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ADVENTURES IN THE FAR FUTURE

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ADVENTURES IN THE FAR FUTURE

The Wind Between the Worlds

By Lester del Rey

I

IT WAS hot in the dome of the Bennington matter transmitter building. The metal shielding walls seemed to catch the rays of the sun and bring them to a focus there. Even the fan that was plugged in nearby didn't help much. Vic Peters shook his head, flipping the mop of yellow hair out of his eyes. He twisted about, so the fan could reach fresh territory, and cursed under his breath.

Heat he could take. As a roving troubleshooter for Teleport Interstellar, he'd worked from Rangoon to Nairobi—but always with men. Pat Trevor was the first of the few women superintendents he'd met. And while he had no illusions of masculine supremacy, he'd have felt a lot better working in shorts or nothing right now.

Besides, a figure like Pat's couldn't be forgotten, even though denim coveralls were hardly supposed to be flattering. Cloth stretched tight across shapely hips had never helped a man concentrate on his work.

"One more bolt, Vic," she told him. "Phew, I'm melting . . . So what happened to your wife?"

He shrugged. "Married her lawyer right after the divorce. Last I knew, they were doing fine. Why not? It wasn't her fault. Between hopping all over the world and spending my spare time trying to get on the moon rocket they were building, I wasn't much of a husband."

Unconsciously, his lips twisted. He'd grown up before DuQuesne discovered the matter transmitter, when reaching the other planets of the Solar System had been the dream of most boys. Somehow, that no longer seemed important to people, now that the world was linked through Teleport Interstellar with races all across the Galaxy.

Man had always been a topsy-turvy race. He'd discovered gunpowder before chemistry, and battled his way up to the atom bomb in a scant few thousand years of civilization, before he had a world-wide government. Other races, apparently, developed space travel long before the matter-transmitter, and long after they'd achieved a genuine science of sociology.

DuQuesne had started it by investigating some obscure extensions of Dirac's esoteric mathematics. To check up on his work, he'd built a machine, only to find that it produced results beyond his expectations; matter in it simply seemed to disappear, releasing energy that was much less than it should have been, but still enough to destroy the machine.

DuQuesne and his students had rechecked their math against the results and come up with an answer they didn't believe. This time they built two machines and experimented with them until they worked together. When the machines were operating, anything within the small fields they generated simply changed places. At first it was just across a few yards, then miles—then half around the world. Matter was transmitted almost instantaneously from one machine to the other no matter how far apart they were.

Such a secret couldn't be kept, of course. DuQuesne gave a demonstration to fellow scientists at which a few reporters were present. They garbled DuQuesne's explanation of electron waves covering the entire universe that were capable of identity shifts, but the accounts of the actual experiment were convincing enough. It meant incredibly fast shipping anywhere on the globe at an impossibly low cost.

The second public demonstration played to a full house of newsmen and cold-headed businessmen. It worked properly —a hundred pounds of bricks on one machine changed place with a hundred pounds of coal on another. But then . . .

Before their eyes, the coal disappeared and a round ball came into existence, suspended in mid-air. It turned around as if seeking something, an eyelike lens focused on the crowd. Then it darted down and knocked the power plug loose.

Nothing could budge it, and no tricks to turn on power again worked.

Even to the businessmen, it was obvious that this object, whatever it was, had not been made on Earth. DuQuesne himself suggested that somewhere some other race must have matter transmittal, and that this was apparently some kind of observer. Man, unable to reach even his own moon yet, had apparently made contact with intelligence from some other world, perhaps some solar system, since there was no theoretical limit to the distance covered by matter transmittal.

It was a week of wild attempts to crack open the "observer" and of futile attempts to learn something about it. Vic's mind had been filled with Martians, and he had tried to join the thousands who flocked to DuQuesne's laboratory to see the thing. But his father had been stubborn—no fare for such nonsense. And Vic had had to wait until the papers sprang the final surprise, a week later.

The ball had suddenly moved aside and made no effort to stop the machine from operating. When power was turned on, it had disappeared, and this time the Envoy had appeared. There was nothing outlandish about him—he seemed simply a normal man, stepping out of the crude machine.

In normal English, he had addressed the crowd with the casual statement that he was a robot, designed deliberately to serve as an ambassador to Earth from the Galactic Council. He was simply to be the observer and voice of the Council, which was made up of all worlds having the matter transmitter. They had detected the transmitter radiation, and, by Galactic Law, Earth had automatically earned provisional status. He was here to help set up transmitter arrangements. Engineers from Betz would build transports to six planets of culture similar to Earth's, to be owned by the Council, as a nonprofit business, but manned by Earthmen as quickly as they could be trained.

In return, nothing was demanded, and nothing more was

offered. We were a primitive world by their standards, but we would have to work out our own advancement, since they would give us no extra knowledge.

He smiled pleasantly to the shocked crowd and moved off with DuQuesne to await results. There were enough, too, from a startled and doubting world. The months that followed were a chaos of news and half-news. The nations were suspicious. There was never something for nothing. The Envoy met the President and Cabinet; he met the United Nations. India walked out; India walked back quickly when plans went ahead blithely without her. Congress proposed tariffs and protested secret treaties. The Envoy met Congress, and somehow overcame enough opposition to get a bare majority.

And the Betz II engineers came on schedule. Man was linked to the stars, though his own planets were still outside his reach. It was a paradox that soon grew stale, but what, actually, would be the point in flying to Mars or Venus when we were in instant touch with the farthest parts of the Galaxy?

There were major wrenches to the economy as our heavy industries suddenly found that other planets could beat them at their work. Plathgol could deliver a perfect Earth automobile, semi-assembled and advanced enough to avoid our patent laws, for twenty pounds of sugar. The heavy industries folded, while we were still experimenting with the business of finding what we had to offer and what we could receive from other worlds. Banks had crashed, men had been out of work. The governments had cushioned the shock, and the new wonders helped to still the voices that suddenly rose up against traffic with alien worlds. But it had been a bitter period, with many lasting scars.

Now a measure of stability had been reached, with a higher standard of living than ever. But the hatreds were pretty deep on the part of those who had been hurt, and others who simply hated newness and change. Vic had done well enough, somehow making his way into the first engineering class out of a hundred thousand applicants. And twelve years had gone by . . .

Pat's voice suddenly cut into his thoughts. "All tightened up here, Vic. Wipe the scowl off and let's go down to check."

She collected her tools, wrapped her legs around a smooth pole, and went sliding down. He yanked the fan and followed her. Below was the crew. Pat lifted an eyebrow at the grizzled, cadaverous head operator. "Okay, Amos. Plathgol standing by?"

Amos pulled his six-feet-two up from his slump and indicated the yellow stand-by light. Inside the twin poles of the huge transmitter that was turned to one on Plathgol, a big, twelve-foot diameter plastic cylinder held a single rabbit. Matter transmitting was always a two-way affair, requiring that the same volume be exchanged. And between the worlds, where different atmospheres and pressures were involved, all sending was done in the big capsules. One-way handling was possible, of course, but involved the danger of something materializing to occupy the same space as something else—even air molecules. It wasn't done except as rigidly controlled experiments.

Amos whistled into the transport-wave interworld phone in the code that was universal between worlds, got an answering whistle, and pressed a lever. The rabbit was gone, and the new capsule was faintly pink, with something resembling a giant worm inside.

Amos clucked in satisfaction. "*Tsiuna*. Good eating, only real good we ever got from these things. I got friends on Plathgol that like rabbit. Want some of this, Pat?"

Vic felt his stomach jerk at the colors that crawled over the *tsiuna*. The hot antiseptic spray was running over the capsule, to be followed by supersonics and ultraviolets to complete sterilization. Amos waited a moment, then pulled out the creature. Pat hefted it.

"Big one. Bring it over to my place and I'll fry it for you and Vic. How does the Dirac meter read, Vic?"

"On the button." The seven per cent power loss was gone now, after a week of hard work in locating it. "Guess you

were right—the reflector was off angle. Should have tried it first, but it never happened before. How'd you figure it out?"

She indicated the interworld phone. "I started out in anthropology, Vic. Got interested in other races, and then found I couldn't talk to the teleport engineers without being one, so I got sidetracked to this job. But I still talk a lot on anything Galactic policy won't forbid. When everything else failed, I complained to the Ecthinbal operator that the Betz II boys installed us wrong. I got sympathy instead of indignation, so I figured it *could* happen. Simple, wasn't it?"

He snorted, and waited while she gave orders to start business. Then, as the loading cars began to hum, she fell behind him, moving out toward the office. "I suppose you'll be leaving tonight, Vic. I'll miss you. You're the only troubleshooter I've met who did more than make passes."

"When I make passes at your kind of girl, it will be legal. And in my business, it's no life for a wife."

But he stopped to look at the building, admiring it for the last time. It was the standard Betz II design, but designed to handle the farm crops around, and bigger than any earlier models on Earth. The Betz II engineers made Earth engineering look childish, even if they did look like big slugs with tentacles and had no sense of sight.

The transmitters were in the circular center, surrounded by a shield wall, a wide hall all around, another shield, a circular hall again, and finally the big outside shield. The two opposite entranceways spiraled through the three shields, each rotating thirty degrees clockwise from the entrance portal through the next shield. Those shields were of inert matter that could be damaged by nothing less violent than a hydrogen bomb directly on them—they refused to soften at less than ten million degrees Kelvin. How the Betzians managed to form them in the first place, nobody knew.

Beyond the transmitter building, however, the usual offices and local transmitters across Earth had not yet been built. That would be strictly Earth construction, and would have to

wait for an off season. They were using the nearest building, an abandoned store a quarter mile away, as a temporary office.

Pat threw the door open and then stopped suddenly. "Ptheela!"

A Plathgolian native sat on a chair, with a bundle of personal belongings around her, her three arms making little marks on something that looked like a used pancake. The Plathgolians had been meat-eating plants once. They still smelled high to Earth noses, and their constantly shedding skin resembled shaggy bark, while their heads were vaguely flowerlike.

Ptheela wriggled her arms. "The hotel found regretfully that it had to decorate my room," she whistled in Galactic Code. "No other room and all other hotels say they're full. Plathgolians stink, I guess. So I'll go home when the transmitter is fixed."

"With your trade studies half done?" Pat protested. "Don't be silly, Ptheela. I've got a room for you in my apartment. How are the studies, anyhow?"

For answer, the plant woman passed over a newspaper, folded to one item. "Trade? Your House of Representatives just passed a tariff on all traffic through Teleport."

Pat scanned the news, scowling. "Damn them. A tariff! They can't tax interstellar traffic. The Galactic Council won't stand for it; we're still accepted only on approval. The Senate will never okay it!"

Ptheela whistled doubtfully, and Vic nodded. "They will. I've been expecting this. A lot of people are afraid of Teleport."

"But we're geared to it now. The old factories are torn down, the new ones are useless for us. We can't get by without the catalysts from Ecthinbal, the cancer-preventative from Plathgol, all the rest. And who'll buy all our sugar? We're producing fifty times what we need, just because most planets don't have plants that separate the levo from the dextro forms. All hell will pop!"

Ptheela wiggled her arms again. "You came too early. Your culture is unbalanced. All physics, no sociology. All eat well, little think well."

All emotion, little reason, Vic added to himself. It had been the same when the industrial revolution came along. Old crafts were uprooted and some people were hurt. There were more jobs now, but they weren't the familiar ones. And the motorists who gloated at first over cheap Plathgol cars complained when Plathgol wasn't permitted to supply the improved, ever-powered models they made for themselves.

Hardest of all had been the idea of accepting the existence of superior races. A feeling of inferiority had crept in, turned to resentment, and then through misunderstanding of other races to an outright hatred of them. Ptheela had been kicked out of her hotel room; but it was only a minor incident in a world full of growing bitterness against the aliens.

"Maybe we can get jobs on Plathgol," Vic suggested harshly.

Ptheela whistled. "Pat could, if she had three husbands—engineers must meet minimum standards. You could be a husband, maybe."

Vic kept forgetting that Plathgol was backward enough to have taboos and odd customs, even though Galactically higher than Earth, having had nearly ten thousand years of history behind her to develop progress and amity.

The televisor connecting them with the transmitter building buzzed, and Amos' dour face came on. "Screwball delivery with top priority, Pat. Professor named Douglas wants to ship a capsule of Heaviside layer air for a capsule of Ecthinbal deep-space vacuum. Common sense says we don't make much shipping vacuums by the pound!"

"Public service, no charge," Vic suggested, and Pat nodded. Douglas was a top man at Caltech, and a plug from him might be useful sometime. "Leave it on, Amos—I want to watch this. Douglas has some idea that space fluctuates, somehow, and he can figure out where Ecthinbal is from a sample. Then he

can figure how fast an exchange force works, whether it's instantaneous or not. We've got the biggest Earth transmitters, so he uses us."

As they watched, a massive capsule was put in place by loading machines, and the light changed from yellow to red. A slightly greenish capsule replaced the other. Amos signaled the disinfection crew and hot spray hit it, to be followed by the ultrasonics. Something crackled suddenly, and Amos made a wild lunge across the screen.

The capsule popped, crashing inward and scattering glass in a thousand directions. Pressure-glass; it should have carried a standard Code warning for cold sterilization and no supersonics. Vic leaped toward the transmitter building.

Pat's cry brought him back. There were shrieks coming from the televisor. Men in the building were clinging frantically to anything they could hold, but men and bundles ready for loading were being picked up violently and sucked toward the transmitter. As Vic watched, a man hit the edge of the field and seemed to be sliced into nothingness, his scream cut off, half-formed.

A big chunk of glass had hit the control, shorting two busbars, holding them together by its weight. The transmitter was locked into continuous transmit. And air, with a pressure of fifteen pounds per square inch, was running in and being shipped to Ecthinbal, where the pressure was barely an ounce per square inch! With that difference, pressure on a single square foot of surface could lift over a ton. The poor devils in the transmitter building didn't have a chance.

He snapped off the televisor as Pat turned away, gagging. "When was the accumulator charged?"

"It wasn't an accumulator," she told him weakly. "The whole plant uses an electron-pulse atomotor, good for twenty years of continuous operation."

Vic swore and made for the door, with Pat and Ptheela after him. The transmitter opening took up about two hundred square feet, which meant somewhere between fifty and five

hundred thousand cubic feet of air a second were being lost. Maybe worse.

Ptheela nodded as she kept pace with him. "I think the tariff won't matter much now," she stated.

II

VIC'S action in charging out had been pure instinct to get where the trouble lay. His legs churned over the ground, while a wind at his back made the going easier.

Then his brain clicked over, and he dug his heels into the ground, trying to stop. Pat crashed into him, but Ptheela's arms lashed out, keeping him from falling. As he turned to face them, the wind struck at his face, whipping up grit and dust from the dry ground. Getting to the transmitter building would be easy—but with the wind already rising, they'd never be able to fight their way back.

It had already reached this far, losing its force with distance, but still carrying a wallop. It was beginning to form a pattern, marked by the clouds of dust and debris it was picking up. The arrangement of the shields and entrances in the building formed a perfect suction device to set the air circling around it counter-clockwise, twisting into a tornado that funneled down to the portals. Men and women near the building were struggling frantically away from the center of the fury. As he watched, a woman was picked up bodily, whirled around, and gulped down one of the yawning entrances. The wind strangled her cries.

Vic motioned Pat and Ptheela and began moving back, fast. Killing himself would do no good. He found one of the little hauling tractors and pulled them onto it with him, heading back until they were out of the worst of the rising wind. Then he swung to face Ptheela.

"Galactic rules be damned, this is an emergency, and we need help! What now?"

The shaggy Plathgolian made an awkward gesture with all three arms, and a slit opened in her chest. "Unprecedented."

The word came out in English, surprisingly, and Pat's look mirrored his; Plathgolians weren't supposed to be able to talk. "You're right. If I speak, I shall be banished by the Council from Plathgol. Ask, nevertheless. I may know more—we've had the teleport longer—but remember that your strange race has a higher ingenuity quotient."

"Thanks." Vic knew what the seven husbands back on her home planet meant to her, if she were exiled, but he'd worry about that after he could stop worrying about the world. "What happens next?"

She dropped back to the faster Galactic Code for that. As he knew, the accidental turning on of the transmitter had keyed in the one on Ecthinbal automatically to receive, but not to transmit; the air was moving between Earth and Ecthinbal in one-way traffic. The receiving circuit, which would have keyed in the Ecthinbal transmit circuit had not been shorted. Continuous transmittal had never been used, to her knowledge; there was no certainty about what would happen. Once started, no outside force could stop a transmitter; the send and stop controls were synchronous, both tapped from a single crystal, and only that proper complex wave-form could cut it off. It now existed as a space-strain, and the Plathgolians believed that this would spread, since the outer edges transmitted before matter could reach the center, setting up an unbalanced resonance that would make the force field grow larger and larger. Eventually, it might spread far beyond the whole building. And, of course, since the metal used by the Betz II engineers could not be cut or damaged, there was no way of tunneling in.

"What about Ecthinbal?" Pat asked.

Ptheela spread her arms. "The game, in reverse. The air rushes in, builds up pressure to break the capsule, and then rushes out—in a balanced stream, fortunately, so there's no danger of crowding two units of matter in one unit of space."

"Then I guess we'd better call the Galactic Envoy," Vic

decided. "All he's ever done is to sit in an office and look smug. Now—"

"He won't come. He is simply an observer. Galactic Law says you must solve your own problem or die."

"Yeah." Vic looked at the cloud of dust being whirled into the transmitter building. "And all I need is something that weighs a couple tons per square foot—with a good crane attached."

Pat looked up suddenly. "How about one of the small atom-powered army tanks, the streamlined ones. Flavin could probably get you one."

Vic stamped down on the pedal, swinging the little tractor around sharply toward the office. The wind was stronger there, but still buckable. He clicked the televisor on, noticing that the dust seemed to disappear just beyond the normal field of the transmitter. It must already be starting to spread out.

"How about it?" he asked Ptheela. "If it spreads, won't it start etching into the transmitter and the station?"

"No. Betz II construction. Everything they built in has some way of grounding out the effect. We don't know how it works, but the field won't touch anything put in by the Betzians."

"What about the hunk of glass that's causing the trouble?"

For a moment she looked as if she were trying to appear hopeful. Then the flowerlike head seemed to wilt. "It's inside the casing, protected from the field."

Pat had been working on the private wire to Chicago, used for emergencies. She was obviously having trouble getting put through to Flavin. The man was a sore spot in Teleport Interstellar, one of the few political appointees. Nominally, he was a go-between for the President and the Teleport group, but actually he was simply a job-holder. Finally Pat had him on the screen.

He was jovial enough, as usual, with a red spot on each cheek which indicated too many drinks for lunch. A bottle stood on the desk in front of him. But his voice was clear enough. "Hi, Pat. What's up?"

Pat disregarded the frown Vic threw her, and began outlining the situation. The panic in her voice didn't require much feigning. Flavin blustered at first, then pressed the hold button for long minutes. Finally, his face reappeared.

"Peters, you'll have full authority, of course. I'll get a couple tanks for you, somehow, but I have to work indirectly." Then he shrugged and looked rueful. "I always knew this sinecure would end. I've got some slips here that make it look as if you had a national disaster."

His hand reached for the bottle, just as his eyes met Vic's accusing look. He shook his head, grinned sourly, put the bottle away in a drawer, untouched. "I'm not a fool entirely, Peters. I can do a little more than chase girls and drink. Probably be no use to you, but the only reason I drink is I'm bored, and I'm not bored now. I'll be out shortly."

Flavin apparently had influence. The tanks arrived just before he did. They were heavy, squat affairs, super-armored to stand up under a fairly close atomic bomb hit, but small enough to plunge through the portals of the transmitter building. Flavin came up as Vic and Pat were studying them. His suit was designed to hide most of his waistline, but the fat of his jowls shook as he hurried up, and there was sweat on his forehead, trickling down from under his toupee.

"Two, eh? Figured that's what I'd get if I asked for a dozen. Think you can get in—and what'll you do then?"

Vic shrugged. He'd been wondering the same thing. "If we could somehow ram the huge piece of glass and crack it where it was wedged into the wiring inside the shielding, it might release the shorted wires. That should effect an automatic cut-off. That's why I'm going with the driver. I can extemporize if we get in."

"Right," Pat agreed quickly. She hitched up her coveralls and headed for the other tank. "And that's why I'm going with the other."

"Pat!" Vic swung toward her. But it wasn't a time for stupid chivalry. The man or woman who could do the job

should do it. He gave her a hand into the compact little tank. "Good luck, then. We'll need it."

He climbed into his own vehicle, crowding past the driver and wriggling into the tiny observer's seat. The driver glanced back, reached for the controls. The motor hummed quietly under them, making itself felt by the vibration of the metal around them. They began moving forward, advancing in low gear. The driver didn't like it as he started through his telescreen, and Vic liked it even less from the direct view through the gun slit. Beside them, the other tank got into motion, roughly paralleling them.

At first it wasn't too bad. They headed toward the north portal, going cautiously, and the tank seemed snug and secure. Beside him, Vic saw a tree suddenly come up by its roots and head toward the transmitter. It struck the front of the tank, but the machine pushed it brutally aside.

Then the going got rough. The driver swore at the controls, finding the machine hard to handle. It wanted to drift, and he set up a fixed correction, only to revise it a moment later. The tank began to list and pitch. The force of the wind increased geometrically as they cut the distance. At fifty feet, the driver's wrists were white from fighting to overcome each tilt of the wind.

Vic swallowed, wondering at the nerve of the man driving, until he saw blood running from a bitten lip. His own stomach was pitching wildly.

"Try another ten feet?" the driver asked.

"Have to."

They crawled by inches now. Every tiny bump threatened to let the force of the wind pitch them over. They had to work by feel. Vic wiped his forehead and wiped it again before he noticed that the palm of his hand was as damp as his brow.

He wondered about Pat and looked for her. There was no sight of the other machine. Thank God, she'd turned back. But there was bitterness in his relief; he'd figured Pat was one

human he could count on completely. Then he looked at the driver's wider screen, and sick shock hit him.

The other tank had turned turtle and was rolling over and over, straight toward the portal! As he looked, a freak accident bounced it up and it landed on its treads. The driver must have been conscious; only consummate skill accounted for the juggling that kept it upright then. But its forward momentum was still too strong, and it lurched for the portal.

Vic jerked against his driver's ear, pointing frantically. "Hit it!"

The driver tensed, but nodded. Though the shriek of the insane wind was too strong for even the sound of the motor, the tank leaped forward, pushing Vic down in his webbed and padded seat. The chances they were taking now were pure gamble, but the driver moved more smoothly with a definite goal. The man let the wind help him pick up speed, jockeying sidewise toward the other tank. They almost rolled over as they swung, bucking and rocking frantically, but the treads hit the ground firmly again. They were drifting across the wind now, straight toward the nose of the other tank.

Vic strained forward; the shock of hitting the tank knocked his head against the gun slit. He hardly felt it as he stared out. The two tanks struggled, forcing against each other, while the portal gaped almost straight ahead.

"Hit the west edge and we have a chance," Vic yelled in the driver's ear. The man nodded weakly, and his foot pressed down harder on the throttle. Against each other, the two tanks showed little tendency to turn over, but they seemed to be lifted off the ground half the time.

Inch by slow inch, they were making it. Pat's tank was well beyond the portal, but Vic's driver was sweating it out, barely on the edge. He bumped an inch forward, reversed with no care for gears, and hitched forward and back again. They seemed to make little progress, but finally Vic could see the edge move past, and they were out of the direct gale into the portal.

A new screen had lighted beside the driver, and Pat's face was in it, along with the other driver. The scouring of the wind made speech impossible over the speakers, but the man motioned. Vic shook his head, indicated a spiral counterclockwise and outward, to avoid bucking against the wind, with the two tanks supporting each other.

They passed the south portal somehow, though there were moments when it seemed they must be swung in, and managed to gain ten feet outward on the turn. The next time around, they had doubled that. It began to be smoother going. The battered tanks lumbered up to their starting point and a little beyond.

Vic crawled out of the seat, surprised to find his legs stiff and weak; the ground seemed to reel under him. It was some comfort to see that the driver was in no better shape. The man leaned against the tank, letting the raw wind dry the perspiration on his uniform. "Bro-ther! Miracles! You're nervy, guy, but I wouldn't go in there again with the angel Michael."

Vic looked at the wind maelstrom. Nobody else would go in there, either. Getting within ten feet of the portal was begging for death, even in the tank—and it would get worse. Then he spotted Pat opening the tank hatch and stumbled over to help her out. She was bruised and more shaky than he, but the webbing over the seat had saved her from broken bones. He lifted her out in his arms, surprised at how light she was. His mind flicked over the picture of her tank twisting over, and his arms tightened around her. She seemed to snuggle into them, seeking comfort.

Her eyes came up, just as he looked down at her. There was no other way than kissing her to show his relief. "You scared hell out of me, Pat."

"Me, too." She was regaining some color, and wriggled to be put down. "Do you know how I feel about what you did in there?"

Flavin cut off any answer Vic could have made, waddling up with his handkerchief out, mopping his face. He stared at them, gulped, shook his head. "Lazarus twins," he growled.

"Better get in the car—there's a drink in the right door pocket."

Vic looked at Pat and she nodded. They could use it. They found the car and chauffeur waiting farther back. Vic poured her a small jigger, and took one for himself before putting the bottle back. But the moment's relaxation over cigarettes was better than the drink.

While Flavin was talking to the tank drivers, a small roll of bills changed hands, bringing grins to their faces. Political opportunist or not, he knew the right thing to do at the right time. Now he came back and climbed in beside them.

"I've had the office moved back to Bennington. The intercity teleport manager offered us space." The locally owned world branches of intercity teleport were independent of Teleport Interstellar, but usually granted courtesy exchanges with the latter. "They'll be evacuating the city next, if I know the Governor. Just got a cease and desist order—came while you were trying to commit suicide. We're to stop transmitting at once!"

He grunted at Vic's grimace, and motioned the chauffeur on, just as a radiophone call reached them. Vic shook his head at the driver and looked out to see Ptheela ploughing along against the wind, calling to them. The plant woman's skin was peeling worse than ever.

Flavin followed Vic's eyes. "You going to let that ride with us? The way Plathies stink? Damned plants, you can't trust 'em. Probably mixed up in this trouble. I heard . . ."

"Plathgol rates higher in civilization than we do," Pat stated flatly.

"Yeah. Ten thousand years stealing culture we had to scratch up for ourselves in a thousand. So the Galactic Council tells us we've got to rub our noses to a superior race. Superior *plants!* Nuts!"

Vic opened the door and reached for Pat's hand. Flavin frowned, fidgeted, then reached out to pull them back. "Okay, okay. I told you that you were in charge here. If you want to ride with stinking Plathies—well, you're running things. But

don't blame me if people start throwing mud." He had the grace to redden faintly as Ptheela came up finally, and changed the subject hastily. "Why can't we just snap a big hunk of metal over the entrances and seal them up?"

"Too late," Ptheela answered, sliding down beside Pat, her English drawing a surprised start from Flavin. "I was inspecting the tanks; they're field-etched where they touched. That means the field is already outside the building, though it will spread more slowly without the metal to resonate it. Anyhow, you couldn't get metal plates up."

"How long will the air last?" Pat asked.

Vic shrugged. "A month at breathing level, maybe. Fortunately the field doesn't spread downward much, with the Betzian design, so it won't start working on the Earth itself. Flavin, how about getting the experts here? I need help."

"Already sent for them," Flavin grunted. They were heading toward the main part of Bennington now, ten miles from the station. His face was gray and he no longer seemed to notice the somewhat pervasive odor of Ptheela.

They drew up to a converted warehouse finally, and he got out, starting up the steps just as the excited cries of a newsboy reached his ears. He flipped a coin and spread the extra before them.

It was all over the front page, with alarming statements from the scientists first interviewed and soothing statements from later ones. No Teleport Interstellar man had spoken, but an interview with one of the local teleport engineers had given the basic facts, along with some surprisingly keen guesses as to what would happen next.

But above everything was the black headline:

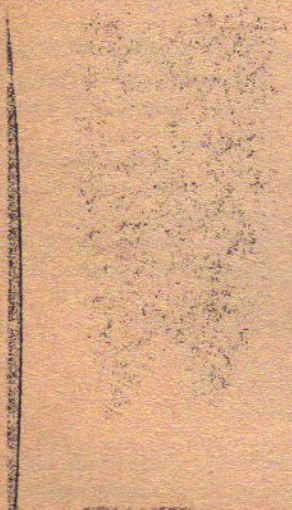
BOMB TRANSMITTER,
SAYS PAN-ASIA

The ultimatum issued by Pan-Asia was filled with high-sounding phrases and noble justification, but its basic message

was clear enough. Unless the loss of air—air that belonged to everyone—was stopped and all future transmitting of all types halted, together with all dealings with "alien anti-terrestrials," Pan-Asia would be forced to bomb the transmitters, together with all other resistance.

"Maybe . . ." Flavin began doubtfully, but Vic cut him off. His faith in mankind's right to its accidental niche in the Galactic Council wasn't increasing much.

"No dice. The field is a space-strain that is permanent, unless canceled by the right wave-form. The canceling crystal is in the transmitter. Destroy that and the field never can be stopped. It'll keep growing until the whole Earth is gone. Flavin, you'd better get those experts here fast!"



III

VIC sat in the car the next morning, watching the black cloud that swirled around the station, reaching well beyond the old office. His eyes were red, his face was gray with fatigue, and his lanky body was slumped onto the seat. Pat looked almost as tired, though she had gotten some sleep. Now she took the empty coffee cup and thermos from him. She ran a hand through his hair, straightening it, then pulled his head down to her shoulder and began rubbing the back of his neck gently.

Ptheela purred approvingly from the other side, and Pat snorted. "Get your mind off romance, Ptheela! Vic's practically out on his feet. If he weren't so darned stubborn, this should make him go to sleep."

"Romance!" Ptheela chewed the idea and spat it out. "All spring budding and no seed. A female should have pride from strong husbands and proven seeding."

Vic let them argue. At the moment, Pat's attention was soothing, but only superficially. His head went on fighting for some usable angle and finding none. He'd swiped all the knowledge he could from Ptheela, without an answer. Plathgol was more advanced than Earth, but far below the Betz II engineers, who were mere servants of the Council.

No wonder man had resented the traffic with other worlds. For centuries he had been the center of his universe. Now, like the Tasmanians, he found himself only an isolated valley of savages in a universe that was united in a culture far beyond his understanding. He'd never even conquered his own planets; all he'd done was to build better ways of killing himself.

Now he was reacting typically enough, in urgent need of

some race even lower, to put him on middle ground, at least. He was substituting hatred for his lost confidence in himself.

Why learn more about matter transmitting when other races knew the answers and were too selfish to share them? Vic grumbled, remembering the experts. He'd wasted hours with them, to find that they were useless. The names that had been towers of strength had proved no more than men as baffled as he was. With even the limited knowledge he'd pried from Ptheela, he was far ahead of them—and still further behind the needs of the problem.

The gun Flavin had insisted he wear was uncomfortable, and he pulled himself up, staring at the crew of men who were working as close to the center of wind as they could get. He hadn't been able to convince them that tunneling was hopeless. All they needed was a one-millimeter hole through the flooring, up which blasting powder could be forced to knock aside the glass fragment. They refused to accept the fact that the Betz II shielding could resist the best diamond drills under full power for centuries. He shrugged. At least it helped the general morale to see something being done; he'd given in finally and let them have their way.

"We might as well go back," he decided. He'd hoped that the morning air and sight of the station might clear his head, but the weight of responsibility had ruined that. It was ridiculous, but he was still in charge.

Flavin reached back and cut on the little television set. With no real understanding, he was trying to learn tolerance of Ptheela, but he felt more comfortable in front, beside the chauffeur.

Vic felt the automatic. "I hear no news on Pan-Asia's ultimatum."

"Yeah. The story was killed by Presidential emergency powers, and Pan-Asia has agreed to a three-day stay—no more. My information isn't the best, but I gather we'll bomb it ourselves if it isn't cleared up by then."

Vic threw open the door to his little office and the four

went in. It wasn't until he started toward his desk that he noticed his visitor.

The Galactic Envoy might have been the robot he claimed, but there was no sign of it. He was dressed casually in expensive tweeds, lounging gracefully in a chair, with a touch of a smile on his face. Now he got up, holding out a hand to Vic.

"I heard you were running things. Haven't seen you since I helped pick you for the first year class, but I keep informed. Thought I'd drop by to tell you the Council has given official approval to your full authority over the Earth Branch of Teleport Interstellar, and I've filed the information with the U.N. and your President."

Vic lifted his head. "Why me?"

"You've learned all the theory Earth has, you've had more practical experience with more stations than anyone else, and you've undoubtedly picked Ptheela's brains dry by now. You're the obvious man."

"I'd a lot rather see one of your high and mighty Galactic experts take over!"

The Envoy shook his head gently. "We've found that the race causing the trouble usually is the race best fitted to solve it. The same ingenuity that maneuvered the sabotage—it *was* sabotage, by the way—will help you solve it, perhaps. The Council may not care much for your grab-first rule in economics and politics, but it never doubted that you represent one of the most ingenious races we have met. You see, there really are *no* inferior races."

"Sabotage?" Pat looked sick. "Who'd be that stupid and vicious?"

The Envoy smiled faintly. "Who'd give the Knights of Terra money for a recruiting drive? I can't play much part in things here—I've got limited abilities, a touch of telepathy, a little more knowledge than you, and a certain in-built skill at handling political situations. Your own government is busy

examining the ramifications of the plot now. It had to be an inside job, as you call it."

"Earth for Earth, and down with the transmitters," Vic summed it up.

The Envoy nodded. "They forget that the transmitters can't be removed without Council workers. And when the Council revokes approval, it destroys all equipment and most books, while seeing that three generations are brought up without knowledge. You'd revert to semi-savagery and have to make a fresh start up. Well, I'm lucky—your President Wilkes is sympathetic, and your F.B.I. has been cooperative so far. If you solve things, the sabotage shouldn't prove too much of a problem. Good luck."

Flavin had been eying him, and his dislike flared up as the Envoy left. "A hell of a lot of nerve for guys who claim they don't interfere!"

"It happened to us twice," Ptheela observed. "We were better for it eventually. The Council's rules are from half a billion years of experience, with tremendous knowledge. We must submit."

"Not without a fight!"

"Without a fight," Vic said bluntly. "We're babes in arms to them. Anyhow, who cares? Congressional babble won't save us if we lose our atmosphere. But they can't see it."

The old idea—something would turn up. Maybe they couldn't cut off the transmitter from outside, and had no way of getting past the wind to the inside. But something would turn up.

He'd heard rumors of the Army taking over, and almost wished they would. As it stood, he had full responsibility and nothing more. Flavin and the Council had turned things over to him, but the local cop on the beat had more power. It would be a relief to have someone around to shout even stupid orders, and get some of the weight off Vic's shoulders.

Sabotage! It couldn't even be an accident; the cockeyed

race to which he belonged had to try to commit suicide and then expect him to save it.

He shook his head, vaguely conscious of someone banging on the door, and reached for the knob. "Amos!"

The sour face never changed expression as the corpselike figure of the man slouched in. Amos was dead—he'd been in the transmitter. They all realized it at once.

But Amos shook off their remarks. "Nothing surprising, just common sense. When I saw the capsule start cracking, I jumped into a capsule headed for Plathgol, set the delay, and tripped the switch. Saw some glass shooting at me, but I was in Plathgol before it hit. Went out and got me a mess of *tsiuna*—they cook fair to middling, seeing they never tried it before they met us. Then I showed 'em my pass, came through Chicago, here, and home. I figured the old woman would be worried. Nobody told me about the mess till I saw the papers. Common sense to report to you, so here I am."

"How much did you see of the explosion?" Pat asked.

"Not much. Just saw it was cracking—trick glass, no temperature tolerance. Looked like Earth capsule color."

It didn't matter. It added to Vic's disgust to believe it was sabotage, but didn't change the picture otherwise. The Council wouldn't reverse its decision. They treated a race as a unit, making no exception for the behavior of a few individuals, whether good or bad.

Another knock on hte door cut off his vicious circle of hopelessness. "Old home week here, evidently. *Come in!*"

The man who entered was the rare example of a fat man in the pink of physical condition, with no sign of softness. He shoved his bulk through the doorway as if he expected the two stars on his shoulders to light the way and awe all beholders. "Who is Victor Peters?"

Vic wiggled a finger at himself, and the general came over. He drew out an envelope and dropped it on the desk, showing clearly that acting as a messenger was far beneath his dignity. "An official communciation from the President of the United

States," he said mechanically, and turned to make his exit back to the intercity transmitters.

It was a plain envelope, without benefit of wax seals or ribbons. Vic ripped it open, looked at the signature and the simple letterhead, and checked the signature again. He read it aloud to the others.

"To Mr.—damn it, officially I've got a doctor's degree—to Mr. Victor Peters, nominally—Hah!—in charge of the Bennington Branch of Teleport Interstellar—I guess they didn't tell him it's *nominally* in charge of all Earth branches. Umm. You are hereby instructed to remove all personnel from a radius of five miles minimum of your Teleport Branch not later than noon, August 21, unless matters shall be satisfactorily culminated prior to that time. Signed, Homer Wilkes, President of the United States of America."

"Bombs!" Pat shuddered, while Vic let the message fall to the floor, kicking it toward the wastebasket. "The fools! The damned fools! Couldn't they tell him what would happen? Couldn't they make him see that it'll only make turning off the transmitter impossible forever?"

Flavin shrugged, dropping unaware onto the couch beside Ptheela. "Maybe he had no choice. Either he does it or some other power does it."

Then he came to his feet, staring at Vic. "My God, that's *tomorrow* noon!"

IV

VIC looked at the clock later, and was surprised to see that it was already well into the afternoon. The others had left him, Ptheela last when she found there was no more knowledge she could contribute. He had one of the electronic calculators plugged in beside him, and a table of the so-called Dirac functions propped up on it; when the press had discovered that Dirac had predicted some of the characteristics that made teleportation possible, they'd named practically everything for him.

Vic pulled the calculator back, just as Flavin came into the room. The man was losing weight, or else fatigue was creating that illusion. He dropped into a chair as Vic looked up.

"The men evacuated from around the station?" Vic asked.

Flavin nodded. "Some of the bright boys finally convinced them that they were just wasting time, anyhow. Besides, the thing is still spreading, and getting too close to them. Vic, the news gets worse all the time. Can you take it?"

"Now what? Don't tell me they've changed it to tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow, hell! In two hours they're sending over straight blockbusters, radar-controlled all the way. No atomics—yet—but they're jumping the gun, anyhow. Some nut convinced Wilkes that an ordinary eight-ton job might just shake things enough to fracture the glass that's holding the short. And Pan-Asia is going completely wild. I've been talking to Wilkes. The people are scarced silly, and they're pressuring for quick war."

Vic nodded reluctantly and reached for the benzedrine he'd hoped to save for the last possible moment, when it

might carry him all the way through. What difference did it make? Even if he had an idea, he'd be unable to use it.

"And yet . . ." He considered it more carefully, trying to figure percentages. There wasn't a chance in a million, but they had to take even that one chance. It was better than nothing. "It might just work—if they hit the right spot. I know where the glass is, and the layout of the station. But I'll need authority to direct the bombs. Flavin, can you get me President Wilkes?"

Flavin shrugged, reached for the televisor. He managed to get quite a way up by some form of code, but then it began to be a game of nerves and brass. Along his own lines, he apparently knew his business. In less than fifteen minutes, Vic was talking to the President. For a further few minutes, the screen remained blank. Then another face came on, this time in military uniform, asking quick questions, while Vic pointed out the proper targets.

Finally the officer nodded. "Good enough, Peters. We'll try it. If you care to watch, you can join the observers. Mr. Flavin already knows where they are. How are the chances?"

"Not good. Worth trying."

The screen darkened again, and Flavin got up. The thing was a wild gamble, but it was better to jar the building than to melt its almost impregnable walls. Even Betz II metal couldn't take a series of hydrogen bombs, though nothing else could hurt it. And with that fury, the whole station would go.

They picked up Pat, and moved out to Flavin's car. Vic knew better than to try to bring Ptheela along. As an alien, she was definitely taboo around military affairs. The storm had reached the city now, and dense clouds were pouring down thick gouts of rain, leaving the day as black as night. The car slogged through it, until Flavin opened the door and motioned them out into a temporary metal shelter.

Things were already started. Remote scanners were watching the guided missiles come down, and eyes were operating in the bombs, working on infra-red that cut through the rain

and darkness. It seemed to move slowly on the screen at first, but picked up apparent speed as it approached the transmitter buildings. The shielding grew close, and Pat drew back with an involuntary jerk as it hit and the screen went black. Dead center.

But the remote scanners showed no change. The abrupt break in the air-motion where the transmitter field began, outside the shielding, still showed. Another bomb came down, and others, each spaced so as to hit in time for others to be turned back, if it worked. Even through the impossible tornado of rotating fury, it was super-precision bombing.

The field went on working just the same, far beyond the shielding, pulling an impossible number of cubic feet of air from Earth every second. They stopped watching the screen shown by the bomb-eyes at last, and even the Army gave up.

"Funny," one observer commented. "No sound, no flash when the bombs hit. I've been watching the remote scanners every time instead of the eye, and nothing happens. The bombs just disappear."

Pat shook herself. "They *can't* hit. They go right through the field, before they can hit. Vic, it won't matter if we do atom-bomb the station. It can't be reached."

But he was already ahead of her.

"The Ecthindar will love that. They've already been dosed with chemical bombs. Now guess what they'll do."

"Simple." It was the observer who got that. "Start feeding atom bombs into their transmitters back to us."

Then he shouted hoarsely, pointing through a window. From the direction of the station, a dazzle of light had lanced out sharply, and was now fading down. Vic snapped back to the remote scanner, and scowled. The field was still working; there was no sign of damage to the transmitter. If the Ecthindar had somehow snapped a bomb into the station, it must have been retransmitted before full damage.

The Army men stared sickly at the station, but Vic was already moving toward the door. Pat grabbed his arm, and

Flavin was with them by the time they reached the waiting car.

"The Bennington office," Vic told the driver. "Fast! Somebody has to see the Ecthindar in a hurry, if it'll do any good."

"I'm going, too, Vic," Pat announced. He shook his head. "I'm going," she repeated stubbornly. "Nobody knows much about Ecthinbal or the Ecthindar. You call in Code messages, get routine Code back. We can't go there without fancy pressure suits, because we can't breathe their air. And they never leave. But I told you I was interested in races, and I have been trying to chit-chat with them. I know some things. You'll need me."

He shook his head again. "It's enough for one of us to get killed. If I fail, Amos can try, or Flavin. If they both fail—well, suit yourself. It won't matter whether they kill me there or send through bombs to kill me here. But if one of us can get a chance to explain, it may make some difference. I don't know. But it may."

Her eyes were hurt, but she gave in, going with him silently as he stepped into the local Bennington unit and stepped out in Chicago, heading toward the Chicago Interstellar branch. She waited patiently while the controlmen scouted out a pressure suit for him. Then she began helping him fasten it and checking his oxygen equipment. "Come back, Vic," she said finally.

He chucked a fist under her chin and kissed her quickly, keeping it casual with a sureness he couldn't feel. "You're a good kid, Pat. I'll sure try."

He pulled the helmet down and clicked it shut before stepping into the capsule and letting the seal snap shut. He could see her swing to the interstellar phone, her lips pursed in whistled code. The sound was muffled, but the lights changed abruptly, and her hand hit the switch.

There was no apparent time involved. He was on Ecthinbal, looking at a faintly greenish atmosphere, noticeable only because of the sudden change, and fifty pounds seemed to have

been added to his weight. The transmitter was the usual Betz II design, and everything else was familiar except for the creature standing beside the capsule.

The Ecthindar might have been a creation out of green glass, coated with a soft fur, and blown by a bottlemaker who enjoyed novelty. There were two thin, long legs, multijointed, and something that faintly resembled the pelvis of a skeleton. Above that, two other thin rods ran up, with a double bulb where lungs might have been, and shoulders like the collar pads of a football player, joined together and topped by four hard knobs, each with a single eye and orifice. Double arms ran from each shoulder, almost to the ground.

He expected to hear a tinkle when the creature moved, and was surprised when he did hear it, until he realized the sound was carried through the metal floor, not through the thin air.

The creature swung open the capsule door after some incomprehensible process that probably served to sterilize it. Its Galactic Code whistle came through Vic's shoes from the floor. "We greet you, Earthman. Our mansions are poor, but they are yours. Our lives are at your disposal." Then the formal speech ended in a sharp whistle. "Literally, it would seem. We die."

It didn't fit with Vic's expectations, but he tried to take his cue from it. "That's why I'm here. Do you have some kind of ruler? Umm, good. How do I get to see this ruler?" He had few hopes of getting there, but it never did any harm to try.

The Ecthindar seemed unsurprised. "I shall take you at once. For what other purpose is a ruler but to serve those who wish to see it? But—I trespass on your kindness in the delay. But may I question whether a strange light came forth from your defective transmitter?"

Vic snapped a look at it, and nodded slowly.

"It did."

Now the ax would fall. He braced himself for it, but the creature ceremoniously elaborated on his nod.

"I was one who believed it might. It is most comforting to

know my science was true. When the bombs came through, we held them in a shield, but, in our error, we believed them radioactive. We tried a negative aspect of space to counteract them. Of course, it failed, since they were only chemical. But I had postulated that some might have escaped from receiver to transmitter, being negative. You are kind. And now, if you will honor my shoulder with the touch of your hand, so that my portable unit will transport us both . . ."

Vic reached out and the scene shifted at once. There was no apparent transmitter, and the trick beat anything he had heard from other planets. Perhaps it was totally unrelated to the teleport machine.

But he had no time to ask.

A door in the little room opened, and another creature came in, this time single from pelvis to shoulders, but otherwise the same. "The ruler has been requested," it whistled. "That which the ruler is, is yours, and that which the ruler has is nothing. May the ruler somehow serve?"

It was either the most cockeyed bit of naïveté or the fanciest runaround Vic had found, but totally unlike anything he'd been prepared for. He gulped, and began whistling out the general situation on Earth.

The Ecthindar interrupted politely. "That we know. And the converse is true—we too are dying. We are a planet of a thin air, and that little is chlorine. Now from a matter transmitter comes a great rush of oxygen, which we consider poison. Our homes around are burned in it, our plant life is dying of it, and we are forced to remain inside and seal ourselves off. Like you, we can do nothing—the wind from your world is beyond our strength."

"But your science . . ."

"Is beyond yours, true. But your race is adaptable, and we are too leisurely for that virtue."

Vic shook his head, though perhaps it made good sense. "But the bombs . . ."

A series of graceful gestures took place between the two creatures, and the ruler turned back to Vic.

"The ruler had not known, of course. It was not important. We lost a few thousand people whom we love. We understood, however. There is no anger, though it pleases us to see that your courtesy extends across the spaces to us. May your dead pass well."

That was at least one good break in the situation. Vic felt some of his worry slide aside to make room for the rest. "And I don't suppose you have any ideas on how we can take care of this . . ."

There was a shocked moment, with abrupt movements from the two creatures. Then something came up in the ruler's hands, vibrating sharply. Vic jumped back—and froze in mid-stride, to fall awkwardly onto the floor. A chunk of ice seemed to form in his backbone and creep along his spine, until it touched his brain. Death or paralysis? It was all the same; he had air for only an hour more. The two creatures were fluttering at each other and moving toward him when he abruptly and painlessly blacked out.

V

HIS first feeling was the familiar, deadening pull of fatigue as his senses began to come back. Then he saw that he was in a tiny room—and that Pat lay stretched out beside him!

He threw himself up to a sitting position, surprised to find that there were no after-effects to whatever the ruler had used. The damned little fool, coming through after him. And now they had her, too.

Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up beside him. "Darn it, I almost fell asleep waiting for you to revive. It's a good thing I brought extra oxygen flasks. Your hour is about up. How'd you manage to insult them?"

He puzzled over it while she changed his oxygen flask and he did the same for her. "I didn't. I just asked whether they didn't know of some way we could take care of this trouble."

"Which meant to them that you suspected they weren't giving all the help they could, after their formal offer when you came over. I convinced them it was just that you were still learning Code, whatever you said. They're nice, Vic. I never really believed other races were better than we are, but I do now—and it doesn't bother me at all."

"It'd bother Flavin. He'd have to prove they were sissies or something. How do we get out?"

She pushed the door open, and they stepped back into the room of the ruler, who was waiting for them. It made no reference to the misunderstanding, but inspected Vic, whistled approval of his condition, and plunged straight to business.

"We have found part of a solution, Earthman. We die, but it will be two weeks before our end. First, we shall set up a transmitter in permanent transmit, equipped with a precipitator to remove our chlorine, and key it to another of your trans-

mitters. Whichever one you wish. Ecthinbal is heavy, but small, and a balance will be struck between the air going from you and the air returning. The winds between stations may disturb your weather, but not seriously, we hope. That which the ruler is, is yours. A lovely passing."

It touched their shoulders, and they were back briefly in the transmitter, to be almost instantly in the Chicago Branch. Vic was still shaking his head.

"It won't work. The ruler didn't allow for the way our gravity falls off faster and our air thins out higher up. We'd end up with maybe four pounds pressure, which isn't enough. So both planets die—two worlds on my shoulders instead of one. Hell, we couldn't take that offer from them, anyhow. Pat, how'd you convince them to let me go?"

She had shucked out of the pressure suit and stood combing her hair. "Common sense, as Amos says. I figured engineers consider each other engineers first, and aliens second, so I went to the head engineer instead of the ruler. He fixed it up somehow. I guess I must have sounded pretty desperate, at that, knowing your air would give out after an hour."

They went through the local intercity teleport to Bennington and on into Vic's office, where Flavin met them with open relief and a load of questions. Vic let Pat answer, while he mulled over her words. Somewhere, there was an idea—let the rulers alone and go to the engineers.

Then Vic was speaking. "Getting our air through other planets. *Our* air. It's a routing job. If we can set up a chain so the air going out of one transmitter in a station is balanced by air coming from another in the same station, there'd be a terrific draft. But most of it would be confined in the station, and there wouldn't be the outside whirlwind to keep us from getting near. Instead of a mad rush of air in or out of the building, there'd be only eddy currents outside of the inner chamber. We'd keep our air, and maybe have time to figure out some way of getting at that hunk of glass."

"Won't work," Flavin said gloomily. "Suppose Wilkes was

asked to route through for another planet. He'd have to turn it down. Too much risk."

"That's where Pat gave me the tip. Engineers get used to thinking of each other as engineers instead of competing races—they have to work together. They have the same problems and develop the same working habits. If I were running a station and the idea was put to me, I'd hate to turn it down, and I might not think of the political end. I've always wanted to see what happened in continuous transmittal; I'll be tickled pink to get at the instrument rolls in the station. And a lot of other engineers will feel the same."

"We're already keyed to Plathgol on a second transmitter," Pat added. "And the Ecthindar indicated they had full operation when it happened, so they're keyed to five other planets."

"Bomb-dropping starts in about four hours," Flavin commented. "After that, what?"

"No chance. They'll go straight through, and the Ecthindar can neutralize them—but one is pretty sure to start blasting here and carry through in full action. Then there'll be no other transmitter in their station, just a big field on permanent receive."

Vic took over Teleport Interstellar authority. Chicago's routing setup was the best in the country, he needed it. Now how did he go about getting a staff trained to use it?

"Know how to find things here?" Flavin asked Pat. He accepted her nod, and looked surprised at Ptheela's equally quick assent. Then he grinned at Vic and began shucking off his coat. "Okay, you see before you one of the best traffic managers that ever helped pull a two-bit railroad out of the red, before I got better offers in politics. I'm good. You get me the dope, Vic can haggle on the transmitter phones, and I'll route it."

He *was* good. Vic watched him take over with surprise, and a sudden growing liking for the man. Flavin had probably been a lot more of a man, before he'd been shoved into politics. Maybe he'd have done less of drinking and picking up prejudices if he'd been working where he knew he was doing

a good job. Certainly he had adapted well enough to the present situation, and he looked happier now as he took over.

Flavin's mind seemed to soak up all routing data at once, from a single look at the complicated blocks of transmitter groups and key-ins. He jumped from step to step without apparent thought, and he had to have information only once before engraving it on his mind. It was a tough nut, since the stations housed six transmitters each, keyed to six planets —but in highly varied combinations; every world had its own group of tie-ins with planets, also. Routing was the most complicated job in the whole problem.

Plathgol was handled by Ptheela, who was still in good standing until the Council would learn of her breaking the law by talking to Vic. There was no trouble there.

It was a maze, but the list was soon complete, from Earth to Ecthinbal, Ee, Petzby, Norag, Szpendrknopalavotschel, Seloo, Enad, Brjd, Teeni, and finally through Plathgol to Earth. Vic whistled the given signal, and the acknowledgments came through. It was in operation. Flavin's nod indicated Wilkes had confirmed it and held off the bombs.

The communicators were chirping busily.

"Some of the rulers must be catching on and don't like it," Ptheela guessed.

To Vic's surprise, though, several did like it, and were simply sending along hopes for success. Ecthinbal's message was short, but it tingled along Vic's nerves: "It is good to have friends."

Bennington was reporting by normal televisor contact, but while things seemed to be improving, they still couldn't get near enough to be sure. The field was apparently collapsing as the air was fed inside it, though very slowly.

The harsh rasp of a buzzer woke him from a nap, while a light blinked on and off near his head. He shook some of the sleep confusion out of his thoughts, and made out an intercom box. Flavin's voice came over it harshly and he flipped the switch.

"Vic, where the hell are you? Never mind. Wilkes just woke me up with a call. Vic, it's helped, but not enough. The field is about even with the building now. It's stopped shrinking, but we're still losing air. There's too much loss at Ecthinbal and at Ee—the engineer there didn't get the portals capped right, and Ecthinbal can't do anything. We're getting about one-third of our air back. And Wilkes can't hold the pressure for bombing much longer! Get over here."

VI

"WHERE'S Ptheela?" Vic asked as he came into the transmitter room. She needed no sleep, and should have taken care of things.

"Gone. Back to Plathgol, I guess," Flavin said bitterly. "She was flicking out as I woke up. Rats deserting the sinking ship—though I was starting to figure her different. It just shows you can't trust a plant."

Vic swept his attention to the communicator panel. The phones were still busy. They were still patient. Even the doubtful ones were now accepting things; but it couldn't last forever. Even without the risk, the transmitter banks were needed for regular use. Many did not have inexhaustible power sources, either.

A new note cut in over the whistling now, and he turned to the Plathgol phone, wondering whether it was Ptheela and what she wanted. The words were English, but the voice was strange.

"Plathgol calling. This is Thlegaa, Wife of Twelve Husbands, Supreme Plathgol Teleport Engineer, Ruler of the Council of United Plathgol, and hereditary goddess, if you want the whole letterhead. Ptheela just gave me the bad news. Why didn't you call on us before—or isn't our air good enough for you?"

"Hell, do you all speak English?" Vic asked, too surprised to care whether he censored his thoughts. "Your air always smelled good to me. Are you serious?"

"I'm absolutely serious about the offer. We're pulling the stops off the transmitter housing. We run a trifle higher pressure than you, so we'll probably make up the whole loss. But I'm not an absolute ruler, so it might be a good idea to speed

things up. You can thank me later. Oh—Ptheela's just been banned for giving you illegal data. She confessed. When you get your Bennington plant working, she'll probably be your first load from us. She's packing up now."

Flavin's face held too much relief. Vic hated to disillusion the politician as he babbled happily about always knowing the Plathgolians were swell people. But Vic knew the job was a long way from solved. With Plathgol supplying air, the field would collapse back to the inside of the single transmitter housing, and there should be an even balance of ingoing and outcoming air, which would end the rush of air into the station, and make the circular halls passable, except for eddy currents. But getting into the inner chamber, where the air formed a gale between the two transmitters, was another matter.

Flavin's chauffeur was asleep at the wheel of the car as they came out of the Bennington local office, yet instinct seemed to rouse him, and the car cut off wildly for the station. Vic had noticed that the cloud around it was gone, and a mass of people was grouped nearby. The wind that had been sucked in and around it to prevent even a tank getting through was gone now, though the atmosphere would probably show signs of it in freak weather reports for weeks after.

Pat had obviously figured out the trouble remaining, and didn't look too surprised at the gloomy faces of the transmitter crew who were grouped near the north entrance. But she began swearing under her breath, as methodically and levelly as a man. Vic was ripping his shirt off as they drew up.

"This time you stay out," he told her. "It's strictly a matter of muscle power against wind resistance, and a man has a woman beat there."

"Why do you think I was cursing?" she asked. "Take it easy, though."

The men opened a way for him. He stripped to his briefs, and let them smear him with oil to cut down air resistance a final fraction. Eddy currents caught at him before he went in,

but not too strongly. Getting past the first shielding wasn't too bad. He found the second entrance port through the middle shield, and snapped a chain around his waist.

Then the full picture of what must have happened on Plathgol hit him. Chains wouldn't have helped when they pulled off the coverings from the entrances, the sudden rush of air must have crushed their lungs and broken their bones, no matter what was done. Imagine volunteering for sure death to help another world! He had to make good on his part.

He got to the inner portal, but the eddies there were too strong to go farther. Even sticking his eyes beyond the edge almost caught him into the blast between the two transmitters. Then he was clawing his way out again.

Amos met him, shaking a gloomy head. "Never make it, Vic. Common sense. I've been there three times with no luck. And the way that draft blows, it'd knock even a tractor plumb out of the way before it could reach that hunk of glass."

Vic nodded. The tanks would take too long to arrive, anyhow, though it would be a good idea to have them called. He yelled to Flavin, who came over on the run, while Vic was making sure that the little regular office building still stood.

"Order the tanks, if we need them," he suggested. "Get me a rifle, some hard-nosed bullets, an all-angle vise big enough to clamp on a three-inch edge, and two of those midget telesets for use between house and field. Quick!"

Amos stared at him, puzzled, but Flavin's car was already roaring toward Bennington, with a couple of cops leading the way with open sirens. Flavin was back with everything in twenty minutes, and Vic selected two of the strongest, leanest-looking men to come with him, while Pat went down to set the midget pickup in front of the still-operating televisor between the transmitter chamber and the little office. Vic picked up the receiver and handed the rest of the equipment to the other two.

It was sheer torture fighting back to the inner entrance port, but they made it, and the other two helped to brace

him with the chain while he clamped the vise to the edge of the portal, and locked the rifle into it, somehow fighting it into place. In the rather ill-defined picture on the tiny set's screen, he could see the huge fragment of glass, out of line from either entrance, between two covering uprights. He could just see the rifle barrel also. The picture lost detail in being transmitted to the little office and picked up from the screen for retransmittal back to him, but it would have to do.

The rifle was loaded to capacity with fourteen cartridges. He lined it up as best he could and tightened the vise, before pulling the trigger. The bullet ricocheted from the inner shield and headed toward the glass—but it missed by a good three feet.

He was close on the fifth try, not over four inches off. But clinging to the edge while he pulled the trigger was getting harder, and the wind velocity inside was tossing the bullets off course.

He left the setting, fired four more shots in succession before he had to stop to rest. They were all close, but scattered. That could keep up all day, seemingly.

He pulled himself up again and squeezed the trigger. There was no sound over the roar of the wind—and then there was suddenly a sound, as if the gale in there had stopped to cough.

A blast of air struck, picking all three men up and tossing them against the wall. He'd forgotten the lag before the incoming air could be cut! It could be as fatal as the inrush alone.

But the gale was dying as he hit the wall. His flesh was bruised from the shock, but it wasn't serious. Plathgol had managed to make their remote control cut out almost to the micro-second of the time when the flow to them had stopped, or the first pressure released—and transmitter waves were supposed to be instantaneous.

He tasted the feeling of triumph as he crawled painfully back. With this transmitter off and the others remote controlled, the whole battle was over. Ecthinbal had keyed out automatically when Earth stopped sending. From now on,

every transmitter would have a full set of remote controls, so the trouble could never happen again.

He staggered out, unhooking the chain, while workmen went rushing in. Pat came through the crowd, with a towel and a pair of pants, and began wiping the oil off him while he tried to dress. Her grin was a bit shaky. He knew it must have looked bad when the final counterblast whipped out.

Amos looked up glumly, and Vic grinned at him. "All over, Amos."

The man nodded, staring at the workmen who were dragging out the great pieces of glass from the building. His voice was strained, unnatural. "Yeah. Common sense solution, Vic."

Then his eyes swung aside and his face hardened. Vic saw the Envoy shoving through, with two wiry men behind him. The Envoy nodded at Vic, but his words were addressed to Amos. "And it should have been common sense that you'd be caught, Amos. These men are from your F.B.I. They have the men who paid you, and I supposed the glass will prove that it was a normal capsule, simply shocked with superhot spray and overdosed with supersonics. Didn't you realize that your easy escape to Plathgol was suspicious?"

Pat had come up; her voice was unbelieving. "Amos!"

Amos swung back then. "Yeah, Pat. I'd do it again, and maybe even without the money. You think I like these God damned animals and plants acting so uppity? I liked it good enough before they came. Maybe I didn't get rid of them, but I sure came close."

The two men were leading him away as he finished, and Pat stared after him, tears in her eyes.

The Envoy broke in. "He'll get a regular trial in your country. It looks better for the local governments to handle these things. But I'll see if he can't get a lighter sentence than the men who hired him. You did a good job, Vic—you and Pat and Flavin. You proved that Earth can cooperate with other worlds. That is the part that impresses the Council as no other solution could have. Your world and Plathgol have al-

ready been accepted officially as full members of the Council now, under Ecthinbal's tutelage. We're a little easier about passing information and knowledge to planets that have passed the test. But you'll hear all that in the announcement over the network tonight. I'll see you again. I'm sure of that."

He was gone, barely in time to clear space for Ptheela, as she came trooping up with eight thin, wispy versions of herself in tow. She chuckled. "They promoted me before they banished me, Pat. Meet my *eight* strong husbands. Now I'll have the strongest seed on all Earth. Oh, I almost forgot. A present for you and Vic."

Then she was gone, leading her husbands toward Flavin's car, while Vic stared down at a particularly ugly *tsiuna* in Pat's hands. He twisted his mouth resignedly.

"All right, I'll learn to eat the stuff," he told her. "I suppose I'll have to get used to it. Pat, will you marry me?"

She dropped the *tsiuna* as she came to him, her lips reaching up for his. It wasn't until a month later that he found *tsiuna* tasted better than chicken.

Stardust

By Chad Oliver

COLLINS floated through the jet blackness that composed the innards of the ship. He moved with every sense alert. He heard the low hum of voices welling up out of the emptiness ahead of him and the oxygen in the still air tasted sweet to him as he drank it into his lungs. The cold smell of metal was all around him, hemming him in, and he shivered involuntarily in the darkness.

At precisely the right instant, he extended his hand forward, made contact with an invisible brace that felt rough and dead to his tingling fingers, and changed direction with a light, delicate shove. The new tunnel was almost as dark as the one he had left behind him, but he could see a faint luminous haze in the distance. His pulses quickened as tiny warmth currents touched his skin and he caught the smell of men in the abyss ahead of him.

It was good to be going toward men, Collins thought. It was a good feeling. He kept to the exact center of the shaft, as far away from the cold metal taste as he could get. A man knew loneliness in the eternal night, alone with his thoughts. A man knew fear—

He guided his body around another turn, and still another, and felt the sudden life shocks in front of him. He closed his eyes to narrow slits, letting them adjust. He could feel space and air on all sides, and the cold, unpleasant smell of metal receded into the distance. Warmth currents bathed his skin. And yet there was a coolness even here, an icy coolness of hostility that mottled the warmth tides like a cancerous disease—

Collins shook the feeling from his mind. Slowly, gradually, the chamber took shape around him, although he still could

not look directly at the intolerable, flickering flame that hissed and sputtered atop the fire torch. Black shadows writhed in the gray half-light on the periphery of the fire-glow and white bodies floated all around him, waiting.

Collins took a deep breath. He could see again.

"Class will come to order," he said into the silence.

The men—young men, all of them—hesitated and then moved into a circle around him. The circle was composed of three distinct layers, one even with Collins, one slightly above him, and another just below him. Each layer contained four men. Collins forced himself to look directly at the fire torch, even though the unaccustomed brightness lanced little needles of pain through his eyes and narrowed their pupils to tiny dots of black. It was not easy, but he kept his face expressionless.

Men were made to live in light.

"Before we start, do any of you have any questions about your work for today?" His voice was soft, patient. But it had a firm edge to it—sheathed now, but capable of cutting like a knife when the need arose.

The young men looked at each other, faintly hostile, uncertain.

"Speak up," Collins said, smiling. "Asking questions is not a sign of ignorance, you know. It is only the stupid who never ask questions."

One of the men cleared his throat. It was Lanson, one of the most intelligent of them. Collins nodded encouragement.

"We don't understand our problem for today, sir," he said, faintly accenting the *sir* to give it a slightly contemptuous ring. "We've talked it over among ourselves, but we can't seem to get it."

"Be specific, Lanson. Exactly what is it that you do not understand?"

Lanson shifted nervously in the still air. "It's about this problem of falling bodies, sir," he said. His voice was genuinely puzzled now; Lanson was interested almost in spite of himself.

"You stated that, because of gravity, two bodies will fall through a vacuum at precisely the same rate of speed, regardless of weight—that is, if we get your meaning correctly, a *heavy* body will fall with the same speed as a *light* body, or, to use your example, a piece of paper and a chunk of metal will hit the floor together."

"O.K. so far, Lanson." Collins braced himself, knowing what was coming. It *was* difficult.

"Well, sir," Lanson continued, choosing his words with care, "we sort of see what you're driving at in the concepts *heavy* and *light*—but what is *falling*? What pushes the piece of paper and the chunk of metal down? Why don't they float like we do?"

"They *do* float," a voice whispered loudly. "Everyone knows that."

Collins looked at the white bodies around him, pale and ghostly in the dancing fireglow. Beyond them, the great darkness hovered like a gigantic beast, shadow tentacles writhing, waiting to envelop them, pull them all into the black vault of the abyss. Collins shivered again as an icy chill crawled down his spine. They couldn't go on like this forever, he knew. They weren't trying the way they used to—it was very hard, and they weren't trying. Every day, every hour, they lost ground. And below them, dancing around their great fires—

He had to make them see.

"You are right, in a sense," he told them carefully. "I'm glad to see that you're using your minds and not just accepting what I say without thought of your own. They do float, as you've seen here. The point is that conditions here are unnatural, not normal, although they are the only ones we've ever known. I've tried to tell you about gravity—"

"Him and his gravity," someone snickered.

"We're not approaching the situation with the proper gravity," someone else whispered. Several of the young men laughed aloud at the pun, staring at Collins with ill-concealed contempt.

"Yes, but what is gravity?" Lanson persisted. "You say that in science we experiment, we measure, we deal with facts rather than wishful thinking. Very well—*show* us some gravity then."

Collins breathed deeply, feeling the doubt all around him. "I can show you no gravity that you can recognize as such," he said slowly. "Nor can I show you the atoms of which matter is composed, much less the subatomic constituents of the atoms themselves. You must be patient, you must consider the situation in which we find ourselves. Even in science, gentlemen, there are times when we must go along on faith, do the best we can—"

"We're not trying to dispute your word, sir," said Lanson, who was doing precisely that. "But it seems to us that even if all this stuff were true somewhere, sometime, we still have to live *here* and not *there*. Since we have to live here, why not confine ourselves to this world, to what can be of practical use to us, and just forget about—"

"No!" Collins said sharply, the anger rising in him like a hot flood. "That will do, Lanson, unless you wish to be reported. We *must* not forget, or we are lost; we are animals, we are no longer men. One day you will see and understand. Until then—"

He stopped, suddenly. The men shifted uncertainly in the air. Collins tensed, every sense alive, vibrant, questing. He probed the deep shadows. His skin tingled. Something was out there—those shadows were no longer empty. Something—

"The other men," he hissed. "Kill that torch."

The flame sputtered and died. The men drifted backward, united now against a common danger, fighting to adjust their eyes again to the absence of light. Collins felt his heart hammering in his throat and cold sweat in the palms of his hands. He drew his knife, waiting.

In the dead silence, panic stalked on padded feet through the chamber of darkness.

Ship's Officer Mark Langston tossed off a few choice ex-

pletives and permitted them to explode harmlessly within the confines of his book-lined office. He flipped open a desk drawer, removed a well-worn flask, and treated himself to a short snifter of Scotch. Then he replaced the flask, banished the contemptuous expression from his face, and glued a patient smile to his mouth.

"Come in," he said, bracing himself.

The office door opened with a calm precision that hinted at a hurricane just below the horizon. A tall, angular, hatchet-faced woman marched inexorably into the room with her teen-age daughter following meekly in her wake.

"You are the Ship's Officer?" inquired the woman in a voice like a file sawing on iron.

"Right the first time," said Mark Langston.

"You're not the same man I spoke to last time," the woman stated suspiciously. "Where is Mr. Raleigh?"

"He jumped overboard," Mark Langston wanted to say.

"Mr. Raleigh is not on duty at the moment," Mark Langston said. "My name is Langston—may I be of service?"

"Well, I should certainly hope so. I am Mrs. Simmons, and this is my daughter Laura."

Mark Langston nodded and glanced at the note that Raleigh had left on his desk. *As a small token of my esteem, I have willed you Mrs. Simmons,* the note read. *May God have mercy on your soul.*

"What seems to be the trouble, Mrs. Simmons?"

Mrs. Simmons sighed deeply, giving an excellent imitation of a death rattle. "It's this excruciating artificial gravity, Mr. Langston," she said. "I simply cannot stand it another moment. I'm having terrible pains around my heart and my back aches. I'm a nervous wreck. You've got to do something, my man. And my darling Laura absolutely can't sleep at night—she does need her sleep so, she's such a delicate child. Aren't you, Laura?"

"Yes, mother," said Laura in a delicate voice.

"Well now, Mrs. Simmons," Langston said carefully, struggling desperately to maintain the smile on his face. "I find this

most difficult to understand. Do you have these symptoms back on Earth? You see, ship's gravity is kept at all times at Earth normal—there's no difference whatever, in effect, between artificial gravity and the gravity you have lived with all your life."

"My good man," Mrs. Simmons said, drawing herself up haughtily, "are you accusing me of—"

"Not at all, not at all," Langston lied. He forced himself to remember Mr. Simmons and his power and influence with the Interstellar Board of Trade. "It's quite possible that the machinery is out of adjustment or something. I'll check into it at once, Mrs. Simmons. We will spare no effort in securing your comfort during your stay on our ship. In the meantime, won't you check with Dr. Ford on Three Deck? I'm certain that he'll be able to help you and your daughter."

Mrs. Simmons brightened visibly. "Oh, Mr. Langston!" she breathed. "Do you really think I require medical attention?"

"It's entirely possible, Mrs. Simmons," Mark Langston said, and meant it.

After mother and daughter had left, Langston got up from his desk and limped over to the private screen against the outside wall. He flicked it on and an infinity of night reached coldly into his soul and pulled him out among a myriad of incredible stars.

There it was, right in his office with him: space, deep space, the endless darkness and the stars that had been his life, his very being. He lost himself in the ever-new immensities. This was space—the space that he had helped to conquer, the star trails that he had made his own. This was the strange world that he had chosen for a home. Out there, far beyond imagining, distant beyond belief, the men and the women that he had lived with, fought with, laughed with, flashed forever into the deeps of night. They carried the great adventure onward, always. And now . . .

And now he was no longer with them.

Mark Langston turned off the screen and limped back to his desk. They had opened up the greatest frontier of them

all—and for what? For Mrs. Simmons and Laura? For stupidity and greed and ignorance? For wealthy tourists who made the Earth a world to be ridiculed? For what?

A red light flashed over his visibox. He switched it on. It was Stan Owens, the ship anthropologist. He looked excited, which was profoundly unusual.

"What's up, Stan? More of those pesky space pirates?"

"Cut the clowning, Father Time. We've run smack dab into the middle of something."

"On the Capella run? What is it—the Ultimate Boredom at last?"

"On the level, Mark. We need you in the control room on the double."

Mark Langston eyed his friend's face with sudden interest. "Hey," he said, "you're not kidding!"

"Come up and see for yourself," Owens smiled, and switched off.

Mark Langston left his office at a thoroughly respectable speed, hurried down the corridor with scarcely a limp, and caught the lift to the control room. He stepped out and instantly it hit him—the spirit, the *feel* of a ship up against the unknown. He had known that feeling a thousand times in his life, and he responded to it with a spreading grin.

Owens collared him and pulled him toward a knot of men gathered around a subsidiary computer. "Hang on tight, old son," the anthropologist said. "This may be too much for your ancient nervous system—this crate has hit the well-known jackpot."

The men stepped back to make room and Captain Kleberg welcomed Mark by shoving a computer report into his hand. "Take a look at this, Mark," he said, running his fingers through his iron-gray hair. "I've about decided that the computer's psycho, or we're psycho, or both."

Langston examined the report with a practiced eye. It was a sub-space survey report—normal space being sub-space with respect to their ship, the *Wilson Langford*, in hyperspace—and seemed to be routine enough at first glance.

There was the usual coordinate check, the drift check, the hydrogen check, the distress beam check—nothing to get excited about. In fact—then he saw it.

"But that's impossible," he said.

"Agreed," said Captain Kleberg. "But there it is."

"You figure it out," Owens suggested.

Mark Langston checked the report again carefully. "Is this a gag?" he asked, knowing full well that it wasn't. "There *can't* be a ship down there."

"Just the same," pointed out the Navigation Officer, "thar she blows!"

"Maybe it's the *Flying Dutchman*," Owens offered.

Langston tried to think the thing through logically. But it simply wasn't logical. There evidently was some sort of a ship down there, in normal space, light-years out from any planetary system. What was it doing there? How did it get there?

"Any distress calls of any sort?" he asked.

"Dead silence," said Captain Kleberg. "And we can't get a *blip* out of her."

"How about positioning?"

"We're almost directly 'above' her," the Navigation Officer reported. "We're practically back-pedaling to keep from losing her."

"How about accelerations?"

"Hard to tell, but I'd guess that she's in free fall. Absolutely no energy tracings at all, and no radiations. She's dead."

Langston let that sink in for a minute. "Have you got a picture yet?" he asked finally.

"They're building one up downstairs," Captain Kleberg said. "It isn't an easy job, of course, but they should be getting something soon."

"Just wait until some of our noble human cargo gets wind of the fact that we're off our course and will miss scheduled landing time by a week or three," Stan Owens chuckled. "We'll have everybody down on us like a pack of hyenas."

There was a whirring buzz, and a three-dimensional mock-

up thumped out of a chute. Captain Kleberg snatched it up and put it on a chart table where everyone could get a good look at it.

There was dead silence in the control room.

"It just can't be," Captain Kleberg said finally, his voice very small.

"No," Mark Langston agreed softly. "But it is."

The men stared at each other, searching for words that were not there.

They came up from the depths, spawned in hate, fed on fury, Collins could smell them, feel the warm currents from their bodies and the rush and surge of air currents from beating wings. They choked the chamber, filling it, strangling it, shooting up like gas under pressure from the world below. Like creatures from hell, and yet—

Collins edged back to the mouth of the tunnel and stopped, letting the rest of the rear guard slide into position around him. Differences were forgotten now, melted in the flame of danger; Collins smiled without humor. It was ironic—they respected him only as a fighter.

He floated down to the very floor of the chamber and touched the cold metal. He blanked his mind, watching his chance.

The other men came in high, as they always did, and he felt and smelled and heard the battle in the darkness above him. Knives and clubs and spears collided with clanging crashes and the echoes of harsh breathing filled the chamber with sound. He strained his eyes, trying to see. Something wet and sticky brushed his face: blood pumping in a warm pulsing stream from a punctured artery.

With a blind rage seething within him, a rage as much at himself as his enemies, Collins launched himself from the floor. His nostrils quivered and he angrily choked off a low animal growl of defiance in his throat. He went up, high and hard, his knife extended in front of him. For a long, intolerable instant there was nothing. And then—contact.

Collins cut and slashed with methodical accuracy, giving no warning and no quarter. Like so many men who see fighting for what it is, he cherished no illusions about it and was chillingly effective. His invisible antagonist fought in silence and stopped, suddenly. Collins moved on, pushing the body away from him. He went up again, slowly, trying to sort the sounds and smells and feelings of battle into some kind of a coherent pattern that would enable him to tell friend from foe. He hesitated, briefly, sensing danger, and then shifted just in time as something hissed past his head and struck his shoulder a numbing blow.

Fighting to see, Collins closed to the attack. The man almost got away from him, but he grabbed a foot and held on. The man suddenly lurched forward and up, and Collins felt the rush of air from his wings. Desperately he lashed out with his knife. He had to get the mutant before he was smashed against a wall—those fragile wings gave the man an impossible advantage in the open air.

A foot kicked him over and over again, methodically, in the face. There was a complete absence of vocal sound, lending to the combat the unreal deadness of a dream. Collins twisted into position, ignoring the kicking foot, and slashed at a wing. The knife punched home, and Collins carefully ripped the thin membrane to shreds. His opponent faltered. Collins cut him again, and then was pushed away. Collins let him go and dived for the tunnel. He could feel the battle receding around him as the other men began to turn back. The smell of blood was sickening in the still air. His shoulder throbbed with pain and his throat was dry and thick with dust.

Collins darted into the tunnel, gasping for breath, and pushed himself forward. He hadn't gone ten yards before he contacted someone else—going the other way.

A knife whirred past his ear and he caught an arm and twisted. There was only a weak, hopeless resistance. Tired or wounded, or perhaps both, he thought grimly. He moved in for the kill, his own knife ready.

"You're beaten," he whispered. "Surrender."

By way of reply, a hand reached out of the darkness and fingernails clawed at his face. Collins closed in warily, seeking an opening. A cornered animal was always dangerous, he had read, and man was no exception. But he was sick of the killing, sick with horror and the smell of blood. His anger was gone, leaving the man. But he could see no way out. What could you do with such a man? When you gave him a chance for his life, he thanked you by renewed fury. His enemy was not a man, he caught himself thinking. He was an animal. Collins raised the knife.

"My spirit will return to destroy you," the man hissed weakly. "My spirit will not forget!"

Suddenly revolted by the thing he had almost done, Collins returned the knife to its sheath.

"You are my prisoner," he said quietly.

The man laughed in his face and clawed him again, feebly. Collins hit him once, wincing as his fist smashed into his jaw, holding on to the other's arm to keep him from floating away. Then he pulled the inert body with him down the tunnel, away from the chamber of death and into the endless darkness and the silence.

After turning the man over to Malcolm, and resting briefly in his quarters, Collins swam up through the dark tunnels to the captain's room. He tried the door, found it unlocked, and floated inside.

The captain's torch was burning as always. It was a wonderful thing, as all the special torches were with their combustion draft chambers. But more wonderful still was the soft, steady light from the myriad of stars that were suspended like gleaming jewels in the black velvet of the viewports. Collins drank in their beauty with his eyes and then turned toward the captain.

"Sit down, my boy," the captain said. "I was just having lunch."

The captain was eating alone at the little table in the center of the control room. His long, snow-white hair was silver in the flickering torchlight and his dark eyes flashed in

his hard, deeply lined face. The captain had strapped himself into his chair and fastened the plate and glass to the nailed-down table. It was far simpler to eat while floating, but the captain refused to do so.

Collins slid into the chair across from him and buckled himself in place. He ate in silence for a moment, swallowing the sticky synthetics without relish and washing them down with drafts of water sucked up through a straw from a closed glass.

"We've got to find a way," Collins said finally.

"Yes. We lost a man."

"There *must* be a way."

"There is no way," the captain said slowly. "But we must keep trying."

Collins looked at the captain, his mind tired with worry. The captain was very old now, he thought. Very old, this man who had held them all together for so long. When he was gone—

"They are beginning to slip, my boy," the captain said. "I don't know how much longer we can hold them. They are turning into animals like the rest of them. And when that happens, we are through. The fools! Do they believe that the food and water will last forever? Time, *time*—we must have more time, and it is running out on us."

Collins shrugged. "We're losing the fight as it is," he pointed out. "Let's not kid ourselves. We need more than time, and dreams won't change the situation any."

"You're young yet, my boy," the captain said softly. "There will come a time when dreams will be all you have left."

Collins was nervous, sitting there in the great loneliness with the captain. The turn their conversation had taken worried him, and his worry was tinged with embarrassment. It was not good to sit in on another man's innermost thoughts; that was why there were barriers between human beings. And the captain was so old, sitting there—a shell of a man with his strength eaten away by long years spent in a futile

battle. If there had been but one real victory, rather than an endless slow defeat . . .

But there hadn't been. And yet the captain must not give up, for when he went down they all went down. "This is a real problem, sir," he said, "a problem in science. As such, it has an answer. You've told me that all of my life. If it isn't true—"

"Oh, it's true, it's true," the captain sighed, running a thin hand through his snow-white hair. "It's true as far as it goes. But it isn't just a problem in science we have to face here—it's a problem in human relationships. We have to solve that problem first, and even then I'm no longer sure that we're capable of solving the other. It's been so long—"

"It's impossible," Collins stated flatly, drawing the captain out. "It just couldn't have happened. What could have gone wrong? We've been over it a thousand times, all of us—studied the plans, the records, the theories. There must be an extra factor somewhere, some strange and unknowable—"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed the captain violently, stung out of his apathy. "Let's have no metaphysical gibberish, my boy—not in this room."

"But how *did* it happen?"

"That's not the question," the captain snapped, his eyes flashing again. "The question is, what are we going to do about it? Here we are—accept that. Where do we go from here?"

Collins didn't answer him, for a good and simple reason. There wasn't any answer. Then he looked at the captain, who watched him wordlessly. *He* had not quit. He had fought and tried and worked and dreamed until his blood grew slow within him and *still* had not surrendered to the shadows and the darkness. He had nagged them and ridiculed them and hurt them—but he had kept them men.

Collins unfastened his belt and floated free of the chair.

"I'm going to see the other man I brought in," he said. "Maybe I can find a lead."

"Good luck, my boy," said the captain softly.

Collins pushed off against a brace and swam into the darkness. All life ended in death, that he knew. But it was how you met that death that made the difference, that marked off finally one man from another. When his turn came, as he sensed it was coming now, he wanted to go out the way a man should—and not like a mindless beast that screamed and struggled in a black vault of emptiness, unloved and alone.

The four men eyed each other over the bottle on Captain Kleberg's private table. All of them occupied chairs, but other than that their positions were remarkably dissimilar. Captain Kleberg sat in a remotely orthodox position, looking, Mark Langston thought, as though his best friend had just strolled in and punched him in the face. Stan Owens, an enigmatic smile playing around the corners of his mouth, had tilted his chair back at a precarious angle and propped his large and unlovely feet up on the table. Jim McConnell, the lanky chief engineer on the *Wilson Langford*, slouched far down with his long legs extending far underneath the table and his face just about even with the neck of the bottle. Mark Langston had turned his chair backwards and perched on it like a saddle, puffing steadily on a thoroughly venerable pipe and occasionally bombarding all concerned with an ominous cloud of blue smoke.

"Well, gentlemen," said Mark Langston, "we seem to have walked smack into a double-dyed purple whiz."

"You've said that before," Captain Kleberg pointed out gloomily. "I want to know what we're going to do about it."

"O.K.," said McConnell, hanging a cigarette at a miraculous angle out of his mouth, "here's the way I see it. First of all, we've found a derelict. It happens to be the old *Viking*, but what's the difference?"

"What's the difference?" echoed Mark Langston. *The first ship*, his mind whispered. *The first of them all.* "If you meant that, it's a singularly cold remark to make."

"Agreed," Jim McConnell nodded, smiling faintly. "*If* I meant it. I'm just trying to jolt you jokers down to earth, or

at least to ship-level. We won't get anywhere with this ah-the-wonder-of-it-all attitude. That dead ship down there *is* the *Viking*, the first of the interstellar ships, the ship that vanished—the ship that was, in fact, an anachronism almost before it got started. But as far as we're concerned it might just as well be the *Mudball X*. With reference to this problem, it's just a ship and the sooner we start looking at it that way the sooner we'll start getting somewhere. End of speech, protected by copyright."

"Don't stop now, Jim," Captain Kleberg said. "Let's see where we get."

McConnell lit a new cigarette from the remnants of its predecessor and shifted his shoulders against the back of the chair until he was comfortable. "Here's the deal then, as I see it," he said slowly. "The *Viking* down there has been unreported for over two hundred years. As far as we can tell, there's no life on her—or at any rate none that's capable of handling her technological equipment. The *Viking* appears to be good and dead. But when she blasted off, back in the year 2100, she carried a crew of two hundred—one hundred men and one hundred women. Every schoolboy knows their story. First question: Is it possible that anyone is still alive on that ship?"

There was a long silence in Captain Kleberg's room while the four men thought of that lonely ship, alone for centuries, dead and silent and outmoded. A heroic thing, reduced to tragi-comic dimensions by the onrush of technology, and yet—

Mark Langston put his cold pipe on the table and leaned forward. "My guess is yes," he said carefully. "Yes, it's possible."

"Air?" questioned Captain Kleberg doubtfully. "Water? Food? Gravity? The ship is dead, you know—there's no question about that part."

Langston nodded. "Yes, I've taken that into account. Look at it this way: First of all, the *Viking* was not, of course, a faster-than-light ship. The trip to Capella was expected to occupy the better part of two hundred years, with the de-

scendants of the original crew finishing the trip. The food would be synthetic, and there would of necessity be plenty. The air supply on the *Viking* was supplied by sealed hydroponic tanks, the valve of which, unless I'm greatly mistaken, were pressure affairs that operated independently of the main power source. I think the air supply would hold out—it's at least possible. The water was carried in tanks and wouldn't be markedly affected by a power failure. Gravity? Well, there wouldn't be any, as far as I can see—"

"Man is a very adaptable animal," Stan Owens said, anticipating him. "He could survive—theoretically at any rate."

"That's it, then," McConnell said. "Until we find out differently, we'll have to assume that there is life of some sort still present in that hulk. Two hundred plus years isn't a fantastic length of time; there may very well be people on that ship. That takes care of our plan of action. It's simple. They're there, trapped. We're here, with a nice new ship. Solution: Go get them and bring them aboard."

Stan Owens' chair hit the floor with a bang.

"Beg pardon," he said, "but that's the one thing we *can't* do."

Mark Langston turned and looked at him.

Stan Owens picked up the empty bottle from the table and jabbed it in McConnell's general direction. "Think a moment, all of you," he said. "This thing isn't quite as simple as it looks and going off half-cocked isn't going to get us anything but a nice soggy fizzle."

"O.K., ape-man," McConnell sighed at the anthropologist. "I might have known that *you* would come up with something complicated. You guys wouldn't fix a bicycle without a field report and culture analysis."

"Look," said Stan Owens patiently. "Let's assume that everything Jim has said is true—if it isn't, if the ship is dead inside as well as out, it doesn't concern us. Let's assume that there are people, human beings, still alive on the *Viking*—people who have lived their entire lives in the darkness, who have never known gravity, who have lived in a world as dif-

ferent from ours as hydrogen is from uranium, who have lived in a static world of death and decay, a world slowly running down—"

A cold chill seemed to seep through the little room like an icy mist. *The children of the* Viking, Mark Langston thought with a feeling akin to awe, *the strange children of the* Viking—

"Let's not have any romantic hogwash, now," Stan Owens continued, waving the empty bottle. "We have no way of knowing how long the *Viking* has been a dead ship, nor do we know what happened to her. But the drive was automatic, wasn't it, Jim?"

McConnell nodded. "That's right. An early atomic drive, kicking up a thrust about equal to a bit less than one-fifth light-year per year in terms of unit distance."

"It wouldn't have just failed," Mark Langston added. "It must have been tampered with."

"Well, that's all conjecture," Owens said slowly. "The important point is that at best the ship has been dead for a good hundred and fifty years, otherwise it would have been contacted by the first faster-than-light ships that tried to hunt her down. That gives us a span of four or five generations living under those upsetting and difficult conditions."

The other men remained silent, watching him.

Jim McConnell shook his head. "O.K.," he said.

Stan Owens spun the bottle on the table with one hand. "We've got two possibilities," he explained. "One, they know full well what the score is. In that case, their whole lives, their very reason for being, is tied up with the *Viking*—that ship reaching Capella *under her own steam and through her own efforts* is the only thing that can make their living hell mean anything. Take that away from them and they are broken, dead. Take that away from them and you are murderers."

"And if they don't believe?" suggested Captain Kleberg.

"The second possibility is tougher," said Stan Owens. "If they have completely adapted to their new environment, then the shock of putting them on this ship would probably be

fatal. The change would be too much; their whole culture, the very fabric of their lives, would be shattered with one blow. Ignoring that little point meant the extinction of more people than I like to think about, on Earth and elsewhere, to say nothing of butcher-wars and revolutions. We are smarter now, or at least we like to think that we are."

Mark Langston nodded at his friend. He had seen enough in his life to back up everything Owens had said, with interest. When you were dealing with human beings, you ignored the human element at your risk. "There's the question of gravity, too," he said.

"Of course," Owens agreed. "If there's been no power on the *Viking* for over a century, and thus no artificial gravity, the sudden change would wipe them out—crush them like flies in a vice. And I dare say that Captain Kleberg wouldn't care to throw this ship into free fall from here to Capella with a load of unconditioned and generally hysterical passengers. We've got a culture too, you know."

Captain Kleberg gave his best approaching-the-guillotine smile. "Don't even think about it," he advised. "We'll all wind up in the funny room. But remember—we've got to make it fast, whatever we do. And no mistakes, of course. This may be a life or death matter for those people, and our own orbital error isn't going to be any joke, even for the computers. I'll hold this ship in position as long as necessary, but we'll have to get with it. If there are people on that ship—"

"That's enough 'ifs' for one session, I think," smiled Mark Langston, stoking up his pipe again.

The small but rugged space launch, utterly dwarfed by the vast distances all around her, came down with a wrenching whine—out of hyperspace and into normal subspace where the dead *Viking* waited. The shock of the transition stunned even the trained crew, and offered convincing evidence of why the great star ship, the *Wilson Langford*, could not be so maneuvered into normal space without a minimum of five days of physical and psychological conditioning for her passengers.

Mark Langston nursed the launch toward the dark shadow of the Viking, which was now visible to the naked eye. It floated ahead of them, cold and alone, like a vast creature of the ocean deeps that had grown old and tired and now only floated mindlessly with the currents it once had challenged. Despite the faint throbbing in his bad leg, Mark Langston felt better than he had in a long, long time. He was home, lost in the stars, and the weary years fell away from him one by one and left him young again.

The *Viking* swam nearer, dominating space. Mark Langston guided the launch with well-remembered skill.

The launch swung alongside the *Viking* and Mark Langston eased her in toward an exact velocity-match.

"How about that?" questioned Jim McConnell thoughtfully. "If we find anyone alive in there, and manage to do anything for them, what becomes of them when they chug into Capella some twenty-thirty years from now and find out that interstellar travel is already old-hat? You talk about destroying their values, Stan, but how do you think they're going to feel when they find out that it's all been for nothing, that they might as well have stayed home?"

The launch hovered next to the black hulk of the *Viking* and Mark Langston swung her abreast of the engine room and clamped her there with gravitraction beams.

"Space suits," he said shortly.

"That isn't quite as tough a problem as it looks like," Stan Owens explained as he struggled into his suit. "Remember that these are not the original members of the crew—they are a wholly new group, with new values. If they manage somehow to bring the *Viking* in, that in itself will be enough. Anyhow, in a sense they are the first. We've got lots of time before the *Viking* lands, if she does, and we can set the psychology boys to work in that interval. Don't worry—when the *Viking* approaches the Capella system she'll get a hero's—or is it heroine's—welcome that'll put all others to shame. And what's more it'll be completely genuine. There are other distinctions in life besides winning the race, you know."

"You seem to have this all figured to the last decimal point," laughed McConnell, "and we don't even know whether or not the *Viking* is empty. Nothing like looking ahead."

The efficient team of the launch, spacesuited for protection, swung the emergency air lock and cutter into position between the launch and the dark shell of the *Viking*. McConnell's crew set the cutters with meticulous care. There was a brief whine and the lights dimmed. That was all.

"Let's go," said Mark Langston.

Cautiously, ready for anything, the men moved through the air lock one by one into the black interior of the dead *Viking*.

Four "days" passed. A class was taught and a battle fought, and an old man spoke with his son . . .

Floating through the dark tunnels, smelling the cold metal all around him, Collins thought of destiny. Destiny, so the books would have you believe, was what you made of it: fate was up to you. But it was a strange destiny, surely, that had placed him in this dark asylum, protected for the moment against the frigid death outside, even deluded into a kind of comfort, but sinking, always sinking, into a living death in the black shadows below.

Sometimes, it did seem hopeless. Without the captain, he knew, they would be lost—the captain would lead them to safety if anyone could. He thought of the early days of the *Viking*, the early halcyon days that he had read about, when the scientists had lived in a veritable artificial paradise, with unlimited time at their disposal and the company of intelligent, congenial friends to make the long hours pass quickly. Collins wished fervently that he might have lived then, in the golden age—

Ruthlessly, he thrust the thought from his mind. What was it that the captain had said? Man could not move backwards and survive. He must go forward, not to the good old days, but to the good new ones.

But how much science had they managed to keep alive?

Was it enough? Time was running out, and the problems yet to be solved were staggering. What was wrong with the engines? Even if they knew, could they fight their way through the world of the other men to the engine room? *Where was the ship?* If they could manage somehow to bring her to life again, would they have time to go anywhere—go before the synthetics were just a memory and the ship turned into a total horror of starving maniacs?

And how long could even the captain bind the men to his will—men who had never known anything but darkness and free flight, men who with each passing "day" became more and more adapted to their ship asylum in the black sea of space and less and less suited for the lives of human beings? Was their fight only a hopeless race up a blind, fantastic alley?

Perhaps the younger men were right. Perhaps they should simply treat the other men, with their backsliding primitive culture and superstition, as animals and try to exterminate them to make the synthetics last longer. Perhaps, from the initial revolution down to the present, it had all been their fault. Perhaps they should forget about being men, forget about saving the ship, and just make the best of the life with which they were confronted.

Collins shook the thought from his mind. That way only seemed to be the easy way, he knew. That way meant death for all of them. The time would come, the time *must* come, when they would need those savage people who now crouched around their strange fires in the black world below.

Collins drifted around a corner and there was Malcolm.

Malcolm, now growing old but still with a twinkle in his eyes, seemed dignified as always in the light of his small torch. He floated rigidly in the air, his spine unbending and his clothing faultlessly neat as usual.

"I say, Collins," he said briskly, "good to see you."

Collins smiled. Malcolm had discovered from the records that his parents had been British, and he had therefore read all the books he could find upon an incredibly distant England

and her people. He had picked up what he fancied to be British phrases, and he used them doggedly. A pathetic thing, to be sure, and a trifle comic, but Collins respected the man's effort to build a desperate individual personality in the midst of chaos. Once he had even tried to find tea, although he hardly knew what it was.

"How's the prisoner?" Collins asked.

"Quite well," Malcolm replied. "He seems to be much stronger now than when you brought him in. Beastly business. What are you going to do with him?"

"Couldn't say," Collins shrugged. "You go and get some sleep and I'll have a talk with our friend. O.K.?"

"Righto," Malcolm said brightly and shoved off down the corridor.

Collins smiled again. Malcolm always made him feel better somehow. He unlocked the corridor door and floated in to where the other man waited in the darkness. The man watched him steadily, without fear. Collins could feel his presence in the room, vibrant, unafraid.

"You have come to kill me," the man stated calmly.

"No," said Collins. "I only want to talk to you. You will not be harmed."

The man laughed in his face.

Collins ignored him and fired a torch. The flame sputtered and caught as the torch built up air pressure, pushing the shadows back and filling the room with warm orange light. Collins narrowed his eyes to slits against the glare and looked at the man. He returned the gaze frankly. He had a strong face, Collins decided. His hair was long and wild and his teeth were sharp and white. His clothing was old and wrinkled, but not unclean. There seemed to be intelligence in his eyes. Or was it only the uncertain light from the torch that made it seem so?

"Start talking," the man said shortly. "Or do you always speak without words?"

"My name is Collins," he said, forcing a smile. "I'm the one who—"

"I remember," the man said.

"Do you have a name, or must I make up one? I'm quite willing to call you Thing or Ug, but maybe you prefer your own name."

"My name is Owens."

"O.K., Owens. Now, look—I'd like to help you if I can. I know you're in a difficult position here—"

"I'll do my worrying," Owens said. "You do yours."

Collins felt himself oddly drawn toward this man before him. A savage? Perhaps. But courage was courage, and even in an enemy it commanded respect.

"You know you could be killed," he told him quietly. "I may not be able to save you for long. Our food supplies are short. I know what would happen to me if I were your captive."

"You might make a good meal at that," Owens stated.

"You," Collins informed him, "are not exactly a born diplomat. Doesn't the prospect of death mean anything to you? Your situation is not ideal, you know."

"Neither is yours," the man said surprisingly. "I have known death all my life. I know that it comes whether you are afraid of it or not, so why be afraid? Your own life will soon be over; perhaps you would do well to reserve your charity."

Collins floated toward the man through the shadows, his own eyes cold and hard. He gripped Owens' arm tightly and applied pressure until his fingers ached. Owens did not flinch and continued to meet his gaze squarely.

"What did you mean by that?" whispered Collins tensely. "What do you know about my life?"

"Your world will be dead within twenty sleep periods, and you will die with it," the man said, his voice edged with hate. "The world will be ours."

"Those are big words," Collins said, fingering his knife with his free hand. "But they are only words."

Owens smiled coldly. "You think that we are fools because we do not believe as you do," he said evenly. "You think

that we are fools because we know the stars are gods. But we know other things as well, my stupid friend."

"Such as?" suggested Collins, drawing his knife.

"You threaten me?" the savage asked, and laughed.

Collins pressed closer, his heart pulsing in his throat. *What did this man know?*

"The tanks, the air tanks," Owens hissed, his eyes wild and bright. "You think we don't know where the air comes from? We do know, and the tanks are in our part of the world—*we're going to seal you off from your air, and the work has already begun.*"

Collins floated back, stunned. The air—

Before he had a chance to recover himself, the door to the room burst open. Young Lanson hurtled through, his body quivering with excitement.

"There he is, there he is!" Lanson screamed, pointing at Owens. "Kill him!"

"Calm down," Collins snapped. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" whispered Lanson hoarsely. "You fool, it's the captain, the captain!"

Collins just stared at him, unable to speak.

"Your father is dead," Lanson said, his voice breaking with hysteria. "He's been murdered."

Slowly, inexorably, Collins felt the fury creep through his veins. Not rage, not hot, blinding madness, but fury—cold, chill fury that seeped like ice through his body, into his heart, his mind. *The captain—*

Shielded now by a wall of ice, his mind took command. He gestured toward Owens. "Bring him," he said shortly, and launched himself into the dark corridor. He left his torch with Lanson and hurtled through the darkness that was his home, his mind refusing even to think of what the captain's death meant to them now. He must think ahead, keep moving . . .

He swam into the control room, and there was the captain. His chest was red where they had pulled the knife out, and he was very still. His people were clustered around him in the control room and the torch cast broken shadows on the walls,

but the captain could not see them. His dead eyes looked outward, out to the silver stars, and now he was alone.

"Dad," said Collins, and his voice was very small. He could not speak further. The captain had been a symbol to him all his life, a force, a principle, that held the ship together. But now, in death, he was only an old man again, an old man with snow-white hair, and Collins was his son.

Collins felt a hand touch his. He looked up to see Helen, his wife, who knew that she could not comfort him but was brave enough to try. Collins squeezed her hand to show that he understood and then turned to his people.

"We will elect a new captain soon," he said quietly. "I will not try to assume the position unless I am asked. We have other problems before us now."

There were murmurs from the crowd, but Collins ignored them. He moved slowly over to where Owens was floating, guarded by Lanson. He looked at Owens coldly for a full minute, staring into his eyes. He waited, smiling very slightly. Then he hit him in the face.

Owens reeled back, shaking his head. Collins hit him again.

"We're going to get through to the engine room," Collins hissed, his face very close to his prisoner's. "This time we're going to get through, and you're going to take us." He hit him again and watched the blood trickle from a split lip. "Understand?"

Lanson pressed in, knife blade gleaming. "Kill him," he screamed. "Kill the—"

"Shut up," Collins looked at the man once, and that was enough. "We need our friend here. The other men are blocking off our air supply. This is our last chance. If we fail this time, we die."

The crowd shifted and moved with the shadows and tension filled the air.

"If he won't take us through—" one voice began.

"He'll take us," Collins replied.

"If we can't fix the drive after we get there—"

"We've got to try," Collins said coldly. "I tell you, those engines *couldn't* have failed! They were tampered with, shut off! If one man can turn them off, another can turn them on." He paused. "I'll kill any man who stands in my way."

"I'm on your side, old boy," Malcolm said, and didn't smile.

Collins shot him a glance and then relaxed a little. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to strike any heroic poses."

Malcolm shrugged. "You lead," he said. "I'll follow."

"No, that won't do," Collins pointed out. "You pick a detail and stay back here—we may not come back, you know. Set the controls, *and make certain that the gravity is adjusted to not more than one-fifth Earth-normal.* Understand?"

"Righto," said Malcolm, and moved off about his task.

"Webb, Renaldo, Echols—you older men who learned your science from the captain—are you with me?"

The men smiled their assent. One muttered something that sounded suspicious like "At last" and went to get his equipment. Spirit and enthusiasm, as though kindled out of the very air, needing only an initial spark, filled the chamber.

Collins spun Owens around and twisted the man's arm up behind his back. "O.K.," he whispered. "Let's go."

Lanson hesitated. "Now?"

"Now," said Collins flatly. "We can pick up weapons and synthetics on the way."

Quite suddenly, Owens twisted himself loose. He floated there before them, his keen eyes flashing.

"Fools!" he said clearly. "He would lead you all into death. We would be butchered before we even drew near my people's world. Do you think that my people are imbeciles, that you can simply move in and succeed where all others have failed? Your leader is a fool!"

Collins icily hit the man again in the face. Owens just laughed at him, wiping the blood away with his hand.

"You prove nothing," Owens said calmly. "You cannot answer my arguments with your fists."

Collins moved in close again and there was death in his eyes. "It's up to you to get us through," he told the man,

beginning to feel the doubt slink back into the chamber and take its ugly hold on the people. "If you do not, we'll tear you apart—inch by inch."

Owens hesitated, cold sweat standing out on his forehead.

"There is a way," he said finally. "There is one way—"

Collins gripped his arm, digging his nails into the man's flesh.

"If you cannot go through," Owens pointed out, "you have to go around."

Collins felt his body go dead within him. *Around?* That meant—

"There's only one way," Owens said. "We'll have to go . . . Outside."

Stars. It was one thing to view them from the shelter of the control room but a different proposition entirely when seen from Outside. Cold they were, and close—it seemed to Collins that he had only to reach out a spacesuited hand to pluck an ice-diamond from its field of velvet black. If he should lose his footing, float off into nothingness, forever alone—

He tried not to think about it. If the dark and brooding *Viking* had seemed quiet in her strange Odyssey through the star-seas, how much more was he conscious of the silence now. It was not merely silence, but an absence of all sound, utter and complete. The old radios of the suits no longer functioned; the air supply was uncertain. Collins almost fancied that his breathing was already flat and stale.

Inch by inch, foot by slow agonizing foot, the men pulled themselves like ants along the silent side of the *Viking*. Collins could see the monstrous, incredible figure of Owens ahead of him, like a robot-suit without a human being in it. Behind him he sensed his people: Webb, Echols, Renaldo, their equipment strapped to their backs, feeling their way along the emergency guy rod even as he was doing. *Were they good enough?* The thought crept, unbidden, into his mind. They had worked hard, they were good, but they had

learned under terrible handicaps. Their tools were inadequate. Could they fix the drive? If not—

Getting out of the *Viking* in their old spacesuits had been something of a feat in itself, although the problem was not in getting through the small air lock but in not getting *blown* through it into infinity. Getting back into the ship again through the engine room was, to say the least, going to be something else again. Owens had said that there was an operable air lock there that he had seen, one that could be opened from Outside, but—*Was the man leading them all to their deaths? Was this all simply a last, ironic gesture of defiance?*

Collins inched his way along. He had no choice, he realized. It was act now or not at all. A chance, however desperate, was still a chance. Owens . . . there was something strange about the man.

Collins stared at the cold metal side of the *Viking* as he crept along it. In there, separated from him by scant feet, were the other men, the children of the revolutionaries. He was in their territory now, their part of the ship, where they gathered around their great synthetic fires and lived their proud but futile lives, sliding back, back, back into a cold death in an empty ship.

Could they be saved, turned to use, if the ship were recovered? Collins had always said that they could, and he believed it. For all their differences, for all their strangeness, these were yet people—people who had chosen to follow a different path from his, but people none the less. A common goal, a common hope, might yet unite the two. And all hands would be needed if the *Viking* were to come through at last.

Collins smiled bitterly. What was that expression he had read in his youth? *Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.* Collins laughed, and the sound was eerily deafening in the closeness of his suit. He had never seen a chicken, and he was unworried about the hatching of an egg. He didn't have any eggs.

His stomach was a hollow knot within him and the palms of

his hands, although beginning to freeze, were clammy with sweat. It seemed to him that he had been crawling for an eternity, crawling forever, crawling through the night and under the merciless stars. *The engine room—where was the engine room?*

They made it. Somehow, they made it. One minute he was crawling inch by inch along the endless guy rod and the next he had stopped, behind Owens. He breathed a cold breath of relief. There, bulging oddly out from the side of the dark *Viking*, was an air lock. Owens had maneuvered himself into position in front of it and was attempting to turn a valve handle. It did not move. Owens waved a gloved hand urgently.

Collins managed to get himself into position next to the other man, and together they twisted at the valve. It didn't budge. Collins felt the cold seeping into his suit and his lungs were choked and constricted. He looked at Owens. Owens looked at him, and for a moment they hung there, motionless, on the brink of eternity.

Then Collins waved to Echols, who slowly made his way over to join them. Wordlessly, Collins fumbled with the pack on Echols' back. It was slow work and his hands were very cold in their thick, insulated gloves. But he finally managed to extract a large hammer. Clumsily, he signaled to Owens and Echols to hold onto him. They braced themselves and got a firm grip on his legs.

Desperately, Collins swung the hammer at the valve. He knew that he might jam it hopelessly, but he had no time now for niceties. The valve had to be jarred loose somehow, and that very quickly. The cold was growing worse.

Collins swung the hammer with as much force as he could muster in his awkward position and then the three men hit the valve together, pulling and tugging and clawing at it with the frenzy and the strength of men who see death staring them icily in the face.

The valve moved. With numbing fingers, they spun it until

it would move no more. Then Collins and Owens grasped the handle. Together they heaved with all their strength.

Nothing happened. The stars seemed to creep nearer—

They pulled again, despair lending strength to their numb muscles. Collins gasped, his heart pounding in his throat. Had it moved? Was it frozen? There—

With a sudden, silent explosion the air-lock door puffed outward. The men held on and then moved into the small air lock one by one, almost completely filling it. Coughing for breath and numb with cold, they sealed the outer door again and went to work on the inner one. Collins tasted blood in his throat and a dead whiteness was washing over his brain.

This time, it was easier. The inner door burst open as the ship's air rushed into the air lock and then Collins led his men into the ship. Instantly, without waiting even to look around them, the men ripped off each other's helmets and gulped in great drafts of heady air. Never before in the lives of any of them had air tasted so sweet; never before had they fully realized the ecstasy of breathing.

When he had partially recovered, Collins secured a synthetic torch from Renaldo's pack and coaxed it into flame. Light leaped out, blinding his eyes, and the room jumped into sharp relief. Owens had not lied. Collins felt something that might have been tears start to his eyes as he looked around him.

They were alone in the engine room.

Collins rallied his mind, still somewhat stunned from its brush with an unfamiliar Outside, and set to work. The first requirement was safety and he floated across the chamber and checked the after door. It was closed, but unlocked. He threw the switch on it and then turned back to his companions.

The next necessity was light. Together, the men kindled torches and planted them strategically around the room. The light was flickering and uneven, but it would have to do. Even at that, it hurt their eyes; Collins doubted that they could have stood much more.

He looked around the engine room, and his doubts returned.

The main plutonium pile, together with its water reactant, was of course invisible behind its graphalloy shielding. If the trouble proved to be not at the surface, but deep within the pile itself, Collins knew that the situation was probably hopeless. But he felt a strange exhilaration none the less. Here, at last, was a straight problem in technology: a problem too difficult for his limited means, perhaps, but still a problem he could sink his teeth into.

Collins eyed the shielding, and the dials and switches with a feeling akin to awe—not superstitious awe, nor unreasoning wonder, but simply a healthy respect for a supreme accomplishment of his people. This was the power that had lifted the *Viking* long ago from the bonds of Earth, carried her beyond Pluto and into interstellar space. And this was the power that had been silent for more than a century. Had the power failed the men, or had the men failed the power? It was no mere rhetorical problem. Upon its solution hinged the fate of Earth's first emissary to the stars.

The men set to work with a will. Collins, Echols, Renaldo, and Webb, the cream of the ship's scientists now that the captain was gone, went at their job with the cool precision of men who have studied and planned for many lonely years for just such an eventuality. Owens stood alone, watching, making no sound, with his face beginning to swell painfully from the blows he had received. The chamber was quiet, but filled with a tense, electric anticipation that was a tangible thing.

Invisible behind its shield, the great pile waited. Outside, hovering beyond the air lock, the stars floated in austere splendor . . .

The crew of four worked on, absorbed in their problem, oblivious to time. The silence was broken only by the harsh breathing and the short, staccato sentences as the men exchanged information and asked questions. They had pitifully little to go on, with their limited instruments, but they had knowledge and understanding. And they had something else—a burning, unquenchable ferocity of purpose that would not be denied.

Man was writing another chapter now—and Collins and his tiny band would not give up.

Time passed as the minutes slipped into hours and the hours crept forward into a day and on.

Finally, they had done all they could.

"It all checks, as far as I can see," said Webb, rubbing his bloodshot eyes, his great beard floating free in the air.

Renaldo nodded. "Someone threw the rods," he agreed. "That's all—there could have been no other failure. Or why are the rods in place?"

Echols, thin and pale, said nothing. There was only one thing to try, his expression seemed to say. They must simply try it, and if it failed then that was that.

Collins was the first to look up. Startled, he surveyed the engine room with quick eyes. "Owens," he said quietly. "He's gone."

The others followed his gaze to the air-lock door, almost without interest. They had greater problems than Owens to worry about; the man's usefulness was at an end.

"He didn't get out the door into the ship," Renaldo offered. "I would have noticed that. He's gone Outside."

"Why?" speculated Collins, and then let it drop. It could not concern them now.

"I guess we're as ready as we'll ever be," Webb said shortly, a tight little smile on his lips.

"Sequence pull," Collins said.

No man spoke what was in his heart, for there were no words. Even their thoughts were under control; they thought of the problem before them and nothing else.

One by one, the damping control rods were pulled. There were eight of them; Renaldo pulled the last.

Nothing happened. There was a deathly silence. Collins held his breath. It might be that Malcolm, in the control room, had not followed instructions. Or they themselves had miscalculated. Or—

A tiny, feeble clicking sounded in the room. In the silence,

it was almost deafening as each fragile click was magnified in the listeners' imagination until it became a thundering roar.

"The counters," whispered Collins. "The counters—"

With a mounting intensity, the clicks increased in both numbers and strength. They beat a tattoo in the chamber, a tattoo that modulated into a smooth *whir* of power.

Suddenly, there was light: white, blinding light that slashed at the mind and burned into eyeballs. Someone screamed, then choked it off.

A crushing, terrible force leaped from the floor and smashed the men down. They fell sprawling, gasping for breath, flecks of blood touching the corners of their mouths with crimson. They were pressed into the hard floor—it seemed that they must press through it entirely and out into space to perish.

A humming roar filled the engine room and the great ship, still for numberless years, vibrated with a surge of power and energy.

"Wrong," gasped Echols hoarsely, his mouth pulled out of shape by the terrible pressure. "What went wrong?"

"Nothing," coughed Collins, pulling himself along the floor like a snake. "That's it—don't you see? *Nothing.*"

The four men stared at each other then, wincing from the pressure pull and the glare of the white lights. And there, prostrate, in fearful pain, they smiled.

The dead *Viking* had come back from a nameless grave; now, at last, she lived again.

Captain Kleberg, his iron-gray hair neatly combed, leaned back in his chair and with an expression almost of contentment on his face puffed on a pipe which had seen better days. Mark Langston, Jim McConnell, and Stan Owens challenged their chairs in their usual ways and perhaps drank more of Captain Kleberg's Scotch than the rule book strictly allowed.

Mark Langston's leg was throbbing unpleasantly but he ignored it. The murmur of the vibrations, the distant hum of buzzers, the clicking of instruments, the far-off song of the jets—all these were once more blended together into the music

he had known. What he had done, and what he had seen, on the dark *Viking* had washed his bitterness away as though it had never existed. He could look his fellow man in the eye again, with pride. That was one of those things you never discussed with anyone, that stayed bottled up within you always. But that was also one of the things that counted in the long run.

"They never would have had a prayer alone," Stan Owens said. "Not a prayer."

"Hardly," agreed McConnell. "It was almost more than we could manage, even with the power unit from the launch, to clear that drive and rig the rods so they could handle them. They wouldn't have had as good a chance as a man trying to build a spaceship with a screw driver."

"From one point of view they were ridiculously overconfident in even trying to get that ship going again," Owens said thoughtfully, sipping his drink. "That was one reason the captain had to go—he knew too much to try. As long as he lived, the situation was static; if he had remained in command we couldn't have done a thing."

The captain. Mark Langston chewed on the stem of his pipe but didn't light it. *He could see the captain now, alone in that great control room, his old eyes alert as he listened to them explaining to him why he had to relinquish his command for the good of his ship. He could hear Owens' quiet voice showing him how his men put their trust in him as a symbol, and waited for him to save them—waited too long. He could hear the captain's slow, careful questions. And he could see—the knife, the sudden knife, the knife they had not been able to stop. The captain, sizing up the situation, had taken his own life to give his people the best possible chance. No man had ever given more.*

McConnell hung a cigarette at an impossible angle out of his mouth. "You feeling any better?" he asked Owens. "You took quite a beating in there."

Stan Owens fingered his battered face ruefully. "I didn't see

any other way to handle it," he said. "Next time I'll just walk through a meat grinder."

Stan Owens. Mark Langston looked at his friend. *It had all been his plan, his responsibility—and he, more than any other man, had brought life again to the lost* Viking. *The old captain, his son Collins, Webb, Renaldo, Echols, the strange and wonderful Englishman Malcolm—these would one day be household names, known to every schoolboy from the saga of the first of the interstellar ships. But who would ever hear the name of Stan Owens, save perhaps as a dimly remembered legend, a ghost-name? Would historians of the future ever figure out what really had happened on that dark ship—and would they correctly identify Owens as the "savage" who had led Collins to the engine room? Would they puzzle unduly over the extra air lock that had not been present when the ship left Earth? Would they ever understand that a switch had been made with Collins' original prisoner, with Owens taking over with his story of a vanishing air supply to goad the desperate Collins into action?*

It had been a masterly plan, considering the time handicaps under which it was devised and executed. The prisoner they had removed from under old Malcolm's eyes had been closeted and given a strong psychological conditioning—he himself had helped in that—so that he would exert a favorable influence among his people when the ship came to life again.

It would take the Viking *thirty years or more to finish her incredible voyage to Capella. But she would get there and find a subtly directed welcome that would surpass her wildest dreams. Civilization would thrill to her story, and Collins and Webb and Renaldo and Echols would be immortalized in story, picture, and legend.*

And Stan Owens? Jim McConnell? Captain Kleberg? Members of the complement of the Wilson Langford, *inexcusably late on a standard run from Earth—except in a few forever-secret records, they would be unknown.*

And it did not matter—that was the best part of it.

Collins stood alone in the midst of the noise and activity of the control room. The white lights beat down on him and even behind his standard dark glasses his eyes hurt. To every man, woman, and child on the ship, he was the captain now—with one exception. To Collins himself, there would always be only one captain.

He walked carefully over to the viewport, forcing his untrained muscles to carry him through the light gravity. It would be years, he knew, before they could stand one-half normal gravity—but they would make it.

Collins stood alone, looking out at the stars his father had loved. Very softly then, so that only he could hear, he whispered a promise:

"We're coming."

Overdrive

By Murray Leinster

I

JIM BRENT woke up when the *Delilah's* overdrive field went off ahead of time. A space-liner's overdrive goes on and stays on. A liner goes from one place to another place, on schedule, and there is no nonsense about it. The *Delilah* was en route from Khem IV to Loren II, and it had been in overdrive for two weeks and it should have stayed in overdrive for two weeks more. But the drive went off and Brent woke up. Anybody would. His stomach turned over twice, and he was swallowing hard as he struggled dizzily to a sitting position. He hung to the sides of his bunk as the universe went into that dizzy, diminishing spiral which ended in a fraction of a second but felt like hours. Then he opened his eyes. Instantly, he thought of the girl named Kit.

A voice said soothingly from the speaker in the ceiling of his cabin:

"There is no immediate cause for alarm. Stay calm. The overdrive field has been cut. That is all. There is no need to be alarmed. This is a well-found ship with a thoroughly trained crew, and we are in communication with our base. There is no occasion for uneasiness."

Brent heard every word, and a cold chill began at the base of his spine and went up, vertebra by vertebra, to chill the back of his skull, and then went deliberately down the ladder of his backbone again. The words from the speaker were soothing, but the message was one to chill the blood. For one thing, the voice lied. It spoke of communication with the *Delilah's* base. That was lie number one. It said there was no reason to be disturbed. That was lie number two and on up to infinity. Liners did not cut their overdrives in mid-voyage. If and when an overdrive went off—and was lied about

—everybody on board the ship was dead. Automatically. But unfortunately they didn't act dead.

Brent waited, feeling sick inside. Then he got up stiffly from his bunk. He put on his clothes. There was no port in his cabin, of course. In overdrive there is nothing to be seen anyhow except out the bow, control-room ports. Overdrive is travel at the speed of light multiplied many times—the multiplier depending on the type of drive.

For almost two centuries humanity had nothing faster than interplanetary drive, and was confined to its home solar system in consequence, because from Sol to its nearest neighbor was four and a half light-years, which would have taken centuries to travel. On overdrive, nowadays, a freighter makes it in a week and a crack liner in a fraction of that time. But they do it in overdrive. Overdrive! If the overdrive goes, the trip is finished. Period.

Brent parted his hair carefully before he went out of his cabin. It was quite absurd. He was thinking. *The overdrive's blown. I've got to look after that girl.* It was a curious thing to think, because he was of the Profession; and besides, she had never spoken to him.

He knew that her name was Kit Harlow and that she was wonderfully pleasing to look at. But there had been a reason for not trying to make her acquaintance. Some very strange things had happened. A planet named Derik had been discovered, most unexpectedly, to have all its cities filled with skeletons and all its treasures looted. Another planet named Tren III was found to have all its citizens rotting in the streets of its looted cities.

Four widely separated planets, in all, had been discovered with their entire populations killed. Two had been painstakingly looted of every valuable which men with unlimited transportation could wish to carry away. And it had been Brent's errand—being of the Profession—to try to find out how all this had come about. Naturally, he had not thought of getting acquainted with girls, however pretty.

Now, though, all bets were off. If the *Delilah's* overdrive

was blown, nobody had any profession or business or obligations of any sort that reached outside the ship. Nothing anybody did would have any effect, or any meaning, to anybody not on the ship at the same time with him. The *Delilah* was, at the moment, very stodgy and respectable. But presently it would be a first-class imitation of hell. Brent's Professional status was gone and all his obligations with it. It occurred to him that the most useful thing he could do would be to explain the situation to Kit Harlow and offer, politely, to kill her before things got too bad.

He didn't have to think the situation out. In overdrive, an antique ship like this—modern ships did vastly better—would cover a light-year of distance in a week of time. Light travels a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second. In eight minutes it travels ninety-two millions of miles. In a day it travels so far that the distance has no meaning. In a year . . . it travels the distance the *Delilah* should cover in a week. If a ship's overdrive went off—any ship's overdrive—and where it went off was known, still it would take ten thousand other space-ships ten thousand years to hunt for it with one chance in ten thousand of finding it.

Nobody ever hunted for a ship that vanished in overdrive. It was useless. If the crew couldn't fix whatever was wrong, it wouldn't get fixed. So far, in two thousand years of interstellar navigation, just two ships had been found after their overdrives blew. Each had drifted into a planetary system by pure chance. One had been lost a century and a half when it was discovered. The other had been missing for eight hundred years. Both were blessedly empty of life when they were found—of course—but both showed plain signs of what had happened inside them before life went. Madness was only part of it—the smallest, least, and cleanest part of it.

I wonder if there are arms on board, thought Brent. *The crew could wipe out the rest of us. Best thing, too.*

His mind went back to the girl. Such a pretty girl! She was traveling with her father, who was an Earth Commerce Commissioner and a Very Important Person indeed. They'd been

on Khem IV while Brent was there. He'd seen them with a pattering escort of secret-service men. But Brent had been busy finding out nothing at all. Khem IV was a thinly settled planet with a savagely totalitarian government, but he'd found no indications of Professional interest. He'd merely been trailed everywhere by unskilled detectives. It was pure coincidence that Kit and Brent traveled on the same ship to Loren II.

I wish she'd missed this ship, thought Brent numbly. It didn't occur to him to wish that he'd missed it.

The speaker in the ceiling repeated:

"There is no cause for alarm. Be calm. The overdrive field has been cut. That is all. We are in communication with our base. There is no need for uneasiness."

It occurred to Brent that it was very foolish to keep repeating that message. It would not reassure anybody. Anyone who knew anything would know it was a lie. The more it was insisted upon, the more frightened the passengers would become.

II

HE OPENED the door of his cabin and went out. His door opened on the main lounge. It was full of the *Delilah's* passengers. He'd never seen so many of them at once before. There were some children. They were playing. There was a woman with a painted, empty face. She smiled fixedly, but her eyes were filled with horror.

Brent looked at the girl he'd thought of first. He moved toward her. A man clutched his arm and babbled:

"Look here! They say—they say the ship's in touch with home. Do you think that's so?"

Brent nodded.

"Oh, surely!" he said untruthfully. "They have a new faster-than-light communication system. All ships have it now. We'll be all right."

The man gasped in relief.

"You're sure? Positive?" Then he began to laugh foolishly. "Then it's all right! It's all right!"

Brent moved on. It would be wonderful if it were true, he thought sourly to himself. Now was no time to refuse a comforting lie to someone who needed it.

Jim frowned to himself. There was something in the back of his mind that was trying to come out. But his head wasn't working just right.

Nobody's mind is clear when filled with the numbing knowledge that he is absolutely helpless against absolutely certain doom. Of course the *Delilah* wasn't in communication with anybody or anything. Radiation is propagated at the speed of light, only. If a message beam could be held tight enough, and if enough power could be put into it, and if it were aimed straight enough—why—a liner like the *Delilah* could send a

message back to Khem IV, from which it had departed two weeks before. But the message would take two years to get back. More, it wasn't likely to hit. The sun Khem had a proper motion, which might be anything from fifteen to three hundred miles a second in any direction. The light from it showed it where it had been two years before. A beam would have to be aimed where it would be two years hence. And even then the beam would hardly hit Khem IV in its orbit. No. The *Delilah* could never get a message back to its base. That was out of the question.

We're dead, thought Brent morbidly, *all of us. Only we haven't started to act like it yet.* Before they did act dead, things would happen it was not pleasant to anticipate.

He stopped beside the girl, Kit Harlow. She and her father were standing by themselves, looking at the other passengers. Their expressions were peculiar. It wasn't that they didn't know what the blown overdrive meant, but that they were taking it in their own way.

"Pardon," said Brent. "I'm Jim Brent. I think you know what's happened. I . . . saw you back in port and I'm traveling by myself. Things will be bad presently. I thought I'd offer—"

The girl looked at him detachedly. Her father said harshly: "You thought you'd offer what?"

He saw a bitter anger in the older man's eyes. And then Brent realized what the other man was thinking. He flushed angrily.

"We are dead," he said coldly. "You know it. You know what's likely to happen as these people go mad. I intended to offer to help keep things decent for your daughter for so long as it can be managed. I happen to be a fool, and I meant to offer to act like one."

With that he turned away, frustrated, bitter. They'd thought he meant something very different. Reasonable enough, at that. Some men, knowing that nothing can make what is coming any worse—

"Just a moment," said the girl.

He turned back. Her voice was just what he'd thought it

would be: clear, and level, and good to listen to. She smiled faintly at him.

"Thank you very much. If you can organize some other passengers, you may be able to prevent some horrors—for a while."

Her father said bitterly:

"I doubt it. That might make things worse. After all, the loudspeakers may have spoken the truth. The overdrive may only be turned off. It may not be blown."

Brent shook his head as if to clear it. He wasn't thinking very straight, and he knew it. Nobody does, immediately after discovering that he cannot have any possible hope. Kit said sharply:

"You really think that?"

"I've been thinking it out," said her father bitterly. "You know what happened where we were! It would be most indiscreet to murder me in any ordinary way. Or you." Then he said harshly, "This young man had better not talk to us."

The girl caught her breath. She went paler.

"I hadn't thought of that!" Then she turned to Brent and said quietly, "My father is right. We do not think this . . . accident is just what it seems. There will be confusion and horror, of course. People will go mad, and people will be killed. We . . . will be among those killed. But we think that ultimately the overdrive will be repaired. Probably, when it is repaired, the ship will go back to Khem IV."

Brent still could not think very straight. His mind was possessed by the horrors which could be anticipated.

"But you can do us a very great favor," said the girl. She moistened her lips and looked at her father. He nodded. "It is . . . very important. Much more important than my father's life or mine. Will you try?"

Brent had been carefully trained to think clearly in emergencies, but this was not an emergency. It still seemed to him pure disaster. There was nothing for his mind to take hold of, to think about.

"First," said Kit, very pale, "you mustn't talk to us again.

Don't avoid us conspicuously, but—especially don't try to keep us from being killed. That's necessary."

Brent tried to listen, with the back of his mind trying to tell him something that fitted in.

"Then," said Kit composedly, "when you get back to Earth, go to the Commerce Commission and find someone who knows my father. Tell him exactly what happened to my father and me, and say that we think it happened because the planet ruler of Khem IV had *vistek* served at a state banquet by mistake. It was served to us. *Vistek.* V-I-S-T-E-K. It was a mistake. He had his cooks executed for the mistake. And—we couldn't be murdered in any ordinary fashion. That's the message."

She looked again at her father. Again he nodded.

"That's all," she said. "You can't do any more for us. And you can't do that if you are known to be friendly to us. Now please don't talk to either of us again."

She turned away and her father turned with her. As they moved off, a voice panted in Brent's ear:

"He's an important man! What'd he say? He's Earth Commissioner of Commerce! He'd know all the inside! What'd he say?"

It was a pimply-faced man named Rudl, who, during the first two weeks of the voyage, had thrust himself into every gathering, talked to every individual passenger, and had succeeded in making a general nuisance of himself. Brent said briefly:

"He said just what the loudspeaker said. That we're in touch with the base and if there's any trouble a rescue ship will come to take us off this ship."

Again it was untrue, but panic would come soon enough. The pimply Rudl whimpered:

"They can't! They couldn't get word back, and they couldn't find us if they knew we were lost! They couldn't—"

Brent said savagely:

"You fool! Do you want to start a panic by babbling like that? Go talk to a ship's officer! Ask him!"

Rudl stumbled away. Brent clenched his hands. Kit's father was an important man. He was too important a man to be murdered in any ordinary way without great repercussions. But why should anybody want to murder him? Why should a ship pretend that its overdrive was blown, and then repaired, simply to arrange for the death of a man and a girl at the hands of fear-crazed passengers? And the message they wanted him to give— What was that about?

He went to the *Delilah's* bar. There were a dozen passengers already in it. Brent saw one of them furtively filling his pockets with snack packets. A bad sign—a man preparing to hoard food against his fellows.

Brent ordered a drink of sarfane, and the bartender served him. He sipped his drink—and froze. Sarfane was a light drink, and ordinarily delicious. It could not be mixed with anything else, though, or its flavor was spoiled. Something had obviously been mixed with this.

He sat very still. *This is quick!* he thought. If the *Delilah's* officers knew the ship's situation was hopeless, it would be reasonable to have served drinks doctored with sedative. The more unstable passengers, who would crack up first, would be the first to drink. If drugged, they would grow sleepy instead of desperate. That would make sense. But it had not been twenty minutes since the overdrive went off. *Quick action,* Brent thought. *Too quick! Much too quick!*

It was.

III

A WOMAN began to scream hysterically, out in the passenger-lounge of the *Delilah*. Brent turned his head. The pimply-faced Rudl was being thrust angrily from her side by another passenger.

The men in the bar talked loudly. Brent sat with the drink of sarfane—with something else in it—in his hand. Kit Harlow had said that madness and frenzy would come upon the *Delilah's* passengers. The overdrive would stay off until that frenzy developed. It would continue until she and her father had been killed. Then, she had said composedly, the overdrive would be repaired and the *Delilah* would probably return to the port from which she had started, taking back its shaken, half-crazed passengers and the bodies of those who had died. None of it made sense, anyhow.

One thing was sure. The drinks of the *Delilah's* bar had been doctored within twenty minutes of the cutting of the overdrive. It should have taken nearly that long to be sure that a failure was irreparable. It seemed almost like a measure planned in advance. It was too quick . . .

Brent tasted his sarfane again. He savored the spoiled flavor carefully, trying to discern what had been added to ruin the delicate flavor. The addition was aromatic, bitter. It was just enough to spoil the pleasure of drinking sarfane.

It's *iposap*, thought Brent. He tasted again, deliberately. *Taurine iposap*. It was a flavoring ingredient for mixed drinks, like the ancient bitters. It came in blue bottles with gold labels, and it was very, very expensive, and on some planets it was forbidden by law. Its flavor was fascinating and blended perfectly with most bar-dispensed beverages. It made them taste better, but most people avoided it. One drink, with one drop

of *iposap* in it, was very good, but two were murder. Most people became fighting drunks when their drinks had been laced with *iposap,* and most drinkers were drunk with two such drinks under their belts.

If all the *Delilah's* drinks had been dashed like Brent's, they were not dosed to make drinkers sleepy, but to make them lunatics. In that case, the officers of the *Delilah* were not planning to check the horrors to be expected in any ship hopelessly lost in space, but were planning to hurry them and increase them. It was designed that madness should follow instantly upon despair. Decent people were to be overwhelmed by madmen before they could organize to die with dignity.

A child began to scream:

"Mummy! Mummy! Don't let them eat me! He says—"

The pimply Rudl scuttled away from the terror-stricken child. The child's mother comforted it absorbedly, her own face ashen.

A man shouted hysterically in the bar: "If we gotta die we oughta kill those officers that didn't take care—" The bartender moved suavely about his duties—duties which consisted of mixing and serving drinks. Rudl sidled to the bar.

There was weeping in the passengers' lounge. A little girl screwed up her face and began to whimper through the mere contagion of despair. Her father picked her up and began to pat her back, his face vacant of all thought. He looked blankly at the wall, mechanically trying to soothe the child.

There was a thwack of fist against flesh. Someone at the bar, reeling, had struck someone else. Thick-tongued, he defied the world and fate and chance. The bartender set out more drinks. There was no flicker of light to indicate that the drink-charges were being punched on the bar-accounting system. Brent suddenly realized that the charge register had not flashed since he had been in the bar.

Quietly Brent spilled his drink and approached the bar. The bartender placed another drink before him. He tasted it. *Iposap* again—and no charge for the drink. Free drinks, and every one laced with the *Taurine* bitters that made one drink

enough for most men, and two too many, and three an incitement to frenzy.

Brent spilled this drink, too, and went casually out of the bar. The atmosphere in it was growing tense and highly charged. As he went out, a man bumped into him, headed in. Another passenger needed a drink to help him face the fact that the ship—on the face of things—would drift forever helplessly in emptiness. Forever was a harsh word. There was food and water and air. There was power. The ship could travel between any two planets of a solar system on its interplanetary drive. Such a journey might take months, but it could be done. It could travel perhaps one light-hour, or even two, but not for light-years. Therefore it would drift forever.

Brent went to his own cabin. Had he not been in the Profession he would have been raging. Instead he was wholly, icily calm. *It's the idea,* he thought, *that she and her father will be killed by those beasts—made into beasts on purpose. Then maybe they'll even execute the survivors just to make everything tidy. In a day or so we'll all be classifiable as criminals.*

Getting at some of his luggage and checking on what he extracted from it, he estimated there should be at least one murder on the *Delilah* within the next six hours. By that time everybody on the ship would have become acutely aware that there was life, in terms of food and water and air, to be gained every time someone else died.

But he underestimated. He was in his cabin less than thirty minutes. When he came out there was already a man dead on the floor of the passengers' lounge, with blood glistening in a dark pool beside him.

IV

NONE of the *Delilah's* officers was anywhere about. Brent asked questions angrily. No ship's officer had appeared. The dead man lay where he had fallen. Somebody had come out of the bar, reeling. He shouted crazily:

"Everybody's gonna die! Everybody! Who's gonna be first?"

A sober man—now dead—had gone up to him and tried to quiet him, urging that the women were already despairing enough and there was surely no need for the children—

The drunk bellowed, "You be first!" And stabbed. Then he advanced upon other passengers, waving a blood-stained knife and shouting his senseless refrain: "Everybody's gonna die! Who'll be next?" It was motiveless murder, attributable exclusively to *iposap* in too many drinks. Some passengers fled from him. But a young man—one of the honeymooners Brent had noticed—charged with a chair held club-wise. Other men leaped in when he brought it down. The drunk was subdued and disarmed and bound with a volunteer guard placed over him. But no ship's officer had answered the signal—often repeated—that an emergency existed in the passengers' lounge.

Brent went back to the bar. The bartender was gone, but he had not locked up. There were open bottles all about, to be used or taken by a gesture. There were more men drinking, now. Some looked dazed and numb, eyes glassy. They stared into space. There were two women at a table. One gulped down a drink and cried shrilly, "I don't want to think! Get me another drink, somebody!" She was already fretful and querulous.

Brent reached for a bottle and poured out a few drops. *Iposap*. He tried another. *Iposap*. There couldn't be any doubt. He felt certain objects in his pockets and was grimly glad

he'd packed some special tools of a construction-man's using—they had been essential a little while back—in his bags.

A brawny man lurched up to Brent and said thickly: "I don't like yer face!"

His fist lashed out. Brent blocked the blow, without returning it. Someone else said belligerently, "That's a dastardly trick, with all of us dyin' . . ." Brent's assailant demanded ferociously, "Who's dyin'? I'm not!" He struck. It was senseless. It was sickening. It was not normal drunkenness. There was neither rhyme nor reason in any of it. A man lurched aggressively against Brent. *Crazy fool!* thought Brent bitterly.

He defended himself—ruthlessly, with the inconspicuous but deadly means of defense he had been taught in the Profession.

Fists flew. A bottle crashed. One of the two women screamed with rage. Her chair had been overturned. She scrambled up from the floor and flew at the nearest man in sight, screeching and scratching . . .

The tumult grew horrible. It was like what passed for festivity in the lowest of dives. Men laughed drunkenly at the woman, who was now clawing her chosen victim, shrieking abuse at him for having knocked her to the floor—as if that were important with the *Delilah's* overdrive off. The man fought back. The woman's clothing tore.

They're watching her, thought Brent disgustedly. *I can try it.*

He vaulted the counter, and no one noticed. He crouched down. The front of the bar itself was solid. The bartender had entered through a small, concealed door. Brent found the handle. He went through. He found himself in the smallest of airlocks. He opened the farther door and was in the crew's part of the ship.

He was on a metal catwalk amid a maze of fabricated girders, with feeble light showing the rounded compartments of the ship's essential machinery. The ship was actually an assemblage of metal balloons enclosed in an outer skin, with stiffening braces running in all directions.

Brent recognized the pattern instantly. The *Delilah* was a Stimson-design freighter modified for passengers. Her hull would be strictly standard in contour to fit inside an overdrive field.

He heard a dynamo hum. It was making current for the ship's interior lighting. There was also the deep purring of the air plant. He placed the two sounds in his mind, and from that knowledge could have drawn blueprints for the entire ship. The crew's quarters would be up high, just under the control room. The interplanetary drive would be just above the ship's normal center of gravity. The overdrive must be in one particular spot because the overdrive field has to enclose the ship centrally. Brent knew where he was and where everything he wanted to find was, too. He headed for the overdrive room.

There were only dim service lamps out here. They threw faint glows on the narrow steel plates of the catwalk on which he had emerged. It would lead to the crew-lift—the shaft up to the crew's quarters on which crewmen would rise and descend by the use of stirrups racked on every level. The fuel tanks were globular, to resist internal pressure. The separate motor rooms were also globular, so they could serve as air-tight compartments in case of need.

Brent went ten paces down the narrow walk. He rounded the ship's main water tank. Then he vanished. He simply reached out, grasped a curving truss-braced girder, and swung into the obscurity between the giant metal balls. The girders, in pairs and with stiffening members between them, were wholly practical ways to move from one place to another. Service crews in space ports used them.

He climbed into blackness, making no noise. Presently he was under the air-plant room. He heard the rushing sound of turbines pulling air through hoses from the several compartments through the ship.

Brent listened critically to the noise of the air plant, as an indication of the age and design of the ship.

He was about to move on when he heard the rattle of a

stirrup on the crew-lift. He watched. A figure decended slowly. He passed by a light in his descent. It was not a crew member, but the passenger Rudl. He got off the lift-shaft, clipped the stirrup in its rack without fumbling, and moved along the catwalk Brent had used only minutes before.

He's been reporting, thought Brent coldly. *They've probably figured out their timetable. So many riots, so many dead, so much of the unspeakable, and then they'll decide it's time to declare the overdrive repaired. And they'll go back to Khem IV because that's the ship's home port and murder has been done, and the passengers who survive will be tried and executed for having reacted to despair and the* iposap *that was given them.*

He waited until the pimply man had vanished. Brent heard the click that told of the tiny airlock closed. He swung away, then, across the dim space of the ship's interior.

It was as he wormed his way toward the overdrive compartment that things fell into place with a click that was almost audible in his own thoughts. He realized what the message Kit had given him meant. It was suddenly the clearest and most obvious thing in the world that the planetary ruler of Khem IV would have his cooks executed if they served an Earth Commerce Commissioner a fruit called *vistek* on a planet called Khem IV. *Vistek* came from the other side of the Galaxy! It came from nine thousand light-years away!

Brent could see precisely why that accident had made it necessary for the *Delilah's* overdrive to be cut off until Kit Harlow and her father were dead. It was a matter he was especially trained to see, because it was a matter concerning his Profession.

V

THE overdrive compartment, like all the others on the *Delilah* was a great round ball of metal with welded gores. Brent reached it and put his ear cautiously to the rounded wall. He listened for minutes. There were minute ringing noises in the metal, some of which were actually remote echoes of the air plant's noises. But any large structure of metal, unless especially muffled, always has such noises. Sometimes they are easily heard, and then spacemen say that it is a singing ship and the superstition is that it is lucky. The *Delilah*, though, was not musical enough for that.

There was someone in the overdrive room. Brent made sure. So before he swung around and into the entrance, he got something out of his pocket, and he stepped through the door with a small pocket-blaster out and ready.

The engineer was sitting in a folding foam-chair, staring at nothing as if fascinated by his own thoughts. As Brent loomed over him, he licked his lips. Then he jerked his head up, startled. He saw that Brent was not a crew member, but a stranger. He made a convulsive movement.

"Still!" said Brent warningly. The tiny blaster bore very steadily. "What's up? Why is the overdrive off?"

The man choked, staring with horrified eyes at the blaster's muzzle. Brent glanced aside for the fraction of a second. The master switch was open—the engine-room switch. He only needed to look directly at that. Without moving his eyes he could see that the telltale dials that would locate trouble—almost invariably hopeless trouble if it happened in space—were still hooded over. They were never used except in port to check the circuits, and of course, hopelessly, if something

did go wrong in space. Between uses they were covered with plastic hoods to protect them from dust. They hadn't been unhooded. So there had been no attempt to find trouble. So there wasn't any trouble. The main switch had been opened on orders.

Brent moved the blaster suggestively.

"I said," he repeated softly, "what's the trouble? Why is the drive off? And don't talk loudly—why are the passengers invited to go mad with fear?"

The *Delilah's* engineer tried to speak.

"I—I—" Then his throat closed with a click. With a visible effort he tore his eyes from the blaster muzzle and looked up at Brent's face. His expression was one of sheer terror.

"How about throwing the switch on?" asked Brent. The engineer moved trembling hands to obey. But Brent saw a gleam of hope in his eyes, or was it a gleam of cunning? Brent snapped, "Don't touch it!" Then he said as softly as before. "That was just a check-up. If you threw the switch, it wouldn't start the engines. It would just light up a 'ready for operation' light in the control room, wouldn't it? And they'd know there was something wrong here. And they'd come—and maybe you'd live."

The engineer gasped:

"Don't—don't kill me!"

"Suppose you tell me how much you know," said Brent, eyes burning.

The engineer moaned softly.

"So you don't know," said Brent, "that the overdrive was to be turned off, the passengers driven mad; and when the right people had been killed, the ship was to turn around and head for port. The surviving passengers would be tried for murder, eh? How about the crew?" he asked with sardonic softness. "Did you stop to think that the crew might be executed for not preventing the passengers from murdering each other?"

The engineer babbled. He was a pitiable sight, but Brent

was merciless. There were hundreds of thousands of colonized planets, now, with local histories up to two thousand years in length. Earth could not govern them—which was why the Profession was a necessity—and there were nearly as many forms of social organization as there were planets. Khem IV was a totalitarian government quite ruthless enough to do exactly what Brent had just named—and the engineer knew it. He whimpered.

Brent looked at him with scornful pity.

"But what can I do with you?" he demanded. "Apparently I know more than you do about this mess."

The engineer whimpered again. Then, with the frantic speed of desperation, he sprang from his chair at an alarm button on the wall. Brent pulled trigger. There was no sound. The engineer's body thumped into the rounded hollow wall of the overdrive room, and then slumped down on the floorplates in the boneless limpness of a man killed by a blaster.

Brent put the blaster back in his pocket.

He now regarded the overdrive with a grim and knowledgeable attention. But he couldn't afford to meddle with it just yet. He noted, though, the details of its installation. It was a good fifty years old. It had been installed by someone only half-qualified, by really modern standards. *They haven't read an engineering journal since this ship was built!* he thought grimly. They'd never heard of the Doorn-Welt equation, for one thing, which shows with such beautiful clarity how and why turning part of the second-stage exciter into a closed circuit gives multiplied space-modification effect. Brent—it was incidental to qualification for the Profession—could work on this drive for a bare few minutes and—

He nodded to himself. But the crew would be armed and desperate, and the passengers were already half-crazed with fear. Alarm the crew further and they might commit a massacre . . . and to reassure the passengers would alarm the crew. *Technically, it would be easy, but humanly it was impossible,* he thought. Yet the impossible would have to be done.

He moved about the absurdly simple apparatus that was the overdrive itself. It was merely a long bar of brightly polished metal with a peculiar greenish cast. At its ends it branched into slenderer rods—almost wires—that went through the skin of the overdrive room and spread out and branched again and again until they ended in pointed projections a few inches only beyond the plating of the hull. There were four separate coils of seemingly bare copper wire, placed in particular relationship to the bar. And that was all. Even the copper seemed uninsulated. But Brent knew better than that.

He climbed away from the engine room with the body dangling and jerking as he climbed among the girders in the semidarkness.

It was almost an hour later when he reached the passengers' lounge again. He'd brushed himself carefully before re-entering. But nobody would have noticed, anyway.

A small group of passengers had gathered together, quietly and grimly waiting for something. The men—there were not too many of them—wore varying expressions of pure desperation. Behind them there were the women. Behind the women were children. There had been fighting. One man had a crude bandage covering half his face, as if someone had clawed at his eye all too successfully. There were some bent and broken chairs.

Kit Harlow and her father were near the group. Kit's face was shockingly pale. Her dress was torn. Her father's features were battered. Blood ran down one temple. A slow, deep rage, deeper than even his fury over what he had discovered, filled Brent to the very brim. He heard a snarling from the bar. "They think they're too good for us! They think—" It was the voice of Rudl—the pimply-faced man whom Brent had seen on his journey to the ship's control room. Brent ground his teeth.

Brent came to Kit, and whispered shortly:

"I saw the overdrive. It's in perfect working order. We've got a chance. Don't let yourself get killed yet!"

But he raged at the signs that she had been forced to struggle in the riot he had missed. He went to the bar and with brisk, angry motions threw water pitchers over the heads and onto the heads of the men inside it.

It would have been suicidal with normal men. But the crowd in the bar was half-crazed by *iposap*—made frantic by a deliberately excessive dosage. Every man clutched some drinkable while Rudl exhorted them. They were drugged and drunken and he worked them up. . . .

The noise was that of wild beasts turned loose. A man came staggering out of the melee, made suddenly cold sober by blood which jetted from his throat. He looked down at it stupidly, and leaned against the wall mutely imploring help from those he had joined in attacking only a little while ago.

It was too late. His knees sagged and gave way under him.

But Brent did not see that. He'd made a diversion. He had the pack fighting blindly. He dived into the fray.

There are tricks of fighting among rioters and drunken men. They are not pretty tricks, but they are effective. Brent used them—sparingly.

Brent got through; crouched below visibility and fighting his way savagely, he reached Rudl. And the pimply man did not know he was endangered until a fist sank deep into his belly, and he collapsed—and a fist connected scientifically with his jaw. Then Brent crouched over him, searching him swiftly. He found a flat case. He reached up and put it in the pocket of one of the surging mob about and above him. Then he dragged the pimply man to the wall and, crouched low, with his head protected by his hunched shoulders, he worked his way out again.

He was not unscathed. His clothes were ripped and he was bleeding when he dragged Rudl out of the door. He was staggering and panting, alike from the beating and the exertion, when he blindly essayed to open a cabin door and drag Rudl inside. Two figures followed—Kit and her father.

"Close the door!" Brent panted.

Instantly he began to tear strips from the bed clothing to bind his victim: his hands . . . his feet. He disarmed and gagged the pimply Rudl.

"I should—kill him," he said, breathing hard when it was done. "He was an agent provocateur assigned to stir those drugged fools to murder one another . . . and you. He had a communicator on him. It carried every sound he heard and every word he spoke to the control room. One of those drunks in the bar has it on him now. It's still keeping the listeners in the control room entertained. But I haven't got much time—"

Kit said quietly:

"It's no use. This is arranged. My father and I are to be killed. If we . . . locked ourselves in our cabins and . . . used the blasters on ourselves it would save other lives."

Brent said, still panting:

"I've killed the overdrive engineer. Now I've manhandled this man and planted his communicator on someone else. When the skipper finds his engineer missing, it won't take him long to figure that somebody knows what's up! When he finds that Rudl's out of circulation and his communicator's in another man's pocket, he'll know somebody understands the whole game! And will he dare leave any passenger alive, if one of them knows what he's up to?"

Kit had been pale enough. Now she went even paler.

"I think," she said with difficulty, "that you have doomed everyone."

"Maybe I have," growled Brent. "Your murder has been effectively bungled, now. And I rather think that the government that ordered this won't be too merciful to bunglers!"

Kit's father said unsteadily:

"Your prisoner, here, just heard what you said. Was that wise?"

Brent stared at the trussed-up Rudl. He seemed unconscious. But Brent leaned over him and lifted an eyelid. A pupil —an eye glared at him. But an unconscious man's eyes roll back. A lifted lid shows only the white.

Brent laughed.

"It wasn't wise for him. If I know rotten governments, when they send somebody out to do dirty work, they give them a psycho test afterward to make sure they didn't learn anything they shouldn't. So Rudl, now, is going to learn something he won't like. If we passengers are killed—which begins to look possible—and if Rudl lives to get back, he'll be sorry, because when his psycho test shows that he's found out why you two needed to be killed . . ."

Kit stared at him. Brent nodded at her.

"There've been four planets found with all their cities looted and all their people dead. You, sir," Brent looked at the Earth Commerce Commissioner, "you found out the first clue to what's happening. You were served *vistek* at a banquet in the palace of the planet ruler of Khem IV. And *vistek* doesn't grow on this side of the Galaxy, and can't be brought here. It's just as impossible to have *vistek* on Khem IV as it would be to build a space fleet capable of murdering and looting whole planets, without a word of the matter leaking out. It's impossible. But it's happened. And you've guessed the answer, I suppose, just as I have. And now our friend Rudl may guess it, too. But if he gets back home with the news, his government will kill him for knowing too much." Then Brent said grimly, "He probably knows how, too. Just to make sure—"

He bent over the bound man, whose eyes were now open and rolling wildly.

"Rudl, your home planet's the base from which ships take off to loot and murder. The ships weren't built there and they aren't manned there. They come from a long way off in a brand-new fashion which isn't even overdrive. *If* you get back home, the psycho tests will show you know that much, and I suspect you know they'll spend a lot of time and effort on you, trying to get you to tell them more."

The beady eyes of the prisoner were wild with terror.

"I don't like this man," said Brent. "I'd intended to turn out the lights and let him wake up in the darkness. In blackness

and silence, and unable to move a muscle, he'd probably have thought he was dead and in hell. But this is better. Come on—"

He led the way out of the cabin. He locked the door behind him, with one of the keys no passenger was supposed to have.

VI

IN BRENT'S own cabin Prof. Harlow said quietly, "What are you?"

Brent had an open traveling bag on the bunk. It did not contain clothing. It was a tool chest. But it contained a very curious assortment of tools and instruments. He chose with some care but more haste. He was stuffing his pockets.

"I'm a man in a hurry," he observed. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to know," said Kit's father mildly. "Because either you are an extraordinary fool, or you are extraordinary in some other way." He drew out a small medal, hanging on a chain about his neck. He twisted it oddly and showed it to Brent. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Brent hesitated. Then he said:

"Y-yes. But it doesn't put me under your orders. I'm afraid I rank you."

Den Harlow, who was a Very Important Person indeed, turned to his daughter and said drily:

"The Profession." Then he looked at what Brent showed him, and added, to Kit, "I am ranked. I do take orders from him."

"I'd like it," said Brent, "if you would get this suicide complex out of your daughter's mind."

Brent, as a member of the Profession, had absolutely no legal status or authority save to ask for help from other members of the Profession. He had only the obligation—given him by his training—to move about the Galaxy and try to make sure that no one world anywhere acquired new weapons it did not share immediately with its sister worlds. Perhaps it was absurdly idealistic, but—as history has shown since, and all too clearly—it was the way by which civilization endured.

As now . . .

He closed his tool kit carefully and said:

"I was working in the Cephis star-cluster. They were building a big fleet of new-type spaceships there. I got into the construction crew to make sure there were no new tricks being included that were kept secret. My papers are in order for that work. But I heard about Procus II being found murdered —the fourth planet killed and looted by somebody from somewhere. I headed back to Earth through this section, trying to pick up rumors here and there. On Khem IV, I'll admit, I didn't find a thing. It's a beastly tyranny, of course, but if people stand for that sort of thing, they invite it. That wasn't my business. But I didn't find a whisper of evidence that a space fleet could be built and armed on that planet, able to do what has been done."

Den Harlow said briefly:

"It wasn't built there. It wasn't armed there. It couldn't be! I made my Commerce Commissionership an excuse for traveling about—just as you manufactured an excuse."

"Now," Brent said, "you two will try to stay alive?"

Kit nodded, her eyes bright.

"I'm going to see if I can do something practical," he added.

"Yes. Be . . . careful, will you?"

He opened the cabin door and went out. He was halfway across the passengers' lounge before he realized that it was not quite necessary for one person in the Profession to ask another to be careful. It wasn't Professional. It was—well—personal. And she'd looked at him with bright eyes . . .

The bedlam in the bar was dying down, now, with Rudl no longer on hand to stimulate it. Badly beaten men wanted fresh drinks. Victors in battle wanted to celebrate.

He went into the dining salon, into the kitchen. Both were empty. Presently they were empty even of him. He had returned to the empty spaces between the balls of metal plate inside the *Delilah's* skin. When he went out the air-lock, he had a blaster ready in his hand.

Not quite an hour later, a simultaneous and unanimous

gasp sounded in the passengers' lounge. It was almost a cry, choked and incredulous, from every throat among the passengers. Each of them had exactly the same experience. The cosmos had seemed to them to whirl dizzily in an expanding spiral. Then their stomachs turned over, twice.

The ship's overdrive had come on again. The passengers who'd seemed nearest to madness from terror and despair, now seemed closest to going out of their minds with joy. The *Delilah* was again moving through space in overdrive!

They did not realize that there was a great difference between this overdrive and the one that had been cut off.

VII

THE MESSAGE went in on a very tight beam, and it was a double-transmission. It could be received only on a very special instrument.

An answer went out. It would take time to reach its destination in emptiness. The answer was similarly complex in its transmission, but its meaning was quite simple. No, there were no ships due from anywhere. No. There was no reason for a space fleet not to come in. Yes. The apparatus on the ground was quite ready.

Then, on the ice cap, a huge framework began to come up out of what seemed a crevasse in a glacier. It rose and rose and rose. There was a square metal frame. It heaved up smoothly until it reared two hundred feet high in a waste of frozen snow and ice. It was two hundred feet across. It was filled in, absolutely, by a shimmering silvery film which had the curious optical quality of an absolutely perfect reflector.

It waited.

Presently there were humming sounds in the sky. A wire-basket transmitter pointed skyward, sending a guiding beam. A dark shape appeared. It descended swiftly. It moved toward the square frame with the shimmering silvery film. It moved into that film. It vanished.

It did not come out on the far side of the framework. It went into the film and ceased to be. Another dark shape descended, and another and another and another . . . In a somehow evil procession a space fleet descended to atmosphere, and projected itself into the appearance of a silver bubble-film—and it was not. There were sixty vessels.

When the last had vanished, the square framework began to descend again. It sank down into what seemed to be a

crevasse. Then there was nothing but a small and inconspicuous building on a snow cap, an ice field, which reached for hundreds and hundreds of miles in every direction. The space fleet was not anywhere around. Not anywhere within thousands of light-years of the planet Khem IV . . .

Now there was a vastly different atmosphere in the passengers' lounge of the *Delilah*. The ship was back in overdrive! With returned spirits, passengers tried to forget the two dead men in a silent cabin. The men and women were sure that everything would be all right now. The *Delilah* was headed on for port. Oh, undoubtedly she was on her way to Loren II, where she had been bound in the first place!

Meanwhile there were injured to be cared for. There were too many of them. Those who had been only drunk were sleeping heavily. Some wept hysterically, remembering. Some —less self-conscious—turned from maniacal frenzy to a beaming, maudlin affection for all their supposed kind. *Iposap* did not make men beasts. It merely helped the beast within them express itself. Now, relieved of terror and horror and dread and despair, they were like lambs. But still there were too many wounded men.

Kit looked at Brent with warm, admiring eyes. He had not only accomplished great things, but he was of the Profession. And that was a very great thing.

Brent said, "Now the crew will really be busy."

"Doing what?" asked Kit, watching his face.

"Trying to find out what I did to their overdrive—though they don't know I did it. Also they're trying to turn it off."

"Can't they?"

"Not unless they smash it," Brent told her in grim amusement. "And I don't think they're that desperate yet. But they're on the dizzy side! The overdrive shouldn't work, and it does. They didn't turn it on, but it's on. And they can't turn it off. But that's not the worst of it, from their standpoint.

"The worst of it," he said drily, "is that it's a different overdrive altogether. This is an old ship. It had a maximum speed

of a light-year of distance in a week of time. But some tricks have been found out since she was built. One is a better setup for the exciter-coils. It's beautifully simple if you understand it, but it can't be fooled with if you don't. If you change the second-stage exciter just exactly right, the overdrive speed shoots away up! I made that change. The *Delilah's* traveling a light-year every four hours, now. It ought to show up in the control room, and up there they should be starting to go crazy."

If he knew spacemen, they would be. Just such inexplicable factors were enough to put the crew into a panic. With the *Delilah* running wild, out of all control and going forty-odd times faster than possible, the crew should be close to gibbering.

But the passengers were beautifully confident. Even Kit said relievedly:

"You've made the ship go faster? Then we'll soon be landing on Loren II!"

"We've passed it," said Brent. "Some time ago. I could handle the ship, but the skipper can't, but he'd kill me if I tried to explain. He'll never be able to land this ship by himself now."

Den Harlow said, "Then where are we going, if not to Loren II?"

"I've no idea," admitted Brent. "But I'm a lot less worried than our skipper. He really has something to worry about!"

"But we must be going somewhere!"

"The trouble is that we may be headed anywhere," said Brent. He explained awkwardly. "I thought I'd better install the new drive to jolt the crew a little. I was afraid they'd miss their engineer, and Rudl, and start investigating in the passengers' quarters. I came to help in case they did. But they're busy. I'll go back and finish my job."

Kit said hopefully, "May I come and help?"

"There may be trouble," said Brent. "They may be hunting for the engineer."

"I've a blaster now," she reminded him. "You gave it to me when you disarmed Rudl. I could watch while you work."

Her father said matter-of-factly:

"She's a very good shot. And as for the danger, if anything happens to you we're all dead anyhow."

"We'll go through the kitchen," he told her. "There's a door to the rest of the ship from there."

There was a woman in the kitchen, though. She was unskilfully preparing food for a child who stayed close to her. The woman said fretfully, "After all the terrible things that have happened, I do think the officers would send the cooks back!"

"They're probably all working to keep the overdrive going," said Kit gravely.

The woman sat the child on a stool and began to feed it. They did not want her to see them disappear into the working section of the ship. Kit rummaged for food for the two of them. She brought Brent a half-warm lunch pack.

"We should talk," she suggested. "I'd like to know about you."

"You know everything that's important," he said briefly. "You know how I think things tie in?"

She waited, watching him admiringly. He felt the admiration and liked it. But he pretended not to notice.

"There's been theorizing," he said in a low tone, "that even overdrive isn't the limit in transportation. On the face of it, it's happened. *Vistek* fruits can't be shipped from the planet they grow on, because cosmic rays reduce them to an unpalatable pulp. Nobody's ever been able to make a *vistek* seed grow away from the planet Malden—and that's on the other side of the Galaxy."

Kit urged him to continue.

"There's one way it could have gotten there," Brent told her quietly. "A transmitter. A transmitter of matter. In theory that would be instantaneous. But so far as the Profession knows it's never been done. But *vistek* on Khem IV proves it has been done."

"It follows," said Kit sagely. "Of course!"

"A transmitter on Malden, and a receiver-transmitter on Khem IV. There's a tyranny on Khem IV. There's a barbarous empire out at Malden. There's an emperor with an aristocracy and torture chambers and an army and navy. Right?"

"So my father said," she agreed.

"He'd have delusions of grandeur," said Brent sourly. "It's an occupational disease of emperors. He'd have ambitions to make an empire that would include all humanity. It's been proved that it won't work, but he'd think he could work it. And if he got hold of a matter-transmitter, he could shift his space fleet anywhere he pleased much faster than any fleet could follow it to fight it."

Kit said matter-of-factly, "My father doesn't think they would try conquest at first. They'd poison the air of a planet and kill everybody, and then loot it afterward. That would be to reward the army and navy. Then they'd attack key planets. Earth, for one. They'd destroy the strong planets which could make fighting fleets in days, if they wanted to. They'd raid, first—striking, sneaking back home by matter-transmitter, and then striking again. Bit by bit they'd whittle away the strength of civilization. When it was weak enough, they'd take over what was left."

"And they've knocked off four planets right here," said Brent coldly, "through a matter-transmitter that must be on Khem IV. They can bribe with the loot of worlds—I wonder how many other places they raid from?"

The whole concept was overwhelming in its destructive potentialities.

Brent saw red. But then the woman in the kitchen lifted her child down from its stool. She wiped off its face saying bitterly:

"At least they ought to let the cooks back!"

She led the child out of the kitchen. Brent said curtly:

"Let's go!"

His personal affairs, and even the situation on the *Delilah* faded into insignificance beside the situation only the three of them on the *Delilah* fully recognized. If this scheme suc-

ceeded, civilization—in terms of freedom for men—would be chipped away and chipped away until only an empire swollen with loot and armed past resistance would be left. . . .

The two of them got into the tiny air-lock that was the egress from the kitchen into the crew's part of the ship. And suddenly Brent's thoughts drew back from the immensities of galactic dangers, and he was acutely conscious of the fact that Kit was pressing close beside him. He knew that she looked up at his face in the tiny cubicle. And he realized with unfeigned astonishment that even with so much more important matters in hand he wanted very badly to kiss her then and there.

But he didn't. Instead, he opened the air-lock's outer door. Then they were in that unearthly area of metal balloons held in place by spidery girders, and dim lights, and danger.

Brent led the way. Abruptly, he stopped and pointed out the way to climb across the girders. Kit followed him without fear. There were many small sounds here: the dynamo whine, and the air-plant noises, and now and again faint clickings of relays.

But suddenly there were voices.

Lights among the empty spaces were few and dim. The voices sounded eerily, reflected so many times and so erratically among strange metal shapes. But there was a near-riot in being. There were yappings. There were snarlings.

Then a deep voice roared. There was a crackling, rasping sound. Someone screamed. The deep voice roared again.

Brent whispered:

"They're getting worked up. That sounded like a try at mutiny, and a hand heat-beam ending it. The crew probably wanted to smash the overdrive regardless, and somebody had to be shot . . . I wouldn't like to be in the skipper's boots."

The yappings and snarlings ceased. There were whinings instead. The deep voice bellowed. The babbling and whining stopped.

"The skipper's still in charge," said Brent. "We'll soon end that!"

Kit's shoulder touched his. She clung to a narrow girder in a dimness filled with geometrical shapes. There were humming re-echoes of the noises just ended.

"I've got my blaster ready if they come this way," whispered Kit. "If they do smash the overdrive, can you fix it?"

He nodded. She smiled at him. Their faces were very close. It was a ridiculous time and place for such things, but suddenly he found himself kissing her.

She kissed him back. Her eyes were joyous. She had to hold fast with both hands or she would drop from the girder. He stopped in panic. She laughed softly. This was the strangest of possible times and places for a man and a girl to kiss each other. Then he said feverishly:

"Come on! Let's get to some place where it's solid!"

VIII

ON A GREAT plain outside the capital city of the planet Malden there were gigantic structures showing the silvery films of matter-transmitters. No visitors ever came to this city. It was not allowed. Very, very few visitors indeed ever came to Malden any longer. Travelers were told there was a quarantine, or that space lines to Malden ran rarely.

If a traveler did reach Malden, he did not leave—not ever.

But the people of Malden did not mind. From time to time the communicator systems of the planet gave notice. Then great mobs assembled before the matter-transmitter films. Presently the blunt noses of spaceships appeared, and spaceships came out of the wavering films, in long lines of ugly shapelessness, and they settled on the meadows. Then the mobs surged toward them.

And the crews of the spaceships threw out treasure to the mobs. Jewels, and gold, and fine fabrics, and all the treasures of looted Galaxy were lavished on the Malden population. And then the Emperor showed himself, strutting, and shouts of adulation filled the air. True, only a fraction of the brigandships' cargoes was distributed, but that was richness. True, the Emperor himself possessed such wealth as had never been dreamed possible, but that was natural.

The Emperor and the people of Malden, alike, believed that they would go on forever in his fashion: that the planet Malden could be a bandit stronghold while it tore down the civilization of the worlds beyond, and then—without changing—be the capital of the empire of all inhabited worlds.

That was foolish. Its downfall had already begun. . . .

The man at the controls of the *Deliliah* began to scream

crazily. The controls did not control anything. The ship sped on through a horrible blackness which had only one tiny point of light in it, and that faint glimmering blinked and wavered and seemed perpetually about to go out. Nothing changed her motion. Nothing could touch her. Nothing could communicate with her. She was a runaway in a cosmos of nothingness which seemed constantly about to swallow her forever.

The helmsman, whose helm controlled nothing, beat with his fists at the bow ports which opened on blackness. He seized something—he did not know what—and battered blindly at everything and anything about him. And he screamed . . .

Brent finished his work. It was a highly unlikely task he had set himself, and he performed it in a most improbable fashion. He took control of the *Delilah* with a pair of tiny, animal-hair brushes and two containers of quick-drying fluid, plus two small instrument cases from his pockets.

He took one of the cases out and wrenched off a magnetic keeper, and put the case against a girder. It clung instantly. It was very near to one of the rods of greenish overdrive-alloy which ran through all the ship in a specific design. He opened a container of liquid and began to paint, very painstakingly, a line of quickly drying liquid from one point of the box to another spot some little distance away. He painted another line, and another, and another, perhaps a dozen, in all. A little later he painted narrower lines down the center of each of the original lines, with liquid from the second container, and using the second brush. This was nearly the end of his task.

Kit stayed close to him. When he moved, she moved to remain as close to him as she could. As he worked, Brent thought in astonishment, *So this is how it happens!* He led a tiny line of liquid to the greenish-tinted rod. He moved back to the small box clinging to the steel beam. Kit followed him. *I like it!* Brent thought absorbedly. He made a liquid connection to a metal stud on the box. It dried immediately.

He stood up in the near-darkness.

"Finished," he said.

Kit went back into his arms.

The space liner *Delilah* sped on. She traveled, now, at some two thousand times the speed of light. In a day she covered nearly twice the average distance between solar systems. In a week she would go from one star cluster to another. In a month from one quadrant to another. In a year she would travel farther than mankind had expanded in the first two thousand years of space travel.

Presently, almost reluctantly, Brent and Kit moved back toward the passengers' quarters. In the air-lock that led in they were again pressed closely together. But this time Brent bent down hungrily to the face lifted up to him.

Later in Den Harlow's cabin, Brent closed and locked the door. He took the second of the two essential cases from his pocket.

"This is a microwave relay," he explained. "I was working on ships out in the Cephis cluster, you remember. This is a gadget used to test circuits when you don't want to be right on the spot. The relay box is out near the ship's skin. This controls it. I've got a dozen different circuits lined in to that box, and from here I can work with any one of them. As long as I have this in my hand, I should be able to run the ship from anywhere in it, only since I can't see outside the ship, it's no use for navigating."

He explained the manner of his rewiring job. Of course the ancient practice of bulky insulation had long since been abandoned. Nowadays, dipped in thin lacquer, a wire became insulated by a transparent, almost infinitesimal film which was proof against any voltage.

He recounted the Thommasson Law, which explains the superconductivity of mercury and tin and other metals at four degrees Kelvin. He explained that he had made his connections to his relay box by first painting a stripe of insulation along the ship's girders, and then had painted a narrower stripe of dissolved superconductor in the middle. A superconductor has literally no electrical resistance at all. A thread the

size of a spider's web will carry a hundred thousand amperes without heating. So Brent had very simply and effectively concentrated all the controls of the *Delilah* at his remote-controlled relay by means of strips of practically invisible lacquer. And he should now have the ship entirely obedient to him in his cabin.

"We'll shake 'em up a bit first," he said tensely, "and then send some dot-dash stuff on their lighting system."

Kit watched his face. He opened the relay-control box. He pushed a button. Instantly there was the dizzy spiralling of all space and a feeling of acute nausea. The *Delilah's* overdrive was off again. He left it off for three seconds. He pressed another button. The spiralling—in reverse—and again the nausea. The ship was again traveling at two thousand times the speed of light. He left it on three seconds, and cut it, and left it off three seconds, and threw it on again. He did it with deliberate rhythm, so there could be no doubt that it was being done by intention.

"The passengers will panic again," he said, "but I can't help that!"

He gave them a series of jolts by flicking the overdrive on and off.

"Now I'll talk to them," said Brent. "This is the ticklish part."

He began to press and release another button on the relay box. It was dot-dash communication, utterly primitive in form but still used for emergency communication by spacecraft. As Brent pushed and released his button, the lights in the crew's quarters and all the working part of the ship dimmed and brightened. It would amount to the most self-evident yet untraceable form of signaling.

"I a-m s-t-o-w-a-w-a-y," he ticked off. "Y-o-u c-a-n-n-o-t f-i-n-d m-e."

The light in the cabin went out. Brent groped in his bag and a tiny but very fierce bluish-white battery lamp glowed. It lighted the small room, with Den Harlow watching, and Kit looking warmly at Brent.

"Smart man, the Skipper," said Brent grimly. "He thinks fast. When I started sending him signals, he turned out our lights. If I demanded to have them back on again he'd know a passenger was responsible."

He ticked off:

"I w-i-l-l r-e-s-t-o-r-e c-o-n-t-r-o-l t-o y-o-u i-f y-o-u p-r-o-c-e-e-d t-o n-e-a-r-e-s-t h-a-b-i-t-a-b-l-e p-l-a-n-e-t a-n-d l-a-n-d a-n-s-w-e-r v-i-a c-r-e-w l-i-g-h-t-i-n-g s-y-s-t-e-m."

"What could he do?" asked Kit breathlessly, "if he won't believe you?"

"He could pump air out of the passengers' quarters," said Brent. "But he couldn't bleed it out into space while we're in overdrive. Not unless he went crazy!"

He watched a tiny dial on the relay-control box.

A long time later, the dial on his control box kicked. He watched it.

"He's agreed," he said skeptically. "My guess is he'd have to shoot all his crew if he didn't. But he's in a bad fix!"

He signalled again, for a long time.

"I've told him his new speed and given him ten hours to find a planet. I told him how to handle the ship on planetary approach. Now we'll see what happens."

He put the case in his pocket. He unlocked the door. He put out the light from his bag before he opened it.

Blackness pervaded the passengers' lounge. A woman was weeping hysterically. Then someone flicked on a pocket lighter. It was a tiny point of light. The overdrive went off. It stayed off for minutes. Brent murmured: "He's picking a nearby solar system—astrogation." The overdrive went on again. Kit said:

"Shouldn't the . . . passengers be given some hope?"

"Not yet," said Brent.

There was a long wait. A tense wait. Then the lights came on.

There were crewmen coming out of the bar and the kitchen and the steward's airlock. They had blasters bearing on all who stirred. They were frightened, as well as desperate. A

man in a skipper's uniform, with dark brows almost meeting over his forehead, glared at the again-terrified passengers.

Brent said sharply to the two beside him, "Get hold of something! Quickly!"

He caught at a chair rail on the wall with his right hand. His left went swiftly into his pocket.

The skipper said, raging, "Go ahead! Wipe them out!"

He raised his blaster to aim at Den Harlow.

And then all weight vanished. The ship's artificial gravity went off.

Brent shifted hands, holding himself steady with his left hand. The skipper did not realize, for a moment. He raised his blaster. As his arm and the heavy weapon rose, his body tilted gracefully forward. The blast made a spurt of smoke from the floor. Then Brent fired with his soundless pocket weapon. There were shrieks of terror from the passengers.

They fell—endlessly, horribly, interminably. Their feet did not press upon the floor. They could not flee or dodge. They could not even turn their bodies. If a woman tried to thrust her child behind her, she found herself floating inches from the floor and the child an uncontrollable floating object which moved her as she moved it. A man lifted his hands before his eyes to shut out the sight of doom, and his body rotated grandly so that he floated face-down. There was not a person who could move from the spot where he had been standing—because there was no traction of his feet upon the floor. But there was no movement of a body's member which did not change the angle of the body to the floor and walls and ceiling. And there was the sensation of ghastly falling towards infinity . . .

But Brent was anchored. His first shot had killed the skipper as the skipper's aim was made impossible by his lack of weight. There was bedlam. Crewmen, their faces contorted, tried to shoot, but they could not aim either. To move one's hand meant that one's body moved also, in the opposite direction. And the crew was half-mad anyhow.

Holding fast and steadied by his grip, Brent fired with

complete ruthlessness. He found himself gripped, and Kit was steadying herself by him and shooting gallantly, too. And Den Harlow had not heard Brent's command in time to obey. But he floated calmly, and turned his wrist only, and deliberately pulled trigger when, and only when, his blaster bore upon a crewman with a blaster he was trying to use.

Brent bellowed, "Throw your blasters away or every man dies!"

Six men threw down their blasters and bleated for mercy. They were in such a state of panic and horror that their cries were unintelligible.

Then Brent put his left hand back in his pocket and the ship's artificial gravity came back on. Passengers and crew members alike toppled to the floor from whatever position they had assumed with relation to it.

"Harlow!" barked Brent. "Pick up those blasters! Shoot any man who tries to get them again!"

Kit's father moved forward grimly to help. Kit pressed close against Brent, desperately ready to fire in his defense, until the crew members who survived were backed into one of the cabins and the door locked upon them with a key Harlow nonchanlantly pulled out of his pocket.

"Now," said Brent, his eyes burning. "We've got to see if there are any more. They figured they had to yield to an unknown stowaway, but they weren't going to let anybody tell about them after he got off. Distribute those blasters where they'll do some good, Harlow! Who's coming with me to the control room?"

Brent surveyed the situation. The control room was familiar enough, if old-fashioned. Panels of the wall were dented and smashed. Somebody had gone out of his head with panic. But the instrument board was unharmed. Kit was close behind him, her brows knitted.

"Hm . . ." said Brent. "I'm no astrogator, but I can manage after a fashion."

He pushed a button marked "General Communication." He spoke into a microphone.

"I am about to cut the overdrive once more," he said firmly, "to make sure we are headed for a planetary system. I will let you know what I find."

His voice would resound through every portion of the *Delilah's* fabric. The passengers might still be fearful, but that could not be helped.

Brent cut the drive. With the ship's main telescope he inspected the star straight ahead. He made quick estimates.

"We are within ten minute's travel of a solar system," he said to the microphone. "I am going to take the *Delilah* there and land."

He slipped the ship into overdrive. He smiled at Kit. Then he said:

"Orders for former members of this ship's crew. Harlow, take the spacemen down to the exit-port. Have them carry all dead bodies of other spacemen—no passengers. Have them ready to land."

He smiled again at Kit. Time passed, and passed, and passed. Brent threw off the overdrive. The stars sprang into being all around the ship. And they were amazingly close to a habitable world. Brent regarded them critically and said:

"Passengers will not land until all members of the crew are off. This is an order!"

He had no authority to give it, but there would be no protest.

He swung the ship on her gyros. He let down, slowly at first but then with increasing confidence. Mountains appeared below. They swelled and grew large. He saw signs of cultivation—not intensive, but there were humans here.

He could see trees. He slowed the *Delilah's* rate of descent. Handling an unfamiliar ship was an uneasy business. Tree branches and then tree trunks crashed and crackled as the ship settled to the ground. Brent punched the exit-port speaker button and ordered:

"Crew to ground, carrying all bodies of crew members."

A light glowed on the panel. *"Exit Port Open."* Kit's father had done that. Only moments later Harlow's voice came:

"Crew all aground."

The *"Exit Port Open"* light faded. Brent gave the interplanetary drive his attention. The *Delilah* lifted once more. In seconds the blue sky turned purplish. Presently it was black, with many stars.

In half an hour, Brent turned off the drive. The *Delilah* floated on. He stared out the ports. The local sun was definitely sol-type and there were other planets. He used the main telescope. He said briefly: "That one is inhabited. Ice caps and all the rest. Some oceans."

He began to operate the gyro controls to turn the ship. All the multitude of stars about the *Delilah* seemed to turn in a stately maneuver. He centered the planet. Then he carefully placed it a trifle away from the crosshairs of the scope. He reached over and barely touched the overdrive. Space swirled and swirled again. They were in perfect landing position. He sent the ship toward the second planet.

"We'll let the passengers off here," he said. "It's inhabited and they'll get along all right. But I don't get off. After all, the Profession's no advantage. It's an obligation. According to the law I'm a pirate for mutinying against the lawful skipper of this ship, and of course it's a capital offense to maroon anybody, as I just did to the survivors of the crew. I'm liable to prosecution for several murders, mutiny in space, marooning, piracy . . . and when the passengers tell their side of the story—I'm going to take the ship and go on off."

"I think that's the right thing," said Kit with conviction.

"You and your father will get word to Earth that there's almost certainly a matter-transmitter on Khem IV, and that what's happened to Procus and Sardin and Luxor and so on—you'll get the word back?"

"No," said Kit.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

He glanced out the bow-ports. The planet they neared was green and pleasing. It looked as if it would be a kindly world.

There was at least one city. The passengers of the *Delilah* would want to land there and most likely stay there.

"Anyhow," said Kit, "my father says you'll be trying to find Earth to take the news yourself. He's going to come along with you. There ought to be at least three or four men on a ship this size." Then she added irrelevantly, "Besides, my father likes you. Very much."

Brent swallowed.

Kit looked intently at her fingernails.

"It might be nice," she said slowly. "And—my father said—in case I should think of anything so foolish or so drastic—he's a Commerce Commissioner and so automatically a magistrate. He said if we wanted him to, he'd—he'd marry us."

The green globe ahead was a world that humans lived on all their lives. It was a nice world. It was an admirable world. It grew slowly larger as the *Delilah* drew nearer to it.

It was fortunate, though, that for some little while Brent didn't have to pay exclusive attention to the controls.

The Millionth Year

By Martin Pearson

I

RALPH STRIKER'S mind was too confused and bewildered to appreciate the full danger of his position. He knew he was tottering on the brink of precipice; he could see water far below. But his thoughts were numb from the shock of sudden transference from the world he knew and understood, to completely alien surroundings.

In what had seemed the veriest fraction of a second, he had been hurled a million years into the future, whisked from a laboratory where everything was comprehensible to—what?

Instinctively, he tried to throw himself backward to safety, even as his brain sought to grasp the newness of the scene before him. His body was not responding properly yet: the shock had thrown him off balance; he was falling . . .

He could feel the terrible fear of it deep in his stomach, the same feeling that he received from the big roller-coaster at Coney Island. Then his brain began to work. He must remember to breathe while he was falling, must let himself fall limp. The water was looming beneath him now—

Splash! He was in. The coldness of the water bit into him; yet, as he struggled upward, some measure of security returned. This was still danger, but it was danger he could understand and cope with.

Carefully, now, he swam up to the surface, looked around quickly for sharks, or their equivalent in this world of the future.

Not too far away he could see land, a low-lying bank with the suggestion of docks and cranes. Good. Calmer now, he struck out for shore, swimming heavily from the equipment that dragged at his shoulders. Striker wished he could drop his

rifle and bandolier at least, but he didn't dare. No telling what might be waiting on that shore—

A steam whistle sounded behind him and he looked around to see a small launch pulling alongside. Hands clutched at him, hauled him over the rim of the craft, and Striker looked into faces as human as his own. They were chattering amiably at him, obviously asking questions, but he couldn't understand a word of the language.

His rescuers were three; suddenly they fell silent as they realized what a strange fish they had pulled out. Striker stared blankly and saw that they were certainly human. It was he, then, who did not give the impression of a reasoning being. His wet, matted hair—the rifle, hand-gun, cooking kit, rucksack crammed with tins, all insanely slung from his waist in a clattering mass—he must be a sight! He grinned feebly at the three rescuers. They were smaller than he; dark-skinned, with a prognathous cast to their features. Their costumes were much less radical than Striker's for they knew where they were going.

"Thanks, friends," said Striker gratefully. Whoever or whatever they were, they had helped him out.

Then the shock of his sudden transition into the future, his thirty-foot drop into icy waters, the strain until his rescue, took their toll. Striker went down and out.

He woke in a sort of hospital ward, flopping like a fish out of water. For a moment of orientation he was bewildered. Then he sat up violently when he recalled where—and *when*—he was. His was but one of a long row of beds. They were only a foot off the ground, and a bit too short and skimpy for his big body. Down the length of the room were other litter-like beds, occupied by representatives of the future race in various stages of disrepair. Some were lying still; others were chattering cheerfully.

"Hey!" Striker querulously called out. Abruptly the noise of the room shut off like water from a faucet; all turnable heads were turned his way. From a great deal of furtive whispering

Striker guessed that he was as great an enigma to them as they were to him.

One of them loped up to his bed with a supervisory air and shot sounds at the man.

"Sorry," said Striker. "I can't understand a word you're saying." By way of explanation, he pointed at his mouth, tapped his temple and violently shook his head. The attendant grinned amicably and held up two fingers as he bustled away.

Striker had barely time to wonder what was up when the creature was back, and with another of his kind. This one must be older, Striker thought, for his face was covered by a network of dark wrinkles, and his jaw protruded very far to the front of his brow. It came to Striker like a blow that it was almost a muzzle. Had man, let alone not progressed, but actually fallen back along the evolutionary scale in the million years since his time?

The older man turned on a light above Striker's bed and held out his hand. Striker soberly shook it as the oldster grinned delightedly and turned to the attendant, uncoiling several yards of incomprehensible chatter. With a brisk smile the attendant rambled off.

The old man held up a finger, as if to demand silence and cooperation. Striker watched very carefully as his mentor indicated the bedclothes, fingered them carefully, and in a voice heavy with significance uttered the word: "bamafa."

This, thought Striker, would be the inevitable language-lesson. Obediently he fingered the fabric and approximated the word.

Being an intense, brilliant man, capable of turning on bursts of concentration like arc-lights, also because he had no opportunity to speak anything else, Striker found himself in a few weeks able to get along in the language of these people. Written speech he mastered easily, fascinated by the curious mathematical relations of the dot-patterns that formed their alphabet.

To his surprise, as soon as he had assimilated enough of the knowledge of this world to form a conclusion, he found quite

definitely that he was in no Utopia. The sneering accusations of the yellow press regarding his authenticity, the savage attacks by disgruntled anthropologists into whose custody he had been given, were very human indeed. But among his friends, quickly found, he discovered that Earthly virtues as well had not yet died.

Baffled, he explained: "I thought that if man were still in existence he would be advanced enough to send me back to my own time." He shrugged. "I gambled and lost."

His first friend, the old man, Prash-maun, who had taught him the language, grinned, his face falling naturally into the lines of mirth that characterized him. "Lost, Striker? You expected to find yourself in either a wilderness on the heels of which would come swift death, or in a perfect world in which man had subdued his surroundings. Neither of these is so, but you are alive, though living on the bounty of friends."

Striker winced. Though it seemed to have no shameful connection among these people, he did not like the idea of charity. His life had been valuable in his own time. "I know," he said. "But tonight we were going exploring. Shall we start?"

"If you wish," said Maun. "But from what you have told me of your day, you'll find little changed."

Striker did not believe the old man just then. Later, having wandered by foot and conveyance through the metropolis into whose harbor he had fallen, he understood.

First they had seen the slums—a word existing in the language meaning exactly that—and were properly horrified. Rickety tenements fronting narrow, twisted streets, the air filled with the smell of refuse and decay; everything was there just as Striker had seen in the warrens under Brooklyn Bridge and the East End of London.

Elsewhere they saw the homes of the wealthy, reminiscent of Millionaires' Row on Fifth Avenue, long since crumbled into dust. There were shops catering to the rich and well-to-do, having windows and displays such as he had seen in his own time.

And then they visited a factory—new ground to Striker, who had been born into a comfortable family and, though realizing well that there was a need of reform of some sort, had never seen how a worker lived. He was appalled at the filthy hovels of the factory hands. "Why do they live here?" he gasped to his guide.

"Company owned," said Maun, depressed by the sight. "If they want to live elsewhere they find themselves another job. And there are no other jobs to be had. Was it so in your world?"

"I don't know," said Striker shakily. "I've signed petitions—protests—but I never saw anything like this. I don't think we had anything the equal of your place here. Many years ago in my world, certainly, but reforms were going on in my time."

"I wish I could say the same," sighed Maun. And they followed the crowd on the guided tour of the factory, the man from the past wincing at the thought of the soul-crushing monotony of the work. It was a production plant of steam motor-vehicles involving the stamping out with heavy dies and presses of simple but huge parts. The workers who serviced the presses looked to the man from the past like little grimy apes moving with mechanical precision, machine-like and yet terribly weary.

Striker remembered talk he had heard from some of his younger assistants—strange words like "Speed-up" and "industrial decrepitude." And now, ironically, he was only beginning to understand them.

"Let's get away from this," he spat to his companion. "I can't stand it!"

Later, when they were smoking cigars of a sort in Maun's modest apartment, the man from the past unburdened his soul.

"Maun," he cried, "one million! And what has it meant to man? To my eyes there has not been one upward step since the day when I left my own time and advanced into this. What can it mean?"

The old man shrugged. "Who can say? I can see that there

is in operation a rising tide of internationalism. I thought once that I might see political and national boundaries swept away before I died. Now it seems that it will take a little longer than that. Shall I tell you how far back history goes for us?"

"Half a million years?" guessed Striker.

"No," said the old man. "Not much more than twelve thousand. And what traces we have of that early day are obscured. Man was then only a little above the beasts. First recorded civilization is Loayan, flourishing nine thousand years ago. And they were a crude people without industries or trade."

"And since then," said Striker, "the climb to your present status has been slow and irregular?"

"Exactly. Do you recognize the pattern?"

"Very well indeed. And so I find myself in a world almost a duplicate of my own, yet unable to use my talents and knowledge. There was a song in my time—" He hummed a bar of the smash hit, *Put Me in My Place.* Abruptly Maun sat up. "Do that again," he said excitedly. Striker whistled the tune and went on to the end with fancy runs and trills.

Maun watched him closely, his features rapt. When the man from the past was quite finished, he raptly breathed: "Beautiful! The most beautiful thing I've ever heard!"

Striker stared dumbly. "You're crazy," he said. "That's just a piece of trash that had every moron on Earth drooling with joy."

"Do you know many more of those?" asked Maun.

"Lots," said Striker. "And I have a memory full to the brim with real music: Sibelius, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich. Plus Gershwin. Say!" Dawn was breaking. "Maybe I can make some money on this sort of thing?"

II

FOR the next month Striker struggled feebly against the incredible notoriety that had engulfed him. After that he surrendered to the fate that was his. From his memory, well stocked with the syncopations and classics of his day, there flowed tune after tune, to which Maun would scamp up some sort of lyrics. His greatest popular success was an insignificant little swing number whose name he did not remember.

And more seriously, he was able to piece together some sort of orchestration, for the vaguely familiar instruments of this new world, to Tschaikowsky's Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies. This, together with numberless Bach preludes, fugues and chorales—the old music-master had been his delight and relaxation in his own time—assured him a reputation as a bizarre and masterly composer of precision, endless pains and melancholy genius.

He lived with Maun now, not in the old scholar's humble apartment near the university, but in that Millionaires' Row he had seen in his tour of the city. Striker grew swiftly accustomed to the social usages of this far day and easily slid into a routine of work. Indeed, it was almost forgotten that he had emerged not from this world but from the misty depths of time long past.

The particular joy he took in revealing to these strange people something of the glory of his own day, he thought, was sufficient compensation for the old-time scientific zeal with which he had torn into problems as widely scattered as engineering, chemistry and archaeology. Striker had been an all-around man, and was not surprised to find himself at last a musician.

The well of melody had not run dry, it seemed, for he

was furiously at work on the notation of a Schumann piano concerto in the great gilded study of his house. Maun was quietly reading over the score as he dashed it down. Striker grimaced furiously and crumpled his pencil in his great fist. He swore furiously and steadily in English.

Maun looked up mildly. "I don't understand," he said.

"Letting off steam," said the man from the past. "Something's wrong—I don't know what. I feel like this sometimes. Whenever it came over me in the old days I'd pack up and see Tibet, or work on something solid."

"Ah," said the old man. "I have been waiting for this."

"You could tell?"

"I could expect it from anyone—especially you, Striker."

The young man rose furiously and paced the length of the room. "What can I do?" he exploded. "I don't know your world—I haven't got my labs—my notes are heaven knows where!"

"What was the last problem you were working on before your time-travel machine?" asked Maun calmly.

Striker thought for a moment, knitting his brows. "We had a man," he said at last. "Charles Fort was his name—" Another long pause.

"What did he do?" prodded the old man calmly.

"Tore down the structure of science," said Striker with a grin. "He made it his job to attack every fact established by research and investigation."

"How could he do that?" demanded Maun, fascinated.

"By the most grueling kind of counter-research. And by wanton insults hurled on the heads of men who had given their lives in a search for the truth. And by proclaiming the anarchy of science. That was his life-work."

"Fascinating!" breathed the old man. "But what were his conclusions?"

"He formulated none. Fort died—died young, some might think. But his work leads so inevitably to certain conclusions that it only remains to check them."

"It may be so," said Maun tolerantly. "Go on."

"What do you know about ball lightning?"

"Nonsense! A fable."

"I thought you'd speak that little piece," laughed Striker. "I've heard it before. But ball lightning exists nonetheless. Countless observers have seen it with eyes as sound as mine. How about lights in the sky?"

"Scores of reasons. *Gegenschein,* cloud effects, meteorites, radiant gas escaping from some natural well, distant cities, aircraft—take your choice."

"You've taken yours already, eh? I shan't argue. You can never argue on the premise that the other man is *wrong,* which is what you're doing." Striker paced the floor, softly fuming. "I'll see," he murmured at last. "Balls of fire . . . lights in the sky . . . strange visitors . . . unknown languages . . . poltergeisten, fairies and demons!"

"One of our newspapers," said Maun, "has a jeering column. They collect stories from papers all over the country and poke fun at them for their provincialism, sincere religious conviction, or whatever other crude manifestation of emotion they may display. Surely they should have a jest or two at the expense of some backwoods editor reporting lights in the sky."

"Thanks, Maun," said Striker. "And the day that one appears I'm going—wherever it is."

"I was going to say," continued Maun tonelessly, realizing that his best and only friend was about to slip two thousand miles away from him, "that they carried just such an item. Lights were seen in Bolama, to the North, by some trappers."

"Bolama," echoed Striker. He had seen literary allusions to the frozen peninsula before; it was the equivalent of Ultima Thule.

III

STRIKER shifted the heavy-laden pack on his shoulders. It had been the rucksack that he had taken with him into this world of the future, and with it he carried the rifle and air-gun that had been also part of his equipment. He didn't trust the tricky little steamguns of the people who had befriended and enriched him.

He had left his porters behind him at the last weather-station, heeding their terrified pleading. And now had come sudden realization of the futility of carrying with him, as he had planned, the masses of observational equipment now discarded.

Ahead of him, the trail was unmarked and the snow new. Glimpsing high above him the sharp line of demarcation between snow and sky, he felt his body go cold. It must be the altitude, he thought. When he had dropped the porters, they had told him that the highlands ahead were almost unexplored. They thought that he would find an aboriginal village inhabited by natives of the continent. They thought, also, that these natives would give him food and shelter. But they were by no means sure. Once beyond the timberline, they were automatically lost, despite the marvelous maps and trek-charts that Maun had prepared for the journey.

He paused to look behind him for a moment, seeing his tracks in rotten snow, then mushed on. And at the peak of the pass he stopped short. Before him stretched so incredible an expanse of snowy tundra that his eyes ached at the effort of encompassing all at one glance. Clumps of plain grass stretched before him, growing tiny in the vast distances of the snowy prairie.

Striker sat down in the snow, breathing deeply. He un-

shipped his pack and pulled out one of the trek-charts his scholarly friend had drawn for him. With a red pencil he marked a deliberate *X* in the very center of the pass indicated on the map. Underneath him, he knew, was a cairn buried by previous adventurers. They had gone about a hundred miles farther and turned back, broken in mind and body. Blame it on the weather, he thought. If the cool, dry wind kept up he was fairly safe; he might even make it to Bolama in two more days, using every glissading trick and braker he knew. And if one of the prairie blizzards swept down on him, it might take longer. Or he might never get there at all.

Wearily, Striker rose again and started down, his feet plunging deeply in the snow. He rubbed his eyes as specks on the bleak tundra swirled before him. Hastily, knowing from three Himalayan expeditions how swiftly and terribly snow-blindness could come, he fumbled for his dark glasses, snapped them on his head. But the spots were still there. They were too large to be men and moved too swiftly. Could they be mounted riders, he wondered. He had heard something of the sort about the aborigines of this land.

Deliberately, he sat in the snow to wait. The moving figures grew larger. He could see that they were riders: short, dark men on wry little canine-type animals. He lit one of the cigars to which he had become accustomed as the figures approached.

"Hello, friends!" he called out across the snow. They did not understand. Drawing rein they unshipped from their shoulders bows of laminated horn, raising them against him. With a start he whipped the air-gun from his belt. Three times the flat crash of the weapon sounded. He had aimed for their mounts; two bolted, bucking wildly, and the third dropped where it stood, its rider tumbling off.

With a cry the little man scrambled to his feet, drawing the powerful bow taut. Striker was about to send a fourth slug smacking into the man's skull when the gun fell from his hands. His skin was tight and hot as though a sudden fever had come over him, and he was trembling in every fiber. The

sun, low in the west, seemed suddenly eclipsed and Striker felt faint and weary. With half an eye he saw the barbarian with the bow had exploded into lumps of flesh scattered over the tundra.

Striker looked up and saw little, electric-blue balls of fire, each bearing a similar caricature of a face, clustering above him.

He found his tongue as two thinly shining rays of light enveloped him and he was lifted up into the cold air. "Lights," the man from the past said thickly. "Lights in the sky."

What happened to Striker then, happened at an inconceivable pace. He had no concept of his motion except that afforded by "persistence of vision." Just as a lightning flash that seemed to last for a full second actually comes and goes in a millionth of that time so Striker saw beneath him the sweep of a whole continent, followed by a brief flash of blackness, as of space.

He thought he saw before him, hanging among the stars, a vast open hall of pure light and color. And the next thing he knew he was standing in that glowing hall. The small, blue spheres that had been carrying him floated before him, then split cleanly in half and, as they disappeared there floated from the spheres luminous points of white, surrounded by little tangles of viscera, glaring filaments and radiants.

Striker knew then what was about to happen to him; and with all the incredible stubbornness of a human mind he braced himself against the shock that was coming.

Then, in a colossal flash of enlightenment, it came over him. The tangle of guts floating before his eyes spoke in a deep, vibrant voice: "We aren't gods. We can't tell you the truth and not blow your brains out like an electric chair. But if you discover for yourself—"

Striker, abruptly, was disembodied and hurled into the past. Painless, soulless, he was there to see and remember. Very, very slowly the intelligence he had experienced began to take form. Slowly the matrix dissociated from its background and emerged aglow with meaning:

One million years into the past slid the ego of Striker and again he saw his own world, but as he had never seen it before. From the cold black of space he looked down with eyesight incredibly clear and at the same time heard and understood the strange babble of two billion tongues and followed the thread of two billion lives.

He discerned himself on the roof of the bleak, barnlike structure on Staten Island, the highest point of the Eastern Seaboard, stepping into the cubicle on which he had been laboring intermittently for the past eighteen years. Striker dispassionately saw himself as he had been—clear gray eyes staring fearlessly into the future. He well knew that the cluster of men about him, his assistants who operated the external controls of his time-catapult, were smaller of soul. Without hatred he clearly saw into the mind of his young assistant the festering thought: ". . . hope the old swine never comes back—risking his priceless reserves: time, money, me. . . ." And the thought trailed off into a rotten pocket of suppurating vileness.

A slam of sound and a flash of light and Striker saw that he had vanished from the cabinet. Watching from the black of space, he felt no pain or shock. What had happened to this other Striker had happened.

His attention focused sharply on other things of his day: hospitals, factory, shipyards. With the cruel dissecting eyes of a surgeon he probed into the lives of his people, keenly noting the action and interaction. "Practice enough," he thought at last.

Then he cut sharply into a little cellar apartment, the incarnation of squalor and dank poverty. It was the contrast between his clean, brisk lab, this hell of stenches and fetor. It was a contrast too intolerable, almost, to be real. He probed the minds of the family that lived there—terror-ridden, hating, despising and despised.

Striker was shocked. His emotions were stirred, and that, he found abruptly, as he tried to shift his focus of attention, was very bad, because if he let his emotions enter into the

matter he was *stuck*. And the fear that this realization engendered nearly undid him for good. With a coldly violent wrench he snapped himself into the next day. It would not do to observe too closely, he realized.

After a thorough inspection of the world of the 1950's, he drifted on along the time-stream for a score of years, alternately contracting and expanding his ego, as it were. This seemed to give him some sort of purchase on the fabric of space; the mechanical analogy was peristalsis.

The North America of 1970 was not pretty to see. All hell had broken loose, and the *fin du siècle* mind had begun to assert itself. New York city was still the biggest town in the world, but it had regained the unwanted title of the most corrupt. To the customary sewer and sanitation grafts there had been added a few new ones; Striker saw into the minds of what was known as the "Powerhouse," the dozen men who ran the lives of the dozen million New Yorkers.

Striker shifted to the West Coast and found things in better shape. There the factories were cleaner and better-lit; there were anti-speedup laws enforced by a reform government. Hollywood, entertainment capital before television had granted that palm to high-up, centrally located Denver, was the world focus for plastics manufacture. Square miles of buildings turned out everything from buttons to houses, molded in one piece. Striker actually saw houses rolling three per minute from the assembly line.

Then Striker took a fairly long jump through time—fifty years—and landed smack in the middle of a second civil war, this time between the East and the West. And this time there was direct participation by the foreign nations. America was the battleground of the world. There wasn't a square foot in the corn belt that hadn't been poisoned, shelled or bombed by one side or the other. New Yorkers were living in their vast subway system on canned goods when Striker looked in. They were mentally in the same state of dumb terror that always grips the small man when he is crushed between two forces which he does not understand.

In Los Angeles things were worse, because the people there had no subways to protect themselves from the Asian bombers that were flying over nightly from the Land of the Rising Sun—on behalf of the Allegheny States—to lay their eggs. The wheels had stopped turning in Hollywood; by tuning in on some Army high-ups, Striker found out that production facilities were scattered over most of Arizona, under the sand.

He located one of these and projected his mind into an empty battle tank as it was being trucked out to a distribution point near ruined Tucson, blasted to powder years ago.

The tank was manned by a foul-mouthed youth, about seventeen, who ferried it to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where it joined several thousand others. A more experienced hand took over. From the conversation Striker realized that they were going to try to get through to Springfield, Ohio, and to cut off the Easterners from the Great Lakes.

The monster division of tanks met opposition in some very solid forts, rolling over them at great cost in life and fire-power. For the next week they kept moving, slower and slower, harried by planes and infantry. When Striker's tank was blown up he departed to his observation point in space, quite certain that the Westerners would not reach Springfield, Ohio—not this time.

He worked himself ahead exactly a century and looked down on a continent again peaceful. The war had been decided by a plague which had wiped out whole armies on both sides. Foreign powers had moved in to carve up the rich prize.

Another century passed and Striker saw another American Revolution, not by a landed, rum-smuggling aristocracy, but by the slavelike labor who ran the foreign-owned factories and mines. This time it was keeps; there were scenes of slaughter that made the watcher sick to his imaginary stomach. And he found that he was jammed again, unable to move in space or time. It took discipline to wrench himself away from the bloody scenes going on beneath him.

He did not observe very closely on his next jump. For the first thing he saw was a little arc of light spilling sparks from a port, shooting through space all the way to the Moon, where it crashed leaving no survivors. Striker's feelings of pride and accomplishment were as dangerous as his disgust with needless slaughter.

Striker moved ahead five hundred years and watched from a distance, finding the void thick with darting jewels made by man. Rockets were everywhere, ferrying human beings and priceless commodities. Cautiously, he peered at Mars to find there a human population of a billion, and growing steadily, from all indications. Surprisingly, there were few great public works and dwellings. Man was living a natural life. There was a score of years devoted to schooling, then the usual human activities of working, breeding and finally dying. But it looked very attractive to Striker, for there was no more disease and the life-span had more than tripled. It was a superb exaggeration of a genus' life history. And it was the same on nearly all the other planets.

He was not sure how far ahead he moved on his next jump into futurity, but it must have been unthinkable centuries. Mars had been depopulated by some unspecified catastrophe, and the race was determined that *that* would not happen again. Tinkering with genes had produced a strain of men with horny plates covering their bodies and great safes surrounding their brains so that nothing less than a stick of dynamite in the mouth could harm them. But it proved to be a blind alley, for with the reversion to brutally strong body-formation, came a corresponding psychological atavism; over the course of the next thousand years crime reappeared and brute lust-murders were common.

Concerted action by the humans who had not the horn-plate genes wiped out the strain in quick order. Experiments began anew at an opposite pole, and man became slight in the next few generations.

The end result of this Striker did not see. At the end of one of his flights he landed off Saturn and probed down to the

surface to see what he could. And what he saw! Pavements that glowed with inner fire, buildings that were little more than arcs of electricity between four terminals! It was when he saw the *men* that he feared for his sanity, for they were slight creatures, right enough. And many had pulpy little horns on their brows. Some glowed with enormously stimulated mitogenic rays.

The implication of this chilled Striker with horror; he tried to leave, to retreat into space for a while to think—and could not move. This was at last what he had dreaded, and the horror snowballed, gathering magnitude and intensity.

IV

STRIKER, fixed immovable, was jammed out there in space until seven years had passed. For the first three he assiduously courted madness by brooding on his plight. By the fourth year he had come to his senses and worked out a grueling system of mental control that would ultimately divorce his mind from any vestige of emotion and impulse, leaving him, for the length of his time traveling, a cold and passionless being, secure from any repetition of this event. After four years of controlling, his project succeeded and he was free again to wander.

He set his course for no less than fifteen thousand years, and back to Earth. He had seen enough of Saturn and its environments.

When he had assumed his customary observation point he looked down briefly. The Earth was again a jungle, abandoned by man and given over to reptiles and carnivores. Striker brought his super-acute vision to bear on a little column of smoke. It was neither volcano nor forest fire. And another crushing fact insinuated itself into his mind. With only the staggering semblance of control he tore as far away from the planet as he could go, finding himself, seconds later, off Proxima Centauri's planetary system.

And there too were human beings—*his* people—now with bodies shriveled, blow-horns extended into luminous organs, some swinging clear of the ground as they moved. They lived wholly radiational lives, with customs and speech utterly beyond his conception. Had he not observed their evolution he would never have believed that they had started as the *genus homo*. They too were able to pass through time and space at will.

The watcher set his course for Earth again, ready to face facts that should not be denied.

Over the mother-planet Striker minutely observed a colony of apes who had learned the use of fire. There were no more than a few hundred of them left, but in a century they were chattering at each other in the crude beginnings of a language. It was their salvation that they were fairly large but not so large that they had no practical enemies. On account of their size they were forced to use what brains they had in the invention of devices to save their strength for work.

They were social creatures. As soon as the population increased they formed elaborate social tabus that nearly ended them, for their ritual made mating so elaborate an affair that the common-sense thing to do was to break the laws, seize a wife and become an outsider. A great reformer arose inevitably—for the will of the apes to end their fantastic restrictions had to find an outlet—and cut the Gordian knot. He lived to an extraordinary age, and for most of his life he ruled over the tribe. And under that rule, they prospered marvelously well.

A couple of centuries later they discovered agriculture, and then there was no checking them. It was no time at all before they reached the classical point of civilization when they realized that it was more worth their while to make their criminals and prisoners work for them than to eat them.

They colonized extensively, being remarkably fecund animals. Their people were spread over most of the world before they had given up cannibalism. The slave system endured for a long, long time—so long that Striker wondered if they would never advance—though, of course, he knew.

He found, although speeded up somewhat, the usual line of development. An industrial revolution occurred and slavery came to an end. Cities in the real sense grew like mushrooms, most of them wrought from the tangled steel that was the only token left that *genus homo* had once passed that way.

When great liners were plowing the sea, coming to berth

in harbor cities, Striker knew with exhausted gratefulness that his incredible journey was near an end. He saw drifting past him three of the blue radiational spheres in which human beings traveled through space, and tried to contact them but there was no reply. The spheres were from Rigel whose population specialized in travel of space and time.

Very carefully, he observed one special harbor, where little steam-launches patrolled the waters day and night on the alert for smugglers. He saw, at last, a strangely dressed man, not at all like the ape people, appear out of nowhere and splash into the harbor's waters. And he knew, with an abstract admiration, that the man was himself.

He watched this other Striker investigate the ways of the world of the millionth year, saw him sitting on the tundra where the ball lightning had been seen. He saw him taken up by the human beings from Rigel and transported to the hall they had built for him in space out of free electrons.

"—and have the toughness to resist panic and explore we shall give you that power," Striker rubbed his eyes, found that he was in the hall in space. The organ notes of the human being from Rigel were still sounding in his ears. He had covered the million years in the blink of an eye.

Assembling his memories and visions of the past, he said: "It was a very great message. I could not have borne it any other way. Why—"

The creatures anticipated him, of course. They not only knew what he would say, they knew why he would say it; they could probe down to the deep motives that were lost even to Striker himself.

"Because," said the organ-voice, "you are a man. We too are men." Striker knew that there was something more, something that the man would not tell him, something that he would have to *feel* . . .

He was silent for a long time, sensing the currents of thought that beat from the three creatures.

Finally, the voice said: "We shall send you back." And

then he got it; snatched out and got it like a brass ring from the feeder at a merry-go-round. As he was whirling through space in the electronic arms of the blue spheres he cried, strangled: "No . . . wait . . . I'll—"

He choked and caught his breath back again. "I'll go back with you—" Then he saw that he was facing Maun in his own house. Striker fell into a chair and buried his head in his hands. He knew that already the three human beings were sleeting back to Rigel with a sad message for the fate of Man.

"Maun," he groaned, "they couldn't ask me. I had to volunteer it. They're dying out—need fresh blood—that's me. But they couldn't ask me!"

Maun, aged face wrinkled with concern, gasped: "Striker—how did you get here? Are you ill?"

Striker was feverish. "There was a race of men before mine. They died out. Your people will rise to internationalism, space-flight, radiational existence—and then—"

Maun rose and got Striker a narcotic drink. "You're sick," he said.

Striker pushed it away, thought better of it and drained the cup. If Maun thought he was raving, so much the better.

This was the blackest day of Striker's life, a message of cosmic futility that made the Middle Ages, six hundred years of ignorance, blackness and horror, seem like a stubbed toe.

He would not talk. It would serve no purpose and help no person in the business of living.

The Chapter Ends

By Poul Anderson

I

"NO," SAID the old man.

"But you don't realize what it means," said Jorun. "You don't know what you're saying."

The old man, Kormt of Huerdar, Gerlaug's son, and Speaker for Solis Township, shook his head till the long, grizzled locks swirled around his wide shoulders. "I have thought it through," he said. His voice was deep and slow and implacable. "You gave me five years to think about it. And my answer is no."

Jorun felt a weariness rise within him. It had been like this for days now, weeks, and it was like trying to knock down a mountain. You beat on its rocky flanks till your hands were bloody, and still the mountain stood there, sunlight on its high snow fields and in the forests that rustled up its slopes, and it did not really notice you. You were a brief thin buzz between two long nights, but the mountain was forever.

"You haven't thought at all," he said with a rudeness born of exhaustion. "You've only reacted unthinkingly to a dead symbol. It's not a human reaction, even, it's a verbal reflex."

Kormt's eyes, meshed in crow's-feet, were serene and steady under the thick gray brows. He smiled a little in his long beard, but made no other reply. Had he simply let the insult glide off him, or had he not understood it at all? There was no real talking to these peasants; too many millennia lay between, and you couldn't shout across that gulf.

"Well," said Jorun, "the ships will be here tomorrow or the next day, and it'll take another day or so to get all your people aboard. You have that long to decide, but after that it'll be too late. Think about it, I beg of you. As for me, I'll be too busy to argue further."

"You are a good man," said Kormt, "and a wise one in your fashion. But you are blind. There is something dead inside you."

He waved one huge gnarled hand. "Look around you, Jorun of Fulkhis. This is *Earth*. This is the old home of all humankind. You cannot go off and forget it. Man cannot do so. It is in him, in his blood and bones and soul; he will carry Earth within him forever."

Jorun's eyes traveled along the arc of the hand. He stood on the edge of the town. Behind him were its houses—low, white, half-timbered, roofed with thatch or red tile, smoke rising from the chimneys; carved galleries overhung the narrow, cobbled, crazily twisting streets; he heard the noise of wheels and wooden clogs, the shouts of children at play. Beyond that were trees and the incredible ruined walls of Sol City. In front of him, the wooded hills were cleared and a gentle landscape of neat fields and orchards rolled down toward the distant glitter of the sea; scattered farm buildings, drowsy cattle, winding gravel roads, fence walls of ancient marble and granite, all dreaming under the sun.

He drew a deep breath. It was pungent in his nostrils. It smelled of leaf mold, plowed earth baking in the warmth, summery trees and gardens, a remote ocean odor of salt and kelp and fish. He thought that no two planets ever had quite the same smell, and that none was as rich as Terra's.

"This is a fair world," he said slowly.

"It is the only one," said Kormt. "Man came from here; and to this, in the end, he must return."

"I wonder—" Jorun sighed. "Take me; not one atom of my body was from this soil before I landed. My people lived on Fulkhis for ages, and changed to meet its conditions. They would not be happy on Terra."

"The atoms are nothing," said Kormt. "It is the form which matters, and that was given to you by Earth."

Jorun studied him for a moment. Kormt was like most of this planet's ten million or so people—a dark, stocky folk, though there were more blond and red-haired throwbacks

here than in the rest of the Galaxy. He was old for a primitive untreated by medical science—he must be almost two hundred years old—but his back was straight, and his stride firm. The coarse, jut-nosed face held an odd strength. Jorun was nearing his thousandth birthday, but couldn't help feeling like a child in Kormt's presence.

That didn't make sense. These few dwellers on Terra were a backward and impoverished race of peasants and handicraftsmen; they were ignorant and unadventurous; they had been static for more thousands of years than anyone knew. What could they have to say to the ancient and mighty civilization which had almost forgotten their little planet?

Kormt looked at the declining sun. "I must go now," he said. "There are the evening chores to do. I will be in town tonight if you should wish to see me."

"I probably will," said Jorun. "There's a lot to do, readying the evacuation, and you're a big help."

The old man bowed with grave courtesy, turned, and walked off down the road. He wore the common costume of Terran men, as archaic in style as in its woven-fabric material: hat, jacket, loose trousers, a long staff in his hand. Contrasting the drab blue of Kormt's dress, Jorun's vivid tunic of shifting rainbow hues was like a flame.

The psychotechnician sighed again, watching him go. He liked the old fellow. It would be criminal to leave him here alone, but the law forbade force—physical or mental—and the Integrator on Corazuno wasn't going to care whether or not one aged man stayed behind. The job was to get the *race* off Terra.

A lovely world. Jorun's thin mobile features, pale-skinned and large-eyed, turned around the horizon. *A fair world we came from.*

There were more beautiful planets in the Galaxy's swarming myriads—the indigo world-ocean of Loa, jeweled with islands; the heaven-defying mountains of Sharang; the sky

of Jareb, that seemed to drip light—oh, many and many, but there was only one Earth.

Jorun remembered his first sight of this world, hanging free in space to watch it after the grueling ten-day run, thirty thousand light-years, from Corazuno. It was blue as it turned before his eyes, a burnished turquoise shield blazoned with the living green and brown of its lands, and the poles were crowned with a glimmering haze of aurora. The belts that streaked its face and blurred the continents were cloud, wind and water and the gray rush of rain, like a benediction from heaven. Beyond the planet hung its moon, a scarred golden crescent, and he had wondered how many generations of men had looked up to it, or watched its light like a broken bridge across moving waters. Against the enormous cold of the sky—utter black out to the distant coils of the nebulae, thronging with a million frosty points of diamond-hard blaze that were the stars—Earth had stood as a sign of haven. To Jorun, who came from Galactic center and its uncountable hosts of suns, heaven was bare, this was the outer fringe where the stars thinned away toward hideous immensity. He had shivered a little, drawn the envelope of air and warmth closer about him, with a convulsive movement. The silence drummed in his head. Then he streaked for the north-pole rendezvous of his group.

Well, he thought now, *we have a pretty routine job. The first expedition here, five years ago, prepared the natives for the fact they'd have to go. Our party simply has to organize these docile peasants in time for the ships.* But it had meant a lot of hard work, and he was tired. It would be good to finish the job and get back home.

Or would it?

He thought of flying with Zarek, his teammate, from the rendezvous to this area assigned as theirs. Plains like oceans of grass, wind-rippled, darkened with the herds of wild cattle whose hoofbeats were a thunder in the earth; forests, hundreds of kilometers of old and mighty trees, rivers piercing them in a long steel gleam; lakes where fish leaped; spilling

sunshine like warm rain, radiance so bright it hurt his eyes, cloud-shadows swift across the land. It had all been empty of man, but still there was a vitality here which was almost frightening to Jorun. His own grim world of moors and crags and spindrift seas was a niggard beside this; here life covered the earth, filled the oceans, and made the heavens clangorous around him. He wondered if the driving energy within man, the force which had raised him to the stars, made him half-god and half-demon, if that was a legacy of Terra.

Well—man had changed; over the thousands of years, natural and controlled adaptation had fitted him to the worlds he had colonized, and most of his many races could not now feel at home here. Jorun thought of his own party: round, amber-skinned Chuli from a tropic world, complaining bitterly about the cold and dryness; gay young Cluthe, gangling and bulge-chested; sophisticated Taliuvenna of the flowing dark hair and the lustrous eyes—no, to them Earth was only one more planet, out of thousands they had seen in their long lives.

And I'm a sentimental fool.

II

HE COULD have willed the vague regret out of his trained nervous system, but he didn't want to. This was the last time human eyes would ever look on Earth, and somehow Jorun felt that it should be more to him than just another psychotechnic job.

"Hello, good sir."

He turned at the voice and forced his tired lips into a friendly smile. "Hello, Julith," he said. It was a wise policy to learn the names of the townspeople, at least, and she was a great-great-granddaughter of the Speaker.

She was some thirteen or fourteen years old, a freckle-faced child with a shy smile, and steady green eyes. There was a certain awkward grace about her, and she seemed more imaginative than most of her stolid race. She curtsied quaintly for him, her bare foot reaching out under the long smock which was daily female dress here.

"Are you busy, good sir?" she asked.

"Well, not too much," said Jorun. He was glad of a chance to talk; it silenced his thoughts. "What can I do for you?"

"I wondered—" She hesitated, then, breathlessly: "I wonder if you could give me a lift down to the beach? Only for an hour or two. It's too far to walk there before I have to be home, and I can't borrow a car, or even a horse. If it won't be any trouble, sir."

"Mmmmm—shouldn't you be at home now? Isn't there milking and so on to do?"

"Oh, I don't live on a farm, good sir. My father is a baker."

"Yes, yes, so he is. I should have remembered." Jorun considered for an instant. There was enough to do in town,

and it wasn't fair for him to play hooky while Zarek worked alone. "Why do you want to go to the beach, Julith?"

"We'll be busy packing up," she said. "Starting tomorrow, I guess. This is my last chance to see it."

Jorun's mouth twisted a little. "All right," he said; "I'll take you."

"You are very kind, good sir," she said gravely.

He didn't reply, but held out his arm, and she clasped it with one hand while her other arm gripped his waist. The generator inside his skull responded to his will, reaching out and clawing itself to the fabric of forces and energies which was physical space. They rose quietly, and went so slowly seaward that he didn't have to raise a windscreen.

"Will we be able to fly like this when we get to the stars?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, Julith," he said. "You see, the people of my civilization are born this way. Thousands of years ago, men learned how to control the great basic forces of the cosmos with only a small bit of energy. Finally they used artificial mutation—that is, they changed themselves, slowly, over many generations, until their brains grew a new part that could generate this controlling force. We can now, even, fly between the stars, by this power. But your people don't have that brain, so we had to build space ships to take you away."

"I see," she said.

"Your great-great-grandchildren can be like us, if your people want to be changed thus,"

"They didn't want to change before," she answered. "I don't think they'll do it now, even in their new home." Her voice held no bitterness; it was an acceptance.

Privately, Jorun doubted it. The psychic shock of this uprooting would be bound to destroy the old traditions of the Terrans; it would not take many centuries before they were culturally assimilated by Galactic Civilization.

Assimilated—nice euphemism. Why not just say—eaten?

They landed on the beach. It was broad and white, running

in dunes from the thin, harsh, salt-streaked grass to the roar and tumble of surf. The sun was low over the watery horizon, filling the damp, blowing air with gold. Jorun could almost look directly at its huge disc.

He sat down. The sand gritted tinily under him, and the wind rumpled this hair and filled his nostrils with its sharp wet smell. He picked up a conch and turned it over in his fingers, wondering at the intricate architecture of it.

"If you hold it to your ear," said Julith, "you can hear the sea." Her childish voice was curiously tender around the rough syllables of Earth's language.

He nodded and obeyed her hint. It was only the small pulse of blood within him—you heard the same thing out in the great hollow silence of space—but it did sing of restless immensities, wind and foam, and the long waves marching under the moon.

"I have two of them myself," said Julith. "I want them so I can always remember this beach. And my children and their children will hold them, too, and hear our sea talking." She folded his fingers around the shell. "You keep this one for yourself."

"Thank you," he said. "I will."

The combers rolled in, booming and spouting against the land. The Terrans called them the horses of God. A thin cloud in the west was turning rose and gold.

"Are there oceans on our new planet?" asked Julith.

"Yes," he said. "It's the most Earthlike world we could find that wasn't already inhabited. You'll be happy there."

But the trees and grasses, the soil and the fruits thereof, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the waters beneath, form and color, smell and sound, taste and texture, everything is different. Is alien. The difference is small, subtle, but it is the abyss of two billion years of separate evolution, and no other world can ever quite be Earth.

Julith looked straight at him with solemn eyes. "Are you folk afraid of Hulduvians?" she asked.

"Why, no," he said. "Of course not."

"Then why are you giving Earth to them?" It was a soft question, but it trembled just a little.

"I thought all your people understood the reason by now," said Jorun. "Civilization—the civilization of man and his non-human allies—has moved inward, toward the great star-clusters of Galactic center. This part of space means nothing to us any more; it's almost a desert. You haven't seen starlight till you've been by Sagittarius. Now the Hulduvians are another civilization. They are not the least bit like us; they live on big, poisonous worlds like Jupiter and Saturn. I think they would seem like pretty nice monsters if they weren't so alien to us that neither side can really understand the other. They use the cosmic energies too, but in a different way—and their way interferes with ours just as ours interferes with theirs. Different brains, you see.

"Anyway, it was decided that the two civilizations would get along best by just staying away from each other. If they divided up the Galaxy between them, there would be no interference; it would be too far from one civilization to the other. The Hulduvians were, really, very nice about it. They're willing to take the outer rim, even if there are fewer stars, and let us have the center.

"So by the agreement, we've got to have all men and manlike beings out of their territory before they come to settle it, just as they'll move out of ours. Their colonists won't be coming to Jupiter and Saturn for centuries yet; but even so, we have to clear the Sirius Sector now, because there'll be a lot of work to do elsewhere. Fortunately, there are only a few people living in this whole part of space. The Sirius Sector has been an isolated, primi—ah—quiet region since the First Empire fell, fifty thousand years ago."

Julith's voice rose a little. "But those people are *us!*"

"And the folk of Alpha Centauri and Procyon and Sirius and—oh, hundreds of other stars. Yet all of you together are only one tiny drop in the quadrillions of the Galaxy. Don't you see, Julith, you have to move for the good of all of us?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I know all that."

She got up, shaking herself. "Let's go swimming."

Jorun smiled and shook his head. "No, I'll wait for you if you want to go."

She nodded and ran off down the beach, sheltering behind a dune to put on a bathing-suit. The Terrans had a nudity taboo, in spite of the mild interglacial climate; typical primitive irrationality. Jorun lay back, folding his arms behind his head, and looked up at the darkening sky. The evening star twinkled forth, low and white on the dusk-blue horizon. Venus—or was it Mercury? He wasn't sure. He wished he knew more about the early history of the Solar System, the first men to ride their thunderous rockets out to die on unknown hell-worlds—the first clumsy steps toward the stars. He could look it up in the archives of Corazuno, but he knew he never would. Too much else to do, too much to remember. Probably less than one per cent of mankind's throngs even knew where Earth was, today—though, for a while, it had been quite a tourist center. But that was perhaps thirty thousand years ago.

Because this world, out of all the billions, has certain physical characteristics, he thought, *my race has made them into standards. Our basic units of length and time and acceleration, our comparisons by which we classify the swarming planets of the Galaxy, they all go back ultimately to Earth. We bear that unspoken memorial to our birthplace within our whole civilization, and will bear it forever. But has she given us more than that? Are our own selves, bodies and minds and dreams, are they also the children of Earth?*

Now he was thinking like Kormt, stubborn old Kormt who clung with such a blind strength to this land simply because it was his. When you considered all the races of this wander-footed species—how many of them there were, how many kinds of man between the stars! And yet they all walked upright; they all had two eyes and a nose between and a mouth below; they were all cells of that great and ancient

culture which had begun here, eons past, with the first hairy half-man who kindled a fire against night. If Earth had not had darkness and cold and prowling beasts, oxygen and cellulose and flint, that culture might never have gestated.

I'm getting illogical. Too tired, nerves worn too thin, psychosomatic control slipping. Now Earth is becoming some obscure mother-symbol for me.

Or has she always been one, for the whole race of us?

A sea gull cried harshly overhead and soared from view.

The sunset was smoldering away and dusk rose like fog out of the ground. Julith came running back to him, her face indistinct in the gloom. She was breathing hard, and he couldn't tell if the catch in her voice was laughter or weeping.

"I'd better be getting home," she said.

III

THEY FLEW slowly back. The town was a yellow twinkle of lights, warmth gleaming from windows across many empty kilometers. Jorun set the girl down outside her home.

"Thank you, good sir," she said, curtseying. "Won't you come in to dinner?"

"Well—"

The door opened, etching the girl black against the ruddiness inside. Jorun's luminous tunic made him like a torch in the dark. "Why, it's the starman," said a woman's voice.

"I took your daughter for a swim," he explained. "I hope you don't mind."

"And if we did, what would it matter?" grumbled a bass tone. Jorun recognized Kormt; the old man must have come as a guest from his farm on the outskirts. "What could we do about it?"

"Now, Granther, that's no way to talk to the gentleman," said the woman. "He's been very kind. Won't you come eat with us, good sir?"

Jorun refused twice, in case they were only being polite, then accepted gladly enough. He was tired of cookery at the inn where he and Zarek boarded. "Thank you."

He entered, ducking under the low door. A single long, smoky-raftered room was kitchen, dining room, and parlor; doors led off to the sleeping quarters. It was furnished with a clumsy elegance, skin rugs, oak wainscoting, carved pillars, glowing ornaments of hammered copper. A radium clock, which must be incredibly old, stood on the stone mantel, above a snapping fire; a chemical-powered gun, obviously of local manufacture, hung over it. Julith's parents, a plain, quiet peasant couple, conducted him to the end of the wooden

table, while half a dozen children watched him with large eyes. The younger children were the only Terrans who seemed to find this removal an adventure.

The meal was good and plentiful: meat, vegetables, bread, beer, milk, ice cream, coffee, all of it from the farms hereabouts. There wasn't much trade between the few thousand communities of Earth; they were practically self-sufficient. The company ate in silence, as was the custom here. When they were finished, Jorun wanted to go, but it would have been rude to leave immediately. He went over to a chair by the fireplace, across from one in which Kormt sprawled.

The old man took out a big-bowled pipe and began stuffing it. Shadows wove across his seamed brown face, his eyes were a gleam out of darkness. "I'll go down to City Hall with you soon," he said. "I imagine that's where the work is going on."

"Yes," said Jorun. "I can relieve Zarek at it. I'd appreciate it if you did come, good sir. Your influence is very steadying on these people."

"It should be," said Kormt. "I've been their Speaker for almost a hundred years. And my father Gerlaug was before me, and his father Kormt was before him." He took a brand from the fire and held it over his pipe, puffing hard, looking up at Jorun through tangled brows. "Who was your great-grandfather?"

"Why—I don't know. I imagine he's still alive somewhere, but—"

"I thought so. No marriage. No family. No home. No tradition." Kormt shook his massive head, slowly. "I pity you Galactics!"

"Now please, good sir—" Damn it all, the old clodhopper could get as irritating as a faulty computer. "We have records that go back to before man left this planet. Records of everything. It is you who have forgotten."

Kormt smiled and puffed blue clouds at him. "That's not what I meant."

"Do you mean you think it is good for men to live a life

that is unchanging, that is just the same from century to century—no new dreams, no new triumphs, always the same grubbing rounds of days? I cannot agree."

Jorun's mind flickered over history, trying to evaluate the basic motivations of his opponent. Partly cultural, partly biological, that must be it. Once Terra had been the center of the civilized universe. But the long migration starward, especially after the fall of the First Empire, drained off the most venturesome elements of the population. That drain went on for thousands of years.

You couldn't call them stagnant. Their life was too healthy, their civilization too rich in its own way—folk art, folk music, ceremony, religion, the intimacy of family life which the Galactics had lost—for that term. But to one who flew between the streaming suns, it was a small existence.

Kormt's voice broke in on his reverie. "Dreams, triumphs, work, deeds, love and life and finally death and the long sleep in the earth," he said. "Why should we want to change them? They never grow old; they are new for each child that is born."

"Well," said Jorun, and stopped. You couldn't really answer that kind of logic. It wasn't logic at all, but something deeper.

"Well," he started over, after a while, "as you know, this evacuation was forced on us, too. We don't want to move you, but we must."

"Oh, yes," said Kormt. "You have been very nice about it. It would have been easier, in a way, if you'd come with fire and gun and chains for us, like the barbarians did long ago. We could have understood you better then."

"At best, it will be hard for your people," said Jorun. "It will be a shock, and they'll need leaders to guide them through it. You have a duty to help them out there, good sir."

"Maybe." Kormt blew a series of smoke rings at his youngest descendant, three years old, who crowed with laughter and climbed up on his knee. "But they'll manage."

"You can't seem to realize," said Jorun, "that you are the *last man on Earth* who refuses to go. You will be *alone*. For

the rest of your life! We couldn't come back for you later under any circumstances, because there'll be Hulduvian colonies between Sol and Sagittarius which we would disturb in passage. You'll be alone, I say!"

Kormt shrugged. "I'm too old to change my ways; there can't be many years left me, anyway. I can live well, just off the food-stores that'll be left here." He ruffled the child's hair, but his face drew into a scowl. "Now, no more of that, good sir, if you please; I'm tired of this argument."

Jorun nodded and fell into the silence that held the rest. Terrans would sometimes sit for hours without talking, content to be in each other's nearness. He thought of Kormt, Gerlaug's son, last man on Earth, altogether alone, living alone and dying alone; and yet, he reflected, was that solitude any greater than the one in which all men dwelt all their days?

Presently the Speaker set the child down, knocked out his pipe and rose. "Come, good sir," he said, reaching for his staff. "Let us go."

They walked side by side down the street, under the dim lamps and past the yellow windows. The cobbles gave back their footfalls in a dull clatter. Once in a while they passed someone else, a vague figure which bowed to Kormt. Only one did not notice them, an old woman who walked crying between the high walls.

"They say it is never night on your worlds," said Kormt.

Jorun threw him a sidelong glance. His face was a strong jutting of highlights from sliding shadow. "Some planets have been given luminous skies," said the technician, "and a few still have cities, too, where it is always light. But when every man can control the cosmic energies, there is no real reason for us to live together; most of us dwell far apart. There are very dark nights on my own world, and I cannot see any other home from my own—just the moors."

"It must be a strange life," said Kormt. "Belonging to no one."

They came out on the market-square, a broad paved space

walled in by houses. There was a fountain in its middle, and a statue dug out of the ruins had been placed there. It was broken, one arm gone—but still the white slim figure of the dancing girl stood with youth and laughter, forever under the sky of Earth. Jorun knew that lovers were wont to meet here, and briefly, irrationally, he wondered how lonely the girl would be in all the millions of years to come.

The City Hall lay at the farther end of the square, big and dark, its eaves carved with dragons, and the gables topped with wing-spreading birds. It was an old building; nobody knew how many generations of men had gathered here. A long, patient line of folk stood outside it, shuffling in one by one to the registry desk; emerging, they went off quietly into the darkness, toward the temporary shelters erected for them.

Walking by the line, Jorun picked faces out of the shadows. There was a young mother holding a crying child, her head bent over it in a timeless pose, murmuring to soothe it. There was a mechanic, still sooty from his work, smiling wearily at some tired joke of the man behind him. There was a scowling, black-browed peasant who muttered a curse as Jorun went by; the rest seemed to accept their fate meekly enough. There was a priest, his head bowed, alone with his God. There was a younger man, his hands clenching and unclenching, big helpless hands, and Jorun heard him saying to someone else: "—if they could have waited till after harvest. I hate to let good grain stand in the field."

Jorun went into the main room, toward the desk at the head of the line. Hulking hairless Zarek was patiently questioning each of the hundreds who came, hat in hand, before him: name, age, sex, occupation, dependents, special needs or desires. He punched the answers out on the recorder machine, half a million lives were held in its electronic memory.

"Oh, there you are," his bass rumbled. "Where've you been?"

"I had to do some concy work," said Jorun. That was a private code term, among others: concy, conciliation, anything

to make the evacuation go smoothly. "Sorry to be so late. I'll take over now."

"All right. I think we can wind the whole thing up by midnight." Zarek smiled and clapped him on the back to go out for supper and sleep. Jorun beckoned to the next Terran and settled down to the long, almost mindless routine of registration. He was interrupted once by Kormt, who yawned mightily and bade him good night; otherwise it was a steady, half-conscious interval in which one anonymous face after another passed by. He was dimly surprised when the last one came up. This was a plump, cheerful, middle-aged fellow with small shrewd eyes, a little more colorfully dressed than the others. He gave his occupation as merchant—a minor tradesman, he explained, dealing in the little things it was more convenient for the peasants to buy than to manufacture themselves.

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long," said Jorun. Concy statement.

"Oh, no." The merchant grinned. "I knew those dumb farmers would be here for hours, so I just went to bed and got up half an hour ago, when it was about over."

"Clever," Jorun rose, sighed, and stretched. The big room was cavernously empty, its lights a harsh glare. It was very quiet here.

"Well, sir, I'm a middling smart chap, if I say it as shouldn't. And you know, I'd like to express my appreciation of all you're doing for us."

"Can't say we're doing much." Jorun locked the machine.

"Oh, the apple-knockers may not like it, but really, good sir, this hasn't been any place for a man of enterprise. It's dead. I'd have got out long ago if there'd been any transportation. Now, when we're getting back into civilization, there'll be some real opportunities. I'll make my pile inside of five years, you bet."

Jorun smiled, but there was a bleakness in him. What chance would this barbarian have even to get near the gigantic work of civilization—let alone comprehend it or take

part in it. He hoped the little fellow wouldn't break his heart trying.

"Well," he said "good night, and good luck to you."

"Good night, sir. We'll meet again, I trust."

Jorun switched off the lights and went out into the square. It was completely deserted. The moon was up now, almost full, and its cold radiance dimmed the lamps. He heard a dog howling far off. The dogs of Earth—such as weren't taken along—would be lonely, too.

Well, he thought, *the job's over. Tomorrow, or the next day, the ships come.*

IV

HE FELT VERY tired, but didn't want to sleep, and willed himself back to alertness. There hadn't been much chance to inspect the ruins, and he felt it would be appropriate to see them by moonlight.

Rising into the air, he ghosted above roofs and trees until he came to the dead city. For a while he hovered in a sky like dark velvet, a faint breeze murmured around him, and he heard the remote noise of crickets and the sea. But stillness enveloped it all, there was no real sound.

Sol City, capital of the legendary First Empire, had been enormous. It must have sprawled over forty or fifty thousand square kilometers when it was in its prime, when it was the gay and wicked heart of human civilization and swollen with the lifeblood of the stars. And yet those who built it had been men of taste, they had sought out genius to create for them. The city was not a collection of buildings; it was a balanced whole, radiating from the mighty peaks of the central palace, through colonnades and parks and leaping skyways, out to the temple-like villas of the rulers. For all its monstrous size, it had been a fairy sight, a woven lace of polished metal and white, black, red stone, colored plastic, music and light—everywhere light.

Bombarded from space; sacked again and again by the barbarian hordes who swarmed maggot-like through the bones of the slain Empire; weathered, shaken by the slow sliding of Earth's crust; pried apart by patient, delicate roots; dug over by hundreds of generations of archeologists, treasure-seekers, the idly curious; made a quarry of metal and stone for the ignorant peasants who finally huddled about it—still its empty walls and blind windows, crumbling arches and toppled pil-

lars held a ghost of beauty and magnificence which was like a half-remembered dream. A dream the whole race had once had.

And now we're waking up.

Jorun moved silently over the ruins. Trees growing between tumbled blocks dappled them with moonlight and shadow; the marble was very white and fair against darkness. He hovered by a broken caryatid, marveling at its exquisite leaping litheness; that girl had borne tons of stone like a flower in her hair. Further on, across a street that was a lane of woods, beyond a park that was thick with forest, lay the nearly complete outline of a house. Only its rain-blurred walls stood. But he could trace the separate rooms; here a noble had entertained his friends, robes that were fluid rainbows, jewels dripping fire, swift cynical interplay of wits like sharpened swords rising above music and the clear sweet laughter of dancing girls; here people whose flesh was now dust had slept and made love and lain side-by-side in darkness to watch the moving pageant of the city; here the slaves had lived and worked and sometimes wept; here the children had played their ageless games under willows, between banks of roses. Oh, it had been a hard and cruel time; it was well gone but it had lived. It had embodied man, all that was noble and splendid and evil and merely wistful in the race, and now its late children had forgotten.

A cat sprang up on one of the walls and flowed noiselessly along it, hunting. Jorun shook himself and flew toward the center of the city, the imperial palace. An owl hooted somewhere, and a bat fluttered out of his way like a small damned soul blackened by hellfire. He didn't raise a wind-screen, but let the air blow around him, the air of Earth.

The palace was almost completely wrecked, a mountain of heaped rocks, bare bones of "eternal" metal gnawed thin by steady ages of wind and rain and frost, but once it must have been gigantic. Men rarely built that big nowadays, they didn't need to; and the whole human spirit had changed, be-

come ever more abstract, finding its treasures within itself. But there had been an elemental magnificence about early man and the works he raised to challenge the sky.

One tower still stood—a gutted shell, white under the stars, rising in a filigree of columns and arches which seemed impossibly airy, as if it were built of moonlight. Jorun settled on its broken upper balcony, dizzily high above the black-and-white fantasy of the ruins. A hawk flew shrieking from its nest, then there was silence.

No—wait—another yell, ringing down the star ways, a dark streak across the moon's face. "Hai-ah!" Jorun recognized the joyful shout of young Cluthe, rushing through heaven like a demon on a broomstick, and scowled in annoyance. He didn't want to be bothered now. Jorun was little older than Cluthe—a few centuries at most—but he came of a melancholy folk; he had been born old.

Another form pursued the first. As they neared, Jorun recognized Taliuvenna's supple outline. Those two had been teamed up for one of the African districts, but—

They sensed him and came wildly out of the sky to perch on the balcony railing and swing their legs above the heights. "How're you?" asked Cluthe. His lean face laughed in the moonlight. "Whoo-oo, what a flight!"

"I'm all right," said Jorun. "You through in your sector?"

"Uh-huh. So we thought we'd just duck over and look in here. Last chance anyone'll ever have to do some sightseeing on Earth."

Taliuvenna's full lips drooped a bit as she looked over the ruins. She came from Yunith, one of the few planets where they still kept cities, and was as much a child of their soaring arrogance as Jorun of his hills and tundras and great empty seas. "I thought it would be bigger," she said.

"Well, they were building this fifty or sixty thousand years ago," said Cluthe. "Can't expect too much."

"There is good art left here," said Jorun. "Pieces which for one reason or another weren't carried off. But you have to look around for it."

"I've seen a lot of it already, in museums," said Taliuvenna. "Not bad."

"C'mon, Tally," cried Cluthe. He touched her shoulder and sprang into the air. "Tag! You're it!"

She screamed with laughter and shot off after him. They rushed across the wilderness, weaving in and out of empty windows, and broken colonnades, and their shouts woke a clamor of echoes.

Jorun sighed. *I'd better go to bed,* he thought. *It's late.*

The spaceship was a steely pillar against a low gray sky. Now and then a fine rain would drizzle down, blurring it from sight; then that would end, and the ship's flanks would glisten as if they were polished. Clouds scudded overhead like flying smoke, and the wind was loud in the trees.

The line of Terrans moving slowly into the vessel semed to go on forever. A couple of the ship's crew flew above them, throwing out a shield against the rain. They shuffled without much talk or expression, pushing carts filled with their little possessions. Jorun stood to one side, watching them go by, one face after another—scored and darkened by the sun of Earth, the winds of Earth, hands still grimy with the soil of Earth.

Well, he thought, *there they go. They aren't being as emotional about it as I thought they would. I wonder if they really do care.*

Julith went past with her parents. She saw him and darted from the line and curtsied before him.

"Good-by, good sir," she said. Looking up, she showed him a small and serious face. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Well," he lied, "I might look in on you sometime."

"Please do! In a few years, maybe, when you can."

It takes many generations to raise a people like this to our standard. In a few years—to me—she'll be in her grave.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy," he said.

She gulped. "Yes," she said, so low he could hardly hear

her. "Yes, I know I will." She turned and ran back to her mother. The raindrops glistened in her hair.

Zarek came up behind Jorun. "I made a last-minute sweep of the whole area," he said. "Detected no sign of human life. So it's all taken care of, except your old man."

"Good," said Jorun tonelessly.

"I wish you could do something about him."

"So do I."

Zarek strolled off again.

A young man and woman, walking hand in hand, turned out of the line not far away and stood for a little while. A spaceman zoomed over to them. "Better get back," he warned. "You'll get rained on."

"That's what we wanted," said the young man.

The spaceman shrugged and resumed his hovering. Presently the couple re-entered the line.

The tail of the procession went by Jorun and the ship swallowed it fast. The rain fell harder, bouncing off his force-shield like silver spears. Lightning winked in the west, and he heard the distant exuberance of thunder.

Kormt came walking slowly toward him. Rain streamed off his clothes and matted his long gray hair and beard. His wooden shoes made a wet sound in the mud. Jorun extended the force-shield to cover him. "I hope you've changed your mind," said the Fulkhisian.

"No, I haven't," said Kormt. "I just stayed away till everybody was aboard. Don't like good-bys."

"You don't know what you're doing," said Jorun for the—thousandth?—time. "It's plain madness to stay here alone."

"I told you I don't like good-bys," said Kormt harshly.

"I have to go advise the captain of the ship," said Jorun. "You have maybe half an hour before she lifts. Nobody will laugh at you for changing your mind."

"I won't." Kormt smiled without warmth. "You people are the future, I guess. Why can't you leave the past alone? I'm the past." He looked toward the far hills, hidden by the

noisy rain. "I like it here, Galactic. That should be enough for you."

"Well, then—" Jorun held out his hand in the archaic gesture of Earth. "Good-by."

"Good-by." Kormt took the hand with a brief, indifferent clasp. Then he turned and walked off toward the village. Jorun watched him till he was out of sight.

The technician paused in the air-lock door, looking over the gray landscape and the village from whose chimneys no smoke rose. *Farewell, my mother,* he thought. And then, surprising himself: *Maybe Kormt is doing the right thing after all.*

He entered the ship and the door closed behind him.

Toward evening, the clouds lifted and the sky showed a clear pale blue—as if it had been washed clean—and the grass and leaves glistened. Kormt came out of the house to watch the sunset. It was a good one, all flame and gold. A pity little Julith wasn't here to see it; she'd always liked sunsets. But Julith was so far away now that if she sent a call to him, calling with the speed of light, it would not come before he was dead.

Nothing would come to him. Not ever again.

He tamped his pipe with a horny thumb and lit it and drew a deep cloud into his lungs. Hands in pockets, he strolled down the wet streets. The sound of his clogs was unexpectedly loud.

Well, son, he thought, *now you've got a whole world all to yourself, to do with just as you like. You're the richest man who ever lived.*

There was no problem in keeping alive. Enough food of all kinds was stored in the town's freeze-vault to support a hundred men for the ten or twenty years remaining to him. But he'd want to stay busy. He could maybe keep three farms from going to seed—watch over fields and orchards and livestock, repair the buildings, dust and wash and light up in the evening. A man ought to keep busy.

He came to the end of the street, where it turned into a

graveled road winding up toward a high hill, and followed that. Dusk was creeping over the fields, the sea was a metal streak very far away and a few early stars blinked forth. A wind was springing up, a soft murmurous wind that talked in the trees. But how quiet things were!

On top of the hill stood the chapel, a small steepled building of ancient stone. He let himself in the gate and walked around to the graveyard behind. There were many of the demure white tombstones—thousands of years of Solis Township, men and women who had lived and worked and begotten, laughed and wept and died. Someone had put a wreath on one grave only this morning; it brushed against his leg as he went by. Tomorrow it would be withered, and weeds would start to grow. He'd have to tend the chapel yard, too. Only fitting.

He found his family plot and stood with feet spread apart, fists on hips, smoking and looking down at the markers, Gerlaug Kormt's son, Tarna Huwan's daughter; these hundred years had they lain in the earth. Hello, Dad, hello, Mother. His fingers reached out and stroked the headstone of his wife. And so many of his children were here, too; sometimes he found it hard to believe that tall Gerlaug and laughing Stamm and shy, gentle Huwan were gone. He'd outlived too many people.

I had to stay, he thought. *This is my land, I am of it and I couldn't go. Someone had to stay and keep the land, if only for a little while. I can give it ten more years before the forest comes and takes it.*

Darkness grew around him. The woods beyond the hill loomed like a wall. Once he started violently; he thought he heard a child crying. No, only a bird. He cursed himself for the senseless pounding of his heart.

Gloomy place here, he thought. *Better get back to the house.*

He groped slowly out of the yard, toward the road. The stars were out now. Kormt looked up and thought he had never seen them so bright. Too bright; he didn't like it.

Go away, stars, he thought. *You took my people, but I'm staying here. This is my land.* He reached down to touch it, but the grass was cold and wet under his palm.

The gravel scrunched loudly as he walked, and the wind mumbled in the hedges, but there was no other sound. Not a voice called; not an engine turned; not a dog barked. No, he hadn't thought it would be so quiet.

And dark. No lights. Have to tend the street lamps himself—it was no fun, not being able to see the town from here, not being able to see anything except the stars. Should have remembered to bring a flashlight, but he was old and absent-minded, and there was no one to remind him. When he died, there would be no one to hold his hands; no one to close his eyes and lay him in the earth—and the forests would grow in over the land and wild beasts would nuzzle his bones.

But I knew that. What of it? I'm tough enough to take it.

The stars flashed and flashed above him. Looking up, against his own will, Kormt saw how bright they were, how bright and quiet. And how very far away! He was seeing light that had left its home before he was born.

He stopped, sucking in his breath between his teeth. "No," he whispered.

This was his land. This was Earth, the home of man; it was his and he was its. This was the *land,* and not a single dust-mote, crazily reeling and spinning through an endlessness of dark and silence, cold and immensity. Earth could not be so alone!

The last man alive. The last man in all the world!

He screamed, then, and began to run. His feet clattered loud on the road; the small sound was quickly swallowed by silence, and he covered his face against the relentless blaze of the stars. But there was no place to run to, no place at all.

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