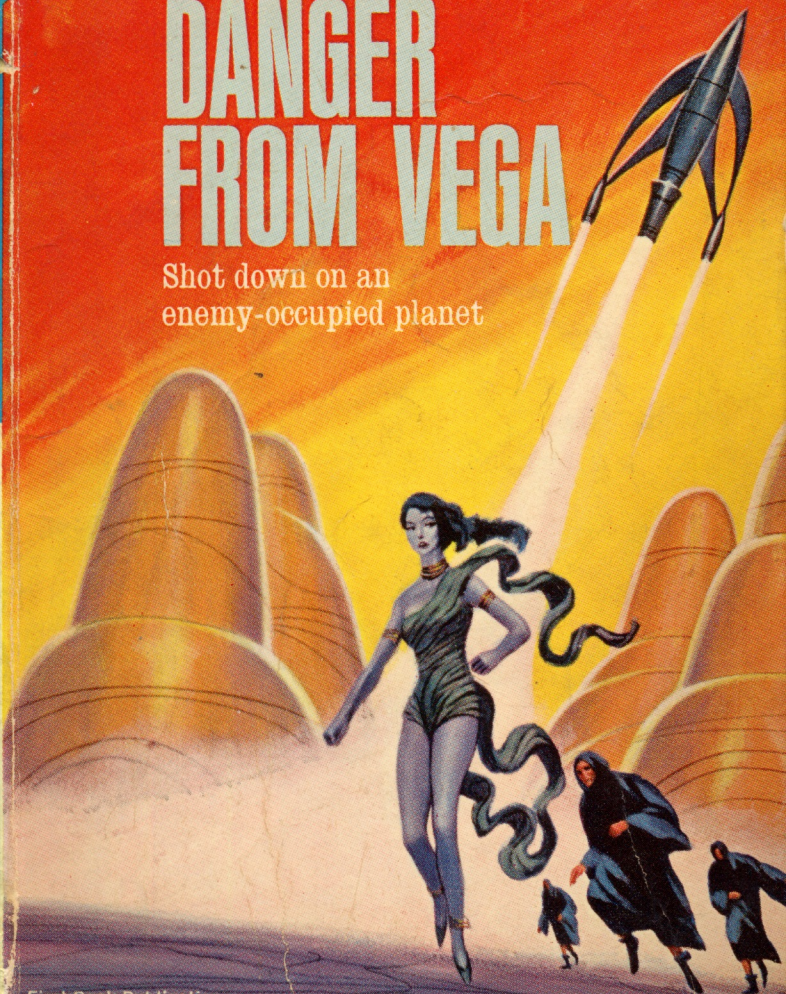


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DANGER FROM VEGA

by

JOHN RACKHAM

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I

THE TEN-SECOND ALARM had come and gone. Every one of the twenty-man crew braced himself and shivered as *S.S. Quest* slipped from the dark security of Pauli-space into the chill hazards of real space-time. There was that vertiginous moment of rainbow pinwheels and implosion, and then no time to dwell on it as they went into rapid and hard-eyed ready-up for anything that might happen.

Lieutenant Jeremy Thorpe knew his motions as well as and probably better than the rest. After five incredible years of this he had exceeded the average survival statistics so many times he had forgotten to count the multiples long ago. Space-suited only to his waist, his nimble fingers tripped and set and adjusted the controls before him. Suit-up was the order, but he was alone in the bow-torpedo control blister, and you could manipulate controls just that little

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bit faster without the armored gloves of a suit. And speed counted. Fire-and-aim controls—on. Detector-and-range screens—on. Outside viewscreen—on. Tubes loaded and ready—the three lower spots on his board winked into life to tell him that three crewmen were closed up and standing by to reload as he fired. Blister-space tight and sealed. Everything checked.

He touched a button, heard the quick-fire chatter of other stations, waited for a gap, and reported. "Bow-torp station to control, check!"

"Control to bow-torps, thank you. Maintain alert!" That was Captain Warnes, and that "maintain alert" was repeated, grim and meticulous, with his every acknowledgement. It was the leitmotif of the whole ship. Be on your toes. The first sign you see of anything that even looks like an enemy, lash out with everything you have, as fast as you can. A policy of desperation, hammered into men who knew that any second now might be their last. Thorpe listened to the chatter. After-torps; belly torps; forward beamers . . . the tale of aggressive armament rattled in the speaker as *Quest* hung in the vastness and spun lazily on a precessional twist. A quarter of a million miles away in any of six directions, other ships were doing the same, and still more ships beyond. Two dozen ships flung out into a tenuous globe in a near-hopeless attempt to contain that area of space where the earthside war-computers had calculated the Vegans were most likely to break out next time.

"Calculated!" He tasted the word in his thoughts and smiled without mirth. Educated guesswork was all. The war-comps guessed right about six or seven times in ten. Not good, but it was the best that could be got. Failing the guesswork, nobody *knew* anything about the Vegans that was helpful. Thorpe recalled what his father had told him, five years ago.

"They flash into the here and now out of nowhere. Bunched. Big shining ships, like chrome-plated eggs. They throw fragmentation-bombs at you. They fry you with heat-beams. They can stop on a pinhead, and lash into speed so fast you wonder how the ships stand it, never mind the crews.

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They make rings round you, cut you to ribbons, and then—snap—they're gone again!" Five years ago, when he was only a newly-graduated youth, valiantly looking forward to "doing his bit" in Space Service against the Vegans in a murderous war that had then been going on for ten years. And now, after all that time, nobody knew anything more than that. Nothing that was helpful, at any rate.

A crackling tension held the ship, the strained silence of men who waited because there wasn't anything to do. Men who didn't know what to hope for. If the war-comps had guessed on the nose, a cluster of Vegans would materialize within the globe of ships, and then they would lash out with all their weapons. They would blast some of the shining ones, perhaps all of them. But some of the Solarian ships would die, too, because the Vegans were fast, and deadly. If the comps were away off this time, nothing would happen, and they would complete a waiting period, then jump back into Pauli-space and go back to base. To do it all over again soon. But the odds were more that the guess would be part accurate, that the enemy would emerge within hitting range of just one, or two, of the waiting ships.

Jeremy Thorpe grinned mirthlessly again. Then it would be every man for himself, with the chances of survival extremely remote. What the fragmentation-bombs left unripped, the heat-beams finished off in fused lumps. And, if by some miracle you did survive, chances of being picked up were so small as to be not worth thinking about. The spaces involved were too big, and fuel-capacity too limited to permit a lengthy search for bits of human driftwood.

He scanned his detectors by habit. His eye fell on two pictures, stuck there between a pair of gauges. Pin-ups. Two laughing, bright-eyed women. Color 3-D snaps that he had taken himself, on the white sand beach of a lake, long ago. Two lovelies, their scanty monokinis leaving no doubt as to their ebullient charms. Curious shipmates had asked him, had tried to raise a snigger about them, had eyed them with frank interest. But only once, each.

His retort, flat and straight, was always: "One's my mother, the other's my sister. Care to guess which is which?"

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Nobody ever asked twice. Friendly envy and curiosity withdrew in a sense of embarrassment. Suggestive remarks somehow didn't seem right about a fellow's mother and sister. And Jeremy Thorpe had thereby concreted the impression that he was an unfriendly, unsociable sort. Which was true. It was also true about the photographs, in one way. In another way it wasn't. He took his gaze away from the life-like pictures, pushing away the sore memories they evoked, and stared at the outside viewscreen.

Very few men of his acquaintance cared to look space full in the eye. That immense black-velvet out there, laced with fragile rainbows of ionization and studded with jewels that flamed in every imaginable color, was too vast and icily impersonal for them. They preferred to rely on their detectors and alarms, to preserve the illusion of security by means of steel walls and solid things to the touch. But Jeremy Thorpe liked to look at space. It was the one thing before which he could feel humble and impressed.

Most ironic of all, he was probably the only man present who need not have been. Fifteen years of insane war had laid its hand on social rules. If you were of the right age-group and reasonably fit, you had to be somebody very special to evade the net of conscription. He grinned again; it was almost a sneer now. He could have dodged it. And honorably, too. But he had chosen otherwise. He had wanted to be here.

Alarms screamed at him suddenly, shattering the musings into shards. He crouched over his screens instantly, fingers alert. There! Five bright spots in a cluster, and close. By God, they were close. Two of them leaped into motion even as he looked, moving so fast they drew thin green lines of fire on the target-scope, so fast that his insides heaved in sympathy with the g-forces involved. Twisting his DF controls frantically to keep them in view, he wisted down to launch one anti-matter torpedo at a spot ten degrees ahead on one of those lines, spun to focus on the other. It stopped, held still for a breath. Part of him wondered, for the thousandth time, how the hell they could do that. Pow-

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er-gauges sagged and rose again as the beamers sucked energy and spat it at those shining things.

The *Quest* lurched and bucked as Captain Warnes tried to dodge what was being thrown at him yet remain within range. Thorpe twisted his scope grimly, holding that spot, waiting for it to jump. Which way? All at once it was off, a thin green line, leaping from dead-still into incredible speed. He tracked it, aimed well ahead, and wristed down again, bracing himself against the straining heaves of the ship. Two torpedoes gone. No sense in watching to see if they would hit. That took time. He shifted his scopes again to find more, his brain refusing the equation which said that five Vegans to one Solarian spelled certain destruction.

He caught another, and hesitated for just a breath at its odd behavior in the screen. Then he realized. This one was jumping, but almost straight towards the *Quest*. He flashed a glance to the outside screens, and saw what very few Earthmen had ever seen and lived to tell. There, a disc of shimmering silver, growing visibly with its velocity. And it stopped, virtually within its own length. He spun the DF madly, wristed down to let loose ravening death on a tail of ion-fire, and again. Then he stared at the viewscreen again, saw the shining thing hang there. Splashes of fire coruscated from it as *Quest's* beamers stabbed out. The chrome-plate ovoid grew a ring of black holes suddenly, pockmarks which spat fire, and Thorpe grunted as the *Quest* lumbered sideways to evade the death that had been thrown. The gleaming image slid from the screen. He snatched a glance at his wide-range detector, just in time to see one green trail disappear in a fuzz of light. One down. They could be hit, if you were lucky.

His eyes were drawn back, fascinated, to the viewscreen. *Quest* rolled and heaved and the shining thing slid back on to the screen again, the ring of black ports now shut. Getting ready to jump, he guessed, and felt fury at the way the thing had dared to come so close, defying the worst the Earth ships could do. Then he yelled and was dazzled as the gleaming thing suddenly sprang apart in a hell of

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bright fire, a swelling globe of incandescence. The torpedoes had struck. Blinded, he twisted away from the screen, and *Quest* lurched, in an upwards leap. In that second he knew they'd been hit. Even as the straps snapped him back into his seat the stricken ship leaped again, harder, and the reverberation of impact echoed through the hull. Another buck-jump, and his head flailed against something steel-hard. Sparks flared and died in his head. Barely conscious, he fumbled to do up his suit all the way, struggled with the helmet, dragged it down, heard it click into place, and the ship seemed to spin and shiver and then dive into darkness, taking him down, too.

Down into a dream, a strange dream in which he was privileged to stand remote and watch himself doing the things he had done . . . A time when he had not been Jeremy Thorpe at all, but someone else. Gerald Corde. The afternoon of graduation day. He and the real Jeremy Thorpe, together in the study they had shared for two years. And there was one other, smaller and older than the two twenty-year-old six-footers who looked so much alike, but not in the least overpowered by them. Vice-Admiral Corde was accustomed to dominate any gathering of which he was part. He did so now, arrow-erect and formidable in his uniform.

"Good grades, Gerald," he said, and as he spoke you knew that "Whip" was the only possible nickname for him. "Just as I had expected. Counted on it. Best in the school!"

"Not quite, Dad. Jeremy nosed in ahead of me, as he always does."

"Fractionally," the old man dismissed it with a shrug. "No offense, young man, but it's Gerald's grades I'm interested in. I've gambled on you, son, and it paid off. I knew it would."

"I don't follow, Dad. What's this all about? Something special? I suspected something of the kind when I saw you in the crowd. Never expected you to be able to make it."

"Had to bend a regulation or two, at that. I haven't a lot of time, so listen. You've been expecting to go straight into Space Service from school, haven't you?"

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"Doesn't everybody? I mean, that's the law now, isn't it?"

"Except for special cases. Very special cases. Like you!"

"Me?" Gerald sank into a chair, stared in bewilderment at Jeremy, who shrugged his lack of understanding, too. The old man permitted a chill smile to disturb his hard features.

"You're my son. The only son I have left. Since your mother died I've had to be mother and father to all of you. And, God help me, I haven't done too well at it. Andy and Jim were both hell-bent to follow in my footsteps. I let them. I was proud to have them in uniform. Now—they're both dead. I was a fool!" It was the nearest Gerald had ever heard his father come to admitting an error, and he marveled at it. "It's not going to happen to you, Gerald. I've made up my mind on that. It's not for you!"

"What?" Gerald was stunned. All his life had been spent in the smell and shadow of the Service. He had taken it for granted that he would wear the black-and-gold with sunbursts, and see space. The old man must be crazy. "You can't say that! I'm eligible now."

"I can pull strings. I have done. It was all arranged long ago. You've heard of Venus Special Research Center? United Earth set it up, about three years ago, to skim off the cream of our youth, the potential geniuses, the brains and resources we need, and keep them safe. Son, this war is bleeding us of our best and we are getting nowhere. Nowhere! Sheer guts and courage aren't going to get us anywhere, ever, in this business. We need brains, inspiration, new weapons, something to give us an edge. The Vegans—this is strictly within these four walls, mind—have us beat all ends up. It is sheer inertia and ignorance that keeps us going."

"You mean we haven't a chance?"

"Just that. We know almost nothing about the enemy, except that he can match us ship for ship, weapon for weapon, and fly rings round us in actual combat. We've known it for years. We haven't made it public, for obvious reasons. But we can't go on much longer. We're squeezing

our resources, making them last, but we can't squeeze manpower much more. And we are fighting blind, like a punch-drunk blind boxer trying to beat a swarm of mid-gets with spears."

"I find that hard to believe." Jeremy Thorpe spoke timidly, his uncertain voice coming oddly from his big frame. Vice-Admiral Corde slanted a hard eye at him.

"It's true enough. Gerald knows most of it already, or he's not as smart as his grades seem to indicate. But we haven't publicized the true state of our plight simply because—as you've just said—it's hard to take. We humans have a built-in tradition of believing ourselves capable of overcoming anything in the long run. But we haven't got a long run, this time."

"Skip that!" Gerald was terse. "You're hoarding genius. All right. But what's that to do with me?"

"When Jim died, and I realized you were all I had left"—the harsh old voice cracked just a trifle—"I made up my mind you weren't going to be sacrificed on the juggernaut like the rest. I had to figure out how. I did it by making sure you had the very best schooling there was, by encouraging you to develop as fast and as far as possible. It wasn't such a gamble, at that. My side of the family isn't exactly half-witted, and your mother was a brilliant woman, God rest her soul. Then I originated the notion of a reserve of brain-power, and saw to it that the idea grew. I pushed it. I yanked every damned string I had, and they were plenty. I may not have been much of a father to you, Gerald, and I haven't seen as much of you as I ought, but I never let up on that aim. I was determined to save you from the bloody war machine out there!" The last words were a snarl.

More calmly, he went on. "Two years ago I saw the scheme come to fruit. And I put your name down as one potential candidate—on condition that you did well enough in your studies. That was the gamble. And you did, and I'm proud of you."

"Now just a minute!" Gerald leaped to his feet, the violence that was part of his impulsive nature breaking through. "Didn't it occur to you that I had some say in this?"

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"You're my son. You'll do as I say!"

"You can't have it both ways. If I'm in uniform, I'm under your orders. If not, not. And be damned to your scheme!"

The old man got to his feet, squared his shoulders, set his jaw and bent a hard eye on his son.

"You'll do it!" he snapped. "You'll obey orders, damn you! It's all arranged. Here!" He slid a hand into his tunic, brought out a folder and slapped it on the table. "All the documents. Reservations for the shuttle ship to Venus. Full clearances. You'll be on that ship tomorrow, hear me? If you try to defy my orders I'll ruin you. If you try anything so insane as to enlist"—he smiled a vicious smile—"but you won't. You're a smart lad, my son, and no fool!"

"Why you—!" Gerald had never had any deep affection for his father, had not seen enough of him for it to develop. But he had known a certain degree of respect. Now it was swept away in a rage so intense, and so futile, that he was robbed of speech.

"Cool down and think about it," the old man advised. "At your age I know there's glamor about a uniform. But there's damn-all glamor out there. It's a gamble, with the odds against you, and sudden death when you lose. We aren't *fighting* the Vegans. We're fly-swatting them, and missing most of the time." His hard old eyes took on a distant look. "They flash out of nowhere. They can stop on a pinhead, jump into acceleration that would mash us. They throw fragmentation-bombs, fry us with heat-beams, cut us to ribbons, and then—snap—they're gone again!"

"Can't we do anything?" That was Jeremy again, shrill now.

"We can't. Yet. It's up to brainy ones like Gerald here, and the finest scientific resources we can lay hands on, to pull something out of the bag to give us the edge."

"You realize"—Gerald was bitter—"that everyone will think that you contrived this? That I'm a dodger, so labeled, because of you? D'you think I'm going to like that?"

"Who cares what anybody else thinks? You be on that ship tomorrow. And that's about all. My time's tight. Good-bye. I don't imagine I'll be able to see you for a year or

two, but I'll be in touch. Venus Directorate will keep me informed. I'm counting on you to show 'em!"

And with a flourish he capped himself and strode out of the quiet study, away down the corridor, leaving a desolation in his wake. Jeremy went to the table to finger the folder, his face a chaos of uncertainty.

"Was it right, what he said about the hopelessness of the war?"

"Eh? Oh, sure, it's right enough." Gerald muttered. "If you'd spent all your vacations as I have, milling around officer's quarters, or being shooed away from some high echelon meeting in a hotel suite, you'd know. You hear things, things you're not meant to hear or understand. Sure the war is tough. I can't give you precise figures, but we're taking a hell of a pasting, by all accounts."

"You knew, and you still want to enlist?"

"Ever since I was old enough to have an opinion of my own it's been the automatic future for me. Andy, and Jim, and Dad—and me, in my turn. Call it a family tradition, if you like. And now that old coot with his yap, yap, yap—who the hell does he think he is, telling me what to do?"

Gerald glared at the shut door, seeing again his father strut away, boiling with impotent rage, and then he turned to Jeremy. And his rage died as he noticed something remarkable. To a casual observer the two youths were very alike, both big, brawny, blond and more than passably good-looking. To anyone prepared to look closer, however, there were subtle differences in the stance, the line of a chin or eye. Where Gerald was volatile, quick in thought and intention, Jeremy was passive and inclined to wait. His was the face of the intellectual introvert, ready to ponder the details and arrive at the measured solution. At any other time his expression was one of brooding calm, but now it was a confusion of emotions. Gerald saw him clutching that precious folder, saw him shake with some inner turmoil.

"Hey!" he said. "What's up? No need for you to get upset, old son, over *my* family quarrels!"

"It's so damned unfair!" Jeremy turned on him, his face pale with unusual vehemence. "You get this . . ." he shook

the folder, "a passport to safety, just because your father is a Vice-Admiral and can pull strings. There's nobody to pull strings for me. My family scraped the bottom of the barrel to be able to maintain me here this long. And now, tomorrow, I have to be swept into the damned military machine whether I like it or not—and I don't—where as you, who *want* to join up, will be excused!"

"That's the way it goes. That's life!"

"Is that all you can say? Life? It's a criminal mockery. You're the military type. You'd love it. But no—you get let off!"

For a moment Gerald was taken aback by his friend's near-hysteria. He had never seen Jeremy like this before. The thought flashed through his mind that Jeremy was scared, had probably been dreading this for some time, but had kept it to himself. He felt resentment, too, at the implication that it was in some way his fault. But the words he might have said were stillborn as an utterly fantastic idea burst into his mind. He stared, seeing Jeremy still clutching that precious collection of documents, and let the idea run, leaping for the conclusion and scorning the possible obstacles in between. Why not? The question shouted so loudly in his mind that he marveled that Jeremy couldn't hear it.

"Passport!" he babbled. "Why not? You've got it in your hand. Why not hang on to it?"

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

"The folder. You have it in your hand. Why not keep it? Who's to know?" The inspiration was so urgent that he shook with the effort to be rational. Going close to Jeremy he said, "What's to stop you marching out of here tomorrow, taking a cab to the shuttle field, and presenting those papers in my place? Who's to know, or care? Here, let me see them just a minute!" He took the folder from Jeremy's limp grasp and shook out the contents on to the table, stirring them with a quick finger. "Just as I thought. Flight reservation, seat number, baggage clearance, authorizations—but not a thing about identification. Whoever is carrying this is Gerald Cord. Get it? You, in my place!"

For a further three breaths the confusion raged on Jere-

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my's face, but then it cleared and was calm. The fine mind had been presented with a problem, and now tackled it in habitual fashion.

"It would never work, Jerry. Too many snags."

"All right. You name 'em, I'll shoot 'em down. Come on!"

"I might run into your father."

"Forget it. The old man wasn't kidding when he said he had a tight schedule. I was surprised he was able to make it here at all today. There's a war on, brother. I'll bet you he's airborne right now, and spaceborne in hours from now. Forget him. Next?"

"What about your part, as me?"

"What about it? I know the drill. Proceed from here to your State Induction Center with reasonable speed by first available transport . . ."

"I meant—about the rest of the school. You'll be seen!"

"Be your age!" Gerald scorned. "How many kids in the school know us to speak to—a dozen? And who's to care?"

Jeremy frowned, half-closing his eyes. "But what about—after you are in? Remember what your father said. And he is a Vice-Admiral!"

"But he won't give a damn, even if it ever came to his ears, about one Jeremy Thorpe, crewman trainee. Jerry, it can't miss!" Gerald snapped his fingers in triumph. "And it's better this way. Think. I'm in. It's what I want, what I intend to get, and I'm the type, as you said. The old man can kid himself about my grades, but you know better than anyone that they aren't as good as yours. And I'm not the 'potter-about-in-a-lab' type, at all. You know that. Lord knows we've done enough aptitude tests to make it clear. My talent, such as it is, is speed, fast decisions, and mechanical know-how. You're the 'abstract theory' one. Brother—it's perfect!"

"Are you really keen to get into the Service, Jerry? After all you know about it?"

"You find that puzzling?" Gerald laughed. "I've got my own reasons; I won't bother you with them now. Don't matter, anyway. It's all fixed. As of tomorrow, we swap places, you and me. . . ."

"What? What?"

Jeremy tossed the folder back on to the table and sighed. "I knew it was too good. And I missed the obvious thing. Jerry, you said you know the drill. We all do. Induction Center, tests and check-ups, assignments to training camps—and they they give you two weeks leave, starting at once, because it might well be the last you'll ever have—" He let the sentence dwindle into silence. Gerald froze, then turned, walked to his chair and sank into it.

"Hell!" he mumbled. "Hell and damnation! Leave—I never gave it a thought. I've never had a home to go to, never bothered to consider—"

"There's my mother," Jeremy said, very quietly. "And my kid sister, too. They know I'm due home. I wrote and told them." The silence in the study grew and thickened. Gerald raged internally. It was such a good scheme. It had a justice, a rightness about it. He just couldn't imagine Jeremy in a military environment, jumping to it, reacting on the hop. It would be murder! But he had a home and family. Gerald had no way of assessing such values. In all his life he had known only the hard-faced Admiral as a father, remote, and the impersonal care or orderlies and hotel staff. But his mind, violently impatient as always, flew at the problem, beat at it.

"I'm sorry." Jeremy sounded dull in defeat. "I wish it could have been possible. It was such a good idea. . . ."

"Just a minute!" Gerald lifted his head, clutching desperately at a faint hope. "Your mother's looking for you to come home by Saturday, day after tomorrow? And she'll be disappointed, hurt maybe, if I turned up in your place, wouldn't she?"

"It's out of the question. She would never understand!"

"Oh yes she might, if you wrote a letter and I took it with me. If you wrote and explained. Look, which do you think she would rather have, you on leave for two weeks and then—bam!—into Space Service? Or you not coming home for a long while, but tucked safe and secure on Venus? Well? Is it so hard to figure?"

"I don't know." Jeremy hesitated. But he did know. The

answer was too obvious to miss. After some hesitation and shuffling he surrendered and took out a pad and pen. Gerald was on fire with victory. To get into the Service after all, and to put one over on the old man—he wasn't sure which element was more tasty, but he liked the sensation.

"Get writing, brother," he urged. "Make it good!"

The dream began to break up, to go out of focus, to whirl into a fractured unreality in which the magnification closed in and settled on that pen, on the paper, scratching laboriously away. Scratching—

II

THE SCRATCHING SOUND was in his right ear, irritatingly. He stirred, and cringed as the top of his head came off. Keeping absolutely still, he waited for it to settle back into place. Helmet. He felt the seal-ring at his neck, felt the hard curve against his forehead. His helmet was too small for his head, which was ridiculous. His head was a low-pressure can through which a tenuous gaseous ache swirled and curled. The scratching came again, was a strained and ragged voice.

"This is Captain Warnes. I ask again, can anyone else hear me? Anyone? If you hear this, report—please!"

Suit-radio. He ventured a movement, discovered that in some inexplicable fashion he was upside-down, retched at the wave of pain that came with the finding, and wriggled his chin to move the talk-switch. The first try brought nothing, second try a croak, and on the third attempt he said, "Lieutenant Thorpe hearing you, sir."

"Thank God. One more. Anybody else? Report—please!"

There came nothing but the low hum of carrier-waves and intermittent crackling. He wriggled tentatively. He was upside-down. And the torpedo-control compartment was in

utter blackness, not even secondary battery-lights showing. He thrust away that significance and struggled to move his cumbersome arms enough to switch on the suit-lights that were fitted to each cuff. Then, by their tenuous beams, he tried to get himself oriented.

"I'm going to assume that there are only the five of us," Warnes said, sounding as if he were stretched to the limit but determined to keep on. "I'll call the roll, just to make sure. Lieutenant Thorpe, you seem to be next senior to me. Bow-torpedoes, I think. Gladden, power-deck crew. Hadley, you're starboard aft beamer-crew. Skoda, radio-man. For the last time, is there anybody else?" The only answer was an indifferent wash of static.

"Very well. We are five. We still live. I'll hear your reports, in sequence, and let's see if we can get a picture of some kind. Thorpe?"

"Total blackout here, sir. So far as I can make out by my suit-lights, and the tension in my suit, the space is tight. Not holed. But that's all."

"And you yourself?"

"I've had a clout on the head. Knocked me out for a bit. But I'm all right otherwise, I think."

"Thank you. Hadley, I'll hear you now."

"I'm fit, sir," the voice was a thick growl with a suspicion of brogue in it. "Shook up a bit, but nothing to bother about. Blackout, as Mr. Thorpe just said. I've checked around a bit. Far as I can tell, the whole after-section is hanging in rags. Flapping in the breeze. Do I check some more, sir?"

"Yes. Be careful now. Thank you. Skoda?"

A shaky, rather high-pitched voice made a false start then settled down to say. "All black here too, sir. The shack is a bloody mess. Weebly and Lieutenant Juno—all chewed up. Equipment is smashed all to hell."

"And you, yourself?"

"Can't use my right arm, sir. Sorry—"

"All right. Don't worry about it. Gladden, let's hear from you."

There was a harsh roar of static, at once, over which Thorpe could just hear the unsteady voice saying "Tech-ser-

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geant Gladden reporting. The power-deck is a mess of bomb-fragments. No survivors, only me. And not me for very much longer."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Radiation, sir. The space is blue with it. Bomb-fragment shattered the pile-shielding all to pieces. She shut herself off, automatically. That's why where's no power on. But the damage is done now."

"Take your anti-radiation capsules!"

"Too late for that, sir. And they won't cope with this density anyway. Stupid—"

"Gladden!" Warnes shouted. "Don't give up, man!"

"Was going to say, sir, it's stupid. The drive is O.K. by the look of it. I can override the automatic quite easily. But if I do the whole bloody ship will be as hot as this space in about thirty seconds. Stupid. We're all dead, one way or the other."

"That will do!" Warnes snapped. "We're not dead yet. Attention all. We're in a hell of a mess, no sense in trying to minimize that. But we are not dead yet. Mr. Thorpe—Hadley—you two seem to be capable of movement. I suggest you do what you can to check lifeboats. You too, Skoda, if you can manage with one arm. If there's only one boat intact, there's a chance. Gladden!"

"Forget it, sir." The roar of interference came as Gladden opened his talk-switch. I'm staying right here. I've had it and I know it. If you want the power on for anything, just say. But don't leave it too long, I haven't much time!" Thorpe was already on the move, groping for the bleeder-valve that would discharge the compartment pressure. A small omission came to his mind.

"Captain Warnes," he said, "how about you, sir? Are you all right?"

"Never mind about me."

"We've a right to know, sir. There are only five of us." He found the valve, and felt his suit pop as the pressure dwindled on the outside. The hatch-lock moved under his hand and swung open to show stars.

"Right?" Warnes grunted. "What right has any one of

us, in a situation like this? Gladden is right. We're all dead, only we won't admit it. We keep on trying, in futility. I'm smashed, Lieutenant. Damned control-module tore away from the bulkhead and has me trapped from the waist down. I can't feel a thing, yet. Never had time to get into a suit, but I managed to reach the helmet, which is how I'm talking to you now. But don't write me off. We need all the wits we have. How about those damned boats? And how does she look, from outside?"

Thorpe had snagged his lifeline on a ring-bolt and was now drifting away from the hull, squirming to spin himself so that he could see. The big dark was all round him, blazing with glorious jewels of fire. Back there on the end of the slim line, the *Quest* looked pathetically small, a toy cast adrift in vastness. It spun helplessly as he watched and saw where one bomb had struck flush on the transverse bulkhead which separated the control-deck from the drive-space. The gaping wound was black and ragged-edged. All that side of the ship was in ruin. He saw the star-limbed midget that had to be Hadley on a similar errand. He saw the stern, and Hadley had called it exactly. Hanging in rags. Flapping in the breeze, if there had been any breeze. But the drive-and-steer tubes seemed unhurt, thrusting through the wreckage like fingers of a steely hand. The slow spin of the ship began to wind him back and he took a handgrip on the line, jerking gently.

"Not worth bothering to check on any of the midship boats," he reported. "Or the after-section. It's a mess. Forward end looks hopeful. I am moving that way now."

"Confirm." Hadley growled. "I'll make my way forward too, see if I can give Skoda a hand."

Minutes later the three of them were clustered round the blister that held the forward port lifeboat. Thorpe reported.

"This one seems O.K., sir. We'll come and help you out ..."

"Take it and blast off!" Warnes interrupted, his voice crackling with urgency and pain. "You can't do anything for me. No suit, and you can't get in here without bleeding

the compartment. I haven't long, anyway. Good luck, Lieutenant, and you other two. . . ."

"We can't just shove off and leave you!" Thorpe was aghast at the suggestion. He tried to see Captain Warnes in his mind, to see him half-crushed and dying, and the picture would not come.

"For God's sake, go!" Warnes shouted. "I'm finished, I tell you! I have a capsule. Carried it ever since I first blasted off. A quick death. I've taken it. A man has a right to some dignity in his last moments. Go, damn you!" The voice cut off with a click. Thorpe felt sick, mentally and physically. His head banged like an empty can. He was slimy with sweat and condensation. Nausea hovered in his gullet. Around him the beautiful stars blazed in sublime indifference. And fifteen men were dead, a ship was dead, they were all dead, in everything but name. Warped and ruptured metal, lifeless gadgetry, and the unthinking enormity of space—and three feeble human bodies dared to hope.

"Pointless to man the pod," Hadley growled. "What would we do after, wait? And for what? Who's going to come for us? Where can we go?"

"There's got to be something!" Thorpe muttered.

"We're a week away from anywhere, even in Pauli," Skoda mumbled. "We can't hope to reach anything, not in a pod."

"If the ship's drive still works, as Gladden said—"

"It's O.K." Gladden's voice came over the sudden hailstorm of static as he cut in. "I've checked round. I have only to throw the manual reset and you have the lot, steering-jets, ion-drive, Pauli—everything—"

"And a bellyful of curies!" Hadley snarled. "A fat lot of good that is, to us!"

"Hold it!" Thorpe snapped, snatching at a stray idea. "We have first class shielding, too, right here!" and he thumped his armored hand on the hull. "This is designed to shield the crew from external radiation. No reason why it won't work the other way round."

"But somebody's got to be in there, to operate—"

"Oh no! Remember the module construction theory?" It was a basic in everybody's training. All ships were so designed,

compartmented, so that in emergency the ship could be conned, flown, and fought, from any sector. There were multi-point plugs and multi-core cables in all sections, just for such a case.

"By remote," he declared. "We can do it from out here, from the pod! Come on, give me a hand to hook up. Skoda, you cable-up the pod. Hadley, with me. The bow-torp space was intact when I left it. We can cross-link from there!"

Shuffling and scrambling over the foreshortened horizon of the hull in sudden hope, they forgot their fears and discomforts, shaking and fumbling in their urge to be quick, cursing the thumb-fingered clumsiness of their suits. Massive cables were plugged in and they got back to the lifeboat, to scramble in alongside Skoda. Thorpe chinned his talk-switch, offering a silent prayer.

"Gladden! You hear me? Still there?"

He winced as the storm of static came again, hurting his ears. "What d'you want?" Gladden sounded lightheaded, uncaring. "Thought you'd gone a long time ago. Waiting for? You want to come in here? Pretty! All blue and mauve, everything sparkling like diamonds . . ." The disjointed mumble faded out below the static roar. Thorpe felt imminent panic, the urge to scream. Gladden had gone over the edge, that was obvious. He was crazy. And they were all stuck with it. He cast a feverish glance round the dim blue glare of the confined lifeboat space. Two hulking shadowy forms loomed, staring sightlessly at him through obscure face-plates. They said nothing. They were leaving it to him. *My God!* he thought, *I'm senior. I'm in charge!* The knowledge dragged him back from the breaking-point, made his wits churn.

Gladden had gone crazy. No blaming him, at that, but what to do? It was pointless to try to break in on him, even if he could have achieved anything by the doing. Ten seconds in that radiation sleet and he'd be all through. A crazy man. Humor him. Why not?

"Gladden!" he tried to be loud and firm without quaver. "You hear me? It's pretty down there?"

DANGER FROM VEGA

"Beautiful. Like fairy-land. Everything shining. Shining!"

"Gladden. I bet it would shine ten times as bright, if you made that switch, re-set the trip, made the drive hot. Eh? Wouldn't that be good?"

Thorpe waited, holding his breath, feeling the cold sweat collect in beads and dribble down his face. That damned roar was getting louder. He heard Gladden mumble something, couldn't tell what. Then the hailstorm roar surged into a sudden and deafening tattoo, a scream—and then a silence that echoed. The life-boat's dim blue glare flickered and became bright. In the same instant the awkwardly twisted sense of "down" being a bit sideways went away. Everything seemed to orient properly. The far fringe of his mind told him the pseudo-gravity unit must have been jarred out of phase in the strike, but was now bedded and functioning normally. Hadley's thick growl sounded in his ear.

"We ought to say Amen, sir. Begod, he was a man!"

"That's true. He's given us a chance. And we'd better not waste it." Thorpe rallied himself into action, anything rather than contemplate the hell of hard radiation that was sleeting through the guts of the *Quest*, just the other side of the hull. "Are we tight? All right, the first thing to do is half-suit. Skoda, I want a look at that arm, see if we can do anything for it." He started to unclip his helmet. Skoda protested.

"The hell with that. Let's get going somewhere!"

"That's what I intend to do. And you're our radio-man, the only one we have. We need you to tell us where. Look, I can fly this thing, with luck, but I need you to plot and set course. Now shut up and get that suit down. Hadley, lend a hand. . . ." The lifeboat was not meant for luxury. The crewman nickname for it, "pod," was scathingly accurate. In essence, not more than an armored metal tube, the lower third of it was taken up by a miniature ion-drive operating from minimum storage-batteries. The upper section was crammed with a simplified module read-out of the controls, and a remote-access to the ship's masters. What was left of space between was devoted to hooked harness and bulkhead lockers containing the bare essentials for survival.

DANGER FROM VEGA

Four men could cram into a pod, if they had to. Now, with only three, but bulking huge in space suits, the room to move was at a minimum. Thorpe got his hand and arms free, reached for Skoda.

"I'll try not to hurt anything. Hadley, be checking round; see what we have in the way of grub and water. And medical. Now then—" He took Skoda's arm and palpated it gently through the sweat-sodden cotton union suit that was all of any of them ever wore in action. On a stray thought he said to Hadley, "Look out for anti-rad capsules, too. We'll need those right away."

"I thought you said the hull would shield us." Skoda quavered, his face gauntly white and corpse-like in the blue glare.

"So it will, but we're on the outside now, and there's space-radiation to think of. The pod ought to keep off most of it, but we can't take any chances." His fingers traveled swiftly, his whole attention given to what he could feel, his dragging weariness and throbbing head ignored. Skoda, as he could see now, was a dark, shock-haired Italianate type, with high cheekbones and cavernous eyes. The harsh light made him look ghastly.

"I can't feel anything broken—ah!" He had reached the upper arm, and from the way the man cringed as he tried to help, the answer became obvious. "Dislocation is all, I think. And I've done this before, thank the Lord. Hadley, I'll need you to brace. Damn this pod, there isn't enough room to turn round. Now, you hold on to him. That's it. Let me get set. Skoda—this will hurt like hell, but only for a moment, so set your teeth. Ready!" He shuffled his shoulders solidly against a bulging locker, took a firm hold. In that moment everything seemed to blue and go out of focus, like a scene from a nightmare. He sucked in a breath, shook his head, and made the effort. Skoda bit down on a groan—and it was done.

"Right. All over. You take a breath or two and then get busy on that board; see what you can make of it. What's your score, Hadley?"

"Not very bright, sir. Plenty of food-paste tubes, but not

much water. Four bulbs is all I can find. About enough for twenty-four hours and a bit. For what good that is."

"About what I'd expected," he muttered. "We're lucky there are any stores at all. The whole lifeboat idea is just a token gesture. I never heard of anybody being rescued from one. Space is just too damn big!"

"There's a medical kit, sir. If you'll hold still I might be able to do something for that head of yours."

"Eh? Oh, never mind that now. It's not serious."

"Take a look for yourself!" Hadley lifted the lid of the box to let Thorpe see himself in the mirror there. He couldn't recognize that spectacle as himself at all. The blue glare made it worse, of course, but even allowing for that, he was a sight. Blood had flowed freely from a dark gash over his right eye, had spread itself all down one side of his face, across his mouth, and was flaking away now. His eyes were black-ringed and too bright by far, and he shone with greasy sweat. He tried to grin, looked at Hadley, and saw a big craggy face, equally grimy and greasy, staring at him.

"Christ!" he mumbled. "We're a sight for sore eyes. All right, see what you can do, but don't worry too much. It looks worse than it is."

He settled against the bulkhead in a crouch to let Hadley loom over him. At the first clumsy dab of cleansing antiseptic jelly, he shut his eyes and fought against the pain-arrows. Strangely, it was easier to bear this sharply localized agony than to fight off the overall drag of ache that had suffused him so far. Then, in seconds, the anesthetic in the paste was doing its work, the pain went away, and he felt light, like a feather.

"That's cleaner than it was. I'll be stitching it now, sir—"

"Nothing much on board," Skoda called, craning back over his shoulder. "The memory banks don't recognize a thing, by these readings. I'll try analysis." Thorpe shut his eyes again. It was eerie to be able to "hear" the screw-needle biting into his scalp and yet not feel it. Skoda's news was bad, but no more than he would have expected. They were too far away from any system known to them for it to register on their limited scanners. That figured. The jump

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from base to rendezvous had taken almost a week in Pauli-drive. So the only thing left was analysis. Feed the data into the ship's computer and hope it would identify something reasonably close as being sufficiently Earth-type to offer chance of planet-fall. That was hope stretched to gossamer fineness. Hadley lurched back.

"Best I can do, sir. Here, you'd better take an anti-rad capsule. Skoda, one for you." Thorpe scrambled erect again, cinched the waistbelt of his suit and stretched to lie alongside the radio-man where he could see the control-console.

"Any luck?"

"Coming through now, what there is of it. God knows what that radiation is doing to the electronics in there, sir, but I'm getting a solid string of negatives so far. Not a bloody thing. No, wait, there's one!" Skoda's fingers flew to recall and hold one cluster of data. Thorpe scanned the reading, knowing enough to recognize it as barely within the permissible parameters. "If it isn't a mocker, it's a chance. An outside chance. By this, it's a small sun, GO type, planets doubtful—and it's forty-eight hours away, near enough exactly."

"Nothing else?"

"Not a ghost of anything. What do we do, sir?"

Again the load came back on his shoulders. Senior. In charge. Make a decision, Jeremy Thorpe. You have two other men depending on you. You have water, life's essential, for twenty-four hours only. You have a crippled ship, alive with boiling radiation. And one dubiously possible sun-system two days away. If everything works the way it should. Some choice!

"What else can we do?" he growled. "Check that reading again and firm it up for course and jump. Hadley, let's make sure everything's lashed down tight, and let me see that medical box again, will you?" He lifted the lid and fingered the contents, hoping to find what he was looking for. He lifted out a small foil-wrapped package.

"We'll use these," he said. "Knock-out pills. As soon as we've made the jump—" They couldn't see the crossed-finger thought in his mind, for which he was profoundly thankful.

DANGER FROM VEGA

The P-drive was a delicate thing, not meant to be bathed in savage radiation, "We'll take a little water, food, and one of these each. Twenty-four hour coma—"

"One of us ought to keep watch," Hadley protested.

"For what?" he snapped. "And why? What can we do to anybody we might run into?" In theory, one kept watch while in Pauli because there were rare times when the nearby presence of power-generators registered through the field, and you could snap out into real space-time and engage. But now?

"It's the only way to make the water last out. All right? Buckle up the harness, and stand by." They struggled, fumbling past and around each other, until they were trussed in the hammock-like harness that served in lieu of acceleration-couches. Thorpe squirmed to get his face and arms turned towards the controls. They were small and crude, nothing as efficient as those inboard, but they would have to serve. A dizzy sense of unreality swept over him again; clusters of needles and gauge-lights swam before his eyes. Vomit lurked at the back of his throat, jerking his stomach. He swallowed once, made himself steady, and gripped the controls.

His tentative touch brought an instant shudder rumbling through the hull. That much still worked, anyway. He tried again, watching the wheeling star-patterns, stilling them, sending them creeping back at an angle, striving to get his sensors and the course-computer's requirements into line with each other. The target-scope shifted and blurred as he glared at it. He squeezed his eyes tight shut, tried again. Gently. Just a nudge. The green-fire cross hairs wandered perversely all round the center. Sweat ran from the end of his nose. He itched. His arms felt like lead.

"Oh, come ON!" he mumbled, nudging the levers again, seeing the cross hairs shiver and creep towards each other. And match. He slammed a switch home to lock on. Now—if only the P-drive were still functioning. He gripped with both hands and twisted, slipped the notch and rammed home—the real universe dissolved in a rainbow pinwheel,

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bringing vertigo, the wrench of implosion—the spectrum spun, ran in on itself and dwindled rapidly into infra-red blackness, taking him with it.

III

THE DREAM CAUGHT HIM as he fell, but this time it was disjointed and fragmentary. Bits and pieces jostled for audience. Jeremy Thorpe—Gerald Corde. Five years. Five incredible, nerve-numbing years in which he had gradually come to accept himself as Jeremy Thorpe all the time, not just when someone else was about. It had been difficult in the beginning, in training. Camp Cochise was a rugged, ruthlessly efficient place. No time for frills or tactful introductions. You were there for three months, and every minute of every day had to count, because you had a lot to learn.

Without knowing it, he had grown accustomed to a certain measure of respect as the son of his father. At Cochise there was none of that. He was just one more unit in the machine. Crewman trainee Thorpe, who had to learn the basic structure and function of every part of the whole range of ship-types that were being slapped together rapidly in other parts of the country. Earth had gone into deep space too early, been dragged into it before there was time to refine, to invent and develop all it would need. There was a merciless man-eating war on. The need was to establish half a dozen basic designs and then produce them, in great quantity. With crews to fit. So you learned all about everything, to start with. On performance, you specialized in one department until you could function efficiently, even if you were four days away from your last sleep, staggering with fatigue, and next door to unconsciousness from wounds.

DANGER FROM VEGA

It had been done. Every one of the instructors had done it, and had survived. Survivors were rare, and precious; they were merciless autocrats, respecting only the hard rules of Space-Regulations. The dream gave him a flash of that first day, of Camp Commandant Boltz addressing them.

"You are all one hundred percent fit and reasonably intelligent. You would not be here otherwise. There are other training camps for the less able. This is Cochise. So you will not drop down dead during training. You may feel like it at times, but you won't do it—" From seven in the morning until seven at night, continuously on the jump apart from grudging breaks for meals. Every day for six days. Every Sunday, that mythical day of rest, came performance tests and gradings, to see whether you were with it or not.

But "substitute-Thorpe" had expected it to be rugged. He had almost enjoyed the contest, applying himself to the task with all the gusto of keen youth. Until the Sunday afternoon of the fifth week, when malicious fate had struck a very close blow indeed.

"Trainee Thorpe to report to Commandant's office—now!" He went, on the run and in tense wonder, trying to recall what he had done wrong.

"At ease, Thorpe." Boltz was lean, colorless, a gray acid-drop of a man who looked as if he had a permanent grudge against life, and unrelenting indigestion. He grimaced now, trying to look pleasant. "I have your grades here, mister. Excellent results. Commended! I am recommending you be transferred to O.T.C. right away. Service needs men like you. That's all. Dismiss!" But the trainee stood fast. Boltz looked up, elevating his brows.

"Well?"

"No, sir!"

"What the hell does that mean, mister?"

"I don't want to go to O.T.C., sir."

"Are you questioning my judgment, Thorpe? Your aggregate performance grades show you a seven point lead over the next best man. Best grades I've seen. You're officer material!"

DANGER FROM VEGA

"No, sir. I mean, just as you say, sir, but I would rather finish as crew, sir."

"Are you refusing to obey an order, mister?" Boltz made it sound as if he hoped this was the case, by way of excellent entertainment.

"No, sir. Space Regs; Section Five, sub-section advancement and promotion—no man to be upgraded unless personal application made and by his agreement, or by direct nomination in the exigency of battle or other such emergency. I don't want to be upgraded, sir." He clamped his lips on that. He could have said more, but the regulations on insolence were wide and all embracing. He did not want extra fatigues for insolence. But even more he did not want to be jumped to O.T.C. That would bring him just that much more dangerously near contact with his father, and the disaster that would inevitably follow such a meeting. Boltz snorted. His watery eye took on a vicious gleam. But he was blocked by the very regulations he held sacrosanct. And he knew it.

"Very well, Thorpe. So be it. I'll just say this. You're a fool! I won't go so far as to call you a traitor, but I'm thinking it. Get out!"

If training camp had previously been rugged, it now became as near pure hell as the combined instruction body could make it. The word got round. A smart guy. Somebody who could have had accelerated advancement, but didn't want it. The word drifted down to the trainee level. Within a day, he had not one friend in the whole of Cochise. But now regulations worked on his behalf. There were strict limits to what they could throw at him. And he was just fit enough, smart enough, and bullheaded enough, to take everything they could throw and beat it. In a perverse way, he enjoyed this challenge. He completed training with the highest grade-scores ever logged at Cochise, the general detestation and envy of everyone present, and a red-ink memo on his papers to say he was a troublemaker and arrogant, but to be considered for soon-as-possible advancement to higher rating.

"I want you to see this, mister." Boltz had sent for him

just to let him read the citation. "You try—just try—to duck out from under this notice, and you'll be in for a court-martial. Understood?"

The dream fragmented again, giving him snap highlights. Four years and four ships. He had taken fantastic chances, had volunteered to make one wherever there was an action vacancy. He'd been shot at, had shaken hands with death again and again. S.S. *Lloyd*, her entire bow-section blasted away by a near-miss in a minor fracas one-and-a-half "lights" from outbase 61 Cygni, Fort Carne. With only half a crew and all of them shivering in shock, *Lloyd* had made it back to Carne. Crewman Thorpe cited for resource and heroism, recommended acting temporary sub-lieutenant, volunteered to fill a berth on the next ship out.

S.S. *Caroline*, hit three times and her whole after-end a fused mass, managed to limp back to base with ion-jets squirting fire in all directions, steering like a scow in a gale. Confirmed sub-lieutenant Thorpe now. And volunteering again. For a moment the dream personage stood away, outside the play, and studied this perverse figure, this death-seeking young man. And then the whole dream wavered, went dark, and he was conscious of an ache and a most desperate thirst.

He pried his eyelids open to a ghastly blue glare, tried to swallow, and his mouth was full of the ashes of an old camp-fire. The faint banshee wail of the P-drive scraped at his nerves. He twisted stiffly to scan the interior of the pod, memory dredging back. The blue-glare hiccupped. He squirmed in his harness to get a look at the control-panel, focusing with difficulty on the miniature gauge-complex. The P-drive automatic showed a half-traverse. Halfway there, wherever "there" was. But the rest of the instruments, which should have been sleepily steady, were kicking and jittering in intermittent instability. He could feel the buck-jumping through the harness-straps. Imagination made him see the arrays of solid-state electronics in the *Quest's* innards, visualizing their sparking and glowing in the deadly rain of gamma rays, neutrons and mesons. He imagined those delicate micro-circuits fusing and peeling, shedding molecules,

frying together into new and weird combinations; he shivered.

He saw the inert, hanging forms of his fellow-fugitives, and fumbled his wrist-lights to glow, to peer into the face-plates of each helmet. They looked dead. Why did he feel sick? Was it just the bash on the head, or could it be something more? Radiation, maybe. He groaned and creaked and fumbled his way to open a bulkhead cabinet. Medicine chest. Waterbulbs. Foodtubes. He shook the bulbs, one at a time. One empty, one half-full, two full ones. It looked as if Hadley and Skoda had made do with the minimum before putting themselves to sleep. He pushed the half-empty bulb-end into his mouth and squeezed, and its moistness was heaven. That, and the second one too, never got as far as his throat, the wetness being immediately absorbed by the desert-sand tissues of his mouth. A third grudging squeeze gave him just enough to provoke a swallow that went down like brick fragments.

He held a foodtube close, peered at it. "Roast chicken with spiced ham, champignons and Burgundy sauce"—that was a laugh. His faced creaked as he tried to grin. It would taste like lumpy library paste. They all did. He gagged on the gooey mess which left a fine film all over his tongue, and chased it away with another squeeze of water. His sense of smell and taste came back, a mixed blessing. He was now aware of the stink of stale sweat, the tang of collodion from his head-wound, hot oil—and a rubbery kind of undertone that was his suit. Nausea leaped in him and he clamped his mouth shut desperately until it passed.

After a while he managed another mouthful of the paste and one more mouthwash. He could still feel the juddering through his harness. His mind kept wanting to speculate, fearfully, on how much longer the ship's mechanisms could be expected to hold up. Retreating from that, he picked up fragments of his dream and mused on them. He had no room to complain. He had begged for this. But it wasn't suicide. There was a deeper, more crucial motive behind it. He'd explained it, once. Now who was that he had told it all to? His headache came back violently as he tried to re-

member. Not that it mattered, not now. The blue glare died, flared again. On the board the gauges went wild for a breathless second. Shivering again, he stared at the two lolling forms alongside him, and wanted for an insane moment to wake them and scream at them. It was all useless. The ship was falling apart.

A glint of light caught his eye, from a crumpled piece of foil. It had held a half dozen coma-pills. Now there were only two left. Hadley and Skoda must have taken two each. But the trip was half over now. He grasped one, fumbled it into his mouth, took a taste of water, was about to luxuriate in the rest of the contents of the bulb when he remembered the anti-rad capsules he ought to take. He got out two, gulped them, sucked down the last of the waterbulb's precious drops, tossed it back into the cabinet and began to zip up his suit. That was pointless, but long habit had drilled it into his reflexes. They trained you like that. Quasi-hypnotic drills, constant repetitions, everything simplified down to mnemonic codes, endless tapes playing to pillow-speakers all night, repeat, repeat, repeat—until the skills and responses became instinctive. As he strained to pull his helmet forward over his head he felt something angular in the external breast-pocket of his suit. He remembered it as soon as it was in his gloved hand.

A pin-up pair. Two beautiful blonde ladies, one honey-gold, the other butter-fair, like perfect dolls resting in his hands. Long ago he had bathed those pictures in inert polymer, to preserve them from damage. He grinned at the fairest one.

"I told you," he said, with careful clarity because his tongue seemed to be strangely thick, "told you it wasn't suicide. Had a purpose. A big reason." It had all made sense to him at the time. Not any more. He was wrong. He had been wrong all the time. The blue glare faded as the drug began to affect him. He let the pictures fall, dragged down on his helmet, felt it click into place. Jeremy Thorpe, about to die. He giggled as he realized it was the wrong one. Not Jeremy Thorpe. *He* was safe under the cloud-cover of Venus. A genius. He would think of something.

DANGER FROM VEGA

"Not your fault, old man," he mumbled. "My idea. You wrote the letter for me. I did all the rest. Not your fault. Good letter—did the trick—"

Reality went far away, became a blurred backdrop of sound and indeterminate blue. Blue sky. Sunny day. The big overland bus swooping and purring along the highway, rocking gently on its air-cushion. Padded seats. All women and old men. That had struck him with acute force, had given him a new focus on the war. Pretty soon now there would be no males left except old men and boys. Then what? The dream blurred and he was looking into blue eyes and green. Mrs. Thorpe, Jeremy's incredibly young-looking mother, and his "kid" sister Mary, who was a luscious nineteen. They had been very kind and good to him. They had helped him to understand just how desperate the war was. They knew, even if Vice-Admiral Corde firmly believed the truth was being kept from civilians.

They knew. Mary had said, "All I'm waiting for is the day when they break down and have to admit that women can fight a ship just as good as any men. I'll be there!"

That had shocked him into a trap. She had sprung it.

"If it's such a terrible life, so dangerous, why are you so keen to get in? Your father tried to stop you. You've even impersonated our Jeremy, just to get into Space. Why?"

To him it was very simple.

"Look!" he said. "The Vegans got us with our pants down, clobbered all our best ships and best men. So the High Command said we'll hoard our brains, our geniuses, keep them safe, and let only expendable people go out and get killed. And that's all wrong! If we're ever going to get a line on what makes the Vegans tick, we've got to get smart and intelligent people out there, to see what happens at first hand. People like me!"

It had sounded conceited at the time. It still did. But he knew he was right. Earth knew pitifully little about the Vegans, didn't even know for sure that they were from Vega. That was just a guess. Man had leaped into space with a new drive, had made starfalls on Procyon, 61 Cygni, Sirius, Altair, all within the fifteen light-year range of the first gen-

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eration of engines. And then the mystery enemy had struck without warning or mercy. Postmortems and guesswork placed their point of origin as "possibly" Vega. Later deadly contacts had confirmed that. So they were Vegans, as a best guess.

But the rest of their information was pitifully meagre. Precious scraps of wreckage bought with blood and death showed that the crews were human, or humanoid, and that the ship-drive systems were virtually the same as Earth's. But that was all. If the Vegans communicated, it was not by any method that Earth instruments could detect. And no one had the vestige of a clue as to how those ships could whip about at such speed as they did, without smearing the crews into jelly. Nor would they ever know, he thought, so long as the best brains sat at home and deliberated about it.

The dream began to blur and tear now, got all mixed up with the knife-edge severity of his training.

"Your control-space is holed, what do you do, Thorpe?"

"Emergency, your manual fire-control is jammed, what do you do?"

"You have a total power-black, what do you do, Mr. Thorpe?"

"What do you do next, Mr. Thorpe? Thorpe? Mister Thorpe ... I"

IV

A SAVAGE HAND shook him violently. A demonic voice howled at him. "Mr. Thorpe! Mr. Thorpe—for God's sake, wake up, sir!"

He screwed his eyes open to a blue glare that stuttered, to Hadley's beefy face contorted into frantic anxiety, and Skoda's haggard stare.

"Uh! What?"

"Thank the Lord! We're less than ten seconds from break-out, sir. If we hold up that long." The pod shuddered to give point to his words.

"Suit-up!" the command was automatic and unthinking. He shrugged his own suit into place where Hadley had undone it to rouse him, snapped the helmet over his head and twisted to glance at the control-board. The P-drive traverse hung on the thin line of completion. He put his gloved grip on the ion-drive levers and set his teeth. Last gasp. A veritable straw! If the machinery held up, if they were delivered safely into real space—what then? The banshee wail snapped off. There came the familiar dizzy-spin rainbows, the fractional moment of implosion and nausea and then the soundless thump of transition. Three pathetically small screens lit into life and movement, one for Skoda to read and discover what they had found, one to steer by, and one to let them see outside where the stars wheeled and spun to the random toppling of the ship.

That toppling was his concern, something he could deal with. He eased the controls, felt the shuddering response, saw the spinning star-spots slow their movement, and then a great flaring fireball came to fill the screen with dazzling light.

"We're close!" he muttered. "Too damned close for comfort. Skoda, get your data on that as fast as you can, before we get too close to back off." He stabilized the spin so that the sun was just clear of the screen, and watched as Skoda twirled his controls to scoop information for the computers. He could guess at the significance of the results which showed, and they were not comforting, but he waited grimly for the expert reading.

"Unless the comp is crazy," Skoda mattered, "this is a freak system. There's only the one planet. See, sir? These other echoes are ghosts. Dust masses at the orbital balance-points. Sun-dogs!"

"And the planet itself?"

"I'm just getting the analysis on that now. There! It looks all right, sir! Within a percent for mass, gravity, surface

temperature and general spectrum. And we're practically on top of it!"

"Give me a fix. Let's see if we can get a good look at it." Skoda put a shimmering pair of cross hairs on to the steering-scope for him, away up in the right quadrant. He nudged his controls again, sensing the heavy sluggishness of the dead ship but thankful for any response at all, and the cross hairs crept until they stood, waveringly, full center.

"There she is!" Hadley's helmet clicked against his as the big man stared at the blue-and-gold ball in the viewer. "Looks pretty, doesn't it?"

"Anything would look pretty right now," Thorpe said. "We have yet to get down there in one piece. If anybody knows any prayers, this is a good time. Skoda, keep a sharp eye out for local rocketry, satellites, things like that. Hadley, I could do with a drink. Break out the last of the water. We have about fifteen minutes before we need worry too much." He touched the main drive, felt the first thunder of it, and eased it gently into half-power. This part was easy, so long as he could see his objective. All that was called for was a light touch occasionally on the tangentials to keep that image in view. The hard part was to come.

He flipped back his helmet again and sucked at the water-bulb Hadley handed him. In his mind he was trying to get the overall picture.

"How d'you reckon our chances, sir?"

"Depends on the drive, Hadley. If that holds up we have a chance, but not much. No sense in kidding ourselves. We're living on borrowed time as it is."

"But if the drive and the power hold out, we can land, can't we?"

"We can try, but it's going to be guesswork all the way. Our best bet is to make a passing orbit or two and see if we can spot an ocean to fall into."

"If you say so, sir." Hadley grunted, but his heavy face showed bewilderment. Thorpe sighed.

"Look, the ship is designed to land tail-first, preferably with a con from the ground, but not necessarily. Tail-first because that's where the main drive is. And for that we

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need astern-viewers, and those we haven't got. Damn it, man, we haven't any stern. You know that!"

"Christ! I forgot all about that. Then we'll have to back down blind, and chance it?"

"That's right. That's why I said we need an ocean to fall into." He had the vision clear, now. The black teardrop bulk of the *Quest*, with her stern structure in ruins, and this frail little pod stuck into her bows like a pear with the stem at the wrong end.

"Can't we kick the pod loose and land in it?" Skoda wondered, and Hadley grunted instant disagreement.

"You ought to know better than that. These things don't have that kind of power, not to make planet-fall. Enough to steer a bit and make a rendezvous, is all. D'you suppose there's anybody down there, sir?"

Thorpe had been trying hard not to think that same thing. It would be the outside ironical limit for them to have survived so far only to fall into a Vegan base. Skoda craned his head round.

"I was wondering about that too, sir. Should I make a signal?"

"No! This place is none of ours, we know that. And we can't chance the opposite, that it's Vegan."

"But the Vegans don't have radio, sir!"

"You don't know that, mister. If there's anybody down there, let them sing out to us, first!"

The planet began to loom large in the viewer and Skoda reported the first faint impingings of ionosphere. They buckled their helmets into place again, saw to their shock-harness, and Thorpe settled himself to the tricky part of the business. Main-drive off. Delicate touches on the forward jets, spilling wavering streams of fire-cloud over the viewer-picture. Gently, to make allowances for the sluggish responses of the ship, to get her into a looping orbit, not too close. Hearing the shrill scream of tortured upper atmosphere, now. Must be getting hot with friction. Snatch a glance at the viewer, at the sensors, at the speed, distance, the radar soundings. Is anyone down there? What sort of intelligent life could develop on a single planet sharing a sun with nothing more

than a few ghostly dust-clouds? Pray for a big stretch of open water.

"I'm getting something on the shortwave, sir!" Skoda's voice shrilled in his ear. "Can't make anything of it, but it's something!"

"See if you can identify the type of transmission, speech or code."

"Looks like speech. No way of telling except by the look of it, not with my bloody helmet on. Should I take a chance, and listen?"

"All right, but be quick. And don't talk back unless I say!" Skoda flipped his helmet back, and at once Thorpe could hear the rapid gabble of an alien voice, distorted as it came from the panel-speaker through Skoda's helmet microphone.

"That's people!" Hadley grunted. "People like us!"

"So are the Vegans, so far as we know." The gabble cut off as Skoda pulled his helmet forward and down again, shutting out the sound.

"What d'you reckon, sir? I never heard anything like that before, but it sounded like speech. Human talk, I mean. We're losing the signal now. It'll be gone in a minute!"

"We'll be going round again, in any case." Thorpe scanned his instruments hastily. "We have to make a fast decision on this. There's only us three, and this could be life or death. I'm going to have all the grief I need just taking her down. We could use help from the ground, if there is any. Or we could be sticking our necks into a trap. I can't decide that for all of us. I'm not competent. All I can say is this: we will be dead lucky if we get down there, water or not, in one piece. We can't be much worse off whichever way it is. I vote we give them a hail, but it's up to you two to say what you think."

"What can we lose?" Hadley growled. "Give 'em a shout, Skodal!"

Off came the helmet again, but this time the radio-man had closed his talk-switch and they had no idea what he was actually saying. Thorpe had no eyes to spare now, as the *Quest* was dipping into a closer spin. He touched the

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controls delicately, trying to strike a middle course between fast and slow, snatching a glance every other second at the panorama unreeling below. They were into the sunset side now, and it was dark down there, but that did not mean too much. At this distance, something over a thousand miles, it would have to be an enormous light to show enough to be picked up by their little screen. The picture was almost black, so he couldn't be sure, but he fancied the read-out itself was beginning to fail. Skoda was fiddling with something inside his helmet. All at once his voice came, with different overtones and an echo.

"Got the mike out of my helmet, sir. You ought to hear this. Mush all over the dial, but nothing clear enough to pull in, so I reckon it's not worth the trouble of trying to raise them. Probably all asleep or minding their own business."

"I'm shrinking our orbit," Thorpe decided. "Can you get a directional on that speech, if we get it again?"

"Should do. It was a good strong signal."

"All right. Do that and let me have it for a beacon. It will help as a guide when I flip her over. Otherwise we're blind!" He was nudging the forward jets steadily as he spoke, watching the dark down there, alert for the first sign of a limb of light. When it came, his fears were confirmed. The screen carried a ragged picture, rippling and tearing across.

"Beginning to break up," he muttered. "Lord knows how everything has held on so long. . . ."

"Got it!" Skoda cried, and they could all hear the gabble again, very faint but quite clear. The radio-man made quick movements and now the steer-scope held a pinpoint of green that perpetually swelled and burst into an outrush of ripples. Thorpe juggled his jets until that green point sat in the dead center of his screen, and then leaned on the retarding levers. The viewer-picture dissolved into a shimmering mass of ion-fire as they slowed and fell deeper into the planetary atmosphere.

"Hello! Hello!" Skoda called. "This is Spaceship *Quest*, of Earth. We are in distress, and landing. Do you read?"

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The gabble halted abruptly. The pod's fabric wailed with the scream of the ship's dying dive through atmosphere. The viewscreen was virtually useless now, its picture torn into incoherent slashes and fragments. There was only that green spot, now steady. All at once it resumed its swelling, and a shrill voice came from the speaker.

"You are of Earth? Say again, please. You are of Earth?" The accent was like nothing he had ever heard before, but the words were unmistakable.

"God save us!" Hadley growled. "They speak English. Talk to them again, Skoda. Tell them we need help!"

"No! Hold it, Skoda. There isn't a damned thing they can do to help us now. We're on our way down, like it or not. All I have is that radio-signal to line up on. I'm heading straight for it now. I intend to hold that as long as I dare, and then flip end-for-end and try to back down on to it. How will it read, from astern?"

"Same as now, sir, only weaker. But we can't land smack on top of their transmitter!"

"What else can we do? See for yourself, the viewer's shot. I can't see a thing!" Skoda's gloved hand reached across in front of his face to thump a fist on the screen mounting and fiddle with the setting. For one crazy second the picture steadied, showed the white cotton-fluff of cloud masses, and below them the long sweep and curve of a land mass. And green-blue ocean. Then the picture failed altogether and the screen went black.

"Aim to the left, to the left!" Skoda urged. "That was a sea down there. The transmitter will be on land, almost for sure. You saw it?"

"I saw!" Thorpe growled. "You know what you're saying?" He snatched a frantic glance at the radar-altitude reading. It was sliding slowly below the three hundred mark. "You expect me to turn this thing over, blind, and then aim to the left? Are you crazy?" All the same, there was precious little else he could do. The protest of ruptured air was a solid shudder now and the forward jets were useless in checking such a headlong fall. Two hundred and still falling. The green spot was steady.

"Here we go!" he muttered, and leaned on the tangential triggers. The spot slid straight down off the scope, leaving it blank. There was no sensation of turning, or movement of any kind apart from the now-frantic shudder of the air-shock outside. He glared at the blank scope. "Oh come on!" he breathed, easing off on the sideways thrust. And there it was, slipping in at the top of the screen. Fast. Too fast! He kicked over the jets on the check side, saw the spot halt its mad rush and weave unsteadily towards the center. It held. He moved his hands, clumsy in their gloves, and took hold of the main-drive levers again, bearing down on them. The gut-crushing drag of deceleration hit him instantly.

Then, sickeningly, the drag came off for a second, leaving him to surge upwards under the pull of his harness. And then on again as the ship's unit coughed back into life. The gauges kicked madly then settled. One-fifty and still falling. The hideous pressure of weight blurred his vision, but he bore down on the levers ruthlessly, praying that the drive would keep on firing. One hundred . . . and still falling fast. Again the drive coughed, kicked out and came on again, jerking them up and down like helpless puppets. Then it began to stammer in stunning hammer blows, making it impossible to know what was happening. He clung to the levers, dragging them as far down as he could, wrenching helplessly in the surges of his harness. The gauges were meaningless now.

"Hang-on!" he yelled. "I'm-going-to-kick-the pod-away-from-the ship!" almost biting his tongue as he snapped to and fro. He made a grab for the red release handle, missed it, tried again, got a savage grip, and heaved. It resisted him. He heaved again, almost blacking out with the effort. And it came away. There was an almighty crash as the bottom of the pod surged to meet them. The blue glare snapped off, came on again at reduced intensity. The control-board became steady. There was a picture now, of sunny sky and clouds. And just the hiss of air past the skin of the pod.

We're still falling, he thought, and reset the controls as

fast as he could, then bore down on the drive once more. This time it was different song as the pod's batteries labored to pit a feeble stream of ion-thrust against the powerful pull of a planet. Once more that foreign gabble sounded in his ears, and the scope showed a stream of ripples from somewhere off its outer rim.

"Skodal!" he snapped. "Get your helmet on, man. We're going to hit dirt any minute! Hadley? You ready?"

There was no answer, and a quick glance showed him Hadley's face, dim within the confines of his helmet, but lifeless and with blood streaming from his nose. And the drag was bad now, as the puny drive gathered strength, struggling to check the pod's fall. It wasn't designed to run at this rate for long. He braced himself for the shock to come, prayed it would be soon, before the batteries were completely drained. There came a crash that dwarfed everything that had gone before. He screamed as the harness bit into his chest and shoulders and then ripped away from its moorings. There was bright agony in his feet, his legs, as he hit the metal floor of the pod and slumped in a breathless heap.

But then, amazingly, he was not dead! He moved cautiously, lifted and turned his head. It grated, but moved. His arms moved too. And his legs. There was a strange see-saw motion about everything. He stumbled over something in the dark, remembered his wrist-lights, flicked them on, and saw Skoda's face staring whitely at him through his visor. Those eyes blinked.

"You all right, Skoda?"

"Damned if I know, sir. What the hell happened?"

"I don't know. We seem to be down, if nothing else. Is it me, or is this damned thing rocking up and down?"

"I can feel that too. Hey! We must be in the sea, after all!"

"I suppose we are. We haven't an instrument left. No power, either. There's only one way to find out. We'll have to open the hatch. Hold it. Let's look at Hadley, first." Skoda managed to stand up and groan, then came to crouch over the inert suit where Hadley lay. Thorpe fumbled

to get the helmet free and lift it back. Blood ran slowly down Hadley's face from his nose. That didn't mean a thing at this moment. Blood takes time to congeal. You can't feel a pulse through armored gloves, nor can you hear breathing when you have only radio-contact with someone else in another suit. He slid the helmet back again and said, "Hold your breath, Skoda; see if we can hear him breathing."

It was a waste of time. There were too many interrupting noises from the suits, and their own hammering heartbeats. By chance his hand fell on the outer pocket which held the two 3-D snapshots. Glossy surface! He set Hadley's helmet back again, held the surface of one of the pictures close by his mouth, then snatched it up to peer. It was clouded.

"Fair enough!" he snapped the helmet snugly into place again. "He's alive. Let's hope he's only knocked out."

"You know why we couldn't hear him, sir? Didn't have his talk-switch closed. I reckon we're both a bit punch-drunk, just now. I know I am. What with being clobbered by Vegans, jumping in Pauli in a red-hot ship, smashing down on a planet like this—and they were talking English. You reckon we died, sir, and this is all some sort of hell?"

"If it is, we're all in it together. Look, we seem to be floating, if we are floating, right way up. That means we must be about halfway under water. So, when we burst that hatch open, this thing is going to flood and go down pretty sharpish!"

"Christ! There seems to be no end to our troubles!"

"But this one isn't all that bad. That's why I mentioned it, just to warn you. The pod will flood, and sink, but we've nothing to worry about so long as our suits hold and we don't get in a panic. All right? Fortunately the door opens inboard. Now, the first thing we do is to shove old Hadley out, and then we follow. If we drag him over to the side, you can launch him as soon as ready. Then you follow, and I'll be right on your heels. Right?" He struggled across to the hatch, took hold of the locking-wheel, and set his feet as best he could. One hearty twist and the door

flailed open, sending him sprawling and a great rush of water tumbled him over into helplessness. Floundering, he struggled up to give Skoda a hand, but it was impossible to shove Hadley's inert bulk against the spouting water. In a matter of seconds they were chest deep and then lifting. And the flow seemed to dwindle. But the hatch was down there, out of sight.

"Punch-drunk is right!" he growled. "We're a pair of fools. Now is the time to duck out, while the internal air-pressure is holding the water back. Ready? Down you go now!"

Skoda's helmet disappeared beneath the surface, taking Hadley's with it, and then, after a moment or two, the radio-man's voice, thankfully, "It's all right, sir. Nothing to it. And it's sunny out here. Marvelous!"

Thorpe grunted to himself, bent his knees and saw the waterline rise up in his helmet-visor, plunging him into green murk. He felt for the hatch, ducked through and kicked out into a bright glare that was almost painful. Waves lapped on a level with his nose, set blurring dribbles down his visor, through which he could see two rounded bobbing helmet-tops. And beyond them, a long way off, the dull smudge of land! He flailed round clumsily, saw the cylindrical end of the pod bobbing drunkenly in the gentle swell. No sign of the ship. They tried to hoist up in the water, but with little success.

"How the hell d'you reckon we're supposed to swim in these things?" he wondered.

And Skoda's voice came, chirpily enough, "I reckon I could manage, if I knew which way to point."

"That's the easiest part. There's land right behind you!" He saw Skoda's helmet bounce as he flailed round, and began bobbing himself again, trying to see further over the waves. All at once there was a splash of something surfacing close by him, and in the same instant something clamped on his back and an arm circled his neck, constricting powerfully into the soft flexible folds of the throat of his suit. Before his startled eyes a face rose out of the water and stared at him. A human face. A woman's face, a woman with blue-green cling-curl hair, silvery green eyes, and a

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complexion like warm ivory. She would have been attractive, had her expression not been so militantly hostile. As he stared at her in stricken amazement she stood up in the water like a seal, revealing a black strap at her throat. He saw her hand arc over and pluck out from behind her head a long gleaming blade. The constricting arm left his neck, but the blade point came close, aimed under his chin, and held there, quite steady, quite deadly.

V

HARSH IN HIS EAR he heard Skoda's sudden gasp of surprise. He kept as still as he could in the gently heaving water. "We have company, and they don't seem any too friendly!"

"Has yours got seaweed hair and fisheyes, sir?"

"And a damned great knife, yes. I reckon we had better go quietly, unless they mean to drown us right here. I wish we could talk to them, but I daren't move."

"You'd have to crack your helmet seal to do that, anyway, sir, and you'd go down like a stone. What d'you reckon they want, anyway?"

"Just capture, I think. Mine could have filleted me long ago, if she wanted to." He caught sight of more heads bobbing in the water. "There's enough of 'em to eat us. Couple of dozen, at least!" And not a friendly face among them, he realized, as several pairs of silvery green eyes came to peer at him and swish away again. Mermaids! And quite pretty, if it weren't for the unbroken hostility in every gaze. He felt a grasp and tug at his wrists, and then the splash of a little bow-wave as he began to move.

"I'm being towed," he announced. "To shore, I think. I hopel" He squinted as far sideways as he could, peering

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through the drift of water on his visor until he could be sure that they were collecting Hadley, too.

"Got me, too. Gawd, I hope they're not cannibals!"

Thorpe grinned, feeling slightly hysterical from reaction. He wondered how many more kinds of death were going to come and gibber at him before he finally succumbed to one of them. The shore line drew closer and he could see treetops. Great fronded trees, they were, like palms. And then a yellow sand beach sloping gently upwards to the tree cover. Beneath the trees, in shade, there seemed to be a whole horde of people waiting. The constant spill of seawater over his visor made accurate seeing impossible, but they looked kin to the mermaids who were towing him. His booted feet struck bottom, tossing him face-forward. He stumbled, found footing, and felt the imperious tug of bonds on his wrists hurrying him through the small surf.

Now, as the glass ran dry, he could see properly, could see Skoda's lumbering figure being impelled up the sand just as he was, away to his left. And he could see the putative mermaids, that they were human enough to have legs and feet just like other women. They were completely human, being naked but for hip-hugging belted harness and the neckstrap with the long knife. This was common garb for all of them that he could see, including the host who scurried down the sand to greet their fellows. And they were all, without exception, female. A fine, long-limbed, vigorously fit-looking bunch, he decided, as they dragged him unceremoniously up the slope and into the shade of the trees. He could see them jabbering at each other, but heard nothing but a distant murmur. There seemed to be some difficulty. He screwed his head round inside his helmet enough to see that Hadley was lagging, that they were having to drag him bodily. Six of them had clapped ropes on his suit and were heaving strongly. Such energy and determination made him sweat as he realized just how helpless he was.

"Skodal" he said, tried to keep his tone light. "I don't know about you, but it's my guess that they don't much care for us."

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"Bunch of naked savages! I expect they think we're some new kind of fish they've caught."

"Hold on! Don't write them off too quick. They must have seen us come down. We must have made a hell of a racket. But they don't seem scared, and that argues against them being all that savage. Almost as if they had seen spacemen before." As he spoke he was being hustled along a narrow game-trail between the tall trees, two shapely women hauling on the ropes which held his wrists. Their short, blue-green hair, springing up in a dense cluster of curls as it dried, was not unattractive. He wondered what the men would be like, and why these women were so immediately and violently hostile. It could hardly be a routine thing to have a spaceship crash-land off their beach!

All at once the trail delivered them into a great open space, a clearing so big that he could only guess at its true size. A village. A large one, too. And not huts, as he had thought at first glance, but houses—by the arrayed hundreds—houses laid out in orderly fashion, with unusual outlines and alien methods of timbering. The houses disgorged people in swarms until the clearing was alive with them. There must have been a great chatter and shouting out there, but his helmet reduced it all to an indistinct mumble. He saw it in snatches as he was hauled along—staggering now from sheer fatigue—to what looked to be a huge hole in the ground. Then he was on the brink and stumbling down the steep sides of a square-cut amphitheater, down to the hard packed earth of its floor. And there the women on the ropes gave him a last tug to send him sprawling, and by the time he had struggled to his knees the fastenings were undone and they had backed away to a safe distance.

He scrubbed at his visor with the cuff of his suit, to rub off the dried smears of saltwater. He saw Skoda sitting up, only feet away. And the inert huddle of Hadley. He glanced up and around. The edges of the amphitheater were some ten or twelve feet above him, the whole thing about fifty yards square where they lay. It had the feel of an arena, or a sacrificial pit. He hoped he was wrong, but

when he craned his head again, he saw that ranged along the rim above—were women. And they were on the alert, some with long spear-like weapons and others with unmistakable longbows.

"We seem to be well and truly in for it," he said. "Those ladies up there look capable."

"Reckon it would be all right to up-helmet, sir? My suit-unit has just about run out. I can smell my own stink."

"Me too. We'll have to chance it. Got to, in any case. I want to have another look at Hadley. That dragging can't have done him any good."

Thorpe lifted his gloved hands and fumbled at the catch of his helmet, keeping a sharp eye on the sentries above, but they made no overt move. It was a delight to feel the cool clean air on his face and in his nostrils. And to hear the buzz and murmur of life. For the first minute after his helmet went back he did nothing but sit and breathe, great thankful lung-fulls of fresh scented air scouring away the slimy pond-water taste of long confinement. He felt better, more optimistic with every breath. The silent watchers made no move, showed no surprise, either. And that was significant. No strangers to spacesuits, evidently. Thus hardly savages.

He got to his feet, threw back the rest of his suit down to waist level and cinched it there, letting the helmet and sleeves dangle at his back. Skoda had moved too, was similarly half-suited. He looked grimy and more haggard than ever, but alive and alert. They converged on Hadley.

"What the hell d'you reckon we've struck, sir?"

"No idea, but they've offered us no harm, yet. We'll just have to wait and see." Hadley was still unconscious, but breathing strongly. The blood had dried on his face and chin and he looked a ghastly sight, but so did they all. Thorpe checked as far as he could, unfastening the suit to feel for possible injuries.

"Seems all right," he muttered. "Just knocked out, far as I can see. That's not surprising, the way the ship went crazy at the end. It's a miracle we're here at all. Let's be thankful for that, if nothing else."

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"Not much else to be glad about," Skoda said. "I want to get this damn suit off, but I don't know. I'd feel sort of helpless without it."

"I know what you mean. But we might as well. After all, those knives of theirs would make short work of rubberized canvas and plastic. And apart from the radio-unit there's nothing any good any more in the suits. The air and moisture units are flat. Come on!" He set the example of standing and unfastening his belt-cinch. It was true. He felt uneasily defenseless as he stepped out of the suit and stood clad in nothing more than a cotton union suit, now dark-stained and foul from long confinement. But the sense of freedom was almost worth it. A few moments later they had peeled Hadley, too.

"Now what?" Skoda wondered. "You reckon they're civilized enough to feed their prisoners?" From some unseen resource his lean and wiry personality had acquired an angry desperation. Standing erect he made a trumpet of his palms and shouted up, "Hey! What about something to eat, then? The service is lousy here!"

It moved them. Thorpe saw two of the women make signs and call to each other. They came together for a rapid interchange of words, then one went away, vanishing from sight beyond the edge. That edge, he saw now, was efficiently straight, and the sloping sides were not smooth, but in regular steps. A terrace. So this *was* an amphitheater, after all. The earth under his feet felt rock-hard, but he could see no signs of stains, or blood, or anything like that. Any village, he thought, must have a center, a focal point where the elders and rulers could meet and make decisions, or where the ceremonies took place. If there were any here. He dug back in his mind for what little he had absorbed of sociology theory and human groupings. Hadley groaned suddenly, and they both knelt by him at once. The big man stirred, opened his eyes.

"Easy now," Thorpe warned. "So far as I could tell you're not badly hurt, but you keep still and check up on yourself while I tell you what's happened." Hadley kept still as

he listened, only his eyes moving. Then he grunted and stirred cautiously, managed to sit up.

"I'm all right. I feel like the Kilkenny dancers have been using their clogs on me, but I can use my arms and legs. What's all that about fish-women with green hair?"

"See for yourself!" Thorpe thumbed a gesture to the guardians up there on the rim and the Irishman bunched his big face into folds as he peered up into the bright sunshine. At that moment there came a faint chatter of voices, and movement at one corner of the prison-square rim. They saw faces appear, and then a delicate-stepping procession of women bearing trays and baskets. But ahead of them came two with hard faces, each with a drawn bow and a straight arrow nocked and ready. Their gestures were eloquent. The three men backed off to the far side of the floor and watched as the baskets and trays were set down and left. Thorpe assumed that the stuff was food and drink and ignored it for the moment. He was far more interested in the women who had brought it. In face and figure they were like their war-like sisters, but they were dressed. Three of them, in skirts and jackets of some patterned woven stuff with a silk-like sheen. The skirt was a simple wrap-round, falling inches short of the knee and caught on the right hip with strap and buckle. An undoubted buckle, in glinting metal. And the jacket was sleeveless, short, open in front and caught under the breasts with yet another strap and buckle. But most important of all, in a slit-pocket at either side of the jacket stood the haft of a short knife or dagger. The effect was startling, a clash between decorative adornment and savage readiness for combat. Buckles argued a skill with metals. Weave and color spoke of sophistication. But the daggers told of constant readiness for danger. And where were the men?"

"How do we know this stuff is fit to eat?" Skoda demanded. "It looks all right, but I'd just as soon my hair didn't turn green."

"We'll just have to chance it. At least the crockery is clean." Thorpe took up a stumpy ceramic pot and examined it curiously. It was light and glazed and symmetrical enough

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to have been spun on a wheel. A great two-handed pitcher matched it exactly. It was brimming with a pale amber fluid. He poured out for them, his mouth watering in anticipation. The taste—he rolled it on his tongue and frowned—was difficult to place.

"It's a ferment of some kind. More like lager than anything else. We'd better go easy on it until we've something solid to hold it down."

"Settles the dust, anyway," Hadley declared as he emptied his pot. "Begod, that's a civilized drink, which is more than I ever expected to taste again. What's the red things, Skoda?"

They sampled with care, but eagerly. One basket held a cluster of meat-joints that tasted like tough chicken but the bones were angled like no creature any of them could name. There were offerings of dried fish as small as sardines, but tasteless. And fruits of all shapes and colors, many of them bursting with juice. Confidence and hope grew with every nourishing swallow. Thorpe glanced from time to time at the silent watchers up there, his mind seething with questions. The sun was high now, and hot, with no shade in the pit.

"I'm going to try talking to them," he said, and put palms to his mouth to shout, "Hello! We are from Earth. We want to talk to you. We come in peace!" That last phrase sounded supremely ridiculous but he had to say it. The watchers stirred, chattered at each other, and he stared suddenly at Skoda. The radio-man stared back wide-eyed.

"That's the same kind of jabber we heard in the radio!"

"You think so too? If only we had a radio now . . ."

"We have!" Skoda dived for his discarded suit, grabbed the helmet. "I noticed, when we were in the pod, that that transmission was broad-band and almost the same wavelength as these. We couldn't hear because we were shielded inside the pod and the suits. But now—" He had the suit-unit out and in his hand. No bigger than his palm, it comprised sender, receiver, loudspeaker and microphone, and isotope batteries, all in the minimum of space. The "hear" button was a projecting rod that was automatically held down all

the time the unit was in place. Skoda depressed it now with a thumb and the gabble came.

"Same stuff. And close!"

Thorpe dived for his own unit and Hadley's. When ready he drew a careful breath, then closed the "send" switch.

"Hello. We are of Earth. We spoke to you before. Now we are landing and being held prisoner. Do you hear me?"

"You are of Earth?" It was that same oddly-accented voice again. "You speak like Earth, but how do we know this is not a trick of the Shining Ones?"

Thorpe let the switch close, stared at his companions. "That *must* mean the Vegans. Their silvery ships. Got to be. This is where we have to be careful not to ball it all up. Hold it!" He opened the switch again. "Wait. We will speak to you again in a little while." He let his hand fall to his knee and frowned. There was too much to grasp, all at once. The spoken English was bad enough, was a staggering thought all by itself.

"Do you recall enough of the course settings to give a rough guess whereabouts we are?" he asked Skoda, and the radio-man passed a shaking hand over his black hair as he scowled in thought.

"Rough would be right. Rendezvous was fourteen 'lights' from Cygni, bearing four degrees away from Second Quadrant. And we jumped two more 'lights' from there, at least, to hit this place. Best I can do."

"Fair enough. I just wanted to clear it in my mind that we can't possibly be anywhere near a human base, or settlement of any kind. You'd agree on that?"

"Can't be any doubt about it, sir. And I see what you mean. How do they come to know our language?"

"Yes. That smells, to me. That voice talked about a trick of the Shining Ones. Strikes me that there might be a bit of trickery on the other side, too. We're a hell of a long way from any known friends." There came a sudden clamor of voices up there on the rim and they looked up to see a procession of figures coming down the ramp once more. Longbows led the way, but this time there was a vigilant crowd at their heels, a squad of women stripped for action

and carrying coiled ropes. The three Earthmen stood, and drew together in instinctive readiness.

"Never a man among them!" Hadley mumbled. "How the blazes d'you suppose they breed? By parthenogenesis?"

"You got it wrong, but I know what you mean. I don't think it matters just now. I don't like the look of those ropes."

"Do we have a crack at them, sir?"

"Wouldn't be much sense in that. There's a score of arrows looking right at us. We might as well go quietly." The longbows moved to either side, and the rope-carriers advanced, stern-faced and determined. Two of them held long strips of cloth. Thorpe stood still as his arms were seized, and a strip of fabric was bound tightly about his eyes, blinding him. Then the ropes went on, knotted with swift and efficient jerks. His thin-soled slippers told him when he had moved from the packed-earth floor to the up-climbing ridges of the ramp. On and up, obeying the insistent drag of the ropes, and then on to level surface again. A surf-rustle of many voices in hushed whispers. Hurrying. The coolness of sudden shade to tell him that he was among the trees again. And then nothing but the steady tramp, the shock of uneven surfaces under his feet, the occasional stumble and going on. And on, until he lost count of distance. A mile, at least, and probably much more. His legs began to ache and protest but the tugging ropes gave him no quarter. And there was no speech among his captors.

His mind fastened on that odd fact, added it to others, and tried to build the collection into some kind of sense. Blindfolded but not assaulted. Led hastily, even roughly, but not driven or lashed. And in silence. As if these people were afraid he might see or hear something they wanted kept from him. It added up to a confusing mixture of fear, suspicion and anxiety. One thing was abundantly plain. They could have killed him at any time. But it had not happened. Therefore there was hope, no matter how scanty.

Without warning, the march came to an end. The rope-ties jerked him to a standstill. Panting, he felt fingers at the knots, and then the clamping grip of bare hands on his

wrists and arms. Now he was led onwards again, but more slowly, with care. His toes bumped against steps, and he began to climb. Wooden steps, by the feel, but solid and firm. Then a cool floor, possibly of stone. And the sense of being within a building, a big one. A strangely pungent smell, one that tickled memories and made him wonder, when he had identified it. Ozone? He heard the grunt and shuffle of others by his side, the gentle slap of leather-shod feet. Then a voice, an old but steady voice, in tones of quiet command. The murmur of many voices in hushed response. His arms were released. He stood quite still, sensing that his immediate captors had withdrawn. The imperious old voice spoke again, in a measured cadence of syllables out of which one sound came distinctly, the one word "Hathar!", accenting the final syllable.

"I am Hathar! You say you are of Earth. How may I believe you?" It was not the same voice, but it was the same alien accent, speaking almost perfect English. Thorpe heard a grunted gasp to left and right of him, and guessed that it was his companions, equally dumbfounded. He found his voice.

"We are of Earth. We don't understand what you mean by proof. What kind of proof do you want? And who are you, anyway? How is it that you speak our language?"

"He who speaks, that one with hair of straw and a wound in his head, how came you by that mark?"

"An injury." Thorpe frowned but answered as simply as he could. "Our ship was struck. I hit my head on something. Does it matter?"

"The wound will be examined. You will keep still. Do not try to resist, or you will die, instantly." His nerves wound up to a snapping-point as cool fingers touched his head, pressing ungently, probing the gash, stirring twinges of pain through his scalp and head. Then they went away, and there was a sudden flow of quiet syllables, all meaningless to him but spoken in a calm feminine voice.

"What did they do to you?" Hadley growled, over to his right.

"Nothing much. A bit rough, but it could have been worse. I hope they're satisfied . . ."

"The wound is slight," the old voice announced, "and has broken the skin only. It should heal soon. It is a point in your favor that the other two show no such marks. I am now giving orders that your garments be removed. Do not resist!"

"What the hell!" Skoda fumed. "You'd think we had a plague or something!" Again the fingers were cool and efficient, brisk but not needlessly rough. And again there was a brief discussion in that meaningless tongue.

"You say you are of Earth. Tell me how you came here."

Thorpe kept his patience, trying to guess what the thinking was behind the question. Again he made his words as simple as possible.

"We were in a battle with the Shining Ones. Many of their ships, and many of ours. We were hit and damaged. By good fortune we were able to make our ship carry us this far before it destroyed itself."

"Your ship plunged into the sea. You escaped from it in a smaller vessel. Both will be examined to see whether you speak truth."

"Just a minute!" His mind reeled before the implications of her ready acceptance of ships from space, but one fact burned above all. "Be careful how you handle that wreck. You know about spaceships?"

"We know a great deal. What would you tell us?"

"That ship is rotten with radiation. The drive-unit was running unshielded for forty-eight hours . . ."

"For two days?" The old voice lost a degree of its calm. "How can that be? You would be dead!"

"We were on the outside of the hull. In a lifeboat. That was the second vessel you mentioned."

"It is being brought ashore now. It will be examined. I will think of what you have said about radiation. How far is Earth from here?"

The unexpected question shook him for a moment. "I'm not sure," he muttered. "We were in a battle, you understand. But it must be, at least, as far as a beam of light

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might travel between the time a child is born and when it is old enough to be called a man. Twenty light-years."

"So far? We have made many estimates. That is one of them. One more question. You spoke to us from your ship. And then again when the Shalla had you safe. The first time I understand, for you had instruments, just as we have. But how could you speak by radio, with nothing but your hands, as you did the second time?"

The insanity had doubled and redoubled on itself so many times that there was no more room for wonder in his mind. He still held the miniature suit-radio in his right hand. He raised it now, making the movement slow, and pressed the "hear" button. Immediately the silence was filled with that rapid gabble, sounding small and metallic from the little speaker.

"Ah!" It was a great gasp of wonder, and told him that there must be at least a dozen people present. He released the button, bringing silence.

"I wish to see that wonder," the old voice shook now. "You will permit this?"

That's a change, he thought. He held out his hand, felt the unit being taken, waited a moment, then said, "The lump on the back . . . press it to listen." A moment or two more and he heard the speaker start up again, and again that gasp of wonder.

"Enough!" the old voice declared. "Let them see! They are Earthmen!"

VI

"I AM HATHAR!" she said, and there was a frosty twinkle in her eyes as she added, "In your tongue that is High Priestess. I am sorry we had to treat you with suspicion.

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It was justified, but there will be no more of it. You are welcome."

The three men blinked in the warm light, mellow and golden, that flooded from great lanterns hanging high in the roof. As Thorpe had guessed, this was a big room, as big as a church. The simile was provoked by her words and underlined by the atmosphere of stateliness and peace. Filling three-quarters of a circle, there was an array of seats, all in richly carved dark wood. The floor bore an inlay of green stones against grey. The walls soared high to a vaulted roof crisscrossed with beams shadow-dark above the hanging lanterns. And there was a silent, watchful audience of young women, barefoot, skirted and jacketed in white, and each with a keen blade held righthanded and ready.

The old woman herself sat on what was virtually a throne, a great high-backed chair standing at the apex of a low pyramid of steps. The wall at her back was draped with a mighty curtain richly worked in a symbolic design that combined circles, curves and slashes of vivid color in a way that was almost mobile. She was old. Thorpe saw that at once. But not in any way senile. Her face was lined rather than wrinkled, and her head was held high over a broad collar of winking jewels. Her hair was pale, a green that was close to silver, and long enough to be caught back from her face with a silver band about her forehead. Like the rest, she wore the sleeveless jacket with the twin dagger-pockets, but hers was studded with gems and embroidered against the white.

He met her quizzical gaze, and then looked away to the two who stood below her on the steps at either side. Again the color here was pure white with slashes of embroidered color. And there was frank curiosity mingled with wonder on these two faces.

"I thank you for your welcome," he said. "There are so many things I don't understand I hardly know where to begin. May I speak freely?" He cast a meaningful glance at the watching audience.

"We are all the handmaids of Hathar," she said. "We speak and understand your tongue, as part of our religion.

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The Shalla do not, but they obey and respect us. You may speak in safety, here."

The word "safety" struck the very note he was most conscious of, as if this were a land at war and ridden with suspicion.

"First things first," he said. "You speak of the Shining Ones, those we call Vegans, because we believe they come from a star we know as Vega. I ask you now—what is your relationship to them?"

The old face hardened into stern lines. He heard a rustle from the mute audience and could feel the sudden tension.

"They enslave us," she said harshly. "They force us to build and repair their ships, to provide them with food and fuel and other needs. We have no love for them!"

"They force you to do these things?"

"They order us, and we obey, because each one carries a small thing, a weapon that spits fire. Should one be so foolish as to rebel"—she made a pointing-finger gesture and a hissing sound—"that one dies. If the work is not done well, they come and take one in five, and they die. And the rest work harder, because it is a terrible thing to be burned to death."

Hadley cleared his throat harshly. "Would you tell us now, ma'am, just what kind of things these Shining Ones are?"

The hooded silver-green eyes swiveled to him, to burn as she said, "They are men. Like you!"

Thorpe could almost feel the hate radiating from her and the quiet gathering, could almost taste it.

"If they are—just like us, then how do you know we are—all right? That we are safer?"

"You speak the Earth tongue, and fluently. Your ship did not shine. You used hathari, that which you call radio, which the Shining Ones hate and destroy. And you do not bear the mark of Satan!"

His face must have shown his bafflement for she made a gesture and went on, "All Shining Ones bear a silver disc—here," and she put a finger to her brow, between her eyes. "You have a mark, a wound, but it is not in the right place. These others bear no mark at all."

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"That's something to be glad of, anyway."

"It is something. Perhaps enough. But you are still men!"

He became abruptly and awkwardly conscious of his nakedness in front of this silent group of female observers. That their gaze was cold and suspicious didn't help much.

"We are hardly in a fit state to be seen," he mumbled. "You said something about a welcome. Are you going to leave us standing naked, or can we have the chance to clean up a bit, and dress, maybe, before we go any further with our talk?"

"Certainly!" She raised her hands, clapped them gently, and the silent circle of women bowed and rustled away. To the attendant girl on her right she said, "Shanne, take them to the pool. See that they have what they need, and then bring them to my chamber. Varis, we must send the word immediately to our sisters over the sea. Come!"

The girl named Shanne made them a tight smile and led them away to one side of the throne, into a narrow passageway and out into the open sunlight again, to where a chuckling stream straggled down over rocks and gathered in a clear pool edged with white stone. The water was cool, and they hardly had time to duck under before she came back with armfuls of fleecy cloth and a pitcher of syrupy green liquid which made an excellent lather.

"This beats anything I've every heard of," Skoda declared as he splashed and spluttered himself clean. "Look at her!" The girl had taken up his suit-radio from where he had laid it on the poolside and was now holding it to her ear with an expression close to rapture. "It's crazy! They've got radio of their own. We heard it, didn't we? So why should she want to listen to that? I mean, it's only talk. And it can't be important news. We're the important news, right now."

"That's what she's listening to," Hadley rumbled, rubbing the green stuff into his hair. "I'll bet the airwaves are burning right now with the full account. We're the local heroes, I bet you!"

"We're more likely to be martyrs if the Vegans catch

that broadcast," Thorpe suggested, but Skoda snorted his disagreement.

"I told you," he said. "They don't *have* radio, or we'd have picked up their signals long ago!"

"You know . . ." Thorpe was struck with sudden inspiration, "that could be the answer to a lot of things. If these people have radio, and have had it a long time—and the Vegans don't, as they would know—and we show up all equipped with portable models: that's what must have saved our skins, after all!"

"What d'you reckon on the Vegans now, sir? That mark she was talking about, that they stick on a man's head?"

"I don't know what to make of it. It sounds like some kind of operation on the brain, a lobotomy perhaps. I hope we never get to find out the hard way, that's all!"

"You hold still a minute, sir, and I'll have another look at your head, see how it's getting on." Thorpe submitted patiently to Hadley's inspection, then gave voice to something that had been irking him for some time.

"Let's get one thing straight, right now. Here we are, three of us together and all mother naked. We've lost our ship and just about everything else we have that's of any use, except what wits we have. We seem to have fallen in lucky so far, but we can't count on that being permanent. I'm trying to get to the point of saying—let's drop the rank and position stuff. My name's Jeremy. What's yours, Hadley?"

"My well-meaning parents had me christened Padraic, sir—sorry, I forgot. I'll answer to Paddy, if you say it loud enough."

"That's fine!" Thorpe grinned. Skoda managed a shaky grin too.

"Anybody calls me Nikolai I'll never forgive 'em. Just Nick will do. I reckon we'll be dead lucky if we ever get back to uniforms again, at that. Or wages!"

"Speaking of uniforms, I hope they intend to provide us with clothing of some kind. I don't fancy spending the rest of my time parading naked in front of a horde of goggling women!" He waded to the edge of the pool. "Miss Shannel!"

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She put down the suit-radio, grasped a dagger, and went two fast steps away from him, all in one breath, then said, "You require something?"

"Something to wear, if it's possible."

"These," she indicated three white wrap-skirts on the grass, "are all we have." He nodded, made the best of it, and heaved himself out to begin drying on a square of fleece. She backed off more.

"No need to be scared of me," he said, irritated by her attitude.

"You are a man!"

"Is that a crime?"

"The man who touches me, dies with me. I have so sworn!" Her tone left no room for comment. Eventually, when they were clean, dry and skirted, she led them by another passage to a heavy door studded with metal and bearing a symbol in gold, a zigzag flash with a vertical through it. The door let them into a small room hushed with drapes and thick with carpet. The old priestess sat at a table, listening to a steady drone of speech from an ornately carved box. Thorpe noted the symbol again. The old woman shut off the sound.

"Sit!" she commanded, as Shanne brought stools. "Now you look more as we have imagined Earth people to be. In a moment Varis will bring drink for you, better than you had of the Shalla." She sounded like somebody trying to be gracious. She had shed her jeweled clothes and was now in plain white, but the daggers were still there, on either side of her breasts. Shanne circled the table to sit by her side. The other two men shuffled and waited, ill at ease, by the stools. Somebody had to make the first move. Thorpe sighed, pushed a stool close to the table and sat.

"You're very kind," he said. The other two sat. Varis came with a jug and goblets, to pour rosy wine. "I've a thousand questions, but one most of all. How is it that you speak our language so well?"

"The speech of the gods?" She swirled the wine in her glass. "It is sacred to us, to the daughters of Hathari. It has taught us much. Our sun has only one planet, this

which we call Lodor. Our day is slightly shorter than yours, our year longer, our orbit eccentric. In our winter the sun grows smaller, in summer larger. We have land areas about our equator, seas at the poles. We have cities, villages, islands. This now, where you are, is an island, called Shal-lon. The people are the Shalla. You have seen them. All this we know and can tell you, because of Earth and the voices from the void."

"By radio?"

"We call it Hathar. When our history was young we were a contented folk. We harvested the land, we sailed our seas, and we had simple skills. And we spoke with one voice, because we had learned, so long ago that no records tell the date, how to talk with each other at a distance. By radio. By hathari. We knew how to make small lightning and tame it to our will."

"The symbol! The lightning tamed?"

"Exactly. This is sacred to us. So it has grown, over many generations. A religion, with shrines and devices with which we speak one to another."

"My old grandfather was a bit of a philosopher," Hadley rumbled. "He told me more than once that half the troubles of our world came just because we had so many different languages. And it's true. How the devil can you deal with a man when you don't know what he's talking about. Sure, this must be a wonderful world, if they've had the radio all that time!"

"It *was*!" the old woman's voice sharpened. "It became even more wonderful on the day, a century ago, that we first heard murmurings and music, from a mysterious source. A great wonder, it was. And a fear too, at first!"

"Are you trying to tell us," Skoda spluttered, "that you received radio signals from Earth? More than fifteen light-years away?"

"What's wrong with that?" Thorpe demanded.

"Wrong? It's impossible! Man, you'd need an antenna a mile long, and amplification to make your hair curl, and a detector so sensitive—and filters and strainers—nah! This I have got to see before I believe!"

"All right, leave it for now. Go on, Mother Hathar."

"Have I shown you a marvel? Think then how much more wonderful it was for us when we realized that this was only the work of people like ourselves, not mysterious, but real. We listened. We learned to understand the speech. We learned much, many wonderful things."

"Did you try to talk back?" Skoda demanded.

"Many times, but we were unsuccessful. However, we learned much. We of Hathar learned. We passed on much to the ordinary people. We gained a fame, respect and reputation for wisdom, one we hardly deserved. We became proud. And we were punished for that!" The chill in her voice made Thorpe shiver.

"For thirty years we had listened, and interpreted to others, the voices from the void. The gods spoke to us, and we spoke to the people. The days came when we learned that the Earth-gods planned to journey through the void in great ships. We hoped they would come here. We prayed for that. And then, one day, the Shining Ones came. There in our skies were the glorious ships. And we, the priesthood of Hathar, proclaimed to all the people that the Earth-gods were come at last. We commanded the people to give a great welcome to the Earth people."

"Oh no!" Thorpe groaned, seeing the obvious and terrible truth.

"Oh, but yes!" she said, icily deliberate. "I was a babe-in-arms at the time, not old enough to understand, but I have heard the story many times since. We have five major cities, all on a seafront because we were, we are, a sea-loving people. And five shining ships came down. Landed. From them came men, tall and handsome in glittering raiment, each with a shining band about his brow. They said nothing, those men, but they smiled much. And our men were curious to see the insides of those wonderful ships."

"That's natural," Hadley rumbled. "We'd be the same."

"The men went in. The Shining Ones welcomed them, but turned away all women. Only our men, by the hundreds. And when they came out again, they were men no longer. Satan had taken them."

"Satan?"

The old eyes flashed at Thorpe. "Before, we never had need to personify evil. This was a happy world. But when the Shining Ones came, we needed a word, and we took that one, from your speech."

"All right!" Thorpe sucked in a breath to steady himself. "We're now getting close to it. The Shining Ones did something to your men, but let me ask this. Were they men, these Shining Ones? What I'm getting at is, did they do it, or were they just repeating something that had been done to them? Do you know about disease, how it can spread from those who have it to others who haven't? That kind of thing?"

"Why do you ask this?"

"Because you speak of Shining Ones, and we talk about Vegans, but are we talking about the enemy himself—or just his slaves?"

The room went thick with silence, and then the three women began to mutter among themselves. Varis and Shanne had gone pale. The old woman was scowling in thought. Thorpe interrupted them with a question.

"Tell me this, then. You say when the men came out, your men, they were changed, had become evil. How? What was the difference?"

"I can tell you," the old woman muttered, "because I have seen. These children have not. Also my mother told me this, about her husband, my father, and my older brother, her son. They look the same, except for the metal disc on the head, that you have already heard of. But their eyes are dull and dead, and they do not speak with each other, only to the women, to order them like work animals. And they are strangers to us."

A mellow-toned bell began to sound in the distance and the three rose hurriedly.

"It is the hour for sunset devotions. We must go. Stay here. We will return soon."

They went away, leaving the three men to wonder.

VII

"THAT DIDN'T GET US very far," Thorpe sighed, then struggled against a huge yawn of weariness. "My guess is that the Vegans, whoever they are, are just as far out of our sight as before. The Shining Ones sound like puppets."

"That radio throws me," Skoda confessed. "By the time any signals of ours got this far they'd be scrambled, attenuated, distorted all to hell. If they can detect that and smooth it, they've got something I want to see."

"Some hope of that!" Hadley growled. "The way they think about men, I reckon we're lucky to be alive!"

Varis came ducking through the drapes to bow and say, "Mother Hathar sends excuses, and I am to show you to the room set for you. Come." She followed her along quiet passages and short flights of steps until they heard a mumble of speech and the smell of ozone was very plain.

"That's electrical discharge," Skoda declared. "Their radio-room must be close. I'd like to take a look."

Varis inclined her head. "It is permitted. Mother Hathar said so. You come this way." She made a sharp right turn into a room so high-vaulted the apex was lost in shadow. There were rows of jars, a maze of glittering wires and coils, and a girl sitting by a central bench before a carved box like the one in the old woman's room. She moved a hand to make silence, stood and bent her head in submissive attitude.

"The Earthmen wish to see and examine the secrets of hathari," Varis said. "You will show them whatever they ask."

"And tell her not to fear," Thorpe suggested. "Tell her we are not going to do her any harm." Varis made what was virtually a shrug.

"I can tell her, but I cannot command fear to depart. Molleen can see that you are men!"

"Molleen!" Hadley exclaimed, before Thorpe could protest about the unfairness of the insistence on their maleness. "Now there's a fine sweet name for a girl. No girl with a name like that would ever be afraid of me, surely?" And there was a surprising gentleness in his manner as he went forward with his hand out. The girl paled. For a moment she stood rigid, then she came round her table to meet the Irishman, to stand distant, to look up at him. Thorpe could see, now, that she was about eighteen or nineteen, into the first bountiful blush of womanhood. She wore the same sterile white jacket but had no dagger. A six-inch wide strip of gauze, extending from a white silden cord about her waist, bore the embroidered symbol of hathari, and it shimmered with her agitation.

"There now," Hadley reached and took her hand, very gently, as if unaware that she was quivering, "it's been a long time since I saw a prettier girl than you, my dear. A long time. And we're good friends, aren't we? Nick is a good friend too. He'll want you to tell him all about this wonderful contraption you have here, and mind you explain it to him nice and simple, now, because he's none too bright. Will you do that?" Watching, Thorpe saw the girl's face flutter into a smile and wide-eyed wonder. She shifted her gaze to Skoda, who grinned. And her smile grew, became a pretty thing.

"Nick," he murmured, "we'd better locate our chambers first, then Varis can bring you back here to potter on your own, without us. We would only be in the way among this lot." Varis led them on, not too far, into a small room with four couches, one in each corner. And in the middle of the stone floor were three familiar objects carefully laid out.

"Our suits!" Skoda cried. "That's a bit of luck. Or a kind thought on somebody's part. Now, if only it hasn't fallen out—" he turned the flat and flexible shapes over eagerly, recognized his own and pounced, to stand up again holding a flat-folded pack. "Always carry a little kit of tools," he announced. "I feel a lot happier about that radio-room now. Which door

was it?" Varis turned and pointed, indicating the crest of the arch over the door.

"That way is inward. The hathari is central to the shrine, you see? That way," she indicated the opposite door, which had a stout wooden bolt across it, "leads outside, to the gardens. These doorways connect with other sleeping chambers." She went away, Skoda following excitedly. Thorpe stooped to turn his suit over and retrieve the two pictures from the pocket. There was nothing else of value. He had discovered that the skirt-garment had a small inner pocket at the waistband. He slid the pictures into it and sat down on one of the bunks.

"Nothing monastic about this, anyway," he commented, feeling the firm resilience of a mattress of some kind. "I'm about ready for this. It has been some time since any of us slept easily."

"You're right, there." Hadley stretched himself out and sighed with the bliss of it. "I'll need no rocking this night."

For all his weariness, however, Thorpe felt sleep eluding his eyelids. There were too many questions nagging his mind. After what seemed an age he stirred and sat up, to see that the Irishman was not asleep either.

"I don't know if it will help," he muttered, "but I was thinking of stepping out for a breath of air and maybe look at the stars. Join me?"

"It wouldn't help me none. Jeremy"—Hadley heaved up on an elbow, his face furrowed with anger—"this world, Lodor is it? It's in a hell of a mess. All the time the old woman was telling us, it seemed like just talk. My mind wouldn't take hold of it at all. But that bit of a girl down there, that Molleen—she was scared stiff of me! Of all of us. Just because we're men! Sure and that's a terrible thing to happen to anybody. It didn't come to me properly until I touched her hand. Like a rabbit, she was."

"You managed to charm her, all right!"

"I've a knack for it right enough. I was brought up on a farm, and I was always good with wild things. But I've never seen that look in a human face before."

"It is pretty hard to grasp," Thorpe nodded. "Seventy

years is a hell of a long time. Three or four generations. Incidentally, that brings up the point you made when we were being hauled out of the pit. Remember? About parthenogenesis. I wonder how they keep going, how they breed?"

"However it is, I'll bet it's something to scare the daylight out of them all. You see, that's what I was thinking. That child was afraid of me. Now you'd expect her to be nervous, or curious. An animal is like that, too. But when you see an animal that is shaking with fright at the sight of you, then you can bet it has learned to be afraid. It's been hurt, or it has good reason for its fear. I'm thinking the old woman was right when she talked about Satan."

"I wish I could think that Earth is safe from this, Paddy, but common sense tells me it could happen there, too, unless something miraculous happens."

"Ah, they would not be let to land so easily on Earth. They'd have a hell of a fight of it first!"

"You're right, there. Ah well, I think I will take a turn in the air. Tell Skoda where I am, if he comes back before I do." Thorpe raised the bolt, and found himself in a short corridor that was no more than a recess.

Three steps took him to a broad gallery with a stout wooden guard-rail on its outer edge. It apparently ran completely round the superstructure of the building. He saw down into a series of dark gardens, caught the glint of light on the pool where they had bathed earlier, and his nostrils filled with the rich scent of night-flowering blooms. Horrors were remote and unreal here. This was sanctuary, surely? It was a clear night and the stars were glorious. He had a basic knowledge of star-fields and astrogation, enough to pick out one or two familiar lights and to guess when he was staring in the direction of Sol. But fifteen or more light-years is a long way, and Sol is not a large star. He had to be content with believing that he was looking in the right region.

A ghost of motion caught the corner of his eye, high up over his head. Keeping quite still, he waited for it to come again. There—a flutter of white. A garment, and a face dimly seen in the starlight. He moved to the guard-rail, set his

back against it and looked up intently. The flutter of white came again, closer now, almost overhead. He saw that there must be a flat roof above, and someone moving on it, circling it. He peered, and smiled as he recognized the face.

"Shanne? Can't you sleep either?"

The apparition vanished as if it had been snatched back. Then, very cautiously, she peered over and down. He kept quite still, sensing that he had startled her. He saw now a wooden ladder braced against the wall.

"Earthman Thorpe?" Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"Right. May I join you?"

"If it is your wish." Her face backed away. He went up the ladder to a flat circular surface some twelve yards across. In the center was a low seat, mushrooming from a thick support. Shanne sat there, staring at him. He took a step towards her, and she stood up so abruptly that he had the conviction she was poised for flight. He halted. He saw now that she, too, wore a dangling strip of gauze, exactly like Molleen, with the same embroidered symbol. Was there some ritual significance about it? He moved again, very steadily, and saw the sleek muscles of her leg leap and tense, saw her bare foot clench on the rooftop. Her arms drew back behind her, as the panic flared within her, and he halted again.

"Please don't be afraid of me," he said, trying to be gentle over the anger that filled him. "I'm not going to hurt you!" Her eyes were glassy. Her lips moved but no sound came. She panted, her breast heaving and swelling until he felt an ache just watching her. And he could no longer fight off his rage that this thing should be. He turned on his heel abruptly and went back to the edge where the ladder was, intending to return to where he had come from. Hadley was right. These women had learned, somehow, to fear men the way an animal fears the hunter. He had to go. It was that, or frighten her still more by showing the anger he could hardly control. His foot was on the first rung when she cried out—

"Nol Come back. I will try not to be afraid!" He went

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slowly back to her. She shifted her feet, stood sideways to him. He saw the shivers run over her curves, her gauzy apron quivering like an aspen leaf.

"Why are you afraid of me?" he asked, making his voice gentle.

"Because I am defenseless. For this period of vigil I wear the seal of hathar. It is a ritual."

"You mean you haven't got your daggers, is that it?"

"Yes. At all other times we always wear the twin blades, one in each pocket, the right one for the man who touches me, the other for my own life."

He strangled on bitter words, made himself be patient. "And you're on some sort of sacred duty now?"

"A vigil. To keep watch, and meditate, trusting to hathari."

"I'm sorry. I've interrupted." He turned away again, but she spoke to halt him, turned to face him bravely.

"No. You are not as other men." The way she said it, she was trying to convince herself. She put up a slim arm to point to the sky. "You do not come from Satan's nest, as they do!"

"Hold it!" He moved close enough to be able to follow her pointing arm. "That one? Below and to the right of the three in a line? How do you know they come from that star?"

"It is said that some of the first men spoke and said so."

"Well now, that's Alpha Lyrae right enough. The constellation of the Harp. Or, as we know it, Vega."

"Can you point to Earth's star, that I may know it?"

"I'll try. It's pretty small, from here." He swung round, raised his arm, and the bare flesh of his wrist grazed her shoulder. She shivered away instantly, but he affected not to notice. "You need a glass, a telescope."

"We have those."

"Look"—he tried again—"I can understand why you hate the Shining Ones, but not why you transfer that feeling to me!"

She moved one step away, then came back. Deliberately she put one foot up on the low seat, crossed her hands on that knee, and stared into the dark.

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"I will tell you." Her voice became singsong, like a recitation. "Then the men came forth from the ships looking neither to left nor right but sought out other men, those who had not yet been perverted. These men went into the ships and were perverted. By the third day the ships were full, and departed, other ships coming in their stead. Many men tried to flee, but were caught. Many women, wives and mothers, tried to detain their men. These were slain with the fire-weapons. By the fourth of a year all men had been perverted and there were none left pure. All were taken away in the shining ships, save five hundred, one hundred in each of the five cities of Lodor."

"So there are only five hundred men on the whole planet! And every one of them a Vegan puppet, bossing you about?"

Her eyes came round to him, wide with surprise. "No. I have explained badly. They do not rule. They treat us like cattle. They collect women to breed and build ships, and that only. For the rest, we do as we please. They are not interested in us at all."

"Wait a bit now." He sat by her foot and looked up at her. "I'm confused. They don't rule?" She abandoned her singsong tone now.

"No. They capture women and train them into a work force, make them build ships. One hundred for each city. Then, once every year, five more ships come, and five hundred go away, with men to crew them."

"They certainly have this thing organized. Did you ever work on ships?"

She stiffened as if he had whipped her across the face. "I am Hathari! Know this. When the Shining Ones first came, many of them sought out the holy shrines of Hathar, all they could find, and destroyed them. And slew those who served there. The Shining Ones hate and fear hathari!"

"So Nick *was* right. The Vegans don't have radio. Sorry!" Without thinking he put out his hand to pat hers. She whipped them away in a flash, so that his open palm slapped softly on her knee. He felt the rigidity of her muscles

under his touch, and his pent-up anger burst out. Still gripping her knee he stood and glared at her.

"This is ridiculous! All right, maybe I shouldn't have touched you, but I have. I'm touching you now. Does it burn? I seem to remember only a few hours ago several of you laid hands on me and my friends and stripped us of our clothes. Were you so frightened then? Did you fall down dead?"

"It was I who investigated the wound on your forehead." Her words came stiffly through clenched teeth. "Had it been deeper and central, you would have died instantly, and I with you."

"Don't be a fool! You satisfied yourself that I was an ordinary man, and that hasn't changed. I'm still ordinary. You have nothing to fear from me, surely you must see that?"

"You are a man! In Heklon, as in the other cities, there are a hundred men. They live in great domed dwelling. By day they stand over the women who work. By night, each one takes to himself a woman, into the dwelling-dome, and there tries to impregnate her with the seed of another life, whether she wishes this or not. Some resist, and die. Most go without complaining, and submit themselves."

"And then?" He hardly recognized his own voice.

"All are marked for identification. Only young and healthy women are chosen. Those who become with child are set aside and watched. When the child comes—if it be male—she and the child are put in another place to be cared for until the child is three, then she is set free. Should the child be female, she and the child are dismissed to do as they please. But should the child be in any way sickly or defective, then mother and child are killed!"

Thorpe let out a shaky breath with great care. His mind reeled before the sadistic and inhuman implications. Brood cattle and ruthless eugenics.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. "I didn't know that. I don't blame you one little bit for loathing men."

"You are hurting me."

He snatched away his grip on her knee, and groaned

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as he saw the red weals where his fingers had gripped. "I'm sorry about that, too. I didn't mean—Shanne, you'll just have to make allowances, and believe that neither myself nor my friends mean any harm to you or any of the people here. All we want to do is somehow to take a crack at the Shining Ones, to strike at them in some way."

"What can you do? You are three, they are many hundreds!"

"Sounds hopeless, yes. But we have a saying, while there's life there is still a chance—" A faint silver chime interrupted him.

"That is the end of my vigil," she said. "In a moment Varis will come. You had better go, lest she see you."

"And that would get you int trouble, more trouble. All right, thanks for everything you've told me, and my apologies for breaking your meditation."

"You have given me much to think on," she whispered as he went quickly down the ladder and back to the room. As he went in, Skoda was just entering by the opposite door.

VIII

"WHAT'S UP WITH you fellers?" Skoda said. "Can't you sleep? Me, I'm just about on my last spark!" He settled wearily on the bed nearest him and sighed, rubbing a hand through his spiky black hair. Then he grinned all at once. "I'm so knotted in the head that I went strolling into the wrong door." He halted himself and squinted at the doorway to the left of where he sat, then at the door where Thorpe stood. He pointed a finger.

"What's on the other side of there?"

"Fresh air and the night, why?"

"Then that door must lead into the room—it was full of girls, all fast asleep! D'you suppose there's more, on that side?"

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"What did you expect, men?" Thorpe muttered. "I thought you said you were tired?"

"That's right, I am. Man, have they got the craziest radio setup I ever saw! If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes . . . they use practically all biological materials, for a start."

"What's that mean?" Hadley growled. He had rolled up his spacesuit into a bundle to prop his head and was sitting up watching his companions. "Leaves and plants and such?"

"No! Not that way. They use juices for acids, and metal plates, and silver wiring, stuff like that. No trouble there. We started off on current electricity that way, too. But their detectors . . . no wonder they're delicate enough to pick up Earth signals! And selective? I've never seen anything to touch it. And they use the nerve fibers of insects and beetles! Fact! I didn't believe it myself until that Molleen got me a magnifier and let me see for myself. Talk about hearing a gnat cough at a hundred yards!"

"They actually dissect the nerve fibers out of insects?" Thorpe moved to his own bed and sat on it. "No wonder their receivers are sensitive, if they are using the sensory equipment of insects."

"It's a funny thing, but logical in a way"—Skoda rolled over and lay flat out in sighing ease—"because they have practically no power at all on the transmission side. I suppose they never bothered much. Never had to. And they have no theory at all on high-tension stuff. No vacuum technique, either. Everything is done with vegetable acids and chemical batteries. Clever . . . it works fine . . . but it seems so cockeyed, when you think that this little unit here, out of my suit, is about ten times as powerful as anything they can do with their biggest transmitter."

"Eh? You're sure of that?"

"Positive. I've just been playing with it, haven't I? It's right down below us, the Supreme Shrine of Hathar. And the master transmitter. If it puts out a quarter of the power of our units I'll be surprised. It's hard to take, isn't it? But, like I said, they have the receivers to handle it, and their ionosphere is as steady as a millpond. So they manage. Man-angel Hell, they do very well, all things considered!"

"Had you baffled, did they?" Hadley chuckled, and Skoda sat up at once, his expression very serious.

"You were joking, and I know it. But get this. I may be a dub at most things but I've played around with coils and capacitors since I was a kid. I was a ham, and a good one. I know radio, even if I know nothing else. And those girls are smart. Their theory leaks a bit in places, but they manage. Given just a bit of a hint or two and any one of them would make a first class radio-mechanic. On their terms they are first class, if that kid of a Molleen is anything to go by."

"I'll take your word for it." Hadley murmured. "Sure and with a name like that it would be inevitable. Tell us, did you get to listen to Earth?"

"I did," Skoda's voice sounded oddly, and Thorpe sharpened his ears. "I can tell you this. We are closer than we figured. No more than ten lights, at the most." Thorpe leaned forward intently.

"You mean by the material you heard?"

"Right. Not to put too precise a date on it—after all, I don't know what today's date is, or if they have any such thing here—but the bits I heard were right out of the early stages of the war. I remember that much. When we were still reckoning we were going to clobber them good and proper any minute. And news about the big Procyon carve-up was still fresh. You can date it from that, just as I can."

"You've got it, near enough," Thorpe nodded. "About ten years is right. Not that it makes a lot of difference. One light-year is as good as a hundred, the state we're in."

"That's not what I was thinking of," Skoda muttered. "I remember that period pretty well. I joined up just about then. Soon after, the radio-ban came on, and broadcasting was stopped, except for the minimum longwave stuff. And the news was bad, too, at the last. I'm thinking what it is going to do to these people when they hear that . . . and then lose touch altogether! We represent a kind of forlorn hope to them. The last they have."

"No news is good news," Hadley rumbled. "Better they

should hear nothing at all than have the horrible truth, up to date, from us."

The three men fell silent as they each pondered this thought. Thorpe lay back on his bed, his mind fermenting with frustration, his naturally aggressive violence finding nothing to fasten on.

"You know," Skoda murmured, "that Molleen is a nice kid. Only nineteen. She told me. Bright as a pin, and smart, once she got over being so scared of me. I know you put the charm on her, Paddy, but still it was a long time before she quit shaking enough to be able to talk. And she just would not touch me, nor come close enough for it."

"And she had good sense!" Hadley scoffed. "A nice little girl like that! You should be filled with shame!"

"Hold it!" Thorpe sat up. "This is not funny, but something you both ought to know about. That girl was scared and with good reason. She fact that she was able to talk to you at all shows she has guts." In bitter detail he told them what he had learned from Shanne. "So you see, for her to be alone and defenseless, with a man—is about the way it would be for one of us to go swimming in an ocean full of man-eating sharks!" There was a thick silence for a while, then Skoda snarled.

"What in the name of hell do they do to those men? Treating their own flesh and blood like that! And I walked into a room full of them, all fast asleep! Christ, if I'd disturbed them . . ."

"You'd have been dead, fast. You saw that they even sleep with their knives at the ready?"

"But it's crazy!" Hadley growled. "We wouldn't harm a hair of their heads, the poor things."

"After three generations of this you'll have a hell of a job persuading them of that! Damn it all to hell, if only there was something we could do!"

"I was kidding myself," Skoda whispered, "that I might be able to teach them a few tricks. How to boost up their transmission-power. Maybe even fudge up a condenser or two. Thinking I would be doing some good . . ."

"It would!" Thorpe got to his feet restlessly. "Don't dis-

card that idea yet. Anything we can do to break down this evil will be a good, no matter how small. At least we can be friendly."

"What's the use? What can the three of us do, bare-handed? Sure we have a bit of knowledge to give them, but then what?"

"Perhaps there's more!" Thorpe was snatching at straws now. "You say our units are much more powerful than anything they have?"

"Must have rattled their eardrums when we spoke to them. Must have made them think we were ten feet tall!"

"Maybe we are. Look, I know only a smattering of radio. You say it is a question of power? All right, then why don't they use power? They know how. They build ships for the Vegans, don't they? I know the Vegans don't have radio, but they do have fusion-power for their drive and Pauli, just as we do. And ion-power for their jets. And this is an isotope-battery job, isn't it?" He tapped the unit that he had slung at his belt by its clips, as they all had. "Why don't they use isotope-energy conversion for power? It's right there under their noses, isn't it?"

"Wait—wait!" Skoda begged, sitting up. "You're jumping a bit. It's the same stuff, true. But you don't just move from chemical batteries to radio-active isotope units in one breath. It took us a hundred years to see the connection, remember?"

"All right. You have the chance to catch them up a century. To do some good."

"But why?" Hadley was sitting up now. "You have something else in mind, I reckon. What?"

"It could take a little while, but we might work up to being able to build a transmitter big enough, powerful enough, to send a message to Earth!"

"Huh!" Skoda's face twisted in a sneer. "I figured it was something like that coming. Message to Earth! For what? Pass the time of day, or shout for help? And when they shout back—if they do—to say they're coming, it will be twenty years later. Twenty years! Do you reckon Earth is going to care one distorted damn what happens to us,

twenty years from now? Why don't you suggest I go ahead and build a Dirac sub-etheric, and be done with it!"

Thorpe felt foolish, but swallowed it in his eagerness to snatch at the last phrase. "Would you know how to build a Dirac?"

"Of course, given the materials, and the power. Different system altogether from plain wave radio, but not all that more difficult. If I had the gear. But I haven't!"

"The pair of you are forgetting one other thing," Hadley rumbled. He glowered at them as they turned to him. "Suppose you conjure up the stuff, and Nick does his magic, and you Dirac a message to Earth H.Q. eh? Would you be so kind as to tell me what would happen then?"

"What are you getting at, Paddy?"

"Just this, Nick my lad. You're a radio man. You just send and receive messages. But what about the people who get them. H.Q. gets the word, right away, that here is a Vegan base. Just one planet, with only women to defend it, and a handful of Vegans, a few ships half-built. And only ten light-years away, too!"

"Say! That's right. This *is* a Vegan base. Man, would they ever knock the daylights out of it! Fighter screen; move in the heavies; away anti-matter bombs; exit one base complete with facilities! What a strike that would be!"

"And what a bloody mess there would be, afterwards! Is that what you want to do to these women? After what they've been through?"

"That's no way to talk!" Thorpe snapped, fighting back his own instant revulsion at the picture that came to his mind. "I know there's a damn hard choice to make, and we stand the chance of being wiped out along with the rest, but it's something we have to do if we can. We're Earth, remember? And this *is* a Vegan base, the very first one we've ever known about."

"It's all talk," Skoda muttered uncertainly, "and a waste of time. We haven't a hope of building a Dirac. You can talk about these women building ships. All right, maybe they do. But how do we get in there, and get out again with the loot? You can bet the men keep a sharp watch. I'll tell you

something else, too. While I was getting Molleen to show me round the stuff, there was a message going out, to all the faithful of the hathari. Earthmen have arrived. They are here, on Shallon, the holy island. Now"—he stretched out on his bed again deliberately,—“there are a few hundreds of the faithful, and I would not care to take bets that there is at least one bad apple among them. So that news is going to leak. And go on leaking. So what would you like to bet that long before we can get organized to start looting the Vegans—they will be here looking for us? With their dinky little flame-throwers. Or worse!”

“That’s an evasion,” Thorpe snarled “We can talk about our own personal problems later. Right now I want the answer to one question. No, make that two. First, if we can get the materials, will you try to build a Dirac? Second, if it works, will you cooperate with me in sending the message that we *know* has got to be sent?”

“I don’t have to answer that, mister. I’ll think about it. And, if you don’t mind, I’d like to go to sleep now. In peace. While I have the chance!” His tone was too pointed to be missed. Thorpe stared at him for a furious minute then whirled and went to throw himself on his own bed. Two against one, and he was on the unpopular side. *This is war*, he thought. *This is what it does to you*. Minutes ago he had been watching the seductive sway of a beautiful girl’s body, and thinking thoughts that any ordinary warm-blooded man might feel. And now he was contemplating ways and means of achieving her almost-certain death and destruction in the merciless holocaust that would accompany an all-out punitive attack by Earth ships on this planet. He felt sick. His mind coiled in on itself in vain search for some way out of the crunch.

If it were possible to give the alarm it had to be done. To fail would be to lend his weight to the process that was daily sapping the manhood of Earth. It was five years since he had last seen Earth, and could not know what it was like now, but he could imagine what it *would* be like, if the Vegans were not stopped. The stark evidence was all around him: A world in which devout maidens were in

constant dread of things they called men, in which women were made to slave and sweat—and bred like mares for some invisible stock-master. A world in which men became senseless and inhuman puppets, not even recognizing their own mothers and wives. This could happen to Earth. . . . Nick Skoda would have to be made to see the sense of it, somehow. . . . He finally slept, but his dreams were filled with fiend-faces that were at once beautiful and hideously inhuman.

He woke with a sore head to the lively clanging of a hand-bell, and got his eyes open just in time to see the vanishing of a young girl in the familiar white apron as she rushed through the chamber. Her fleet speed set his memory back in tune with last night.

"One more day I never thought I'd see," Hadley said, as they rose and made shift to tidy their beds. He got no response. The ill-feeling of last night still tainted the air. Thorpe swung round as a girl came cautiously to their doorway to peer, and make signs to others who came at her heels with bowls and large jugs of steaming water. The one in charge looked about twenty-five, about Shanne's age. The four followers were younger, barely out of their teens. They deposited their burdens and departed.

"I am Edda," the older one stayed to tell them, "and it is my pleasure to serve you. In a while food will be brought."

"Wait!" Thorpe raised a hand and she stopped, her face smoothly but guardedly attentive. "Please give my respects to Mother Hathar, and tell her that we don't want to cause any more trouble than need be. What I mean is, we can eat with the rest, unless there's some rule says we mustn't."

It was impossible to tell what Edda thought. There was, to him, an odd quality of arrogant aloofness about her as she bowed her head just a fraction.

"I will tell Mother Hathar your wish, and return." She turned and went in barefoot silence. Hadley scratched his head with comical dismay on his heavy features.

"And to think that she'd run a knife into me if I so much as went to put my arm around her! It's a queer world and all. If they're so spit scared of man you'd think they'd

have more sense than to dress the way they do, with that little jacket-thing . . ."

"Probably doesn't mean a thing to them," Skoda retorted as he began washing. "I read a thing once about fashions where it said the function of clothes is to focus attention on whatever image you want other people to have of you. So a normal woman would dress so as to make you look at what she thinks is her best aspect. But you can't judge these women that way. This whole setup is off-beam. It's abnormal!"

"More's the pity, with every one of them as pretty as a statue."

"Pretty?" Thorpe growled. "When you remember why, is it still pretty? These are the cream. The sub-standard ones are destroyed at birth. Pretty?"

"You can grieve about the past, but you have to live in the present, and plan for the future," Hadley retorted. "No matter how it's happened they are a fine body of women, and if things were different I wouldn't mind if I spent the rest of my days right here."

"You're liable to do that in any case," Skoda said, with point. Edda spoke from the door, gently.

"Mother Hathar will be glad if you will join the Superior Sisters at breakfast. This way." Thorpe was too intent on his own savage thoughts to notice their path. He wanted a showdown, to know how he stood with everybody. And he wanted to pick an urgent bone with the old woman, too.

She was at the head of the long narrow table, presiding over a gathering of girls all of this same age, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. They stood, rustlingly, as the Earthmen entered, and edged along willingly to make room for them at the head end of the table by Mother Hathar. Then they all sat once more and began silently to eat, carefully keeping their eyes on their plates and their tongues still. Edda found herself a seat. Thorpe saw Varis, and Shanne, before he sat himself by the old woman's right hand, with Skoda opposite. Youngsters of no more than ten or eleven came scurrying with plates and goblets and strange cutlery for the guests. Even these little ones, he

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saw, were double-daggered like their mature sisters. He glanced along the rows of faces. Hadley was right. Every one as pretty as a picture, the picture of generously mature femininity arrogantly displayed. Surgent sex thrust forth like some kind of challenge. Or assurance? His mind snapped back from the speculation as the old woman said—

"I trust you had a restful night. I am told that you," she turned to Skoda, "were good enough to praise our efforts and equipment, that this is your special interest. True?"

"That's right, to both points. Your methods differ from ours, and your theory is a bit shaky in spots, but the equipment is first class. There's not much I can tell you about receivers, anyway."

"Praise indeed from one who understands how to compress the mysteries into such a small space as the boxes you carry. If you could teach us that art, we would be forever grateful."

Skoda grinned. "That's not so easy. You'd need tools to make the tools you'd need to start along that line. But it could be worked out, given time!"

"And time is just what we do not have!" Thorpe dropped the words into the conversation with deliberate intent. The effect was an immediate hush, and then an electric tension all along the table.

IX

"Is THERE SOMETHING WRONG?" the old woman asked, turning a chill eye on Thorpe. Her tone suited him perfectly.

"You are dead right there is. I understand you have broadcast the information of our presence here, all over the world?"

"That is more scope than I would claim, but substantially

you are right. The hathari have been informed. This displeases you?"

"You might have consulted us first, before throwing the story away. Spreading information is your business. You ought to know how hard it is to set limits on that kind of thing. Who knows where it will end up?"

"Ah!" She nodded and smiled a cold smile. "I understand now. You think I have been indiscreet, that I should have kept your presence a secret, is that it?" He felt the quiet lash of her scorn and seethed inside.

"I think so, yes! Only a fool makes a gift of information to a deadly enemy. How do you know somebody won't pass the story along to the men?"

"Strong words," Mother Hathar purred. "You do ill to offend us, Jeremy Thorpe. You speak of consultation. Did you consult us when you decided to seek refuge on our planet? Should we have consulted you when the Shalla had their points on you and were poised to strike?"

"That was different. We were in no position to choose!"

"Quite so. There was no choice, neither in your case nor ours. Do you think ours were the only eyes to see your ship fall from the sky? Or to hear your voices when you shouted in the instruments? Was there a secret to be kept? Do you think the Shining Ones are stupid?"

For one hideous moment he was too stunned to think at all, then the blood burned on his face as he realized the extent of his inanity. The cold impact of two dozen pair of scornful eyes stung him.

"I'm sorry. I hadn't thought . . ."

"There is much you do not know. For instance, in all the honored history of the hathari only once have we given false information to the people. Only once, and that was because we ourselves were deceived. That was when the Shining Ones came and we proclaimed them as Earthmen. We spoke in good faith, but in error, and we have paid dearly for it ever since. Our order was reviled, our instruments seized and destroyed, many of our order were killed. That was seventy years ago. Now, by degrees, we are winning back something of our former respect among those who matter, but

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we still have enemies and the past is not yet buried. We exist on sufferance and on our reputation for integrity. We still give out information. This is the field in which we are without peer. We spread the news, and even our enemies are forced to admit that we are honorable, that we speak true, always."

"You must be very proud of that reputation," he muttered, "and I am sorry I spoke in haste against it."

"But I have not done yet." The old voice was clear and relentless. "Our reputation for integrity is almost all we have, that and a few skills. Know then that yesterday I sent forth the instruction that the hathari were to spread a lie! It was deliberately done. To the members of our order the truth is known—that you are indeed from Earth, that you are well and unhurt, and that you sympathize and are on our side." She let that hang in the air long enough to make him burn again, then went on. "They know this, but by my order they are even now causing it to be believed that the ship which fell yesterday was destroyed and that there were no survivors. That is for the common ear, and for the evil ones, to protect you!"

"And yourselves!" he retorted, his anger flaring up again. "Let's be honest both ways, shall we? All right, you've made a sacrifice on our behalf, and been cunning about it. I'm grateful for that. And I was wrong. I'll admit it. But let's have your side clear, too. You know that if the men suspected we were alive and here, they'd be here too. And that wouldn't be so good for you, would it?" An angry buzz along the table greeted his words, but he turned to face the glare of their eyes and raised his voice to ride over their protest.

"Mother Hathar herself used the word integrity. I don't blame her, or you, for wanting to save yourselves from what the Shining Ones would do if they came here. I'll go along with that—but let's not throw all the responsibility on us! You're protecting yourselves too! If your integrity is worth a damn you have to admit it!" The words had hardly died away before a lithe shape left her seat, quick as a cat, and was by his side. He turned to stare and froze as a razor-

edged blade kissed his throat. He kept as still as the death that was so close. He saw her wrist and there was not a quiver in it. . . .

"You think we value our lives, man? You think we value yours, either?" Her voice was wire-taut. "We have nothing to lose but honor, and I for one regret that we risk ours for your sake. Say but the word and we die together and settle the question for all time!"

Now he heard a chorus of ready voices, all in agreement. "Speak—Earthman! Speak!" and there would be no doubt what they wanted him to say.

Then the old woman snapped a dozen lashing syllables at them and they were silent. She drew breath and spoke again. "Speth! Put up that blade and return to your seat. Now! Truly I cannot blame the Earth people for thinking we are fools, on this showing. For hathari, go!" Her arm slackened and the deadly blade went away, so that Thorpe could draw a shaky breath and look up into her face. Hadley had said they were all pretty, and this one, Speth, was no exception. Somehow her clear young loveliness lent added force to the intensity of her hate. Soft lips writhed on her gleaming teeth as she muttered:

"I withdraw—man!"

"Now listen to me," Mother Hathari ordered, as soon as Speth had regained her seat. "You are all young, even these men, and youth speaks in haste and with hot blood. But there is a time for haste and anger, and a time for wit and wisdom. To say we have nothing to lose is to say that we have already lost. To take an enemy with you into death is one thing; to plunge each other into death is something different, and futile. But above all try to grasp this thing; that these are men—not Shining Ones—that there is a difference! You will find this hard. You have never known men. But you must try not to confuse one with the other!"

"It may be even so," Speth spoke up and her tone betrayed the hatred that she could not let go yet, "but whatever strange breed of creature they may be, that one talks like a fool!"

"Ah now!" Hadley cleared his throat and spoke, his massive voice rolling in the sudden surprised silence. "Might I just

say a word here? We all talk the same lingo, which is something to be thankful for, because I can put this to you to think over. If I have the wrong of something, and I talk like a fool, which I have done many's the time, you'd have the right to tell me so to my face. And I would argue with you. I might even lose my temper and shout. But if I've any sense at all, and you can show me I'm wrong, then I'll have to admit it. And I would do the same for you, if I had the chance. Isn't that how we all learn things? By finding out what fools we are? But what good does it do to stick a knife in a man? Does it make him any the less a fool? Would you rather have me dead wrong, or alive and a bit wiser maybe?"

"You speak well," the old woman declared. "And with wisdom. Let us dispute, if it be to some purpose, but let us not have any more show of knives and killing. Not here. If I may say this without offense, the very fact that these men say foolish things should prove that they are not like those things we know as men—who say nothing at all!"

"So they are with us"—it was Speth again, still not satisfied—"and on our side. You say it. But what can they do? What can any of us do, but be ready to die when the time comes?"

Thorpe, his anger now confused with reluctant admiration for what he recognized as a kindred spirit, ached to be able to offer some stirring answer, but the cold facts tied his tongue. Even Hadley's ready joviality had no word to offer. The old woman frowned and was about to speak when she was interrupted by a hurrying youngster bringing a message. The chatter between the messenger and the old woman cut off. She turned.

"The Shalla send word that they have secured the small vessel in which you escaped. They wish to know whether it is of value to you or not?"

Skoda stopped eating and his guardedly polite expression gave way to sudden excitement. "That's our pod!" he said. "And I reckon we do want it. We certainly do."

"Drive unit," Thorpe nodded. "Batteries, instruments, all sorts of stuff we might be able to use. That's if it's not ruined."

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He turned to Mother Hathar and said, candidly. "We can use some help from you, again, but if we're lucky it shouldn't be too long before we are able to do something for you in return."

"What form of help do you need?"

"Interpreter, I suppose you'd call it, between us and the Shalla. Transport to wherever they have the pod cached, and to carry back whatever we can rescue from it."

"And tools!" Hadley growled. "Or did you think we were going to rip the thing apart with that diddy little tool-kit of yours, Nick?"

"That could be a snag," Thorpe nodded again. "Those things aren't just blown together. But let's worry about that after we've seen the way the thing has survived. It may be a total wreck."

"Very well." The old woman cast her eyes over the attentive sisterhood. "Better that two of you should go. One of you, and a junior? No . . ." she corrected herself, "it had better be two Superiors, in view of the unusual nature of the task. Who is willing?"

"I will accept the duty." The voice was gentle but firm, and Thorpe was not surprised to see that it was Shanne who had spoken. He hid a smile, but stared in amazement as Skoda spoke up.

"I'll take a chance and say that I'd like to pick one—if it's allowed. I'd like to ask the lady who was so fast with her knife just now. Speth, was it? How about it?" That electric silence chilled the table again. Thorpe frowned, wondering what Skoda was up to. A deliberate try to stir up trouble, maybe? The eyes were on Speth. She put her chin up.

"Very well, man. I will talk for you."

"That's fine," said Skoda with a grin. "All right, I'm ready if everybody else is."

Ten minutes later, with the two Superior Sisters silently leading, they emerged from the quiet of the establishment into a chatter of many voices in what served as a forecourt to the Shrine. It took Thorpe a hard stare to recognize the Shalla women who had come with the message as being kin to those hard-eyed wardens who had held longbows on

their captives only the day before. The half-dozen who were here now were jovial and at ease, each one in a sarong-type garment of vividly dyed and patterned cloth. Something of the ease went away with the appearance of the Earthmen, but not to the extent of the open hostility that had been their expression before. Perhaps they were reassured by the hathari's acceptance of the strangers. But he noted, nevertheless, that every one of them wore a double-bitted small-ax tucked in a belt, a thick-bladed knife strapped to the right calf, and the neck strap and chest-strings of a sheath down the spine, to hold a two-foot swordblade. Then he looked past them to the vehicle they had brought, and the thing which stood in the traces, and forgot all about belligerent women.

"What in the name of all that's holy is that?" he breathed, hearing a gasp from Skoda by his side at the same sight. It stood no more than four feet high at shoulder level, but there were three shoulders on the side they could see, with an assumed three more on the other side to go with its six legs. These were massive, as thick as a man's thigh, and equipped with short claws. They needed to be powerful, to support a broad body that was ten feet long from neck to stumpy tail tip and armored with overlapping scales. But it was the huge head that caught the eye.

"'Tis like a crocodile that's had its face bashed in!" Hadley mumbled. "Glory be, are we expected to believe a thing like that is tame?"

"They don't seem to be scared of it," Thorpe pointed out. "I'd hate to meet that on a dark night, but it may be just its looks." The beast swung its great head round to peer at them, opened the expanse of its scoop-shovel mouth and gave out a growl like the distant mutter of thunder. A Shalla woman standing close by reached her flat hand and slapped it so hard the smack echoed. The thing heaved its head to front again and stood placidly undisturbed. "There's your answer," Thorpe grinned, and went forward, trying hard not to cringe too far away from that fearsome muzzle.

The vehicle was as much like an earthly farmcart as to

be immediately familiar and reassuring. The wheels were large and leather-tired, the front pair mounted on a swivel, and the cart itself was lashed and roped together with leather, rather than nailed, but the general idea was familiar. Until Hadley said—

"How the devil do they steer that beast, then? I can't see anything that looks like reins, at all!" Shanne and Speth had climbed into the cart and stood up to the front end. Thorpe heaved himself up along with the other men and waited, watching. There were three Shalla on either side of the animal. At some snapped word of command they began in concert to thump and beat on the bulky body and to kick the thick legs with their bare feet. It began to move, rolling as its legs moved three one side then three the other, slowly and ponderously. The women moved with it, persisting in their urging until the beast had worked up a creditable rate of progress, equivalent to a fast walk. Then they left off their urging and dropped back, all except one who took a flying leap square on to the squat muzzle, swaying gracefully with the seasick motion as she worked her way rearwards and wound up standing precariously on a bony ridge where the head rose in a hump to join the neck and body. There she remained, her feet astride, her bottom resting comfortably against the hump, and hands on her hips in full control of the situation.

At least that was what it looked like. "She's the driver, sure enough," Hadley declared, clinging to the side of the cart, "but I still can't see how she controls the beast!" What added to their unease was the discovery that the lumbering animal was still working up speed, and the other women were now being left behind, although they were running fast.

"Down a track like this who needs a guide?" Skoda gasped, as the cart jolted over the narrow tree-lined pathway. Thorpe, peering ahead, saw a fork rapidly coming near.

"Demonstration coming up," he said grimly. "This ought to show." It proved to be elegantly simple. He was just quick enough to see the driver-woman casually shift her foot to place it over the animal's left eye, where it was

shrouded in bone. As immediately as its weight would allow, it heaved its head round to the left, and the rest of its gross body followed as a matter of course. Whereupon she removed her foot and reclined in indifference as the great thing thudded on. Thorpe grinned. His eye fell on the two white-jacketed, white-skirted Sisters who stood up front in silent dignity, and the grin faded.

"What was the big idea suggesting Speth?" he demanded of Skoda, keeping his voice low. "You wouldn't be trying to get me put away, would you?"

"If you're thinking of going through with that notion of calling in the Earth ships to blast this place, that wouldn't be a bad ideal" Skoda retorted. "But it wasn't that, at all. Just an idea of mine. I'll tell you later, if it works out. Paddy's not the only one with psychology."

"I called it philosophy," Hadley retorted, "and it's not the same thing at all. I've been thinking about this situation here. And will you look at the hideous beast that's pulling us? A nightmare, but it's tame."

"Leave out the riddles," Thorpe growled.

"Ah, but listen, because there's a point. We look like hideous things to these women, too, remember that. They don't know that we're tame. But I would ask you to think of something else now. Not only are we the only three men on a whole planetful of women, God help us, but these are not really women at all. Be still now, Nick; what I mean is, a woman is only a woman by comparison to, and responding to, a man. How can she be feminine, otherwise?"

"If you have a point I wish you'd get to it, Paddy."

"All right, then. You've seen—you can't help seeing—the way all these lovely creatures emphasize their feminine aspects. Did you ever see a muscle-man showing off? And what's he doing, but trying hard to kid himself he's really a man? He's insecure. A sane and healthy man doesn't need to show off. A sane and healthy woman's the same, she doesn't need to make a thing of it. Bernard Shaw—an Irishman, of course—said something about it that I don't recall exactly, but to the effect that when a woman wears too much paint and not enough clothes, she is getting worried."

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"You've got me worried now," Skoda retorted. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, and I doubt if you do, either."

"I do. I know, you see, that these creatures are female, deep down inside in their biology. They can't alter that, no matter how much they might hate men on the surface, consciously. So each and every one of them is like a bomb, all wound up and ticking, and we are right in the middle of it all. We have only to put a foot wrong and the whole boiling will go up. Or down. Or sideways. Anything can happen."

"It need not," Thorpe spoke with all the confidence he could work up. "Women have been afraid of men before, and got over it."

"Three of us . . . and three million of them, maybe? And after three generations of blind hatred?"

The lumbering beast dragged them bumpily out of the tree-lined path into the sunshine at the head of a beach, and they dropped the uneasy conversation in order to study the scene. They were looking down on a large landlocked cove, the spurs of rock running out almost a mile into the sea on either hand. And the enclosed harbor was rich with small boats, some lying alongside a timbered pier on their left, the others bobbing at anchor in regular rows. They were flat-bottomed sailboats, square-prowed to let them run up on the sand and disgorge their cargo, and with shear-leg masts braced and rigged with an intricacy of cordage. A fishing fleet, every craft neat and trim. Thorpe recalled the way they had dismissed the Shalla as savages at first glance, and smiled wryly. Then his attention moved to the stained and pitted metal hulk that bobbed sluggishly at the far end of the pier.

"That's it," he said, "and still buoyant, by the look. Couldn't have been too badly shook up, after all." The Shalla woman blotted out her beast's vision entirely now, one foot over each eye, and it lumbered to a ponderous halt by the end of the pier. Shanne spoke a brief word to the driver-woman then turned and gestured to the passengers to dismount.

"The calla will wait for us here, if we require it," she said.

"Calla? That's the wagon? And what do you call that six-legged nightmare pulling it?"

"The mok?" she frowned. "It is no nightmare. Ah, you mean it is strange to you. But you have beasts of burden, surely? The mok is a very placid, rather stupid animal, but very hard working and reliable." She led off, with Speth, along the pier-planks.

Thorpe followed and looked at their mutilated craft. "Full of water," he said, "and we can't pump it out, even if we had a pump, because the door is open. And we can't pump air into it for the same reason. Because the door is open. And if we shut the door the damn thing is sealed!"

"Oh great!" Skoda scratched his head. "Now all we want is diving gear, so that we can work under water on it, in the dark with no tools!"

"What about our suits?" Hadley suggested. "We could weight the feet a bit?" Thorpe shook his head.

"We might have to, but I'd rather not if I can help it. Too damn clumsy." He paused, then went on, "I was thinking of tipping it up sideways. We might be able to buoy it so that the door stayed on top, and bail out. But it's too damn heavy. And it would be unstable, anyway."

"What d'you reckon it weighs?" Skoda wondered. "I know it's about five ton, empty, but with all that water in it it must be double, at least."

"Thinking of hoisting it? I doubt they've got tackle that powerful, but we could ask, I suppose. Shannel! You understand what we've been saying, and what we're trying to do?"

"I think so," she nodded her head very slightly, "and I will ask for you. You wish to know whether the Shalla have tackle strong enough to lift the damn thing up and let the water run out, yes?"

"Huh?" Thorpe gaped for a moment, then closed his mouth hurriedly and nodded. Skoda let out a smothered sound and he rounded on him in a flash, putting his hand up. Speth had stationed herself several feet off, aloofly indifferent. "Hold it, Nick. Not a word! I think we are about to prove you wrong, Paddy. My fault for being a bit free with my language in front of an innocent. She obviously doesn't

catch the intention of the word, only that I've used it with emphasis. And she is copying me. Which means she is willing to learn, even though she may not know it, from us. How does that square with hatred, Paddy?"

Hadley scowled and fingered his jaw, which made a scraping sound. "I'd say maybe we have instinct working for us, at that!"

Skoda gave them both an odd look, then turned as Shanne came back from a rapid colloquy with one of the Shalla women on a nearby craft. She shook her head regretfully.

"They think, from their experience in towing the damn thing, that it would be too heavy to lift out of the water. Objects gain weight as they leave the support of the water, as you no doubt know.

"Yes . . ." Thorpe sighed, then snapped his fingers suddenly. "Towing! That's it. Why can't we tow—haul—the damn thing up on the beach and just let the water run out?"

"We might get it as far as the beach, sure!" Skoda agreed. "But it is going to be one hell of a job from there. Same problem, isn't it?"

"Not a bit of it! From dry land we can get power. What about the mok? And we can surely find the equivalent of rollers with all these seafaring people about. Are you still understanding me, Shanne? We mean to haul it along this pier as far as the beach, and then heave it up on to the sand and roll it over to let the water drain out. We could do with the help and cooperation of a few of the Shalla. And the mok. And all the heavy cable we can beg or borrow." The infection of his insistence reached as far as Speth, who drew near to listen. She was sent promptly to explain to the mok-driver. Shanne passed urgent advice and instruction to the Shalla boat-women and within moments the pier was a froth of action and bustle.

Boats were hastily shoved off to give clearance. The three men laid on the lifeboat's mooring-cables with a will, hauling and struggling to get it moving and keep it moving sluggishly along the pier towards the beach. After the first five minutes on their own they found the women joining them, setting their feet and heaving lustily so that the

water-logged cylinder bobbed and bumped rapidly into the shallows and leaned over, coming up heavily on the ropes. By this time the mok had been beaten and harried into position, its head aimed up the sandy slope and heavy ropes trailing back from it, ready to bend on to the mooring lines. Thorpe flipped the sweat from his face and studied the line.

"We'll try a dead haul first," he decided. "See how far we get that way. Then, if we have to, we can run a rolling-line round her and roll her up the beach." In a rapid interchange with Shanne and several of the Shalla, he had been made to see that rollers would not serve on sand. "Quite right," he had admitted, with an apologetic grin to the women. "I should have seen that myself. Too soft, damn it!" So they tried brute force, and the mok responded gallantly, lumbering into the drag of the harness until the massive cylinder had ploughed a wet furrow for three quarters of its length. Then it could do no more, but floundered helplessly in the holes dug by its own straining feet. Thorpe called a halt, running up the lines to slap the great beast's heaving side in reward.

"Easy, boy!" he panted. "Save it for later!" He pantomimed to the driver to stop, then explained with gestures just how the ropes should be recast, wading waist-deep into the water to throw the first one. Several of the Shalla had by now discarded their gaudy sarongs and were stripped for business, down to the hip-strap harness they had worn on their first encounter. But there was no hostility now, only eager interest in their mutual task. Thorpe was surprised to find Shanne up to her knees in the slight surf to meet him as he walked out with the rope over his shoulder.

"It's too damn heavy to haul direct, see?" Thorpe explained. "But this rope goes round and under and over, and if a few of us haul on this end it will roll. Nick, better have another line ready to loop the top end when we get her swung round. Paddy, you throw your weight on this, with me. You too, Shanne, if you want to. It all helps!" She seized the rope willingly. And the pod rolled, heavily at first then

more easily, until it had twisted on its upper extremity and lay parallel to the slope of the beach. Halfway in the rolling the hatch door swung in to show a dark interior, and a fair amount of water dribbled out, but the capsule leveled with the all-important door on the upper side of the curvature.

By this time, at the risk of getting himself crushed once or twice, Skoda had managed to get a second long line looped about the cylinder at the top end, and he and Hadley, along with several Shalla, were holding on to it. Thorpe spoke over his shoulder to Shanne.

"See they hold this thing safe for a while. Nick! Hold on. I'm going up there and secure that door open somehow." With the ropes to help, he managed to get on top of the pod, and then down through the hatch into the capsule itself, down into five feet of surging water. He groped for the ruins of the shock-harness and managed to get enough of it to lash the heavy door so that it would not swing shut again. Then he was up, out, and leaping down to the sand, waving to the crowd to haul away. By now several of the Shalla had realized what he was up to, and as the pod rolled, and the dark orifice came over and down, gushing water, they crept cautiously round to the lower side with lengths of lumber. He saw them, and grinned approvingly. At the right moment he gave them the signal and the chocks were driven deep into the sand, hard up against the curved metal.

"That's it!" he cried in relief. "She's safe now. We can relax. Shanne, would you express my thanks and gratitude to the Shalla for their help? They did a damn good job!"

Again there was that familiar look of wonderment, almost of struggle, then she nodded, raised her voice and spoke to the little crowd of fisher-women. He was astounded at the way the friendly spirit of cooperation suddenly fled. In an uneasy silence the crowd looked at each other, then, one by one, they drifted away about their own business, leaving only the two Sisters to stay with the three men.

X

"WHAT WAS ALL THAT ABOUT?" He threw the question at Shanne, but it was Speth who answered him.

"The words reminded them that you were men and that they had helped you. Just as we are helping you and wondering why."

"I am not wondering why!" Shanne contradicted, more sharply than she usually spoke. "These men are not like the other kind."

"Never mind that," Skoda broke in. "We have other things to do. I would like you," and he indicated Speth, who lifted her chin instantly, "to come along with me—in there!" He nodded to the dark entrance of the pod, now at ground level. Without thought her hands crossed and reached for the twin dagger hilts by her breasts.

"Do you take me for a fool?"

"You'll be a coward, and a fool, if you don't. I want to show you something. And I may need your help, too." Thorpe saw her hesitate, and then set her jaw. Moments later she was crouching in the sand watching the radio-man squirm in at the awkward angle dictated by the lie of the pod. A second or so later the interior lit up with a blue glare. Speth knelt, peered in, then went all the way. After a moment Thorpe nodded to himself.

"You too, Shanne. There's room enough, and things you'd want to see. Go on, there's no danger." She too hesitated but soon had disappeared into the pod with Skoda.

"What's the game? What's he up to?" Hadley seemed worried.

"Professional enthusiasm. Skoda's using his head. Those girls are radio-experts, remember? It's their religion. And he's

showing them a marvel or two. There's enough life left in the batteries to energize the instruments, if nothing else. And they've never seen televisual stuff before. I'll bet their eyes are bugging." He had guessed right. The two Sisters emerged in a stunned glow.

"These are the inner secrets of hathari such as we have dreamed of but never been able to unravel. Truly you are not like other men if you understand these things. Now we have no more doubts," Shanne said. Speth put it even more pointedly. She came to stand before Thorpe, and with a swift gesture plucked out her daggers and offered them to him hilt-first.

"Never again will these be used against you, oh man. All I ask is how best I may serve the masters of this mystery."

"Keep your blades," he told her. "We are only three. There are still the other men to think of. As for help"—he turned as Skoda came dusting sand from his knees—"you're the expert here, Nick. What's the shape in there?"

"It's not all my stuff. Instruments, sure, but there's a lot more. The batteries can be recharged if we can lay hands on some hydrocarbon fuel liquid. And the drive-converter looks O.K. What we need most is tools."

After some effort and pantomime, with plenty of description in the nearest words available, it seemed there was a fair amount of tool skill among the Shalla. They worked mostly in wood and stone, of course, but they did handle a small amount of metal-craft, mostly copper and the various bronzes. They could and did make very fine quality copper and silver wire in many gauges. "And," Shanne said, "many of them, of course, have worked for the Shining Ones, on their spaceships."

"They have?" Thorpe was stunned. "These women here?"

"Some of them, yes. Does this surprise you?"

"Never mind the surprise," Skoda said; "just get us some of those ladies, if you can. Experienced spaceship builders are just what we need."

"I'll say we do!" Thorpe had a sudden flash of larger ideas. "Not just for tools, either." Speth went away at a trot to seek information and came back excitedly to tell them there

was an establishment only a short walk back from the beach where several of the experienced women had set up a kind of advanced workshop for the benefit of the harbor fleet.

"That figures," Thorpe grinned. "Come on, gang, this is just what we need. Now we're getting the breaks. Nick!" He drew his companions aside as they set off. "You and Hadley can concentrate on the breakdown angle and getting out everything that could possibly be any good. Speth can talk for you. I want to take Shanne and sort out whichever of these women knows most about those ships. If I can get anything that will do as paper and pencil or pen, I aim to find out everything I can about those shining ships. We know their main power-source and drive are the same as ours in principle, but there must be a hell of a lot more we don't know. How they compensate for high-gee, for one. And their intercom technique, for another."

They had reached the tree-line by now, and came to a wide road that was deeply rutted with the passage of many heavy-laden carts. That sight lifted his hopes still more. It indicated that whoever was at the far end of that track was accustomed to big stuff. "I wonder if they reckon their output in mok-power?" he mused, and chuckled at the thought. Shanne came to his elbow, and gave him a side-glance as they strode along.

"You are pleased, Jeremy Thorpe? Is that why you smile?"

"I like to be getting on with something, to have something to aim for," he explained. "Hope. Prospects. A chance. Does that make sense?"

"Oh yes, I understand that. And when you smile I feel I want to smile too, and be happy with you. What is damn?"

"Ah now," he shook his head in thought hard, "it's not easy to explain. It's not really a word at all, but a sound to indicate a feeling that is too strong to put in a word. Look, when you saw what there was to see in that capsule you were impressed, yes? Now, suppose I tell you that the instruments you saw are only small things, crude emergency instruments, and that the ship itself had the same things, only one hundred times as good. What then? And before

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you can speak, suppose I add this, that on Earth in time of peace we have instruments which bring huge pictures in color, and full sound, from one side of the Earth to the other, and so common that all people have these instruments in their homes. Now—have you words to express how you feel about that?"

She shook her head and sighed. "Truly yours must be a wonderful world, with such marvels, and for everyone, even the common people. It is as you say. There are no words to tell how I feel."

"That's it. We haven't got the words, either, for the times when we get excited. So we use meaningless sounds to let off some of the effect. You mustn't pay too much attention to it. But tell me, how come some of the Shalla women have been spaceship workers? Do the Shining Ones actually come here, to this island, and take them?"

"They would not dare!" she snapped. "We would die, all of us, before that should happen, hathari and Shalla alike!" Then, with a rueful smile, she relaxed her belligerence and said, "Damn!" Then in a gentler tone she explained. "The Shalla are a proud and pure people. Their elders in council made the choice long ago, the choice between suicide or honorable survival. Now, once a year they have the great games, to decide who shall be the most fit. The winners, about fifty or so, then take ship and sail to Heklon, and allow themselves to be taken by the Shining Ones."

A chill ran along his spine at the implication of her simple words. She went on in steady calm. "Those who bear males are never heard of again. They lose the gamble. But those who bear females return here. And so the Shalla people survive." He wanted to ask how the hathari managed their own survival problems, but they had now reached a clearing among the trees, and there was the workshop establishment. Four large wooden buildings lay two by two on either side of the rutted track. Chimneys gushed smoke. They heard the clank and ring of hammers on metal and buzz of machinery. The air was rich with the scent of newly cut wood and scorched metal.

The workers not only had paper and drawing instru-

ments, they had offices where nothing was done but drawing and designing. They met the "factory-manager," an older Shalla woman with authority in every line of her face and stance. She deferred to the Sisters, but kept a sharply hostile eye on the men until both Shanne and Speth had spent some time in convincing her that it was all right. Eventually Speth and the other two went off to the shed where all the hammering sounds were coming from, and Thorpe was left with Shanne and the still-suspicious manager. Shanne called her Marcath, and Thorpe saw that she must be in her fifties. But there were lines on her face, not wrinkles, and there was no sign of stiffness or withering about her shape. The only marks of authority he could see were the silver armlets she wore and the decorated inserts in the leather of her equipment. For the rest she wore as gaudy a sarong as any, and had all the uncompromising hostility that was so common to all these women. At last, however, it seemed to dawn on her that Thorpe only wanted to know what she knew about the Shining Ships, that she had secrets to reveal to someone who might be able to use them to strike at the Shining Ones. Then she moved.

In a matter of minutes the three of them were heads-close over a drawing board in one small office, and joined presently by two more, who were dexterous with charred stick and straight-edge. Marcath began with the crude outline of the ship itself, making it clear through Shanne that all the ships were exactly the same. Thorpe watched as she sketched in the various compartments, rubbing and altering until she had the general proportions right. Then she instructed her help to prepare enlargements of each space, with much to-and-fro discussion and argument. The pattern unfolded into familiarity for him. Control-space, main-drive stem and fuel storage, power-room and controls for local handling, places to eat and sleep, blisters for the weaponry. And then items not so easy to grasp, not so familiar. He put his finger on one, conveyed his question via Shanne, and the to-and-fro jabber became complex. At last Shanne said—

"This is the device, so Marcath explains it, which makes things heavy toward it? Does that mean anything?"

"Ah!" he nodded in understanding. "The pseudo-gravity unit. Yes, we have those, but not nearly as big as that. It's a damn big unit, by that drawing, but maybe their design is different from ours." He intended to pass on to something else, but a younger assistant had already begun a detailed sketch of the unit in question, viewed from the outside, and he was caught, suddenly, by one or two odd features of it. There was what looked like a sheaf of output leads, for one thing. He had never heard of output, certainly not along wires, from a grav-unit! Where would be the point? The unit generated a field analogous to a magnetic stress, not a current flow.

"Check up on those will you, Shanne? Ask what they are for." The chattering and gesturing went on for some time, and she said, at last—

"They say that these are wires, thick ones, which run throughout the ship structure and are terminated in the outside shell. Marcath says that it is very important that the ends be melted into one piece with the shining outer surface in all cases, that the Shining Ones are very particular that this be done properly."

"So it must be important. I'll remember that, though I can't see the point of it, at the moment." They went on to other matters, to detail on the heat-beamers and the fragmentation-bomb throwers, the mechanism of opening and closing the ports for these. He had no idea, at this stage, what might be most important. The only thing was to grab everything he could get. It took the raucous scream of a hooter to remind him that time was still passing at the standard rate and that he was acutely hungry.

"It's about time we packed it in," he said. "For the day, anyway. I'd like to take away the best of these sketches, and I'd be obliged if our good friends here could turn out a few more sometime. Anything in detail that we haven't covered so far." When Shanne had relayed that, he added: "And please tell Marcath, and her assistants, that I'm very

grateful for all the help, that I hope to be able to repay this somehow!"

He remembered what Speth had said, the last time gratitude had been expressed, so he was not too surprised to see a similar reaction here. But it was less marked. The three Shalla stood back, stiffening in hostility, putting on the look they had lost in the absorption of their work, but after just time for one deep breath, Marcath stood forward again, and raised her right hand to lay it across her body to her left breast. She bowed stiffly and said something that made Shanne stare and think before answering. As soon as they were outside again, and the Shalla had gone to tend to their neglected business, Thorpe demanded an explanation. Shanne was pink with confusion and distress.

"Without thinking," she muttered, "I have done you a disservice. In speaking to the Shalla I have used their word for 'men'. There is no other word, you see? But of course, men—they have the same feeling as we, or anyone, about men. The men we know of. So when I say—"These men are grateful to you"—it is the wrong thing! I should have had more wit than that. I am ashamed! Damn!"

"That's all right!" he laughed. "You couldn't help it. We shall have to work up some different kind of image, that's all. But what about the old woman, Marcath, and that little ritual she performed?"

"She is older, and perhaps more sensible than most. She spoke the general words which are used in saying greetings and good-byes—but the gesture of hand-on-breast is one I do not know. I will ask Mother Hathar."

"Meantime, we'd better get back down to the beach and see how the work is going. I hope Nick and Paddy got the tools they wanted, or all our dreams are shot!"

The mok had been hustled back into harness again and the cart was loaded with precious fragments. Hadley came toiling up the sand with the medicine chest in one hand and a battery-module in the other, to lay them in the cart.

"There's a few more battery-clusters left," he puffed, "and the main body of the drive-unit. We can't get that out without cutting-torches, and it would be no good if we had it.

But the rest came apart fairly easy once we got started. Bailing out the last of the water was the bad bit. Here comes Nick and the girleen now. She's a worker, that one!" Speth was pink-flushed with effort and her hair had come down to stream about her face, but she strode steadily with a battery-module in each fist. On her heels came Skoda, weary but looking pleased with himself.

"Enough stuff here to keep me busy for weeks," he panted, laying his burden on top of the rest. "That's the lot. So far as I can tell, it all works, and there's plenty of power available now, for just about anything we are going to need, short of blasting off. What a day! I could do with something to eat—and a shavel!"

"That gives me a notion," Thorpe muttered as they scrambled into the cart and the starting-up performance began. "Shanne—to your knowledge, do the Shining Ones have hair on their faces?"

Both she and Septh were baffled by the question. Weary as she was, Speth leaped down from the cart and went off to inquire among the Shalla, to come running back just as the mok began to get lumberingly under way. She sprang for the tail-board, accepted Skoda's outstretched hand as help, clambered aboard, and then shook her head.

"None of them have ever seen a Shining One so afflicted," she told them. "How would such a thing happen?"

"You are about to learn. Gents, fellow-sufferers in the fight for glory, we are about to become the Bearded Ones!" While Skoda and Hadley stared he explained the matter of image. "We're men, but different, get it? If we look different, it will make things easier all round."

"Me with fur!" Skoda scraped his bristling chin and groaned. "And just when I was breaking down a few barriers, too. Do we have to?"

"Don't be too quick to write it off as a loss, Nick. Not only will it make us different from men—their version of men—but we'll be very different from them, the women, too. And that's a help. Right, Paddy?"

"I'll go along with that. They can't grow whiskers, begod!"

"And you're not doing so bad anyway," Thorpe added meaningfully. "You gave Speth a hand just now and she never turned a hair. When I was talking with Shanne last night she nearly died because I accidentally touched her. We are getting on."

"You still think it's a noble idea to tip off Earth that this is a Vegan base, then?" Skoda jerked the question, and Thorpe frowned.

"Maybe not. There might be a better way, it all depends. Does that mean you will be able to make a Dirac?"

"I can't guarantee it will work, and I haven't a hope of making a receiver to check. I told you, the detection technique here is completely out of step with anything we know. But I ought to be able to do a lot on the transmission side. Apart from raw power, theirs is pretty much the same as ours. It'll take three or four days before I can tell for sure, but right now the prospects look all right."

Hadley braced his back against the side of the cart and put his foot on a shaking stack of battery-units. "You're all confused," he said to Skoda. "First you say you're against bringing violent warfare to this nice quiet planet, and I'm with you. Then you say you think you can build a Dirac transmitter. Why bother? Why say it? You could have told us it was impossible and never a bit of difference would we have known."

"Because I have another idea, that's all. A message to Earth will get there in about ten days. And sure they could send a heavy fleet and blast the place. But they could also send, maybe, a couple of shipsful of experts, sneak them in quietly, and we'd have an underground movement, see what I mean. These shrines might have been made for the job—with exclusive radio, and the girls will cooperate given the chance. We've proved that, and we're just third-rate crew. Think what experts might do, in our place!"

It was good thinking, and Thorpe was slightly disgusted with himself for not having had the idea earlier. But there were snags.

"You were the one who talked about leaks, I recall," he said. "We know a bit more now. It's not likely that these

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women will betray us to the Vegans, agreed. But they could be made to talk. Or rooted out and put to whatever is Vegan for torture—if they get any sort of hint as to what is going on. We're only three, and we've been lucky so far. But a gang—is a different matter."

"It's worth a try. It's a damn sight better than your notion, of advertising the place as a base and getting it pulverized!"

"All right, Nick! Don't fly off the handle. I'm just trying to suggest this: Whatever we try to do, we owe it to these women to let them know, to pass their opinion for or against—first. When we get back, you and Paddy can handle this stuff, tell them what you've got, what you can do with it. But I'm going to see the old woman and warn her what's likely to happen, see what she says."

Mother Hathar was almost affable as she greeted him in her chamber. "I hope you have managed to gather much valuable equipment, enough to show us some of your advanced secrets. We are keen to be taught."

XI

"WE MAY BE ABOUT to teach you something disastrous. With the parts we've secured, and a lot of work, and some luck, we may be able to send a message to Earth."

"That would be a wonderful achievement." Her voice was neutral.

"A different kind of radio. The message would get there in ten days or so. It could bring an Earth fleet here within thirty days."

"A fleet of Earth ships? And their purpose?"

"That's the point, isn't it?" He explained the alternatives. An all-out devastating attack on a Vegan base, with all the

slaughter and pollution that would ensue; or a sneak infiltration of skilled and expert fifth-column agents, and the inevitable reprisals. Her small, sterile bosom heaved just once.

"Why do you tell me these things?"

"Because you deserve the chance to choose. We know where our duty lies. Our job is to hit the Vegans, if we can. But this is your planet. You people are human, like us. We've come to like the place, and the people. We don't want to bring you misery, although it seems our fate to do just that."

"Life seldom offers us choices," she said, "and when it does, they are difficult ones. You have already brought unrest. My sources of information are many and detailed. You disturb my Sisters. You upset the Shalla. Chief-constructor Marcath is almost as old as I am, and remembers the old gestures between man and woman. Real man, that is. Such delicate matters would be best left forgotten."

"I'm sorry about that, but I'm talking about real trouble now, not trivial matters."

"Trivial?" Her old eyes flashed for a moment. "You think it a trivial matter to agitate my little flock and make them think and feel futile and impossible things? However, I have an answer of a kind to your big problem. Is it not true that you would risk much, even your own survival, if you could strike a blow at the Shining Ones?"

"That's part of the hazard of war."

"Of course. Credit us, then, with the same high purpose. But, because we lack any resource, any positive weapon, we have had to consider other means. More subtle ones. Do you know anything of medicine?"

"Not much, why?"

"We could do with help in our research. We seek a way of determining the sex of the unborn. We have been working on this problem for many years. A way to make sure that only female children are produced in the nests of the Shining Ones."

It took him several stunned seconds to grasp the full import of her quiet words. Then, "But wouldn't they suspect—suppose you made it possible? Wouldn't they—?"

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"Exact vengeance? Perhaps. We think not, but does it matter? In fact, they would probably just go away. They do not think as we do. They stay, they use us, only so long as we are useful. If we ceased to provide male children, they would leave."

"And then you'd be faced with planetary suicide!"

"We would have a few peaceful years, before the end. You see, your talk of bringing disaster is not so frightening, not to us."

"How many people know about this sex-control thing?"

"Not just the fanatical few," she answered his unspoken question. "For instance, that message I was attending was to say that on the day after tomorrow the Queen-Mother of Heklon is visiting us."

"For what?"

"Not because of you." She cracked a sneering smile. "We hathari preserve an uneasy alliance with the civil power against the common foe, even though we disagree on everything else. Ruthel of Hecklon, with her gaudy retinue, will come to make pilgrimage to Hathar. That is for show. In fact she will want to know how our researches are proceeding, and whether or not we yet have a weapon of some other kind." She put her dry old hands on the table and studied them. "We have tried in many ways to strike down the evil ones, but without success. They go armed, always. They strip those women they use, and search them. And they move always in numbers. Two or more. Never alone."

"But surely," he growled, "a dozen husky women could lay for a couple and smash them? There's only a hundred all told!"

"It has been tried. Strike two, and in two breaths there are two score coming to aid. With no cry or sound. As if they share a common mind. Such is the myth, indeed, that they all think as one."

"Telepathy?" He chewed his lip at the notion. "That's not a myth, necessarily. Our science was investigating that kind of thing, before the war stopped it. We never got any answers that I know of, but we did have some funny

results. It would explain a lot if they do have mental links of some kind. However, it won't help us right now. About this royal visit. You want us to keep out of the way?"

"You are men!" The simple phrase was sufficient.

Thorpe made his way back down to the laboratory room slowly and in sober thought, elusive problems itching his mind. He found Skoda in the heart of a cluster of bright and engrossed faces. From somewhere the radio-man had acquired some sheets of a clear flexible stuff on which he had made ripple designs in an attempt to clarify wave-theory and modulation. He was now showing them the elegantly simple proof of the Dirac ultra-wave method.

"This wave," he said, "travels at the ultimate speed, which we call 'c.' So does any other wave. No wave can travel faster. But an impressed modulation can. Let me show you just how. I put this wave on top of that one, see?" and he laid two transparencies one over the other against a white paper background. "Now, if I move one of them just a little—the interaction between the two moves quite a lot. See that? What moves is the relationship between the two, not the waves themselves. It's that idea that we use in making a transmitter that will send messages—modulations—relationships—at many times the speed of the carrier waves."

Thorpe worked his way round the group to where Hadley leaned against a wall watching and looking bored. "The girls are lapping it up," he whispered, "but it's all Greek to me. I feel useless!"

"Not much call for a beamer-mechanic here. What they really need is a fertility-clinician." Hadley furled his brows in bafflement but Thorpe was too desperately depressed to care to explain. An isolated word came out of Skoda's talk, and rang a bell in his mind, one that he listened to with avidity. Power! Batteries using vegetable acids and plates was all the hathari had. Skoda had said so. But they knew about copper wire, and the old woman had said they knew how to make falling water work for them. Water-mill

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—copper wire—now if only they had magnets. He gave Hadley a wink, and a nod.

"Come on," he invited, "with me. I've just thought of a way we can help. I need you to put the charm on the duty-announcer!"

There was a different startled-faced teen-ager in the transmitter-room this time. Hadley had her gentled and cooperative in less than five minutes of talk. Her name was Lyree, and she was only too willing to serve the Earth master. Yes, they knew of the steel so treated that it clung to other steel or iron. Yes, it was common and the Shalla metal-workers would surely know of it. Was that all the Earth men wanted? Lyree seemed just a trifle disappointed at the briefness of her danger. Thorpe was growing sensitive to nuances by now, and he appreciated Mother Hathar's comments about her flock beginning to forget their vows. It is one thing to swear off men when the only samples available are viciously inhuman, but quite another when that situation is drastically changed. Thorpe pulled his mind away from dizzy speculations in that line.

To Hadley he said, "We have a job on, you and I. Skoda can teach them all he wants about powered transmitters, but so long as he has the only available source, those batteries, it is not going to help the other shrines all over this world much. We are going to show them how to make power without batteries. Where there are water-mills, or windmills, and copper wire, and magnets—and a bit of know-how—"

"Got you!" Hadley said. "It should be a pushover. When do we start, first thing in the morning?"

"You bet. And that means an early night. Which is right now, for me. I could do with just one night's sleep!"

It seemed that he had no sooner stretched out on his bed and shut his eyes than he was opening them again, muzzily, to the sound of Skoda coming to bed. The radio-man was draggingly weary but jubilant.

"Wake you up? Sorry. You must be as bushed as me. But those girls are dead keen and they catch on fast. They'd

have me talking yet if it hadn't been for some duty roster or something. Vigil, they call it."

"Ah yes." Thorpe smiled to himself and turned over to sleep again, wondering who would be keeping watch on the roof tonight. Again it seemed he had scarcely dropped off before a hand shook him, very gently. His irritated growl was smothered as he sat up to see a familiar figure dart back from his side and stand trembling.

"Shannel" he whispered. "What's wrong? Trouble?"

"Of a kind. Are you very tired?"

"Not all that much. Can I help at all?"

"It is my vigil time in a moment. Would you—come and talk?"

"If that's what you want, sure. Shall I wait for the bell and then come up there?" She nodded and went silently away. The vision of her seductive curves retiring from sight gave him a momentary alarm as he remembered what Hadley had said about explosive repressions. And the old woman's veiled hints about disturbing her flock with "futile" longings. The chime stirred him. He buckled on his skirt and went out. As he gained the roof she was sitting as before. She rose to meet him, shaking visibly with nerves.

"I am torn," she said abruptly, "between loyalties. I will tell you and let you judge. I believe you will speak true."

"I'll try. But what loyalties?"

"I am a priestess of hathari. Mother Hathar is Supreme. But you have inner secrets of hathari such as we have only dreamed of, so you must be far above her. Is that true?"

"That's not a fair question, Shanne. I know some things she doesn't, yes, but if it comes to a conflict between who you should obey, I can't say one way or the other until I know what the point is. I'm no high priest."

She turned away, moved a step, then swung back to him. "Last night I spent a vigil here, with you. As you know. I was defenseless, yet you did not harm me. You touched me and I was afraid, yet you were kind. You were moved by my story of the evil that has come to our land." She made a gesture of groping. "It was all so confusing that,

in the morning, I went to Mother Hathar and confessed all, every word."

He stood very still, keeping his face straight. So this was what the old woman had been hinting at!

"What did she say?"

"She was angry. She said that although you were a man of Earth, and to be respected, yet you were still a man, and thus to be feared and suspected.

"She could be right, at that. But go on, what made you doubt?"

"Today you and the other men showed us that not only were you great masters of hathari and other mysteries, but that you work as we do, sweat as we do, and even the Shalla were impressed. So I think that perhaps Mother Hathar is wrong, or that perhaps she is envious of your great powers." Her green-silver eyes were wide on his, seeking his opinion. He would have laughed had the situation been less fraught with peril. Hadley was right about the instincts, after all. Was there some way he could turn a fact of nature to good account? Putting the question that way reminded him of another fact of nature and suggested a daring scheme.

"Come and sit down," he invited. "This wants some explaining. Let me ask you one thing first. Are you aware of the idea Mother Hathar is working on, about predetermining the sex of the unborn child?"

"Oh yes," she nodded. "All the Superior Sisters have studied it."

"So you know all about sex. And you yourself told me that the Shining Ones impregnate women, so you know all about that, too!" He watched her keenly from the corner of his eye as he spoke, saw her stiffen and shudder, and then he knew what he was up against.

"You don't have much happiness here, do you? Shanne, one of the the greatest of all joys is the deep affection between a man and a woman. That is something Mother Hathar knows nothing of, because she was still a baby when the last real men vanished from your lives. We three are ordinary men. If I speak for myself I speak for all when I say

that you are a lovely girl, very attractive. Any man would feel as I do. Any real man, that is. The last thing I want is to do you any harm."

"Are Earth women like me?"

"Not very many of them are quite so lovely. But I can show you." He dug out the 3-D photographs and she produced a night-light from beneath the round seat. She was fascinated both by the texture of the pictures and the subjects. And delighted when he told her one was his sister, and the other his mother. Her shivering had disappeared by the time he put the pictures away again.

"More great wonders," she sighed. "Is there no end to them?"

"Let me show you a greater one still," he said, and put his arm round her waist as she sat by him. For a moment she was as tense as a guitar string, sitting quite still. Then, insensibly, she began to relax, to lean against him.

"It is a strange and disturbing feeling," she whispered. "An uneasiness, but pleasant, like nothing I have ever known before." She turned her face to his, very close and wide-eyed in the starlight.

"Now try this," he breathed, and kissed her very tenderly. Breathless moments later she snuggled close to him and heaved a deep sigh of pleasure.

"This is the way it's supposed to be between real men and women," he told her. "Something Mother Hathar has never known and cannot possibly understand, so there's no point in telling her, because she would forbid it. She would rather defeat the Shining Ones by making the whole of Lodor a place of women. We three hope to do it differently. If we can get an Earth fleet here and destroy the Shining Ones, this planet can breed men again, real men."

"And then all women will be able to feel as I feel now?"

"That's it. Now, who's side are you on?"

She sighed again, turned her face up to his and answered him in the simplest and most convincing way possible. When the silver chime sounded she was shocked into exclaiming—

"It cannot be! So soon? Never has a vigil passed so

swiftly, or so joyously for me. Will there be other times like this?"

"Why not?" he said, with a touch of grimness. "We could be stuck here for a lifetime if things don't work out."

"Not I. My time is short. The Sisters of Hathar do not live long."

"Eh! What's that mean?"

"I told you the shrines had been destroyed by the Shining Ones. Some escaped, some were rebuilt, all are secret, but regularly the Shining Ones seek out our shrines and try to wipe them out. Here on Shallon is the Supreme Shrine, and from here the Sisters go out, as needed, to keep the holy skills alive. Soon it will be my turn to go."

He chilled despite himself, because this was something he could do nothing about. It made sense. At all costs the line of communication had to be kept open. But what a way to do it! Persecution and martyrdom! He was more than ever glad that he had brought a little happiness into her life before it was too late.

It took him long to fall asleep, and he woke early.

"Nick! Paddy!" he stirred out his companions. "I want a word, while we have the chance. Listen. Our coming and being here is beginning to upset the old woman. She's on our side up to a point, but you have to remember that she is the supreme boss, the high priestess—and now that we've come along, we are making her look second best, and she is liable to get nasty."

"What d'you want us to do" Nick grumbled. "Overthrow her regime?"

"Nothing like that. Look, I've managed to break down a lot of the fear between me and Shanne. The instincts you were talking about, Paddy. I think I have her on my side. How are you doing with Varis? And how's your influence with Speth, Nick? What I'm getting at, can we count on some support if it comes to a clash? We may need all the help we can get, any time."

"I ~~think~~ Varis is getting a bit fond of me," Hadley admitted awkwardly. "I didn't want to push it. She's a fine girl."

"I know you," Thorpe snapped. "I know you won't do her any harm. I know Nick, too. It sounds like taking advantage, but if we can keep those girls on our side, we'll be six instead of three, and it might make all the difference." They argued awhile but he had his way in the end. He pursued the other leg of his plan as soon as they were seated and he could get Mother Hathar's ear.

"A waterwheel?" she echoed. "Yes, we have such things. There is one very near here. In season it is used for grinding grain. It will be deserted at this time."

"Good. Then I won't be disturbing anybody." He laid out his ideas for her approval. He and Shanne would find this wheel. Nick had promised to supply a generator. It was nothing more than one of the pod's servo-motors slightly modified. And Hadley, with Varis, would lay a twin wire all the way from the shrine to the wheel. "Then," he explained, "we will be able to provide you with power for hathari such as you have never had before."

Her old eyes glittered, but her face gave nothing away. She said only, "If it is for hathari then I will not speak against it. You may do as you wish."

That was a day that the three were to look back on as an interlude in the urgency of war. Rigging and securing the generator took very little time. Shanne was awed and impressed by the violence of the spark he showed her, once the motor was spinning, but her greatest delight came when, after they had shared their picnic meal, she asked him to show her more of the magic feeling between a man and a woman. He discovered, to their mutual rapture, that her instincts were as true and deep as any normal, healthy woman's. It bothered the happy pair not at all that Hadley and Varis took a long, long time to appear with the double wire, but it was obvious to Thorpe that Varis glowed more beautifully than ever when he saw her, and that Hadley had not wasted any time winning her over.

Once the connections were made, sparks must have been flying at Skoda's end, for it was less than an hour later that he and Speth came excitedly to report that all was well. And there were other sparks, for those with eyes. Speth

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clung to Skoda's hand unashamedly, and no one would have believed that this laughing girl was the same who had been so swift with her knife only a little while earlier. They were becoming human and normal, Thorpe mused, and they looked glorious in it, but how much longer could it go on? And when, when would they be able to do something positive to strike at the Vegans? Dynamo-power was fine. Skoda would describe how to make it, over the air, and in short order every shrine in Lodor would have a boost. But that didn't hit the Vegans, at all! And tomorrow was the state visit of Ruthel of Heklon. Thorpe wondered. Perhaps he might get more sense from the civil power!

XII

NICK SKODA WAS BUSY in the laboratory next to the radio-room, trying to devise a workable twelve-volt lamp with limited materials, and happy with his struggle. Thorpe had asked permission from old Hathar for himself and Hadley to be somewhere where they could watch the ceremonials. Now it was close on noon and the two men, together with Edda, who had gone along to show them the way, were secreted in a small niche high above the Chapel. It was a place to remember. This was where they had stood, naked and defenseless, while the old woman deliberated whether to spare them or not. Now they were respected guests. Or were they? Thorpe had his own opinions on that. From where he stood he could see the hathari assembled in rows on either side the throne where the old woman sat. Now, for this occasion, they all wore a long cowed robe of white, even Hathar herself. Thorpe was reminded, grimly, that this was in fact a quasi-religious order.

The chatter of voices and the rustle of feet brought all

heads round to gaze at the entrance as the Royal party made its appearance. Thorpe looked, and could hardly believe what he saw. This was culture confused and run riot, insanity openly declared. This was what happened when the balance of nature was violently upset. He could pick out Queen-Mother Ruthel only because of her place. It would have been an impossibility for any one person, however unusual, to stand out plainly in this peacock motley. She was regally tall, arrogant, and spectacularly lovely, but so were they all. Her hair was elaborately coiffed, laced with gold wires and brooches, alive with jewels, and it was as vividly blue as any sapphire. But there were hair-styles all about her in every hue from the glint of silver to the purple-black of iodine. Around her slim neck lay bands of pearls and flaming gems. A gown bellowed from shoulders to feet in flame and green. Her skirt was of the same clashing color scheme. Her fingers were thick with jewels, and bands circled her wrists and ankles, and from the fair smoothness of her brow to the tips of her sandaled toes she was as pure a yellow as a primrose.

The eye-catching beauty on her right was blush-rose pink. On her left swayed a Venus with a rich mauve complexion. Complexions came like an insane spectrum, matching and clashing with gowns in garish hues. They smiled and chattered, those bright-eyed beauties, in skins of emerald green, in wine-red, in sinuous indigo, or the purest flame-orange, and they were gowned, jeweled and trinketed until Thorpe's eyes reeled from the sight. Hadley, just that little bit harder-headed, noticed a common factor in all the extravaganza.

"Will you look, now?" he muttered. "Just like the others. They all manage somehow to keep their breasts bare. And their stomachs too! D'ye see that?"

Thorpe looked again, and had to agree. However outré the gown, the plaster of jewelry, or the billow of skirt, each one took care to be revealed down to the navel in front. Thirty or more dazzling figures now rustled towards old Hathar's throne, and there was no exception to the rule among them all. Edda anticipated their question.

"It is the only way to make light of an evil," she said.

"The Shining Ones will not allow any woman who is with child to venture far from their reach, not even Queen Ruthel herself. So it is the fashion to let the stomach be freely shown. It is almost a pride!"

"I suppose they'd never have been allowed to take a boat-ride otherwise?" Thorpe growled, his anger flaming at this further evidence of the inhuman qualities of the Vegans, and his admiration immediate for the courage of these women in so boldly accepting the affront and turning it to a kind of mockery. "But those colors of skin—are they artificial, a dye?"

"No one knows." Edda gave him a twisted smile. "The women of Lodor began to change color long ago. Some say it was because of accidents before they knew the proper ways of handling the strange machinery of the shining ships. . . ."

"Stray radiation, you mean?"

"It is believed so. In the first days many children were born puny, or deformed, or dead. And some were—colored. Others say that the new colors were because of whatever it is that is done to the males, or because some of the males came here from other worlds, where things are not the same as here. Whatever the true answer may be, it has become the custom for all women so to stain and dye themselves that no one knows what is their true tint, and thus the shame of impurity is hidden."

Camouflage, he thought, and again he admired the courage that had prompted them to act to hide their scars.

Edda went on, "Some of us are born pure, by great good fortune. Of these are the hathari chosen. The white ones. That is why we wear all things white. With the Shalla also, only white ones are accepted. They are a very proud people. There are a few other such groups, not many."

The acoustics of the chapel were such that the three could hear all that passed between the two so-dissimilar rulers, but neither man could understand a word. Formalities, Thorpe supposed, until he saw a tense smile on Edda's face, saw her bob her head as at some satisfaction. Then she turned to him, very close in the small space of the niche, and the

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smile on her lovely face was such as to make him feel a chill.

"Hathar has just requested Ruthel of Heklon to give passage for three of us when her ship returns to the city this evening. Three of us for whom the time has come to leave the Mother Shrine, to go into the world and become Superiors of other shrines far away."

Shanne had warned him of this. His tongue felt dry as he asked, "Which three?"

Edda smiled again, evilly. "Shanne, Varis, and Speth!"

"Eh? Hadley grunted. "What was all that?"

"The old woman has just shown her hand. She has arranged to get rid of three Sisters. And you need no help to guess why those three. Shanne and me. You and Varis. And Speth practically hangs on Nick's every word. So she has decided to break it up, the old bitch!"

Edda gasped and made double snatching movements, but Thorpe was seething with rage, and faster than she at grabbing. She hissed as he caught each of her wrists in a savage grip. Her bosom heaved mightily as she strove to break his hold, but in vain.

"Pig-stick me, would you? I ought to take these toys away from you and tickle you with them. Hold still, damn it, or I'll snap both your wrists. I mean just that!"

She groaned as he applied pressure. Her teeth showed as she said, "I do not fear you, or death!"

"Maybe you don't, but there's something you might think worse, and I am a man, remember?" For a moment he thought she was going to faint. She went limp in his grip.

"What do you want of me?"

"Nothing from you, particularly, just that you'd better not try to do that again. You can do something *for* me, though. You go see Hathar, urgently, and fix it so that we can have a heart-to-heart talk with her. Right? And tell her it *is* urgent, that if she doesn't play ball we have a trick or two up our sleeves that will scare the daylights out of her, and the rest of you. Now get!" and he released her arms so that she could stalk away.

Hadley sighed. "Now what?"

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"I'm not sure, but whatever happens, we three have got to stick together on it. Come on, let's find Nick and tell him what goes on."

Skoda had his arm up to the elbow in a tangle of gleaming wires, with Speth craning over and peering to guide him. The glow left her cheeks as she saw their grim faces. It took the radio-man a long and scowling moment to grasp the point of their news, but Speth understood it instantly.

"It is my duty," she whispered. "And my honor, but I wish it were otherwise." Thorpe choked back the scorching words that came to his lips.

"Duty? I'm not buying that kind of coincidence. This is a deliberate move by old Hathar to break up our relationships. I *thought* she was hatching something!"

"But what can we do?" Skoda demanded. "There's only three of us up against a couple hundred females armed to the teeth."

"They don't mind getting killed, either," Hadley reminded. "I'd like to have a crack at some of them, but where would it get us, apart from sudden and uncomfortable death?"

"There are ways." As always, Thorpe's wits functioned better under pressure. To Skoda he said, "Didn't you say our suit-units were a lot more powerful than the best they can do here? Can they be boosted more?"

"Nothing to it. Bypass a capacitor or two and they'd output up to ten times as much. Wouldn't do the batteries any good, mind, but it would work for a short while. But it would play hell with their delicate receivers . . . hey!"

"You've got it. That's one surefire way we can twist their arms. Hathar won't risk having her holy hathari shattered."

"But what good will it do to challenge Hathar?" Speth demanded. "Even if she has chosen us three deliberately, it is still our duty to go, or if not ours then someone else's. The holy places must be kept!"

Before he could answer there came the scurry of soft feet, and they were joined by Shanne and Varis who came throwing back their cowls and openly revealing their distress.

"You've heard." Thorpe eyed them. "No need to dwell on

it. I think Hathar has done this on purpose. I also think I can call her play on it. But let's settle one issue first. Which would you rather do, abide by the rules, obey, do your duty, and hope some day either to die the death along with a Shining One, or find some way to promote the mass suicide of the whole of Lodor—that? Or take one hell of a gamble with me, now, and possibly find some way of taking a crack at the enemy and doing him some damage? You pick it."

"Ah now, hold on, Jeremy," Hadley objected. "That sounds fine and grand, but what the devil can we hope to do?"

"A lot. Listen. We have—or will have, soon—a Dirac. Right, Nick?" He threw the question to Skoda, who nodded.

"Twenty-four hours and she should be ready."

"That's one strike. We have, also, a lot of stuff about Vegan ships. Not everything, but a lot. It may not make much sense to us, but it will to the double-domes back on Earth."

The two men shrugged in concert. "That's a gamble, all right." Hadley growled, "I've had a look at those drawings. The only thing new to me that I can make anything of is that pseudo-grav unit. . . ."

"You mean, with all those leads to the hull?" Skoda queried. "I saw that. You know what I thought. I did a bit of pseudo-grav theory one time. Inertial-field stuff. If those leads actually flow the field out to the hull then the whole of the ship's interior will be inertialess."

"Strike!" Thorpe cried. "Nick, you know what you've just said? You have put your finger right on the reason why the Vegan ships can fly rings round ours in combat. Got to be. And dead obvious, too. *Now* do you see what I'm getting at? We have a stack of stuff that must be equally valuable, that we have got to get out. And there's a lot more we can get, by the simplest method of all. We can get it, if we take a chance!"

He had his next words all ready, but a chill voice from the laboratory doorway chopped him off short.

"You challenge my authority, Earthman Thorpe?"

Hathar stood there, bleak and calm, with a dozen of the Superior Sisters ranged on either side of her, all with dag-

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gers drawn ready. Thorpe edged aside just enough to be able to whisper to Skoda:

"Pretend to be fixing your suit-unit, Nick. I'll tell you when to put on the act." Then he moved away and stood clear, looking the old woman full in the eye, just as bleak and determined as she was.

"Call it a challenge if you like. Let's say I question your motives, your personal and private motives in deciding to send away these particular three at this particular time."

"You have neither authority nor power to question anything I do."

"It's not my power, or authority, but your boast. You claim the hathari always speaks true. And you are Hathar, more true than any. So I challenge you to speak true, by your boast, your faith, and tell us all exactly why you choose to send out these three at this time. The truth!"

The words cut deep. Not all her age and skill could hide the fact that she was inwardly torn. And doubt grew the longer he hesitated. At last, in a voice thick with fury, she cried—"Seize them! Kill them, and those other three faithless ones!"

"Wait!" Thorpe snapped, as the white-robed figures surged forward. "Hathar fears the truth and dare not say it. Therefore hathari is false, you are all deluded, and I do not hesitate to destroy your instruments!"

The surge halted, the lovely faces uncertain and confused. Only the old woman stood firm.

"He cannot destroy hathari. Pay no heed to his nonsense!"

"Nonsense? Think again, old woman." He snatched his suit-unit from its place on his hip and raised it close to his mouth. "Have you forgotten that I once spoke to you through this, in a voice like thunder. Hear now your own transmission." He pressed the receive switch and they all heard the steady voice of the vigil-operator on duty in the nearby room relayed by the thing in his hand. As he released the switch again the laboratory was as still as death, so still that tiny rustlings from the agitated robes were plainly audible.

"Think of this," he told them. "This unit is set for low power, low by our standards. Nick has just reset that one

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he's holding so that it is a hundred times more powerful. You saw him do it. Do I speak true?"

"That's right," Skoda nodded, holding the unit up.

"And now," Thorpe said, "listen, foolish old woman, to what *this* one can do!" He thumbed the talk switch, held the unit close and called, loud and long, "Hathareeee!" The howling roar of the speaker in the next chamber was instant, and terrifying. The white-robed sisterhood wilted. Hathar herself ducked and raised a hand to her face in fear. The giant sound echoed and died, and they heard a scream and crash as the unfortunate operator recoiled from her instrument. Thorpe glared at the assembly.

"Now let's have the knives," he challenged. "Take us. Come on! No matter how quick you are, Nick has only to scream once into his unit and your sacred hathari will burst into fragments—and you know it!"

The deadlock held in silent fury for three long breaths, then broke in the only way it could. Hathar dredged up what was left of her dignity.

"What do you want of us?"

"Two things, for now. First, nobody gets sent anywhere just yet. We need all the brains and skill we can get, right here. Second, I want audience and cooperation from you on a plan I have in mind, just as soon as I can work out a few final details. Before that ship departs. Right?"

Hathar bowed stiffly, whirled round and stalked away, taking the Sisters with her.

XIII

"MAN!" HADLEY SIGHED. "That was a hell of a bluff you put up. My hair was turning whiter every minute."

"A bluff?" Varis slid out of her cloak and stared at him. "What is a bluff?" Hadley took her cloak and folded it to lay on a bench.

"You didn't think we would really bust your precious hathari, did you, me darlin'? We were only pretending!"

"It's a thought, though," Skoda said. "I reckon it might be a good idea to change the wave-lengths on our units, switch over to a higher frequency altogether. Then we'd have private air and no eavesdroppers. I'll do that right now, while I think of it."

"What's this plan?" Hadley demanded, passing over his unit, and letting his arm find its own way about Varis, without any objection from her.

"The robes gave me the hint," Thorpe replied. "You can't tell who, or what, is under those things. So if we could borrow a couple, me and Paddy, and hitch a ride on that ship . . .?"

"To do what?"

"To see if we can't knock off a Vegan!" Thorpe waited until the storm of protest had died a little, then, "I'm not out of my mind, at all. Look, we can do it this way." He spelled out his tentative scheme for them, and they argued. They tried to prove it was suicide, but he matched them point for point with ready suggestions. The exercise had its reward in that he was able to use the experience to match the same objections all over again from Hathar as he laid out the plan for her ears.

"It is sheer madness," she declared. "It is well known that when one is struck, many others come at once and all are armed."

"Do they move at night?"

"In the evening, when the workday is over, yes. There are those who prowl for any unfortunate women who may be so unwise as to be about."

"Those are the ones I'm after. We will hit 'em so fast and hard they won't know what's happened. And we'll blind 'em so they can't tell tales. And then we'll make 'em talk, somehow."

He won his point. Skoda was furious because it was insisted that he stay and carry on with the Dirac, with Speth. Thorpe wanted either Shanne or Varis to drop out, to keep the number right, but in this one case he was met by op-

position that would not yield. Varis offered to cut his throat there and then at thought of letting Hadley go without her, and Shanne said nothing, but held his hand and shook her head. So it was that when Ruthel of Hecklon set sail with her peacock court and her gaudily decked craft there were four silent and aloof white-robed figures in the prow, and only those four knew that a little Shalla ship set off to follow at a horizon's distance, as part of the mad scheme.

The red flush of sunset stained the sky as the ship came to its first sight of Heklon. Thorpe was more and more impressed as the outline of the city grew into view. To Shanne, by his side, he murmured, "I didn't expect anything half as big as this. It's huge. Those buildings must be tremendous!"

"I have been this way once before, on a duty visit to the shrine which lies beyond the city. It looks imposing, but you will find that a lot of it is decaying and neglected. Especially about the center, where the Shining Ones build their ships. Do you see the dome, now?"

"Just noticed it. What is it?"

"That is where the Shining Ones live. It is like nothing we have built, being made of many hundreds of lesser bowl shapes joined by edges to make one huge hemisphere. All the Shining Ones build thus, even for the smaller places where the parts are made for the new ships. Soon it will be time for the ships to go. Already the Shalla are starting the games to decide who will be fit to go. Then the whole thing will start all over again."

"Perhaps it won't, this next time. There's got to be some way to stop them."

They hushed as the ship slowed and the agile crew began reefing sail to bring her alongside one of the many piers which lined the harbor. At this close range he saw that many of the tall buildings wore the marks of desolation, windows shattered, paint long since flaked away, banners tattered and grimy from neglect. The four watched as the fine ladies of the party scurried ashore in threes and fours, to be scooped up and driven off in ornate carriages drawn by beasts very like Earth deer, but smaller and one-horned. Thorpe smiled

a wry smile in the privacy of his cowl. "Unicorns, rainbow women, mermaids, and a devil's brood nesting under a geodesic dome," he said, under his breath. "Bows and arrows and spaceships, and nuns with daggers. Who's to say anything is crazy, in a setup like this?"

"Mark the pier," he advised as they gathered for a last minute talk. "We have to be able to find our way back here. Now, you know the drill. Me and Shanne go ahead. You keep us just in sight. And if there's any more than three, we all fade until they've gone by." He led off into the dingy deserted streets with Shanne pacing by his side and all his senses alert. There was no time to dwell on architecture, or to speculate on what this city had been like in the past. This was enemy territory. The minutes went by. They worked further away from the dock area. There was not a sign of life anywhere. He began to question the feasibility of the hunt. A whole city, one third of it in ruins, was just too big to hunt through. In any case, all sensible women would be snug indoors and abed by this hour, and the Vegans would know that.

"I'm afraid we're wasting time," he mumbled as they turned a corner and started down yet another dark canyon of silence. No sooner had he spoken than Shanne seized his arm and hissed, "Listen!"

Holding his breath, he caught the faint and distant click and slap of booted feet—and the sounds were coming nearer. He touched her and they hurried forward to meet the on-comers, eyes straining into the gloom. He saw starlight on a distant glint of metal, and gripped her hand, dragging her aside into the first doorway handy. In black shadow they pressed well back and waited. Fifteen seconds and the footsteps were loud, then going by. Only two of them, two big and brawny fellows, bare-headed and blank-faced, each with a silver disc glittering on his forehead, each dressed from neck to knee in rustling metallic fabric.

Vegans! Thorpe clenched one hand on the short length of lead rod he had brought just for this moment, raised his other hand to hold the radio-unit ready to his mouth, and nudged Shanne to move out. From here the plan was

utter simplicity. Hadley and Varis would move straight at the Vegans, to focus their attention, while he and Shanne drifted up behind them as silent as ghosts—and strike! He thumbed the talk switch as he moved.

“Paddy? Here they . . .” the words dried in his mouth, for at the first whisper both Vegans halted as if they had slammed into a brick wall, hung there for a breath, and then slumped and fell like dead men. Utterly baffled, he could think of only one thing.

“Come on!” he cried. “They’re down. Let’s grab ’em and get!” As he ran he saw the other two sprinting to meet him. Skidding to a halt he said, “You take that one, Paddy, I’ll bring the other. Away you go, girls, ahead. We’ll follow!” It was heart-cracking effort. The sack-limp Vegans were monstrously heavy after the first few yards, and the streets were long and turnings few. Ten minutes of shambling brought Thorpe to the point where he had to stop, or fall down. Hadley collapsed beside him, whooping for breath. The two girls needed no telling, but spread out to either side, watching and listening for pursuit.

“What’d you hit ’em with?” Hadley puffed.

“Never laid a finger!” Thorpe gasped. “They just dropped!” Varis came back, then Shanne, to report not a sign of chase. They set off again, making an awkward shift to share one body between two. They stumbled down alleyways. They gambled on guesswork short-cuts. They shambled on until legs were like string and breath was agony. They found the pier and the Shalla boat. They dragged and dumped their captives down into it, then fell in themselves and slumped in the bottom, utterly exhausted, while the three-woman crew shoved off in stealthy silence and the boat went drifting out to sea.

After a while Thorpe levered himself up enough to throw off his heavy robe and let the cool air suck the sweat from his body.

“That was a damn fool, gamble,” Thorpe muttered. “We never deserved to get away with it. And we forgot the damn hoods, at that.” He dragged out a thick cloth bag he had carried ready and clumsily fitted it over a Vegan

head, while Hadley did the same for the other one. The Irishman put his head close, then felt for a pulse.

"If this one isn't dead he's putting up a fine imitation. How's that one?"

Shanne leaned over. Thorpe reached for a wrist. Varis heaved herself up in agitation. "If they are dead," she cried, "we have failed!"

"Hush!" Shanne lifted a slim hand. "This one lives, barely."

"Now how the devil could they just drop?" Thorpe muttered, casting his mind back. "It was exactly as I spoke to you, Paddy, over this." And he lifted the little suit-unit and stared at it. "Could it be this? Just a radio-wave? I know high-frequency stuff can affect tissue, but surely not a midget like this!"

"Listen!" Shanne whispered. "He weeps!" They hushed, and against the click and squeak of canvas and the lap of water they heard the quietly feeble sobbing of their captive. And then a broken hardly-audible voice. "He says," Shanne reported, white-faced, "that he remembers, now. That he is himself again. That the great and wonderful Queen has departed from him. All have departed from him. He is alone, and afraid. Where are they all gone? There were many with him, in his mind. Now he is alone, and he is afraid!" The feeble babble rose to a sudden eerie cry. The Vegan gave a convulsive start, and then was quite still. Shanne put a fluttering hand to still the turmoil of her breast and stared in fear at Thorpe.

"What does it mean, Jeremy?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a feeling this is wilder than we thought. I doubt if he was speaking of any Queen we know, but something that was going on in his mind. His mind!"

"Anyhow," Hadley muttered, "he's dead. That's the both of them. I doubt we'll get any secrets from them now."

"Don't be too sure, Paddy." Thorpe lifted the radio-unit to his mouth and spoke. "Nick? Nick Skoda, do you read?" On the second try he got a response, very faintly.

"Read you, Jeremy. What's new?"

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"We are on our way back. No sign of pursuit. We have two dead ones. I want you to contact old Hathar and ask her to have ready her best in the surgical line. I want these two opened up. I want to know just what it is they have planted in their skulls!" Skoda made him repeat it, then cut off. Hadley stirred uneasily.

"Do you think they can do a brain operation, then?"

"Ask them, not me. How about it, Shanne?"

"We can do it," she nodded, looking sick. "I think Mother Hathar herself will want to take charge of this."

They reached the island shortly before dawn, and then there was the dismally grisly business of carrying the bodies to the shrine, made more gruesome by the need to fend off those who were savagely eager to mutilate the remains of their enemies. Hadley secured and carried off the two hand-weapons he had taken from the bodies. Thorpe took his problems to Skoda, who was relentlessly plugging away at the construction of the Dirac.

"Micro-waves certainly do affect tissues, in all sorts of ways, but I can't see the feeble output from these things doing any harm. Not to knock over a full grown healthy man. If that's what knocked them down then they're not as human as we thought."

"But they must be human," Thorpe argued, "or they wouldn't be able to breed with these women!" At which Skoda elevated his shoulders and said, "You pick it. You can't have it both ways."

Thorpe chewed his lip savagely. "What sticks me is the obvious. If they *are* vulnerable to radio-waves, why haven't we hit 'em before?"

"Because it's a fleet order that we keep radio-silence except for short-range internal use. That's common sense. You never know what you might give away."

"That's it, then. They have some sort of communicator surgically implanted in their skulls. And we shattered it. And the voices in his mind went away. That's it!"

"Not for my money," Skoda shook his head. "Not radio. What you're talking about is a thought-wave amplifier. Mech-

anized telepathy. Our lot have tried it, years ago. Never came to anything, though."

Telepathy! Thorpe mulled the notion in his mind. Hathar had said something of the kind, too. It would explain a lot, if it were true.

Hadley had his problems, too. He and Varis had stripped one of the little heat-guns. "I can take a laser-beamer apart with my eyes shut," he claimed, "but I'm no good with the theoretical stuff. Power-pack and leads, and switches, those I can find, but for the rest it looks like long-wave stuff all jumbled up with infra-red output."

"Never mind. Just so long as you can describe it, for transmission, somebody else will unravel it. I wish that surgery would hurry up!"

It was halfway to noon before Hathar sent for him. She was alone in her private chamber, looking older and worn. Her hand shook as she uncovered a flat tray on the table for him to see.

"These are what I took from the brains of those unfortunate men," she said. He looked. His stomach heaved, but he clamped down on his jaw and swallowed, then looked again. The two were identical. From a fish-belly white three-lobed body no bigger than his little fingernail there spread eight hair-fine tendrils, each about nine inches long. The pulpy body was black and yellow-spotted, the tendrils coppery, with a mass of delicate extensions almost too fine to be seen.

"I would call these antennae," she said, "and they are extremely tough. I found them intricately woven into and spread through the brain-tissue. Judging by the physical damage, they must have contracted very suddenly and strongly, to cause fatal lacerations. Is this what you hoped to find? If so, what do they mean?"

"I expected something, but not this," he mastered his voice with an effort. "They resemble—spiders."

"That is true. I would assume that these are female, if they follow the same pattern as other insects. It would be logical."

"Spawn of the devil," he muttered. "In this case the devil is a female. A Queen. These are some of her brood, parasites

on human males. A lot of things make sense now. Men are needed as hosts, workers, servants, for the Queen-mother of this lot. Through these she controls them, like puppets. They all think in tune, in mental rapport. They probably steal the skills and knowledge of the man they inhabit and add it to the common pool. By her instructions they work, and fight, and breed, to make more hosts for more daughters."

"Can it be true?" Hathar went as white as ashes. "All this, from a super-insect mind?"

"It's true, all right. You've seen the dome they've built. What is it but an oversized hive? I'm willing to bet there's a sub-queen on every ship, and a senior queen in each dome—and the grand queen of all squatting in her nest back on their home planet."

"It is supposition. You have very little evidence."

"You think so?" He was savage now. "You add it up. They take only males, ignoring females except for breeding. They don't talk to each other, nor do their ships communicate—and where's the need, when they are all of one mind? And they seek out and destroy hathari, your radio. You know why? Because it irritates them, gives them a headache or an itch. Your very weak stuff does that. Ours knocks them dead! It killed them so fast they never knew what hit them, so they couldn't report, so there was no pursuit, this time! Don't you see it? These things died, instantly, but the men lived on for a short while. What more evidence do you need?"

She nodded slowly, and then her old eyes took on a hard glitter. She sat up, stiffening her spine in determination. "You are right, it is enough. Earthman Thorpe, you have a weapon with which to strike the evil ones, the shining Satans!"

"We have." He corrected her instantly. "We're all in on this. We can forget private quarrels for the moment. Now we can hit them, the next question is how? What's the best way? It's a gamble in any case, but we have to try, all of us!" She drew a deep breath, lifting her withered old breasts defiantly and touching her daggers.

"For the chance, however dangerous, to strike at the evil

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ones, I pledge you our absolute support. All hathari is at your service. You have only to command us!"

But it wasn't as easy as that. There were a dozen difficult decisions to make, and hazards to be considered. Skoda stressed one.

"We have got to keep radio-silence on this shortwave stuff until we're ready to lash out close. If we mess about at long range we might tickle them and tip our hand." Then there were simple mechanics to think of. They had enough battery-packs from the lifeboat to power up some thirty possible units, and without any kind of mass-production facilities, every one had to be handmade. If the entire complement of the Shrine worked day and night they might just do it in forty-eight hours. And that became their deadline for several other reasons. The Shalla games gave the strongest hint.

A spokeswoman said, "As it nears the noon hour of the day after tomorrow there will come a new Shining Ship from the void to descend on Heklon. On the day after that all the new-built ships will fly away, and the work will begin all over again. On that day our winning maidens go to Heklon."

Thorpe hammered the point home. "It's the key day. A new ship and a hand-over. They'll be all gathered and busy swapping jobs and information. That's when we have to strike. Too early and they'll be dispersed, or alert. Too late—and we lose a hundred ships from Heklon alone!"

So everybody labored, even old Hathar herself. Skoda was the key man. He and Speth worked delicately and ceaselessly on the Dirac, yet kept a constant and ready eye on the many crude micro-wave emitters that grew under determined fingers. And two devout juniors kept weary watch and constant reports to other shrines throughout the time, and spelled each other in compiling exhaustive notes about the Shining Ones, their ships, their ways and their still-to-be-proven vulnerability to micro-waves, for transmission via Dirac just as soon as the apparatus was ready.

"That," Thorpe insisted, "is vital. We may flop. We may pull the most disastrous bust. But so long as we can get the data out to Earth, we won't be a total loss."

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And so it was that just before dawn of the crucial day, half a dozen little ships of the Shalla stole silently over the heaving sea to come quietly alongside the decaying piers of Heklon and disgorge thirty white-robed figures into the shabby dockside area of that once-great city.

Thorpe and Shanne made their way, like the others, inwards to the most convenient deserted building within a certain distance of that vital center area. The great dome was their target point and they were to ring it and wait. He found one derelict structure to suit him, parted from her, and began making his way to the rooftop. Fifteen minutes later he stood out in the first sunlight and saw her distant figure appear, away to his right. He waved. After a minute or two he saw another white robe appear, away to his right. He waved. After a minute or two he saw another white robe appear, far away to his left, and waved again. Edda, contritely apologetic to him but bloodthirstily eager to see the Shining Ones die, had taken her station. And so, one by one, the thin ring of retribution formed itself around the Vegan space-field.

Thorpe had set up a short stick to cast a shadow by which he could gauge the time. Ahead of him he could just see the humping top of the big dome. From his hip-strap hung a battery which trailed wires to the crude instrument in his hand. The shadow shortened and his skyward glances grew more frequent.

There! Very high up in the blue he saw just a glint of silver, of polished metal. This was it! He threw his arm up, saw his signal answered on either side, closed the rough switch on his weapon, and heard it fizz and then settle down to a shrill whine. He went down from the roof swiftly, fanning the air with sweeping waves from side to side. On the street again he paused one moment to orient himself, then began to march, steadily and silently in towards the city-center, always as he went being careful to sweep a wide arc before him.

He felt foolish, futile and ineffective. He had no way of knowing whether he was discharging death or just making motions. He hoped fervently that the others would be able

to overcome the same feeling, that they would have faith. He came upon a chattering crowd of gaudy women, and they hushed to give him reverent room. He crossed a street and plunged into another. A fast-moving carriage turned a corner and made him dart aside. He kept on. He began to sweat under the heavy robe. He sprayed the air like a priest bestowing benediction. And now he was moving into dereliction again, but of a different kind. Here the houses and stores were ruinous, with gaping walls, gashed and distorted pavings, gangling beams, roofs leaning at perilous tilts, and piles of rubble on all sides. He moved more slowly now, sweeping wider, taking no chances. Through gaps in the shattered ruins the dome loomed huge, its very size a threat.

Then all at once he stepped out of devastation into order, across a perimeter line as precise as if drawn with a giant compass. The hard-packed ground had a very shallow depression, yielding a scene that was geometric in its arrangement. The massively gleaming ovoids of ships stretched away on either side in the arc of a grand circle, and nestling round each one were little domes. Factory-buildings, he guessed, each to its own ship. And in the center, dominating all, the great bulk of the main dome, its shell dully gleaming like a many-faceted insect's eye. And all was still. Nothing moved. He halted where he was. That was the order. He glanced to right and left, and waited. In a moment or two he saw Edda. And then Shanne. He waved greeting but stayed where he was, steadily but ceaselessly fanning the area. Orders again. He glanced up into the sky, and the new-arriving ship was growing rapidly as it fell. In another two breaths he could hear the first shrill scream of its dive through atmosphere. He shut off his weapon, and waited, remembering his own hard words.

"The new ship *must* land. We have to let it. If we don't, it may get just a fringe dose, take alarm, and go back up again. And we're all dead!" So he waited. This was the testing time. The scream grew to a howl and then a gargantuan bellow, and the air about him thrashed with shock-waves. The glittering ovoid fell, sat down on spouting ion-fire, settled,

and the jets winked out. The sudden silence was shattering. He counted fifteen seconds, and there came the buzz of hatches and the ringing clatter of a telescopic ladder thrusting itself out from a dark orifice down to the ground. Still he waited, a nerve twitching in his face. It had been easy to plan, but it was nerve-wracking to do.

Now they came out, two by two, stalwart and handsome men from space, striding and marching easily, each in glittering metallic uniform. "And each one with a spider in his brain!" he muttered, his thumb on the switch. The double line wheeled, headed for the dome, had almost reached it, when the whole picture shattered and broke apart. As if on some hideous cue, many-colored women broke from the work-domes, running and screaming. Staggering figures reeled from the many entrances of the main dome. And the double-line of new men broke into milling disorder. Thorpe switched on, began fanning and running. Skoda had guessed right. The metal of domes and ships had partly shielded the people inside from the radio-waves. Hit—fatally perhaps—but not dead, not yet. The men in the open had gone down instantly, but his mouth went dry at the thought of those others who might still have enough life left to bite back, those inside the ships, the work-domes, the big dome. And they all had heat-beam weapons! Switch to stage two, already planned.

He ran towards the nearest work-dome and straight into its semi-circle entrance, dodging the screaming women who ran out. He had no time for more than a snatched glance at the interior, at long rows of weirdly intricate machines and the stink of scorched flesh. He waved his weapon generously around, ducked out again and ran on to the next. He had no time to think, to observe the shape of the battle, to bother about anything or anyone else. He was counting domes. He backed out of the eighth and last, and a searing breath burned the air by his ear. He fell, rolled, rayed the area, all in one frantic movement, and saw two Vegans fall where they had been sheltered by the curve of the dome.

Up again, he ran on and in, to the inviting gangway of a

new-built ship, straight up and into the hatch, the beam-emitter whining in his hand. A writhing man screamed and fell the last ten steps of the inner ladder. Thorpe stood, gasping for breath, to count a grim five as he sprayed the interior liberally. Then it was out, down the ladder, run again for the next ship, and repeat the performance. Part of his mind was dividing by thirty into a hundred and being prepared to do his three and a third and then more. But he had underestimated the unleashed savagery of the Sisters, once they saw how effective the whining weapons were. He knew it was all over when he found himself almost having to use force to hold back one vengeful girl from going back over his tracks, just to make sure.

They were a breathless, much-scorched, yet jubilant group as they gathered by the latest-arrived ship and surveyed the fallen. Thorpe made a rapid nose-count. All present and accounted for.

"We busted them good!" Hadley growled, throwing back his cowl to show a grin made ferocious by a four-day black stubble. "But it's going to be a grim job picking up the bits and pieces."

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"WE'LL HAVE TO leave that for somebody else," Thorpe declared. "We aren't out of the wood yet, by a long way. We've got to assume that some of these creatures lived long enough to scream a warning, even to shout for help. And there are four more bases like this."

"You reckon the others will come here?"

"I don't know, Nick. They don't think the way we do. But we have to assume they will, and be ready."

"With what? We're sitting ducks here. We'll never knock 'em down out of the sky with these midgets!"

"And we'd not stand a chance trying to hit them with their own stuff, even if we knew how," Hadley added. Thorpe cast a hard glance at his little band. It was a time for desperate measures, for a scheme he had been nursing and trying to firm up. A gamble to go far beyond anything they had so far endured.

"Suppose we don't wait here?" he demanded. "Suppose we take a ship, this new one—we know it's fly-ready—and go to meet them? I reckon I can learn to fly the thing without too much trouble. After all, they are built to be flown by men like us!"

Hadley sucked in a long shaking breath. "Begod, even if you could get us off the ground, what would we fight them with? We've no crew, and they will be bound to know their own weapons better than we do. There's only the three of us, Jeremy!"

"Three? I can count thirty!" He looked round at the scorched and disheveled Sisterhood. "You want to bet they're willing? As for weapons, we have workshops all around us. You said, Paddy, that the heat-beamers are electrical—long-wave and infra-red stuff. It shouldn't be too hard to convert them, Nick. You have skilled work staff here, by the hundred, once it gets across to them that they have a chance to hit back for real. What more do you want?"

Skoda scratched his jaw, eyed the ship close by, then turned a grin on Speth by his side. "Come on, green-eyes, we have more work to do."

"That's the stuff!" Thorpe snapped. "Paddy, you and Varis can get the work-detail organized. Pacify the women. Put them in the picture. Stop them from wrecking everything. And collar some of those who know how to tackle heat-beam units and how to run the machines. Shanne, you come with me. We are going to learn that ship, so far as controls go, from top to bottom—and sideways!"

It was not as difficult as he had feared. He had done this once before, in training, and although this was an alien ship, it had to fly in the same environment and by the same forces as any other ship. When you had a shrewd idea what a thing was for, you knew near enough where it had to be,

what it ought to look like, and, eventually, how to work it. He ran into one grisly surprise. Sealed away in the ship's heart was a tank-room, a space filled with an ammoniacal liquid. In the thin broth floated the grossly enlarged body of a thing exactly like that pair he had seen on old Hathar's table-top—and clustered round the big body were thousands of pinpoint-sized little ones, her spawn. He radioed the gruesome brood thoroughly, just to make sure, then sealed off the tank again.

He and Shanne settled at last in the control-space. Many things were readily familiar here. He explained to her the handling and function of various levers and grips, and why it was so helpful to have all these things arranged in twin form to provide dual control. Most of the indicators and instruments were comprehensible, if different in design. But he was bothered more than anything by the total absence of anything even like a viewscreen. As she sat by him in the copilot seat and listened and nodded, he took her over everything he was sure of, but he had at last to confess that this one thing had him stopped.

"And it is vital," he muttered. "Unless I can see what goes on outside, somehow—I daren't leave the ground. There has to be some way of knowing where we are. Unless they do that by telepathy too, and if that is the case, then we're sunk!" It had not occurred to him in just that form before, but the more he thought of it, the more it appeared obvious. You couldn't have external views without something like radio, so far as he could conceive. And the Vegans were antipathetic to radio, for obvious reasons. Thus—no viewers! Then Shanne, peering about as keenly as he, happened to look straight up over her head. She said "Oh!" and reached up. Before he could do more than begin to mutter a warning about mucking about with strange gadgets, she had hauled down a hollow bowl-shaped thing and drew it completely down over her head. He held her wrist anxiously.

"It is all right!" her voice came hollowly from inside the hood. "I can see out. It is wonderful. You try!" Looking up, he saw that the twin of the thing hung over his own seat. A

moment later he was pulling it down over his own head. There was ample room to turn his head and stare. And stare. Because it was almost as good as being outdoors. On the curved interior before him he saw the airfield. If he turned his head to the right he was looking at the big dome. On the left were the other ships. He could even see the near-ground below, down by his chin. He marveled, shoved the cover up and stared at it in wonder. There were wrist-thick loops of cables coming away from the outside, dozens of them. He snapped his fingers in sudden understanding.

"Optical fibres! Of course! Masses of them from all over the skin of the ship. So simple, but how effective! Shanne," he turned to her in delight, "you're a wonderful person. What would I ever have done without you?" There was fire in her green-silver eyes and an eager understanding on her lovely face as she moved towards him. His breathing was fast and unsteady by the time they sundered contact.

"Damn!" she sighed, and he chuckled.

"As you say, damn! But this won't do. We have work to get on with. I wonder how the others are doing?" He managed to raise both Skoda and Hadley on the little radio-unit.

"Nothing to it!" the radio-technician gloated. "Man, those machine-shops are really something. Fully computerized. You just specify what you want, hit the right buttons, and out she comes. Our total armament is eight heat-beams. Give us another half hour and they'll all be mega-watt micro-wave emitters. How's your end? Think you'll be able to fly?"

"No sweat. Some of the stuff is strange, but no trouble so long as we don't have to do a warp-jump. Which we won't. How's the mopping-up chore coming, Paddy?"

"Just fine. The women are keen. A bit too keen, with the beamers. Better keep your robe on."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm sending Shanne down to check round all the Sisters and make sure all the weapons are manned, that they know what to do. I'd just as soon not have any lay-women aboard for the trip. It might be risky—know what I mean?" So Shanne went away down the ladder and left him to that tedious but essential practice—

practice—practice, that is so vitally necessary if a man is going to be able to grab and hit the right lever and button at the right time without having to stop and think. By stages he fed power to the various relays until he had everything alive but the main drive and jets and could go through the most complex shift with smooth familiarity. Then Skoda beeped him on radio.

"Everything converted and ready to blow, skipper. Shanne wants a word with you first." Skoda's voice sounded haggard, weary. So did Shanne's. As she spoke, Thorpe realized that he was ache-tired too.

"Jeremy," she said, "all is ready. Some junior sisters from Heklon Shrine have come, offering help. But our sisters are so tired!"

"Yes, I know," he sighed. "Me too. I can barely keep my eyes open."

"What do we do, sir?" That was Skoda again, and Thorpe felt a stir of irritation at the title, but recognized how inevitable it was. He saw by the view-hood that sunset was racing on them.

"We'd be crazy to take off half-doped with fatigue. It's nearly dark. Look, have the weapon-crews camp right there by their posts, as best they can, and bed down. Post the Heklon juniors to keep a watch, a vigil. They are to scream a warning if anything shows during the night, and roust us out about half an hour before dawn. Right? And I want Shanne up here with me, as copilot."

The control seat was very comfortable. He was practically asleep in it before she arrived to settle down by his side.

Hadley's voice and none-too-gentle shake roused him. "Sunup in half an hour, sir," he growled. "The rest are stirring. Ready to lift as soon as you like." Thorpe knuckled the grit from his eyes, stretched, and took hold of the controls, tugging the view-hood down over his head. The ship went up as effortlessly as a dream. He had painstakingly traced out the pseudo-grav leads and controls, and he had known it was alive by the shiver of a red column in a sealed transparent tube, yet for all that he was astonished

by the utter absence of any sensation of lift. It was as if the external scene just fell away below.

"Ready to lift any time you like, sir!" Skoda's voice came edgily.

"Take it easy, Nick. We've been airborne for five minutes, must be close on a mile up by now."

"Begod!" Hadley growled, "It's just struck me. We can't see what we're doing, and all these gadgets are just Chinese to me!"

"Look for an inverted goldfish bowl kind of thing, probably up over your head somewhere. Put it over your head. Right? Pass it on to the rest—" The ship fell upwards swiftly. Heklon was now no more than a smudge of grey with a hundred-point star in its center. He reached to put his hand on Shanne's wrist. "Up to you now, girl. You point me the way to the next city." With a little trail juggling and a few errors he was able to level off and set course by her directions. Below them the continent unreeled steadily. He jockeyed their speed until they were skimming just ahead of the first flush of dawn.

"Arreck soon," she warned, and then, suddenly, "There, ahead!"

He caught up the suit-unit to his mouth. "Nick, Paddy, pass it on to the rest. I'm going to try a fast low-level pass, then turn and come back for another. All weapons fire at will, at anything, and full-bore!"

He was getting the different, gossamer "feel" of this ship now, the barely audible whisper-sound of power, the superbly effortless response to his controls. And now he could see the dark cluster of buildings that was Arreck—and the plain target of the space-field with its ring of ships and center dome. He put his own ship into a steeply dipping approach, leaned on the power, and heard the shrill screech of tortured air whipping past the hull. The space-field sprang up at him, swelling into hugeness, slipping past below and behind in a flash. Cringing instinctively for the drag that did not come, he spun into a tight bank and aimed back and down, over the target again. There was a sense of anti-climax. Nothing. Not a sign that anything had been achieved.

One sure way to find out, he thought, and jockeying the ship round he brought it to hover-halt about a thousand feet directly above that central dome. And waited for a grim count of thirty. Still no sign. Arreck space-port was dead.

"All right," he growled to Shanne, "let's try the next one."

Again she pointed the way and he set the ship skimming, racing on the verge of dawn's grey light, slanting southward now to Panator. And in due course the pattern was silently and efficiently repeated. It gave him no satisfaction.

This is more like butchering cattle, he thought, too easy by far. But then he thought of seventy years of ruthlessly inhuman exploitation, degradation and killing, and the distaste seemed less important. Now, for long steady hours, they sped over the rolling ocean, the sunlight at their heels and lagging behind. Then they raised land and Shanne gave her words of guidance. Once more he passed the word to "Stand by to hit 'em!" and they stormed in over the sea to Rotalan, to crisscross the now familiar geometric target. But this time his hard eye noticed something different about that pattern on the first pass, and confirmed it on the second. The hundred in a ring were there, and the big dome, but there was no sign of the new arrival, the odd one.

"Either it didn't arrive yet, or it's spaceborne already," he reported, "and waiting for us somewhere. Maintain alert!"

The thirty-second count dragged to its sterile end and they sped away again for their last target. Shanne briefed him on it.

"Merdan is a large island. The city of Merdan is on the far shore. Very soon now, but we have time to eat and drink something. I will see to it." She came back very quickly with curiously shaped jars, one each, brimming with wine, and an armful of orange-like fruit.

"Have yours," he suggested. "And then you can watch out while I take five." It was one of those moments to treasure, sitting there by her side, surrounded by the quiet hum of unfamiliar power, the surge and dance of outlandish instruments, yet nothing more outlandish than she herself, in that

setting. The view-cowl covered her down to her chin. She had her slim hands on the steering levers between her knees and was utterly engrossed in what she was doing.

She snatched a sudden breath, in quick apprehension. "We approach Merdan," she cried, "but the Shining Ones come to meet us!" He had his viewer down in a flash, crackling the warning to the others by radio. And Shanne had spoken no more than the cold facts. There ahead was the dark smudge of an island just cresting the far edge of the sea, but between that and him came a ring of gleaming ships, a formation showing instantly that they meant business. He hit his retard-jets hard and fast and then went down, in his mind a picture of his own armament, that ring of eight beamers around the belly of the ship. Strategy, now, was to somehow jockey the enemy into such an approach that he could use his weapons to best advantage, while minimizing theirs.

It boiled through his mind ten times faster than he could have spoken it, a hundred times faster than he could have begun to explain. He snatched a glance down, to see the waves virtually lapping his bottom, slammed the up-drive on, snatched a second glance up and saw the ring-formation turn over and drop on him. There were fast and deadly, their intention obvious. They had him boxed.

"That's what you think!" he grunted, and bore down on the lift-throttles hard, sending the ship arrowing straight up through that ring of death. He caught a blurred glimpse of open weapon-ports spitting their venom, and then the outside scene went crazy, jerking, looping, tumbling in a mad whirl. He knew why, instantly, a hit. A frag-bomb hit. Because the ship was inertialess, there could be no sensation of impact, but the shock had sent them bouncing and spinning like a soap-bubble. The drill to stabilize was automatic and unthinking, and then he could look down. It was a sight to gloat on. The ships in a ring plunged straight down, smacked into the sea and disappeared for a moment in a circle of spray. Then they surfaced, to lie there and roll. *Dead hands at the controls*, he thought. Then, *God, if their weapon-ports are still open—!* He stared, and winced as one leaped into a searing fireball of destruction. Then two more.

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And he missed the rest as his own ship reared and plunged in the shock wave from the explosions. His shiver gave way to renewed caution.

"That was only ten," he muttered to Shanne. "They might have a lot more yet. Keep your eyes peeled!" He picked up Merdan again and headed for it, swooping down low and close to the sea. He watched the coastline leap close. He wondered how badly his ship was hit, but he did not dare take his hands off the controls. He hoped they would try that ring-formation again. Not their usual form. In the past he had seen them pop out of Pauli-drive in a tight cluster, and spit their death outwards on a large and dispersed force around them. This was different, and if it had been devised on the spur of the moment, then he was up against brains, and in for trouble. They would try something new next time. If there was to be a next time.

Mountains loomed and he lifted the ship up to skim over them. A red blossom on his control-panel went purple and then blue. Altitude? Couldn't be. Air-pressure, then. The ship was holed somewhere. He went down the far side of the mountain ridge and he didn't need to be told he had found Merdan. There ahead were shining ships lifting off in all directions. *Here we go!* he thought, and put into effect the craziest strategy anyone could imagine, just as it seethed into his mind. Devoting a grudging second or two to getting aimed straight for that last base, he threw the attitude-drive hard over and then caressed the tangential correctors just enough to set the ship spinning on its axis like a lazy top. Then he snatched for his radio.

"All weapons full-bore and hold them down. Never mind whether you can see anything or not." The scene in his viewer was enough to bring nausea as they howled and spun simultaneously straight for the air space above the space-port. So far as his bemused senses could tell, they got through and out the other side without damage. He checked the spin, braked the drive and swept the ship round and up, squeezing his eyes tight before trying to see what the results were. It was a sight that was to stay in his memory a long time. One ship went screaming up in a crazy broken-winged

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spiral, spitting ion-fire, and then to vanish in a coruscating flare of destruction. Another shot after it, faltered in mid-flight, and fell like a stone square on the roof of the great dome, smashing a mighty dent in the many-eyed surface. Two more spun in blind flight and ran headlong into each other, to perish in a flare that blinded him for several seconds. One squatted where it was and melted itself into a puddle of fused earth with its spouting jets. Two more had just begun to lift and were now scuttling crabwise over the field, wreaking havoc and destruction before they shuddered into stillness. High above he saw a familiar sight, and hit the throttles again.

He slid the ship steadily along, close to the ground. The vengeful ring stormed down on him. He waited, feeling cold, judged the moment, then bore down on the lift-drive. Again they dived straight up through that ring of death. Again they leaped and spun in a crazy pattern from impact. And again, stabilized, he looked down to see the circle of ships scream down and plunge straight into the ground.

And it was all over. He felt drained, weary, an old man, as he touched Shanne and said, "Better go and see what the damage is, honey. We're on our way home now. I can manage this on my own."

Her report was nothing as serious as he had dreaded. The first hit had been somewhere in what was the crew's living space, the second had come close to Hadley's weapon-blister, and there was a hole through which the air whistled. The Irishman was down, a blow on the head, but Varis was caring for him. Edda and the two others with her had been scorched, but not seriously. And that was all.

"We're very lucky," he sighed. "Very lucky." There didn't seem to be anything else to say, certainly no feeling of triumph. It was a sadly silent and chastened party that climbed down from the ship as soon as he had grounded it again in Heklon. Varis lent her shoulder to Hadley to lean on. Edda's weapon-crew were a sight, their faces and hair singed and their garments in tatters. But they were whole, and uncomplaining.

Shalla boats took them back to the island, and the Shalla

women seemed to have caught the gloom too. As Shanne said, "Truly, all the Shining Ones are destroyed. The hathari has reported it. We should be glad. But what is to become of us, now that there are no men left at all?"

Thorpe had no answer. Yet another sadness awaited them as they reached the shrine. Hathar was stricken, had taken to her bed, and had not long to live. The three men were shocked to see the plain truth of it as they stood by her bedside.

"My time is come," she whispered. "I am not sorry to go, not now. I have lived to see the end of the Shining Ones, destroyed by Earthmen, those people we have long admired and revered. And I am proud to know that the hathari had a great hand in it. All this is more than I had a right to hope for."

"You have a good life to look back on, Mother Hathar."

"We all make errors. I have made my share. You will make yours, Jeremy Thorpe. But I ask you to take my place."

"Me? How can I?"

"You can. The women of Hathar need men. All Lodor needs men." Those were the last words they heard. They left her to the Sisters. In the hathari-room again, Thorpe sighed his regret. "It's up to me. I wish it wasn't, but I've stuck my neck out, and I've got it." He gathered his wits, forced himself to be practical.

"First thing," he decided, "is to get the word out to all shrines and then to all Lodor. The shining ships are to be preserved, repaired where it is possible, made ready to fly and fight!" The junior sister on duty stared her incomprehension and he realized he had to explain, for her and all those who would be listening. "The ships are valuable. They can be used to strike back at the Shining Ones on other worlds. You will also ask, by hathari, for any and all women who want to avenge themselves, who want to save another world from the evil they have suffered here, to make it known that they will serve. That they will be ready to fly in those ships."

"Women in fighting ships?" Hadley growled, and then blinked as Varis gripped his arm, her eyes flashing.

"We can fight, as you have seen!"

"There you are!" Thorpe nodded. "We can use them, all of them. Except those who are with child. They must be cared for." He speared the junior with a stern eye. "You will also broadcast that. Tell them that all women who are with child are to take care. They are to know—for it is true—that their children will be normal and human, even the male children. Particularly the male children. There will be real men on Lodor again, soon. Tell them that!"

"It sounds fine," Skoda came close to confide, "but who's going to skipper those ships? The women can build them, know how they work, but flying them is something else again."

"Nothing to it, Nick. I learned, didn't I?"

"But you're a trained pilot. I couldn't have done it, nor Paddy, so how can you expect a bunch of women to learn?"

"We'll set up a school. Better still, we'll ask for some! You have the Dirac going?"

"So far as I can tell, sure. Three girls in rotation sending data as hard as they can." They stepped across to where one girl was reciting from a screen while another scribbled hastily and a third monitored the instrument.

"All right." Thorpe put up a finger to halt the operation. "Send this: 'For attention Vice-Admiral Corde personal. Lieutenant Jeremy Thorpe reporting. Lodor origin. We have four hundred Vegan ships fully operational, also many thousands capable maintenance and operational personnel. Need competent executives. Personnel here all female, repeat female. Executives will be welcome only if bearded, repeat bearded.' Send that, then carry on with the data for today. Repeat it again tomorrow, and daily for a while."

He had guessed accurately. The unusual nature of the signal was enough to bring investigations from Earth as fast as they could jump the distance. Five weeks only from the time the signal went out, Skoda's jury-rigged alarms rang and buzzed, bringing him speedily to slide into place before the panel he had built up from salvaged parts. He rattled a key.

DANGER FROM VEGA

"This is Lodor," he said. "Identify!" and he switched on a spotlight.

"Hermes, flagship 15th Battle Squadron, Solarian Fleet, Vice-Admiral Corde in command and speaking. Are you reading me, Lodor?"

"I see you, sir. This is radio-technician Skoda, ex S.S. *Quest*."

"Let me talk to this Lieutenant Thorpe, would you?" Skoda opened his eyes wide, slid aside to let Thorpe get in view and face the screen. "You young rip, Gerald! By God, those whiskers don't fool me one bit. I ought to have you court-martialed for this. All this time I've believed you safely tucked away on Venus!"

"Just as well I wasn't, isn't it?" Thorpe said boldly, and the old face in the visor went red under its straggle of white whiskers.

"What's all this nonsense about ships, Vegan ships?"

"Why don't you come down and see, Dad? You'll be very welcome, you and your crew. Four hundred ships, and all the personnel you'll ever want."

When the invitation was grumpily accepted and the communication link closed, he turned to smile at Shanne by his side.

"You'll like him. That bark is only on the surface. Along with him will come many men. In a way, this is very like the Shining Ones. They came with men from many other planets. The women of Lodor worked for them, built ships for them, produced children by them. This could be very much the same. Can you believe me when I say that it will really be very different?"

"I believe you, Jeremy. If these men from the stars are all like you, it will be very different. There will be joy on Lodor again when all women can be as happy as you have made me."