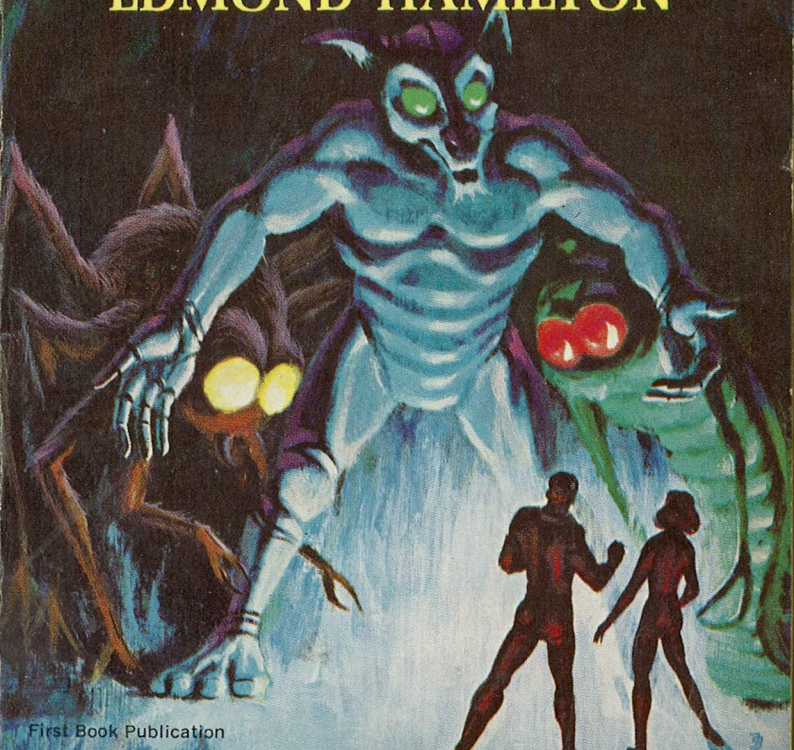


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double
M-111/

Doom cruise of the
starship Vega Queen

FUGITIVE OF THE STARS

EDMOND HAMILTON



First Book Publication

**FUGITIVE
OF
THE STARS**
EDMOND HAMILTON

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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LAND BEYOND THE MAP

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I

TO FALL with a soundless scream through an empty chaos of contending forces, to be riven right out of your own dimensions and hurled quaking through alien continua . . . that was how it was, if you looked at it one way.

But not, thought Horne, if you looked at it his way. It was a voyage through enchanted isles on the shores of the universe, through the great lamps of foreign suns, where pale planets rose up in colored sunlight like mysterious new Hesperides, and dropped behind you, and you went on and on, mystery into mystery.

"The trouble with me," he thought wryly, "is that I've still got a little of the romantic fourteen-year-old in me."

He was a long way from being a boy in a Connecticut city who had dreamed of stars. Eighteen years of time and a hundred-odd light-years of space. A long way, but he still got a bit of the old thrill when he looked out ahead through the

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pilot room windows. And this was nice, not only for his own sake but because he could share the thrill with Vinson, the young Second Pilot, who was making his first trip out here. Vinson spent most of his time staring out the windows as though he wanted to absorb into himself everything that he saw, so that he might keep it forever, unchanged.

The windows were not really windows. In a ship going many times faster than light by cross-cutting through dimensions, all you would see was a twisted blur. A ship's eyes were radar instruments of fantastic speed and scope, but human and near-human people had their psychological limitations, and it had been found that pilots functioned better when they could see with their physical eyes a summation of radar's information presented on window-like screens.

Horne looked out at beauty and danger. This was the Fringe, where not many star-ships ever went. These swarms of high-piled suns, smoky red and pallid green, cruel white and warm, beckoning orange, lured and glittered like fabled islands. But they could lure to destruction. There were very few radar beacons or navigation aids out here, for this was far outside the vast network of the Federation. This was the coast of the galaxy, and if you went much farther you found yourself out in the black emptiness that ran all the way to Andromeda.

Horne said to Denman, the third man in the pilot room, "Five, six times I've piloted through the Fringe, and I've never seen anything of all these wild worlds; but a few landing-fields for a few hours. I envy you."

"Don't," said Denman. He was a small, graying man, with a worried expression that had got more pronounced all the way. Not being ship's crew, he had no right to be in the pilot-room of the *Vega Queen*. But he was Federation personnel, and Captain Wasek had given him full freedom of the ship.

"Don't what?" said Horne.

"Don't envy me. The Fringe may look like adventure and romance to you. What it really is, is headache. To me, and to the Federation."

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Vinson said knowledgeably, "I should think it would be. I mean, these primitive worlds don't belong to the Federation. Yet they depend on it for protection against invasion, that kind of thing. They're so far away and there's so much red tape about sovereignty and observers and so on. . . ."

"Well," said Denman, feigning astonishment, "the little rascal has been reading! Exactly right, my boy. Only you don't know the half of it, not till you've been through it as an observer." After a moment he added gloomily, "Three months on Allamar Two, observing. I hope I'm still there when the next ship stops to pick me up."

Horne was a little shocked. "I thought the humanoids on nearly all these worlds were friendly."

Denman nodded. "They were. Whether they still are is doubtful. Something's going on out here. That's why I was sent here. Trouble in the Fringe? Need an observer? Send Denman. He's expendable."

As though regretting his little outburst, Denman shut his mouth up tight. He continued to look sourly at the window picturing the red spark of Binnoth, the twin golden suns of Vira, and, much nearer and brighter, the blue-white flare of Allamar.

"But," said Vinson, staring curiously now at Denman, "they must have asked for you on Allamar Two, or the Federation Council wouldn't have sent you."

"Oh, they asked," said Denman absently. "Or some of them did. But they could change their minds. And it wasn't entirely the natives of Allamar I was thinking about. . . ."

His voice trailed off. Vinson continued to stare at him.

Horne said, "Time to check the board."

Vinson jerked a glance at the chrono and jumped up. "Sorry." He went to the navigation-board. Out in deep space, a ship flew itself by its own cybernetic controls. But even electronic brains had been known to slip a cog, and it required the human pilot to watch for the alarm-lights that would show such a lapse. Vinson bent over it, a tall wide-shouldered boy in immaculate uniform, full of pride at being Second Pilot on a Federation packet, full of youth and wonder and

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excitement. He was also full of ability, and Horne forgot about the navigation-board. He turned to Denman.

"I'm not pumping for information . . ." he began.

"Meaning, you are," said Denman.

Horne grinned. "All right, then, I am, but feel free to slap me down if I'm out of line. This trouble in the Fringe . . . has it any relation to all the stuff you were asking me, about possible unauthorized ships poking about out here?"

Denman nodded. "It has." Horne thought that was all he was going to say but after a moment he added, "You're bound to hear it at Allamar or some other stop, so I might as well tell you. Unauthorized ships have indeed been prowling about the Fringe. Slavers."

For a moment, Horne didn't get it, the idea was so outlandish. Over by the navigation-board, Vinson's dark head had snapped erect.

Horne said, "Slavers? You mean, raiding for humanoid slaves. . . ?"

"Yes. Why anyone would want the poor devils, even for cheap labor, I don't know. But the complaints have been filtering through. So, send Denman to look into it."

Horne shook his head, incredulous. "In this day and age . . . ?"

Vinson came back from the board. "But that," he said, "is against every law there is! The Federation has cruisers. Why don't they patrol the Fringe and break it up?" As an after-thought he turned and said to Horne, "Board checked out, sir. A-OK."

Denman said, "You're not thinking, boy. Cruisers on extended patrol have got to have bases within reach on civilized worlds able to handle all the problems of supply and maintenance. There are very few civilized worlds out here, and not one of them has chosen to join the Federation."

Vinson nodded. "So, no bases, no patrols. I see."

Denman looked bitterly at an orange-yellow star shining out in the farther distance of the Fringe, and added, "Skereth would be the key to the whole Fringe, if we had it in the Federation. But it isn't. They've held off joining; they've

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argued; they've demurred. So instead of a decent force capable of going out and dealing with such a situation, we have to send an under-official out to 'investigate.' That's me."

Horne began to understand why Denman was so sour. He said, "We're stopping to pick up passengers at Skereth, on the way back. I've heard . . ."

"I know," said Denman cynically, "I've heard the same thing. Special envoys going to Vega to talk about Skereth entering the Federation. Fine and dandy. I hope they do it. But it won't do me any good. All the preliminary talks, and the ratification red-tape, and the time required to build a base and get it operating . . ." He shook his head. "For the next two years, at least, I'll still be hitch-hiking on tramp freighters from one Fringe world to another — that is, if I'm alive to hitch."

"You're thinking of the slavers," Horne said.

"They wouldn't be anxious to have me get back home, do you think? No. And of course the humanoids are always an uncertain quantity . . . most living things are, especially if they've been frightened or hurt." Denman sighed and looked at the diamond-clear flame that was Allamar. "I wish," he said, "that I was a drinking man."

Later, lying in the dark cabin in his bunk, listening to the deep faint throbbing of the drives and feeling the fabric of the ship around him like an extension of his own flesh, Horne thought that Denman was taking the whole thing too big. He was a lonely man, obviously, far from what home and family he might have, and, just as obviously, he carried something of a grudge against his superiors, with all this talk of Denman being expendable and always getting the dirty jobs. Horne thought he was dramatizing the situation, both its importance and its danger, in order to dramatize himself.

Later still, when he came trundling down the beam of the automatic beacon to land on the single primitive field of Allamar Two, he was not so sure.

Horne had landed at Allamar once before, some five years ago. He remembered how it had been then, a festive occasion with much drumming and squealing of outlandish instru-

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ments, much waving of banners made out of feathers and bright leaves, and all-night sessions of solemn drinking after the business of trade was finished.

This time there were neither music nor banners. The *Vega Queen* settled down in a totally deserted field. After the smoke and dust cleared away and the gangway was run out, Horne and Captain Wasek and the Third Officer went down with Denman to stand in the clear sunlight. A brisk cool breeze went by with a smell of distant snowfields in it, and there was nobody at all to meet them.

Then Horne pointed toward the forest edge that hemmed the landing-field.

The people of Allamar Two were a tall race, averaging nine feet or so for the adult men, very powerful in build, richly furred from crown to toe in varying shades of brown. They had huge eyes that reflected their gentle and rather solemn natures, and a turn of feature that gave them a permanent expression of mild dejection, lightened only occasionally, even at festival times, by a smile.

This time, now, they stood ranked in the shelter of the trees with weapons in their hands, primitive things made clumsily of wood and stone, for they were a peaceable folk. There were no women or children that Horne could see, only able-bodied men. They stood looking at the ship with an air of desperate incompetence that made Horne want to laugh, only it was not in the least funny.

Denman said, "You see?"

He began to walk toward the trees, his hands held up with the palms forward. He called out to the people, not in lingua franca but in their own tongue, which Horne did not understand. They answered him, and he stopped, and presently a group of five men came out from the trees to meet him. From their dress and ornaments Horne knew that these were chiefs. They talked with Denman, and after a time all six of them turned and came back toward the ship. Then the chiefs stopped and would come no farther.

Denman came all the way and picked up his bag. "They don't trust anybody any more," he said to Wasek. "Will you

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come and speak to them? It might make things easier the next time a Federation ship wants to land here."

Wasek went back with Denman and talked to the chiefs in the lingua franca. The talking did not last long. Wasek shook hands with Denman and returned to the ship. Looking tiny and forlorn amid the massive shaggy shapes, Denman went the other way, toward the forest.

Wasek shook his head. "Something has them all upset. I didn't really believe that talk about slavers, but now I'm beginning to."

Horne looked after Denman. "I hope he'll be all right. I certainly don't envy his job here."

He was worried about Denman. He was so worried that he felt guilty at the thought of leaving him and going on to the stopover at Skereth and the pleasant fleshpots there that awaited them before the return voyage.

He spoke of this to Vinson, and later he would remember that when he spoke he had not the slightest premonitory prickle down his spine.

II

ON SKERETH, once in a lifetime a man may see the sun or catch a glimpse of the stars. Otherwise he lives beneath a wall of eternal cloud and takes the universe beyond on faith. Some people said that that peculiarity of nature explained the whole psychology of Skereth.

But in the port city of Skambar there was no need either

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of the stars or the single unseen moon to light the long nights. The glare of neons did that job with eye-searing efficiency. Skambar was a new city, grown up all haphazard around the big modern spaceport that served Skereth's lively interstellar trade among the Fringe worlds. There were blocks of tall new buildings set on fine straight streets, and then suddenly you were past them into a jumble of plastic shacks and jerry-built rooming houses, bars and shops and more bars and dubious-looking places with shuttered windows, gambling dens and still more bars, the whole mass of it shrieking with red and blue and green and yellow light. These lesser streets were narrow and inclined to wander furtively. By daylight, under the tawny blaze of the sky they looked cheap, frowsy and unclean. By night, while not exactly a fairyland, they were attractive enough to men who had been a long time in space.

Vinson was finding it delightful. Horne had been at some pains to take him to the better places he had found when he was here before. There were girls, quite human girls because the dominant people of Skereth were quite human, and some of the girls had cried out, "Jim! Jim!" and been glad to see him, which made Horne feel pleasantly experienced, so that he swaggered just a little before Vinson's admiring gaze. The girls were glad to have drinks bought for them, and they made much of Vinson, and altogether it looked as though it was going to be a good evening.

"Remember," he said dryly to Vinson, "that the nights here are as long as three of ours, so space yourself. That pale-green stuff will have you flat on your ear."

"It tastes like soda-pop," Vinson said.

"It pops, all right. Like the top of your head off." Horne lay back on the shoddy cushions that were provided for sitting, finding his head most pleasurably propped against something soft and warm. The room was big, with a low ceiling and no windows. Inside here the light was soft and dim, the warm air murmurous with voices and laughter. Horne thought fleetingly of Denman out on Allamar Two, crouched in some dismal village with his charges hunkered around

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him like so many unhappy Saint Bernards. He shook his head, and once again he felt a faint twinge of guiltiness.

The food, placed on tiny tables islanded among the cushions, was very good, and the girls were friendly, and presently the lights dimmed even more, except for one pale shaft in the middle of the room, and a girl appeared in it carrying a curious basket woven of rushes. She was not a human girl. Her beauty was faintly shocking at first, and Horne heard Vinson draw his breath in sharply. The girl bent her silvery head over the basket and opened it, and then she began to dance.

Golden globes of light no bigger than might be circled by a thumb and finger floated up out of the basket and joined in her dancing.

Her body was slender and glinty and pliant as mist. It drifted and swayed in the single shaft of light, and the golden globes swirled around her, making a game out of the dancing, swooping with a rush like bursting bubbles up the slim curve of her flank, evading her hands as she laughed and caught at them, clothing her in veils of soft radiance and then whipping free in a kind of comet's tail to follow shining behind her head. At the last she lifted up her arms and all the shining globes were gathered into them, and she let them fall in a glittering cascade back into the rush basket, and closed the lid, and all the lights went out. When they came back on again the girl and her basket were gone.

In the midst of the applause Horne saw that two young men had come up and were standing close by, looking down at him and Vinson.

They were natives of Skereth, with the light hair and clean-cut features of their race. They were little more than youngsters . . . students, Horne thought, out for an evening of glamor and excitement among the wild life of Skambar. They were staring with great interest at his and Vinson's shoulder-patches with the insigne of the interlocking suns on them.

"You're off the Federation packet, aren't you?" one of them asked, and Horne nodded. They both smiled, and the other one said, "May we buy you a drink?"

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Horne said that was an invitation he couldn't refuse, and he and Vinson and the girls rearranged themselves on the cushions so that there was room for them to sit down.

They wanted to talk about space and spacemen. They were starry-eyed about it, but they also wanted to know how much it paid and what conditions were like on the Federation ships. After a while Vinson said, "But you people aren't in the Federation."

"We're going to be in it," said one of the boys. "And soon. Morivenn's going to Vega in your ship. We thought you knew that."

"Outside of our department," Horne said, "which is navigation, we don't know anything."

"I remember hearing some talk of an envoy, or envoys," Vinson said, "but we thought it might be just rumor. Who is Morivenn?"

"The leader of the Pro-Federation party here on Skereth," said the boy. His name was Mica, and he had eyes of a darker blue than one would ever see on Earth, so dark they were almost black. "Oh, he'll get us in, all right, one way or another. They can't keep up barred off forever from the big wide universe beyond the Fringe."

"Who's they?" asked Horne.

"The anti-Federation party," said the other boy, and grinned. His name was Durin, or something like it, and there was nothing at all extraordinary about him. "They've had things their own way so long that they just can't bear to think of competition. But it's got to come."

"And when it does come," said Mica, "we'd like to get berths on a Federation ship. You see, our traders just make the same stupid little circuit around the posts out here on the Fringe, and we want to go to Vega, and Altair and the Cluster Worlds, and all the other places there are to see."

"What are the girls like at Vega?" asked Durin.

"What kind do you want?" Vinson said with a princely gesture. "You name it, we have it." He was Vega-born, and proud of it.

"We've just got to get Skereth into the Federation," said

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Durin, and closed his eyes, sighing in anticipation of the myriad Vegan girls.

The pale-green stuff he had been drinking was beginning to make Horne's head buzz just a trifle. The warm scented air began to be oppressive. He stretched and got up.

"Thanks for the drinks," he said, "and good luck to you. Who knows, maybe you'll be serving with one of us on a ship sometime." He turned to Vinson. "I'm going out for some air. I'll just remind you again that the nights are long here, and you can take it from there."

"I'm happy right here," said Vinson. "Now I've got both the girls."

The two boys jumped up. "We'll go with you. There's a place down in the Nightbirds' Quarter. You ever been there?"

Horne said he hadn't.

"Well," said Durin, "you can't really say you've been to Skereth if you haven't been there." He added, "You can get plenty of fresh air on the way."

"What's the Nightbirds' Quarter?" Vinson wanted to know.

"Where the Nightbirds live."

"Logical enough. Now what are Nightbirds?"

"Just what they sound like. An avian race from the far north where the nights go on forever, and they don't care much for daylight. There's a lot of them on the night shifts at the spaceport, and the pleasure spots down in their quarter really swing."

"I'm game," said Horne. "Let's go."

Vinson hesitated, torn between present pleasures and the thought of being left alone while there was a party going on somewhere else. After a moment he kissed the girls good-bye and caught up with Horne and the two boys in the doorway.

The night air smelled good, fresh and cool. The gaudy streets were cheerfully noisy, populous without being crowded. The boys chattered away, pointing out this or that or making some comment on the local life and customs. The buzzing in Horne's head went away and was replaced by a buoyant sense of well-being.

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"That green stuff," he said to Vinson, "is the greatest drink in the galaxy, if you handle it right."

Vinson smiled. They walked along a narrow street into the quarter of the Nightbirds. The lights were softer here, more subdued and blue-tinted so that the shoddiness of the buildings was concealed as though by moonlight. Strains of very odd music filtered out through doors and louvered windows.

"It's just a little way ahead," said Mica.

A company of creatures moved across the blue-lighted street, going with light gliding steps and a rustle of white plumage. Vinson's eyes followed them, huge with wonder, and Horne thought, I know how he feels. I still can get a lifting of the heart and a gladness that I was born now when men are not chained to one little planet but can go from star to star.

"Just there," said Mica, pointing.

A group of men were standing in front of the place, four or five of them, talking together as though they had just come out and were wondering where to go next. Horne went to pass them, with Vinson and the boys behind him.

He found his way blocked, and one of the men had reached out and was fingering his shoulder-patch.

"Federation."

It was a statement, not a question. Horne felt a hot twinge shoot down his spine and through his belly. "Yes," he said, and felt all his muscles tightening against the sudden electric sense of trouble in the air.

He smiled and tried again to pass.

"Federation," said the man again, in a louder tone, and other voices took it up and sent the word on into the dim recesses of the building.

"Listen," said Mica nervously from behind Horne. "Listen, we don't want any trouble. . . ."

More men came out of the building. Horne had already begun to move backward, his shoulder butting against Vinson's and feeling the obstinacy of it.

"Listen," said Mica again, his voice cracking.

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One of the men reached out and slapped him hard. "If you were just a little older I'd break your neck for a traitor." He slapped him again. "Go on, run!"

Horne heard Mica's feet going away. Durin had been muttering something about anti-Federation people and bad feeling, and then Horne didn't hear Durin any more, only another pair of feet going quickly away. For him and Vinson it was far too late to run, though he would have been willing to. But the men had him penned in against the wall. Horne was astonished and shaken. There had been a lot of feeling on Skereth the last time he had been here, against and for the Federation, but nothing like this.

He said evenly, still hoping against hope, "Would you mind letting us through?"

"When we're through talking," said the man who had spoken first. He pushed Horne gently against the wall. "If you don't want trouble, mister, then stay off of other peoples' worlds and out of other peoples' business."

Vinson said, "I take it you're unhappy about the delegation going to Vega." The answer was obvious, and nobody bothered to give it. Vinson continued, "Then why don't you take it up with them?"

"Because," said the leader, "they're not here, and you are."

Vinson said, "Well, in that case . . ." and hit him.

III

THEY MADE a good try at fighting their way out. Horne clearly remembered afterward that they had gotten to the

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middle of the street and that he had personally broken one man's jaw. He remembered that Vinson had an unexpectedly powerful left. And then something hit him from behind, a board or a bottle or a stone, and when he came round again they were all alone in the street and Vinson was trying to help him up.

No. Not Vinson. Someone else.

He saw the face close above him in the blue light, a Skereth face, clean-cut and intelligent and unmarked, with dark concerned eyes. "Are you all right?"

Horne clawed his way up the young man's arm, looking around for Vinson.

"Vinson," he said. He stood up, hanging on to the stranger. He shouted, "Vinson!"

"There's no one here, no one but you."

"Vinson!" Horne shouted again, and went staggering away.

The young man caught him. "Hush! Listen."

Horne listened, his head clearing, his body still cold and wooden, a kernel of nausea growing from a pain that seemed to be centered just behind his left ear. He heard the sounds then, the quiet, vicious sounds of men savaging a victim, the grunts of effort and the guttural, excited breathing. They came from somewhere. . . . Where?

"In there," said the young man, pointing to a narrow alley so shadowed by the buildings that it had escaped Horne's notice. The young man began to run and Horne ran after him, stiffly, stumbling over the curbstones.

As he went, the young man whistled, a sharp, shrill, long-carrying note.

The men who were in the alley, busy in the darkness with particular intense business, heard the whistle and froze, startled in various attitudes above the light-colored heap that lay quietly moaning under their feet.

A tremendous anger came over Horne so that he forgot the pain in his head, and the cold woodenness was burned out of him. His eyesight became strangely acute. He saw the young man running close ahead of him and noticed for the first time that he wore spaceman's garb. He saw the men

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who were standing above Vinson come loose from their startlement and begin to move again. He saw the stranger plow into them and then he was plowing in too, his fists hammering hard against flesh, hard with a simple desire to destroy. At the same time, in the street behind him, he heard sounds of voices and running feet.

The young stranger fought beside him, shoulder to shoulder, standing over Vinson's moaning.

The two of them would not have stood long, no longer than he and Vinson had stood before against the great outnumbering of men that faced them. But the whistle had brought other men, men in spaceman's boots and caps. They shouted, and the young man shouted back, "In here!" They came boiling down the alley full of bloodlusting exuberance, and in a few minutes there was nobody left there but Horne and Vinson and the young stranger and the newcomers with the spaceman's caps. The others had all run away.

The young man told somebody to call an ambulance. Then he kneeled down beside Horne who was holding Vinson's head in his lap.

Vinson said, "I think I made a mistake. I shouldn't have hit him."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Horne said. "How bad is it?"

"I don't really know," said Vinson, and fainted. Horne looked across at the young man.

"Thanks," he said.

"I'm sorry I didn't happen along earlier. My name's Ardic."

"Jim Horne."

They shook hands over Vinson's heavily-breathing body.

"I'm sorry," said Ardic. "I'm ashamed for my people, for Skereth. There's a lot of feeling about this business of joining the Federation. Some of it's bitter to the point of being fanatical."

"I gathered that."

"They think it means giving up sovereignty and independence, having to take orders from a bunch of strangers who are light-years away. They're afraid of their jobs, afraid

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of change. But this kind of thing . . . It makes me sick and ashamed."

"Where were the Nightbirds while all this was going on?" Horne asked, remembering the complete desertion of the street.

"They only work here," Ardric said, "and eat, and sleep. Otherwise they don't get involved."

"They might at least have called the police," Horne grumbled.

"Not they," said Ardric. "Unless it was one of their own in trouble. Then they can get involved fast enough."

The ambulance came. Horne said thanks to the other spacemen while Vinson was being loaded in.

"May I ride with you?" Ardric asked. "I'd like to know how he is."

They rode together to the hospital with Vinson.

Horne called Port Authority and had a message sent to Captain Wasek, and then accepted treatment for his own cuts and bruises. After that he sat with Ardric, glad of the company.

Wasek came, angry and upset. Horne told him the story and Wasek shook hands with Ardric.

"I'm grateful," he said. He looked at the collar tabs on Ardric's tunic. "I'm not familiar with all the insignia, I'm afraid. You're Skereth merchant fleet, I know, but . . ."

"Assistant Pilot," Ardric said. "What you would call a Second."

"Well, now," said Wasek. "Well! That's very fitting. So is Vinson a Second. What ship?"

"None," said Ardric, "right now."

"Out of a berth, eh? Stay around then . . . because we may be out of a Second."

They were.

"Fractured left tibia, and a moderate concussion, with multiple contusions and abrasions," the doctor said, "and lucky it wasn't worse. But he won't pilot any ships for a while."

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Horne was sorry. He had come to like young Vinson. Still, it was better than it might have been. Vinson, and quite possibly he too, might have been dead if Ardric hadn't come along.

Wasek was looking at Ardric. "We can't take off without a Second. How about it? Are you qualified, and would you like the berth?"

"Would I?" said Ardric, and began pulling papers from his tunic pocket. "Here's my ticket, flight record, health card."

He was qualified. When the *Vega Queen* lifted off, Ardric was sitting in Vinson's chair, and Horne was glad that they had been able to repay Ardric in this way for the considerable service he had done them. Even Vinson had been glad of that, though he regretted being left behind.

When the time came to set the course, after lift-off, Horne simply said, "Arcturus III," and let Ardric punch the tapes and feed them into the computers. He let Ardric set up the results on the board. Only then did he check the coordinates out and find them to be correct. He nodded, and Ardric grinned.

"First hurdle," he said, and leaned back in his chair like someone relaxing from a long run. Horne noticed that his eyes were very dark blue, as the boy Mica's had been, and it crossed his mind that there was something upsetting about blue eyes being as opaque as black ones. But they looked eagerly at the view-screen windows, at the stars, and Ardric said, "I never thought I'd get as far as Vega, except when Skereth joined the Federation, and I could be an old man by then."

"The two boys . . ." Horne had explained about Mica and Durin before, and how he and Vinson had happened to come into the Nightbirds' quarter. "The two boys seemed pretty certain that Morivenn would swing it, in spite of the opposition."

"If anybody can do it," Ardric said, "he can."

Horne would have liked to meet, or at least see, Morivenn, whose voyage to Vega had caused him so much trouble. But

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Morivenn and the three other men of his delegation kept to their cabins even at mealtimes.

"Other passengers came aboard at Skereth too, you know," said Ardric. "They're wise to be afraid. One fanatic with a weapon can end things very quickly."

His dark blue eyes, it seemed to Horne, were always on the stars and for a long time he thought that Ardric was looking at space the way Vinson had looked at it, with a boy's excitement. Then he began to feel that there was something else in Ardric's attitude, something more calculating than excitement, or perhaps it was not the stars that excited him at all, but something else.

But that was silly. After all, Horne thought, Vinson was of Earth stock even if he was Vega-born, and he and I have a common denominator of feeling. Ardric is of a different world, different stock, different culture. How do I know how a man of Skereth looks when he is expressing excitement, or any other emotion for that matter? And if there are times when his mouth seems to lose that friendly smile and becomes thin-lipped and rather too harsh, that too may simply be because people of his stock normally have thin lips which give an impression of harshness.

He was competent, anyway. Highly competent. And, except for the occasional periods of withdrawal when it seemed to Horne that he might be thinking flinty thoughts, he was good company during the watches they shared.

Then Ardric volunteered a piece of information that explained things to Horne.

"My father," he said abruptly one day, when he saw Horne looking at him curiously, "is bitterly against joining the Federation. I think sometimes how he must feel to know that I'm here, helping to pilot Morivenn on his way to Vega."

The ship plowed her way between the island suns, heading for Arcturus where they would discharge cargo and some people from the Federation consular service, take on more cargo and the returning consular personnel. Then they would lift off for the long home-flight to the heart of the galaxy,

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to Vega. They came out of FTL drive, into normal space. Arcturus burned larger and brighter in the screens until presently all the other stars were burned away and there was only the single furnace blaze to fill the sky.

"I've been here before," said Ardric. "I can take her in."

"I'm sure you could," said Horne, "but regulations require me to do it."

Ardric grinned. "Okay. But don't forget the meteor-swarm. I was with a man who did, and it was . . ." he made a gesture of sliding one hand past the other, touching. "It was that close."

The meteor-swarm was periodic, and fully charted. Horne plotted his deceleration pattern to take full account of it, checked the coordinates twice through the computers and set up the combination on the board.

The *Vega Queen*, stately as a great tarnished carp in a pool of diamonds, swung her nose around and began the business of slowing down. It would take her three and one-half days, Vega Arbitrary Time, of spiraling toward the planetary surface to reach a speed that would enable her to land without setting herself and the surrounding air on fire.

The first day passed.

The second day passed, and it was dinner time. Horne and Ardric were standing watch, four on and four off, and they ate in the pilot room together at the end of the third trick and the beginning of the fourth. It was Horne's turn to go off.

The steward brought the dinner in and they ate it. They talked of the wonders of the wider galaxy, and at regular intervals Horne, since he was finishing his trick, rose to check the navigation-board and the all-important tell-tales that monitored planetary drift, the particles of debris attracted randomly by the gravitational field and impossible to chart. The automatic compensators were functioning perfectly.

The steward came again with coffee and the small glass of brandy for Horne. When it was Ardric's turn to go off he

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would have an equally small amount of the green liquor of Skereth.

Horne rose and checked the board again. He had his coffee and his brandy, formally handed over the pilot room to Ardric by punching the code in the log-tape, and went to his cabin, which was only a dozen steps away and connected to the pilot room with a direct-speaker alarm. He closed the door and began to undress. He was thinking that they should pass well clear of the meteor-swarm at about the mid-point of his next trick, when the dark closed over him with such swift waves of weakness that he barely made it to his bunk before he fell.

The next thing he knew there was a panic of noise, sirens, bells, human voices, shouts and screams, and someone was shaking him. Someone was slapping him, brutally pounding him awake. Even through the sick mists that clogged his brain and clouded his emotions, he could feel the cold and bitter hatred behind those blows and the speaking of his name.

He saw Wasek's face.

He mumbled an attempt at a question, trying desperately to come awake. He heard Wasek answer something about the meteor swarm and he said, "But not yet — next trick, my watch . . ."

Wasek hauled him bodily erect. "This *is* your watch, you drunken murdering bastard. Get in there and do something if you can." And he said something more about Ardric, but Horne didn't hear it. All he could hear now were the noises of the ship screaming and the people screaming and the feet running over the metal floors and the lifeboat hatches clanging. He started to walk the twelve steps to the pilot room, his knees giving under him and his belly weighted down with lead, and then something hit the ship again — Again? Had it been hit before? He couldn't remember with his mind but his body seemed to have a memory of jarring agony and wrenching metal. The lights went out and the corridor tilted upward, then slid away at an insane angle, and Horne went with it into the dark again.

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IV

HE HEARD the voices long before he opened his eyes. He kept his eyes shut and tried not to listen, hoping that the darkness would claim him again and keep him, this time, forever. But it did not. And there was no escape from the voices.

One was that of a child, crying. One was that of a woman, crying. The rest were those of men, speaking in the dulled and ragged tones of shock, starting sentences and never finishing them, or repeating sometimes one word or a phrase over and over again. *I went forward, see, to get this bucket out of Stores, and that was when . . . Just like a piece of torn paper, that bulkhead, my God, I saw it go out. . . . Nothing left, nothing at all left, not even anything I can bury. . . .*

The woman, between her sobs, just said a name over and over again.

Horne had to open his eyes at last.

There were eighteen people in the lifeboat. A woman, a child, and sixteen men.

One of them was Wasek, with an ugly wound across his left cheek and his tunic stained with blood. He looked at Horne. The other fifteen men looked at Horne. So did the woman, but he did not think she saw him, and the child was crying.

Horne said, in a voice he did not recognize as his own, "What happened?"

There was a sound and a movement among the fifteen men. Wasek turned on them.

"I didn't save his life just for that. I'm not through with him yet. I won't be through with him for a long time."

Then men subsided. They were too exhausted in their emotions to carry any feeling too far, even the feeling of hatred. Wasek grunted and pointed out the port.

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"That's what happened."

Horne had already seen. The lifeboat was moving steadily away, its small jets hammering, but it was within sight of the scattered wreckage. Some parts of the *Vega Queen* were still recognizable as having once been part of a ship. Most of it was unrecognizable as ever having been anything.

"How many lifeboats got away?"

"This is it. These are all there are. Eighteen survivors. Eighteen, Horne. Figure out for yourself how many lives you took."

Horne shook his head. His tongue felt like a stick of wood in his mouth. "I took?" he said. "No, I . . . For God's sake, Captain, tell me what happened!"

The men watched him with cold hating eyes. Cold hate. Yes. He remembered Wasek shaking him, slapping him, saying, *You drunken murdering bastard.*

Horne began to shake. "I had one glass of brandy. How can a man get drunk on one glass of brandy?" They did not answer him. Wasek's face was like stone. Horne looked again at the wreckage, and for the third time he said, despairing, "What happened?"

"The meteor swarm," said Wasek. "We ran straight into it."

Horne stared at him. "That isn't possible. We were chartered to clear that swarm by fifteen thousand miles."

"You set the course up yourself, Horne. It took no account of the swarm. . . ."

"How can you say that? How do you know? I set the course."

Wasek went stonily on. "If Ardrick had been an experienced pilot, he might have seen it in time, but he wasn't and he didn't, and you were passed out drunk. He was standing your watch for you, trying to cover, and he didn't realize in time."

"But the course was set! Fifteen thousand miles. We couldn't have got even near the fringe of the swarm!"

"But we did," said Wasek. "And there are eighteen survivors."

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He looked at Horne and the others all looked at Horne, all except the woman whose head was bent and who kept saying "Bob" over and over again.

Horne tried to stop his shaking, which was becoming uncontrollable. He concentrated on stopping it, and when he had succeeded he made himself think back to when he had plotted that course. When he had had the charts before him, the periodicity of the swarm, relative time, planetary phase time, solar phase time, and the periodic tables all made out for any possible approach.

He could not have made a mistake.

Could he?

Could he be certain he had not made a mistake, in calculation, in punching the tapes, in reading off the results?

"I don't see how," he said aloud, to himself, to nobody. "I doublechecked them. The coordinates. Carefully, doublechecked them. And just before I went off I checked again. We were on course, everything was as it should be."

"So good," said Wasek, "that you figured you could leave it to Ardric to take her in."

"Captain," said Horne. "Sir. I had one glass of brandy, just the same as I always had. Ardric can tell you . . ." He broke off. There were only fifteen men beside Wasek in the lifeboat. It did not take long to see that Ardric's face was not among them. "No. I guess he can't. But it's true all the same. . . ."

Wasek said, "It isn't the glass of brandy that bothers me. It's the two empty bottles that were in your cabin."

Horne stared at him blankly. "The *what*?"

"I fell over them when I came in. You were drunk, Horne, drunk and snoring like a goddam swine, and Ardric died at his post trying to salvage something from the error you made in the course." Wasek leaned a little closer. "My ship, Horne. Ninety-seven crewmen, and thirty-eight passengers, including women and children. I'm going to crucify you, Horne. I'm going to hang you up and trail your guts out over the floor."

Horne did not answer him. There did not seem to be any-

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thing more to say. He felt completely stunned, without life or health or the ability to react.

And he sat, stunned and silent, all the time that it took the lifeboat to limp its slow and overburdened way to a landing on Arcturus III. Sometimes, underneath the pall of shock and horror and self-doubt that covered him — *did I make a mistake in the course? I know I didn't get drunk but did I possibly make a mistake in the course?* — underneath this pall he was conscious from time to time that his mind was working, ferreting about in dark places, gathering bits and pieces of memory and speculation. He let it alone, too heartsick to care much.

It wasn't until the surface of Arcturus III was close under them, shaggy with forests and humped with mountains like the back of some monstrous beast, that his mind suddenly spoke to him clearly and said, "Ninety-seven men of the crew and thirty-eight passengers died in that wreck, and Morivenn was one of them, and there were eight men of Skereth aboard besides him — three in his delegation, three others, and Ardric."

His mind let him ponder that a while, and then it said, "You did not drink two bottles of brandy in your cabin."

These two things were statements. After them, still later, came a question.

"How do you *know* that only one lifeboat got away?"

He could only answer that Wasek had said so, which in turn led to the question, "How does *he* know?"

There was no answer to that.

His mind scurried and scabbled some more, and after a time, when the retro-jets were blasting, it said, "All you had to drink was one glass of brandy and a cup of coffee. So one or the other must have been drugged. Drugged, yes. The lights went out on me so suddenly. And Ardric sat at the table alone, after the brandy came, chatting away, while you carefully checked the board and never looked to see what he was doing."

Why look? Ardric who saved Vinson's life, Ardric who appeared out of nowhere in the Nightbirds' Quarter and helped

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so nobly in the trouble with the anti-Feds, and who just happened by the happiest chance to be a qualified Second Pilot so that they could reward him for saving Vinson's life by giving him Vinson's job. Why would Ardric drug the brandy and wreck the ship that was taking Morivenn to Vega? Ardric was all in favor of Federation. . . .

He said.

And maybe that was the flint-hard thought he was thinking as he looked at the stars. Thinking of how all these people were going to die in order to kill Morivenn and keep Skereth out of the Federation. Because maybe the whole thing — right from the time those two kids came up and brought us a drink in that joint in Skambar, and then talked us into going to the Nightbirds' Quarter . . .

The kids, and the men waiting for us there in a place where the people don't interfere with the affairs of humans, don't even call the police. They knocked me out and left me, but they dragged Vinson into an alley and smashed him up, and then Ardric came, and a few hours later he was Second Pilot of the *Vega Queen*.

"Ardric!" he said harshly, aloud. "Ardric, Ardric!"

Wasek turned his head. "What about Ardric?"

"He . . ." said Horne, and was suddenly so choked with rage that he could not speak for a moment or two. "He drugged my brandy, he changed the course, he wrecked the *Queen*, nobody else could have . . ."

Wasek had gone white. He belted Horne across the mouth so hard that the blood fountained where his teeth had cut the inside of his lips.

Wasek said in a very quiet voice, "I wouldn't say that again, Horne. You really shouldn't, seeing the man died trying to cover for you."

Between the rage and the pain and the frustration, Horne wanted very badly to kill Wasek but that was not practical and so he sat rigid with the blood running down onto his tunic and his eyes hot and furious, glaring at the captain.

"I'll show you," he said, and cursed Wasek.

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But the words were so blurred with the blood and the swelling of his lips that Wasek did not understand them.

The lifeboat landed. Horne did not see much of what happened afterwards because men from Port Authority took him directly from the lifeboat to a closed van. They told him that this was for his own protection. Wasek had reported by radio as soon as the lifeboat was clear, and of course they had had the wreck on their radarscopes before that, and by now every spaceman around the port knew about how it had happened. Through a couple of tiny ventilator ports Horne could see that there was a large crowd and considerable activity, and he was just as glad to be in the van where they couldn't get at him, if they were so minded. They went out by a closed gate on the opposite side of the field and there was no trouble.

Whether it was at that moment in the stuffy oil-and-metal smelling obscurity of the van, or whether it was later, in the shabby cheerlessness of the detention cell at PAHQ, that Horne suddenly found himself a different man, he was never sure. There was so little to choose between the two places and the way he felt in them. The anger was the same, the shame, the degradation, the sick incredulity. *I can no longer walk down a street, he thought. I can't go into a bar. I can't talk to another man. I always walked with my head up, and now I can't crawl low enough on my belly to get by.*

It would be bad enough if I deserved this. But I don't.

The different man, the new Horne, said, "The bastards. I'll show them."

It was difficult to remember just then that Wasek and the others were perfectly justified in their belief. There was in him only the raging hurt that men who knew him, who served alongside him, commanded him — that any of them, and especially Wasek, could think that he, Jim Horne, was capable of such an act.

The thing that was different about this new Jim Horne was that there weren't any soft places in him anymore. No friendly welcomes for admiring kids buying drinks. No gratitude for help given in time of need. And no desire to see

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the other fellow's point of view. A man willing to murder all or most of the passengers and crew of a large ship in order to advance a political cause must be a devout believer in that cause, but Horne was not interested.

He wondered if Ardric were still alive.

He had a feeling that he was. Another lifeboat might have gotten away without anyone knowing or seeing it in the awful confusion of the wreck. No one would ever be able to check the actual number of bodies, nor know whether all the boats were accounted for. — Any that were missing might have been vaporized by impact or broken up into chunks of drift. A good pilot might have gotten well clear before the final blowout and hidden his small craft in the fringes of the meteor swarm, moving with it, thus evading radar watch. He might have come down in a remote spot, some private field where he could land secretly, or he might have been picked up in space by some ship waiting beyond radar range.

He might be dead. Even if he had planned to get away, Ardric might be dead. You couldn't stage-manage a space-wreck with any great degree of certainty. If Ardric had indeed been in the pilot room when Wasek was trying to get him, Horne, there, then he was certainly dead. But why would he have been there? He had already called to Wasek for help, and disclosed Horne's condition, so if there were any survivors they would all know about it. Why would he wait around and take chances any longer?

It might be just wishful thinking, to be so sure that Ardric had got away. But Horne had to have something to hang onto. Otherwise there would not be any hope, and a man had to have some hope in order to go on living.

He needed that shred of hope very desperately when they gave him a preliminary hearing before the representative of the Federation Board of Inquiry. There were some local men present and a couple from the Pilots' Association and the Space Officers' Association. They listened while Wasek and several others testified as to what they had seen at the time of the wreck and later. They listened while Horne told his story of the two boys and the Nightbirds and the anti-

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Feds and the drugged brandy, and while he was talking he heard the way the words dropped like stones into cold water. And because the story sounded preposterous to the men who were listening, it began to sound so to Horne, and even his voice began to acquire a note of doubt.

For he had no proof. Not a single small fragment of proof. He was, to be honest, only speculating on what Ardric had done, and to them Ardric was a hero who had died at his post. All he could know for sure was what he himself had not done . . . namely, foul up the course and then get drunk.

He would never have any proof if he did not find Ardric.

The judgment of the Board representative was foregone. Horne was to be returned to Vega Center for trial according to the legal procedures of the Federation. And Horne knew what the outcome of that trial would be. Permanent loss of his ticket, a fine, imprisonment . . . They might just as well hang him and be done with it.

Wasek did not even look at him as he went out.

They took Horne back to the detention room and locked him in. He sat staring at the drab wall, thinking.

Thinking that a dead man would be hard to find, but that finding one was his only chance. . . .

V

It was two days later before Horne made his move.

It was a forlorn hope, and he knew it. But if he was ever to find Ardric and clear himself, he had to start doing it now, before they took him back to Vega. The detention room

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was tight and the man who guarded him was careful. He could see only one way. He sent Wasek a message. *If you'll bring me what money's due me*, he wrote, *I'll confess to the Board now that I was derelict in duty.*

Horne was gambling on two things. One was that Wasek could not get another berth as captain until he was completely cleared of the *Vega Queen* disaster. A confession by Horne would clear him right away, and Horne thought he would come. The other thing was a little-known clause in the Space Code which he hoped his guard had never heard about.

He had sent his message just before sunset, for it was essential that Wasek should come after dark. He sat watching the bit of sky in the high loophole window turn from orange to pale yellow to dusk, and the velvety night of the planet came down, and nothing happened. He began to sweat. If Wasek didn't come until morning, or if he didn't come at all . . .

Wasek came. The door was unlocked and opened and the guard let the visitor in, then closed and re-locked the door from the outside.

Grim and bitter, Wasek shoved an envelope at him. "Here it is, your wages for the outward trip. Though what need you'll have of money where you're going, I couldn't say."

"I'll need a lawyer, to work up a clemency plea," Horne said sullenly, and took the envelope.

"I've notified the Board you'll make a full confession," Wasek said. "They'll hear you in the morning."

Horne nodded. "But first there's one thing. . . ."

"What?"

"This," and Horne swung with all his strength.

His fist caught Wasek on the jaw. The Captain staggered and slithered and Horne sprang forward and caught him with the solicitude of a lover, easing him down to the floor without a sound.

Wasek was not knocked out but he was so near to it that it made no difference. His eyes were glazed and his hands fluttered vaguely, and a slurred whisper came from his mouth.

Horne worked fast, taking Wasek's belt to tie his wrists

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behind his back, ripping a strip from his sleeve to make a gag that wouldn't choke the man to death. Then he fumbled frantically for the little pocket inside Wasek's jacket. The sweat sprang out on his forehead and his fingers were all thumbs, and for a moment he thought the thing wasn't there, but then he felt the flat, hard outline of it and in a moment held it out in his hand.

There was a clause in the Space Code which said that the licensed master of a ship had the right and duty to possess and carry at all time a semi-lethal weapon. The clause had been put there in older and wilder days, for good reasons connected with some classic mutinies. Most masters these days complied with the regulation by carrying a miniaturized pocket-stunner they never used, and Horne had gambled that his guard didn't know this, and it seemed now he hadn't.

As he straightened up with the little weapon, he saw that Wasek had come around. The look in his pale eyes was like a laser-beam of hate.

"I'm sorry," Horne said. "You see, I was telling the truth the first time and I've got to prove it, and this is the only way . . ."

Under the blaze of those eyes, his voice trailed away. Then his anger returned and he said, "The hell with you."

He went and knocked loudly on the door.

The guard came and opened it. The guard was a careful man but he was not a very fast one. He was not supposed to have any captives more dangerous than drunken spacemen to watch. He tried to get his weapon out but the stunner in Horne's fist buzzed like a baby rattlesnake and the guard went down. Horne dragged him in and laid him beside Wasek. He figured that Wasek would probably work himself loose before the guard woke up which gave him very little time.

He was keyed up for anything now, and when he went out into the corridor he was ready to use the stunner on anyone who got in his way. It was a slight anticlimax to find that there was nobody. The hour was late and the Port Authority building was not built or run like a prison. It was the simplest

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thing in the world for Horne to walk downstairs and out a side door.

The twisting streets of the spacemen's quarter took him in.

He knocked twenty minutes later at a door in an ill-lighted alley, and the face of a man looked out at him — one of those faces that seemed to have been dragged right through the slime and crime of a hundred planets.

"You'll remember me," Horne said. "I was in court here when you were questioned in that *vian*-smuggling case two years ago. You were guilty as hell, but they couldn't prove it."

The face smiled. "Ah, yes, Officer Horne. But we are in trouble now, are we not? We have broken detention or jumped bail, and come here for . . ."

Horne pushed past him into a dingy room and laid money on the table. "For enough of a disguise to get me past the port police, for a Spaceman First Class ticket, and for a berth on the first ship that goes to Skereth. There's three hundred credits."

The face laughed out loud. "Really, for a sum as small as that, it is naïve to expect . . ."

"There's more," said Horne, and reached into his pocket and brought out the stunner. "There's this. A splitting headache for a week. Or would you rather take the credits?"

Ten days later, looking not very much like himself, Horne was deep in the bowels of a dumpy Fringe trading-ship as it lifted off for Skereth.

Horne had time to think on the long, slow voyage back out through the Fringe. He had time to turn over and over in his mind everything he knew about Ardric. There wasn't very much, and the main part of it was that Ardric had said his home was at Rillah, which was the old ruling city of Skereth and lay across a small landlocked sea from the new spaceport town. Of course, Ardric might have lied about that as he had lied about everything else. . . .

When he thought too long about Ardric, his hands would tremble a little. He had begun to fear that if he ever did find

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Ardric he would kill him outright instead of making him tell the truth. Then the black depression would come back on him and whisper to him that Ardrick was really dead, that he could never have made it away from the wreck in time, and that he was an idiot to go hunting a dead man, a phantom. . . .

Skereth finally rolled toward the freighter, a tawny globe. When the ship went down through the eternal cloud-layer to the busy spaceport at Skambar, Horne felt a pang, thinking of how short a time ago he had left here as the Chief Pilot of a good ship without a worry in the world.

When the freighter docked, Horne did not leave it with the rest of the crew. He deliberately scamped on a job, and had timed it so that a cursing Second Officer swore that he would have no planet-liberty until he did his task over. Horne sulked and went to work, using every opportunity to keep an eye on the docks outside the ship.

There was a little group of Skereth men outside the dock-gate. They were not officials, but they stood there talking among themselves and watching every man who came out of the ship. From time to time one or two of them went away and then came back in cone-fliers.

Were they police?

Maybe. Horne had known quite well that his escape would be broadcast, and that officials on Skereth would receive the warning.

But what if they weren't police? Unless he was dead wrong in all his deductions, there was a big, deep conspiracy on Skereth . . . one that had used Ardrick to kill Morivenn so that Skereth would stay out of the Federation. He, Horne, had implied as much in the testimony he had given at his hearing, and nobody had believed him.

"No, not police," thought Horne. "The men who sent Ardrick on his errand . . ."

They would guess that Jim Horne, escaped prisoner, might come back to Skereth looking for Ardrick. He had shouted his charges against Ardrick loudly enough. And if Jim Horne

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came back to Skereth they were, quite apparently, ready for him.

Horne revised his plans. He was not going to be able to walk out and take the first public flier across the landlocked sea to Rillah. He would have to go some other way.

He made his work last until night, was profanely forbidden liberty that night, and went to his bunk. In the small hours of the morning, in the forever starless darkness, Horne slipped out of the ship.

The watchers were still out there, though there were only three of them now. He could use the stunner, but he had a pretty sound idea that there would be others close by, and he did not think he would get very far that way.

There was an electrical barrier around the ship, not lethally charged but highly unpleasant if you touched it. Horne crouched down in the dark on the other side of the ship from the gate, and began work with the insulated tools he had filched out of the ship.

Twice he had to stop and crouch like a motionless shadow while cone-fliers went by overhead with a lazy, whistling sound. He was pretty sure that these were other watchers. They were, it seemed to Horne, awfully thorough about this.

Too thorough, too ruthless. There must be more to all this than just a political bias against Skereth joining the Federation. But what could it be?

Horne made his opening and slipped through it, and bumped head-on into two figures coming along so quietly he hadn't heard them.

He jumped back, and then he saw that they were Night-birds. They raised no alarm, they did not even glance twice at him, but minced along on their ridiculous avian feet, soundless as shadows. He saw them go on around the dock and pass the little group at the gate without stopping, and he remembered how Mica had said that they worked in the spaceport area by night and had little to do with humans and nothing to do with human police.

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He had been sorry for that, the night that he and Vinson were attacked. He was glad of it, now.

Within an hour, Horne stood in the heavy darkness on the fishermen's wharf of Skambar. The light metal power-boats lay along the narrow wharves chuckling sloppily among themselves as they rose and fell. There was no watchman on the wharf. The landlocked sea of Skereth was so famously full of hideous forms of life, that only the hardiest of men fished it by day and no one in their right mind would take a boat out on it at night.

"So I'm not in my right mind." Horne muttered, and picked out the likeliest boat for his purpose, a metalloy two-man skiff with good power.

It occurred to him, as he took it out, that he was taking some fisherman's wealth and livelihood. The old Jim Horne would have felt pangs of conscience about that. The new Horne dismissed the thought. All that mattered now was that he was on his way to Rillah . . . and Ardric.

VI

A GREAT SINUOUS shining arm reached out of the black water directly ahead of the skiff. Horne slammed the steering lever hard over with one hand and reached for his stunner with the other. The little bullet-shaped craft shot off on a frantic tangent drawing swirls of cold phosphorescent fire from the water under its metalloy hull. The arm continued its lazy motion without any sign of disturbance. Horne began to laugh. It was only a long, thick coil of weed, given a sem-

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blance of life by the rolling of the whole bed in some hidden undercurrent.

His laughter became rather too loud, ringing with a shocking loneliness across the empty sea. Horne stopped it. He couldn't let himself get edgy now. He had come a long way and a brutal hard one, but he had a longer and harder way yet to go, to the city of Rillah in quest of a ghost.

"Maybe," he muttered to himself, "I better get some sleep."

He was sweating and shaking in a way that alarmed him. He pulled back on the speed lever until the skiff was moving at a safe rate of speed. Its radar beam would take it around rocks or islands of floating weed too thick for passage, bringing it back to the course he had set. The night would go on for a long time yet, for nights here endured almost as long as three Earth days.

He lay down in the narrow well and slid the plastic canopy over him in case it rained. Rain on Skereth was not merely a matter of getting wet. A shower could swamp the skiff before he even had time to wake up.

He lay still, feeling the quiet lift and fall of the black water like the breathing of a slumbering giant. He was exhausted, burned out inside by the intensity that life had taken on for him in these last weeks.

Lying there, he thought suddenly of Denman. He remembered how sorry he had felt for the little Federation man when they had dropped him on that barbaric planet to live with humanoids in order to try and trace the slavers who were oppressing them. He had felt almost guilty to be leaving Denman there.

"I should have saved my pity for myself," Horne thought.

He lay staring up at the sky through the transparent canopy, waiting for sleep, and he noticed what he thought was a dim star, low and far off in the west.

"The clouds must have broken," he thought, and closed his eyes. The skiff moved gently over the breathing sea.

Broken clouds, a star...that meant tomorrow the sun would shine.

Horne started up, flinging back the canopy. He had been

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half asleep or he would have remembered that not once in a generation did the clouds break on Skereth.

Whatever the light was in the sky, it was not a star.

It was still there, but brighter, and as he watched it now he could see that it moved back and forth as well as forward. It reminded him of a man with a flashlight walking in a dark place, looking for something.

Looking for something.

He watched it, crouched over the controls of the skiff. His heart was beating hard again and his hands quivered.

Back and forth the light went, coming ever closer, sweeping the dark sea.

Looking for something . . .

Looking for him . . .

The light moved, unhurried, methodical, restless. He started to push the speed lever forward and then changed his mind. The damned phosphorescence would give him away if he made a wake. From the sky it would show like a fiery arrow pointing right at him. Even his present rate of speed was now too much. He shoved the lever into the off slot and stood looking desperately around, wondering what to do. If he stayed drifting where he was, eventually the sweeping light would catch him in its beam and the men behind it would either take him back to be tried or shoot him dead, probably the latter. He had to hide. But where in the open sea did you hide?

A weed island if you could find one and if you could get to it in time.

He peered and squinted into the night.

A smear of luminescence showed, soft and faint to his left, too high to be merely a surface patch. He glanced again at the light and then he began feverishly to strip to his shirt and shorts. His feet were already bare. There was a plastic mooring line reeled up forward for use where no magnetic moorings were available. He tied the end of it around his waist and slid over the side, trying not to splash.

The water was warm. It was calm, but with the great slow pulsing aliveness of the sea that is never quite still. It was very wide and black and there were creatures in it more

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hideous and hungry than any in the oceans of Earth. Horne swam slowly, with infinite care, towing the skiff behind him, moving his head constantly from side to side looking for tell-tale gleams.

Behind him the light searched closer and closer.

He swam faster toward the pale glow ahead of him.

Cold slippery tentacles of weed came fingering his bare flesh. He shrank from it but there was no other way, so he forced himself on into the mass that grew thicker and thicker as he went until he could almost stand in it. Soon the high-growing fronds curved over his head like trees, so that he moved in a tangled tracery of soft light, leaf, stem and branch all glowing silver against the blackness of sea and sky.

He could no longer see the searching presence in the sky. The mat of weed was slimy but solid under foot. He braced himself and pulled on the skiff until it was well in under the tree-like fronds. Then he climbed hastily back in, shuddering with revulsion from the touch of the weed. He began to pull streamers of the stuff over the metal hull and over the partly closed canopy so that no tell-tale glint would give him away. Then he hunched up as in a cave surrounded by the silver-glowing weed and waited.

There was a kind of lazy whistling in the sky now. He could not see the craft but by the sound he figured it was one of the cone-fliers. The scientists of Skereth had learned to control the G-particle in the nucleus of the iron atom some time before the scientists of Earth had even discovered its existence. This one sounded like a compressed-air unit for low-velocity flight.

The soft luminescence of the weed was blanked out by a harsher and more brilliant light. It moved with agonizing slowness across the floating island, seeking, probing.

Horne drew his head down between his shoulders, as though that would help.

Through the open end of the canopy, looking over the stern, Horne could see the weed now as an ugly tangle of pallid wormy stems and flabby leaves, all its fairy-like beauty destroyed by the pitiless light. And he saw something else.

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Something large and wetly glistening and independently alive.

Horne froze where he crouched, one hand outstretched to touch the little stunner laid ready beside him, but not picking it up.

The large glistening thing flowed and contracted, flowed and contracted, moving with a kind of single-minded determination that was horrible to watch. All Horne's boyhood nightmares returned to him. Long ago and far away on Earth he had lived near the sandy beaches, loving the sea but wondering why it had to spawn such disgusting creatures in its splendid depths. Now the ultimate in horror was lapping steadily toward him, and the damned cone hovered overhead sweeping its searchlight back and forth, suspicious of the island which was the only place where a man might hide a stolen skiff and himself.

Horne sat, trapped. He didn't dare to make any undue disturbance in the weed by using the stunner to fight the thing off.

He did not dare let it get into the skiff with him, either.

The light penetrated through his camouflage of weed fronds and lit up the inside of the skiff so that he felt as though everybody in the universe could see him. He swore at it under his breath, muttering, "Go on, can't you? Go on!" He drew himself together, flinching from the momentarily expected blast of destruction from above, and staring hollow-eyed at the hungry creature that was only interested in getting its dinner, flowing at him over the wet weed. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer. He slid the canopy the rest of the way shut, nipping a rubbery gelatinous edge that was already flapping over the stern. It was a very small movement. If they saw it overhead they would have to see it, that was all.

Apparently they did not. The light filtering into the skiff got dimmer. At first he thought it was all because the sea-thing was climbing up over the top of the canopy. But then he realized that the cone had moved on. The whistling of its propulsion unit became more distant, fading slowly as the cone continued its sweeping operations out over the sea again.

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He picked up the stunner and waited, feeling the stern sink a little with the dragging weight, watching the underside of the creature slide up over the canopy and hoping the plastic would hold.

When the weed was all gleaming silver again and the sound of the cone was quite gone, Horne did several things with almost hysterical swiftness. With his left hand he punched the firing key that started the skiff's small jet. Simultaneously, with his right hand, he wrenched canopy back a few inches and triggered the stunner directly into the creature, praying that the thing had at least enough of a nervous system to feel it.

It had. The creature began a slow, enormous flopping that shook the weed island and threw the skiff around so violently that Horne was tumbled with bone-cracking force against the side, where he managed to hang on. After a few minutes the motion subsided and he looked up and saw that the canopy was clear. The shaking of the weed had subsided outside. He shut off the jet and peered cautiously over the stern, pushing the canopy back. The thing, not liking the stunner's shock, had floundered deep in the water and only ripples from underneath rocked the weed. Horne waited until they had died away and crept to the bow of the skiff. Then with the utmost reluctance he entrusted himself to the weed again.

When he had hauled the skiff into open water again he clambered into it and dried himself and pulled his clothes on, and then took a couple of deep pulls on a flask he had found among the meager stores. The dim "star" was still visible, this time moving away toward the eastern horizon. He looked after it, hatefully. He'd been lucky this time, but it was in no sense a victory.

If they were hunting for him on Skereth they knew why he was here and where he was most likely to go — to Rillah, Ardric's home city. Their course across this landlocked sea was also the course to Rillah, and they would inevitably be there long before him. So he would have to change all of his plans, such as they were. He would not head straight for Rillah now, but would have to land somewhere many miles

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out of his way and circle around to come at the city from another direction. Because of course they would be waiting for him.

They. Impersonal word, meaning Federation officials possibly, Skereth police certainly, the local authorities of Rillah, and, if Ardric was alive yet, Ardric himself. The whole damned city would be watching for him, and he wouldn't have a chance if they saw him.

VII

WEARINESS AND black despair came over Horne. What's the use, he thought, I might as well have let them take me back there. I might as well go over the side and have done with it. Or else try and get away from Skereth, out to one of the fringe worlds. There are lots of places where a man can lose himself.

Lose himself is right. No, the devil with that kind of a life.

Ninety-seven crewmen and thirty-eight passengers, and a good ship, and they say I did it. They say I was a lousy drunken negligent murderous fool.

Horne clenched his fists and beat them gently against the gunwale. Every time he thought he had it fought down and under control it came back on him and the agony was just as great as ever.

He looked over the dark sea toward Rillah, where the last gleam of the cone's light was disappearing. It would pass on above the coast and the coastal range and the outer and

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inner valleys, heading out across the vast plain beyond them where the city stood at the junction of two rivers.

"I'll be damned if I'll let him get away with it," he said aloud and fiercely. The face of Ardric came clearly into his mind, the nice clean-cut intelligent face that was perhaps just a little too thin in the mouth and too flinty in the eyes — only you'd never think of that until the bastard had stuck the knife right up to here in your back.

"If he is alive," said Horne softly, "I'll make him sorry the day he didn't die in the wreck of the *Vega Queen*!"

He got out his chart and set a new course, far south of the one he had followed before. The flying cone was now out of sight entirely. He set the speed lever wide open and the skiff leaped over the black water, streaking bright fire behind it.

Night and day are long on Skereth, and the twilights in between are slow and lingering. It was still dark when Horne finally made his landfall on a deserted coast, hiding the skiff under a tumble of rock where the overfrowning cliffs had fallen on the narrow beach. Dawn saw him crossing the saddle of a mountain pass, walking with a dogged steadiness, his few supplies slung between his shoulders and his long lean body bent to the slope of the rise. When full morning came he had reached the foothills above the plain and stood looking out at a tawny emptiness apparently as vast as the sea he had left behind him.

He drank deeply at a spring, ate a few mouthfuls of his remaining food, slept for a time in a crevice of the rocks, and went on again. And the long, long day dragged on.

Noon. The invisible orange-yellow sun stained the clouds with streaks of gold and bloody crimson and unexpected mauves. Heat filtered like a physical substance through the cloud-layers, filling the space between land and sky so that even the wind that blew and blew and never stopped blowing across the flat plain could not cool it. The looped windings of a river seemed like molten brass running from some huge crucible, and the spiny trees beside it were the color of dull flame. Yellow grasses grew waist high, rippling under the furnace wind, and every so often the colors in the sky would

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darken to a sullen purple and everything that moved became still and waited.

It was just before the breaking of one of these storms that Horne saw the watchtower. It was obviously very old, a broken relic left over from an earlier and ruder day. It had probably had no watcher in it since men took to the sky and the use of artificial eyes and ears. But Horne did not like it, even so. It made him feel helpless and exposed. On the rare occasions when he had sighted a cone — he had purposely chosen a route away from the regular flight lanes — he had been able to lie hidden in the long grass until the danger was past. But this tower was stationary and he was going to have to pass it, and there was no possibility of concealment.

The first gust of the storm, a blast that made the normal gale seem feeble, blew him to his hands and knees and then the slatey darkness clapped down and hid the tower and everything else under cloud and driving rain. The idea occurred to Horne to use the storm as cover. The wind was blowing his way. He let it take him.

And take him it did. It drove him staggering this way and that and the rain came in solid torrents like a waterfall and the lightning was amazing. He had never tried walking in a Skereth storm before and he found out very quickly why it was not a good idea. You lost all idea of direction and the thunder made you deaf and the lightning, blind and the rain drowned you standing up. He caught glimpses of the tower two or three times, outlined in a shaking glare, and then he didn't see anything any more until a deep gully opened suddenly right under his feet, choked to its banks with rushing water. He whirled around, dropping to all fours and clawing away to avoid being blown into the gully, and with incredible abruptness men appeared around him — he was not sure how many, two, three, four, staggering at him, reaching out to grab him.

There had been watchers in the tower, then. Even this far out from Rillah they were waiting for him. They had seen him from a distance and guessed that he might try to get

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past the tower in the storm. They were not going to let him.

Horne snarled like an animal and sprang at the nearest man.

They fell down on the sodden grass, under the pounding rain. Horne beat with his fists at the man's head. Hands caught him from behind and dragged him off. He turned, crouching, and fought them. They whirled clumsily in the wind and rain and then, all of a sudden, the lightning seemed inside Horne's head and he never heard any following thunder.

When he came to again he was in a stone room with a broken ceiling through which some rain found its way. A modern portable lamp burned brightly in a corner. He was lying on his back on a very dirty floor and four wet and muddy men were looking down at him.

Four men and a woman.

The woman was young, more of a girl than a woman, and she was not wet and muddy. She was dressed like the men, in a loose shirt of some silken material, shorts and sandals, but the shirt and shorts fitted her quite differently. She had long yellow hair and rather greenish eyes and her expression was far too somber for anyone that young and that good-looking.

"Are you awake now?" she asked him, in good Universal with a trace of the same accent Ardric had had. It made Horne bristle. He sat up, rubbing his head and glowering around. His stunner had been taken from him. One of the men was holding a gun-like weapon.

"Yes," he said, "I'm awake."

He got to his feet, dizzy but too proud and angry to admit it.

"Who are you with?" he demanded. "The police, or Ardric? Or is it both?"

The girl said, "We are with Morivenn."

"Morivenn?" Horne was still dazed and did not immediately get it. Then he said, "But Morivenn died in the *Vega Queen*."

"I know," the girl said. "I'm his daughter."

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Horne stood still while the lightning blazed beyond the window slits and the thunder shook the stones.

Then he said quietly, "I'm sorry. And I suppose you'll have to kill me if you've made up your mind to it. But I was not responsible for that wreck."

He thought a glance passed between the four men. The girl's face remained set and uncommunicative.

She said, "There are men in Rillah who say you were."

"There are men in Vega Center who say so too. That doesn't make it so." He paused. "What does Ardric say?"

"Ardric is dead."

"Are you sure of that?"

She did not answer that. "Tell me about the wreck."

He told her while the water dripped noisily down the stones and the men watched him with closed, hard faces.

"The course was altered after I set it. And a man doesn't lie in a drunken stupor on one glass of brandy. Somebody planned very carefully to destroy the ship and in order to do so I had to be gotten out of the way. This worked out just fine, because if there were any survivors I, or my memory, would take the blame and nobody would think to look for any other cause."

Horne added, his face taking on that dark iron look again, "He must have wanted awfully bad to kill your father."

"Ardric?"

"Who else? He was my co-pilot. Nobody else could have done it."

"But Ardric died in the wreck. Would he have killed himself, too?"

"Fanatics have been known to do just that. Only Ardric was no fanatic. He was a spaceman and a man of the world, the real hard world where two and two always make four. He didn't have to die in the wreck. All he had to do was get away in a lifeboat and keep out of sight. Go home, where he's among friends and can spit in the Federation's eye."

"We're not all his friends," said the girl. "Sit down."

She motioned him to a block of stone that had fallen from somewhere above, and sat herself down on another one. The

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storm was slackening now, rolling away across the plain. One of the men climbed up a winding stair that was part of the outer wall and still sound almost to the top. He disappeared overhead. The others remained where they were, between Horne and the door.

Horne looked at the girl. "Then he is alive," he said.

"I think so. I'm not sure." She leaned forward, searching his face with remarkably wise eyes, neither friendly nor hostile, merely making an estimate of the sort of man he was, how far he might be trusted, how much he might be expected to understand.

"You are named Horne?"

"That's right."

"I am called Yso. These four are my friends, as they were friends of my father. Now, I think I believe your story of the wreck, Horne. And I think we can help each other. . . ."

"Maybe," said Horne, "and you look like a nice girl, though I can't say I'm wild about your friends. But I'm only interested in finding Ardric and choking the truth out of him. The politics of Skereth are your affair, not mine."

He stood up and looked at the man who was holding the gun.

The man shook his head. "Please don't try it," he said. "We've gone to such great risk and trouble to intercept you that I would hate to be forced to burn your leg off."

Horne frowned, his head held slightly forward, his knees bent and tense.

"I mean just that," said the man quietly.

"I think you do," said Horne, shrugged, and sat down again. He looked with bleak resentment at the girl. "Do you get many recruits this way?"

"We have no time for politeness," she said. "You don't understand how things are here. You think all you have to do is get into Rillah and find Ardric and choke the truth out of him. It's not that easy. If we hadn't found you and stopped you here you'd have been dead long before sundown. You'd never have even reached the walls of Rillah."

"I knew they'd be waiting for me," Horne said dourly. "A

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flier nearly caught me on the sea, and I was pretty sure it was the police headed for Rillah."

"The police," said the man with the gun, "are the least of your worries. You say you're not interested in our politics, but you'd better get interested, because you're in them over your head."

VIII

THE GIRL said, "Never mind that now, Ewan. We . . ."

"No. Yso," said Ewan stubbornly, "he might as well get the whole picture now. It'll save us all trouble later." He turned again to Horne. "Morivenn was on his way to Vega Center to bring Skereth into the Galactic Federation. Ardric saw to it that he never got there and in killing Morivenn he not only stopped the Federation movement here, he also pretty nearly wrecked the Federation party. Morivenn was a strong leader and there was no one to replace him. But Ardric didn't do all that on his own, just as a matter of political conviction."

"I don't particularly care," said Horne, "why he did it. All I want is to make him admit doing it. I want my name cleared. From there on anybody can have the ball that wants it."

"All right," said Ewan. "You only want Ardric. Do you know who he is, how powerful his family is? Do you know what connection they have with the Vellae?"

"The Vellae?"

"The anti-Federation party. Do you know why the Vellae

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are so determined to keep Skereth out of the Galactic Federation that they'll murder a hundred-odd people to get the one man who endangers them? Do you know what they'll do to you, Horne, the second you show your face in Rillah? Well, I'll tell you.

"The Vellae *own* Rillah. It's the fountainhead and stronghold of the anti-Federation movement. A man named Ruric is one of the three top men, the triumvirate that runs the Vellae and right now, through their puppet governors, this whole world. Ruric is the father of Ardric. Do you begin to get the picture now, Horne? Do you still think you'll walk right up to Ardric on the street and make him confess?"

Horne only said, "Go on. Let's have the rest of it."

"The rest of it," said Ewan, "is money and power and pride. The Vellae were the rulers of most of Skereth before the Galactic Federation was ever heard of. Since the advent of space flight and trade with other systems they've enlarged their field of operations. They own most of the merchant fleet and control most of the commerce. And since non-Federation ships are immune from search by Federation authorities, they don't have to stop at the legal stuff. We know that they use slave labor in some of their operations. We know that they bring in non-humans and semi-humans from the Fringe worlds, strictly against Federation law —"

Horne started. "For God's sake! Then your Vellae are the slavers Denman was sent out to investigate!"

"Denman?" said Ewan, frowning.

Horne told them about the little Federation official whom they had left on Allamar Two, who had been sent out to get to the bottom of the secret slaving of humanoids. They listened intently, but they did not seem to get very excited about it.

"It won't do us any good," said Yso, "if your man Denman traces the slaving to the Vellae a year or two from now. What matters is now, and whether we can hit the Vellae now with what we have."

Ewan nodded agreement, and said to Horne, "You see what the Vellae stand to lose if the truth about Morivenn's

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death should get out? The *Vega Queen* was a Federation packet, full of Federation personnel. Deliberate sabotage would constitute an act of war, and even the Vellae can't stand off the whole Federation navy. And if Skereth is 'pacified' and brought into the Galactic Federation, the Vellae are through. Their monopolies will be broken, their activities supervised, their ships searched. They won't be the lords of Skereth any longer. Now, how long do you think they'll let you stir up talk and suspicion against their man Ardric?"

"There's another reason, too," said Yso. Her tone was so somber and full of apprehension that Horne was startled. "The most important reason of all. My father was sure of it. The only way to save Skereth, he told me, and perhaps other worlds too, was to get Federation law and authority in here before the Vellae were ready for it. He was afraid. They're doing something, he told me, something that will change our history and the history of this whole part of the galaxy, but I don't know what it is."

Ewan made an impatient sound. Apparently they had been over this ground before.

"I still think Morivenn had an obsession on that point," he said. "The Vellae's obvious motives are good enough, without hunting for secret ones."

"All right," said Yso angrily, "you explain what happens to all the slaves they bring in from the Fringe worlds. We know they come. But after they reach Skereth, they vanish completely. Where?"

"I'll admit it's a problem," said Ewan. "I just don't think it's as important as your father did, that's all." He looked at Horne. "Are you convinced now?"

"One thing kind of puzzles me," Horne said. "What's your big interest in whether I get killed or not?"

"I should think," said Yso, "that would be obvious. You're the only actual witness against Ardric. Without you, even if we proved he was alive and in hiding, he could hardly be convicted." She shook her head. "We both want the same thing, Horne. We have to work together to get it. It would be better if we did it as friends."

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Horne took a deep breath and made an honest effort to swallow his anger. The girl was right and he knew it. So he said, "All right, how do we do it?"

"We don't, not right now." The man who spoke was the man who had climbed the tower stair and who had now come hurrying down in time to hear Horne's question. He added, "There are three fliers coming this way."

Instantly Ewan and the other two sprang up. One of them switched off the portable light, burning forgotten in the corner even though the storm was past and the sky outside was bright again. Horne and the girl rose too. They stood still, listening, looking up. The air, cooled briefly by the rain, grew hot and the wet stones steamed.

The man who had run down the stairway said, "They look as though they're going to investigate the tower. We'd better clear out."

Ewan went to the wall under the steps and swung out a pivoted stone. There was a narrow shaft beyond it in the thickness of a buttress. One of the other men picked up the light and gave a hasty look around. Yso entered the shaft and began to climb down and Ewan indicated that Horne should follow her.

"How big are they?" Ewan was asking, and the man who had been the lookout said,

"Two single-seaters, and the other one's bigger. Carries three anyway, maybe four."

The shaft was not deep. There was an ancient and shaky-looking tunnel beneath it, short enough so that light from its far end seeped back in. "It comes out in a bend of the stream you nearly fell into," Yso said. "There's a fair-sized cave there, where the tower guards used to keep their mounts hidden in the old days. We have our fliers there."

Horne heard the stone door shut with a hollow grating sound overhead. For a few minutes there was only the enclosed and magnified sound of people moving and breathing in a tunnel. Then the noise of running water became louder and louder, and there was another noise mixed with it — a

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shrill high whistling. The cone-shaped fliers were close at hand.

Horne said, "What if they know about this passage and the cave too?"

Ewan answered from behind him, "Then we fight."

"Could I have my stunner back now?"

Ewan gave it to him, saying, "It isn't much. Our guns are better. But you might as well have it."

The daylight got brighter and the tunnel ended in a long slantwise flattish cave, quite obviously made by water erosion in the days when the stream had been higher and mightier in its bed. The muddy water rushed along now some distance below and there was a trail angling down to its brink that might possibly be climbed by animals with good stout claws. In the cave, standing improbably erect on their pointed bottoms and looking like oversize tops with their shiny round bubble canopies in place, were two three-place fliers.

Yso laid a hand on Horne's arm and said, "Come with me." She started to run toward one of the fliers. Ewan spoke briefly to the three other men. They nodded and ran to the second flier. Ewan joined Yso and Horne.

The shrill whistling was very loud now, officious and irritating, rasping to the nerves. Horne kept glancing apprehensively at the long open front of the cave, which was really little more than a shelf gouged out of the river bank. But now they were at the cone.

The light landing-ladder was down. Ewan climbed it, pressing a button on the rim. The canopy raised up. Ewan jumped in and leaned over to give Yso a hand up. Horne followed her. The cone was steady as the Rock of Gibraltar on its anti-grav compensators.

There were three seats in the small circular cockpit, two behind the operator's seat where Ewan was already taking his place. Horne sat behind with Yso. The canopy clapped shut.

Yso made a sudden sound that was almost, but not quite, a scream. Horne looked out through the clear plastic bubble.

A single-place flier had dropped down into the little gorge

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of the stream and was hovering outside the cave. Horne could see quite plainly the expression of the pilot's face as he looked in.

"I guess," said Horne, "we fight."

The next few seconds went by so fast there was no counting them. Ewan said, "Strap in," and hit the levers on the flat control board in front of him. Horne clipped the padded belt around his waist. The cone lifted up and quivered and its jet unit bellowed softly in the cave. Yso, her face set and pale but not particularly frightened, was hunched over a small panel between the seats, swiftly closing relays. The cone was apparently armed.

Horne would have preferred a larger craft and considerably more space to maneuver in. He had served his hitch in the Federation Navy in the last border war. But you made out with what you had. He checked over his stunner and then put it away. It would not do him any good here.

The flier outside the cave had shot up out of sight. The second cone rose and cut in its propulsion unit. Ewan had the communicator going now. He was talking to the man at the controls of the other cone. "— break for it. Once we get outside we can fight them."

"Let's go together, then. Spread. I'm hot."

"Watch out for the big one. It's probably heavy-armed. All right."

The two cones slammed on full power and went out of the cave like projectiles. The anti-grav lift slammed them again, this time from underneath, and they went straight up to avoid hitting the opposite wall of the gorge, shooting apart then in opposite directions. It was masterly flying. But it wasn't good enough.

The enemy was on top of them.

Horne looked up to see the pointed bottom of a one-man flier just above him, almost close enough to touch. Instinctively he ducked and it flipped away just microseconds short of a collision that would have wrecked both of them. Yso punched a firing-stud and a spurt of pinkish light a hundred feet long leaped out viciously toward the darting hull. But in the same

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second Ewan altered his own course with violent suddenness. A return beam, but smaller and shorter, flicked at them from the small flier. Both missed.

"You spoiled my aim," said Yso matter-of-factly. "They're not police, that's sure. No insigne."

"Vellae?" said Horne. He was looking at Yso with considerable interest."

"Obviously. What's the matter, haven't you ever seen a woman fight before?"

"When I was in the Navy some of my best men were women. Are you Navy?"

"Skereth Planetary. We're not so big but we do know our business."

"Get that other one," said Ewan sharply. "There. Can you do it?"

The other one-man flier and the big cone with four men in it had concentrated on the second cone, which had happened to come closer to them. They were leaping and bobbing all over that part of the sky, their bubble canopies flashing dull glints of gold and crimson from the clouds above.

Yso said, "Hold steady. I'll try."

IX

SHE FIRED. The wicked pink beam lashed out from some orifice in the rim of the hull. The big cone shot aside and the beam flicked by and hit the one-man craft, burning viciously against its hull. Grav-shields crippled, it up-ended and plunged downward, but meanwhile the big cone got two

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shots in against the hull and canopy of the escaping craft. Horne heard them clearly like two cracks of an enormous whip. The one against the hull was glancing. The one against the canopy hit square. The plastic fused. The men beneath it took fire like torches. It looked like a cruel death and it was, but it was also very quick. The hull floated on, tilted drunkenly, a great cup holding flame and ash and bitter smoke.

Ewan said something under his breath, and Yso turned her head away, looking sick. But there was no time for mourning. The big cone had made a perpendicular leap straight up and was now high above them. The smaller one was down on the deck, almost brushing the long grass.

Ewan's hands moved fast on the controls. Horne felt himself pushed hard into the belt and then into the seat, his neck all but snapping as the cone skittered wildly in an attempt to break free. Twice he saw pink flashes in the air. Then something hit them a violent blow. They were all thrown forward and down. Horne's belt held him in his seat but his head just missed the corner of Yso's firing panel on its way down to hit his knees. When he got his breath partly back he saw that Ewan was lying on the control board and not sitting up. Their cone was spinning in a crazy spiral, going up and away to nowhere.

Yso mumbled something about, "They hit us." She was dazed, but hanging on, trying to make sense. Horne unclipped his belt. The motion of the cone almost hurled him through the canopy but he clung to the back of Ewan's seat with all his strength and pulled himself over to where he could grasp Ewan's shoulder.

"Is he dead?" asked Yso.

"I don't think so. Banged his head — " Ewan was bleeding profusely from the nose. The controls were all slippery with it. Horne heaved Ewan out of the way and tried to remember which levers were which. He had flown these craft before, but not for quite a while. He pulled one and it was the right one and the spinning motion slowed.

"Make it fast," said Yso flatly. "They're right after us."

It must have been the smaller flier's less lethal beam that

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had hit them glancingly from below. Now both it and the big one were closing in for the kill. Horne said, "Keep 'em busy," and began the business of getting the unconscious Ewan unbuckled and out of the operator's seat and himself into it.

Yso fired with the cold fury of desperation, lacing the sky with pink beams.

The Vellae cones danced up and out of the way and then came on again.

"Now," said Horne, taking the controls in his hands, "I'm going to make a crash maneuver. Stand by."

"Standing by," said Yso.

Their cone flopped and whirled groundward. It looked disabled, but Horne kept its motion so erratic and deceptively shifty that it was hard to hit. The little Vellae cone stayed off. The big one followed Horne down, impatiently waiting for a clear shot.

When he was about twenty feet off the ground, Horne said, "Here we go." Their cone zoomed straight up at terrific speed. Horne could feel himself being flattened down into the seat while the air shrieked around the canopy. "Fire!" he shouted. "Damn it, fire!" The big cone was just above them, was level with them, was under them. Horne saw the faces of the men for one split-second, as they understood what had happened and what was about to happen. Then they disappeared in a blossom of pink fire and fell away fast, dwindling to a dark trailing smoke, and the clouds were getting close enough to touch.

Horne adjusted the grav-shields. The dizzy upward falling slowed gradually and stopped. They hung motionless under a great curved belly of red-gold cloud.

Yso said, "Did we do it? Are we still alive?"

Horne grunted. "I think so."

He shook his head to clear it and looked down. The wrecked cones, three of them, were sending up lazy ribbons of smoke from out of the tawny grass, far below. The one-man flier had pulled back to where it could run, if it wanted to. It mounted a lighter weapon than the big craft, but it was faster.

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The communicator buzzed. Horne turned it on.

A voice said, "Horne?"

Horne stiffened. A great wave of heat passed over him and then he was as cold as a piece of steel.

"Ardric," he said.

The one-man cone hung glittering in the distance, under the brilliant clouds.

"Oh, no," said the voice from the communicator. "Ardric is dead. He died in the wreck of the *Vega Queen*, and his family put on mourning and cried."

Horne began to curse him in a voice that quivered. "You lousy, yellow-bellied —" He reached out suddenly and grasped the control levers. Their cone streaked toward the hovering flier.

The flier darted out of reach with mocking ease, and he heard sound of Ardric's laughter.

"Try again, Horne," he said.

A kind of blindness came upon Horne, so that he could see only the small cone with its glittering canopy and nothing else in the world. He hunched over the controls and tried again.

The little cone skipped and darted and whirled as swiftly as a sunbeam and he pursued it, tantalizingly just too slow, maddeningly burdened with the extra size and armament of his craft. But he would not give up.

Yso had reached and shut off the communicator. She was talking to him but he would not listen.

In the narrow space of the cockpit floor, Ewan stirred and groaned and got to his knees.

Horne barely heard them. He said to Yso, "Ready now . . . I'll get him on the next pass."

I'll get him, he thought. I'll burn him out of the sky.

He started to shove the control levers for another pass and Ewan knocked his hands away and tried to push him out of the seat. Ewan had been talking to Yso and had heard her better than Horne did.

"Are you crazy, Horne? He's just playing with you, waiting for more of his men to come. We've got to —"

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Horne pushed him away. "Let me alone. I'll kill him."

Ewan swore. He hit Horne alongside the head. The blow stung Horne but it neither dazed him nor shocked him to his senses. It merely made him turn around and knock Ewan back into the cockpit with the same casual anger he would have applied to a wasp or a bee. Then he returned to the business of Ardric.

Yso screamed at him, shaking his shoulder. "Look there to the north, Horne! There, there!"

She was so insistent and shrill that he took his eyes away from Ardric's flier for a second. And in the north he saw a flight of five cones, coming fast.

Horne shivered and ran his hands over his face, like a man waking from sleep.

He sent the flier racing away.

The communicator made its signal and he opened it again. Ardric's voice said, "It won't do you any good to run. We have the best fliers on Skereth. But I suppose you won't make it easy for us."

Horne did not answer. He did not have any words in him. He shut off the communicator. The cone fled through the brassy sky, above the yellow-tawny plain.

Ewan sat up, holding his injured face. "Head east as much as you can," he said. "There are mountains there. We might be able to lose them."

Horne angled east. The jet unit roared wide open, but the Vellae cones crept slowly, steadily closer. Here nothing depended on the skill of the pilot. It was a simple and unarguable matter of mechanical superiority.

A heavy shadow on the eastern horizon grew high and thick and became a mountain range.

Horne measured the distance to the mountains, and then he watched the Vellae cones for a while, estimating the rate at which they were overtaking him. He computed mentally, and he didn't like the results.

"We aren't going to make it, are we?" Yso said.

Horne shook his head. "It doesn't look too good. If we only had a storm or even a low cloud to hide in."

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But the storms were too far away and the clouds were all too high for the unpressurized, low-altitude cones.

Ewan said, "Let me back there."

Horne surrendered the controls without argument. It was Ewan's flier. Maybe he could do something more with it.

He did a little more. He nursed just a fraction of extra speed out of it. The mountains rushed at them. The Vellae cones continued to overhaul them, but not as fast.

There were lower clouds now, over the crests of the mountain peaks. "If only I can get into one," Ewan said. "I'll try dropping down in a valley somewhere beyond the ridge and hope they go over us."

"Wouldn't it be better —" Yso started to say, and Ewan cut her short.

"We're about out of fuel. So that doesn't give us much choice."

A minute later he said, "Keep an eye out for peaks. Here we go."

The cone plunged into a mass of cloud and the whole world was lost beyond the thick dark mist.

Almost at once Ewan slowed his forward speed and shifted off on a sharp tangent. Horne and the girl sat tensely, straining their eyes for solid shadows in the mist. The Vellae cones had disappeared along with everything else. Ewan jockeyed the flier through a broad gap of which both sides were invisible, between the peaks and crossed the backbone of the range. Then he began to drop with dangerous swiftness, looking for a place to come down.

There wasn't any.

Where the trailing cloud-mass thinned there were only sheer cliffs and sharp ridges, rockfalls and chasms that seemed to have no bottom. On this inhospitable mountain face there were not even any trees.

The jet coughed twice and died.

Momentum carried them a little farther, floating on anti-grav alone now and battered helplessly by every wind, blowing fiercely through the passes and around the slopes.

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Horne said, "We might as well go down ourselves as get knocked down."

"Either way," said Ewan, "we won't like it."

The cone dropped, wobbling down the lower slopes like a loose bubble while the wind tried to turn it over and smash it on the rocks.

Horne said suddenly, "I've got an idea."

He told them his idea, rapidly. Ewan grunted. "A-hundred-to-one gamble. But we might as well play it."

The clouds were still thick and low overhead and there was no sign yet of the Vellae cones.

"Can you bring her down there?" Horne said to Ewan, pointing to a ledge of rock halfway up an otherwise sheer cliff. The ledge slanted and a long crack full of rubble ran from the low end of it, angling down across a less precipitous shoulder of the mountain. It looked as though it might offer both shelter and a way down.

Ewan said sourly, "Of course, landing there without jets will be easy." He started to play with the grav-shields, tipping the cone around so that its own attraction-repulsion balance brought it nearer and nearer to the ledge.

Horne pulled off his shirt and arranged it over the back of his seat, so that from a distance it would look as though someone was still sitting there.

"You too, Yso," he said.

She stared at him, and he shouted, "Would you rather be modest or alive?"

Turning away from him, she peeled off her shirt and stretched it over the seat back. Then she sat hunched up with her arms folded across her front.

Horne had other things to think about. He helped Ewan out of his shirt one arm at a time while the cone flopped and heaved and side-slipped toward the ledge. "There," he said, "that may satisfy them if they don't come too close."

The ledge flew at them, tilted crazily.

"Be ready to jump," said Ewan, "the instant we touch."

Horne put his hand on the canopy release.

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The cone cracked down hard on the ledge against the cliff-face. Horne sprung the canopy. He practically threw Yso out. The cone toppled, tottered, and began to lift. Ewan jumped and landed on all fours. He was screaming at Horne. Horne saw the ledge going away from him and flung himself frantically into the air. He hit far too near the edge for comfort. Ewan grabbed him and dragged him in. They crouched together panting on the rock and watched the cone drift off, tossed and battered by the wind. When it was within shooting range, it was impossible to tell that the three bright shirts showing through the canopy had no people in them.

"All right," said Horne. "Let's find cover."

They scuttled along the ledge and down into the crack, which was much bigger than it had looked from a distance and full of big boulders. They crawled in like three animals among the crevices and lay there, watching.

Their derelict cone drifted farther and farther away. Presently one of the Vellae cones dropped out of the overcast and spotted it. Apparently Ardrick's force had split up for the search. The Vellae cone made one pass at the derelict and hit it squarely with a beam on the first try. It burst into flame and began a spiral plunge downward. The Vellae cone hit it again on the way down to make sure. It crashed out of sight into a maze of narrow rocky gorges. The Vellae cone rose up high and hovered.

Presently the rest of the force joined it. They watched for a while until the last thin wisp of smoke had blown away. Then they lifted up and went whistling over the ridge toward Rillah.

Ewan said tightly, "It worked."

Horne looked bitterly after Ardrick and muttered, "Some day, so help me . . ."

Then the two men and the girl pulled themselves out from under the rocks and began the long and dangerous climb down to whatever lay below.

By Earth reckoning the descent would have taken them about a day and a half. This being Skereth, the sky was still

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burning with the furious colors of sunset when they stood above the last slope and looked out over the most God-forsaken badland Horne had ever seen on any world.

Red and purple and yellow sky, above red and yellow, brown and purple and sandy rock. And the rock was cut and gouged and churned as though in imitation of the stormy clouds above it, then frozen by some gorgon breath into a permanent nightmare.

There was no place to go but on. Thirst and hunger were vital things with them now. There might be water in some of those crazy cracks and where there was water there might also be food.

They went on, stumbling and staggering, while the glaring colors turned somber and died out of the sky and were dimmed in the rocks beneath, and gradually everything was made to look softened and lovely in the long, long twilight.

They didn't find any water. They found fine dry sand at the bottom of a serpentine crevice, and they followed the sandy bed partly because it was easier walking and partly because they no longer had a very clear idea of what they were doing.

Instinct and reaction still functioned. Horne stopped suddenly, reaching for his stunner. It was oddly heavy in his hand and he had difficulty gripping it. Yso stopped too and went down on her knees and Ewan stumbled over her.

"Quiet," mumbled Horne. "Listen."

In the twilight and the empty rock, somewhere near them, something moved, and it did not move like anything human.

X

IT HAD been a quick and furtive sound, as though some creature scurried out of sight to lie in wait around the next bend

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of the crevice. Horne shook his head violently to clear the cobwebs out of it.

Ewan had his gun out. It was a much more formidable weapon than Horne's stunner, which he guessed was almost exhausted of its charge anyway.

"Stay here with Yso," he said to Ewan. "I'll try and see what it is."

He started forward, one step at a time. He was very tired and curiously reluctant for any more fighting. He wanted to lie down and die, or sleep, he didn't much care which, so long as it was restful. But he went on toward the dark pillar of rock, dragging his feet.

A voice spoke to him. It was a very queer, creaking, rusty voice with long-drawn sibilants and a general sound as though human speech was a trial to it.

"Don't sssshoot," it said. "Pleassse. I am friend."

Horne stopped, a quiver running down his backbone. "Friend, are you?" he said harshly. "Then why are you hiding?"

"People sssshoot," said the voice. "Too quick. I have food and water for you. Pleassse?"

Horne laughed. "You do, huh? For us. That's fine. But it's kind of a silly lie. You couldn't possibly know anything about us."

The voice said, "Fife hass a radio. He heard the talk of the Vellae."

"Fife?"

"Our leader."

"But the Vellae thought we were dead."

"We were closer to the wreckage than they. There were no bodies in it. Fife sssaid you got away. We have been looking for you all this time."

"Who are you?" Horne said.

"I am Chell of Chorann."

Horne remembered Chorann. It was one of the remotest worlds of the Fringe, beyond even Allamar, far out on the rim of the galaxy. He had touched there just once, in a ship carrying machinery to a mine project that had been estab-

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lished there. The mine-clearing had been nothing but a pinpoint opening enclosed by the vast, towering, grotesque forests of that world. The engineers at the mine had spoken of the mysterious form of life that drifted in those mighty forests, aloof, never showing itself in friendliness, glimpsed only as flitting shadows. The memory of that did not make Horne feel any great rush of confidence in the unseen creature who called himself Chell.

He said, "Yes, but who are you with? What's your group? You said 'we'."

Chell answered quietly, "We are those few who have escaped from the Vellae slave-pens."

Yso caught her breath and stood up. She came forward.

"Tell him to come out, Horne. I want to talk to him."

"Don't sssshoot?" said Chell.

"Not unless you do something you shouldn't," Horne said.

There was the faint sound, louder and less furtive this time, but still in some way not human. A peculiar shadow moved out slowly from behind the rock, taking on bulk and solidity in the twilight gloom.

"Sssee?" said Chell, without rancor. "It is safer for usss of Chorann to ssspeak first."

Horne saw very well. He would have been likely to do exactly what Chell feared, to have shot first and wondered later what the devil it was he killed. The creature was round as a balloon, with an indefiniteness of outline that suggested fur or thick bristles. It was frighteningly big, four feet across at least. It seemed to half float in the air and half walk on four or five long tentacles that grew from its lower hemisphere. The fifth one was curled up holding a bundle. There was no head, no visible eyes, no face. Just a big round furry ball that talked.

Ewan said something that sounded like, "I'll be damned."

Yso shrank back a bit by Horne's shoulder, but after a moment she said firmly, "We're glad to meet you, Chell. We've known for a long time that the Vellae brought in slaves from other worlds, but you're the first one we've actu-

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ally spoken to. Are there many of you who have escaped and are hiding here?"

"You will see," He put down his bundle and tactfully drew back a little way. "Drink and eat now while I call the others. Then we will take you to Fife."

Ewan said suspiciously, "What others?"

"Searchers like myself." With just a hint of impatience, Chell said, "If we had meant you harm, we would sssimply have not looked for you. You would all, I think, be dead before the next dawn. Thisss way you have been following leads to no water."

Horne shrugged. "That makes sense, I guess. All right, Chell, we'll trust you."

Horne picked up the bundle and opened it. There were two big plastic flasks of water and some smoked meat that Horne could not identify and did not particularly want to. He was in no mood to question anything in the way of food. They ate and drank, and Horne kept one eye on Chell, who had gone even farther away and was apparently not doing anything.

"I thought you were going to call your friends," he said.

"I am calling them. Our normal voices are too high for your hearing. That iss why we sound so funny when we ssspeak to you."

Yso said, "It's a pity we couldn't have known about you before. Everything might have been different. Morivenn might not have died, the Vellae might have been completely crushed. You said your leader has a radio. Couldn't you have got into touch with us somehow?"

She sounded almost hysterical about it. Reaction, Horne thought. Too much strain and violence, too many shocks, and then the hours of physical exhaustion.

Chell only said, "Remember that we know very little of your world. Fife heard from the talk of the Vellae that you were their enemies, and that it wasss important to them that you should all die. Sssso we wanted to keep that from happening. Otherwise. . ."

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Horne could sense the shrug that was physically impossible but implied.

"Otherwise," said Chell, "to uss the people of Skereth are all enemies."

Two more round shadowy shapes came skimming over the rim of rock against the skyline and dropped down with that curious half-floating glide into the crevice.

"Are you ready?" asked Chell politely. "Then we go."

He moved toward the humans and the other two round, furry shapes followed.

"Now wait a minute," said Ewan, pulling back a little. "How are we going?"

"We carry you. Much easier than walking, especially at night. Don't fear. Chorann is a heavier world than this. Burdens are light for us here. That is why the Vellae find us so useful."

Horne felt tentacles like enormously strong wire cables wrap around him. Then the creature—he was not sure if it was Chell or one of the others—inflated itself even bigger, exactly like a balloon, and bobbed upward, holding him in carefully against a mat of thick warm fur and helping itself along with a free pair of tentacles outstretched to catch protecting points of rock.

"We are able," said Chell, "to extract pure hydrogen from the air, as sea-creatures extract oxygen. Physically, we're mostly an air-sac. So do not fear to fall."

Horne abandoned himself to not fearing anything. It seemed that about all he could do right now was go along with what was happening. The fur against which he was so firmly pressed was incredibly soft and had a dry, faintly dusty, not at all unpleasant smell. The body underneath it was weirdly boneless and resilient. Very dimly, as though from far inside it, he could hear the sounds of life—the rhythmic heartbeat, the in-and-out sigh of breathing.

They traveled swiftly, skimming and gliding over the dark rock in the starless night, across the dry winding gullies and bitter flats of the badlands, like swimmers under water. And after a time there was a fleck of light.

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They went toward it and it grew into a gleam from some hidden lantern, left out purposely for a cautious guide. Horne caught the glint of a narrow stream and the moist smell of it on the air. Then he was set on his feet in sparse grass and the lantern glow was directly ahead of him, beyond a narrow door of stone.

A figure was standing in front of the door, a sharp black silhouette against the light.

"This is Fife," said Chell. "He is not what you could call human either."

Fife said, "None of us are human here." His voice was high and piping, with a sly mocking note in it. "But we all look so queer to each other that you won't be out of place. Come in."

They came, Horne and Ewan stooping to pass the door, following him into a large chamber hollowed in the soft red sandstone. The lantern, a portable atom-battery type, was on the floor in the center. Fife picked it up and hung it from a hook in the ceiling and Chell, who was the last one through, dropped a curtain down over the door.

"The Vellae don't often come this way," Fife said, "but it pays to be careful."

He turned and studied them. Horne tried to guess at what his world of origin might be, but he could not. Fife was small and lean, perhaps five feet high, completely hairless and marked rather beautifully over his gray skin with shadings of electric blue, banded with fine lines of black and yellow on his breast and back and along his limbs. His eyes were yellow too, all iris and very bright, and quite unreadable.

"These are the rest of us," he said, gesturing with a thin four-fingered hand. "As you see, not many leave the Vellae."

Horne looked beyond him in the lantern light. There were perhaps twenty-four people in the rock chamber, only people was the wrong word. They were the most widely assorted crew Horne had ever seen.

His eyes fastened first on two of the crowd whose type he had seen not long before, two huge-eyed hairy things that were nine feet tall and had mild dejected faces.

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"You're from Allamar," said Horne, using the few words of their own language that he knew, and they brightened up like big dogs that were lost and heard a familiar voice.

"Yes," rumbled the one. "Allamar. I am Lurgh."

Of the others there were three, a woman and two men, who were humanoid in size and shape. Only their fantastically long pointed ears and over-prominent teeth gave them away, together with a vestigial ridge of fur along the spine. Then there were Chell's folk—considerably smaller now and rolled companionably together in a corner, their fur showing a bright green in the lamplight, their tentacles bright red. Like Christmas ornaments, Horne thought hysterically, and then caught himself.

There were great gargoyle-like creatures, dull purple in color, with enormous clawed hands and ridiculous little wings. There were spidery-looking things with small bodies and too many long, thin arms, splendidly adapted for climbing, Horne thought, on rocky surfaces. He became dizzy with their crowded strangeness. There were odd ones, loners, who between them covered just about every size and shape and mutation of human, animal and insect you could imagine. They were all-powerful in their own way, capable of performing some particular function superlatively well.

He heard Ewan, behind him, swear and say, "The Vellae slavers have been busy, all right."

"Very busy," said Fife, "and we are only part of the proof of that. But now, we are curious. Why did the Vellae want so badly to kill you people?"

They explained, Ewan and Yso talking in turns, acutely conscious all the time of the many eyes that watched them, shiveringly aware that they were not watched with any love. Horne understood that to these creatures now, all humans would appear as enemies. It dawned on him, not with any great shock of surprise, that they had been brought here on probation, as it were, and were quite likely to be killed if their story didn't stand up.

He challenged Fife with that, and the yellow-eyed man thing nodded.

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"I thought you might be of some use to us. We escaped the slave-pens, but we want to go farther than this. We want to go home. If we can, we want to free those others of our people who are held behind the locked gates of the Great Project. And especially we would like to kill as many of the Vellae as we can."

His eyes blazed with a most chilling human hatred.

"In any case, we can't hide forever here, crouching in a hole, half-starved, and always watching the sky for Vellae fliers. We'll die if we have to, but we want it to be to some purpose, something the Vellae won't forget."

A low muttering growl of agreement ran around the room.

Fife looked at the three humans. "You're of their own breed, and yet they hunted you. So for the present you live, because we need something we haven't got — a weapon, a piece of information, anything that will help us plan what we shall do. If you don't have it —" He shrugged expressively.

"Listen," said Horne. "We've suffered as much from the Vellae as you have. Her father, my ship and my whole career, and now all three of us are fugitives like you."

Fife said, "I listen eagerly. I am not your enemy — yet. I am nothing. We have a purpose. So have you. Let us see how they run together."

Ewan said angrily, "Why damn it, Morivenn worked for years and finally gave his life fighting the Vellae, largely on your account. His daughter and I —"

Fife said, "In the tunnels under Skereth we heard very little of Morivenn, or you." He turned to Horne. "Your story interests me. You are not of Skereth, you say?"

"No," said Horne, "and like you I wish I'd never heard of it. I'm from Earth, a spaceman in the service of the Federation government."

He went on for the second time to explain exactly what had happened to him and how, and why he had come to Skereth.

"These people," he said, indicating Yso and Ewan, "went to a lot of trouble to keep me from getting killed too soon. They lost three men and very nearly lost themselves doing

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it. I'm like you, Fife, I'm only interested in my own affairs but I'm not so stupid as to throw away good allies. They want to overthrow the Vellae for political reasons. I don't think any of us will quarrel with them, either. I want one of the Vellae leaders, Ardric, so that I can prove he wrecked my ship. You want revenge and freedom. Good enough. They all work together."

He glanced around the place to see if he was getting home but the huddled ring of alien faces baffled him completely. He couldn't tell what they thought. And Fife only said,

"I am open to instruction. Go on."

"Ardric is the key to everything. If we can get him and make him talk, everything else comes automatically. The Federation legally can move in and smash the Vellae. The slaves illegally brought here will be freed and taken home. My name will be cleared, and Morivenn's party can bring Skereth into the Federation as a free world and not the private property of the Vellae."

Fife nodded slowly. "And how would we do this thing?"

"We know Ardric is in Rillah. We'd have to go there and get him."

"How?"

"There," said Horne, "I thought you might supply some ideas."

"Let us sit down," said Fife, "and discuss this matter."

They sat on the bare cool sandstone and the whole ring of weird unhuman forms moved in closer to hear. Horn sat beside Yso and kept his hand on hers. Ewan guarded her from the other side.

But it was Yso who said, "There are entrances to the pit in Rillah. You come from the pits, and yet you're on this side of the mountains. So the tunnels must run all the way through. Am I right?"

"You are," said the humanoid woman with the pointed ears, speaking for the first time. She wore an incongruously splendid piece of metallic embroidery that covered, very scantily, her fine mammalian breasts and ran in a narrow strip down her front to supplement a sort of drapery of

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blue silk held loosely around her hips with a couple of big gold rings. If you didn't look any higher than her neck, and didn't mind the hackles, she was quite something. And she was looking with typical female interest at the dirty, be-draggled and half-naked Yso.

"I don't suppose," she said to Fife, "it's possible these people are spies, and all that show the Vellae put on of shooting down their cone was only a show for our benefit?"

XI

FIFE SHOWED the edges of his sharp little teeth in what might have been a smile.

"I considered that possibility, Meeva," he said, "and I decided the chances were against it. Frankly, I doubt whether the Vellae would go to all that trouble just for us. We're not that important."

"Still," said one of the purple gargoyles, in halting Universal and a voice that sounded as though it came from three miles underground, "Meeva may be right. We are not good judges of how these humans think."

Fife nodded. "Right. Perfectly right."

"And," said Meeva, her pointed ears quivering with malice and excitement, "see how quickly these humans came forward with their plan. 'The tunnels must run all the way through.' Oh, yes! And now we must run into Rillah itself. How? Through the tunnels!"

She sprang up, speaking passionately to the whole group.

"What would the Vellae like better than to get us back

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into the tunnels? Back into the slave-pens and the dark galleries of the Project?"

Some of the aliens said, "That's true." And they looked balefully with their strange eyes at the humans.

Meeva struck her breast dramatically. "I will not go back. I would rather stay here and die in the open air than to spend one more day in the tunnels. And I would rather kill myself here and now than trust the word of a human!"

She had a magnetic personality. Horne thought her speech was fairly corny but effective. At least, it was highly effective on her particular audience. He began to be afraid of her.

He stood up. "You don't have to take my word for anything," he said, "and you don't have to go anywhere, either. Just show us where the tunnels are and we'll go ourselves."

"Ah," cried Meeva, whirling on him, "yes — then you could lead the Vellae here and kill us all!"

"Oh, hell," said Horne disgustedly, "women are women no matter what, I guess." He turned to Fife. "Who is she, anyway?"

Fife grinned maliciously, as though he had had trouble before with Meeva.

"She was a priestess where she came from," he said. "She had a big temple built in beautiful stone with hordes of people to wait on her, and they came from all over the world to hear her oracles."

The two men of Meeva's race jumped up and cried, "That is true — every word!"

Fife said, "If it is, the people of your world are great fools. Sit down, Meeva."

She started to open her mouth, and he said again, in a certain tone, "Sit down, Meeva. We do not need any of your oracles."

Meeva shut her mouth and sat down. The two men assisted her, making a great show of her preciousness. Meeva thanked them graciously and then said to Fife, "Do as you will. But I stay here."

She folded her arms and retired from the argument, looking lofty. Horne felt easier. But then the purple gargoyles said

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in its subterranean voice, "Even charlatans can speak the truth."

"I know, I know," said Fife. He looked impatiently around the circle. "You chose me your leader, didn't you?"

"Yes," said the gargoyle.

"Why?"

"Because you were clever enough to find a way for us to escape the slave-pens."

"All right. Now do you think that I have become suddenly so stupid that I can't see what is obvious to everyone else?"

Fife looked up at Horne, and then from him to Ewan and the girl, and his eyes were bright, cruel and utterly without mercy. He had begun to seem almost human to them as they talked, but now in an instant that psuedo-humanness was gone and he was as alien as all the others and far more dangerous.

"I do not trust these humans, either," said Fife. "But I weigh the chances. We are great gamblers in my home place, and since I left the egg I have been used to casting dice with both hands. So I say this: it is my thought that we should go into the tunnels and on to Rillah with them, by the ways we know. Those who wish to stay here with Meeva can stay. But I say this, too. The three humans go weaponless and each one with a guard, and if there is any treachery they will be the first to regret it."

Ewan sprang up. "No!" he said. "I'm not going up against the Vellae unarmed. Either you trust us or —"

"Ewan," said Horne quietly. "Look around you. Figure how many you could kill before the rest would tear you to pieces. Then think a minute about Yso."

Ewan growled something under his breath. But there was no denying the truth of what Horne said. He took his gun from his belt and threw it down in front of Fife. Then he sat down again.

Horne said to Fife, "I'm a gambler, too. I'll wager everything I have left — my life — against a million-to-one chance of getting my hands on Ardric. If this is the way you want to play the hand that's the way it will have to be. But before

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you're through you may wish you'd let us keep our weapons." He handed over his stunner.

"We'll be very careful of them," Fife said, grinning. "They're the only ones we have."

He looked around. "Now, then. Who's going to go into Rillah?"

The aliens began to mutter and shift about, talking among themselves. Horne watched them anxiously, thinking in terms of strength and feeling hopelessly handicapped by his total ignorance of what traps and dangers might lie before them. But Yso, exhausted as she was, was thinking of something else. She leaned forward.

"Fife, you said, 'behind the locked gates of the Great Project.' She — Meeva — mentioned it too. What is it?"

Fife said speculatively, "Don't you know?"

"No." She had forgotten her weariness in her excitement. "My father always believed that the Vellae were doing something so dangerous and forbidden that they didn't dare use Skereth labor, even the poor devils they practically conscript into some of their mines. He thought that that was why they secretly brought in the outworld slaves, like you."

Fife shrugged. "Your father would know the reasoning of his people better than I. I only know that we are taken in our sleep by armed men and drugged and brought in ships to Skereth, where we do not even see the daylight before we're unloaded in hidden hangars and taken into pits. There we dig. We dig endlessly, making galleries, chambers, and more galleries, running here, there, up and down. This is called the Great Project."

They looked at each other. Horne asked, "But what is it that these galleries are meant to hold?"

"From the talk of guards," Fife said, "we gathered that the Vellae were creating a space for some great and secret scientific thing." He added, with an edge of bitterness, "But what do ignorant humanoids know of science?"

The gargoyle said solemnly, "Whatever they are making, it is evil. Even the Vellae guards said that."

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Yso gave Ewan a small glance of triumph. "Morivenn was right, though. There's no doubt about that."

"No," said Ewan, "and I'm sorry. Not because I was wrong, but because the Vellae will be more watchful if they're guarding a great secret, and that'll make it harder for us."

In a little while the aliens sorted themselves into two groups. One, a small bunch of seven or eight, were clustered around Meeva and her men. The other one of about fifteen, including the gargoyle and Chell's people and the two hairy giants from Allamar, had moved over around Fife.

Lurgh said, "To go is dangerous. But we think that nothing will come of sitting here."

"Good," said Fife. "Now we must think." He rose and began to pace up and down, his eyes bright, the tip of his pointed tongue flicking back and forth over his lips. Suddenly he turned and pointed at Meeva.

"Since you won't risk your person, you can contribute your clothes. The humans must be dressed. The Vellae will know at first glance we're slaves, but the humans must be able to pass as masters."

"No!" cried Meeva. "Never!" But Fife nodded to Chell and Lurgh and the gargoyle. They moved in swiftly. Fife paced, never looking toward the angry shrieking.

"You two men will have to provide for yourselves," he said. "Guard uniforms, first of all. And a cone would help a great deal if you could get hold of one."

"Cones?" said Horne. "In the tunnels?"

"Oh, yes. One-man cones, that are adapted to their special functions. How else do you think the work could be supervised and the slaves ordered and controlled? Yes, a cone. That will be necessary. We can't hope to get all the way to Rillah without meeting someone, even in the older galleries. If we can make it look as though we're a regular work-party of guards and slaves..."

The purple gargoyle, whose name was D'quar, came back with Chell, holding a streamer of blue cloth. Fife took it and the strip of embroidery and tossed them to Yso.

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"I hope you appreciate them," he said maliciously. "Meeva used to work quite naked to save her costume, and even here she only put it on once in a while when she wanted to play priestess."

Yso looked unhappily toward Meeva and said, "I'm sorry. . . ."

Meeva, held forcibly in the enormous hands of Lurgh, screamed a torrent of words, and Fife laughed.

"She never learned that kind of language in any temple. Shut her up, Lurgh."

Lurgh shook her, and she was quiet. So were the two men of her race, who were nursing bruises now.

"We'll sleep for six hours," Fife said. His sharp eyes had been appraising the two men and the woman. "You're too worn out now to be any good to us. You'd never even make it to Rillah. Meanwhile, those who are not going with us can make a fair sharing of the food and fill the water flasks."

Horne and Ewan and Yso went over and stretched out at the farthest end of the big rock chamber. Despite his crushing weariness, Horne could not close his eyes at once. The spectacle in the big cavern fascinated him, a phantasmagoria of impossible shapes and weird, enormous shadows coming and going around the lantern. Shifting spheres that floated with their tentacles reaching, gargoyle faces looking solemnly through the gloom, the sharply unhuman silhouette that was Fife and the brown-furred looming bulk of the giant creatures from Allamar, arms and antennae, chitin and hide and feather, mixing and meeting and clacking and whispering in the light and darkness . . .

A sudden feeling of nightmare gripped Horne. What was he doing in this place with these creatures so far removed from human? He thought, not for the first time, that men had gone too fast and far from Earth, that they weren't ready yet for this sort of thing. It seemed to him that he watched an unearthly Sabbath of diabolical celebrants, and he could almost hear Berlioz' mocking, blasphemous music. He wanted to get out of here, to leave sleeping Yso and Ewan and their

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problems, to leave these children of nightmare, to get off the world and go home, go home. . . .

A thought checked Horne's shuddery reaction. Alien and creepy as the shadowy horde were, they all wanted just the same thing as he. To go home. They had been dragged here by force, by the slavers of the Vellae. They had labored and endured and finally escaped, and their simple minds yearned for the mists of Chorann, and the sad forests of Allamar, and all the other wild Fringe worlds they came from, just as he longed for Earth. A hatred for the Vellae for doing this ruthless thing — a hatred that for the first time was not connected with his own wrongs — came to Horne. And why had the Vellae done it? What mysterious thing were they doing with the slaves that even their own men thought was so evil?

The strange silhouette of Fife came toward him, against the light. The little alien had not missed the fact that Horne was wakeful. He came and looked down at him with his yellow eyes.

"You watch us," he said, and there was suspicion in the statement.

Horne nodded. He said, "Yes, Fife. I watch you."

There was a silence. Whether Fife was partly telepathic or not, or whether he read Horne's changed feelings by some other means, Horne could not know. But when Fife spoke again it was in an altered tone.

"Sleep, human. There will be no rest for any of us on the way to Rillah."

XII

THE GALLERY was cut wide and high through the living rock. It was dry and well-ventilated, partly through shafts that

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bored upward to the outside air. Horne figured that they must be hooded against rain and therefore against light too, because no light came through them even though he knew that it was day again in the outer world. Some of the slaves had had their work-lamps with them when they escaped. The purple gargoyle, D'quar, stalked ahead, wearing an incongruous star on his hideous brow, a guiding light to the rest of them.

At intervals along the gallery, steel hatches were set into the right-hand wall—the inner wall, if Horne had figured rightly. They were coated with an anti-corrosive plastic and locked with curious-looking locks. Even Fife did not know what the hatches were for. He only knew that they were deadly dangerous to tamper with. Horne was not tempted to bother with them.

They had come a long way from the refuge in the badlands, working their way by forced marches during the dark hours along the rim of the foothills until they reached the base of a particular bald, humped mountain that was, Ewan had said, close to Rillah on the other side.

While the slow dawn was breaking, Fife led them up a maze of canyons and rising ridges which made for such arduous travel that Yso's strength gave out temporarily. Lurgh, the big brown-furred creature from Allamar Two, had carried her along for a while, not seeming in the least bothered by her weight. By the time she had her strength back, they were entering the mouth of an old boring half hidden by a slide.

"This must have been part of a mine once," Fife said. "This side of the mountain is full of them, I believe, but this is the only one I know. Some of them connect with the outer galleries of the Project, and that is how we few managed to escape. I think even most of the Vellae have forgotten these borings are still here."

He added, "Go softly. The roof is liable to fall."

They wormed their way through a claustrophobic nightmare of rubble and rotten shorings, with sand and pebbles

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sifting ominously down their necks, until a narrow opening let them into the dry, solid gallery cut in the deeper rock. That had been, Horne thought, a devil of a long time ago and they had been climbing ever since. By now, they must be close to the top of the mountain, just inside the curve of the south shoulder.

Tunnel in the rind of a mountain, with doors in it. What for? Even preoccupied as he was with Ardric and his intense need to find him, Horne could not help wondering now and again just what was hidden behind those locked doors in the vast bulk of the mountain.

Yso and Ewan were feverish in their desire to know, and they had been restrained only by the grim warnings of the alien slaves from trying to find out.

Chell of Chorann spoke suddenly in a sibilant whisper. "D'quar, put out your light."

D'quar obeyed, instantly and without question. As the purple gargoyle stopped, they all stopped, and then they stood in the utter darkness, trying not to breathe or move while they listened.

Horne could hear nothing at all, but the ultra-sonic hearing of Chell was keener.

"There iss a cone," he said. "Coming this way."

"Ah!" Fife's sharp whisper held both satisfaction and worry. "The Vellae patrol these outer galleries now and then, making sure that all is well. So. We will have a chance at a cone. If we take it, good. If we do not, we may as well kill each other quickly and mercifully on the spot. And it will have to be done fast. *Fast*, Horne, you hear? Otherwise he will call the others with his radio and it will all be useless."

Remembering the utter lack of facilities for ambush in the gallery, Horne said, "That's fine, but do you have any idea about how we do it?"

"Oh," said Fife, "I have a plan already. I've been making it ever since we entered the gallery."

He began to talk rapidly. When he was finished Horne said, "All right. Why argue? Let's get going."

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Chell said, "The cone isss still some distance away. You can risk a light for a few ssseconds."

A work-lamp flicked on, turned so low it was hardly brighter than a match flame but almost blinding after the total darkness. Chell wrapped three of his tentacles around Horne and took an enormous breath. He rose to the ceiling and began bobbing along under it. Another one of the furry green balls from Chorann picked Ewan up, the same way. The others all began to run along the gallery, hurrying to get out of sight around a turn they had just passed. Horne saw Yso stop and look around, reluctant to leave them, and the entirely useless thought came to Horne that she was a very gorgeous thing in Meeva's scanty finery, with her long yellow hair hanging over her white shoulders. Then he called in a frantic whisper,

"Fife! Fife, what about the gun?"

Fife paused long enough to shake his head. "You might damage the cone or the uniform. Don't worry, we'll give you all the help you need."

"Thank you," said Horne, "very much."

"Sssh!" said Chell. "It comes."

His companion, carrying Ewan, whispered, "Here it is." In the last gleam of the vanishing light, Horne saw him disappear upward into one of the air-shafts. Chell followed him.

It was the devil of a place to be, hanging in the grip of a living green balloon, jammed into a hole in the mountain where he could not see anything at all. His life and the success of his whole mission and a lot of other things depended on his seeing clearly and not making the slightest mistake.

He couldn't see, but he could hear. There was a faint, muffled throbbing in the gallery below.

Then there was light.

Then there was a transparent canopy directly underneath him, with light glowing from two rods set in it, and the top of a man's close-cropped head and the tops of his shoulders in a red uniform tunic and his arms outstretched in red sleeves and his hands on the control levers.

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Chell let his breath out and dropped.

They landed together, with Horne underneath, on the slippery plastic bubble. Instantly Chell gripped onto the rim of the cone with three widespread tentacles and flung Horne out and down with the other tentacles. Horne caught a glimpse of Ewan apparently flying through the air and then the other green ball was beside Chell and the two of them with their combined weight and strength were overbalancing the light floating cone. The man inside it was craning his head upward, his mouth and eyes stretched wide. For the first moment or two he was not doing anything but that. — In another few seconds, while he got his wits together again, it might be too late.

Horne leaped for the rim and hit the canopy release.

The plastic bubble opened, almost throwing Chell and his friend but not quite. The cone was dragging now at a tilted angle and the man inside it was clawing mechanically toward the controls to level it again. But he was also trying not to fall clear out of his seat. Before he could make up his mind, Horne was inside the cone and on top of him.

The cockpit was only meant to hold one man. The red-uniformed man tried first to get at his gun, but Horne's knee was already on it and crushing it into his side. Then he bunched up his fists and snarled and pounded Horne as hard as he could around the face. Horne hit him back. He got his hands around the man's neck and choked him and beat his head against the inside coaming of the rim, but it was padded and the whole thing was ineffectual because there was no room to move in.

Ewan reached the controls from outside the cockpit and shut off the small propulsion unit and shifted the grav shields so the cone fell over easily and Chell could let go of it. Horne sprawled out of the cone onto the rock floor, dragging the guard with him.

The guard looked past him and his face went perfectly white. He made one last desperate effort to get his gun out. Horne got his feet under him and hit the man solidly on the

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jaw, and the rest of the slaves came round and stood looking at the first Vellae they had ever seen lying prone and helpless at their feet. Horne slid the man's gun out of its holster.

Fife said, "Strip him." His face, at this moment, was not even remotely human.

By the time they had his uniform off him the man had opened his eyes again and was staring with a kind of helpless horror at the two hairy nine-foot giants who were holding him and the other aliens that were around. Fife's eyes were brilliant. He held the gun Ewan had given him in his hand.

"Stand away," he said.

Horne casually raised the gun that he had taken from the guard. He said in a mild voice, "Why do you want to do that? You could be throwing away a lot of important information."

He thought for a minute that Fife was going to try killing him, but then Fife relaxed and let the gun fall to his side.

"You may be right," he said. "Very well, we'll see what we can find out from him. D'quar?"

The purple gargoyle came and squatted down beside the guard. He held up one huge hand and ostentatiously extruded from his finger ends, one by one, claws that would have been useful to a tiger. Then he laid his hand gently on the guard's chest, just below the throat.

"Ask him whatever you want," Fife said to Horne. "D'quar will see that you get the answers."

Before Horne could speak, Ewan had pushed forward and bent over the man. "What's behind those doors? What are the Vellae doing inside this mountain?"

The guard looked up at him with bitter contempt. "I know you," he said. "I've seen your picture often in the telecasts. You used to be Morivenn's errand boy." He glanced around at the hostile alien faces bent over him. "So this is what you people are doing now that Morivenn is dead. Isn't this pretty low for a human, even a Federationist, to sink?"

Ewan said, "That doesn't answer my question."

"I'm not going to answer it." The guard's face was set now

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in the desperate hardness of a man who knows he is going to die and is determined to give his killers no satisfaction. "The doors are there. If you want to know what's behind them, go and look for yourself."

Horne pushed Ewan aside. "We can talk about that later. You men go back and forth to Rillah, don't you? You know most of what goes on?"

"We do."

"What do you know about Ardric?"

"Ardric?" the man, surprised. "Why, he — " Then he broke off and his eyes became wary. "He's dead. I thought everyone knew that."

Fife said softly. "D'quar — "

One of those sharp claws moved and hooked itself in the man's throat and began slowly to contract, tearing a little as it went. The guard cried out once and then shut his teeth tight together.

Horne said, "You're just wasting your time, D'quar. You won't get him to talk that way."

"Shut up," snarled Fife. "He'll talk or we'll tear him to pieces. Go on, D'quar, tear him!"

Horne shook his head. "You're smart enough, Fife, but you don't know men. This one's all angry and nerved up to die and he isn't going to tell us anything. Why? Because he figures he'll die anyway and so the hell with us. On the other hand, if he had a choice — "

"What kind of a choice?"

"A choice of life or death. If he doesn't talk, he dies. If he does talk, he lives. Don't be stubborn, Fife. What's one Vellae against a chance for home and freedom?"

Fife looked around at the others.

Lurgh awkwardly shifted his giant bulk and said hesitantly, "I think the human is right."

There were no dissenting voices.

For the second time, Fife mastered himself. "We agree, then. If the man talks, he lives."

D'quar sighed, as with regret, and removed his hand.

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Horne said to the guard, "Well?"

He watched while the man's hard resolve crumbled away now that its foundation was removed. There was nothing, he thought, more weakening than hope.

"I can start you off easy," Horne said, "by telling you we know Ardric is alive. We were fighting him only a day or two ago."

"Fighting?" the guard said. "They kept that secret enough. I knew Ardric was gone —"

He took a deep breath and plunged.

"Ardric has been working in the Project ever since he came back to Skereth."

A savage thrill, almost of triumph, sprang up in Horne. He looked at the others and said in a thin harsh voice like a cutting blade, "We won't have to go to Rillah."

"Right here in the Project?" said Fife. "Doing what?"

"Well," said the man, "he's primarily a spaceman and doesn't know a thing about the Project, but he is used to giving orders. So his father put him in charge of the whole Project guard. Now he tells us how to do the work we've been doing for years."

Fife was figuring time. Finally he said grudgingly, "We all escaped before that, so you may be telling the truth."

"I think he is," said Horne. "If a man wanted to hide for a while, a man who was supposed to be dead, where would he find a better place than this?"

He bent down beside the guard. "I want Ardric. How can I get to him?"

The man looked at him, startled by the cold intensity of his manner. "I don't think there is any way," he said. "He lives and works in the Administration Center, the heart of the Project. Even if you wore my uniform you wouldn't have much chance to get near him, and even if you did they'd kill you before you could get away. These others —" He looked around at the aliens and shook his head. "No chance at all."

"Are you sure of that?" Horne said. "Think hard. And remember what depends on it."

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Sweat came out on the man's face. He was more frightened now, when he had seen a glimmer of hope, than when he had been sure he was going to die.

"I don't know," he said desperately. "Please, I can't tell you a way if there isn't one."

"Try," said Horne. "Take plenty of time."

The man looked around, trapped and despairing. His eyes fell on Yso and his lips half parted as though he were going to make an appeal to her, but then he seemed to recognize her as Morivenn's daughter and the hope in his eyes died.

Fife sauntered a step closer. The aliens began to edge in, and D'quar stood absently looking down at his own talons, and all the unhuman faces stared in a hungry way. Horne could guess what the guard was feeling, as he looked up at those unhuman faces and thought of how these slaves had been treated.

The man's face became agonized with effort, and his voice came in a rattling rush.

"If you go down through the access galleries you'll meet other guards, and you'll have to pass through many levels where work is still going on and there are even more guards to watch over the slaves. So that's impossible. You just couldn't get past without being seen and challenged. So the only possible way there might be would be if you went through the Project itself —"

"Behind the doors?"

"Yes — but listen, if you got all the way to a main-ganglion relay station and from there to the control center in Administration, there would still be only a handful of you against the Project guards, and any slave caught in Administration would be shot on sight. So there isn't any way I can see —"

"Just a minute," Horne said. "Main ganglion? What's that? What are the Vellae building in this mountain?"

An expression of haunting fear crept into the man's face against his will but too strong to be denied.

"A brain," he said. "A huge, great brain."

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XIII

FOR A minute there was complete silence in the gallery. Then Fife said, wonderingly,

"A brain? A living, thinking brain?"

"Not living, like that," said the guard. "It's a giant electronic computer, one of those that can calculate so far beyond human powers that they're called 'brains.' This one is the biggest there ever was."

Yso said slowly, "No wonder they killed my father. No wonder they'd kill anybody who tried to get Skereth into the Federation."

She looked desperately from Horne to Ewan and then to the aliens and Fife's clever unhuman face.

"We thought it was just their profits and power they were afraid of losing, but it's more. My father thought so and he was right. If Skereth entered the Federation, the Vellae leaders couldn't hope to hide what they're doing here. They'd go to prison for it as a menace to the peace of the whole galactic community."

Fife shook his head. "But why?"

Ewan said grimly, "Federation law forbids any world or any government or any private interest to construct an electronic calculating machine of more than a certain capability. They can have as many brains as they need to conduct their business, but they must not be linked together, and they must not exceed the fixed limit. If they do, the Federation considers it an act of war. It will take punitive action against any world, in the Federation or out of it, that endangers the rest of the galaxy by building such a dangerous thing."

The full significance of what the guard had said more or less escaped Horne, who was a spaceman and not much concerned with the complexities of galactic law outside his own sphere. But he was impressed by the reactions of Yso and

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Ewan, who were openly horror-struck. And he remembered talk about past trouble with such brains.

He asked, "Why is it so dangerous? A weapon I could understand, but an electronic brain . . ."

"It is a weapon," Ewan said. "Potentially, the most dangerous of all." He paused, as though searching for a way to explain. "Look, a spear is an extension of a man's hand and far more dangerous, isn't it? Well, an electronic brain is an extension of a man's mind — really the combined minds of many men."

That was clear enough. Horne nodded, and Ewan went on. "Theoretically, it could be extended to such proportions that the men who controlled it would be practically invincible. They would have all weapons, all strategy, all propaganda, all psychology, ready for instant use. One whole section of the brain this large could, for instance, be put to working out new equations for advanced weapons systems, leaving the rest of it free to solve the problems of attack on all levels, figure the probability curve of the enemy's movements — everything. And all the time new data would be added, making the brain even more powerful. I don't say it could never be smashed, but it would be a tough proposition, and there wouldn't be much left of the planet after it was over."

He clenched his hands and beat them gently together in a gesture of sheer desperation.

"If we don't succeed here — if we don't manage somehow to get proof to the Federation government — Skereth and probably this whole part of the galaxy will be involved in such a war that —"

"Sssh!" said Chell suddenly, bounding up. "Another cone. A bigger cone, I think."

The guard stiffened in the grip of the hairy ones. "I didn't make the routine communications check. Now they're coming to see what happened to me. It'll be a two-man cone, and armed."

"You treacherous human," said Fife, and began to move swiftly in toward the guard.

Horne pushed him aside. "We didn't give him much

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chance to make his check, did we? Anyway, we still need him. Alive and unhurt, you understand. Now get him out of sight around that bend."

He handed Ewan the gun he had taken from the guard. "See that nothing happens to him. Yso, I'll need you, and I'll need Chell."

He began in great haste to pull on the guard's red uniform. Yso said, "What are you going to do?"

"Put on a little play for them." He paused briefly, frowning. "It'll be dangerous. We'll likely all get killed. If you and Chell don't want to risk —"

Yso said, "Let's not waste time, Horne. What is it that you want us to do?"

He told her while he was climbing into the cone. The idea had come to him quickly, very incomplete at first, but taking on a larger and fuller shape as he thought about it and considered what might be done afterward if it did what he hoped it would do.

Chell added the finishing touch.

"Use the arms of the cone," he said. "See? They're both tools and weapons."

Horne saw now what he had not noticed before — a pair of jointed, armlike appendages ending in iron claws, folded in under the rim of the metal cone.

"They can carry a current," Chell said. "I know because I have seen slaves burned and shocked, even killed. So be careful. Pleasse?"

He bobbed swiftly back to Yso. Horne shut the canopy and worked the grav-shields to right the cone. He started the tiny compressed-air propulsion unit and the cone moved sedately at the pace of a man walking, back along the gallery the way it had come.

When the two-man cone rounded a curve, the guards in it saw Chell coming first of all, a huge furry green ball carrying Yso in three of his tentacles. Yso appeared to be unconscious, hanging limp with her yellow hair falling down like a banner and the scanty blue streamer fluttering from her waist.

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With his two spare tentacles, Chell made gestures of warding off Horne in his cone, who was apparently herding him along with his burden. The powerful claw-handed arms were extended now from the cone, threatening him, and one was close enough to his fur to make Chell's gesture of alarm authentic enough. Even so, he was careful to keep as much of his bulk as possible between Horne and the others, to hide him.

Horne, keeping his face turned away, said over the speaker attachment, "I found this slave and the woman in the gallery. They attacked me and I was forced to subdue them. The woman may be badly hurt. I'm glad you came. Will you get out and see to her? It's vitally important that we take her alive to Ardric."

The two guards in the cone were staring fascinated at the white-skinned girl in Chell's grasp.

"Who is she?" one of them asked. "And how did she get into the gallery?"

"I don't know how she got in," Horne said, "but I'm pretty sure I know who she is. I've seen her picture. That's Morivenn's daughter."

"Morivenn's daughter?" said the guard at the controls. His voice tightened and went up a notch. "*Morivenn's daughter?*"

"There isn't any doubt of it," Horne said.

"Here in the Project?" the guard said. "You're right, this is vital!"

He set the cone down with a thump. The propulsion unit died. The canopy opened and both men jumped down and ran toward Yso.

Instantly Chell dropped her gently to the floor, let go of her, and flung his tentacles around the nearest guard, who bellowed in alarm. The other one reached for his gun and shouted for Horne to do something about Chell.

Horne touched two controls in swift succession. The cone shot forward several feet and a great iron hand reached out and gripped the man's arm with its amazingly flexible fingers. The gun splashed a brief fury of flame against the rocky

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ceiling and then dropped as the man was hauled off his feet and held dangling.

Chell must have called to his friends, because they came swiftly and one took hold of the second man so that Horne could let go of him. Yso looked up excitedly at Horne and cried, "It worked! Now what?"

Horne neutralized the cone and jumped down. He was feeling good, and fighting it, because he knew that it was far too early in the game to start congratulating himself. He said grimly, "Now we finish the questioning and make our plans, and they'd better be good ones because we won't have any chance to change them later on."

"We had better hurry, too," said Chell, "before yet another cone comes searching after these two."

They joined Fife and the other slaves and Ewan. Horne bent over their first captive.

"Now," he said, "I want to know about those locked doors and the passages behind them."

From there on the actual planning did not take long. It was a wildly improbable venture and, Horne thought, almost certainly foredoomed to failure, but it offered the only possibility he could see and no one disputed him, or suggested anything better.

The locks of the iron doors were controlled by a frequency key in the guard's cone. The doors actually were access hatches for maintenance and repair in the labyrinthine corridors of the Project—the brain that already required most of a mountain to contain its cells and ganglia—vast memory banks, computing units, comparison centers, data analyzers, all the components of the human brain except that indefinable part from which man derives his emotions, his personality and his humanness.

With the feeling of one about to make an uncanny entrance into the very tissues of a quasi-living entity, Horne activated the frequency key and opened one of the doors into the brain.

The door had been carefully selected from the guard's information. Now the three Project men, bound and gagged,

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were pulled into the chamber beyond the hatch, where they would not be discovered too soon. Horne turned the small cone over to Ewan, who would have use for it.

Yso was already at the controls of the larger one, with Fife beside her. Chell and his two comrades would go with them. All the rest would come with Horne.

There was not, Horne thought, much to choose between the two groups in the probability of survival.

Horne and his group were to make their way secretly to the Administration Center and attack from within. Yso, Ewan and Fife, and the three from Chorann, were to make their way openly into the lower galleries where the slaves were working, rouse them to action, knock out the guards, and attack the Administration Center from without. They hoped to get, not only Ardrick, but the brain itself. Then, if they died, they might at least wreck the brain while they were doing it.

"Make it good," Horne said to Ewan.

"You, too," said Ewan. His voice was determined, but it revealed no great note of hope.

Horne glanced at Yso, dazzling in her garish finery. He smiled.

"You're just what we need to lead a crusade," he said. "Give it to them, Morivenn's daughter!"

She nodded, shaking back her yellow hair, and he knew he did not have to give her either urging or encouragement. He knew she was thinking of her father. Horne felt a brief but remarkably sharp stab of regret that he would probably never have the chance to know this girl any better than he did now.

Fife smiled to himself and played hungrily with the weapon keys on the board before him. Horne spoke to him and then held out his hand to Chell, who wrapped the tip of a tentacle around it.

"Okay," said Horne. "Let's go."

He nodded to Lurgh and the purple gargoyle, and stepped in through the hatch door, and the whole weird crew padded after him into the secret corridors of the brain.

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XIV

THE MOUNTAIN was a skull and Horne walked within it, a micro-organism moving through the convoluted tunnels of the brain that filled its great domed hollowness.

There was light in the brain, for the other human micro-organisms that served it must see to move. There were catwalks provided for their moving. One of these stretched from an arched opening on the far side of the entrance chamber, a narrow spidery thing that stretched away and away, apparently into infinity, one long straight thread traversing a mass of support cables.

After the dim rock gallery, the suffused light and complex perspectives of this place confused Horne's eyes and made him dizzy. For comfort he looked upward to the smooth round roof of the bore, but it was too close above his head and gave him a claustrophobic feeling of being smothered and deep-buried.

So he looked down.

The catwalk hung above a huge transparent tube. This was what the webbed cables supported, this glassy vein that ran from everlasting to everlasting, carrying inside itself a thick mass of wires in many colors. The wires were like a schematic diagram of a bundle of nerve fibers, and Horne realized that that was exactly what they were. This, according to the guard, was one of the main ganglia, serving a whole portion of the brain. Looking at the bundled wires, it was difficult for Horne to rid himself of an unpleasant feeling that they were alive.

Was thinking aliveness? Where did you draw the fine line between sentience and unawareness?

And if this mighty thing inside of which they walked was

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conscious was it conscious of *them*? The skin between Horne's shoulders crawled when that idea crossed his mind.

"It's nothing but a damned big overgrown computer," he said, as much to reassure himself as the others.

It did not seem to reassure the others. There was not much expression at any time in the purple face of D'quar, but it seemed to Horne that the gargoyle moved slowly, unwillingly, looking from side to side and saying nothing. The others, especially Lurgh and his hairy big double from Allamar, were obviously uneasy. These simple humanoids, who knew next to nothing of science, didn't like being here at all.

Nor were Horne's words any reassurance to himself. He might fight down the semi-superstitious repulsion he felt, but he could not disguise the fact this colossal computer — call it a brain, call it living, or not — gave those who possessed it a tremendous power to wield against their enemies. More and more, Horne began to understand the horror and fear that Yso and Ewan had felt when they had learned the nature of the Project.

"Come on," he said roughly to his hesitating, motley crew of followers.

Below the tube, a long way down from the catwalk on which they stood, was the bottom of the round bore.

Horne looked over his shoulder at D'quar, who was standing hesitantly with one big clawed foot on the catwalk, as though he didn't like the idea of trusting his knotty bulk to this frail strand.

"Think how much worse it'll be for your nine-foot friends like Lurgh," he said. "But at that, I think we'd better space ourselves out. Don't follow me too closely and don't have two heavy ones right together."

He started out along the narrow way, hanging tightly to the hand ropes.

The catwalk was not rigid. He felt the sway as D'quar came on behind him. The cables, woven of some neutral, non-magnetic plastic, creaked and sprang. Horne set his teeth

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and walked on, trying not to think of how far it was to the floor and the inevitable alarms that would be set off if they all came crashing down into the tube.

It was hard to tell in this place how far you had come or how far you had yet to go. Horne looked back once or twice and saw his little band of all-sized, all-colored, all-shaped monstrosities strung out behind him, stepping with infinite care, the two hairy giants separated by large intervals and bent almost on all fours.

"Horne's Foreign Legion," he thought sourly, and then was a little ashamed of the thought. The humanoids were coming back into a place of torment from which they had escaped, of their own free will, and that took bravery.

Behind the strung-out line of them, the catwalk ended at the arch from which they had come. The next time he looked back, the arch had dwindled into the pinpoint nothingness of distance.

There was something hypnotic and horrifying about it, as though you had gotten into a spatial warp without beginning or end and would go on through eternity until the whole cosmos collapsed and prepared to recycle.

He was glad when he came upon a branching sideline where a slim bundle of fibers separated from the parent stem and curved off into a huge chamber. There was a branch of the catwalk, too, and he could have gone into the chamber, but he only stopped long enough to see that it was crammed with banks of tubes and transistors and miles of circuiting. There was a constant flickering of little lights and a soft buzzing and clicking that sounded eerily like somebody muttering busily to himself.

They passed several of these huge chambers. Horne thought about how many more of them there must be in the bulk of the mountain and how deep and far the labyrinthine twinings of these nerve paths and chambered cells must reach on all sides of him. *And they're building it still bigger*, he thought. *And think what men like Ardric can do with such power.*

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He wondered how Yso and Ewan and the aliens with them were doing with their side of it.

He was sure of one thing. If he couldn't do both, it was more important to smash this great lurking giant than to clear his own name. In the long run, he supposed, the one would follow the other anyway, even though he might not be around to see it.

Out of the hypnotic web before him emerged an archway much like the one they had left behind. This would be the main-ganglion relay-center the guard had described.

Horne lifted his hand in warning. In utter silence he moved forward and the others followed him like ghosts.

This arch had a door in it. Horne pushed it open.

There was a big circular room with panels all around it. Two men, obviously engineers and wearing no uniforms, were going about their business of seeing that the impulse streams were flowing properly in this division of the brain, that there was no block or overload. They looked up startled as Horne came through the door and one of them said, "Is there trouble along the line there? The instruments didn't show —"

"Yes," Horne said, "there's trouble. But not quite the kind you mean. D'quar!"

He pulled the stolen gun from the holster of his stolen uniform and said to the engineers, "Stand perfectly still and you won't be harmed."

They stood still and their eyes grew big and their faces white as D'quar and giant Lurgh and the rest of the motley crew poured in through the doorway.

"Is this a slave rising?" asked one of them.

Horne said devoutly, "I hope so."

The man made a brave but perfectly futile rush for a communicator. Lurgh was nearest him and the nine-foot giant picked the man up and cuffed him along the side of the head, and there was no further movement from him.

The other man resigned himself to being bound. While D'quar saw to this, Horne was opening other hatch-doors.

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Three of them gave onto main tubes like the one they had just come from. The fourth opened onto a lift.

If the guard they had captured had told the truth, at the bottom of the lift was the central room of Administration.

Horne took a deep breath and turned to his tensely waiting alien followers. "Well," he said, "we might as well go."

They crowded in and Horne pushed the button. The round chamber dropped with vertiginous swiftness down the shaft.

When Horne heard the first whine of the air cushion he said, "Come out with a rush and arm yourselves as soon as you can."

D'quar said, "What if the others do not come?"

"Then," said Horne, "we'll just have to hold on until they arrive."

Brave words, he thought. The only trouble was that he didn't feel that way at all. He had been forced to do more fighting the last few days than he had done in his whole life, but he still didn't like it and didn't think he ever would. They were committed now and he might as well put on a good front.

The lift slowed and stopped and the door slid open.

There was a narrow corridor in front of the lift, with rows of identical doors on either side of it. There was nobody in the corridor. Horne led the way swiftly to the end of it.

Here a round space perhaps three hundred feet in diameter and almost as high had been hollowed out of the very heart of the mountain. Buildings of steel and glass filled all the circular space except for the center and the streets that radiated from it, dividing the buildings into separate blocks.

The streets, Horne knew, connected with the entrances from Rillah and the private base where the Vellae ships landed with slaves, and also with the galleries and work-centers around the periphery of the brain. It was from one of these streets that the other slaves led by Yso and Ewan, were supposed to pour in to the attack.

There was no sign of them yet. But some sort of alarm had roused the center. Behind the glass window-walls of the buildings, technicians at the many input-output devices of

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the brain were turning from their work and peering out into the plaza. Here there was a noise and men were running — technicians and scientists hurrying for cover, red-uniformed guards coming from various directions and disappearing along one particular street that lay to Horne's left.

A number of them were coming out of a building with a sign that said, *Project Guard Office*. It was not too far around the plaza, to Horne's right.

All Horne's muscles tightened and the old hate burned up in him so strongly that he felt invincible.

"Ardric's there," he said to his companions. "Let's get him."

He ran out across the plaza.

There was a sudden cessation of movement among the people as they became aware of him in his red uniform and then saw the monstrous group that followed him. Somebody shouted in a voice of panic that the slaves were already here. The unarmed, non-uniformed men began to run away, spreading wild confusion around the plaza, and the guards stopped going wherever they were headed and swung around to shoot at Horne's little mob. But they could not fire effectively for the moment without killing a lot of their own people. They hesitated and, in the meantime, Horne had reached the door of the Guard Office and pushed it violently open and gone through it into the place beyond, with the aliens pouring in after him.

The Guard communication center was here. Operators bent tensely over their instruments, listening to a bedlam of voices, transmitting orders and instructions given by their chief.

The chief, wearing the red guard uniform but otherwise unchanged since the last time Horne had seen him aboard the *Vega Queen*, was a man with a clean-cut intelligent face, too thin and cruel around the mouth and too flint-hard in the eyes, not trying now to be pleasant but full of the alert anger of a man attacked.

Horne sprang, just as Ardrick looked up.

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XV

HORNE HAD a brief glimpse of Ardric, startled, forming a name with his lips, reaching for his gun. Then he was toppling over among the astonished operators and Horne went with him, his hands, his knees, his whole body savagely engaged in paying Ardric some small part of what he owed him.

They rolled and thrashed in fierce silence on the floor, among the frantic legs of the operators and the leaping forms of the aliens who were subduing them. There was a frightful noise. Voices shouted metallically from the communicators, demanding to know what was happening.

D'quar picked up a microphone and roared in his hoarse, heavy voice, "We have the Center, that's what's happening! You're caught between us —" and he howled his triumph and his hate at the unseen guards who were fighting his fellow-slaves somewhere in the outer galleries.

Horne, only dimly aware of these extraneous things, thought that D'quar was exulting too soon. But he didn't care. All he cared about was that at last he had Ardric in the grip of his two hands.

Ardric was fighting back. Horne's mouth was full of blood and his face was cut and his body was bruised, but that was all right too. It was good. He had Ardric's neck finally in the bend of his forearm and was pressing back, pressing back —

Two enormous hairy hands opened Horne's grip as easily as if he had been a child. A second pair of hands extracted Ardric and held him, half-conscious, the skin of his cheeks already mottled blue.

Horne looked up a little dazedly into the face of Lurgh and his fellow giant, and Lurgh said, "You wanted this one alive. Remember?"

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Horne staggered up, still dazed. "Yes," he said. "Yes, see that he doesn't get away."

The communications center was a shambles. The operators were wounded, dead or escaped. About half the aliens were armed now and the others were searching the inner rooms for weapons. D'quar was still roaring his defiance, his gargoyle face unrecognizable now, and Horne made a frantic effort to quiet them down, to get them into some sort of order before the inevitable happened.

The guards outside began their counter-attack.

The great front window burst in a shower of glass. Instantly there was a scramble for cover. Red-uniformed shapes poured in, firing their weapons. Horne, behind part of the communications equipment, fired back and so did every alien who had a gun. Searing beams flashed and cracked. The room was filled in seconds with smoke and a smell of burning. The slaves who had been searching the inner rooms came back with guns and fired from the shelter of the doorways. But they were using unfamiliar weapons and the guards, trained fighting-men, outnumbered them.

Ardric, pinned down by the great bulk of the hairy alien from Allamar, said with vicious satisfaction, "My men will kill every damn one of you." And Horne knew he was right.

Where were Ewan and Yso and the other slaves? What had happened in the outer galleries?

If they didn't come soon, they wouldn't need to come at all.

He fired at the red uniforms and choked on the smoke and the stench of the dying.

There came then a deep far sound like wind or the voice of the sea. It grew and grew swiftly, and the attacking guards heard it and became irresolute, and the fire slackened.

Half a dozen one-man cones and two larger ones spewed in a line out of the street to the left of the plaza. The guards who had been attacking Horne's force ran out to meet them, waving their arms. Then more men in red uniforms came running out of the street. Some of them were wounded. Others kept stopping every few feet to turn and fire and then run

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again. They mingled with the other guards and they all milled around for a moment and the cones hovered overhead. The two armed cones fired back also along the street.

A beam shot out from between the building and knocked one of the cones reeling back, its grav shields fused. There was burst of sporadic firing both in the air and on the ground. Then the red-uniformed men broke and ran and the cones followed them, and out from the street came the two-man cone with Yso at the controls, her yellow hair flying and Fife crouched beside her over the weapon-panel, firing like a demon and missing more often than not. After her came a string of wobbly cones manned by creatures of every sort sufficiently humanoid to fit them, and a flying cluster of green furry balls with weapons in their tentacles.

On the street below them came the army of the slaves, an outworld legion of incredible, beautiful, ugly, grotesque, laughable, horrifying beings, welded into a vast brotherhood by their common need for freedom and their hatred of the Vellae. From Fringe worlds far away they had been brought and driven like laboring beasts. Now the hour of their vengeance had come and there was no ruth or mercy in them. They were blood-mad and not even guns firing in their faces could stop them. Seeing this, the nerve of the guards gave way and they fell back, faster and faster.

The aliens poured into the plaza. They came like a flooding river that widened and surged and filled all the space there was and the red uniforms were swept away.

In the communications center there was now a strange quiet. Horne felt almost deafened by it. He stood still, shaking his head, swaying just a little with the swift weakness of relief. He did not believe it, but it was true. They had won.

This far, they had won.

He ran out into the square with his few remaining followers, and close beside him the nine-foot one carried Ardrick with him, helpless in the grip of those mighty hands.

Chell came and dropped down over them. "Better take off that red suit, Horne," he said. "These ones are in no mood to ask who's inside it before they kill you." He looked around.

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"Where's D'quar? It was his voice that turned the tide. Some of us could hear him bellowing over the guard's radios that you had taken the Administration Center, and the guards began to waver, and that did it."

The purple gargoyle raised his head, made even more hideous by burns and blood, and smiled ruefully.

"It wasn't exactly true," he said.

"It worked, though," said Chell. He wrapped his tentacles joyously around Horne and the gargoyle. Then he remembered something and spoke to them sadly. "Ewan's dead. He brought down the first guard and got the rising started, but they killed him."

Ardric had not said a word since Lurgh had pulled Horne off of him. He spoke now, standing like a child in the grip of those mighty arms, his face white with fury and fear of the crowding unhuman bodies, furred and scaled, hairy and naked, and of the baleful unhuman eyes that looked at him hungering for his life.

"You've cheated me twice now, Horne," he said. "You were supposed to die in the wreck, and when I heard you were on your way to Rillah I even left the project to make sure you didn't get through."

Shedding the red coat, Horne barely looked at him. He did not trust himself to do so.

"This time you won't get away," said Ardrick. "None of you." He raised his voice so that all those around him could hear. "The alarm is out. The Vellae are already on the way here with every man they can raise. They'll tear the guts out of you."

One of the aliens said, "I know this one." It was a thin creature, yellowish in color and scaled all down its back with diamond-shaped scales. Its eyes were brilliant, catching the light on many facets, peering close at Ardrick.

"This is the leader one," it said, its voice high and clear, carrying with the soft insistence of a blowing wind, and the rough noise and babble began to subside as the people listened. "This is Ardrick, the leader one, the leader one, the one who tells us when and how we die."

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Its voice was almost a chant, repeating the phrase, "The leader one." And now the crowd sound began again, deep and angry.

It began to move, a wall of grotesque masks and weird-shapen bodies, pressing in around Ardric.

Horne stepped in front of him. "Wait! This man must stay alive. He —"

"He came in the ship that took me from my world," said another voice out of that mounting of voices. "I saw him in the village. He came from the ship and told the slavers how to take us."

So that, Horne thought, was where Ardric had gotten his experience at piloting — on the Vellae slave ships. Well, of course.

It was a fleeting thought. The wall of bodies was pressing close now. He pulled his gun. "Wait!" he shouted, and fired a blast at the roof. They paused and stared at him, startled but not afraid, and he saw in their faces that they could just as easily include him in their thirst for revenge. He was human. The fact that he was also Jim Horne might be unknown to most of them at the moment, and he didn't think they would greatly care anyway.

Ardric was laughing. It was a strange kind of laughter, but genuine. "Think fast, Horne!"

"Get him back inside if you can," said Horne to Lurgh. They started a backward movement, and Chell, who had been hovering nervously overhead, shot suddenly away.

"We will kill that one," said the yellowish one with the scales, in his soft-carrying voice. And they came on again.

Ardric said maliciously, "Start shooting, Horne. Aren't you going to shoot? They'll kill me and you'll never get me into court."

Lurgh said, "Be careful, Horne. He would like you to do that. If you kill any of them the rest will : . ."

Chell came shooting back, crying shrilly. "Yso is coming! Morivenn's daughter!" He went up and down over the crowd shouting Yso's name, and Horne saw others of his race doing the same, and in a moment the crowd was looking for Yso,

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getting their attention away from Ardric as a wild ragged cheering broke out and grew louder and more continuous.

Lurgh took the opportunity to get Ardric back into the smashed communications center and out of sight. Yso's cone appeared overhead, unable to land in the milling crowd. The canopy was open. She shouted down at him, wild-eyed and half hysterical. "It's done, Horne!"

He shouted back at her, in a harsh voice that was intended to shock her out of it.

"Nothing's done yet, except that we've killed some guards and captured some others. The Vellae will be coming in force! Use your amplifier there and tell this mob to go and guard the entrances against the Vellae!"

She stared, and then obeyed him. The alien horde's excitement ebbed a little, but not their ferocious purpose.

"More Vellae to kill," called one of the hairy giants. "Come, brothers!"

As the horde thinned away, hurrying to block the entrances, Yso was able to land her cone. She came to Horne, and all her emotion of triumph had left her.

"Do we have any chance of holding the Vellae back?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not for long. We — the slaves — took the guards here by surprise, this time. We jumped them before they knew what was going on. But there'll be no more surprise. The humanoids are full of courage but how long will their courage stand up against the odds of numbers and weapons?"

Yso said after a moment, "Horne, if we do not get out of this, we do not. But the brain of the Vellae must be destroyed, whether we escape or not."

Horne nodded. "That's my thought too. But the question is . . . can we do it, in the limited time we have?"

"Surely, if we cut the nerve-cables and smash the relay switchboards — " she began, but Horne shook his head.

"How long do you think it would take the Vellae to repair any damage like that? A few days, a few weeks . . . and the thing would be functioning again."

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"Then there is no way?"

"There may be a way," said Fife. The little alien had remained with Horne and his yellow eyes were glowing like coals. "It will be a cruel blow we will deal the Vellae. Whether we die or not, their great creation will be destroyed by their slaves."

"But how?" said Horne. "You said you knew a way. . . ."

"Oh, no," said Fife, "I did not say that for I do not know the human science, I would not know how to do it. But there is someone who does know, and could tell us."

"Who?"

And when Fife answered, Horne realized that the proposal was so uncanny that he would never have thought of it, whereas the little alien had.

"You have said that the brain has no will, is not alive, and holds its tremendous knowledge at the service of its human masters," said Fife. "Ask the brain itself how we can destroy it."

XVI

TIME HAD passed. Horne didn't know how much. Probably a period short enough to be measured in minutes, but everything seemed to take years. In the plaza outside, groups of slaves still stalked and shambled and hopped among the broken glass, looking for someone to kill. But the bulk of the aliens were massed in the two main tunnels that led into the mountain from Rillah and from the port. Fighting was already joined.

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In the room, one of many in the operations center where data and problems were fed to the brain and the answers received, a white-faced technician hung over his input-output mechanisms. It had taken a little hard persuasion to make him code the question, *How can you be most quickly destroyed?* He had pointed out that "you" had no meaning for the brain, and they in turn had pointed out that he had better find a way of phrasing that would have meaning for it, and that he had better do so fast.

He had done so and the problem had been fed in. Now they waited — Horne, Yso, and Chell, and Ardric securely shackled and guarded. Far away in its mighty vaults and chambers, the brain coldly pondered the problem of its own destruction.

It shook Horne, a little, to think of it — this colossal instrument of knowledge being willfully and deliberately destroyed. It seemed almost to be a crime worse than human murder, to strike down an intelligence that might be capable of giving men the answers to the deepest riddles of the universe. For a moment he was tempted to refrain from doing this thing.

But legend had it that a man had been tempted once before by a Tree of Knowledge, to his regret. And it was certain that a day would come when many men, many worlds would bitterly regret it if they held back their hands now. The iron-hard laws of the Federation against the creation of electronic brains beyond a certain capacity had not been evolved out of mere theory. Three times in the past, worlds like Skereth that had secretly nourished monstrous, mindless intelligences like this one had taken the powers and the weapons derived from them and had set the galaxy aflame before their ambitions were stopped. It would happen again, here, if the intelligence seated in this hollow mountain was not ended.

Horne stared out the window and waited for the brain's answer, and worried.

A very long-legged creature with snow-white skin and a little crest of horns came leaping across the plaza and into the building. Horne went to meet him.

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"I bring word from D'quar," the creature said. "I am to say that the Vellae come against us with many men, and these we could fight, but that also they have very heavy weapons that fill the halls with flame, and these we cannot fight. I am to say that unless other ways of escape are found we will all die, and that they should be found very soon. *Very soon.*"

Horne indicated the engineering office across the plaza where Fife and a selected group of aliens were extracting information from charts and some reluctant men.

"That's being done now. Tell D'quar and the others to hold out as long as they can."

Yso called him and he went back into the office. The machine was typing out a bewildering mass of symbols. Horne said, "Read it!"

The technician began to laugh hysterically. "'A nuclear bomb of 80 megaton capacity placed in the position represented by the figures . . ."

Ardric too began to laugh. "You might as well give up, Horne. You couldn't destroy the brain if you had all the time in the world, and you don't have. We've got you trapped."

Horne said quietly to the technician, "Try again. Substitute another word for *destroyed* — something meaning maximum damage."

The technician hesitated. Chell reached out a couple of tentacles and he flinched and began hurriedly to punch out a tape.

It clicked into the machine and again they waited.

The first stragglers came into the plaza, retreating ahead of the line of battle.

Fife came out of the engineering section with a rolled-up chart in his hand. He came running. "There are other ways out," he said. "Look here." He flung the chart open on the floor. "Some of the original borings, where they first started work on the brain, were left open for emergency exits. They blocked the others." He pointed. "See? Here and here, there are ways."

Horne saw. "That's fine," he said, "except that we'd have to go through the brain again to get to them."

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Fife looked out the window. The groups of stragglers were growing and coming faster. "I don't see that we have much choice," he said.

The machine was click-clacking a message. Chell laid the end of one bright-red tentacle like a necklace around the technician's throat. The man looked agonized, but resigned. He picked up the message and read it.

"It's a list of critical relays and safety switches to be opened, and the precise increase in voltage necessary to burn out all circuits."

A shiver went through Horne. There was something so un-human, so uncanny, in the icy calmness with which the mighty computer had calculated its own destruction, on order. But after all, though it was called a brain, it was without will or personality, without any realization of self. It computed, nothing more — and it computed its own destruction as passionlessly as anything else.

"Get to it," Horne said. "Fife, see that he has all the help he needs and send messengers to the tunnels to tell them to start falling back. Chell . . ."

Chell wrapped his tentacles around Ardric. Horne saw Ardric's face briefly as he was lifted up, and for the first time he read despair there, and it gave him a warm, good, joyous feeling. He picked up the chart on one hand and took hold of Yso with the other. "Let's go."

The slaves were coming faster and faster now out of the two streets leading to the main entrances. Many of them were hurt. There was a confused din and roar, punctuated with ominous boomings. Fife and the technician, with whatever help they had gathered up, had disappeared.

Now Ardric began to struggle fiercely. "You'll never get out of the mountain. Look at them run! The Vellae are close behind!"

"Not close enough," said Horne. "Not quite, I don't think." He smiled at Ardric, the smile of a happy man. "They may hunt us all down and kill us, but they can't stop Fife, not now. The brain is finished, Ardric. All the hard work, and all the people enslaved and killed, all the plotting, me and

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Morivenn and the *Vega Queen* — all for nothing, Ardric. Just time wasted."

Chell said uneasily, "Horne . . ."

"Keep him quiet," Horne said. Chell tightened his tentacles and Ardric gasped, and his eyes became dim and disinterested. Horne shook open the chart.

"Which way?" asked Yso, pale and tired now that she had come down from the peak of emotion after the battle.

Horne got himself oriented. "Behind that block of buildings. Come on."

He began to run, still holding Yso and helping her along. Chell came after them with Ardric.

They passed down the street and into the space behind the Administration Center, where the living rock of the mountain stood in a curved wall. There was a massive door in it. Horne pushed it open and stepped through onto a balcony about halfway up the side of a huge cavern, a balcony so unexpected that he was momentarily stunned by the sensation of the ground falling out from under his feet.

This was the occipital opening where all the nerves of the mountain-high cranium channeled together to the primary control center. From every level the glistening tubes with their cores of bright bundled wire came, running out of their holes in the rock and descending in orderly rows to their ultimate terminals.

Yso caught her breath and cried out. "Look!"

In one, two, then three of the tubes, fire flashed like a bolt of lightning, vanishing into the rock. Behind it the bright tube became opaque, blackened, dead.

Horne looked at the chart again. "One on each side," he said, and pointed. "There, and there. These lower levels, naturally, were built first, and the main ganglia on this level connect with passages to these old outlets. Good."

He left Yso with Chell and ran back to face the growing confusion in the plaza.

The business of falling back in the main tunnels had become more of a business of running frantically away from the Vellae weapons that were too powerful to face. Horne got

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them started down the right street. Pretty soon he had helpers. D'quar joined him, and then Fife.

"We wrecked the controls," Fife said, "after he opened the switches, so they can't stop what's been started." He rubbed his hands together, grinning.

The last of the alien slaves ran across the plaza. After them, close on their heels, came the first of the attacking Vellae.

Fife said, "It's time to go."

They ran with the rest of the running slaves, at first firing behind them as they went and then just running.

In the great cavern now the balcony on both sides was filled with a grotesque stream of creatures hurrying into the two galleries. The place had taken on the eerie look of an inferno. Fire flashed and ran in the tubes, and now in some places the plastic tubing itself had begun to melt and burn. The cavern was thick with choking smoke. Frantic slaves crowded toward the tunnels.

Chell was hovering, holding Ardrick tightly, and another one of his breed had picked up Yso and was keeping her safe from the trampling rush.

Horne coughed and fired at a red uniform dimly glimpsed in the street outside. "You did a good job," he told Fife. "Too damn good."

"Well," said Fife, "it's too late now. If we live, I'll see you in Rillah!"

He ran off along the right hand gallery. Horne took the left. And they fled into the tunnels of the dying brain.

They ran, the unhuman, the semi-human, the light-footed and the huge, the fleet and the clumsy, along the narrow swaying catwalks. And around them and under them the brain died in convulsions of smoke and fire and arcing flame.

The bundled wires in the tubes heated as current from the unchecked generators poured into them, through the broken gateways of protective devices that no longer functioned. They heated until the insulation burned away and the fusing fire raced along the slender filaments. It raced through every branching nerve-path into the cells and chambers where the

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brain did its remembering, its computing and comparing, its almost human learning and associating. Circuits fused; arcs of blue fire leaped over the panels and the tube banks; holocausts of energy were released to fill the rocky chambers with destruction.

Horne ran, clinging to the handrail because he could no longer see, along the wildly swaying catwalk. Now and again, as they passed the mouth of some burning chambers, he could see through the swirls of smoke ahead the weird forms of the slaves running, leaping, shambling, striving in a desperate attempt to outrace the destruction that was following with such swiftness on their heels.

Because now the galleries themselves were burning. The plastic tubes, the network of suspension cables that held them, the very catwalk, were melting and crumbling behind them in the smoke and heat.

The Vellae who had followed them into the galleries were caught in that swift-racing destruction.

Horne heard the echo of a shattering explosion and felt the whole mountain shake, as though it felt suddenly the insecurity of its hollowed and honeycombed mass. A very great panic came over Horne and he ran with fire at his heels and the mountain shivering uneasily over his head, and smoke strangling in his lungs. Then there was a rocky corridor full of smoke but without fire, and a small barred opening through which another light shone — the light of sunset.

They cleared the bars away and fought madly out through the hole onto the mountain's flanks, while the mountain itself rocked and groaned around them and echoed with dim cracking sounds. The brain had calmly plotted the basis of its own destruction. Fife's reckless release of power had augmented it. The work of the Vellae themselves in constructing the physical housing of the brain and leaving little more than the shell of a mountain, was finishing it. It felt, and sounded, as though the galleries were collapsing inward by levels upon the huge hollow center of Administration.

Horne and his alien-bodied comrades ran, in the clear air and the sunset light, down the lower slopes toward the safety

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of the plain, and above them the face of the mountain changed.

XVII

THE SHIPS loomed along the spaceport in a long row, with lights and sound and movement around their bases but with their great hulls going up into the starless night. Toward them, in long shuffling files, went those who were to embark in them, shambling, hopping, or walking like humans. The lights glanced off hide and scale and wing, off strange faces, strange eyes. They moved into the ships silently, but with a straining eagerness. For these were the ships that were to take the humanoids home to a score of different lonely worlds far-scattered through the Fringe.

These were Federation ships. The power and authority of the Federation had come to Skereth in full force after the shattering revelation. And the people of Skereth had welcomed them, after learning of the things the Vellae had done, of the stealing of slaves and of the great brain inside the mountain that had been designed to give the Vellae weapons for war and conquest.

"I wish," said Fife to Horne and Yso where they stood on the edge of the Skambar spaceport, "that we did not leave so many dead behind. Lurgh . . ."

Lurgh had died in the fighting in the tunnels. Other humanoids had perished in that battle, too many of them.

But of the Vellae, only a handful had escaped. Most of them, including Ardrick's father, had stayed in the Adminis-

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tration Center in a frantic effort to save some part of the vast thing they had labored on for so long, and had been trapped in the spreading fires and falling rock that followed the explosion of overloaded generators.

Horne said dryly, "I notice that you don't seem to include Ewan's death among your regrets."

"He was a good man," said Fife. "He fought with us well. It is not good that he died. But . . . he was human."

Horne nodded. "Yes. And the ones who are going to take you home again are human, too. Remember it."

D'quar said in his slow, rumbling voice, "Horne is right. Not all humans are evil, Fife."

His purple gargoyle face was solemn. Horne thought, He looks like something out of a fairy tale about ogres but damned if I haven't learned to like him.

"True," said Fife. "True. But whether they are good or evil I do not care. I only care that they leave me alone."

"The Federation will see that they do," Horne said. "And Fife, think about this in the long winter nights, if you have any on your world. In the Federation, human and non-human have managed to work together pretty well. The day may come when your world will want to join them."

Fife's yellow eyes held a curious gleam as he answered. "Come and talk to me about it sometime, Horne. You and Yso. I may not listen, but I won't set the dogs on you, either."

"That's a bargain," Horne said.

They went away toward the ships, with D'quar towering over Fife, and Horne looked after them and said, "They're not human but they're two damned good men."

He and Yso were walking away when out of the darkness a tall grim man in the uniform of a captain came to them.

"They told me you were here," Wasek said. He jerked his head toward the looming row of hulls. "One of those ships is mine."

Horne stood and looked at him and said nothing. The silence grew longer and finally Wasek said, "All right, all right, I'm sorry. But what the devil was I supposed to think?" He

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added, "Anyway, that punch you gave me ought to make up for it some. My jaw hurt for days."

Horne said, "Good."

Wasek muttered something. He said, "They tell me you're all cleared."

"All but the papers," Horne said. He had handed Ardric over to Federation authorities as soon as the first ship landed, and in the meantime the Morivenn faction on Skereth had been busy. Ardric was still stubbornly and vindictively refusing to admit anything, but the simple fact that he was still alive was in itself a pretty good confession. However, others of the anti-Fed party who had been rounded up by Morivenn's followers had been less iron-hard in their resolve. These included the two boys, Mica and Durin, who had confessed to their part in the plan to disable Vinson, and one of the men who had helped in the actual beating there in the Nightbirds' quarter. "There won't," said Horne, "be any trouble at all, they tell me."

"Well," said Wasek, "that's fine. Be glad to have you serve with me again, Horne. Any time."

He started to put his hand out and then hesitated, not knowing whether it would be taken, and stood there looking so uncomfortable that Horne held out his own hand.

"I ought to slug you again, instead," he said.

"Hell of a way for a Pilot to talk to a Captain," said Wasek, but there was no conviction in his voice.

When he had gone, Yso looked at Horne. "How long before you go back to space?"

"Not too long," he said. "The Federation's investigation commission will soon have all my testimony, and the testimony of the anti-Feds who arranged to put Ardric in Vinson's place. My clearance should come through pretty quickly afterwards." He looked at her and added, in quite a different tone, "But I'm coming back to Skereth, Yso."

"If you didn't, I would come after you," she said.

He took her hand and they went on. Behind them, after a time, the rumbling roar of a great starship cleaving the atmos-

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phere and setting the echoes flying as it took off, bound out for distant suns. Again and again the sound rocked across Skambar and the dark sea and in distant Rillah the ears of Skereth heard it and knew that the children of the Fringe were going home.

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