

AVON / G1318 / 50¢



MAN AND HIS GALACTIC
ANCESTORS JOIN FORCES
TO PRESERVE THE RACE

SPACE GYPSIES

MURRAY LEINSTER



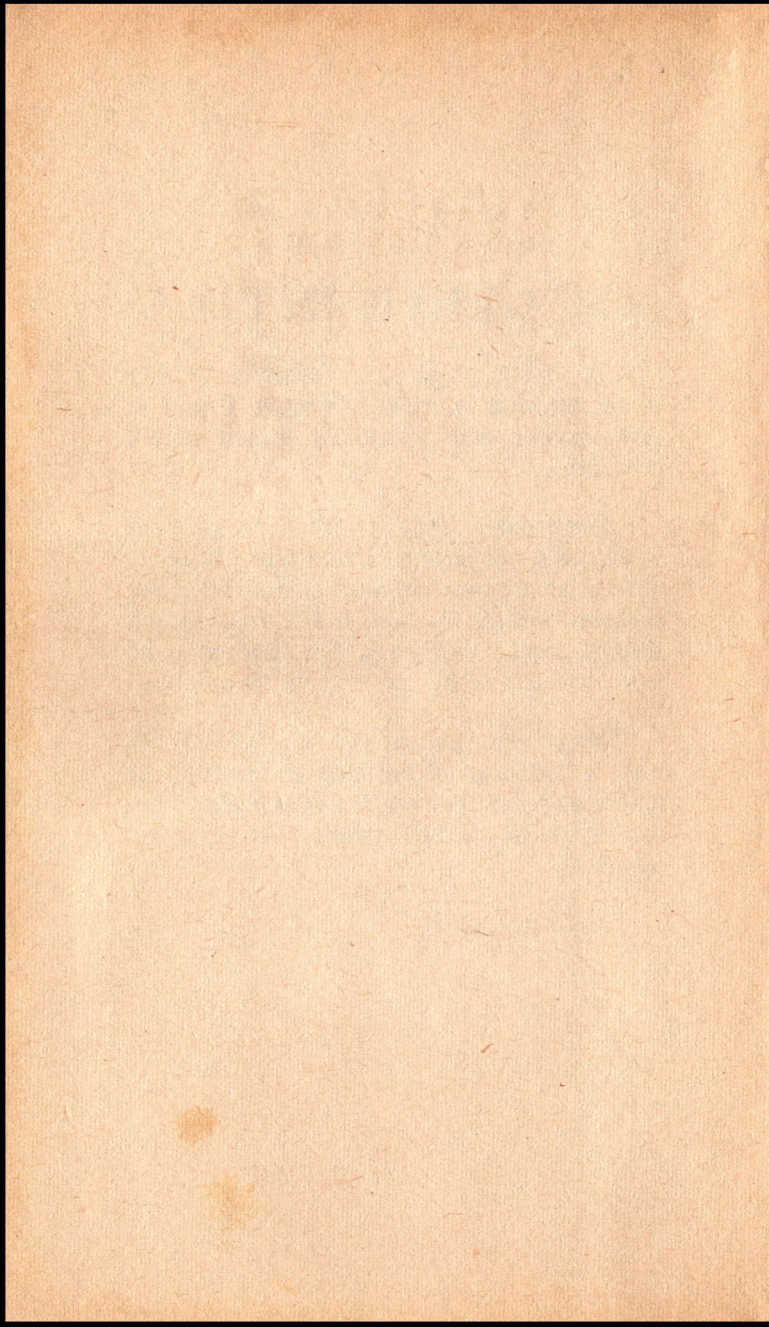
IN THE DOMAIN OF THE DAMNED

“... Things are singing in the trees. I can’t spare the time to try to see them. I need to keep moving and advertising myself as not sneaking up ...”

Karen tried to obey his orders to keep her voice going out on a communicator-frequency not too far removed from the signal-beam. But she was afraid, for him. Her throat clicked shut. She could not speak. She listened as he continued to advance and to talk. Presently—

“Things are opening out ahead,” he reported. “No sign of anybody to meet me or take a pot-shot. I’m nearly at the place where the foliage ends. Still plenty of tree trunks, though.”

His voice stopped.



SPACE GYPSIES

MURRAY LEINSTER

AN AVON BOOK



This Avon edition is the first
publication in any form of
Space Gypsies.

AVON BOOKS
A division of
The Hearst Corporation
959 Eighth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10019

Copyright © 1967 by Murray Leinster.
Published by arrangement with the author.

All rights reserved, which includes the right to
reproduce this book or portions thereof in any
form whatsoever. For information address
Avon Books.

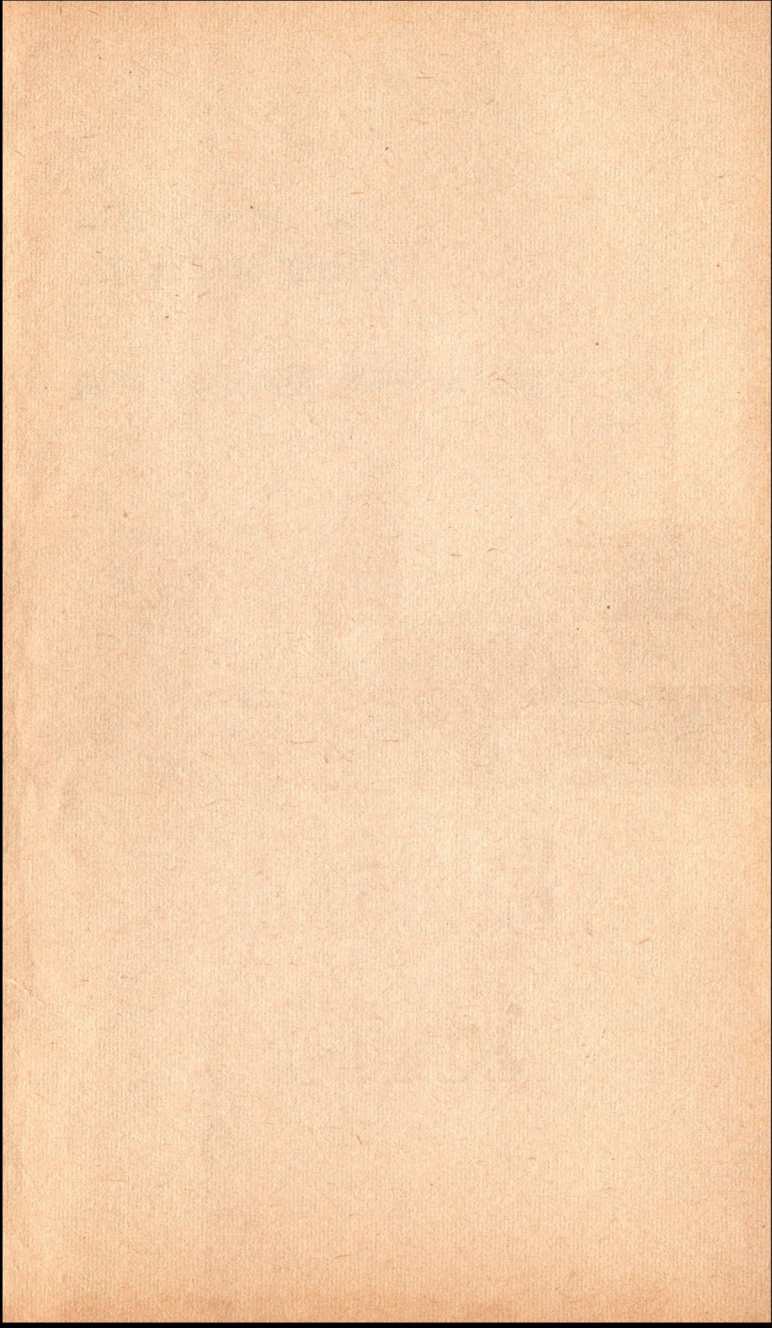
First Avon Printing, June, 1967

Cover illustration by Paul Lehr

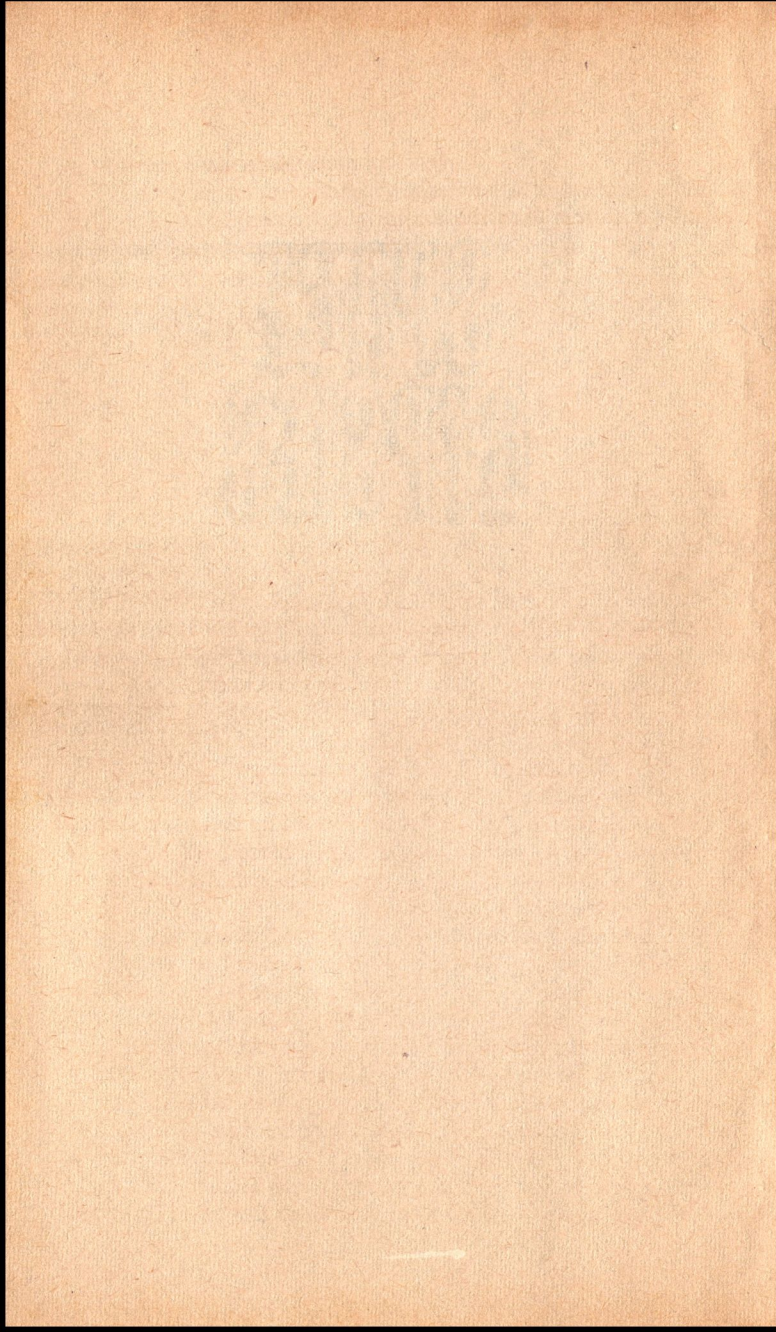
Printed in the U.S.A.

Other Avon Books by Murray Leinster:

**THE WAILING ASTEROID
MINERS IN THE SKY**



SPACE GYPSIES



CHAPTER 1

The *Marintha* was three months and four landings away from Earth when it became necessary to change the fuel-ingot in her drive. It had been necessary twice before on this journey. It was routine. It was so normal an operation that only Howell, who owned the space-yacht and acted as skipper, and Ketch in the engine room, were involved. Howell's part in it was simply to bring the yacht out of overdrive—the state of being in a self-created cocoon of stressed space in which the normal properties of space went haywire. The speed of light, for example, depended on the power of the unit that stretched the nothingness about the *Marintha*. The increase of mass with velocity was reversed. When Howell threw the switch to end these conditions, the *Marintha* would break out from the totally opaque and non-reflecting overdrive field. She would find herself somewhere in between-the-stars. It was extremely unlikely that there'd be a solar system within light-years.

That was all Howell had to do. Then Ketch, in the engine room, would unscrew the bolts of the fuel-chamber cover. He'd take out the eroded fuel-ingot, put it aside for later re-smelting, and put a new ingot in its place. He'd put the lid back on, re-tighten the bolts, and then the *Marintha* could go on her way. Only the two persons did the whole thing. The others aboard paid no attention. Breen, whose specialty was botany, did not interrupt his concoction of a special festive dish to break the monotony of pre-prepared spacecraft rations. Karen, his daughter, was in the tiny control room with Howell. Ketch, of course, was in the engine room. His avocation was big game

hunting, but he served as the *Marintha's* engineer. The yacht was too small to need intercoms between its compartments. Howell simply called, "Breakout coming!"

Karen didn't answer. It wasn't necessary. Her father put down the fluffy dessert he was blending and grunted acknowledgment. Ketch said, "Go ahead." He stood beside the fuel-chamber. Howell threw the switch.

The acutely uncomfortable sensations of breakout hit them. The four aboard the yacht felt a momentary violent dizziness and a momentary violent nausea, and then a feeling of giddy, twisting fall. But it lasted less than a heartbeat. Then the vision-screens lighted, and all the stars of the galaxy shone in all their innumerable tints and brightnesses. The *Marintha* was back in normal space in which a ship could not possibly travel faster than the speed of light and in which the nearest solar system might be a lifetime away.

Karen looked at the stars with wonder in her eyes. They were unfamiliar, of course. Except for four landings, the *Marintha* had driven steadily for three months away from her home port, Earth. She had covered an improbable number of light-centuries of distance. All the star patterns seen from Earth had long since been lost. Only the Milky Way remained recognizable among the features of the galaxy—and that seemed curiously askew.

There was the matter-of-fact clicking of the log camera, which photographed the cosmos at each breakout from overdrive for a suitable record of its journey. It happened that this particular breakout was farther from the First Solar System in this particular direction than any human ship had travelled before. But that wasn't a distinction nowadays. Since the finding of those rubble-heaps which were considered to be the ruins of cities built by mankind's progenitors, space travel went on with a casual confidence earlier times could not have imagined. There were no longer boasts of farthest-from-home journeys. Either somebody had broken the record before one could brag about it, or somebody very shortly would. The rubble-heaps that had been cities were proof, it was believed, that men had nothing to fear but other men.

So as the *Marintha* lay still in emptiness, out of overdrive, Karen stared at the strange new stars, Howell lounged in the pilot's chair, Karen's father went back to his cookery, and

Ketch unscrewed the bolts on the fuel-chamber lid. None of the four felt any anxiety. They had perfect confidence in the yacht. They had fuel and food to last almost indefinitely. They couldn't imagine needing anything else. Ketch was equipped for big game hunting anywhere the *Marintha* might happen to land. Breen was equipped with the tools of botany. Howell did not own a weapon, and of course Karen was unarmed. The *Marintha* was wholly without any equipment for battle other than Ketch's hunting rifles. But the rubble-heaps on four hundred different planets—the *Marintha* had added two more in its last four landings—assured them that there was nothing in the galaxy to make a yacht need to be able to defend itself.

It was remarkable, if they'd realized it. It was appalling, if they'd thought about it. They could have reasoned quite logically to a conclusion that somewhere, in some direction and at some distance, they must run into some danger that the builders of the now-deserted cities hadn't been able to counter. Because the cities now were rubble. But no danger ever had turned up, so they'd no faintest suspicion that such a thing was possible.

Ketch removed the last bolt from the fuel-chamber lid. He put aside the almost-used-up fuel-ingot. He put in a fresh one. He replaced the bolts. He began to screw down the lid. Karen's father worked upon the foamy dessert that was to top off their next meal. He decorated it with delicately sculptured foliage—leaves of one of the eight food-plants found everywhere that rubble-cities were to be found. They were proof that the builders of those cities had carried their own food-plants from world to world as they settled them.

In the control room, Howell looked casually at the stars, and now and again out of habit looked at the instrument-board. One of the instrument-needles quivered very slightly. He didn't happen to be looking at it. Presently, another. Then a wide-sensitivity receiver clicked loudly. It was an all-wave receiver and could give notice of beamed radiation through most of the electromagnetic spectrum. Radar and communicator-beams became audible as they arrived.

Such things were arriving now. Howell stared.

"Queer!" he said. "That's queer!"

Frowning, he began to flip switches, one after another. Beam-direction locators. A wave-form analyzer. A recorder.

"What's the matter?" asked Karen.

"Something out there . . . I don't know what. But it couldn't be another ship! That's unthinkable! It couldn't be!"

Nevertheless, the instruments insisted that something was here in between-the-stars where only the *Marintha* should in reason exist. The beam-direction locator swung to indicate a source of microwave radiation almost dead ahead. The wave-form analyzer busily prepared a picture of a distinctly unusual wave-pattern. The recorder whined faintly, its tape storing human speech in the control room as well as all the data brought in by the yacht's instrumentation.

Howell threw on the yacht's radar. It took guidance from the beam-locator and flung its peculiar bat-like squeaks in the direction the locator pointed out. Echoes came back. They were audible, via loud-speaker, but they went to the radar-screen, too. A circle appeared on that screen. It shrank and shrank, and double circles appeared and shrank, and then triple ones. There was a blip. Then four circles appeared and shrank on the radar-screen and a second blip appeared. The circles expanded once more until the first blip reappeared. It held steady in position.

"There are two things out there!" said Howell, frowning. "Two of them! One's about ten thousand miles away. The other's nearer fifty thousand. What the devil—they're almost stationary!"

That was not natural. The things themselves were extraordinary. There is much matter accumulated around suns and stars and solar systems. There are meteorites and cosmic-dust particles and cometary masses and shapeless objects up to the size of asteroids. But in between-the-stars there is emptiness. There are no things giving radar indications from ten and fifty thousand miles. There can be dark stars, but not masses of matter which by radar report are only feet or yards in size. Most particularly, there are no objects in between-the-stars which project microwave beams at yachts like the *Marintha*.

On the other hand, it was the most firmly believed of all the dogmas of science that mankind had nothing to fear but itself. There had been an interstellar civilization once before. There were the ruins of its cities to prove it. It had ended. The same ruins proved that. But it was a human civilization. There couldn't be a non-human race in the galaxy to constitute a danger to mankind. The lost race of the rubble-heap cities had exterminated all rivals before it grew old and weary and—so the most respected authorities said—committed suicide.

The beam-locator clicked again. Something new had been projected at the *Marintha*. It was on the order of a radar-beam, but the analyzer made it out to be extraordinarily complex. It ceased. Howell threw the yacht's electron telescope into circuit. The telescope-screen showed a pattern of stars, but with something indefinite in silhouette between them. He adjusted the controls. The object clarified. There was only starlight, and this was quite at the limit of the telescope's pick-up power for such faint illumination. But the thing in the telescope field was obviously a spaceship of some sort. Yet it certainly hadn't been made on any planet Howell knew.

He said sharply over his shoulder: "Ketch! Hurry up with the drive. There's something out yonder I don't like. We may need to get moving—and fast!"

He had cold chills running up and down his spine. The sensation was like what one might expect if one saw a ghost. Howell saw something and didn't believe it—but still he saw it. There couldn't be another civilized race! It wasn't possible! For half a thousand years men had roamed the stars, and at first they were cautious and even timorous because the laws of probability said that pure chance must have produced more than one creature capable of civilization in the hundreds of millions of Earth-type worlds in the galaxy of the Milky Way.

But there were none. There never had been even one intelligent race other than the human. The progenitors of modern mankind had possessed a civilization that present-day men hadn't yet matched. They'd wiped out all possible rivals just as they'd destroyed all dangerous animals on the worlds they'd colonized. Modern man had inherited a galaxy made safe for humanity. He hadn't inherited anything else, but this much seemed certain—and nothing contrary to it could be imagined!

But some ten thousand miles away there was an object which beamed complex microwaves at the *Marintha*. It was shaped like an Earth-ecology slug. Now, suddenly, a faint whining sound came from it, and was picked up by the *Marintha's* detection apparatus. The whine was like that of a space-drive—the normal-space drive used for journeys between planets and for landings and liftings-off from worlds. It was slow, and quite useless outside a planetary system. But the drive used between suns was too fast to be practical for journeys of only light-hours or even days.

"That's a drive," said Howell. All unconsciously, his voice

had gone grim. "It's a ship, and it's moving toward us! Ketch, can you hurry things up?"

Ketch swore. A spanner clattered on the engine room floor. He'd tried to hurry and his fingers became thumbs.

"These bolts have a lot of threads on them," he said irritably. "I'm doing the best I can!"

Howell watched the radar-screen. Karen opened her lips to speak, and did not.

"It's moving toward us," Howell said tensely. "And it has plenty of acceleration!" He stirred restlessly. "I'll feel better when we can drive!"

Karen's father came to the control room door. He'd removed the apron he'd been wearing while, despite his eminence in the science of botany, he acted as ship's cook for a small, private, and strictly amateur space-exploration expedition. Howell set the controls for a high-speed entry into overdrive the instant it was possible. Breen looked at him benignly.

"What's up?"

Howell said again, "There's something out there. It looks like a ship and acts like a ship. But it can't be—unless it's a non-human one."

"Impossible!" said Breen confidently. "Let's go over and look at it."

"It's coming to look at us," said Howell.

Ketch said angrily from the engine room, "I crossed a thread. Four more bolts to go!"

Then there was silence. By all authoritative opinion, the thing that was happening, couldn't be. The slug-shaped ship simply couldn't have been made by men. Its radar—if it was only a radar—wouldn't have had such a complex wave-form. But there were radar-scopes in existence which instead of returning only the news that something was a certain distance away, bearing such-and-such, gave information about the object's size and shape and composition. It was expected to be very useful to meteor-miners, but the *Marintha* wasn't equipped with it. The slug-ship might have something of the sort, though, in which case it already knew much more about the *Marintha* than the *Marintha* knew about it.

Howell touched the query-button, and the triple circle on the radar-screen shrank and disappeared. The quadruple circle appeared. The blip beyond it from the second impossible object

showed up again. It seemed to be stationary, still nearly fifty thousand miles away.

"That one's not heading our way, anyhow," said Howell. "Maybe they feel about us as I feel about them. I'd like to have a consort right now, to carry back word of this affair if we happened to get the worst of it."

A noise came out of the all-wave receiver. It was not a voice in any normal sense. It was a mooing, bleating, howling sound, more like the dismal bellow of an animal than anything else. Karen went pale. The idea of a mysterious, alien spaceship operated by men would be alarming enough to a girl—but a spaceship with a crew of beasts who made mere sounds instead of speech . . .

"If that's a question," said Howell grimly, "the answer is 'no comment.' Not yet! When Ketch has finished his job, maybe! But we act mysterious until he's finished, anyhow."

Ketch called from the engine room:

"Two more bolts, and then tightening up all around. Then we'll be set!"

Howell bit at his knuckles, watching the instruments and the screens. It was not easy to admit to one's self that humanity's isolated grandeur and dignity might be an illusion. But a different race, achieving spacecraft, might have better ships than men could make. Which would be bad! They might be so much farther advanced that men would be like savages in comparison! And when a civilized race encounters a primitive one, the result is history—at least on Earth. It isn't the civilized race that dies of the meeting.

A second mooing, bleating sound. It was horrible because it seemed to be meaningless. It was a noise, and some creature had made it, but it had no discoverable significance. No understandable purpose was served by its utterance.

"Maybe," said Howell in wholly mirthless amusement, "maybe we should howl back. It might be only polite!"

But his expression did not lighten. He was uneasy. He was very unhappily puzzled. He was genuinely worried, which showed itself in a violent wish that Karen hadn't come on this cruise. The journey itself was Breen's idea—to test a theory he'd formed about the eight kinds of food-plants found wherever ancient cities had become mere piles of rubble. Howell had offered the *Marintha* and himself because he knew that Karen

would make the trip with her father. Now he wished urgently that he hadn't, for Karen's sake alone.

There was a long silence from space. Ketch turned the last bolts. It took time. Then there came an entirely new kind of sound from the far-away but approaching slug-ship. The beam-locator verified its source. It came from the slug-ship—and it was human speech.

It was words, unintelligible but unmistakable. The voice was a clear soprano. It could be a child or a woman or a young girl. It spoke briskly and came to a plain stop, and then there was silence again.

Howell sat up straight in the pilot's chair. Breen said with satisfaction, "Now, that's something like it! They don't use the same language we do, but I'll accept whoever said that as kissing kin to Karen and me!"

"It was human," agreed Howell. "No doubt of it! Karen—"

"What?"

"Say something into this microphone," Howell commanded. "Your voice sounds like that one. It should be as reassuring to them as that was to us. Go ahead!"

Karen was relieved. There were still some people who spoke languages other than the one now considered the galactic tongue. As time went on, it could be expected that dialects would develop on different worlds, and perhaps some day interpreters might be needed. But humans who used any human language would have the beginning of communication if only because they used the same sort of signals: words.

Howell stared at the electron telescope screen as if he expected Karen's words to make a visible change in the slug-ship's appearance. She said carefully:

"'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbly in the wabe—"

There was a brilliant flash of light from the forepart of the approaching slug-shaped ship. A blue-white flame, bright as a sun, streaked toward the *Marintha*. It travelled at incredible speed. No material object could be accelerated to such a velocity so quickly. It moved like a lighting-flash toward the *Marintha*.

By pure, bewildered instinct, Howell threw over the overdrive switch. Relays crashed and contacts arced and there was the beginning of those excessively unpleasant sensations which

either entering or breaking out of overdrive invariably produced.

But the flame-missile hit. It hit obliquely, but it hit. And there were spitting sparks and jettings of burned-out insulation smoke in the engine room. The *Marintha* teetered on the very borderline between escape into overdrive and collapse back to normal space. The sensations of the four in the yacht were intolerable—dizziness and nausea and spinning fall. . . . They seemed to last for hours. But, obviously, they didn't.

The vision-screens went dark. Instantly all instruments read zero. The *Marintha* was in overdrive, racing for nowhere at multiples of the speed of light. Nothing could touch her. She was utterly out of communication with the universe of stars and suns and galaxies. She had no contact with anything outside herself. And when she broke out of overdrive again, she should be almost infinitely far away from the place where an impossible, alien spacecraft had fired an incredible weapon at her from thousands of miles away—and had made a partial hit with it.

Howell called, "Ketch! Any damage?"

Ketch said bitterly, "The devil, yes! Shorts! Blasts! Fusings! And enough insulation burned to make it tricky to move around in here! We're damaged, all right, but I don't know how badly. And I won't dare try to find out before we're near something solid!"

Breen said querulously, "They fooled us! Tricked us!"

"Y-yes," said Karen. "But at least we got away! And they can't follow us in overdrive!"

Howell said in a peculiarly dry voice, "Probably not."

He went to the engine room. Ketch was in the act of getting past wires and bus-bars whose insulation-coatings were scorched and shrivelled. Incredible currents had flowed for the fraction of a second. If they'd flowed even milliseconds longer, the yacht would have been a total wreck in space. Even now the engine room was not a place in which it was safe to move about. Ketch got out into the corridor and seemed to shake himself.

"A very tight moment," he said wryly. "And I don't mean only what we ran away from. I include what we ran away *with*—this damage! I hope I can patch things up!"

Howell said shortly, "We'd better set the *Marintha* down somewhere before we try that. What worries me is that they

made beast-noises at us, and we didn't answer. So then they made a human noise, and we answered, and instantly they shot at us. The human voice was a test, a shibboleth, a trap, to see if we were people. And we were, so they tried to kill us. Evidently they don't like people. But that means there are people here! And if this is typical of space-encounters, why the people are as likely to shoot on sight as whoever or whatever is in the ship we saw!"

Karen said incredulously, "People? Here?"

"And fighting people," Howell told her. "That slug-shaped ship had a weapon to fight with. They must have something—the people we were supposed to be—to fight back with. This is a very nasty mess!"

"But if there are people here, and if we can get in touch with them," said Karen hopefully, "they might help us fix the drive that's damaged. Or maybe we can help them somehow . . ."

"Unfortunately," said Howell, "our friends of a little while ago are tricky. They proved it. If we came upon people here, they might think we were another trick." Then he said impatiently, "Just see what you can find out about the damage, Ketch, without taking any chances. I'd like to get well away from where we were shot at, then break out, pick a Sol-type sun and run for it, and get to ground on an Earth-type planet and, if possible, under cover while we make what repairs we can. Maybe I sound scared. I am. We've believed there was no other intelligent race in the galaxy. Now we know there's at least one and probably two. It isn't good!"

"Very true," said Ketch sardonically. "We know there's at least one other race, because it challenged us. And we know it's civilized because it tried to kill us!"

He brushed soot and insulator particles off his clothing.

"I'll look in the door here and see what I can find out about the damage while risking nothing."

Howell went back to the engine room. He stared at the unregistering instruments and the blank dark vision-screens. He set his lips angrily. This was a private yacht, and they'd used it as such. The people on the *Marintha* had essayed a very long journey, in the mood of people going on a picnic. People on a picnic do not expect to find themselves in an ambush. They don't expect to encounter people or creatures who will instantly try to murder them. It isn't timorous to be appalled when such things happen. It isn't disgraceful to want to get out of the

ambush instead of fighting through it—especially with a girl to think of. It is completely natural to be disturbed by the discovery that one's murder has been attempted—and may be attempted again. And when one has no weapons at all to discourage would-be murderers with, it produces a queasy feeling.

The *Marintha* drove on at the unbelievable speed of a ship in overdrive. There was no faintest indication in the feel of the ship that it moved at all. It felt as solid and as stable as if it were aground on a normal-gravity planet. It was as completely isolated from the cosmos outside its overdrive field as if it were buried in the heart of a mountain.

But this was a very bad fix. Howell wished bitterly that Karen were safe at home. But then it occurred to him that she wouldn't be safe, even back home on Earth. For centuries, humankind had believed that no other, inimical race could exist to represent a danger. But if that was wrong, if the slug-ship was the product of a race and a civilization implacably hostile to men—which seemed the case—and if that race were technically farther advanced than the human race—which looked intolerably likely—there was a very, very bad situation to be faced. The survival of the *Marintha* became starkly necessary, not because its people did not want to die—but because they had to get home with the news.

A suspicion hit Howell with all the suddenness and the shock effect of a blow. The rubble-heaps that once had been cities were found on more than four hundred planets spread across two thousand light-years of space. Those cities had been destroyed with a thoroughness that seemed to rule out their destruction by enemies. They hadn't been looted. They'd simply been smashed. There'd been no conqueror-occupation of the worlds they'd ruled. The wrecked cities looked convincingly as if their own inhabitants had gone deliberately about shattering them and destroying themselves to make the race and all its achievements as nearly as possible as if it had never been.

Howell now wondered with exceeding grimness if that interpretation might not be a mistake. Maybe—possibly—conceivably the race that travelled in slug-ships and broadcast a recorded human voice to deceive a human ship—maybe that race had destroyed the lost race of humanity. Maybe some few individuals had survived to father the humanity of Earth and today. Modern men hadn't yet built back to the civilization of

the rubble-heap cities. If the slug-ship civilization had destroyed the ancient cities thousands of years ago, in the time since then, the slug-ship race might have advanced so far beyond humankind that it would be simply a matter of finding the human race again before destroying it. And the *Marintha* in its every item of design and equipment would reveal that it was the human race the slug-ship had tested with a human voice-recording. So the *Marintha* could cause Earth-humanity to be searched for and found—and destroyed.

There was the rasping sound of an electric arc—a short-circuit. The sound of a blow somewhere. Something broke in the galley. Then there was dizziness and nausea and the feeling of a second spiral fall. The vision-screens lighted. The air smelled of ozone and vaporized metal. The *Marintha* had broken out of overdrive by a breakdown of her overdrive-field generator. It might or might not be possible to make a repair.

Howell found himself hoping desperately that the slug-ship couldn't trail the unarmed *Marintha* in overdrive. Human technology wasn't up to doing it. Not yet. But in theory it *could* be done. Howell hoped very fiercely that the beings in the slug-ship couldn't do it.

CHAPTER 2

Later, Ketch said dubiously that the overdrive-field generator might be tried again, but he promised nothing. Howell was just finishing an improvised device he couldn't have imagined a few hours earlier. It was a setup which would destroy the yacht's log-tape if a button was pressed or if the *Marintha* lost her air to space. It was not a contrivance to defend the yacht; that was out of the question. It was a device to defend Earth. If the yacht was wrecked and fell into the hands of the slug-ship creatures, with the log-tape destroyed they wouldn't be able to find out where it came from by means of the tape. He hoped that all star-charts would share in the destruction. He'd tried to arrange that, too. The whole idea was pure defeatism, and he wasn't pleased with it, but it was the best he could do. The slug-creatures could still learn that the human race existed, by the way the yacht was designed. It would be a definite stimulus to a search for that race. But there was simply no way to hinder that.

Howell's expression was grimness itself as Ketch explained that he'd made a strictly jury rig of the almost shattered overdrive unit, and that it might just possibly work once or twice or even three times more before it blew out past any hope of cobbling.

"All right," said Howell. "We'll try it. I've picked out a sun that's G-type, like Earth, and ought to have planets. It's not the nearest, but we'll go close to at least one other in getting to it, and it's our best bet."

From the habitual complacent confidence of a very few hours back, Howell had become the most confirmed of

pessimists. Now he was guessing that the *Marintha* might be trailed, even in overdrive. He planned now on that assumption.

"I don't guarantee anything," repeated Ketch. "If we can get to ground somewhere, maybe I can improve on this. But this is the best I can do just now."

"I didn't ask for a guarantee," said Howell irritably. "What good would a guarantee be if we're stuck out here? Let's try the thing!"

He returned to the control room. He swung the yacht about. He flipped on the small round screen which served the purpose of a compass for course-setting on a planetary sea. This small instrument was incredibly accurate, and it had been adjusted to unbelievable precision. It indicated the line of travel the *Marintha* would be following when it was driving blindly in the blackness of overdrive. It was also comparable to the sights of a rifle, except that the yacht would be the bullet on its way.

He centered the sun he'd chosen in the very middle of the screen. Then he displaced it the fraction of a hair, because he couldn't know the proper motion to make allowance for. He set the overdrive timer for the best guess he could make for distance.

"Ready for overdrive?"

Karen's father protested: "Wait a second! I dropped my dessert-dish when we broke out without warning. I'm still cleaning up the mess."

"Do it in overdrive," commanded Howell. "Ketch?"

"Go ahead," said Ketch dourly. "But don't blame me—"

Howell threw the switch. There was vertigo. There was nausea. There was an appalling sensation of tumbling fall. Then everything was as it had been for most of the time the *Marintha* had been away from Earth and all the time she'd been driving at many times light-speed in overdrive. There was a complete black-out of the cosmos. There was a feeling of absolute solidity. Instruments read zero. The *Marintha* was again, if precariously, in overdrive.

"I'm almost surprised," said Ketch. "But still—"

He didn't look surprised. Nor did Breen. Breen grumbled. The elaborate dessert he had almost completely decorated had fallen from his hands some time earlier and it was still only partly cleaned up. Now he finished that job, and wiped the floor with a towel and dumped the dessert, the plastic dish, and the towel together into the garbage-disposal unit. He pressed the

activating button. The assorted organic substances of the refuse shivered and collapsed. The garbage unit had the rather remarkable ability to suppress all carbon valence-bonds in objects in its special high-frequency field. Consequently any organic substance put into it collapsed into impalpable powder when the unit was turned on. The powder-particles were of colloidal, barely molecular size, and the powder itself flowed like a liquid. And it was perfectly safe because its anti-valence frequency and wave-form was totally reflected by air. Nothing could happen outside the unit, but refuse from the ship thrown into it became something easy to dispose of. It was peculiar that humans hadn't found any other use for it.

Howell was restless and uneasy. There was very much to be thought about, with very little information to go on. The soprano voice which had spoken definite if unintelligible words could have been, of course, a taped voice. But where had it been taped? Not in the part of the galaxy known to the humans of Earth and all its colonies! If a slug-ship carried a recording like that to use as a trap for victims to be murdered, it was like a weapon in that it wouldn't be carried unless in anticipation of something to use it on. But it would only work on humans! So there must either be humans here, or else creatures with human voices and throats and tongues and lips to form vowel-and-consonant sounds that would seem normal to the human ear. But the presence of humans seemed much more likely.

It had been guessed that when the race of the rubble-heap cities destroyed itself, that there were some isolated survivors on non-colonized worlds. Some were on Earth, it was supposed, and modern humankind was descended from them. If they hadn't been numerous enough to sustain a technological culture, they'd have gone back to savagery as tools they couldn't replace wore out.

But Howell now guessed that there might somewhere else have been other groups of survivors. Some might have died out, and some might have increased and built up a civilization—which might have been found by the slug-ships and might now be fighting the previously unsuspected murderers of their remoter ancestors. If the *Marintha* could join forces with them. . . . But they'd naturally be suspicious of traps.

There were other things to be debated. One slug-ship had essayed to deal with the *Marintha*. Another remained far away, yet well within communicator-range. That made unpleasant

sense. There was no way to put messages, as such, into overdrive. The only way to carry news faster than light was in a ship. So one could guess that the ship that had fired on the *Marintha* was a scout-ship, hunting for whatever it had believed the space-yacht to be. The farther-away ship was on hand to flee with a report of anything the first ship could not handle. That implied warfare. It implied that the fighting was not entirely one-sided, nor yet a knock-down-drag-out affair with fleets of fighting ships seeking each other out. There might be war fleets of space, but there were scout-ships, too, travelling in pairs so one could always get back to tell what had happened to the other.

All this was logical deduction from recent events. But there were many, many other bits of information to be extracted from what had happened. And there were matters of immediate concern, too. Howell looked at his watch and took his seat at the control-board.

"Thirty seconds to breakout," he said curtly. A little later he said, "Twenty." Still later, "Ten." Then he counted down, "Five, four, three, two, one—"

Hell broke loose in the engine room. The enormous surge of power from the overdrive-field, seeking its normal storage-space when the field was broken, went free. The choke that should have controlled it burned out. The surge of power went shatteringly into the capacitor. Its plates couldn't adjust in time. They swelled. They made arcs of flame. There was dense smoke and the smell of electric sparks and a deafening roaring sound.

And then there was sudden silence.

Howell went to see the damage. There was no point in speech. He saw catastrophe undiluted. The *Marintha's* overdrive appeared to be shot, ruined, wrecked, and blown out, and she was a considerable number of light-centuries from Earth. If her normal-space drive could run that long, it would take a thousand years to get back home. Which meant that she wouldn't.

Howell's lips tensed. He turned around. The vision-screens were bright with a thousand million stars. But there was one break in the space-yacht's favor. The breakdown had come at the instant of breakout, and because of it. And Howell had done a good job of astrogation. There was a yellow sun nearby, a G-type, Sol-type sun with a disk a full half-degree in diameter. It was of that family of suns which most often have habitable

planets in the third or fourth orbit out from them. It was the sun Howell had aimed for, but the point of breakout was extraordinary good luck.

"Anyhow we'll probably get to ground," he said evenly. "We've that much good luck—if that's what it is."

He searched for planets. There was a world. The electron telescope enlarged it. It was featureless, pure white. It was a cloud world. Sunlight would never penetrate to its surface. There was another world. It was a gas-giant, with striations almost about its equator. A third world. It had ice-caps and green foliage and the curious dark muddy areas which are always seas.

He made painstaking observations. He used the yacht's computer. He swung the *Marintha*, and steadied it, and then threw on the normal-space drive-switch. There was a whining sound. It rose in pitch, and rose and rose. At its highest, Howell leaned back.

"We drive at full acceleration for so long," he said evenly, "and then we coast. If they can trail us by our drive, they'll have to start trailing while we're driving. And we may start coasting before then."

Karen said incredulously, "You don't think they could trail us from where they shot at us, do you?"

"N-no," said Howell, not altogether truthfully. "But in theory it's possible, and they might be a long way ahead of us in technology. I'm looking on the dark side of things, so I can feel good when they don't happen."

Actually, his pessimism had increased since it had occurred to him how utterly improbable it was that a slug-ship had challenged within minutes after the yacht broke out to change fuel-ingots. It couldn't have happened by accident. Ships don't break out in between-the-stars except for such reasons as the *Marintha* had. There's nothing to be done in it or with it. It's simply thousands of thousands of millions of miles in which nothing ever happens. But something had happened. So the *Marintha* must have been detected in overdrive and trailed in overdrive and challenged and attacked as soon as she broke out.

Karen said, distress in her voice, "But if they're that far ahead of us—we can't hope to—to get back home! Can we?"

"We're not sure they're ahead of us," said Howell, again not quite truthfully. Then he said least truthfully of all: "Anyhow, there are the humans with voices like yours. The slug-ship

panicked when your voice reached it. Maybe the owners of human voices like yours are so far ahead of the characters who shot at us that they started to run away as soon as they let off one whack in our general direction."

Karen looked dubious. Her father said blandly:

"Remember, Karen, civilization is a matter of natural development. On all planets nature invents the equivalent of trees and brushwood and even grass. In the same way savage humans invent clubs, then spears, then bows and arrows. When civilization comes, men invent chemical explosives, then laser weapons, and then blast-weapons in that order. The thing that hit us was a blast-weapon. So the creatures of the slug-shaped ships can't be too far ahead of us!"

Karen shook her head. Her father took her arm and led her off to the galley, there to discuss a possible substitute for the dessert that had dropped from his hand and was now impalpable wetted dust in the garbage-disposal.

Ketch said unpleasantly, "You're wrong about the slug-ship panicking when it sighted us! When I go hunting, I'm not panicked by the sight of game! I'm hunting! So were they!"

Howell nodded.

"Don't you think that's occurred to me?"

"If I'm right," said Ketch, with an authoritative air, "they'll turn up here. They won't need to trail us! If the voice they used to trick us means they're hunting men, they'll know where to look for us!"

Howell looked up sharply. Ketch said, "Hunting deer, you know they'll head for water. Hunting humans in space, you'd know they'd either high-tail it for home, or else head for the nearest Sol-type solar system to find an Earth-type world to land and hide on."

Howell ground his teeth. He wasn't a hunter. He hadn't thought from that standpoint. But it added very considerably to the things he had to be disturbed about.

"I wish you'd said that earlier," he said. "We could have fooled them on it. But I did pick up the second nearest, not the first solar system. Still—"

He went over the yacht's detector systems. One picked up the crackling static which was the short wave broadcast of the sun. Another picked up whisperings that came from the gas-giant world, and peculiar trilling noises from the cloud-planet. All were familiar. But as the time to cut acceleration drew near,

Howell became more and more nerve-racked. He had the *Marintha* aimed and building up velocity to make ninety per cent of her journey to the green world in free fall. She'd float for three days with no drive operating. Then there'd be a quarter hour of maneuvering—maybe even less—and then the yacht should be safely aground. And if no slug-ship appeared in time to pick up the present solar-system drive whining, and if it went away before the landing operation—why then they could see what could be done in the way of repairs. Which probably wouldn't be much.

Presently the acceleration ended. The *Marintha* floated on on stored-up momentum. But Howell was only partly relieved. He had Karen on his mind, and he felt that he would need to fight in her defense, and he had nothing to fight with. He could see no chance of improvement in the yacht's situation. The capacitor of the overdrive system seemed hopelessly gone, and without it or a substitute he couldn't get the *Marintha* back to the civilization they knew, even without an inimical alien race to hinder him. He was bitterly sure that the slug-ships had detected the yacht in overdrive and trailed it, and if, improbably, he was able to head back for home, they'd trail the yacht and if they shot down the *Marintha* or simply followed it back to Earth—the tall and glittering cities of resurgent mankind would presently be blasted to rubble-heaps again.

Breen puttered in the galley. He was a civilized man. He'd made a hobby of cookery and a career of botany, neither of which was an adventurous pursuit. He'd never been in physical danger in his life before, and he couldn't quite realize the situation now. He seemed to think that there was some sort of emergency existing, but that it would be taken care of by somebody whose duty it was. Probably Howell.

Karen worried because she saw that Howell did. She was able to be frightened because something might happen to him. Not even civilization can condition a girl not to worry about some man. But it was true that she worried about the state of things that had been developing satisfactorily between herself and Howell. She was only vaguely uneasy about everything else.

And Ketch reacted according to his type of civilized humanity. He'd hunted big game for sport. Until now he'd had no more serious matter to consider. But now he began to think of this as a sport, with the others and himself as hunted game. He responded with something like elation. It was

better sport than he'd ever known before. But of course he couldn't imagine that he or they could actually be killed.

Howell came upon him examining his sporting rifles and preparing them for use on something other than four- or six-legged game.

Howell said abruptly, "When we land, we've got to check our overdrive system first thing. Everything depends on our getting it to work."

"We'll see about it," promised Ketch. Then he said interestedly, "What do you think that slug-ship heaved at us?"

"It was an over-sized blaster," said Howell. "It fired a ball-lightning bolt. It moved too fast to be a material object, and it would be slowed up by air just like a bolt from a blast-rifle. There's simply no limit in space to how fast or how far it can go."

Ketch whistled, and then nodded.

"We could build that," he said thoughtfully. "The creatures after us may not be so far advanced!"

"They've got overdrives that work," said Howell. "And maybe other things we don't know about yet. Anyhow, our first job after landing is to try to tinker the overdrive."

Ketch grinned.

"Do that," he said, "and you'll head for home, eh? I'm thinking it would be sport to hunt those creatures." Then he said suddenly, "Or are you thinking all we can hope for is a safe landing on a habitable planet? That if we find one with a rubble-heap city on it we'll be extra lucky because there'll be food-plants for us, by courtesy of our ancestors? Is that your idea?"

"We'll need a lot of luck to get even that," said Howell dourly. "But we've had some. We could be out in between-the-stars with a completely smashed overdrive. We're not. Or that blaster-bolt could have hit us a fiftieth of a second before it did. And it didn't. So we're here."

Surprisingly, Ketch grinned more widely.

"Ah! Look on the bright side!" he said approvingly. "But what might seem to you the bright side mightn't appeal to me."

Howell frowned.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I've done a lot of hunting," said Ketch, "but I never had to depend on killing meat for food. It ought to be exciting. I might like it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Howell.

"You wouldn't," said Ketch amiably. "I'm just saying that it would be sporting to try to kill some of these creatures that tried to kill us. Like a drama-tape story in reality. Do you watch drama-tapes?"

"No."

"There's some good hunting stuff on some of them," said Ketch. He regarded Howell amusedly. It was singularly like the air of a younger man treating an older man with kindly tolerance because the older man thinks foolish things he's learned instead of the wise things one invents.

Howell shrugged his shoulders and went back into the control room. And almost immediately he heard the whine of a ship's solar-system drive. It was what he'd heard at the beginning of the encounter with the slug-ships with which this present situation had begun. It wouldn't be a human ship. It was a slug-shaped craft, past question, and if Ketch were right, it would be heading for the green world which was the only planet in this system of any possible use to humans. Presently he heard another and fainter whine. That would be the consort of the scout-ship, hanging in the background in case the first ship ran into trouble.

Grimly, Howell cut off all his detection devices. They might reveal the position of the *Marintha*. They might also fail to give warning if she was discovered, but in that case there was nothing they could do, so it wouldn't matter.

Pessimism filled him. The vision-screens wouldn't either broadcast or resonate, so they could be left on. It occurred to him that by cutting down the sensitivity of the all-wave receiver he might make that non-resonant. He did so. Then he could see the universe around him, and he could hear communications between the two slug-ships. He found himself hoping absurdly that when they heard no drive and their detectors found nothing—the *Marintha* might well be out of their range—they'd simply go away to hunt in a more probable place. But he didn't believe it. Anyhow, to change the *Marintha's* destination from the green world to one of the other planets would be a blatant advertisement of the yacht's existence and course.

He tried to think of other matters than purely pessimistic envisionings of disaster. There was the inferred existence of enemies the slug-ships hunted. A recorded human voice from the slug-ship suggested that those enemies were human beings, separated from Earth-humans by light-centuries and by forty

thousand years of isolation. If slug-ship scouts travelled in pairs, for one to be sure to escape contact with enemy craft and bring a stronger force to avenge the other—why perhaps the whining he'd heard here wasn't a slug-ship at all, but a ship of the slug-ship creatures' antagonists in a war that went on hereabouts in space.

Such feverish attempts to find reason for even the most unlikely hopes kept Howell busy. There was no more profitable thing for him to do. The *Marintha* floated effortlessly upon the long curved course which should bring her to rendezvous with the green planet. Howell listened for communications between the two slug-ships. Their drives were silent now. He stayed beside the control-board, listening and watching and listening again, until from sheer exhaustion he fell into nerve-racked sleep.

Karen waked him, her eyes anxious.

"I know you need sleep," she said unhappily, "but there's something coming in and we don't know what to make of it."

He was instantly wide awake. He stared at the screens. The now-familiar pattern of the stars was unchanged. The all-wave receiver gave out only the tiny cracklings of the sun and small other sounds perfectly natural in a planetary system.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"It just stopped. It'll come back. It—it sounds like words."

He shook himself. He stood up and moved himself. He ached from the hours of uneasy partial slumber he'd had.

Then there were new sounds. They weren't whinings. They weren't the beast-howl, beast-mooing noises with which the *Marintha* had once been challenged. These new sounds began faintly, and strengthened faintly, and died away again. Karen parted her lips to speak, but he waved her to silence. The sounds came again.

Howell risked raising the sensitivity of the all-wave receiver by a trifle. The sounds came once more, and louder.

"They're words," said Howell.

He wanted to rejoice. He wanted to feel that something was breaking for the four of them in the *Marintha*. He wanted desperately to credit fate or chance or destiny with some sense of fairness—which would result in Karen's safety. But there'd been too many bad breaks.

"If," he said deliberately, after a long time, "if that isn't another decoy-call like the one you answered, Karen, this may

be what we haven't really hoped for. But I'm not going to answer it. Not yet!"

He settled down to listen to it. Hours after the first hearing, he believed he recognized certain sequences in the sounds. They came again and again. The sounds came at intervals of about a quarter of an hour. They continued for a minute or more. Then they faded out. Presently they came back, and he recognized the same sequences of syllables.

It was a taped message, transmitted without a pause by an automatic transmitter. But the way it faded in and out again was proof that it was a beamed message, sweeping back and forth so that a large volume of space would receive a reasonably strong signal at the cost of its being audible only at intervals. It was like a position-indicator on a seacoast. It was like a traffic-lane marker for atmospheric fliers. It was like the lighthouses of ancient days, at least identifying themselves and possibly telling more than their own identity. It could even be a distress signal.

Or it could be a trick of the slug-ship's crew.

Howell doubted everything except the most undesirable of interpretations. But even he had to admit that if it were a human broadcast, it could mean that this was an area and a solar system where slug-ships did not come. Otherwise the human-voice people would not have dared—No! It might mean that here humans were not afraid of the slug-ships! It could be a matter-of-fact announcement of the location of a city the slug-ships dared not attack. It could be a combat-base of enemies of the slug-ship creatures. It could have a fighting force strong enough to give battle to any force brought against it.

It could be almost anything. Those were the encouraging ideas which Howell regarded with pessimistic suspicion. There was the possibility that the *Marintha* actually neared safety, but that one slug-ship dared make a foray here, and that it would rush upon and destroy the *Marintha* before help could come from the green world.

In any case, if there were humans aground on the green planet, it should be possible to communicate with them and make friends with them and have Karen at least in no such danger as she was in now.

But there was the slug-ship! Howell wouldn't risk a call to the planet ahead. Not until the *Marintha* was much nearer. Not until he began to pick up the radiation-signals that fill all space near a center of civilization. The most he would risk—so great

was his distrust of all things that might harm Karen—the utmost he'd risk was the energizing of the beam-locator. And it indicated that the beamed broadcast came from the green planet toward which the *Marintha* floated. More, it pointed to one spot where now-visible continents almost divided a muddy-colored sea.

The electron telescope told more and more about the planet as the *Marintha* floated nearer. It was a good world. There were seas and islands and continents between two ice-caps of which one was larger than the other. There was an area which was probably desert, and there were mountain-ranges which said that there should be rain-forests. But he saw no sign of agriculture. At that, though, foodstuff on this world might grow mainly on trees, and there would be no need for vast clearings and seasonally planted crops.

But there were no signs of cities. Not one. The beam-direction locator, tuned to pin-point the source of the monotonous, fading-in-and-fading-out broadcast, said that it came from a peninsula jutting out into a world-girdling sea, just where two continents almost came together. There was a small circular area here which looked different from its surroundings. But the most painstaking search showed no sign of civilized development.

Howell, having yielded to faint and desperate hopes, now felt himself sinking back into complete discouragement.

"The worst I can imagine," he told Karen gloomily, "is that either it's a trick of the slug-ship creatures, or else instead of being help for us, it's a call for help for someone else. It could be a distress-call from a human ship, in a part of space the slug-ships usually stay away from. Even that could be a break—maybe! It wouldn't be too good, but we need anything good we can get. But I'm not sure! I'm suspicious of I-don't-know-what. Yet I can't bring myself to believe that we shouldn't give it a good close look."

"I think you're exactly right," said Karen. She looked at him with a certain anxiety. "My father thinks so too."

Breen said comfortably, "Ketch thinks the same. He was telling Karen so."

At just this moment Ketch appeared and said amiably, "What was I telling Karen? It was probably a lie."

Howell said doggedly, doubting his own wisdom but with thoughts of the slug-ship haunting him, "I'm going to make one

orbit low down, swinging over the peninsula the beam-cast comes from. We'll all use our eyes, and there'll be the cameras. We'll be moving too fast to use the electron telescope. If we're not shot down—we'll be going fast, and even artillery-sized blasters have a limited velocity in air—if we're not shot down and there's no attempt at it, we'll land on the second orbiting. Right?"

Ketch said, "There's nothing else to do, is there?"

Breen agreed complacently. "You're the skipper," he said.

He beamed, and Howell felt a certain astonished annoyance that any man could be so blithely and blindly confident that everything would come out all right in the end. Howell was acutely aware that he might be making a decision that would doom all of them. But in his best judgment they were already doomed. And neither of the others offered to take charge. They didn't even object to what he proposed. It threw all the responsibility on his shoulders.

It was a heavy load. He took observations. He listened with straining ears to the small crackling sounds from the nearby sun. He re-computed his rendezvous with the green planet while the *Marintha* floated on, losing momentum ever so gradually to the gravitational field of the sun, changing velocity hour by hour, yet always moving toward that imaginary point in space where she would fall into orbit around the green world, at the very limit of its atmosphere.

Then would come the moment of decision. Absolutely anything could be waiting for the yacht. It was already certain that a slug-ship floated on as the *Marintha* did, with the same ice-capped planet as its destination. But it had broken out of overdrive on the far side of the sun. It would not arrive before the *Marintha* had either made contact with a human civilization on the planet, or with a wrecked ship of the presumably human race—or possibly had run into a trap from which there was no escape.

Howell tried to fit the pieces of the *Marintha's* situation into a pattern from which predictions could be made. But he failed completely. There was simply no alternative to the action he was taking. It offered only the remotest of favorable possibilities, but all other actions than this offered no favorable chances at all.

The *Marintha* floated on toward the meeting place with the green world. Clouds could be seen to move across its sunward

hemisphere. As the *Marintha* approached, Howell hooked up an extremely high-precision directional receiver and tried to pick up other signals such as any civilized planet must let escape to space. There were no spark-signals. There were no amplitude-modulated signals. No frequency-modulated sounds. There was static from thunderstorms. There was nothing else—except the endlessly repeated broadcast call and minute-long spoken message.

"It can't be a beacon," said Howell harassedly, when the world he'd chosen was a huge round target shutting off much of the firmament. "It hasn't range enough. It can't be anything but a call for help! But what are the odds against our making contact with a civilized race by coming upon one of its space craft in distress?"

"What are the odds," Ketch asked, "against the four of us being alive and coming to a landing here, with our overdrive damaged where it was when there wasn't a star-disk to be seen?"

"That's drama-tape coincidence," said Howell impatiently. "Such things happen, as we know. But it's only on the tapes that coincidences happen in succession for the benefit of the actors playing hero." Then he said, "I'll make one orbit as nearly over that peninsula as I can make it. We'll try to see what's down there. We'll probably see nothing. If we're not shot at, I'll land on the second time around. This is the only liveable planet we can reach. We might as well land at the only place where there are signs of civilization. The beam-message is certainly that!"

They were very near, now. The green world filled half the sky before the *Marintha*. It seemed to grow visibly as they looked. The yacht would go on past the sunset line, and be swung around behind it by the planet's gravitational field, and deep into its shadow. Then, to eyes watching from the peninsula, it would seem to come out of the sunrise and pass overhead. But the sky should be bright enough to make it difficult to follow. Those above, in the yacht, might have a quarter of a minute or a little more in which to examine the beam-signal site and to take photographs.

Darkness fell. The night-side of the green world was utterly black. Howell moved quickly. Radar told him the yacht's distance from solidity. There was a magnetic field. There were no moons. Radar again, to check the height. Howell used the yacht's solar-system drive to correct the altitude. They were far

into the planet's shadow then, with the planet itself a monstrous darkness that seemed to grope blindly for the *Marintha*.

They came out abruptly into sunshine, with dawn plucking mountains and islands and continents out of blackness below them. Two hundred miles high. The *Marintha* went hurtling onward, cameras making overlapping pictures of all that could be photographed at so low an orbital height.

Howell said at last, "Orbit's an hour ten minutes. That peninsula should be coming over the horizon any time now."

He listened with desperate attention to the all-wave receiver, still cut down considerably lest it call attention to itself by re-radiation. He heard no menacing whine of a slug-ship solar-system drive.

The peninsula appeared ahead, foreshortened almost past identification. Cameras recorded it as the yacht swept on. No signals came up. No blaster-bolts. Nothing, except once the soprano voice reiterating the message beamed out continuously to space. Its volume was tremendous, so near, but they passed through the beam in seconds.

They saw the circular space, half a mile in diameter, that the electron telescope had pointed out. It still looked distinctly different from the rest of the vegetation about it. From two hundred miles they couldn't tell just what the difference was, save that its color was not that of its surroundings.

The *Marintha* went by. No sign of life. No hummings, no whines, no cracklings save of storms somewhere unseen. The yacht hurtled onward. Before it reached the sunset line again, Karen and her father and Ketch were examining the pictures the cameras had made, magnifying them to try to see what existed at the spot from which the beam-signal originated.

Karen spotted it. A round, silvery object, the size of a pinhead even with the picture enlarged. It was in the center of a half-mile circle of brownish appearance. It was not a slug-ship. It was not a ship made by the humanity of Earth. It appeared to be a globe of metal. Ketch made the one guess which seemed plausibly to explain what they saw.

"It's defoliation," he said. "It's a wreck. They burned away or destroyed the foliage for a quarter of a mile all around, so a rescue ship could find it without trouble. Maybe we should have called down to say we're coming."

"No!" said Howell. "The slug-ship heard Karen's voice and

thought we were—these people. If they hear our voices, not using their language, they may think we're a slug-ship. I'll land an unthreatening distance away. Not in the defoliated area. If I did, they might start shooting."

He listened again for the whine of a slug-ship's drive. He heard nothing disturbing, except that he heard nothing. The *Marintha* dived into darkness and drove on into oblivion. Again Howell used the solar-system drive to bring the yacht into the exact line at the exact height for the action he planned.

Presently they came once more to the sunrise, and Howell used the drive with grim precision to lose height. When the strangely foreshortened peninsula appeared ahead for the second time, he brought his velocity down to tolerable atmospheric speed by further use of the space-drive. There was the roaring of split atmosphere about them. The speed checked and checked. The circle of brown color appeared. Howell dived the yacht for it.

The *Marintha* was only thousands of feet above the surface, now. She came down and down. Ten thousand feet. Eight. Six. Four. At two thousand feet he levelled off, dived again, and the small craft skimmed across treetops, leaving a wake of wildly thrashing foliage behind it. Then she slowed. She stopped only tens of yards high. Then she settled deliberately, straight down. There was an enormous cracking and crackling of tree trunks and branches as her weight bent and tilted and then broke them.

She touched ground. Howell said crisply, "Call to them, Karen. By space-phone. We have to take the chance. Keep your voice going."

Karen obediently picked up the transmitter. She said clearly, "We are friends. We are people from Earth. We heard your call and we will try to help you, though we need help ourselves." Then, seeing Howell about to leave, "Wait!" she said anxiously to him, "you're not going outside!"

"I am," said Howell curtly. "If we delay, we may seem to be preparing to do them some dirt. And only one of us should go, for the same reason. But I'll take a rifle."

He slung a talkie over his shoulder. He took the sporting rifle Ketch handed him. He went to the exit-port. There he said peremptorily, "Talk, Karen!"

To Ketch and Breen he said in a low tone, "We're in a very tight fix. I'll try to keep you posted by talkie, but if there's trouble, about all you can do is lift off and find somewhere else

aground here where you can try to keep from being found. Don't try to help me."

He opened the port and jumped to the ground. All about him was jungle, though not unduly filled with underbrush. He headed through it for the sere brown area in which a globular metal object had been photographed from space.

The jungle was thick but by no means impassable. He forced his way through it. Almost immediately he began to speak into the talkie. His voice was not soprano, but it wasn't likely that it would sound like a creature from a slug-ship. He spoke deliberately to be overheard. Those back in the *Marintha* heard every sound.

"This is a pretty thick jungle," they heard him say. *"A few vines, not many, and very few thorns. The smells aren't unpleasant. Some are even attractive."*

He went on. He wished to be heard moving openly toward the defoliated area. A man or any other creature intending mischief would either move silently or else with the equivalent of roarings intended to intimidate those who heard him. Coming openly, and talking, he'd be less likely to seem menacing.

"... Things are singing in the trees. I can't spare the time to try to see them. I need to keep moving and advertising myself as not sneaking up ..."

Karen tried to obey his orders to keep her voice going out on a communicator-frequency not too far removed from the signal-beam. But she was afraid, for him. Her throat clicked shut. She could not speak. She listened as he continued to advance and to talk. Presently—

"Things are opening out ahead," he reported. *"No sign of anybody coming to meet me or take a pot shot. I'm nearly at the place where the foliage ends. Still plenty of tree trunks, though."*

His voice stopped.

CHAPTER 3

There was excellent reason. He had come to a place where bare and interlacing tree trunks made filigree patterns against the sky. All foliage abruptly ceased to be. The trees seemed to thin out, but it was illusory because in the absence of leaves he could see for a long way between them. They hadn't merely been stripped of leaves though. They were dead. They'd been killed. Their trunks looked dull and lifeless by comparison with the jungle-stuff still alive. There was no trace of anything with life in it ahead. Even the underbrush—there must be some underbrush where there are trees of varied species—even the underbrush appeared only as sticks. The ground was covered with rotted leaves. To right and left, the trees raised bare branches as if making frozen, futile gestures to the sky.

There was a clump of some local species, hundreds of slender saplings merging together thirty feet above the ground. They joined there, and other saplings rose from their junction-places and grew another thirty feet and joined again. It was like a three-story forest. It covered acres—and half of it was dead and half of it was living. The dead part was in the leafless area which from aloft formed an almost perfect circle. The living part was outside it. Howell saw dead ground-cover—creeping stuff with no upright stalks, but only runners and roots going down into the soil. In the brown circle it had been killed. Yet fresh runners already grew inward from the edge.

There was no sound before him. If wind stirred the jungle-tops, Howell did not hear it. There was the silence of death in this leafless portion of the jungle. Behind him things chattered

and squeaked and made various mostly high-pitched noises. Ahead—nothing!

It didn't feel right. It didn't look right. Men destroying foliage to make a guide and destination for rescuers might have killed the trees. They wouldn't have bothered with underbrush. They surely would not have troubled the equivalent of grass. But something, somehow, had killed every trace of vegetation in a circle half a mile across. The trees were left to decay and ultimately to fall, but although the vegetation had been killed, the fertility of the soil was unaffected. The creeping stuff grew back into the area where creeping stuff had died.

It was definitely not right. It felt wrong. All of Howell's suspicions, which he hadn't been able to name even to himself, now returned with doubled intensity. He ceased to speak because his mind was filled with observing and suspecting and listening, and trying frantically to understand. He moved—not into the dead space, but along its edges. There was something in a tree, caught in a junction of branches. It had been an animal perhaps the size of a catamount. It was long dead. It had been armored, like the armadillos of Earth and the small carnivores of Briesis. It had been aloft in the tree and it had been killed and it had fallen and been caught in the tree's branches. A hunter would have taken it for a trophy most likely, if he'd shot it. But Howell told himself absorbedly that a dead thing found in a place where everything else was dead could have died in the same disaster and from the same cause. His suspicions deepened.

He continued to move along the edge of the dead space. There was a discolored, dried-up, rotten soft-tissue plant, with a dead flower half a yard across. It had been killed. Death had been indiscriminate, striking everything with life in it. Flowers, trees, ground-cover, animals—all had been victims.

Then Howell saw the metal globe that had seemed the size of a pinhead on a much-magnified picture taken from space. It was a globe, it was metal, it was not a natural object. It had been designed. It had been made. It had been put here. It was perhaps thirty feet in diameter, with the peculiar look of metal which has been plastic-coated to utilize its strength while preserving it from rust and acid conditions. It looked like a spaceship. There seemed to be vents and photo units outside. From within it or from somewhere nearby the moving beam of the distress call must be projected.

But everything around it was dead.

Still utterly absorbed, Howell continued to be oblivious to the people in the *Marintha* and of his obligation to keep them informed of what he found.

He reached a place where he could see the metal globe almost completely. And now, even if it had occurred to him to speak, he would have been speechless.

A rotted tree had fallen and a pointed, broken limb had struck the still-distant metal globe. It had punctured it. It had ripped away one part of one sheet of absurdly thin plating.

The globe wasn't a spaceship; it was only a paper-thin shell of metal. It was a dummy, with external details to make it seem designed for a voyage in space, but with no contents to make such a voyage possible. It was scenery, placed on a jungle-clad peninsula of an unnamed and uninhabited world.

And then Howell saw something else—which made the blood pound in his temples. Red rage surged through him. Now he understood, suddenly and completely.

He saw bones. They were partly covered by scraps of cloth. They were well within the area where everything was dead. They were human bones. But they were quite small ones. There were three complete human skeletons, halfway between the edge of the brown spot and the dummy metal globe.

And by their size, Howell guessed them to be the skeletons of three human children, perhaps twelve years old.

He made inarticulate noises in his throat as he went back to the *Marintha*. When he arrived where Karen and Breen and Ketch watched anxiously from the exit-port, he was still unable to speak coherently. It was long minutes, with Karen looking frightenedly at him, before he was able to give an understandable account of what he'd seen.

"The—the globe's a dummy," he said, his voice still thick with fury. "It's bait. It's a trap for—humans, using the message-beam as a lure. The message must say that there's a human ship aground and calling for help!"

He looked at Karen, seething. He turned to Ketch.

"We've got to make something to kill them with!" he said fiercely. "The slug-ship things! Because the trap worked! A human ship—of people whose ships must be globes—a human ship came! Its people went toward the globe. Maybe they guessed they were too late because they got no answers to their calls. But they went there. And—and somewhere near the globe

one of them touched a trip-wire or a trigger. And then—a killer-field went on—and everything within a quarter of a mile died instantly!”

His fists were clenched. He was fury and rage incarnate.

“The others of the ship—they probably risked going after some of the bodies. But they didn’t dare go too far. There were three of them they didn’t dare try to reach. They’re still there. And I’m pretty sure they’re—children.”

He went and locked himself in the control room. He heard small cracklings. The all-wave receiver, still muted against self-revelation, emitted the noises associated with a solar flare. It was not important, but it reminded him that there was a slug-ship on the way here, confirmed now in its guess at the *Marintha*’s destination by the drive-sounds made by the solar-system drive during the yacht’s landing.

The slug-ship wasn’t hurrying. It followed the *Marintha* leisurely, like hunters after a game animal whose trail is plain and which cannot possibly hope to get away.

A long time later Howell came out again. Ketch nodded reassuringly to Karen.

“He’s all right now, and with new ideas of what we’re to do and how we’ll do it.”

There could have been a touch of sarcasm in Ketch’s tone, but Howell nodded. He said in a carefully controlled voice:

“I’ve been thinking. We’ll get out the capacitor and see what can be done with it. Maybe not all the plates are ruined. Maybe if we take out the spoiled ones, we can reassemble something with enough capacity to work. Maybe we can improvise extra plates. If it’s absolutely necessary, there’s some material in the scenery the slug-creatures built for their booby trap.”

Karen made a wordless sound of protest.

“I know!” said Howell. “But I think I know how to get to the damned thing and turn it off without tripping it. If it’s necessary I’ll try it. Otherwise not.”

“But there’s no point in taking extra chances!” Ketch protested. “We should think of something to be done—”

Howell said nothing. In drama-tapes, the principal characters always found a last-instant solution to their difficulties. Ketch likened their very real predicament to the contrived ones of taped narratives.

“Breen?” asked Howell.

“Botanizing,” said Karen. “He said he wouldn’t go far.”

Howell grimaced. There was so much work to be done, and Breen went poking about looking at plants! But he wouldn't be of much use in the engine room. Ketch would be better.

"I'm going to take down the capacitor," Howell said, without happy anticipation but because it was all that could be done.

"Hold on!" protested Ketch. "Shouldn't we move the yacht first? Hide it and ourselves?"

"The booby trap hasn't been visited in a long time," said Howell, "or they'd have repaired the tear in its plating that gives the whole show away. But we may need some material from it. And also, our drive would be spotted when we moved."

Ketch shrugged his shoulders almost up to his ears. He said, "Excuse me, Karen. We've a problem to solve."

Howell couldn't spare the energy to be annoyed by Ketch's adoption of the manner of a dramatic actor. He went into the control room, and Ketch followed. They set to work. Ketch seemed to expect either Howell or himself to make some startling discovery which would solve all problems. Such triumphs were not rare—in fiction. But here there was danger, about which they could do nothing for their own safety. There was danger to more than themselves, about which apparently they could do even less. If the *Marintha* fell into the hands of the slug-ship creatures, even if the four humans now aboard were not discovered, every item of her design and equipment would be proof that there was another human race somewhere in the galaxy. The absence of fighting-ship weapons would be proof, too, that this other race was totally unprepared for battle. And to creatures who would make booby traps for humans, baited with a call for help that they might murder anyone who responded, the prospect of a wholesale massacre would be delightful. They might still have records or traditions of the long-ago extermination of the race of the rubble-heap cities. They might know where to look for them again, guessing that a pitiful number of survivors of that butchery might have rebuilt a civilization while forgetting what had destroyed its forerunner.

Howell worked with a grim, set face. Ketch helped with a tendency to make unnecessary, dramatic gestures. They got the capacitor out of its built-in niche. They took it apart. It was hopelessly wrecked. There wasn't an unpunctured plate or a not-cracked dielectric sheet.

"It's no go," said Howell. "We've got to work out something else."

Ketch considered. Then he said, "It seems to me that we should be able to hide somewhere on this planet and live on game we shoot and so on."

His tone was not that of someone suggesting a regrettable possibility. Howell made no answer at all, but his silence was a more definite disagreement than any possible statement of disapproval would have been.

Breen came back. He was placidly pleased. He had highly interesting botanical specimens, indicating a biological invention paralleling but not duplicating a cross-fertilization process worked out by vegetation on Handel's Planet. It was a triumph. But there was more.

"There's a rubble-heap city somewhere near," he announced. "Look!"

There were eight plant-species—all food-plants—which were found on every planet formerly occupied by the lost race of mankind. They did not fit into the evolutionary lines of the worlds on which they were found. They had been introduced by the lost race, the builders of the cities now reduced to debris. Breen had found three of the eight species here. This was evidence that there must be a smashed city somewhere on this world. To Breen, it was splendid progress in the purpose of the *Marintha's* voyage. It was his aim to find the planet on which the eight species had developed by evolutionary mutation and selection. If he found that world, he'd have found the home world of the lost race, where it began and developed until it was vastly greater and more civilized than mankind of today. If Breen made the discovery and it was verified by other sciences, he would feel that he had not lived in vain.

Karen readied a meal while her father talked expansively of his discovery. There was nothing to be done outside the yacht, and rather less to be done within it, now that the capacitor was known to be destroyed rather than damaged. Howell was not capable of casual conversation, he was so disturbed. His former pessimism had returned when the possibility of making contact with enemies of the slug-ship race had vanished. The *Marintha* could support the four of them almost indefinitely, if let alone. It could travel to the other planets of this system, with the same proviso. But there was only one way in which the situation

could imaginably be improved. He considered that one way practically hopeless—but it must be tried.

He was silent and moody while the others talked. Karen looked distressed. Breen was absurdly elated—but he blandly waited for the situation to be resolved favorably. Ketch argued plausibly for various implausible courses of action, all of them more or less dramatically appealing but with nothing else to recommend them.

Eventually Breen got out the pictures made from space and examined them under high magnification. Presently he chortled. He'd found where there ought to be a rubble-heap that thousands of years before had been a city. It was within a reasonable distance of the *Marintha* where she lay aground.

Howell couldn't take their insensitivity to the appalling state of things. He went to his cabin to escape it, and to try to sleep. What he planned couldn't be done in darkness. He had to wait for day. He noticed that Karen seemed particularly distressed when he left the others, but he didn't dwell on it now, though most of his thinking was directly or indirectly concerned with Karen.

In the morning he was up the first of them all. He took a blast-rifle and went quietly out of the ship. It could have been extremely unwise, but he couldn't abandon completely the confidence of humans in their own safety. He knew there was danger, but he could not quite believe in danger from anything but the slug-ship now floating confidently—perhaps gloatingly—out to attempt again the murder of the humans in the *Marintha*. So he went out without leaving word of his purpose. Besides the rifle, he carried two lengths of rope and two of the rope-hooks used for lashing objects fast in ships' storage holds.

He made his way through the jungle he'd traversed the day before. It seemed less thick than he remembered it. But jungle does tend to seem thinner when one has some familiarity with it.

He came out presently exactly where he'd first glimpsed the dead area the day before. Again he moved around the edge of the killed space, not yet venturing inside it. In a little while he could see the metal globe. And then he moved back and forth, with his eyes raised above ground-level, examining the trees in relation to each other.

He took some time to make his selection. Then he threw a doubled rope with a lashing-hook at its farther end. At the third try he caught the hook on the tree. He tested it. Then he swung

himself up on the rope. He was thirty feet above-ground in a very few minutes. He braced himself and flung the rope again. He caught it on a second tree. He tested it, and the limb broke. He hooked on to another. Very shortly he was in the second tree and tossing the lashing-hook into the branches of a third. Again he had trouble making the hook lodge properly, but it could be released by tugging on one side of the doubled cable.

It was very hard work and very slow progress, but he moved into the dead area. The purpose behind approaching the trap by way of treetops was simply, of course, that the globe was the bait of a booby trap. Somewhere in the now-dead space, there was a trigger or a trip-wire. More probably, there were several. Anybody going to the seeming spaceship would normally go on foot. It would be absurd to mount triggers or trip-wires in treetops. So Howell moved toward the dummy globe by swinging laboriously from a succession of tree limbs on doubled slender ropes. He chose his aerial route three and four trees ahead.

Ultimately he arrived where trees had been felled to make room for the fake spacecraft, where the booby trap centered. He searched this space very painstakingly before he swung down to it. For minutes he moved with infinite caution, making quite sure that he would not touch anything—not even a wire as thin as a spiderweb—by any accident.

He found the booby trap unit itself. Very carefully and very painstakingly, he jammed the relay which would take a tiny dollop of power from the trigger or the trip, and send a monstrous surge of current through the killer-field generating unit. He smashed that unit. Then he worked for some time getting a part of its power-assembly separated from the rest. He was more or less puzzled by the plastic coating, not only of the unit as a whole, but of each part of it separately. It was a hard, transparent substance. Cables were coated with it; where they were joined, the joint had the glassy coating. In the whole device, including the connections, there wasn't the fraction of a square millimetre of bare metal exposed.

He tried to make deductions from the fact as he went, staggering a little from his burden, back to the edge of the formerly deadly space. He passed the small and pathetic skeletons. He went to the edge of the brown space. He put down the capacity-storage unit from the killer-field device. He went back. Unhappily, he gathered up the skeletons. They were

small. They were fragile. They seemed definitely to be those of twelve-year-old children. Doggedly—perhaps he was ashamed of his sentimentality—he placed them neatly and respectfully under a cover of green stuff. He recovered the alien capacitor and went back to the *Marintha* with it.

The others of the *Marintha's* company had his own generations-old, automatic confidence in their safety under all circumstances not specifically pointed out as dangerous. Karen was the only one left in the ship. She greeted him with a little indrawn breath of relief.

"We didn't know where you'd gone!" she told him. "My father and Ketch went to see the rubble-heap the photograph says isn't far away."

Howell frowned. He'd taken appalling chances himself. He was just back from taking them. But it seemed to him that Karen shouldn't have been left by herself. There wouldn't be dangerous animals if there was a shattered city on this planet, of course, but it was still far from certain that nothing else inimical existed here.

"I've had a queer feeling," said Karen uncertainly, "that there was something watching the yacht just now. Hiding—and peering at me."

Howell, struggling, got the object he'd brought back up upon the exit-port sill.

"It's not likely," he said. He got up into the port and picked up the burden again. "Why not close the port?"

"My father and Ketch are out."

"They'll bang on the hull if necessary," he told her. He put down his load in the engine room. "I brought this back to see how far ahead of us the slug-ship creatures may be. I rather hope it's a long way."

He cracked the hard plastic coating on the bus-bars of the package he'd brought back. He made contacts. He set up circuits. He hooked in instruments.

"I'm going to do some tests," he explained, "to see how this compares with our ruined capacitor. It functioned like a capacitor in the circuit I took it from. If they're way ahead of us, they'll have designed more power-storage capacity in this than we had in our capacitor of several times the size. If so, we may repair our overdrive around it. If not, we don't. We'll be better off if we can, but the rest of humanity will be better off if the slug-creatures aren't too far advanced."

"You think they'll—attack Earth some day?"

"Eventually," admitted Howell, "they're bound to, with crazy confident amateurs riding around the galaxy without the least precaution. Like us! Just a minute—"

He had his instruments ready. He threw a switch. He read and rearranged the instruments. He threw the switch yet again. He tried still another instrumental setup.

"Not good enough!" he said grimly. "Very good, but not the kind of goodness that would be of use to us." Then he said, "But we don't want to kill people. It's powerful enough for that!"

He hadn't really hoped the booby trap's capacitor would substitute for the *Marintha's* ruined one. But he couldn't afford to overlook any chance, however slim. But it was still depressing to have even the most unlikely fail him.

He sat down drearily. His expression was very bitter. Karen said nervously, "You don't think there can possibly be anybody—watching us?"

"Slug-creatures? No. They'd blast us aground as they tried to blast us in space."

He stared apathetically at nothing. Pessimism overwhelmed him again. Karen tried something else, to rouse him.

"But we don't really know. . . . We assume that the slug-people are deadly and murderous. But they might assume that we are deadly and murderous! They might even have reason—"

"The booby trap answers that, Karen," he said tiredly. "I don't feel like talking. Do you mind?"

She was silent. Presently she went to the still-open port. She looked out unhappily for a long time. Something moved in the jungle nearby. She ran back to Howell.

"S-something moved!" she panted. "Really!"

He got up and went to the port. He looked out. Nothing stirred, but he did get the feeling that something watched him. After some moments he drew back and found a place where he could look out the port with a blast-rifle handy. Karen looked fearfully from him to the port and back again.

A very considerable time later, Howell stirred. He'd been lost in dread anticipations. But without realizing it he'd studied each envisioned disaster for that weak point which would make it possible for the disaster to happen. The feeling of frustration persisted. He couldn't really imagine any replacement of the absolutely necessary capacitor, and therefore he couldn't imagine flight from a part of space in which slug-ships set up

elaborate booby traps. The one here hadn't been set up to kill the company of the *Marintha*. It had been set up to destroy members of the race of which Howell could know only that it existed and used words, and that the skeletons of seeming twelve-year-old members were wholly human.

This was no clue as to how to communicate with this local race of human beings. There was no way to avoid discovery by a slug-ship actually on the way here now. The only subject left to think about was the obtaining of a high price for the murder of Karen and Breen and Ketch and himself. So he'd been thinking about that.

"I want some clothing," he said heavily. "I want to make some dummy humans representing us."

Karen stirred, relieved that he'd come partly out of what was almost pathological depression. She brought garments. Her father's. Her own. Howell's own.

Howell said, "We'll stuff them with crumpled paper."

He set to work and Karen joined him. It was a curious occupation for people under an effective sentence of death or perpetual imprisonment light-centuries from the worlds they knew. They were, in substance, hiding from creatures they'd never seen, but which would blast them on sight. They knew there was another race than the inimical one. But there was a war in existence of which their predicament was proof, and they would be blasted by any ship of either side because ships of either race might consider the *Marintha* a stratagem of the enemy. They had no weapons greater than those designed for game hunting. They were practically game themselves. And Howell dourly fastened garments together and painstakingly stuffed them with crumpled paper to make them look like human beings. Karen, inwardly anxious and uneasy, helped as if it were the most normal of occupations.

"Something's occurred to me," said Howell, only a little less heavily than before. But even that slight change of intonation encouraged Karen. "We can't get away from a slug-ship if there's one handy—which there is. Especially we can't get away from two. They've got overdrive, and we haven't. They saw us and shot at us. They may know that we aren't the enemy they carry artillery-sized blast-weapons to destroy—but they do know we're not them. And so to them we're enemies."

"Yes," said Karen. She showed him a dummy. "Do you think this is all right?"

"Probably," said Howell. He went on. "If we're enemies, they want to kill us. But our ship is peculiar to their eyes. They ought to want to know what we're all about. We haven't used a weapon against them, but they're not sure we're unarmed. In fact, they probably can't imagine us as unarmed. So—in this particular solar system, what would they do?"

Karen looked at him. She and Howell had been almost continuously in each other's society for three months. They were of suitable ages to find each other interesting. Under such circumstances, as normal individuals they'd tend either to dislike each other intensely, or else like each other very much. But in the present situation of the *Marintha*, they wouldn't show their feelings. Not if they were Karen and Howell, at any rate.

Still, Karen acted as any girl would act when she wanted desperately to be the most important thing in a man's life. She tried to be necessary to him, leaving to him the larger and more vital matters such as how they were to survive in this dangerous situation. Howell, in turn, acted as if the most important thing in his life were endangered—and it was: Karen could not but share in the fate of her father and Ketch and Howell. If they were killed, she'd be killed. So Howell devoted all his energy and much the greater part of his thoughts to trying to ensure that Karen might be made safe.

For that he'd performed every action since the first breakout in between-the-stars, when a slug-ship challenged the *Marintha*. Now he made dummies. But he felt that he had to explain.

"If a slug-ship comes to this solar system," he said detachedly, "it will know about the booby trap here, or else it would try to land and murder the shipwrecked crew it would believe were calling for help. But suppose it comes here. It would see the *Marintha*—aground near the booby trap. It would be only reasonable to guess that we followed the message-beam to here—which we did. It should seem probable that some of us were killed by the booby trap—which we very well could have been. If it could see our apparent corpses in the dead space, the fact that the *Marintha* remained aground ought to suggest that we all went to the booby trap to answer the supposed globe-ship's calls for help, and all of us were killed."

Karen considered.

"That's the way we'd think," she admitted. "But they might not think the same way. If they're really an alien race, and not

human at all, couldn't their minds work quite differently from ours?"

"No," said Howell flatly. "They might not feel like we do about innumerable things. They might react emotionally in ways we can't imagine. But the purpose of intelligence or intellect in the human sense is to know and understand and make use of reality. And reality is a logical whole. To understand it, an intelligent race would have to think logically. So any alien race that develops a civilization will have to think very much as we do."

He worked a few moments longer on the dummy he was stuffing with crumpled paper.

"Anyhow," he said curtly, "I'm betting that they may decide that their booby trap killed us all off, and that we left a new and interesting type of spaceship for them to study and speculate about. They ought to be very much interested in new kinds of spaceships! They ought to want to take the *Marintha* with as little damage as possible. They made a trap for their enemies—and got some of them. Maybe we can set a trap for them."

He stood up and picked up the bulky but very light objects he and Karen had made together.

"The only bad feature," he said thoughtfully, "is that even if we trap them, it may not do us a bit of good."

He went out of the exit-port, carrying the dummies.

CHAPTER 4

He made his way again to the dead area, having a great deal of trouble with his burden of stuffed figures. Trees tried to block the way. Brushwood plucked at the clumsy bodies which nearby were so unconvincing. There was one time when a vine entangled a dragging stuffed leg, and he had to put down the whole burden to clear it. Again he found himself surrounded on three sides by tree trunks too close to let him through. He had to retrace his steps and find a more open way.

He reached the killed circle. He went into it, dodging tree trunks and with his unwieldy burden scraped at by the brittle sticks which once had been underbrush. Presently he tripped, and looked down to see what he'd tripped on. It was a fine wire coated with transparent plastic like all the metal objects of the slug-ship culture's making. It had undoubtedly communicated with a relay, which some hours earlier would have flashed a killer-field to murder him and re-kill anything within its range. Now the killer-field generating outfit was smashed, and an essential part of it lay useless in the *Marintha's* engine room.

But the trip-wire was information Howell needed. It told him where the foremost member of a rescue party, marching toward a booby trap that had lured them here, would have released pure death upon himself and all living things nearby as a reward for his altruism.

So Howell put down, here, the dummy representing himself. It would be plainly visible from the sky. He went back and placed the others as if while following him they had all been killed. It was an admirable picture of what would have appeared

if the *Marintha* had been a rescue ship lured to this place by the message-beam—as the *Marintha* had been—and if all its ship's company had gone unsuspectingly to their fate.

Having accomplished this errand, Howell was more than doubtful of its usefulness. He went doggedly back to the still-living jungle he'd left. He was fully aware, now, of the mischances that could turn any stratagem into futility. But it suddenly occurred to him that he and the others of the *Marintha* were practically inviting catastrophe. He was suddenly appalled by the idea of Karen being left alone in the yacht. There were adventure tape-dramas—mostly historical or period pieces—in which people did experience danger and face disaster. But they were make-believe. And for believability most of them were laid in earlier times when humanity was not—as it now believed it was—plu-perfectly safe.

The four of them, Howell reflected angrily, were like children who'd never been really frightened. They pretended delicious terror for the fun of it. When they encountered really alarming things, they tended to react like children who do not like the way a game is going. They tried to stop playing. That was certainly the case with Breen, and probably with Ketch. They were now looking over the rubble remainders of a long-shattered city. For the time being, they'd stopped playing at flight from a slug-shaped enemy spaceship.

Howell hurried back toward the yacht. Just past the edge of the dead area he passed the spot where he'd put the three small skeletons under a decorous cover of green-stuff. He'd had nothing then with which to dig a grave, and he had nothing now. But he wouldn't have stopped anyway because he began to think of shocking omissions in their reactions to real danger. Karen was alone in the ship, right now. They hadn't monitored the all-wave receiver. Howell had computed the position and course and hence the time of arrival of the slug-ship on its way here now. It shouldn't arrive for some time yet; but it could have driven again, planning to use power for deceleration on arrival. It could turn up any instant! And Karen would be alone, because he'd been out setting up a scenic effect, and Breen and Ketch were out botanizing!

He was almost running when he caught the first glimpses of the yacht between tree trunks. At a hundred yards he shouted. He heard the clanking of the metal dogs that held the port shut

and sealed it. The port cracked open, and Karen peered fearfully out. An infinite relief and gratitude showed on her face, but she was terrified.

She couldn't speak when he vaulted up to the then fully opened port. She clung to him. She'd been crying. She was still frightened.

"What's happened?" he demanded fiercely.

It was singular that he held her close, and this was the first time they'd ever acted other than decorously, but it was not the occasion for romantic speeches. He kissed her and repeated as fiercely as before, "What's happened? What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"There's a—whine in the sky," she said shakily. "The—the receiver picked it up. I heard it! It's like—what you said was a slug-ship. . . ."

She didn't try to release herself. He asked grimly, "How long ago?"

"N-not long. Maybe five minutes. . . ."

"Then we've some time. If it was landing, it'd be down now. It's making one orbit to slow down. A low orbit could take around ninety minutes. We've got to get Ketch and your father."

He kissed her and moved toward the control room. He came back and kissed her again. He vanished. Karen put her hand to her throat. She'd been frightened. But Howell had held her close and kissed her, and now her fears were dissipated. The reason for them was in no wise diminished, but nevertheless her eyes shone a little. And it could have been said that any two people of suitable age, thrown together as they had been these past three months, would either dislike each other excessively or care for each other a great deal. Karen would have denied it. She was quite sure that if she and Howell had never known each other, and their eyes had met on a crowded street, they'd have known what she was now sure of.

Howell threw the switch of the yacht's outside siren. Space-liners were not equipped with such gadgets as sirens, but yachts found them desirable. Landing as yachtsmen did on worlds only other yachtsmen frequented, there was need of an audible signal to guide exploring parties and hunters back to the little ships that went everywhere with no thought of danger.

The yacht's siren went "*Whiro-o-o!*" It would be hearable for

miles. Howell came back. He put his arms around Karen again.

"That'll fetch them," he said confidently. He kissed her and said, "I've been wanting to do this for a long time."

She said unevenly, "I've—been wanting you to."

"We won't tell them for now."

"No . . . not for now . . ."

It was insanity, of course. The *Marintha* was crippled and unarmed, and there was a slug-ship descending for a landing somewhere partway around this world. And slug-ships shot on sight at vessels like the *Marintha*. They made booby traps to murder humans, and there could be no doubt that the landing slug-ship would make the space-yacht a target for monstrous blaster-bolts of which one had already crippled her past repair.

The state of things offered no excuse for hope, unless it was that three-quarters of a mile away there were four dummies made from clothing of the *Marintha's* crew. They lay, those dummies, in a blasted area in which nothing grew. If the slug-ship should notice them—which was doubtful—it might assume that all those who travelled in the *Marintha* had been killed and the yacht needn't be destroyed before examination. But if it didn't act on that assumption . . .

The siren wailed again. The sound would carry over the jungles of an unnamed planet, over hills and hollows, beating upon mountain-flanks and reflected from precipices. Breen and Ketch would hear it and assuredly hasten back. But in the meantime, Karen felt the magnificent uplift of spirit which comes to a girl when she becomes admittedly the most important thing in a chosen man's life.

They talked pure romantic nonsense, which was doubly foolish because there were things urgently needing to be done. But none of the things that needed to be done were really possible; therefore it would have been quadruply foolish to put aside their sudden and urgent rejoicing in each other's existence. It would last, it seemed, for only a very short time, but that was all the more reason to rejoice while it was still possible.

The siren wailed again. Its monstrous quaverings went up and down the scale, and flying things launched themselves from jungle treetops and dashed crazily about, and doubtless there were small walking or crawling things that crouched down in their holes and listened to it fearfully. But Howell and Karen hardly noticed it.

They were looking at each other as if they'd never seen each other quite completely before, when Ketch shouted from a little distance away. Then Karen smiled ruefully and drew away from Howell as he released her, and they greeted Ketch and Karen's father as they came to the port of the yacht.

"We found a rubble-heap," said Ketch, with a look of shrewdness on his face. "And something else."

Breen puffed up into the yacht.

"Bad luck!" he grunted. "Very bad luck! There were holes there! Somebody or something dug those holes! Lately!"

Howell nodded unemotionally. Ketch and Breen were agitated by some discovery they'd made. He had now to make them resolute and ready to face what the revelation of a slug-ship's approach meant. It was, in substance, that they were almost certainly about to be killed. If they reacted as he believed they should— And if they didn't— He said, "I've something to tell you—"

"They were humans," said Ketch. "They—"

"No doubt about it!" puffed Breen. "No doubt at all! They dug holes down to deposits of metal in the rubble. There was rust left behind. They'd found machinery, maybe. Rusted past recognition, but they can smelt it down, no doubt. Their ships —"

"We found where their ships had grounded," interposed Ketch. "Brushwood crushed flat. They'd landed, and they'd stayed a while, digging in the rubble-heaps."

"Must've had metal detectors," said Breen, still partly out of breath. "To tell where the metal was. That'd make them— human. They couldn't be anything else!"

"They could," said Howell coldly. "They could be slug-ship beings like those in the one that's orbiting now, to come down next time around."

"But they have to be humans! They're gone now, but—" Then Breen stopped short. "What's that you say?"

"There's a slug-ship in orbit," said Howell. "Karen heard its whine. Considering the booby trap and the *Marintha* plainly visible from the sky, where do you think they'll turn up?"

There was silence. Then Ketch said almost with zest, "We've got to get away fast! Take what we can carry and hide until we can make contact with the humans here. They're bound to go away again!"

"After studying the *Marintha*," said Howell savagely, "and

learning that there's another human race than the one they know and set traps for! After possibly guessing that this other human race was wiped out and now has built up again from survivors of the rubble-heap cities after they were smashed thousands of years ago!"

"What—" Ketch's mouth dropped open.

"And after very probably learning," continued Howell, still savagely, "that they can do another massacre now, because they'll have traditions if they haven't records of smashing the civilization of the rubble-heap men! And they'll know where to find it. Surely! Do we have to go and hide so they can do that all over again?"

Breen asked querulously, "What else can we do?"

Then Howell told them what else they could do. Their response was almost unbelievable. They were civilized men, citified men, generations removed from any real danger of sudden death. But they were not generations removed from dramas, in which they'd experienced vicariously all sorts of thrills and splendid adventures. Watching them, they developed a fine confidence that they'd survive unharmed all the dangers and dramatic twists of the plot. Now they found themselves cast in roles of a highly dramatic type. Howell's instructions sounded like stage directions. Breen obediently took one of Ketch's sporting rifles. Ketch hesitated. He spoke to Karen—but Karen had received Howell's orders as if there could be no possible other course of action. She, herself, picked out a light rifle with which she'd made good scores at targets. The *Marintha's* company, save for Howell, prepared for an essentially hopeless battle as if for amateur theatricals.

Only Howell's grimness was real. He'd handled the three small skeletons which appeared to be those of children. He did not look upon coming events as adventures in which nothing lethal or final could happen to the human participants. He could envision Karen killed: Karen the victim of such a blaster-bolt as had disabled the *Marintha*; Karen wounded, injured, dying. He didn't envision himself as killed; nobody can really do that. But even generations of total safety hadn't erased the instinct of a man to face lions or slug-ships in defense of a girl he cares for.

So Howell was the one member of the *Marintha's* crew who knew bloodthirstiness in anticipation of the slug-ship's landing. He couldn't imagine what sort of beings manned—or

creatured—a slug-ship, but already he hated them with a violence that harked back to the ancient days when men carried stone hammers and spears to kill with.

Breen and Ketch had only enthusiasm to urge them on, but with an infinite amount of luck it might not matter. It could be that long-buried instincts would reappear when the fighting began. Target-shooting was a standard sport and on most worlds a man was expected to make a good score at the flip-targets as in much older days a man was expected to play a good hand of bridge. Living targets might help.

“How about the radar?” asked Ketch briskly. “We want to be warned when they come.”

“No!” said Howell angrily. “This is to be an ambush! The *Marintha* has to seem dead to make it one. They could pick up a radar-pulse!”

“An ambush!” Breen said zestfully. “Yes! I’ve seen them on drama-tapes. And we’re to lie in ambush!”

Howell pointed out one of the *Marintha*’s view-ports. If the slug-ship landed on this side, here was a good bit of cover. That spot would have a good field of fire. This other would be good concealment from which to shoot.

“Try not to spoil the skins!” said Ketch.

Howell didn’t protest the confusion of a hunter’s thinking with that of a man fighting for considerably more than his own life.

“Now, over on this side—”

There was a whining noise from the control room. The all-wave receiver had picked up the drive of a slug-ship. Howell’s jaws clamped tightly. He was assuming that the slug-ship creatures thought like men, though they might have very different motives.

But intelligence that arrived at space-drives like those of men, and booby traps such as men have been known to set for each other, and weapons like those of men—the huge blaster-bolt that had hit the *Marintha* was simply an oversized ball-lightning missile—if the slug-creatures paralleled human achievements, they must think like humans, though they need not feel like them at all.

The whine of the distant space-drive stopped. It cut in again. Off once more. Howell could tell what the unseen space-vessel was doing. It was decelerating, of course, to come down and view the *Marintha* from nearby for its destruction, or whatever

alternative the slug-creatures had in mind. If the eyes of the slug-creatures were no better than men's, or their telescopes not more useful, it would want to arrive over the *Marintha* moderately low down. If it suspected powerful weapons of human ships, it would tend to stay high. In any case it would not land before it had in some fashion tested out those supposed weapons. If the four dummies in the dead space were seen and accepted as corpses, the testing might not be elaborate. But the *Marintha* had to lie perfectly still as if all its crew were dead or destroyed. And it might be destroyed anyhow.

There came a mooing, bleating, howling sound from the all-wave receiver. It was beast-like, animal; it formed no words. It sounded like a monster bellowing defiance.

"That's a challenge," said Ketch brightly.

"We don't answer it," said Howell curtly.

The unthinkable dismal sound came again. Karen's features showed fear. But she looked quickly at Howell, and her uneasiness disappeared.

There came words from the unseen ship overhead. They were spoken in a clear soprano voice. There were consonants and vowels. It seemed to Howell that he recognized some of the sounds that the booby trap bait-beam had repeated so often. They would be words that happened to occur both in the planetary broadcast and this other mocking, derisive challenge.

This was mockery and it was derision. Howell ground his teeth. He was convinced now that the slug-ship overhead was the same that had challenged the space-yacht in the first place with a beastly sound like these last. It had trailed the *Marintha* in its overdrive escape from the encounter. It had followed the overdrive change-of-course to this system. Its breakout point, here, happened to be farther from the green planet than the *Marintha's*, so it had arrived there on solar-system drive much later. But now it was overhead and the *Marintha* was grounded below, and a ship cannot go into overdrive in atmosphere. It will vaporize itself. So the slug-ship aloft could mock the *Marintha*. And it did.

"I think," said Howell detachedly, "that things depend now on whether or not they saw or see the dummies I set out."

Breen and Ketch now seemed to feel the high excitement of men participating in the high adventure of a drama-tape. Howell couldn't believe that they were desperate like himself,

but he needed to keep them in this frame of mind since it was the best he could hope for. When action began they might panic and flee, or they might react as most men have always done when they found their backs against a wall.

More bestial sounds. The soprano voice again.

Breen said, "Too bad the diggers at the rubble-heap city went away! They'd have fought with us."

"They're humans," said Ketch. He listened to the sounds from emptiness. "No doubt about it. Not like whoever's making that racket."

This was admirable, sophisticated, tape-dramatic reaction to imminent danger awaiting the moment of its arrival. Howell needed to confirm them in their roles of calm and confident combatants-to-be. He said, "How do you know they're human?"

"He found—"

"I found something," said Breen. "An anthropologist could make deductions from it. I make the obvious one—that one of the diggers' children lost it."

He drew a small and draggled object from his pocket. It was a stick and a bit of paper or something of the sort. It was colored. It was very small.

It was a pinwheel, a child's toy, made out of unimportant materials on a miniature scale. A child would run with it and be charmed by its spinning, or hold it gleefully in a wind to see it turn from the wind's pressure. But it was no more than three or four inches across.

Howell almost paid attention. But he couldn't keep his eyes from the screens that showed the sky. There was a ship up there which mocked the *Marintha*. It just barely might see the dummies, and if so it might just barely think the *Marintha* empty of its crew—that all its occupants had gone to be killed by the booby trap.

There was a spark in mid-sky. It was a lurid, furious, deadly blue-white speck of incandescence. It grew. It was coming down. To the *Marintha*. Exactly where it would strike would depend, of course, on the thinking of the creatures in the slug-ship. But in matters of technology they thought like men. They had to! So the one remote chance Howell had seized upon was a guess at further similarity of thinking processes. If the human race in this part of the galaxy built spaceships in the form of globes, the *Marintha's* hull-design would make the skipper of the

slug-ship want to examine something so strange and new. In that case he wouldn't want to destroy it if he could help it. He might smash a part of it as a precaution. But he might—

The ravening, flaming missile came down. In air, it did not move with the limitless velocity of the bolt that had been fired in between-the-stars. It grew, and sped ferociously for the yacht. Its brilliance was intolerable. Only at the last instant could Howell be sure that it would be a miss.

There was a furious flash of light. There was the shock of an explosion transmitted to the space-yacht by the ground on which it rested. Then there was steam and smoke and hurtling masses of soil and shattered jungle trees. Some of them hit the *Marintha*. Then there was a twenty-foot crater in the ground, some four feet deep and only yards from the *Marintha's* hull.

Howell said quickly, "Good! It looks like we've fooled them!"

Breen had jerked to tenseness. Ketch had paled a little.

"Now they'll miss again," said Howell. "On purpose. Here it comes!"

There was a second infinitely lurid spark darting down from the center of the sky. It exactly repeated the velocity and the fury of the first. It struck closer to the *Marintha*. There was a second impact and monstrous spouting of steam and flying masses of dirt and shattered limbs and tree trunks. There were heavy blows on the *Marintha's* outer plating. She tilted all askew.

"If we acted normally now," said Howell, "we'd jump out the ports and run. And they'd see us and blast us. The next bolt won't be so close."

Ketch and Breen looked at him, and he assumed the devil-may-care manner of a tape-drama actor in a moment of high suspense, just before splendid and melodramatic action. The pose built up the illusion that this was something in a staged adventure which could not but end happily after stirring deeds of derring-do. Ketch straightened up. Breen composed his features.

"Right!" Breen said enthusiastically. "And we'll lie in ambush—"

A third giant blaster-bolt landed a little farther off. A fourth and a fifth. They looked very much indeed like bombardment intended to destroy the *Marintha* and certain to do so if it were continued. Had Howell been less hopeless of any other stratagem, he'd have had the others well away and not gambling

their lives on his guess at what the slug-ship skipper would do. But the stakes were too high to be bet except for great and high results.

There were six smoking craters blasted out of the jungle before the sparks ceased to form in the sky. Howell said matter-of-factly, after five minutes had passed without another detonation, "It looks like we put it over! They'll ground, presently, and come to take a look at what they think their booby trap won for them." Then, deliberately, he said, "What's that about the holes you found dug in the rubble-heap?"

Breen stared at him. Then he rose to the occasion and said with fine casualness, "The rubble was excavated in four places that we found. The excavations go down deep in the rubble. All arrived at different depths at traces of corroded metal. Not all of them were iron. Apparently whoever dug them out had metal-detectors and could find out where to dig. And we found where a ship or ships had rested aground and later lifted off again. All this was no more than a day or two before we arrived. And we found that pinwheel. What does it mean?"

"It means we've some work ahead of us," said Howell briskly, "after we've done what's immediately necessary. They ought to be coming in sight shortly."

He watched the screens in the control room. There was silence. Then the whine of a ship-drive, solar-system type. The slug-ship was coming in for a landing.

Howell said detachedly, "Children on a space voyage aren't unusual, but children on a ship that mines metal out of rubble-heap cities—that's something else! When there are booby traps set for them, that means they aren't just an exploring party or even an expedition gathering up rubble-heap remains. It's something all its own."

The drive-whine was loud now. Howell pointed to a screen.

"There's our friend. Low down. Barely above the trees."

The bow vision-screen showed a moving shape. It was not of any design ever built by members of the human race now spreading out from Earth. It was utterly alien. It looked very nearly like a giant slug, even to twin horns at its forward parts, resembling the eye-stalks of those gastropoda. It seemed to be made of metal, but again the metal had been covered with something else. It could be guessed that there was a coating of plastic like that on the plates of the booby trap globe and the lethal units of the trap itself.

It checked its forward motion. Its drive-whine was loud and rasping. It came forward again. It changed course to circle the grounded space-yacht at a very considerable distance. It passed not far from the booby trap globe and almost over the dead area. The whining was loud indeed.

"We haven't shot at them," said Howell deliberately, "because we've nothing to shoot a ship with. But they're pretty well convinced, now, that we're dead. If they saw the dummies—and they should have—they ought to be quite sure."

Karen interposed to explain the matter of the dummies, over the sound of the slug-ship's drive. Ketch and Breen had known nothing about them. They'd been at the rubble-heap city when Howell climbed through treetops, and the dummies were made after that. Karen's voice was quite steady. And this, like Howell's more histrionic behavior, reinforced the atmosphere of a drama-tape adventure tale.

Breen and Ketch could have been simply despairing, but instead they felt—though precariously—anticipation of action instead of disaster. Howell staged a scene of before-battle discussion. He didn't believe his plan would succeed, but he couldn't imagine not trying it. He expected to be killed. Worse, he expected Karen to be killed, too. But for Breen and Ketch—and Karen—it was wise to pretend calm confidence.

The slug-ship apparently did see the dummies. Apparently it did not detect that they were fakes. Now it came directly to the *Marintha* and its drive-whine rose to a scream coming from the all-wave speaker. It came to a stop only hundreds of yards from the grounded, tilted, space-yacht, barely above treetop level, and the protuberances that looked like the eye-stalks of a slug pointed at the yacht as if at a target. The flexible stalks held weapons. Undoubtedly they were ready to fling the incandescent, giant, ball-lightning bolts at the slightest sign of movement on the *Marintha*.

There was stillness. There was no sign but the high-pitched scream which Howell turned down for comfort's sake. Then, very gradually, the slug-ship settled to the ground. It vanished behind the trees whose thrust-aside branches and displaced trunks told of their destruction by the landing ship.

The drive-whine stopped. The slug-ship was aground. Howell led the way to the opposite side of the *Marintha*. The slug-ship might have outside microphones, so he opened the farther port with care to avoid noise. Then he stopped and went back to

make sure that if he didn't open the log-tape instrument itself, all the records of the ship's journey to here from Earth would be destroyed. He didn't believe there was real value in the precaution, but he could do no less than take it.

The four of them slipped out and to the ground. Howell had briefed them as if giving stage-directions. Ketch and Breen went around the *Marintha's* stern, to make use of cover for the ambush Howell planned. Howell and Karen moved cautiously around the bow. If they were sighted, every shred of hope would vanish instantly. Therefore he had told the others to place themselves close to the yacht. The blasted-out craters might expose targets moving toward it. They should be in position well before a landing party from the slug-ship could arrive.

Howell and Karen ensconced themselves where a fallen tree trunk would be partial protection against any ordinary hand-weapon. Oddly enough, close to the ground they could see farther through the jungle than at normal eye-height. Howell scrunched himself down to take advantage of the fact.

He and Karen were alone again, but he was necessarily absorbed in this next-to-hopeless attempt to resist a fighting ship with sporting rifles. The attempt was so foolhardy that he couldn't give it less than every atom of his attention. Yet he realized that even highly improbable success in this particular combat wouldn't ensure their safety.

"There's a consort of this ship listening in, somewhere a long way off," he told Karen bitterly. "I hope we'll do something for her to listen to!"

Then he repeated the advice he'd given Breen and Ketch about the proper time to fire—at the last instant before the slug-ship creatures moved to enter the yacht, so as many as possible could be fired on before they could flee. It did not occur to him, or to Karen, that a girl wasn't supposed to fight. Against other humans, that convention would apply. But women hunted game on divers worlds. If their targets weren't human ones, they felt no aversion. So Karen would feel no qualms about shooting at the creatures from the slug-ship. They weren't specifically human, or even humanoid.

It seemed a horribly long time before there was any evidence on that subject, however. Things made bird-like noises, some among tree branches, some on the ground. Others made animal sounds. A very tiny creature rustled fallen leaves directly before Howell's firing position.

Then, looking between jungle-stalks close to the ground, Howell saw movement. Things were coming from the landed ship. It was not possible to see them clearly, but assuredly they were not human. For moments Howell believed that they had enormous eyes, until he saw part of a moving shape more clearly and it was evident that what he saw were goggles. They would imply space-suits. The slug-ship creatures wore space-suits! In atmosphere!

It meant that they couldn't breathe the air that humans found quite satisfactory. Howell drew in his breath sharply. That was good fortune! It meant that any wound which involved the puncture of an alien's space-suit would be a killing wound. It multiplied the chances of success in this ambush, provided Ketch and Breen maintained their delusion that this was an adventure like a drama-tape play in which all the heroic characters—themselves—were bound to arrive at a happy ending. Now Howell began to hope desperately that Ketch and Breen would have no time to develop qualms and acquire apprehensions, to become frightened. Because if they did—

They didn't have time. There was a movement in the jungle. Then—a Thing appeared. It was neither much larger nor much smaller than a man. It wore a space-suit, which was like a mask in that it had all the implications of horror a mask evokes. Howell couldn't make out what sort of creature the space-suit covered. It was flesh, however, and it carried something which could only be a weapon, and it moved with a writhing, insectile gait. It had limbs, of which one carried its weapon. It had a head which moved to point this way and that, in an insect-like fashion no familiar animal practised.

There was a second slug-creature behind the first. It crawled or writhed close to the leader. This first pair moved eagerly toward the space-yacht. Three others came behind the first two. Two more came behind them. That seemed to be the entire group. They came squirming and crawling through the jungle-growths. They made no sounds. But men in space-suits make no sounds in air, either. They probably spoke freely enough to each other and to the ship by suit-radio—but they wouldn't speak, at that. They'd grunt and hoot and moo and bellow. They made their way, squirming, to the *Marintha's* entrance-port. The first of them up-ended itself against the yacht's metal sides. It fumbled to solve the problem of the fastening.

Howell fired. At the same instant, Breen and Ketch fired also.

Then Karen's light little rifle let go its bolt. The thing up-ended against the yacht's hull seemed almost to fly to pieces. Horrible greenish-yellow flesh ripped open.

Howell fired again at another target. He scored a hit, but the things reacted swiftly. Instantly one of them fired back. A blaster-bolt flashed past Howell's shoulder. He shot again. The rasping crackle of Karen's rifle sounded in his ears. He knew that Breen and Ketch were shooting ruthlessly into the squirming confusion where the slug-creatures had been bunched. But they didn't stay bunched. Individuals slithered with astonishing speed into the jungle. Then incandescent blaster-bolts came back, searching for the humans they'd believed murdered beforehand. It took them only instants to change their roles from eager investigators—looters—to targets for four rifles, and then to definitely competent jungle-fighters.

There was one dead Thing, blown almost apart but still writhing, and another whose suit-helmet was shattered. It made high-pitched screaming noises, squirming blindly. It fired its weapon without aim and without ceasing. But then the others had vanished, and almost immediately the four humans were under fire from places not between them and the slug-ship.

The reason was instantly apparent. Intolerable brightness flamed. The flexible things at the slug-ship's forward part, the things that looked like eye-stalks, twisted upon themselves. They pointed. From one of them a blue-white ball of flame rushed out. It struck a jungle tree and the tree exploded where it hit. A lightning-ball of flame darted from the other tube. It also hit a jungle tree, which exploded like the first.

The slug-ship, obviously, was not abandoning its landing party. It was fighting in defense of its crew-creatures on the ground. In open country it would have been pure, raw, naked destruction. Here, in jungle, a single bolt destroyed only the object it struck, which broke the bolt and released its electric flame. But the bolts came out in unending twin streams.

The seeming eye-stalks poured them out almost as if they were hoses spouting star-temperature flames. It was basic to their deadliness that anything broke them—and that where they broke there was nothing left but steam or vapor. If one struck a thick and heavy tree trunk, all its energy was released exactly there. If one happened to encounter a sapling, it detonated no less violently. If this steady, intolerable sequence of lightning-bolts continued, it would incinerate all the jungle between twin,

blasted-out lanes of smoking, steaming, wildly flaming wreckage to which the ship's artillery-sized blasters added every instant.

It was a highly efficient system for handling combat problems aground. It was perfectly designed for the destruction of Howell and Karen and Ketch and Breen. There seemed to be no possible chance that it could fail.

CHAPTER 5

It was a very nasty sort of fighting. The slug-ship creatures had formed a sort of perimeter, though a thin one, within which the *Marintha's* folk were enclosed. The goggled, writhing monsters shot furiously at spots where the humans lay hidden, to point out their position to the ship. The rubbery, squirming, seeming eye-stalks of the slug-ship flung giant-sized bolts toward the indicated targets—but every time a ball-lightning bolt struck anything, it exploded. Anything! And that was the one favorable item in the current situation, so far as the humans were concerned.

The ball-lightning bolts did not crash through the jungle as artillery shells would have done, to explode near the humans. They didn't snap through foliage and boughs and tree-trunks on the way. The lightning-bolts were not projectiles; they were energy-weapons. If even the biggest of blaster-bolts struck a half-inch tree branch, it burst and all its monstrous destructiveness was wasted.

There was fire, of course. There was the incineration of the object struck. But the trees had to be cleared away for the weapons to have range. They had to do the clearing. To destroy something a hundred yards away, in jungle, the giant blaster-bolt launcher had to destroy everything in between it and its final target. To make an open space, every growing thing had separately to be destroyed.

But there could be no shield against the lightning-bolts. A single one, striking the *Marintha* far from squarely, had crippled her. That was in space. Aground here, no standing

growth could survive a hit. But it was necessary to make a hit on every standing growth. The incandescent balls poured out, second after second and minute after minute. Two lanes of smoking devastation began and grew away into the jungle from the two ship-weapons. Steam and flying fragments flew from the detonated jungle trees. The four humans were caught between the two lanes of death, whose inner edges exploded violently and grew wider, always toward each other. When they met, there would be nothing alive anywhere near the meeting-place. Certainly no humans.

Breen and Ketch seemed to have gone primitive, back to the days of savage wars. They used their weapons ferociously. They exposed themselves recklessly to fire at the armored slug-things. They could be blasted, and any wound must be a fatal one as their suits lost whatever weird atmosphere the creatures required. Breen, particularly, had the air of a baresark made fearless and mad by the zest of battle. He killed a slug-thing, and howled in triumph. Ketch fired more sanely. Karen, deadly pale, used her light rifle steadily, making sure of her aim at every shot.

Howell seemed to be the one who had lost his head. He crawled a little distance apart to where he could fire between still-standing trees at the slug-ship. Nothing, of course, could have been more futile than to fire at a ship with a mere sporting weapon. But he was firing at the muzzles of the twin, squirming weapons on the ship. He aimed at the round openings out of which the flaming bolts emerged. The point was that the bolts were not missiles but energy-weapons—ball-lightning. Anything which broke a blaster-bolt pattern would detonate it. They had been burst by little boughs as well as by tree trunks. It might be possible to burst one even by the tiny bolt of a hunting rifle. In fact, it was bound to be possible.

One of Howell's rifle-bolts did detonate a lightning-bolt ball of thousands of times its volume. It was then barely out of the tube which ejected it. He fired again and again and again, wholly absorbed and with his rifle braced for the utmost of steadiness.

Then a second bolt from Howell's rifle hit a blast-ball. It happened to hit it just right. It went into the yawning mouth of the left-hand tube that spat destruction. It struck a giant lightning-ball just formed and not yet flung out. It hit far, far

back in the generator of lightning-bolts. It hit inside the slug-ship.

The fireball burst in the tube which should have guided it; it burst inside the source of power for the lightnings. It was like a muzzle-burst in an old-fashioned chemical-explosive cannon.

And it blew the ship apart.

There was a horrible, racking explosion. The slug-ship's plating ripped and tore. Flames from short-circuits melted and shorted its power units. All its stored power let go, with flamings brighter than the sunshine. Yellow vapor puffed skyward in a gigantic smoke-ring. Masses of plastic-covered metal went flying across the jungle.

For a space there was silence save for the cracklings of burning jungle. Then Ketch's rifle rasped again. Something thrashed crazily beyond the devastated space.

"Got him!" said Ketch. "What the devil happened?"

Then he choked. There was the strangling reek of chlorine in the air. Some tendril of yellowish gas had floated near him for an instant. It went away, diluting itself with the normal atmosphere of this particular world.

"It's been arranged," said Howell, not quite steadily, "for us to go on living for a while. I don't know how long. Watch out for any of the beasts that may still be alive. I've something to listen to. Karen?"

She followed him with a curiously docile air. They went in the yacht and Howell carefully disconnected the device that would have destroyed the log-tape by which the *Marintha's* route from Earth to here might have been deduced. Turning off the destructor was an expression of unexpected hope. Karen watched him, her expression strange.

He put his arms around her.

"I was—scared!" he said shakenly. "You could have been killed, Karen! You could have been killed!"

She kissed him.

"But I wasn't. Neither were you. So—maybe we'll live happily ever after, after all!"

Then the all-wave receiver gave out a bleating, mooing noise. It was dismal. It was purely animal. And yet somehow it was inquiring. Howell tensed. It came again.

"That's the other slug-ship," he said coldly, "the consort of the one out there." He waved a hand in the direction of the

recent battle. "It could start blasting us from space, and we couldn't do a thing. But I suspect it has orders—and now they won't believe we're unarmed. I think it will go home and say somebody killed its partner. And all its friends will come boiling out to resent our unmannerly behavior. But first it's calling to make sure that its partner truly doesn't answer its calls."

The mooing sound came once more. It was insistent. The noise was somehow abhorrent. It had no human quality at all. It was the inarticulate cry of an animal. It was bestial. Yet the creatures who used such sounds for communication built spaceships and ship-weapons of extreme effectiveness in space. Luckily, they weren't equally deadly aground.

"No-o-o," said Howell. "I don't think it'll come to see what's happened to its friend. The humans around here must have put up some good fights if slug-ships travel only in pairs with one hanging back to carry home news of what happened to the other."

There was a call from outside. Breen, beaming, spoke zestfully as he climbed into the yacht with Ketch close behind him.

"That was quite an adventure, Howell! I've watched such things on tape, but I never expected a share in one!"

He obviously didn't really recognize how close he'd come to being killed. Ketch said nothing. His expression was strange. There had been opinions stated among psychologists back home that the conditioned habits and viewpoints of modern civilized men didn't mean that primitive behavior-patterns were destroyed. They were only repressed to different degrees in different people. Howell reflected fleetingly that Ketch had had other but equally primitive impulses during the shooting. Now he wasn't exuberant, like Breen. He looked watchful. Satisfied. Given experience, he might come to look competent. But insofar as he became adapted to action of the kind just past, he'd become less content with life on a civilized planet.

"It was an adventure, all right," said Howell, "but it isn't over yet. How many of the beasts did you see?"

Ketch still said nothing. He turned his eyes to Breen. Breen said, "Six—seven. No—eight of them altogether. And we killed them all!" he said exultantly. "I didn't know I was as good a shot as that!"

Ketch spoke for the first time. "You weren't. All of us hit the one that was trying to open the exit-port. It practically dis-

integrated. I got two more and one after their ship blew up. I think Karen got one . . ."

"We'll have to make sure," said Howell. "I came in to find out—"

The dismal bellowing came from the all-wave receiver yet again. Now, oddly, Howell suddenly realized how it could convey information or ask for it. The mooing was not a single note. It was a chord. It was a dissonant mingling of frequencies. Instead of a tone modulated and changed to vowels and consonants in succession, it was a noise like a dozen instruments sounded together, with some ceasing and others entering the cacophony. The result was an outcry a human ear might eventually learn to analyze and understand. But men would never be able to duplicate it.

"I came inside," said Howell, "to find out what you just heard. I think that's the other slug-ship, gone to bring friends to murder us—but thoroughly this time."

Ketch said briskly, "I'll go hunt the remaining beasts, if there are any." As Howell opened his mouth to speak, Ketch added, "I've done plenty of big game hunting, but never before of anything that could shoot back at me. I'm the best one for the job, though!"

He swung out the port and dropped to the ground. Howell said quickly, "Stay here with Karen, Breen. And keep listening. If the things wore space-suits today, as they did, there must be a limit to how long they can go on what to them is air. But one of them might try to get into the *Marintha* and smash things before it dies. They don't know how badly we're smashed already. Watch!"

He swung down to the ground behind Ketch. There was a faint sting of chlorine in the air. There was the smell of ozone. There was smoke and the reek of smoldering green stuff. The composite stench was not pleasant. Also there was the smell of scorched flesh, which was revolting.

Ketch was moving toward the blasted-clear space beyond the six craters first-formed about the yacht. He carried his rifle ready for instant use. But in the hunting of dangerous game there is a necessary precaution at least as important as alertness and a ready weapon. Any one of the remaining slug-ship creatures would be a castaway now, on a planet whose air it could not breathe. It would be the most dangerous of all possible hunted things, because it could not possibly hope to

live longer than its air supply allowed. If one of those creatures survived, it would not flee. It could gain nothing by flight. So it would try to kill members of the monstrous oxygen-breathing animals who had destroyed its ship. It could have no other purpose.

So Howell followed Ketch, making of himself the needed extra precaution no hunter of dangerous game should go without. That precaution was another man with a rifle, ready to use it if the first man needed help.

Ketch needed it. There was nearly no wind, and coiling masses of steam and smoke and smells rose twistily toward the sky. Ketch advanced carefully toward the burned area. The slug-creatures had scattered to be outside it, and from the unscorched outer edge had directed the aim of the ball-lightning weapons by their fire. Ketch went on. His eyes swept back and forth, keenly. There could be no question of his alertness or his caution.

Then there was a stirring among tree branches twenty feet above the ground. Ketch turned his eyes upward. He searched for something that seemed to be shaking a foliage-masked tree limb overhead. It was in all respects what a hunter should do.

But Howell shot as fast as his rifle would fire. A stream of blaster-bolts—glowing as brightly as ancient tracer-bullets—poured into the jungle at the base of the tree whose upper parts Ketch stared at so alertly.

On the ground a hand-weapon exploded and something jerked violently.

There'd been a slug-creature aground and it had found one of the surprisingly few vines that grew in this jungle. It had tugged on that to call Ketch's attention aloft. He'd raised his eyes and for long seconds, certainly, he'd have stared at that one spot. Which would have made him a perfect target for the slug-creature.

But Howell had seen the lesser stirring at ground-level. He'd flung bolts at it, and he'd killed one of the two slug-creatures possibly still alive.

Ketch raged. It seemed almost as if he'd have preferred to be killed than to have Howell save his life, as Howell had certainly done.

"Why the devil did you do that?" he demanded furiously. "That was my shot!"

"This is no sporting excursion," Howell told him. "It's

business! And a nasty business, at that! There are only four of us, and none of us can be spared."

"But that was my shot!" repeated Ketch angrily. "And you took it!"

Howell shrugged. He had too much on his mind to engage in argument now. He said, "There could be another beast around. It's yours. If you see it aiming at me, I won't mind a bit if you kill it. We probably ought to check the slug-ship, though. They thought we were all dead, so they shouldn't have put on space-suits except for a landing party. But it might be standard for them to have all hands suit up when any kind of action is in prospect. Against another ship, it'd make sense."

He turned away to the slug-ship. He moved in its direction, using his eyes with a desperate intentness. Ketch followed, still resentful. Howell made a mental note to try to think of some way to placate him. He'd been touchy because he didn't see their situation as Howell did. His whole life had assumed his safety under any and all conditions. His hunting had been of animals that couldn't fight back. Now that a dangerous opponent had appeared, he still had the viewpoint of a hunter for sport, and even their present situation hadn't made him into a practical man in a very bad spot.

They approached the shattered slug-ship, weapons ready. There was silence except for the cracklings and snappings of the dying-out fire. There was the smell of chlorine.

The slug-ship was eighty feet long—twenty more than the *Marintha*. The smell of chlorine grew stronger as they drew near. It was made of white metal—beautifully white metal, like steel that has never been in contact with oxygen. And every particle of it was coated with transparent plastic. Where the plates were ripped by the internal explosion, they were half an inch thick, and already the totally reflecting broken surface was dulling where the air touched it.

"Aluminum!" Howell grunted. "How did they ever work it, much less smelt it?"

His mind worked busily, but his eyes searched fiercely for anything that might possibly be alive in the slug-ship. He saw two shapes which he had to force himself to look at. They were crew-members of this ship. They were dead. It was not easy to believe that such creatures could make a ship like this. But, looking into it through a great gash, the ship was itself almost inconceivable.

There was no bare metal in sight. The whole ship was

molded in plastic, with metal imbedded here and there for strength. There were differences in the plastic colors. There was a space where instruments were obviously to be read. The generators of lightning-bolts were in the bow, and both had exploded with devastating effect. With some idea of how they must work, Howell could see how an alien psychology had used principles familiar to humans to make devices that were almost unrecognizable. For example, there were no knobs or handles for controls. They were obviously sliding plates instead, with holes in the slides for digits to fit into. There were molded recesses in the now-shattered walls which could have been bunks for repose, but it could be only a guess to say so. And nothing could be seen of the ship's working mechanisms. They seemed to be buried deep in opaque plastic, and they wouldn't be arranged as human equipment was placed at all.

Ketch coughed, stranglingly. Presently he said, "Chlorine, eh?"

"Chlorine," agreed Howell. "They breathed it. Try to figure out how they'd build a civilization! With any moisture at all—and how could they avoid that?—any metal would be eaten up by the atmosphere they breathed! They had to coat all their metals with plastic to seal out the chlorine, or they'd rot immediately. But they made a civilization! They must have worked in gas-tight factories, or even in a vacuum."

The two of them stared into the rent and riven slug-ship.

And something twanged behind them. It was like the deepest note of a piano or organ save that it died away abruptly. It was followed by the rasping, nerve-racked sound of a hand-weapon shooting itself empty.

They whirled. Within yards of them, something not human writhed convulsively, partly hidden under a tree toppled by the slug-ship's weight. From the writhings, blaster-bolts went flaming in all directions. They stopped. The writhings continued, growing feebler—and then there was the dead body of a slug-ship creature. It had crawled or writhed to a distance at which it could not possibly fail to kill them both before either could turn. But now it was dead, and neither of them had killed it.

For long seconds there was silence, except for small cracklings and the diminishing hiss of steam.

Then a clear soprano voice somewhere spoke words. Human-sounding words, though they could have no meaning to

Howell or to Ketch. Ketch took a step toward the sound. Howell stopped him.

"Hold it!" he commanded. "We invite creatures that kill slug-creatures. We don't hunt for them. And they may be men." He raised his voice: "We're very much obliged. Will you come out and make friends?"

As he heard his own voice, and the inquiring tone, Howell realized that no slug-creature could have been as convincing. The soprano voice replied, promptly and briskly. Then what appeared to be a twelve-year-old boy stepped out from behind a standing tree trunk and grinned at them. The small figure carried what was almost certainly a weapon.

Howell felt the hairs crawl at the back of his neck. This was no situation for a child to be in!

He said sharply, "The devil! You killed that thing! But you shouldn't be mixed up in this! Where are your parents? There'll be a fleet—"

He stopped. Whatever he might say would be meaningless to this small and grinning apparition. There was a rustling, and a second child appeared, also apparently no more than twelve years old. A third, Grinning, they beckoned and led the way toward the *Marintha*.

They wore garments of green stuff which apparently wasn't woven. The pattern was highly suitable for movement through jungle. There was nothing to be caught by protruding twigs or branches. There was a belt, to which not-readily-recognizable objects were hung. Howell had an instant's bewildered memory of pictures projected during a college seminar on races of men. One had been of an imagined race once believed in on Earth—a race of miniature men and women. But these were children!

The port of the *Marintha* opened as they approached. Karen stared out of it, her eyes wide and astonished. Her father peered over her shoulder.

"What on Earth—?"

"This isn't Earth," said Howell. "These small characters killed the last of the slug-things as it was about to shoot Ketch and myself in the back from short range. They seem pleased with themselves. We've got to find their parents and warn them what's on the way. And we'll ask them for a little help—if they can give it."

He began almost reluctantly to have hopes. But there were definite reasons against hoping.

"You thought there was something watching the yacht," he added. "You felt eyes on you. These are some of the eyes."

The three small figures regarded Karen amiably. They spoke, using their own language with intonations and with gestures. It became clear that they wanted Karen and Breen, as well as Howell and Ketch, to go somewhere with them.

"I think," said Howell, "that we'd better go along. We owe them a small debt of gratitude, Ketch and I."

Hesitantly, Karen disappeared. She came back with the weapon she'd carried in the fight outside the space-yacht, and with the heavier weapon her father had used. Breen's expression remained blank and astonished, but he descended to the ground with her. The small figures set out briskly in the lead. The *Marintha's* party followed them.

Ketch said in a peculiar voice, "These youngsters are trained. They aren't even excited over having killed that creature. I'd say they must be a fighting breed."

"They're human," said Howell drily. "That may explain it."

Ketch said in sudden warmth, "You didn't pick up any artificial radiation from the whole planet! But here they are! They've got weapons! They evidently know a lot about the slug-things! They aren't even curious about them! So they've got a hidden civilization of a pretty high order!"

"They're not much interested in the *Marintha*, though."

"Maybe," said Ketch with sudden enthusiasm, "maybe they make their cities underground. Then they wouldn't leak signals to space. The slug-ships wouldn't find them. Maybe all they need to handle the slug-ships is spaceships and weapons we can design for them! They've been driven into hiding. We could bring them out—"

"No evidence," said Howell. "You're guessing. But I doubt they've survived by hiding. The slug-ships travel in pairs, with one ready to run home if anything happens to the other. They wouldn't do that if they'd driven this human race into caves! It wouldn't be necessary!"

Karen said uneasily, "You said they killed a slug-creature when it was—"

"About to kill us. Yes," he admitted.

He told her he wasn't pleased with himself for being so incautious that but for a grinning child skipping on ahead, he and Ketch would have died as they looked into the shattered slug-ship.

She went pale and looked at him appealingly.

"I won't take a chance like that again," he said reassuringly. Then he reported, "Ketch is expanding. He's been a big game hunter. This is big game hunting to the nth degree. I think he likes it."

He hadn't lowered his voice particularly, but ordinarily Ketch wouldn't have heard. Ketch did, though, and said with an air of great significance, "We're shipwrecked, and plenty! It's not likely we'll get home again, ever. I'm thinking ahead. You'd better do the same."

Howell shrugged. Ketch was acting oddly, but it could well enough be a reaction to the very unpleasant experience just past for all of them. So far as planning ahead was concerned, there are times when it is quite useless to make plans, but impossible to refrain. Right now the appearance of the three seeming children had changed the entire situation into something that couldn't be guessed. But already Howell was trying to think ahead—quite uselessly, of course.

The *Marintha* was another problem. The slug-ships must use units equivalent to those of the space-yacht. Physical laws dictate the use of similar devices for similar purposes. The slug-ship would have the equivalent of a capacitor molded somewhere in its massive plastic substance. But it might or might not be usable in the *Marintha*. Certainly to find it and dissect it out and test it and determine its properties, and then install it and modify the other units that had to work with it. . . . It might be done, but it would take either exact information, known in advance, or time to work in that simply couldn't be had. Long before such a thing could be done, there'd be a whining slug-fleet overhead, sending down lightning from the skies.

In short, there was no point in making plans for the *Marintha*. Howell grimly decided that the yacht could be written off.

And there was no point, either, in making plans based on contact with three children of a certainly human race, before the meaning of the contact was clear. Howell knew that he could hope, and the temptation was extreme. But he resolutely clung to his pessimism. On the whole, it was a sounder way to look at things.

They went on and on, toward the tip of the peninsula jutting out into a world-girdling sea. They picked their way through not

impassable jungle-growths. Presently they came upon two other small figures, coming from ahead and moving smartly toward the *Marintha* and the alien spaceship. There was an exchange of greetings only, but it seemed that these two already knew what had happened. They spoke briefly to the three guiding small ones, and cordially if unintelligibly to Breen—whose eyes opened wider than before, if that were possible—and then to Ketch, and then to Howell and Karen walking together. The two small figures went on to the rear.

Karen said in an astounded whisper, "Did you see that? One of them had whiskers! Gray whiskers!"

Howell nodded stiffly. He'd seen, and all his speculations had to be revised again. The children were not children. But they were human. After a dozen paces his pessimism took firm hold of him again. He was partly amazed, and partly disappointed, but much of his feeling was simple, grim loss of any hope of real help from the other human race he'd only guessed at before. Because such miniature creatures—

"They're grown-up, but tiny!" protested Karen bewilderedly. "Are they midgets?"

"No," said Howell drearily. "There were small races back on Earth. It's reasonable enough! If their ancestors and ours built the rubble-heap cities together, and the slug-ships came out of nowhere, there were no survivors on most worlds. But on Earth, where there was no city, there were some few people—maybe hunting parties or yachting parties like ours. They weren't spotted by the slug-ships, and we're descended from them."

"I know," said Karen anxiously. "You've guessed at that before."

Howell went on, doubting his own words:

"Somewhere else, on another world probably with heavier gravity than Earth's, there were some other accidental survivors. Their home worlds were blasted. They didn't know but that the murderers might come again. So they stayed where they were. They adapted to heavier gravity by not growing so large. They built up a civilization. And now they've run into the slug-creatures again."

It was not an improvisation. He'd worked out a part of it for a guess at how the skeletons of human children could be found in a booby trap light-centuries from the part of the galaxy he knew. But he hadn't guessed that they weren't children. Now he spread out his hands.

"They can't be doing so well," he said pessimistically. "The slug-ships travel in pairs, like patrols. One of each pair is ready to take back news of any concentration of human ships to wherever the slug-ships come from. That's proof that the slug-creatures have the stronger fleet. They want to use it. The humans fight hit-and-run. They haven't a war-fleet that can stage a full-scale space-battle. You can tell it by the patrol system. They're losing. And how can we get any help from men—miniature men!—who're already losing and already spread out so thin that the slug-ships set booby traps for them? Maybe we can hope for no more than help in destroying the *Marintha* so there'll be nothing to tell the slug-creatures that she came from where there's still another race of men."

Five paces. Ten. Twenty. Karen said, distressed, "If that—has to be done—what becomes of us?"

"That," said Howell, with foreboding, "is what we're going to find out now."

The three seeming children shouted. There were cries in reply. The four from the *Marintha* came out of the jungle to a place where gigantic trees grew in a forest, widely spaced. Their foliage was dense, so that beneath their out-flung branches there was only twilight. Here there was no underbrush at all. And here, hidden to eyes aloft by the leafage, there were two metal globular ships. They were smaller even than the *Marintha*. The larger of the two was no more than thirty feet in diameter. And there seemed to be innumerable small folk moving about around them.

Allowing for the difference between globular spacecraft and caravans, and between mongrel dogs and the distinctly not-canine animals that moved assuredly about among the small people—allowing for such things, there lay before them a perfect gypsy encampment.

CHAPTER 6

Communication, of course, was the immediate problem, and Howell was fiercely impatient with its difficulties. But gestures and smiles expressed welcome, which was an abstraction, and everybody concerned discovered unanticipated artistic gifts. They drew pictures which, with gestures and emotions expressed by tones of voice, were much more informative than would have been suspected.

Brisk male members of the small-man race, of whom some were almost up to Howell's shoulder, settled down with him to exchange information concerning slug-ships and the art of war. It shortly appeared that the art of war consisted, on the part of the slug-ships, of dirty tricks whenever possible. For example, the booby trap on this world. The *Marintha* had been observed long before her landing by the booby trap. It had been viewed with skepticism, as a possible dirty trick. Even after its landing and after Howell had been seen marching to the booby trap, the fact that he was oversize for a human being of their experience cast doubt upon his authenticity. It had been suspected that he was a new type of space-suit designed to deceive members of the small-man race.

It was, first, the roundabout way he went to the faked globe-ship in the killed space that had silenced those of the small people who insisted that he be shot. But on the way out of the dead area he'd gathered up the child-size skeletons of long-ago victims of the trap. He'd covered them decently, which no slug-creature could be imagined to do. And the small folk were urgently debating the question of making contact with him and

the others—who were also oversized, but different from each other—when the slug-ship came in for its landing. And then the small people were helpless to aid them. Somebody sketched a series of crude pictures which showed successive events in a battle between six small-men spacecraft—globes—and a single armed slug-ship. The small-men countered the lightning-bolts of the slug-ship by throwing out screens of metal pellets to break up the ball-lightning missiles the slug-ship used. They finally got the slug-ship with a guided missile, but lost one of their own number in the fight. So they'd been unable to try to help that strange ship, the *Marintha*.

They were apologetic about it, but they had women and children aboard and they weren't even wholly sure that the *Marintha* was not herself a booby trap. Now they were sure. And would Howell show them how he'd destroyed the slug-ship?

He did, the more willingly because he'd have done exactly as these small folk had done if it were a question of endangering Karen in a hopeless attempt to aid a dubious stranger.

While he talked to the elders, Ketch demonstrated his hunting-rifle to interested younger small-men. They were vastly admiring. Breen worked at communication with still others. His drawings of leaves and flowers were professionally accurate. He became the center of an absorbed group interested in foodstuffs. The eight food-plants spread throughout the galaxy by the men of the rubble-heap cities were known to them, of course. Presently Breen went off with a chattering group to see the highly special crops they'd developed. They could scratch-plant a food crop and go away and come back again to harvest it, or even get some sort of harvest in days, if they dared remain aground. And they had some plants which could be gathered at any period of their growth and provide different but substantial foodstuffs at whatever stage of development they had reached.

And Karen talked, or seemed to, with the women. They surrounded her, with children staring as children do stare at strangers. And they spoke and smiled and gestured, and somehow they seemed to be carrying on quite a satisfactory conversation. Howell heard Karen's voice from time to time.

But Howell was brooding and unsatisfied when he gathered up the others to go back to the *Marintha*.

"They were disappointed," he said sourly, "when they learned that the way this slug-ship was wrecked required that it

be aground and using its blast-cannon almost directly at somebody with a blast-rifle. But they're anxious to give us anything they've got. They want to be our friends, but they've no spare parts for overdrives and there are some questions I can't seem to get through to them. For one thing, everything they use is beautifully designed, and it works, but there's something—"

There was a small crowd of the small-people following them, preceding them, walking zestfully on either side.

"Their weapons are hand-made," said Ketch. "All of them. They're chemical weapons, too."

Karen said, "Their clothes are hand-woven, too, when they're woven at all. The fabrics are fabulous! The women pride themselves on the cloth they make for their families' clothing!"

Howell shook his head impatiently.

"That's part of it, perhaps. But I couldn't ask what I wanted to."

"Their food crops," said Breen, puffing a little, "are astonishing! They showed me plants growing. They use foliage in their ships for air-control, by the way. It's primitive, but in some ways better than our systems."

Howell stopped short in his walk, and then went on again.

"That's the word," he said gloomily. "Primitive! They've got spaceships, but their coils are hand-woven. I asked about their cities, their bases. I couldn't get the question across. I asked where most of their race lived. They sketched globe-ships. I asked about factories—where their globes were built. They sketched half-moons and crescents at random—meaning planets, no doubt. But I drew the skyline of a city and it didn't seem to mean anything to them."

Karen stumbled, and a small-man moved quickly to support her. She smiled at him and said quietly to Howell, "It wouldn't mean anything. They don't have cities."

"No cities?" Howell stared, frowning at her and paying no attention to the brightly-colored small folk about the *Marintha's* people.

"The globe-ships," said Karen, "are their homes. They have their wives and children with them. Like gypsies. They live on these ships, or in them. They make their own technical devices and weave their own cloth and grow their own food, some of it aboard ship where it purifies the air. But some of it is grown aground when they dare stay on a suitable world for a while."

Howell blinked. But it was true that there were women and children of the small-man race all about them. They wouldn't be carried in fighting ships. They wouldn't be aboard ship at all if there were a world of safety for them to live on while men went out to give battle to the slug-ships.

"But—" Howell shook his head.

"Every so often," said Karen matter-of-factly, "all the ships that can do so gather by appointment on some world they think the slug-ships won't find for a while. Then they smelt metals and grow crops and exchange the things they've made, and they build new ships for the new members of their race grown old enough to be on their own. They exchange crew-members, too, so there'll be somebody on every ship who knows how to do everything that's needed, and no kind of knowledge will be limited to one ship. And then they move on before the slug-ships can find them."

"How'd you find all this out?" demanded Howell.

"From the women," said Karen. "They told me." Then she added, "Their babies—they're adorable! So tiny! Like little dolls! They're lovely!"

The little crowd moved on through the jungle. It was composed of small-folk in bright-colored garments, with the four humans from Earth looming tall among them. There was much chattering.

Ketch said eagerly, "We can invent some heavy weapons for them. And if we can get one ship armed decently, I'll take a dozen or so of them for a crew—" Then he said, "No. There should be two ships. Then we can take on a patrolling pair at once. That'll curl the creatures' hair! Pairs of their ships vanishing without a trace. . . ."

Howell said drily, "I gather, though, that the slug-fleet whose scouts we ran into is only days in overdrive away. Before we could make designs for weapons, and make patterns and castings and devices to machine them, and then wind the coils and mount and calibrate them—"

"We've got to think about it," said Ketch defensively. "There must be some way to do it!"

Howell did not answer. He went on through the jungle, surrounded and preceded and followed by members of the small-human race. Their attitude toward the Earth quartet and their ship the *Marintha* was a charmed curiosity. They were going sightseeing to the crippled yacht.

Howell brooded. He'd stumbled on a discovery that should have been of infinite importance—a second race of human beings, separated from Earth-based humanity since the destruction of the rubble-heap cities forty thousand years before. And two races of men with separate cultures should have very much to give to each other. But the small-men were battling a danger the larger race so far had escaped—the slug-ships. The small-men had been forced to contrive a way of life never dreamed of by the branch of humanity to which Howell and the others belonged.

And in making contact with them, the *Marintha* had inevitably made contact with a monstrous, alien, malignant race of beings who'd almost destroyed all humanity æons ago. It was now seeking out the small-men—murdering them, making booby traps for them, hunting them with murder-ships patrolling space in pairs so that if they could offer effective resistance to one slug-ship, the other would instantly go to bring back an irresistible force for their destruction.

The *Marintha* had undoubtedly been trailed—in overdrive!—from the instant of its first detection. It had out-tricked one of the trailing pair and destroyed it. Now the other had gone for reinforcements. And the *Marintha* could not escape. But it had to! Else the chlorine-breathing monsters would learn of the existence of Earth humanity. Which would well mean a second desolation of the human-occupied part of the galaxy, and rusting, shattered, depopulated masses of wreckage to keep company with rubble-heaps on half a thousand worlds.

Which was enough of disaster. But there were the small-folk, too. They were plainly losing the struggle for survival. There must have been a time when they had cities and laboratories and sciences. Otherwise they could never have developed the ships in which they tried doggedly to stay alive. They'd tried to adapt to their danger by scattering, save that they held widely spaced foregatherings and helped each other build new globe-ships to flee in, and forlornly exchanged news and crew members so their remaining technology would not be lost. But such furtive gatherings could not lead to new discoveries. They had to use every resource they possessed merely to survive—and it wasn't enough. They could only hide and flee, and flee and hide, while their enemies hunted them mercilessly and for sport. They trapped the small-folk as if they were vermin. They killed them as if they were flies. And the small-folk fought gallantly and to

the death when they were cornered, and they were as human as Karen or Ketch or Breen or Howell. Howell felt not only sympathy for them. He also felt that irrational, emotional sense of obligation men feel toward their fellows when they are apparently doomed and yet still could be helped.

They found the two small-people they'd passed on the way to the globe-ships when they returned. They were in the *Marintha's* engine room, and they'd shifted the useless capacitor from the booby trap and examined the *Marintha's* overdrive unit. The original, now-disassembled capacitor still lay where Howell and Ketch had taken it apart, because the garbage-disposal device could not disintegrate metals but only organic compounds with a carbon base.

The small-man with gray whiskers wore a somehow professional air. He lectured his fellows on the subject of space-drives and their components. He wore garments of lurid purple, and he pursed his lips and spoke with a fine authority. Some of the folk of the globe-ships were not interested. They dispersed through the yacht, fascinated by what they saw. Karen did the honors of the ship. Ketch took his coterie of weapon-conscious younger small-men to see his sporting equipment. Breen went to the survival-cabinet and brought out the seeds and cultures required by law to be carried in all spacecraft. He began to sketch instructive details of what the seeds were for, and what they would do.

But the gray-whiskered small-man continued to lecture on the overdrive-generating system of the *Marintha*. Sometimes somebody argued a point with him. A highly technical argument was evidently beginning.

Howell listened for a time. Then he went back to those with whom he'd tried to communicate earlier. He wanted to make a bargain with them. If they couldn't repair the *Marintha* to journey in deep space, would they find for him the deepest abyss of this planet's ocean, so he could drop the yacht into it where all the resources of the slug-ship culture couldn't find it? Or if they found it, couldn't recover it for study?

He didn't stipulate for the reception of the four Earth-humans in the small-men's ships. He didn't even stipulate for a globe-ship to pick him out of the sea after he'd sent the *Marintha* on its way to oblivion. He was thinking very grimly of Karen. She wouldn't want to go home if doing so would lead to the arrival of fleets of monsters to repeat the massacre of the

rubble-heap cities. She'd rather be marooned here than lead destruction home. In any case she'd share in the doom that followed her to Earth. And yet, she wouldn't want to live on here.

He tried urgently to get his question into pictures and gestures and grimaces. The *Marintha* could lift off with the same limited drive by which she'd landed. She could dive into the deepest deep of all the seas, and thereby at least delay the discovery of Earth-humanity by the monsters of the slug-ships. Would the small-folk help him find a suitable place to sink her?

He didn't get the question understood. The small-folk could not quite grasp the reasoning by which the *Marintha* had to be destroyed without attempting to fight. The most useful question he was able to ask was, when would the slug-ship fighting fleet arrive? The miniature humans could answer that. The answer was, between the third and fourth sunsets from now.

A group of the visitors went trooping out of the engine room and the yacht. The whiskered authority on space-drives led them. They seemed to head toward the exploded slug-ship.

Ketch came to Howell. He said abruptly, "Since the *Marintha's* wrecked, you've made a deal for us to be taken aboard a globe-ship, haven't you?"

"Not yet," said Howell. "I'm not sure I can. They're already pretty crowded. Maybe there's no room for us. Maybe no air."

Ketch said feverishly, "But we've got to go with them! And we've got to take all the technical data the *Marintha* carries!"

Howell shrugged.

"I'm trying to arrange the *Marintha's* destruction. Maybe I can't even make that absolutely certain."

"But we have to go with them!" insisted Ketch. His tone was suddenly urgent. "Presently they'll gather together—all the globe-ships at one place! We'll have weapons worked out! We'll demonstrate them! I'll take a crew of the little men and we'll go hunting slug-ships! We'll blast them! We'll smash them! We'll curl their hair! And then we'll begin to make a fleet and we'll move on the worlds the slug-ships come from—"

"We?" asked Howell politely.

"I'll need you," said Ketch, "but if I have to I can make out! But I think you'll join me! When Karen hears—"

"You have my blessings," said Howell with irony. "But right now our first impossible task is to keep the slug-creatures from coming back here and learning that there are two human races,

not one, and that they've made contact. Because if they find that out, they'll make an all-out attack on the race that's not used to fighting them and won't be prepared: Our race! You've my blessing on what you want to do, but first things come first!"

He turned aside and drearily helped display the yacht and its equipment to the raptly admiring small-folk. He gathered the impression that they were astonished at so large a spacecraft built for the use of so few. The globe-ships were crowded with tiny men and women and children. Howell morosely realized that they were crowded because at their infrequent gatherings, they couldn't build new ships fast enough. They did everything practically by hand, and what machinery they used was itself handmade. Their civilization labored under the tremendous pressure of constant danger, constant need to move on, to avoid slug-ships, and a need never to stay aground longer than could be helped. Under such a handicap, they'd reached the point of diminishing returns. The small-race of human beings was headed for extinction.

Then a question arose in Howell's mind. How did they survive at all? Their weapons were pitiful against the slug-ships'. They must have either more sensitive detection devices than their enemies, so they'd always have adequate warning to flee, or else they'd found some way to avoid detection by the slug-ships under some circumstances they could bring about. One or the other they must have.

With all hope for personal escape abandoned, Howell considered the most important thing in the galaxy just now, the prevention of the slug-creatures from examining the *Marintha*, intact or wrecked, crippled or in perfect shape.

There were noises outside, a small-sized tumult. Howell could imagine nothing positive or good as an explanation. In his present frame of mind, he could anticipate only disasters. So before he went to the entrance-port he snatched up one of Ketch's weapons.

When he reached the port, there was a cheerful soprano babbling outside. Small folk jumped out of the port, eeling past him. They ran toward a certain spot in the jungle. There were thrashings and movements there. Howell thought instantly of a possible still-surviving slug-ship creature. But the noise didn't match such an event.

Then, abruptly, there appeared what should have been a heartening though perhaps bewildering sight. A straggling,

heaving group of small-men were making their way toward the *Marintha* with something heavy and burdensome in their midst. They were bringing it to the space-yacht. They had cut down saplings to make poles to hang it from, and they'd ripped fabric strips from somewhere—probably inside the slug-ship's wreck—to hang it by. They came into view with an entirely unidentifiable object which by its swaying and evident weight caused much staggering and hilarity.

They brought it to the *Marintha's* port with a vast amount of chattering and orders given by everybody to everybody else. They got the object up into the yacht. There the gray-whiskered small-man took firm command. Somebody—several somebodies—came out of the engine room with parts of the yacht's disassembled capacitor. They carried their loads outside, dumping the swollen and punctured plates on the ground. The whiskered small-man judgmentally estimated the space left by the removal of the original capacitor. He turned and briskly began to chip the irregular block of solid plastic his companions had brought. His lips worked, pursing and unpursing, in a fashion peculiar to skilled workmen who have absorbed the knowledge of their trade so they need not take particular thought once they have identified their problem. There are never but so many such men, and all of them do things with their mouths as they work. This one pursed his lips and made small noises to himself.

Howell picked up the sheared-away bits of plastic and dropped them into the garbage-disposal device. As they touched its bottom, they naturally disintegrated. Without fuss, they became an utterly impalpable powder which immediately flowed out a refuse-vent to the ground, because the space-yacht was in atmosphere.

All activity stopped instantly. Small-men stared. There was an abrupt and violent babble of voices. There was excitement of unprecedented intensity. Small folk came from all over the *Marintha*, asking questions. Others crowded in from outside, and a hubbub of voices and a flurry of gesticulations followed.

Then silence fell once more. Small-men, crowded together, looked from Howell to the garbage-disposal unit and back again. Some peered over the shoulders of nearer ones. Some had climbed up on the yacht's built-in furnishings to be able to see. There were gestures, asking Howell to do the same thing once more.

He frowned. This was not sightseeing. There was no more cheerful chatter. Every member of the small-man race had suddenly ceased to be interested in anything at all except the device that took the organic refuse of the space-yacht, and by loosening the valence-bonds of the carbon atoms it contained, caused it to fall apart to powder-particles finer than the smoothest of talc or graphite. The powder was like a fourth state of matter, being neither solid nor liquid nor a gas. It was a powder. The tilting of the yacht caused the powder to flow to the lower side of its container. If blown upon, it would swirl away in tendrils like smoke. But it would become solid again only by the adhesion of its ultra-microscopic particles, one by one, to other matter outside.

The gray-whiskered man spoke. It should have been gruffly. But he was astounded. He was incredulous. He was deeply and agitatedly absorbed in what he'd just seen. He made gestures which were only partly dignified. They tended to be imploring. He begged Howell to do it again.

Puzzled, Howell dropped more scraps of plastic into the garbage-disposal unit. They turned to powder. More scraps. They did the same. And more.

There was an incredible tumult. Some of the miniature human faces were aglow with excitement. Their owners shouted shrilly. Some seemed awed, dazed by the remarkable thing they'd seen. There were small-men who pounded each other on the back, howling in apparent glee. There were some who clasped hands in overwhelming emotion. Howell saw a man in rose-pink garments, making his way forcefully through the crowd. He reached a certain small-race woman. He embraced her, pointing to the garbage-disposal unit and practically babbling to her. She wept quietly.

"Hold on!" protested Howell. "What's the matter? If you want garbage-disposal, I'll give it to you! I'll make one for you! But let Whiskers, here, do his stuff. Clear the way! Clear the way!"

Ketch and Breen came shouldering their way through the crowding, rejoicing small-men. Ketch demanded, "What's going on here? What's going on?"

"They saw a garbage unit work," said Howell wryly, "and they went out of their minds." Then he said impatiently, "See if you can draw pictures of people going out of their minds and find out what all the fuss is about."

He moved forward, spreading out his arms and shooving the fascinated small humans out of the space-yacht. Before the last were gone he saw some of them running toward the wreck of the slug-ship. He returned to the whiskered man in purple, who pursed his lips and gazed raptly at the garbage device. He made small sounds to himself. But this time the sounds he made were not comfortable, meditative ones. They were plaintive. They were almost querulous. He could make nothing of the garbage-disposer and he wanted most desperately to do so.

"Look," said Howell vexedly, "if it means that much to you, I'll make you one and show you how to make others. But what is this?"

The whiskered man made gestures. It was perfectly clear that he and some of his companions had gone to the slug-ship's wreck and carved some item of equipment out of the solid plastic which was most of the slug-ship's hull. The plastic had to be massive, for strength, and it was reinforced with metal imbedded in it. Howell hadn't recognized the object until he saw the whiskered man estimating its size in comparison with the space the capacitor had been pulled out from. The whiskered man's gestures were assurance that he proposed to make it replace the capacitor just dumped on the ground outside. But Howell didn't believe it: the small-men had spaceships, but their technology was still primitive when they had to make even their weapons by hand.

"Go ahead and try it," said Howell skeptically. "By all means try it! If it takes us away from here until we can lose our trailers—if we can lose them—that'll be perfect. But if it only blows up the *Marintha* I won't complain!"

The small-man, of course, did not understand. But Howell had spoken to him, and he spoke back. Somehow his tone conveyed desperate entreaty because of the dignity with which he expressed it. What he wanted Howell to do was of the utmost possible urgency.

Breen said puzzledly, "I've given them part of the seeds from our emergency-kit, and Ketch has been drawing things that can be used for weapons. What more can they want?"

"Apparently," said Howell sardonically, "they want something to handle garbage with! I can't make him out as wanting anything else."

He made a pantomime of removing the garbage-disposer and

presenting it to the whiskered small-man. That undersized person looked horrified. He wanted something else. It was Karen who interpreted.

"He doesn't want to take this one," she said convincingly. "This one is too much to take from us. But if we'll show him how to make one—"

"It's a slightly tricky job," said Howell, "but tell him I'll try. It's not more hopeless than the job he's undertaken—to power our overdrive by a slug-ship capacitor! If he can do that . . ."

Three small people came bashfully into the yacht. Howell had chased them out minutes before. Now they were back again. They carried chopped-off bits of the plastic of the slug-ship. With signs and gestures they asked ingratiatingly if they might drop these bits of plastic into the garbage-disposal device.

"Go ahead!" said Howell impatiently. "Have your fun!"

And they did. And it was fun. They were incredibly pleased and hopeful.

But Howell was in no enviable frame of mind. The fact was, of course, that his thoughts could never stray far from the hopeless state of affairs that lay before Karen. The contact with the small race hadn't improved her situation. Now it was obvious that even if the *Marintha* should somehow be repaired—but he was unable to believe it could happen—it should not return to the worlds of Earth-humanity without absolute assurance that it wasn't trailed by slug-ships. And Howell was convinced now that such trailing was standard practise for the chlorine-breathers, though the small-men must have some way to evade it.

He saw no conceivable hope for Karen other than a lifetime of furtive hiding among the small people, plus the knowledge that if she were ever found, their own race would be sought for and discovered and massacred as its forbears had been so many thousands of years before.

So there could be no good fortune for any of them. But not all of them shared Howell's pessimism. Ketch was developing a new psychology since the fight with the slug-creatures. It was based, ultimately, on tape-dramas he had watched. He'd experienced combat, as in those excellently staged dramatic tales. He hadn't been hurt, and he'd liked it. He'd acquired a dramatic hatred of the slug-creatures because such a hatred fitted into daydreams of an armed spacecraft with himself as

skipper and admiring small-men as his subordinates, roving space to destroy slug-ships in a frenzy appropriate to a drama-tape but to nothing else.

The yearning of the small-men for garbage-disposal units, too, was irritating because seemingly so senseless. But they couldn't seem to think of anything else, now. With other reasons for angry frustration, Howell developed a savage mood.

More of the small-folk came into the yacht, persistently, apologetically and even bashfully, to drop some morsel of plastic into the garbage unit and watch it become powder. Howell went angrily to search in the ship's stores for small parts to make a spare disposal unit for a globe-ship, meaningless as the idea seemed to be.

Ketch followed him. He spoke with an air of fine authority: "Howell, you're making a very bad mistake. You've acted as leader on this expedition up to now, but you're showing fewer and fewer qualifications for making decisions on which the lives of the rest of us depend. We've got to design some weapons!"

"Well?" said Howell.

He picked out the small parts he'd need. It occurred to him that the small, useless capacitor from the booby trap could be used in the thing he'd foolishly promised to make.

"If that whiskered small-man cobbles the *Marintha* to drive again, we'll need designs for weapons to defend ourselves with. But we can do more. I can recruit some of those small characters to come along with us and use the weapons."

Howell turned his head to look at Ketch.

"We've got to learn their language," said Ketch decisively. "We've got to build weapons. We've got to join the globe-ships when they gather at their next rendezvous. We've got to have a record of slug-ships destroyed and proof that we can lead the small-men with our new weapons to something more than a stalemate against the beasts who hunt them now!"

"It's at least not yet certain," Howell told him, "that the *Marintha* can be repaired. Besides that, there's Karen. If you did turn the yacht—my yacht, by the way—into a fighting ship, do you think you should make Karen enforcedly part of the crew?"

"Karen," said Ketch in the same authoritative tone, "is a woman. And a woman glories in being the wife of a fighting man."

"That's the way it is on drama-tapes," snapped Howell. "You're a fool! This is reality!"

He pushed Ketch out of the way and went back to the engine room. He had the parts he needed, and paper on which to sketch.

The whiskered small-man was at work on the clumsy, plastic-encased object from the slug-ship wreck. When Howell put down the assortment of small parts, he looked up. His eyes shone. He abandoned what he'd been doing. He looked desperately at each and every one of the objects that would go to make up the garbage-disposal unit, and so fierce was his desire to understand them that Howell changed his original intention. He diagrammed the inward workings of every one. It wasn't too difficult, after a vocabulary of picturings had been made from one component taken apart.

The whiskered man had two helpers, and Howell had not known that such intense and concentrated attention could be paid by anybody to anything. They watched him tensely as he worked. He could leave nothing unexplained. He could pass over nothing as self-evident. It was the wave-form of the oscillations in the disintegration-chamber metal which did the work, of course. But the high-frequency current used should have radiated like a broadcast instead of remaining confined to the metal until some organic compound came in contact with it. It was difficult to explain that the air in the ship reflected back what should have been high-frequency, radio-spectrum radiation. The standard illustration was that if an electric lamp were submerged in quicksilver, no light could escape. It would all be reflected back to the light-source. No garbage-disposal unit, surrounded by air, could have any of its radiation escape. Which was why plastic objects inside the ship were unaffected.

Time passed, and the sunlight on the jungle outside the yacht gave way to darkness. There was very probably a spectacular sunset, but Howell did not see it. He labored at the assembly of a garbage-disposal unit. It was tricky, but the development of apparatus to produce the needed wave-form, which he expected to be most difficult to explain, went through swimmingly. The whiskered small-man took it in stride. He watched eagerly as Howell soldered this and that, and he urgently insisted on restating, in diagrams and pictures, every item of information to

be sure that he had it right—which was praiseworthy, but took up time.

Karen raised the question of dinner. Howell shook his head. He found it ironic and farcical and typical of this whole affair that though there was a friendly civilized race anxious and willing to help the *Marintha*, there was substantially nothing that it could do. That at once there was most desperate need for the *Marintha* to get home—which appeared to be impossible—and there was most imperative reason that she shouldn't attempt it, lest she be trailed. The yacht should get off this world before a slug-ship fighting-fleet arrived, but it would be wiser to dump it into the deepest depths of the sea. And with such problems demanding impossible solutions—he was making a gadget to dispose of garbage!

Karen brought him sandwiches. He nodded and offered them to the three small-men who alone remained in the *Marintha* after darkness fell. They refused, and waited so yearningly for him to complete his task that he merely took a bite now and then and continued his labor.

Later Karen came again. She said, "Aren't you going to try to get some sleep?"

"I've got no particular use for sleep," said Howell dourly. "What good would it do me?"

"You should sleep!" protested Karen.

He did not answer. She said hesitatingly that Ketch was designing weapons. Howell carefully soldered a tiny contact.

She said, "He's—asked me to learn the language as fast as I possibly can."

"No harm," said Howell, "nor any particular good, the way things look now. I suspect he wants you to learn especially military terminology. Which will be about as useful as what I'm doing."

"I wish—" she stopped and said helplessly, "I wish something—"

He lifted his eyes to her.

"I'm working," he said grimly, "for you. I can't do anything that's really hopeful so I'm doing things that are practically hopeless, in the hope that I may be mistaken about how hopeless they are."

She went away, looking unhappily behind her. He continued his work. A long time after what was probably midnight, he finished the task. He connected the capacitor from the booby

trap. He turned on the current. He gave the completed device to the whiskered small-man. He was very tired then. There is nothing as fatiguing as frustration.

"It's all yours," he said wearily. "Do you want to try it?"

He watched as the whiskery small-man picked up a scrap of plastic. He trembled. He dropped the plastic in the new garbage-disposal unit. It seemed to melt very quietly and very quickly except that it did not become a liquid, but a powder. Impalpable powder. It flowed back and forth as the container was tilted. The whiskered man's two helpers almost solemnly repeated the test. Their eyes shone. They said nothing, as if speech were impossible. But nobody could have been more excited.

The whiskered small-man reached up and patted Howell on the shoulder. He urged him away.

He and his two helpers threw themselves into the work of adapting the plastic-surrounded capacitor from the wrecked slug-ship to the wrecked overdrive unit of the *Marintha*. They worked feverishly. It was a very delicate job. If it didn't work at all there'd be little harm, considering everything, and if it did work it wouldn't do much good. But it would certainly require very precise knowledge of slug-culture equipment if it was to work at all.

Howell watched for a certain length of time. They did seem to know what they were doing. But the *Marintha* would still be unarmed even if the overdrive field was again available, and there was no time to create weapons, and there was no way to evade pursuit even if they could flee. The small-men had some device—

Howell was worn out by pessimism and a grim despair. On the morrow he'd try to arrange for Karen to have asylum among the small-folk. If possible he'd transfer some technical books with her, and she could translate them later. If Breen and Ketch could be accepted, of course they'd try to pass on Earth science too. And if he could explain to the small people, and if they had room for him also, they might follow him to where he'd send the *Marintha* to dive down until her hull-plates buckled from the pressure. And they might pick him up from the water—if it was worth while. And after that—

He flung himself on a couch and was instantly asleep.

He waked with an appalling sensation of giddiness and nausea and of a twisting, spiral fall. He was bewildered. It couldn't be! Then he heard agitated babblings, and suddenly he

knew it was so. He was on his feet even before the nausea ended. He bolted for the control room. He rushed into it to find the vision-screens blank. The *Marintha* was not only in space, but in overdrive. And half a dozen of the small-men, in the control room, struggled to get the face-plate off the instrument-board to get at the relays behind it. While Howell slept, the capacitor from the slug-ship had been installed. While he slept, the yacht had been lifted off for a matter-of-fact, wholly confident check on the improvised repair. But the *Marintha* was now in overdrive, headed in an unknown direction at an unknown multiple of the speed of light—and the small-men were struggling to get behind the instrument-board to fix whatever was wrong that was preventing the *Marintha* from breaking out of overdrive.

CHAPTER 7

It was one of those things that nobody could possibly have predicted. There was no use in debating whose fault it might be, or in dividing up the blame. It had happened, and Howell could tell a part of it by his own now-vanished symptoms such as everybody experiences when going into or out of overdrive. But it was a shock to have gone dismally to sleep, having no actual belief that the *Marintha* could ever be put into overdrive again, and being resolved anyhow to sink her in the deepest sea, and then to wake and find her lifted off the booby trap planet, in overdrive, and now unable to get out again.

He thrust aside the small-men. He tried, himself, to get the front-plate clear for removal. He broke his fingernails in the utterly futile effort. He was sure, with a bitter certainty, that the yacht had been thrown into overdrive solely to verify that it could be done. It had probably been intended to make the briefest of overdrive hops. It was wholly unlikely that a particular line of drive had been chosen. But the *Marintha* was surely driving away from the unnamed planet of the booby trap on which the others of her crew had been left. With every second it became less likely that she would ever find her way back to it again. And there was unquestionably a squadron or a fleet of fighting slug-ships on the way to that green world now. More, and worse, the *Marintha* had been detected in overdrive in the first place, and she was subject to detection in overdrive now, and when she broke out of overdrive—as she must, and quickly—there would probably be the consequences of detection by implacable enemies to be faced.

Howell felt trapped, tearing futilely at the instrument-board because the yacht was in overdrive and would not break out. But then he saw the small-men staring hopefully at him, and he was ashamed.

"The devil!" he said disgustedly. "I could have had it off by now!"

He got a screwdriver and with suddenly steady hands removed the polished black plate which was the instrument-board between rows of dials and switches. He peered at the exposed maze of wires and relays and amplifiers. The breakout switch was frozen. When the overdrive field went on, there'd been a surge of current of such extra violence that an arc had formed across a spot on the relay-contacts. The metal surfaces that should have slid past each other to cause breakout were brazed together for a space of perhaps an eighth of an inch. It was the most trivial of operational failures. Only a screwdriver and a hammer were needed. He had the screwdriver in his hand. The hammer was immediately available. He tapped on the screwdriver, cutting through the eighth-inch welded—melted—spot. The relay flipped clear. There was giddiness, there was nausea, there was the feel of a horrible spiral fall through nothingness. Then he was staring at the vision-screens.

Multitudes of stars glowed all about the *Marintha*. They were, of course, totally unfamiliar. There was a sun of vivid green, seemingly near enough to have a disk if one squinted at it, but it was actually only a pinpoint of brilliance. There was the Milky Way, distinctly not itself as seen from Earth. There was an anonymous star-cluster between the *Marintha* and it. This was what the starboard vision-screens showed. To port there were fewer suns.

Howell threw on all detection-instruments, including the all-wave receiver. He hastily restored it to maximum sensitivity, whether or not it would resonate. He set the nearest-object radar spinning, outside the hull, to warn him of anything within light-minutes.

The small-men beamed at him, admiring his quick response to the emergency, which was serious enough to produce another emergency even more serious.

"I wish," said Howell grimly, "that I could talk your language to give you the dressing-down you deserve! Let's see—"

The small-men continued to regard him with confidence and

with admiration. They got out of his way with alacrity. They plainly waited to see what he would do, or what he would want them to do. He surveyed the situation. In part his emotions were purest, unadulterated fury. In part they were pessimistic to the edge of despair.

The *Marintha* was lost from the world of the booby trap and the small-men's gypsy encampment and the balance of her proper ship's company. By past experience, she might expect to be challenged at any instant by a slug-ship which would have followed in overdrive from the instant it detected her. Such a slug-ship might break out beyond the effective range even of its ball-lightning weapon, but it need not, and—

As of the moment, the detector-system announced that space was empty of active enemies. Howell ran his eyes over the small-men. The whiskered expert on space-drives was not among them. He was probably back at the globe-ships, feverishly trying to use the knowledge Howell had given him to make another unit of garbage-disposal equipment.

It was very likely that one of these present luridly-clothed small-men was the engineer or the astrogator of one of the two globe-ships. The very best of the small-race's qualified pilots might be aboard the *Marintha* now. It wasn't likely that the yacht had been lifted off and put into overdrive by incompetents. But none offered to take charge. Each one looked at him blandly and trustfully. He was awake; therefore he was in command of the yacht. Therefore they waited for him to give them orders. They would be intensely interested. They would be helpful to the best of their ability. But above all they would be wholly confident of the wisdom of whatever he chose to do. Because he could make a device to dispose of garbage!

He suddenly realized that he seemed to be alone save for the small-men. None of his companions was visible. They'd allowed the yacht to be lifted off by small-men. They hadn't insisted that he be consulted. Not one of them—not even Karen—had waked him to tell him of the intended test of the overdrive-field generator. They'd let him be lifted off with the *Marintha*!

He went to Breen's cabin. Empty. Ketch's. Empty. He touched the knob of Karen's door—and it turned in his hand. The door opened and Karen was staring at him.

"What the dev—" he stopped. "Do you know what's happened?"

She shook her head. Then she moistened her lips and nodded.

"I—think so," she said in a queer tone. "It was a mistake, I suppose. My mistake."

He waited.

"You—worked most of the night," she told him uneasily. "You were—making a garbage thing for the small people. You finished it. You were worn out. You went to sleep while they worked on the overdrive. I was—nervous. I didn't sleep. But early this morning they'd gone and—there were other small-people outside. My father went out to them. Ketch followed. I heard him talking. They couldn't understand him, of course, but he talked like—like someone making a speech. Enthusiastic. We were going to do wonderful things for them, he said. Show them how to kill slug-creatures and destroy their ships. Wonderful things. They—listened. But of course they didn't understand."

"He's an idiot," said Howell coldly. "He thinks he's in a drama-tape, cast in the role of a great national leader carrying his nation to triumph. Well?"

"He came in and got a rifle," said Karen. "He went off, I suppose to show them in miniature what we'll teach them to make in giant size. My father went off in another direction, probably about plants of some sort. I—waited. I thought you'd wake up presently and—I could give you breakfast."

Howell made an instinctive gesture, and then checked himself.

"Go on."

"Presently there were even more small-folk about. I heard Ketch's voice again, but I didn't hear what he said. Then some of the small people came into the yacht. I assumed he'd told them to. We've had no reason to keep them out. But I heard the exit-port close. That was when I made my mistake. I—I didn't go out to see what they were doing. They must have lifted off and out of atmosphere. I couldn't tell, of course, because the artificial gravity adjusts for such things. And then—we went into overdrive and I heard you rush for the control room. I should have found out what they were going to do in the yacht. But I thought Ketch had told them—"

"He probably did," said Howell grimly. "He'd make a grand gesture authorizing anything without knowing what it was."

He headed back to the control room, seething. Earth-based humanity very often behaved childishly. With all his sur-

roundings elaborately protective, the average man grew up without burning himself, cutting himself, falling out of a tree, breaking an arm or leg or even going hungry. Nothing injurious ever happened, and he never really learned that they could. It was wholly probable that Ketch was now acting a dramatic role without the apprehensions a suitable past would have developed in him. With small-men admiring him, he could very well have authorized a trial trip by the repaired *Marintha* without the least idea of what he was doing.

An instrument-needle quivered ever so faintly in the denuded mass of dials and switches.

Howell said harshly, "Overdrive coming!"

He pushed over the switch. There was a very bright spark. The feeling of twisting fall and nausea and giddiness. Then the *Marintha* felt as steady as a rock. Actually it drove blindly without destination at a rate Howell somehow believed was faster than her previous overdrive rate. But there'd been a lurid spark in the relay. It was again welded fast by the much-greater-than-ordinary current flow. Howell swore under his breath and took up the screwdriver and hammer once more. He snapped instructions to Karen to get a specific high-conductivity dressing for the contact surfaces of the relay. He used it when he'd cleared the melted-together spot again. He threw off the overdrive switch and the *Marintha* broke out to clear space again. Howell stared grimly at the vision-plates.

The star-cluster he'd noted was visible but slightly moved in relation to the Milky Way. Howell could not even guess at relative distances, but he was sure now that the *Marintha* was faster than she'd ever been before.

"Something broke out near us just now," he told Karen, "a very short time after we broke out. So I went back into overdrive. We'll find out if it throws him off the track."

There were murmurs among the small-men who waited expectantly for Howell to do something or require something of them. He said sardonically, "They're wondering, I suppose, why I don't do whatever they'd do in their ships to get away on an occasion like this. But this is all the *Marintha* will do! Incidentally she's overpowered now. She could blow out both drives if she felt like it. Maybe she will."

It was not the happiest of prospects. The use of a slug-ship capacitor meant, evidently, a storage of energy even greater than the *Marintha's* original capacitor had provided. Which

meant a flow of raw power her circuits weren't designed to carry. Which meant that she could blow her drives to smoking scrap at any instant and lie helpless in space for the slug-ships to find. Which would give great pleasure to those chlorine-breathing monstrosities.

One of the small-men diffidently called attention to something. He pointed to a tiny area on one of the vision-screens. Howell blinked.

"He's pointing to where we came from!" said Karen. "He would be! There'd be nothing else for him to point to."

Howell considered for seconds. Then he nodded.

"Right! It has to be that."

It was wholly reasonable. More, it was self-evident that the pilots of the small race's globe-ships would operate quite differently from the astrogators of ships like the *Marintha*. Earth-humans voyaged from solar system to solar system, through charted volumes of space. Explorers tied in newly travelled ways to previously charted ones. They always kept the necessary return-journey in mind. But if the globe-ships were in flight from their enemies, they and they alone would habitually break out of overdrive in between-the-stars. They alone would really envision space as having three dimensions, so that star-clusters would serve as beacons and other galaxies as direction-marks. And to them, moving always into unexplored areas and with no thought of return, charts of where they'd been would be useless and of the unknown before them, impossible. For rendezvous they'd develop a system of coördinates that would practically be abstractions, yet by which they could meet each other even in totally strange territory. And a small-man in a red vest-like garment, after two unmeasured overdrive hops at an unknown number of times the speed of light, put his finger confidently on the line to be taken to get back to their starting-point.

"Right!" said Howell again. "That's where we came from. The only question is whether we dare go back."

He watched the detector-dials, which would receive and identify and report the surge of power if another ship broke out of overdrive within its very considerable range. Its needle quivered. A ship had broken out somewhere.

"Overdrive coming!" said Howell savagely.

He threw the switch. Nausea. Giddiness. Falling. The *Marintha* again drove blindly, isolated from all the universe

outside its own overdrive-field. In theory, nothing could touch the *Marintha* inside that unsubstantial barrier. In theory, nothing could enter that field, whether solid object or radiation. In theory, nothing could leave it. And it had been believed undetectable. But Howell now had appallingly good evidence that a moving overdrive field, carrying a ship at many times light-speed within it, created some signal which another ship in overdrive could detect and home on.

"The answer to the question I mentioned," he said bitterly, "appears to be, no! We don't dare go back to the booby trap world! Something's trailing us. Maybe two somethings. We took another overdrive hop and they or their cousins turned up instantly where we broke out. Now we're hopping again. If something breaks out of overdrive immediately when we do so again—that's it!"

The *Marintha* drove on and on and on. The small-men consulted among themselves. The one with the garment like a vest apparently took the opinion of others and presently nodded satisfiedly to himself. They settled down to wait. Howell paced up and down, scowling as he thought. Presently he paused and regarded the placid, plainly un-alarmed small-men.

"Karen," he said exasperatedly, "they know what sort of fix we're in. But they sit there without a care in the world. What's the matter with them?"

"I think," said Karen, "they expect you to do something remarkable. After all, we came to this part of the galaxy. It's full of dangers. They can't imagine our having gotten to where we found them without encountering those dangers and defeating them. So they expect you to do it again."

"But we'd a blown-out capacitor when they found us!" protested Howell. "That should prove we were vulnerable!"

"A bolt from a slug-ship would explain it," said Karen, "and that could happen to anybody by accident, they'd think. And we did destroy that slug-ship aground—or you did. And there was the booby trap. It had killed some small-people from another and earlier ship. They couldn't disarm it. You did. So they think you can do remarkable things. And they're waiting for you to do some more."

Howell said something explosive under his breath. He beckoned to the small-man in the red vest. That miniature human moved briskly to his side.

"I want you to point out the way back to the booby trap

planet," said Howell. He felt foolish, speaking to someone who wouldn't understand a word. He made gestures, repeating the one the small-man had used before, when pointing to the screen. "I won't head there unless we lose whatever's after us now, but—can you point the way?"

The little man seemed to understand. Howell flipped the breakout switch. He grimaced at the sensations of falling and giddiness and nausea. The screens lighted. The small man surveyed them and pointed confidently with his finger. It was the most matter-of-fact of gestures. He probably couldn't imagine a ship remaining lost in space.

Howell swung the yacht to an entirely new direction. On the dial that told of another ship's breakout, a needle quivered. It would have to be a slug-ship. On the instant Howell had the *Marintha* out of normal space again. He hoped it would be before the slug-ship's detectors acted. He guessed at a reaction-time for that unpleasant ship's pilot, and was back in normal space at about the instant the slug-ship should have left it. Then he went back into overdrive just as the slug-ship should have returned to normal space.

It was a matter of dodging, of outguessing the unseen pilot of the unseen enemy ship. It was an attempt to bewilder the monster at the controls of the enemy craft. And it seemed to work.

Sweating, Howell cut off all his own detection-instruments except the one that told of the other ship's breakout, lest they give information as well as receive it. He dodged crazily between the real universe and the artificial one which was the state of being in overdrive.

The shifts back and forth were horrible. With each shift came the vertigo and nausea and the feel of falling. Repeated, it became torment. Karen looked white and ill, and the small-men lost their bland expectancy and became tense and nerve-racked.

And then Howell stopped the jumps into and out of overdrive. The *Marintha* lay still in space, with ten thousand myriads of stars about her. Howell scowled at the one instrument left in operation. But nothing happened. And nothing happened. And still nothing happened. There was no sign of any spacecraft or—after some minutes—artificial radiation in all of empty space.

After a long, long time, Howell said evenly, "It looks like

we've lost whatever was after us. The question now is what to do next."

The small-man with the red vest put his finger on a vision-screen. Howell nodded.

"That's very likely the way for us to go," he told Karen as evenly as before. "But we were detected in overdrive going away from there. I don't know whether or not we'd be detected going back. If we were, their friends—" he nodded toward the now-recovered small-men, "their friends would pay for it unless they got away fast in their globe-ships. And Ketch and your father would definitely pay, unless they were taken on the globe-ships."

Karen parted her lips to speak, and then did not.

The breakout-detector quivered. Howell did nothing. After minutes, it quivered again.

"We're not in the clear," said Howell, "but one of them popped out then and we didn't react. So it popped back into overdrive. It's hunting for signs of us there."

He turned on all the detection-instruments. He'd been playing a very deadly game of blind-man's-buff, with the *Marintha* driving blindly at multiples of light-speed between dodgings. Now Howell wiped sweat from his forehead.

"I'm going to try something new," he said very grimly indeed. "We've been trying to dodge and run as fast as possible. Now we'll try dodging and creeping. Watch this dial for me."

He went back to the engine room and made adjustments to the overdrive unit. Under ordinary circumstances, of course, a ship going into overdrive instantly attained the maximum speed the overdrive-field could give it. In order to exist, such a field had to move, and whatever was enclosed in it had to move with and in it. But the highest speed the *Marintha* could make wasn't enough to leave its invisible pursuer behind. So Howell cut down the overdrive velocity to an absurdly small figure. What he did should cut down the flow of power associated with entry and breakout. It should reduce the likelihood of a blow-out. And just possibly, the weakened power-surges might be feeble enough to go undetected.

He went back to the control-board. The small-men watched his every movement. They murmured among themselves. The little man with the red vest went toward the engine room. He stopped and looked inquiringly at Howell. Howell paid no at-

tention. The small-man went into the engine room. Howell continued to regard all the detection-instruments with a specifically grim expression.

Nothing happened. There was no quiver of the overdrive detection device. There was nothing from the all-wave receiver but the infinitesimal cracklings which were the solar flares of far-away suns, and very occasionally those singular flute-like musical notes for which there was as yet no known explanation but which some people called the music of the spheres.

Still nothing happened. The nearest-object indicator registered infinity—and would until its search-pulse had travelled for light-months or years and had been reflected back an equal distance, when the returned signal would be too faint to register.

The little man with the red vest came out of the engine room. He looked puzzled. He went to the garbage-disposal unit and looked it over carefully. Whatever he looked for he did not find. He rejoined the other small-men and they talked among themselves in low tones, as if not to disturb Howell. But they regarded him confidently.

"They still expect a miracle," said Howell coldly, with his eyes moving swiftly from one instrument to another. "They're going to be disappointed, unless . . ." he shrugged and said curtly, "Overdrive coming!"

He threw the switch. There was dizziness, but it was not disturbing. There was nausea, but it was trivial. The sensation of falling was hardly more marked than in a swiftly falling elevator. Even the screens did not blank out instantly. They seemed to fade instead of being abruptly extinguished. But the *Marintha* went into overdrive. Because of the adjustment of the generator, she was surrounded by a stress-envelope of strained space which had the properties of an overdrive-field, but barely so. By comparison with the speed at which the usual field-strength carried the *Marintha*, she crawled. She crept. She moved at a snail-like gait.

But it was still faster than the first interstellar voyagers had been able to travel. They, though, took six years to make a four-light-year journey between solar systems.

"We're crawling now," said Howell. "It's just barely possible that whatever detects normal overdrive-fields won't pick up one that's so nearly something else. If I'm wrong about it—we'll probably never know it."

It was officially accepted theory that nothing could break into an overdrive-field. But it was also officially accepted that if the impossible happened and something did—if, for example, a ship in overdrive drove into a sun—that either the field would bounce and the ship's occupants know nothing of the event, or else the overdrive-field would break with a simultaneous release of all the energy within the ship it surrounded. And in that case, the ship's occupants would know nothing of the event because they'd be dead before they could realize it.

Now the *Marintha* drove more slowly than a detection instrument should be willing to credit. For hours on end the space-yacht remained sealed away from all the normal cosmos. It was not possible to see anything, hear anything, or know anything of the universe beyond the overdrive-field's extension.

Howell said, "It seems to me that for two people who supposedly care for each other, Karen, we act less romantically than any other couple in history."

Karen smiled faintly.

"But you're busy taking me to where I'll be safe, aren't you?"

"Trying, yes. Succeeding—I don't know. But at least we're not acting like characters in a drama-tape!"

Karen looked at him with a peculiarly wry expression. Their chance of living seemed very small. She considered that she and Howell were very probably about to die. Naturally, she would have preferred their romantic state to loom at least as large as the danger they were in. But Howell was acting with complete sanity, trying to find even the last least chance for the two of them. Karen, though, would have settled for a little less sanity and a little more ecstasy in what might be their last moments of life. But a girl can hardly change the character of the man she does care about. Karen submitted to the way Howell happened to be made, because there was nothing else to do.

Still, it was a very long time indeed before Howell raised his eyes from the now-not-registering instruments and said, "Now we'll see what happens."

He nodded to Karen, but didn't smile. His expression was wholly intent instead of impressively emotional. Without any trimmings at all, he threw the breakout switch to find out what might await them in normal space.

The uncomfortable sensations of breakout were singularly mild. The dizziness and the nausea were trivial. The feeling of a spinning fall was almost absent. The vision-screens lighted

almost deliberately, taking a good fraction of a second to reach full brightness.

Then the stars of the galaxy surrounded the *Marintha* on all sides. Their number was incalculable, but it is usual to guess the total number of shining suns in the First Galaxy at one hundred thousand millions. Such a figure has no meaning to anybody. But if one counted all the strong bright stars nearby, and the vastly greater number of those just a little less bright, and the still more enormous number of those just a little bit fainter, and so on down to the unthinkable quantity of suns which are the minutest glimmerings the eye can detect . . . if one did that, the number a hundred thousand million would acquire meaning. It would be the number of the stars that could be seen from the *Marintha*.

Silence. Stillness, save for infinitesimal cracklings and hissings. Minutes passed. Tens of minutes. The detection instruments read a unanimous zero.

The small-men murmured to each other. Somehow they seemed bewildered, even disappointed. As long minutes went by and Howell did nothing but watch the instruments, the small-men seemed visibly disturbed. The one in the red vest hesitantly asked a question in his own language. Howell did not lift his eyes.

"See if you can make out what he wants, Karen," he commanded.

He was doing sums in his head, because the computer could not handle guesses. He attempted to feel the incomputable total of speeds and durations and courses such as the *Marintha* had followed. It was actually an attempt to find the total of a series of random motions. The result would be a guess which was more or less plausible. He arrived at it.

Karen made gestures to the small-man, and he gesticulated back. She produced a writing-pad. They drew pictures and made motions, and each of them spoke, from time to time, with the unreasonable feeling that that should help in understanding.

Howell said, "I think we have to take the chance."

Karen spoke with some doubt.

"You asked what the small-man wants. I think he wants to know why you didn't destroy the ship that was following us. He's disturbed because it got away."

"I'll be happy enough if we've gotten away," said Howell. "The happiest ending I can see as possible is a chance to save

ourselves and the worlds we know from murder-raids by sinking the *Marintha* in the deepest ocean to be found. I don't want to have to look for one! If we can get back to the small people's ships, we've the best chance to make our suicide—it may come to that—of some use to the galaxy. I think we should try for it.”

He beckoned to the small-man in the red vest. He made it clear that he wanted a direction in which to drive, for a return to the world they'd started from. The small-men's globe-ships must feel concern for the test-crew of their own race who'd lifted off in the *Marintha* to try out a cobbled repair, and hadn't come back. Ketch would be indignant over the space-yacht's vanishing. He'd envisioned himself in the highly dramatic role of a leader of fighting small-men in a superlatively armed globe-ship. He might anticipate something even more glamorous, since he'd said splendidly that Karen would rather be the wife of a fighting man than anything else. And Breen would be deeply anxious about his daughter Karen.

In the *Marintha*'s control room, the small-man with the red vest looked at the stars on the screen. He put his finger decisively on a particular spot. He even marked off the steady, yellow glow of a Sol-type sun as the center of the solar system they wished to drive for. Howell was dubious that it was the right one. Nevertheless he lined up the *Marintha* for it with infinite care.

“Overdrive coming,” he said curtly.

He threw the switch. The vision-screens faded. There were other evidences that the yacht had gone into overdrive. It was slow overdrive. It was overdrive so much minimized that it was almost something else. But not quite.

The *Marintha* stayed in overdrive on this course and at this speed for very nearly nine hours. There could be no exact computation of the time required. Howell had a feeling about the speed. The little man in the red vest had something more than a feeling about the proper course. Perhaps he'd ideas about the distance, too, but they couldn't be communicated. In any case, the *Marintha* drove at the minimum rate possible in overdrive for what seemed much longer than the chronometers said. Then Howell broke out. He expected the little man to give him another bearing from this breakout point.

But he didn't need it. When the screens lighted, with an extreme of deliberation, there was a yellow sun to starboard. There was a cloud-world, with no markings of any sort from the

vapor-layers that covered it from pole to pole. There was a gas-giant planet with reddish striations almost at its equator. And there was a green world with ice-caps and seas and continents.

And the *Marintha's* all-wave receiver picked up whinings that were all too familiar. There were slug-ships in this solar system. They were here by scores and hundreds. The breakout detector flickered and wavered as more slug-ships arrived from nowhere and began to use their solar-system drives as the only practical way to move about within the limits of a sun's planetary system.

This was, of course, the slug-fleet Howell had deduced must exist because patrolling slug-ships travelled in pairs. Of the pair first encountered, one had stayed out of the way of possible harm while its companion investigated and tried to destroy the *Marintha*. When that ship went to ground and Howell blew it up with a blaster-bolt down the throat of its lightning cannon, the survivor of the pair had bleated and hooted dismally, and then disappeared. Howell reasoned then that it had gone for help. Now it was back with a fleet of fighting ships that nothing could withstand. And as more and more of the ugly ships broke out and began to organize themselves, Howell was bitterly sure that this was the end of everything.

Then he heard the small-men. They made a tumult of triumph and rejoicing. They grinned at him, beaming. From doubt and disappointment, they'd changed instantly to hilarious anticipation. They believed that up to this moment he had seemed to flee so that no companion slug-ship would report that a new and ultra-deadly enemy was in action against its race. Because of that forbearance, they believed, he'd now assembled the now-present fleet to become the victims of his remarkable abilities. They grinned in ecstatic triumph as they waited for him to annihilate the slug-ship fleet.

And more and ever more slug-ships broke out of overdrive and drove to take their places in battle-formation.

Then a bleating, hooting outcry came from the all-wave receiver. A slug-ship was broadcasting something in the chlorine-breathers' substitute for language. A sun-bright blue-white flame appeared from nowhere and flashed past the *Marintha*. It seemed to miss the yacht by inches. More of the monstrous lightning-bolts shot out—

CHAPTER 8

Howell threw the overdrive switch. The vision-screens faded. There were the usual symptoms accompanying entry into the isolated, twisted-space cocoon which was an overdrive-field. But again the symptoms were mild. They were almost unnoticeable. They were as much fainter than those usually felt as the speed of the *Mirantha* was now less than the rate at which overdrive usually carried ships between the stars. The yacht, escaping murder-weapons in space, fled at the slowest of crawls.

For one instant the yacht seemed to be surrounded by a buzzing, whining fleet of unseen enemies. Bleatings and hootings had begun all about her, as the nearest murder-ships relayed the detailed information their instruments gave them. Deadly missiles of ball-lightning flashed toward her, any one of which would end her existence.

Then the place where the yacht had been was empty. Instantly other ships—slug-ships—flicked into seeming nothingness to pursue her.

But they drove on full-power. Before they could recover from the anguish all overdrive entries produce, they had flashed far past the place where the *Marintha* could be said to be. They went on and on, seeking her trail in nothingness, light-weeks and even light-months beyond this planetary system—which the *Marintha* hadn't left.

It was pure recklessness for Howell to use overdrive amidst all the celestial trash that gathers and floats around a sun. It was far from conservative. No skipper is anxious to find out really what will happen if, in overdrive, his ship rams into an asteroid or even the nucleus of a comet. But the *Marintha* had no choice.

She had to take to overdrive or be blasted in mid-space, and overdrive meant plunging blindly to nowhere with an escort of chlorine-breathing monsters who might—who might!—be able to crack her field and force her back into cosmos where she was helpless. If they could trail a ship in overdrive, they might be able to do more.

In the *Marintha* the small-men babbled. They were bewildered. They made incredulous gestures to each other. The *Marintha* had plunged into the very center of a war-fleet of the slug-creatures, and then plunged out again! They couldn't understand it! If Howell could blow up a grounded slug-ship with a hand-weapon, and if he could disarm booby traps equipped with killer-fields, in his repaired and re-furbished ship he should wreak vast destruction on an enemy-fleet! But he hadn't. Why?

The man with the red vest went to the garbage-disposal unit. He lifted its cover and gazed inside. He shook his head querulously.

"Karen," said Howell grimly, "come up here and get set to talk. Since the small-folk aground must have detected the slug-fleet, they may be getting set to get away. I've got to break out to locate the planet they're on—if they're still there. If they are there, I'll risk landing to put these small-men aboard their own ships. I'll try to turn you over to your father, to get away with them. Then I'll make sure the *Marintha* doesn't become a source of information for the monsters who're after us."

She protested, "But you won't—you won't—"

"Get set to call!" ordered Howell grimly. "Never mind what I'm going to do!"

He made ready as she picked up the communicator and turned it on. He said, "Breakout coming!" and threw the switch. He then became wholly intent upon his instruments and what he could see in the vision-screens. The green world was a vividly visible disk. Karen began to speak: "*Marintha* calling! *Marintha* calling ground! Come in! *Marintha* calling ground."

The all-wave receiver yielded whinings, faint and very many of them. They sounded not unlike the infuriated buzzings of a nest of hornets. But they were far away now. Very oddly, they were too near to use overdrive for travel, especially with debris to be found in such quantities as appear about a sun. But they were too far away to overtake the *Marintha* on solar-system drive.

The all-wave receiver brought in Breen's voice.

"Karen! What happened? There's a slug-ship fleet on the way!"

"I know," said Karen unhappily. "We're going to land the small-men if their ships will wait for them, and—"

"Ask if the small-men will take the three of you on board their ships," ordered Howell. When she protested, he snapped, "Do as I say!"

She obeyed, but her voice wavered.

"Come to ground," boomed Breen's voice in the speaker. "*The small-men are dancing! They're celebrating! One of their ships went aloft some hours ago, and since it came back I can't get any sense out of them! But they say come to ground!*"

Howell nodded, his features set.

"I've got our overdrive set so low I can make another jump," he observed. "It'll save hours. Overdrive coming!"

The vision-screens faded. Howell counted minutes and seconds. Then he said, "Breakout coming!"

The screens lighted. To the left there was a monstrous mass of utter blackness, blotting out almost half the firmament. It was the night side of the green planet. Howell swung the yacht's nose about and dived for the blackness' edge. As he saw the situation, he was bound to lose Karen and his own life in any case. The only long-range good he could hope to do would develop indirectly through Breen and Ketch—if all went well. If they were accepted as guests of the small-man race, in time they might persuade their hosts to search for the civilization that had produced the *Marintha*. Such an encounter would give warning to the Earth-human race. They might prepare. They might arm. They might meet and smash the chlorine-breathing monsters who had smashed the cities and the civilization of humanity's forefathers.

If that happened, it would justify Howell's own reluctant mission, to be carried out when the others were gone from the green planet and before the slug-ships arrived. He meant to drive the *Marintha* straight down into the deepest chasm of the green world's oceans, until the stout hull of the space-yacht collapsed. He'd do this so the slug-creatures couldn't learn from her of the race of which Karen was a member.

The night side of the booby trap world blotted out half the stars. The *Marintha* plunged on. Presently a thin faint rim of reddish light appeared ahead. The *Marintha* raced onward

toward the brightness. It was the dawn-line, where day began at this time on this planet. Howell dived. Normally a ship coming in for a landing will make at least one orbital turn to lose velocity. But Howell swung the *Marintha* about and used full solar-system drive to kill her speed.

He was almost exactly over the peninsula when the yacht's rate of motion matched that of the ground. The space-yacht hovered for an instant, and then descended swiftly.

"Get your baggage set, Karen," commanded Howell. "Pack up technical reference books too. Ketch and your father can translate them eventually."

Karen said rebelliously, "I'm not going to go away with anybody while you sink the *Marintha* and you in it!"

There were creakings and crashings outside. Trees resisted the yacht's landing. A tree trunk toppled and the *Marintha* touched ground. Howell strode to the exit-port and opened it. The small-men who'd been his passengers went out in a subdued, bewildered fashion. Other small-men came running to meet them. There was eager, ecstatic exchange of news. There was wild hilarity. Those who'd been so disappointed because Howell in the *Marintha* inexplicably spared the ships of slug-creatures, and who just before landing had been quite bewildered—those same small-folk suddenly turned beaming faces back to him as he stood in the exit-port. They waved. They shouted. Those who'd come to meet them led the way back toward the globe-ships. But all the party turned to wave and shout joyously until they were out of sight.

"It would be interesting," said Howell sardonically, "to know what they're so pleased about!"

"My father will know," said Karen. "Or Ketch."

More tumult in the distance. Breen and Ketch came through the jungle, with an escort of the miniature men. Some members of the escort carried parcels. All wore grins wide enough to cut their throats. But Breen and Ketch didn't seem to share their hilarity.

"You're all right," said Breen heavily, when he stood beside Karen in the exit-port. "I was pretty badly worried. I thought something had blown out in the engine room."

Ketch said somewhat displeased, "What did happen? We thought you'd run into a slug-ship! The small-folk thought so too. They'd arranged to take us aboard, because they knew this fleet would be coming. They were ready to lift off, happy about

something but disturbed about something else. Then Karen called. Then everything changed. Everybody was happy! Nobody was disturbed any more. They brought us here. Then —”

The small-men who'd escorted Ketch and Breen turned and made their way back toward their ships. But they turned and grinned happily and waved exuberantly. Then they disappeared.

Howell swore suddenly, under his breath. Ketch said suspiciously, "What's the matter? What's the program? What do we do?"

"I've got to sink the *Marintha*! We can't let it be examined by the slug-beasts! You three have to go off in the globe-ships! Karen! Call the small-folk. It doesn't matter what you say. Just talk urgently so they'll come to find out what we want before they lift off!"

Karen disappeared into the yacht. Howell clenched and unclenched his hands. Ketch had daydreamed of heroism in the drama-tape mode, complete with dramatic gestures and posturings. Breen had apparently taken everything that had happened on this planet in a completely matter-of-fact fashion, equally unsurprised and unalarmed. Only Howell had seen the successive situations realistically, and only he had come to the conclusion that he must dive the *Marintha* to the depths of the sea until its hull was crushed by the pressure. From an abstract viewpoint, his decision might have seemed highly noble and heroic. But he didn't feel that way. He was irritated. He didn't feel even faintly satisfied with the idea of dying. And he couldn't insist that the others join him in something he didn't like himself.

Karen came back. She looked pale.

"They don't answer. But—there are lots of whining sounds . . ."

Howell started up to try to call himself. But then Ketch uttered an angry cry, "Look there! They're lifting off!"

And it was true. Above the jungle, a globe-ship rose. It cleared the giant trees that had hidden it. It hung motionless for a space, and then the second globe-ship came clear of the feathery, leafy branches that had concealed it and appeared also against the sky. The two ships swung forward, barely a hundred feet above ground-level. They floated over the intervening jungle and came to a stop above the *Marintha*.

The four of the *Marintha's* company stared upward, incredulous. Ports in the two globe-ships opened. Small figures appeared and waved. Howell shouted furiously. Ketch bel-
lowed.

The small-men, waving cordially, disappeared again. The two globe-ships went swiftly, serenely, confidently up into the sky. They dwindled. They became dots. Specks. They vanished.

"They took my ideas," said Ketch darkly, "and now they'll try to carry them out! But they won't make it!"

He referred, of course, to his grandiose notions of space-bat-
tles in ships yet to be built, with armaments yet to be designed,
which he would lead with splendid gestures.

Breen said querulously, "They brought all my botanical
specimens. But—"

Karen said, "He thinks—" and she meant Howell, unmistak-
ably, "he thinks he should sink the *Marintha*. Leaving us
marooned—for those creatures to find! And—he intends to go
down to the sea-bottom in the *Marintha*!"

Howell said with surpassing bitterness, "That was when I
thought the small-folk would take you aboard. Not now! Now it
would be murder, since they've gone. Get inside!"

Breen lifted his botanical specimens up into the port. Ketch,
it appeared, had made something of a collection of the
handmade weapons of the small-men. He got them aboard the
yacht. Once within the small spaceship, the peevish, whining
sound of slug-ship solar-system drives was loud and insistent
from the all-wave receiver. There were many, many slug-ships
in the fleet come to avenge the destruction of a scout-ship.

Howell went into the engine room. He changed the settings of
the overdrive generator. He adjusted them to produce again the
highest possible overdrive speed of which the *Marintha* was
capable. He went back to the control room.

"Ketch!" he called.

Ketch came indignantly.

"We've got one ingot in the fuel-chamber," said Howell.
"There's room for more. Fill it up. And hurry!"

"But it's not safe!" protested Ketch. "Do you want to take a
chance on blowing up the ship?"

"Yes," said Howell. "I do. Hurry up with it."

He set the *Marintha's* detectors to maximum gain. Tiny
specks appeared on the radar-screen. The slug-fleet was an
incredible thing. Howell had no idea how many of the small-

humans there were, nor how many ships they could gather together in their furtive, desperate assemblies on worlds they could only hope the slug-ships would not find before they'd gone away. But this fleet must outnumber them many times over. It could have no purpose other than the hunting-down and extermination of the small-man race. It was a horde. Such a fleet could turn the whole surface of a planet into flame. It could sterilize a world, destroying all life upon it. If it came upon a human-occupied planet. . . .

Karen came to the control room and stood beside Howell.

"If anything happens to you now," she said evenly, "it happens to me too!"

"And the other way about," growled Howell.

She nodded. He searched her features. Then much of the grimness left his own. He smiled very faintly.

"I haven't acted very—romantically," he said wryly. "Not since it turned out that we—feel as we do. Want to know why?"

"It might make me feel better," admitted Karen.

"Because I figured the *Marintha* had to be destroyed," he told her. "Which meant I'd have to go with it. And if I'd acted—romantically, I wasn't sure I could."

"That's silly!" said Karen.

He stood up. He reached for her. She did not retreat. Minutes later Ketch called from the engine room. The fuel-chamber was filled to a dangerous degree. A glancing lightning-bolt had hit the *Marintha* once. It did damage, but no more than damage. If such a bolt hit the yacht now, there would be literally nothing left of it at all—which was still preferable to a less complete destruction.

Howell kissed Karen again and sat down at the instrument-board. He said, "Lifting off!" and threw a switch. The *Marintha* lurched and lifted toward the sky. The horizon retreated while nearby objects—trees, the dead space about the booby trap, the shores of the peninsula, the sea itself and presently another continent showing at the edge of what was then visible—all things flowed toward and underneath the space-yacht.

Then, quite suddenly, it seemed that the horizon dropped down. From an apparently hollow bowl below, the world they were leaving became a visible, enormous ball. The sky overhead was dark by then and the sun was a blazing disk of flame. There were many, many stars.

Howell said soberly, "The nearest slug-ships are only a few

thousand miles away. It would be entertaining to know if they've figured out that I dodged the first ones that started for us by going so slowly that they passed us without knowing it. They may try the same trick on us! I wonder . . ."

He glanced at the outside air-pressure dial. It said zero. He looked up at Karen and said, "You can tell them overdrive's coming."

Karen went to the control room door. She called. Howell threw the switch. It was a highly hazardous operation. The *Marintha's* overdrive now made use of the full capacity of a capacitor she was not designed to use. Her circuits were not rated to carry the load. She could blow. And if she did, with a man-packed fuel-chamber, that fuel would blow also and there would be a momentary flare of hell-fire where the space-yacht had been. Then there'd be no more *Marintha* and the slug-ship fleet would have had a long journey in overdrive for nothing.

But the drive didn't blow. And this time those aboard felt a monstrous vertigo and an intolerable nausea, and for a heartbeat they had the panicky sensation of falling headlong while in a spinning spiral. Because this time the *Marintha* went into full-power overdrive—higher power than she'd ever used before.

But in it everything seemed perfectly normal. The yacht felt as solid as if encased in rock. She was locked away from all the ordinary cosmos by a force-field stressing space to change all its properties, including the velocity of light. But the experience of those inside the yacht was of absolute firmness, absolute safety, and absolute tranquility.

It was very much of an anticlimax.

It was ridiculous! At the beginning of these events the *Marintha* had been bound upon a voyage of private exploration. A fuel-ingot needed to be changed, and she came out of overdrive to make that change. And she was challenged and attacked. She limped away from the danger spot and her drive-system wrecked itself. She got to ground and was followed by a ship of a chlorine-breathing race, intent upon murder. She destroyed that ship and its crew and encountered a second race of human beings. The yacht was repaired, and became lost in emptiness, found its way back, then they were inexplicably deserted by cheering, waving fellow-humans, and—

Now the yacht drove with seeming placidity in an unsubstantial no-place. Nothing had been accomplished. Noth-

ing significant had happened. The only apparent difference between now and the moment before the beginning of things was that now they knew what would happen if the *Marintha* broke out to normal space again. Now they knew that this time she'd be attacked by ball-lightning bolts from dozens or scores or perhaps hundreds of misshapen ships whose occupants were monsters of murderous intent. Gaining that information was all that had been achieved. It was anticlimactic indeed.

But it is the nature of anticlimaxes to seem very natural, once they've happened. An hour after leaving the booby trap planet, Breen roused himself to prepare a meal, exactly as he'd have done had none of the recent events taken place. Ketch glowered at a cabin wall, in not-unprecedented moroseness. Howell watched the instruments. They should show nothing, and that was what they did show. But he remained pessimistic enough to think that if the slug-ships could trail in overdrive, they should be able to attack. Still, after an hour he had his doubts.

He began to pace up and down the tiny control room. Karen watched him. Maybe the yacht couldn't be attacked in overdrive. The fact would solve nothing, if it were a fact. Nothing, seemingly, would solve anything. The tricks by which the yacht had escaped destruction on two out of four seemingly certain occasions were now known to the slug-creatures. It would not be wise to use them again. There were no more tricks remaining to be tried. There was no use in thinking about tricks, or anything else.

So presently Howell said irritably, "I can't help wondering why those small-folk deserted us as they did! They gave us everything they could, including a capacitor we couldn't have found or—most likely—installed. Then they dumped your father and Ketch back on us and waved their hands happily and left us to be smashed by the slug-ships!"

"It could be a mistake," Karen said. "You destroyed a slug-ship on the ground. Maybe they just came to believe you could destroy them anywhere and any time you pleased."

"They'd no evidence for it," protested Howell. "The only thing they saw in this ship that they seemed to think was worth having was a garbage-disposal unit!"

Karen didn't answer. She was with Howell. She had a private and quite irrational conviction that when greater emergencies arose, Howell would meet them. To be sure, an emergency existed now. For the moment the *Marintha's* overdrive field

protected her, while incidentally it carried her onward to nowhere at very many times the speed of light.

Breen called them to dinner. They dined. Everything they saw, heard, felt or experienced seemed completely commonplace and secure. Everything was superlatively the way things should be in a space-yacht journeying in overdrive in a galaxy which was absolutely safe for them to travel in. The four in the yacht could know that they were in danger, but there was no sign of it. They could reason that they must be doomed, but there was no tangible evidence for the belief. They should have felt despair, but there was nothing to remind them of it. So long as her overdrive-field surrounded her, apparently nothing could happen to the *Marintha*, or anybody aboard her. True, the yacht drove blindly toward the completely unknown and they dared not cut overdrive to look at it, but they seemed perfectly safe so long as they didn't.

It was a state of things, however, that human beings are not designed to endure.

"I think," said Howell, restlessly, "that we're going to have to find out if we're followed. It would be insane to run away if we're not."

Ketch said with annoyance, "We could be running away from nothing. The small-folk took to space with the slug-fleet on the way. They weren't worried about it!"

"I'd like to know why not," admitted Howell. "Come to think of it, they acted as if they knew they were perfectly safe and believed we were, too."

"I have to admit," Breen observed heavily, "that they acted in the friendliest fashion possible. They even seemed grateful—I might say absurdly grateful—for the device you showed them how to make, Howell."

Howell grimaced.

"A thing to dispose of garbage! Yes. They liked that!"

Ketch said in his new tone of authority and decision:

"Maybe their ships can outrun the beasts' ships. And maybe they know that since we had our overdrive changed by their workmen, we can outrun them too."

Howell nodded, but without conviction.

"That's one guess."

"So we could be running away with nothing running after us," said Ketch angrily. "I don't say that's true, but it could be!"

"The question," said Howell, "is how much to bet on it. Apparently the least bet we can make is of our lives."

Ketch fumed. It was an irritating possibility. If the *Marintha* broke out of overdrive, she might be destroyed instantly. On the other hand, if she drove on until all the fuel-ingots in the fuel-chamber were exhausted, she might find then that she wasn't pursued; that she hadn't been pursued because she'd left the slug-fleet behind long ago. And then she might not have fuel with which to return to Earth.

"I think," said Howell slowly, "that we can cut down the size of our bet. I'll try."

He frowned thoughtfully to himself until the meal was ended. Then Breen scraped the dishes into the garbage-disposal unit. The counter-valence field came on in that small and commonplace bit of equipment. The garbage was disposed of as the valence-bonds of carbon compounds ceased to exist. When such waste matter touched the metal in which a particular frequency and wave-form oscillated, all the compounds of carbon fell apart. But the garbage unit did not broadcast what would have been a killer-field, because air reflected it; air was opaque to it. The garbage-disposal frequency could leave its source only when there was no air around it.

Meanwhile, nothing happened. There could be no feeling of safety because there was probably a fleet of fighting ships following the space-yacht wherever it went, to ferociously destroy it. There could be no feeling of danger because so long as the overdrive-field stayed in being, nothing could happen to the *Marintha*. But the doubt was nerve-racking.

So Howell retired to the engine room and busied himself with the manufacture of a gadget. It was a timing-device and a link to the overdrive-switch, with a shunt to the all-angle cameras which photographed all the firmament about the *Marintha* whenever she broke out of overdrive for the log-tape record of her journeyings. When completed and installed, Howell should be able to break the *Marintha* out to normal space with its myriads of suns and star-clusters. Even before breakout was complete, the gadget would be operating to reverse the process. Because when the *Marintha* did break out, for perhaps a millisecond—the thousandth part of a second—nothing would happen. But the slug-ships, if present, would break out as soon thereafter as their detectors could record her action. That would

account for two milliseconds. Then their weapons would have to locate and range the *Marintha*, and fire on it. That would be four seconds from the time the *Marintha* broke out. So the gadget would cut on the overdrive again three thousandths of a second after breakout. And just before that three-millisecond interval was over, the cameras would operate. In sum, the yacht would be in normal space for three one-thousandths of a second, during which time slug-ships should begin to appear around it, but there would not be time for their detectors to pick the *Marintha* out as a target, to swing their weapons to bear, and to fire. There shouldn't be time! And the yacht should be back in overdrive with a millisecond or even two to spare, and it should have detailed pictures of all of space about it.

As a matter of course, Howell set all instruments on recording. Then he threw the switch.

There was pure anguish for each of the four persons aboard. The giddiness was horrible and the nausea appalling and the feeling of fall intense. It was doubled by the instant repetition of each symptom. And then the four in the ship had a memory of the vision-screens brightly lighted, and all the alarm-bells of the little ship ringing furiously—and then the screens were dead again and the alarm-bells bewilderedly ceased to clang. And that was all.

But Howell examined the records. They were not pleasing. The automatic pictures of the *Marintha*'s surroundings, taken whenever she broke out, this time had been delayed until slug-ships could appear. And they did.

There were not less than six of the revoltingly shaped alien spacecraft within a five-mile radius of the *Marintha*. There were thirty-six within a ten-mile radius, and more than a hundred within a fifteen-mile sphere, and there were others on beyond. They were uncountable. But the *Marintha* was back in overdrive before any of them could fire on her.

Howell said sardonically, "I'd say that this is that! We're followed, all right! We've just one chance left—that we can travel faster than they can with the fuel-ingots we've loaded into the drive. But that's hardly anything either to bank on or hope for."

He shrugged.

Ketch was visibly angered by a development so markedly unlike the drama-tape kind of happening he'd decided he preferred and which he therefore demanded that destiny supply.

He went stamping away, muttering. He'd think furiously and then come to frustration because he couldn't even imagine a miraculous coincidence—such as sometimes happens in drama-tape stories—which could restore him to his chosen dramatic role.

Breen's forehead corrugated. He said plaintively, "This is bad, Karen! I'd no idea you'd be endangered when I let you come with me!"

"All our intentions have been of the very best kind," said Howell bitterly, "but that's not even a comforting thought, now. We're in the devil of a fix!"

Karen said evenly, "What sort of fix are the small-men in?"

"Why—they're—" Howell looked sharply at her. "What are you driving at, Karen?"

"They'd no more weapons than we have," said Karen. "Nothing to count, anyhow. But they didn't even look alarmed when they left us. They expected to get away. They expected us to get away too, I think. How?"

"You tell me," said Howell.

"I can't!" protested Karen. "How could I? But if we knew what the small-men expected to do, whether running away or whatever, it might be something we could do, too. For that matter—"

She stopped. Howell said with a certain grimness, "Maybe that's an idea! You're about to say that the one thing they should want more than any other would be a weapon to use against the slug-ships. If they got excited about something they learned from us, that's what it ought to be. What they did get excited about was the garbage-disposal unit. So you're about to ask if that could be a weapon. You're about to point out that they made a unit of their own most likely, besides the one I built. You're going to say that one of them went out to space this morning and came back with news they all celebrated. Which could be that the weapon they wanted had been tried out."

Karen said uncomfortably, "I wasn't exactly—"

"You were thinking along that line," said Howell. He went on, his expression very queer, "And there's the fact that what excited them was the garbage unit breaking down plastic from the slug-ship wreck. They didn't try leaves and earth and such. They went over to the wreck and came back with scraps of plastic. They looked on the garbage device as something that

disintegrated the plastic the slug-ships have to be built of, because their atmosphere's partly chlorine and all their metal objects have to be protected against it."

"I hadn't thought—"

"You were going to," said Howell, with finality. "You were going to! And you'd have been right!"

He turned on his heel. He went into the ship's stores. He came out with a welding-torch and a coil of heavy cable. He went to the garbage unit and made very sure that it was turned off—that it wasn't producing the oscillations that broke down carbon compounds—including the plastic the slug-creatures used for all their constructions.

He began to weld the end of the cable to the bottom-plate of the garbage unit. As he worked, he talked disjointedly, with the air of someone obstinately making a case for something he found it difficult to believe.

"Item," he said dourly. "There's a garbage-disposal frequency that can't broadcast simply because air reflects it and is opaque to it. So it does no harm inside the ship. But if it were outside the yacht, with no air to keep it captive—then it would broadcast, all right! And when it struck plastic, that plastic would fall away to powder. Because—" unconsciously, his tone rose in pitch, "because it's the wave-form and not the power that does the trick! It should work the devil of a long way!"

He turned off the torch and cut the cable. He re-lighted the torch and began to weld the cable to a steel floor-plate. The bottom-plate of the disposal unit—the plate that garbage dropped on where it immediately fell apart to colloid-sized particles—the bottom-plate of the garbage disposer was linked to the floor-plate by a cable which would carry the high-frequency wave-form from one to the other, with no loss in transit because of the insulating air around it.

"Another item," he said as dourly as before. "High-frequency current, whatever its wave-form, travels only on the outside surface of a conductor. The *Marintha* is a conductor. When I turn on the garbage unit, the oscillations will flow to the outside hull-plates. Necessarily! And they can radiate from the whole outer surface of the ship as an antenna!"

He put away the torch. He said with something like curtness, "We're carbon compounds, mostly, but these waves can't harm us. We're in air and insulated by air. The slug-ships won't be in air. They can be harmed. We will now see how much!"

"I don't quite follow—" Breen said uncomfortably.

"No need to follow," said Howell. "Just look!"

He led the way into the control room. He adjusted switches. When the *Marintha* broke out of overdrive, the garbage-disposal unit would generate its peculiar waves. They wouldn't stay in the unit because they could pass through the cable to the floor-plates. They wouldn't stay in the floor-plates because they could move to the outer surface of the space-yacht's hull. And they wouldn't stay there because like other items of the magneto-electric spectrum, they could radiate away into space. And they would.

Or should. But there was only one way to test it. That test would involve the lives of four people now, but ultimately as many lives as there were people to be affected.

"Overdrive coming!" said Howell. He sounded almost savage, which spoiled the effect of what could have been a high dramatic moment, but was a very natural reaction. He threw the switch.

The *Marintha* broke out of overdrive.

* * * * *

There were stars by thousands and millions and billions. There were gas-clouds light-centuries away, shining by the light of many suns. There were star-clusters and nebulae, and the Milky Way itself. There were white and blue-white suns, and yellow ones, and unwinking specks of light of every color the eyes of men could recognize. And suddenly, in the faint and lucent twilight of starshine—suddenly there was the *Marintha*.

She came into being apparently from nowhere. At one instant there was nothing. Then there was the space-yacht, her bright metal plates reflecting the faint, faint glow of a thousand million far-away suns. She appeared and instantly, invisible radiating waves spread out from her in all imaginable directions. There was, of course, no sign of their existence, but they were real and they spread at the speed of light.

For the fraction of a second she was alone, and her loneliness was infinite. But then other things appeared. They were shapes. By scores and by hundreds they flickered into being, and each had the form of a slug—such a slimy and unpleasant thing as is found under rotting logs in woodland. The resemblance even

extended to horns like eyestalks, save that on these shapes the horns were the deadliest of weapons.

Some of the shapes appeared close to the *Marintha*. There were some ahead and some behind, and to the right and left, and above and below. The nearest was not a mile from the silver-steel yacht from Earth. The farthest—Howell at the vision-screens could not tell. They seemed to fill all of space so far as the eye could distinguish them.

But they didn't remain as they appeared. They retained the shape of fighting ships long enough to be seen as such, but no longer. Then, soundlessly, they ceased to be objects of solid, iron-hard plastic. They became mere similitudes of ships formed of the finest imaginable dust. They were thrust instantly out to shapelessness and the properties of dust-clouds by the expanding air they'd contained for their crews to breathe.

More slug-ships broke out of overdrive, to cease to be ships and become dust-swarms as they arrived. And more ships. And more. And more.

Presently no others appeared, and the *Marintha* was again alone in the vast remoteness of between-the-stars. But there was a new dust-cloud in space. It was not likely that human astronomers would ever observe it, because it was very small. Within the next year, expanding as it would continue to do, it would exist only in a few hundred thousand cubic miles of nothingness. In fifty years, or perhaps a century, it would have dissipated past detection, and the only traces left of a slug-ship fighting fleet would be various objects of metal, no longer protected or held together by the plastic in which they'd been submerged. Perhaps in ten thousand thousand years some would have drifted to where some sun's gravitational field would draw them to fiery oblivion in its photosphere.

In the *Marintha*, Howell drew a deep breath, still staring at the screens which showed the few last denser dust-clumpings. They represented the last-comers. Karen stared incredulously at the mistiness which was all that could be seen.

"It appears," said Howell with some care, "that we finally hit on what the small-folk saw right away in our garbage-disposal unit. They've got plans for this trick. Now, as soon as they foregather at the next meeting place, they'll pass on the trick of destroying garbage—because incidentally it destroys slug-ships!"

Ketch made an inarticulate small sound. His emotions were hopelessly mixed.

Breen said heavily, "They were really very unpleasant creatures, Howell! I think we are well out of this affair. What do you plan to do now?"

"Head home," said Howell briskly. "We could carry on with our original plans if we wished, of course. If we keep the garbage unit running, we need only to have a slug-ship try to approach us to dispose of it without even knowing it. But I think our ships at home ought to be told about the trick. Robots in orbit about occupied worlds will take care of any slug-ship that might stumble on them. But that's for precaution. I doubt that the beasts will try to go to space at all, after a few more experiences."

Breen frowned reflectively. Then he said, "Experiences? But they won't—"

"They'll have the experience," said Howell, "of sending ships to space and having them never come back. They can never find out how it happens. Any slug-ship that gets close enough to—say—a small-folk globe-ship, will disintegrate before its crew can grasp the idea. And even if they knew the whole trick—it wouldn't work against a metal ship, and they can't make ships for a chlorine atmosphere without making them of plastic."

"Hm," said Breen profoundly. "I see . . . yes, I see."

Howell swung the *Marintha* about. He set a course with infinite care. He said, "Overdrive coming!"

Breen winced and Ketch growled as the acute discomfort of entering overdrive gripped them. Karen caught her breath. Howell stood up from the pilot's chair.

"And I have a personal reason for wanting to get back to Earth," he observed. "Karen?"

He led her out of the control room. Her eyes were shining.

"The—small-people will have garbage disposers, too," she said in wondering relief. "And then they can really defend themselves against the slug-men! I'm glad of that! It seems so terrible for them to be hunted—"

"They'll do the hunting now," said Howell gruffly. "The garbage units won't act in atmosphere, of course, so they can't attack the chlorine-breathers' planets as the beasts' ancestors attacked and destroyed our forefathers' cities. But the beasts will learn to stay aground!"

He led her the length of the saloon. He opened the door of the ship's-stores cabinet. He ushered her in.

"The baby small-people are adorable!" said Karen softly. "I'm so glad they'll be safe!" Then Howell closed the cabinet door and she said, "But what—why—"

"I explained once," said Howell, "why I didn't act romantic after we'd—er—admitted a certain interest in each other. I was busy, I said, trying to make you safe. I think you're safe now. I'm preparing to argue that we should be married as soon as we can get back to Earth. We might as well tell your father we're going to marry, anyhow. Shall I argue?"

"But—how—?"

"Like this," said Howell.

He kissed her.

WHY SHOULD HUMANITY DESTROY ITSELF?

The MARINTHA hurtled into space to discover the secret of the galactic ancestors of the human race. In the shattered rubble of great civilizations they discovered bizarre remnants of humanity beside whom they would battle the poisonous forces arrayed against all human life...

Humanity's future hung
in the starry balance!