ourselves, John. Not with people living on it. D'you suppose the sharks are taking worlds for themselves? D'you think they just wipe out everyone on a planet and then grab it?"

"Hell," said Emiko, his face drawn and hating. "I'll bet they would—"

A few of the castaways trailed forlornly into the ashes but, even apart from everyone's tiredness and reaction after the crash, there was no heart in this raking over the mass graves of an unknown race. The concept of meeting a human being not born on one of the many worlds of the Solarian grouping or aboard one of their spaceships still had power to grip a man's imagination; but not like this, not in turning

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over fused chunks, burned artifacts, the ruined residue of a race.

"We don't know, John." Matlin stood up and waved an arm. "We'd better get moving again before everyone goes maudlin on us. We're in enough trouble ourselves."

Emiko rose with a grunt of effort. "*Saint Vincent* will send a rescue party. I know our radio is being fouled up by the same sort of blanket that stopped Charlie Hastings from sending—but *Saint Vincent* won't let us down."

"You're right, of course, John."

Matlin spoke with force. But he didn't know. He hadn't the strength even to admit they might be marooned here forever.

The survivors trailed in and, picking up their wounded and the radios and all their other gear that had proved salvable, they set off once more along the beach, heading south.

Someone up front shouted shrilly, pointing. Everyone stopped. Over the curve of the horizon a lean shape streaked through the air towards them. Before anyone had a chance even to move position, that atmosphere-splintering aircraft screamed past above, contrails breaking away in ruler-straight lines, keening a passage down over the opposite horizon.

"So now they know we're here!" Matlin felt like cursing his luck; but he knew luck had no part in that little demonstration of planetary power.

"Sharks?" someone asked in a quavering voice.

"Who the hell else?" demanded Emiko belligerently. "Grow up, will you!"

"Having tried to destroy the people of this world," Matlin said mildly, but loud enough for them all to hear, "it seems the sharks are patrolling, just to make sure they have succeeded. Well—they've found us. We don't know how long they'll take to react. But we must assume they will be quick." He jerked a thumb at the trees. "We've got to hide. Don't rush it!" He shouted as one or two broke running for the trees. "You're still a ship's company and under my orders!"

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But they did rush. In a scrabbling rout they scuttled for the trees. Pressing in between the palm-like boles, wondering if they had made transit into the fire from the frying pan, Matlin pushed forward to the head of the column once everyone was off the beach.

His heart thumped and sweat stung his eyes. This sort of exercise was hardly duplicated by the gym robots back aboard. This stretched sinews, jolted leg muscles, drew a gasp of effort at each step. Men slipped on the thick and treacherously slippery mat of leaves beneath the trees. Women stumbled over looping vines. There could be any sort of vegetable horror lurking in here. The leaves closed overhead and shut the party into a tomb of verdure.

Most of the surviving personnel had come from the command sections of his ship, and whilst the human side of Matlin rejoined that his friends had come through so far alive, he felt sorrow for those of his company who had not made it intensify, because of his feeling for those who had. But it also meant that the tough planetary explorers, the men who habitually traipsed over alien planets, had been snuffed out. He must do this work with personnel only half-trained for it.

After an hour of back-breaking struggling forward, he called a halt. They rested, panting, wiping the sweat away, trying to cobble their clothes about them. A girl carrying a power pack sacrificed vital undergarments to make a pad for the strap that had rubbed a weal red and angry across her shoulder.

Matlin felt the heavy drag of the twin Lee Johns at his waist. Those were among the last of the company's possessions to be sacrificed. Most of the officers had some sort of side arm. Matlin, knew, with somber foreboding and bowel-loosening fear, they might not get the chance to use them.

Above the screen of leaves, a howling rose, screeching decibels of sound down, drenching the forests in noise.

"There goes another one," said Emiko sourly.

This planet of LeBlanc possessed a day and a night cycle similar to Earth's—that first natural clock that had counted

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out the time for a large slice of the galaxy—and soon the shadows of night threw fresh problems at Matlin.

Everyone was shattered by tiredness. They had to rest. Some of the girls were in a bad way. Reluctantly, Matlin gave orders to camp. Emiko found the spot, his flat rubbery face showing a trace of his old humor as he reported a stream and a cleared sward overhung by trees.

Tiredness dragged at Matlin as he organized watches, denied the use of fire, ate a hasty emergency ration that, if nothing else, gave him strength and cleared away the immediate effects of fatigue. But a man couldn't go on indefinitely on pills.

They lashed the women and off-duty men into the trees and then, two by two, the sentries prowled the camp, on the lookout for—for what? So far the only fauna they had seen came into the see-and-admire class—butterflies, humming-birds tree-sloths and similar alien equivalents to terrestrial animals. But—what else lurked in this damn forest beyond the edge of vision?

The problem confronting Matlin was simple; but it admitted of only one correct answer. The wrong answer brought death.

He sat in the crotch of a tree cleaning one Lee Johns, the other in its holster with the strap unclipped, ready for instant use. As he worked, his mind raced around the alternatives.

If he radioed out at the wrong time the sharks would pick up the signal, echoing back from their blanket, and home in on him.

If he failed to radio out the rescue ships from *Saint Vincent* would never find him.

Just how long would they take? When would they arrive? How long would they remain? And—the big one—would they be able to handle the sharks waiting for them?

He sweated over vectors and times and sublight speeds and ratios of possibility until the first Lee Johns gleamed blue and menacingly beautiful. Then he shoved it back in its holster and started in on the second. He'd always thought guns ugly before. Now they looked just fine.

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"Hi, Skipper. What about some sleep?"

"I'm okay, John. I'm a walking pill box right now."

"And me. I'm worried over the female personnel."

Emiko hadn't called them girls, and that meant he was being formal and that meant he *was* worried.

"I know. We'll have to push on as best we can. I'd like the men to carry a little more equipment. And also scout ahead. Give the girls a little more chance to acclimatize, harden up."

"Wilco, Skipper. D'you think the sharks can find us in here?"

Matlin checked the charge on the second gun. His fingers trembled very slightly against the blue metal.

"Difficult to say. If they follow us in by land we ought to have some warning. I know we're not getting anywhere by going inland like this. But we can't hang around this area too long."

"If they drop a bomb on this whole forest—" He didn't finish.

"We'll start at first light and push right on. We can follow the stream back. That should give easier marching."

"Check."

The next day proved even worse torture as tired muscles pulled against stiffness, the wildly variant exercise straining unused muscles, the agony of flesh and blood pitting itself against the trail only through the masochistic bludgeoning of will power. And driving all their wills, Matlin flogged them on.

Fear rode at their back and terror urged them on.

By evening of the second day, the stream had sunk between rocky banks and the water ran fast and whitely-bubbling over rapids and log-falls. They saw a number of nasty-looking animals much the size and shape of a Nile crocodile, except that they jumped sure-footed from rock to rock on correspondingly longer and more flexible legs. Their teeth-hedged mouths gaped whitely at the humans, slogging along the bank above them. The girls looked down and Patsy, the biologists and botanists teams' secretary, would

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have stopped for a closer look; but Emiko urged her on with a back-handed compliment.

"It's a funny thing, Skipper," he said, coming back to Matlin at the rear, "those animals down there—alien and yet sufficiently terrestrial-looking to tell us exactly what their capabilities are—would tear us to bits for a light snack if they had half a chance. Yet we looked down on them with a detached scientific curiosity—you saw Patsy—"

"I know. But we also have the sense not to let them get at us. What's the funny bit, John? I need a good laugh around now. Tone up my muscles."

At once Matlin saw he had offended his exec. He cussed himself for a clumsy fool; John Emiko had more inside that round skull and behind that flat face than a mere regulation-bound spaceship exec might be expected to have. Contritely, he said, "Sorry, John—nerves shot to hell. What's your point?"

"You're lucky to have any nerves left, Skipper. Most of the crew's have been in for retreads ages ago."

Emiko was back to some parody of his usual form, and Matlin felt the comfort of a strong crutch once again but-tressing his inner weaknesses. "Well?"

"Those aliens—we spotted them as soon as they boiled out of hyperspace—oh, sure, they fired first. But we were all ready to fire, smash right back. That's a pretty poor commentary on modern interstellar life, isn't it? I mean, you meet up with an entirely fresh life-form and the first thing you do is start trying to kill it."

"If they hadn't fired, we wouldn't have, and probably right now, we'd be sitting around a table, living it up a little, with them catching up with the news in our neck of the galaxy." He smiled wanly. "And wicky werka, of course."

"It bothers me, though." Emiko shook his head. "We meet up with a brand-new alien grouping—we don't even know what they look like, if they're humanoids. They might even be these mythical monster-aliens we're supposed to run up against one day. But we don't know. We just traded shots."

Matlin decided they'd come far enough. The bank of the

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stream had now congested in on itself, branches and vines loping across to trail in the narrowing stream, pooling and rippling red in the last rays of the sun. Overhead the sky showed through rents in the leaves; on their present course that head cover would soon disappear as the arching trees gave way to brush and grass.

He gave the necessary orders and when everything had been seen to, he found a dry spot beneath a low bush that gave him a good field of view of the trail back. John Emiko slid down beside him, his face worried.

"How much longer, Skipper?"

"Between ourselves, I'm disappointed—hell! I'm shattered!—that we've heard no indications that a rescue ship has come for us. I figured on tomorrow morning as the latest. If those two aircraft that chased us didn't spot us—if the rescue ship gets here in between patrols—hell, John, there are a lot of ifs and buts in this thing!"

"We trust in you, Skipper."

There was no answer to that in words that a man of Matlin's stamp could give and remain calmly unsentimental.

He said, "Been thinking about what you'd said about these damn sharks. There, you see—reflex habit. We usually call aliens we haven't made contact with sharks—or octos—because that brands them as just another problem we have to solve after having solved plenty more of a similar nature in the past. We don't create bogey men to frighten ourselves. The galaxy can do that quite nicely, thank you."

"Yet we never have quite the same series of events when we meet up with aliens—remember the stories about the Utukku? All sweetness and light at first, language interchanges, presents, culture missions—then, blooey!"

"Different from the Lego. We just couldn't get to talk to them. The history books have it all down in tridi color; how we called them Octos, fought them for Gideon's planetary bases, used those creaky old fluxwagons and manual controls to beat them. There wasn't anything there of the 'impossibility of contact with aliens' notions; all the time the Octos were targets for annihilation, our back room boys

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were trying everything they had to talk to them like sane civilized human beings. And, in the end, we did."

"Yes. You have to be just a little bit careful how you hold out the hand of friendship in the galaxy. You never have the chance to make a mistake twice."

"Still and all," Matlin said, rubbing the back of his neck tiredly where the muscles ached from equipment straps, "these damn sharks reacted too fast. They saw us and they fired. At least we'd have given them a chance to talk and try to establish communication."

"Maybe they're fighting a war of their own and are punch-drunk, space-happy—and as woozy-brained as I am right now." And John Emiko yawned hugely.

In that awkward position, fists clenched and arms bent up and mouth open with muscles stretching, he stopped moving and breathing, held frozen. Matlin slid a gun out and waited, crouching under the bush. Slowly, carefully, Emiko let his breath out, lowered his arms and sank down beside his captain. Together, breathing softly, their guns aimed down the back trail, they waited for that dark figure to move again, to flit craftily from one bush to the next.

Speaking so softly his breath hardly stirred, Matlin said, "Remember what we said about the sharks. Don't fire until we have to—and not at all if we can help it."

Someone in the camp behind them stirred and a low voice sounded. There was nothing they could do about that without giving away their position. They didn't want to assume that darkly flitting shape following them was an enemy; but they wanted to stay alive and they had to be careful.

A thing like a loon chattered from the side, answered immediately by another on the other side.

"All around us," Emiko whispered.

Before the decision to awake the camp and chance a misunderstanding could be taken, Matlin heard the savagely upraised voices, the screaming hate-filled shrieks, the coughing uproar of projectile weapons. The aliens were attacking and their numbers showed in a dark wave that broke against the outskirts of the camp. A bullet gouged the dirt beside

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Matlin's head and earth stung his cheeks. The gun was on low-power and he aimed it and pressed the trigger, fanning a wash of energy across that fearsome horde avalanching towards him. At his side, Emiko was firing short stabbing bursts on full power.

The camp awoke to a pandemonium of shouts and curses and then, as the crew saw their commander firing steadily, they became a steady core of men and women determined to stay alive as long as possible. Carpenters and Smeeson Fifty-Two's belched lividly, hurling needles and explosive shells. Lee-Johns lit with dripping purple fire the surrounding rocks and bushes and limned in devouring flame the enormous charging bodies of warriors who clawed in with one thought in their heads: "*Kill the aliens!*"

For the Solarians were aliens, too, on this planet.

Liquid fire dripped above their heads and searing drops burned narrow holes through clothing and flesh and blood. Men and women screamed and, screaming, fought on until they died. Smoke drifted, flat and stinking. In the incessant sheet-lightning discharges no coherent picture could be formed of the total effect; a man could see only what lay before him and fired at anything that tried to kill him.

More of the deadly dripping fire balls lofted over.

A crazed figure, burning, the hair twining upwards in a Medusa-crown of flame, screaming through bubbling lips, ran across Matlin's line of fire. He choked. Then he snapped his second Lee-Johns up to full power and mercifully gave the boon of euthanasia to Hilary Hines.

"They keep on coming, Skipper!"

"Try to shoot those devilish fire balls down!"

A blackened man rolled like a sack of charcoal to the edge of the bank and fell straight into the torrent.

Flames gouted all over the camp area. Bushes burned. Matlin saw one of the radios take a bullet in its guts and spray transistors and printed circuits outwards like a gay rocket at a corpse-meet. He cursed and lumbered across to where Joanna Brule, unarmed, crouched in a scooped hole beneath a plastic sheet. Her body, white and rosy in flick-

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ering fireglow, bulged up, buttocks high. Under her stomach she cradled the last radio, protecting it with her self.

Matlin flopped beside her, smiling at her face, trying to do the impossible. He smacked her bottom lightly. "Good girl. We'll soon knock off these alien beasties—then we can call the ship."

"Skipper—" Her face was ghastly, her eyes and mouth black holes in dough. "Hilary—you saw Hilary?"

"She's out of it now, Joanna. But you've a job to do still. Don't let me down!"

"No—no, I won't, skipper. . . ."

"Good girl."

Empty words, pathetic inspiration. But what damn else could he do?

He spun back to the fight, cursing with a crazed personal hatred for these alien devils who were murdering his friends. This wasn't the work for which the Terran Survey Corps trained. This wasn't scientific exploration of the galaxy. This was butchers' work.

"They're slowing down, Skipper!"

John Emiko walked with a limp, holding his thigh. Below the knee his leg dangled awkwardly, blood ran down his shin. "Took a stupid bullet. But we're licking them!"

Matlin nodded brutally. What had been bothering him exploded now into action. He found the first body he stumbled across, hefted it, staggered back to Joanna Brule.

"Here! Get up, girl! Put this poor devil over the radio! Then get down beside it!"

He draped the dead man—it had been Jack Perry, he saw, a first-class signals man—over the set and patted Joanna gently on the cheek. She was not in a state of shock. But that lay in store for her.

A fire ball fell and exploded nearby and a sizzling splatter of drops spat fiendishly across the dead man. Matlin ripped out his medikit and slapped styptic pastilles over the half-dozen inflamed spots on Joanna's skin. He left her the kit. "Treat yourself, Joanna! They're coming in again!"

This time the attack swarmed balefully up to the inner defense ring of bushes, blackened now and sere skeletons.

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Matlin paused to recharge his Lee-Johns, dismay chilling him as his fumbling fingers discovered two more charges. When their ammunition had gone—then the aliens would do as they wished with them.

At first, as that crazed battle swayed there on an alien planet, Matlin thought even the sky had turned to flame. Then he saw the sky redden and lighten with the dawn.

How long they had been fighting, he didn't know. The only thing left in his world was to hold out. They had to beat these aliens. There had been no time to parley, to talk of friendship; the aliens had attacked and they meant to kill every last terran. There could be only one answer to that.

Over the horizon, its noise blasting shrilly through the racket of battle below, an aircraft lanced like the terminal arbiter of final doom. Craning upwards, Matlin caught a glimpse of the ship—a black dot arrow-heading a white groove across the sky. He knew what that aircraft was doing now. He could imagine the sights coming on, the war-head being programmed, the quick thrust of energy and then the missile's engines thrusting it forward in unerring aim at the ring of fire on the ground below.

As he looked, the aircraft exploded into a ring of fire. Two rings, one on the ground, the other in the sky.

Matlin shook his head dazedly.

The noise buffeted down about then.

He scrambled up, fanned a last burst of fire at shambling figures that slavered and tried to tear his throat out, fought his way back to Joanna. She still lay beside the radio and the dead man. He leant down and smacked her hard.

"Call out, Joanna! Call the TSC! Emergency band!"

Numbed, she couldn't understand. He shook her, screaming.

Then she realized what her captain was saying. She gave one sob and then her blood-bedabbled fingers flew at the radio and she began to scream into the microphone.

Matlin whirled away, seeing dead men, burned equipment, expended weapons. Fire glazed his eyes. Sweat channeled the muck on his chest. His legs felt balloon-large and

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lead-heavy. He dragged himself back to the perimeter and saw Hardy Swift firing the last charge in his Lee-Johns. Swift had no legs. Then Guns keeled over, dead. Emiko cursed and fired, his energy spraying a charging group of aliens and whiffing them into their component atoms.

A little silence ensued.

Into that silence dropped, like liquid notes of gold, the shrilly descending whine of a ship on planetaries.

They all looked. All that were left.

A pinnacle dropped down towards them, the lower ports open, her little gun turret swinging around menacingly. Men waved from within. Matlin waved back—he did not stand up.

The pinnacle's turret flamed and fire sprouted amongst a group of rocks on the river's edge. Shrieking figures cartwheeled from their deadly cover. Weapons crisped them.

Emiko said, "I think that's the last of them, Skipper."

The pinnacle settled in the center of the perimeter. The first man out was Lieutenant-commander Mbebe, his face grim and drawn, the Lee-Johns dwarfed in his fist.

"Hurry it up, Dick!" he shouted. "Everybody aboard."

Carrying what was left of his crew into the pinnacle sickened Matlin. But at last the hideous task was over. The little craft rose, closed ports and bolted for the sky. Matlin sat exhausted at the side of Mbebe's control chair. He knew he was back aboard a ship of the TSC; but he couldn't feel that yet.

The pinnacle's parent Survey Corps battleship had dropped down to the outermost fringes of the planet's atmosphere. She whipped the little craft up on a tractor beam and tucked her into her bay. Matlin, supported by Mbebe, stumbled along to the control room. If anything more was to happen, he wanted to see it.

He was not disappointed.

The whole battleship control, larger than the pinnacle just stowed away, buzzed and hummed and shone with activity. On the screens Matlin saw, with a queer jolt of awe and humility, five Survey Corps battleships in steady line

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astern behind the flagship. So *Saint Vincent* had sent six battleships to rescue him and his crew! He felt small.

Orders relayed in tight crisp voices, meters danced around their dials, men and women all wearing wonderful freshly laundered uniforms worked with calm assurance; the air smelt like wine, control fascia lights shone with the reassuring comfort of Christmas tree decorations. This, this whole heady atmosphere, was home.

"Shark on screen, sir!"

The tech's voice had not finished before the answering orders whipped out, flat and hard. "Destroy!"

Hating himself for his feelings and quite powerless to prevent them, Matlin sat and watched with tremendous soul-shaking satisfaction the complete destruction of seven shark spaceships.

His thoughts were not nice.

But then—he had just been through a "not-nice" experience.

"That," said John Emiko with savage glee, "is what we should have done to them as soon as we saw them, Skipper."

"Sharks, yes," said Matlin, weakly, his head hurting.

"Well?"

"Don't you understand yet, John?" Matlin's feelings churned like sour milk inside him, the bile tasted filthy at the back of his mouth. "Don't you know who those poor devils were?"

"You feel sorry for them! After what they did—you saw Hilary, and Guns, and—"

"I know. This is how interstellar wars start. All the hatred and the cruelty and the killing. We would have talked. But they wanted revenge. They wanted to kill the aliens who had burned and devastated their towns. They weren't sharks, John! They were the people of this planet—fighting for it against—against us!"

"Oh, God!" said John Emiko.

X

ALREADY THE FIRST steel mill had belched its loud and soulless burp against the planet Jethro and the first plates had skittered off the rollers, shimmering with peacock-tailed color, pooled with liquid oily reflections of a new sun in the Jethroan sky.

No longer the sun, Jezreel, but the Sun, Centaurus. No longer—Jezreeljethro—but Centaurusjethro.

The steel mill began with a never satisfied maw burrowing deep into the heart of the Mountains of Carmel Jones and extending through a whole complicated series of automated shops and foundries and mills, ended by the banks of the river Yasmeeen. Already the Lapiz Lake showed bands and streaks of putrefaction and industrial contamination.

"Of course," the hemisphere manager had said, warmly believing his own industrial propaganda, "of course, all the effluents will be cleared up in time. We'll have this planet looking ship-shape in no time at all! No time at all!"

"It always looked pretty good to me before." Colin Copping had aged since the day he and Arnold Gunderson had tried to blow up a SCS spaceship. Now—now he had other plans.

"We won't let it rest like this, Colin." Simon Strang stood braced against the feel of the world about him, a world called to his attention by a despairing message from Tom and Fay Barnes. They were old friends in the inchoate but articulate half-world in which Simon lived, of the House of Wolfgang, an old imperious House of much fame. Old Rainscarfe had called the head of his parent House of Wolfgang as soon as their ships had made planetfall again; but by then, nothing but the Construction Service could have moved Jethro back. And the SCS were not in the business of taking planets away from the Solarian Confederation.

Now Simon Strang was saying good-bye. He had done what he could, raised what dust-devils he had been able to blow into being; but everyone, once the Lansen genera-

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tors had begun to whine deep in the core of Jethro, had known that the process was irreversible.

Anthea was weeping. Old Rainscarfe, Gunderson, Dirk Tiamat, Arthur Copping, all stood uncomfortably on the edge of the raw concrete landing field. Brilliantly lit brand-new hangars serrated the sky. Somewhere beneath their steel and concrete roots, the crushed bulbs of Anthea's daffodils would never flower again.

"Good-bye, Simon!" they called. To Strang their voices sounded like a last sea dirge for a hero sliding to his last bourn in the empty reaches of the sea.

Strange how mankind had this hate-love relationship with the sea carried over into his feelings for the wider ocean of space. Homer would have understood the men and women who ventured across the light-splintered parsecs in their frail metal shells of air. But there was no blind Homer alive today to sing a song of the scourge of space, a last lay of the light-years.

Arthur Copping gripped his son by the shoulders. He looked searchingly into his face and then, as though reassured by what he found there, nodded briefly. A hard man, he expected strength and durability in his son above anyone else.

"Good-bye, Colin. Don't forget to screen your mother. She's worried about you going off into space alone like this. But I'm not. I joy in the opportunity for you. Be strong, Colin. Do what is right. Do what you have to do."

"I'm only going to Earth, Father—I mean"—that statement carried so many psychological overtones it would screw a couch into a formfit—"I mean—I'm not going into space. I'm going across to Earth. And that, if you please, is a wondrous thought. . . ."

"You know what Earth means to us." Old silver-haired Rainscarfe, like them all, treasured the memory of their heritage bound up in a planet none had seen.

"Our ancestors traveled slowly and dangerously across the light-years, going from one planet to another, always seeking fresh horizons—and now, here we are, back a mere four light-years from Earth."

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Dirk Tiamat said gruffly, "It's putting the clock back, if you ask me."

Simon caught that. "I like that, Dirk. 'Putting the clock back.' I'll use that. It should catch attention."

The five minute warning hooted above their heads.

"Good-bye!" "Good-bye!" "Thank you, all." "Take care of yourself!"

And then they were in the ship, walking quickly through to the waving lounge, looking down on the spectators moving back to the terminal area, already cut off from the people of this world by the final clang of the airlocks. Simon Strang and Colin Copping waved down and imagined they could pick out their individual friends in that variegated waving crowd below.

"It's very good of you, Simon, to take me with you—"

"Nonsense, Colin. I need a good human companion—I can hardly call you a secretary, otherwise the department of manpower will be on my neck—someone to run my secro-bots for me. I have to get through an enormous amount of work every day. You're going to be a great help. And I'll see you work hard!"

"I'll work, Simon. Never worry about that. I'll work."

The expression in Colin Copping's face was lost on Simon as he stared for the last time down on Jethro.

Then the spaceliner lifted on her planetary drive, a brief announcement burred smoothly over the tannoy, then she shifted onto her sublight drive and whisked into hyperspace for the miniscule hop to Solterra.

Colin Copping had been immensely pleased to take the position offered by Simon Strang for three main reasons: One; Simon Strang was exceedingly wealthy. Two; He traveled extensively in the galaxy. Three; the third was a far more personal reason and one that Copping wasn't prepared even to think about too intensively just yet.

There would be time for that. He knew the time would come, as he had known the snows would melt on the flanks of the Mountains of Mount Carmel in the spring, where now brute mechanical fingers clawed away the splendors of his home.

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All the wonders and the splendors and the marvels of Earth made Copping ask one simple question: "If men can make a planet as beautiful as this why did they have to rape my world?"

"How do you think Earth became so beautiful, Colin?" Simon's sensitive face betrayed too easily the cast of his thoughts. "Where an empty planet is used I grant no harm is done; but when men take a planet like Jethro to use as factory-area, why then, man is gravely at fault."

They booked in at a middle-class hotel, for Simon hated ostentation, and taking a penthouse suite, he at once set about taking up all his old contacts. As he sat before his deegee controls, Copping wandered off to flop down into a formfit and flick for a comrobot to bring him the news. The screen was set up and Copping at once began to feel the verve and pace of life here on Earth.

They had set down at the South Pole landing field and their hotel overlooked the tropical gardens positioned exactly at the point where Scott had found Amundsen's flag.

The statues of the first men to reach this spot on the Earth's surface, lovingly carved from Carrara marble, stood surrounded by the lushness of hibiscus, poinsettia and the flamboyance of the firetree amid a profusion of orchids.

Now Copping, in his automatically temperate-oriented hotel suite, ignored the riotous color outside and concentrated on the pseudo life of the screen. He learned a great deal—not so much of what happened on Earth for that was supposedly common knowledge in the galaxy—but details of habits, attitudes, ways of looking at things and people that shook him out of the rut of a frontier planet's ways.

On Jethro the log houses had been built as buildings should, with a solid roof and four square walls. But here—they built houses inside out. Part of his childhood education had familiarized him with the concept, of course, and he had seen photographs and film depicting not only Earth's cities, but many other of mankind's cities on the planets of the confederation. But actually to see it, at first hand—why, here people lived in houses which they attached to the permanent central umbilical cord of the build-

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ing, rising hundreds of storys into the sky, clustered like grapes on a vine, attaching their inlets for water and power and their outlets for sewage direct to the cities' facilities. Then, when they fancied a move, or business took them to another city, they simply disconnected, set the antigravs going and flew off to another city and another endoskeleton. Each separate house could be a man's kingdom, tastefully decorated as he wished and as often as he wished, his for the flying and his for the living—exoskeleton houses except for only the most particular of purposes were as outmoded as the internal combustion engine.

Simon relinquished his deegee controls and brisked across to Colin Copping. His intense absorption in the things of life he considered mattered showed now in the bright smile, the pleased look about him. "They've arranged a little reception for me, Colin. Rather nice, really. And you'll be able to meet the people who care about what is going on in the galaxy."

Copping voiced a thought that had bothered him. "But why me, Simon? After all, although I have the usual education of a modern Solarian, I'm still a frontier boy. I'm not at home yet with the super-civilization habitual to you." He tried to make it sound casual.

"I'll be frank, Colin." Simon flung himself into a formfit and dangled a leg over the edge. The formfit gave up trying to grow a support for that nervous limb after a time. "I need you for my secretarial bureau. True. But, more—you are here as a symbol! You can talk. You can make people really feel what is happening to the worlds wrenched into slavery by the SCS."

"Yes—well—"

"I'm not talking in purple prose, Colin. What I say has been attested time after time. Jethro is just one more example."

"But your father—"

"My father!" Simon's face shadowed with the bitterness he felt and the bewilderment. "I thought he was a fine man. A straight man! Then he deliberately estranged me—oh, the story is too familiar—and too painful—for me to repeat it

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now. The incident of Jethro was merely the last in a line long of sins of omission and commission." He stood up fretfully. "But tonight you'll have the opportunity of telling some of the doubters your story—at first hand. There is a man, Walter Gokstad, who must be convinced. If you wish to right the wrong done to Jethro—Gokstad must be brought over to our side!"

That evening at the reception held in the Sparkling Palace hanging on the invisible wires of artgraves, a thousand feet above the surface of a sub-tropical pool, Copping met Walter Gokstad and at once took a violent dislike to the man.

It wasn't that he was fat—everyone could keep in tip-top physical shape on the gym machines—but that he gave the impression of fatness. And oiliness. He minced up to Copping to shake hands, smiling wetly, like a barrel of lard, all soft blubber and sham and affectation. Copping shook hands and felt with repugnance the soft smooth skin, apparently boneless. It was like shaking hands with a snake-skin—the impression, false though it might be, of sliminess remained.

"... pleased to meet you, my dear Colin. Simon has been telling me about the tragedy of Jethro. Such a shame. Yet these things sometimes happen." They walked slowly together across the parquet floor between drifting pendulous globes of light casting a shimmering chiaroscuro of color and variegated shadows all about them. "You can't build a solar system without breaking a few eggs."

Gokstad laughed rumblingly at his own joke—and Copping felt sick.

Something must have shown on his face for Simon spoke, smiling a warning. "Shall we go across to the display? I know you don't share our views, Walter. But we're right, you know."

"Convince me and I'll buy," Gokstad said with all the self-importance of a mouse hooked on cocaine. Copping dropped back a couple of paces. Simon walked at his elbow as Gokstad high-stepped across the floor.

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"He's—" Copping couldn't say what he felt. "He's *awful*"

"You have to dirty your fingers a little, Colin, when you're dealing with certain elements in the galaxy. He's an important man. Has the ear of influential government circles. And he doesn't like Caracci."

"That's the first nice thing I've heard about Caracci."

Simon made a face. "Maybe. Gokstad doesn't like Caracci because he's bucking for his job. Chief of SCS!"

"Well, he must be a big wheel. And you think if he takes over he'll be amenable to your friends' ideas?"

"We've got to convince him first."

Out of his thoughts and not the non sequitur Simon obviously considered the remark, Copping said: "And I looked at Strang like he was a god!"

The reception had gone off well and parties of people congregated and broke apart to join other groupings. Copping found himself, Simon, Gokstad, one or two others including a few girls all dressed in relaxed informal evening lounging clothes, sitting before the display. Other people drifted across and soon an animated crowd watched with the mild self-aware interest of civilized beings.

"That's right," Simon had said to Copping. "We try not to become excited. Over-indulgence in extravagant emotions is very wearing. The psyche suffers too, you know. But over this world-stealing business, well—I may be surprised."

"I can become excited," Copping had said darkly.

For that sophisticated audience, the display-in-chief consisted of an edited and compressed version of the events on Jethro. Film clips, sonorous music, heavily slanted dialogue, all told eloquently of a free and happy people forced into virtual slavery, their planet torn from them. The auditorium end of the great hall hushed as that galactic tragedy unfolded.

Amid murmurs of "disgraceful" "uncivilized" "shocking," the next section of the display lit up and for Copping followed fifteen minutes of learning, a quarter of an hour when his mind expanded to new facts and a fresh concept of what he was fighting. For the guests at the reception this

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was old stuff and most drifted off, back to the dancing and the talking and the drinking. But Copping sat watching the story of humankind expanding into the galaxy presented in a way all the histories and all the lectures at colleges had failed to convey to him.

Simon said softly, "This is our latest presentation, Colin, carefully programmed to hit the right spots in everybody's subconscious. It will be screened during peak viewing hours."

Gokstad heaved himself up. "I don't have to sit here and watch your moronic near-subliminal propaganda, Simon."

"It's not—" Simon began to protest hotly.

"You'll have to watch your step or you'll have the morals boys after you. Subliminal is still a dirty word, you know."

"You watch, Colin." Simon jackknifed up and, smiling, drew Gokstad away, bending over the shorter man like a father-elect escorting a nine month pregnancy to the hospital. Colin Copping heard Gokstad saying: ". . . *my* ships and *my* corporation! I can't afford mud . . . *my* responsibilities and *my* planets . . ."

Thankfully, Copping turned back to the display.

Every schoolchild knew the story, naturally, as part of their education to life in the galaxy. In this tridi full color display, Copping was presented with the facts in a new light; he began to see why so many people strongly disagreed with the government viewpoint. The foundation of their argument was the contention: "We should go on and out and colonize as we go. To bring back planets to our doorstep is to negate human achievement. When we meet up with the real aliens we will still be a fumbling race of people tied by their planets' apron strings to the solar system of their birth."

Along around here, Copping surmised, Simon would, on the next presentation, add in Dirk Tiamat's gruff opinion: "It's putting the clock back."

This program would be beamed out on the screens of the solar systems, paid for as bona fide advertising. It would make people think. They could see and hear for themselves what was going on in the galaxy in their name. Copping saw very clearly that he and his like, the men who had been

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dispossessed, were very small beer; he was here to add emotional overtones necessary for a good presentation. What a man like Gokstad really cared about was money and power; not the well being of a few ragged frontiersmen.

Gradually Copping disregarded the display, sinking back in his seat to review dispassionately the progress he had so far made. If Simon convinced Gokstad and the people behind him to support his friends, the SCS might be crippled if Gokstad came to power.

Copping wasn't really sure that would satisfy him.

The accident of the man who had tried to befriend him being the son of the man who had deceived him had at first seemed wildly ironic; only later had Copping realized the extra power that chance relationship gave him. When a man hated his father there were levers and hidden springs of the subconscious to be manipulated.

As for Gerban Arnouf—an old Smeeson seemed just.

A drink in his hand and his jewelled fingers flashing, Walter Gokstad was impressing a crowd with his personality as Copping wandered over. The reception was growing wilder now and the musical robots had merged imperceptibly into the latest jimjah craze and a few girls and men were jimjahing away beneath the speakers. Their antics drew a disbelieving gape from Copping.

"That, my dear Colin, is the civilization they rape a world to maintain." Simon appeared flushed. His forehead caught the lights, gleaming slickly.

"You can't convince me it's wrong to jimjah," said a redhead with an emerald sequined dress that undulated as she spoke. "It's absolutely the top!"

She jimjahed off and became caught up in the whirls and wriggles and contortions, her red hair a bright flame beneath the fluorescents. Copping stared at her. His throat had gone dry. There were other things in the galaxy apart from planets and policy and politics. . . .

"All this jimjah nonsense!" Gokstad upended his drink and at once took another from the robot at his elbow. "Came in from a bunch of primitives we turned up on some planet

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or other. Even adults are doing it! Ridiculous! They look like cavorting elephants."

At once Copping became a fervent advocate of the jim-jah craze and all it stood for.

"But I'm sure, Walter, you'll see the factual advantages from our position." Simon evidently took up the threads of an interrupted argument. "Scavenging space for planets is not fit work for Solarians! Apart from the efforts of the TSC—which seem to grow less every year—we just aren't going out into the galaxy!"

"We're bringing planets to form good strong tightly-knit communities around solid G-stars, Simon!" Gokstad's drinking rate carried on steadily despite what ever else he might be doing. "We're building a mighty empire—"

"Empire, *schmoovey!*" snapped a dark-faced, extravagantly dressed man beside Simon. This, Copping knew, was Tom Barnes, a member of his own parent House. At his side a pale, pretty woman in transparent yellow fluff-clothes smiled anxiously, her eyes darting everywhere but at the people to whom she was talking. This was Barne's wife, Fay.

"All right, Tom! Call it Confederation of free races, if you wish. I don't care what you call the setup. But it works!"

"That isn't the final arbiter among the stars . . ."

"You find me a better."

"Any time!"

"Now, now," said Simon, his breeziness hollow under the strain. "All the alien peoples we've met in the past are united with us in the Confederation. We call it the Solarian Confederation—"

"And the Shurilala and the Takkatians call it that, too!" Gokstad drank, smiling widely. "*That* proves something!"

"Of course! But we must break this idea of bringing planets back to our central suns! There is still time. But if we leave it too late the pioneering spirit will be leached from us and we'll end up a bunch of cowering agoraphobes!"

"Nonsense, Simon! You're looking on the black side!"

Copping thought he saw quite clearly the character and accomplishments of the people among whom he was not to live. They disgusted him in a way he found peculiar;

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after all, some of them were doing what they believed in, and the others made expediency appear logical. But they would not serve his ends. He would have to rid himself of Simon Strang as soon as Stephen Strang's son had reached the end of his usefulness to him.

After that—then they would see, wouldn't they?

But in the interim—why, that could be made to be enjoyable.

He found a drink and wondered away from the group around Simon and Gokstad. He saw the redhead in the undulating emerald dress and began to work his way through the dancers towards her, his body already moving experimentally in the abandon of the jimjah.

PART THREE

XI

AROUND MULTI-LAYERED catwalks and hovering closer on minutely-controlled artgravs, the scientists clustered about the great ball. One hundred feet in diameter, the ball had been sculpted by a series of master hands to represent a planet. The name of the planet happened to be Vesta—but this same procedure had been carried out on many planets previously and would, so Chief Controller Stephen Christopher Strang sincerely believed, be carried out on very many more.

The years had treated Strang with kindly indulgence and even without his gym machines and the normal expectancy of physical fitness until the last few years of a man's life span, he still looked tough and fit and eager for work.

He had made Controller after Chief Commissioner and now he had reached the penultimate step. From Chief Controller he could only go on to become Head of the SCS—or downwards to retirement and relaxation out of the gaudy swirl of interstellar geopolitics.

All about him his men studied the modeled globe of Vesta. This way paid dividends. Strang had once long ago seen a planet moved by the Lansen generators without the minutely detailed study experience had shown necessary. The planet had split open. The experience had been nerve-shattering. The Commissioner in charge had died in the holocaust and Strang had only a single pang of pity for the man.

Now his scientists studied and measured and made their reports. They would inform him of the latest positions of faults and schisms, of undersea trenches and all the lines of failure along which the crust of this world could slip

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and writhe and torture itself in the turmoil of adjustment. In a very real sense a planet was like a living being; it wasn't built to be hurled through space without protection on any other course than the one it had followed since it had been born.

Worlds were fragile objects..

Even old Earth, in the days before weather control had brought order under man's guiding hands, had shown what such a fragile object could do. A single hurricane could suck a quarter of a million tons of water from the sea every second. Two hundred miles an hour winds would flatten everything in their paths. A day's condensation could liberate energy approximating that achieved by the explosion of thirteen thousand megaton bombs. Earthquakes occurred at the rate of roughly two a minute. Only a few of these achieved great magnitude, and stressed-construction of buildings and the endoskeleton systems had long since obviated the needless death tolls of another era.

Earthquakes were no novelty to Strang. The colossal forces boiling and bubbling inside a heavy planet continually seeking equilibrium thrust upwards and the crust of the planet would break and rift at weak points, along lines of fault, riding up in gashes and wounds that would—if Strang allowed—rend the planet to pieces. Within Earth-type planets—all that, for the moment, the SCS were concerned with—a solid white-hot inner core of iron and nickel, surrounded by molten outer core of slightly cooler metal and covered by the brittle crust represented an eggshell filled with liquid fire with a dense ballbearing at the center. Clumsy handling of that little fireball could burn a man's fingers down to stumps.

Strang had a use for all his fingers.

He had a job to do. No natural force, no laws of celestial mechanics, no—and with special vehemence—no other man, was going to stop him carrying out that job to a successful conclusion.

So he studied the modeled globe of Vesta, slowly spinning in the artgravs, noting every possible weakness.

Distances covered in interstellar exploration and planet-

gathering had increased sharply over the years, the expected effect of a massive increase in area resulting from a volume-expansion did not hold true in a galaxy composed of a flat one hundred thousand light-year diameter disc; itself not in any sense solidly packed with stars but consisting of spiral arms, great oceans of emptiness and streaks and swirls of hydrogen and cosmic dust. Outside the disc the globular clusters held some interest and there were always the angled-orbit stars filling out the galaxy's sphere. But Strang had hewed close to his path. He had moved outwards from the hub, along the spiral arm in which the Earth lay thirty thousand light-years from the center. The so-called Rim of fiction, of course, did not exist in fact; the stars attenuated and grew more disparate as the spiral arm fizzled out. There must—it stood to reason—be a star from which if you looked out away from the Milky Way you would see no other stars but those amassed in the far distant galaxies. The true desert of space would extend blackly away out to those unimaginable distances. But then—there were plenty of stars from which, if you looked out in the same way—you would see only one or two stars of your own Milky Way galaxy. Space sort of crept in among the scattered stars, the darkness burrowing in between spiral arms, the emptiness creating a dimly-lit tattering of the hem of the Galaxy.

With the completion of his work with Vesta, Strang had no intention of pursuing further planets out along a random path towards that mythical Rim of the galaxy. With Vesta safely tucked away he intended to retrace his steps and challenge Tung Chi Leslie for a slice of the spiral arm extending in towards the hub. There—he felt convinced—lay the exciting future.

Strang stepped down onto the floor. He craned his head back for a last look at the simulacrum world.

"Everything's set, sir." Doctor Sitobem, the Field Chief, smiled with his usual nervous deprecatory twitch of the lips. Sitobem—a member of the House of Longhi—was a good and competent scientist-turned-administrator. With his sparse hair and the skin tightly-drawn over strong bones, his face

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conveyed an odd aura of a pored marble statue. But he knew his stuff.

"You can begin clearing the Shaft Camp, Doctor." Strang had developed a brusque style with his men in these latter years. He tended to regard his associates in the light of what they could do for him and no longer as personalities. "I intend to have a meal. Then we can go down to the chamber."

"Very well, sir. Oh—your son—"

"Is he still hanging around?"

Sitobem knew well enough the regard father and son held each other in; it had been going on for long enough.

"Yes, sir. He asked permission to go down to the chamber with us."

"He did what? What the hell's come over Simon! Oh—all right. But get rid of that secretary of his. There won't be room for idle sightseers, and Simon will be one too many. But this might be an education for him, at that. . . ."

In the shadows leading to the teleport, Colin Copping listened. He had grown into a tough masculine dynamo of power, a man whose brooding eyes looked on the galaxy and found it wanting. So far he had not found it expedient to throw over Simon Strang; but now—his face habitually showed a blank lackey mask—but now the time had come.

Like everyone else on the Shaft Camp he wore crisp green coveralls. He had cultivated the ability to merge not only with his background but with other men. Now he stood deferentially aside as Stephen Strang bustled past issuing his last orders.

Simon Strang walked across, nervous, his face sweating, to fall in at the tail of the comet following the presence of his father.

Oh, yes, Copping decided. This was a very fine time indeed.

"What's got into you, Simon? Want to share the thrills and dangers of shifting planet?"

Simon's lips trembled. "There's no danger—is there? I mean—"

His father laughed brutally.

"If there was danger I can't envisage you joining us."

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Simon turned away to hide the anger. Watching and listening, Copping felt a twinge of pity for the man who had befriended him. But then he remembered Jethro—and the pity vanished.

Over the meal Strang became expansive. He talked. The others listened. He told them of his determination to open up fresh areas of the spiral arm in towards the hub. He felt confident, he said, that man's true destiny lay in that direction.

The whole meal partook of the quality of a ritual feast, a banquet on the eve of a great hero's conquering departure. In the shadows Copping nursed his hate and waited.

Simon tried to inject something of his own point of view. But—as Copping saw with cynical clarity—the dreams and ideas of Simon and his friends had not moved a millimeter since the day he had joined them at the reception at which Walter Gokstad had bluntly rebuffed them. That seemed a long time ago to Copping.

"Oh, shut that claptrap, Simon! Have you seen Sally lately?"

"No—but Susan and Sarah send their love—"

Strang's face congested. The veins beat thickly in his neck and forehead. He slammed a knife down hard.

"I've told you and your mother, Simon. I want to hear nothing about—about those two!"

"Just because they married without your approval doesn't mean they have ceased to exist!" Simon said with some courage.

"Oh, but it does! As far as I am concerned Mrs. Oquendo and Mrs. Matlin do not exist!"

Simon couldn't face his father. He stuffed a forkful of something into his mouth and chewed. But his left hand twisted the fork with knuckle-blanching force.

Copping looked at Stephen Strang as a man looks at an alien life form under a microscope. The Chief Controller had not, expectedly, remembered Copping from that pyrotechnic visit to doomed Jethro. Copping fingered the Carpenter at his waist and he allowed a thin smile to form on his face, safe from all observation. He had once thought

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a Smeeson sufficient reward for Gerban Arnouf. Now, with maturity, he had refined those clumsy ideas.

After the meal the scientists' no longer needed began to clear away Shaft Camp and trail across to the waiting spaceships. The chamber party assembled before the teleport. Teleports were useful at short ranges for bulky items, or at long ranges for lightweight objects; so far the boffins had not perfected an all-purpose teleport. They would, one day, of course. Copping stood in the shadows as the overheads dimmed, and waited.

Dr. Sitobem went through first. He entered the box, the door shut, the cycling light glowed and then, as air sighed through the inlets, the door opened and the next man stepped through. Sitobem, having been broken down to constituent nuclear particles and shot down into the chamber at the planet's core, had been reassembled there without apparent dislocation of continuity. When Simon went through he licked his lips and was clumsy about entering the box, with Strang's brutal laughter echoing in his head.

The narrow shaft first driven by the borer sometimes stayed intact right through a planetary operation. More often, as here on Vesta, subterranean upheavals crushed it, filled it with molten fire, twisted it into chaotic uselessness. All the borer did was to open the first channel into the core and then, surrounded by a manmade electromagnetic shielding flux that withstood all those awesome pressures around, the teleport would be erected and the scientists commuted from chamber to surface via broken down beams of nucleonic particles and wavicles. The idea of riding some super-gigantic elevator to and from the surface chilled practical men to the marrow.

Strang went through last. Even alone, the bulldog arrogance showed in the way he strutted rather than walked into the box.

Looking at him Copping felt the bile rising in waves of sheer hatred. When the cycling light died, he moved forward like a deadly cat stalking towards the waterhole and his prey.

This—he was going to enjoy.

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In the chamber at the planet's nickel and iron core, Dr. Sitobem requested the usual check from the geophone operators. Connected to the surface and thence, by normal sub-light radio to the orbiting spaceships, they checked on the progress of the surface parties.

Commodore Morley Lansdowne came on the circuit.

"All set up here, Doctor. I'm lifting jets on the last ship in ten minutes."

"Good. The shield is due on in thirty minutes."

"Check."

"Remember, Morley," Strang leaned over the top and growled into the geophone, "we're staging at the hundred light-year mark. I don't intend to stay down here all the trip in to Pallas."

"I understand—sir."

No one could blame a Chief Controller for wishing to remain immured at the core of a planet. The fauna and flora of Vesta contained many interesting specimens and although the shield to be flung about the planet would protect them from the rigors of lightless space, it always paid dividends to stage a journey and let the planet swim for a day or so in the friendly rays of a G-star on the way.

Strang stumped back to the control desk he had usurped.

"Pallas!" he said with ironic emphasis. "In the old days we all went out and grabbed planets for our own home suns and allies. Now we're a governmental service; we do the work and bring home the planets and sometimes we have to orbit them around the suns of the Confederation."

Dr. Sitobem, twitching his lips, ventured mildly, "We're not xenophobes any longer, sir. Why—the Paints have been our good friends for centuries!"

"Yeah, I know. I'd just rather be orbiting this planet around Sol, or Centaurus, or one of the home suns."

Simon, keeping in the background, knew his father was just being awkward, trying to rile his associates. Ancient wars in space were best forgotten. Especially with the continued stories coming in with monotonous regularity of the imminent collision of the Solarian Confederation with another and—heartbreakingly—inimical alien race.

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It seemed there would always be Sharks in space for men to meet and fumble around the courtesies and the hatreds before real contact was made. It seemed—but that was sloppy thinking. There *would* be initially inimicable aliens just as there *would* be aliens with whom Earthmen became fast friends from the moment of first contact.

To Simon, his father had grown into a bloated ogre. He had made this visit to try to bring his father to an acceptance of Susan's and Sarah's marriages. The family had been split and his mother ached in private and faced the world with a stony public visage. That hurt Simon.

Now that would-be great man of iron sat surrounded by his lackeys, superintending the removal of one more world. He would share the never-flagging excitement of the moments when the Lansen generators started up and the planet moved. Then, during the staging halt around the selected star, he would teleport to the surface and be taken off by a pinnacle from his fleet. No doubt about it. Chief Controller Stephen Christopher Strang was a big man. His father. Big.

Strang himself sat slumped, watching all that went on with the professional, cold and completely passionless eye of the perfectionist who knows what he wants and the means of obtaining it. He did not interfere in the operation. Techs studied their dials and waited for Dr. Sitobem to give the signal. When it came even the filtered air within the chamber at the core of the world subtly changed. The Lansen generators began their sub-audible whine—no dogs, on pain of instant madness—and as the potential built up so men's skins fibrillated, hair brittled, teeth ached, the whole body of man, bone and flesh, blood and muscle, tautened and strummed in time to the harmonics hammering inaudibly from the generators.

Simon's fingernails drove into his palms. One or two of the femal techs, all with hair clipped short, blew their noses on tissues. The echoing ball of the manmade chamber where should only be solid nickel and iron so compressed that it beat in white-hot fangs of anger at the intrusion, thrummed with activity.

On the geophone transmitted from his flagship, Morley

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Landsdowne's voice said: "The sun is fluctuating. Dimming is taking place on a regular cycle, level eleven on the Lansen charts."

"Thank you," answered Sitobem. He looked like a chicken about to be plucked. "The thermocouples and lightmeters are repeating satisfactorily."

Landsdowne sniffed. He had been in a chamber at moment of potential breakthrough and he had welcomed the sound of a voice from outside. He had known the reactions of the sun were monitored in the chamber and, it stood to reason, as men drew off vast quantities of pure energy to power their Lansen generators the sun would show that drain in a fluctuation, a dimming, reaction to man's interference. Evidently Dr. Sitobem didn't relish the human voice—or he was worried.

"She's nearly there!" said a girl tech. Strang glanced at the records. Potential had built up to breakthrough point. Any heartbeat now, and—

They flashed. They coruscated for a single chronocron of time. Then Landsdowne's voice said: "Vesta's gone into hyperspace! You've shifted her!"

Strang leaned back. Now they were pelting through mankind's version of that other space and time continuum where at a steady rate of knots they outpaced laggardly light in their own space-time continuum.

Another planet was Earthward bound.

Well—Pallas bound.

The good feeling soaked through Strang.

He had been violently displeased when Susan had, defying his wishes, married that oaf Oquendo and gone to be a sniveling Kassim around Shurilala. He had been even more displeased when Sarah—his Sarah!—had pranced in towing some lout of a TSC Commander and claiming the man to be her husband. He'd been badly let down by the two elder daughters. Sally—well, Sally had her sights set on that young lad Craig Drummond. With Zeus Drummond about to give up the leadership of the House of Christopher, Strang could not afford to offend the old man. House Leadership had long figured in Strang's plans for his career. Anyway, Craig

seemed the sort of boy he could trust his daughter to. Apart from the nonsense he talked about shifting planets without boring to the center, a nonsense Strang had not fully investigated—he seemed a suitable match.

But Susan—and Sarah . . .

Life never dealt four aces in a row. . . . You had to fight for what you wanted, and when you got half of it, the first half turned rotten in your hand. . . .

The Lansen generators even sucking raw gobbets of power from a sun could not hurl the bulk of a planet through sub-space with the speed the McIvors could drive a spaceship. Morley Landsdowne was waiting in orbit around the G-star when the planet Vesta popped out of hyperspace and took up a temporary orbit. The shield went down and the warm and wonderful sunshine shone down on the surface once more. Not one of the animals of the surface would know that the sun they saw again was not the sun they had seen disappear from their sky. . . .

Techs sat back and blew out their cheeks. A hum of relieved conversation broke out in the chamber. The first leg was over. Strang nodded to Sitobem.

"Very good, Doctor. I am leaving you now. Just carry on with the good work as though I were still here."

He went with heavy authority towards the teleport.

He never allowed himself to think of his exact situation in the chamber. After all, a man's mind could accept the fact of his being buried alive beneath the load of a complete planet; everywhere he turned was *up*. There was no longer a *down*.

He entered the box and the doors shut. The cycling lights remained dead. Irritation seized him. He had a ten thousand light-year thick spiral arm to investigate and its planets to bring home as trophies—this delay infuriated him.

He thumped the overriding manual controls and still the cycling program remained dead.

He stormed from the teleport back into the chamber.

"What the hell's going on? Get some techs on that box and get them on quick! I don't have time to waste hanging about down here!"

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"At once, sir." Sitobem scurried away, hounding his techs into scurrying action.

A curious frozen waiting descended on the chamber. The gathered scientists and techs knew well enough what was going on. They could travel instantaneously to the surface via the teleport, or as near instantaneously as made no difference. But that single door had been closed. Now they waited to find if it had also been bolted.

Strang's main feelings were those of frustration and impatience. Fear, as yet, had no place in his mind.

For his son, Simon, the fear came first, gibbering and clawing blackly on his shoulder, leering with the mask of putrefying death in his face. Simon had to face that fear. Then he saw his father, scowling, beating one fist into the other palm—and the feeling of absolute spite that sight created drove out feelings of self-fear, gave him a hate-love reaction of luxurious mocking laughter.

Sitobem looked ghastly. The fluorescents sheened green and sickly from his forehead, gouged pits of verdigris in his cheeks, shrank his wizened neck to a stalk. He had to swallow twice, convulsively, before he could speak.

"Commodore Landsdowne is on the surface, sir. He reports the surface teleport completely wrecked."

"Wrecked? That's not possible."

"It looks, sir, Commodore Landsdowne says, like the work of a bomb. The Shaft Camp has been largely destroyed."

"A bomb!" Strang's face betrayed his bewilderment. "Why should a bomb be left lying about in a dangerous state? Why have a bomb on surface at all?" He pushed Sitobem out of the way, thrusting his large face at the geophone.

"Morley? Clear away the debris and set up a fresh teleport. Snap to it! I've work to do out of this hole!"

Landsdowne said, carefully, "The four spare teleports we carried were aboard *Firedrake*, sir. There was an explosion and fires." Quite clearly Strang heard Landsdowne's swallow over the geophone. "All the teleports were destroyed."

Simon said, "Oh! Colin was traveling aboard *Firedrake*. I do hope he isn't injured."

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"No casualties." Landsdowne's voice brought no comfort to the men trapped in the chamber.

Strang stood before the geophone, stunned. The feeling of insupportable pressures that, as a spaceman, he felt in the center of a planet and hitherto been thrown off by him as old-maid's fears. Whilst the machinery drew power through the heat-exchangers from the white-hot heart of the planet the air conditioners would run, the refrigeration would operate, the artificial gravity would keep them from floating around under pseudo free fall conditions. Despite the unforgettable fact that this control chamber lay at the core of a planet, their situation was paralleled by a control room in space. That had always been the comfort for Strang.

But now—now that door had been shut and bolted.

"I've never been an advocate," he said with harsh emphasis, "of a cybernarchy. I've fought always against allowing deciding principles to be taken out of a man's hands. But no damnfool machine would have let a bomb go off at the teleport and aboard the storeship carrying the spares." He turned his head, still bent, and lowered upon the men and women watching him. "We'll get out of here. We'll get out. And, I promise you, the man responsible for this will be caught and tried and punished! I'll see to that!"

"But what are we going to *do*?" shouted a female tech.

Strang crushed her with a look.

"We'll keep our heads for a start."

"This is awful!" Dr. Sitobem gripped his hands together. They squealed. The sound set teeth on edge.

Strang unclamped his holster flap. "I'll crisp the first person who panics! I'm not indulging in any hysteria. We're scientific human beings, we inhabit the galaxy—we're not brainless animals . . . Now—all of you get out and do what you'd be doing. Don't worry. I'll get you out of this."

They went, reluctantly, fearful, out to their sleeping quarters. Strang gripped Sitobem hard by the shoulder.

"Listen to me, Doctor. You have to show these people just what a leader they have. So help me, if you crack up on me I'll crucify you! Now—get out there and sort out the food situation. We may be down here some time."

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Like a whipped cur, Sitobem scuttled for the crew's quarters. Simon and his father glared at each other. Only a skeleton staff remained monitoring controls.

"Just keep all your remarks to yourself, Simon. I've work to do." Strang turned his back on his son.

Mildly, Simon said to that broad and arrogant back, "I was only going to say you stomped on that incipient panic. They'd have gone if you hadn't—"

"I know, Simon. That's my job. They were near to a mass hysteria that would have finished us. Now get out from under my feet."

Strang held still for a moment, head down, grasping the warm plastic of the geophone. *Dear God! Not like this, not entombed in the hellfires of an alien planet!*

Then he lifted the receiver and spoke with all his brutal, irritable harshness.

"Morley! Unless you come up with a solution I'm going to have to get out of here my way."

Landsdowne's voice sounded thin and scratchy. "This is a hell of a mess . . . We can't get you out right away. The borer would take months—"

"What the hell's the use of the borer, Morley? We want a teleport on the surface, not down here."

"I was thinking you could come up through the shaft—"

"Well, that's out! And, anyway, we don't have the time. Our air should be okay for a bit yet; but we're short of food and water. We can only recycle a certain amount—we didn't program this chamber for long-term occupancy. Maybe we will in future. Have you any other bright ideas?"

"We have already radioed for a fresh teleport—"

"Yes. I thought you'd do that. Where is the nearest set located?"

His vicious sarcasm was not lost on Morley Landsdowne. Truly, their relationship had changed over the years.

"The Service don't have any nearer than Epsilon—"

"Don't tell me what you can't do! Where is the set? How long will it take to get here?"

"The set's not far away—Briseis. But—"

"But nothing! As I recall Briseis is a week away—I'd

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be prepared to waste a week of my life shut up down here. A week—" Strang paused as Landsdown, who had been spluttering away trying to interrupt, at last got through.

"That's on McIvors, sir."

"Well?" But Strang had recognized the hollow feeling in his stomach. This was not good.

"I said the Service's nearest was Epsilon. There are no McIvor powered ships on Briseis—no Service, no Navy, no Marines. They have a fast freighter there—one of the old Antares tubs powered by VRM engines—"

"I remember those. Only a quarter the speed of the McIvors."

"Yes, sir."

"A month. A whole solid month terran we'll be stuck down here."

"I'm afraid so—"

"You're afraid! Why? *You're* not chained in this damned white-hot dungeon!"

"No, sir."

Sitobem had walked in, still shaking. Now he said through pinched lips, "I've checked the store situation. We could possibly last out a month terran—just—by strict rationing—"

"All right, Doctor! Thank you. I know how to handle a rationing system. We'll go down to subsistence level if necessary—"

"It'll be touch and go, sir—"

"*All right!* Don't harp on it." Strang gripped the geophone as though he could wring the thing's neck. "Listen to me, Morley. And you, Doctor. I'm not staying cooped up down here for a month. Gerban Arnouf has certain plans culminating before then and I must be on hand to—well, that's by the by. And Tung Chi Leslie, also, must be handled—I'm letting you all into my confidence like this, fully conscious of the risk I am taking; but also well aware of the loyalty and trust I obtain from my subordinates."

Simon winced.

"The well being of the galaxy demands that I leave this prison immediately."

Mankind—and that included Stephen Strang—always spoke

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casually of the galaxy when they meant very well that small slice they had so far explored. The galaxy with its one hundred thousand light-year diameter disc remained a far-distant prospect for the thorough exploration the TSC deemed necessary. Plenty of ships had driven full-tilt on their space drives across the galaxy—and some had even returned. But the Solarian government's firm attitude was to explore cautiously and consolidate the gains before going on. Simon knew this, everyone knew this; but when Stephen Strang spoke of the galaxy needing him immediately—why, they tended to imagine the whole vast teeming multitude of stars rising up and beseeching Stephen Strang.

The most lamentable trouble was—it wasn't funny.

"How do you intend to do that, sir?" Landsdowne must have known by now that Strang had an alternative.

Strang consciously preened himself. He spoke with blatant overtones of triumph in his voice. "We're trapped down here and it is imperative we get out immediately. I am going to use the Lansen generators unpredictably—"

"You're going to shatter the planet!"

"Yes."

"But you can't!" Sitobem thrust forward with agonized earnestness. "What of all our work! Vesta is a wonderful planet! You can't wantonly smash it up just to liberate yourself—"

"Think, Doctor!" Strang's voice and gesture menaced the old scientific administrator. "Think very carefully what you say to me now!"

Sitobem swallowed and then, very courageously, said, "I meant merely that in view of an alternative rescue it would be vandalism to destroy the planet now."

"I do not ask you, Dr. Sitobem, to manage the affairs of my slice of the galaxy! What I say goes. I am not to be cooped up in a planet. That seems perfectly straight forward."

"It's a risky step—" Landsdowne said, worriedly.

"If I am prepared to take the risk that is all that concerns you, Morley."

Sitobem slumped back on a control bench. "When a

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planet splits the crust ruptures and disintegrates—then the molten outer core spills out, fiery and volcanic. Gobs of matter spray into space and start to solidify. Anything on the surface, of course, is at once destroyed. But—but the inner core—nickel and iron at tremendous pressure and white-heat—

"That will explode outwards rather splendidly!" Strang spoke with a relish as of a new experience.

"But we're right in the center—"

"And, in theory, should be left floating in space in our chamber. The planet should unfold from around us like a cosmic dance of the seven veils."

Thirty years or so ago that particular image would have been unthinkable to Strang. But there had been Abby Merilees in the interim. Shena hadn't known about her but, Strang suspected, she was growing more aware of the latest conquests. A pity. But mooning about women wouldn't get him out of this spot. He felt the strength of confidence in what he was doing support his decisions. Space knew what Gerban Arnouf was up to—and as for Leslie Tungwell, both of them had been put-out when, as Controllers, they had seen Strang make Chief Controller first. First. That was the thing. To be first in everything.

He'd surely be the first deliberately to smash up a planet.

Around him in the chamber the scientists had crept quietly back. He knew he had their complete attention.

He spoke heavily into the geophone. "Start getting everything you want off surface, Morley. Let me know when you're clear."

"Yes, sir—but—"

Strang rode on unheeding. "You'd better stand well off in space. Vesta will probably break up spectacularly—mind you take film. I want to see that. Then as soon as we break free of the last of the core send in for us fast. We'll wait until we can establish direct radio contact—one of the techs here will lash up a spacerig—and then we'll cut the force flux shield." He laughed with self-satisfaction. "After that you can break your way in with pickaxes."

"We can do all that, of course, sir. We'll erect our own

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shield with air and everything. And the chamber's physical concrete walls are thin—but . . . but . . ."

"That's it, then. Stop butting and get your tail off the surface!"

A murmur of conversation from behind Landsdowne reached over the geophone link. A sharp voice said something about: "Blasted egocentric arrogancel" And another voice, a deep rumble, said: "Waste of a perfectly good planet."

Strang heard. He was aware of a sudden indrawn breath from Sitobem and some of the other close scientists. He vaguely understood they expected him to explode into anger. But the voices from Landsdowne's flagship pleased him. What little men thought of him gave him a valuable insight into his course in life. Of course, what they said stemmed only from their own knowledge that they *were* small insignificant ciphers in the galaxy. They didn't have the courage to own to what they wanted and then to go all out for that end.

A fresh voice cut in over the murmur on the geophone. At first, listening, Strang did not want to believe what it said. Then he was forced to listen as the scientists at his back broke into excited exclamations of joy.

The voice said: ". . . picked up our signal and is now vectoring in on overdriven McIvors! Be here inside thirty hours terran. Another eight hours to unship and reerect the teleport and the chamber can be evacuated at once."

"Thirty-eight hours!" "That's no time at all!" "That's great!"

The scientists pounded one another's backs. Simon, watching his father's face, saw no echoing pleasure. He moved closer, said in a whisper of gloating triumph, "You *wanted* to smash up the planet, didn't you, Father?"

Strang jerked as though stung by an electric discharge. "What?" And then, bleakly, "Get lost, Simon."

Simon moved away. He knew enough to leave his father to enjoy that moment of triumphant loss alone.

Sharp on thirty-six hours terran later Strang was the first to step into the box and be whisked to the surface. His face showed granite and marble lines of displeasure. Simon, following him out, saw the figure that detached

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itself from the crowd of waiting scientists and service personnel at the Shaft Camp.

"Susan!"

She laughed and kissed him and then disengaged to speak to her father. Strang stood humped, talking to Landsdowne. He did not turn, did not alter a plane of his features, did not falter over a single syllable in his conversation as his daughter spoke to him.

"Father!" Susan swung away, tears dangerously bright in her eyes. A tall, handsome and crinkly-haired man stepped out angrily, took her arm.

"Hold up, Suel I'll speak to the idiot—"

"No—Bruce! It'll only make trouble—"

Bruce Kassim Oquendo stared with hot eyes at his father-in-law. He did not like what he saw. "I'm talking to Stephen Christopher Strang!" he said loudly and clearly. "I do not expect a reply. We picked up your distress call and came running with our teleport. But it seems we needn't have bothered to call on you."

Strang's voice had died, but he still refused to turn around. Morley Landsdowne felt like pulling the planet in on top of a hole and not coming out for a week.

Oquendo went on, "As far as I am concerned, Chief Controller Strang, you could have stayed down in your pit until hell froze over." He pivoted Susan around. "Come on, Susan. Don't bother to say good-bye to your father. He hasn't the manners to understand a pig's grunt."

XII

STRANG STORMED back to Solishtar in a turbulent frame of mind.

He expended a full three hours' energy on the Carpenters and a whole slew of china cabinets, strewing the rifle range with whitely-glinting shards. Even then he saw the image of glinting stars in the smashed crockery. He was a man chained to space and well aware of his bonds.

Shena had gone visiting friends on Solvenus—one of the

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old original planets of the system—and Strang by this time had no compunctions in temporarily installing his latest conquest. She was an empty-headed little courtesan who foolishly affected silver hair; but Strang, with her lack of conversation and her magnificent body, found her entirely adequate to his needs.

A communications robot trundled across after they had finished the evening meal and plunked the screen before the couch, switching on.

"Not yet, you mindless mechanical monster!" Strang hastily tumbled the girl off the end of the couch and straightened up his white shirt, pulling the collar back over his shoulder to cover the bites. She sat up on the floor, arching her back, and squealed.

"Shut up, idiot! And take that leg off the screen!"

"But I thought I was going to meet your friends—" she started to wail.

Then Strang pushed his face forward, forgetting the girl, not caring just how much she was showing, concentrating on Major General Alah-ed-din Ryohzh Jordan Jelal.

"Clear to talk, sir?"

"All clear, Aladdin. You've news?" The ferocious eagerness beat from Strang like a bloodhound on the scent.

Jelal shook his head. He had aged, like them all, over the past years; but that death's head appearance of ruthless dedication to the practice of killing still had power to chill and repel. "I'm having to report no success on tracing anyone, sir. We've been over the ground a dozen times. *Fire-drake* was just a mess. Forensics screened her; but all traces had been lost."

"So you've failed?"

"The police are keen on the coincident accident theory, sir."

"The police are bumlbers! That's why I told you to find out." Strang punched a fist into the couch. It was not a formfit and so did not respond. "Anyway, even if it was an accident someone must have been responsible! And I wanted him! I want him fricasseed and served up finely grated—"

Jelal had not missed the past tense.

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"Everything happened on top of everything else, sir. It's a sad reflection on our police force; but—"

"It doesn't throw my personal army forces up in a very favorable light, does it, Aladdin?"

"No, sir."

"I shall be spacing out to the SGC Omega Twelve sector."

"But Tung Chi Leslie—"

"I know. I shall deal with that problem when it occurs. You will prepare your usual army forces—consult Commodore Landsdowne over transport. But, General—you will leave a cadre in the Solarian base. I'm having fresh replacements sent there. They will follow when indoctrinated. Understood?"

"Understood, sir." Jelal's teak face showed an emotion now, a puzzlement he could not hide.

"Don't worry over your orders, Aladdin. I shan't ask you to fight Leslie Tung's army—that would be impolite. . . ."

"Yes, sir."

Strang relaxed from the screen, saw a naked ankle protruding from the end of the couch and kicked it. He then had to cough hard to cover the squeal. "Now you're a major general, Aladdin, you're entitled to a deegee. See that you have one installed here. I dislike deegees just as much as I ever did; but at least they are better than this screening."

"It is a compliment, sir, to have my deegee installed in your palace—"

"Save me the compliments. Now get on with it. I'll see you in the Omega twelve sector."

The screen darkened and the comrobot bustled it away. Strang reached down a hand, caught a leg and hauled in.

"I can at least tell a deegee to wait outside the door," he said. The girl giggled.

"I always said these robots were too uppity—they delight in putting me in embarrassing situations."

"Not them, my flower—you can do that by yourself quite refreshingly often."

Next morning Strang programmed the Wolseley superhor-

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net to take the girl back to Solariadne—she was holidaying there—and took the RR *Golden Ghost* out to his ship hanging in parking orbit off Solmars. He moved with a snap. He had given the houserobots strict programs to clean the palace up. He didn't care if Shena knew. He just had no time and mental energy to spare in emotional squabbles. He needed all his power and skill for the battles that lay ahead.

After all, that close bi-symbiosis of Shena and himself had been a rarity these days. The House system permitted certain well-defined spheres of free love; you could enjoy someone of your own House, if in the normal course of events that would have been possible, with no guilt feelings riding an earlier age and with no problems of conscience. No offspring, no transgression of forbidden degrees; these rules remained. And yet despite all this, Strang had his houserobots minutely programmed to clear the palace of every trace of the empty-headed silver-haired courtesan, despite her name—something Christopher something. He told himself he wanted no emotional drain before important conferences in space. He told himself he didn't mind if Shena knew. . . .

Strang had in these latter days developed the mannerism of clamping his mouth shut with an arrogance all the more pronounced for its deliberation, pausing between sentences. He would do this and then cut his gaze down across his auditor's face. He had found it an amusingly satisfying tool in his perennial ego-flaying gambits. Morley Landsdowne, who had risen one rank in thirty years, had wounding experience of that mannerism. Jelal—who had risen two—had so far been spared. Strang had a use for Major General Jelal in his plans, a use for which a strong and self-centered man's interests would be vital. Landsdowne had remained too much what Strang had once been.

The old *Archimedes* rode somewhere in the fleet that awaited his orders. Like a warrior past his prime his old flagship still hunted with the new bucks. Now he stepped aboard SCS *Anaxagoras* amid the circumstance of centuries old tradition, the twittering of pipes, the sideboys, the immacu-

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lately turned-out guard. He saluted, a mere gesture, and at once went below.

His secretarial bureau robots clustered, waiting.

The strange and obscurely alarming impression had crossed his mind before that he dealt more with machines than he did with people; one day the whole shooting-match might be taken over by the electronic marvels and the cybernarchy he hated and feared would overwhelm mankind's encroachments on the galaxy.

He kicked a secrobot's leg as he sat down. The feeling of stolid indifference reassured him. To rule, a brain must know what hate was. And then, knowing, discard it.

He had debated his wisdom in not seeing Caracci this time in the solar system. Caracci, that much older, that much more authoritarian, had in effect given Strang carte blanche on his area of space the last time the two had met. In making this Rubicon move to adjust his sphere of influence, Strang had not wished to chance a revocation of that august edict. He was playing it close to the chest.

By this time Tung Chi Leslie would know that Strang had sent in a prognosis of diminishing returns on his own sector and had transhipped at Solmars. He would seek urgent reasons for transmitting this information to Caracci. So far Caracci had not responded. The reasons for that seemed clear enough to Strang aboard SCS *Anaxagoras*. Gerban Arnouf had not yet jumped.

Stephen Strang would not thank anyone these days for calling him one of Caracci's Young Men. Those days were dead. He had heard with disfavor reports of Arnouf's accumulation of a cadre of intense young workers, forming what he hoped one day would be called Arnouf's Young Men. As a Controller, Arnouf was trying to run before he had finished walking. Strang believed he had no need for any help of that close, intimate nature as yet. He had his teams. His subordinates had been hand-picked and, by this time in his career, Strang knew them and their capabilities and weaknesses.

There would be time enough for his own group of Young Men. You had to be first in the galaxy, yes; but there was

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no percentage in rushing headlong forward without first checking the way.

He could outwit and, if necessary, smash Leslie Tung. Of this he felt very sure. Gerban Arnouf represented the greater opposition—and that opposition was mortal.

After half an hour of intense concentration and effort he had wiped out a considerably greater portion of the work load than he had expected. He leaned back, stretching in the formfit, and Morley Landsdowne came through on the ship's intercom.

"We're all ready to go, sir. Permission to space out?"

"Whenever you like. I shall come up to the bridge shortly."

"Yes, sir."

Strang went back to his secrobots and was about to initiate a regrading scheme in the radar tech branch when the intercom said: "Slight hold, sir. Permission to board has been received from Miss Sally Strang. Shall—"

"Yes!" said Strang, standing up and cascading files and loose papers onto the deck. "Tell her to come on in. I'll be at the main airlock."

"Check."

He moved with purposeful vigor from his suite and positioned himself on the apron area before the airlocks of the main cluster, an idiotic smile on his face and a feeling of bursting rockets in his head. Sally.

She came through like a new planet swinging into orbit.

"Dad! I heard all about it from Sarah!" Sally hugged him, giving him no time to answer, rushing on. "It must have been awful. I mean—trapped down there in the middle of a planet, white hot fires all about, no food and water and the air running out—I know it was only your example that kept everybody sane! I know I'd have died!"

"It wasn't like that and you wouldn't." He did not mention Sarah. That had been settled.

"Thank God you got out all right."

"Yes. Well—how are you, Sally? What have you been doing? I couldn't reach you on Isis—"

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"I *know!* I've been out with Craig trying out his new technique. It works, Dad, it really does!"

"H'mm, young lady. That has to be proved—"

She stood back. As Strang looked over her shoulders he saw the airlock doors closing on a motley collection of electronic equipment, cables, meters, precariously boxed contraptions. Standing sheepishly beside it like a junkman in a breaker's yard, Craig Drummond showed unmistakable signs of not knowing whether to step briskly forward, disappear, or to stay there until someone noticed him.

"We've been shifting some of the asteroids around— Had to put them all back through." Sally laughed mischievously. "They're all counted and tallied—"

"Of course. We use 'em as we want them—and you've been juggling with them, have you, miss?"

Craig Drummond cleared his throat, jerked forward, and blurted out, "I've been shifting them, sir. Any blame falls on me."

And Stephen Strang laughed.

"I can see your shining armor from here, Craig. Nice to see you. Now come on down to my rooms for a drink. Oh—and it seems you're on the way to the Omega Twelve sector. That's where I'm bound and I can't stop to put you off."

"That's just find, Dad. That's where we want to go."

"Oh?"

She hung onto his arm as she had done when they'd walked the cultivated parklands of Isis in the long ago; when she'd been a gay mischievous sprite without a care in her head apart from the next party, the new doll, the latest packet of sweets. Now she was contemplating marriage . . . Incredible.

"Craig's ideas *work*, Dad! I've seen the doohickey—"

"The Split-potential principle," Craig put in with a deprecating cough.

"That's the gadget. I've seen it spin an asteroid in from Jupiter and pop it sweetly along Mars orbit. Of course, like I said, we had to put it back. But—"

"That's an asteroid, Sally."

"It'll work on a planet, too! You'll see!"

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"Will I? How?"

She laughed and they entered his apartments where at once she hurled her purse down onto a formfit and dragged Craig over to her father. "Why, easy. You're going to shift your next planet using Craig's brains, Dad!"

At once Strang saw with instantaneous intuitive clarity what his next moves must be in the cosmic battle of wits between the men who had once been Caracci's Young Men.

Eighty planets now swung around Sol, and her home suns had likewise expanded their planetary populations. Strang initiated a policy memo direct to Caracci, with copies to Leslie Tung and Gerban Arnouf, outlining his belief that the time had come for a further expansion of Solarian outpost civilizations. The précis said succinctly, "With the almost certain advent of Shark problems centering around the Omega Twelve sector I believe we should establish a stellar population on the outskirts ready to take the initial shock."

He knew well enough the ribald answer to that one. It took time, they would scoff, to set up a stellar system sufficient for that purpose. It took time to move planets and populate them. Population by people was the care of Solarian Commonwealth Expansion; the SCS provided the homes, and the SCE inhabited them. Strang knew that SCE had been running behind schedule; a dozen new worlds to colonize would come like manna from heaven to them.

He finished: "I will set up a planetary grouping inside a year terran."

He sent the forms off and lay back in his formfit, chuckling maliciously. Let Arnouf pick the bones out of that one.

Caracci's answer came back by return.

"Proceed. Caracci."

Again—carte blanche.

Having successfully sidestepped the problem of Leslie Tung, Strang could leave Arnouf to roast a little longer.

Out here heading inwards along the spiral arm to the hub, the stars clustered more thickly than Strang had ever before seen. The Zagreb cluster by comparison appeared a desert.

Most of the stars were little red M-stars, of little practi-

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cal value. A few variables were charted and then pointedly ignored. The giants and supergiants, also, related to the terrans solely as astrogation points. Let the scientists enthuse over them. The SCS had business to conduct in the galaxy. Strang made his choice carefully, ending up with two mild yellow G-stars within a light-year of each other, around which he planned to orbit a solar defense complex that would act as a shield to the Solarian Confederation and as a jumping off point for the next planned expansion.

From all the stars around with heavy planets of roughly Earth size he would take the raw material for his dream.

He saw that Craig Drummond was issued with a set of regulation Service coveralls, inconspicuously green, putting Drummond squarely into the framework of the organization operating under Strang's own hand. He wanted no specially privileged operatives undermining his authority.

Then he turned Drummond and his equipment with a landing team loose on sun SGC Nine Nine Seven Six Eight Omega Twelve. Planets Sixteen, Seventeen and Eighteen were all first class material. He would take them all.

Strang made a point of personally checking over the defense warning devices suspended in hyperspace. They formed a great sphere of early warning information telling of the approach of any massive body in hyperspace, matching the much greater and more complex defensive sphere around the Solarian Confederation home suns.

As he said gruffly to Landsdowne, "I don't want to be jumped by any damn runaway planets, or Shark-controlled worlds. We've had enough of that in the past."

Landsdowne nodded. He spoke less and less freely to Strang these days.

"And I want our teams fully committed. Get all the borders in action on suitable planets. I want the Lansen generators operating inside six months."

"Yes, sir."

Strang stood at the apex of his career, looking out on space, seeing the starfields glitter clear across the view. Not many of those dots of light were of much use. But those that were, were going to be tucked away in the firm grasp

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of the Solarian Confederation. He stood at the apex so far—but he intended to go on upwards. He hadn't asked to be born into the galaxy, but he had been and he was firmly resolved to take everything that the galaxy could give him.

He turned away from that blazing panorama sprawled in casual might across the screens and began to leave the bridge of his flagship. He had set the machinery in motion; but there remained still much to be done.

The radar officer said, "A contact, sir! Two—there are two bogeys out there!" She read off the ranges and bearings and declinations.

Then: "Bogey One calling. Relaying."

The voice from the speakers said: "SCS *Anaxagoras*. Request permission to come aboard. This is private yacht *Liberty*, Colin Copping commanding."

"Copping?" said Landsdowne. "Oh—Simon Strang's secretary."

"No longer," said Strang shortly. "I hear he left Simon. All right. Let him come aboard."

"Second bogey no response, sir—"

"Action stations," said Morley Landsdowne quietly. He took command. "Will you remain here, sir, or go to your—"

"I've never been in action before, Morley, and if you think you can cheat me out of it now, you're mistaken."

"Let's hope we don't have to, sir—"

The ident machine chuntered through its electronic memories. It dinged its bell and spat out a card. Landsdowne picked it up.

"TSC two-place scouter!" He looked surprised. "Not alien. Still—I think I'll remain at action stations until we find out a little more." He looked like a man enjoying himself for the first time in years. "No reply?"

"Nothing, sir." The signals officer checked her techs. "We're picking up nothing at all in any band."

"Right. Have a party go out and pick it up. But take things easily. You'll be covered from here, but if you're too close—"

A boarding party left *Anaxagoras* in a launch. Intrigued, Strang waited on the bridge. He did not truthfully know

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if he was pleased or disappointed that there was not to be the lethal flare of spatial combat. Colin Copping entered the control room. He looked about in surprise, saw the tense faces of the personnel, said something and was firmly hushed by an officer.

The speaker said: "We've made contact, sir. It's a TSC two-place scouter all right. Badly damaged. On free orbit. It must have been out here for some time—"

"Bring it aboard," Landsdowne said. "If there's a mystery here we'll get to the bottom of it. Jump to it!"

Everyone including Strang waited excitedly. They did not notice the way Colin Copping was staring at Stephen Strang, took no notice of the pinched look of hatred yellowing around his nostrils and the way his fists clenched savagely at his sides.

XIII

TERRAN SURVEY CORPS COMMANDERS, as a breed of men, stood as a race apart from all other ranks and titles. A TSC Commander would be the human being in command of other human beings at the time of their contact with aliens. This single facet of their responsibilities alone sums up why men like Richard Matlin felt a glow of more than ordinary affection for the rank, duties and responsibilities of a TSC Commander. Also—they ranked with a Space Navy Captain and equivalent ranks in other services. That added a pleasurable little tickle of guilt on the gingerbread.

' Now, Commander John Emiko widened his flat rubbery face into a cheerfully impudent smile and said, "Looks like I made it at last, Dick."

Captain Richard Matlin answered that smile with a gentle punch on the shoulder, contemptuous of deep psychological reasons behind the brief gesture of affection.

They stood in the Admiral's space cabin—the stiff formality of space punctilio had little parade in the TSC—and they felt good. Even so, Dick Matlin appreciated the twinge of nostalgic regret for that special and exotic rank of Commander that he was now passing by.

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"You'll be getting *Halberd*, John." The Admiral twinkled at them. An old space-dog, he knew good men. "As for you, Dick—there's a special and interesting one in the bag for you."

"I hope," Matlin said with a totally unexpected flare of hope, "you mean a ship, sir."

The Admiral laughed gently. "Only in a manner of speaking." A com robot wheeled a screen across and at once it lit up with the fiery stars of space. A voice was saying: "... devilish fast. On a par with our *Roma* class cruisers. And they carry weaponry to match."

The three Survey Corpsmen in the room had no need to be told the details. The com robots' positive handling of the screen, the dots of light wheeling there among the stars, the impersonal voice with its assessment of capabilities. They knew the score.

The voice said: "I've decided to disengage. There appear to be four of them and my central turrets have been shot to blazes. No communication with engines. I just hope Jock keeps them at full bore." A slight pause in which a distant and curiously frightening crackle became audible. Then: "Okay, so I'm running away. I'm running because I want to come back with something a little more lethal than a TSC scout."

"That sounds like Peter Armitage," Matlin said flatly.

The admiral had picked up his own personal hushphone. Now he looked up, his face bleak. "It's Peter, all right. He's way way out. We're sending a battleship echelon off at once. I only hope he makes it."

The screen went black.

"Hell—" said Emiko unsteadily.

"That could be his communications shot out. We don't know." Matlin wasn't whistling in the dark; that could have happened.

"I hope that's all it is." The admiral spoke quickly on the phone again and then said, "His beam snapped cleanly. That could also be the same sort of experience you went through, Dick."

"Yeah. I remember."

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One wall of the admiral's space cabin represented in foreshortened tridi the segment of galaxy that TSS *Saint Vincent* was now exploring. Various color symbols denoted stars and their planets together with their status in the current exploration program. Right on the edge of virgin territory—that was the way the TSC still conceived of their search among the drifting stars—the admiral pointed out the symbol representing Peter Armitage's TS Scout *Audacious*.

"Way out," agreed Matlin.

"We keep running into the Sharks on a widening plane of partition." The admiral let himself down gently into a formfit. "Seems to me they're making no attempt to stop us in a big way. They just jump out from nowhere, smash up our advanced elements, and then disappear. So far we've run across no signs of their colonizing worlds. The chances are that they're even farther away from their home worlds than we are from Earth."

"If we keep expanding like we are we're bound to meet up with them in a face-to-face—or face-to-thing—encounter some time." Emiko nodded at the tridi display. "It can't come soon enough for me."

Le Blanc still worried the old crew of TSS *Crossbow*.

"They've got to stop pulling back some time," agreed Matlin. "But I would still like to know more about them. I can't help this feeling I have of callous waste. Why would two alien cultures have to meet in war?"

"They haven't always, Dick." The admiral's memories went back a long way, past the Utukku, to encompass the friendly meeting with other alien cultures. "We always start by assuming any race that has starflight to be basically peaceful, having fought through their war neuroses." He smiled. "That's oversimplifying a complex psychological condition, of course; but until an alien race proves itself unfriendly, we act with friendship."

"We had no chance, though, with this lot of Sharks."

"No."

The screen lit and a signals officer said, "A brief and garbled signal came in from *Audacious*. They're badly hit but they're breaking away."

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"Thank God for that," said the admiral. He meant it.

The tension in the space cabin eased. "I'll be getting along then," said Emiko. "I want to look at my new ship."

When Emiko left, Matlin looked enquiringly at the admiral. The old space-dog seemed to be enjoying a private joke now that he could turn from that drama light-years away.

"I'm giving you a ship, Dick. Interesting. You're getting a two-place TSC scouter."

"A *what?*"

"A two-place scouter. Badly damaged."

Three and a half hours later Captain and Mrs. Matlin were on their way aboard a TSC Space Packet—as passengers—to the Omega Twelve sector.

All Sarah said, was, "Now Dad's got to see you in line of duty. I could have wished it some other way. But this way is better than nothing."

From Shurilala, around the same time, another ship clove hyperspace with spinning McIvors heading for the Omega Twelve sector. Aboard, a family squabble had been in progress for some time. Bruce Oquendo felt he had been badly done by. He'd tried to stand up for Susan, hadn't he? They'd spaced in and overstrained their engines so that he'd had to have a complete overhaul, they'd brought the teleport in to free Susan's father—and the boor just ignored them. Oquendo thought he had done the only thing open to him to do.

So Susan had torn into him, telling him what a bigmouthed baby he was, telling him he ought to have known better.

So—the squabble smoldered on.

"I don't see why we should space out just so I can apologize to him." Oquendo slumped in the control seat, letting the automatics run the ship, not looking at his wife; just letting himself slouch there, baffled.

"You were the one who told him what you thought—"

"All right! Suppose I was wrong to say what I did. That doesn't mean I couldn't send a deegee—"

"Father hates deegees."

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"Well, that's his hard luck. They're in common use now, nothing weird about them, is there?"

"He just doesn't like them. And just as I was thinking we were getting back to be friends again! Oh, Bruce! You know all the trouble we had when we were married—"

"I don't think," Bruce Kassim Oquendo said tartly, "I shall forget."

"Well," Susan said back at him, just as shortly, "you should try."

The silence that descended hung thick and heavy and exceedingly irritatingly.

Oquendo's ship arrowed the starlanes, heading out to the Omega Twelve sector. The silence of space outside that speeding hull rang with noise in comparison with the silence within.

In the Omega Twelve sector towards which those two ships traveled in parsec-gulping strides, Stephen Strang had temporarily banished the mystery of the little TSC two place scouter they picked up from his mind. The Survey Corps were sending a man along to pick up their property and investigate the charred relics of scouter and Globe-Trotter. Strang turned to other more rewarding avenues of speculation.

Gerban Arnouf, never one to be slow to take a point, had staked out a claim in tandem to Strang's Omega Twelve volume of the spiral arm and Leslie Tung had perforce to content himself with a reduced sovereignty. If Arnouf wanted to team up with Strang in breaking Tung, then Strang would be happy to oblige. That way he'd slip his own knife between the shoulderblades of two men in rotation instead of trying to do the job in parallel. His own back would have to be watched, of course. . . .

That attitude had become a habit. Strang had selected a strong team to guard his back and tried to infiltrate his opponents' guards. He had always had the most excellent of reasons for disliking deegees.

Out here in the Omega Twelve sector he had that old familiar itchy feeling that events were brewing to a climax;

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men would die, careers would be smashed, the course of humanity's destiny in the galaxy would reach a nodal point. Whatever happened, Stephen Strang meant to come out at the other end whole, with enhanced prestige—and with a large slice of his future insured.

Colin Copping had proved a surprise. The young man with the bitter face and hot eyes had explained frankly that he did not agree with Simon's attitudes and did not care for his friends.

"You probably don't remember Jethro," he said harshly. "Jethro?"

"I was born there. Gerban Arnouf came and took the planet—and you tried to intervene—"

"I remember," said Strang viciously. He gestured to a formfit and Copping sat down with the edgy nervousness of a big cat. "But Arnouf took Jethro anyway."

"I know. I remember thinking you looked like a god when you came down and told us we needn't worry any more, that the planet would not be moved, that we wouldn't lose our homes— And we believed you."

"I tried. I couldn't do any more."

Copping lowered his eyelids. Then he looked up and around Strang's apartments. "You live in some style here—"

"That is my concern, Copping. Now. You say you wish to work for me."

"Yes. I must send *Liberty* back to Simon. I can be useful to you."

And so Copping joined Strang's personal staff. An odd thought occurred to him that, unawares, he must have initiated a group of young adherents—and that Colin Copping was the first of Strang's Young Men.

Craig Drummond presented a problem of a different magnitude. He had successfully demonstrated his Split-potential principle by moving planets Sixteen, Seventeen and Eighteen to their new positions around the G-star Strang had, with conscious intent, called Shena. The other G-star he called Sally. He had personally written the names in thick black ink across the official name listings.

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The interview with Drummond took place, to Strang's acknowledged relief, without Sally.

He started abruptly, banging home the main purpose of the interview. "I like your work, Craig. As I shall be using the Split-potential principle a great deal, and as no other SCS Controller as yet has it, I am calling it the Strang System. I trust you see the wisdom of that."

Drummond swallowed and looked apologetic. "Well—"

"Good. This will be a great help to your career, Craig." He stood up and laid a fatherly hand on the young man's shoulder. "When the Strang System is fully in use the limits are boundless. There's a great future ahead in the galaxy for young men like you."

"Thank you, sir—"

Strang ushered him out, affable and paternal. He felt no qualms over stealing another man's ideas. It was done all the time, wasn't it? Anyway, if Sally married him then it would all be in the family.

On the threshold Drummond said apologetically, "I'd like to use something a little larger than a pinnacle, sir, for the orbital vehicle. I'm sharpening the basic compatibility—there were some earthquakes when we shifted Eighteen, that we can do without—and I need to put in more monitoring equipment."

"Speak to Commodore Landsdowne. Tell him you can have what ships you like. Oh—don't tie up any fighting craft."

"Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir."

Things were shaping up. Soon there would be a whole new double solar system swimming here, with good people from the Solarian worlds populating it, a great fresh hive of humanity. That was man's work.

The speaker said: "The TSC Packet has arrived, sir."

"Good. Tell the TSC officer to handle the two-place scouter. I'll see him later."

He went back to his administration work feeling very cheerful.

The ident plate lit up and he turned—and his face froze.

"Sarah—"

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Off screen, a man's voice asid: "Captain Matlin, TSC, reporting to Chief Controller Strang. I'd like to speak to you."

Strang hesitated. Then he released the door and Matlin and Sarah walked in. He thought she looked fine—a little pale and her lips pinched in—he knew what that meant.

"Hullo, Dad."

"I'm seeing your—ah—husband in line of duty. After that I don't want to see you again."

Matlin kept his temper. He said, "Preliminary reports on the TSC scouter indicate it has been subjected to intense energy—beamed." He wondered briefly if the old admiral had known the identity of the little scouter when he'd picked Matlin for the job. "I understand you knew Charlie and Myra Hastings—"

"Nol" said Strang, genuinely shocked. "Not theirs?"

"Yes. This means we can date exactly when it happened. They'd been down on planet Seventeen. My technical team from the Packet are running the Globe-Trotter records now. I thought you would like to see—"

"Yes, yes." Strang rose, hurling down a file. "I'll come at once."

Despite the feelings of bitterness between them, they recognized the importance of this find. A small scouter from a terran ship, floating derelict in space for year after lightless year—and then she had been picked up again and now men would read in the records the dark story of that old tragedy.

A small select group settled down in the laboratory's tiny auditorium to watch projected on the screen the records taken from the damaged Globe-Trotter salvaged from the wreck of the Hasting's scouter. A great deal of work had been done in restoration, interpretation, in basic forensic science to bring up what little remained.

They saw the sharp-edged, hostile crystalline world of Planet Seventeen. On the screen before them, flickering in and out of detailed vision as the charred ends of tape and the damaged memory tanks yielded their knowledge, the brief excursion and tragedy unfolded.

Clarity had been lost. As the Globe-Trotter rounded a yellow jasper trail with chingling fronds of chrysoprase sliding and twirling over its back the scene in the icy valley below clouded and attenuated, came back to focus patchily, tantalized with visions of gargantuan structures shifting and merging in pearly mist.

"This is the interesting section." Matlin gestured and the film slowed to flicker a frame at a time and finally to stop. "There. That's the best image we can achieve."

Strang stooped forward. "It's just damnably out of focus. Can't you bring it any clearer?"

Matlin shook his head. He had no inclination to be more than civil to his father-in-law.

"That's a building—I think." Strang rubbed a finger across his eyes. "Can't the scanners build up the picture?"

"No better than this. I agree it seems to be a building. The valley is deep and the Globe-Trotter came around this quartz bluff and saw this. Then—"

The frames moved swiftly now and an orange flare spread all over the film. "That was when he was beamed. How he got back to the scouter we'll never know. He was in a hell of a mess."

"Go back to the valley," Strang ordered savagely. "If someone was on planet then—where are they now? We just shifted that planet into orbit around Shena."

The film spun back. Again they studied that enigmatic crystal valley with the spires of chalcedony and carnelian rising sparkling and between them—what? A building? Something rounded and domed in a world of harsh angularity, something out of place, something made by an intelligence.

"Can you get a fix on that valley?" demanded Strang.

"There's absolutely no way of telling in the Globe-Trotter's records." Matlin felt a kinship with that icy world of jagged edges—that was the way he felt to this autocratic old man at his side.

Strang swung on Landsdowne. "Get your men down there, Morley. I want that planet gone over inch by inch. We've got to find that valley."

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"Yes, sir," said Landsdowne. He rose at once.

As he went Colin Copping rose and left also.

"There's no more here for me." Strang lumbered to his feet. He turned his back on Matlin. "After all, this all happened a long time ago. I'm creating solar systems and that's happening *now*."

"The Hastings were my friends," Matlin said softly.

Strang refused to rise to the bait. He left abruptly. Sarah glanced helplessly at her husband. He forced a smile and said, "One day, dear, one day he'll see reason."

Susan was saying the same thing to Bruce Oquendo as they came aboard *Anaxagoras*. When word of their arrival was brought to Strang he was speaking to Craig Drummond on screen from the planet Vicksburg and he refused curtly to speak to his daughter. "I had to see Sarah because duty compelled me to deal with her husband. But I do not wish to see or hear of them again—any of them." He flicked angrily for the com robot to wheel the second screen away and went on with his conversation with Drummond.

"My son's a ninny," he said, chomping on the words. "And my two elder daughters married so far beneath them it hurts—at least you, Craig, in marrying Sally can carry on the Christopher Strang traditions."

"Uh—yes, sir," said Craig, with the feeling he had been caught up in a whirlwind. "We're doing well on Vicksburg. Should be moving day after tomorrow—"

"I'll be there."

"Right, sir—ah—yes, thank you."

Strang flicked for the com robot without saying good-bye. If only Simon had a half the steely strength of that man Matlin, Sarah had married. . . . If only Bruce Oquendo wasn't so dominated by his family and now, it seemed, by Susan. . . . He had to believe in Craig Drummond. He had to. His wife Shena had gone through her allotted number of eggs—medicine these days did not allow the waste of a woman's reproduction capabilities in losing an ovum a month; they cherished them carefully so that a women of eighty—with the physical characteristics of a woman of twenty-five—could bear children with ease. But there was a limit. He

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could expect no more children from Shena. Grandchildren, now . . . But Susan and Sarah showed no inclination to rush into parenthood.

He was creating an empire, but that would mean nothing if he could not see clearly a firm future for the Strang family within his creation.

Once he had the Head of the House of Christopher in his grasp, once he had that power—then he might be able to influence events more directly. He *would* do so. He felt a profound psychic conviction that he was destined to be remembered as the founder of a dynasty that would take mankind to the farthest reaches of the galaxy.

XIV

SUSAN AND SARAH flung their arms around each other and kissed and hugged with the intensity of shared misfortune. Oquendo and Matlin shook hands a little distantly, sizing each other up, awkward at their wives' display.

"Welcome aboard, Oquendo," said Matlin. He led the way from the airlock up to the bridge of the TSC Packet.

Lieutenant Commander Penkowski smiled. "We have the Hastings' scouter aboard, sir," he said. "We're all ready to space out."

"Good work, Commander. But I'd rather like to go across to Vicksburg. They're moving it today. Quite a sight."

"Yes, sir!" said Penkowski eagerly.

And so hanging in space off the planet Vicksburg, Captain and Mrs. Matlin, and Mr. and Mrs. Oquendo joined Chief Controller Strang and his teams, Colin Copping, and Craig Drummond and Sally Strang. Many ships of the Solarian Confederation gathered, each with a special function or as observers. Strang saw his daughter and Drummond off.

He stood bluffly on the lip of *Anaxagoras's* airlock as they prepared to enter the pinnace.

"No, Craig, I won't be coming down with you this time. You can handle Vicksburg—the Strang System has proved

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highly successful. We're moving more planets than Arnouf or Tung dreamed of!"

"Right, then, sir." Drummond coughed and moved back. Sally kissed her father. She wore a simple, short white shift-dress, as innocent as the dawn. "Cheerio, Dad. I'll bet you're pleased you don't have to go through the teleport down to the center of a planet any more! Craig's a real genius—"

"I know, Sally. I'll see you when you reach 'Sally.' " He smiled fondly on the last daughter left to him. "That sounds good, somehow."

"Sounds pompous to me, Dad! You should have called the sun 'Stephen,' or something like. *That* would have been in keeping with what you're trying to do."

He kissed her again and let her fingers slide through his own as she went through the airlock into the pinnacle.

The pinnacle jetted from the spaceship's flank and fell away towards the fully-illuminated ball below. Watching the monitor screen, Strang felt the strength of purpose in him heightened and justified by his daughter Sally. A shadow flicked past and Landsdowne from the bridge said, "That was Copping aboard Simon's yacht *Liberty*, sir. Looks as though he's going down, too."

"Humph," said Strang. "I thought he was supposed to send that yacht back to Simon."

He stumped back to the bridge where he could be in the center of events.

Landsdowne greeted him and nodded towards the side screens. "That's the Survey Corps packet craft out there, sir. Captain Matlin—"

"I'm not interested, Morley. If they want a grandstand view of moving a planet I won't stop them." He lowered himself down into his own command chair, set back and above Landsdowne's. There had been changes incorporated when *Anaxagoras* had been built, lessons he had learned from *Archimedes*. "I wanted Copping here at this time. Send out a call for him, Morley."

"Yes, sir."

Sally's remark rankled in Strang's mind. Sure he didn't have to go down into the white-hot guts of a planet any

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more. He hadn't *had* to go down to control chamber for a long time, since the days when he'd started out as a Lansen tech, freshly joined from the TSC, and with Shena as a luscious prize within his grasp. But he knew well enough, and was courageous enough to admit it to himself, that Craig Drummond had come along with his Split-potential principle at the right time. Strang had shrugged off the experience; but those claustrophobic hours down in Vesta had left a scar.

"Can't raise Copping, sir." Landsdowne reported briefly. "We're still calling out."

"Check," said Strang. He sat back. No matter how many times he grasped a planet and wrenched it from the orbit it had followed since it coalesced from primeval hydrogen—no matter how many times he re-arranged the galactic structure—he experienced a deep and shudderingly satisfying thrill of pure enjoyment of the power vested in him.

Down on the surface of Vicksburg, Drummond carried out the last checks of the north polar tower. Vicksburg was a pleasant world; the cycle of evolution had here reached what on Earth had been called the Later Palaeozoic, where a lush surface teemed with fish, clumsy amphibia and the multifarious wonderments of widespread swamp forests. What men knew of the cycle of evolution as epitomized by Earth had been well-documented; against it the mere ninety-eight volumes of Patrick Tait Tait's century-old, *An Outline of Evolution on the Planets of Variant Stars*, showed how much there was yet to learn, and understand, of the course of living evolution in the galaxy.

North and south poles here on Vicksburg were not as cold as they might have been and Drummond could wear normal planetary-proofs. Sally, too, had merely donned planetary-proofs over her white dress. They stood looking up at the tower. Carver, the scientist in charge, beckoned them across and they went into the domed building nested against the base of the tower. Here the controls waited the signal to go.

"Pleased to see you, Craig."

"All set?"

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"Waiting for the tremblers to synchronoise and then it's all systems go."

"Fine. I put up a shuttle here. Managed to cram in all the gear quite well. A pinnacle is far too small."

Carver, although probably two hundred years older than Drummond, had no side in taking orders. He knew first-order brain power when he met it. The shuttle orbiting the planet around the equator took in signals from north and south pole towers, synchronized them, set up the trembler responses that would make and maintain the Split-potential at each pole exactly in phase. Landlines were out of the question and planetary radio was an anachronism when men used space for every communications use.

"We should do better than last time." Drummond looked cheerful, composed yet alert. On the job like this, he shed his vague nervous air. Sally looked at him and noticed the change and knew in a few years he would be as poised as the most sophisticated of career scientists. That, she worked for. Now she waited as her man went about the job he knew best in all the galaxy. She thought of that ball of mud back on Solishtar and she smiled. They had come a long way since the memorial service to the Hastings. And then to find their old scouter like that . . . strange. . . .

Power flowed into the Strang System and Vicksburg's sun dimmed and fluctuated. Drummond watched everything with the cool eyes that reported back to a brain in complete command of everything that was taking place.

"We ought to make transit without shifting so much as a ton of the crust," he said conversationally. "We can put out more power than the Lansen generators, and we operate that power from the surface, holding the planet between the poles like a ball between finger and thumb."

"I have no hesitation in saying I'm pleased we don't have to go down to a chamber." Carver followed Drummond's lead. "And we cut out six to nine month's effort boring."

"All set!" called a tech from his board. "Potential is high—and matching!"

"It's all yours, Craig." Carver nodded to the main board.

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Drummond did not reply. To him the grandeur and mystique in moving a planet bodily through hyperspace and popping it out the other end into orbit represented a mathematical problem, a physics problem, even a psychological problem if you counted the human element. Geopolitics, for Craig Drummond, meant less than nothing. Although his future father-in-law had given him cogent reasons for calling the principle the Strang System he accepted that decision because Strang had made it.

Sally put an arm on his shoulders. Then she withdrew and sat down demurely to wait while he moved a planet. There was no skylarking now over a ball of mud.

Everything looked good. The split-potential matched exactly and the automatics would keep it matched, sending their multitudes of signals via the shuttle orbiting the planet, from north to south poles and back again.

All systems go . . .

Aboard Simon Strang's space yacht *Liberty*, Colin Copping sat before his fully automated controls, alone in the ship, and he laughed. The laugh echoed eerily in the metal hull. The sound carried a bestial ring of imbalance, of a mind relieved of the tether of conscience and human feeling.

"I made you suffer a little on Vesta, Strang," Copping said, aloud, to himself. "You sweated a little. But you got out of it. You knew you would. I knew you would. But you didn't like it, did you, Mister stinking Chief filthy Controller rotten Stephen Strang? Oh, no, you didn't enjoy that."

Copping reached for the gun controls. He thought of Rainscarfe and Dirk Tiamat, of Gunderson and his father, Arthur Copping, as they had stood and listened there in their town of Happy Landings, to the smooth lies of this man Strang. They had believed him. But then, they had been naive innocents in the galaxy. Then they had thought that man would help man along the starways. Well—Colin Copping had quickly found out the truth.

He set up a firing pattern and swung the sights across. This time he was going to settle with Strang in a way that would make Strang writhe, would tear the heart and guts out of him, would cripple him mentally, would make him

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suffer as Copping and all the people of Jethro of the sun Jezreel had suffered.

Then a little whisper to reach the ears of Gerban Arnouf—and then, dallied with and played upon but to follow with certainty—a Smeeson, or a Carpenter—never a Lee-Johns—something to cause a hurtful and painful end. Arnouf had come to Jethro and set about stealing the planet. But Strang had told the lies and buoyed hope when all hope was dead. Arnouf had been the executioner. Strang had been the torturer.

The shuttle orbiting around Vicksburg swam up over the far limb of the planet. Copping gave a final check. His escape into hyperspace must be made swiftly, before the gathered ships could react. He centered the sights on the shuttle. He activated the automatic firing pattern and then sat back, one hand poised above the hyperspace control, waiting for the guns to fire and release the years of hate within him.

Among that gathered assemblage, Major General Jelal rode an army ferret in towards *Anaxagoras*. He felt the impending moment of triumph when he would lay before Strang the results of patient and fanatically dedicated forensic science. From infinitesimal clues scrutinized with all the rigor of a scientific technology his men had at last told him, with a ninety-nine point nine percent predicated accuracy, the name of the man responsible for the debacle on Vesta and *Firedrake*. Colin Copping. Well. The young squirt had been getting too friendly with Strang lately. Jelal relished his position as confidant of the Chief Controller. Another obstacle removed and a smart piece of detection into the bargain— Oh, yes, Major General Jelal felt very pleased as his ferret blasted space towards the flagship.

On his forward screen the familiar shape of Simon Strang's spaceyacht *Liberty* swam up, crossing ahead of him, vectors and courses automatically computed and adjusted so that the rarity of a space collision should never occur. Jelal had no time for Simon Strang. Then he pondered. Surely Copping had sent the yacht back to Solishtar? Odd.

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Jelal had spaced in from Vesta and obviously Copping had not returned the yacht. He went back to thinking of his coming moment of triumph. Around the curve of the planet, Vicksburg, the shuttle that Drummond put up squirted into view, far below the horizon from *Liberty*.

Drummond, too, represented a problem. He seemed to do as he pleased. Strang gave him what he wanted. Well—maybe something could be worked out there, too.

Then the military mind tightened up. But before Jelal's thoughts had time to sort themselves out, his hands flew above the controls of the army ship.

Fire jetted from *Liberty*.

The shuttle vaporized.

Jelal's ferret fired.

Liberty exploded.

At the north pole of Vicksburg men and women saw the telltale dials and desperately tried to halt the flow of stupendous energy pouring in from the sun. Some screamed. Drummond saw Sally in her white dress start toward him—

Vicksburg shattered.

Like a ball of mud it flew apart.

But this ball contained within itself the raging fury of molten metals and white-hot magma that exploded outwards with the shattering force of millions upon millions of nuclear bombs.

Gobbets of streaming lava boiled out into space. Rocks hissing with liberated energy solidified and coruscated out in an expanding balloon of death.

A whole world disintegrated.

Strang saw that stupendous sight.

Sitting at the hub of his spatial empire, he sat and watched, and he shriveled.

"Sally . . ." he whispered.

To Captain Matlin that monstrous eruption came as a stunning shock and then as an ugly blasphemy.

Instinctively, acting with the speed of thought of the born-and-bred Survey Corpsman, he said, "Activate force shields."

Penkowski, just as automatically, said, "Wilco, sir."

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The force shields slapped across.

Almost at once chunks of white-hot rock and writhing half-solidified streamers of lava began to coruscate and sparkle against the shell of force cradling the little packet. Mere material matter however hot would take a very long time to penetrate those screens. The lethal flare of energy weapons was another thing entirely. Matlin looked on as the planet spewed itself out into space, stripping off layer after layer of molten magma, peeling away its substance, revealing the inner core which struck at vision with shrewd white-hot pincers of fire.

He felt numbed. Susan and Sarah gripped each others' hands. Bruce Oquendo swallowed nervously. The sight exerted a chill of foreboding on them all. The fears they felt were not mirrored in fears for their own safety; the mere sight of a whole planet blowing-up, although terrifying and heart-breaking, could not account for this very personal peril they all experienced. Matlin, of them all, guessed that a world—any world—represented home and safety and the comfort of a broad bosom.

A world—any world—to be thus summarily destroyed awoke the hackles of a man's racial heritage. The fear of solid earth cracking up under a man's feet went back so far into the mists of antiquity that perhaps no other fear had such powerful terror-stimulating responses.

"My God!" whispered Penkowski. "It's awful!"

The sound died in the shocked silence, punctuated only by the never-ending unheard click and hum of equipment maintaining human beings alive in space.

Then the radar officer said unsteadily, "Would you mind coming over here a minute, sir."

Penkowski and Matlin responded together. Ideas of rank and precedence were out of place now. On the radar screen a trace showed, hard and clear-cut, bright and near.

"That's not rock, sir, and it's not the semi-molten metals coming out of—out of the planet." The signals officer let the tear-stains lie on her cheeks. She was not the only one.

"Bring in the scanners, optics, step up the magnification." Matlin forced the hard grimness of his voice to stay steady

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and hating, turning his anger and sorrow into the channels of familiar duty. That was the easiest way. . . .

Bruce Oquendo cast one last look at the awful splendor of the death of a world and then he escorted Susan and Sarah from the bridge. Matlin was relieved by their departure.

"Magnification coming up now, sir."

The sharp-edged metallic object snapped into fine focus on the screens. Lights ruddied the swelling bulge and star-glimmer glinted from ports and turrets.

"That's no ship I've ever seen!" Penkowski slid into the exec's chair and the exec stood behind him, both well content to let Matlin handle this.

"I don't believe it is a ship." Matlin jogged his memory. Somewhere and recently he had seen a domed shape like that—the *Globe-Trotter's* damaged records! That terrible idea formed in his mind even as flame sparkled from the alien shape. "Give it everything you can, commander!" he shouted. Then: "Get away from here!"

He grabbed a handmike, felt the little packet lurch and saw a menacing orange glow coalesce around the edges of the screens. He steadied himself against the control position. "Put me through to *Anaxagoras*! Double quick! Emergency band! Move!"

"Wilco, sir." The signals officer thrashed into her techs and emergency relays clicked. "Through."

"*Anaxagoras*! Commodore Landsdowne! Emergency!"

The packet lurched again and on the screen the splintering shards of light festooned that alien fort with a halo of lethal light. Somewhere aft an alarm gonged. The nauseating smell of burning insulation tainted the air.

"Commodore Landsdowne! Emergency! All fighting ships to action stations! Come on, *Anaxagoras*! Get with it!"

Some of the Survey Corps packet's screens went dead and the gunnery officer cursed and set up his own emergency firing circuits. A packet, designed for rapid interstellar transportation, possessed peashooters and popguns for armament. But he went on firing with everything he had left.

"This is *Anaxagoras*! What's your trouble?"

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"Tell Landsdowne the Sharks have forts coming up out of Vicksburg! He'll have to use all the force he has! We're being knocked out of space . . ."

The emergency bands went dead and the hand mike clicked on emptiness.

"I hope that's us and not the flagship!" Matlin said and hurled the hand mike from him.

Penkowski looked elated and scared. This was his first time in action.

"Take your ship out of this, commander!" Matlin started to stand up and was hurled full length as the tiny ship shuddered under the impact of massive energy bolts. They were down to their last two shields, now, and any second that ravening alien energy would eat its way clean through and devour the ship and all those who sailed in her.

"But—" said Penkowski.

"Now, commander! Now!"

The TSC packet catapulted away from that domed fort spewing alien energy among the exploding debris of a world.

The shuddering stopped. Shakily, Matlin picked himself up and studied the last remaining live screen. It showed the massive outpouring of molten rock and magma ballooning into space. Dots of light wheeled and circled as the SCS ship took violent evasive maneuvers. Shields glowed in momentary energy-release as rocks struck them.

"What communications have you?"

"I'm trying to regain contact with *Anaxagoras*, sir."

On the screen those wheeling dots of light steadied and fire wreathed them as their weapons went into action. Shark forts, spraying up out of the wreckage of a world, flamed and struggled—and died.

"Someone's caught on, then," said Matlin thankfully.

"They must have been waiting for us." Penkowski still hadn't caught on. He shook his head. Matlin felt a quick amused stab of pity for the young man. His first command, his first action—and now it was no wonder he failed to understand what was really happening.

"Commander." Matlin put the old snap into his voice.

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"Kindly take us alongside the flagship. I have to speak to Commodore Landsdowne."

"Wilco, sir."

The packet curved, steadied and then thrashed away on a course that would bring her nuzzling up against *Anaxagoras*.

"Ask for assistance, commander. The SCS owe us that, at least."

"Yes, sir. But those Shark forts—they were waiting for us . . . But where did they come from?"

Matlin did not answer. He jerked his head at the screen. Penkowski, all of them in the control room, dazedly recovering their wits, looked. They were passing the dead, seared and disfigured globe of a Shark fort. A Solarian cruiser whickered past on an opposite course, heading down like an iron-beaked galley to the holocaust of fighting ships and forts, spewing molten magma, and tumbling whirling debris littering space beyond. A pinnacle cut from the cruiser's flank, arced across, braked hard and nuzzled up to the lifeless fort.

"They're investigating already. Keep on course for the flagship."

"That Shark fort must have been half a mile in diameter, a globe, studded with weaponry, ports, all the paraphernalia of a fighting arsenal. It would have been fully automatic," Matlin said grimly. "Programmed to come to life and shoot up everything it didn't like as soon as it was exposed to space."

"But—" said Penkowski.

"Come with me aboard *Anaxagoras*. Listen."

"Yes, sir," said Penkowski, weakly.

Aboard the flagship Matlin strode briskly for the bridge, Penkowski trailing. He looked for Strang but the Chief Controller was not in the control room. Commodore Landsdowne was. He had grown. He sat at his command post, face grave and calm, methodically dealing with every Shark fort to have come up out of the ruins of Vicksburg. The physical aura of power and professional competence radiating

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from him had a visibly calming and heartening effect on everyone.

"Thanks for your warning, Dick." Landsdowne gestured to a seat at his board. "Yours was the first to come in." Matlin nodded and sat down.

"It's a hell of a mess, Morley."

"Yes. Who knows how long it's been going on?"

"Since Charlie and Myra Hastings stumbled on a glimmering of it on Planet Seventeen—and that's a long time ago."

"And how long before that?"

"It's a Construction Service problem, Morley. But you know you have all the help the TSC can give you."

"Thanks. I may have to use everything in space before we're through."

"Your boss—Caracci—?"

"I'm awaiting a signal any minute." Landsdowne shook a grave head. "I don't like to think what he's going to say."

"When those forts spewed out—it was like tossing a handful of jumping firecrackers into a jimjah session."

"Not elegant—but apt." Landsdowne blew out his cheeks. "We've settled the last of them. I'm having detailed reports made up. Armament, electronics, cybers, dates and ages if possible. Major-General Jelal is superintending that."

Matlin brought up the sore and wounding question. "What happened to Vicksburg? How could the Sharks—?"

"Not Sharks, Dick. Colin Copping—you met him?—shot out the coordinating shuttle. The trembler harmonics ran wild and long before the automatics could shut down the power from the sun—*blooeeey*." Landsdowne spoke with a personal grief. "Craig Drummond, Carver, a lot of good men gone. And—and Sally Strang."

"I know. Sarah's badly cut-up—so is Susan. Oh, what a hell of a sweet mess!"

"That broke up Vicksburg. When it broke—out popped the Shark forts. Obviously, they came alive when the planet ruptured. If it hadn't—"

A harsh grating voice behind them swung them around.

"We would not have known what we know now." Stephen

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Strang had aged. He stomped in and stood before them, glowering down. "Is this all you have to do, Commodore Landsdowne? Chat with your boozing pals?"

"All the Shark forts have been dealt with, sir. General Jelal is superintending the investigation. Captain Matlin was the first officer to recognize the danger and sound the alarm." Landsdowne spoke stiffly. He was remembering those moments of crisis when, alone on the bridge, he had handled affairs and Stephen Strang had been closeted in his apartments.

Strang passed a hand over his face. "The damn Sharks! Don't you understand? All the planets we've taken from these sectors of space are riddled with time bombs! Shark forts, Shark installations, Shark nuclear weapons—all buried deep below the surface. At any time they like, the Sharks can trigger the alarm and the Solarian Confederation is going to be faced with dozens of its worlds breaking up, being overrun by automated weapons systems, taken away before they even know there's a shooting war on!"

"I understand all that quite well." Matlin stood up. He didn't like to have to crook his head up to see his father-in-law. "I could suggest that you carry out a better inspection of the worlds you select. The SCS has long been antagonistic towards the TSC and we have been denied our old status as planet-probers. All we are now is an organization dedicated to staking out planets for you. On Planet Seventeen, when the Hastings died, the orders were that the planet was suitable and further investigation would be carried out by the SCS. You've hoed your own furrow. Now you are harvesting the weeds."

Strang visibly flinched. Then he tightened up his jaw. He began to speak in his cold, cutting, contemptuous voice, when Matlin interrupted. "I would make a suggestion. You'd better try to wipe out all traces here of what has happened. It won't be easy but it can be done. It would not be clever for the Solarian Confederation if the Sharks discover we have found out their secret plan. You'd better send cruisers out to cover as large a globe of space as you can manage, to find and destroy any snoopers."

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"When I want your suggestions, Captain, I may ask for them—"

But Landsdowne said, "My God!" And at once began to issue orders that spread a wide and determined net of scouting cruisers ruthlessly seeking any snooping Sharks.

"I don't like you, Matlin." Strang spoke with that hard clamping of the jaw biting off phrases. "My daughter Sally is dead. She was the only one of my children worth anything in this galaxy. You will get nothing from me. Now, I have work to do—"

"You're wrong, Strang. Your daughter Sarah matches any other woman you can put against her . . . even her sister Susan and she's two hundred percent. You're wrong, Strang . . . Pitifully wrong!"

A communications screen lit and a woman's voice spoke. Strang answered at once without bothering to reply to Matlin.

"This is Chief Controller Strang."

"A signal from Caracci. He congratulates you in discovering this Shark plot. Now that we are apprized of the danger we can take steps to inspect and disinfect every world taken from the plague areas. He wishes you take over responsibility for the areas of Gerban Arnouf and Tung Chi Leslie. They have been remiss in not uncovering this problem. You have full authority. You will use any means to your hand. The Space Navy, the Marines, the Army, the police forces, the civil service—you have overriding authority."

Strang kept his head. He said, "And the TSC?"

"Caracci says they have been exempted from his disposal by the Solarian Government. A shakeup is expected."

"I see."

Landsdowne caught Matlin's eye and pulled a face.

The woman on the screen—a blonde with full lips and high coloring, with rich creamy shoulders—smiled and said, "Caracci is aware that you understand the full seriousness of the situation. The Sharks have been pulling away from direct contact with us. They probably do not have the techniques for moving worlds, so they have planted nuclear devices and forts on the worlds we are likely to take. That

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way they infiltrate us and when they trigger—”

“I know.” Strang was back in form now. He always had supposed that Caracci had liked him—Morley Landsdowne had said so, and this proved it beyond doubt. Arnouf and Tung got the chop. Strang got the prize.

Of course, that was only right. . . .

Again the woman on the screen smiled. “Now that the official business is over, Steve, when are you coming—?”

“I am on the bridge of my flagship with the fate of a galaxy to decide,” Strang cut in icily. “I will contact you, Sheila. Good-bye.” He flicked and the screen died.

Matlin sniggered rudely.

Landsdowne—who had heard and seen it all before—went back to handling the calls coming in for orders and decisions.

“You’d better get back to your packet, Matlin.” Strang was coming out of the nightmare now. “Take your two-place scouter and get to hell out of it.”

“I’ll give your regards to Sarah, and to Susan and her husband. If you go on like this you’re hardly likely to meet them again.”

“I don’t wish you to tell lies on my behalf. I have nothing to say to my daughters—either of them—now. . . .”

“I’m sorry about Sally. She was all right.” And Matlin nodded to Landsdowne, turned, bumped into Penkowski, and said, “Come on, commander. Back to work,” and left the bridge.

“We’ve a big job to do, Morley.” Strang glanced at the work piled on Morley Landsdowne’s control position, the flashing lights, the communications bands screaming for information and requests for instructions. “You handle this. I want to catch up on something I should have done a long time ago.”

Landsdowne was too busy to answer.

Down in his apartments Strang sat slowly and awkwardly before his deegee controls. He would have to get used to handling them from now on. Then he snapped them off and flicked for a com robot. Deegees would not yet operate satisfactorily over much more than a dozen light-years.

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"Get me Solishtar."

Before the com robot could comply another wheeled a screen across and Gerban Arnouf stared out at Strang.

"So you're taking over, Stephen?"

"So Caracci says."

Arnouf's thick, beard-fringed face had grown even more bloated over the years. His hooded eyes were a sullen smolder of hatred. "I suppose you never forgave me for that Jethro affair?"

Strang smiled easily. "I hadn't really considered that end of it, Gerban. All the Jethro affair did for me was to make me understand clearly that there was no limit to the weapons a man has to use in the galaxy. You follow?"

"Oh, I follow, all right." The hatred fumed thick from Arnouf like incense before a paunched hunched idol.

"You've been taking in some very undesirable property, Gerban. You've been sending worlds riddled with Shark bombs and weaponry right into the Solarian Confederation—"

"You'd have done the same if—"

"Don't believe all your spies tell you, Gerban. I didn't. I found out."

"You haven't finished with me yet—I'll get—"

"No threats, please, Gerban. They are hardly the sort of thing one expects from people in our positions . . ."

Arnouf flicked and the screen died.

Strang allowed the luxurious thoughts to roll around in his head. So much for Gerban Arnouf! Smashed flat.

Now that Craig Drummond was dead the Strang System would be his, undeniably. The headship of the House of Christopher would still come to him; old Zeus Drummond would be badly cut up about Craig's death; but Strang would still become the Head of the House. It was a great pity about Sally . . . She had looked so young and innocent in that white dress . . . Like a sacrificial lamb. . . .

Shena was too old. But Strang could still father children; tough sons ready to fare the starlanes and build on the foundations of the empire Strang was creating.

He had to go on. He could not go back for there was nowhere in his life that could help him now. Everything

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lay in the future. He had to ring Solishtar and tell Shena that he wanted a wife who could bear sons. She would be hurt—but the galaxy did that to people. He had to go on.

Nothing was left to him now but that.

To go on.

The com robot brought the screen in closer and said with metallic deference: "Solishtar, sir. Your palace. Mrs. Strang on screen."

Around Stephen Christopher Strang, as he spoke from the heart of his mechanical cybernetic empire, the pitiless spear-bright stars sang their hypnotic siren song—beckoning.

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