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THE SUN DESTROYERS

"I particularly liked 'The Sun Destroyers'. It surely
was unusual and unexpected." — Ray Bradbury

ROSS ROCKLYNNE



They whirled about him, in their thousands, crying out their praise, their worship, their intense admiration. His thought swirls rioted uncontrollably as their litany drew him to the pinnacle of his happiness. He saw now that there was truly no limit to his magnificence. . . .

He played his visions over them, as they whirled in awkward adoration, and a hideous, mind-destroying doubt crawled through him. He froze in horror, stricken dumb. It seemed as if his very life-force were draining away. . . .

"Go! Vanish!"

Space was still and the energy creatures were gone. And, as if they also expected his command, the stars commenced to pale. They faded to redness, to darkness, to nonbeing, and darkness wrapped itself around him. He shook in a series of trapped convulsions and drew his visions in about him like a shroud. He hung there, unable to still his dreadful thoughts. Then, involuntarily, there was a click in his consciousness. When he again looked, the familiar ranks of galaxies and stars, unchanged, surrounded him.

He was back in the first band of true space, and he knew he was mad.

The inner third band—a dream dimension—and each creature had been but a replica of himself. . . .

Turn this book over for a second complete novel.

THE SUN DESTROYERS

by Ross Rocklynne



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1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

THE SUN DESTROYERS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

"Into the Darkness," from *Astonishing Stories*, June, 1940
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"Abyss of Darkness," from *Astonishing Stories*, December,
1942;
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An earlier version of "Daughter of Darkness" was published in *Astonishing Stories*, November, 1941; Copyright © 1941 by Fictioneers, Inc.; Copyright © 1969 by Ross L. Rocklin.

An earlier version of "Rebel of the Darkness" was published as "Revolt of the Devil Star" in *Imagination*, February, 1951; Copyright © 1950 by Greenleaf Publishing Co.

AUTHOR'S DEDICATION:

To my sister Olive
and my brother Clyde,
and all the words and games.

First Ace printing: March, 1973

A YANK AT VALHALLA

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Printed in U.S.A.

CONTENTS

BOOK ONE

INTO THE DARKNESS 7

The Story of a Creature of Light and of Dark. His Flight Across Lightlessness. His Life, His Love, His End. The Beginning, though not the Real Beginning, of the quest.

CHAPTER

ONE	Birth of "Darkness"	7
TWO	Cosmic Children	10
THREE	Oldster	15
FOUR	Beyond Light	19
FIVE	The Colored Globes	25
SIX	Dissipation	33

BOOK TWO

DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS 37

The Story of a Dark Destroyer. Her Return Flight Across the Great Emptiness. Her Life, Her Lightless Love, Her End: the Seed of the Quest Is Planted Again.

PROLOGUE 37

CHAPTER

ONE	Sun Destroyer	38
TWO	Sun Dust	46
THREE	Into The Darkness	50
FOUR	The Son of Sun Destroyer	60
FIVE	Oldster Awakens	68
SIX	The Forty-Ninth Band	74

BOOK THREE

ABYSS OF DARKNESS 83

The Story of a Creature of Light Engulfed in Maiming Dark. His Life, His Deadly Love, the Wondrous Story of His End: the Quest Seems Ended, and yet Barely Has Begun.

PROLOGUE 83

CHAPTER

ONE	Yellow Light	84
TWO	<i>You Must Fight!</i>	90
THREE	The Inner Band	99
FOUR	The Betrayal	105
FIVE	A Race Is Born	110

BOOK FOUR

REBEL OF THE DARKNESS 113

The Quest Begins. Devil Star Roams the Galaxies. Pursues His Demons of Light and of Dark Who in the End Pursue Him. His Life, His Lovelessness, His End: the Quest Is Now Most Wondrously Concluded.

CHAPTER

ONE	Devil Star	113
TWO	Dark Fire	119
THREE	The Band of Decision	125
FOUR	World Rim	134
FIVE	The Golden-Lights	143
SIX	A Time of Glory	152

BOOK ONE
Into The Darkness

I

Birth of "Darkness"

Out in space, on the lip of the farthest galaxy and between the two star clusters, there came into being a luminiferous globe that radiated for light-years around. A life had been born!

It became aware of light; one of its visions had become activated. First it saw the innumerable suns and nebulae whose radiated energy now fed it. Beyond that it saw a dense, impenetrable darkness.

The darkness intrigued it. It could understand the stars, but the darkness it could not. The babe probed outward several light-years and met only lightlessness. It probed further, and further, but there was no light. Only after its visions could not delve deeper did it give up, but a strange seed had been sown; that there was light on the far edge of the darkness became its innate conviction.

Wonders never seemed to cease parading themselves before this newly-born. It became aware of another personality hovering near, an energy creature thirty million miles across. At its core hung a globe of subtly glowing green light one million miles in diameter.

He explored this being with his vision, and it remained still during his inspection. He felt strange forces plucking at him, forces that filled him to overflowing with peacefulness. At once, he discovered a system of energy waves having marvelous possibilities.

"Who are you?" these waves were able to inquire of that other life.

Softly soothing, he received answer.

"I am your mother."

"You mean . . . ?"

"You are my son—my creation. I shall call you . . . Darkness. Lie here and grow, Darkness, and when you are many times larger, I will come again."

She had vanished, swallowed untraceably by a vast spiral nebula, a cloud of swiftly twisting stardust.

He lay motionless, strange thoughts flowing. Mostly he wondered about the sea of lightlessness lapping the shore of this galaxy in which he had been born. Sometime later he wondered about life—what life was, and its purpose.

"When *she* comes again, I shall ask her," he mused. "Darkness, she called me—Darkness!"

His thoughts swung back to the darkness.

For five million years he bathed himself in the rays that permeate space. He grew. He was ten million miles in diameter.

His mother came; he saw her hurtling toward him from a far distance. She stopped close.

"You are much larger, Darkness. You grow faster than the other newly-born." He detected pride in her transmitted thoughts.

"I have been lying here, thinking," he said. "I have been wondering, and I have come to guess at many things. There are others, like you and myself."

"There are thousands of others. I am going to take you to them. Have you tried propellents?"

"I have not tried, but I shall." There was a silence. "I have discovered the propellents," said Darkness, puzzled, "but they will not move me."

She seemed amused. "That is one thing you do not know, Darkness. You are inhabiting the seventeenth band of hyperspace; propellents will not work there. See if you can expand."

All these were new things, but instinctively he felt himself expand to twice his original size.

"Good. I am going to snap you into the first band—there. Try your propellents."

He tried them and, to his intense delight, the flaring lights that were the stars fled past. So great was his exhilaration that he worked up a speed that placed him several light-years from his mother.

She drew up beside him. "For one so young, you have speed. I shall be proud of you. I feel, Darkness," and there was wistfulness in her tone, "that you will be different from the others."

She searched his memory swirls. "But try not to be too different."

Puzzled at this, he gazed at her, but she turned away. "Come."

He followed her down the aisles formed by the stars, as she accommodated her pace to his.

They stopped at the sixth galaxy from the abyss of lightlessness. He discerned thousands of shapes that were his kind moving swiftly past and around him. These, then, were his people.

She pointed them out to him. "You will know them by their vibrations and the varying shades of the colored globes of light at their centers."

She ran off a great list of names which he had no trouble in impressing on his memory swirls.

"Radiant, Vibrant, Swift, Milky, Incandescent, Great Power, Sun-eater, Light-year—"

"Come, I am going to present you to Oldster."

They whirled off to a space seven light-years distant. They stopped, just outside the galaxy. There was a peculiar snap in his consciousness.

"Oldster has isolated himself in the sixth band of hyperspace," said his mother.

Where before he had seen nothing save inky space, dotted with masses of flaming, tortured matter, he now saw an energy creature whose aura fairly radiated old age. And the immense purple globe which hung at his core lacked a certain vital luster which Darkness had instinctively linked with his own youth and boundless energy.

His mother caught the old being's attention, and Darkness felt his thought rays contact them.

"Oh, it's you, Sparkle," the old being's kindly thoughts said. "And who is it with you?"

Darkness saw his mother, Sparkle, shoot off streams of crystalline light.

"This is my first son."

The newly-born felt Oldster's thought rays going through his memory swirls.

"And you have named him Darkness," said Oldster slowly. "Because he has wondered about it." His visions withdrew, half-absently. "He is so young, and yet he is

a thinker; already he thinks about life."

For a long time Oldster bent a penetrating gaze upon him. Abruptly, his vision rays swung away and centered on a tiny, isolated group of stars. There was a heavy, dragging silence.

"Darkness," Oldster said finally, "your thoughts are useless." The thoughts now seemed to come from an immeasurable distance, or an infinitely tired mind. "You are young, Darkness. Do not think so much—so much that the happiness of life is destroyed in the overestimation of it. When you wish, you may come to see me. I shall be in the sixth band for many millions of years."

Abruptly, Oldster vanished. He had snapped both mother and son back in the first band.

She fixed her vision on him. "Darkness, what he says is true—every word. Play for awhile—there are innumerable things to do. And once in great intervals, if you wish, go to see Oldster; but for a long time do not bother him with your questions."

"I will try," answered Darkness, in sudden decision.

II

、 Cosmic Children

Darkness played. He played for many million years. With playmates of his own age, he roamed through the endless numbers of galaxies that composed the universe. From one end to another he dashed in a reckless obedience to Oldster's command.

He explored the surfaces of stars, often disrupting them into fragments, sending scalding geysers of belching flame millions of miles into space. He followed his companions into the swirling depths of the green-hued nebulae that hung in intergalactic space. But to disturb these mighty creations of nature was impossible. Majestically they rolled around and around, or coiled into spirals, or at times condensed into matter that formed beautiful hot suns.

Energy to feed on was rampant here, but so densely and

widely was it distributed that he and his comrades could not even dream of absorbing more than a trillionth part of it in all their lives.

He learned the mysteries of the forty-seven bands of hyperspace. He learned to snap into them or out again into the first or true band at will. He knew the delights of blackness impenetrable in the fifteenth band, of a queerly illusory multiple existence in the twenty-third, and an equally strange sensation of speeding away from himself in an opposite direction in the thirty-first, and of the forty-seventh, where all space turned into a nightmarish concoction of cubistic suns and galaxies.

Incomprehensible were those forty-seven bands. They were coexistent in space, yet they were separated from each other by a means which no one had ever discovered. In each band were unmistakable signs that it was the same universe. Darkness only knew that each band was one of forty-seven subtly differing faces which the universe possessed, and the powers of his mind experienced no difficulty in allowing him to cross the unseen bridges which spanned the gulfs between them.

And he made no attempts toward finding the solution—he was determined to cease thinking, for the time being at least. He was content to play, and to draw as much pleasure and excitement as he could from every new possibility of amusement.

But the end of all *that* came, as he had suspected it would. He played, and loved all this, until. . . .

He had come to his fifty-millionth year, still a youth. The purple globe at his core could have swallowed a sun a million miles in diameter, and his whole body could have displaced fifty suns of that size. For a period of a hundred thousand years he lay asleep in the seventh band, where a soft, colorless light pervaded the universe.

He awoke, and was about to transfer himself to the first band and rejoin the children of Radiant, Light-year, Great Power and all those others.

He stopped, almost dumbfounded, for a sudden, overwhelming antipathy for companionship had come over him. He discovered, indeed, that he never wanted to join his friends again. While he had slept, a metamorphosis had come about, and he was as alienated from his play-

mates as if he had never known them.

What had caused it? Something. Perhaps, long before his years, he had passed into the adult stage of mind. Now he was rebelling against the friendships which meant nothing more than futile play.

Play! Bouncing huge suns around like rubber balls, and then tearing them up into solar systems; chasing one another up the scale through the forty-seven bands, and back again; darting about in the immense spaces between galaxies, rendering themselves invisible by expanding to ten times normal size.

He did not want to play, and he never wanted to see his friends again. He did not hate them, but he was intolerant of the characteristics which bade them to disport amongst the stars for eternity.

He was not mature in size, but he felt he had become an adult, while they were still children—tossing suns the length of a galaxy, and then hurling small bits of materialized energy around them to form planets; then just as likely to hurl huger masses to disrupt the planetary systems they so painstakingly made.

He had felt it all along, this superiority. He had manifested it by besting them in every form of play they conceived. They generally bungled everything, more apt to explode a star into small fragments than to whirl it until centrifugal force threw off planets.

I have become an adult in mind, if not in body; I am at the point where I must accumulate wisdom, and perhaps sorrow, he thought whimsically. I will see Oldster, and ask him my questions—the questions I have thus far kept in the background of my thoughts. But, he added thoughtfully, I have a feeling that even his wisdom will fail to enlighten me. Nevertheless, there must be answers. What is life? Why is it? And there must be another universe beyond the darkness that hems this one in.

Darkness reluctantly turned and made a slow trail across that galaxy and into the next, where he discovered those young energy creatures with whom it would be impossible to enjoy himself again.

He drew up, and absently translated his time standard to one corresponding with theirs, a rate of consciousness at which they could observe the six planets whirling

around a small, white-hot sun as separate bodies and not mere rings of light.

They were gathered in numbers of some hundreds around this sun, and Darkness hovered on the outskirts of the crowd, watching them moodily.

One of the young purple lights, Cosmic by name, threw a mass of matter a short distance into space, reached out with a tractor ray and drew it in. He swung it 'round and 'round on the tip of that ray, gradually forming ever-decreasing circles. To endow the planet with a velocity that would hurl it unerringly between the two outermost planetary orbits required a delicate sense of compensatory adjustment between the factors of mass, velocity, and solar attraction.

When Cosmic had got the lump of matter down to an angular velocity that was uniform, Darkness knew an irritation he had never succeeded in suppressing. An intuition, which had unfailingly proved itself accurate, told him that anything but creating an orbit for that planet was likely to ensue.

"Cosmic." He contacted the planet-maker's thought rays. "Cosmic, the velocity you have generated is too great. The whole system will break up."

"Oh, Darkness." Cosmic threw a vision on him. "Come on, join us. You say the speed is wrong? Never—you are! I've calculated everything to a fine point."

"To the wrong point," insisted Darkness stubbornly. "Undoubtedly, your estimation of the planet's mass is the factor which makes your equation incorrect. Lower the velocity. You'll see."

Cosmic continued to swing his lump of matter, but stared curiously at Darkness.

"What's the matter with you?" he inquired. "You don't sound just right. What does it matter if I do calculate wrong, and disturb the system's equilibrium? We'll very probably break up the whole thing later, anyway."

A flash of passion came over Darkness. "That's the trouble," he said fiercely. "It doesn't matter to any of you. You will always be children. You will always be playing. Careful construction, joyous destruction—that is the creed on which you base your lives. Don't you feel as if you'd

like, sometime, to quit playing, and do something . . . worthwhile?"

As if they had discovered a strangely different set of laws governing an alien galaxy, the hundreds of youths, greens and purples, stared at Darkness.

Cosmic continued swinging the planet he had made through space, but he was plainly puzzled. "What's wrong with you, Darkness? What else is there to do except to roam the galaxies and make suns? I can't think of a single living thing that might be called more worthwhile."

"What good is playing?" answered Darkness. "What good is making a solar system? If you made one, and then, perhaps, vitalized it with life, that would be worthwhile! Or think, think! About yourself, about life, why it is, and what it means in the scheme of things! Or," and he trembled a little, "try discovering what lies beyond the veil of lightlessness which surrounds the universe."

The hundreds of youths looked at the darkness.

Cosmic stared anxiously at him. "Are you crazy? We all know there's nothing beyond. Everything that is is right here in the universe. That blackness is just empty, and it stretches away from here forever."

"Where did you get that information?" Darkness inquired scornfully. "You don't know that. Nobody does. But I am going to know! I awoke from sleep a short while ago, and I couldn't bear the thought of play. I wanted to do something substantial. So I am going into the darkness."

He turned his gaze hungrily on the deep abyss hemming in the stars. There were thousands of years, even under its lower time standard, in which awe dominated the gathering. In his astonishment at such an unheard-of intention, Cosmic entirely forgot his circling planet. It lessened in velocity, and then tore loose from the tractor ray that had become weak, in a tangent to the circle it had been performing.

It sped toward that solar system, and entered between the orbits of the outermost planets. Solar gravitation seized it, the lone planet took up an erratic orbit, and then the whole system had settled into complete stability, with seven planets where there had been six.

"You see," said Darkness, with a note of unsteady mirth, "if you had used your intended speed, the system would have coalesced. The speed of the planet dropped, and then escaped you. Some blind chance sent it in the right direction. It was purely an accident. Now throw in a second sun, and watch the system break up. That has always amused you." His aura quivered. "Goodbye, friends."

III

Oldster

He was gone from their sight forever. He had snapped into the sixth band.

He ranged back to the spot where Oldster should have been. He was not.

Probably in some other band, thought Darkness, and went through all the others, excepting the fifteenth, where resided a complete lack of light. With a feeling akin to awe, since Oldster was apparently in none of them, he went into the fifteenth and called out.

There was a period of silence. Then Oldster answered, in his thoughts a cadence of infinite weariness.

"Yes, my son; who calls me?"

"It is I, Darkness, whom Sparkle presented to you nearly fifty million years ago." Hesitating, an unexplainable feeling as of sadness unquenchable came to him.

"I looked for you in the sixth," he went on in a rush of words, "but did not expect to find you here, isolated, with no light to see by."

"I am tired of seeing, my son. I have lived too long. I have tired of thinking and of seeing. I am sad."

Darkness hung motionless, hardly daring to interrupt the strange thought of this incredible ancient. He ventured timidly, "It is just that I am tired of playing, Oldster, tired of doing nothing. I should like to accomplish something of some use. Therefore, I have come to you, to ask you three questions, the answers to which I must know."

Oldster stirred restlessly. "Ask your questions."

"I am curious about life." Oldster's visitor hesitated nervously, and then went on, "It has a purpose, I know, and I want to know that purpose. That is my first question."

"But why, Darkness? What makes you think life *has* a purpose, an ultimate purpose?"

"I don't know," came the answer, and for the first time Darkness was startled with the knowledge that he really didn't! "But there must be some purpose!" he cried.

"How can you say 'must'? Oh, Darkness, you have clothed life in garments far too rich for its ordinary character! You have given it the sacred aspect of meaning! There is no meaning to it. Once upon a time the spark of life fired a blob of common energy with consciousness of its existence. From that, by some obscure evolutionary process, we came. That is all. We are born. We live, and grow, and then we die! After that, there is nothing! Nothing!"

Something in Darkness shuddered violently, and then rebelliously. But his thoughts were quiet and tense. "I won't believe that! You are telling me that life is only meant for death, then. Why . . . why, if that were so, why should there be life? No, Oldster! I feel that there must be something which justifies my existence."

Was it pity that came flowing along with Oldster's thoughts? "You will never believe me. I knew it. All my ancient wisdom could not change you, and perhaps it is just as well. Yet you may spend a lifetime in learning what I have told you."

His thoughts withdrew, absently, and then returned.

"Your other questions, Darkness."

For a long time Darkness did not answer. He was of half a mind to leave Oldster and leave it to his own experiences to solve his other problems. His resentment was hotter than a dwarf sun, for a moment. But it cooled and though he was beginning to doubt the wisdom to which Oldster laid claim, he continued with his questioning.

"What is the use of the globe of purple light which forever remains at my center, and even returns, no matter how far I hurl it from me?"

Such a wave of mingled agitation and sadness passed from the old being that Darkness shuddered. Oldster turned on him with extraordinary fierceness. "Do not learn *that* secret! I will not tell you! What might I not have spared myself had I not sought and found the answer to that riddle! I was a thinker, Darkness, like you! Darkness, if you value . . . Come, Darkness," he went on in a singularly broken manner, "Your remaining question." His thought rays switched back and forth with an uncommon sign of utter chaos of mind.

Then they centered on Darkness again. "I know your other query, Darkness. I know; I knew when first Sparkle brought you to me, eons ago.

"What is beyond the darkness? That has occupied your mind since your creation. What lies on the fringe of the lightless section by which this universe is bounded?

"I do not know, Darkness. Nor does anyone know."

"But you *must* believe there is something beyond," cried Darkness.

"Darkness, in the dim past of our race, beings of your caliber have tried—five of them I remember in my time, billions of years ago. But they never came back. They left the universe, hurling themselves into that awful void, and they never came back."

"How do you know they didn't reach that foreign universe?" asked Darkness breathlessly.

"Because they didn't come back," answered Oldster, simply. "If they could have gotten across, at least one or two of them would have returned. They never reached that universe. Why? All the energy they were able to accumulate for that staggering voyage was exhausted. And they dissipated—died—in the energyless emptiness of the darkness."

"There must be a way to cross!" said Darkness violently. "There must be a way to gather energy for the crossing! Oldster, you are destroying my life-dream! I have wanted to cross. I want to find the edge of the darkness. I want to find life there—perhaps then I will find the meaning of all life!"

"Find the—" began Oldster pityingly, then stopped, realizing the futility of completing the sentence.

"It is a pity you are not like the others, Darkness. Per-

haps they understand that it is as purposeful to lie sleeping in the seventh band as to discover the riddle of the darkness. They are truly happy, you are not. Always, my son, you overestimate the worth of life."

"Am I wrong in doing so?"

"No. Think as you will, and think that life is high. There is no harm. Dream your dream of great life, and dream your dream of another universe. There is joy even in the sadness of unattainment."

Again that long silence, and again the smoldering flame of resentment in Darkness' mind. This time there was no quenching of that flame. It burned fiercely.

"I will not dream!" said Darkness furiously. "When first my visions became activated, they rested on the darkness, and my newborn thought swirls wondered about the darkness, and knew that something lay beyond it!

"And whether or not I die in that void, I am going into it!"

Abruptly, irately, he snapped from the fifteenth band into the first, but before he had time to use his propellents he saw Oldster, a giant body of intense, swirling energies of pure light, materialize before him.

"Darkness, stop!" and Oldster's thoughts were unsteady. "Darkness," he went on, as the younger energy creature stared spellbound, "I had vowed to myself never to leave the band of lightlessness. I have come from it, a moment, for . . . you!"

"You will die. You will dissipate in the void! You will never cross it, if it can be crossed, with the limited energy your body contains!"

He seized Darkness' thought swirls in tight bands of energy.

"Darkness, there is knowledge that I possess. Receive it!"

With newborn wonder, Darkness erased consciousness. The mighty accumulated knowledge of Oldster sped into him in a swift flow, a great tide of space lore no other being had ever possessed.

The inflow ceased, and as from an immeasurably distant space came Oldster's parting words:

"Darkness, farewell! Use your knowledge, use it to further your dream. Use it to cross the darkness."

Again fully conscious, Darkness knew that Oldster had gone again into the fifteenth band of utter lightlessness, in his vain attempt at peace.

He hung tensely motionless in the first band, exploring the knowledge that now was his. At the portent of one particular portion of it, he trembled.

In wildest exhilaration, he thrust out his propellents, dashing at full speed to his mother.

He hung before her.

"Mother, I am going into the darkness!"

There was a silence, pregnant with her sorrow. "Yes, I know. It was destined when first you were born. For that I named you Darkness." A restless quiver of sparks left her, her gaze sad and loving. She said, "Farewell, Darkness, my son."

She wrenched herself from true space, and he was alone. The thought stabbed him. He was alone—alone as Oldster.

Struggling against the vast depression that overwhelmed him, he slowly started on his way to the very furthest edge of the universe, for there lay the Great Energy.

Absently he drifted across the galaxies, the brilliant denizens of the cosmos, lying quiescent on their eternal black beds. He drew a small sun into him, and converted it into energy for the long flight.

And suddenly, far off he saw his innumerable former companions. A cold mirth seized him. Playing! The folly of children, the aimlessness of stars!

He sped away from them, and slowly increased his velocity, the thousands of galaxies flashing away behind. His speed mounted a frightful acceleration carrying him toward his goal.

IV

Beyond Light

It took him seven million years to cross the universe, going at the tremendous velocity he had attained. And he was in a galaxy whose far-flung suns hung out into the

darkness, who were themselves traveling into the darkness at the comparatively slow pace of several thousand miles a second.

Instantaneously, his vision rested on an immense star, a star so immense that he felt himself unconsciously expand in an effort to rival it. So titanic was its mass that it drew all light rays save the short ultraviolet back into it.

It was hot, an inconceivable mass of matter a billion miles across. Like an evil, sentient monster of the skies it hung, dominating the tiny suns of this galaxy that were perhaps its children, to Darkness flooding the heavens with ultraviolet light from its great expanse of writhing, coiling, belching surface; and mingled with that light was a radiation of energy so virulent that it ate its way painfully into his very brain.

Still another radiation impinged on him, an energy which, were he to possess its source, would activate his propellents to such an extent that his velocity would pale any to which his race had attained in all its long history, hurling him into the darkness at such an unthinkable rate that the universe would be gone in the infinitesimal part of a second!

But how hopeless seemed the task of rending it from that giant of the universe. The source of that energy, he knew with certain knowledge, was matter, matter so incomparably dense—its electrons crowding each other till they touched—that even that furiously molten star could not destroy it!

He spurred back several million miles, and stared at it. Suddenly he knew fear, a cold fear. He felt that the sun was animate, that it knew he was waiting there, that it was prepared to resist his pitiable onslaughts. And as if in support of his fears, he felt rays of such intense repelling power, such alive, painful malignancy that he almost threw away his mad intentions of splitting it.

"I have eaten suns before," he told himself, with the air of one arguing against himself. "I can at least split that one open, and extract the morsel that lies in its interior."

He drew into him as many of the surrounding suns as he was able, converting them into pure energy. He ceased at last, for no longer could his body, a giant complexity of

swarming intense fields sixty million miles across, assimilate more.

Then, with all the acceleration he could muster, he dashed headlong at the celestial monster.

It grew and expanded, filling all the skies until he could no longer see anything but it. He drew near its surface. Rays of fearful potency smote him until he convulsed in the whiplash agony of it. At frightful velocity, he contacted the heaving surface, and . . . made a tiny dent some millions of miles in depth.

He strove to push forward, but streams of energy repelled him, energy that flung him away from the star in acceleration.

He stopped his backward flight, fighting his torment, and threw himself upon the star again. It repulsed him with an uncanny likeness to a living thing. Again and again he went through the agonizing process, to be as often thrust back.

He could not account for those repelling rays, which seemed to operate in direct contrariness to the star's obviously great gravitational field, nor did he try to account for them. There were mysteries in space which even Oldster had never been able to solve.

But there was a new awe in him. He hung in space, spent and quivering.

"It is *almost* alive," he thought, and then adopted new tactics. Rushing at the giant, he skimmed over and through its surface in titanic spirals, until he had swept it entirely free of raging, incandescent gases. Before the star could replenish its surface, he spiraled it again, clinging to it until he could no longer resist the repelling forces, or the burning rays which impinged upon him.

The star now lay in the heavens diminished by a tenth of its former bulk. Darkness, hardly able to keep himself together, retired a distance from it and discarded excess energy.

He went back to the star.

Churning seas of pure light flickered fitfully across. Now and then there were belchings of matter bursting within itself.

Darkness began again. He charged, head on. He contacted, bored millions of miles, and was thrown back with

mounting velocity. Hurling back into space, Darkness finally knew that all these tactics would in the last analysis prove useless. His glance roving, it came to rest on a dense, redly glowing sun. For a moment it meant nothing, and then he knew—knew that here at last lay the solution.

He plucked that dying star from its place, and swinging it in huge circles on the tip of a tractor ray, flung it with the utmost of his savage force at the gargantuan star.

Fiercely, he watched the smaller sun approach its parent. Closer, closer, and then—they collided! A titanic explosion ripped space, sending out wave after wave of cosmic rays, causing an inferno of venomous, raging flames that extended far into the skies, licking it in a fury of utter abandon. The mighty sun split wide open, exhibiting a violet-hot, gaping maw more than a billion miles wide.

Darkness activated his propellents and dropped into the awful cavity, until he was far beneath its rim and had approached the center of the star where lay that mass of matter which was the source of the Great Energy. To his sight it was invisible, save as a blank area of nothingness, since light rays of no wavelength whatsoever could leave it.

Darkness wrapped himself around the sphere, and at the same time the two halves of the giant star fell together, imprisoning him at its core.

This possibility he had not overlooked with concentrated knots of force, he ate away the merest portion of the surface of the sphere, and absorbed it in him. He was amazed at the metamorphosis. He became aware of a vigor so infinite that he felt nothing could withstand him.

Slowly, he began to expand. He was inexorable. The star could not stop him; it gave. It cracked, great gaping cracks which parted with displays of blinding light and pure heat. He continued to grow, pushing outward.

With the sphere of Great Energy, which was no more than ten million miles across, in his grasp, he continued inflation. A terrific blast of malignant energy ripped at him; cracks millions of miles in length appeared, cosmic displays of pure energy flared. After that, the gargantua gave way before Darkness so readily that he had split it up into separate parts before he ever knew it.

He then became aware that he was in the center of thousands of large and small pieces of the star that were shooting away from him in all directions, forming new suns that would chart individual orbits for themselves.

He had conquered. He hung motionless, grasping the sphere of Great Energy at his center, along with the mystic globe of purple light.

He swung his vision on the darkness, and looked at it in fascination for a long time. Then, without a last look at the universe of his birth, he activated his propellents with the nameless Great Energy and plunged into that dark well.

All light, save that he created, vanished. He was hemmed in on all sides by the vastness of empty space. Exhaltation, coupled with an awareness of the infinite power in his grasp, took hold of his thoughts and made them soar. His acceleration was minimum rather than maximum, yet in a brief space of his time standard he traversed uncountable billions of light-years.

Darkness ahead, and darkness behind, and darkness all around—that had been his dream. It had been his dream all through his life, even during those formless years in which he had played, in obedience to Oldster's admonishment. Always there had been the thought: what lies at the other end of the darkness? Now he was in the darkness, and a joy such as he had never known claimed him. He was on the way! Would he find another universe, a universe which had bred the same kind of life as he had known? He could not think otherwise.

His acceleration was incredible! Yet he knew that he was using a minimum of power: He began to step it up, swiftly increasing even the vast velocity which he had attained. Where lay that other universe? He could not know, and he had chosen no single direction in which to leave his own universe. There had been no choice of direction. Any line stretching into the vault of the darkness might have ended in that alien universe. . . .

Not until a million years had elapsed did his emotions subside. Then there were other thoughts. He began to feel a dreadful fright, a fright that grew on him as he left his universe farther behind. He was hurtling into the darkness that none before him had crossed, and few had dared

to try crossing, at a velocity which he finally realized he could attain, but not comprehend. Mind could not think it, thoughts could not say it!

And—he was alone! *Alone!* An icy hand clutched at him. He had never known the true meaning of that word. There were none of his friends near, nor his mother, nor great-brained Oldster—there was no living thing within innumerable light-centuries. *He* was the only life in the void!

Thus, for almost exactly ninety million years he wondered and thought, first about life, then the edge of the darkness, and lastly the mysterious energy field eternally at his core. He found the answer to two, and perhaps, in the end, the other.

Ever, each infinitesimal second that elapsed, his visions were probing hundreds of light-years ahead, seeking the first sign of that universe he believed in; but no, all was darkness so dense it seemed to possess mass.

The monotony became agony. A colossal loneliness began to tear at him. He wanted to do anything, even play, or slice huge stars up into planets. But there was only one escape from the phantasmal horror of the unending ebony path. Now and then he seized the globe of light with a tractor ray and hurled into the curtain of darkness behind him at terrific velocity.

It sped away under the momentum imparted to it until sight of it was lost. But always, though millions of years might elapse, it returned, attached to him by invisible strings of energy. It was part of him, it defied penetration of its secret, and it would never leave him, until, perhaps, of itself it revealed its true purpose.

Infinite numbers of light-years, so infinite that if written, a sheet as broad as the universe would have been required, reeled behind.

Eighty million years passed. Darkness had not been as old as that when he had gone into the void for which he had been named. Fear that he had been wrong took a stronger foothold in his thoughts. But now he knew that he would never go back.

Long before the eighty-nine-millionth year came, he had exhausted all sources of amusement. Sometimes he expanded or contracted to incredible sizes. Sometimes he

automatically went through the motions of traversing the forty-seven bands. He felt the click in his consciousness which told him that if there had been hyperspace in the darkness, he would have been transported into it. But how could there be different kinds of darkness? He strongly doubted the existence of hyperspace here, for only matter could occasion the dimensional disturbances which obtained in his universe.

But with the eighty-nine-millionth year came the end of his pilgrimage. It came abruptly. For one tiny space of time, his visions contacted a stream of light, light that was left as the outward trail of a celestial body. Darkness' body, fifty million miles in girth, involuntarily contracted to half its size. Energy streamed together and formed molten blobs of flaring matter that sped from him in the chaotic emotions of the moment.

A wave of shuddering thankfulness shook him, and his thoughts rioted sobbingly in his memory swirls.

"Oldster, Oldster, if only your great brain could know this—"

Uncontrollably inflating and deflating, he tore onward, shearing vast quantities of energy from the tight matter at his core, converting it into propellent power that drove him at a velocity that was more than unthinkable, toward the universe from whence had come that light-giving body.

V

The Colored Globes

In the ninety-millionth year a dim spot of light rushed at him, and, as he hurtled onward, the spot of light grew, and expanded, and broke up into tinier lights, tinier lights that in turn broke up into their components—until the darkness was blotted out, giving way to the dazzling, beautiful radiance of an egg-shaped universe.

He was out of the darkness; he had discovered its edge. Instinctively, he lessened his velocity to a fraction of its former self, and then, as if some mightier will than his

had overcome him, he lost consciousness and sped unknowingly, at steady speed, through the outlying fringe of the outer galaxy, through it, through its brothers, until, unconscious, he was in the midst of that alien galactic system.

When he regained consciousness, at first he made a rigid tour of inspection, flying about from star to star, tearing them wantonly apart, as if each and every atom belonged solely to him. The galaxies, the suns, the very elements of construction, all were the same as he knew them. All nature, he decided, was probably alike, in this universe, or in that one.

But was there life?

An abrupt wave of restlessness, of unease, passed over him. He felt unhappy and unsated. He looked about on the stars, great giants, dwarfs fiercely burning, other hulks of matter cooled to black, forbidding cinders, intergalactic nebulae wreathing unpurposefully about, assuming weird and beautiful formations over periods of thousands of years. He, Darkness, had come to them, he had crossed the great gap of nothing, but they were unaffected by this unbelievable feat and went swinging on their courses, knowing nothing of him. He felt small, without meaning. Such thoughts seemed the very apostasy of sense, but there they were; he could not shake them off. It was with a growing feeling of disillusionment that he drifted through the countless galaxies and nebulae that unrolled before him, in search of life.

And his quest was rewarded. From afar, the beating flow of the life energy came. He drove toward its source, thirty or forty light-years, and hung in its presence.

The being was a green-light, that one of the two classes in which Darkness had divided the life he knew. He himself was a purple-light, containing at his core a globe of pure light, the purpose of which had been one of the major problems of his existence.

The green-light, when she saw him, came to a stop. They stared at each other.

Finally she spoke, and there was wonder and doubt in her thoughts.

"Who are you? You seem . . . alien."

"You will hardly believe me," Darkness replied, now

trembling with a sensation which, inexplicably, could not be defined by the fact that he was conversing with a being of another universe. "But I am alien. I do not belong to this universe."

"But that seems quite impossible. Perhaps you are from another space, beyond the forty-seventh. But that is more impossible!" She eyed him with growing puzzlement and awe.

"I am from no other space," said Darkness somberly. "I am from another universe beyond the darkness."

"From beyond the darkness?" she said faintly, and then she involuntarily contracted. Abruptly she turned her visions on the darkness. For a long, long time she stared at it, and then she returned her vision rays to Darkness.

"So you have crossed the darkness," she whispered. "They used to tell me that that was the most impossible thing it was possible to dream of—to cross that terrible section of lightlessness. No one could cross, they said, because there was nothing on the other side. But I never believed, purple-light, I never believed them. And there have been times when I have desperately wanted to traverse it myself. But there were tales of beings who had gone into it, and never returned. And you have crossed it!"

A shower of crystalline sparks fled from her. So evident was the sudden hero worship carried on her thought waves that Darkness felt a wild rise in spirits. And suddenly he was able to define the never-before experienced emotions which had enwrapped him when first this green-light spoke.

"Green-light, I have journeyed a distance the length of which I cannot think to you, seeking the riddle of the darkness. But perhaps there was something else I was seeking, something to fill a vacant part of me. I know now what it was. A mate, green-light, a thinker. And you are that thinker, that friend with whom I can journey, voyaging from universe to universe, finding the secrets of all that is. Look! The Great Energy which alone made it possible for me to cross the darkness has been barely tapped!"

Imperceptibly she drew away. There was an unex-

plainable wariness that seemed half sorrow in her thoughts.

"You are a thinker," he exclaimed. "Will you come with me?"

She stared at him, and he felt she possessed a natural wisdom he could never hope to accumulate. There was a strange shrinkage of his spirits. What was that she was saying?

"Darkness," she said gently, "you would do well to turn and leave me, a green-light, forever. You are a purple-light, I a green. Green-light and purple-light—is that all you have thought about the two types of life? Then you must know that beyond the difference in color, there is another: the greens have a knowledge not vouchsafed the purples, until it is . . . too late. For your own sake, then, I ask you to leave me forever."

He looked at her puzzled. Then, slowly, "That is an impossible request, now that I have found you. You are what I need," he insisted.

"But don't you understand?" she cried. "I know something you have not even guessed at! Darkness—leave me!"

He became bewildered. What was she driving at? What was it she knew that he could not know? For a moment he hesitated. Far down in him a voice was bidding him to do as she asked, and quickly. But another voice, that of a growing emotion he could not name, bid him stay; for she was the complement of himself, the half of him that would make him complete. And the second voice was stronger.

"I am not going," he said firmly, and the force of his thoughts left no doubt as to the unshakable quality of his decision.

She spoke faintly, as if some outside will had overcome her. "No, Darkness, now you are not going; it is too late! Learn the secret of the purple globe!"

Abruptly, she wrenched herself into a hyperspace, and all his doubts and fears were erased as she disappeared. He followed her delightedly up the scale, catching sight of her in one band just as she vanished into the next.

And so they came to the forty-seventh, where all matter, its largest and smallest components, assumed the shapes of unchangeable cubes; even he and the green-

light appeared as cubes, gigantic cubes millions of miles in extent, a geometric figure they could never hope to distort.

Darkness watched her expectantly. Perhaps she would now start a game of chopping chunks off these cubed suns and swing them around as planets. Well, he would be willing to do that for a while, in her curious mood of playfulness, but after that they must settle down to discovering possible galactic systems beyond this one.

As he looked at her she vanished.

"Hmm, probably gone down the scale," thought Darkness, and he dropped through the lower bands. He found her in none.

"Darkness . . . try the . . . forty-eighth. . . ." Her thought came faintly.

"The forty-eighth!" he cried in astonishment. At the same time, there was a seething of his memory swirls as if the knowledge of his life were being arranged to fit some new fact, a strange alchemy of the mind by which he came to know that there *was* a forty-eighth.

Now he knew, as he had always known, that there was a forty-eighth. He snapped himself into it.

Energy became rampant in a ceaseless shifting about him. A strange energy, reminding him of nothing so much as the beating flow of an energy creature approaching him from a near distance. His vision sought out the green-light.

She was facing him somberly, yet with a queerly detached arrogance. His mind was suddenly choked with the freezing sensation that he was face to face with horror.

"I have never been here before," he whispered faintly.

He thought he detected pity in her, but it was overwhelmed by the feeling that she was under the influence of an outside will that could not know pity.

Yet she said, "I am sadder than ever before. But too late. You are my mate, and this is the band of . . . life!"

Abruptly while he stared, she receded, and he could not follow, save with his visions. Presently, as if a hypnotist had clamped his mind, she herself disappeared, all that he saw of her being the green globe of light she carried. He saw nothing else, knew nothing else. It be-

came his whole universe, his whole life. A peacefulness, complete and uncorroded by vain striving, settled on him like stardust.

The green globe of light dimmed and became smaller, until it was less than a pinpoint, surrounded by an infinity of colorless energy.

Then, so abruptly it was in the nature of a shock, he came from his torpor and was conscious. Far off he still saw the green globe of light, but it was growing in size, approaching—approaching a purple globe of light that in turn raced toward it at high velocity.

"It is my own light," he thought, startled. "I must have unwittingly hurled it forth when she settled that hypnotic influence over me. No matter. It will come back."

But would it come back? The green globe of light was expanding in apparent size, approaching the purple globe which, in turn, dwindled toward it at increasing speed.

"At that rate," he thought in panic, "they will collide. Then how will my light come back to me?"

He watched intently, a poignantly cold feeling clutching at him. Closer . . . closer. He quivered. Green globe and purple globe had crashed.

They met in a blinding crescendo of light that brightened space for light-years around. A huge mistiness of light formed into a sphere, in the center of which hung a brilliant ball. The misty light slowly subsided until it had been absorbed into the brighter light, that remained as motionless as Darkness himself. Then it commenced pulsating with a strange, rhythmic regularity.

Something about that pulsing stirred ancient memories, something that said, "You, too, were once no more than that pulsing ball."

Thoughts immense in scope, to him, tumbled in his mind.

"That globe is life," he thought starkly. "The green-light and I have created life. That was her meaning, when she said this was the band of life. Its activating energy flows rampant here.

"That is the secret of the purple globe; with the green globe it creates life. And I had never known the forty-eighth band until she made it known to me!

"The purpose of life—to create life." The thought of

that took fire in his brain. For one brief, intoxicating moment he thought that he had solved the last and most baffling of his mighty problems.

As with all other moments of exaltation he had known, disillusionment followed swiftly after. To what end was that? The process continued on and on, and what came of it? Was creation of life the only use of life? A meaningless circle! He recalled Oldster's words of the past, and horror claimed him.

"Life, my life," he whispered dully. "A dead sun and life—one of equal importance with the other. That is unbelievable!" he burst out.

He was aware of the green-light hovering near; yes, she possessed a central light, while his was gone!

She looked at him sorrowfully. "Darkness, if only you had listened to me!"

Blankly, he returned her gaze. "Why is it that you have a light, while I have none?"

"A provision of whatever it was that created us endows the green-lights with the ability to replace their lights three times. Each merging of a purple and green-light may result in the creation of one or several newly-born. Thus the number born overbalances the number of deaths. When my fourth light has gone, as it will some day, I know, I too, will die."

"You mean, I will . . . die?"

"Soon."

Darkness shuddered, caught halfway between an emotion of blind anger and mental agony. "There is death everywhere," he whispered, "and everything is futile!"

"Perhaps," she said softly, her grief carrying poignantly to him. "Darkness, do not be sad. Darkness, death does indeed come to all, but that does not say that life is of no significance.

"Far past in the gone ages of our race, we were pitiful, tiny blobs of energy which crept along at less than light speed. An energy creature of that time knew nothing of any but the first and forty-eighth band of hyperspace. The rest he could not conceive of as being existent. He was ignorant, possessing elementary means of absorbing energy for life. For countless billions of years he never

knew there was an edge to the universe. He could not conceive an edge.

"He was weak, but he gained in strength. Slowly, he evolved, and intelligence entered his mind.

"Always, he discovered things he had been formerly unable to conceive in his mind, and even now there are things that lay beyond the mind; one of them is the end of all space. And the greatest is, why life exists. Both are something we cannot conceive, but in time evolution of mental powers will allow us to conceive them, even as we conceived the existence of hyperspace and those other things. Dimly, so dimly, even now I can see some reason, but it slips the mind. But Darkness! All of matter is destined to break down to an unchanging state of maximum entropy; it is life, and life alone, that builds in an upward direction. So . . . faith!"

She was gone. She had sown what comfort she could.

Her words shot Darkness full of the wild fire of hope. That was the answer! Vague and promissory it was, but no one could arrive nearer to the solution than that. For a moment he was suffused with the blissful thought that the last of his problems was disposed of.

Then, in one awful space of time, the green-light's philosophy was gone from his memory as if it had never been uttered. He felt the pangs of an unassailable weariness, as if life energies were seeping away.

Haggardly, he put into effect one driving thought. With lagging power, he shot from the fatal band of life . . . and death . . . down the scale. Something unnameable, perhaps some natal memory, made him pause for the merest second in the seventeenth band. Afar off, he saw the green-light and her newly-born. They had left the highest band and come to the band where propellents became useless. So it had been at his own birth.

He paused no more and dropped to the true band, pursuing a slow course across the star beds of this universe, until he at last emerged on its ragged shore. He went on into the darkness, until hundred hundreds of light-years separated him from the universe his people had never known existed.

Dissipation

He stopped and looked back at the lens of misty radiance. "I have not even discovered the edge of the darkness," he thought. "It stretches out and around. That galactic system and my own are just pinpoints of light, sticking up, vast distances apart, through an unlimited ebony cloth. They are so small in the darkness they barely have the one dimension of existence!"

He went on his way, slowly, wearily, as of the power to activate his propellents were diminishing. There came a time, in his slow, desperate striving after the great velocity he had known in crossing the lightless section, when that universe, that pinpoint sticking up, became as a pinpoint to his sight.

He stopped, took one longing look at it, and accelerated until it was lost to view.

"I am alone again," he thought vaguely. "I am more alone than Oldster ever was. How did he escape death from the green-lights? Perhaps he discovered their terrible secret, and fled before they could wreak their havoc on him. He was a lover of wisdom, and he did not want to die. Now he is living, and he is alone, marooning himself in the lightness band, striving not to think. He could make himself die, but he is afraid to, even though he is so tired of life, and of thinking his endless thoughts.

"I will die. But no . . . ! Ah, yes, I will."

He grew bewildered. He thought, or tried to think, of what came after death. Why, there would be nothing! He would not be there, and without him nothing else could exist!

"I would not be there, and therefore there would be nothing," he thought starkly. "Oh, that is inconceivable. Death! Why, forever after I died, I would be . . . dead!"

He strove to alleviate the awfulness of the eternal unconsciousness. "I was nothing once, that is true; why cannot that time come again? But it is unthinkable. I feel as if I am the center of everything, the cause, the focal point, and even the foundation."

For some time this thought gave him a kind of gloating

satisfaction. Death was indeed not so bad, when one could thus drag to oblivion the very things which had sponsored his life. But at length, reason supplanted dreams. He sighed. "And that is vanity!"

Again he felt the ineffably horrible sensation of an incapacity to activate his propellents the full measure, and an inability to keep himself down to normal size. His memory swirls were pulsating and striving, sometimes, to obliterate themselves.

Everything seemed meaningless. His very drop into the darkness, at slow acceleration, was without purpose.

"I could not reach either universe now," he commented to himself, "because I am dying. Poor mother! Poor Oldster! They will not even know I crossed. That seems the greatest sorrow—to do a great thing, and not be able to tell of it. Why did they not tell me of the central lights? With Oldster, it was fear that I should come to the same deathless end as he. With mother—she obeyed an instinct as deeply rooted as space. There must be perpetuation of life.

"Why? Was the green-light right? Is there some tangible purpose to life, which we are unable to perceive? But where is my gain, if I have to die to bring to ultimate fruition that purpose? I suppose Oldster knew the truth. Life just is, had an accidental birth, and exists haphazardly, like a star, or an electron.

"But, knowing these things, why do I not immediately give way to the expanding forces within me? Ah, I do not know!"

Convulsively he applied his mind to the continuance of life within his insistently expanding body. For a while he gloried in the small increase of his fading vigor.

"Making solar systems!" his mind took up the thread of a lost thought. "Happy sons of Radiant, Incandescent, Great Power, and all the others!"

He concentrated on the sudden thought that struck him. He was dying, of that he was well aware, but he was dying without doing anything. What had he actually done, in this life of his?

"But what can I do? I am alone," he thought vaguely. Then, "I could make a planet, and I could put the life germ on it. Oldster taught me that."

Suddenly he was afraid he would die before he created this planet. He set his mind to it, and began to strip from the sphere of tight matter vast quantities of energy, then condensed it to form matter more attenuated. With lagging power, he formed mass after mass of matter, ranging all through the ninety-eight elements that he knew.

Fifty-thousand years saw the planet's first stage of completion. It had become a tiny sphere some fifteen-thousand miles in diameter. With a heat ray he then boiled it, and with an other ray cooled its crust at the same time forming oceans and continents on its surface. Both water and land, he knew, were necessary to life which was bound by nature of its construction to the surface of a planet.

Then came the final, completing touch. No other being had ever deliberately done what Darkness did then. Carefully, he created an infinitesimal splash of life-perpetuating protoplasm; he dropped it aimlessly into a tiny wrinkle on the planet's surface.

He looked at the finished work, the most perfect planet he or his playmates had ever created, with satisfaction, notwithstanding the dull pain of weariness that throbbed through the complex energy fields of his body.

Then he took the planet up in a tractor ray, and swung it around and around, as he now so vividly recalled doing in his childhood. He gave it a swift angular velocity, and then shot it off at a tangent, in a direction along the line of which he was reasonably sure lay his own universe. He watched it with dulling visions. It receded into the darkness that would surround it for ages, and then it was a pinpoint, and then nothing.

"It is gone," he said, somehow wretchedly lonely because of that, "but it will reach the universe; perhaps for millions of years it will traverse the galaxies unmolested. Then a sun will reach out and claim it. There will be life upon it, life that will grow until it is intelligent, and will say it has a soul, and purpose in existing."

Nor did the ironic humor of the ultimate swift and speedy death of even that type of life, once it had begun existence, escape him. Perhaps for one or ten million years it would flourish, and then even it would be gone—once upon a time nothing and then nothing again.

He felt a sensation that brought blankness nearer, a sensation of expansion, but now he made no further attempts to prolong a life which was, in effect, already dead. There was a heave within him, as if some subconscious force were deliberately attempting to tear him apart.

He told himself that he was no longer afraid. *I am simply going into another darkness—but it will be a much longer journey than the other.*

Like a protecting cloak, he drew in his vision rays about him, away from the ebony emptiness. He drifted, expanding through the vast, inter-universal space.

The last expansion came, the expansion that dissipated his memory swirls. A vast, compact sphere of living drew itself out until Darkness was only free energy distributed over light-years of space.

And death, in that last moment, seemed suddenly to be a far greater and more astounding occurrence than birth had ever seemed.

BOOK TWO

Daughter of Darkness

Prologue

Deep within the fifteenth band of lightlessness reposed he who had lived so long that he had forgotten the unutterable span of years which stretched back from this moment to the moment of his birth.

He thought, and wished to forget thought. To forget thought—that was death! Ah, let death come. If it would but creep up on him without his knowledge. If it would not let him know of its restful presence until it had done its work. If it would not give him warning, so that, unwilling, he fought against it with all the subterranean forces of his seventy-million-mile body.

To fight against death, and to wish it at the same time: this was a battle that could know no winner. Better to wish for nothing, to throttle thought until it subsided to a level where recognition of one's identity was a difficult thing.

Completely enclosed, first by the fifteenth band of lightlessness, second by his self-imposed guard against thoughts concerning the outer universe, still there was the trickle of thought that gave him awareness. Outside was the universe, in all its glowing splendor. Outside, too, were other energy creatures, beings such as he himself had been before his eternal quest for knowledge had led him to escape his normal fate—the fate he would now welcome.

They knew of him who strove not to think, and they respected his desire. For he had become a legend, beloved, yet held in awe.

Why did he wish to die, and yet could not die? Those young energy creatures could not know; but they did know that to disturb him would be to bring to him an unendurable agony. One ray of light, one single outside thought, would be as a stiletto piercing him with shocking awareness of external things. He had sought a hundred million years for the self-administered anesthetic

that would ease him to coma and a blessed semblance of mindless apathy. To disturb him now would be cruelty.

This was Oldster, this incredibly aged creature, who, some said, was here even before the galaxies, or perhaps before the nebulae, or—who knows?—even before time itself. This was the Old One of the race, he who no longer wished to think, or, if he must think, wished to think of extinction and its blessed relief.

I

Sun Destroyer

The breadth of this universe would not be comprehended with the naked mind. It was so great in girth that at the utmost, frightful velocity an energy creature could attain, he could never hope to travel from rim to rim in anything less than seven million years.

Yet this universe was small.

Small, and with little significance in the vastness of all. It was but a pin-point of light breaking the dead monotony of a darkness vast past description. Dark space, dark emptiness. A frightening gulf, in truth, a bottomless pit; an ocean of lightlessness, and utterly without a particle of any kind to give it warmth or character.

It stretched away. . . .

But there were other universes, other feeble pinpoints which, in their own right, were huge.

The youths were gathered in numbers of some hundreds around the giant white star, amongst them an air of interest and excitement as they watched the planet-swinging.

"The system will crumble," murmured the green-light, Luminescent. "How could it do otherwise? The gravitational stresses! The crisscrossing orbits!"

"Yet if Swift succeeds in making this new planet settle to a stable orbit, it will form the largest and most complex solar system we have created," mused her companion, the purple-light Star Eater.

"Swift will do it," insisted the nearby green-light Darting Green Ray. "If you remember, he placed the fifty-seventh when we all thought it impossible. By my count, thirty others have been thrown in since then. We could go on up to a hundred or more, no doubt of it.

"If only Sun Destroyer doesn't come along now!"

"If only she doesn't!"

Nervous sparkling streams formed about Luminescent's thirty million miles of coruscant energy.

If only Sun Destroyer would stay away.

They turned their full attention on Swift, as if to blot out the darkened thoughts of that roving Sun Destroyer.

Swift was swinging his planet; he was planet-swinger of the moment, upon whose intuition rested the stability of a new and somewhat top-heavy solar system. Yes, it was an incredibly intricate solar system these energy creatures had built. Millions of years before they had, in their endless search for diversified pleasures, selected this monster star to weave about with a family of planets. Their success, so far, was phenomenal. No less than eighty-seven planets shuttled in stable orbits. There was no attempt to place the orbits in one plane; haphazardly, they lay in every conceivable plane. But as the number of planets had grown, so had their difficulties. Eccentric anomalies were so great that some planets swung in orbits whose major axes might be billions of miles, while the minor axes were but two or three million. These orbits reached in all directions. Now, how to insert another planet directly into the midst of that mad tangle? Such was Swift's problem.

He nonetheless solved it, and he solved it adroitly; within the cogent swirls of patterned energy that formed his mind, cunning equations shortened or lengthened, at proper intervals, the tractor beam on the end of which poised his swinging new world, so that its velocity, when finally it was snapped into place, was pared to a nicety. Gracefully, even if somewhat dangerously, it missed direct collision with half a dozen of its fellows; then it whipped about in a complete and marvelously accurate ellipse, and serenely assumed its position in the monstrous complexity of orbits.

Flames of excitement added new light to the burning

heavens. Swift accepted congratulations with becoming modesty. He retired into the crowd, giving the creation and placement of the next planet into the care of a huge young green-light who was on the verge of her maturity, though neither she nor her companions were aware of it. Bursting with excess energies as she was, she confidently made her planet, rolling it out upon the sky, flipping it and dancing it on the end of a tractor beam. She began a trial swing. A thousand years later, the planet sped true.

The thousands of years wore on. Swift placed the hundredth planet.

If only Sun Destroyer stayed away!

"If only Sun Destroyer stays away!" whispered Luminescent.

"If only she does," muttered Star Eater.

"But maybe she won't," mourned Darting Green Ray.

"She must!"

"Perhaps she will."

"We'll hope that she does."

The painstaking, infinitely pleasurable task went on. The delicate computations which were now required by that solar mechanism of interweaving bodies were past belief. But these children of the universal spaces were inspired. This was not only a toy with moving parts; it had become an artistic creation. Space was being mastered, matter made to humble itself, the laws of motion forced to bend. The hundred and tenth planet went in.

White Galaxy started the next planet. He was busy assembling the raw materials when he felt that which he did not wish to feel. The purple luminosity at his core seemed to contract; then racing spangles of purple light flung against his outer rim, where they quivered and powdered into effulgent dust. In fearful spasm, White Galaxy's visions speared the heavens, looking for the source of his fear.

He was not alone. The others felt what he felt: the hated and hateful beat of a life-force, the life-force of a green-light, a vibrancy they knew too well. It impinged upon them from afar, and rushed upward in intensity as their questing vision rays lanced the skies.

A single thought grew from the gathering; of itself it seemed to wound the burning spaces.

"Sun Destroyer!"

As one, the gathering of purples and greens swung in a single direction; their visions reached far, through the constellations to find Sun Destroyer's point of radiation. For it was she! They saw her, millions and hundreds of millions of miles away, yes, light-years away, yet devouring the paltry distances with demon stride. On she came, implacable in her discovery of them; on she came, emerging with rush and fuming commotion from between two distant galaxies, a train of ruptured, flattened, shattered, collided, churning, mashed and powdered suns in her wake. This was Sun Destroyer, destroying.

"Sun Destroyer!"

The fearful cry went up again, this time with a note of protest.

She flashed toward them, thrusting suns to right and left in chaotic abandon, thirsty in her power, satiate with energy. Young as she was, with an excellence and beauty of form and coruscation not seen in these skies; gold cascades of living energy poured within her outer confining rim; circling spangled brilliancies moved in lazy dance about her green central core, as if not moved by the violent power replete within the rest of her. Spheroidal she was, but with smoothnesses and liquidly mirror surfaces that none of these purple and green-lights saw in each other. In her shining beauty she hung at last before them, ceasing motion with one thrust of her para-propellents, while the heavens turned to fire in the throwing-off of her wasteful excess of burning energy.

"What do you do?" she asked. Mirth was in her tones. Her visions swept the frozen group, centering a moment on White Galaxy. White Galaxy, not beautiful as was Sun Destroyer, shrank back; but White Galaxy was growing. Soon he would mature, but not yet; his fear of Sun Destroyer was fear of her beauty, contrasted with his lack of beauty, or so he thought. He could not know the truth that lay behind her glance; yet it was only a glance as her visions slid away, to rest upon his half-made planet.

"We do nothing," said Swift, taking the initiative in a

bold move to scorn her. "Sun Destroyer, go back where you came from. We do not wish you here."

"What do you do?"

She scoured the gathering with her visions, and then pierced through them to that area of sky they almost hid. Swift comprehension was in Sun Destroyer's thoughts, for now she saw the planet-woven sun.

"A new solar system." Admiration lingered in her thoughts. "A very complex one, too." Amazement was hers. "It must have taken you a very long time, an exceedingly long time, to fabricate it."

"An exceedingly long time," agreed Swift in rising anger. "Sun Destroyer! Go away! You shall not make one move toward our solar system."

Sun Destroyer seemed hardly to hear him. Languidly upon an axis she rotated as she studied the marvelous toy. "Never fear, Swift," she said at last. "I have no intention of destroying your system. On the contrary, I shall assist you; together we shall add to its excellence! Of course, it is now my turn."

She contracted to half her size. Pure energy pressed in upon itself with a blinding display of light and heat. Out upon the skies, twirling on the tip of a tractor beam, went Sun Destroyer's fifteen-thousand-mile planet.

"Back now, White Galaxy," admonished Sun Destroyer. "You were a little slow, you know; naturally, you have lost your turn." White Galaxy, still held by his fear of her beauty and of something else within her he could never name, did indeed move back, shrinking away from her. The other energy creatures fluttered on the sky in a restless wave.

"Stop her! She will destroy the sun as she destroys all suns!"

Sun Destroyer swung her lump of matter in ever-widened circles. Vainly in his anger, Swift swelled to twice his size, as if to block her from the sun. But there was no stopping Sun Destroyer. There seemed barely enough time for her to make an accurate set of equations before she loosed the twirling world. It rolled across the field of the sky at moderate speed while the dozens of youths watched abjectly.

"The planet is too massive," murmured Luminescent.

"And moving far too slowly," cried Sun Flame.

"The balance will be destroyed, and the system, our beautiful system, will cave in on itself!" said Darting Green Ray.

The planet went looping in. In the outermost level of orbits it seemed to falter badly. It fell to the next level, and conditions there turned out to be marvelously suited to its presence. Sun Destroyer's planet sped true; it was gyrating around the massive sun in an almost perfect circle.

Immediately, Sun Destroyer contracted again, and produced still another planet without going through the formality of declaring this to be her turn also. The second planet hurtled true. Sun Destroyer placed a third, and yet a fourth; both went in without error. One hundred fourteen planets; the youths were awed; the poetic rhythms of those gleaming planets shuttling about the proud fierce sun stunned them. But Sun Destroyer would destroy it, destroy it!

"Stop her! Sun Destroyer, go back!"

Swift, caught between rage and fascination, uncertainly faced the mirth of Sun Destroyer. Within him, he felt the same shrinkage of spirits that afflicted White Galaxy. But he would not permit himself to back off; beautiful she was, and different, and for those reasons if no others she must be stood up to.

"It was hardly skill," said Swift. "A matter of luck."

"Luck?" Her green central core seemed to heave. The golden cascades within her darkened.

"Luck," insisted Swift. His glance raked her with scorn. Within him grew an excitement. He had touched her monstrous vanity. Her mirth was gone. Her arrogant composure was dissolving. Where beauty had been grew ugliness. Forward Swift surged to taunt her, completely forgetful of what had been his objective, somehow to chase Sun Destroyer away. "Luck," he repeated. "Luck! No computations were made. You apparently do not have the necessary intelligence to make them—or even to know they should be made."

She hung before him, unspinning, rigid in space, staring at him astounded. "I?" she cried. "I?"

"You," insisted Swift. "You ride the skies like a thing

that owns the universe. But even your beauty burns out of you when you are crossed. Obviously, you do not own even yourself, much less the universe. You fancy yourself to be so much better a breed than we, but are you? We have observed that your reasoning power is undeveloped; your bright prettiness is seen to be only glitter and turns black when someone brave enough to speak his mind to you—like myself—

"Like yourself?"

The thought ripped into Swift. He started to speak again, but no words would come. An inner trembling had stopped him. His excitement controlled him, and then fear. What had he said? Sun Destroyer was not leaving; she was, on the contrary, spinning in the heavens. Her golden internal lights again spangled within her. Far from chasing her away, he had rekindled her purpose. Mirth darted across the open spaces from Sun Destroyer and impinged again on Swift.

"You are not brave, Swift," said Sun Destroyer; her laughter tore at him. "You are frightened. As all of you are frightened—not of what I might do to your intricate toy over which you have labored so long, no. You are frightened of my perfection!" Languidly upon the skies, indulgently observing them, she rotated. The throng hung silent; then they fluttered into motion as Sun Destroyer again turned upon the monster sun and its many planets.

Sun Destroyer's thoughts came musingly.

"Swift says it was luck. But was it? In my perfection, need I make elaborate computations for such simple work as placing a planet? We shall see. Perhaps I shall show you that it was skill, born out of the fabric of me!"

Even before she finished speaking, energy coalesced within her. A spheroidal lump of hot matter formed. It was a planet. As it cooled down and cleared itself of raging fumes, Sun Destroyer flung it out on the tip of a tractor beam.

"It is a small planet," said Sun Destroyer off-handedly. "Back now, Swift!" and away the planet went in a shallow loop as solar attraction bent the angle of its path. Swift had indeed moved back. He was numbed to new fear. Small the planet was, but . . .

Suddenly the gathering of youths surged on the sky.

A hundred outraged cries rang as that tiny, seemingly inoffensive planet became a plundering demon. It glided across the orbit of the outermost world, which in turn faltered and collided with its fellow in the next orbit. A racking commotion now ensued; a full dozen planets were caught in a holocaust of cross motion. The thrown planet in the meantime skipped through a dozen other orbits in a planetary dance that ended in chaos. Several planets dropped into their primary. The monster sun shuddered rackingly. Solar prominences burned the sky, incinerating all the inner planets. Sun Destroyer's planet looped around the other side of the system and with what seemed calculated precision reduced all the middle orbits to ruin. Suddenly there was no order at all. Planets collided, exploded, fell into the sun. Finally the sun itself exploded.

Where the beautiful, complex toy had reposed was ravening space, heaven's inferno. The energy creatures rode out the storm, rode the waves of heat and demon light. When it was over, they fluttered back together, whirling and expanding and darting off into side spaces looking for the object of their hate. But Sun Destroyer had not gone. She hung precisely where she had been, discarding excess luminescence from the monster flare.

"She destroyed our sun, as she destroys all suns!"

"It was a bad calculation, very bad," said Sun Destroyer mournfully. "I suppose I am not so skillful after all. Perhaps Swift was right."

Of all that gathering, only Swift and White Galaxy knew the truth. And Swift was therefore mute. He abjectly wished her to go, her and her cascading yellow gleams, and her promise of a further threat that he could not name.

Sun Destroyer did go, with a final flaunting glance at the angered and grieving crowd. Out went her propellants, and she rushed away across the galaxies, weaving between the stars, touching them not.

Sun Dust

Sun Destroyer, flinging herself through star cluster after star cluster, suddenly felt a thrill of fright.

She stopped her headlong motion, thrusting her visions into the backward distance. The fright grew as she saw the being who came in her wake. It was a green-light twice as large as herself.

"Stop, Sun Destroyer!"

The thought came clearly and firmly. Sun Destroyer's unease persisted. Saying no word, she waited for the green-light to catch up with her.

They hung in space facing each other. Quiverings of exuded radiance sparkled along the rim of the older green-light's body.

"My daughter," said Sun Dust sadly. "Why must you cause others unhappiness?"

Some of Sun Destroyer's unease disappeared. It was replaced by defiance.

"I seek only my own happiness," she retorted.

"By destroying that of others?"

"Did I destroy that of others?" asked Sun Destroyer, as if in surprise.

"There are many strange tales of you," Sun Dust said gently. "The other youths are fearful when you come. You take their peace."

"I do not mean to, mother. I only know that I seek my own happiness. I care not about other things. It seems right and proper that I do as I do." She added, pointedly, sharply: "I doubt if any thing will change me."

The Mother hung motionless. Sun Destroyer began to rotate upon the heavens, to rotate and expand, while the running streams of yellow gleams agitated within her. The pain of her younger years was returning to her, carried, it seemed, in the sorrowfulness of this being. And she did not wish it to return—did not wish it to!

The mother said, "Sun Destroyer—my daughter." Distress was in her voice. "Could you not find other means to satisfy your desires? Surely there are more worthwhile things than destruction, are there not?"

"Ah, yes," said Sun Destroyer mockingly. She almost could not believe that these words were being said. "You echo the credo of Darkness, mother—of him who sired me. Darkness, dreaming that he would solve the secrets of all that is. He solved nothing. Darkness! He should have listened to Oldster, who knew the truth, that not too high a value must be placed on one's life—nor any life. Darkness, the fool."

Dark grew the golden gleams within her, for her thoughts were dark and running with pain.

Darkness himself awakened her pain. She quivered deep within, as if to force from her being the monstrous blight. Sharply she said to this being who also awakened her pain:

"I have been very happy. I have been happy because I do not consider myself—or others—as sacred appendages of the universe. Why would you take that happiness from me?"

For a long time the older green-light held visions on her youngest child. She was remembering that day long ago when Darkness burst through from another universe, searching for the significance of life, and finding it only in death. Fright was in Sun Dust, fright of Sun Destroyer, and fear for Sun Destroyer. On that day many years ago when Sun Destroyer lay in her cradle in the seventeenth band of hyperspace, Darkness passed by on his way to death and gazed upon his child. What was in his gaze, and what did his presence mean?

Sun Dust felt her knowledge, a hidden knowledge, that somehow was evoked by memory of that which Darkness carried: the sphere of Great Energy.

Energies unknown spearing through the cradling space where this one of the golden effulgences had grown. Sun Destroyer she was, a destroyer indeed, and not only of suns. Mindless and wanton destruction was her credo, and utter and complete satisfaction of personal desires. Sun Dust knew the truth as she would never know it again. She had bred a child who was as different as horror was different from peace.

She said faintly, "No, there was nothing of you in Darkness, my child."

The pain was gone. Sun Destroyer felt new energies

within her and brightening thoughts. Deliberately, as if to give her growing elation its expression, she reached out with pressor beam and tractor ray and tore a nearby sun into flaming ruin, scattering the fragments the length and depth of a galaxy.

Her mother could only look at her.

But Sun Destroyer was pleased again, and uncaring. Soft, languid lights took shape in her body. How quickly her thoughts ran, how brightly she saw herself! "Darkness," she mused. "Ah, Darkness! He sought the end and the meaning of all life—but who are we to say that he failed? Mother, look upon me! Am I not flawless?" Quickly she spun in smooth sphericity, mirrorlike and gleaming. "Am I not the meaning that Darkness sought? Do I not personify that for which life has sought ever since life first came to be? Yes, *I* am that meaning!

"Life seeks happiness. *That* is its meaning. But life fails to find happiness. The reasons, I am sure, are obvious; for from the beginning we have imbued ourselves with a sacred love of ourselves. We have become so inflated with the idea of being alive that we consider the universe made for us. Then, out of our respect for ourselves, we manufacture respect for others, and how wrong it is to do so. You must see the meaning, mother."

"I hear only words," came the thoughts of Sun Dust.

But Sun Destroyer dreamed on. "Life blunders," she whispered. "Each of us sacrifices some of himself to maintain the happiness of others. When we seek happiness for others a part of us dies. Therefore, *I—I*, Sun Destroyer, and only *I*—am the meaning that Darkness was seeking, the meaning that he created, all unknowingly. For see! I am happy. My desires are sated. I do as I will, without thought for the happiness of others."

A foam of red sparks leaped unbidden from the complex energy fields of her body.

"But I breed unhappiness by trying to do as *you* wish me to do, mother," she said darkly. "I shape myself with your desires—and I die!"

"No," said Sun Dust.

"I die!" said Sun Destroyer, and charged bitterly, "You have not listened."

"I listened, I heard. My child, I heard only words."

Sun Destroyer stared at her, at this great quiet creature who hung athwart space and who was moved only to sorrow and love. No, Sun Dust would never understand; how could she understand one who was the end product of all her race? How could she or any like her ever know what lay in the thought swirls of Sun Destroyer? But she *must* understand! At least she must know of Sun Destroyer's secret yearning, and she must know something of the answers to its fulfillment.

And if she did not, *who would?*

A gulf as wide as that spanning two universes yawned in horror before her.

"Mother." The word trembled out of her. "There is something I must know. A little while ago, a great knowledge came to me. I knew—and I know not how I knew—that there is a band of space beyond the forty-eighth."

"Beyond the forty-eighth? Beyond? No, my child."

"Yes! I ascended the bands. Up through to the topmost—and I sought to break through—into the forty-ninth. There is a forty-ninth band. Yes, I sought to fling myself past the band of life into a forty-ninth, and I failed. Failed!"

The quiet sphere of Sun Dust was no longer quiet. The cry of this strange being who was her daughter was a pain within her. "I am glad you failed," whispered Sun Dust. "For if there is a forty-ninth band, the knowledge bodes you no good. I know nothing of this forty-ninth band. Nor has anyone spoken of it. Therefore how could it be? If others know nothing of it, how can you?"

"I *do* know," said Sun Destroyer sharply. "As for how I know, it is for the reasons I gave you." Abruptly, she was luxuriating in the rightness of that which she knew. The mystery of her greatness lured her. "Why, it must be, mother, that I am the only energy creature ever to sense the existence of the forty-ninth band! After all, I must be the very reason for the existence of all life. In me is centered the driving force of all our race. Therefore, I shall go into the forty-ninth band!"

"My child!" Sun Dust's distress was tinged with a growing horror. "You do not know what you say."

"I know," the dreaming thoughts of Sun Destroyer came. "Pain was mine when first I knew of the forty-ninth; but then the pain was gone. The forty-ninth band cannot bode ill for me—not if pain goes!"

"Somehow there is a way to shatter the wall between the band of life and the forty-ninth. I shall shatter that wall."

Abruptly, she disappeared into a hyperspace.

Sun Dust did not try to follow. The forty-ninth band! There was, there could be, no such thing. And yet . . .

She pursued a slow, spiritless trail across her jeweled amphitheater, and knew a sadness that she should have been instrumental in bringing Sun Destroyer into being.

III

Into The Darkness

For the fourth time, Sun Destroyer impelled herself into the forty-eighth band, where the universe seemed entirely to lose its true character in an infinity of colorless, rampant life energy. There was in her, though she did not realize it, a growing fright. Thrice she had sought, by sheer momentum, to break through into the forty-ninth band, of whose existence she was as certain as of life itself. Thrice she had failed. Thrice she was forced to forget her failure, and dropped back through the scale of bands, now and then reaching out to split one blazing sun after another. Each time the memory of failure persisted, leading her into an unbearable morass of discontent. For the fourth time she returned.

"It is naught but a foolish impulse," she told herself smolderingly. "I shall try again, and then, if I fail, I shall fail forever."

Subsequently, there was the clicking in her consciousness which told her that she should indeed have entered the forty-ninth band; but around her was nothing but the life energy of the forty-eighth.

Momentarily, fury exploded; she stilled it, and with

monumental effort thrust the problem from her. She dropped to the first band, that of true space, heartlessly ruptured a magnificent quadruple system of stars, and sped savagely away across the universe, a plundering, destroying creature, in search of creatures her own age.

"I shall play and destroy and torment my fellow creatures from now on," she told herself firmly. "Thus I shall seek the happiness which I, as the end product of all life, am deserving of. Ah, the forty-ninth band is but a chimera, which I would follow but to reap my own eternal discontent!"

The tens of thousands, the millions of years fled. Sun Destroyer truly played, if the viciousness with which she acted could be called play. Idleness could not be tolerated; monotony was to be avoided. Sun Destroyer must destroy. There was a sheer magnificence to be experienced when one sent two stars across a galaxy to crash upon each other with supernal burst of energy. To dash amongst her own kind, and completely without regard for their desires to disrupt their carefully wrought toys, to scatter them, to disappear into a hyperspace with a taunting word—such was the rightful action of him who would be eternally without discontent!

Yes, one must play, and in playing give no thought either to the future or the past. Also, one must be without a goal, and must plan nothing. Goals somehow disappeared or their value diminished as one approached them; plans in turn never held true to themselves, but were forever distorting themselves or even turning full-circle to become the opposite of what they were intended to become. The forty-ninth band? Even if such existed, it could no longer exert its dread fascination upon her. With these rigid attitudes, reasoned Sun Destroyer, she would extract from existence the unending pleasure which, surely, was the rightful heritage of life.

To hold these rigid attitudes was indeed a task. One must be active, most active, so that doubt of oneself rippled behind and never quite caught up. Sun Destroyer ripped and slid and skidded across the unbounded domain of countless billions of stars; she danced in dervish pattern. No matter that her fellow energy creatures stared and trembled at her approach; no matter that they hated

and feared her—she would feed on their hate and their fear, and grow large and strong in her happiness.

The creatures of the skies knew no rest from Sun Destroyer, and she would give them no rest. They found their playland infested with this green-light who sought them at first to play, ostensibly, but whose ultimate purpose was their discomfort. In their harrowing ordeal, they even dared the terrors of the unknown bands of hyperspace. One of these unknown bands was the nineteenth. In this band, so the story went, strange dimensional tortures abounded. Furthermore, life, should it venture within, would find itself divided witlessly into many parts. Nobody seemed really sure of what actually went on in the nineteenth, although Swift insisted he had discovered its laws.

"You go in and you find yourself divided into seventeen equal parts," said Swift.

"Fourteen," challenged the young green-light Sky Mist. "So it was told me by some of the older ones of our race when they dared to enter the nineteenth. But it was a terrible experience, and they emerged instantly."

"I have entered," said Swift, "and entered alone. It was frightening, yes, but I didn't know about that beforehand, and I took a chance and stayed—long enough to count seventeen parts of me, no less."

"It *was* seventeen," another purple-light agreed. "However, the single time I was there I noted that the real effect of the nineteenth band is to reduce one to one-seventeenth of his true size; coincidentally, he sees sixteen reflections of himself in a kind of hypnotic mental outpouring in which he attempts to compensate for his lost bulk."

"An ingenious but impractical theory," said Swift off-handedly. "Enough of these speculations, however. I myself am off to the nineteenth band for a practical demonstration, if only to myself. Perhaps there are those brave enough to enter with me."

Sky Mist began to gather his courage, but still hung back. The others, charmed and at once repelled by the monstrous idea, fluttered uncertainly so that foamy iridescences frothed about their rims. They looked off to the rim of the galaxy which enclosed them, as if seeking other

diversion. It was then that the outermost one of the gathering saw Sun Destroyer.

"Sun Destroyer comes!"

The heavens seemed to chill and darken.

"We must go before she sees us!"

Sun Destroyer was the living impulse of their migration into the nineteenth band. As one, the gathering shared the common thought of escape, escape, no matter where; the nineteenth band of hyperspace opened to receive them. Sun Destroyer plunged across space and hung motionless in the swarming sparkles that were left behind when her quarry vanished. She whirled a furious splatter of vision rays out upon the skies; perhaps each creature was hiding somewhere behind the shield of some great star!

Sun Destroyer searched first in true space. She ranged through the light-years, at first taking some pleasure in the chase; of the youthful energy creatures she saw no sign. She hung then before the portals of the hyperspaces, and thought with demon humor, *They fear the bands of space less than they fear me!* She ascended the spaces, skipping, however, from one to another. Some of these bands contained horrors and mysteries unmentionable; others could be worked with if their laws were understood; most were less preferable than the band of true space at any time.

A million years of searching passed. Fury and astonishment goaded Sun Destroyer. How silent the universe with her fellow youths gone! How loud the painful thoughts within her memory swirls! She must find them; she would again hum with the universal music of her contentment. But where had those fleeing youths immured themselves? The answer came at last: in the nineteenth band! Or, perhaps, the dreaded twentieth band, or the twenty-eighth—but most likely the nineteenth. These were the three bands that Sun Destroyer herself knew nothing off. But she would not let fear even begin in her—she was in the nineteenth band before she ever knew it.

Sun Destroyer felt the blinding, divisive pain of her entrance into the nineteenth band; but pain she had known before. Her astonishment was greater than her pain, and then came her great mirth. For this was indeed the space

into which the youths had fled. They lay scattered upon the sky in myriads, pared down to smaller sizes. At a single glance, Sun Destroyer recognized thirteen different and smaller copies of Sun Mist. Swift himself was distributed everywhere. And Sun Destroyer herself! She saw herself in multiply form, in spinning glowing beauty that shamed the lesser ones to ugliness. For a moment this unequaled sight charmed her, but then the myriad of her fellows cried in orchestrated voice, "She has found us!" "We must undo the plan!" "She is here, and the crystal will shatter!"

Sun Destroyer's multiply gaze was an admiring one, but was rigidly curious, for she divined a strangeness here. The youths moved not in their many pared-down forms. It was as if each had been assigned a position which he was reluctant to change. But Sun Destroyer could change position, and in a wicked experiment she did so; she permeated with multiply dance the motionless concourse. A cry of protest breathed across the silent and starless sky. "She moves; the equation will be destroyed!"

"What do you do?" Sun Destroyer's voice came from the many forms of her. Slyly casual her voice was, as she searched for some clue to the game that was being played. Then she began to see the crystalline pattern of ultimate beauty that the youths presented to themselves. The prime number seventeen was the control factor; thought itself was the moving force that formed the living crystal; and the object was the lessening of pain.

The seventeen scattered forms of Sun Destroyer shivered and whirled and cascaded their golden gleams within her; her ecstasy was real.

"Let me play with you," she whispered. "I will not disturb your peace this time."

"Go! Sun Destroyer, you must go!"

"I must stay." Her multiply forms danced involuntarily. Again protest whirled from the living crystal. "I promise you! You play a game I must be part of. See! I am able to divine the nature of your game. I can place myself as well as any of you." Her searing thought formed within her and her copies. Rigidly, her seventeen selves assumed a pattern like a template that placed itself three-

dimensionally within the complex latticework of the myriad others. The living crystal then was forced to change into a new pattern. Space sang and seemed to snap as the concourse of multiplied energy creatures crystallized anew; but with that new crystallization came such pulsing discordances within Sun Destroyer that even she shuddered with the horror of what she had done. In her eagerness, the equation failed; pain came in corrosive beats. The wail of anger and suffering ate into her thought swirls, so that in spasm and fright she sought to undo her error. But upon the strange heavens of the nineteenth band grew only a crystal of impossible structure and revolting ugliness and unbearable pain.

A moment that structure held. Then Swift in his many forms broke free of the crystal and it at once broke free of its structure to become a formless and even uglier mass of contorting energy creatures.

"She has found us," said Swift. "Even here she would find us. So now we must go, before she leads us into more painful structures. Her thinking is ugly; she could not lead us into beauty."

The words were almost impossible for Sun Destroyer to hear. She rejected them almost as soon as they reached her; but not soon enough. The portent of what was happening dazed her; her bewilderment changed to horror.

"You must *not* go," she cried, surging amongst them as if she would block their many exits. "I erred—I did not know. I saw beauty in your form; I only wished to create more perfect beauty. I divined that as you moved toward beauty, you moved from pain. I only wished—"

Space was empty.

Sun Destroyer was alone in the nineteenth band.

They would never return, they would not believe that she would wish to seek beauty with them, that she sought painlessness and the surcease that ultimate beauty gave. She looked about on her seventeen separate and small selves, on the gleaming sphericity of the many Sun Destroyers, and she saw her own golden gleams turn ugly and dark within her. She could not bear the sight, and turned from herself toward the blank part of her inner mind.

But even there was torture.

Where was not torture?

The forty-ninth band. But even this thought, dull and old and full of horror, must be turned back again and again before she could face it and again examine it. And in order to face it, she must leave the nineteenth band and its ruined joy; she must depart forever from her seventeen selves, and somehow regain the hope of her single self.

In the fifteenth band, where resided no light whatsoever, Sun Destroyer restored herself to something of what she had been, and yet knew she could never be the same. Scorn of herself and of her supplicative abasement burned in her mind. She had begged the children of the skies for help; they, in their rightful suspicion, had denied her. Now no one could help her, save as she helped herself. Dread seized her, dread of herself and the need that was plain within her. Now there was but one answer to her life; she had known the answer; she had tried to blot it out. Her mind reeled at the enormity of the thing she must do. . . .

Several light-years distant, the green- and purple-lights dispiritedly awaited the emergence of Sun Destroyer into the true band of space. They had no doubt she would emerge with taunts that would shame them for what they had attempted in the nineteenth band. They knew she would hover amongst them, challenging them to games only so that she could distribute annoyances. But when Sun Destroyer did emerge and flash toward them it was only to flash on by as if they never existed. Luminiscent stared after her, not so much in relief as in shock. "That is strange," she whispered. "Strange! There must be something wrong with Sun Destroyer—"

Sun Destroyer hung before her mother.

The visions of Sun Dust locked with those of the younger green-light; puzzlement mixed with dread was in her gaze.

"What is it, my daughter?" she queried doubtfully. "You have not thus voluntarily come to me in many millions of years."

Languidly Sun Destroyer rotated on a gradually changing axis. "You have two other children now who show you the respect you demand, mother," she said casually.

Sun Dust's inner green light seemed to darken; already three of her green-lights were gone. One remained to her, and when that one went also she would die.

Sun Dust was sad, not because of her coming end, but because her child should remind her of it, in subtle taunt.

"You have something you wish to know of me, my child."

"A little thing," said Sun Destroyer. "There is a little thing I would know of Darkness, he who sired me. It is not so very important, however, so that if you wished not to tell me—" Astoundedly, the words choked off; she could not control the eagerness within her. Shame rendered her further speechless, for Sun Dust could not help but note her lie.

Sun Dust said slowly, almost as if in relief, "It is something that is very important. Yet, in what way could Darkness be of import?" She mused on the question, made as if to search Sun Destroyer's thought swirls; but Sun Destroyer thrust her off in unhidden recoil.

"Very well," she said stiffly. "It is important. Darkness and his whole life and what he did with his life is important to me, for I am the product of that life! Darkness sought for answers to life—in me reside those answers, and the means of implementing them! Do you understand?"

Sun Dust could only gaze mutely.

"However, it is not only of Darkness I wish to know," Sun Destroyer continued. "I seem to remember, from fragments of the story you told me, of another being, a being named—" She stopped, hardly able to say the name, she had thought it and dreamed of it so often.

Her mother said, "You speak of Oldster?"

"Yes!" Her eagerness was open to the skies now, consuming her, to be seen by any who looked. "Oldster, he who resides in the universe from which Darkness came. Mother, tell me of him! Was he wise?"

"He was very wise, my child."

"And it was he who gave Darkness the secret that enabled him to cross the great gap of nothing that separates our universe from his?"

"It was Oldster who gave Darkness access to the sphere of Great Energy which enabled him to cross. Ah, yes,"

Sun Dust whispered, "Oldster was wise, so wise that he must live even today; for he escaped his doom. But he wishes to die."

"To die?" The thought scoured Sun Destroyer with its newness. She swelled so that arrows of pale energy impaled the spaces about her. "Oldster, the wise, would wish to die? He could not then be so wise." For a thousand years she brooded on that enigma. Finally, "Perhaps even the wise are sometimes foolish. Perhaps," she added slowly, "one can become so wise that it becomes wise to wish for death. Therefore, though it is a foolish desire, I have no quarrel with it. Now mother, tell me of another thing, of the sphere of Great Energy. Does—does it still exist?"

"It is indestructible," said Sun Dust simply. "Surely you must know this. It still exists, for Darkness carried it out into the darkness with him as he strove to reach his native universe. Darkness died, but the sphere is still out there, moving slowly toward that other universe."

"It is still out there," repeated Sun Destroyer. "Then, mother, who is to say that I may not follow it—catch up with it—and use it!"

"Who is to say, indeed?" murmured Sun Dust sorrowfully, and asked her question, though she sensed its answer. "But why?"

"Why? *Why!*" The thoughts of Sun Destroyer streamed; violences stormed within her; she strained against bonds as if testing that point at which they could be broken. "You ask me why, and yet you must know why—for why else do I live except to discover those things I must know, and to learn the answer to questions none before me has asked? Mother, I too must cross the darkness, as Darkness did before me!"

"And then?"

"And then—then I shall seek out Oldster, and wrest from him the answer to the secret that plagues me, so that I may at last know my happiness. And who, indeed, more earnestly seeks happiness than I? Who is more deserving of happiness, of all the creatures of the skies, than I? Therefore, I shall leave you, leave this universe, and eventually even leave Oldster, after I have found him. For what need then shall I have of anyone?"

Her voice dreamed. The universe hummed about her. Her future lured her with its promise. For a long time the moment held, and then she must bring herself back to hear the horror in the voice of Sun Dust, and to feel the probing quest of Sun Dust's thoughts in her own thought swirls.

"To seek out Oldster," Sun Dust's thoughts came, "you will endure such agonies as you cannot dream. Do you not understand, my child? Oh, Sun Destroyer, you must not! You seek happiness, but there is no happiness in the darkness. For a hundred million years, you will know agony such as a younger green-light never could know. Had you chosen to cross the darkness when you were younger—when there was still time—"

The chill enveloped Sun Destroyer. For a frightening moment, she understood Sun Dust's meaning; but then she must discard that understanding. For in that understanding lay fuller knowledge of the nature of her bonds, the very bonds that tied her cruelly to life in this universe—if she would let it!

Out of her being, therefore, was wrenched the cry, "I follow my desires!"

She moved back another light-year as if distance strengthened her. Sun Dust gauged that mounting physical barrier, but in her sadness she did not attempt to follow or lessen the other distances that were growing between her and her first-born.

"You follow your desires," she said sadly, "if you but could. But I know you must go, my child, for the forces that move you are too great. Since I shall not—shall never see you again, I must tell you one more thing." Her voice now was heavy with warning. "Sun Destroyer, though you must cross the darkness, though you must seek out Oldster, do not attempt to follow in his path."

Sun Dust disappeared into a hyperspace, gone from Sun Destroyer forever; and Sun Destroyer felt the intoxication of her freedom. She twirled in space, charmed with the newness of her release. Now she answered to no one; indeed, she was mistress of two universes, and even Oldster would bow before her!

Sun Destroyer grew taut. In her mind she bent herself like a great bow that would hurl her straight and true to

an unimaginable target. Her great moment came, and then she was gone. She flung in unerring motion across the powdered star-streams of heaven, and only once in her long journey to that entrance point where Darkness had appeared in this universe so many millions of years ago did she pause—ruthlessly destroying the ringed star which her playmates thought free of her depredations.

Then, with mounting acceleration and a seething of excitement unmatched even by the bursting cores of the novae about her, she speared the great spaces. Whole galaxies sped by and were lost. Nebulae enclosed her and dropped behind. Finally, after seven million years, the whole vast sweep of the starred heavens before her was gripped in a great, tight semicircle by a darkness that stretched endlessly away.

On the edge of this darkness, with the dazzling, radiant beauty of the egg-shaped universe behind her, she hovered. Her visions witlessly speared the mystery of that supremely vast ocean of lightlessness; then she was into it, and, forever, left her own universe behind.

IV

The Son of Sun Destroyer

Only after the last trace of universal matter, light and lightless energy were swallowed by the darkness and she moved through unthinkable black, did Sun Destroyer detect the first sign of the sphere of Great Energy. It came as a single pulse, impinging unmistakably upon her. She swelled as if she would hasten her flight by enclosing all about her. Again the pulse came, and again, until radiation from the thing she sought poured through her in a steady stream, providing a beam she was able to follow.

Ahead of her still was darkness, but she felt the presence of the perfectly invisible sphere of tight matter which Darkness wrested from a billion-mile star millions of years ago—yes, easily one hundred fifty million years ago! And it was near! She rushed upon it as upon a quarry that would turn on her were she not to take it first. And

then it was hers, she was wrapped about it, and all in a moment was intoxicated with the inexhaustible powers that flooded through her. For a moment, she was Darkness, not as he was in death, but as he was in full life, plunging into the unknown. She knew the fright of Darkness, but also she felt that she must know his unrivaled sense of victory.

Nothing could withstand him who owned the sphere of Great Energy. Great had been Darkness, but greater still was Sun Destroyer, the daughter of Darkness! Suddenly the darkness knew no horrors for her, but presented her, in processions of ebony pageantry, the happiness that was hers. Here was no fright; the darkness was happiness; at its end was Oldster, who in turn would add to her happiness and complete it with his endless wisdom. For Oldster would know of the forty-ninth band! And so would go pain.

A marvelous rustling now seemed to fill space. The voices of great beings who lived elsewhere seemed to call to her. She listened to them, knowing at once that they did not exist, and yet charmed by the imageries she conjured. Lilting were the voices. They were the voices of no one she knew—except perhaps that of Darkness? Faint grew the voices as she expunged them. She thought vaguely, perhaps they came from the forty-ninth band?

Her fantasies endured for that moment, and then were gone. In full force, she saw again the darkness she would cross. She must go. She ate at the sphere of Great Energy with concentrated knots of force—she moved under that unimaginable power with a starting velocity she had never known before.

The first light-years passed.

Then forty million years were gone.

Sun Dust.

The words of Sun Dust came back.

Sun Destroyer knew torture.

The desire was nameless. It stabbed her; it was with her all her waking moments. What was this need, greater than any desire she had known before? How long would it last? Shudders ran through the complex energy fields of her grown body, and subsisted with seeming interminableness for long periods of time, feeding on an instinct

that had grown to unmanageable proportions. Yes, her body had grown, as had her green light. That was the answer! She had matured. Now she was experiencing the same agonies Darkness must have endured on his long journey; except that his had been worse, for he had not known their source.

Sun Destroyer, cleaving the untold distances within the darkness, was slave to her buffeting emotions. Monotony was one of her demons. She wished to slash suns, she wished to heap scorn on the ugly ones of her race so that they would flee her and leave their complex toy galaxies for her to heap into smoking ruin. Then she would live again! For she was dead here, entrapped; trapped by her own desire for happiness which had instead become an agony of unsatisfied longing.

Sun Destroyer drifted in self-imposed coma. She heard again the singing and the lilting, the beautiful and the wonderful voices of the great ones who lived in the forty-ninth band. Yes, she would believe they existed. Surely they must, for she heard them, orchestrated out of the fabric of a darkness that was living and not dead, dead like that which enclosed her and pressed in upon her and would not let her live. Oh, the voices! the voices! The voices died; she awoke; the depravity of her hurtling and endless existence smothered her.

When would it end?

Much as had Darkness eons before, when she finally sighted the universe toward which the sphere of Great Energy had led her, she involuntarily contracted and then expanded with the joy of that which she saw. The lightless spaces about her were ablaze with spangling streams of her excess energy; her emotions danced on the black sky. And then, as the new universe moved in upon her with startling jumps in size, and it rose to its full lenticular radiance, silhouetted in aching beauty against the blackest of darknesses, she abruptly lost consciousness. When she awoke, she knew she must have dreamed—but no! She was surrounded by an infinitude of galaxies stretching farther than her visions could plumb.

Now she drifted, making no effort to guide herself, even when she brushed the flames of some mammoth star. She drifted across these new fields of the endless sky,

grasping the sphere of Great Energy near her green core, drinking in the celestial beauties about her as if they would revivify her. Her thoughts drifted, too; she dreamed; she wished now to drift through her life without effort, without longings, without needs, without even the desire to destroy or to exert mastery over the lesser forms of matter or of life.

Then that peaceful moment in Sun Destroyer's life was gone.

She felt the beat of a life-force.

Her drifting thoughts tautened and came to full halt. Involuntarily, her visions lanced out in sudden, eager motion; she sent them stabbing between two near galaxies. She caught sight of the purple-light who approached. He was coming swiftly, and, if he continued on, would pass her. She moved slowly to intercept him.

He stopped when he saw her, rotating upon the skies as he studied her. There was in his attitude an uncertainty, at first; surely he must have sensed her strangeness. But he was a languid and indulgent purple-light, who knew that all matter ended where the darkness began, if he thought about it at all. He therefore approached, coming so close that reflected starlight from the liquescent mirror surfaces of Sun Destroyer seemed to bobble in swift-changing pattern across him.

Within Sun Destroyer, a strange alchemy was taking place. She was becoming hard, cold, infused with merciless purpose.

She whispered, "What is your name, purple-light?"

The purple-light eyed her doubtfully. "I am called, as she who created me named me, Great Red Sun."

"And I am known as Sun Destroyer, Great Red Sun."

The purple-light laughed. "But you will not destroy me, Sun Destroyer."

Sun Destroyer laughed with him, and moved a step nearer. "I do not want to." She held his visions; she transfixed him; she would not let him go. "Tell me," she said slowly, "what you know of a creature named Oldster!"

Great Red Sun moved back, to view her as an object among the stars; for he was plainly curious. But Sun Destroyer, her purpose fermenting whether she willed it or not, again closed up the distance, so that everything

but a rim of sky was blotted out of his sight except her, her green light, and the shining magnificence of her surfaces and the gleaming cascades of gold within her. Great Red Sun saw what was happening, and in his indulgence of her stayed where he was.

He said curiously, "You do not know of Oldster, he who thinks and wishes to die because he thinks? Surely you must know of Oldster; for everyone does. Ah, he is aged, and he will live forever! Such is the legend handed down. But I am sure you know the legend as well as I."

Sun Destroyer said nothing. The silence weighted upon Great Red Sun; with Sun Destroyer looming over him, he must speak. "You know the legend," he insisted. "You know he must not be disturbed; this you surely know!"

"And why not?" whispered Sun Destroyer. "Why is it you must not disturb him?"

"It is what we have been told, green-light—you as well as the others—unless," he added in piqued humor, "you have just this moment burst into being out of the fabric of space! We all know that it would be cruel to waken him, for he seeks forgetfulness, and has sought it these past two hundred million years. He sleeps, and sleeps, and, I think, grows ever nearer to death."

Sun Destroyer started. "To death?" she cried. "But he must not die—he must not! Tell me where he sleeps, purple-light. I must know. His wisdom is great, and he must not die!"

Great Red Sun rotated languidly. "Yet I am sure he will."

Sun Destroyer surged in on him even closer. "Tell me," she whispered. "Great Red Sun, Oldster knows something I must know. I have come distances you cannot begin to comprehend, merely to see him and to speak with him. Do you understand? Tell me where this ancient being sleeps—then I shall go away and leave you!"

"Go away and leave me?" Great Red Sun mused on the words. "I do not see why that would be of any great value, Sun Destroyer. Could I not leave you, anytime I wish? Therefore, you speak in riddles."

Sun Destroyer's body throbbed. She said fiercely, "Tell me where Oldster sleeps!"

Great Red Sun began to move away. "I will not tell

you." He turned his visions from her in cold disdain. "You would disturb him, you would waken him, and you would even torture him if he would let you. I sense it. Therefore, I shall not tell you!

"Go away, green-light. There is evil in you, and I do not like it."

He moved away faster and faster.

Sun Destroyer energized herself with the sphere of Great Energy and looped in front of him. She caught his thought swirls and held them in tight bands of living force.

"Come with me, Great Red Sun."

"Come with—you?"

Great Red Sun stared. Suddenly he began to tremble. All the universe changed for Great Red Sun. Where before had been the starry vistas of his unending land was now only this huge and looming green-light, with the dancing green forms at her central core.

"Go where with you, green-light? I will come!"

Sun Destroyer murmured with merciless intonation, "To the forty-eighth band!"

And she snapped herself into a hyperspace, ascended the scale, and paused in the cubed forty-seventh band until the purple-light caught up with her and stared in dazed wonder.

Sun Destroyer again approached, looming over him and occluding the burning cubed galaxies.

"Tell me," she whispered, "where Oldster resides!"

Great Red Sun's thoughts were listless. "It does not matter, green-light; I will tell you that which everyone knows anyway. He resides a mere galaxy's length from here, in the darkness of the fifteenth band. It would be cruel beyond words to disturb him, though."

"Now—follow me!" said Sun Destroyer, and in moments the beating flow of the life energy surrounded her, and the purple-light as well. Sun Destroyer, obeying laws as old as life itself, hovered in those sunless skies, the green forms dancing in silent whirl on her green core. She waited for the moment.

The moment came. If Great Red Sun was lost in hypnotic lure, Sun Destroyer was doubly lost, for all the evil in her and all the striving and all need were gone. She

was in motion, receding a vast distance from the purple-light, and she knew no thought. Somewhere out on the skies a change had occurred. Great Red Sun's purple core was growing toward her; but intercepting its path was her own green globe.

She watched, lost to everything except the imminence of that silent and inevitable meeting.

Green and purple-light crashed blindingly, throbbed, settled—and now they were but one sphere of mistily pulsing light.

The sight of it closed around Sun Destroyer's senses. Now there was no pain, there was only soft fulfillment. The past was lost. She was what must be and should be. "It is my child—my child!" she murmured, even as, unknown to her, another green-light formed magically within her. She had no further thought for Great Red Sun, the neuter dying purple-light, who hung in devitalized shock beyond the rim of her visions. She would not see him again, nor would he see her, for Great Red Sun soon would die; he would not know his child, he would know nothing.

Sun Destroyer moved upon the pulsing ball, enclosed it, and dropped with it to the seventeenth band.

Sun Destroyer hovered near it, watching it in its galactic cradle, and a great sense of relief and peace and completion flooded through her. The agony of loneliness and frustration that had grown to such terrible proportions was gone now. She seemed content to hang here, to watch with strange sensations of pride her newly-born, the first of four who would be allowed her.

"It is my child," she dreamed. "And I have done a wonderful thing. Lie there, my son, and grow. And your name shall be Vanguard!"

The vanguard of those who would know the anarchic contentment and happiness which others of their race, in their ignorance and fear, helplessly discarded.

The vanguard of those who would be empowered to reach that pinnacle of power beyond the band of life.

Her thoughts flowed peacefully, enclosing her in their anesthetic charm. Then, slowly, remembrance of things external returned. She had crossed the universal spaces, dared the darkness and conquered; a wonderful, a joyful

deed had been accomplished. Almost it seemed enough to insure her as the ultimate of her race. It was not, of course, enough. There was Oldster, and then the forty-ninth band!

She must leave her child; yes, leave him, to grow by himself until the distant time of her return. She circled him, she laved him with soft energies as if to still the impact of terror that would come in the first moment of awareness, and then she dropped from the seventeenth band to the first.

Here in the true band, enclosed by the unfamiliar configurations of an ancient sky, she hovered spiritlessly. She was as sluggish in her sense of goal as she was in her feelings. What had happened to her? In the universe of her birth, her desire to penetrate to the forty-ninth band had been a flaming, a racking thing. Now it was assuming unimportance. From her dulled emotions came a thrill of burgeoning anger. Of course it was unimportant, as all things were unimportant! Then why should she desire it to assume importance? Terror of the paradox grew out of anger, and following terror came the memory of her pain, and the memory of her younger years. Memory bred fantasy, and in convulsing spasms of streaming thought that spewed broken arrows of light on the skies she saw herself to be her own child, the infant Vanguard. But no! It was she herself, as she was, so it seemed, when she too was a babe held powerless in the seventeenth band; an echo of Vanguard, backward in time to the moment of her own birth!

Sun Destroyer writhed in her unbidden memories. She must go. She must leave her memories and her fantasies, and she must leave the sphere of Great Energy.

She did not know why, but the sphere of Great Energy must be cleft from her, forever. She hurled it out, straight and true, using its own vast energies to put it beyond the reach or staying power of any mortal creature. She hurled it as a thing loathed, and watched it as it fumed away invisibly toward the limits of the universe where darkness received it.

It was gone.

Why? What blind impulse made her cut the lifeline to her own universe? "Because," the still voice came, so

still it could not claim real substance, "with the sphere goes your pain, daughter of Darkness." For, yes, pain was gone, at least for now. And now she too must go—faster, sweeping pell-mell across the littered seas of the sky, and faster, to outrun thought.

She could not outrun thought, but neither could she outrun the self-rebuilding processes within her. After a dozen light-years a measure of her old self returned, and came the thought of Oldster. Oldster! Ah, now she knew of his secret lair, and she would go there.

She paused, a struggling thought like a burning pain within her. "I must see my child again, for perhaps I may never—"

The thought burned and flamed and died, as she irately swept its implications of horror away. No, she would return. Vanguard would know her, he would know Sun Destroyer; he would know the real Sun Destroyer, destroyer of suns and recipient of endless joy; and Vanguard would learn from her. In vicious delight, she swept out with a tractor beam and lumped a dozen hot young stars into a galaxy-destroying supernova. Avidly she fed on the sight of the inferno, the useless havoc, the careless destruction she had wrought—and snapped herself into the fifteenth band of lightlessness.

V

Oldster Awakens

Lightlessness came. No matter; she would find Oldster by the very pulsation of his slowing thoughts.

She impelled herself through hyperspace without benefit of light, toward the near rim of the universe where the ancient one resided.

Abruptly, energy surged against her thought swirls—and the energy was that of thought, so feeble, so incredibly faint, that it could have emanated from none other than him she sought! She hovered, as if pushed back by the wavefront of enfeebled thoughts. She trembled unaccountably, filled with a dread she could not analyze.

Those thoughts! There was in them a harrowing timbre of suffering, and they dwelt part in death and part in life. Were these idealess thoughts those of Oldster, and had he lived with them the uncounted millions or billions of years? Then he must be mad, mad! In revulsion she fled back, and again hovered, bitter with rage toward herself, fighting the horror she had shared.

"Oldster!"

She whispered the name.

"*Oldster!*"

She cried it out, and felt it flung back stridently as if in a chamber; but it was the reverberating chamber of her own mind. Nonetheless, in sheer reflex she moved nearer the source of those stripped thoughts—and nearer, throwing the name out clearly but softly at first, then putting the full power of her thought voice behind it. Her fear, as she planned, was destroyed. She hurled herself full at the foci of the feeble thought waves, and cried into lightlessness,

"OLDSTER!"

Silence.

And still silence.

Then the complex energy fields of her body constricted. Horror again claimed her, but this time she would not give way to its impulses. The monstrous creature was awakening; she felt the racking spasms if its thought as if a vast, a torpid body were pulling itself in torture from an immeasurable deep.

"Oldster," she whispered tremulously. "Awaken! Awaken! It is I, the daughter of Darkness, who calls to you!"

Motion, of a great quivering form, of a mind that had scarcely known motion for ages. It struck at her from the dark with repellent force. She could scarcely endure the reality of this immured creature, dead to himself and to others, and yet heaving and twisting and expanding back to life. If only she could see him, surely her dread would vanish. Then he would be but another energy creature, ancient but conceivable. In this palling dark, though, she could not even dream his realness!

Yet he who had been dead for so long now was rising to the dreadful pain of life, for abruptly space about her

was thick with the torment of unformed thoughts. Out of his sludge of forgetfulness he was coming. She had goaded him, she, Sun Destroyer, who had destroyed his sleep, as was her unequalled right.

"Awaken!" she cried.

"I awake."

The voice was faint, as if from a far distance. But it was a voice, approachable and solid. Sun Destroyer surged in uncontrollable bodily expansion toward it, making the voice large in her mind, and forming an image of Oldster to go with it. Yes, he was real, he was only real, and not mere image.

Her fright was gone.

"I have come across the darkness, Oldster," she said. "And I am the daughter of Darkness, whom you knew in long ages past!"

The thought waves of the being grew in volume, rack-ing space in their spasm of untold despair, so that Sun Destroyer found herself again shrinking from dread.

"Who calls?" the ancient one suddenly cried; the bitter protest smote Sun Destroyer. "Who calls him who sought above all things not to be disturbed? Then it is in vain, and my agony must begin again. Go away, daughter of Darkness, if such you are! Ah, I care not for Darkness nor the emptiness he crossed. It is peace alone I seek, and the dark emptiness of nonexistence. I am sad, and the wakefulness you have brought me back to is an agony I cannot bear. Go away, I implore you, daughter of Dark-ness, and leave me once again to seek the peace you de-destroy. Go. Go!"

"I cannot go. Even as you gave Darkness the secret of Great Energy, so now must you give an answer that I seek. Listen to me, Oldster."

"I listen to nothing save my own despair," the creature said dully. "You have brought me back to a pain I had thought never to endure again. Leave me, leave me!"

"I shall not leave you, Oldster, for I too know the mean-ing of pain."

She spoke arrogantly. The furies were rising in her. Oldster, no less than myriad others, was to bow before her; already he was hers, brought back to torment at her bidding.

"I shall not leave you, Oldster," she repeated in disdain. "I have dared to awaken you; shall I then dare to let you sleep again? No, Oldster, you shall remain awake until I have of you all that I wish. You shall not lie in decrepit uselessness and seek to hide your knowledge from me, who is the ultimate of my race; who possesses within her, save for a link I cannot supply, the ability to penetrate beyond the forty-eighth band of life and into the forty-ninth!"

Silence, heavy with portent, rushed in on her. Her own words seemed to fill the vacuous silence. The dark of the fifteenth band pressed against her, so that she found herself searching for a single ray of light to leaven the unknown menace of Oldster. For he was wise; perhaps he was powerful also! Perhaps he was using the silence to crush her. She started forward half in fear. "Oldster—"

"Quiet, my child."

Then, as if he were throttling a pain that stabbed through and again through him, Oldster's mutter came:

"She speaks in words that mean nothing; she, daughter of Darkness—Sun Destroyer! Ah, now I know of you!" And indeed, Sun Destroyed felt the impact of Oldster's thoughts probing in one lightning thrust through her memory swirls, before she was able to close them in one resentful effort.

"You have no right!" she cried.

Oldster said heavily, "There is no right and there is no wrong, my child, as you yourself contend. Oh, Sun Destroyer, Sun Destroyer, I sorrow for you, as I sorrow for others who someday may be like you."

Sun Destroyer drew back uncertainly. "I know not why you should sorrow for me." Now she spoke again with arrogance, so that Oldster would understand. "I sorrow for no one, Oldster. I am completion within myself, and expect nothing from anyone outside myself."

"Then that is but another chimera you follow." His voice dragged, heavy with a foreboding that Sun Destroyer could not comprehend. "If you indeed are able to penetrate the forty-ninth band, daughter of Darkness, then do I sorrow for you all the more. Oh, Sun Destroyer," he burst out, "return where you came from, and

take your child with you. Your child, Sun Destroyer! What will happen to your child?"

"I shall return to him," she said.

"You do not know!" Oldster's voice came in racking beat. "You think you are mistress of your universes, but your course is the course of self-destruction. Sun Destroyer, I who knows it is best tell you this. Return to your child, return to your universe if you can, but help your child—for he will need your help!

"And you must forget the forty-ninth band."

"Forget the forty-ninth band?" All else was swept away, thoughts of her child, of the great enveloping chill that was settling over her. Yes, she would return to her child, for what could stop her; but forget the forty-ninth band? "No," she cried. She felt herself surging against the bonds this creature would throw about her. "Oldster, you are old, and your thoughts are old. You dwell in a hermitage, and there is no joy for you. Perhaps you also hope to destroy my joy, after having destroyed your own."

"No, my child," came Oldster's mutter.

Sun Destroyer would not stop. "You are wise, Oldster, but sometimes youth is wiser." Her voice raged. "Have I not found that which all my race has sought through all of time? For I have struck away my bonds. Now see! I have even no pity of you and your wakeful state. Nor shall I have pity, even when that which I wish is given to me. Perhaps," she added in demon humor, "I shall keep you awake, for all the years of my life, even after I find the forty-ninth band."

Oldster moved in his space; she felt the restless beat of his thoughts.

"Her dreams are too great," he muttered. "Even her dreams of torturing me shall not come to pass. But because she dreams, she dreams of a forty-ninth band, and there can be none—not a true one. Daughter of Darkness, hear me: there can be no true forty-ninth band!"

She said coldly, "There could not be any forty-ninth band other than a true one. You speak meaninglessly, or you lie."

"I do not lie; the forty-ninth band is not real."

"You lie, or so you are not as wise as I thought, for I know of a forty-ninth! I first knew of it when I was very

young, and all your vaunted wisdom cannot stay me in my course. Now I need but the knowledge you have gained through the millions of years. Surely, in that knowledge, lies the clue."

"My knowledge is of no use to such as you," replied Oldster. His voice was dull, his thoughts feeble and embittered. "My knowledge will only harm you, for of what use can you put it—except to find a forty-ninth band which does not truly exist. Oh, Sun Destroyer, Sun Destroyer, go away, while there is yet time. Believe me, I know things of you that you do not know of yourself! Ah, I will *not* give you this knowledge you desire!" and Sun Destroyer felt his thoughts withdraw, as if he were again preparing to wrap himself in his mindless dark.

She surged forward with a sharp cry, coming so close to the great unseen hulk that she felt the radiation of his aura.

"You shall never rest, Oldster," she whispered into the looming hulk, "if such is your decision. If you do not give me this knowledge, I shall never give you peace. Never to rest again, never to sleep, never a hope of that extinction you long for! To think you are safe, to sink toward slumber—only to awaken as I burst into your retreat! That shall be your fate, Oldster, wherever you are, for all the years of my life, and all the years of my son's life!

"I speak truly. Now do you think to refuse me?"

"No."

The single word came in drumming beat. Sun Destroyer heard it, and could not believe. But her ecstasy began.

"I am to be told how to reach the forty-ninth band?"

"You are to be given that knowledge which I have, Sun Destroyer, and with it you will find your forty-ninth band. I give you your wish, daughter of Darkness, not from fear of you and your witless threats—" Oldster paused as if to underscore his meaning, and an inner trembling seized her, for she saw in his words the same kind of remorseless taunt she had meted out to him. Again she surged toward him, crying out, knowing she must not allow herself to be turned back by her own weapons being used against her; but Oldster's drumming thoughts blanketed about her.

"Peace, my child," he muttered. "I wish no ill for you; but I know I must give you what you wish. For now there is only the single path you may follow.

"But later on, you will beseech me."

"Beseech you!" The cry was torn from her. Then, in wonder, "Beseech you, when I, the highest of my race, have attained that which will complete my whole life?"

"You will plead with me, Sun Destroyer, plead with me to bring you back." Oldster was shuddering, racked with a despair that vibrated across the spaces between them, but Sun Destroyer felt only a puzzled wonder that he should despair, when eternal happiness lay before her. For Oldster's battle with her was lost, and in the lightlessness of the fifteenth band, she permitted herself to rotate in gloating victory, awaiting his command.

And it came.

"Sun Destroyer, receive the knowledge I am about to give you!"

Sun Destroyer's ecstasy reached its peak as she erased awareness, as Oldster's probing mind grasped her memory swirls in tight bands of energy, as the knowledge he chose for her flooded in resistless tide. . . .

VI

The Forty-Ninth Band

The thousands of years passed, and Oldster felt her go, slipping in ecstasy through the layers of space that held the fifteenth band in untrammelled dark. He felt her go, away from him, away from all that is, and he listened long to the silences of hyperspace. At last he felt the whispered drumbeat of her voice.

"It is there, Oldster, the knowledge I sought. Oldster, you have guided me well. Now let me prove that I am the ultimate of all life. Oldster, farewell!"

Again there was silence for Oldster, and the bare beginning of peace. But would there or could there be peace from now on, with Sun Destroyer dispersed upon the universe, when any moment she might recur to him like

a memory more frightful than any of those in all his long life? Yes, she would infest him, not because of her threat, but because she could not will otherwise.

But for now she was gone, leaving with him double reason not to think, not to feel, not to hope. Time would pass, the ache would dull, and perhaps again his thoughts would stop. Thoughts! How they brought him pain and depthless despair! Better to fight them again, to begin the old battle, to slough them off, even with the threat of Sun Destroyer hanging over him. Convulsively, he drew his thoughts in about him, quieting them, soothing them, erasing remembrance of all the glowing universe.

Perhaps she would not come. . . .

Oldster drowsed, and drowsed deeper still. Tens of thousands, a million years passed. Outside the fifteenth band of lightlessness life had its being, and the nebulae and galaxies and stars and the lesser things of the heavens spun unceasingly, in brilliant internal or borrowed splendor. Inside reposed he who desired not to think. Toward blessed coma Oldster drifted.

"Oldster!"

Without substance the name pierced him. He knew not how much time had elapsed. However long or short, it had not been long enough. But now all was silence again; he had dreamed. It had been an outlaw thought, and his name had not been cried out after all.

"Oldster!"

The name was real, and the cry was real. Oldster listened dully to its unwelcome echoes within him. The agony of wakefulness shot through him, and yet he knew that he must awake—for Sun Destroyer called.

"I awake," he muttered. "You call me again, my daughter, when I seek peace. But I awake."

"I call for your aid, Oldster!"

The voice of Sun Destroyer was shot through with horror.

"I need your help!"

"And have you indeed reached the forty-ninth band, Sun Destroyer?" Oldster questioned wearily.

"I have reached it, Oldster—it is about me!"

"Then," Oldster muttered, "there is a new sorrow that I must learn to blot out in thoughtlessness. Sun Destroyer,

had you but listened! Had you but returned to your universe! Had you but taken your child with you!"

There was blank silence. And Sun Destroyer's voice came, penetrating down through the bands of hyperspace that separated her from Oldster.

She spoke, in tremulous wax and wane, "My child! Vanguard! He whom I created. How long has he been alone? How long!" Her voice washed away, as if her thoughts too were swept up to pinnacles unseen. Thinly came her thoughts again. "I do not understand of what you speak, Oldster. What have I to do with things of other bands, or even the true band? For see! I am truly set apart from my race. I am in the forty-ninth band!"

"Yes, my daughter," whispered Oldster bitterly. "You are in the forty-ninth band. Then why was it you again broke my slumber?"

"I wish to return," said Sun Destroyer. "For a moment! Oldster, I wish to return and again see my child."

Oldster whispered, "But tell me what it is you see. What is the nature of the forty-ninth band? Does it hold happiness, eternal without end?"

"Oh, it does, Oldster, it does! And yet—Oldster!" Her thoughts came in drumbeat, rhythmic, ominous, dulling. "I see dead stars—and black gulfs surrounded by stars which are not matter. They move, in patterns strange to the sight—circling, with no recourse to the laws of motion. They split, and the lumps of nothing split—and from them are born whole galaxies! Blazing, spinning galaxies. Creation is about me, I am drowning in its beauty, and I would be happy, Oldster, I would be happy if—"

"Yes, my child. You would be happy except for—"

"Except for the shadows," Sun Destroyer cried. "The shadows, with their pointed tips, creeping in from everywhere; the ugly shadows, quietly drawing away all of the matrix from which creation spins . . . it is so black! Black as your fifteenth band, Oldster! How will I return? I knew a strange peace when I looked upon my child, and it seemed that all things had been explained to me!"

"Tell me more of what you see," said Oldster dully.

"Now the universe is again bright."

"Tell me more."

"All is beauty. I am happy. I spin through the bright-

ness, taking it into me as the shadows took it before, but—suddenly there is a cavity in the center of the brightness. A single star grows in the cavity and dims and dies—and I am moving without will into the cavity and it has enclosed me. All space has closed about, folding me tight, and is pressing me, Oldster, pressing me without pity. I am smaller, and smaller.” Upward in fright rose the thoughts of Sun Destroyer. “And I have tried to escape, to fling myself down into the forty-eighth band. I am powerless! I am being crushed. Is there no one to pity me, to draw me back, to free me? Oldster, you must hear! Draw me back, back to your universe, for if I do not escape, do not escape—”

“It is your child you think of,” muttered Oldster.

“He must not be left there too long,” came the violent cry of Sun Destroyer. “I must return. Vanguard must know me, he must not lie there alone, with no one to come.”

In racking beat her thoughts came, strident and raging as if she would shackle him to her by sheer force of need. Oldster, face to face with the horrors of a universe he wanted nothing of, shuddered throughout the complex coiling fields of his ancient body. *I sought death*, he thought starkly, *but I am face to face with life—and it will not let me go! Stay, daughter of Darkness, look for that happiness which is about you. What of your happiness?*

“But you are happy, Sun Destroyer! What of the happiness you searched for and found?” She heard the insistent cry, for her raging thoughts abruptly ceased. For a long time only silence was in the spaces; then came Sun Destroyer’s musing mutter, as of one who knows no single thought.

“I think of my child,” she muttered. “And yet I am also happy, for I am at the pinnacle of being. Am I not set apart from my race?”

Oldster whispered, “Yes, Sun Destroyer, you are indeed set apart. Yes! You have sought happiness. Now you have found it.” His voice turned soothing, persuasive, insidious. “Tell me more of what you see!”

“I am moving through the galaxies and there is nothing

that moves me. It is, then, the galaxies which move past me, by a will of their own. They are speeding, speeding away, and the sight is beautiful beyond imagination. They disappear, and more arrive, growing toward me and then contracting as they speed past and away—but not. They do not contract, it is I who expand. I am large. Larger than all the universe. Now—energy creatures! Creatures of my own kind, Oldster. They surround me, and they see in me a wonderful perfection.”

Her voice cut off; then, thin and remote, came the disjointed cry: “Oldster, if I am unable to return, what will become of Vanguard, my son?”

“He will remain in the seventeenth band,” Oldster made slow reply.

“But he will be helpless,” came that thin and remote voice, as if from a separate being. Waves of horror beat against Oldster’s thoughts. “You must release me, Oldster! Take away the knowledge you gave me. I do not desire it. It is of no value. I am trapped in fantasy, trapped here in the forty-ninth band!”

“I cannot release you,” said Oldster sorrowfully. “There is nothing that can release you. Now you are set apart from others, as you wished.” He said, his voice penetrating and insidious, “Now you know complete happiness.”

“I know complete happiness,” whispered the daughter of Darkness hollowly. “Truly, I am sad that others have not followed me in my way of life. I am expanding, Oldster.”

“Continue to expand, then. But if you expand too much, will not death take you?”

“Oh, Oldster, I cannot die. Happiness has no place for death, truly, it has not. Therefore I cannot die!”

“Then continue to expand, and tell me what you see as you expand.”

“The universe darkens.”

“And what of the creatures who surrounded you?”

“They were all creatures who had died before. Now they are gone, out into the darkness that hovers on the rim of everything. Oldster, I followed them. I lost sight of them, but I followed them nonetheless, into a darkness which is much like the one I, and Darkness before me,

crossed. Oldster!" Her thoughts seethed with excitement. "I thought I saw Vanguard. It could not be—but could it? He is there, much larger than he should be. He comes close and speaks—no! He is the purple-light who died in the creation of Vanguard!

"Oldster, I do not want kour knowledgel"

Her thoughts vanished. Oldster waited for a recurrence of that ebbing voice.

It came, in spasms of ebb and flow. "I do not want it," Sun Destroyer whispered. "In my childhood the terrible pain came, and with it came the thought of the forty-ninth band. Then when your knowledge came to me, the terrible pain came again! It was the same pain—and then I was in the forty-ninth band!

"I expand."

"Continue to expand," admonished Oldster. "Truly, daughter of Darkness, in that direction lies a happiness I would seek for myself, had I but the courage. Now, Sun Destroyer," and his thoughts were compassionately insistent, "you see your child!"

"I see my child, yes!"

"And the thought comes to me that you also see Darkness, himself, emerging out of the emptiness, full with the flush of life, wrapped in his great dreams."

"Yes, Oldster. It is Darkness himself, and he comes close. Oldster!"

The voice rose. It became a strident rasp that seemed to sunder all of space. From all around Oldster the tearing thoughts of Sun Destroyer came, formless, splotched throughout the bands of space, echoing and reechoing within the tortured chamber of Oldster's mind.

"Oldster, it is he!" came the bursting thoughts of Sun Destroyer. "It is Darkness, none other, riding the heavens beyond where I lie, and from him come the piercing dead shadows that I saw before.

"But he has no inner light!"

Sun Destroyer threshed in her space. Oldster was buffeted and torn by her stormy horror. Her voice washed away to nothing and then returned in a discordance that ruptured all the peace Oldster ever had known.

"I am being destroyed!" cried Sun Destroyer in tones

of protest. "I have just begun to live, and the sphere of Great Energy is destroying me! See the shafts of pointed darkness that hurl from it, the unseeable shadows of hate that pierce me!

"Oh, Darkness, go, go from here and die! Your time is over, mine has begun. Why do you stay?"

Thinly that rasp of thought ran out. The shaken universe was silent. Oldster strained; he heard nothing.

"Daughter of Darkness!" he cried. "Hear me!"

"I hear!" said Sun Destroyer. Her voice tore through space, convulsive, sobbing, raging.

"I hear, Oldster, but I am near death, and all your wisdom cannot save me. For see, I did not know for what I searched; I searched for Darkness himself, and called it something else."

"No, no," cried Oldster; "you inhabit that band of which you dream!"

The thoughts that reached him were heavy with her dying, but in them was arrogance.

"You can fool me no longer, Old One. I inhabit myself, I am closed within myself, and everything I searched for was within myself; the forty-ninth band lives in me, born of the dread memory of that which made me what I am.

"And so I expand; but I shall not die."

Her voice dreamed. Fitfully it came, as if from remote spaces. Again Oldster strained to hear, and as he strove he felt a liquid peace settle over him, as if the horror of Sun Destroyer and the pity of her had canceled some of the horrors of his own past.

"I shall not die, of course," dreamed the voice of Sun Destroyer in the mind of Oldster. "For how can perfection die? I shall simply dream the dreams that I wish. And they are peaceful dreams, of life and of beauty; and of Vanguard my child . . . and the other children who will be given to me. They will not be the terrible striving dreams that pitilessly forced me to know my own beginnings."

The voice grew thinner, so that at the last expansion of Sun Destroyer, Oldster could not distinguish the silence of space from her last whisper.

Then the silence was everything, and he was wrapped around by it, and the first blanketing slumber began.

Oldster drowsed, then slept, fitful at first with his disturbing thoughts, and then with no awareness at all. Blessed peace was achieved. Long millions of years would pass before Oldster awakened again.

BOOK THREE

Abyss of Darkness

Prologue

Of darkness the cosmos was made. There was nothing else, nothing—unless one chose to consider the throttled points of brilliance which the darkness, at intervals of unmentionable light-years, permitted to remain in its realm. These were the universes; and, though they stretched without number toward the unseen horizon of space-time, they were so small, so unidimensional in the frightful sea of lightlessness, that they submissively drenched themselves in the overpowering stigma of non-entity, and became part and parcel of the darkness themselves.

And yet, each point of brilliance swarmed and flowed with the ceaseless, soundless orchestration of atoms, planets, stars and galaxies. Each sun was an atom-torturing note in a swelling cosmic song. Each gap between the galaxies was a rest-beat. Each galaxy was a harmonic undertone to the operatic whole which sang thunderously and unheeded to the unsentient darkness. Churning, restive, tortured by its own inner movements, strong, mighty, the universal rhythm pounded back at itself; the great nebulae writhed greenly; the great suns blasted themselves with their own violent excesses of heat and light and spewed out galaxy-spanning fans of cosmic rays. And there was no director to the chaotic symphony which was now frightful, now gentle, now bestial, now soothing.

Soothing to him who lay alone in the seventeenth band of hyperspace. . . .

Yellow Light

How long he had lain here, it was beyond him to know. But there must have been a beginning for, before there had been sight, there had been thought, and quiet, entombed darkness.

Therefore there must have been something before the thought.

But what?

The trickle of awareness ran first through his memory swirls, the awareness of an outside, a something beyond himself. Thus had his visions unfolded and the magic of the universe flowed into him. The great stars and nebulae presented themselves to him in all their pageantry, and he was dazzled by the splendid hot colors, the poetry of their motions; the soundless songs they sang moved him beyond intelligent thought.

He was charmed by the opulence of this enormous gesture which the universe made toward him. He was flattered by the radiant energy in which he was laved, and which his embryonic body absorbed into the complex energy patterns that composed his great mass. There was peace and quiet and beauty and thoughtfulness, and a kind, celestial attention to his needs. He lived without strife or the need for understanding in a plentiful Arcadia.

He was contented.

He was an energy creature, now more than two million miles in girth and growing apace, and he did not understand the awful, ineradicable shadow that had fallen across his life.

His mother had not come for him.

The slow millions of years trooped away to die. The universal restive hum continued, and the universe changed its face. There were new, green-hued nebulae on the stage; there were new stars emerging in fiery grandeur from the wings, with their attendant trains of self-effacing planets. He watched it all, reaching out to the limit of his visions, hanging pendant in his great auditorium, surfeited with his great happiness, and never once hearing a discord. There was no evil in him.

"Who are you?"

The low muttering of drums, the harsh clangor of a cymbal, and the heartbeat of the universe seemed to still.

The uttered thought swept inward to impinge on his memory swirls, and the even, steady, undisturbed throb of his consciousness was broken. Chaos, indecision, wonder, fear—these were his. He faltered in his own mind for the source of the thought. It had not originated there. He swept out with visions.

Far away, across the blinding white width of a galaxy, he saw the creature. There was a strange shrinkage of his spirits. Life! Life other than his!

He was quivering with dread, his vanity shattered by a revelation he had not considered in his way of life. Liquid sparks of varicolored flame fled his vast swollen spheroidal body. Life, other than his, to divide the universe with him!

The incisive question came again, whispering at him with demon intonations. He forced his trembling vision rays to play over the smaller, different body that was pendant a thousand light years distant—a globe of milk-white radiance, throbbing with the slow pulsations of life, and at its heart a glowing ball of green light. Their visions locked and they were staring at each other in hard, bright wonder.

"I did not know there was other life," he whispered.

She answered with scorn, "Did not know there was other life! Where is your mother, large body? What is your name? What are the yellow dots that dance in your purple light?"

He looked inward on himself, ~~looked~~ at the star-yellow globes which truly marred the perfection of his purple central core. He was flooded with shame, overflowing from some instinctive well of knowledge, that the great pulsing center of his body was not clear purple. He looked up, dazed. Mother? Name?

"I do not know what you mean, green light," he whispered.

"Why hasn't your mother come for you?" she demanded sharply. "Why hasn't she given you a name? Why hasn't she taken you from the seventeenth band into the first band of true space? How long have you been lying here?"

You are big and swollen and unnatural. You are big enough to have been plunging through the starways for more than a million, perhaps five million years."

He shrank back from the awful indictment her words hurled at him. A great, helpless confusion grew in him. A thousand shafts of shame speared his monstrous vanity, and his pride in himself and his central importance drained away. He was no longer the hub; he existed somewhere on the outer rim of being, and he was whirled without purpose or will in a vast, involuntary arc. It was not he who whirled the universe in its spectacular pagentry, it was he who was whirled: he was but a minor actor in the show.

He emitted his thought faintly: "Have you a mother? Have you a name?"

She was staring at him with the cold, instinctive knowledge of her kind, the knowledge that only a green-light had. Buried deep within her, there was a heartless pity for him and the enormity of the thing that had happened to him.

"Every creature has a mother, strange one. My mother was here but a million years ago. It was then she named me. I am known as Star Glory." A proud quiver of sparks rained in molten beauty from her tiny body. She added dreamily, "It is a beautiful name. What a pity that you have none."

A forlorn resentment rippled over his glowing, swollen sphericity.

"But I shall have a name," he flared. "I shall have a name as soon as my mother comes. It shall be as strong a name as yours is beautiful."

"Your mother must be dead," she said heartlessly.

"No!" he cried, agonized. "No!"

"Your mother is dead," she added, goading at his pain with thoughtless knives. "Else why is it that you are still here when you are so big? Nothing," she said with her chilling wisdom, "could keep your mother away if she were alive. She is dead. But do not worry. Soon my mother, Crescent Moon, will come again, and she will release me. Perhaps she will also release you. In the meantime, let us talk. What do you think of the stars?"

"They are beautiful, beautiful," he whispered, shaken in a torrent of fear and wild doubt.

"Yes, of course, they are beautiful," she said complacently. "But they are powerful also. I wonder if they are more powerful than I. I should like to pit my strength against them, to tear them apart and fling their flaming remnants in thousands of directions." She brooded for a thousand years on her luscious dream. Presently she added, "Do you think you could destroy a nebula?"

He had no answer for her in his dumb, stricken misery, and she talked on and on, for thousands of spinning years, laying before him a picture of the universe as described by her mother. He learned of a great concourse of lenticular, egg- and ring-shaped galaxies spreading across the sky for seven billion light-years, the shining motes at last drawing up short on the awful black shore of the solid sea of lightlessness which stretches away forever.

"My mother told me that once a creature crossed the great abyss. His name was Darkness. I do not believe it. There is nothing beyond our universe."

He learned of the forty-seven bands of hyperspace.

And then came her mother.

He saw her from afar, her great flawless body with a single ripe star of green light hanging pendant at her core. She emerged from a distant nebula, the brilliance of her flight leaving her a broad fan of incandescent sparks. He heard nothing of what occurred between small and large green-light, for they spoke only to each other.

His memory swirls writhed with a poignant-sweet eagerness. She would come for him! He would be freed, freed from the awful stigma of nonentity, of namelessness. He would mingle with other youths, green and purple-lights, and he would cavort with them through the corridors of the stars, dashing in mad abandon the length of a thousand galaxies. He would toss suns and build and shatter solar systems. He would slip up and down the forty-seven bands of hyperspace, and once more the wild, sad, powerful symphony of stars would sound ringingly in his memory swirls. He would have a name.

He watched them, Mother and daughter, trembling in his eagerness. By some strange knowledge he knew that Star Glory had been snapped from the seventeenth band

of hyper-space by her mother. What happened affirmed the knowledge. Star Glory surged into glorious motion, as she tried her heretofore unused and unusable propellants. She lost girth as she fled at increasing speed across the quiescent galaxies and into the far distance. Proudly her mother followed after her. They were gone.

Gone? He knew a sudden stab of fright. He was seized in the relentless talons of horror.

"Come back," he cried. "Come back!"

But would she come back? Had Star Glory, the small one of the green light, forgotten him and her promise? It could not be so. He was not doomed to lie here, shrinking from the terror of his awful abnormality. He was without a mother!

Slowly wheeled the stars in their vast orbits. Slowly coiled the powerful grim nebulae. Swiftly darted bearded comets across the age-old bright universe. The thousands of years were slipping away into the dusty past, and his own soul was shriveling within him. He was alone, the abandoned, the forgotten, the ill-born.

The mother of Star Glory came back.

He saw her with his all-encompassing visions, driving toward him on the invisible thrust of her propellants. Slowly she came, the flawless green-light, and her coming presaged a dull, thudding agony within him. His swollen body contracted under the impulse of his dreadful thoughts. She hung now in the first band of true space, drenching him in the slow, reluctant sadness of her unuttered thoughts, and he could not bring himself to speak.

"Star Glory told me of you," she said into the throbbing silence.

"I have no mother of my own," he whispered. "Star Glory says she is dead."

The green-light held his visions with her own. There was in her a shudder of pain; but tenderness and love also.

"Yes," she said gently. "She is dead. How she died, why she died, I do not think that even Oldster would know; and though he did, it would be wrong, cruel, to disturb him."

She paused, bending on him a look of gentle pity. "Now

you are ready for your freedom. Your name shall be Yellow Light.

There was a constriction of shame in his memory swirls. "Yellow Light," he whispered faintly. "That is my name?"

He felt the soothing touch of her thoughts, binding him strongly in her outflowing gentleness. There was a bitter sadness in her voice when she spoke.

"Yes, that is to be your name. You must try to be proud of it. For they will call you that anyway! Yellow Light, you are in the first band of true space!"

There was a click in his consciousness which told him that such indeed was the case. He was free. He hung poised in throbbing uncertainty, surrounded by all the bright beauty of the far-flung galaxies, drinking into him the radiant energy which swept in plenitude through the rich burning fabric of space.

The green light hung a distance away, clouding out the xanthic blaze of a diadem of clustered stars.

"Your propellants," the thought whispered gently to him. "Try them."

He remembered the soaring flight of Star Glory, the vast distances which had eroded away to nothing under the great velocity that was hers. He was trembling in his eagerness as he explored the complex mechanism of his swollen body. His propellants thrust out. He felt the first surge of motion, but like a great clumsy animal he fumbled in unequal spurts. There was no sense of direction in him. He traced a slow tortuous path through the hub of a restlessly churned galaxy. He weaved from side to side, and yet thrilled to the motion that he gave himself. But it was hard, hard. Why did he not move with the ease and grace and swiftness of Star Glory?

He drew his propellants in at last and halted, turning his proud glance on the green-light.

"I moved," he cried excitedly.

She hung a distance away, quivering, and he had the feeling that she was shrouded in horror. Vast emptinesses yawned in him. He was shaken with her voiceless compassion. For what? For whom? He did not dare to think the true thought.

"I moved," he whispered, and the complex energy fields contracted toward the yellow-specked purple core of his

body. He was faint, burning in the fire of her chaotic, broken thoughts.

At length she answered, "You moved, Yellow Light. Yes, you moved. Come with me." She went slowly, accommodating her pace to his as they followed the resplendent aisles formed by the gyrating stars.

II

You Must Fight!

Thousands of light-years inward toward the center of the universe she went with him, pointing out from afar darting groups of the creatures who lived between the stars. "Dark Nebula, Comet, Bright Star-Cloud, Incandescent, Star-Hot, Blue Sun, Mighty, Sparkle, Valiant—" So she reeled off great lists of names which he had no trouble impressing on his memory swirls.

She told him of the forty-seven bands of hyperspace, and bade him follow her. It was hard. He struggled with the strange mechanism of his mind which permitted ascension or descension into the strange facets of the universe. She waited for him anxiously in the second, the third, and halted him there. Here, some strange hyperlaw had flattened all the mighty, proud, three-dimensional suns and swarming galaxies into a two-dimensional projection of themselves, and there was no depth and no beauty. He shuddered at the ugliness of a depraved universe and was caught up in horror by the tight black skin of nothingness which somehow seemed to be removed a step from, and parallel to, the compressed plane of meaningless brilliance.

"What is beyond there?" he whispered.

She answered, "No one knows, and no one shall know. Energy creatures have tried to break that invisible barrier; we are not so equipped. It is the mystery of the third band."

Patiently, then, she went on ahead of him and waited until his incredible clumsiness allowed him to ascend into the fourth band. He hung there and saw his great young

body repeated and repeated in long ranks that stretched away until his visions could no longer see them. The dark, dead images frightened him. They passed through the seventh band, where a soft, mellow, languid radiance washed through a starless cosmos. And through the tenth.

His progress was slow, wearisome. The green-light abruptly grasped at his thought swirls and clicked him back with her to the first band of true space. He faced her, dreading her next words, somehow understanding what was in her mind.

"I am alone now," he said, with a sinking sensation.

She trembled. "Yellow Light, Yellow Light," she cried softly, and there was a deep, foreboding grief in her. "Why is it? Why must this be? But I cannot stop it. It is done. I do not know why it was done, or who did it. It may be the enormous meaning that transcends time and space and has its answer somewhere, far above us. Oldster could tell you! Oldster! But Oldster dies, alone, in the fifteenth band of lightlessness, and he wishes to die and be no more! Yellow Light, I am sad!"

He said dully, for he was beginning to see something of himself, "Now what is there for me?"

Involuntarily she moved back from him a half-million miles, as if he had lashed her. She was shaken, her thoughts contorted with her sadness for him. Chaotic bubbles of liquescent light fled from her contracting body.

"Play!" she burst out violently. "There!" She pointed into the far distance and he saw, as his visions caught the scene, a swarming group of green and purple-lights in abandoned fantasy of motion about a violent sun. "You will play with them. No more can I tell you!"

"What is my purpose in life?" he asked quietly.

"Play, Yellow Light! Play! Purpose? It will be revealed to you."

She turned. He spurred after her in mounting fright, terrified of her leaving him. But when he faced her again, his thoughts were paralyzed, and he could find no word to say. So she went, leaving him in his flaming loneliness.

He hung there, quiescent before the stars, searching in his mind for something that he surely should have, and yet aware that somehow, subtly, he had lost memory of it. He searched into the far, far distances and saw only the

gaunt mystery of tortured matter. He was entombed in a mausoleum of light-surfeited space. His horror was real.

What was he to do? Play? So had the green-light instructed. He looked toward the playing youths and there was in him a constriction of fright. He moved off unsteadily, weaving uncertainly in his great clumsy stride, his approach a painful, slow process of indirection, of formless motion. Angrily, he sought for the full power and strength that must be his. His propellants did not respond to his agonized efforts.

He stopped millions of miles from the swarming youths. He knew he had no courage to face them. He was engulfed in fear, and he was not of them. He spurred back along the direction he had come, and with craven heart immersed himself in the dead lightlessness of a dark nebula. He hung there, trembling with his self-loathing, living over again the dreadful pity that Crescent Moon had bestowed on him. Why? Why was there pity for him? Who was his mother? What had happened to her? Why was it he had been allowed to remain in the seventeenth band too long and what had it done to him?

Who was Oldster?

Oldster! The name awoke in him a terrible fascination. He knew a strange reverence for the mysterious creature, a strange kinship. Oldster wished to die! Yellow Light brooded on the ghastly thought, revolted and at the same time charmed by his revulsion. He must visit Oldster! He would know!

He thought awhile, for the passing thousands of years, on the horror of those things that Oldster, the all-wise, could tell him about himself. Then came pain, and the pangs of a new fear. He trembled. Oldster would tell him . . . what?

Ah, no, he thought starkly. I am afraid! I cannot go before him—yet.

A blank, unnamed desire to go, anywhere, surged unrestrained through him. He activated his propellants with an abrupt awkward surge and emerged slowly from the deep night of the nebula, casting about with his visions like a creature that emerges affrightedly from its lair. He saw no energy creatures, and thus brought himself again into the splendid brilliance of the stars.

He looked then into the far distances, and he thought he saw his destiny beckoning to him. Out there, beyond the circle of life, he must go! Why? He did not yet know the answer, and yet he must go.

So he went, pursuing his erratic course across the quiescent jewels that lay scattered on the limitless ebony cloth of the universe; and so for fifteen million years, life other than his did not know him. At last, saddened, his own mental involutions revealed to him, he returned, knowing that he had fled, not from life, as he had thought; not with a desire to await some change in his body that would make him like other energy creatures; he had attempted to flee that from which all the soaring grace of Star Glory's flight could not take him—himself.

I have gained nothing, he thought sadly, as he hung on the ragged shores of his own galaxy. *The years are wasted, and I have grown. I have been alone, and I have never escaped. I am the same. I am Yellow Light, and I have not been proud of my name! What matters the discoloration of my purple light? What matter the pitiful deficiencies that encumber me? I have not fought. Yellow Light, Yellow Light*, he cried softly, *you must fight!*

Toward this end, holding his courage erect, he sought out life and found it, his visions resting at last on a titanic violet sun around which swarmed a horde of energy creatures, purples and greens. He was imbued with the sacred hope of a new fulfillment, and yet the pangs of dread ate at his thought swirls. If he failed, where would he turn?

It was a thought that had no answer, but he felt that then he would know true horror. He would have to escape! Where? Where lay escape from the cruel taunts of life, escape from himself? He was suddenly trembling with a nostalgic yearning for an invisible, intangible something that he could not name, that came trembling out of the reservoir of his clouded memory. Shaken by the thought, he drove slowly toward the blazing violet sun.

On the outskirts of the milling crowd of green and purple lights, he stopped. He watched with a rigid fear of discovery that slowly turned to a tremulously eager excitement.

This was a game the youths were playing, a staggering game of cosmic proportions. Below, coloring the heavens virulently in its baleful violet glow, a huge sun was growing. Vicious whirls of tortured gas fled across its face. Geysers of torn, disrupted matter arced upward like a hot tongue to lick toward nearby stars. The sun was in visible pain from its colossal weight pressing inward on itself.

Beneath the comparatively calm exterior, a furnace of titanic heat explosions raged. Now and again a planet-size fragment belched upward to fall in a futile frenzy of frustration as its parent dragged it back with inexorable gravitational fingers. The gargantua was three million miles in diameter, and the excited youths were skillfully adding to its mass by stripping a nearby galaxy of stars.

Yellow Light watched eagerly, charmed by the consummate skill with which a young purple-light delicately lowered a hundred-thousand-mile star into the ravening maw of the monster. He understood, too, the mechanics which demanded such precision. The skymonster was a cosmic powder-dump, primed to respond instantly and with suicidal force to an untoward exterior intervention. It sought release, even as it fought to maintain stability.

All this Yellow Light saw, and saw too the clamoring youths as they fought for their turns. One by one, stars were selected, swung on tractor beams, discarded as their masses proved their danger. One by one, while the breathless youths watched, solar masses were lowered through the immense gravitational field, until the oceans of gas that tripped across the monster's face licked at the proffered morsels and swallowed them in a greedy burst of inchoate flame.

Yellow Light's swollen body rippled visibly with his desire to enter the delighting game. He turned now, still undiscovered, and stealthily reached out toward the denuded galaxy, with a tractor ray drawing back toward himself a flaming mass which he thought would answer the purpose. His thought swirls throbbed in anticipation.

Slowly the sky monster grew, racked with its incredible stresses of heat and weight. Yellow Light hung back, lacking the courage to claim his turn, trembling with an

inner frustration and dread. Finally he could stand it no longer. A green-light, the center of attention of a hundred energy creatures, completed her task with swift, complacent proficiency. Yellow Light activated his propellants and moved into the breach, at the same time thrusting his ripe young sun out on the tip of his tractor ray.

"Stand back!" he cried tremulously. "Stand back! It's my turn!" He began to swing the lump of flaming matter in vast clumsy arcs.

The youths churned back in a great scattering cloud, back and away from the untoward length of his ray.

They were staring at him, Yellow Light knew. He felt a convulsion of panic. The sun almost slipped from his awkward grasp. Determinedly, he continued to swing it, aping the motions of those who had preceded him. Then suddenly, like an angry hive, the horde of youths swarmed in and closed about him in a sphere, nimbly dodging his tractor ray.

"Who is he?"—"An adult!"—"What is he doing here?"—"It is not his turn!"

A hundred outraged cries rang in his thought swirls. A single purple-light detached himself from the throng and cried with vast scorn, "Who are you, Yellow Light? What do you do here? Go away, large one!"

Yellow Light was sick with fright. "It is my turn," he whispered.

They sensed his great clumsiness, his fear.

"Yellow Light!" a half-hundred of them cried in mockery. "Yellow Light! Yellow Light!"

The sun slipped from his grasp and started to fall toward the writhing violet sun. Paralyzed, he stared after it. He emitted a great wild cry and plunged with his awkward stride after it. He caught it again on the tip of his tractor ray, and the pack of youths roared in high fury, "He is destroying our sun. Stop him! Stop Yellow Light!"

The gravitational drag of the star was beyond belief. Plucked at with their thousand spears of insult, he fought with his falling sun as if his life depended on it, and he swung it free, in a vast arc, only to have it spin away in a mighty spiraling orbit. It disappeared beyond

the titan's farther rim, whirled swiftly, and came into view on the opposite rim just as it struck that heaving surface. The youths gasped concertedly, and suddenly they scattered back and away.

Yellow Light, for a moment of unbelief, held his visions on that terrible prelude to catastrophe. Then he too urged himself back a light-year, stunned.

The gargantua's surface rippled with planet-size tidal waves and bulged for an infinitesimal second at its equator. The outraged matter at its core, pressed beyond endurance by the sudden application of a force and mass it could not compensate for, swelled up against its constructing confines and gave up all its supernal heat and energy in one huge upsurge of liberation. Million-mile cracks appeared on the crazily agitated surface of the star, deepened into vast gorges from which puffs of matter and light were emitted with frightful velocity. Pounded at insensately from within itself, the whole star broke apart with one vast detonation which bathed the heavens in demon light. It threw its fragments with unequaled savagery upon the sky, destroying in their course the tattered remnants of the two galaxies which had fed it. The inferno reached for fifteen light-years across space, and Yellow Light, visions blacked out by the ravening brilliance, was hurled back on the wave-front of the explosion.

Dazed, he finally thrust out with his para-propellants and stopped. From his vantage point, he saw the remainder of the conflagration. The brilliance died. Chaos was on the universe. New suns flared into life; freed matter settled into the stability of solitary, sedately coiling nebulae; flaming gases fled in great mist clouds across the gaps between four newly formed galaxies. Of the giant sun there was nothing. It had died and its convulsions had remade a tiny corner of the universe.

He hung there, shivering, knowing that there was something he must do. He must get away! He was too late, for from a hundred different directions the youths converged on him until once more he was encircled with their outraged cries.

"He destroyed our sun!" The purple-light who thus spoke reached out with a pressor ray. Yellow Light was

ignominiously jarred a half-million miles to one side.

"Yellow Light, Yellow Light!" the voices cried. Another pressor ray flung him in an opposite direction. Feebly he tried to resist.

"I did not destroy it," he panted, with an upsurge of rage. "I would have added to it successfully if there hadn't been interference! It wasn't my fault!"

A half-dozen rays, tractors and pressors both, stopped his protests, tore at him, pushed him, whirled him, until great foaming puffs of brilliance erupted from his over-size body. In a fury he lashed out with his own rays, but they were clumsily, ineffectively guided.

The youths cried out their devil's song: "Yellow Light! Clumsy one! Yellow Light!"

"Stop it!"

A new voice burst through the mocking clamor. As if by magic, Yellow Light's torturers ceased their battering, and he whirled, finally focusing his visions on the newcomer. Star Glory! A great starved eagerness leaped up in him at sight of her flawless milk-white sphericity with the round, clear green light as her core.

"Stop it, I say!" said Star Glory coldly. The youths stared at her. One of them burst out in excited voice, "Stop it? Why should we stop it? He is a clumsy fool. He destroyed our star with his clumsiness. Look at him! Yellow Light!"

"Yellow Light, Yellow Light," the attendant throng muttered half-heartedly.

"Stop it!" cried Star Glory. She bent on Yellow Light a look of tenderness. She said slowly, "It is not right that you should treat him this way. I was with him in the seventeenth band. He had no mother. He was in the seventeenth band too long. My own mother, Crescent Moon, says that he was in the seventeenth band too long. She rescued him. If he is clumsy or has yellow lights at his core, you must blame it on his long stay in the seventeenth band, not on him. Something happened to him."

The encircling youths were quiet and involuntarily drew back from him.

Yellow Light felt the hot flood of a terrible shame as the meaning of her words flowed into him. He trembled, caught halfway between an emotion of blind anger and

futile despair. He held himself rigid, aware of the pity in which the uneasy youths held him.

Horror mounted within him.

"Say no more, Star Glory," he whispered imploringly.

"I was in the seventeenth band with him, myself," said Star Glory eagerly. "It was I who told him his mother had died. And then it was I who begged my mother to rescue him." She rotated languidly, as she repeated her tale again and again.

Yellow Light writhed in the agony of the indictment all unwittingly hurled at him, as she thus bathed at the center of attention.

"I can stand it no more!" he cried in a terrible voice.

Star Glory whirled in surprise, apparently remembering him again. She turned then to the throng as a sudden thought struck her. "I know where there is a sun perhaps larger than the one Yellow Light so clumsily destroyed. We will go there!"

The youths, already forgetting the object of their late mockery, burst out with eager assent, milling about her.

"And Yellow Light may go with us!" said Star Glory magnanimously. "Come, Yellow Light!"

With a final delighted glance at him, she activated her propellants and shot away, the whole concourse of youths streaming after her, a chain of lights sweeping across the newly created galaxies. With blurred visions, Yellow Light stared after them. Then, a lost thought spurring him on, he frantically followed them.

It was in vain. His flight was cumbersome, pitiful in its fumbling attempt at a great velocity. He stopped finally, the youths gone, shuddering in a horror that was directed at himself.

I am alone, he thought starkly. I have failed. I am lost!

Then, for the second time, came a flashing memory. There was something he must find! There was something he must look for! There was something that was for him, and him alone! He thrust out wildly with his visions, hoping that he might see, or sense, the nameless reality of that which must be his. There was flaming matter—that was all.

But in his mind the flame of his desire burned fiercer and hotter, consuming him in terrible, bright clearness.

"I will find it!" he vowed passionately to the poised assemblage of stars. "I will find it—and I will know peace!"

III

The Inner Band

He was young, in the life scale of energy creatures, but thirty million years had passed since his birth. Already there was in him an unyielding black bitterness, tinged with white from afar with the unseen bright beacon of his hope. In search of the fulfillment of an unnameable desire he went, and the millions of years passed.

He was a specter of the stellar legions, weaving through their impersonal ranks, searching deeply beneath their scalded faces, reeling with the suffocation of his continued failure as he found no clue. The bands of hyperspace knew him, as he thrust himself into them with laborious mental effort, from first to forty-seventh, where all space was filled with cubistically distorted stars and galaxies. And he knew nothing of the forty-eighth, the chilling band of life. He was a purple-light and did not have the instinctively guarded, natural wisdom of the green.

He was forty million years in age, and he met Star Glory. He saw her flashing toward him from the far distance, bright with her perfection, searing him with the memory of the awful thing she had revealed to him. He froze, choked with an emotion he could not label.

"Yellow Light!" She thrust out her para-propellants, halting before him in sharp curiosity. "Where have you been?"

His great loneliness ebbed from him in a swift tide as he was washed in the cruel tenderness of her gaze.

He blurted out thickly, "Everywhere, Star Glory! I have sought. I have searched the universe over—" He halted.

"You have searched?" she demanded. "For what? Oh, Yellow Light, for what have you searched? Is not everything you desire around you?"

"No," he whispered, "no!"

She came closer. "For what do you search?" She was eager with tremulous curiosity, striving to reach into his memory swirls with her thought bands, to reach in and draw out his innermost thoughts. He closed his memory swirls against her, overcome with shame.

"I do not know for what I search," he gasped. Then, in bitter frenzy, he cried out, "I do not know! There is in me a terrible yearning! There is something I must find. It is here, Star Glory, and yet it is not here! I have not found it!"

For long she stared at him, and he was again aware of the wisdom that was hers, a wisdom he could never accumulate, and which she would never divulge. Suddenly she filled him with nameless horror.

"Leave me, Star Glory!" he whispered. "Leave me!"

"She rotated with slow, piercing thought. "Perhaps," she said presently, "you are on a fool's quest, Yellow Light. But I will leave." She did, though he would have had her back the moment she was gone. He turned and blundered in slow, zigzag fashion in the opposite direction, a vast sickness growing in him—fool's quest! So Star Glory had said. But she could not be right! Else why this thunderous longing that beat in his mind?"

His meeting with Star Glory had a strange result. Thousands of years later, a group of youths came flashing toward him, circling him in dazzling brilliance as they taunted his clumsiness with their own grace.

"Yellow Light!" their devil's song blasted out. "Yellow Light! He searches and does not know for what he searches!"

"Star Glory would not have told you!" he cried in his mortification, but at the same time he knew that her vanity had betrayed him.

"Yellow Light!" the dervishes called mockingly. "How can he find what he does not know?"

"I will find it," he cried, goaded to consuming rage.

"He will find it. Yellow Light, the clumsy one, the yellow one, will find it! As well could he solve the mystery of the third band—" And they whirled away, their knife-thoughts still in his brain.

He quivered, his thoughts rioting uncontrollably under their mockery, his body expanding and contracting under

the dreadful indictment. They were not like him! They did not have to search for a chimera! Poor Yellow Light, the deluded. And then came thought of the third band.

Slowly the thought unfolded, like a flower that has been in the darkness too long. Then, by some alchemy of the mind, he knew, as he had always known, that he and he alone could solve that mystery. He halted on the threshold of soaring emotions, exploring the astounding discovery.

It must be what I seek, he thought in awe. The third band! The third band! It is mine!" By laborious mental command he clicked into it.

Before him stretched the thin, patterned plane of white brilliance that was the three-dimensional universe projected onto a two-dimensional plane. The third band! And beyond the depraved ugliness of compressed galaxies stretched the tight, ebony skin of nothingness, reaching without end into diminishing distances.

"It is mine," he whispered with a terrible bright clearness of purpose, and without doubt he hurled himself at that dark curtain behind which mystery, darkly ominous, lay entombed.

It parted and closed behind him.

He hung poised, hardly daring to think on the incredible occurrence. But he was here! He was choked with the pride of his feat, a feat no other energy creature had ever accomplished. He was the only living being able to penetrate that dark wall! And though around him was the sheerest darkness, the thought was intoxicating to his senses.

Darkness! Nothingness! He waited, trembling with the revelation of his mightiness. He sent out his vision rays for what must have been long light-years. There was nothing. A chilling doubt began to arise.

"No," he cried at long last. "No! There is something! There is at least a galaxy, a far galaxy, a new universe!"

And far away, a mote of egg-shaped light, he saw it—a galaxy! Energy formed and foamed away from him as his body contracted to half its size under the emotions of thanksgiving and pulsing wonder. Involuntarily, he lashed out with his propellants and surged into glorious, parsec-

eating flight. Through him flowed such strength and power as he had never known. His speed mounted, for the galaxy grew apace, nor did it seem to weave from side to side. He was flying, straight and true, with all the grace of Star Glory herself!

And still faster!

His mind numbed with the utter enigma of that which was happening. He, Yellow Light, the malformed, the ill-born, was great. He was the eater-of-space, the faster-than-light, owner of the inner band! He hungrily drank in the celestial beauty of a million stars as the galaxy subdivided within itself, and now lay spread across the endless darkness with spiral arms outstretched to receive him. And into it he plunged, drenching himself in the radiant energy which throbbed through space, in mad excitement hurling himself in graceful loops and arcs around flaming hulks of matter. From one end of the majestic galaxy to the other he plummeted with incomparable ease and strength, slicing dead red cinders into dozens of separate pieces, hurling them with skill unsurpassed around other stars to form complete, complex solar systems. He devoured stars whole, converted them into energy, then contracted his body until energy coalesced, flowed together and formed new lumps of matter. He flung it from him at light speed, in wanton abandon. Stars exploded as his titanic bullets struck them, and he reformed them with ironic mercy. "I am master!" he exulted, and halted on the edge of the galaxy to see the dead emptiness that stretched away forever. He threw himself into it, and with delight watched the galaxy shrink. It was gone. Again he cast about him with his visions, and a nimbus seemed to settle about his mind.

"This is the birthplace of matter," he whispered, and why he thought it he did not know. Yet, it was truth. Untold years, numbering in the tens of millions, seemed to pass through the dark fabric of space, and there was a manifold rustling of energy growing from nothing. He saw the motes of light glowing in prismatic beauty, swirling in eldritch dances as they pirouetted about each other, melted together, and assumed the guise of matter. Matter which darkened and swelled and seethed. Matter which churned against itself, colliding, flaring in molten

beauty, gaining mass from a magical source, and thundering upward to sun size.

All around him space was ruptured and cast out of being, as the illustrious miracle took place. Suns of fiery magnificence swarmed through the infinite extents of a newborn universe. They erupted and clawed at each other with gravitational drags; and planets, steaming hot, shot out from their writhing interiors.

He moved with the pomp of a conqueror through the flaming legions.

"This is mine," he cried, and there was no voice to deny him.

No voice! No life! The thought was a clanging discord.

"There must be life!" he cried violently.

Thus he saw life, and its energy beat strongly at him. Space swarmed with life. He saw groups of energy creatures, far away on the ragged shores of the numberless galactic accretions. They had no knowledge of him, Yellow Light, for they moved and played on, intent on themselves and their own pursuits. In Yellow Light grew a vast cunning. He moved with insolent, powerful grace toward a nearby sun, a lost memory tugging at him.

He hovered over the star and proceeded to reach out to a nearby galaxy with jabbing tractor rays, bringing back smaller stars. He dropped them, thus adding to the star's bulk until it became a ravening furnace of indigo violence. It grew, swelled, became a dangerous celestial bomb. And now, with infinite skill and precision, Yellow Light lowered suns delicately, in constant stream, apparently absorbed with lofty fascination in his game, apparently unaware of the energy creatures who, one by one, left their own games as they noted Yellow Light's tremendously careless skill. They came darting from all directions, tens and hundreds of them. They watched in silent awe as Yellow Light fed the madly undulating rind of the ripening star with a flawless technique which soon had the monster a billion miles through.

And then they came by the thousands! Yellow Light felt such joy as he had never known. If only Star Glory, if only those other taunting youths, could see him now.

They pressed closer about him and his bulging star, voiceless. They knew that he did not see them, and if he

did see them, would not deign to notice them. He felt a great pity for their smallness, their inferior strength. He cast a side vision at them, sweepingly, carelessly, then returned to his effortless task.

They appreciated his recognition of them, and finally they could contain themselves no longer. A chant grew, swelling with voluminous roar against his thought swirls.

"He is great! The greatest of the great! See the star he has built! Oh, there can be none greater than this stranger in our midst. We are the luckless ones, and we writhe in our shame!"

They whirled about him, in their thousands, crying out their praise, their worship, their intense admiration. His thought swirls rioted uncontrollably as their litany drew him to the pinnacle of his happiness. He saw now that there was truly no limit to his magnificence, and no limit of size to which he could take this star.

He played his visions over them, as they whirled in awkward adoration, and a hideous, mind-destroying doubt crawled through him. He froze in horror, stricken dumb. It seemed as if his very life-force were draining away.

"He is great," said the weaving throng doubtfully.

The truth burst in him with white-hot intensity. Something crumbled in his mind, and with a wild, mad thought blasting at the hovering expectant thousands, he spurred back and away.

"Go! Vanish!"

Space was still and the energy creatures were gone.

And, as if they also expected his command, the stars commenced to pale. They faded to redness, to darkness, to non-being, and darkness wrapped itself around him. He shook in a series of trapped convulsions and drew his visions in about him like a shroud. He hung there, unable to still his dreadful thoughts. Then, involuntarily, there was a click in his consciousness. When he again looked, the familiar ranks of galaxies and stars, unchanged, surrounded him.

He was back in the first band of true space, and he knew he was mad.

The inner third band—a dream dimension—and each creature had been but a replica of himself. . . .

The Betrayal

For long thousands of years, he was afraid to move, for he knew what he would find. He was filled with a dull, dead weariness in which thoughts trickled slowly. And yet one thought stood out with burning clarity. He had not found that for which he sought.

"I will never find it," he whispered in agony. Never? The thought was unbearable.

Then came whispering to him the name that flowed like a great unseen river through space. Crescent Moon, the mother of Star Glory, had twice mentioned him. Oldster—the wise.

"He must not die!" he cried violently. "He must not sleep! I will find him!"

Abruptly, his horror was washed away in the great fear that Oldster would die before he, Yellow Light, could speak to him. That must not happen! Oldster would know, and Oldster would answer. He trembled with his longing, and entered the fifteenth band of lightlessness, engulfed in its funereal obscurity.

"Oldster!" He cried the name out, but in all this infinity he did not feel the beat of a life-force. Oldster was far, far away. Nonetheless, he began his search. He blundered for untold thousands of years that swelled to millions, seeking for the merest whisp of thought that might emanate from the somnolent hulk of the terrifying creature. The invisible light-years fled away as he weaved out from a center. And finally, so faint as to be almost without being, came a single mental vibration, wordless, meaningless.

He drove toward it, a terrible fright seizing at his mind. The strength of the thought hardly increased, and yet he felt now the faint, pulsing beat of a fading life-force. Oldster it surely must be!

"Awake! Awake! I am Yellow Light. Do you know of me? I was without a mother. She died. Oldster!" Over and over again, without end, a single goading thought that impinged with monotonous insistency on the dying creature's brain.

The pulse of life fluttered, then increased in strength with spasmodic, dreadful surges. Yellow Light leaped into the breach, hammering at it with his thoughts.

Then came a muttering, a mumble, a restless jumble of agonized thought, a great wave of delirious horror. Spellbound with the futilely lashing thoughts of the creature, Yellow Light was held frozen.

The formless thought ceased abruptly. A hollow, stricken voice, as if borne on leaden wings from a distance infinitely far, said, "Go away! Away! There is nothing for you here. I am tortured again!"

"I did not mean to bring you pain," said Yellow Light violently.

"But you have brought me pain, a pain I thought to escape," the old creature burst out rackingly. "Who are you? Why do you torture me? Ah, I will soon know."

Yellow Light's thought swirls were seized with tight bands of energy which relentlessly, cruelly explored through the accumulated memory of his life. The probing bands withdrew, and the thousands of years, pregnant with foreboding silence, trooped away.

Then came Oldster's dull whisper, "Yellow Light is his name—Vanguard! And I had thought myself done with Sun Destroyer! Oh, Yellow Light, whose true name is Vanguard, there is an evil heritage on you, and I see no end, no end!"

The fluttering fingers of horror touched at Yellow Light's brain.

"My true name is Vanguard," he whispered, but before he could complete the thought, Oldster reached into him, and one by one tore away the veils drawn over his identity. Acutely revealed was the story of that creature from an age long-gone; of Darkness, the dreamer, who had plunged across the sea of lightlessness, in search of a purpose, and had found it only in death; of Sun Destroyer, his daughter, who had returned along his path only to die in the mad fantasies of her disordered mind, after bringing into being her child, Vanguard.

"Vanguard!" Yellow Light said starkly. "That is my true name! But—but Oldster! Death—birth! I understand none of these."

"Nor shall you." It seemed as if Oldster's memory

were fleeing backward along a trail which took him to the day when he was young. He muttered restlessly, "What might I not have spared myself had I not sought the answer to those problems. Oh, Yellow Light—Vanguard—leave me. Leave me! I cannot help you. I am lost; we are all lost, and there is no answer!"

Yellow Light surged forward in violent denial.

He charged passionately, "There is an answer, Oldster. And you know that answer. I have searched. I do not know how long I have searched! What is it? What is it that haunts me, Oldster, so that it drips on me like an acid, eating at me until I am mad with the desire to find it? I am lost if you do not tell me!"

"There is no real answer to your dream," Oldster said dully. "My son, return to the inner third band!"

"The inner third band?" The scalding memory of the dream dimension returned. "I cannot! There is nothing for me there, Oldster. I will not live in dreams!"

"You have lived in nothing else," said Oldster sadly. His thoughts left Yellow Light momentarily, then came back.

He whispered, so that his voice was barely audible, "If you really wish to find that which you seek—there is Star Glory!"

"Star Glory!" and suddenly he was shaking, his mind seared unaccountably with the thought.

"But—but—" he whispered. But Oldster had drawn his thought bands in around him and would say no more.

Yellow Light hung in darkness unutterable, palsied with an unknown horror. Star Glory! He must seek her out, and his search would at last be rewarded. But why? Why?

He dropped to the first band of true space, and, with erratic, strangely eager propellants, lashed himself across the boundless star fields. He found her, in the course of a thousand years.

He intercepted her course, and for long moments, quivering with his mad exultation, he held her visions with his own.

She, in turn, returned his stare, and he sensed a peculiar change coming over her.

She spoke at last, faintly:

"You are strange, Yellow Light, strange. Why is it that you are here?"

He was caught in the grip of an emotion he could not name. "I do not know, Star Glory! I have been sent by Oldster—I do not know why I have been sent!"

For a long time she bent on him the growing glance of cruelty and paradoxical tenderness.

She whispered at last, "Then I think that I know. Yellow Light, follow me!"

He poised, trembling with unexplainable dread. He watched Star Glory as she receded, and then it seemed to be the last he knew. A nimbus settled over his thought swirls, and he remembered only that under the terrible spell of her receding green light, he had cast out his own yellow-specked purple light. Two globes—green and purple—collided in midspace, merged, and became a pulsing ball of luminescence.

He stared, gripped with a sense of loss.

Star Glory he saw. She hovered over the white, pulsing ball, and he knew with poignant certainty that it was life—life that he and Star Glory had created. And she, though her green light had merged with his purple, had magically acquired another light, while his was gone, gone!

"Gone!" he cried in agony, and did not know why he was agonized. Suddenly he saw Star Glory and the energy child disappear.

He went after her in a frenzy, and found her again in the seventeenth band of hyperspace. She was hovering in strange benediction over her child. Yellow Light moved toward her in leaden motion.

"Star Glory," he whispered.

She turned toward him, and read his unspoken question. Her thoughts were cold.

"You will die," she said heartlessly.

"No!" he cried.

"Yes. Thus it is, thus it must be." She was impersonal, uncaring. "Oldster wishes to die. You knew that. It is not strange that he should point out the path of death to you. Perhaps," she added, with demon humor, "it is what you were searching for!"

"I did not search for that," he said dully. He stared at

the energy child, hanging pendant in the seventeenth band, where propellants were useless. A memory, a longing that was old, tugged at the roots of his brain. But he could not place it. A great, deathly weariness was working grimly in his body.

"My purple light," he said helplessly. "It is gone. But yours has returned!"

"And will return three times more," she uttered, and there was the shadow of her own eventual doom hanging over her words. She rotated restlessly. "Go, Yellow Light! There is a law which governs us—and I can do nothing about it. Had you been like Oldster, if in your wisdom you had known the secret of the purple and green lights . . . ah, Oldster brought his own torture on himself. He will never die!"

She turned from him, and so he left her, the talons of his dissipation into the energy from he had been formed clawing at his propellants, rendering them almost entirely useless.

He drifted without purpose the length of a galaxy, striving to drink into him as much of the beauty around him as he could before he was negated. It was useless. His brooding thoughts returned to Oldster and the great treachery that Oldster had practiced on him. Bitter fury goaded him to a flaming, zigzag flight. He remembered suddenly the soaring grace of his flight in the inner third band. And so came the great thought!

The inner third band! His memory swirls throbbed with excitement. He could go there!

"Oldster, Oldster," he whispered, the wild fire of hope burning in him, "had I listened! But it cannot be too late!"

It could not be too late. It must not be! He threw himself into the third band with his waning strength, tremulous with thought of the dream-life that awaited him. He flung himself at the impalpable dark skin behind which lay the dream dimension.

It was as if he had flung himself against a solid wall.

"I am lost," he said starkly, "and my search is finished—"

A Race is Born

"I have been waiting for you," said Oldster.

"You betrayed me!" said Yellow Light, trembling with dread. "I have come before you to die, Oldster! You will know that I am dying; you will know that it is you who have caused it, and you will never forget. You will live in horror of the memory, but it will return, and your sleep will be broken and you will never be at peace again!"

The aged creature's thought rays rested on his rioting memory swirls with singularly gentle touch.

"Peace, my son," he whispered, his words aching. "I have given you more than you could have given yourself, Yellow Light! You stayed in the seventeenth band too long and emerged to find yourself lacking in the great grace and power of motion which other energy creatures possessed. Such is the penalty—such was the heritage of Sun Destroyer, your mother. But there was another heritage which she gave you, all unwittingly. It was fitting that she called you Vanguard, for you are the vanguard of a new race, of which the yellow light is the symbol!"

The dying creature drew back a slow light-year.

"You mean—" He groped with the blinding thought.

"Yes, yes!" Oldster's thoughts reached out with swelling strength and glory. "You are a step upward along the path of evolution, and you have given birth to a new race. Another mystery of space has been shattered. And there are more, Yellow Light, more! Long, winding and bitter is the path, but it ascends to a land of promise I cannot guess at.

"I see a glimmering—for a moment I understand the enormous purpose behind the cycle of life and death. The years have fled, and I have thrust all the bitterness of my life behind me, but now and anon, in my death-striving dreams, I see a tremendous purpose. Whither? I do not know. But you are a touchstone on the path, as was that first creature whose mutation allowed him ascent into the hyperspatial universe, as were a million, a billion

others. From them stemmed the new races. The Star Glories, the others, the unnumbered billions of others, were shadows with no meaning. My son," Oldster whispered, and it seemed that he himself felt the rare brilliance of ultimate meaning, "you are great!"

Yellow Light hung exhausted, no longer fighting, bathed in the blinding significance of the word. Great! He dreamed a dream that lay billions of years in the future.

"Yellow lights," he muttered. "I see them—and they are no longer different. And from me they stem!"

He fondled the thought with languid, luscious introspection, hardly aware that every passing moment brought him nearer extinction. He passed in thought over the mad, mad years of his life, as he blundered through the heavenly corridors, seeking and not finding, stretched on the agonizing rack of his own thoughts, tortured with dreams. Now it seemed as if all memory of his pain were softened.

"Yellow Light," he thought sadly. "I should have been proud of my name."

He could no longer focus thoughts. He knew he was dying. And yet, dying before the wise old creature, a lost remembrance plagued him.

He fought with himself. "I must know," he thought in stark horror, knowing that he could no longer form the words. "I must. Oldster! Let me die then—but first let me know! For what did I search?"

Soothingly, faintly, gently came the answering whisper. "For the seventeenth band. But it was beyond recall—the seventeenth band, backward in time the length of your life when you were but a child; when you knew nothing of life, even your own; when the universe seemed to sing a great song of peace. You remember, Yellow Light! Now you know that your search was in vain, save in death!"

Oldster's voice was gone, and Yellow Light sank into an abyss from which even he knew there would be no return. "Save in death," he repeated, as the darkness yawned; it was truth.

He thought he heard the pounding, soundless rhythm

of a swelling song as the universe singled him out and made him the center of being, the hub of the great wheel, the master, the supreme audience. It was good. He imagined himself to be very young again.

BOOK FOUR
Rebel of the Darkness

I

Devil Star

The story of Darkness has been told. Darkness, the dreamer who crossed the immeasurable gulf of lightless emptiness between two universes. He, an energy creature tens of millions of miles in girth, sought the answer to life. Perhaps he found that answer in death, when he mated in the thus-far inaccessible band of life.

Also, the story of Darkness' daughter Sun Destroyer has been told. She plunged back along Darkness's trail to seek out that aged, sorrowing being whose name was Oldster. For Oldster was wise. He had counseled Darkness. Surely Oldster could lead Sun Destroyer to her life's completion in the forty-ninth band of hyperspace. But there was no forty-ninth band, unless it lay in Sun Destroyer's wild fantasies of impossible happiness. She too died, yearning for her son Vanguard, the infant purple-light who lay helpless in the seventeenth band of hyperspace.

The story of Vanguard has been told. He was renamed Yellow Light by his taunting playmates, because of imperfections in his central core. Disabled by his long stay in the seventeenth band, he was never to know contentment. Oldster, in his compassion and wisdom, led Vanguard to mate—to create and thus to die—for he knew Vanguard's true greatness, that he was destined to father a new race which would supplant the old.

There is, however, another story to be told, the last story of the darkness, the story of the purple-light named Devil Star. Out of the infinities he comes, pressing headlong through the scattered concourses of the stars. Cursed beyond hope, Devil Star, even from the moment of his birth, seeks a nameless thing, a secret held inviolate in

the depths of his thought swirls. Moving at speeds far beyond that of light itself, he does not know he flees a horror he cannot outdistance.

Millions of years have passed since this Devil Star's crashing birth. Stars have swung in their elongated orbits. The universe in that instant of time has blurred into a slightly different pattern. Novae have flickered in their feebly dying explosions, puffing out upon space the excreta of their deaths. Planets have been born, lush with life, and that life has died. Decay and crushing retrogression is the story being enacted on this entropic stage, and yet he who flees in his torment does not see the ultimate hope this holds out for him.

Around him, above, and below to a depth beyond imagination stretch untold millions of light-years, and this Devil Star has traversed them all. He has peered with searing tentacles of energy into the bursting hearts of atoms. With touch that is gentle and loving he has reached for the darting wave-trains of electrons, striving to control his horror so that he might comprehend that shattering law which came into being at a time unthinkably remote. Not succeeding, he has turned into a wild creature, loosing his grief and longing into attack on this teeming universe and the forty-eight bands of hyperspace which compose it.

The forty-eighth band.

Comes the drugging memory that darts within its cage, seeking a door never made for its escape. And Devil Star thunders through space pursued by the horror of his memory.

Now there are dreams, dying sometimes to mere awareness. There is around him the tympanic thrumming of hyperspace's thirteenth band, and he seeks to attune himself to that harmonic, to become a sympathetic instrument on which it might play. He dreams awhile, dreams the great staggering dream that he is controlling this moment, this naked, two-dimensioned instant of time—dreams that in this thin-sliced layer of eternity he is master.

"For one stripped moment," dreams Devil Star, "let me control. Then I shall have the answer!" To what?

The raging of thought, the denial of universal com-

munion, the sinking again into that battle with the unimaginable webwork of motion that began ten thousand billion years ago.

But there is the grief of longing, and the desire; and then memory, speeding wraithlike from the far distances of time, striking him, rebounding, returning to strike again. There are the green-lights, the half-hundred of them scattered through the millions of his years of his life. And there is that other green-light, the mother green-light, she who created him and nurtured him and taught him. He does not want to think of her.

There was a time when Devil Star was young. He does not want to think of it. Yet he was young, once. Must he think of it? Yes, he must, in dread nostalgic pain which in being felt again somehow lost a part of its edge.

Therefore he must think again of his youth, of the years of play—of youth and that great yard of galaxies surrounded by the high fence of the darkness. Youth and the joys of living. Youth—and the deep-fluttering memory of his birth.

Into his ten-millionth year, this Devil Star never spoke of that memory. He kept it cold and dying in an unplumbed chamber of his thought swirls. Then the memory, having grown too large, must press upward in its wild escape. And these are the memories of Devil Star:

“Moon Flame!”

The memory of Moon Flame is so strong.

“You spoke?” Devil Star’s companion in the joyous race across that galaxy touched him briefly with his visions.

“Yes, I spoke. Moon Flame, listen to me. I must know something. Whether you—if the others—if *they* remember.”

The purple-light Moon Flame rotated lazily in his hurtling flight. “Remember what?”

“The moment of birth,” said Devil Star. “Remember the mother, the dying father, the band of life.” He felt his sickness come upon him as he uttered the words. He strove to control the fluttering of his aura, without success, for there was concerned alarm in the gaze of Moon Flame.

“I remember nothing of this,” said Moon Flame slowly. “Birth, death, father. The words are meaningless; you speak in riddles. And while we talk we lose the race. I

see the others—in the galaxy beyond. Shall we forget these riddles and move on faster?”

For a clairvoyant second in his time scale the raging thoughts of Devil Star swelled. “I am cursed!” And subsided. Then he did move faster, but only to hurl himself across Moon Flame’s path.

“You must listen,” he said tensely. “We must stop, we purple-lights, we must learn, think, beware. For all of us will die.”

Moon Flame clove the sky toward Devil Star without lessening his speed. “Die,” he said. “Another word.”

“But you do not understand, Moon Flame! None of us can. Death is our destiny. It was destined before we were born.”

“Then if this strange event is destined, why fight it? No one could win.”

“No one?” Devil Star said, as Moon Flame loomed toward him refusing to lessen his speed. Devil Star swerved into a different trajectory, brushing the surface of a violet super-sun. He said, “I shall win, Moon Flame. I shall fight death, the death green-lights mete out to purple-lights. I shall interrupt destiny; I shall master destiny.”

But Moon Flame did not understand. He could not. The importance of this information escaped him; even the words themselves hazed away in his mind. He brushed Devil Star aside with an impatient pressor beam, scornful of him for having dropped out of the race. He shot away, leaving a swirl of incandescent globules in his wake. Devil Star’s visions followed after him, but all he saw was the immortal blaze of his life’s years. He would not die!

He moved again after a moment, a yearning sadness in him. He still had time to live, and to live without thought. That time might never come again. He went after Moon Flame and the others, letting his joy of life swell within him. He was not ready, either to fight his urges or to be harmed by those who could harm him. He was not yet the rebel, though the time for that would come.

Devil Star was to have five million more years of peace. Then the time came.

He was alone, and cradling his loneliness, atop a galaxy shaped like a masterfully blown, brimming wine glass,

with the bubbles of stars blowing about its rim. The moment of his curse had come, and he knew it well, for he saw the vast cunning that had grown in him, and he was powerless to stop it.

He would lie here, shielded by a great star, and he would wait.

The waiting was not long. Came the beat of a life-force curving around the bright colossus that shadowed him. He trembled. Deep inside the voices of his being whispered that he should forget, turn back, play—skim along the surface of life as Moon Flame and the others. Accept destiny, Devil Star!

Destiny. The cunning shift and quiver of subparticles that began when the universe began.

He would not.

The life-force pressed in on him, strengthened. And now with a thread of his vision rays he thrust around his shielding star, to see an energy creature whose green central light danced with undersurface forms and cast out a hypnotic radiance. She swam lazily into view, but beneath the languid appearance of her he sensed a frightening intensity.

Devil Star moved closer to his star and off to the side, for now he sensed the swirl and pulse of another life. With a thinned ray of sight, he beheld the purple-light ripping through space toward the deadly source of the vibration that drew him.

For one chaotic moment, Devil Star's purpose was as nothing. His fear of being discovered vanished, for he knew this energy creature.

"Solar Cloud!"

The cry of warning blasted through space. He came into full view of green and purple-light, ready to disrupt, if he could, this first scene in a chilling drama. Neither heard his cry. The beings hung pendant in space, the huge green-light languidly, composedly rotating, the slightly smaller purple-light staring in hard, bright wonder. They could not—would not—see or hear him. They were caught on that barbed law from which mere interference could not set them free. And Devil Star knew that they were speaking, but speaking along such tightened bands of energy he could not hear what they said.

"Solar Cloud," he whispered, "stop!"

Then came reaction. The full knowledge of his ultimate triumph came to him. He would succeed in his purpose, and having succeeded would succeed in other things as well. Giddily he caressed his luscious dream. He was young, not nearly so old as the matured purple-light Solar Cloud. But he would live to be older: old beyond death. At once, he was transformed from his pity and back to his cunning. He would watch.

The green light disappeared into a hyperspace. The purple-light was bewildered. Then he too disappeared, and Devil Star, bitterly frightened that already he had lost them, felt the click in his thought swirls that transported him into the second band of the universe's forty-eight layers. For a moment he was one with solid matter that threatened to make him part of it. He shook himself out of the second band and into the third, where all the universe was pressed into flatness. He endured the fourth band and its snakes of living light. He entered the fifth, searching for trace of green and purple-light, but there was only cosmos in wild motion, the burning matters and energies of the universe seething against walls of utmost black, splattering, smashing, raining back into original shapes to repeat the causeless motion. Spasms of pain ripped through Devil Star as eating vibrations impinged on him. For a flickering moment he allowed himself to wonder at the reason behind that display of a universe amok. Causeless?

Nothing without cause.

Or was there?

He flicked into the next band, and the next, vainly searching for green and purple-light. In a wild gamble, he shot all the way to the thirty-sixth and, starkly limned against that sick yellow background, he saw their brightening colors. Thereafter, making no attempt to hide, he followed, until around him were those cubed celestial bodies of the forty-seventh band.

The green-light vanished.

The purple-light remained behind, frantically darting across those strange heavens. A wild, trembling excitement shook Devil Star. He must get closer! Solar Cloud knew nothing of a forty-eighth band, but surely the green-

light somehow would draw him into it. And Devil Star inadvertently would be drawn with him; for he would be near Solar Cloud, near the sundered skin of the forty-eighth band, and he would be able to follow.

And, subtly, he knew why he must follow. There was the memory, the damning memory of his birth, and he must know if it were memory, or phantasm without meaning.

He did indeed move closer to Solar Cloud . . . and instantly was swept along in a tide that lifted and bore him. He had his moment of surprise before his consciousness blurred. He was rocking, laved in spangling energies. He was washing back and forth, in some mighty and primeval ocean of force. Then, sharply, he was aware.

His visions darted out, then withdrew. The full knowledge of where he was smote him. Crystalline tongues of fire quivered from his contracting body. The impossible had happened.

The laws of the universe had made no provision for this lawless event.

He, unmatured, was in the forty-eighth band.

II

Dark Fire

Time passing, the great vital pulses of time, flowing like an unseen river through that band where life energies burned. And coldly, almost thoughtlessly, like a being detached from his own body, he watched.

He saw that mating of green and purple-light as their central cores met in annihilating fusion.

And saw and felt the grayness of coming death settle over Solar Cloud.

Then he drifted in torpor, saw the pulsing white globe which heralded life, and saw nothing else. The moment was relived. The memory had been there.

Then, almost like pain, all that was gone. Against his will, he had been moved to the first band of true space.

Still his thoughts did not function. He hung in a box

of emptiness between two stars, unable to plumb the depths of that staggering event.

Solar Cloud was dead, or dying.

As he, Devil Star, was destined to die.

Now the thoughts did start. An incredible thing had happened. Where had it begun? Ten thousand billion years ago? Or a mere fragment of time since Devil Star had been born?

His thoughts took their upward surge, and as full awareness returned he felt a shock of knowledge: he was being watched, and it was the green-light, she who had conceived a life, and heartlessly destroyed one, who was watching him. A sudden cunning hatred of her took hold of him. He held her stare and flung it back arrogantly. And she watched him with coldness from the eminence of her greater size.

The moment of silence drew out to become a vibrating deadly thing stretched between them. Around them stars hotly burned, cooled, collided in collisions that turned them into destroying novae; cooled and grew again in that mad rushing race toward the universe's entropic doom. And still Devil Star fought for dominance.

The moment could hold no longer. He felt his arrogance dissolving, though he hotly cried out against it. And this the green-light felt.

She said chillingly, "I saw you there. And it was not meant to be. Will you forget?"

"Forget?" The cry was choked from Devil Star. Then the nature of that insidious invitation struck him: this green light, and others of her kind, must be vulnerable to him and his astounding knowledge. "You are . . . begging me to forget, Comet Glow?"

And as he mockingly uttered her name, she drew back, a darkness creeping into the brilliant depths of her. "If that is the word you wish to use—yes."

He surged closer to her. "It is the word, mother of four children. Then let me forget also the arts of existence—the eating of energy, the dispelling of it, the use of my propellants. I would as soon forget them. And let me also forget the dread moment of my birth!"

And he knew what effect that had on her, for he had

told none but Moon Flame. Involuntarily she expanded in her dawning horror.

"Remember . . . that?" The words were torn from her.

"I remember it. Is there another purple-light who remembers it? Is there another such as I?" He rotated in mock preening. "I will not forget," he said. He was gone from her sight, into another band of hyperspace. But she followed, reaching out with tight bands of energy, holding him fast, yet at a distance.

"Devil Star!" The words came faintly. "What is it you search for?"

She was debasing herself before him, she, a green-light, millions of years older than he. And he knew his moment of gloating should be put to one side. He was young. There was much knowledge he did not have.

"I am searching for—" He stopped. For what? His rim was ablaze with the sparkling excrescences which betrayed his uncertainty. He began again: "Comet Glow, perhaps I am seeking to be master of my own fate."

For a long time her somber gaze rested on him. "Devil Star, it is not possible."

Instantly he tore from her restraining bonds of energy. "You say that," he cried, "who saw me, an unmatured purple-light, in the band of life—who knows I have a memory which carries me to the moment of my own birth!"

And he stopped, chilled by her odd, pitying silence. He was pressed to dismaying silence himself, and wondered if, somewhere in the undercaverns of his thought swirls, he knew the dread answer she was trying to give him. Another thought rose clamoring. Green-lights are . . . different. They have a cruel, natural wisdom purple-lights cannot hope to possess.

And, mockingly, that ruinous afterthought: *They?*

He was sinking into his dreadful abyss.

"Devil Star." The gentle thought of Comet Glow came. "You are young. You are life. Live as life *must* live. Yes, as it *must*."

She pressed closer, laving him with her anxiety. "Do you seek to change the natal matrix of the vast universe? Ten thousand billion years ago—and longer, Devil Star, perhaps longer—the pattern of all that is was foreordained

—and all that will be! No electron that moved along its path but what moved in response to a prior event.

“There has been no thought, and shall be none, that was not caused by prior thought or birthed from event. No result without cause, and no event without result!”

His words came out of the tortured depths of him. “I was in the band of life. And it was against the pattern. There was no reason for it, no reason!”

“Yes,” she whispered sadly. “There was a reason. And if you persist in searching for that reason, or in making use of your knowledge, you will but have further proof of the shackles destiny binds us with.”

Alone in the quivering brightness hung Devil Star. Not make use of knowledge? No result without cause? The thoughts tugged and tore. Into his mind came the drug-ging answer to all problems. He slept. And in his sleep, an insidious process began working, a selection and burying of the hated answers.

These, O Golden Lights, are the memories of Devil Star; and there are more.

He came back; he came back to the energy children of his own group, and he played as they played. Coldly secret was his knowledge, secret not only from others, but from penetration by his outer mind. And yet he knew his knowledge was there and would harden and polish until its facets would shine brilliantly throughout him. For he was different from them.

Different, exterior to the pattern—he, the rebel from causation.

Somewhere in the passing millions of years, the senseless, joyous years of youth, Devil Star's mother vanished and was never seen again. He took small note of it. Comet Glow, too: sometimes he saw her studying him, in somber thought, from a faraway depth of space, and then she too faded into a forgotten darkness. Other names passed from the scene. And in from the wings, in response to a cue none heard or looked for or questioned, came other, younger energy creatures, eager for life, excited and delirious as they merged with the splendors about them. On this entropic stage, Devil Star cunningly acted out his part, and called it play.

And there was a green-light, one of the twin siblings of Comet Glow, who played along with him.

Her name was Dark Fire, and sometimes, peering with her into the black whirling cauldron of a sunspot, he saw in her his own primeval excitement with movement. The universe was movement. There was no stillness; if there were stillness there was death, and therefore that which moved was life, and the more wildly it moved the more it lived. Dark Fire lived. Out of a nebula's green heart she would come racing, trailing wasteful streams of excess energy, circling him, adance in her fiery outpourings.

"Devil Star," she would cry. "I've discovered something; you must come. A monster star, rolling across the sky so fast it is a disk, not a globe. And its own weight should split it up! But it doesn't split up. Why?"

"Some concentration of core energy," amusedly, tentatively from Devil Star.

"We'll go there, Devil Star, now. Out on the whirling edge of the universe, out where matter ends and the darkness begins—"

He felt a wonderful sense of companionship with that green-light. He felt a tenderness for her, a longing to be of her and with her, because of her wildness and her talent for doing the unexpected. The pattern of play in this surging universe concerned the helter-skelter rearrangement of galaxies themselves; one became boldly ambitious to put more than a nick into the dusty perimeters of the terrible huge green nebulae. But Dark Fire explored more lusciously novel avenues of play.

"Come, Devil Star, look what I have done!"

He saw the planet she had made, and marveled. A planet whose surface crawled with beings made of solid matter. Tiny motes of things, of many different patterns, powered by thin streams of energy, dependent on gravitation and a compound chemical which flowed. An incredible kind of actual life whose base was silicon—or perhaps carbon, he did not trouble to find out.

"It dies so swiftly," he said.

"But its time scale is different. I shall tend this planet," she dreamed. "The life-forms will improve on themselves. Someday they may come out into space." Excitement was

in her. "And they will never know that she who created them watches their brave venture."

For a long time Devil Star brooded over that planet and its alien life. So strange, he thought, so impossible. In the subswirls of his mind a remembrance shook him.

"Something troubles you, Devil Star?"

"Yes," he said faintly. "You have done something which has never been done. The creation of that planet, and its life-forms. It is . . . against the pattern!"

She sensed the problem. Far from meeting his own mood of questioning, however, her gaze held secret mockery. "Against it? Devil Star, there is nothing against the pattern; and no one who can go against it."

"No!" he cried out in denial. "Dark Fire, you had choice—to create or not to create. You chose to create. You were master of yourself in your choice."

"No. I did that which I *would* do. I had no choice." She rotated along a precessing axis, probing him, mocking him. "Let us explore this thought of yours. I have choice, so you would say, of destroying this life that I have created, or of allowing it to exist. But I have no choice."

"You have choice!"

"No."

Again, mockery. Suddenly she drew back, lashing out with a destroying heat ray that in a cosmic instant seared the planet. Molten waves heaved across its surface. Fuming yellow blazes boiled away the life of its beings. Devil Star looked on in horror, and a clamoring thought arose: *As she would destroy me!*

That shocked moment held. Then, mockingly:

"I made no choice, Devil Star. I could not have acted but as I did. For am I not the child of my mother, of all who went before her? Am I not the product of all the events of space-time that have impinged upon me to make me as I am? Am I not moved and swayed by cosmic tides that began long before I began? And you, Devil Star; you yourself are but a wave-curl in the tide . . . another event . . . pressing in on me, forcing me to make my so-called choice. Choice? There was none. There was an inevitable act."

His aura was fuming with the tremor of his denial.

"Then," he cried bitterly, "we might as well drift. It would all come out the same anyway."

Amusement was in her thoughts. "Do you drift?" she asked.

The complete logic of that reply escaped him.

"I do not drift." Anger made him add, "Nor am I drifted, by you, Dark Fire, or anyone. I would not have destroyed the planet." Then a thought shook him. He looked at her askance. "Dark Fire, until now we have been friends, sharing life together. We can no longer be friends. For a time will come, and soon, when I must make a choice between two events. Do you understand?"

Her visions caught his, puzzled. "I do not understand," she said slowly. "We must always be friends."

A fuzzy-headed comet slashed across the dark heavens between them.

Devil Star said in mirthless mockery, "Friends! Can green and purple-lights ever be friends?"

For a long time she held that thought. Then, as if in reaction against the horror that rose from the instinctive matrix of her, she surged back across the heavens. From that far distance, her amplifying fear and shock drove against him, wave upon wave.

"You speak and do not know whereof you speak, Devil Star! You cannot mean—"

He followed in triumph, but it was a cold and bitter triumph faulted by her betrayal. Dark Fire dwindled away more swiftly than he followed, as though to flee from him must dull her turmoil. But drifting back came her voice, cold and thinned by distance:

"Devil Star, there will be no choice!"

III

The Band of Decision

The friendship of Dark Fire and Devil Star was finished. Often, in the millions of years that were to elapse, they would be members of the same playing group, but a barrier would exist. Devil Star thrilled to the

impenetrable hostility that lay so subtly between them, for he recognized himself to be in deadly combat with life's most inimical force; Dark Fire was but the symbol of that force.

In the midst of his violent, star-disrupting play was immured the cold thought: *I am destined to die, and to die in a certain manner. I shall therefore turn destiny aside; I shall not die!*

When Dark Fire came, he would be ready for her.

When Dark Fire came, however, he was not.

He was in his forty-millionth year, still a youth in his vast time scale, when he began drifting away from his other friends as well. He was huge, his purple light a vast globe of force flickering with deep indigo wells of flame, his outer body strong with tremendous, interacting fields of force. And the games of his youth palled.

For already he felt the hunger in him, and mistook the first deep pangs for the need to acquire knowledge.

His search for knowledge took him not into the macro-but into the microcosms. Surely the larger universe was near the end result while the smaller was near the beginning. Somewhere in that complex welter of whirling subparticles he would be able to find result without cause!

His tools were crude. It was nothing to pluck a star from the heavens with a reaching tractor ray, to split it, explode it. But to shear a molecule from a parent mass, to hold it inviolate from its fellows, was indeed nearly impossible. He raged at the task for a million years, forgetting all the names linked to his life—forgetting the menace of Dark Fire.

Dark Fire, Comet Glow, Moon Flame—these indeed belonged to another universe. On the rim of an outer galaxy, Devil Star conducted his dark probe. For ten thousand years at a time he held himself motionless, shredding cold matter, slicing it, training himself to split his broad arms of leaping energy into threads of power, thinning his vision rays down to that consistency which would give him sight into small worlds.

When success came, as it did, it lasted for one thrilling moment. In a vacuum of its own, untouched by outside forces, that microcosm hung pendant. Devil Star saw it fuzzily, by the reflecting thread of electrons he sent

against it. And was to see it no more. For in the moment of triumph, when his defenses were discarded, came the icy cold certainty that he was being watched.

That captured micro-universe was gone from his delicate grasp as if it had never been. With a violence beyond imagining, he expanded to half again his girth. Lingered along the rims of his senses was the single, quivering pulse of life-energy. From a distance it had come, beamed upon him as if by intent. From a dozen portions of his body his visions leapt out. And he saw Dark Fire.

He was gripped by the splendor of her, as she moved slowly down an aisle of stars toward him . . . her visions already touching his, holding them with hard, bright purpose. Against the darker background of space, her central green light was lustrous, and alive with dancing greener forms under its translucent swirling rim. For a moment, his thoughts convulsed. Wildly he searched for a memory that would take him back to his natal moment; for another memory, when he was not much older, when he hovered behind a shielding star, cunning with his knowledge, strong; and for another!

"Devil Star, there will be no choice!"

The clangor of that voice from the past had no meaning for him, though frantically he tried to examine it. But meanings, reasons, coherent thinking, were lost to him. As Dark Fire drifted nearer, he was enclosed in vast peace. He knew at once that his searching, even his finding, was a patchwork substitute for this great longing that had been built into the very fabric of him.

Now came the voice of Dark Fire, humming, insidious.

"Devil Star, our moment has come, as we knew it would. Devil Star, follow me!"

And now he hangs in the vibrant band of life, drawn there half by her will, half by his. He trembles with the half-memory of death, and yet is bathed by the hypnotic vibrations flooding from the central light of her, so that he knows peace and understands the answers to all questions.

She is dwindling. He knows what he must do.

As she would destroy me!

The thought rages, but he prepares.

Then hiatus: the gulf of timelessness between two

instants of time. He is there, by a mechanism he does not understand. There has been a click deep in the lower caverns of his thought swirls—as if he has transported himself to another band of hyperspace.

But is this another hyperspace? It cannot be. In that ladder of universes, and he has climbed it from lower to topmost rung, there is nothing similar.

He views this strange space with childish wonder, knowing that he is here, and yet is without a body, without a purple central light. He knows, too, that actually he must be in the forty-eighth band of hyperspace, about to die, and at peace.

He is there—and here. Fantasy or reality? It does not matter. It comes to him, in wonder gentle as light scattering, that here is an importance he might never comprehend.

A queer, geometric, somehow logical universe. Yes, the idea of logic presses insistently in. And yet what he views does not seem outwardly logical. For these clean-cut star systems, though surely vast distances stretch between them, seem equally large to his sight. They lie, he reasons, on a four-dimensional skin, stretched out and pasted upon it. There is distance . . . but no perspective.

Between those star systems are no dust motes, no hurrying comets, no uncollected suns, no irregularity. There is dark vacuum, pure, logical vacuum.

But suns, sometimes whole groups of suns, whirl sparkling across that vacuous space from one spinning galaxy to another. That galaxy, in turn, urges another unit from its turning heart or its majestically rounded rim. The quiet orderly exchange-exchange is magnificent to watch. The new suns, or solar systems, quietly fall into new orbits that seem prepared for them. There is a shiver and dance of movement as the other members of the receiving system move obligingly about to make room.

He moves quietly through this charmed universe—the bodiless entity of him—wondering about it, speculating. How quiet, how at peace, how right. And then, as he hangs motionless again in dark vacuum, he sees a single, glowing sun detach itself from the rounding rim of the nearest galaxy. It speeds toward him—and is closer. Yet

he will not move. The distance lessens. It is upon him and passing through him.

For a burning moment he is locked in its fiery heart, and all of being blazes with hurt.

Surging against his pain, he fights his way out, and speeds away rotating and looking back, bewildered. The speeding sun has faltered in its flight and is hanging motionless. The entire universe quivers and blurs, as if in response to some discord. Then the sun reverses direction, reluctantly falling back into its parent star system.

And the system explodes!

Frozen with stark horror, Devil Star sees that sudden, senseless explosion. He watches a hundred suns shoot like streaming bullets in a dozen directions. Those suns plow through nearby galaxies. They drive relentlessly to new positions in other galactic accretions. The universe surges and bubbles and seethes with irregularity. There are more explosions and more frantic exchanges. The heavens are alight with flaming tongues of corrupted matter. There is an urgent hustle and bustle.

Then the exchanged suns begin to find their niches without commotion. The number of explosions lessens. The firmament ceases its horrifying agitation. Order is restored. The orderly suns, sometimes with attendant planets, march quietly across the dark sky.

Now the configuration of this strange sky is different.

Numbly, Devil Star hardly dares to move. Then a clamor rises in him. There is something he must do. He is repelled by his need, and does not know why he is repelled. From that strange, dimensionless distance he sees a sun moving toward him. He rushes to meet it. Again that prolonged, fiery moment of agony.

And that universe, that industrious universe with its lawless logic, that universe is gone.

Devil Star is back in the forty-eighth band, watching Dark Fire.

The moment of watching was drawn out.

"Devil Star!" The cry blasted across space, imperative; but in the substrata of that cry was unspeakable horror.

Faintly Devil Star answered: "No."

The brightening green flames of Dark Fire's central light wavered, dimmed, brightened again. He felt the

wave upon wave of hypnotic compulsion washing over him. But he only felt an answering deadness in the depths of his thought swirls.

She came across the spaces, looming, rushing, trailing chaotic streams of energy along her weaving path. She was upon him before he understood what was happening. Her speechless rage and hate preceded her. Astounded, he felt a searing burst of pain deep, in the energy fields of his complex body, and saw that a flaming red beam of force had leaped from her. Vainly he tried to beat it off with screening forces. The beam seared through. She was pouring the energy of her vast body into that beam, intent on eating through to the heart of him.

"You must die, Devil Star!" The mindless cacophony screamed, ripping, filling the universe with its throbbing hate.

"You must die! You are in the band of life! And you must die!"

Numbed beyond thought, he only spurred back, intent on outdistancing her. She, a demon bent on destroying him, followed. Desperately he clicked himself from the band of life and into the forty-seventh band. And she burst into that space after him—and into the next and the next.

As he fled, working only on instinct and the dazed horror that fed him, a chilling, mountainous certainty rose. The laws of life as he knew them had been violated. No matter that he had triumphed, in some obscure, staggering way that he could not yet comprehend. To Dark Fire it made no difference. Her wisdom, her destroying hate, as with all green-lights, must have its source in blind instinct. There had been outrage. He must die!

A cruel incisiveness claimed him as he frantically dropped down the terraced spaces of the universe. Here and there as he fled, he plucked small suns from the heavens, swept scattered debris into his body, and converted it all to primal energy. When she burst through after him into the eleventh band, he was ready for her. All the quivering excess energy his swollen body held

was channeled into a concentrated bolt of destruction that smote her point-blank.

Shaken even beyond horror, he saw those clouds of fuming light that exploded from the core of her.

She hung without motion, lax, her visions down, a sickly pale radiance creeping in shadowy waves through her. Across her central green light fitful waves of yellow surged. And then the force fields that made her body a coherent unit lost their function. Involuntary expansion started.

"I am dying!" The hideous accusation blasted stridently out.

"As you would have had me die!"

"No, no! Devil Star! You have done a terrible thing! You . . . do not know . . . how terrible . . . for you."

"I had choice!" he cried bitterly.

Silence. Then, from a distance, muttering:

"Choice. No. There could have been no . . . choice. It began . . . how long ago? Before you were born, Devil Star. Before . . . back to the . . . beginning. No motion but was caused by motion. No cause without result, or result . . . without cause. Thought from thought, thought from . . . motion. How else . . . could it be?"

"Devil Star!" That muttering, distant voice held blind despair. "Your only immortality . . . truly, your only happiness . . . lay in that child . . . you and I would have created."

Her voice muttered away into nothing. In repelled fascination, Devil Star watched expansive grayness sweep across and engulf her. Deathly puffs of blackening light filled the heavens as the friend of his youth died. Then he left that band, the eleventh band where insanity lived.

In the first band of true space, he thrust out with his para-propellants and hurled himself into light speed. Then he went still faster, fled through a galaxy and burst from its outer rim. He traversed the black gulf that separated it from its neighbor. The universe careened, the splendor about him went unnoticed.

For a million years Devil Star sought his opiate in blind motion. Finally, deep into the bottomless darkness that cupped this lenticular universe, he stopped. His

horror was not dulled. The memory was not sheared off. He could not outrun himself. He was cursed.

Devil Star was cursed; but he was alive, unlike Dark Fire whose deathly urge had been turned back upon her. The thought trudged in with dead reluctance; it had no wings to make him soar. For, in spite of all, Dark Fire, the beloved friend of his youth, truly was dead. No matter that all of nature had conspired against him, a purple-light; no matter that Dark Fire, from some blind instinct, had sought with all her being to fulfill a supposedly incorruptible law of the universe. She was dead, and he had killed her.

He hung quivering and lost in the lightless emptiness. His triumph, for the moment, was without savor.

I should not have fought, he thought numbly. It was not meant that I should fight. Better to play, not to think.

Not meant? His thoughts took their whirling plunge into that maelstrom which flung him in endless circles of illogic. He had fought destiny, and won; but had there been some chain of causes and results, some implacable series of microcosmic events, that made his triumph only an inevitable act, part of the pattern after all?

Then he had not escaped.

He shrank into himself, pulling his visions in about him so that even the mother universe and its searching brilliance seemed not to exist. Now he was as alone as mortality could be. He was feeding on his own inner resources, a circuitous being independent of the flux and strain of conflicting energies. He was master of himself; for this naked, two-dimensional instant of time he was the master!

But no: his convictions could not hold up, for there was the past, whipping his every thought and action into submission with infinitely reaching arms of cause and result. He had not escaped; and with this realization a new fury entered the life of Devil Star. It came like the roar of a monster full-born in the subswirls of his mind: a monster clawing and rearing, fighting for emergence into the searching light of his awareness. He was shaken to the depths by the beast housed below his consciousness—that depthless, unuttered longing to which he could

not give a name. Frantically, his thoughts moved back along the years of his life, searching for some explanation of a ruinous emotion. Entombed in his self-imposed darkness, removed from the entropic swing and surge of the universe, he felt that longing engulf him.

"It is something I want," he gasped. "Some thing I must have, must!"

Then, slipping unbidden from another corner of his mind, as if in cue to his desperation, came a sense of solution. The new thought held him rigid.

"I was in another universe," he whispered. "In that moment before *she* would have had me fling out my central purple core and die, I was transported to another band of space, a band I never saw before. And when I returned to the band of life, my will to mate with her, and to die, was gone."

He hung laxly, surfeited with his emotions. It was that he longed for, that other hidden band; it could be nothing else. For if it were not that . . . he thrust the clangorous thought away, for it was as pain-filled as that red beam a maddened Dark Fire had sent against him.

Now he pushed aside the darkness enclosing him, as if it were a cocoon, and he a new life. And he beheld the resplendent lens of the universe a hundred light-years away.

And as he beheld it, the prime conviction of his life returned to become a drumming force inside him. Surely that universe and its myriad avenues was not mirrored into being by the counterplay of energies at the beginning of time. Destiny could be turned aside. Had he not so turned it? And the answer to its turning lay in that hidden band of space.

Somehow he would find that band; he would put his life into it—and find the answer to all of being!

World Rim

The universe knew Devil Star again. He drifted back into it at medium speed, captivated with the wonder of his upward-spiraling thoughts. Dimly, he knew that the cleaving memory of Dark Fire's destruction was turning fuzzy. He wanted it so. Neither ecstasy nor hurt could endure in full measure much longer than the present moment. For, it seemed, the mind was a turbulent structure, as frantic in its upheavals and overthrows as the interior fury of a white dwarf star. Somewhere in his thought swirls, caged for this moment, were the sharpest agonies of his life. In their place had risen hope, and it was a thrilling hope indeed, the hope that the hidden band held out for him.

He would find that hidden band, though he had to roam the universe a hundred times over.

He knew it existed, and existed approximately as he visualized it with his strange, bodiless sight. He could see the glory of it now, those geometric galaxies, and their calculated exchange and counterexchange of glowing suns. The gigantic thought of its being made him tremble, for here was mystery indeed. Yet as long as there was mystery, life could thrill to the full fury of existence.

He stepped up his velocity, thrusting out his visions in growing rapture as he hurled through the light-spattered outermost fringes of the dazzling universe. Here was splendor, conflict, movement! And he was part of it again.

Then, the worse for its suddenness, a chill spread through him.

For, from afar, flickering in crazy paths across the heaving black patchwork of a dark nebular cloud, he saw a group of energy creatures. He started back and away, filled only with the need to escape their sight. But they saw him. Instantly, their para-propellants flashed, and they came thundering toward him, the babble of their excited thoughts rushing in.

"Devil Star! Where have you been?"

"It's been a million—"

"No, ten million—"

“—years!”

They ringed him, circling, and in stark horror at this intrusion of his carefully erected sanity he wanted only to fling himself into some other band. He could not look at them without thinking of Dark Fire.

He resisted the impulse to flee, knowing they would follow. Now he was caught again in the full current of the life-force. In this careening group were many that he knew, many that he did not. And there were the missing names!

“I have been—” he choked, and stopped. Terror, first for himself, and then for them, engulfed him. He would tell them where he had been and what he had seen. They would be forewarned. He would tell them, green-light and purple, of the self-destruction they imposed on themselves.

And then, as he hung in strangled half-speech, awareness of the truth pierced him. These energy creatures were no more concerned with the answers to their questions than if they had never been uttered. Had they inquired of Dark Fire? Had they ever questioned an appearance into their midst or a disappearance from it?

They crowded, jostling. If Devil Star had spoken they could not have heard him in their excitement. “Come, Devil Star—” A nudging pressor beam caught him unaware, jarring him sideways half a planet’s orbit. A half-dozen flung out, dancing him, whirling him ahead of them in their thoughtless joy. ‘We’ve found a new game—”

He let himself be impelled, numbed, in the direction they chose. He thrust out his own propellants, half-heartedly keeping up with them, his thoughts a tempest. After a while he would leave them; he would disappear to some more quiet corner of the cosmos. But now, for some reason, he must stay. . . .

“Yes, Devil Star, *where have you been?*”

Unerringly he faced about in his flight, picking out the green-light who uttered the question. She rode the bright heavens alongside him, keeping pace, her visions intent on him rather than on her hilariously cavorting playmates. And he knew instantly that though she played along with

them, she had reached that point in her life where she was not really of them.

As he was not of them.

She repeated the question, naively unaware of its importance as she stared in bland curiosity. He returned her gaze blankly, wondering at that tremendous secret she instinctively hid from purple-lights.

He whispered, "Green-light, you do not know where I have been?"

She laughed. "Should I know?"

"No. No! You could not know . . . and could not believe. I have been—"

And he stopped, faint with his knowledge of what she was and what she must be thinking. He must be cunning, strong, and treacherous, too. He had bared his thoughts to Comet Glow and to Dark Fire. This green-light would not know him. He quivered with the effort of self-denial, and laughed, too, in the strange way that was possible for him.

"I have been," he chided, "ten billion light-years away. I discovered ten million comets and tied their beards together."

She studied him, piqued. "You must have been to a very interesting place," she decided. Tentatively: "Shall we go there together, Devil Star? I am tired of these silly creatures I am forced to be with."

Said Devil Star, "We shall go together! Now or later?"
"Now!"

Devil Star frowned. "We'd better not," he said cautiously. "They'd see us and follow. We'll sneak off later, shall we?"

She was reluctant at this proposal, but she agreed. "All right. But don't forget—later." She watched him suspiciously, not knowing whether to believe him. Then she and Devil Star were caught up in the flickering motion of the crowd that surrounded them, and they were in the midst of the new game.

With part of his mind, with the light-hearted, deceitful part whose use he had discovered, he played. He was more avid than they, with ironic humor dumping lavish scoops of stellar matter onto a red star, and then taking his turn with pressor beam to hold the frantic matter in

place. Even when the star grew to a size beyond endurance, it was Devil Star who insisted it could be made more massive, to increase the fury of its explosion. Following his directions, the greater part of the group shot the full force of their pressor beams onto the straining surface of that outraged colossus. The remaining half-dozen went to work denuding a small galaxy nearby and lowering its components into the star. Then the pressor beams instantly were withdrawn.

The star exploded in one racking puff of atomic dissolution. The excited crowd of energy creatures hung inert in space as the fury of the explosion engulfed them. Their identities were lost in that mad glare of force. They became one with the ravening skies. They were shot tumbling and whirling, their thoughts burned away in wave upon wave of exploding surf. They were expunged, but mobile and alive, will-less and relaxed in the deliciousness of uncontrolled motion.

Devil Star was caught up too. He let himself tumble, blown on the white wind of destruction. With this difference: he kept on going.

And somewhere behind him, reproachful, was the green-light—World Rim was her name.

He would see her again.

He had no room for emotion now. There was purpose only. He thundered through the empty spaces, veering away from galaxies that vibrated with the noxious beat of the life-force. And found a galaxy where peace was.

Now he must think.

He, Devil Star, had cheated death. Truly, that had been the prime search of his life. Having cheated it, he had uncovered the way to knowledge unending. His was the right to probe beneath the devious faces of the turning universe. He would discover the hidden band.

Something had happened in that band which enabled him to triumph over life's first law. Had it given him choice? He was convinced that it had.

In the tens of thousands, in the millions of years that now passed, Devil Star came to think of that band as the band of decision. He had been in that band. He had in-

interrupted its faultless rightness, and thereby interrupted destiny. And it was somewhere.

The bands of space, frightening though they were to him and to all energy creatures, nonetheless knew him. He entered them one by one, forcing himself through their complexities, studying them with a coldly disciplined leisure. He had time . . . he had fought death and won . . . he was immortal, the rebel from causation.

His purpose held unblemished. With the cold analytical tool of his mind, he probed for the reasons behind these strange layers of space. Gazing on the obscene ugliness of the third band, he wondered at what lay behind the dark skin of nothingness that clove it. He tried to break through and failed; he knew he could never enter. With equal certainty, he knew the answer did not lie there. For . . . he could not enter.

The fourth band and its snakes of living light. The fifth, where the cosmos shook and seemed to scream and where no order prevailed. On up. The eighth, where all of space was geared to such a time scale that the blazing components of the universe were serpentes of solid matter. He speeded his own time rate, thinking to catch up with some moment that this universe called the present. In the fastest time scale he could create, he saw no change.

The ninth band, inhabited by the brittle cinders of suns, gaunt prognosticators of the universe's ultimate decadence. He probed beneath those suns. They were not burnt-out matter, they were matter held in some timeless moment of atomic convulsion, as if the fury of light and heat had been sheared away. What reason? Was there here a result without cause?

But he knew in the innermost heart of him that there was reason. The universe was warped and curled, fighting its own irresistible stresses and strains, stretching itself out of shape and out of logic, then discarding its own topological impossibilities into hidden pockets of space. A straight line was no less straight if warped by a gravitational field, for who or what in that field could determine any other straightness?

He ascended the bands, moving with a leisure he did not think of as being unnatural. His purpose held white

and pure. He had no thought for others of his kind, for the lost names of his youth. Unendingly, the secrets of space channeled into his mind. He was bursting with the wonder of it.

You are young, Devil Star.

I am young, came the unbidden thought, and still able
—No!

He curbed that astounding flurry of inner wildness, and then rearranged the thought. He was young, yes—and deathless. Eternity was his, to seek knowledge in. He was annointed with a great destiny. Destiny? *No, Devil Star, you shall arrange your destiny.*

—young.

The fifteenth, the twentieth, the thirtieth bands. He searched them all, unhurrying, dawdling, experiencing no sense of failure. He was content.

You are young, Devil Star! You are still young!

The crazed subthought was screaming at him.

He hardly heard it.

He did not hurry.

He came to the thirty-fifth band, where unattached colors of violent hue did their spastic dances through matterless space.

—youth. There is still time, not for this, but for that other!

The forty-first. The forty-sixth. He made his leisurely transit into the forty-seventh. And there was chaos. A jumble, a mumble of agony that split from the innermost core of him; thoughts that burned him like whitest heat, and turned him into something he could not recognize. Devil Star was chaos.

Recognition again. Wave upon wave of horror rolled over him. Flares of condensing energy rained from his outer to his inner body. For he knew what he had tried to do—tried, again and again, and, time after time, had failed to do: to enter the forty-eighth band.

In his chaos, he had hurled himself at that unseen wall, and time after time it had hurled him back.

Thought returned slowly. He was numbed with the attack of the monster inside him. Fleeting, knowledge came. But it was gone before he could snatch it. Then he blundered like a blinded creature down the bands.

He knew what he must do, what he could not deny. Slowly, he left that galaxy, plunged across the winding arteries where dark flowed, was in the galaxy of his birth. And at last, alone in space, he faced her.

"It is you," she said wonderingly. "Devil Star."

His returning thoughts were heavy with fatigue. "It is I, World Rim. And I have come back—to keep my promise."

"Your promise . . . yes. To take me to the place you found."

She was searching him, whirling nearer in her green-cored glory, intent with her visions. And he saw with shock that she was changed. Larger, matured—but changed also in some inscrutable way that he would not put into words.

"We will go now," he said heavily.

Still she searched him, and the interminable years passed while she searched. Uneasily she rotated against her starred background.

"There is something wrong," she said.

"There is nothing wrong!" The denial burst out.

She brooded. "Very well," she said with chilling reluctance. "We shall go together to this place. Where is it?"

World Rim was older than in that brief moment he had known her so long ago. At last he admitted to himself that she must have had children. Yet, there was about her a naiveté that made him impatient.

"I shall follow *you*," he said.

A subtle change came over her. She stared. He saw the dancing green masses in her flawless body. And her thought came. "Very well, Devil Star! Follow me!"

In growing delight he followed her up the bands, as obedient to his ruinous emotions as any unsuspecting purple-light who had followed that path before him. He was like a creature apart, however, who views himself—for encased deeply in his thought swirls, deeper still and stronger than the clamorous outside longing, was another purpose, unemotional and anarchistic.

The spaces of the universe dropped behind. He burst through into the tenth band. World Rim was there, inert in space, watching, not him, but a small faceted black

star. Suddenly he was chilled by the immensity of her abstraction.

"Green-light!" he whispered.

At first she seemed not to hear him. Then she touched him briefly with a vision ray.

"Devil Star," she murmured. "No, it's no use. There is something wrong. Go away."

The utter calamity of that order held him rigid.

"There is nothing wrong," he insisted. "I am here. We are obedient to the laws of life. I shall go with you."

Her ray of vision wavered away, as if there were some difficulty in keeping her attention upon him.

"No, there is something wrong," she repeated stubbornly. "Why should I take you anywhere?" Then, craftily: "Where is there to take you?"

He burst into the full flood of her withdrawn visions. He was trembling, trying to reject what he heard, and not succeeding. Welling from his depths came knowledge of the ultimate horror he was facing. Here—now—he must defeat the horror, or he was lost to it and would live with it forever.

"I shall go with you," he whispered in bitter frenzy. "You will take me with you—to the forty-eighth band!"

As soon as the words were out, he knew he should not have uttered them. First stillness claimed her. Then came her faint thought.

"It is," she said wonderingly, "the place you had been when we spoke so many years ago. But no. It is impossible, Devil Star. Perhaps you are deceiving me again."

Though her rim was heaving and fluttering, and though she seemed to be drifting away, he surged in upon her, reckless, uncaring. "Deceived you! It is you who deceived me, deceived me and all purple-lights. But I was not deceived, green-light!"

And it flooded out of him, half in bitter scorn, half in pride, the whole story of his anarchistic fight against the universe: the story of his victory over destiny, and of his victory over death.

"I fought you, World Rim," he lashed out. "You and all other green-lights—and I fought the universe itself. Stay it though he would, the caverns of his resolve were engulfing him. In fright, he strove to heave himself out

of dark chaos. But he spoke on, alternately frightened and astounded at what he was saying.

And from World Rim silence.

"Speak!" he said wildly. "You will help me. There is a need in me, a longing. I do not know what it is!"

World Rim seemed to shrink, until she was small, her central light wavering, dimming and flaming.

"Then I know," she whispered. "Devil Star, you wish to die."

"No!"

"And you wish to create."

He stared, shaken with the thought.

"To create," he whispered.

"But—" She faltered. Then her voice gained strength; she was firm with conviction. "I see it all, Devil Star. You wish to die, and in dying to create. All energy creatures, even green-lights after their fourth giving of birth, must die, or they will be very unhappy. It is very clear.

"But also you wish to find that impossible so-called band of decision you talk about."

His mind was whirled, drugged, tortured while she spoke. And yet, as if the barless cage in his thought swirls had opened, he knew that from her deeply buried instincts the true answer to his longing had come. To create, yes. That she had also mentioned death and the search for a chimera called the band of decision he for the moment glazed over.

"Then I must create," he said hollowly. "And I can create only in the forty-eighth band. World Rim, you must take me there."

"No." The word shattered against him. "No, Devil Star," she said sadly. "For when we got there, you would find—or think you would find—this band of decision. And then it would be same as with . . . Dark Fire."

There was a humming in his mind swirls, a growing noisy reverberation that was the beginning of madness. Again he hurled himself after the drifting form of her, until she loomed and occluded all the universe save herself. From him rained the fiery excrescences of his terrible fear. "We must go," he cried, "and we will go, World Rim, you and I, to the forty-eighth band."

From the core of her the red beams of her anger were

beginning to form. Along her rim, flame sparkled. "No," she said stubbornly. "I do not want to go, and there is nothing to be done about it. Somehow you must have changed, Devil Star."

She laughed suddenly, peering at him.

"It is very funny! You wish to die, and in dying to create. But now you will be unable to do either. Nor can you reach the band of decision, for it presumably lies within the forty-eighth band. Yes, you've changed—changed!"

Paralyzed, he hung in the burned space of the tenth band, the splendorous black suns seeming to fling her words back in brassy echoes.

She drifted faster away, her thoughts roaring in, tripled in volume by his own noisy madness, and strident with their connotations. "Only green-lights remember the moment of their birth, Devil Star! Else how could they know their way back to the forty-eighth band when the time came?" Came her dwindling laughter, across the rushing spaces, into the maddened thought swirls of Devil Star. Horror piled on horror. He could endure no more.

These are the memories of Devil Star, O Golden Lights. And in them is the memory of the half-hundred green-lights who followed after, and the memory of the other things, of the drumbeat of longing, of the search through matter's fabric, and of the hundred million years that passed.

V

The Golden-Lights

They would see him from afar, streaming across the star fields, not pausing, hurrying only, hurrying to some place that had no location. And they would see him again, spinning along the axle of some galactic wheel. And still again, rigid in abstraction, grasping at space and its dust in a timeless query none of them would ever understand. He was there when they were born and there when they died. And his name was never known.

The universe writhed. The parts of it assumed new configurations. Matter changed in its inevitable way, dropping toward that bottom level where time must end. Devil Star lived on.

The mother green-light, dropping down the bands of space from the seventeenth band where her youngest lay in mindless contentment, paused in the sixth band of hyperspace. For, scarcely a light-year away, the giant body of the legendary creature hung sleeping.

Full of tenderness for her child and for all life, she looked upon that aged purple-light with the awe of reverence. Out of what unexplained past had he come? Who was he? She drifted nearer, for a long time searching him with her visions. And he stirred, awoke and saw her. Restlessly, he turned away.

"Green-light, leave me." His thoughts came from what seemed an infinite distance of weariness.

She scarcely dared to think; but she would not leave. Presently she spoke, whispering:

"We have seen you from afar, often. And you have never spoken. And you must be lonely."

"Lonely!" The word came back at her in a racking burst. "I am not lonely. I do not wish to be disturbed. Now go."

She moved away, reluctantly, but she was filled with compassion. "Yes, I shall go. But I know you are sad—and indeed you are lonely. I shall come again. And the others will know of you, and will revere you, and perhaps those who seek knowledge will come to you. We shall not try to guess at the secret of your life. And you will have a name."

Tenderly, remembering the naming of her youngest, she renamed her oldest.

"To us, you will be known as Oldster."

"You must have learned many things," the young purple-light said timidly. He was called Burning Planet.

Oldster muttered, "There are some who are different, such as you, Burning Planet. But what is it to be different? As you, I have searched and found nothing—nothing! And I am sad. I wish only for extinction. And it will not come."

"To be extinguished is—" Burning Planet was anxious to comprehend.

"Yes." Bitter amusement was in Oldster's thoughts. "To be no more. To burn no more. I thought to master destiny; but destiny masters me, as you. I cannot exclude the universe which continues to give me life."

"But there is joy in learning! Is that not reason to live?"

"Joy!" The word was uttered in such a frenzy of grief that the young purple-light timorously drew back in readiness for flight. Oldster's immense body, seventy million miles across, quivered with lakes of blinding energy. "Can there be joy when I long for something that can never be? Oh, my son, leave, leave me in my sadness!"

Burning Planet was overwhelmed, and could not make himself leave.

Presently, as if from an infinitely deep space, came the suffering thoughts of Oldster.

"There is space, and there are stars, and of the things to know about them I have little to seek out. I have traveled the star lanes for eons, filled with my longing, and the search for knowledge has been only the disguised search for my life's completion.

"Yet I have learned; but what I have failed to learn, my son, is the spark that keeps my hope and my life alive."

"There is a great secret that eludes you?" Burning Planet spoke breathlessly.

The old being of the universe sighed as he absently studied a nearby group of meteoroids parading in silent cold line across the bright sky.

"Do we have choice," he whispered. "Did I have choice. For there was the band of decision—but you would not understand that, my son. Oh, the years have passed, and there is no answer. Space-time began; it fumed into being at some point unthinkably remote. Where? How? Why? We conceive no beginning, for beginning is time itself; and yet, from nothingness sprang matter. Result without cause. I have searched—searched downward into miniscule universes, striving to find that beginning which came into being without a first motion.

"I have trapped matter's smallest part, stripped space of all influences around it. And having trapped it, no

longer sensed it. For observation is influence.

"In that vacuous cage, did that particle move in paths of its own choosing? If it did, without cause—"

Oldster's thoughts broke off. Then, drudging, they came again: "But no. The universe decays, and draws life into decadence with it. There is no hope!"

Silence endured. Timorously Burning Planet spoke, but there was no response. Reluctantly he withdrew from the aged creature's presence, for there was more he would have known. He returned to space's first level, pondering.

I shall seek knowledge, he decided. I shall not be like the others, mastered by their own whims . . . by destiny? But I do not understand. I am not mastered. . . . And from afar he felt it, the wax and wane of the life impulse. From the spiraling arms of a nebula, out of its green heart as if she had been hiding therein, a green-light drifted toward him. But Burning Planet's time had not come. He continued on his way.

There was Darkness.

And the daughter of Darkness, Sun Destroyer.

And her son, Vanguard, to be known for a long time as Yellow Light.

And there were the millions, the tens and hundreds of millions of years that passed.

With drudging energy, Oldster heaved his vast body into a ragged motion that took him for the last time across the light-streaming rivers of the sky, into the first deeps of the darkness that Darkness had crossed. There, beyond sight of that meager pinpoint arrangement of matter that was this universe, he drew his visions in about him, and drew in his thoughts as well, striving to cancel them out.

Millennia would pass, though, and still he would be trying to blot out the memories of his life. Still he would fight his agonizing need. His was failure, for he had not created.

As for the band of decision—with his fading consciousness he searched back through time. He had imagined it. It had never existed!

He would sleep now. He would decay downward to

that moment when the centripetal urge for life would grow too feeble. The last hounds of his defense would wander off. For now he could not be disturbed.

"Awake, Oldster."

The serene yet lordly voice echoed through and through that immeasurably deep cavern of thoughtlessness where Oldster resided.

"Awake, and awake to the high moment of your long life."

The field upon field of overlapping energies that was Oldster quivered with the beginning beat of the old torture. Forces that had all but nullified themselves trembled out of balance. The vast body heaved and turned and its portions writhed. Then it held rigid.

Awareness had come to Oldster: awareness, strong and lashing. He beheld the fact of his return to life with an icy horror he had never expected to endure again. His thoughts lashed about like those of a being in a trap of pain. For one moment of illusory freedom he felt his pain depart, as he plunged back along time's trail to the gone days of his youth.

"Awake."

The sweet years of youth, when he had no thought but for play. Let them come again! But no. He felt memory swept away, and he was returned to his future. And from outside the packet of canceling forces that was himself had come a . . . voice.

"No!" The word shouted within him. It filled the closed universe that he had fashioned for his awaited death. And he knew the muted denial was bursting in violence to him who so cruelly shattered his dream of night. "No, whoever you are, whatever, leave me! Leave me alone, not to think, not to live. Ah, you have made me live again, as Sun Destroyer and Vanguard, when I would have none of them."

His thoughts spiraled away, thrown out in convulsive denial. The awful agonies of returning sensation spread crazily to the limits of his being. A vision trembled involuntarily. . . .

"And it is of Vanguard that we would speak." The thought vibrated in serene, lordly compassion against his

thought swirls. "Now, you who were born as Devil Star, look upon us!"

Wave upon wave of horror engulfed Oldster as that command drove in. He would not! He was master of himself, of his environs. The rebel thought endured, however, only long enough to be swept away by the shattering failures of his life. His central resolve dissipated. Not to fight, not to reach—ah, there would have lain happiness!

Thinly at first his visions moved from him; then they fumed out in thick beams designed to bring full revelation of that energy creature whose unafraid thoughts pried into his.

And as he saw he lay silent in that emptiness, quiet in his congealed wonder.

Momentarily, his thoughts dwelt in that long-gone moment when Dark Fire moved in splendor toward him, with her destiny of creation and death. For here was splendor beyond imagination, with the promise of something wondrous, and something tormenting; but here also was destiny, in these ranks upon endless ranks of beings, hanging in somber immobility against that lightless sky.

He saw those thousands upon thousands of golden-lighted energy beings gazing down upon him in serene sublimity. Their formless thoughts flowed around and through him, without discord, with peace.

"Golden-lights," he whispered, and as he spoke the words he was moved beyond thought.

How long?

How long!

And from that concourse came answer, from one of them, from all of them—he would never know.

"For longer than you can dream, Oldster. For longer than the life of a star. You have slept, slept ages beyond calculation. Yet here, in this pulseless emptiness, we have found you. And the time has come."

"The time," whispered Oldster.

"The time of glory."

There was a rustling of thoughts flowing, thoughts unfettered by fear, nor chained to hope. And the golden central cores shone in beauty.

"The time of glory that comes to you, Oldster. For you

are the last of your people. And we are of Vanguard, and those who came after Vanguard."

Now that unlocated voice swelled, filling the darkness with its lordly sweetness.

"For see, Oldster! We are all that you dreamed of—and more. We stem from Vanguard! And Vanguard gave life more than he dreamed. Clearly and purely we see the answers to those ultimate questions Darkness himself asked. Sun Destroyer herself, in her ancient past, never dreamed that her vain quest would be reached in us—through her!"

The giant words drummed against Oldster; he strove to break through to their meanings, but shadows obtruded themselves. Fear came unbidden and uncontrolled. He quivered, searching amongst those serenely watching beings with their crystal-sparkling, golden-drenched bodies for some sign that would make meaning burst upon him. For a while, he reveled in the belief that soon he would understand. He waited, letting his visions rove from one to another of those untroubled golden ones. The answers did not come. In depraved ugliness came doubt, shouting at him.

"No," he cried bitterly. "You speak of impossible things. There are no answers. You are mockeries. What is it to me who you are? I, Oldster, want none of you—I do not want hope! Now leave me, leave me alone in my sadness."

He lashed out at them, feeling his old agonies, and knowing that they, in their serene perfection, could not understand that they had but doubled and redoubled his tortures. For they and their kind must die and vanish in the stampeding downgrade forces which led to universal quiet. They too were but atoms trampling over each other in that mad rush toward the bottom level of inertness. Even perfection must die, ruled by destiny.

He started to withdraw his visions, when they, far from retreating, whirled nearer, their bright golden centers glowing in upon him until he was trapped in a blaze of fire. The inbred contentment of their thoughts pulsed through him. He fought against that dominance. He quivered with the dread that in spite of himself they would fill him full of that anesthetic hope he had no use for.

Then, thundering through his thought swirls, came that

lordly measured voice, sublime in the surety of its owner's purpose:

"Oldster! You have not failed!"

"Not failed!"

Convulsively Oldster flung back the words, like a missile to be hurled.

"Not failed? You are mockeries, you golden-lights, and now you must go, and go forever, and leave me alone in this lightless emptiness. Not failed!" The words seemed to echo in their frenzied dreariness. He felt the outermost limits of his being expanding, and quivering with miniscule outflarings of yellow energy, as if he could drive them away by the pressure of his physical being. Failing that, he would drive them away with the whip of his contempt.

"I, Oldster, who used to be Devil Star, have failed in ways your blind minds would never perceive."

His thoughts drummed, violent in their unthrottled hate. They did not retreat, but continued to surround him and smother him with that sense of peace which he must battle if he were to keep his sanity.

"You do not understand failure, you golden-lights, you who stemmed from Vanguard. Could you ever feel the tortures of Vanguard himself, or of those who went before him—of Sun Destroyer, of Darkness? Ah, I can see it. You have reached a perfection beyond such burrowings! And I shall not let you give me peace.

"For I have failed, and I will continue to be tortured with my failures. You would not understand."

"We understand."

That voice, in its merciless love of him, drove in.

"We understand, and we say you have not failed. For see! You have created, and has not that driving urge to create been the great pain of your life?"

His thoughts swept out in blind denial. "Leave me, golden-lights, leave me! I have not created."

"You created us."

Deep in the fabric of him he was at last torn. In those insidious words was a horror he dared not recognize. "No," came his agonized muttering. "You are giving me hope. And I have lived too long with torture to endure hope.

"Leave me."

"We shall not leave, Oldster, until your great life has reached its completion." The sublime voice vibrated sweetly on the emptiness. "You created us—as surely as if you had sired Darkness himself. For did you not guide Darkness to *his* life's completion? Was it not the thought of you that brought Sun Destroyer back along Darkness's path? And was it not you who guided Vanguard, you who, in your greatness, saw us in him? Yes, Oldster, you are our creator—you are the creator of life!

"And it is life that will endure, and has ultimate meaning."

Oldster hung laxly in that sphere of golden blaze, his exhausted mind devoid of will for battle.

"Then I have created," he whispered. Peace flowed, scouring at the bitter longings of his life. Deep within was a warning voice, but now he would not heed it. Not to fight, not to rebel—ah, how sweet to accept it!

He was theirs. Let it be so. Let them lead him to his life's completion. They in their all-knowingness could not be questioned. He had created. The thought held white and pure before him. Let the thought be so.

"Life that shall endure," he muttered.

"Oldster!" The sublime voice rang. "Life does endure! For is not life the rebel from dead matter? Matter is death, for it grows old, powdering and graying toward its entropic destiny. But life is the rebel. Life builds and grows and evolves toward its high destiny which we know, but which you cannot know. But this you shall know. Life masters itself. Life is outside destiny—and has choice!"

Laxly he hung, accepting those dazzling meanings. Now it was over. He would not fight. And then, from somewhere, from a thousand directions, he felt their thoughts grasping at his thought swirls, filling him with that drugged peace he knew with Dark Fire, that companion of his lost years, when he faced her in the band of life.

"Oldster." Inward hummed that lordly, loving voice. "Now you will know you have not failed. For are you not life, and the greatest rebel of all life?"

"And life has within it the dark rebel!"

VI

A Time of Glory

After this, there shall be no more years; no more of memory or wonder or battle. There will be no more of Darkness, of Sun Destroyer, of Vanguard who was called Yellow Light, or of golden-lights. And this will be as Oldster wills it.

For now within him, in this moment before the universe must cease to exist, comes knowledge. The moment is the same as when he hung pendant in the forty-eighth band about to release his central globe, obedient to the relentless urge of destiny. He has been transported to that unlocated cosmos which lies beyond time and space dimensions. He is in the band of decision.

Again he looks upon those swinging suns with the rapt wonder of youth. It is the same band for which he looked so long!

"Look upon this, Oldster, for the time of glory comes. In its last moments, your life can know no higher joy."

Distant yet near, the sweet voice drifted in.

"Now you inhabit that place you searched for. And it is a place that belongs to life alone."

"My last moments." The thought was examined wonderingly. From far down came feeble denial. "No, golden-lights. For I have tried to die. I cannot. I am trapped to life by the destiny that created me."

He drifted in untrammelled vacuum, his motion a dimensionless sensation. He drank in the beauty of this faultless universe, its rounded, glowing suns, its logical plan, the purposeful paths of motion as units of seeming matter moved quietly from one galaxy to another. At least they looked like galaxies—but were not?

As those suns were not suns!

Into this bodiless entity that was himself came the whisper of doubt. Not suns! Blindly his reaching thoughts swept out.

"Then I searched everywhere for the band of decision—except within myself!"

"Yes, Oldster!"

The seeming galaxies blurred and shimmered as if in answering accord.

"And now," cried Oldster, "my thoughts return to that moment when I trapped the universe's smallest particle in emptied space, and vainly wondered if it could determine its own destiny. It could not."

Silence. He drifted. His formless self moved, in some strange way, through these logically constructed islands of space toward some goal whose meaning hummed within him. Then, echoing through and through this universe came the ringing voice that hovered outside himself.

"And now you see, Oldster, and you know what it is you see. For life is the rebel, and dead matter knows no path but that given it. Oldster! Does not the mind, and that essence of self which is beyond the mind—do not even these need structure?"

Light as the touch of space, those thoughts lingered. Then Oldster felt their withdrawal. The fluttering of countless minds against his began to quiet. Without pain, he knew they were leaving him.

"Oldster"—the thought held no sadness, only an immeasurable love—"you know you have choice, and you know why you have it. Now farewell. Your time of glory comes."

They were gone, those golden-lights, and in their near-perfection they carried with them those ultimate answers Darkness himself sought. And yet it did not matter, for he, Oldster, was within his fabled band of decision. And life could ask no more.

In mounting ecstasy, he hurled himself through vast spaces that were yet small beyond calculation; he went rushing with deadly accuracy toward his yet unseen goal. Those "galaxies," those structures of which the golden-lights spoke, slanted out behind him, and new ones rushed into his sightless vision.

What old and new thoughts did those swinging suns evoke, what memories and dreams, in the slumbering outer mind of that being who was called Oldster? Which configuration of "stars" and "planets," and what shuttling motion in and between them, called forth the haunting remembrances of Moon Flame, of Comet Glow and her

child Dark Fire; of World Rim and the countless lost names of his unmeasured past? Ah, even the essence of being has structure; it must be so. And he inhabited, moved through, that band of decision.

And soon he would meet . . . his dark rebell

His ecstasy soared as he burst across those dimensionless distances and unerringly swung into a blaze of pressing light created by a sphere of galaxies. And he halted, feeling the throb of his certain knowledge as he fixed his strange vision on the writhing heart of the farthest course of stars.

Instantly a lone star heaved from it and moved across dark space. Oldster was in its path as instantly.

Even in the midst of his blinding pain, his ecstasy endured. He knew there was no hurt, that it was not a star which flamed through him, but some other formless quality of his inner being. He knew that he did not see, for there was no light. And he knew that he was not here.

Yet what did it matter what symbols he chose, symbols that he understood, but which were not real. For that dark rebel, whatever form it possessed, was within him. And the essence of being has choice!

He watched that sun falter in midspace, watched it reverse direction and fall back, *with its message*, to the untroubled galaxy that had urged it forth. His joy was a mighty song as that particle of itself jousted with the destiny that bade it continue along a straight-angle path—fought and won.

That rebel particle was rushing, rushing back to the heart of the deeply buried mechanism that ejected it. Soon it would strike. And he knew that when it struck its blow there would be . . . explosion!

And for him, now, was the time of glory.

For that particle, that sun, was himself, as all these turning, studious galaxies were himself, the mind and the soul of him. What need to cleave space, to endure torture, to question himself now? Why question the manner in which he, Devil Star, had been given access to this glory that lay under his supposedly conscious self? The golden-lights knew. The minds of the golden-lights, though, were wrapped in a spiritual blaze beyond his comprehension for eternity. Let it be so.

His thoughts rolled on, growing rich within him as that portentuous falling sun hurled itself along its returning path.

"Darkness—Sun Destroyer—Vanguard," he whispered. "Rebels all. And Devil Star! Where are those who followed the worn paths? But you, Darkness, you, Sun Destroyer, you, Vanguard"—almost he could see the shadowy pained shapes of them beckoning to him from a past beyond recall—"have we not created as no other energy creature created? For there are the golden-lights."

His thoughts dreamed on; the strangely visible constructions of his inner mind seemed to glitter their accord.

"The golden-lights know what you never knew," he dreamed. "The answer to life itself. But even I, in these last moments, see a portion of that distant answer. Yes, Darkness! Life the rebel—the mighty force that combats the entropic gradient of the universe. Let the universe slope down, but life eternally moves upward, building on its own discarded forms. And life will rebuild all that is.

"Were we ourselves not changelings, mutants with strange powers? And it was the dark rebel within us that made us so! The dark rebel, that moves as it will."

Piercing through to him from some outer circle of being came shrill warning. He ignored it. Let the surface awareness of him thrash about, in terror of that which was to happen. He would not return to it. He was here, his bodiless entity, watching life function in dauntless disobedience to the laws lifeless destiny laid down.

That glowing particle, that was himself as well, was far down into its parent system, moving swiftly along the path it had chosen for itself. Now, because of this choice, would come the rearrangement of this vast web-work around him. New thoughts, different outlooks, and volition that thwarted destiny. For destiny ruled that a purple-light must die in one certain manner.

Destiny could not rule life's dark rebel.

Again the warning, the clamorous scream to return, to fight. He would have none of it. He felt a tender pity for that being whose mere awareness was obedient to what the stresses and strains of his vast body demanded. He would not return.

The dark rebel struck.

In the timeless moment of its striking all space seemed to still. And the clamoring thoughts of Oldster, that aged being, stilled as well. His animal struggles ceased. Alone in his mausoleum of darkness, he was filled with a pulsing wonder. He felt the forcefields girding his great body together losing their prime binding energy.

And then expansion.

The chill of horror returned to him. "I am dying," he whispered. And that horror was abruptly gone. He looked about him, peering into the darkness that would show him nothing. Then he remembered that which he had seen in his inner being. The dark rebel falling, aimed true and striking. The cataclysm that followed, the white puffing rings of concentric explosion, the pell-mell exchange of suns.

The rearrangement of desire.

And in full measure the meaning of that astounding event came. The thought hummed and swelled, until he was flinging it out beyond him in mocking wave upon wave, into the face of that universe which had mocked him with its dead answers. In this last moment of expansion, the pain and formless searching of his years vanished in the ultimate triumph. He had had choice between two events, that of being and that of not-being. Without intervention he had chosen. He was content. It was the time of glory.