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STARWOLF #1

EDMOND HAMILTON

A GREAT NEW GALACTIC-ADVENTURE SERIES!
MORGAN CHANE, THE STARWOLF, BATTLES
PIRATES AND HOSTILE SPACE-CRUISERS TO
FIND THE SECRET OF THE DARK NEBULA.

THE WEAPON FROM BEYOND



FUGITIVE OF THE GALAXY

The first Chane knew about it was when the *Red Alert* signal came howling over the ship's intercom, followed at once by a burst of acceleration that laid Chane up hard against a bulkhead.

The spaceship wrenched screaming onto a tangential course. It seemed to Chane that he could feel the bulkhead bend under his hand.

Then Dilullo's voice came rasping over the intercom: "I've got a little bad news for you. We've got a Starwolf squadron on our tail."

And Chane thought, *They've caught up with me, Ssander's brothers and the rest. Now they won't stop till they've blown this whole ship out of space.*

EDMOND HAMILTON has been writing and selling science-fiction since the Twenties and is one of the favorite writers of the field. Author of many fine adventure novels of High Space and Other Worlds, including the fabled *Captain Future* series, he is launching a new series of space adventures featuring Morgan Chane, the Star-wolf. THE WEAPON FROM BEYOND is the first of that series.

The Weapon from Beyond

Starwolf # 1

EDMOND HAMILTON

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I

THE STARS WATCHED HIM, and it seemed to him that they whispered to him.

Die, Starwolf. Your course is run.

He lay across the pilot-chair, and the dark veils were close around his brain, and the wound in his side throbbed and burned. He was not unconscious, he knew that his little ship had come out of overdrive, and that there were things that he should do. But it was no use, no use at all.

Let it go, Starwolf. Die.

In a corner of his mind, Morgan Chane knew that it was not the stars that were talking to him. It was some part of himself that still wanted to survive and that was haunting him, prodding him, trying to get him onto his feet. But it was easier to ignore it, and lie here.

Easier, yes. And how happy his death would make his dear friends and loving comrades. Chane's fogged mind held onto that thought. And finally it brought a dull

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anger, and a resolve. He would not make them happy. He would live, and some day he would make those who were now hunting him very unhappy indeed.

The savage determination seemed to clear the blur of darkness a little from his brain. He opened his eyes and then, slowly and painfully, he hauled himself erect in the seat. The action pulled at his wound sickeningly, and for a few minutes he fought against nausea. Then he reached out a shaky hand toward a switch. He must first find out exactly where he was, where the last desperately hasty course he had set as he fled had brought him.

Like little red eyes, figures glowed on the board as the computer silently answered his question. He read the figures but his brain was not clear enough to translate them. Shaking his head drunkenly, he peered at the viewplate.

A mass of blazing stars walled the firmament in front of him. High-piled suns, smoky-red, pure white, pale green and gold and peacock blue, glared at him. Great canyons of darkness rifted the star-mass, rivers of cosmic dust out of which gleamed the pale witch-fires of drowned suns. He was just outside a cluster, and now Chane's blurred mind remembered that in the last desperate moment of flight, when he threw his stolen ship into overdrive before blacking out, he had jabbed the coordinates of Corvus Cluster.

Blackness, nothingness, the eternal solemn silence of the void, and the suns of the cluster pouring their mighty radiance upon the tiny needle that was his ship. His memory quickened, and he knew now why he had come here. There was a world that he knew about in this gigantic hive of stars. He could lie up there and hide, and he sorely needed such a refuge, for he had no healamp and his wound would take time to heal natu-

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rally. He thought he would be safe on that world, if he could reach it.

Unsteadily, Chane set a course, and the little ship hurtled toward the edge of the cluster at the top speed of its normal drive.

The darkness began to dim his brain again and he thought, *No, I have to stay awake, for tomorrow we raid the Hyades.*

But that could not be right, they had hit the Hyades months ago. What was the matter with his memory? Things seemed jumbled and without sense or sequence.

Sweeping out from Varna in their swift little squadron, running down the Sagittarius Passage and cross-cutting Owl Nebula to come down in a surprise swoop on the fat little planet with the fat little people who squealed and panicked when he and his comrades hit their rich towns. . . .

But that had been a long time ago. Their last raid, the one where he had got this wound, had been to Shandor Five. He remembered how on their way there they had been spotted and chased by a squadron of heavies, and had escaped them by slamming right through a star-system at full speed in normal drive. He could remember Ssander laughing and saying, "They won't take the chances we Varnans take and that's why they never catch us."

But Ssander is dead, and I killed him, and that is why I'm flying for my life!

It flashed across Chane's mind: he remembered the quarrel over loot on Shandor Five and how Ssander had got furious and tried to kill him and how he had killed Ssander instead. And how, wounded, he had fled from the avengers. . . .

The dark veils had cleared away and he was here in his little ship, still fleeing, hurtling toward the cluster.

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He stared at it, sweat on his dark face, his black eyes wild.

He thought that he had better stop blacking out or he would not have long to live. The hunters were after him, and there was no one in the galaxy who would give aid to a wounded Starwolf.

Chane had aimed to enter the cluster at a point where one of the dark dust-rivers divided it, and he was already passing the outpost sentinel suns. Soon he could hear the tick and whisper of dust against the hull. He was keeping out of the denser drift, and the particles were not much bigger than atoms. If, at these speeds, he met particles much bigger, they would hole the ship.

Chane got into his suit and helmet. It was a prolonged effort, and the pain of it was such that he had to set his teeth to keep from groaning. It seemed to him that the wound was more agonizing than it had been, but there was no time to look at it; the heal-patch he had put over it would have to do for now.

Up the great, dark, dusty river between the cluster stars went the little ship, and often Chane's head sagged against the board. But he kept his course. The dust might prove death for him. But it could be life, for those who would come hunting could not probe far in it.

The viewplate was blurred and vague now. It looked like a window, but it was a complex mechanism functioning through probe-rays far faster than light, and his probes had little range here. Chane had to keep all his attention on the dimness ahead, and that was hard with the wound throbbing in his side and the dark fingers always reaching for his brain.

Stars loomed up in the dust, burning like muffled torches, angry red and yellow suns that the tiny ship slowly passed. A deeper spot of brooding blackness, a

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dead sun, lay far ahead to zenith and became a somber star-mark that he seemed to approach with unnatural slowness. . . .

The dim river in the stars twisted a little, and Chane changed course. The hours went on and on, and he was well inside the cluster. But it was a long way yet. . . .

Chane dreamed.

The good days, the morning days, that now had so suddenly ended. The going forth from Varna of the little ships that were everywhere so dreaded. The slamming out of overdrive and the swoop upon a city of a startled world, and the warning cry across the suns—*The Star-wolves are out!*

And the mirthful laughter of himself and his comrades as they went in, mocking the slow sluggishness of those who resisted: Go in fast and take the plunder and beat down those who tried to stop you, fast, fast, and away to the ships again, and finally back to Varna with loot and wounds and high-hearted triumph. The good days . . . could they really be ended for him?

Chane thought of that, and fed the fires of his sullen anger. They had turned against him, tried to kill him, hunted him. But no matter what they said he was one of them, as strong, as swift, as cunning as any of them, and a time would come when he would prove it. But for now he must hide, lie concealed until his wound bettered, and soon he would reach the world where he could do that.

Again there was a turning of the dark river, the dust rifting deeper into the cluster. More of the baleful witch-stars went by, and the dust whispered louder on the hull. Far ahead, a glazed, dim eye of bloody orange watched his ship approach. And presently Chane could make out the planet that moved lonesome around the

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lonely dying star, and he knew it for the planet of his refuge.

He almost made it.

II

HIS LUCK STARTED running out when the blip of a ship approaching in normal drive showed up on the probe-screen. It was outside the dust, coming along the edge of the river in the stars. It would surely come close enough for its probes to spot him, even in the dust.

There were no alternatives. If the ship was one of the Varnan hunters, they would destroy him. If it was from anyplace but Varna, they would be his enemies the moment they identified his Starwolf craft. And they would identify it as such at first glance, for no world anywhere had ships like the hated Varnan ships.

He had to go deeper into hiding and there was only one place for that, and that was the denser drift. He took his little ship deeper into the dust-stream.

The whispering and ticking on the hull became louder. The larger particles outside so blurred his probe-rays that he lost track of the ship outside the dust. Similarly, they would lose track of him. Chane cut his drive and sat motionless. There was nothing to do but wait.

He did not have to wait long.

When it came, it was no more than a slight quiver that he could hardly feel. But all his instruments went out.

Chane turned. One look was enough. A bit of drift no bigger than a marble had holed the hull and had

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wrecked his drive-unit and converter. He was in a dead ship, and nothing he could do would make it live again. He could not even broadcast a call.

He looked at the now-blank screen, and though he could not now see the images of the stars he seemed again to hear their mocking whisper.

Let it go, Starwolf. . . .

Chane's shoulders sagged. Maybe it was as well this way. What future would there be for him anyway, in a galaxy where every man would be his enemy?

Sitting slumped there, in a kind of numb daze, he thought how strange it was that he should end up this way. He had always thought that it would come in a sudden blaze of battle, in some swift swooping raid across the stars. That was the end most Starwolves came to, if they went out too many times from Varna.

He had never dreamed that he would die in this slow, dull, leaden fashion, just sitting and waiting, waiting in a dead ship until his oxygen ran out.

A feeling of revulsion grew slowly in Chane's weary mind. There must be some better end for him than this, some last effort he could make, no matter how hopeless.

He tried to think it out. The only possible source of help was the ship just outside the dust-river. If he could signal them and they came to his aid, one of two things would happen: they could be the Varnans hunting him, and they would kill him; or they could be men of some other world and as soon as they saw his Starwolf ship, they would be his deadly enemies.

But what if his ship was not here? Then, they would accept him as an Earthman, for that was what he was by pure descent even though he had never seen Earth.

Chane looked back at the wrecked drive-unit and converter. They were dead, but the power-chamber that

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supplied energy to the converter was intact. He thought he saw a way. . . .

It was a gamble, and he hated to bet his life on it. Yet it was better than just sitting here and dying. But he knew that he had to make his bet quickly, or he would not even have this gambling chance.

He began, slowly and clumsily, to take apart some of the instruments on the board. It was difficult work, with gloved hands, and it was even more difficult to re-assemble some of the parts into the mechanism he needed. When he finished, he had a small timing-device that he hoped would work.

Chane went back to the power-chamber and began to hook his timing-device to it. He had to work fast, and his task involved bending and crouching in a very confined space, and he felt the wound in his side tearing at him like a vulture. Tears of pain blurred his vision.

Cry, he told himself. How they'd love to know that you died crying!

The blur went away and he forced his nerveless fingers, ignoring the pain.

When he had finished his task, he cracked the lock open and took all four of the impellers from the space-suit rack. He went back then to the power-chamber and turned on his crude timing-device.

Then Chane went out of the ship like a scared cat, two impellers in each hand driving him out amid the stars.

He hurtled away from the little craft, with the stars doing a crazy dance around him. He had gone into a spin but there was no time to right that. There was only one thing important and that was to get as far away as possible before his timing-gadget shorted the energy chamber and destroyed the ship. Chane counted seconds in his mind as the glittering starry hosts went round and round him.

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The stars paled for a moment as a white nova seemed to flare in his eyes. It went out and he was in blind darkness. But he was living. He had got far enough before the power-chamber let go and destroyed his ship.

He turned off his impellers and drifted. The men in the ship outside the dust-river should have seen that flare. They might or might not come into the dust to investigate. And if they did, they might or might not be the Varnans who wanted his life.

He swam alone in the infinite, with stars above him and below him and all around him.

He wondered if anyone had ever been so alone. His parents had been dead for years, killed by the heavy gravitation of Varna. His friends on Varna were friends no longer but hunters eager to kill him. He had always thought of himself as Varnan and now he knew that he had been wrong.

No family, no friends, no country, no world . . . and not even a ship. Just a suit and a few hours of oxygen and a hostile universe around him.

But he was still a Starwolf, and if he had to die he would die like one. . . .

The grand and glittering backdrop of the cluster stars revolved slowly around him. To check his rotation might take power from the impellers that he would later need. And this way he could scan all the starfields as he turned.

But nothing moved in them, nothing at all.

Time went by. The lordly suns had been here for a long while and they were in no hurry to see the man die.

On what seemed to him his ten-millionth rotation, his eye caught something. A star winked.

He looked again, but the star was serene and steady. Were his eyes betraying him? Chane thought it likely,

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but he would push his bet all the way. He used his impellers to urge him in the direction of that star.

Within minutes, he knew that his eyes had not erred. For another star winked briefly as something occluded it. He strained his eyes, but it was hard to see, for the dark veils were closing around him again. The wound in his side, strained by his exertions, had opened again and he felt that his life was running out of it.

His vision cleared and he saw a black blot growing against the starfields, a blot that grew to the outline of a ship. It was not Varnan; the ships of Varna were small and needle-like. This ship had the silhouette of a Class Sixteen or Twenty and had the odd eyebrow bridge that was characteristic of the ships of old Earth. It was barely moving, coming his way.

Chane tried to formulate in his mind what story to tell to keep them from suspecting the truth about him. The darkness closed in on him but he fought it off, and flashed his impellers on and off as a signal.

He never knew how much later it was that he found the ship beside him and its airlock opening like a black mouth. He made a final effort and moved clumsily into it, and then he gave up fighting and the blackness took him.

He awoke later feeling surprisingly good. He discovered why when he found that he lay in a ship-bunk with a healamp glowing against his side. Already the wound looked dry and half-healed.

Chane looked around. The bunk-room was small. A bulb glowed in the metal ceiling, and he felt the drone and vibration of a ship in normal drive. Then he saw that a man was sitting on the edge of the opposite bunk, watching him.

The man got up and came over to him. He was older

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than Chane, a good bit older, and he had an oddly unfinished look about his hands and face and figure, as though he had been roughly carved out of rock by an unskilled sculptor. His short hair was graying a little and he had a long, horse-like face with eyes of no particular color.

"You cut it pretty fine," he said.

"I did," said Chane.

"Will you tell me what the devil a wounded Earthman is doing floating around in Corvus Cluster?" asked the other. He added, as an afterthought, "I'm John Dilullo."

Chane's eyes strayed to the stun-gun the Earthman wore belted around his coverall. "You're mercenaries, aren't you?"

Dilullo nodded. "We are. But you haven't answered my question."

Chane's mind raced. He would have to be careful. The Mercs were known all over the galaxy as a tough lot. A very high proportion of them were Earthmen, and there was a reason for this.

Earth, long ago, had pioneered the interstellar drive that opened up the galaxy. Yet, for all that, Earth was a poor planet. It was poor because all the other planets of its system were uninhabitable, with ferociously hostile conditions and only a few scant mineral resources. Compared to the great star-systems with many rich, peopled worlds, Earth was a poverty-stricken planet.

So Earth's chief export was men. Skilled spacemen, technicians, and fighters streamed out from old Earth to many parts of the galaxy. And the mercenaries from Earth were among the toughest.

"My name's Morgan Chane," he said. "Meteor-prospector, operating out of Alto Two. I went too deep into the damned drift and my ship was holed. One frag-

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ment caught me in the side, and others hit my drive. I saw my power-chamber was going to blow, and I just managed to get into my suit and get out of there in time."

He added, "I needn't say that I'm glad you saw the flare and came along."

Dilullo nodded. "Well, I've only one more question for now. . . ." He was turning away as he spoke. Then he suddenly whirled back around, his hand grabbing out the weapon at his belt.

Chane came out of the bunk like a flying shadow. His tigerish leap took him across the wide space between them at preternatural speed, and with his left hand he wrested away the weapon while his right hand cracked Dilullo's face. Dilullo went sprawling to the deck.

Chane aimed at him. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't use this on you?"

Dilullo fingered his bleeding lip and looked up and said, "No particular reason, except that there's no charge in it."

Chane smiled grimly. Then, as his fingers tightened on the butt of the weapon, his smile faded. There was no charge-magazine in it.

"That was a test," said Dilullo, getting stiffly to his feet. "When you were unconscious, and I fixed that healamp on you, I felt your musculature. I'd already heard that Varnan ships were raiding toward this cluster. I knew you weren't a Varnan . . . you could shave off the fine fur and all that but you couldn't change the shape of your head. But all the same, you had the muscles of a Starwolf.

"Then," Dilullo said, "I remembered rumors I'd heard from the out-worlds, about an Earthman who raided with the Varnans and was one of them. I hadn't believed them, no one believed them, for the Varnans,

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from a heavy planet, have such strength and speed no Earthman could keep up with them. But you could, and right now you proved it. You're a Starwolf."

Chane said nothing. His eyes looked past the other man to the closed door.

"Do me the credit," said Dilullo, "of believing that I wouldn't come down here without first making sure you couldn't do what you're thinking of doing."

Chane looked into the colorless eyes, and believed.

"All right," he said. "So now?"

"I'm curious," said Dilullo, sitting down in a bunk. "About many things. About you, in particular." He waited.

Chane tossed him the useless weapon, and sat down. He thought for a moment, and Dilullo suggested mildly, "Just the truth."

"I thought I knew the truth, until now," Chane said. "I thought I was a Varnan. I was born on Varna . . . my parents were missionaries from Earth who were going to reform the wicked Varnan ways. Of course the heavy gravitation soon killed them, and it nearly killed me, but it didn't, quite, and I grew up with the Varnans and thought I was one of them."

He could not keep the bitterness out of his voice. Dilullo, watching him narrowly, said nothing.

"Then the Varnans hit Shandor Five, and I was one of them when they did it. But there was a quarrel there about the loot, and when I struck Ssander he tried to kill me. I killed him instead, and the others turned on me. I barely got away alive."

He added, after a moment, "I can't go back to Varna now. 'Damned Earthpawn!' Ssander called me. *Me*, as Varnan as he was in everything but blood. But I can't go back." He sat silent, brooding.

Dilullo said, "You've plundered and robbed and you've

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doubtlessly killed, along with those you ran with. But do you have any remorse about that? No. The only thing you're sorry about is that they threw you out of the pack. By God, you're a true Starwolf!"

Chane made no answer to that. After a moment, Dilullo went on, "We—my men and I—have come here to Corvus Cluster because we've been hired to do a job. A rather dangerous job."

"So?"

Dilullo's eyes measured him. "As you say, you're a Varnan in everything but blood. You know every Starwolf trick there is, and that's a lot. I could use you on this job."

Chane smiled. "The offer is flattering. . . . No."

"Better think about it," said Dilullo. "And think of this—my men would kill you instantly if I told them you're a Starwolf."

Chane said, "And you'll tell them, unless I sign up with you?"

It was Dilullo's turn to smile. "Other people besides Varnans can be ruthless." He added, "Anyway, you haven't got anyplace to go, have you?"

"No," said Chane, and his face darkened. "No."

After a moment he asked, "What makes you think you could trust me?"

Dilullo stood up. "Trust a Starwolf? Do you think I'm crazy? I trust only the fact that you know you'll die if I tell about you."

Chane looked up at him. "Suppose something happened to you so you couldn't tell?"

"That," said Dilullo, "would be unfortunate . . . for you. I'd see to it that, in that case, your little secret automatically became known."

There was a silence. Then Chane asked, "What's the job?"

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"It's a risky job," said Dilullo, "and the more people who know about it ahead of time, the riskier it'll be. Just assume for now that you're going to gamble your neck and will very likely lose it."

"That wouldn't grieve you too much, would it?" Chane said.

Dilullo shrugged. "I'll tell you how it is, Chane. When a Starwolf gets killed, they declare a holiday on all decent worlds."

Chane smiled. "At least we understand each other."

III

THE NIGHT SKY dripped silver. The world called Kharal lay in the heart of the cluster, and the system to which it belonged was close to Corvus Nebula. That great cloud was a gigantic glowing sprawl across the heavens, with the burning glory of the cluster stars around it, so that soft light and deep black shadows lay always over the planet by night.

Chane stood in the shadow of the ship and looked across the small and quiet spaceport toward the lights of the city. Those reddish lights hung in a vast pyramid against the sky. A soft wind laden with spicy scents that had an acrid background blew toward him from that direction, and it brought him the sound of a distant buzz and hum.

Hours before, Dilullo and one other Merc had been taken secretly by a Kharali car to the city under cover of darkness.

"You'll stay here," Dilullo had told them. "I'm taking

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Bollard with me, and no one else, to talk to those who want to hire us."

Chane remembering that, smiled. The other Mercs were in the ship, gambling. And what was there to keep him here?

He walked toward the city, under the softly glowing sky. The spaceport was dark and quiet with nothing on it but two dumpy interstellar freighters and several armed Kharali planetary cruisers. No one passed him on the road except that once there was a whizzing roar as one of the three-wheeled Kharali cars sped by. These were a city-loving people, and even those who worked the mines that were this world's wealth returned to the cities at night. The arid, flat lands stretched away, still and silver under the nebula-sky.

There was a pulse of excitement in Chane. He had visited many strange worlds, but always as one of the Starwolves, and that meant that everywhere he had been a feared and hated enemy. But now, alone as he was, who would know that he was anything but an Earthman?

Kharal was an Earth-sized planet and Chane, used to the heavy gravitation of Varna, found himself moving with a soft vagueness. But he had adjusted to that by the time he reached the city.

It was a monolithic city, carved long ago from a mountain of black rock. Thus it was a city-mountain, with high-piled galleries and windows and terraces shining ruddy light, with alien gargoyles projecting out at every level, a mammoth hive of life towering up into the soft nebula sky. Chane looked up and up, and heard the sounds from it now as a dull, throbbing roar.

He went through a great arched doorway in the base of the city-mountain. It had huge metal doors that could be closed for defense but they had not been closed for

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a long time and were so corroded that the reliefs upon them which pictures kings, warriors, dancers and strange beasts were vague and blurred.

Chane started up a broad stone ramp, ignoring the motoway that slid beside it. At once the bursting life and roar of the place were all around him: Men and not-men, the human Kharalis and the humanoid aborigines, voices high and light, voices guttural and throaty. They jostled under the ruddy lights, with the throng now and then giving way before a hairy humanoid who brought a lowing, hobbled and grotesque beast to market. Smells and smokes of strange foods from cookshops in the galleries, the bawl of peddlers offering their wares, and over all the haunting singsong of the Kharali multiple-flutes echoing and reechoing.

The humans of Kharal were very tall and slender people, none of them under seven feet. They looked down, with contempt in their pale blue faces, at Chane. The women turned away from him as though they had seen something defiling, and the men made remarks and laughed mockingly. A young boy, gawky in his rather soiled robe, followed close behind Chane to show that even he was inches taller than the Earthman, and the mocking titters were redoubled. Other boys took up the game, and as he went upward he acquired a jeering retinue.

Chane ignored them, climbing to still other levels, and after a little time they tired of him and went away.

He thought, *This would be a dangerous city to loot. You could easily get trapped in these galleries.*

And then he remembered that he was not a Varnan any longer, that he would not again raid with the Star-wolves.

He stopped at a stall and bought a cup of stinging, almost acid, intoxicant. The Kharali who served him,

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when he had finished, took the cup and ostentatiously scrubbed it. There were more titters.

Chane remembered what Dilullo had told them about the Kharalis before they landed.

They were truly human, of course, like the peoples of many star-worlds. That had been a big surprise for the first explorers from Earth after they perfected the star-drive . . . the fact of so many human-peopled worlds. It had turned out that Earthmen hadn't been the first, that many systems had been seeded by a star-traveling human stock so remote in the past that only vague traditions of them lingered. But this human stock had been altered in different ways by ages of evolutionary pressure, and the Kharalis were the result here.

"They consider other humans as much beneath them as their own aborigines," Dilullo had said. "They're utterly insular, and dislike all strangers. Be polite."

So Chane was polite. He ignored the mocking looks and the contemptuous remarks, even though a few of the latter, uttered by Kharalis who spoke galacto, the lingua-franca of the galaxy, were perfectly understandable. He drank again, and studiously avoided looking at Kharali women, and went on climbing the ramps and stairways, stopping here and there to peer at some odd sight. When the Varnans went on a plundering raid, they had little time for sightseeing, and Chane was enjoying a new experience.

He came into a wide gallery whose one whole side was open to the nebula sky. Under the ruddy lights, there was a small crowd of Kharalis, gathered around something Chane could not see, and there was laughter from them and now and then a strange hissing sound. He worked his way, without shoving or jostling, through the ring to see what it was they watched.

Several of the humanoids were here, hairy creatures

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with too many arms and mild, stupid eyes. Some of them carried leather ropes curiously looped at the ends. Two of them had such ropes tied to the legs of a winged beast that was between them. It was a semi-reptilian creature half as big as a man, its body scaled and wattled, its fanged beak striking the air in brainless fury. When it made a lunge in one direction, the rope on its other leg pulled it back. When that happened, the creature's wattles turned bright red and it hissed furiously.

The tall Kharalis found it amusing. They laughed each time the wattles crimsoned, each time the wild hissing began. Chane had seen beast-baiting on many worlds, and thought it childish. He turned to make his way out of the ring.

Something whispered, and a loop wrapped itself around each of his arms. He swung around. Two Kharali men had taken trapping-ropes from the humanoids, and had used the clever cast-and-loop to fasten onto Chane. A burst of malicious laughter went up.

Chane stood still, and put a smile on his face. He looked around the circle of mirthful, mocking blue faces.

"All right," he said in galacto. "I understand. To you, an Earthman is a strange beast. Now let me go."

But they were not going to let him go that easily. The rope on his left arm tugged, pulling him sharply. As he reacted to keep his balance, the rope on his right arm pulled so that he staggered.

The laughter was very loud now, drowning out the distant flutes. The wattled beast was forgotten.

"Look," said Chane. "You've had your little joke."

He was keeping down his anger, he had already disobeyed orders by being here and there was no use in making it worse.

His arms suddenly flew up to horizontal, grotesquely pointing in each direction, as both Kharalis pulled simul-

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taneously. One of the humanoids came and capered in front of Chane, pointing at him and then at the wattled beast. It was a joke that even his simple brain could understand and his merriment triggered new bursts of laughter from the blue men. They rocked with it, looking at the humanoid and then at Chane.

Chane turned his head and looked at the Kharali who held the rope on his right arm. He asked softly, "Will you let me go now?"

The answer was a sharp and painful tug on his right arm. The Kharali looked at him with a malicious smile.

Chane moved with all the speed and strength that his Varna-grown muscles gave him on this slighter world. He leaped toward the Kharali on his right, and the surging strength of that lunge pulled the man with the left rope off his feet.

Chane dived in close to the tall, startled Kharali and thrust his arms under the man's arms, reaching upward. His hands curved out to grab the front of the Kharali's arms, near the shoulders. He put all his strength into a levering, surging embrace. There was a dull double crack, like the sound of wet sticks breaking, and Chane stepped back.

The Kharali stood, his face a mask of horror. His long, slender arms hung limp, both of them broken near the shoulders.

For a moment, the Kharalis stared silently. It was as though they could not believe it, as though a despised cur dog had suddenly become a tiger and pounced.

Chane used the moment to slide between them across the gallery to a narrow stair. Then a raging chorus went up behind him. He started running then, going up the stairs, taking three steps at a time.

He was laughing as he ran. He would not soon forget

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the Kharali bully, and how his face had changed from malice to open-mouthed horror.

The stair came up into a dark corridor in the rock. His eyes picked out another stairway angling off and he took it. The whole city-mountain was a labyrinth of passages.

He emerged into a broad, red-lit bazaar that seemed to run away forever and was crowded with the tall people chaffering at stalls. Behind a stall that was festooned with statuettes of blasphemously hideous little snake-armed idols, Chane spotted a narrow stair that led downward. He slid through the crowd toward it, as blue faces looked down at him in surprise.

Going up was no good; he could only get out of this place by reaching the base of the city-mountain. He had been in worse places than this, and he was not greatly worried.

The narrow stair he followed downward suddenly opened into a big room in the rock. The glowing pink lights here showed it was a little amphitheater, with robed Kharalis sitting all around its edge, looking down at a small central stage.

Three nearly-naked Kharali girls were dancing on the stage to the wailing of multiple-flutes. They danced amid glittering points of steel, six-inch pointed blades that bristled from the floor, set about fifteen inches apart. The slender blue bodies leaped and whirled, and the bare feet came down close to the cruel blades and leaped up again, and as they danced the girls threw back their long black hair and laughed.

Chane stared, fascinated. He felt an admiration that was almost love for these three girls who could laugh as they danced with danger.

Then he heard the echo of distant gongs, and a scrabble of feet coming down the stair behind them. He

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started to run again as his pursuers came out of the stair.

He had not thought that someone with a weapon might have joined them. Not until he heard the stungun buzzing behind him.

IV

DILULLO SAT in the big, shadowy stone hall high in the city-mountain, and felt his frustration and anger increase.

He had been sitting here for hours, and the oligarchs who ruled Kharal had not yet come. There was nobody across the table except Odenjaa, the Kharali who had contacted him at Achernar weeks ago, and who had this night brought them from the ship up into the city by secret ways.

"Soon," said Odenjaa. "Very soon the lords of Kharal will be here."

"You said that two hours ago," said Dilullo.

He was getting tired of this. The chair he sat in was damnably uncomfortable, for it had been made for taller men to sit in, and Dilullo's legs dangled like a child's.

He was pretty sure they were keeping him waiting purposely, but there was nothing he could do but compose his face and look unperturbed. Bollard, sitting nearby, looked quite unbothered, but then fat Bollard, the toughest of the Mercs, had a moon face that rarely showed anything.

The lights around the room threw a ruddy glow that hurt his eyes, but the black rock walls remained dark

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and brooding. Through the open window came chill night air, and with it came the whispered flutes and voices of all the levels in the vast warren beneath.

Suddenly, Dilullo felt sick of strange worlds. He had seen too many of them in a career that had gone on too long. A Merc was old at forty. What the devil was he doing out here in Corvus Cluster, anyway?

He thought sourly, "Quit being sorry for yourself. You're here because you like to make a lot of money and this is the only way you can do it."

Finally, the lords of Kharal came. There were six of them, tall in their rich robes, all but one of them middle-aged or elderly. They seated themselves with ceremony at the table, and only then did they look superciliously across at Dilullo and Bollard.

Dilullo had dealt with men of a good many starworlds, though with none quite so insular as these, and he was determined not to be put into any position of inferiority in making this deal.

He said clearly and loudly in galacto, "You sent for me."

Then he was silent, staring at the lords of Kharal and waiting for them to answer.

Finally, the youngest Kharali, whose face had darkened with resentment, said harshly, "I did not send for you, Earthman."

"Then why am I here?" demanded Dilullo. His hand waving toward Odenjaa, he said, "This man came to me at Achernar, many weeks ago. He told me that Kharal had an enemy, the planet Vhol, the outermost world of this system. He said that your enemies of Vhol have a great new weapon which you wish destroyed. He assured me you would pay me well if I brought men and helped you."

His deliberately patronizing statement brought scowls

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to the faces of all the others, except for the very oldest Kharali, whose eyes studied him coldly from a face that was a spider-web of wrinkles.

It was this oldest man who answered. "Collectively, we did send for you, though one of us dissented. It may well be that we can use you, Earthman."

Insult for insult, Dilullo thought. He hoped that now that they had shown proper contempt for each other, they could get down to business.

"Why are those of Vhol your enemies?" he asked.

The old man answered. "It is simple. They covet our world's mineral wealth. They are more numerous than we, and they have a somewhat more advanced technology"—he spoke the last as though it was a dirty word—"and so they tried to land a force and conquer us. We repelled their landing."

Dilullo nodded. This was an old story. A star-system got space-travel, and then one of its worlds tried to take over the others and start an empire.

"But the new weapon? How did you learn of this?"

"There have been rumors," said the old Kharali. "Then a few months ago, a reconnoitering Vhollan cruiser was disabled by our own cruisers. There was one living officer in it, whom we captured and questioned. He told us all he knows."

"All?"

Odenjaa, smiling, explained. "There are certain drugs we have that can make a man unconscious, and in his unconsciousness he will answer every question, and not even remember it afterwards."

"What did he say?"

"He said that soon Vhol would destroy us utterly, that out of Corvus Nebula they would bring a weapon which would annihilate us."

"Out of the Nebula?" Dilullo was startled. "But that

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place is a maze of drift, uncharted, dangerous. . . ." He broke off and then said, with a sour smile, "I can see why you wanted to hire Mercs to do this job."

The youngest of the lords of Kharal said something harsh and rapid in his own language, looking furiously at Dilullo.

Odenjaa translated. "You are to know that Kharalis have died trying to enter the nebula, but that our ships lack the subtle instruments that the Vhollans and you Earthmen use."

Dilullo thought that that was probably true. The Kharalis had not had space-travel for too long, and they were the kind of insular, tradition-ridden people who were not very good at it. They had no star-shipping at all; the ships of other stars brought them goods to exchange for the rare and valuable gems and metals of Kharal. When he came to think of it, he wouldn't want to try bucking that nebula in a planet-cruiser as they had.

He said gravely, "If I seem to reflect on the courage of the men of Kharal, I apologize."

The Kharali lords looked only a little less angry. "But," added Dilullo, "I must know more of this. Did your captured Vhollan know anything of the nature of the weapon?"

The old Kharali spread his hands. "No. We have questioned him many times under the drug, the last time only a few days ago, but he knows nothing more."

"Can I talk to this Vhollan captive?" asked Dilullo.

Instantly, they became suspicious. "Why would you want to confer with one of our enemies, if you are to work for us? No."

For the first time, Bollard spoke, in the soft lisp that seemed so incongruous from his moon-fat face.

"It's too damn vague, John."

"It's vague," Dilullo admitted. "But it might just be

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done." He thought for a minute, and then he looked across the table at the Kharalis and said, "Thirty lightstones."

They stared at him puzzledly, and he repeated patiently, "Thirty lightstones. That is what you will pay us if we succeed in doing this thing for you."

They looked first incredulous, then furious. "Thirty lightstones?" said the young Kharali lord. "Do you think we would give little Earthmen the ransom of an emperor?"

"How much is the ransom of a world?" said Dilullo. "Of Kharal? How many of your lightstones will your enemies take if they conquer you?"

Their faces changed, only a little. But, watching them, Bollard murmured, "They'll pay it."

Dilullo gave them no time to reflect on the magnitude of his demand. "That will be the payment if we find and destroy the weapon of your enemies. But first we must learn if we can do that, and the learning will be very risky for us. Three of the lightstones will be paid to us in advance."

They found their voices this time, snarling their anger. "And what if you Earthmen take the three jewels and go your way, laughing at us?"

Dilullo looked at Odenjaa. "You were the one who looked for Mercs to hire. Tell me, did you hear of Mercs ever cheating those who hired them?"

"Yes," said Odenjaa. "Twice it happened."

"And what happened to the Mercs who did that?" pursued Dilullo. "You must have heard that, too. Tell it."

A little reluctantly, Odenjaa replied. "It is said that other Mercs took them, as prisoners, and delivered them over to the worlds which they had swindled."

"It is true," said Dilullo, to those across the table. "We are a guild, we Mercs. Nowhere in the galaxy could

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we operate if we did not keep faith. Three lightstones in advance."

They still glared at him, all except the oldest man. He said coldly, "Get the jewels for them."

One of the men went away, and after a little time he came back and with an angry gesture sent three tiny gleaming moons rolling across the table toward the Earthmen. Tiny, thought Dilullo, but beautiful, beautiful, seeming to fill a part of the room with dancing, dazzling swirls of light. He heard Bollard suck in his breath, and it made him feel like a god to reach a hand and grasp three moons and put them in his pocket.

There was a sound at a door and Odenjaa went there, and when he came back from the door his eyes glittered at Dilullo.

"There is something that concerns you," he said hissing. "One of your men has intruded, has tried to kill . . ."

Two tall Kharali men came in, supporting between them a drunkenly staggering figure.

"Surprised?" said Chane, and then fell down on his face.

V

IT SEEMED to Chane before he awoke that Dilullo's voice was speaking to him from a great distance. He knew that this could not be. He perfectly remembered how, numbed by the stun-gun's effect, he had fallen down when his captors released him.

He remembered lying flat on the floor and hearing a Kharali voice say, "This man does not go with you. He must remain here to be punished."

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And Dilullo's voice calmly answering, "Keep him and punish him, then," and his captors picking him up and dragging him through many levels to a place of cells, into one of which they had thrown him.

Chane opened his eyes. Yes, he was in the rock cell, which had a barred door opening into a red-lit corridor, and in the wall opposite the door a nine-inch square loophole window looking out at the glowing night sky of Kharal.

He lay on the damp rock floor. He had sore places in his ribs, and now he remembered that they had kicked him for a while after they dragged him into this cell.

Chane felt that some of the numbness had left him, and he hauled himself to sit with his back against the wall. His head cleared. He stared around the cell, and felt a wild feeling of revulsion.

He had never been caged before. No Starwolf was ever imprisoned . . . if one was caught on a raid he was ruthlessly killed at once. Of course these people didn't know he was a Starwolf in everything but appearance. That did not change his fierce claustrophobic resentment.

He was about to get up and try his strength on the thick metal door-bars, when it happened again. He heard the tiny voice of Dilullo speaking to him as from a great distance.

"Chane . . . ?"

Chane shook his head. A stun-gun could have odd aftereffects on the nervous system.

"Chane?"

Chane stiffened. The tiny whisper was not directionless. It seemed to come from just below his own left shoulder.

He looked down at himself. There was nothing there

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but the button that secured the flap of the left pocket of his jacket.

He turned his head a little, and brought the pocket and its flap-button up to his ear.

"Chanel"

He heard it quite clearly now; it came out of the button.

Chane brought the button around to the front of his face and whispered into it.

"When you gave me this fine new jacket, why didn't you tell me this button was a little transceiver?"

Dilullo's voice answered dryly. "We Mercs have our little tricks, Chane. But we don't like everyone to know them. I would have told you later, when I was sure you wouldn't desert us."

"Thanks," said Chane. "And thanks for walking off and letting the Kharalis keep me."

"Don't thank me," said the dry voice. "You deserved it."

Chane grinned. "I guess I did, at that."

"It's too bad," said the tiny voice of Dilullo, "that tomorrow morning they'll take you and break both your arms, as retribution. I don't know what you'll do when they turn you out then to die slowly."

Chane brought the button back around to his lips and whispered, "Did you go to the trouble of calling me and letting me know about the transceiver just to express your sorrow?"

"No," answered the voice of Dilullo. "There's more to it than that."

"I thought there was. What?"

"Listen carefully, Chane. The Kharalis hold a Vhollan officer prisoner, presumably in the same prison area you're in. I want that man. We're going to Vhol, and

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we won't be under suspicion there if we take them one of their own whom we've got free."

Chane understood. "But why didn't you ask the Kharalis for him?"

"They got suspicious when I even asked to talk to the man! If I'd asked them to let me take him away, they'd be convinced I was going to throw in with the Vhollans."

"Won't they be just as suspicious if I break this Vhollan out?" asked Chane.

Dilullo answered sharply. "With luck, we'll be away from Kharal and their suspicions won't matter. Now don't argue, but listen. I don't want this man to know *why* you're helping him escape, so tell him you need him to guide you out, that you were brought in unconscious, and so on."

"Neat," said Chane. "But you forget one thing, and that's getting out of this cell."

"The button of your right-hand jacket pocket is a miniaturized ato-flash. Intensity six, duration forty seconds. The stud is on the back," Dilullo said.

Chane looked down at the button. "And how many more of these little tricks have you got?"

"We have quite a few, Chane. But you don't. I didn't trust you with more than two and didn't even tell you about those."

"Suppose this Vhollan isn't imprisoned here, but somewhere else?" asked Chane.

Dilullo's whisper was untroubled. "Then you'd better find him. If you come out without him, don't bother coming to the ship. We'll take off and leave you."

"You know," said Chane admiringly, "there are times when I think you'd make a Starwolf."

"One more thing, Chane. We have to come back to Kharal, if we succeed, to get our pay. So no killing. Repeat, *no killing*. Out."

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Chane got to his feet and silently flexed his arms and legs for minutes until he was sure the last numbness had left them. Then he tiptoed to the barred door, pressing his face against it.

He could see a row of similar doors opposite, and at the far end of the corridor he could just see the feet of a guard who sat sprawled in a chair there. He stepped back, and thought.

After a time he carefully unhooked both of the buttons from his jacket. The transceiver button he put into a shirt pocket. Then he took off the jacket, and got down on the floor by the barred door.

He unobtrusively wrapped the jacket around the base of one of the door-bars, leaving the bar exposed at one point. He carefully brought the tiny aperture of the button ato-flash against the bar, using his free hand to throw a fold of the jacket over the other hand and the button. Then he pressed the stud on the back of the button.

The tiny flash was veiled by the jacket, and its hiss was drowned by the cough Chane let go. He kept the flash on for twenty seconds, and then released the stud.

Little tendrils of smoke came up from scorched parts of the jacket. Chane used his hands as fans to draw the smoke into the cell, so it would go out the loophole window instead of drifting down the corridor.

He unwrapped the scorched jacket. The bar had been burned through.

Chane considered. He could burn through the bar another place and remove a section, but he did not want to do that unless he had to; he might need the ato-flash again.

He put the tiny instrument in his pocket, and laid hold of the severed bar and tested it. He felt pretty sure from the feel of it that his Varnan strength was enough to

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bend it now. But he was also pretty sure that it would make noise.

If you stopped to think too much, you could die before you made up your mind. Chane gripped the severed bar, and let all his revulsion at being caged will his muscles into a wild surge of power.

The bar bent inward, with a metallic sound.

There was just space enough for him to squeeze out, and he went out fast for it had to be quick or not at all.

The Kharali guard jumped up from his chair to see the Earthman bounding at him like a dark panther, with incredible speed.

Chane's hand chopped and the guard fell senseless with his hand reaching vainly toward a button on the wall. Chane eased him to the floor and then searched him, but there was no weapon on the man, and no keys. He turned, his gaze searching along the corridor. He saw nothing that looked like a spy-eye. Apparently the Kharalis, who didn't care much for gadgets, had figured the alarm-button was enough.

Apparently, also, they didn't put many people in jail, for most of the cells were empty. Chane was not surprised. From what he had seen of them, the Kharalis were the type who would get more pleasure out of executing or punishing a man in public than in jailing him.

In one cell, a humanoid lay sprawling and snoring, his hairy arms moving in his sleep. He had some swollen bruises, and from him came an overpowering stench of the acid intoxicant.

Two more cells were empty but in the next a man was sleeping. He was about Chane's size and age and he was a white man. Not swarthy white, not Earthman white, but an albino white with fine white hair. When Chan hissed and awakened him, he saw the man's eyes were not albino but a clear blue.

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He jumped to his feet. He wore a short tunic quite unlike the Kharali robes, and a sort of officer's harness over it.

"Do you know the way out of this city?" Chane asked, speaking galacto.

The Vhollan's eyes widened. "The Earthman they dragged in a while ago. How—"

"Listen," Chane interrupted. "I got out of the cell. I want to get out of the whole damned city. But I was unconscious when they brought me in, and don't know where I am. If I get you out of there, can you guide me? Do you know the ways?"

The Vhollan began to babble excitedly. "Yes, yes, I know; they have taken me in and out many times, for questioning. I won't answer them, so they drug me for some reason and bring me back, but I've seen, I know. . . .

"Stand back, then." Chane bent down and used the remaining power of the ato-flash to cut through the base of a door bar. There was not quite enough power to cut through it completely.

The bar was nine-tenths severed. Chane sat down, braced his feet against the other bars, and then grabbed the nearly-severed one just above the cut. He let it go fast with a muttered curse. It was still hot.

He waited a minute, tried again, and found it had cooled enough. He braced his feet and put his back into it and pulled. The long muscles that Varna had given him slid and swelled and the nearly-severed bar broke free with a *pung*. He didn't relax, he kept pulling, and the bar bent slowly outward. The Vhollan squeezed out fast.

"You've got strength!" he exclaimed, staring.

"It only looked like it," Chane lied. "I'd cut through the top of the bar before I woke you."

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The Vhollan pointed toward the door at the end of the corridor opposite to the one where the guard had sat.

"The only way out," he whispered. "And it's always locked from the other side."

"What's beyond it?" Chane demanded.

"Two more Kharali guards. They are armed. When the one in here wanted out, he simply called through the door to them."

The man, Chane noted, was trying to speak quickly and to the point, but he was shaking with excitement.

Chane pondered. He could only see one way to get that door open, and so they would have to try it and see what happened.

He took the Vhollan by the arm and ran with him, silently, down the corridor to where the guard lay slumped. He had the Vhollan stand with his back against the wall, just beside the alarm button. Then Chane took the unconscious guard and leaned him up face foremost against the Vhollan.

"Hold him up," Chane said.

It did not look too convincing, he thought. The unconscious guard was taller, and his robed figure leaned forward in a drunken, improbable way. But he did hide the Vhollan standing against the wall, and if the deception was only good for a few seconds, that should be enough.

"When I hiss, press the button and stand still," Chane ordered, and then sped back to stand beside the door.

He hissed. A bell rang sharply on the other side of the door. The door swung open a moment later, opening into the corridor with Chane behind it.

There was a moment's pause and then two pairs of feet pounded through the door. The two Kharalis both held stun-guns and they were hurrying but not too much. They had glanced in and seen the inner guard

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standing with his back to them, and no prisoners out of their cells.

Chane leaped with all his speed behind them and his flat hands struck and flashed and struck again, and the two slumped down. He took the stun-gun from one of them and gave each of them a blast from it to keep them quiet for a while.

He went down the hallway and chuckled as he saw the Vhollan, trying now to get out from under the senseless body, giving the impression of wrestling with his tall Kharali burden. Chane gave that one a blast of the stun-gun, too.

He said sharply to the Vhollan, "Out now. Take the other weapon."

As he passed the cell where the humanoid had been sleeping, he saw that the creature had aroused and was looking out through the bars with red-rimmed, blood-shot eyes, obviously too foggy from drink to make any sense of what was going on, even if he had had the intelligence.

"Sleep, my hairy brother," Chane said to him. "We are neither of us fit for cities."

They went into the room from which the two guards had come. There was no one in it and it had only one other door. That opened out onto one of the broad galleries, and no one was there, either.

The city seemed quieter, almost sleeping. Chane could hear echoes of faint fluting from somewhere beneath, and the bawl of a distant, angry voice.

"This way," urged the Vhollan. "The main motowalk is this way."

"We'd never make it," said Chane. "There are still too many about, and they could spot us as far as they could see us by our shorter stature."

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He went across the gallery and leaned out over its low protective wall, looking out into the night.

The nebula had slid quite a way across the sky as Kharal turned toward the coming day. The silver radiance now came down slantingly, and the grotesque stone gargoyles that jutted out from the steeply-sloping face of the city-mountain threw long, distorted black shadows.

There was a gargoyle at each level, and he estimated that they were about ten levels above the ground. He decided at once.

"We'll go down the outside wall," he said. "It's rough and weathered, and there's the gargoyles to help us."

The Vhollan man looked out and down. He could not get any paler than he was but he could look a little sick, and he did.

"Come along or stay, as you like," said Chane. "It makes no difference to me."

And he thought, *Only the difference between life and death, that's all, if I go back without this man.*

The Vhollan gulped and nodded. They went over the low wall and started down.

It was not as easy as Chane had thought it would be. The rock was not as weathered as the slanting shadows had made it look. He clung on, his fingernails cracking, and lowered himself to the first gargoyle below him.

The Vhollan man followed, flattened with his face against the stone. He was breathing in quick gasps when he reached Chane.

They went down that way, from gargoyle to gargoyle, and each one of the stone monstrosities seemed more blasphemously obscene than the last. At the fifth one, they paused for rest. Chane, observing this one in the silvery nebula-glow, thought how ridiculous he must look, stuck up on the side of the city-mountain, sitting

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on the stone back of a blobby creature whose face and backside were all together.

He chuckled a little, and the Vhollan turned his white face and looked at him as if in fear.

It became much trickier near the ground, for one of the great gates was not too far away and there were a few robed figures bunched there. The two hugged the shadow like a friend, and went away, avoiding the road that led to the spaceport but going in that direction. Nobody stopped them, and the ship took them in and went away from there.

VI

THE MAN NAMED Yorolin kept talking and talking, filling Dilullo's little cabin with his protestations.

"There's no *reason* why you can't take me back to Vhol," he said.

"Look," said Dilullo. "I've had trouble enough in this system already. We heard there was a war here and we came to sell weapons. But I land on Kharal and get run right off because one of my men is in a fight. It figures that Vhol could be just as hostile. I'm going to the third planet, Jarnath."

"That's a semi-barbarous world," said Yorolin. "The humanoids there are a poor lot."

"Well, they might be glad enough to get some modern weapons, and might have something valuable to trade for them," said Dilullo.

Chane, sitting in a corner and listening, admired the bluff Dilullo was putting up. It was good . . . good enough that Yorolin was now looking desperate.

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"I belong to one of the great families of Vhol and I have influence," he said. "Nothing will happen to you. I guarantee it."

Dilullo pretended doubt. "I don't know. I'd like to do some business at Vhol, if I could. I'll think about it." He added, "In the meantime, you'd better get some sleep. You look as though you'd about had it."

Yorolin nodded shakily. "I have."

Dilullo took him out into the narrow corridor. "Use Doud's cabin, over there. He's standing his turn on the bridge."

When Dilullo came back into the cabin and sat down, Chane waited for the blast. But Dilullo reached into a locker and brought out a bottle.

"Do you want a drink?"

Surprised, but not showing it, Chane nodded and accepted the drink. He didn't like it.

"Earth whisky," said Dilullo. "It takes getting used to."

He sat back and looked at Chane with a bleak, steady gaze.

"What's it like on Varna?" he asked, unexpectedly.

Chane considered. "It's a big world. But it's not a very rich world . . . at least, until we got space travel."

Dilullo nodded. "Until the Earthmen came and taught you how to build starships, and turned you loose on the galaxy."

Chane smiled. "That was a long time ago but I've heard about it. The Varnans tricked the Earthmen as though they were children. They said all they wanted to do was to engage in peaceful trade with other worlds, like the Earthmen did."

"And we've had the Starwolves ever since," said Dilullo. "If the independent starworlds could quit quarrel-

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ing with each other just once, they could join together and go in and clean Varna out."

Chane shook his head. "It wouldn't be that easy. In space, no one is an even match for Varnans for no one can endure the acceleration-pressures they can."

"But if a big enough coalition fleet moved in . . ."

"It would find it tough going. There are many mighty starworlds in that arm of the galaxy. We Varnans have never raided them, instead we trade with them, our loot for their products. They benefit by us, and they'd resist any attempt by outsiders to enter their space."

"A damned immoral arrangement, but that wouldn't bother Varnans," grumbled Dilullo. "I've heard they have no religion at all."

"Religion?" Chane shook his head. "Not a bit. That's why my parents came to Varna, but they got nowhere in their mission."

"No religion, no ethics," said Dilullo. "But you've got some laws and rules. Especially when you go out on raids."

Chane began to understand now, but he only nodded and said, "Yes, we do."

Dilullo refilled his own glass. "I'll tell you something, Chane. Earth is a poor world too. So a lot of us have to go out in space to make a living. We don't raid, but we do the tough, dirty jobs of the galaxy that people don't want to do themselves.

"We're hired men. But we're independent . . . we don't run in packs. Someone wants Mercs to do a job, he comes to a Merc leader with a reputation . . . like me. The leader signs on the Mercs best fitted for the job, and gets a Merc ship to come in on shares. When the job's over and the price of it split up, the Mercs disband. It may be a completely different bunch next time I take on an operation.

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"What I'm getting at," he continued, and now his eyes bored into Chane's face, "is that while we're together on a job, our lives may depend on all orders being obeyed."

Chane shrugged. "If you'll remember, I didn't ask for any part of the job."

"You didn't ask for it but you've got it," Dilullo said harshly. "You think a hell of a lot of yourself because you've been a Starwolf. I'll tell you right now that as long as you're with me you're going to be a pretty tame wolf. You'll wait when I tell you to wait, and you'll bite only when I say 'Bitel' Do you understand?"

"I understand what you're saying," answered Chane carefully. After a moment he asked. "Do you think you can tell me what we're after on Vhol?"

"I think I can," said Dilullo, "for if you open your mouth about it there, you're liable to be dead. Vhol is only a waystop, Chane. What we're after is somewhere in the nebula. The Vhollans have got something in there, some kind of weapon or power that the Kharalis fear and want destroyed. That's the job we're hired for."

He paused, then added, "We could go straight to the nebula, and then fly around in it for years searching, without finding anything. It's better to go to Vhol and let the Vhollans *lead* us to what they've got out there. But it's going to be tricky, and if they guess what we're up to, it'll be our necks."

Chane felt a kindling interest. He saw the face of danger and it was a face he had known all his life, since first he had been old enough to go raiding from Varna. Danger was the antagonist with whom you struggled, and if you bested him you came away with plunder and if you lost you died. But without the struggle you were simply bored, as he had been bored on this ship until now.

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"How did the Kharalis find out about this Vhollan weapon?" he asked. "Yorolin?"

Dilullo nodded. "Yorolin told them the Vhollans had something big out there, but he didn't know what it was. But Yorolin doesn't know he told them anything . . . he was drugged, unconscious, when they pumped him."

Chane nodded. "And presently you'll let Yorolin persuade you to go to Vhol?"

"Yes," said Dilullo. "He won't find it too hard to get me to go there. I hope it'll be as easy for us to leave there!"

When Chane went back into the crew-room there were only four men in it, for the Mercs stood duty as crew-men in flight. They were sitting in the bunks and they had been talking, but they stopped talking when he came in.

Bollard turned his moon-fat face toward him and said, in his lisping voice, "Well now, Chane . . . did you have a good time in the city?"

Chane nodded. "I had a good time."

"That's nice," said Bollard. "Don't you think that's nice, boys?"

Rutledge gave Chane a hot-eyed stare and said nothing, but Bixel, without looking up from the small instrument he was disassembling, drawled that that was real nice.

Sekkinen, a tall rawhide man with a look of gloom about him, had no time for subtleties. He said loudly to Chane, "You were supposed to stay with the ship. You heard the order."

"Ah, but Chane's not like us, he's something special," said Bollard. "He'd have to be something special, or John wouldn't take a rock-hopper prospector and make him a full-fledged Merc."

Chane had known from the first that they resented

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having to accept him, but there would be more than mere resentment if they knew the truth about him.

"The only thing is," Bollard said to him, "that your busting in like that might just have made the Kharalis so mad that they'd have killed us. What if that had happened?"

"I'd have been sorry," said Chane, with a sweet smile.

Bollard beamed at him. "Sure you would. And I'll tell you what, Chane. If it ever happens again like that, to keep you from being broken-hearted about it I'll just kill you so you don't suffer all that sorrow."

Chane said nothing. He was remembering what Dilullo had said about Mercs' lives depending on each other, and he knew that the lisp'd warning was in earnest.

He was thinking that these Earthmen might not be Varnans but that they could be just as dangerous in a different way, and that Mercs had not got their tough reputation for nothing. It seemed like a good time to keep his mouth shut, and get some sleep.

When he awoke the ship was in its landing-pattern around Vhol, and he joined a few of the Mercs at the forward port to look at the planet. Through drifting clouds they saw dark blue, almost tideless, oceans and the coasts of green continents.

"It looks a lot like Earth," said Rutledge.

Chane almost asked, "Does it?" but he managed not to ask that betraying question.

As the landing-pattern took them lower, Bixel said, "That city's not like any on Earth. Except maybe old Venice, blown up fifty times."

The ship was approaching a flat coast fringed by a multitude of small islands. The sea rolled between the islands in hundreds of natural waterways and on the islands were crowded the white buildings, none very

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lofty, of a far-stretching city. Further inland, where the land rose a little, was a medium sized spaceport and beyond it rows of tall white blocks that looked like warehouses or factories.

"A more advanced world than Kharal," said Rutledge. "Look, they've got at least a half-dozen starships of their own on that port, and lots of planetary types."

When they landed and cracked the lock, Yorolin spoke first to the two white-haired young Vhollan port officials in his own language.

The Vhollan officials looked suspicious. One of them spoke in galacto to Dilullo, after Yorolin indicated him as the leader.

"You carry weapons?"

"Samples of weapons," Dilullo corrected.

"Why do you bring them to Vhol?"

Dilullo put on a look of indignation. "I was only doing your friend Yorolin a favor to come here at all! But maybe we can do some business here."

The official remaining courteously unconvinced, Dilullo patiently explained. "Look, we're Mercs and all we want to do is make a living. We heard there was some sort of war in this system so we came with some samples of late-type weapons. I wish now we'd never come! We land on Kharal and before we can even talk business to them, they run us off because one of my men got into trouble. If you people don't want to see what we've got to offer, all right, but no need to make a big thing out of it."

Again Yorolin spoke rapidly to the official in their own tongue, and finally the official nodded.

"Very well; we allow the landing. But a guard will be placed outside your ship. None of these weapons are to be removed from it."

Dilullo nodded. "All right, I understand." He turned

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to Yorolin. "Now I want to get in touch with somebody in your officialdom who would be interested in buying late-type weapons. Who?"

Yorolin thought. "Thrandirin would be the man . . . I'll let him know at once."

Dilullo said, "I'll be right here, if he wants to get in touch with me." He looked over the Mercs. "While we're here, you can take turns in town liberty. Except you, Chane . . . you get no liberty."

Chane had expected that, and he saw the Mercs grinning their satisfaction. But when Yorolin understood, he made lengthy objection.

"Chane is the man who saved me," said Yorolin. "I want my family and friends to meet him. I insist upon it!"

Chane saw frustration and irritation appear on Dilullo's face, and he felt like grinning back but he did not.

"All right," said Dilullo sourly. "If you make such a point of it."

While they waited for Vhollan guards to come, before which the port officials would not let them off the ship, Dilullo found a chance to speak privately to Chane.

"You know what we're here for. To find out what's going on in the nebula, and where. Keep your ears open but don't seem inquisitive. And, Chane . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm not convinced that Yorolin is all that grateful. It could be they'll be trying to find out some things about us from you. Watch it."

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VII

THEY HAD ALL been drinking and were gay, and a couple of the men were more than that. There were three girls and four men, besides Chane, and they were a merry, crowded cargo for the skimmer as it wended slowly along the crowded waterways under the glowing nebula sky.

Yorolin was singing a lilting song which the girl beside Chane, whose name was Laneeah or something that sounded like it, translated for him. It was about love and flowers and things of that sort and Chane didn't think much of it; on Varna the songs had been of raiding and fighting, of running galactic dangers and coming home with treasure. However, he liked the Vhollans, and their world being the outermost of their red-giant sun's planets, it was pleasantly tropical and not burned dry like Kharal.

The waterways were calm and the wind was only a heavy breeze laden with drifting perfume from the flowering trees that grew on either side. These islands were the pleasure part of the Vhollan city, and in fact were the only part Chane had seen except the surprisingly pretentious villa where he had met Yorolin's parents and friends, and where this party had got started.

He had remembered Dilullo's admonition to keep his ears open, but he didn't think he was going to hear anything from this crowd that would help them any.

"We don't see many Earthmen here," said Laneeah. She spoke galacto well. "Only a few traders now and then."

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"How do you like us?" asked Chane, feeling a wry amusement at being classed as an Earthman.

"Ugly," she said. "Colored hair, even black hair like yours. Faces that are red or tan, not white." She made a small sound of disgust, but she was smiling as though she did not find him ugly at all.

It made him think suddenly of Varna and of Graal, most beautiful of the girls he had known there, and how she had contrasted her splendid fine-furred golden body with his hairlessness, and mocked him.

Then the skimmer drew in to a landing and there were many lights and jovial music and they went ashore. There was a sort of bazaar of amusements here, small peaked buildings with colored lights under the tall flowering trees, and a swarming, aimless crowd of people. The Vhollans made a handsome sight, they were proud of their white bodies and white hair and wore their knee-length tunics in brilliant colors.

In an arbor of immense flame-colored flowers they sat and had more of the fruity Vhollan wine, and Yorolin pounded his fist on the table and spoke with passion to Chane.

"Out in deep space, that's where I should be, like you. Not paddling around in a miserable planet-cruiser."

His face was flushed with the wine and Chane felt the drink himself, and reminded himself to be careful.

"Well, why aren't you?" he asked Yorolin. "Vhol has starships; I saw them on the spaceport."

"Not so many," said Yorolin. "And it takes seniority to get a berth in one of them, but someday I'll be on one; someday ..."

"Oh, stop talking about stars and come on and have some fun," said Laneeah. "Or Chane and I will leave you here."

They went on, passing some places, entering others.

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A kaleidoscope of impressions: jugglers tossing silver bells, flowers grown from seeds in seconds and drifting down on their heads, more wine, and dancers, and still more wine.

It was in this last drinking-place, a long low room with fire-bowls in braziers for illumination and walls of flaming red, that Yorolin suddenly looked across the room and exclaimed, "A Pyam! I haven't seen one for years! Come on, Chane; this will be something for you to tell about."

He led Chane across the room, the others being too engaged in chatter to follow.

At a table sat a stocky Vhollan man, and on the table was a creature that was secured to the man's wrist by a thin chain. It looked like a little yellow mannikin shaped like a turnip, with two small legs, its body going up to a neckless, pointed head, with two small blinking eyes and a small baby mouth.

"Can it speak galacto?" asked Yorolin, and the man with the chain nodded.

"It can. It brings me many a coin from the offworld people."

"What the devil is it?" asked Chane.

Yorolin grinned. "It's not related to the human, though it vaguely looks that way. It's a rare inhabitant of our forests . . . it's got some intelligence and one remarkable power." He told the Vhollan, "Have your Pyam give my friend a demonstration."

The Vhollan spoke to the creature in his own language. The creature turned and looked at Chane, and somehow the impact of the blinking gaze was disturbing.

"Oh, yes," it said in flat parrot-like words. "Oh, yes, I can see memories. I can see men with golden hair and they run toward little ships on a strange world and they are laughing. Oh, yes, I can see. . . ."

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With sudden alarm, Chane realized what the strange power of the Pyam was. It could read minds and memories and babble them forth in its squeaky tones, and in a moment it would babble a secret that would be his death.

"What kind of nonsense is this?" Chane interrupted loudly. He spoke to the Vhollan man. "Is the thing a telepath? If it is, I challenge it to read what I am thinking at this moment."

And he turned and looked at the Pyam and as he did so he thought with fierce, raging intensity, *If you read more from my mind I will kill you, right now, right this minute.* He put all the will power he had into concentrating on that thought, into packing it with passionate conviction.

The Pyam's eyes blinked. "Oh yes, I can see," it squeaked. "Oh, yes. . . ."

"Yes?" said Yorolin.

The blinking eyes looked into Chane's face. "Oh yes, I can see . . . nothing. Nothing. Oh, yes. . . ."

The Pyam's owner looked astounded. "That's the first time it ever failed."

"Maybe its powers don't work on Earthmen," said Yorolin, laughing. He gave the man a coin and they turned away. "Sorry, Chane, I thought it would be interesting for you. . . ."

Did you? thought Chane. *Or did you arrange for the beast to be here and lead me right to it, so it could probe my mind?*

He was taut with suspicion now. He remembered Di-lullo's warning, which he had almost forgotten.

He let none of it show in his face but went back to the table with Yarolin and drank and laughed with the others. He thought, and then, after looking carelessly around the room, he came to a decision. He began to

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drink more heavily, and he made a show of doing so.

"Not so much," said Laneeah, "or you will not last the evening."

Chane smiled at her. "The space between the stars has no wine in it and a man can get awfully dry."

He kept on drinking and he began to act as though he was pretty drunk. His head rang a little but he was not drunk at all, and he kept an eye on the Vhollan with the Pyam, across the room. A few people had gathered around them, and the Pyam squeaked at them, and finally they gave coins and went away.

The stocky man then picked up the Pyam, carrying it under his arm like an overgrown baby, and went out. He went out the back door, as Chane had hoped he would.

Chane gave it a few seconds and then staggered to his feet. "I'll be back in a moment," he said thickly, and walked a little unsteadily toward the back of the place as though heading for a place of necessity.

He heard Yorolin laugh and say, "Our friend seems to have underestimated the wines of Vhol."

Chane, at the back of the room, shot a glance and saw that they were not looking after him. He slipped quickly out the back door and found himself in a dark alleyway.

He saw the shadowy figure of the stocky Vhollan, going away down the alley. Chane went after him fast, going on the tips of his toes in leaping strides that made no sound. But apparently the Pyam sensed him, for it squeaked, and the man turned around sharply.

Chane's bunched fists hit him on the point of the jaw. He did not use all his strength, which he thought was foolish, but all the same he did not feel like going back to Dilullo and saying he'd killed someone.

The man fell, dragging the Pyam down with him

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by the chain, and the creature squeaked in horrified alarm.

Be quiet! Be very quiet, and I will not hurt you, thought Chane.

The creature became silent and cringed, as much as its absurd little legs would allow it to cringe.

Chane took the end of the chain away from the unconscious man. He dragged the Vhollan into a lightless space between two outbuildings.

The Pyam made a small whimpering sound. Chane patted its pointed head and thought, *You will not be hurt. Tell me, was your owner hired to bring you to this tavern?*

"Oh, yes," said the Pyam. "Gold pieces. Yes."

Chane considered for a moment, and then asked mentally, *Can you read the thoughts of someone who is a little way off? Like across a room?*

The Pyam's squeak, despite its dogmatic affirmative opening, was doubtful. "Oh yes. Not unless I see his face."

Speak whispers now, thought Chane. *Whispers. No loud sound, no hurting.*

Carrying the Pyam, he slipped back to the door of the drinking-place and opened it a few inches.

The man at the table across the room, he thought, *the man I am looking at.* And he looked at Yorolin.

The Pyam began to squeak in a subdued, conspiratorial chirping.

"Oh yes . . . did Chane suspect the trick? How could he . . . but he looked a bit as if he did . . . it didn't work anyway and I'll have to report to Thrandirin that I couldn't confirm our suspicions . . . we *can't* take chances . . . what's Chane doing back there . . . is he being sick? Maybe I'd better go and see. . . ."

Chane silently slipped back into the darkness of the

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alley. The Pyam's little blinking eyes looked at him fearfully.

They tell me you're from the forest, thought Chane. Would you like to return there?

"Oh, yes. Yes!"

If I turned you loose, could you get there?

"Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. . . ."

That's enough, thought Chane. He removed the thin chain and set the Pyam down on the ground. All right. Go, little one.

The Pyam waddled rapidly into the shadows and went away. Chane thought that, with its telepathic sense to warn it of obstacles, it would make it.

He turned around and went back to the door. Yorolin was worried about him, and he must not keep his dear and grateful friend waiting.

VIII

THE BIG STARSHIP came down majestically toward the spaceport, shining and magnificent in the nebula-glow, seeming to hang for a moment in the sky.

Then it settled down slowly into the area of the port that was reserved for the military ships of Vhol.

In the navigation room of the little Merc ship, Dilullo and Bixel, the radarman, stared at each other in amazement.

"That's not a warship. Perfectly ordinary cargo carrier. What's it doing in the military reservation?"

"Docking," said Dilullo, and leaned over Bixel's shoulder to study the scanner and the radargraph.

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"It came in on a fifty degree course," said Bixel.

Dilullo nodded, his worn face harsh in the hooded glow. "So it didn't come from the nebula. . . ."

"Not unless it came the long way round."

"That's exactly what I mean. They might be going and coming by different ways, setting roundabout courses deliberately to make it difficult to get a fix on them."

"They could be," Bixel said, "and that would put us in kind of a fix . . . not to be funny. Couldn't we just go back to the idea that they're playing it straight? I was much happier that way."

"So was I. Only there must be some special reason why an ordinary cargo ship plunks down in a maximum-security military area. Of course it may be something else entirely . . . but if they had brought something important back from the nebula, that's what they'd do with it." He straightened up. "Keep tracking all arrivals and departures, Maybe some pattern will come clear."

He got out of the cramped little room and went below to Records, an even more cramped little room, where he dug out the stock list, price list, and spec sheets for all the sample weapons he had aboard. Nobody seemed passionately interested in even talking to him about his weapons, and if they really had something tremendous out in the nebula they would hardly need them. Nevertheless, he felt that he should be ready if called upon.

A little later Rutledge summoned him, and Dilullo put the microspools in his pocket and went to the lock. Rutledge pointed. A big skimmer—the things had wheels and were ground-cars as well as watercraft—was coming fast toward them across the spaceport.

A Vhollan officer and a civilian and a bunch of armed soldiers got out of the craft and approached the Merc ship. The civilian was middle-aged, a stocky man with

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authority in his massive head and face. He came to Dilullo and surveyed him coldly.

"My name is Thrandirin, and I am of the Government," he said. "The spaceport tower reported that you have been using your radar."

Dilullo swore inwardly, but kept his face and voice untroubled. "Of course we have. We always test radar while in dock."

"I'm afraid," said Thrandirin, "that we shall have to ask you and your men to live off-ship while you're here, and visit your ship only under escort."

"Now wait a minute," said Dilullo angrily. "You can't do that . . . just because we tested our radar."

"You could have been tracking our warships," retorted Thrandirin. "We are in a state of war with Kharal, and the movements of our ships are secret."

"Oh, damn your war with Kharal," said Dilullo. "The only thing about it that interests me is money." And that was true enough. He pulled the microspools out of his pocket and shook them in his hand. "I'm here to sell weapons. I don't care who uses them against what, or how. The Kharalis frankly said no and kicked us out. I'd appreciate it if you Vhollans would be as honest. Do you want to buy or don't you?"

"The subject is still under discussion," said Thrandirin.

"Which is Universal Bureaucratic for we'll get around to it sometime. How long are we expected to wait?"

The Vhollan shrugged. "Until the decision is made. In the meantime, you will evacuate your ship within the hour. There are inns over in the port quarter."

"Oh, no," blazed Dilullo. "No, I won't. I'll call my men in and take off, and the view of Vhol going away from it will be the best view we've had yet."

A wintry quality came into Thrandirin's voice. "I re-

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gret that we can't give you takeoff clearance at this time . . . perhaps not for a few days."

Dilullo felt the first whispering touch of a net gathering around them. "You've no legal right to detain us if we want to leave your system, war or not."

"It's only for your own protection," said Thrandirin. "We've had word that a squadron of raiding Starwolves is in the Cluster and may be near this area."

Dilullo was genuinely startled. He had forgotten Chane's assertion that his former comrades would not easily give up the hunt for him.

On the other hand, Thrandirin was obviously using this alarm about Starwolves as an official excuse to keep him here. He doubted, looking at the Vhollan's bleak face, that the man would care if all the Mercs in creation were in danger.

He thought rapidly. There was no possibility of their defying the order, and the worst thing he could do now was to make too big a fuss. That would only confirm their suspicions.

"Oh, all right," he said sourly. "It's a ridiculous thing, and our ship will be left unguarded. . . ."

"I assure you," said Thrandirin smoothly, "that your ship will be closely guarded at all times."

It was a veiled warning, Dilullo thought, but he let it go. He went into the ship and called together what Mercs were there, and told them.

"Better pack a few things," he added. "We may be living quite a few days on Star Street."

Star Street was not so much a place as a name. It was the name that starmen invariably gave to whatever street near a spaceport afforded fun and comfort. The Star Street of Vhol was not too much different from many others that Dilullo had walked.

It had lights and music and drink and food and

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women. It was a gusty, crowded place but it was not sinful, for most of these people had never heard of the Judeo-Christian ethic and did not know they were sinning at all. Dilullo did not have an easy time keeping his men with him as he looked for an inn.

A buxom woman with pale green skin and flashing eyes hailed him from the open front of her establishment, where girls of different hues and at least three different shapes preened themselves.

"The ninety-nine joys dwell here, oh Earthmen! Enter!"

Dilullo shook his head. "Not I, mother. I crave the hundredth joy."

"And what is the hundredth joy?"

Dilullo answered sourly, "The joy of sitting down quietly and reading a good book."

Rutledge broke up laughing, beside him, and the woman started to screech curses in galacto.

"Old!" she cried. "Old withered husk of an Earthman! Totter on your way, ancient one!"

Dilullo shrugged as her maledictions followed them down the noisy street. "I don't know but what she's right. I'm feeling fairly old, and not very bright."

He found an inn that looked clean enough and bargained for rooms. The big common room was shadowy and empty, the inn's patrons having apparently gone forth to sample the happiness Dilullo had rejected. He sat down with the others and called for a Vhollan brandy, and then turned to Rutledge.

"You go back to the ship. The guards may not let you inside, but wait around near it and as our chaps come in from liberty, tell them where we're staying."

Rutledge nodded and went away, Dilullo and the others drank their brandy for a little while in silence.

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Then Bixel asked, "What about it, John? Is this job blown?"

"It isn't yet," said Dilullo.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come to Vhol."

Dilullo felt no anger at the criticism. The Mercs were a pretty democratic lot, they would obey a leader's orders but they didn't mind telling him when they thought he was wrong. And a leader who was wrong too many times, and ended up too many missions with empty hands, would soon have a hard job getting men to follow him.

"It seemed like our best chance," he said. "We wouldn't get far dashing into the nebula and looking for a needle in that size of a haystack. Do you know how many parsecs across the nebula is?"

"It's a problem," Bixel said, making the understatement of the decade, and dropped the subject.

After a while the other Mercs began to come in, most of them fairly sober. Sekkinen brought a message from Rutledge, at the spaceport.

"Rutledge said to tell you they unloaded some stuff from that cargo ship in the military port. He could see them through the fence. There were some crates, and they hustled them into the warehouse."

"They did, did they?" Dilullo said. And added, "That makes it even more interesting."

He was glad when Bollard came. Despite his fat and sloppy look, Bollard was by far the ablest of his men and had been a leader himself more than once.

When Bollard had heard, he thought for a little time and then said, "I think we've had it. I'd say, get off Vhol as soon as we can, take our three lightstones and better luck next time."

That was a good sound point of view. With the Vholans suspicious of them, it was going to be awfully hard

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to pull this one off. It made sense to do just as Bollard said.

The trouble was that Dilullo did not like getting licked. The trouble also was that Dilullo could not afford to get licked. If he fell on his face with this job it could mean the beginning of the end for him as a Merc leader. He was getting old for it. Nobody had thought much about that because of his record, but he had thought about it. Plenty. Perhaps too much. And he thought that all it would take was one big walloping failure like this to make them say he was just a bit past his work. They'd say it regretfully. They'd talk about how big he'd been in the old days. But they'd say it.

"Look," he told Bollard. "All is not lost. Not yet, anyway. All right, we can't use our radar to get a line on our destination. But there's another possibility. A ship came in and landed in the military port. A cargo ship, not a warship. It wouldn't land there unless it was particularly important."

Bollard frowned. "A supply ship for whatever they're working on in the nebula. Sure. But what does that do for us?"

"It wouldn't do anything if the ship was just loading up with supplies and going out . . . that is, not unless we could follow it. But it brought something with it. Rutledge saw them unload some crates and rush them into the military port warehouse."

"Go on," said Bollard, eyeing him with a cold and fishy eye.

"If we could get a look at what's in those crates . . . not just a look but an analyzer scan . . . something we could compare with the record-spools for point of origin . . . it might give us an idea of what they're doing out there, and where."

"It might," said Bollard. "Or it might not. But the point

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is that getting in and out of that warehouse, past all their security arrangements, is going to be just about impossible."

"Just about," said Dilullo. "Not absolutely. Anybody want to volunteer?"

In derisive words or by gloomy shakes of the head, they let him know what the answer was.

"Then the old Merc law applies," said Dilullo. "Nobody wants to volunteer for a mean job, the job goes to the last man who broke the rules."

A beautiful smile came onto the moonlike face of Bollard. "But of course," he said. "Of course. Morgan Chane."

IX

CHANE LAY on his back and looked up at the nebula sky, and let his hand trail in the water as the skimmer glided silently through the channels.

"Are you going to sleep?" asked Laneeah.

"No."

"You drank an awful lot."

"I'm all right now," he assured her.

He was all right, but he was still very much on guard. Yorolin had not done anything except drink some more and get highly expansive and genial, but that one glimpse the Pyam had given him into Yorolin's mind had been enough.

They had wandered along the pleasure-places and Yorolin had wanted Chane to see something he called the feeding of the Golden Ones. Chane gathered that

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these were some kind of sea-creatures and that feeding them was a regular event. He didn't think much of feeding fish as fun, and he had managed to separate Laneeah from the others and entice her into a skimmer ride through the islands. Yorolin had made no objection at all and Chane had found that fact suspicious.

"How long are you going to be on Vhol, Chane?"

"It's hard to say."

"But," said Laneeah, "if all you're doing here is trying to sell weapons, it won't take long, will it?"

"I'll tell you what," said Chane. "We've got another purpose in coming to Vhol. Maybe I'd better not tell you."

She leaned with quick interest, her clear-cut face outlined against the glowing nebula.

"What's this other thing you're doing here?" she asked. "You can tell me."

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you. We've come here for this . . . to grab beautiful women wherever we can find them."

And he grabbed her and pulled her down.

Laneeah screeched. "You're breaking my *back!*" He loosened his grip a little, laughing, and she pulled away. "Are all Earthmen as strong as you?"

"No," said Chane. "You might say that I'm special."

"Special?" she said scornfully, and slapped his face. "You're like all Earthmen. Repulsive. Horribly repulsive."

"You'll get used to that," he said, not letting go of her.

The skimmer glided past the outermost islands and the open sea was like a wrinkled sheet of silver under the glowing sky. From the lights back on the pleasure island there drifted a scrap of lilting music.

There came a distant *phat!* sound from the shore and a moment later there was a muffled splash somewhere

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near the skimmer. It was repeated, and suddenly Laneeah jumped up in terror.

"They've started to feed the Golden Ones!" she cried out. "So we'll miss it," said Chane.

"You don't understand . . . we've drifted out onto the feeding grounds! Look . . .!"

Chane heard the *phat!* sound again and then saw that a big dark mass had been catapulted out from the pleasure island. The mass hit the sea not far from their skimmer, and as it floated he saw that it looked like some kind of dark, stringy fodder.

"If one did hit us, it wouldn't hurt us . . ." he began, but Laneeah interrupted him by screaming.

The sea was boiling furiously right next to the skimmer. The light craft rocked and tilted, and then there was a roaring, swashing sound of disturbed waters.

A colossal yellow head broke surface. It was all of ten feet across, domed and wet-glistening. It opened an enormous maw and snapped up the mass of stringy food. Then it chewed noisily, at the same time looking toward them with eyes that were huge and round and utterly stupid.

Now Chane saw that other heads were breaking surface eagerly in the whole area. Gigantic golden bodies with oddly arm-like flippers, bodies that would have made a whale look like a sprat, thrashed and broached as the creatures eagerly made for the masses of food-fiber that continued to arrive from shore.

Laneeah was still screaming. Now Chane saw that the creature nearest them, having devoured its food, was moving straight toward the skimmer. It was only too obvious that the great brainless brute took the skimmer to be an unusually large ration and was eager to devour it.

Chane picked up the emergency paddle from the bot-

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tom of the skimmer and struck with all his strength the top of the wet, domed head.

"Start the motor and steer out of here," he shouted to Laneeah, without turning.

He raised the paddle to deal another blow. But the Golden One, instead of charging, opened its huge mouth and delivered a thunderous bawl.

Chane broke into laughter. It was obvious that nothing had ever hit the leviathan painfully in its whole life, and it was bawling like a smacked baby.

He turned his head, still laughing, and told Laneeah, "Damn it, stop screaming and start up."

She could not have heard him over that Brobdinagian bellow, but the sight of Chane laughing seemed to shock her out of her hysteria. She started the little motor and the skimmer glided away.

The light craft rocked, tilted and floundered on the waves that the Golden Ones were making. Twice again one of the creatures mistook them for something edible and bore down on them, and each time Chane swung the paddle. It seemed that he had guessed right and that no one or nothing had ever dared to touch these colossi, for although they could not really have felt much pain, the shock and surprise seemed to confuse them.

They reached the pleasure island and Yorolin and the others came running to them, and Laneeah, still tearful, pointed accusingly at Chane.

"He *laughed!*"

Yorolin exclaimed, "You could have been killed! How ever did you drift out there?"

Chane preferred not to go into that. He said to Laneeah, "I'm sorry. It was just that the thing's stupid surprise was so funny."

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Yorolin shook his head. "You're not like any Earthman I ever met. There's something wild about you."

Chane did not want Yorolin thinking along that line, and he said, "Some more drinks seem called for."

They had some more, and a few more than that, and by the time they dropped Chane at the spaceport, they were a noisy party and Laneeah had almost, if not quite, forgiven him.

Rutledge met Chane before he reached the ship. "How nice of you to show up," he said. "I've been hanging around for hours waiting for you, though of course I haven't minded."

"What's happened?" asked Chane.

Rutledge told him as they walked along Star Street, still ablaze with lights and raucous with rowdy sounds. Rutledge dropped off at a drinking-place to alleviate his boredom and Chane went on along to the inn.

He found Dilullo sitting alone in the common room with a half-filled glass of brandy in front of him.

He said, "Your Starwolf friends are still after you, Chane."

Chane listened, and then nodded. "I'm not surprised. Ssander had two brothers in that squadron. They won't go back to Varna until they've seen my dead body."

Dilullo looked at him thoughtfully. "It doesn't seem to worry you much."

Chane smiled. "Varnans don't worry. If you meet your enemy you try to kill him and hope you succeed, but worrying before then does no good."

"Fine," said Dilullo. "Well, I worry. I worry about meeting up with Varnans. I worry about these Vhollans and what they'll do next. They're definitely suspicious of us."

Chane nodded, and told him about Yorolin and the Pyam. He added with a shrug, "If the mission fails, it

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fails. Come to that, I like the Vhollans a lot better than the Kharalis."

Dilullo eyed him. "So do I. A lot better. But there's more to it than that."

"What?"

"There's two things. When a Merc takes on a job, he keeps faith. The other thing is that these likable Vhollans are carrying a war of conquest to Kharal."

"So they're going to conquer Kharal . . . is that such a terrible thing?" asked Chane, smiling.

"Maybe not to a Starwolf. But an Earthman sees things differently," said Dilullo. He drank his brandy and continued slowly. "I'll tell you something. You Varnans look on raids and conquest as fun. Other starworlds—lots of them—see conquest as a good and right thing. But there's one world that doesn't like conquest at all, it's so peaceable. And that's Earth."

He set his glass down. "You know why that is, Chane? It's because Earth was a world of war and conquest for thousands of years. Our people have forgotten more about fighting than any of you will ever learn. We were soaked in conquest right up to our ears for a long, long time and that's why we don't have much use for it any more."

Chane was silent. Dilullo said, "Ah, what's the use of talking to you about it. You're young and you've been raised wrong. I'm not young, and I wish to heaven I was back at Brindisi."

"That's a place on Earth?" asked Chane.

Dilullo nodded moodily. "It's on the sea, and in the morning you can see the sun coming up out of the mists of the Adriatic. It's beautiful and it's home. The only trouble is, you can starve to death there."

Chane said, after a moment, "I remember the name of the place my parents came from, on Earth. It was Wales."

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"I've been there," said Dilullo. "Dark mountains, dark valleys. People who sing like angels and are golden-hearted friends till you get them mad, and then they're wildcats. Maybe you got something from there as well as Varna."

After a few moments, Chane said, "Well, so far it's a standoff. We haven't found out anything; they haven't found out anything. So what happens next?"

"Tomorrow," said Dilullo, "I will put on a very large and convincing show of trying to sell these people some weapons."

"And what about me?"

"You?" said Dilullo. "You, my friend, are going to figure out how to do the impossible, and do it quickly, cleanly, and without being seen, let alone caught."

"Mmm," said Chane, "that should keep me busy for an hour or two, what what do I do after that?"

"Sit and polish your ego." He shoved the brandy bottle over. "Settle down. I've got some talking to do. About the impossible."

When he was finished, Chane looked at him almost with awe. "That might even take me three hours to figure out. You have a lot of faith in me, Dilullo."

Dilullo showed him the edges of his teeth. "That is the only reason you're alive," he said. "And you'll be as sorry as the rest of us if you let me down."

X

NEXT NIGHT, Chane lay in the grass well outside the military port and studied its lights. In one hand he held a six-foot roll of thin, neutral-colored cloth. His other

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hand held tightly to a collar that was around the neck of a snokk.

The snokk was both furious and frightened. The animals looked something like a furry wallaby, or small kangaroo. But they had a doglike disposition and ran happily in packs in some parts of the town. This one was not happy, for attached to the collar was a leather hood that completely muffled its head. It kept trying to dig its hind feet into the ground and bound away, but Chane held it.

"Soon," he whispered soothingly. "Very soon."

The snokk responded with a series of growling barks that were effectively muffled by the hood.

Chane had done his homework well. Now he looked at the conical tower that rose from the central building. That was where the ring-projector was, and he had by day seen the searchlights around it, though now they were dark.

He began to crawl forward, dragging the reluctant snokk along. Chane went with every muscle tense. At any moment he would cross the edge of the ringlike aura of force projected to enclose the whole military port. When he crossed that, things would happen very quickly.

He went on, going slowly but making sure that he was set to move fast at any moment. The snokk gave him more and more trouble but he relentlessly dragged it on with him. He could see the lights and the loom of the big starships on the port, warcraft with grim, closed weapon-ports in their sides. He made out the low structure that was the warehouse.

It happened about the moment that Chane expected it to happen. A sharp alarm rang across the port, and the searchlights flashed into life. Their beams swung swiftly in his direction.

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Those lights, triggered and aimed by computers linked to the ring-apparatus, could move fast. But his Varnaborn reactions gave Chane a slight edge. He acted, when the alarm first sounded, with all the speed he had.

His right hand ripped the hood and collar off the head of the snokk. With the same forward motion he threw himself flat on the ground and pulled the square of neutral-colored cloth over himself and lay still.

The snokk, freed, went off across the port with great hopping leaps, sounding an outraged series of howling barks. Two searchlights instantly locked onto the animal, while the other beams wove an intricate mathematical pattern to cover the whole edge of the port.

Chane lay quite still, trying to look like a bump in the ground.

He heard a fast skimmer come out onto the port and stop some distance from him. He heard the furious barks of the snokk receding.

Someone in the skimmer swore disgustedly, and someone else laughed. Then it went away again, back the way it had come.

The searchlights, after a little more probing, went out.

Chane continued to lie still under his cloth. Three minutes later the searchlights suddenly came on again and swept the whole area once more. Then they went out again.

Chane came out from under the cloth then. He was grinning as he rolled it up.

"A Starwolf child could get in there," he had told Dillullo when he had finished his reconnaissance. But that had just been a little bragging, and anyway, he had only come this first step: the rest of the job would not be child's work at all.

He worked his way patiently toward the warehouse, keeping to the shadows as much as possible, using his

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camouflage cloth whenever he stopped to listen. The warehouse, a low flat-roofed metal building, did not seem to be guarded, but if there was anything important in it, there were sure to be cunning devices to expose an intruder.

It was almost an hour before Chane stood in the dark interior of the warehouse. He had entered by the roof, first using small sensors to select an area of the roof free of alarms, then using a hooded ato-flash to cut a neat circle. If he replaced the cutout and fused it into place when he left, it might be a long time before it was noticed.

He took out his pocket-lamp and flashed its thin beam. The first thing he saw was that the crates from the cargo-ship had been unpacked.

Three objects stood upon a long trestle-table beside the crates. Chane stared at them. He walked around the table to inspect them from all sides. Then he stared at them again, shaking his head.

He had handled a lot of exotic loot in his time. He thought he could identify, or at least take a guess at, almost everything in the way of artifacts and the stuff whereof they were made.

These three objects mocked him.

They were all made of the same substance, a metal that vaguely resembled pale, hard gold, but was like nothing he had ever seen before. In form they were all different. One was a shining, fluted ribbon reared like a snake three feet high. One was a congery of nine small spheres, held rigidly together by short, slender rods. The third was a truncated cone, wide and thick at the base, with no openings and no decoration. They were beautiful enough to be ornaments, but somehow instinctively he knew they weren't. He could not guess at the purpose of any of them.

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Still shaking his head, but reminding himself strongly that he didn't have all night, Chane took from a belt-pouch a minicamera and a small but highly sophisticated instrument Dilullo had given him; a portable analyzer that poked and probed with fingering rays among the molecules of a substance and came up with a pretty accurate chart of its essential components. Because of its extreme miniaturization it had a limited usefulness, but within those limitations it was useful indeed. Chane applied its sensor units to the base of the spiraled golden ribbon and clicked it on, and then began snapping quick record shots with the little camera.

The truncated cone occluded a portion of the nine-sphere congery. He reached out and moved it . . . the metal was satin-smooth and chilly and surprisingly light. He leaned past it to aim the camera's tiny flashpod at the golden spheres. And suddenly he went rigid.

There was a whisper of sound in the dark warehouse.

He swung on his heel, his hand going to the stunner inside his jacket, his little beam probing every corner. There were these enigmatic golden objects, and some piles of regulation ship-stores cases.

Nothing more. And no one.

The sound whispered a little louder. It was like someone, or something, trying to speak in a breathy murmur. Now Chane identified its source. It was coming from the cone.

He stepped back from the thing. It lay in the beam of his light, shining and still. But the breathy whisper from it grew in volume.

Now a light came up from the cone, as though emanating from the solid metal. It was not ordinary light; it was a twisting tendril of soft glowing flame. It twisted higher, endlessly pouring out of the cone, until there was a great wreath of it several feet above his head.

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Then, without warning, the wreath of light exploded into a myriad of tiny stars.

The whispering voice swelled louder. The little stars above floated down in showers. They were not mere sparks or points of light: each one was different, each like a real star made inconceivably tiny.

They swirled and floated around Chane, yet he could not feel their touch. Red giants and white dwarfs, smoky orange suns and the evil-glowing quasars, and their perfection was so absolute that for a moment Chane lost perspective. They seemed to him real stars, and he was a giant standing in a cascade of swirling suns.

The murmuring voice was still louder, and now he could hear strange, irregular rhythms in it.

Someone, or something, singing?

Of a sudden, Chane realized his peril. If there was an alarm-device here triggered by sound, it could be activated by this.

He grabbed for the cone, to search for some control on it. But before his hand quite touched it, the swirling stars around him vanished and the whispering singing ceased.

He stood, a little shaken by the experience, but understanding now. This seemingly-solid cone was an instrument that reproduced audio-visual records, and was turned on or off by the mere proximity of a hand.

But who, or what, had made such a record as this?

Chane, after a moment, cautiously examined the other gold-colored objects, the fluted spiral and the congery of spheres. But no wave of the hand produced in them any reaction.

He stood, thinking. It seemed evident that the Vholans, who had brought these things here, had not made them. Then who had?

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A people inside the nebula? One that had mastered unknown technologies? But if so . . .

He heard a slight clicking sound from the door.

Instantly, Chane stiffened. There *had* been a sonic-triggered alarm in here. Guards had come, and were softly unlocking the combination of the door.

Chane thought swiftly. He ran to the golden cone. He passed his hand over it, and the whispering sound began and the tendril of light grew up from it. Chane thrust the analyzer and the camera into his pouch, already moving away.

The door clicked softly again. Chane sprang to one of the corners of the room, and crouched behind cases of stores.

In the darkness, the wreath of light above the cone exploded again into tiny stars, and the whispering swelled.

The door opened.

There were two helmeted Vhollan guards and they had lethal lasers in their hands, and they were ready to fire at once. But for just a second, their eyes were riveted by that amazing cataract of stars.

Chane's stun-gun buzzed and dropped them.

He had, he thought, only a very few minutes before the guards were missed. His plans for getting out of the port required much more time than that.

A grin crossed his face and he thought, *The hell with clever plans. Do it the Starwolf way.*

The small skimmer the guards had come in stood outside the warehouse. Chane reached down and took the helmet off one of the unconscious men, and put it on his head. It would conceal the fact that his hair was not the albino white of Vhol, and it would help to hide his face. The guard's jacket concealed his non-Vhollan clothing.

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He jumped into the driver's seat of the skimmer, turned it on, and went racing and screaming toward the main gateway of the military port.

The searchlights on the tower came on and locked onto him. He waved his free arm wildly as he drove up to the gateway, and shouted to the guards there. He hardly knew a word of Vhollan so he kept his shout a wordless one, relying on the screaming of the siren to make it unintelligible anyway. He pointed excitedly ahead and goosed the skimmer to its highest speed.

The guards fell away, startled and excited, and Chane drove on into the darkness, laughing. It was the old Varnan way: be as clever and tricky as you can but when cleverness won't work, smash right through before people wake up. He and Ssander had done it many times.

For a fleeting moment, he was sorry that Ssander was dead.

XI

"THEY DIDN'T SEE ME," Chane said. "Not to recognize me as a non-Vhollan. I can vouch for that. They didn't see me at all."

Dilullo's face was very hard in the lamplight, the lines cut deep like knife-slashes in dark wood.

"What did you do with the skimmer?"

"Found a lonely beach, drove it out onto the water a way, and sank it." Chane looked at Dilullo and was astonished to find himself making excuses. "It was that damned cone, that recorder thing. I had no way of knowing what it was, and it went on all by itself when

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my hand got near it." He saw Dilullo looking at him very oddly, and he hurried on. "Don't worry about it. I came in over the roofs. Nobody saw me. Why would they suspect us? Obviously some of their own people must be overly prying or they wouldn't have all that tight security. If there are no thieves on Vhol it'll be the rarest planet in the galaxy."

He tossed the belt pouch on Dilullo's lap. "I got what you wanted, anyway. It's all there." He sat down and helped himself to a drink from Dilullo's brandy bottle. The bottle, he noticed, had taken a severe beating, but Dilullo was cold and stony sober as a rock.

"Just the same," Dilullo said, "I think the time has come to say goodbye to Vhol." He set the pouch aside. "Have to wait on these till we have the ship's techlab." He leaned forward, looking at Chane. "What was so strange about these things?"

"The metal they were made of. The fact that they were unclassifiable as to function. Above all, the fact that they came from an area—the nebula—that doesn't have any inhabited world with a technology above Class Two level."

Dilullo nodded. "I wondered if you remembered that. We studied all the microfile charts on our way here from Kharal."

"Either the microfile charts are wrong, or something else is. Because those things are not only from a very high technology, but a very alien one."

Dilullo grunted. He got up and lifted a corner of the curtain across the window. It was already dawn. Chane turned off the lamp and a pearl-pink light flooded into the little room of the inn on Star Street.

"Could they have been weapons, Chane? Or components of weapons?"

Chane shook his head. "The recorder thing certainly

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wasn't. I couldn't swear to the other two, of course, but they didn't *feel* like it." He meant an inner feeling, the instinctive recognition by a practiced fighter for any deadly instrument.

"That's interesting," Dilullo said. "Did I tell you, by the way, that Thrandirin wants to inspect our wares tomorrow, with a view to buying? Go get some sleep, Chane. And when I call you, wake up fast."

It was not Dilullo who waked him, though. It was Bollard, looking as though he had just waked up himself, or was perhaps just on the verge of going to sleep.

"If you have any possession here that you can't bear to leave behind you, bring it . . . just so long as it'll fit into your pocket." Bollard scratched his chest and yawned. "Otherwise, forget it."

"I travel light." Chane pulled his boots on. They were all he had taken off before he slept. "Where's Dilullo?"

"'Board ship, with Thrandirin and some top brass. He wants us to join him."

Chane paused in his boot-pulling and met Bollard's gaze. The small eyes behind those fat pink lids were anything but sleepy.

"I see," said Chane, and stamped his heel down and stood up. He grinned at Bollard. "Let's not keep him waiting."

"You want to go down and explain that to the guards?" He smiled back at Chane, a fat lazy man without a care in the world. "They're posted front and back, ever since last night. Confined to quarters, Thrandirin said, for our own protection during a period of emergency. Something happened last night that upset them. He didn't say what. He only allowed Machris, the weapons expert, and one other man to go with Dilullo to the ship. So we have almost a full crew. But the guards have lasers. So it's going to be a little bit of a problem. . . ." Bollard

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seemed to ponder a moment. "John said something about you coming in over the roofs. Could that be done by others, say, fat slobs like me?"

"I can't vouch for the construction," Chane said, "but if you don't fall through you shouldn't have any trouble. It'll have to be done quietly, though. These buildings aren't very high, and if they hear us we'll be in worse trouble than if we'd just butted them head on."

"Let's try," said Bollard, and went away, leaving Chane wishing it were night.

But it was not night. It was high noon, and the sun of Vhol shone white and bright overhead, driving a shaft of brilliance down through the trapdoor when Chane pushed it carefully open.

There was no one to be seen. Chane stepped out and waved the others after him. They came quietly up the ladder one at a time, and at intervals they went quietly across the roof, not running, in the direction Chane had pointed out.

Meanwhile, Chane and Bollard kept watch of the streets below in front of and behind the inn. Chane drew the alley because Bollard was in command and therefore got the most important post. Motionless as one of the carved stone gargoyles of Kharal, he peered down into the alley from behind a kitchen chimney. The Vhollan guards were a tough-looking lot, standing patiently in good order, not minding the sun nor the chatter of small urchins gathered to stare at them, nor the invitations of several young ladies who seemed to be telling them they could go and have a cooling drink and be back before they were missed. Chane disliked the Vhollan guards intensely. He preferred men who would loosen their tunics and sit in the shade and chaffer with the ladies.

The Mercs were not as good as Varnans, nobody was,

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but they were good enough, and they got off without attracting any attention from below. Bollard signaled that all was clear on his side. Chane joined him and they went on their way toward the spaceport.

The roofs of Star Street were utilitarian, ugly, and mercifully flat. The Mercs moved across them in a long irregular line, going as quickly as they could without making any running noises for people to come up and investigate. The line of buildings ended at the spaceport fence, separated from it by a perimeter road that served the warehouse area. The gate was no more than thirty yards away, and the Merc ship sat unconcernedly on its pad a quarter mile beyond.

It looked a long, long way.

Chane took a deep breath and Bollard said quietly to the Mercs, all bunched together on that ultimate roof, "All right; once we start moving, don't stop."

Chane opened the trapdoor and they went down through the building, not worrying now about making noise, not worrying about anything but getting where they wanted to go. There were three floors in the building. The air was stale and heavy in the corridors, sweet with too much perfume. There were a lot of doors, mostly closed. The sound of music came up from below.

They hit the ground floor running, passed through a series of ornate rooms that were chipped and worn and moth-eaten in the daylight that leaked in through the curtained windows. There were people in the rooms, of various sizes, shapes, and colors, some of them quite strange, but Chane did not have time to see exactly what they were doing. He only saw their startled eyes turned on him in the half-gloom. A towering woman in green charged at them, screeching angrily like a gigantic parrot. Then the front door slammed open with a

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jingling of sinful bells, and they were out in the clean hot street.

They headed for the gate. And Chane was astonished at how rapidly Bollard could make his fat legs go when he really wanted to.

There was a watchman's box beside the gate. The man inside it saw them coming. Chane could see him staring at them for what seemed like minutes as they rushed closer, and he smiled at the man, a contemptuous smile that mocked the slow reactions of the lesser breeds. He himself, or any other Starwolf, would have had the gate closed and half the onrushing Mercs shot down before the watchman's synapses finally clicked and set his hand in motion toward the switch. Actually the time lapse from initial stimulus to reaction was only a matter of seconds. But it was enough to bring Chane in stunner range. The watchman fell down. The Mercs pounded through the gate. Bollard was the last of them and Chane saw Bollard staring at him with a very peculiar expression as he passed, and only then did he realize that in the necessity of the moment he had forgotten all about being careful and had raced ahead of the others, covering the thirty yards at a speed well-nigh impossible for a normal Earthman.

He swore silently. He was going to give himself away for sure if he wasn't more careful, perhaps had already done so.

Somebody shouted, "Here they come!"

The Vhollan guards had finally been alerted. They were coming down Star Street at the double, and in a minute, Chane knew, those needle-like laser beams would begin to flicker. He heard Bollard's almost unconcerned order to spread out. He punched the switch and jumped through as the gate began to swing. Bollard was fishing something out of his belt-pouch, a bit of plastic

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with a magnetic fuse-and-coupler plate. He slapped it onto the end of the gate as it swung past, just above the lock assembly. Then Chane and Bollard ran on together toward the ship.

Behind them there was a pop and an intense flash of light as the gate clanked shut. Bollard smiled. "That fused the gate and the post together. They can cut through, of course, but it'll take 'em a couple minutes. Where did you learn to run?"

"Rock-jumping in the drift mines," said Chane innocently. "Does wonders for the coordination. You should try it sometime."

Bollard grunted and saved his breath. The Merc ship still seemed a million miles away. Chane fumed at having to rein himself in to the Mercs' pace, but he did it. Finally Bollard panted, "Why don't you go on ahead like you did before?"

"Hell," said Chane, pretending to pant also, "I can only do that in spurts. I blew myself."

He panted harder, looking back over his shoulder. The guards were approaching the gate now. One of them went into the watchman's box. Chane assumed that he tried the switch, but nothing happened. The gate remained closed. Some of the guards fired through the mesh. The whipcrack and flash of the lasers scarred the air behind the Mercs but the range was too long for the small power-packs in the hand weapons. Chane thanked the luck of the Starwolves that the guards had not thought they might need heavier weapons.

There was not as yet any sign of life around the Merc ship. Presumably the Vhollans within would feel perfectly safe, believing that the ship's crew was bottled up at the inn, and Chane was sure that Dilullo would see to it that the demonstration was held where the visitors

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wouldn't be inconvenienced by noises from outside. Still and all, there should be a guard. . . .

There was. Two Vhollans in uniform came out of the lock to see what was going on. They saw, but they were already too late. The Mercs knocked them down neatly with their stun-guns. The skimmer in which Dilullo and the Vhollan officials had come was parked beside the boarding steps. Bollard ordered the men aboard and motioned to Chane. Together they tossed the unconscious men into the skimmer and started it, heading it back without a driver toward the fence. The guards from the inn had cut their way through the gate.

Bollard nodded. "That all worked out real nice," he said.

They scrambled up the steps and into the lock. The warning hooter was going, the *CLEAR LOCK* sign flashing red. Dilullo had not wasted any time. The inner lock door clapped shut and sealed itself almost on Chane's coattails.

Members of the crew with flight duty hurried to their stations. Chane went to the bridge room with Bollard.

There was quite a crowd in it, all Mercs but one, and all but one jubilant. The one was Thrandirin. Dilullo stood with him before the video pickup grid, so that there should not be any mistake when the message went out.

Dilullo was talking into the communicator.

"Hold your fire," he was saying. "We're about to take off, so clear space. And forget about your intercept procedures. Thrandirin and the two officers will be returned to you safely if you do as I say. But if anybody fires off so much as a slingshot at us, they die."

Chane hardly heard the words. He was looking at the expression on Thrandirin's heavy, authoritative face, and it filled him with pure joy.

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The drive units throbbed to life, growled, roared, screamed, and took the Merc ship skyward. And nobody fired so much as a slingshot as it went.

XII

THE MERC SHIP hung in the edge of the nebula, lapped in radiance.

Dilullo sat in the wardroom with Bollard, studying for the hundredth time the photographs and the analyzer record on the objects in the warehouse.

"You'll wear them out with eyetracks," Bollard said. "They aren't going to tell you anything different from what they already have."

"Which is nothing," Dilullo said. "Or worse than nothing. The photographs are clear and sharp. I see the things, therefore I know they exist. Then along comes the analyzer record and tells me they don't."

He tossed the little plastic disc onto the table. It was blank and innocent as the day it was made, recording zero.

"Chane didn't handle it right, John. Attached the sensors wrong, or forgot to turn it on."

"Do you believe that?"

"Knowing Chane, no. But I have to believe something, and the fault isn't in the analyzer. That's been checked."

"And rechecked."

"So it has to be Chane."

Dilullo shrugged. "That's the most logical explanation."

"Is there another one?"

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"Sure. The things are made out of some substance that the analyzer isn't programmed to identify. I.e., not on our atomic table. But we know that's ridiculous, don't we?"

"Of course we do," said Bollard slowly.

Dilullo got up and got a bottle and sat down again. "We're not doing anything else," he said. "Get Thrandirin and the two generals in here. And Chane."

"Why him?"

"Because he saw the things. Touched them. Set one off. Heard it . . . singing."

Bollard snorted. "Chane's fast and he's good, but I wouldn't trust him any farther than he could throw me."

"I wouldn't either," said Dilullo. "So bring him."

Bollard went out. Dilullo put his chin in his fists and stared at the disc and the photographs. Outside the hull the pale fires of the nebula glowed across infinity . . . endless parsecs of infinity in three dimensions. Up in the navigation room Bixel read micro-books from the ship's library for the third time over and drank innumerable cups of coffee, keeping vigil over the radar which remained as obstinately blank as the analyzer disc.

Bollard came back with Chane and Thrandirin and the two generals, Markolin and Tatichin. The *-in* suffix was important on Vhol, it seemed, identifying a certain gens which had acquired power a long time back and hung onto it with admirable determination. They figured largely in administrative, military and space-flight areas, and they were accustomed to command. Which made them less than patient prisoners.

Thrandirin opened the game, as he always did, with the *How-long-are-you-going-to-persist-in-this-idiocy* gambit. Dilullo countered, as he always did, with the *As-long-as-it-takes-me-to-get-what-I-want* one. Then all three

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told him that was impossible, and demanded to be taken home.

Dilullo nodded and smiled. "Now that we've got that out of the way, perhaps we can just sit around and have a drink or two and talk about the weather." He passed the bottle and the glasses around the scarred table. The Vhollans accepted the liquor stiffly and sat like three statues done in marble and draped in bright tunics. Only their eyes were alive, startlingly blue and bright.

Thrandirin's eyes rested briefly on the photographs in front of Dilullo and moved away again.

"No," said Dilullo. "Go ahead, look at them." He passed them down. "Look at this, too." He passed the disc. "You've seen them before. There's no need to be bashful about it."

Thrandirin shook his head. "I say what I have said before. If I knew any more than you do about those objects I would not tell you. But I don't. I saw them in the warehouse, and that is all. I am not a scientist, I am not a technician, and I have no direct part in this operation."

"Yet you are a government official," said Dilullo. "Pretty top-level, too. Top enough to dicker for weapons."

Thrandirin made no comment.

"I find it very difficult to believe that you do not know where those things came from," said Dilullo softly.

Thrandirin shrugged. "I don't see why you find it difficult. You questioned us with a lie-detector of your latest type and it should have proved to you that we know nothing."

Tatichin said brusquely, as though it were an old sore subject with him, "Only six men know about this thing. Our ruler, his chief minister, the chief of the War Department, and the navigators who actually take the ships into the nebula. Even the captains do not know

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the course, and the navigators are under constant guard, virtual prisoners, both in space and on Vhol."

"Then it must be something of tremendous importance," Dilullo said. The three marble statues stared at him with hard blue eyes and said nothing. "The Kharalis questioned Yorolin under an irresistible drug. He told them that Vhol had a weapon out in the nebula, something powerful enough to wipe them off the face of their world."

The hard blue eyes flared brighter on that, but the Vhollans did not seem too surprised.

"We assumed that they had," said Thrandirin, "though Yorolin could not remember anything beyond the fact that the Kharalis had drugged him. A man cannot lie under that drug, it is true. But he can tell only what is in his mind, no more, no less. Yorolin believed what he said. That does not necessarily make it so."

Now Dilullo's eyes grew very hard and his jaw set like a steel trap. "Your own unlying minds have told me that you too have heard this, and that you are indeed planning the conquest of Kharal. Now that being so, isn't it strange that you were interested in buying weapons from us? Ordinary puny conventional little weapons, even though rather better than the ones you have, when there's a super-weapon lying at hand here in this nebula?"

"Surely we answered that question for you," said Thrandirin.

"Oh, yes, you said the weapons were needed to ensure the safety of the nebula. Now that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it?"

"I'm afraid I do not follow your line of reasoning, and I definitely do not enjoy your company." Thrandirin rose, and the generals rose with him. "I most bitterly regret that I did not have you imprisoned the moment you landed. I underestimated your—"

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"Gall?" said Dilullo. "Nerve? Plain stupid rashness?"

Thrandirin shrugged. "I could not believe that you would come openly to Vhol from Kharal if you had actually taken service with the Kharalis. And of course there was Yorolin . . . we knew the Kharalis would never have given him up willingly, and the fact that you did help him to escape seemed to prove your story. So we hesitated. There was even some discussion"—here he looked rather coldly at Markolin—"about hiring you for our own use against Kharal. You were very adroit, Captain Dilullo. I hope you are enjoying your triumph. But I will remind you again. Even if you should manage to find what you're seeking, they have been warned by sub-spectrum transmission from Vhol. They will be expecting you."

"*They?* Heavy cruisers, Thrandirin? How many? One? Two? Three?"

Markolin said, "He can't tell you, nor can I. Rest assured the force is sufficient to guard our . . . installation." The hesitation before that word was so brief as to be almost unnoticeable. "And I can assure you also that the value of our lives is not great enough to buy your safety there."

"That is so," said Thrandirin. "And now we would prefer to return to our own quarters, if you please."

"Of course," said Dilullo. "No, stay here, Bollard." He spoke briefly over the ship's intercom, and in a moment another man came and took the Vhollans away. Dilullo swung around and looked at Chane and Bollard.

"They wanted to buy our weapons, and they thought of hiring us to use against Kharal."

"I heard that," said Bollard. "I don't see anything too strange about it. It just means that their super-weapon isn't operational yet and won't be for some time, so they're hedging their bets."

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Dilullo nodded. "Makes sense. What do you say, Chane?"

"I'd say Bollard was right. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Well," said Chane, "that recorder thing in the warehouse. If they're constructing a weapon out here in the nebula, they sure aren't bothering to construct audio-visual recorders, and anyway it wasn't a Vhollan artifact." Chane paused. There was something else itching at his mind, and he waited till it came clear. "Besides, what's all this secrecy about? I can understand tight security, sure. And I can understand them being afraid that the Kharalis might hire somebody to go into the nebula, just as they did, and try to capture or destroy the weapon. But they're so afraid that they don't even trust men like Thrandirin and the generals to know where those came from or what they are." Chane pointed to the photographs of the three golden objects. "One of those things makes very strange music and shoots stars, but is no more than an audio-visual recorder. And what is so thunderingly secret about that? It doesn't make sense to me at all."

Dilullo looked at Bollard, who shook his head. "I didn't see his star-shooting recorder, so I can't say yes or no. Why not just come out and say what's on your mind, John?"

Dilullo picked up the little blank analyzer disc, the plastic zero. "I'm beginning to think," he said, "that this may be more important than what Vhol does to Kharal, or vice versa. I think the Vhollans have got hold of something big, all right . . . something so big that it frightens the wits out of them. Because," he added slowly, "I don't think they understand whatever it is, or know how to use it, any more than we do."

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There was a lengthy silence. Finally Bollard said, "Would you care to explain that a little better, John?"

Dilullo shook his head. "No. Because I'm only guessing, and a man's a fool to go galloping off on a wild guess. The only way we'll ever know is to find the thing and see for ourselves. And I'm beginning to think the Vhollans are right when they say we never will."

He punched the intercom to the navigation room. "Start a sweep pattern, Finney. Plot it to cover as much of the nebula coast as possible without leaving any gaps. That supply ship has to come from Vhol sometime, and all we need is a little bit of luck."

The voice of Finney, the navigator, came back in tones of pure acid. "Sure, John. Just a wee little bit of luck."

Presently the Merc ship was on her way, an infinitesimal spider spinning a small frail web across the burning cliffs of the nebula, and everybody aboard knew what her chances were of catching the tiny fly she wanted. Particularly when the fly had ample warning.

Chane had lost all sense of the passage of time, and Dilullo was acutely aware that there had been far too much of it, when Bixel looked up from his radar screen and said, in a tone of utter disbelief:

"I've got a blip."

Dilullo had one moment of triumphant joy. But it did not last long, for Bixel said, "I've got another. And another. Hell, I've got a flock of them."

Dilullo bent over the radar screen with a cold premonition clutching at his heart.

"They've changed course," Bixel said. "Heading straight for us now and coming fast. Awfully damned fast."

Bollard had wedged himself into the little room and was peering over both their shoulders. "Those aren't supply ships. Could be a squadron of Vhollan cruisers . . . if they've decided they don't mind losing their friends."

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Dilullo shook his head dismally, "Only one kind of ship is that size, moves in that kind of formation, and has that kind of speed. I guess Thrandirin wasn't lying after all, about the Starwolves."

XIII

THE FIRST Chane knew about it was when the *Red Alert* signal came howling over the ship's intercom, followed at once by a burst of acceleration that set the ship's seams creaking and laid Chane up hard against a bulkhead. He had been stretched out in a borrowed bunk half asleep, but only half, and even that much was a major achievement. He hated waiting. He hated this business of dangling in a vacuum, waiting for another man to make the decisions. Wisdom and the instinct for survival told him he had better be patient because he had no other choice at the moment. But his physical being found it difficult to obey. It was not used to being inactive. A lifetime of training had taught it that inactivity was the next thing to being dead, a state fit only for the lesser breeds who were meant to be preyed upon. A Varnan fought hard, and when he was through fighting he enjoyed the fruits of his victory just as hard, until it was time to go fight again. Chane's metabolism revolted against waiting.

The alert and the frantic leaping of the ship were like a sudden release from prison.

He jumped up and went into the main passageway. Men were running in what appeared to be wild confusion, but Chane knew it was not, and in a matter of

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seconds everyone was at his station and the ship was quiet with a quivering, breathing quietness. The quiet of a very different sort of waiting.

Chane had no assigned station. He went on toward the bridge.

Dilullo's voice came rasping over the intercom, speaking to the whole ship.

"I've got a little bad news for you," it said. "We've got a Starwolf squadron on our tail."

Chane froze in the passageway.

Dilullo's voice seemed to have a personal edge in it, a warning edge, as it went on, "I repeat, we have a Starwolf squadron in pursuit." *Talking to me*, Chane thought. *Well, and here we are. They've caught up with me, Ssander's brothers and the rest.*

Dilullo's voice continued. "I am taking evasive action. We'll fight if we have to, but I'm going to do my damndest to run. So prepare for max stress."

Meaning, I won't have time to warn you of abrupt changes in course or velocity. Just hang on and hope the ship holds together.

Chane stood still in the passageway, his body braced, his mind racing.

He might have been in worse spots in his career but he couldn't remember one off-hand. If the Mercs should have any reason to suspect his origin they would kill him long before Ssander's brothers could possibly reach him. And if they didn't suspect him, he would die anyway when the Starwolf squadron caught them.

Because it would catch them. Nobody got away from the Starwolves. Nobody could go fast enough, for nobody could endure physically the shattering impact of inertial stress that the Starwolves endured, maneuvering their little ships at man-killing velocities. That was what made them unbeatable in space.

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The Merc ship wrenched screaming onto a tangential course. It seemed to Chane that he could feel the bulkhead bend under his hand. The blood beat up in him hard and hot. He straightened up as the ship steadied again, and went on forward to the bridge room.

It was dark there except for the hooded lights of the instrument panels. Dark enough so that the red-gold fire of the nebula seemed to fill it, pouring in through the forward viewport. Illusion, of course; the viewport was now a viewscreen and the nebula it showed was not the actuality but an FTL stimulus simulcrum. The illusion was good enough. Dilullo's head and shoulders loomed against the fireglow, and the ship plunged through rolling, whipping clouds of cold flame. The suns that set the nebula gas to burning with their light fled past like flung coals.

Dilullo looked up and saw Chane's face in the glow and said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I get restless just sitting," Chane said in a flat, quiet voice. "I thought I might be able to help."

The copilot, a small dark rawhide man named Gomez, said irritably, "Get him out of here, John. I don't need any rock-hopper pilot breathing down my neck. Not now."

Dilullo said, "Hang on."

Chane grabbed a support girder. Again the ship screamed and groaned. The metal bit into Chane's flesh, and again he thought he could feel it bend. The image in the viewscreen blurred to a chaotic jumble of racing sparks. Then it steadied and they were falling down a vast long chute between walls of flame, and Gomez said, "One more time, John, and you're going to crack her bones."

"All right," said Dilullo. "Here's the one more time."

Chane heard more than the ship cry out. The men were

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beginning to crumple under the hammering. Gomez sagged in his chair. Blood sprang from his nose and went in dark runnels over his mouth and chin. Dilullo sighed a great sigh as the breath was squeezed from his lungs. He seemed to lean over the control panel and Chane reached forward to take the ship, drew back as Dilullo forced himself erect again, his mouth open and biting savagely on air, dragging it into him by main force and stubbornness. On the other side of the bridge room a man hung sideways against his recoil harness and did not move. Unnoticed, Chane grinned a sardonic grin, and clung to his girder, and breathed evenly against the pressure of the inertial hand that tried to crush him and could not.

Then he wondered what he was grinning about. This toughness he was so proud of was about to be his doom. The Mercs could not match it, and so the Starwolves would win.

He wondered if they knew that he was aboard the Merc ship. He didn't see how they could, for sure. But they must have tracked him to Corvus, and that would be enough. They would shake out the whole cluster until they found him or made sure he was dead.

Chane grinned again, thinking how Dilullo must be regretting his own cleverness in keeping his tame Starwolf alive. Chane felt no responsibility for the results. That had been all Dilullo's idea, and Chane could even take a certain cruel pleasure in the way he was being paid out for it.

He knew that Dilullo must be thinking the same thing. Just once Dilullo turned and met his eye, and Chane thought, *He'd give me to them now if he could, if it would save his men. But he knows it wouldn't. The Varnans couldn't let these men live, not knowing what I*

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might have told them. Wouldn't let them live, in any case, for helping me.

The ship lurched and staggered, slowing down. The viewscreen flickered, blanked out, became again a window onto normal space. They drifted underneath the belly of a great orange sun, veiled and misty in the cloudy fire.

After a minute Dilullo said, "Bixel?" And again, "Bixel!"

Bixel's voice came faintly from the navigation room. He sounded as though he was snuffing blood out of his own nose. "I don't see anything," he said. "I think—" He choked and gasped and went on again, "I think you shook 'em."

"Just as well," muttered Gomez, mopping himself. "One more time and you'd have cracked *my* bones to a jelly."

Chane said, "They'll be along." He saw Gomez and some of the others turn and glare at him, and he pretended weakness, sliding down along the girder to sit on the floor beside Dilullo. "They know we can't take it like they can. They know we have to stop."

"How did you get to be such an expert on Starwolves?" asked Gomez. Not suspiciously. Just slapping down a bigmouth. Chane slumped against his girder and shut his eyes.

"You don't have to be an expert," he said, "to know that."

And how many times I've done this, he thought. Watched a ship run and dodge and twist, half killing the men inside, and we watched and followed and waited until the strength was beaten out of them. And now I'm on the receiving end. . . .

Bixel said over the intercom, "They're here."

The Starwolf ships dropped into normal space, showing their bright little blips like sudden sparks on the

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radar screen. Distant yet. Too far off to be seen. But zeroing in.

Chane's hands ached to take the controls from Dilullo, but he kept them still. It was useless anyway. The Merc ship was no stronger than the men who built it.

"Coordinates!" said Dilullo, and Bixel's tired voice answered, "Coming."

The computer beside the copilot's chair began to chatter. Gomez read the tapes it fed out. Chane knew what he was going to say and waited till he said it.

"They're globing us."

Yes. Break formation and dart like flying slivers of light all around the exhausted prey. Englobe it, disable it, close and pounce.

"What the devil do they want of us?" roared Bollard's voice from the engine-room.

There was a little silence before Dilullo said, "Maybe just to kill us. It's the nature of the beast."

"I don't think so," Chane said, and he thought, *I know damn well.* "I think they'd have knocked us apart back there on first contact. I think this is a boarding action. Maybe they . . . got wind of something in the nebula. Maybe they think we know."

"Up shields," said Dilullo.

Bollard's voice answered, "Shields up, John. But they can batter them down. There's too many."

"I know." Dilullo turned to Gomez. "Is there any gap in that globe?"

"Nothing they couldn't close long before we got there."

Bixel's voice, high and tight, said, "John, they're coming fast."

Dilullo said quietly, "Does anyone have any suggestions?"

Chane answered, "Take them by surprise."

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"The expert again," said Gomez. "Go ahead, John. Take them by surprise."

Dilullo said, "I'm listening, Chane."

"They think we're beat. I don't have to be an expert to know that, either. They're stronger than ordinary people, they count on that, and they count on people feeling helpless and giving up. If you suddenly bulled at them head on, I think you might break out, and you better do it fast before they blow your tail off."

Dilullo considered, his hands poised over the controls. "The shields won't hold for long, you know. We aren't a heavy."

"They won't have to hold long if you go fast enough."

"I may kill some men doing it."

"You're the skipper," Chane said. "You asked, I'm only answering. But they'll die anyway if the Starwolves get hold of you. And maybe not so cleanly."

"Yes," said Dilullo. "I guess you don't have to be an expert to know that, either. Full power, Bollard. And good luck all."

He brought his hands down onto the keys.

Braced against the girder, Chane felt the acceleration slam against him, driving his spine back into the steel. The fabric of the ship moaned around him, quivered, shuddered, swayed. He thought, *She's breaking up!* and tensed himself for the whistle of air through riven plates and a sight of the nebula above his head before he died. Through the viewplate he could see the fiery veils curling past, whipped like sea-mist over their onrushing bow. Something struck them. The ship jarred and rolled. Brush lightning burned blue inside the bridge room and there was a smell of ozone. But the shield held. The ship rushed on, gaining speed. There were brutal sounds of men in agony. Chane watched Dilullo.

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A second blow struck. Bollard's voice, thick and choking, said, "I don't know, John. Maybe once more."

"Hope for twice," said Dilullo.

Now there was something ahead of them, dark and solid in the glow. A Starwolf cruiser, diving in to block them.

"Their reactions are faster than ours," Dilullo said in a strange half-laughing voice, and drove straight toward it.

Chane was standing now, bent forward, his belly tight and his blood pounding gloriously. He wanted to shout, *Go ahead; do it the Starwolf way! Drive, because they won't believe you have the strength or the guts to do it! Make him step aside; make him give way!*

The next two blows hit them head on. Chane could see them coming, buds of destruction loosed by the Starwolf ship to burst into full bloom against their shield. He could picture the man guiding that ship . . . man, yes, human, yes, but different, shaped by the savage world of Varna to a sleek-furred magnificence of strength and speed . . . the face high-boned, flat-cheeked, smiling, the long slanted eyes, cat-bright with the excitement of the chase. He would be thinking, "They're only men, not Varnans. They'll turn back. They'll turn back."

Somebody was shouting to Dilullo, "Sheer off; you'll crash him!" Several people were shouting. The small cruiser seemed to leap toward them, heading straight for the eyebrow bridge and the viewport. In a couple of seconds they would have it in their laps. The cries reached a peak of hysteria and lapsed into hypnotized silence. Dilullo held course and velocity, so rigidly that Chane wondered if he was dead at his post. The Starwolf cruiser was so close now that he thought he could almost make out the shape of the pilot behind the curved port,

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and he tasted something in his mouth, something coppery, and knew that it was fear.

He thought he saw the face of the Starwolf pilot soften into disbelief, into belated understanding. . . .

In a sudden swerve that would have killed any other living thing, the cruiser went aside past their starboard bow. Chane waited for the grinding crunch of a side-swipe, but there was none.

They were out of the globe, and clear.

The viewport blanked as they passed over into jump velocity, became again a viewscreen. Dilullo leaned back in his chair and looked at Chane, his hard face looking broken in the fireglow, mottled dark in the hollows and squeezed white over the bones.

"Respite," he said. "They'll come again." His voice was harsh and reedy, his lungs laboring for breath.

"But you're alive," said Chane. "It's only when you're dead that there isn't any chance at all." He stared at Dilullo and shook his head. "I've never seen anything better done."

"And you never will," Dilullo said, "until I kill you." He half fell out of the chair, looked at Gomez, shook him, then jerked a thumb at the controls. "Take over while I check the damage."

Chane sat down in the pilot's chair. The ship was slow and heavy under his hands, but it was good to feel any kind of a ship again. He sent it plunging deeper into the nebula, threading the denser clouds where it might be a little harder to follow.

Dilullo came back and took the controls again until Gomez could relieve him. One man was dead, and there were four sickbay cases, including General Markolin. No one but Morgan Chane was in good shape.

They dropped back into normal space in the heart of

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a parsec-long serpent of flame that coiled across a dozen suns.

Bixel, who had had some rest and stopped his nose-bleed, sat watching his radar screen. The men slept. Even Dilullo slept, stretched out on a bench in the bridge room. Chane dozed, while time crept by with a kind of dazed sluggishness . . . so much time that Chane began to hope that the hunters had given up.

But it was only a hope, and it vanished when Bixel pushed the alarm button and cried out over the intercom, "Here they come again."

Well, thought Chane, it was a good try, anyway. A damned good try.

XIV

THE BRIGHT relentless little sparks flew swiftly across the radar screen. Dilullo looked at them, a cold dull sickness at the pit of his stomach. Damn them. Damn Morgan Chane and his own smartness in keeping him alive. If he hadn't kept him . . .

He would be in just as much trouble, Dilullo told himself. The wolfpack was never known to let any promising prey slip through its jaws, and a Merc ship could be carrying anything . . . like, say, a fortune in lightstones for the payroll.

And yet . . .

He looked at Chane through the doorway, sitting quiet in the bridge room, and considered what would happen if he dropped him out of a hatchway, suited and attached to a signal flare.

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He looked at the sparks again, racing towards him, and he was suddenly angry. He was so angry he shook with it, and the cold sickness in him was burned away. Damn these arrogant whelps of Starwolves. He wasn't going to give up anything. Not because he knew it wouldn't stop them anyway, but because he wasn't going to be pushed and knocked around like a little boy unable to defend himself against the big boys. It was too humiliating.

He strode back to the pilot's chair and strapped in, his body protesting in every fiber as he did so. He told it to shut up.

Gomez protested, and he told him to shut up, too.

"But, John, the men can't take any more. Neither can the ship."

"Okay," said Dilullo. "Then let's see to it that there's not one shred of bone or meat left for those wolves to snap their teeth on." He shouted over the intercom to Bollard: "Full power and never mind the shields."

He could see the ships now. Over his shoulder he said to Chane, "Come on up here, where you can get a good view."

Chane stood behind him, against the girder. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to make them destroy us," Dilullo said, and pressed the keys.

The Merc ship leaped forward, toward the oncoming squadron.

Bixel's voice blasted over the intercom. "John, I've got another one, a heavy. A heavy! Coming up on our tail!"

It was a moment before that registered. Dilullo was committed now to angry death, his whole attention fixed on the Starwolf ships. He heard Bixel all right, and he heard others shouting at him, but they were somewhere beyond a wall.

Then Morgan Chane's fingers closed on his shoulder

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in a grip so painful that he couldn't ignore it, and Chane was saying, "Heavy cruiser! It must be Vhollan . . . the guard force Thrandirin talked about. They must have been looking out for us . . . picked us up when we came within range of their probes."

Dilullo's mind broke out of frozen rage and began to work at full speed. "Get a fix!" he snapped to Bixel. "Estimated course and velocity." He looked at the Starwolf ships again, this time with a kind of fiendish pleasure. "Shields up, Bollard! Shields up! We're going to give our Starwolf friends something big to play with. Gomez . . . hit that aft monitor screen."

He could see the formation of little Starwolf ships ahead of him very clearly. It was shaping into a flying U, the wings stretching out almost fondly to enfold him.

Below the viewport a screen flickered to life bringing him a picture of what was behind him. A big starcruiser loomed out of the nebula drift, closing fast. He wondered what the skipper was thinking as he saw and recognized the Starwolf squadron. He thought it must be something of a shock to him, having come after one small Merc ship only to find that the Vhollans' private preserves had been invaded by a much more numerous and deadly enemy.

It must be something of a shock to the Starwolves, too . . . seeing a heavy cruiser where they had expected only an exhausted prey.

The ship-to-ship band sprang to life. A man's voice shouted in sputtering galacto, "Mercs! This is the Vhollan cruiser. Cut power immediately or we'll disable you."

Dilullo opened his transmitter and said, "Dilullo talking. What about the Starwolves?"

"We'll take care of them."

"That's nice," Dilullo said. "Thanks. But may I remind

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you that I have Thrandirin and two generals aboard. I wouldn't want to take any chances with their safety."

"Neither would I," said the Vhollen voice grimly, "but my orders are to stop you first and worry about your hostages second. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Dilullo, and notched his power up two steps. The ship jumped forward and he began to yaw it back and forth so that it ran toward the Starwolves the way a fox runs, never giving a clean target for a shot. It was hard on the ship, hard on the men, but not nearly so hard as the licking force-beam of the cruiser that missed them because of it.

The Starwolf formation was breaking up and scattering, so as not to provide a bunched-up target for the cruiser. It was almost in the nature of an afterthought that they fired at the Merc ship. It bucked and rolled twice as the missiles impacted on its screen, and then it was through the squadron, going away and going fast, and the monitor screen showed behind him the big Vhollan cruiser and the Starwolf ships locked in battle, the swift wicked little ships darting and snapping at the huge heavy like dogs around a bear.

Dilullo glanced up and saw Chane's black eyes fixed upon the monitor, his expression both relieved and regretful.

Dilullo said, "I'm sorry we can't stay around to see who wins."

The battle faded, left behind in the glowing mists, and then even the mists were left behind as the Merc ship climbed into overdrive.

Chane said, with a ring of pride he could not quite conceal, "They'll keep that heavy busy, all right. It has the weight, but they have the speed. They won't try to crush it . . . but if nobody else interrupts, they'll just sting it to death."

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"I hope they all have fun," said Dilullo edgedly. and spoke into the intercom. "Bixel, did you get an ECV?"

"I'm feeding it into the computer now. I'll have the backtrack in a minute."

They waited. Dilullo saw that Chane was studying him with a new expression . . . what would you call it? Respect? Admiration?

"You were really going to do it," Chane said. "Make them destroy us so they couldn't get anything."

"These Starwolves," said Dilullo, "are too sure of themselves. Somebody, someday, is going to stand up and surprise the life out of them."

Chane said, "I wouldn't have believed that once, but now I'm not so sure."

"Here it is," said Gomez, the computer tape chattering out under his hand.

Gomez studied the tape and set up a pattern on the sky-board. "Extrapolating from estimated course and velocity, the cruiser probably came from this area." He punched the identifying coordinates and a microchart slid over the magnification lens and filled the area bounded by the pattern. Dilullo leaned over to study it.

The area was part of the coiled fire-snake, that part that might be likened to the head. At about the place where a parsecs-long fire-snake might have an eye, there was a star. A green star, with five planetary bodies, only one of which was large enough to be rightfully called a planet.

Dilullo became aware of somebody looking over his shoulder. It was Bollard, his round face still placid in spite of some ugly blotches that might be bruises or burst veins.

"Everything okay in engineering?" Dilullo asked.

"All okay. Though we don't deserve it."

"Then I suppose we'd better have a look at that."

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Bollard frowned at the green star, the baleful eye of the fire-snake.

"Might or might not be the place, John."

"We'll never know till we look, will we?"

"I won't even answer that. Do you think you can sneak in behind that cruiser while it's busy with our Starwolf friends?"

"I can try."

"Sure you can try. But don't get too biggity just because you bulled down a Starwolf. One cruiser found us, but if one cruiser was all they had on guard they'd never have sent it away to look. There must be another one waiting planetside, watching to see if we slip by. And they'll know by now that we have."

"Thanks, Bollard," said Dilullo. "Now go back down and encourage your drive-units."

He set the course for the green sun.

They dropped back into normal space dangerously near to a band of drift between the two little outer worlds of the system of the green star, and they hid there, pretending to be an asteroid circling lazily with all the others in the misty, curdled light, the thick nebula gases glowing icy green here instead of the warm gold around the yellow stars. It made Dilullo feel cold and oddly claustrophobic. He found himself gasping for breath and wondered what was the matter with him, and then he remembered how once when he was a child he had lain drowning at the bottom of a pool of still green water.

He shook the nightmare away, reminding himself that his father had come in time to save him, but that Daddy wasn't here now and it was up to him.

He went into the navigation room to check with Bixel. There was a lot of clutter on the long-range probe scan-

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ner screen. It took a while to sort things out, but there was no doubt about the result.

"Another heavy cruiser," Bixel said. "On station by the planet, flying an intercept patrol pattern. We haven't got a chance of getting past him."

"Well," said Dilullo, "at least we know we're in the right place."

He went back into the bridge room, shoving past Bollard in the doorway. Bollard said, "What now?"

"Give me five minutes to think up a brilliant plan," Dilullo said.

Chane beckoned to him. He was standing beside Rutledge at the radio control center. Rutledge had opened the ship-to-ship channel, and Dilullo could hear voices crackling back and forth in Vhollan.

"That's the two cruisers—the one fighting the Starwolves and the one at the planet ahead," Chane said. "They're doing an awful lot of talking." He smiled, and again there was that touch of pride only half hidden. "They sound pretty upset."

"They have a right to be," said Dilullo. "Not only us invading their privacy, but a flock of Starwolves. Go get Thrandirin up here. He can translate."

Chane went out. Dilullo listened to the voices. They did sound upset, and increasingly so. Because he had made the relatively short jump in overdrive, the actual lapse of time since they left the battle was not great, and it sounded as though it was still going on . . . the two cruiser captains were shouting back and forth at each other now, and Dilullo grinned.

"Sounds like one of 'em is yelling for help and the other one is telling him he can't come."

He fell silent as Chane came in with Thrandirin. He watched the Vhollan's face, saw his expression change as he heard the heated voices on the radio.

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"The Starwolves are giving your cruiser a hard time, aren't they?" he asked.

Thrandirin nodded.

"Will the one at the planet go to help him?"

"No. The orders are quite clear. One cruiser is to remain on station at all times, regardless of what happens."

The voices on the radio stopped yelling and one of them said something in a cold, hard matter-of-fact tone. After that there was a silence. Dilullo watched Thrandirin's face, not unaware of Chane standing behind the Vhollan with a half-smile on his mouth and his ears pricked forward.

The second voice answered in what sounded like a brief affirmative. He could almost see the face of the man making it, a man heavily burdened with decision. And Thrandirin said angrily, "No!"

"What did they say?" asked Dilullo.

Thrandirin shook his head. Dilullo said, "Well, if you won't tell us we'll wait and see."

They waited. There was no more talk from the radio. The bridge room was quite silent. Everybody stood or sat like statues, not sure what it was they waited for. Then Bixel's voice came sharply over the intercom.

"John! The one at the planet is breaking out of pattern."

"Is he coming this way?"

"No. Heading off at an angle of fourteen degrees, with twice that much azimuth. Going fast." And then Bixel cried, "He's jumped into overdrive. I've lost him."

"Now," Dilullo said to Thrandirin. "What did they say?"

Thrandirin looked at him with weary hatred. "He has gone to help the other cruiser against the Starwolves. He had to make a choice . . . and he decided that they were a far greater threat than you."

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"Not very complimentary to us," said Dilullo. "But I won't quarrel, since it leaves the planet clear."

"Yes, it does," said Thrandirin. "Go ahead and land. There's no one to stop you now. And when our cruisers have finished with the Starwolves, they'll come back and catch you on the ground and stamp you flat."

Bollard said, "For once I agree with him, John."

"Yes," said Dilullo, "so do I. You want to turn back now?"

"What?" said Bollard. "And waste all the trouble that we've been through?"

He hurried off to his drive-units. Chane, full of private laughter, took Thrandirin away.

Dilullo took the Merc ship out of the drift and full speed in toward the planet.

XV

IT WOULD have been easier, Dilullo thought, if they knew what they were looking for. But they didn't, and they didn't even know how long they had to look for it, except that it might not be long enough. Dilullo had found a chance to speak to Chane alone.

"What's your guess? You know them; you've been in actions like that before. How will it go?"

Chane had said, "The Starwolves are fearless, but not brainless. One heavy cruiser they would gamble with, and as you heard, they had it in so much trouble its captain was screaming for help. But two heavy cruisers . . . no. Even without the losses they must have had, that's too much weight for them. They'll pull out."

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"Out of the fight? Or out entirely?"

Chane shrugged. "If Ssander were still calling the turns, it would be entirely. The squadron's been away from Varna for a long time, much longer than it planned to be. It's run into trouble it wasn't expecting and can't handle . . . two heavies. Ssander would have balanced the knife . . . the killing end against the head . . . and reckoned that it was wiser to live and let vengeance wait until tomorrow. I think they'll go." He smiled. "And when they do, those two cruisers will be back here in a hurry to clean up their less important problem."

"Don't forget that you're part of that problem," Dilullo reminded him.

Now the Merc ship scudded low across the curve of the planet . . . lower than Dilullo liked. But the atmosphere was oddly thick, muffling the little world in an almost impenetrable curtain. After he got down through it far enough he understood what made it that way. The world seemed to consist of one vast dust storm, whipped and driven by tremendous winds. Where he could see it, the surface was all rolling dunes and rock. In some places the dunes had flowed over the ridges and the stiff reaching pinnacles; in others the rocks were high and strong enough to hold back the dunes, and in the lees of these grotesquely eroded walls were long smooth plains, showing a darker color than the piled dunes. Dilullo was not exactly sure what that color was. The sand, or dust, might have been anything from light tan to red, back on Earth, but under the green sun the colors were distorted and strange, as though a child had been perversely puddling them together to see what ugly muddiness he could invent.

"Not exactly a place you'd pick for looks," said Dilullo.

Gomez uttered something uncomplimentary in Spanish, and Chane, who was haunting the bridge room again

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and peering over their shoulders, laughed and said, "If someone wanted to hide something where nobody would be likely to look for it, this would be the place."

Bollard's voice came over the intercom from engineering. "See anything yet?" When Dilullo told him no, he said, "We'd better get lucky pretty soon, John. Those cruisers will be back."

"I'm praying," Dilullo said. "That's the best I can do right now."

They swept over the night side, peering for lights; seeing none, they headed into a dawn that flushed chartreuse and copper sulphate instead of rose. Beyond the dawn, where the sun was high, a range of black peaks rose out of the dunes, their buttressed shoulders fighting back the waves of sand. On the other side of the range—the lee side protected from the prevailing wind, on a fan-shaped plain as smooth as a girl's cheek—was the thing they were looking for.

At the moment he saw it Dilullo knew it could not have been anything else; that, in fact, subconsciously, he had known what it would be, ever since Chane came back from the Vhollan warehouse with the pictures and the analyzer disc that registered nothing.

It was a ship. His brain told him it couldn't be a ship, it was too colossal, but his eyes saw it and it was.

A ship like nothing he had ever seen before or even dreamed of. A ship so huge it could never have been launched from any planet; it must have been built in space, taking shape in some nameless void under the hands and eyes of Lord knew what creators, a floating world alone and free, without binding sun or sister planets. A world, long and dark and self-enclosed, and not designed to stay forever in one fixed orbit, but intended to voyage freely in the vastness of all creation. This far it had voyaged. And here it lay, beached at last on this

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wretched world, its massive frame broken, lost, dead and lonely, half buried in the alien sand.

Chane said softly, "So that's what they were hiding."

"Where did it come from?" Gomez said. "Not from any world I know."

"A ship that size was never built just to run between the worlds we know," said Dilullo. "There isn't any technology in our galaxy that could have built it. It came from outside somewhere. Andromeda, perhaps . . . or even further."

"I don't think that that thing was ever supposed to land on any planet . . . and if that is so, the pull of gravity would be enough stress to break it," Chane said.

"Look!" interrupted Dilullo. "They've sighted us."

There was a small huddle of metal-and-plastic domes at the foot of the cliffs. Men started running out of them as the Merc ship came down lower. Other men appeared out of the broken side of the monster ship, ants crawling from the carcass of a giant that had overleaped the dark gulf between the island universes and had killed itself in the leaping.

Dilullo spoke sharply over the intercom to the whole company. "We move as soon as we land. I think these men are specialists, civilians, but some of them may put up a fight, and there may be a guard force. Use stunners and don't kill unless you have to. Bollard . . ."

"Yes, John!"

"Man the assault chamber and cover us. After we have secured the position, we'll establish a defense perimeter around both ships as fast as we can. I'm going to land as close as I can to the big one. The cruisers won't be able to clobber us with their heavy weapons without damaging the big one, and I don't think they want to do that. Pick what men you need, Bollard. Okay, we're going in."

Then the Merc ship was down on the green-umber

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plain, with the massive ragged flank of the alien craft looming up beside them like a mountain range of metal. Dilullo cracked the lock and went out through it at the head of the Mercs, with Chane running easily at his shoulder like a good dog. The Vhollan specialists, much alarmed, were running about and doing a lot of shouting but not much else. They were not going to be a problem, Dilullo thought, and then he saw the other men.

There were about twenty of them, white-haired Vhollans in uniform tunics, looking ghastly in the green glow. They seemed to have come out of the great ship. Perhaps they lived in it, guarding it even from their own people so that no unsupervised act could occur, no unauthorized fragment of material be removed unseen. These men had lasers, and they moved with a nasty professional precision, heading straight for the Mercs.

Bollard let go with a round of gas shells from the ship. The Merc ships did not carry much heavy armament, since they were primarily transports designed to get the men to where the action was. But they did often have to land or take off in areas of intense hostility, and so they carried some weaponry, chiefly defensive. The non-lethal gas shells were very effective at breaking up offensive group action.

The Vhollan soldiers coughed and reeled around with their hands over their eyes. Most of them dropped their lasers on the first round because they could not see to shoot and were therefore likely only to kill each other. The second round took care of the laggards. Mercs with breathing masks completed the disarming and rounding up. Others had the civilians in hand and were looking into the domes for a place to put them.

"Well," said Chane, "that was easy enough."

Dilullo grunted.

"You don't look very happy about it."

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"In this business things don't come easy," Dilullo said. "If they do, you generally wind up paying for it later on." He looked up at the sky. "I'd give a lot to know how soon those cruisers will be back."

Chane did not answer that, and neither did the sky. Dilullo got busy with Bollard, driving the Mercs to set up the defense perimeter, hauling out every weapon they had, including the samples, and setting men with power tools to make emplacements for them, blasting pits in the sand. Other men brought out the siege-fences of lightweight hard-alloy sections that had been useful to the Mercs on many hostile worlds, and set them up. They worked fast, sweating, and all the time Dilullo kept watching the sky.

It was an ugly sky, murky and dull. The sun looked like a drowned man's face . . . there was that drowning symbol again . . . glowing with sickly phosphorescence through the dust and the nebula gas. It stayed empty. The wind blew. They were screened from the full force of it here by the cliff wall, but it made screaming noises overhead, ripping past the pinnacles of dark rock with furious determination. A fine spray of sand drifted down, into the eyes and ears and mouth, down the collar, sticking and grating on the sweaty skin.

Dilullo was versed in strange worlds, in the taste and feel of the air, the sensation of the ground under his feet. This one was cold and gritty, sharp-edged, unwelcoming, and, though the air was breathable, it had a bitter smell. Dilullo did not like this world. It had turned away from the task of spawning life, preferring to spend its eons in selfish barrenness.

Nothing had ever lived here. But something, someone, for some reason, had come here to die.

Bollard reported to him at last that the perimeter was established and fully manned. Dilullo turned and looked

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up at the mountainous riven hulk looming above them. Even in the heat of preparation he had been conscious of it, not only as a physical thing but as a spiritual one, an alienness, a mystery, a coldness at the heart and a deep excitement hot and flaring in the nerves.

"Is Bixel manning the radar?"

"Yes. So far, nothing."

"Keep in close touch and don't let him get sleepy. Chane . . ."

"Yes?"

"Find out which one of those specialists is in charge of the project and bring him to me."

"Where'll you be?"

Dilullo took a deep breath and said, "In there."

The Vhollans had jury-rigged a hatchway in one of the broken places in the great ship's side. Other rents in the metal fabric had been covered with sheets of tough plastic to keep out the wind and the sifting dust.

Dilullo climbed the gritty steps to the hatchway and went through it, into another world.

XVI

CHANE WALKED under the loom of the great ship, toward the dome where the Vhollans were being held. He was not thinking of either one at the moment. He was thinking of two heavy cruisers and a squadron of Starwolves, somewhere out beyond that curdled sky . . . wondering how the battle went, and who had died.

He did not like this feeling of being all torn up inside. He hated the Starwolves, he wanted them dead, he knew they would kill him without mercy, and yet . . .

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Those hours on the Merc ship had been some of the hardest of his life. It was all wrong to have to fight your own kind and cheer on the man that was beating them because you told him how. Chane could never remember a time when things had not been simple and uncomplicated for him; he was a Starwolf, he was proud and strong, full member of a brotherhood, and the galaxy was a glorious place full of plunder and excitement, all theirs to do with as they wished.

Now, because his brothers had turned against him, he was forced to herd with the sheep, and that was bad enough, but the worst of it was he was beginning to like one of them. Dilullo was only human but he did have guts. No Starwolf could have done better. It hurt Chane to say it, even to himself, but it was true.

Damn. And what were they doing out there, those swift little ships biting and tearing at the cruiser? They had it in bad trouble, that was certain, or the second cruiser would never have gone. Chane smiled with unregenerate pride. The Vhollans had handed this world to the Mercs on a silver platter, rather than run the risk of the Starwolves breaking through.

One heavy cruiser the Starwolves could handle. But not two. *I should be out there, he thought, helping you, instead of being glad the cruiser held you and hoping the second one will blast you to atoms.*

As they would probably blast him and Dilullo and the rest of the Mercs when they came back.

Well, that would take care of his problems, anyway. He despised all this prying about inside himself, trying to sort out emotions he had never been forced to feel before. So the devil with it.

The dome was before him and he went in. The Vhollans were penned together in what seemed to be a lounge or common room, under the watchful eyes and

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ready stun-guns of four of the Mercs, headed by Sekkinen. It took a few minutes to cut through the half-hysterical gabble after Chane explained to Sekkinen what Dilullo wanted, and began questioning the civilians in galacto. Eventually they came out with a lean, studious-looking Vhollan in a rumpled blue tunic who stared at the Mercs with a superciliousness mixed with the fright of the scholar confronted suddenly by large and violent men. He admitted that his name was Labdibdin, and that he was chief of the research project.

"But," he added, "I wish to make clear that I will not cooperate with you in any way whatever."

Chane shrugged. "You can talk to Dilullo about that."

"Don't lose him," said Sekkinen.

"I won't lose him." Chane took Labdibdin's arm, and he put his strength into the grip so that the Vhollan winced in pain and then looked at Chane, startled by such strength in a human grasp. Chane smiled at him and said, "We won't have any trouble. Come along with me."

The Vhollan came. He walked stiffly ahead of Chane, out of the dome and back over the cold sand, under the tremendous sagging belly of the ship. The thing must be a mile long, Chane thought, and a quarter that high . . . it was quite obvious now that it had never been intended to land.

He began to be excited, wondering about the ship, where it had come from, and why, and what was in it. The keen Starwolf nose scented loot.

Then he remembered that Dilullo was running this show, and his ardor cooled, for Dilullo had all those odd ideas about ethics and property.

He pushed the Vhollan with unnecessary force up the steps and through the hatchway.

A gangway bridged a twenty-foot gap of empty dark-

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ness that went down deep below the level of the sand, into the bowels of the ship. At the end of the gangway was a transverse corridor running fore and aft, as far as Chane could see in both directions. Worklights had been rigged by the Vhollan technicians. They shed a cold and meager glare, unfitting to the place, like matches in the belly of Jonah's whale. They showed the sheathing plates of the corridor to be the same pale-gold metal he had seen in the warehouse back on Vhol. It must have had great tensile strength, because it was relatively undamaged, buckled here and there but not broken. The whole corridor tilted slightly, the floor running unevenly uphill and down. Even so, the floor-plates were not shattered.

The inward wall was pierced by doorways set at intervals of fifty feet or so. Chane went through the nearest one.

And found himself perched like a bird in the high midst of what looked like a cosmic museum.

He had no way of estimating the space it occupied. It went high overhead and far below, deep down beyond the level of the sand outside, and on either hand it stretched away into dimness, lit here and there by the inadequate worklights.

He stood on a narrow gallery. Above and below there were further galleries, and from them sprang a web-work of walks that spanned the vast area spider-fashion, all interconnected vertically by a system of caged lifts. The lifts and the walks were designed to give access to all levels of the enormous stacks that filled the place, marching in orderly rows almost like the buildings of some fantastic city. The pale-gold metal from which they and the walkways had been constructed had again proved its toughness; the original perfect symmetry had gone with the inevitable buckling and twisting, walks

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were skewed and stacks leaned out of true, and probably there was damage he couldn't see, farther down, but on the whole it had survived.

And there was enough rich plunder here to keep four generations of Starwolves happy.

Chane said to Labdibdin, in a voice hushed with awe, "These must have been the greatest looters in the universe."

Labdibdin looked at him with utter scorn. "Not looters. Scientists. Collectors of knowledge."

"Oh," said Chane. "I see. It all depends on who does it."

He moved forward along the canted walk, clinging to the rail and urging Labdibdin ahead of him. The transparent windows of the nearest stack showed only an imperfect view of what was inside. The tough plastic had cracked and starred in places. But there was a way in from the walk. He scrambled through it and stood in a large room crammed with cushioned cases.

Cases of stones: Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, precious and semi-precious stones from all over the galaxy. And mixed with them were other stones, chunks of granite and basalt and sandstone and marble and many more he couldn't name. All stones. All together.

Cases of artifacts: Curved blades of silversteel from the Hercules markets, with fine-wrought hilts, and crude axes from some backward world; needles and pins and pots and buckets and chased gold helmets with jeweled crests, belt-buckles and rings, hammers and saws . . . bewilderment.

"This is only a tiny sample," said Labdibdin. "Apparently they meant to classify later on, when they would have plenty of time . . . probably on the homeward voyage."

"Homeward where?" asked Chane.

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With a look of strange uneasiness, Labdibdin said, "We're not sure."

Chane reached out and touched one of the cases that held the jewels. The plastic cover was cold under his fingers but he could feel the heat of the red and green and many-colored stones like a physical burning.

Labdibdin permitted himself a bitter smile.

"The cases were power-operated. You passed a hand, so, over this small lens, and the lid opened. There is no power now. You'd have to blow it open."

"Impractical, right now," said Chane, and sighed. "We might as well find Dilullo."

They found him without trouble, a little farther along, looking at a collection of boxes of dirt. Just plain dirt, as far as Chane could see.

"Soil samples," said Labdibdin. "There are many such, and collections of plants, and samples of water, and minerals, and gases . . . atmospheres, we suppose, from all the worlds they touched. Endless artifacts of all sorts. . . ."

"What about weapons?" Dilullo asked.

"There were some weapons among the artifacts they collected, but the sophisticated ones were permanently disarmed. . . ."

Dilullo said, "Don't play vague with me. I don't care what they collected. I'm only interested in their own weapons, the weapons of this ship."

Labdibdin set his jaw and answered, biting his words off one at a time as though he hated them: "We have not found any weapons in this ship, except the useless articles in the specimen cases."

"I can't blame you for lying," said Dilullo. "You wouldn't want to give us a weapon to use against your own people. But half the Cluster is talking about what

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you have here . . . the super-weapon that's going to conquer Kharal. . . ."

A faint pinkness crept into Labdibdin's cheeks, the nearest thing to a flush that Chane had seen in these marble-skinned people. His fists clenched and he pounded them up and down on the railing in a kind of desperation.

"Weapons," he said. "Weapons." His voice choked. "My own people keep pushing and pushing and pushing, wanting me to find weapons for them, and there aren't any! There is not a sign of a weapon in this ship. There is no record of a weapon of any kind. *The Krii did not use weapons!* I keep telling them that and they will not believe . . ."

"The Krii?"

"The . . . people who built this ship." He shook his hand in a wild gesture intended to take in all the collection stacks. "In all these, in *all* of them, there is not one single specimen of a living thing, not a bird, not an animal, not a fish nor an insect. They didn't take life. I'll show you something."

He went away from them, half running. Dilullo looked at Chane. They both shrugged, puzzled by the man's violence, not at all believing what he said.

"Keep a close eye on him," Dilullo muttered, and they ran after the Vhollan, Dilullo a bit slowly on the canted metal walk—it was a long way down—Chane skipping lightly on Labdibdin's heels.

He led them to a service lift, rigged by the Vhollans and run by a portable generator. They got into it and it dropped them rattling down and down, past level after level of the stacks with the bits and pieces of a galaxy hoarded in them. Then it stopped and Labdibdin led them forward into a great oblong chamber that had obviously been a coordinating center for the ship and

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was now serving the same purpose for the Vhollan technicians.

Some of the original furniture was still there, though the Vhollans had moved in a few sketchy conveniences. It gave Chane a start when he looked at it. The height of a table made him feel like a child in grown-up land, but the contoured chairs that went with it were too narrow to accommodate even his lean bottom. No wonder the Vhollans had brought their own.

He saw the smooth-worn places on the chairs and table, the many subtle marks of use. Here someone or something had sat and worked, manipulating a built-in mechanism of some sort with banks of keys that were not intended for human fingers, had worn the keys smooth and bright, and worn a deep hollow in the unidentifiable padding of the chair.

"How long?" asked Chane. "I mean, how long would they have been on the ship?"

"That's a silly question," Labdibdin answered tartly. "How long is long? By their reckoning or ours? Years or decades, or perhaps only months. And I wish I knew. I wish I knew! Look here."

He stood in front of a pedestal, quite high, made from the pale-gold metal. It had a console in front with an intricate arrangement of keys. "It has its own power-unit, independent of the ship," he said, and stretched his hand out to it.

Chane laid his own hand on the back of Labdibdin's neck and said softly, "I can snap it between my fingers. So be careful."

"Oh, don't be a fool," snarled Labdibdin. "Weapons, weapons! You're the same as they are at Vhol; it's all you think of."

A shimmering appeared in the air above the pedestal.

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Labdibdin turned to Dilullo and demanded, "Will you allow me to proceed?"

Dilullo was watching everything, the Vhollan, the room, Chane, the array of unfamiliar and unguessable articles ranged here and there for study. He seemed to be watching outside the ship as well, picturing the ugly green sky in his mind and wondering when the cruisers would appear in it. He seemed to be listening for something, beyond the great engulfing silence of the ship.

He nodded to Chane, who stepped back. Labdibdin, muttering, picked up a pair of very odd gloves with long slender rods curving out from some of the fingers. He pulled them on and began pecking delicately at the console keys.

A three-dimensional image took shape in the shimmer on top of the pedestal. Chane stared at it and asked, "What is the thing?"

"You're an Earthman and you don't know?" Labdibdin said. "It's keyed from there."

Dilullo said, "It's a species of bird on Earth. But what's the purpose of this demonstration?"

Labdibdin snarled, "To prove what I was saying. The Krii did not take life, not of anything. They collected images only."

He pecked with the rods at the console. In quick succession images appeared and vanished . . . insects, fish, worms, spiders. Labdibdin shut the instrument off and turned, flinging his gloves away. He looked at Chane and Dilullo, a haggard, harried man beneath his scholarly arrogance.

"I wish to heaven somebody would believe me. There seems to have been some kind of a defensive system, a powerful screen that they could use to project the ship. We couldn't get it to work."

Dilullo shook his head. "It wouldn't work here, even if

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you had the power for it. A screen works in space but not when a ship has landed . . . the force is instantly grounded and dissipated."

Labdibdin said, "That's what our technicians said. But anyway, one thing is sure . . . the Krii did not use offensive weapons!"

Chane shook his head. "That just isn't possible."

"I'm beginning to believe him," said Dilullo. "The Krii, you called them? You've deciphered their records, obviously."

"Some of them," Labdibdin admitted. "I have the best philologists on Vhol here, working themselves into breakdowns. I tell you, they've pushed us and pushed us until we're all ready to drop, insisting that we come up with what they want, something to knock a world apart with. They don't seem to care half as much about the ship itself . . . or the real knowledge we might gain from it." He ran his hand lovingly over the table edge. "Stuff from another galaxy, another universe. A different atomic table . . . totally alien life-forms . . . what we could learn! But we have to waste time with all research oriented toward finding the weapons that don't exist. We're going to lose so much. . . ."

"Another galaxy," said Dilullo. "Different atomic table . . . I made a pretty good guess. How much do you know about these . . . Krii?"

"They were devoted to learning. Apparently they had embarked on a project to study all of creation . . . one guesses at other ships in yet other galaxies, performing the same task of collecting samples. Their technological level must be unbelievably high."

"Still, they crashed."

"Not quite. A crash landing, rather . . . and of course this ship was never meant to land. Something happened. The relevant parts of the ship are pretty well

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demolished, and the records relating to the crash naturally very brief and sketchy, but it seems obvious there was an explosion in one of their power-cells, which damaged their life-support system so extensively they could not hope to make the voyage home. Of course nothing in this galaxy would do them any good in the way of substitute or repair. They seem to have chosen this world deliberately, because it is isolated and uninhabited, well hidden in the nebula . . . and it was only by the merest accident that a Vhollan prospector looking for rare metals happened to find it."

"Suitable place for a graveyard," said Dilullo. "Did you find any bodies of the Krii in the wreck?"

"Oh, yes," said Labdibdin. "Yes, indeed, we found a number of them." He looked at Dilullo with haunted eyes and added, "The only thing is . . . they don't seem to be dead."

XVII

THEY WERE DEEP in the very heart of the ship, walking down a long corridor with their footsteps ringing hollow from the metal vault, echoing away behind them to be lost in silence. The lights were sparse here, with long dim intervals between.

"We don't come here very often," said Labdibdin. He spoke very softly, as though he were anxious not to be heard by anyone or anything but the two Earthmen. From his first bristling hostility, the Vhollan had softened to an astonishing degree.

He's a driven man, Dilullo thought. It's a relief to him

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to talk to anyone, even us . . . to break that stifling bond of secrecy. He's been imprisoned here for too long a time, practically entombed in this ship with . . . with whatever I am about to see, which is enough to make his shoulders droop and his knees give way a little with every step. He's ready to crack, and small wonder.

The footsteps sounded indecently loud in Dilullo's ears, and somehow dangerous. He was acutely conscious of the silence around him, the vast dark bulk of the ship that enclosed him. He saw his own smallness: an insect creeping in the bowels of an alien mountain. What was worse, he felt like an intruding insect, impertinently making free with someone, or something, else's property.

Dilullo wondered what Chane was thinking. He didn't give much away. Those bright black eyes seemed always to be the same, alert to every sensation, interested in everything, but never introspective. Perhaps that was a better way to go through life, just taking everything as it came, day to day, minute to minute, never worrying and never trying to get beneath the simple outward surface of things. It was when you got to thinking that things became complicated.

Or was Chane really as matter-of-fact as he always seemed? Dilullo suddenly doubted it.

Labdibdin held up his hand. "We're almost there," he whispered. "Please go carefully."

The smooth floor and sheathing of the corridor became a series of overlapping collars. "To take up shock," Labdibdin said, making a telescoping motion with his hands. "The chamber is mounted in a web of flexible supports, so that almost nothing short of complete annihilation of the ship could harm it."

Dilullo went carefully, lifting his feet high so as not to stumble.

There was a doorway, open, and more of the dim

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Vhollan lights beyond. The doorway was exceedingly tall and narrow. Dilullo stepped through it, his shoulders rubbing on both sides.

He had some idea of what he was going to see. And yet he was not prepared at all for what he saw.

Beside him Chane uttered a Varnan oath, and his hand strayed automatically to his stunner.

If he were truly a wolf, Dilullo thought, he would be snarling with his ears flat and his hackles up and his tail tucked under his belly. And I feel like that right now, myself . . . or perhaps, more accurately, I feel like a shivering ape-ling huddled in the night while Fear stalks past.

Because these things were Fear. Not rational fear, which is a survival mechanism. No. This was the blind and mindless fear that cringes in the flesh, the xenophobic shrinking of the protoplasm from what is utterly alien and strange.

He could see why the Vhollans did not come here often to visit the Krii.

There were perhaps a hundred of them. They sat in orderly rows, each one upright in a high and narrow chair, in something of the attitude of the old Pharaohs: the nether limbs close together, the upper ones, with the long delicate appendages that served them for fingers, resting on the arms of the chairs. They wore only a simple drapery, and their bodies had the appearance of dark amber, not only in color but in substance, and in form they might have been either animal or vegetable, or a combination of the two, or a third something that defied analysis in the terms of this galaxy. They were very tall, very slender, and they seemed to have neither joints nor muscles but to flow all together like the ribboned weed that sways in tidewater pools.

Their faces consisted mostly of two big opalescent

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eyes set in a tall narrow head. There were breathing slits at the sides of the head, and a small puckered mouth that seemed pursed in eternal contemplation.

The eyes were wide open and they seemed to stare, all one hundred pairs of them, straight into Dilullo's heart.

He turned to Labdibdin, to get away from that staring, and he said, "What makes you think they're not dead? They look petrified."

But in his bones he knew that Labdibdin was right.

"Because," answered Labdibdin, "one of the records we deciphered was a message sent by them *after* they crash-landed here. It gave the coordinates of this system, and it said"—he ran his tongue nervously over his lips, looking sidelong at the rows of eyes—"it said they would wait."

"You mean they . . . sent for help?"

"It would seem so."

"And they said they'd wait?" asked Chane. "Looks to me as though help never came and they waited too long." He had gotten over his first shock and decided the things were harmless. He went to examine one more closely. "Didn't you ever dissect one, or do any tests, to make sure?"

"Try touching it," Labdibdin said. "Go ahead. Try."

Chane put his hand out tentatively. It stopped in mid-air some eighteen inches from the body of the Krii, and Chane caught it away, shaking it. "Cold!" he said. "No, not really cold . . . icy and tingling. What is it?"

"Stasis," Labdibdin said. "Each chair is a self-contained unit with its own power supply. Each occupant is enclosed in a force-field that freezes it in space and time . . . a little warp-bubble wrapped around it like a cocoon, impenetrable. . . ."

"Isn't there any way to shut it off?"

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"No. The mechanism is self-encapsulating. This was a survival system, very carefully constructed and thought out. In a stasis field they require no air, and no sustenance, because time is slowed to a stop and their metabolic processes along with it. They can wait forever if they have to, and be safe. Nothing can get at them, or harm them in any way. Not that we wanted to harm them." Labdibdin looked at the Krii, hungering. "To talk to them, to study them, to know how they think and function. I've been hoping . . ."

He stopped, and Dilullo asked him, "Hoping what?"

"Our best mathematicians and astronomers have been trying to work out some kind of a time-factor. That is, to translate *their* time of transmission of the call for help and *their* estimate of how long it would take the rescue ship to reach them. It isn't at all easy, and our people have come up with four possible dates for the arrival of the rescue ship. One of them is . . . approximately now."

Dilullo shook his head. "This is all going a little too fast for me. I have an intergalactic ship, then I have its whole crew sitting here staring at me, and now I have another intergalactic ship on the way. And it might be coming, like now?"

"We don't *know*," said Labdibdin despairingly. "It's only one of four estimates, and a 'now' might mean yesterday or tomorrow or next year. But that's the reason Vhol has been pushing us so hard here, just in case. . . . For myself, I've been hoping it would come while we're here, hoping I'd have a chance to talk to them."

Chane smiled. "Don't you think they'll be angry when they find you've been meddling with their belongings?"

"Probably," Labdibdin said. "But their scientists. I think they'd understand . . . not the weapons part, but

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the rest of it, the wanting to know. I think they'd understand that we *had* to meddle."

Again he was silent, and very sad. "This whole thing has been a terrible waste," he said. "Rushed and hurried and all for the wrong objectives. The only chance we'll ever have in my lifetime, certainly, to learn even a little about another galaxy, and the stupid bureaucrats back on Vhol can't think of anything except their piddling little war with Kharal."

Chane shrugged. "Everybody has his own idea of what's important. The Kharalis would be more interested in knowing that there isn't a super-weapon out here than they would be in learning about fifty galaxies."

"The Kharalis," said Labdibdin, "are a narrow and ignorant lot."

"They are that," Chane said, and turned to Dilullo. "The Krii aren't being much help either. Don't you think we'd better get back up?"

Dilullo nodded. He took one more look at the ranks of the not-dead but not-alive creatures, sitting so patiently in hope of their resurrection, and he thought that their alienness went deeper than the matter of form or even substance. He couldn't quite analyze what he meant by that, and then he thought, *It's their faces. Not the features. The expression. The look of utter calm. Those faces have never known passion of any kind.*

"Do you see it too?" Labdibdin said. "I think the specie must have evolved in a gentle environment, where it had no enemies and no need to fight for survival. They haven't *conquered* anything . . . I mean in themselves. They haven't suffered and learned and turned away from violence to seek a better path. It just was never in them. Love isn't in them either, by the way, judging from their records. They seem to be completely without

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visceral emotions of any kind, so they can be good with absolutely no trouble at all. It makes me wonder if their whole galaxy is different from ours, without all the natural violences that obtain on our planets . . . climatic changes, drought, flood, famine, all the things that made us fighters in the beginning and gave us survival as the victor's crown . . . or whether the world of the Krii was an isolated case."

"As a human I have to stick with my visceral emotions. They may make us a lot of trouble but they're also all what makes life worth living. I don't think I envy the Krii too much," Dilullo said.

Chane laughed and said, "I don't want to be irreverent, but our dead look more alive than they do. Let's go. I'm tired of being stared at."

They went, back along the hollow-ringing corridor, and this time Dilullo had a queer cold prickling at his back, as though the hundred pairs of eyes still watched, piercing through metal and dim light to follow him.

How they must have wondered, studying the strange wild natives of this star-jungle, the lovers, the killers, the saints, the sufferers, the triumphant damned.

"I don't think it means very much," he said suddenly, "to *not* do something, unless you've wanted very much to do it."

"That's because you're human," said Labdibdin. "And to a human, perfect peace is as good as death. The organism decays."

"Yes," said Chane, with such vehemence that Dilullo was startled into smiling.

"He doesn't mean just war, you know. There are other kinds of fighting."

"Right. But to a flower, say, or a tree—"

The tiny transceiver in Dilullo's pocket-flap spoke

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with Bollard's voice. "John," it said. "Bixel's got those two blips on his radar."

"Coming," said Dilullo, and sighed. "What price perfect peace?"

XVIII

LABDIBDIN HAD BEEN sent back to the domes with another Merc, and Chane sat in the bridge room waiting to know why Dilullo had wanted him here instead of on what was presently going to be the firing line. Through the door of the navigation room he could see Bixel hunched over his radar screen, following the approach of the cruisers. Rutledge was handling the ship-to-ship radio. Dilullo and the captain of one of the Vhollan cruisers were talking on it.

The Vhollan's voice came in loud and clear. *Senior captain*, Chane thought, *with spit, polish, and efficiency crackling in every word of his bad galacto.*

"I will offer you this one chance to surrender. Your only other alternative, as you must realize, is death. I surely don't have to point out to you the hopelessness of fighting two heavy cruisers."

"Then why do it?" said Dilullo dryly. "Supposing I did surrender? What would the terms be?"

"You would be returned to Vhol for trial."

"Uh huh," said Dilullo. "It would be so much simpler for you just to turn out the firing-squad right here . . . simpler and *quieter*. But assuming you really did take us back to Vhol, then we could plan on either A: execution for penetrating military secrets; or B: rotting in a Vhollan prison for the rest of our lives."

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He looked over at Chane with lifted eyebrows. Chane shook his head. So did Rutledge. Bixel, who was listening over the intercom, said, "Tell him to go—"

"You would at least have a chance to live," said the Vhollan. "This way you have none."

"My men seem to have a different opinion," Dilullo answered. "They say no."

The cruiser captain sounded impatient. "Then they're fools. Our heavy beams can blast your ship."

"Sure," said Dilullo. "Only you won't use them because if you do you will also blast this big prize package you're supposed to be guarding. Why do you think I cuddled up so close to it . . . because I loved it? Sorry, Captain. It was a good try."

There was a pause. The cruiser captain muttered something in low exasperated Vhollan.

"I think he's calling you names," said Rutledge.

"Very likely." Dilullo leaned to the mike. "By the way, Captain, how did you do with the Starwolves?"

"We drove them off," said the Vhollan curtly. "Of course."

"Of course," said Dilullo, "but not without some damage. How is the other boy feeling, the one that was screaming so loud for help?"

"I don't think he's feeling too good, John," said Bixel. "He's yawning around a lot, as though some of his drive-tubes weren't functioning just right."

Chane thought, *The Starwolves would have had him if the second cruiser hadn't come up. It must have been a great fight.*

He wondered if Ssander's brothers had survived it. If they had, he was still going to have to face them some day. They wouldn't give up, and sooner or later . . .

But he was proud of them.

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The Vhollan captain was giving Dilullo one last chance to surrender, and Dilullo was saying no.

"You may get us, friend, but you'll have to fight for it."

"Very well," said the captain, and his voice was cold and flat and hard now as a steel blade. "We'll fight. And no quarter, Dilullo. No quarter."

He broke off transmission. Chane stood up, impatient, his belly tight with anticipation. Rutledge looked up at Dilullo.

"That's telling them, John. By the way, do you have any plan at all for getting us out of here?"

"Something will come to me," said Dilullo. "Are you tracking them, Bixel?"

"Tracking. They're coming in now. . . ."

"What's the heading?"

Bixel told him, and Dilullo went to the viewport. Chane joined him. At first he could see nothing in the dirty green murk. Then two dark shapes appeared, very distant, and small. They grew with enormous swiftness. The constant screaming of the wind outside was drowned in rolling, booming thunder. The Merc ship trembled once, and twice. The cruisers swept past, high over the crest of the ridge, went into landing position, dropped their landing gear, and disappeared behind the ridge.

Dilullo sighed, much as though he had been holding his breath. "I hoped they'd do that."

Chane stared at him, surprised. "They just about had to, if they were smart. They can't use their heavy beams against us . . . as you told him . . . but we're not hampered. We could have peppered them with our portable missile launchers. I was hoping they'd be foolish enough to land within our range."

"Maybe they did just that," Dilullo said. He pointed to the wall of cliffs, the jagged fingers holding back the sand. "Do you think you could climb up there?"

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He knows I can, thought Chane . . . and said, "It would depend on how much I had to carry with me."

"If you had two men to help you, could you muscle one of those portable launchers up to the top?"

"Ah," said Chane. "Now I see. The ridge screens us from their heavy beams, so if we took off on a low trajectory they couldn't stop us. But they could come right hot on our heels and catch us in space, unless . . ."

"Exactly," said Dilullo. "Unless they couldn't."

Chane said, "I'll get it there."

Dilullo nodded and lifted the transceiver button. "Bollard?"

Bollard's voice came back thready and small. "Yes, John."

"Pick me the two strongest men you can think of, break out some coils of heavy duty line, detach one missile-launcher from your perimeter, and get them all assembled. Don't forget the ammo, about ten rounds."

Chane said, "Make it twenty."

"You won't have time," said Dilullo. "They'll uncork their lasers and blow you off the ridge before you could fire that many." Then he paused, looking at Chane. He said into the transceiver, "Make it twenty."

"You don't want men," said Bollard's voice. "You don't even want mules. You want . . . yes, John. On the double."

Dilullo went to the door of the navigation room. "Stay with it, Bixel."

Bixel looked at him, round-eyed. "But why? The cruisers are down now, and he said the Starwolves had gone, so . . ."

"Just stay with it."

Bixel leaned back in his chair. "If you say so, John. This is easier than getting shot at."

"Would you like me to stay with the radio?" asked Rutledge.

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"No."

Rutledge shrugged. "No harm in asking. But I might have known. You're a hard man, John."

Dilullo grinned bleakly. "Let's go see how hard."

He beckoned to Chane. They went down from the bridge room to the open lock, and out into the cold gritty air and the shifting sand.

The Mercs were deployed along the defense perimeter, dug in behind the assault-fence or manning the emplacements. They were waiting quietly, Chane saw. Good hard tough pros. They would be fighting for their lives in a short while . . . just as long as it took the men off the cruisers to get organized and make the long march around the end of the cliff wall. But nothing was happening now and so they were taking it easy, tightening their collars to keep the sand out, checking their weapons, talking back and forth unconcernedly. Another day, another dollar, Chane thought, and not a bad way at all to make a living. It wasn't like the Starwolf way, of course. It was a job and not a game; it lacked the dash and pride. These were hired men, as against the free-booting lords of the starways who had no masters. But since for a while at least he was denied the one, the other wasn't too bad a substitute.

"Still think you can do it?" Dilullo asked. They were walking down the line toward where Bollard was hauling one of the portable launchers out of its emplacement and shouting orders about regrouping and closing the gap. Chane looked up at the cliffs, his eyes narrowed against the dust.

"I can do it," he said. "But I'd hate to get caught half-way up."

"What are you hanging around for, then?" asked Dilullo. "Concentrate on their drive-tubes. Try to disable both cruisers, but take the undamaged one first. Watch

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out for return fire, and when it comes, run like hell. We'll wait for you . . . but not too long."

"You just worry about holding them off here," said Chane. "If they crack the perimeter we won't have any place to run to."

The coils of heavy-duty line had arrived, thin hard stuff with little weight to it. Chane draped one over his shoulder and took up one end of the launcher cradle. Bollard had provided him, as ordered, with the two strongest men in the outfit, Sekkinen and a giant named O'Shannaig. Sekkinen took the other end of the cradle. O'Shannaig loaded himself with the missile belts . . . nasty little things with warheads of a non-nuclear but sufficiently violent nature. They couldn't kill a heavy cruiser. Applied in exactly the right places, they could make it hurt.

Chane said, "Go." And they went, running in the soft sand, under the belly of the monster ship, and then out from under its ruined bow, past the huddled domes where the Vhollan technicians were locked up. Chane suddenly remembered Thrandirin and the two generals and wondered what Dilullo would do with them.

Sekkinen began to blow and flounder, and Chane slowed down impatiently. He was going to have to pace himself or wear out his team too early. O'Shannaig was doing better because he had his arms free. Even so, he was sweating and his steps had lost their spring. It was hard going in the sand. The weight of their burdens pressed them down so that they waded in it, and it slipped and rolled and clutched their ankles. They found themselves on solid rock at last, right under the loom of the cliffs.

"Okay," Chane said. "Sit a minute while I have a look." He pretended to be panting hard, to match their pant-

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ing, and moved away slowly, craning upward at the black cliffs.

They looked sheer enough, standing straight up in a monolithic wall until they broke at the top into those eroded pinnacles that tore the passing wind and made it shriek.

O'Shannaig said in his quiet burring voice, "John must be daft. T'is not possible to climb yon, not with all this around our necks."

"With or without it," said Sekkinen. He looked at Chane without love. "Unless you can pass some kind of a miracle."

XIX

CHANE DIDN'T know about miracles, but he knew about strength and obstacles and what a man could do if he had to. No, not a man, a Starwolf. A Varnan.

He walked along the foot of the cliff, taking his time. He knew the men from the cruisers would be moving by now and that if he did not reach the top of the cliff before they came around and spotted him, he was going to be caught with either the launcher or the ammunition or one of the other men dangling helplessly midway and it was going to be bad. Even so, he did not hurry.

The wind was going to be a problem up there. In the dead calm under the cliff, he could look up and see the wind, made physical by the sand it carried in smoking clouds from the dune. Wind like that could carry away

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a man, or a missile launcher, with equal ease, even though it might drop them sooner.

He wished the drowned sun would burn a little brighter. That was one reason the cliff looked so smooth. The flat dim light did not show up the faults and roughness. Green on black . . . that didn't help any either. Chane began to hate this world. It didn't like him. It didn't like life of any kind. All it liked was sand and rock and wind.

He spat the taste of dust and bitter air out of his mouth and went on a little farther, and found what he was looking for.

When he was sure he had found it, he lifted the transceiver button and said, "I'm about to see what I can do about that miracle. Bring the stuff along."

He rearranged the coil of rope and his other gear so that nothing stuck out to catch, and he began to climb up the chimney he had found in the rock.

The first part of it wasn't so hard. The trouble came when the chimney washed out and left him on a nearly sheer, nearly vertical face, halfway to the top. He had thought the face was roughened enough to give him a chance, and he had gambled on it. It turned out to be very poor odds.

He remembered that other climb he had made, down the outside of the city-mountain on Kharal. He wished with all his heart he had those gargoyles here.

Inch by inch he worked his way up, mostly by the sheer strength of his fingers. After a while he found himself in a kind of hypnotic daze, concerned only with the cracks and bulges of the rock. His hands hurt abominably; his muscles were stretched like ropes to the breaking point. He heard a voice saying over and over in his head, *Starwolf, Starwolf*, and he knew it was telling him that a man would quit now, and fall, and die, but

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that he was a Starwolf, a Varnan, too proud to die like an ordinary man.

The shrieking wind deafened him. The hair of his head was plucked and tweaked with such sudden violence that it almost blew him off the rock. A shock of panic went through him. Blown sand bit into his flesh like a shot. He cowered tight against the cliff-face, looked up, and saw that he had reached the top.

He was still not home free. He had to worm his way a little farther, laterally now, below the crest of the ridge until he was in the lee of a pinnacle. He clambered up into a kind of nest in the eroded rock and sat there, gasping and trembling, feeling the rock quiver under him with the violence of the wind, and he cursed Dilullo, laughing. *I'm going to have to stop this*, he thought. *I let him sucker me into one thing after another because I have to show off how good I am. He knows that, and he uses me. Can you do it, he asks, and I say yes. . . .*

And I did it.

A tiny voice sounded under the noise of the wind. "Chanel Chanel!"

He realized now that it had been calling for several minutes. He lifted the transceiver.

"Sekkinen, I'm sending down the line. You can toss a coin, but one of you is going to have to come up here with another line. Third man to stay down and make fast. We'll have to haul the stuff up."

He found a solid, sturdy tooth of rock to anchor the line on. Apparently O'Shannaig had won the toss, or lost it; it was his long body that came gangling up the cliff, his red-gold hair and craggy face that appeared over the lip of the hollow. Chane laughed, panting now in all honesty. "Next time I'll ask them to send me a small weakling. You weigh, my friend."

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"Aye," said O'Shannaig. "I do that." He flexed his arms. "I was pulling, too."

They sent the second line down. Sekkinen made both of them fast on the launcher and they hauled it up and wrestled it into the hollow, and then brought up the belts.

"Okay, Sekkinen," said Chane into the transceiver. "It's your turn now."

They hauled him up in double-quick time, a big and tough and very unhappy man, who crawled into the hollow muttering that he was never built to be a monkey on a string. The hollow was getting overcrowded. Chane knotted a line around his waist, and a second one over his shoulders. The second one was hitched at the other end to the launcher.

"This is the tricky part," he said. "If I blow off, catch me."

With Sekkinen paying out and O'Shannaig snubbing around the rock tooth, Chane slid out of the hollow and over the crest, into the full fury of the wind.

He didn't think he was going to make it. The wind was determined to fly him into space like a whirling kite. It hammered and kicked him, tore his breath away, blinded him and choked him with sand. He hugged the pinnacle, finding plenty of handholds now where the full force of erosion had been at work, working himself around to the windward side. He was at the crest of the great dune now, and it was like riding one of the giant waves on Varna's lava beaches, high and dizzy, breathless with the spume. Only this spume was hard and dry, flaying the skin from his face and hands. He cowered and crawled in it, and presently the wind was pinning him flat against the rock and he could see the cruisers resting down at the foot of the dune.

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He could also see the tail end of a line of armed men marching out of sight around the end of the cliff.

There were hollows on this side of the pinnacle as well, where the softer parts of the rock had been gnawed away. The wind fairly blew him into one and he decided not to argue with it; this would do as well as another. He spoke into the transceiver.

"All right," he said. "Up and over, and watch yourselves."

He braced himself in the hollow, right at the front, with his back against one wall and his feet against another. He laid hold of the second line and began to haul it in, hand over hand.

Praying as he did that the launcher wouldn't get away from his friends and fall down the cliff—because if it did, he would go with it.

It felt as though he were hauling on the rock itself. Nothing moved and he wondered if Sekkinen and O'Shannaig were not able between them to manhandle the launcher up and over those vital few feet of the crest to where he could get a purchase on it. Then all of a sudden, the tension eased and the launcher came leaping at him in a flurry of sand and he shouted to them to snub it. It skidded and slowed to a stop, the belts trailing after it on the snubline.

Chane heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks," he said. "Now get on back to the ship, quick. The Vhollans are coming."

He wrestled the launcher into position in front of the hollow, a two-man job. While he was doing it, O'Shannaig's voice, maddeningly slow, replied that, "It wouldna be richt to go without you."

In desperation, Chane shouted into his transceiver.

"Bollard!"

"Yes?"

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"I'm in position. Will you tell these two noble jackasses to clear out? I can run faster than they can; I'll have a better chance without them. When these lasers cut loose, I don't want to have to wait for anybody."

Bollard said, "He's right, boys. Come on down." From the noises he heard then, Chane gathered that since it was an order, Sekkinen and O'Shannaig were going down the ropes a lot faster than they had come up. He finished laying out the belts and slapped the first one into place in the launcher.

"Chane," said Bollard, "the column has just come in sight."

"Yeah. If I don't see you again, tell Dilullo . . ."

Dilullo's voice cut in. "I'm listening."

"I guess not right now," said Chane. "I'm too busy. The cruisers are practically underneath me. The wind is murder, but these missiles don't much care about wind. . . . One of these cruisers has taken a beating, all right. I can see that."

He laughed. *Good for the Starwolves!* He centered the guidance hairs until they met exactly on the clustered drive-tube assembly of the undamaged cruiser.

Dilullo's voice said, "I'll bet you a half-unit that you don't get off more than ten."

Dilullo lost. Chane got off ten in such quick succession that the first laser didn't crack until he had turned from the bent and smoking tubes of the first cruiser to the already slightly battered ones of the second. The heavy laser beam began chewing its way along the crest . . . they didn't have him zeroed yet, but they would in a minute. Rock and sand erupted in smoke and thunder. Chane got off four more and the second laser unlimbered and blew the dune not thirty feet below him into an inferno. Then, all of a sudden, the lasers

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stopped and the launcher stopped and there wasn't any more sound of battle.

And a great shadow passed overhead and blotted out the sun.

XX

EERIE QUIET; eerie twilight. Chane crouched in the hollow, his neck hairs prickling. He tried the launcher mechanism and it was dead under his fingers, as though the power-pack operating the trigger assembly had gone out.

The laser-pods on the cruisers remained dark and silent.

"Bollard!" he said into the transceiver. "Dilullo! Anybody!"

There was no answer.

He tried his stunner and that was dead too.

He looked skyward and he could not see anything, except that somewhere up there in the murk and dust and nebula-mist something hung between the planet and the sun.

He fought his way out of the hollow and back over the crest to the other side, taking up his life-line as he went, swinging free for dreadful seconds as the wind took him around the corner and dropped him back into the place he had started from. He could see the Merc ship, the defense perimeter, and off to his left the men from the Vhollan cruisers fanned out into an attack formation with anti-personnel weapons. A couple of the Merc gas-shells had apparently burst among them a lit-

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tle before, because some of them were reeling around in the characteristic fashion and wisps of vapor were still shredding away on the wind. Other than that, everybody was just standing and staring at the sky or fiddling with weapons that had inexplicably stopped working.

Chane went down the line hand-over-hand to the bottom of the cliff, and started running.

Out on the plain, in the dusk of that great shadow, the Vhollans seemed to be smitten with a sudden panic desire for togetherness. Their outflung line receded, coiling in upon itself. It became a mob of frightened men, expecting attack from they knew not what and demoralized by the realization that they had been deprived of any means of defending themselves, beyond their bare hands and pocket knives. Chane could hear their voices clamoring, thin and far away under the wind.

He knew how they felt. Stripped and naked, and worse than that . . . at the mercy of something or someone too powerful to fight, like tiny children with paper swords against a charge of militia. He didn't like it either. It made him scared, an emotion he was not accustomed to.

He heard orders being shouted up and down the Merc line. They were beginning to fall back on the ship, hauling their useless weapons with them. But as he passed the domes, Chane met Dilullo and a couple of men.

"The Krii rescue ship?" asked Chane.

"It has to be," Dilullo answered. "Nothing else . . ." He looked skyward, his face a bad color in the unnatural twilight. "The radar isn't working. Nothing's working. Not even the hand torches. I want to talk to Labdibdin."

Chane went with them to the domes. It was dark in-

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side and sounds of near-panic could be heard. Rutledge had replaced Sekkinen as door-guard, and as soon as he saw Dilullo he ran toward him, demanding to know what was happening.

"My stunner doesn't work and the transceiver . . . I've been calling. . . ."

"I know," Dilullo said, and pointed to the door. "Let them out."

Rutledge stared at him. "What about the Vhollans? What about the attack?"

"I don't think there's going to be an attack now," said Dilullo, and added under his breath, "At least, I hope not."

Rutledge went back and unlocked the door. The Vhollans poured out in an untidy mass, and then paused. They too began looking up at the sky, and babbling. Their voices had become oddly hushed.

Dilullo shouted for Labdibdin, and presently he came jostling through the crowd, with several more of the scientists on his heels.

"It's the ship," said Labdibdin. "It must be. This force that has inhibited all power equipment . . . and all weapons, too, hasn't it . . ."

"It has."

". . . is a purely defensive device, and the Krii were masters of non-violent means of defense. We were using weapons here, you see. I could hear the lasers up on the ridge. So they stopped us."

"Yes," said Dilullo. "You're the expert on the Krii. What do you suggest we ought to do?"

Labdibdin looked upward at the hovering shadow, and then at the great dark derelict that bulked so large on the sandy plain.

"They don't take life," he said.

"Are you sure of that, or just hoping?"

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"All the evidence . . ." said Labdibdin, and stopped. He was awestricken before the might and the imminent nearness of the Krii ship.

Chane said, "What difference does it make? We don't have anything left but our claws and teeth. It's up to them whether they kill us or not."

"That being the case," said Dilullo, "what do you think, Labdibdin?"

"I'm *sure* they don't take life," said Labdibdin. "I'm staking my own life on it. I think if we don't oppose or provoke them in any way, if we go back into our ships and . . ." He made a helpless gesture, and Dilullo nodded.

"And see what happens. All right. Will you take that message to your cruiser captains? Tell them that's what we're going to do, and urge upon them as strongly as you can the wisdom of doing likewise. It seems pretty obvious that this whole thing is out of our hands now, anyway."

"Yes," said Labdibdin. "Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"A few of us may come back . . . to watch." He looked again at the mighty derelict, in whose dark belly the hundred Krii sat waiting. "Only to watch. And at a distance."

The Vhollans streamed out over the plain toward the milling mob from the cruisers. Chane and Dilullo and the other Mercs hurried back to the Merc ship.

"How did it go on the ridge?" Dilullo asked as they went.

"Good," said Chane. "It'll take them a while to make repairs on those cruisers . . . neither one's in shape to get off the ground." He smiled wryly. "Your plan worked just fine. We can take off any time now."

"That's nice," said Dilullo. "Except we don't have any power."

They both looked skyward.

"I feel like a mouse," said Dilullo.

Rutledge shivered. "Me, too. I hope your Vhollan friend is right and the cat isn't carnivorous."

Dilullo turned to Chane. "Are you worried now?"

Chane knew what he meant. *Starwolves don't worry.* He showed the edges of his teeth and said, "I'm worried."

Starwolves are strong, and that's why they don't worry. The weak worry, and today I am weak, and I know it. For the first time in my life. I would like to claw their big ship out of the sky and break it, and I feel sick because they made me helpless. And it was no trouble to them to do it. They just pushed a button somewhere, a flick of one of those long stringy digits, and the animals were suppressed.

He remembered the passionless faces of the Krii, and hated them.

Dilullo said mildly, "I'm glad to know there's something that can get you down. Are you tired, Chane?"

"No."

"You're fast on your feet. Run ahead and get Thrandirin and the generals out of the ship. Tell 'em to go to blazes with the rest of the Vhollans. If the Krii decide to let us have our power back sometime, I want to go, and I don't want to bother dropping our guests off at their home planet. I don't think it would be very healthy."

"I doubt it," said Chane, and took off running.

And as he ran, he thought, *Here I go again. Why didn't I just tell him I was tired? Pride, boy. And when you were a very little boy your father used to tell you how it went before a fall.*

I guess he was right. It was pride in what I had done in that raid that made me fight with Ssander when he tried to cut in on my share of the loot.

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And here I am. Not a Starwolf any more, not really a Merc, either . . . just living on their sufferance . . . and at this moment I'm not even a man. Just an annoyance to the Krii. And if that isn't a fall . . .

He reached the ship, fighting his way through the Mercs who were loading in the weapons and equipment, on the chance that it all might work some day again. It was pitch dark inside, the only light coming in through the open hatchways, which of course would not close now. He groped his way to the cabin where the three Vhollans were locked up, let them out and guided them down, and when they stood outside he watched their faces and smiled.

"I don't understand," said Thrandirin. "What is it? I see our men going away without fighting, and the light is strange. . . ."

"That's right," said Chane, and pointed at the vast loom of the wrecked Krii ship. "Someone else has come looking for that. Someone bigger than us. I think you can kiss it goodbye." He gestured skyward. "For there's another just like it up there now."

The Vhollans stared at him like three night-goggling birds in the weird dusk.

"If I were you," said Chane, "I'd get going. You can talk the whole thing over with Labdibdin . . . while we all wait."

They went. Chane turned to help with the loading, which had all to be done by hand.

They were concentrating on the most valuable items and they were working awfully fast, so they had a good part of the job done when there began to be a new sound in the sky, and Chane looked up and saw a big pale-gold egg sinking toward them out of the shadowy clouds.

In a quiet voice Dilullo said, "Into the ship. Just put everything down and go."

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Only about a third of the men were working outside, passing the things through the cargo hatch along a kind of human belt that extended to the storage hold. They did what Dilullo told them, and Chane thought he had never seen an area cleared so quickly. He followed Dilullo and Bollard up the steps to the lock, moving in a more dignified fashion, perhaps, but not much more. Chane's heart was pounding in a way it had not done since he was a child waking from a nightmare, and there was a cold, unpleasant knot in his middle.

The open and unshuttable lock chamber seemed dreadfully exposed.

"Whole damn ship's open," Bollard muttered. There was sweat on his round moon face, and it looked cold. "They could just walk in. . . ."

"Can you think of anything we can do about it?" asked Dilullo.

"Okay," said Bollard. "Okay."

They stood and watched while the big gold egg came and settled gently onto the sand.

It sat there for a time and did nothing, and they continued to watch it, and now Chane had a feeling it was watching them. They were in plain sight if anybody wanted to look real hard, though they were taking pains not to be conspicuous. It was probably dangerous, and they should go farther in. But that was no protection either since they couldn't close the hatches, and they might as well see what was going on. The Krii would know perfectly well they were here anyway.

The Krii, when finally they did appear, seemed not to be interested one way or the other.

There were six of them. They emerged one after another through a hatchway that opened low down in the side of the egg, extruding a narrow stairway. The last

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two carried between them a long thin object of unguessable purpose, shrouded in dark cloth.

Very tall and slender, their seemingly jointless bodies swaying gracefully, they moved in single file toward the great ship. Their skins, Chane noted, were not quite so dark an amber as those of the Krii he had seen frozen in stasis. Their limbs were extremely supple, the long-digitated hands looking almost like fronds stirring in the wind.

They walk so tall, he thought, because they're not afraid of us. And if they're not afraid, it must be because they know we can't hurt them. Not won't hurt them. Can't hurt them.

They did not even look at the Merc ship. They never turned those narrow high-domed heads to left or right to look at anything. They marched quietly to the entrance and went up the steps and disappeared inside the enormous wreck.

They were in there a long time. The men got tired of standing in the lock and clawed their way in the darkness up to the bridge room, where they could be more comfortable and still watch.

Bollard said, "So far, they're peaceful."

"Yes," said Dilullo. "So far."

The golden egg sat on the sand and waited, its long rows of ports gleaming dully in the dim light. It did not have the conventional drive-tube assembly, Chane noted, and there were no external signs at all of what kind of power was used. Whatever it was, it functioned in the inhibiting force-field where nothing else did. Naturally. A defensive device wasn't much good if it immobilized you along with your enemy.

He saw movement in the entrance to the great wreck, and he said, "They're coming back."

The six came out, and after them the hundred.

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In single file, forming a long swaying line, they marched out of the dark tomb where they had waited . . . how long? Their garments fluttering, their large eyes wide in the dimness, they marched across the blowing sand and into the golden shuttle-craft that would take them to the rescue ship, which would take them home. Chane looked at their faces.

"They're not human, all right," he said. "Not one of them is laughing, or crying, or dancing, or hugging someone. They all look as peaceful and harmonious as they did when they were . . . I was going to say 'dead,' but you know what I mean."

"No visceral emotions," said Dilullo. "And yet that other ship has made a tremendous long voyage to find them. That argues emotions of some sort."

"Maybe they were more interested in saving the experience these Krii have had, than in saving the Krii themselves," said Chane.

"I'm not interested either way," said Bollard. "I only want to know what they're going to do to us."

They watched, and Chane knew that from the open lock and the cargo hatch the other Mercs were watching, waiting, and tasting the bitter taste of fear, just like he was.

It wasn't that you minded dying so much, though you didn't look forward to it. It was that you minded the way you were going to die, Chane thought. If these long limber honey-skinned vegetables decided to finish you, they would do it coolly and efficiently, and so remotely that you wouldn't even know what hit you. Like gassing vermin in a burrow.

The last of the hundred entered the shuttle-craft and its hatchway closed upon them. The golden egg hummed and rose up into the whirling dust and cloud, and was gone.

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"Now maybe they'll let us go?" said Bollard.

"I don't think so," said Dilullo. "Not just yet."

Chane swore a short fierce oath in Varnan, the first slip of that kind he had made, but Bollard didn't notice it.

He was too busy looking at the fleet of golden eggs that had appeared, dropping one after the other until there were nine neatly lined up on the sand.

Dilullo said, "We might as well make ourselves comfortable. I believe we're going to have a long wait."

And long it was. Just about the longest wait that Chane could ever remember, penned up in the little iron prison of the ship. They ate cold rations, lived in the dark, and looked hungrily at the open hatchways that mocked them. Toward the end Dilullo had to use all his powers of persuasion, including his fists, to keep the men inside.

Presumably the officers of the Vhollan cruisers were having the same trouble, and presumably they succeeded, because the Vhollans kept clear. Once or twice Chane thought he saw figures moving in the dust-whirls underneath the cliff. It might have been Labdibdin and some of the other technicians; probably was. If so, they did their watching from a discreet distance.

There was one comfort. The Vhollans couldn't use this interval to repair their tubes. Not unless they did it with little hammers and their bare hands.

Chane paced and prowled, and finally sat moping, sullen as a caged tiger.

Outside, the Krii worked steadily, neither slow nor fast, keeping a methodical rhythm that rasped the nerves just to watch it. They never once came near the Merc ship. As far as they were concerned, it seemed, the Merc ship did not exist.

"Not very complimentary," said Dilullo, "but let's keep

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it that way. Maybe Labdibdin is perfectly right and they don't take life. That wouldn't stop them from having some highly effective method of suppressing people, the way they suppress machines, and their idea of the seriousness of resultant damage to the organism might not agree with ours. Lord knows what their metabolism is like, or their nervous systems. You can wreck a man pretty thoroughly and still leave him living. They simply might not understand what they were doing."

Chane agreed with him. Still, it was hard to have to look at the irritatingly remote and lofty creatures day after day and not want to try rushing out and killing a few just to vary the monotony.

The shuttle-craft came and went, disgorging various equipment, taking the Krii technicians back and forth. A considerable amount of work was being done inside the wreck, but of course there was no way of knowing what that was. Outside, the Krii were setting up a complex of transparent rods that gradually took the form of a tunnel. They built that out from the entrance of the ship to a distance of about thirty feet, and then at the end they erected a kind of lock-chamber. At the ship end, the tunnel-like structure was sealed to the opening by a collar; they left only a narrow aperture for the technicians to go and come.

One day, light appeared suddenly through the rents in the ship's hull.

"They've got the power on again," said Dilullo. "Or jury-rigged a replacement for it."

"How do they run their generators when we can't?" Chane demanded. "They're in this inhibiting field too."

"They developed the inhibiting field, and would know how to shield their own equipment against it. Or their

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power system may be so different from ours . . . I mean, they don't even have the same atomic table."

Chane said, "However they do it, they're doing it. And if they've got the power on, all those cases will open up. . . ."

All those cases of jewels and precious metals. The loot of a galaxy, the way he saw it. It made his mouth water. Even the Starwolves had never aspired to such splendid heights.

A golden egg attached itself to the lock chamber at the end of the tunnel.

Chane pressed close to the viewport, with Dilullo and Bollard beside him. Nobody said anything. They waited, feeling that something decisive was about to happen.

The tunnel-like structure of crystal rods began to glow with a shimmering radiance that made its outline blur and shift. The radiance intensified, flared, then settled to a steady pulsing.

Things began to appear in it, gliding smoothly and swiftly from the great ship to the golden egg.

"Some kind of a carrier field," said Dilullo. "It makes the stuff weightless and kicks it along. . . ."

Chane groaned. "Don't give me any scientific lectures. Just look at that. *Look* at it!"

The loot of a galaxy went by, just out of reach, streaming steadily from the hold of the Krii ship into the golden egg; into a series of golden eggs that operated in an endless belt-shuttle, loading and rising and returning in a circular pattern.

The loot of a galaxy.

"And they're not even going to spend it," Chane said. "They're going to all of this trouble just to *study* it."

"Blasphemy, according to your ideas," said Dilullo, and grinned at Chane. "Don't cry."

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"What are you talking about?" asked Bollard.

"Nothing. Except our friend here seems to have a frustrated case of sticky fingers."

Bollard shook his head. "The devil with our friend. Look; they're loading all the specimens the expedition gathered. When they're finished, what then?"

It was not a question that was intended to be answered, and nobody tried.

But eventually the answer came.

The last items went down the carrier field and the glow died. Methodically the Krii dismantled their equipment and returned it into the clouds. The great hulk became dark again and now it was empty, drained of all use and meaning.

Finally, and at last, one of the Krii walked toward the Merc ship. It stood for a moment, very tall, swaying slightly with the wind, its great passionless eyes fixed on them.

Then it flung up one long thin arm in an unmistakable gesture, pointing to the sky.

It turned then and went back to the single golden egg that remained. The hatch closed, and in a moment the trampled sand was empty.

All of a sudden the lights were on in the Merc ship and the generators were jarring the bulkhead as they jolted into life again.

"He told us to go, and I think I know why," said Dilullo. He began to bellow urgently into the intercom. "Secure hatches! Flight stations on the double! We're taking off!"

And they took off, going like a scalded rocket in a flat trajectory that took them away from the cliff wall at an angle too low for the Vhollan laser beams to bear on them until they were out of range.

Dilullo ordered the ship into a stationary orbit and

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told Rutledge, "Get that camera working. I've a pretty good idea what's going to happen and I want to record it."

Rutledge opened the pod that held the camera and turned the monitor screen to *ON*.

Chane stared with the others into the screen that showed them what the camera was seeing.

"Too much dust," said Rutledge, and manipulated the controls, and the picture cleared as the camera saw with different eyes, exchanging a light-reflectant image for one composed by sensor-beams.

It showed the great wrecked ship, lying monstrous on the plain. It showed the ridge and the two Vhollan cruisers beyond; the cruisers seemed like tiny, little miniatures for children to hang on strings and whirl around their heads.

After a while Rutledge looked at Dilullo, and Dilullo said, "Keep filming. Unless you want to go home broke."

"You think the Krii are going to destroy the ship?" asked Chane.

"Wouldn't you? When you know people have been meddling and prying with it, people with much less technological skill than yours but with much more war-like natures . . . would you leave it there for them to study? The Krii couldn't remove everything. The drive system, the generators, all that would be left, and the defensive mechanisms. Given time, the Vhollans might learn how to duplicate them in terms of our atomic table. Besides, why else would the Krii have told us to get clear? They wouldn't care about our fight with the Vhollans, and whether we got away or not. I think they didn't want us to get killed by any action of theirs."

The image remained static on the screen, the vast dark broken outline of the ship quite clear against the sand.

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Suddenly a little spark flashed down and touched the hulk. It spread with incredible swiftness into a blinding flame that covered all that huge fabric of metal from stem to stern and ate it up, devoured it, crumbled it to ashes and then to atoms, until there was nothing left but a mile-long scar on the sand. And presently even that would vanish.

The Vhollan cruisers, shielded by the ridge, were unharmed.

Dilullo said, "Shut off the camera. I guess that shows we did our duty."

"We?" said Rutledge.

"The Kharalis hired us to find out what was in the nebula that threatened them, and destroy it. We found it, and it has been destroyed. Period." He looked down at the Vhollan cruisers. "They'll be getting busy on repairs now. I don't see any more reason to hang around."

There wasn't a man aboard who wanted to quarrel with him.

They climbed up out of the atmosphere, and out from under the shadow that had oppressed them for so many days, where the giant ship had hung between them and the sun.

Whether by accident or design, Dilullo chose a course that took them, not close but close enough to see . . .

Close enough to see a vast dark shape breaking out of orbit, beginning the long voyage home across the black and empty ocean that laps the shores of the island universes.

"No visceral emotions," said Dilullo softly, "but, by God, they've got something."

Even Chane had to agree.

The Mercs had expansive ideas about doing some celebrating and Dilullo just let them go ahead and try.

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As he had foreseen, they were too tired, and those off duty were glad enough to crawl into their bunks for the first decent sleep they had had in so long they couldn't remember.

Chane, not all that exhausted, remained in the ward-room for another drink with Dilullo. They were all alone now, and Dilullo said, "When we get to Kharal, you'll stay in the ship and make as though you never existed."

Chane grinned. "You don't have to talk me into that. Tell me, do you think they'll pay over the lightstones?"

Dilullo nodded. "They'll pay. In the first place, nasty as they are in some ways, they keep their word. In the second place, the films of that monster ship will so impress them that the sight of it being destroyed will make them glad to pay."

"You don't plan to tell them that it wasn't really us who destroyed it?" Chane asked.

"Look," said Dilullo; "I'm reasonably fair and honest but I'm not foolish. They hired us to do a job, and the job is done, and we're pretty well battered up from it. That's enough." He added, "What will you do with your share when we sell the lightstones?"

Chane shrugged. "I hadn't thought about it. I'm used to taking things, not buying them."

"That's a little habit you'll have to get over if you want to stay a Merc. Do you?"

Chane paused before answering. "I do, for the time being, anyway. As you said before, I haven't got any place else to go. . . . I don't think you're as good as the Varnans, but you're pretty good."

Dilullo said dryly, "I don't think you'll ever make the best Merc that ever was, but you've got capabilities."

"Where do we go from Kharal?" Chane asked. "Earth?" Dilullo nodded.

THE WEAPON FROM BEYOND

"You know," said Chane, "I've got kind of interested in Earth."

Dilullo shook his head and said dourly, "I'm not too happy about taking you there. When I think of the people there walking up and down, and looking at you and not knowing you're a tiger impersonating an Earthman, I wonder what I'm getting into. But I guess we can clip your claws."

Chane smiled. "We'll see."

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Morgan Chane was an Earthman by parentage, but he had been born on the pirate-world Varna, whose heavy gravity had developed strength and incredibly quick reflexes in him. When he was old enough, he joined the raider-ships that looted the starworlds, and fought side by side with the dreaded Starwolves of Varna.

But then there was a fight among them. Chane killed their leader, and the other Starwolves turned on him. He barely got away alive—wounded near death, his Starwolf pursuers following him across the galaxy.

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