

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

No. 5

VOLUME I

2 / -



THIS WORLD
MUST DIE

Ivar
Jorgenson

—
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STAR-
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OF THE
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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. I

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1958

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

Every once in a while, somebody steers the conversation back to the old question of what distinguishes man from the so-called lower animals. Veterans of such bull sessions seem to agree that intelligence alone is not a good enough answer. Other animals are intelligent, too—only not quite as intelligent as man (it says here). For the sake of the argument, we're looking for a difference in kind, not merely one in degree.

Man's sense of humour has been suggested as his distinctive characteristic fairly often. But just to be different, I've got another idea I think is worth kicking around. Man is the only animal that gambles.

It's true. Other creatures may appear to take chances occasionally, but they don't really. Wild game goes in for protective colouration so it can stay out of fights it knows it can't win. And the wisdom of running away to fight another day can be observed anywhere and any time in cats and dogs.

Man is not only willing to take chances—he *likes* to. The United States considers most forms of gambling illegal, but people find ways to gamble anyway. And the propaganda for legalized gambling never stops.

Of course, there are two kinds of gambling. The kind that goes on in Las Vegas is one ; Ivar Jorgenson obviously thinks this kind will always be with us, and I definitely agree. It may not be very productive, except of thrills—but the other kind is definitely worthwhile.

The Wright Brothers gambled when they tried to fly. And space travel will be the biggest gamble of all. But the long odds encourage man instead of making him hesitate. It's a darned good thing, too ; otherwise we'd still be squatting in caves.

Anybody want to bet that I'm wrong ?

—LTS

This World Must Die !

by Ivar Jorgenson

Illustrated by Emsh



The computer said

*Gardner was the man
to blast Lurion to dust—
but the computer had
been wrong once....*

Ivar Jorgenson was born in the little fishing village of Haugesund, Norway, and grew up with an inherent love of the sea. He was taken to the United States when he was eight years old, but has done considerable travelling since then, and wrote his first published story while on shipboard. He writes in the classic tradition of adventure science fiction, and "This World Must Die !" is one of his best.

THIS WORLD MUST DIE !

by IVAR JORGENSEN

CHAPTER I

Karnes didn't look much like the sort of man who could order the death of a planet, Loy Gardner thought. He didn't seem to have the necessary hardness, despite the precise angularity of his face. But you could never tell about people, it seemed.

Karnes didn't have to do the job himself. Gardner would take care of that. But it was Karnes' decision, and that was the awful part of the job.

"In sixty-seven years, plus or minus eight months," Karnes said, tapping the sheet of computations, "Lurion will launch an all-out war against the Solar System. During this war, Earth will be totally destroyed."

Gardner held himself in check. "Nice. If the machine's telling the truth about this, that is."

"Truth? Truth's a concept that exists only for past time. This hasn't happened yet. The computer says it *will* happen—if we allow it. Care to take the chance?"

"Oh," Gardner said softly. He leaned back in the firm webchair, watching Karnes very carefully. Around him, the computer system of Earth Central clicked and murmured. A bright bank of cryotronic tubes glared at him from the wall. Gardner crossed one uniformed leg over the other, and waited. It didn't take a million-cryotron calculator to guess what Karnes was aiming at, but Gardner had long since learned to let Earth's Chief of Security do things in his own way.

Karnes rubbed his cheekbones, a gesture that accented his angularity. He said, "There are three billion people living on Lurion."

"There are six billion on Earth," Gardner countered.

Karnes smiled coldly. "Ah—yes. Among Lurion's three billion are some who will be the parents of those who will aid in Earth's destruction, sixty-seven years from now. Unless, of course, we prevent that."

Sweat started to roll down Gardner's face. "Prevent? *How?*"

"By destroying Lurion, of course."

Gardner had seen it coming for more than a minute, but still it rocked him. He said, "And suppose the computer is wrong?"

Karnes shrugged. "Worlds have died unjustly before. A minor readjustment in a solar furnace's metabolism, a flare of energy, and a totally innocent world dies."

"Of novas, yes. Natural causes. But this is different. It's murder, isn't it?"

"In self-defence, before the fact. But you're forcing me to rationalize, Loy, and that's bad. Let me make it clear: *we will never know* if the computer was wrong. Therefore, we'll have to assume for the sake of our own souls that it was right. Lurion must be destroyed, else Earth will be. I don't think you're the man for the job. The computer does, though."

Coming so quickly, the snapper nearly threw Gardner. "Sir?"

"I didn't think you could handle it," Karnes said. "But I fed your tape through the machine. The machine says you're the best man we have. I defer to its judgment."

"All right," Gardner said hoarsely. He examined himself, wondering if he could swing the job. He decided the computer was right, and Karnes wrong.

God help me, he thought. Out loud he said, glowering down at the Security Chief, "How's it going to be done, and when do I leave?"

"You'll be in charge of a team of five," Karnes said. "Come with me."

Lurion was the fourth (and only inhabited) world of the Betelgeuse system, a smallish planet swinging on a somewhat eccentric orbit half a billion miles from its brilliant sun. Gardner came out of warp-drive a few million miles outside Lurion's atmosphere, shifted to ion-drive, and coasted down.

It was important that the landing be a good one. His ship was slated to be the getaway craft after the job was done. The other members of his team were under instructions to abandon their ships wherever they landed.

Calmly, now, Gardner went over the plan in his mind, reviewed the names of his team members, re-examined the thumbnail sketches of each that Karnes had given him. He had never met any of them. He wasn't convinced of the wisdom of that part of the operation, but there was no use questioning Security decisions.

On his wrist, the little indicator band was quiescent. Each of its five coloured panels lay dull, unlit. When all five panels were lit, Lurion was doomed.

One of the panels—the white one—would light the moment Gardner touched Lurion's surface. That was his own colour, as leader of the team.

A moment after landing, the red panel would flare into brightness. The red was for Jolland Smee, the lone survivor of the first Terran attempt to destroy Lurion.

It was only hours after Gardner had agreed to take the assignment that Karnes had revealed there had already-been one attempt at the job. A five-man team had been sent six months before. Only three of its members had managed to reach Lurion alive. One had been waylaid by thieves before he could get out of the System, while a second miscalculated his orbit and rode his warship square into Betelgeuse.

The three who *had* made the trip hadn't done too well either. Davis, the leader of the group, had unexpectedly developed an addiction to sour-sweet Lurioni *khall*, a vegetable-mash wine.

A second man had contracted a Lurioni disease and had died (or was murdered) in a hospital. The survivor, Jolland Smee, had established himself comfortably, and was waiting for replacements. He couldn't do the job alone.

The fate of Davis interested Gardner. Why, he wondered, should a sober, serious-minded Security man abruptly turn into a wino the moment he made planetfall?

It took five co-ordinates to set up the resonating circuit that would destroy Lurion. One man—Smee—was there already, his transmitter ready to link forces with others. One more—Gardner—was on his way.

Gradually, the other three would arrive. Gardner thought about them as he jockeyed his ship through Lurion's turbulent thick atmosphere.

Deever Weegan was slated to be the first of the three. Gardner had seen Weegan's photo and file. He was a hard-eyed, fleshless man of stoic reserve and forbearance. His colour on the indicator band was green.

Kully Leopold would be next. Leopold was a round-faced, round-eyed little man with a short stiff beard and twinkling eyes. He was the sort of deceptively mild person they saved for the most ruthless of missions. His colour was blue.

Damon Archer completed the quintet. Yellow was his colour on the indicator, but his colour as a person was a sort of bland grey, Gardner thought. Archer showed no outstanding characteristics, no peaks on the graph at all. Well, Gardner reflected, Karnes probably knows what he's doing—or else the computer does. Archer probably had an over-all competence that made up for his lack of specialties.

That made five. Gardner wondered whether this mission would meet the fate of its predecessor.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Well, they had sixty-seven years to get the job done. If the computer were right, Gardner thought.

If.

He pulled out of a dizzying landing-spin, got the ship pointing in the right direction at the right moment, shifted over to automatic, and let the cyber brain bring him down on the button. At the moment of landing, the indicator on his wrist flashed white. A second later—as soon as Jolland Smee was able to signal contact—the red panel lit.

So far, so good, Gardner thought.

He had landed on a broad brown dirt apron at the edge of a bustling spacefield. The field was bright in the yellowish-red sunlight, hulls sticking up here and there in seemingly random distribution.

The suitcase was in the cargo rack, and Gardner pulled it down delicately. Inside were his jewels, his loupe, and—his sonic generator. The jewels were worth at least a million, but Earth Central hadn't minded the expense; it was the generator that counted.

Grasping the handle firmly, he jogged down the catwalk, across the field, and toward the customs shed.

An eagle-faced Lurioni, swarthy and with bright gleaming eyes, pounced on him as he entered.

"Over here, please. Name, please?"

"Loy Gardner, of Earth." There was little point in adopting an alias.

"Occupation?"

"Jewel-merchant."

At that, the Lurioni's eyes brightened. "Hmm. Interesting. Your papers, please?"

Gardner handed over his passport and his jewel-peddler's permit. The alien scrutinized them carefully and said, "I'll have to examine your baggage, of course. Please step through with me."

The Lurioni led him to an inner room and opaqued the windows. "Open the suitcase, please."

Gardner opened it. The alien brushed through his personal effects in a matter-of-fact way, without showing any great curiosity, and gestured to the pouch of jewels.

"These?"

"My merchandise." Gardner undid the drawstring and revealed three uncut blue-white diamonds, a tri-coloured tourmaline, a large pale star sapphire, a glittering opal. It was a curious mixture of precious and semi-precious. Reaching deeper into the pouch, he drew out three garnets, a large emerald, a ruby. The customs man checked each stone off against the list on Gardner's invoices, nodded, and pointed to the generator that lay wrapped in the corner of the suitcase.

"What's this?"

Gardner stiffened and tried to conceal his momentary discomfort. "That—is a sonic generator," he said. "I use it to test gems—to see if they're genuine." Silently he added, *And*

it's part of a chain of generators that will split this planet into so much sand.

"An interesting device," the alien said casually.

"And very useful," Gardner said.

"No doubt." The Lurioni made a fluttering motion with his seven-fingered hands. "Jewel merchant, eh? Well, your papers seem in order. Put your pebbles away and pass through." The alien's eyes glittered. Gardner caught the hint. He scooped up the gems, allowing one of the diamonds to slip through his fingers.

It bounced loudly on the smooth floor.

"You seem to have dropped one of your stones," the Lurioni remarked dryly.

Gardner shook his head emphatically. "Are you sure? I didn't hear anything." He grinned.

The alien matched the grin, but there was nothing warm about it. "I guess I was mistaken, then. Nothing dropped. Nothing at all."

As Gardner left, he glanced back warily and saw the Lurioni stooping, reaching for the diamond.

Rule One, he thought. A smart jewel-merchant always bribes the customs men. They expected it as their due.

CHAPTER II

Gardner rented a small room in a crowded section of the big city. He was not anxious to attract attention.

Present figures had it that some three thousand Terrans were living on Lurion. That would help. Of these, more than a hundred were jewel-merchants; the Lurioni were good customers for baubles of almost any sort. That would help, too; Gardner had to remain inconspicuous.

The three thousand Terrans were expendable. For the past year ever since the computer's projected data had revealed that Lurion would destroy Earth if it were not destroyed first. Earth Central had kept a careful, if subtle, check on passports to Lurion. No one was allowed to go there whose death might be lamentable. On the other hand, it was necessary to have a goodly number of Terrans there to provide protective camouflage for the Security team.

The entire project had been planned very carefully. Of course, the *first* team had benefitted from careful planning too

—and where were they? Gardner would have to be sure to avoid their mistakes.

The three remaining members of his crew were scheduled to arrive at intervals of approximately one week, each at a different spaceport on a different continent. Gardner had the arrival times of each etched carefully into his memory; he didn't dare entrust any detail of the project to paper. Lurion's death was going to be of natural causes, and woe betide Gardner if the Lurioni, the Terran people themselves, or any other race of the galaxy got wind of exactly what was taking place.

It would mean the end of Earth's dominion in the universe if that happened. More than that, it would mean the end of Earth—sixty-seven years prematurely.

Five generators were needed; five of them, to be set up at specified spatial intervals and resonate with the same deadly note. And Lurion would crumble in on itself, and be no more.

It was simpler, Gardner thought, to declare all-out war, or else to drop a fission bomb directly into Betelgeuse. But a war required a provocation, and Terra preferred not to make war—while Betelgeuse was far too huge a star to toy with so casually. The consequences might not be so easy to deal with.

No. This was the only way.

He looked around his room. There was the pouch of jewels, and over there the generator. On his wrist, the indicator. It would be three weeks before Damon Archer arrived to complete the team. There was nothing to do but wait.

Later that first night he tried to sleep, but he was awakened almost immediately by the annoying buzz of his door-announcer.

"Yes?"

"Call for you, Mr. Gardner. You'd better take it downstairs."

He struggled out of bed and into his clothes. "Thank you," he said wearily. "I'll be there right away."

It took him several minutes to dress. When he opened the door, a grinning Lurioni boy stood there, obviously waiting for a tip. *Persistent devil*, Gardner thought, and gave the boy a coin.

The youngster took it grudgingly and stepped aside. Gardner carefully locked and sealed his door. "Will you show me to the phone?"

"Maybe."

Gardner scowled and handed over another coin. "This way," the boy said.

The phone was a public-communicator type, without visiscreen. "Hello?" Gardner said.

"Mr. White?"

"N-no-yes. Yes, this is white," Gardner said hastily, catching on. "Who's this, please?"

"A friend of yours from the old country, Mr. White. Maybe you don't remember me, but perhaps if I could get to see you, you'd realize that I had *red* blood in my veins."

Red. It was Smee.

"A very good idea," Gardner said, coming awake rapidly. "Where can we get together?"

"There's a bar I like on One Thousand Six and the Lane of Light," Smee said. "It's in North City. Care to meet me there in—say, an hour?"

"Fine," Gardner said, and hung up. He hadn't bothered to arrange any identification signals; Smee was smart enough to find some way of identifying himself, and the less there was between them by way of signals the safer things were.

He went back upstairs and checked the seal on his door, just to satisfy curiosity. Sure enough, it had been approached—probably by the same boy who had brought him the message. But the seal hadn't been touched, merely investigated. There was no way to get that single giant molecule off the door without the key, and since the key happened to be Gardner's breath he wasn't particularly worried about being robbed. Thumbprints could be imitated, but it was a little harder to match a man's breath.

He exhaled and the door-seal slid together into a globe the size of his fist. Putting his thumb to the conventional door-plate lock underneath, he opened it and went in.

His wallet was lying where he had left it. He slipped a few bills out, put the wallet away, and locked up again. He headed downstairs and hailed a cab.

Smee was short and balding, but with a wiry toughness about him that did plenty to explain why he had survived and the other four members of his team hadn't.

He was sitting in a back corner of the bar, sipping a greenish drink, when Gardner walked in. Gardner spotted him

immediately, and the register in the back of his mind clicked and said *There he is* instinctively.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

Smee looked up from his drink. "Suit yourself, friend. There's plenty of room."

Gardner wondered whether he had been recognized. He sat down and said, "Mighty white of you, mister."

The other grinned. "Hello, Gardner. Glad you're here."

"Smee?"

"Of course."

A bartender appeared, fawned servilely, and said, "Would the Earthman care for a drink?"

"The Earthman would. Suppose you give me—ah—the same thing my friend here is having."

"Certainly. One *khall*, at once. Do you drink it cool or warm?"

"Cool," Gardner bluffed.

The alien put the drink before him and Gardner stared at it reflectively before sipping. He had read Smee's report on the unhappy fate of his predecessor. He saw Smee watching him curiously.

"An unfortunate predilection for drinking *khall* was the undoing of a friend of ours," Smee remarked.

"I know," Gardner said. "I'm curious." He touched the glass hesitantly to his lips. *Khall* was sweet on first taste, with an immediate aftertaste of sourness. It was a subtle sort of drink, but not one that Gardner would care to have often. "Interesting," he said. "But I'd hardly feel the loss if I never had any again."

The short man smiled. "Each man has his own poison. Davis liked *khall*. It—made him forget things."

"I see you're drinking it. Do you want to forget too?"

"I've been here six months," Smee said. "I won't get forgetfulness out of a bottle that easily. When are your friends due here?"

"One, two, and three weeks. It'll be good to have the whole gang of us together, won't it?"

"Downright jolly," Smee said. He frowned. "Any trouble yet?"

"Trouble?"

"Inside, I mean."

Gardner saw what Smee meant, and shook his head. "No. Not yet. But there's three weeks yet, isn't there?"

"Yes. Three weeks." Smee sipped at his drink, and ran thick fingers through the fuzz on his head. "Long time, Gardner. Very long time."

Gardner suddenly realized that Smee was drunk. *Well, who wouldn't be?* he asked himself. *Six months on a planet you've been told to blow up.* He wondered what he would be like, if it took six months this time. He hoped fervently that Leopold and Archer and Weegan got there on time.

"Are you planning to stay on this continent?" Smee asked suddenly.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh—nothing, I guess. Except that in the original setup this was my area. And we can't all be in the same place, of course."

"Naturally," Gardner said. "I'll stay here. You know this place better; you can move on. Take Continent East."

Smee sighed. "Very well, then. I'll be there when the time comes."

A very special geographical distribution was necessary if the generator were to produce its effect. Lines of force had to be drawn through the planet, from hemisphere to hemisphere. The five would be together only at the very end, after the generators had been activated, when they fled in Gardner's ship.

He began to regret having met Smee. The plan was so set up that there was no real need for the conspirators to have personal contact; when the indicator band glowed on five wrists in five colours, the time had come, and each man knew where he was to be and what he was to do. Gardner looked at the rings under Smee's deepset eyes and shivered. Six months of waiting, and Smee was still here—but how much damage had been done to him?

"I think I'll be going," Gardner said. "You woke me up. I haven't slept in a while."

Smee caught his wrist with a surprisingly powerful grip. "Why not wait? There's a floor show starting in ten minutes. You may find it interesting."

"I'd rather—"

"Please wait," Smee said strangely. "The floor show here is unique. I . . . find it healthy to watch it."

Gardner shrugged. He was wide awake now anyway. "All right. I'll stay."

The tables in the front of the bar were cleared away, the front windows opaqued so no outsiders would get free looks, and a sphincter in the wall to Gardner's right irised open. There was a sudden hush in the bar.

A beam of blue light knifed through the opening in the wall, focussed sharply on the opposite wall, and held there. A bolt of bright yellow followed, spearing into the blue. The colours twined, moved along the wall, suddenly blanked out—

And two Lurioni stepped through.

They were a man and a woman, wearing only brief loin-cloths. A harsh red light shot down from the ceiling and illuminated their thin, jointed bodies. Gardner looked at them with interest.

The Lurioni were humanoid, nearly human in form—bipeds, mammalian, with swarthy skins insulating them against the fierce radiations of Betelgeuse. Adipose tissue was at a premium on Lurion; they were a lean race. Seven many-jointed fingers gave them a vaguely spidery appearance that was weird.

The two in the centre of the floor began to dance—stiffly, precisely, to grave music piping from a grille in the wall. Gardner shuddered a little at the music; he had a delicate sense of pitch, and the excruciating quarter-tone intervals and jarring discordancies affected him strongly.

The music accelerated, and so did the dancers. The off-stage instruments struck a clashing chord and the female dancer went into an awkward pirouette.

She spun for a moment, then fumbled at her loincloth. A knife flashed in the red spotlight—and a red line traced itself down the golden chest of the male dancer.

Gardner caught his breath. "What sort of dance *is* this?" he asked.

Smee smiled mellowly. "Entertainment here runs to the morbid side. If we're lucky, maybe the management was able to afford to hire a kill tonight. There hasn't been one here in weeks." He took another drink, grinning complacently.

Gardner felt cold. The dance continued, unwinding inexorably; the dancers were moving at a frenzied pace, and their dark bodies were glistening with sweat. The male dancer had a knife too, Gardner saw; it flickered momentarily in the seven-fingered hands, and a line of blood appeared on the girl's neck. The dancers separated, spun at opposite ends of the hall, came together again.

The girl's knife slit the man's arm. They were precise, delicate strokes, not butcherswings ; Gardner estimated that none of the cuts penetrated very much deeper than the outer skin. But the dancers were obviously feeling the pain, and as he looked around he saw the patrons—Lurioni, chiefly—staring eagerly at them, waiting for the climax of the dance. An invisible drum began beating. A flute wailed atonally.

The dancers closed, danced apart, rejoined. Each time, a cut was inflicted. They seemed to be outdoing each other in the attempt to make the cut as artistic as possible. He wondered if either saw the knife coming before the moment of pain.

"Don't they feel it?" Gardner asked.

"Of course not," Smee said. "They're doped to the eyebrows. It's the customers who feel it."

Looking around, Gardner saw that he was right. Total empathy had been achieved. The patrons were rocking back and forth, grunting a little at the infliction of each wound, grinning fiercely, swaying and murmuring. Gardner found himself falling into the wild rhythms of the music, and nervously checked himself.

The dancers were moving jerkily now, their former angular grace transformed into a marionette-like parody. The male dancer was soaked with blood and perspiration ; the female had come off slightly better, and Gardner suddenly realized that there *was* going to be a kill tonight, and it was the male who would die.

The music swung upward. The girl moved in, dancing bouncily on the outer edges of her feet, lifting the knife, letting it sparkle in the dimmed spotlight, preparing now for the final moment, the climax—

And the lights went on.

Gardner felt the wrench back into reality with a painful tug, and knew the impact on the others must have been even more violent. The dancers were frozen in mid-floor, looking merely naked and no longer nude ; their eyes were vacant, their arms dangled limply, and they seemed totally bewildered.

Four uniformed Lurioni stood at the door.

It's a raid, Gardner thought wildly. He was right. The patrons suddenly made a scrambling dash for the windows, the rear doors, any available exit ; Gardner felt Smee's powerful hand gripping his wrist again, dragging him away. He looked back and saw the four policemen laying about them viciously

with heavy truncheons. Several of the patrons lay sprawled on the floor, blood welling from their scalps. The two dancers stood grotesquely in the dance area, covered with their own blood. They were holding hands, joining forces against the sudden encroachment of the outer world.

"Come on," Smee whispered harshly. "I know the way."

A moment later they were outside, in a deserted-looking alley. Gardner felt himself trembling, and impatiently stiffened in a half-successful attempt to regain control.

"Why didn't you tell me this place was illegal?" he demanded angrily. "If we're ever caught by the police and given any kind of truth-check we're all cooked!"

Smee stared at him blandly. "The place isn't illegal," he said. "And the policemen never arrest anyone."

"Huh?"

"They felt like staging a raid, so they had one. All they wanted to do was bang people with truncheons. That's the way this planet works."

"And you knew that before you invited me here?"

"I knew there was a chance of a raid. But what do you want to do—hibernate until the fifth man is here?"

Gardner shook his head. "No—no, you're right. It did me good to see this thing tonight."

A light late evening drizzle was falling, now; the air was warm and muggy. But inside he felt chilled. Smee looked completely sober now.

"We'd better not see each other again," Smee said. "Not until the time comes."

"All right," Gardner said. "Not until the time comes."

CHAPTER III

They parted, going in separate directions, and Gardner found himself alone in the rainy night.

Oddly, the scene he had just witnessed had calmed and soothed, rather than upset him. He knew he was groping for rationalizations, for reasons for destroying Lurion. It was sheer soft-headedness, of course; no reason was necessary beyond that of mere precaution.

But precaution was an abstraction, and Gardner operated from concretes. He wanted to see himself as an executioner,

not a murderer. *Okay, he thought. A world that thrives on that sort of senseless cruelty deserves what it's going to get.*

False piety, a mocking voice within him said. Holier-than-thou is a good excuse for anything, eh?

He kept walking, stiff-legged, stiff-minded.

The city's name was City. His room was in South City. He was in North City, now. The three splintery moons above cast a feeble and confusing light, as he made his way through the untidy streets. He wanted to walk, to keep walking, to walk the tension and fear out of his system before he found a cab and returned to his room.

He had no idea which way he was going. The streets were silent now. It was nearly two hours past midnight.

He turned into a street lined on both sides with grubby little residential dwellings, and someone hit him from behind.

It was a light, glancing blow—but the one that followed nearly knocked him sprawling. He recovered, danced away, and turned around.

A pair of young Lurioni stood there, grinning.

"Hello, Earthman."

They seemed to be boys—though it was hard to tell, with the Lurioni; they wore open jackets, and the rain had soaked them to the skin. "Got any money, Earthman?"

Gardner let an expression of abject fear crawl across his face. "You—you want to rob me?"

"Rob you? Hah! Who said anything about robbing you, Earthman? We just want your money!"

"Oh. Well—"

"Hit him," one of the boys whispered to the other. The smaller of the two advanced boldly to Gardner and struck him in the stomach. Gardner rode with the blow, but allowed an agonized grunt to escape.

"Hand over your cash, or we'll give you more, Earthman."

"Sure," Gardner said. "Sure. Just don't hit me again." He reached for his right-hand pocket, but the taller boy said, "Uh-uh, friend. Keep your hands out of your pockets. Now tell us which one, and we'll take it out for you."

"The right-hand one," Gardner said.

"Get the money," the tall boy commanded.

Gardner poised tensely while the younger boy slipped a hand into his pocket and started to draw out his billfold. Suddenly Gardner turned at a right angle, pulling his pocket tight shut

and trapping the boy's hand. He grabbed the boy's wrist, arched his back, bent his knees, and flipped.

The lightweight Lurioni went into the air heels first and crashed into his companion. Gardner was on them the next second, taking advantage of their astonishment. He straddled them and clamped one hand on each throat. They glared up at him, hate in their eyes.

"I think I'll strangle you," Gardner remarked. "One with each hand." He tightened his grip on the throats, kneeling at the same time on their chests. They kicked and flailed their arms, but to no avail.

After a moment he released them. They made no attempt to rise, and he backed away a step or two.

"Stay right there until I'm around the corner," Gardner ordered brusquely. "I'll let you both have it with my blaster if either of you gets up."

He had no blaster. But they made no sign of moving.

He edged away, facing them. They remained flattened against the wet pavement until he was at the end of the street.

"You can get up now—and start running, in the opposite direction."

They rose. But the older boy suddenly produced a knife from somewhere in his jacket and thrust it into his companion's body. Gardner gasped as the tall boy coolly watched his companion crumple, then turned and trotted away.

A pleasant planet, Gardner thought.

For the first time, he found himself impatient for the completion of the mission.

Three days of the first week went by without incident. Gardner spent most of his time in the vicinity of his hotel, took special care not to risk staying out too late—his life was too precious to the project to chance it on the streets in so dangerous a city.

He sent Smee a note, advising him to make the transfer at once and get going on to the continent where he belonged. He didn't want Smee getting mixed up in anything here in City either. Even though he had survived six months on Lurion, he wouldn't necessarily be immune to a policeman's truncheon or a Lurioni delinquent's knife.

The trouble with the project, Gardner thought, was that every man was indispensable. Five generators was the mini-

him, and one member of the team backing out would snafu the entire enterprise.

But he tried not to think of the project. He concentrated on selling his jewels, in case the authorities might be checking on him.

The jewels would have to be very carefully managed. He had to spin them out to last at least the three weeks, and probably a good deal more. He had the usual six-month visa, but he dreaded the thought of spending his days with no occupation to keep his mind away from the project.

He hustled around in the small group of Terrans in City, meeting them, setting up an identity as a jewel-merchant, getting to know them. Again, protective camouflage; a newly-arrived Terran would be *expected* to seek people from his home world.

In Gardner's case, though, it hurt. In three weeks or so, he knew, he would be on his way back to Earth—while the people he was meeting and befriending now would perish, expendable, with all of Lurion.

It didn't help to meet the girl, either.

Her name was Lori Marks, and she was an anthropologist. Gardner met her on the third day, in the lobby of the hotel where he was staying.

"Hello, Earthman. You live here, or just visiting?"

"I live here," Gardner said. The girl was tall and wide-eyed, with hair dyed green and cheekbones just a shade too wide. She looked very attractive. Realizing the dangers of any such encounter, Gardner tried to move on, but she was in a conversational mood.

"I live here too," she said, laughing prettily. "They told me at the desk that another Terran had checked in, but I didn't know if you were the one. It's good to see a friendly face again."

"Yes," Gardner said vaguely. "I really must run along, now. I—"

She was pouting. "You don't have to run away so fast, you know. I'm not going to bite."

Gardner forced a good imitation of a chuckle. "Okay, then. Can I buy you a drink?"

He saw a good deal of her in the next three days—too much, he admitted bitterly. They spent most of their time in the hotel casino, since Gardner steadfastly refused to try to lure

her to his room, and carefully avoided any opportunity of entering hers.

As they sat together at the casino table, Gardner wondered just what she thought of him. That he was a queer one, certainly—either a man with an unbreakable puritan frame of mind, or one who just didn't care for women. She was wrong on both counts, Gardner thought, but he didn't dare let her find that out.

"It's funny, you being a jewel-merchant, Loy."

"How so, funny?"

"Funny because I always pictured a jewel-merchant as a little shrunken sort of man with a squint in his eyes from peering through his loupe. You don't look the part, dammit!"

"Sorry," he said. "Remind me to shrink next time I see you. And someday remind me to tell you what I think anthropologists ought to look like."

She giggled delightedly. "*Touche*!"

She was a graduate anthropology student, working on her doctoral thesis. It was an interesting topic she had chosen: *Abnormal Cruelty on Civilised Worlds*. She had certainly come to the right world for that, he agreed. And then he remembered that in three weeks—a little more than two, now—he was going to kill this girl and the three billion Lurioni she was studying.

"How long are you planning to stay on Lurion?" he asked, trying to sound merely formally curious.

"Oh, another month or so, I guess. My visa's up in two months, but I've seen about all the cruelty I want to see. These people have perfected it astonishingly well. You'd be surprised how many happy marriages there are here—with one partner a sadist and the other a masochist."

"It's a sensible arrangement," Gardner said. "You're leaving in a month, eh? Guess I'll be on Terra before ye, in that case. I'll be going in two, two-and-a-half weeks."

Her eyes brightened. "I envy you. Frankly, I'm sick of this place. If I could get passage back I'd leave with you, but all the ships out are booked solid for a month."

You could leave with me, Gardner thought, and then he reflected that there was room for no more than five in his ship, and members of his team had to have priority.

She's expendable, he told himself savagely. *Earth Central would never have approved her visa if she had any value to anybody. She'll have to die with the rest of them.*

"You look pale, Loy. Something the matter?"

"No—nothing," he said. "Not enough alcohol in me, that's all."

He took a hefty slug of *khall* and stared broodingly at the swirling greenish liquor remaining in the glass. He wondered if his predecessor, Davis, had also met a girl on Lurion. The *khall* helped to numb the guilt, all right.

"You really can't be feeling all right," she said. Her hand touched his, and, irritably, he snatched it away.

He apologized immediately, but he knew he had hurt her.

She's just a lonely kid on an ugly world, and I'm being nasty to her.

A line of Shakespeare drifted back to him. The Moor of Venice in an agony of contrition: "*I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee—*"

"You are a strange one," she said.

He grinned. "I'm still sober, that's all. Let's go out and get drunk."

He got very carefully and meticulously crooked, maintaining iron control over himself all the while. He had just enough *khall* to numb the burgeoning guilt growing within him, but not enough to cause him to say or do anything indiscreet.

She was somewhat less careful. Within an hour she was volubly prattling of her oedipus complex, her very real fear of becoming a spinster schoolteacher in some college's anthropology department, her feeling of repugnance for Lurion and all that happened there. In short, she tossed at Gardner her entire self, the *persona* lurking behind the mask.

Had he been a little more sober, he would have stopped her before it was too late, before she had given so much of herself that it would be impossible for him to kill her. But—being carefully insulated by a precise quantity of *khall*—he listened, he heard, and he remembered, without being affected.

Nice kid, he thought. Probably are a lot of nice Earth folk on Lurion. Even some nice Lurioni, maybe.

But that's not going to stop me.

Sometime later that day he took her back upstairs kissed her lightly outside her room, and watched her stagger inside and topple on the bed. She didn't invite him in, and he wasn't looking for an invitation. He closed the door and went to his own room.

As usual, the seal had been tinkered with. The management knew he was a jewel-merchant, and were dead set on robbing him before he left, but there just wasn't any way of penetrating that seal. He broke it with a quick blast of air—the signal wasn't affected by the alcohol fumes on his breath—entered, and sealed the door from the inside.

The next day, he took her to the bar on One Thousand Six and the Lane of Lights, the place where he had met Smee.

He half expected to see Smee again. But the short man wasn't there ; Gardner hoped he had followed his orders and moved on to his permanent location in the East.

"You'll see cruelty at its most refined tonight," he promised her.

He hoped there would be a raid, with all the ruthless violence of the last one. He hoped the knife-dancers would be out in full glory.

They took a table at the back, where he had sat with Smee.

"What time does the show start?" she asked.

"An hour after midnight or so," Gardner said. "We've got lots of time yet."

They ordered drinks—*khal*, of course. Sipping hers, Lori said, "Can I have a preview of what I'm going to see? It always helps when I'm not taken by surprise."

Gardner told her. She coughed a little and said, "Very lovely. I'm going to have the most lurid doctoral thesis ever written, when I get back. I could fill a whole book with the sins of Lurion."

When I get back, she had said. Gardner shrugged it off. "It ought to make for exciting reading—if your examiners like exciting reading, that is."

"They don't. It's not the number of instances of cruelty I cite that's the test : it's my evaluation. They won't give me a doctorate just for a catalogue of atrocities. It's the analysis they want to read. They'll skip through all the luridness to find out *why* I think Lurion is this way, how it got this way. That's what's important in anthropology : not what, but how and why."

The evening passed slowly. Gardner fought a rousing inner battle to keep sober ; he won, but it was far from easy. The thought of Davis kept him temperate—Davis, the sober Security man who had turned into a rummy in two weeks on Lurion.

Shortly after midnight the familiar hush fell over the place, and the tables were cleared away. The hall sphinctered open.

The dancers appeared. They were different ones, and this time they were three instead of two—two men and a woman. Music began to grind in the background, and the dance started.

He glanced at Lori. She was watching, fascinated.

The dance wound through to its conclusion this time. Feeling a curious chill, Gardner saw the two males advance stiffly on the female and transfix her suddenly with both their knives.

Gardner gasped. The female was crumpling daintily to the floor, the audience was drumming its heels in applause—and Lori had not lost her composure. True scientific detachment, that. Remarkable.

A riot of lights bathed the floor as the dead dancer was removed. Suddenly, a new light struck Gardner's eyes—a sharp insistent flash of green.

He glanced at the indicator band on his wrist. The green panel was pulsating brightly.

Deever Weegan had just arrived.

"Something wrong?" Lori asked. "You look sick again."

"I'm just not used to public bloodshed," he said casually.

"I'm not an anthropologist, you know."

His fingers were quivering. He looked at the firm green light again.

Three-fifths of the chain that would destroy Lurion had been forged.

CHAPTER IV

It took nearly a week for Weegan to get in touch with him, and by that time the blue panel on the indicator band was glowing as well; Kully Leopold had arrived, one whole day prematurely.

That made four. Only Damon Archer, the anchor man on the team was yet to be heard from, and he would be arriving in another week.

It was necessary that the team members space their arrivals. There was a regular pattern of coming and going between Lurion and Earth, just as there was between Earth and every other world of the galaxy. The five team members would not be noticed if they entered Lurion one at a time. And, since

their landings were scheduled for five different spaceports on five different continents, it was unlikely that the sonic generator each carried would cause much excitement, unless the customs officials bothered to compare notes on strange devices.

Smee had arrived with a tourist group six months earlier. His generator was already accounted for as a souped-up camera, which it had been redesigned to resemble. Gardner's was a jeweller's apparatus. The others each had their alibis too.

By now Gardner had had a visi-screen installed in his room, for the benefit of customers who might want to call him.

At least, that was the ostensible reason. But he anticipated calls from the newly-arriving members of his team, and he wanted to be able to see their faces as they spoke. He was something more than a figurehead leader ; it was his job to see that each of the other four was alert, stable, and ready to do his job when the time came.

Gardner wondered what might happen if one of them weren't ready. Himself, for instance.

Weegan called him shortly after Leopold had landed. Gardner stared at the image in the screen, comparing it with the photo of Weegan he had seen back on Earth in Karnes' office.

"You're Gardner, aren't you?"

"Right. Weegan?"

The man in the screen nodded. "Of course."

Weegan had an ascetic look about him. His eyes were so stony they seemed to glitter ; his cheekbones jutted sharply beneath each ear, and his thin, bloodless lips were set in an austere line. Gardner wondered if the inner man were as coldly bleak as the exterior.

"What's on your mind, Weegan ? You're set up all right where you are, aren't you ?"

"Yes. I'm simply checking."

"Checking on me?"

"Checking on the project in general. I want it to work well."

Gardner gasped and went pale. Was Weegan out of his mind, talking of "the project" so loosely over a public communicator. "The sale of gems is going well," Gardner said icily. "I imagine we'll all return to Earth rich men."

Weegan seemed to recognize his error. "Oh—of course. Are the other members of the corporation doing well?"

"I think so," Gardner said. "Dudley and I were in contact the other day, and he said vegetables were set for a rise. Better check with your stockbroker. And Oscar told me his wife is better." *Catch wise, you idiot. Don't ask a foolish question now.*

"I'm glad to hear it," Weegan said. "Well, we'll be in touch again, won't we?"

"In about a week, I think. Is that soon enough?"

"No, but it'll have to do," Weegan said. He broke the contact.

Gardner stared at the dying swirl of colour on the screen for a moment, letting some of the blood seep back into his face, letting the butterflies in his large intestine settle into place.

If he hadn't managed to shut Weegan up in time, the thin-faced man might have gone prattling on, inquiring after Smee and Leopold and the not-yet-arrived Archer, linking the five of them neatly in one breath. It might not give the show away, but anything that tended to link the team was dangerous. If someone should remember those names and decide to have another look at the innocent-seeming gadgets each had brought with him to Lurion, they were as good as dead.

Worse. If the Lurioni discovered what the generators could do, they wouldn't be content merely to devise unpleasant deaths for the five. They'd plaster news of the conspiracy all over the universe, and Earth's name would be something to spit at.

Naturally, Earth would deny any official connection with the five, but who would believe them? Five men don't decide on their own initiative to destroy a planet.

Shuddering, Gardner cursed Weegan, cursed Karnes, cursed the computer whose clicking relays had got them into this business in the first place. And then a new thought occurred to him.

The computer had presumably had a hand in choosing the first, the unsuccessful team. Well, the computer had been 80 per cent wrong that time; only Smee had had the stuff to survive.

So another team had been sent out, of whom at least one—Weegan—had the non-survival characteristic of failing to reason out the consequences of his words. And one other—Gardner himself—was given to serious interior misgivings about the whole project.

That made at least two of the computer's four new selections who weren't perfectly fitted for the job—and he hadn't even met the other two, yet.

It wasn't a very good score.

Suppose—*suppose*—the computer's accuracy on long-range predictions was equally miserable?

Suppose it was all cockeyed about the anticipated Lurioni invasion of Earth?

Suppose he was murdering a world that meant no harm?

Sudden perspiration popped out all over him—and, just as suddenly, he was past the conflict-point and secure in his belief.

Lurion was an abysmal world. It was a hateful, cold, nasty place. It was the sort of world on which you didn't turn your back on anyone without two affidavits, and even then rear-view vision was a useful precaution.

The galaxy wouldn't be losing anything by losing Lurion—and if there was a chance Lurion might attack Earth, Lurion would have to go. Unquestionably.

For the first time in a number of days, Gardner smiled, confident that the computer was right and he was right and that the job he was doing was right.

And then he heard Lori Marks' voice in the corridor calling to him, and his newly-found complacency was shattered in an instant.

"Loy? Loy? Can I come in?"

"Just a minute, Lori. I'll have to unseal the door." Sweat started to course down his body again; this was going to be the test. It was the first time she had ever come to his room.

He breathed on the seal and it curled into a ball. A moment later he had the door open.

She was holding some type-written sheets in her hand. "I've just finished typing up my notes on that horrid dance we saw, and I wondered if you'd want to check through them for accuracy. As a fellow eye-witness, that is."

"Be happy to," he said. But he could tell that she hadn't come up here simply to have him read her anthropological observations. She was wearing a lowcut synthilk blouse that was calculated toward a session of biology, not anthropology. And for the first time since he'd known her she wore perfume.

As he took the notes from her she said, "I hope you won't have too much trouble with the spelling. My machine is out

of kilter, and I had to use one of the local voicewriters. It's good and efficient, but phonetically a nightmare."

"I'll manage," Gardner said.

He skimmed through the first paragraph or two of her notes and allowed himself to appear to be reading the rest. Actually his mind was occupied with decision-making.

By the time he had finished his pseudo-scanning of the notes, he had made up his mind.

"Well?" she asked.

"Hmm. Nice and accurate, I'd say. A bit lacking in real sparkle, though. You don't fully convey the nastiness of the situation."

She nodded. "I thought so too when I read them back. Got any suggestions?"

"Focus it more sharply on the people watching the thing. Not us, but the others. The ones busy empathizing with the dancers. That's the really nasty part of the business."

"You're right," she said. "I'll add that when I'm preparing my submission."

She peered curiously at the sonic generator, which Gardner had never bothered to hide—a doorseal is too efficient to make much furtiveness necessary—and took a seat next to him.

Her intention in coming up here was almost embarrassingly obvious. Gardner felt a fleeting sense of guilt about what he was going to do, and banished the sensation. There was to be no more guilt about this.

As she snuggled close to him he edged away, then stood up and said in a brittle voice, "Would it be too melodramatic if I said I had Something To Tell You, Lori?"

"No. Of course not, Loy. Tell me anything you want." Her eyes were half-closed and a little dreamy.

"I'm married," he said. It was a flat lie. "I have a wife and family back on Terra, and I'm very devoted to them. And before our relationship gets any more awkward than it already is, I feel you ought to know that I'm very much in love with my wife."

She looked steam-rollered; The dreaminess vanished from her eyes, to be replaced with a catlike expression of insult and injury. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said softly.

"I understand. If—if circumstances had been otherwise, Lori, well—maybe—you know what I'm trying to say. But as it is—"

She stood up, making the job easier for him. He gripped her hand. He had never felt like such a heel in his life.

"I don't think we ought to see each other any more," he told her. "I'm only going to be on Lurion another week, and it would be easier for both of us—"

"Of course, Loy." There was a surprising curtness in her voice that both pleased and puzzled him. He had feared she might go to pieces completely—but he hadn't expected her to find this sudden reserve of strength.

"Good-bye," he said.

She picked up her notes, smiled bleakly at him, and left without a word. Moving mechanically, Gardner replaced the doorseal, then stared unseeingly at the dirty black streaks against the dinghy green of the walls.

It was easier now, he thought. She'd die hating him. That way it wouldn't be so hard.

If he could only keep out of her way for the next week—

Suddenly the yellow panel on his indicator band pinged into brightness. He looked at it dazedly for a moment, not understanding.

Damon Archer was on Lurion—the fifth man in the chain. And he was a week ahead of schedule.

Tensely, Gardner poured a drink from the *khall* bottle he now kept on his table. If Archer were here—and the indicator band said he was—then Lurion's remaining time could be numbered in hours, not in days.

But why was Archer here so early?

CHAPTER V

Before Gardner had arrived at any sort of an explanation, the visi-screen chimed three times—the signal for a long-distance communication. He placed his drink down carefully out of range of the visual pickup and activated the set.

"Yes?"

It was Smee. The balding operative smiled apologetically.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Mr. Gardner."

"No—no. What's on your mind?"

"I suppose you're aware that your friend has arrived on Lurion."

"Yes, I know that," Gardner said impatiently. "He got here early. What of it?"

The impatience was suddenly mirrored in Smee's tones. "Six months is a long time, Mr. Gardner. Now that your friend is here, when do we—"

"Soon, Smee. You'll get the word."

"When?"

"I'm not sure," Gardner snapped. "There may be some instructions from the home company, and I don't want to close the deal in haste. Got that?"

Smee sighed heavily. "Let's see that the deal *does* get closed, Gardner."

He broke the contact.

Gardner snatched at the drink and took a healthy swallow. Then he turned away, wincing a little as the liquid hit his stomach.

He couldn't blame Smee. The little man had been on Lurion six months, which was a long time for anyone—particularly someone waiting patiently for a chance to destroy the planet. Smee's only thought was that the team was now complete; let's blow up the works and get back to Earth on the double.

It was understandable. But Gardner couldn't work that way. For one reason or another Archer was early, and until he knew why he couldn't give the blow-up order. For all he knew, Archer was carrying a stay of execution for Lurion.

There was a case in point somewhere in Thucydides, he thought. The Athenians had captured the rebellious town of Mitylene, and had determined to put all the inhabitants to the sword. A last-minute meeting of the Assembly voted to reverse the decision, and messengers arrived at Mitylene bearing the reprieve at the very moment the sentence was about to be carried out.

Perhaps Lurion was reprieved as well, Gardner thought. He would have to wait until he heard from the newly-arrived Archer.

And then what? he wondered.

If there were no reprieve, it would be up to him at last to give the order to fire. And Lurion and the girl and the menace to the Earth of now-plus-sixty-seven would crumble into dust all at once.

He finished the drink. Then, acting with methodical precision, he corked the half-full bottle on the table and dumped it into the disposal chute.

Whatever happened now, he wanted to be sober.

Fifteen minutes later, the visi-screen emitted the buzz that meant a local call.

He activated the screen, and a strange face appeared. A bland, mild face, undistinguished and not memorable in any way.

"You must be Gardner," the stranger said. "I'm Damon Archer."

"Yes. I knew you were here, and I was expecting to hear from you about your early arrival." Gardner frowned suspiciously. The assignment called for Archer to be on the planet's northernmost continent, a good three thousand miles from here—but he had made a *local* call.

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"I'm at the spaceport. I've just checked through customs, and—"

"What? But your assignment from the company specified that—"

"I know, Mr. Gardner. But I'll have to see you immediately. I want to talk privately with you before we go ahead with anything."

Gardner tensed. "All right. How soon can you be here?"

"Within the hour," Archer said.

Forty-five minutes later, Archer arrived. He was taller and a little leaner than Gardner expected, but otherwise he had a curiously nondescript quality—or *lack* of quality—that interested Gardner.

Archer looked all around Gardner's single room, noting the sonic generator, the pouch of jewels, the dirty glass. He gestured to the doorseal that Gardner had replaced on the inside of the door.

"Do we need *that* here?"

"It protects us," Gardner said. "I keep it up all the time."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd remove it while I'm here," Archer said. He shivered lightly. "It's — ah — a sort of phobia of mine. Modified claustrophobia, you know. A friend of mine once had his host die on him, and he couldn't get out of the room. Had to jump into a net from the twelfth floor. He hasn't been the same since."

Gardner shrugged. "I guess we'll be safe enough without it." He hid the generator and the jewel-pouch carefully in the closet, then removed the seal from the room door and put it over the closet door. Curious, he thought; Archer seemed too ordinary to have any phobias. But it was his right to ask for the seal's removal, and Gardner saw no point in insisting.

"Now, then," Gardner said. "May I ask why you're here, instead of at your assigned post?"

"May I speak freely about the nature of—ah—the project?" Archer asked, glancing around furtively.

"If you must," said Gardner. "This room's safe—if there are no eavesdroppers."

He yanked the door open. The corridor outside was deserted. "It looks clear," he said. "Say what you want to say."

Archer folded his legs and tapped the suitcase he had carried with him. "My generator is in here. Yours, I think, is in that closet. Are all five members of the team here, now?"

"Look at your indicator band," Gardner said, surprised.

"Of course. All five *are* here. Now, my instructions from Earth Central require me to have a full recapitulation of the nature of our mission from your lips before we can act."

"What the hell for?"

Archer smiled apologetically. "As—pardon me—a check on your stability. Karnes has some misgivings about—about—"

"I know," Gardner grunted. "He uttered them to me before I left. Okay, here's your summary: we've been sent here as a team with the assignment of destroying Lurion. It takes five of us to do it, each equipped with a sonic generator that will set up a vibratory pattern when turned on in the proper geographic locality. I'm in charge."

"Who picked you for the job?"

"Karnes. Chief of Security at Earth Central. With the aid of the computer, of course."

"And—why is it necessary to destroy Lurion?"

"The computer prognostics have it that Lurion will launch a destructive attack on Earth some time in the next seventy years or so. We have to strike first."

Archer sat back, smiling quietly. "All right. You've got it all down well enough. I guess we can proceed on schedule, then."

"I pass the test?"

"You do. When's the event due to take place?"

"As soon as you get up north where you belong," Gardner said. "Give me a call when you get there, and I'll send the signal." He realized now that he had no more doubts, no hesitation whatever about bringing the project to its culmination.

"Very well. I'll leave at once," Archer said.

He rose, tugging his jacket-snaps together and sealing them. Gardner watched him, brows furrowed.

The visi-screen chimed again.

Gardner snapped it on and a round, bearded face appeared—that of Kully Leopold, the only member of the team Gardner had yet to hear from.

“I guess I’ll be going,” Archer said, a little hurriedly.

“Stick around,” Gardner told him. “Let’s hear what Leopold has to say.” He returned his attention to the screen.

“You *are* Leopold, aren’t you?”

“That’s right—*hey!* He’s leaving!”

Gardner whirled and saw Archer, suitcase in hand, fumbling annoyedly with the intricate Lurioni doorlatch. A number of seemingly irrelevant but actually interrelated facts suddenly fitted themselves together.

“Where are you going, Archer?”

“I’m—” He got the door open at last, and without bothering to finish the sentence started to go through.

Gardner jumped.

He grabbed Archer by the shoulder and spun him back into the room; the door slammed shut.

“What’s your hurry?” Gardner demanded. “I told you to stick around.”

Instead of answering, Archer crashed a fist into Gardner’s stomach. Gardner gasped and doubled up, but as Archer brought his fist round for another blow Gardner grabbed it suddenly and flipped Archer over his shoulder.

The thin man landed heavily and scrambled to his feet, but by that time Gardner was on top of him. Archer’s eyes were glaring desperately; he strained to roll over, clawed at Gardner’s arms, tried to force the heavier man off him.

Gardner slapped him twice, just to loosen him up, then thumped his head against the floor hard. Archer’s eyes closed.

Gardner turned back to the screen. Leopold was still watching, eyes wide in the oval face.

“That was Archer, wasn’t it?” Leopold asked. “What in blazes is happening?”

“I don’t know,” said Gardner. “But he made me take the doorseal down, and then he had me dictate what amounted to a full confession of—of the company’s trade secrets. Now he tried a quick getaway. I’m going to look through his suitcase. Call me back in ten minutes or so, will you?”

He broke the contact. He didn't care to have the contents of Archer's suitcase sent out over public beam.

Archer was still unconscious. Good. Gardner slit the suitcase open with a penknife and looked inside.

Much clothing. A small package containing the sonic generator. And—

What's this?

A pocket recorder!

Gardner depressed a stud and heard his own voice say, "*We've been sent here as a team with the assignment of destroying Lurion. It takes five of us—*"

Gardner smiled grimly and pressed the *erase* stud. Then he drew a glass of water and tossed it in Archer's face. The man on the floor sputtered, coughed, and opened his eyes.

"I've just listened to your little recording," Gardner said.

"Who are you working for, Archer?"

"What? How—?"

"Don't bluster your way out of it. Who paid you to wriggle a confession out of me?"

Archer grinned. "No one, yet. But I imagine the Confederacy of Rim Stars will be interested in the way Earth lives up to its high ethical pronouncements."

Gardner was ready this time. He sidestepped as Archer sprang.

The spy was quick on his feet. He ducked back and lunged at Gardner. Gardner left his guard open, took a soft punch below the heart, and sent Archer rocking backward with a stiff jolt to the chin.

Gardner followed it up with a barrage of light punches and a swift crack across Archer's exposed throat. It was dirty fighting, but that didn't matter now.

Archer gagged and started to topple. Gardner caught him neatly, propped him up, and hit him again.

The spy shot backward three feet and cracked sharply against the wall. Gardner winced involuntarily at the sound of the impact. Archer slid slowly to the floor and sprawled there twistedly, his mouth sagging open, his tongue protruding oddly to one side.

Gardner knelt and examined him. He wasn't breathing.

Very carefully now, Gardner took the dead man's recorder and touched the playback stud. The reel had been completely erased. Just to make sure, he opened the mechanism, took out

the microtape, and stuffed it thoughtfully into the disposal chute.

So much for Archer. But a new problem presented itself.

Archer had been the fifth man on the team. There were only four of them, now. Smee, Leopold, Weegan, and himself. It took five to set up the generator system so it would be effective.

Archer's generator was in the suitcase—unless the spy had gimmicked it, which was doubtful. But how were they going to work it?

Suppose—

The thought was interrupted. The door opened, and Gardner glanced up, startled, to see Lori Marks enter the room.

"It isn't like you to leave your door open," she said in a soft voice. "And I think you owe me some explanations, Loy."

CHAPTER VI

Together, they stuffed Archer's body in the closet, and together they restored the room to order.

Gardner put the seal on the closet. They'd have to rip up the walls to find Archer.

"I checked the records in the Customs Office," Lori said. "I told them I wanted to know if you were married. They didn't like the idea of showing me your papers, but when I told them you—you had—when I told them, and gave them some money besides, they let me look. Your entrance papers say you're not married. Why did you say you were, Loy? To get rid of me?"

"How much of the conversation between Archer and me did you hear?" he asked.

"Only the very end. When he said something about the Confederacy of Rim Stars paying highly for information—but what has that to do with—"

"Quiet, and listen to me." Gardner's face was set in a stern mask. "Archer was part of a team of five sent out by Earth Central to do a job on Lurion. Only he sold out, or was planning to as soon as he had the confession from my lips. But I caught on."

"What kind of job?" she asked.

"We were sent here to destroy Lurion."

Her eyes widened for a moment, then focussed on him in a bewildered glare. "What?"

He told her. He told her about Karnes and about the computer, and about the necessity for the mission. And why he had pretended he was married.

When he was all finished, he watched her reaction. She forced a little lopsided smile and said, "And I was studying cruelty on Lurion! I could have stayed at home and done a better job."

"No. You're dead wrong," he said. "There's nothing cruel about what Earth's doing to Lurion. We're killing three billion people, sure. But we're removing a filthy plague-spot from the universe. We're saving Earth and we're protecting the rest of the galaxy."

She shook her head numbly. "You're just acting in cold blood. You can't deny that."

"We don't want to deny it." He felt oddly calm now, as if he had believed these things all his life and not merely come to grasp them recently. "We know we're acting in cold blood—to save ourselves the trouble of acting in hot blood when Lurion springs its war on us. Lori, this world is rotten. You *know* that."

"Yes. I know that."

"Well, then, eventually some of that rottenness is going to flare up into a galactic war. Billions may be killed; the economies of hundreds of worlds may be disrupted. We can avoid that now."

"There are innocent people on Lurion. There *must* be."

"Some healthy cells have to die when you remove a cancer," Gardner said.

"You would have let *me* die," Lori whispered.

He nodded. "I nearly threw up the whole project because of that. It was a mistake ever getting entangled with you. There was no way to save you—but you were only one person. Billions have to be considered."

"So you said you were married."

"Only to keep you away from me, to keep you from breaking down my determination to go through with the job. Well, you'll live now. Your ship leaves in two or three weeks, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll have to send back to Earth for a replacement, now that Archer's dead. By that time you'll be off Lurion and safely on the return trip home."

A frown rippled across her forehead. "You still have Archer's generator, haven't you? Isn't it working?"

"I assume so. But the generators have to be widely spaced. I can't be in two places at once when it's time to throw the switches. There'll have to be a replacement."

"How complicated is the generator?" she asked.

"Not very. Why?"

"Maybe I could be the replacement," she said.

He blinked and said, "Should I take that at face value or not?"

"I made an offer. I think you need my help. If you don't want it—"

"Lori, are you serious? Why do you want to—to help murder this planet?"

"Maybe I love you, you idiot. Maybe I've spent enough time here to begin thinking it wouldn't be murder, that it would be more like an execution—or a mercy killing." There was a tear at the edge of her eye. Angrily she flicked it away. "Well? Don't you believe your own sales talk, Loy?"

He had no immediate answer. The visi-screen chimed, taking him off the hook.

He expected that it would be Leopold, calling back. But it was Smee. The agent looked agitated.

"Gardner, what's holding things up? All of us are here now. I want to go home, dammit!"

Gardner took a deep breath. "I've got good news for you, Smee. The project's getting under way immediately. And make sure you stay by your generator until I'm there to pick you up."

"I'll be there," Smee said. "Don't worry about that."

Gardner broke the contact and looked at the girl. She was pale and tense, but without any indication of wavering. "Your offer's accepted," he said curtly.

"Where's the generator, and how does it work?"

He unsealed the closet and produced both generators, Archer's and his. Archer's had been modified somewhat; it looked now like a twinturreted microscope, but the familiar instruments were all in their proper places.

"Briefly, it's a sound-generator," he told her. "It sets up an inaudible vibration; and when we get that vibration going from five different places on Lurion—*crack!*"

"And how do we all escape afterward?"

"Each generator transmits a characteristic signal that I'll be able to home in on. I'll make a quick trip to the pick-up points and get everybody. We ought to have enough time."

"You'd better be very clear about the part I play in this," Lori said. "Explain it all carefully."

He grinned nervously. "It doesn't take much intelligence to run the thing. In order to set it into action, you depress this lever." He took her hand and touched it to the lever. She drew it back instantly, as if the stud were radioactive.

"You don't have to be afraid of it," he said. "It takes all five to blow up the works. Besides, none of them will work unless mine is activated first. I'm the control man for the circuit."

"How will I know when yours is working?" she asked.

"The moment I flip the lever on my generator, yours is going to start humming. As soon as that hum begins, you and Weegan and Leopold and Smee are going to activate your individual generators. Then we've got six hours to run for it before the planet caves in, which means I go zooming all over Lurion grabbing team members."

"Where should I be?"

"At the spaceport, of course. I can't land my ship in the middle of the street out here. Pack up any notes you want to take along, take the generator with you, and get down to the spaceport. After the generator's in operation, rent a locker and hide it in there. Those lockers can't be opened in a hurry."

She smiled. "Okay. Let me repeat it to see if I've got it straight."

It was all so simple, Gardner thought, as he left his ship and headed for the spaceport, cradling the deadly generator under his arm. Just push the buttons, and run for it. And at the push of a finger, a world dies.

The spaceport at Delison, halfway across the planet, looked much like the one at City. Gardner made his way into the jostling crowd, trying to keep his eyes from meeting the eyes of any of the Lurioni. *In six hours*, he thought—*six hours . . .*

The generator looked as innocent as a camera. He looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, standing there alone in the midst of the crowd. Then, quietly, he placed his finger on the actuator button—and pushed.

There was a faint droning noise. The white bulb in the generator's panel lit.

He waited. After a moment, the red bulb lit. That was Smee, ever anxious. Then, the green. Weegan.

Someone was peering at him curiously—a tall Lurioni in official uniform. Gardner began to sweat. The blue bulb lit. Leopold.

Just one generator remained inactive—Lori's. The yellow bulb was still dim. He pictured her in an agony of indecision, holding back at the last moment, unable to push the button at the crucial moment.

Come on, Lori, he thought savagely, wishing he were telepathic. *Push the button. Push it, kid.*

His hands were quivering, and he realized he was holding the generator too tightly. The locker door hung open, ready to receive its deadly contents.

"Hey, you!" a voice called, harsh, thick, threatening.

"What's that gadget you got? A bomb?"

The guard was a hundred feet away and advancing rapidly. *Come on, Lori!*

He froze, unable to move, staring at the unlit bulb on the panel.

And at the last instant the yellow bulb lit.

Good girl, he thought. He jammed the now-activated generator into the locker, shut it, slapped his seal on the door. They weren't going to get *that* off in six hours—or sixty!

"Come here, you! What was that thing?"

Gardner put his head down and dashed into a swirling mob. The guard would never dare to fire—not even on Lurion. He pushed and trampled his way back toward his ship, climbed the catwalk at about three lights, and feverishly punched out his first destination. Back to City, to pick up the girl.

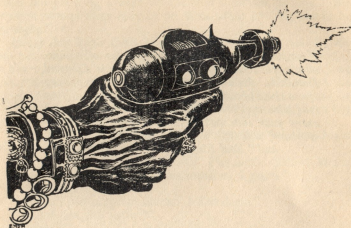
Six hours later, the tiny ship hung three quarters of a billion miles from Betelgeuse and three hundred million miles from Lurion. Five pairs of stony eyes stared at the ship's single viewplate.

"It ought to happen just . . . about . . . *now*," Gardner said.

As he spoke the black dot that was Lurion suddenly—*crumbled!*

The job was done.

—Ivar Jorgenson



The Starcombers

by EDMOND HAMILTON

*Greedy scavengers of the Universe, they took the
dead dreams of ancient races and sold them for
junk—until their bitter battle with the cleft-men
taught them what dreams are worth !*

Illustrated by Emsh

If anyone can be called the inventor of action-adventure science fiction, that man is Edmond Hamilton. He's been writing exciting tales of deep space since about the time the first science fiction magazine appeared, and he gets better at it with every year that passes. We think "The Starcombers" will rank with his "Universe Wreckers" and "Star Kings" as a true classic

THE STARCOMBERS

by EDMOND HAMILTON

CHAPTER I

The dark star had only three planets. Perhaps there had been more in the days of its prime, but if so they had been lost somewhere along the aeons-old track of its wandering. The little fleet of four battered, slouching ships had already visited two of them. Now they hung off the innermost world, waiting for word from the scout.

It came, finally. The voice of Sam Fletcher spoke in the cramped control-room of the *Prosperous Hope*, faint and unclear because the radio, like everything else about the *Prosperous Hope*, operated on marginal efficiency.

"There's a good landing place on the plateau. Practically level."

"Look," said Harry Axe into the mike, "I don' care how level the place is, I want to know is it worth landing. We wasted enough time already on them other two big hunks of nothing."

Harry Axe was a short, wide man with a roll of paunch over his belt. His coverall was both greasy and ragged, he needed a shave, and his small hairy hands had not really been clean since the last time his mother scrubbed them. He owned the *Prosperous Hope* outright, and through family connections he had an interest in the other three ships. This made him a big man, but it did not make him a rich one.

"Come on, Fletch," he bawled, "what do you see down there? Anything?"

"A hell of a big crack," said Fletcher's distant voice. "Right across the planet. Diastrophism, I guess."

"What's in it?"

"Black. Nothing but black. Miles deep."

"Fletch are you sober?"

"Sober?"

"Yeah. Sober!"

"Me?" said Fletcher, and laughed. . .

Harry Axe clenched his hands and breathed deeply. "Okay. Okay. Are you too drunk to tell me if there's anything worth landing for?"

"On the plateau there are formations. Square ones. Geometrically square, what's left of 'em. They look to me like foundations, sunk in the rock."

"Yeah?" said Axe, suddenly eager.

"Yes. Big, too. And the probe makes a noise like metal. I'll guide you in."

Axe turned around and kicked his brother-in-law out of the pilot's chair. "I told you to see to it he didn't take no bottle with him. You know what's the matter with you, Joe? You're too damn worthless to live, that's what."

Joe Leedy stood rubbing his chin. He was built like a tall weed, with pale hair hanging in a thick shock over his forehead. He said mildly, "I searched him, Harry. But you know Fletch. He's mighty smart about hiding it."

Far below, between the black star-shot heavens and the blacker world, Sam Fletcher hovered in the scout. He looked around him at the striding suns, blazing blue and crimson, white and gold, all marching in their groups and companies along the galactic road that never changes and is never the

same. He looked at the dead sun close at hand, an enormous bulk occluding the stars behind it, faintly glimmering with a ghostly light. He looked at the world beneath.

He wondered, as he had wondered so many times, What are we doing out here? Why did we ever have to leave Earth, we soft little things of blood and flesh, what crazy obsession drove us out to the stars, the stars that don't want us, that reject us, that kill us? Has one Earthman ever been happier, really happier, for leaving his own safe world? Have I been happier?

But it was no use wondering. Long ago Earthmen had started their star-wandering and no matter how painful and purposeless it was, they couldn't go back. He couldn't go back.

"But I'm doing pretty good," Fletcher said aloud. He had switched off his mike, so no one could hear but himself. "I'm still flying. I'm going to land now, and I'm not going to think of anything."

He took a small plastic bottle out of its hiding place and drank.

The plateau was below him in the cold dark. It was near the cleft, but not too near. It was an easy landing.

Tears welled up in Fletcher's eyes. "Won't there ever be an end?" he asked of no one in particular. "Will I have to fight this out every goddamned time until I die?"

There wasn't any answer.

He drank again. In a minute his hands grew steadier on the controls. He opened the mike and began to call the co-ordinates, very slowly and carefully, moving in.

The four ships began their descending curve, one after the other, toward the dark plateau.

It was noon of a lightless day. The dead sun was overhead, a big round hole in the sky where no stars showed. There was a moon, and it was dark, too, except for the gleaming and glimmering of reflected light from other suns, far off. The ships were set haphazardly around the plateau. The big machines had been run out of them, and they were already ripping and tearing at the massive foundation walls, their headlights cutting sharp slashes through the airless dark.

Sam Fletcher went down the corridor to his bunk in the corner of the main deck supply room. On the way he passed the airlock. The inner door was shut and the red light was on, indicating that the outer door was open. He paused, swaying

on his feet, a tall man, lean but strongly built, his face deeply lined and hollow under the cheekbones, his thick brown hair stippled with grey. His eyes were blue, rather vague now, looking with a kind of dark brilliance from under heavy brows. After a minute he set his bottle down and began to fiddle with the airlock 'scope, his head leaned forward against the viewer.

The 'scope reflected everything visible from this side of the ship. To his right, and extending back across the plateau, he could see the humped and broken lines of the foundation walls and God, yes, he thought, they do make you wonder. How long have they been here, and what was this world like when they were new? The machines rooted and tore at them, greedy, destructive, seeking out the metal—placed there by somebody, and of heaven only knew what molecular construction, and possibly worth an untold fortune—embedded in the timeless rock and the almost equally timeless plastic material. Tomorrow he would have to go out and root and tear with the others, and there would not be any rest until every scrap of salvage was in the holds of the four ships.

Salvage ships, they were called on their clearance papers. Scavengers would have been a better term. Whatever time and chance had left behind on the far-flung galactic beaches, they picked up and sold. It didn't matter what—wrecked ships, the bodies of forgotten kings, the siftings of alien middens the last lost remnants of other days and other dreams. Junk.

Fletcher looked at the machines, and again he wondered why men had ever bothered to struggle their way out to the stars. For this was all the struggle came to in the end, sordid money-making things like this. And all the men who had dreamed and died in that struggle, so that Harry Axe and others like him could pick the bones of far-off worlds!

He looked away from the machines, across the infinitely desolate wilderness of rock where nothing stirred in the windless, endless night, to the edge of the cleft at the extreme other end of his field of vision.

A figure, pale silver against the stars, was standing there at the edge of nothing, looking at the ships and the activities of men.

Fletcher thought, I am drunk and this thing I am looking at is not possible.

The figure remained, unmoving, at the edge of the cleft. It seemed quite small, almost childlike. The universe around it was very large, very dark.

Fletcher swayed away from the viewer. There were vac-suits in the locker. In five minutes he was in one, and through the airlock, and stepping out on the bare rock.

The figure was still there.

Fletcher walked toward it. He had not opened his helmet radio, so the voices of the men working the machines did not reach him, and he walked in utter silence. When he turned his back on the plateau he could no longer see the ships or the lights, and it was as though they did not exist. His footsteps were soundless as in a dream.

The figure saw him. He knew that because it started slightly, becoming alert and watchful, poised for flight. He held out his hands to it. The black rock stretched between, and he moved over to it in tall strides, smiling, forgetting that the creature, whatever it might be, could not possibly see his face.

It was a human sort of a creature in outline, all in pale silver. Like himself, he thought, it was armoured against the airless cold. Its head was silvery, blank and featureless, as anonymous as his own bubble-head of dented alloy.

When he was no more than forty feet from it, it turned suddenly and was gone.

"No, no!" he called to it. "Wait!" His voice boomed inside his helmet. He remembered that his radio was not working, and he switched it on without stopping to wonder whether the creature could receive him even so, or understand him if it did. He ran toward the lip of the cleft, shouting, "Wait! Wait!"

He stood on the edge of nothing, and swayed, and almost fell.

A dreadful vertigo came over him. He flung himself back from that shocking brink, and gasped and trembled, bathed in cold sweat. Presently he got down on his hands and knees and began to crawl forward, placing his hands carefully. When he reached the edge again he was flat on his belly. He looked down.

And down.

And still down, and there was no end to his looking.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried again.

There were stars in the bottom of the cleft. Not bright and clear like the ones overhead, but misty, burning with an unsteady flicker.

Fletcher became immensely excited. "Wait!" he cried. "Listen, do you live down there?"

But there was no answer. He thought he saw a silver mote moving on the cliffs below him, but it was such a brief glimpse, and not repeated, that he could not be sure. He lay where he was, hypnotized by the depths and the drowned stars.

Harry Axe and Joe Leedy and a man named Zakarian from one of the other ships came and crept gingerly to where they could grasp Fletcher's feet, and pulled him back. They got him well away from the edge. Then Harry Axe said.

"What's the matter with you, you got the dee-tees? Who were you shouting at?"

"There's air down there," said Fletcher wonderingly.

"Ah," said Zakarian. "He's drunk."

"Look for yourself," said Fletcher. "You can see the distortion. There's some kind of lights down there, I don't know what. Depends on how far away they are."

"I thought you said there was nothing there but black," said Axe.

"That was from space. This is from a lot closer." Fletcher jerked his arm impatiently from Axe's grasp. "They could be house lights. They could be fire-holes, or volcanoes. All depends."

"House lights?" said Joe Leedy, on a shrill note that was not quite laughter.

"Well," said Fletcher, "they must live somewhere."

"Who?" said Axe.

Zakarian snorted. "Who? Why, the folks he was shouting at, naturally. The little green men." He gave Fletcher a shove toward the *Prosperous Hope*. "Go on, now. Sleep it off."

Fletcher began to move toward the ship. But he said with quiet dignity, "There was someone watching us. I frightened him away, but he'll be back. It's just possible that these walls we're tearing up are sacred relics or something, and the people down there may object. If I were you, I'd keep an eye out."

Harry Axe grumbled and swore, but there was a note of uneasiness in his voice. He had had trouble of that kind before. "All right," he said. "Joe, you stick around for a while. If anything comes up out of that hole, you let me know."

Joe Leedy sighed and ambled back toward the cleft. Fletcher entered the ship, took off his vac-suit, and went to bed.

CHAPTER II

The dark sun slid down the sky, following even in death the pattern set for it in the beginning. A short while after it had set, Joe Leedy came back from the cleft bearing a small limp body under his arm, like a lean hound with a rabbit.

Fletcher heard the commotion of men coming into the ship. He dragged himself heavily out of sleep, out of his bunk, and went yawning and slouching down the corridor to the main cabin. There was quite a good crowd there, and a bedlam of noise.

Fletcher pushed his way through to where Harry Axe and Joe Leedy were laying something out on one of the bunks. It was about four and a half feet long.

"I told you, didn't I?" said Fletcher.

Nobody answered him.

Somebody said, "Is it human?"

"How the hell do I know if it's human?" asked Harry. "It's all covered up, ain't it?" He gave the small figure a yank, and it flopped bonelessly. "Whatever it is, it sure looks dead. Listen, Joe Leedy, I'm telling you, if you killed it you can take the consequences."

"Ah," said Joe, "I just tapped him on top the helmet. He wasn't disposed to be neighbourly, so let him take the consequences. Anyway, he ain't dead." He bent closer, fingering the silvery material that clothed the body. The head was covered too, as Fletcher remembered, by a helmet that pretty well concealed the face. Joe Leedy whistled, and said, "Will you look at this stuff, now."

Everybody crowded forward to look.

"Ain't nothing to it," Joe Leedy said. "Like cobwebs. Bet you the whole suit don't weigh more'n five pounds, helmet and all."

Somebody whistled. Zakarian began to finger the stuff, too. He and Joe and Harry Axe all looked excited.

"Some kind of plastic," Zakarian said. And added, "I think. I never saw nothing like it before."

"How much," said Harry Axe, "do you reckon stuff like that would fetch? I mean, supposing they could figure out what it is, and duplicate it, how much would you reckon?"

"You don't own it," said Fletcher. "He does. And he needs it to get home in, if he's still kicking."

"Yeah," said Harry, hungrily. "If. Let's see what else he's got on him."

They began to paw at the belt and pouches of the suit, getting in each other's way. Fletcher leaned closer, and his eyes narrowed. Suddenly he moved, very fast. He hit Harry Axe on the point of his jaw and knocked him backward, and at almost the same time he butted Joe Leedy aside and into Zakarian. Zakarian swore and stumbled back into the crowd and Joe fell on his hands and knees.

Fletcher was still moving forward. With both of his big hands he grabbed the silverclad arm of the stranger, but as quick as he was it was not quick enough. A hissing white beam shot from a tube in the stranger's hand. It hit a man standing close beside the bunk and burned a hole through his shoulder, and flamed on into the chest of another man standing behind him.

They both screamed. The crowd began to break wildly in all directions. Fletcher was on his knees now beside the bunk, forcing the arm of the stranger upward so that the hissing beam splashed off the ceiling in goutts of white fire.

"Hit him," said Fletcher between his teeth, panting.

Joe Leedy, his face absolutely colourless, scuttled up and hit the silver helmet with a short length of pipe. The body inside the suit writhed convulsively and partially relaxed. Joe Leedy hit it again, and Fletcher said, "That's enough."

He was still on his knees beside the bunk, but now he held the tube in his own hand. It was still hissing white fire. He stared at it, holding it stiffly erect toward the ceiling.

"Shut it off," said Zakarian.

Fletcher said, "I don't know how."

Harry Axe came out of his daze and shouted, "Look out, you're burning a hole in the roof."

"I can't help it," said Fletcher calmly. "Let me alone."

He began to turn the tube with the fingers of one hand, holding it in the other, and frowning at it intently. The two men who had been hit lay on the deck and moaned. Everybody else was frozen, watching Fletcher.

The thick plate of the overdeck glowed and brightened.

Very delicately, Fletcher poked a finger at a small indentation in the tube. It went out.

He let it drop on the floor. He went over to Harry Axe and took hold of the front of his coverall. He was shaking violently. He put his face close to Harry's, and said.

"You're a fool, Harry. You're a thieving, greedy fool. It's a wonder we weren't all killed because of you."

"Can I help it," growled Harry Axe, "if the little so-and-so was shamming?" He twisted away from Fletcher, rubbing his jaw. "Joe," he yelled angrily, "why weren't you watching him? I thought you said you knocked him out."

Joe said, "We shoulda searched him first thing, Harry, Fletcher is right. Come on, let's make sure he don't do it again."

This time they tied the stranger's hands behind him and took away everything that could be removed. Then they sat him up and tied him bodily to a stanchion.

"That ought to hold him," said Harry Axe. "The little rat."

"I don't know," said Fletcher. "How would you feel if you came to after a knock on the head and saw a bunch of hairy apes tearing away at you?"

"That looks like blood inside this helmet," Joe said, and pointed to the man's head.

"Hey," said Harry, "it does. Maybe we better get that helmet off."

They got it off, wrenching at the unfamiliar but quite simple fastenings.

Fletcher did not know what he had expected to see. Something childlike, perhaps, to match the size. At any rate, he was shocked by what he did see. It was a man's face losing nothing of strength in its smallness. The cast of it was alien, but not so much so as many Fletcher had seen that were still classed as humanoid. The bone structure was very sharp, moulded in hard arching curves that left the eyes and the cheeks deep-hollowed. The skin was chalk white. The hair was a kind of smoky colour that might have been natural, or another colour gone grey. It was rough hair, roughly cut. There did not seem to be any beard, but the face was not young. The lines were deep, and the mouth was bitter. Two little runnels of blood had come from the nostrils.

The eyes were open and watching. And they were what upset Fletcher the most. There was a black intelligence in them, a human anguish, a cold and purely animal intention to survive no matter what. Fletcher had a swift intuitive vision, not in detail but only in mood, of the kind of world a man would have to be born into to develop that particular expression. The mood was enough. He hoped he would never know the details.

But Harry Axe was a business man. He held the helmet in his hands, light as a sunbeam but unmarked by the blows of Joe Leedy's pipe. He caressed it, and his face was animated with many thoughts.

"Make friends with him," he said suddenly. "Tell him we're sorry. Wipe his nose for him, give him a drink, some grub—anything he wants." He looked at them. "You stupid or something? Don't you know a good thing when you see it?"

"Yeah," said Joe Leedy slowly, "I do. And this ain't it."

"How much metal are we gonna get out of them walls?" said Harry. "Enough to fill maybe two ships at the most. How much will it bring when we get it on the market? Maybe plenty. We hope so. But maybe not so much. Ain't that so, Zak?"

Zakarian and several other men had joined the group. Zakarian nodded and said it was so.

"All right. But you take this helmet, this suit he's wearing. Think what *they'd* be worth. Not salvage, what they call junk, but something good right now. Something they'd pay real money to get hold of. We want to trade with him. We want to find out how they make this stuff. We want to see what else his people have got that we can latch onto. Don't you see the possibilities? We might even start a legit business, run it up into a fortune. It's been done. Maybe we found ourselves a real gold mine this time." He leaned forward, smiled ingratiatingly at the little man. "See? Friend. Friend. Get that?"

The little man looked at him with those bright, cold, deadly eyes.

Hunger, physical and chronic, was stamped in every gaunt line of that too human, too desperately animal face.

With the towel and the warm water Fletcher gently sponged the blood from the man's skin. The flesh under his fingers was rigid as marble, and the body did not stir. He smiled and spoke quietly, but there was no response, no yielding. He put the basin aside and took some bread brought him and held it out. Still there was no response. It occurred to Fletcher that the man might never have seen bread before. He broke off a piece and put it in his own mouth and ate it. Then he held it out again, and a new light came into the man's eyes.

"Untie his hands," said Fletcher.

They were untied, and he put the bread into them. The man felt it and smelled it. He broke off a piece and tasted it. Then he ate, hungrily, but like a man with some standard of manners, not like a beast. When he was finished Fletcher offered him more, and he took it, looking at Fletcher with a sudden flash of grim humour that was startling. It was as though he said, All right, damn you, since I'm here I might as well get something out of it.

"There," said Harry Axe, "you're getting through to him. Good boy, Fletch. Go on."

"Don't be in such a rush," Fletcher said. "Relax."

Now, while he ate his bread, the man was looking at the cabin and the things that were in it. His gaze lingered only briefly on the men. What he was interested in was *things*. something speculative and cunning came into his face, and was quickly hidden, so quickly that only Fletcher caught it. And then the man's attention returned to the men around him, and especially to Harry Axe.

Suddenly he smiled, and spoke.

Harry Axe was elated. The little man's words were so much gibberish, but Harry nodded violently, smiled to his back teeth, and said, "Friends, friends, all friends. Understand?" To Fletcher he said, "Now we're getting somewhere."

Yes, thought Fletcher, but where? He watched the stranger closely.

The little man spoke again, slowly. He pointed to outside, and then he pointed down. He indicated far down. Harry said, "Yeah, yeah, I get it. Down in the cleft." The little man pointed to himself, and then held up his hands, clenching and straightening the fingers a number of times. He made an all-inclusive gesture. "He means himself and his people," said Fletcher. "I don't know what system of arithmetic he uses, but he could mean anything from fifty to five thousand."

Harry Axe held out the helmet. He pointed to the silvery suit covering the man's body. He made various gestures indicative of transference, and wound up setting the helmet on his own head. It was far too small, and sat ludicrously on top of his shaggy skull. The little man laughed, almost. He, too, made gestures of transference, and then pantomimed eating, his teeth coming together with a hungry snap.

"I think," said Fletcher, "he means he and his people will trade with us for food."

"Ah," said Harry. "Ah, that's it. That's what I wanted." He took the foolish-looking helmet off his head and gave it back to the little man, nodding and grinning. Then he began to stride up and down.

"I want everything we can spare out of every ship. I want it loaded in the scout, right away. Don't matter what, so long as it's food. If you got anything spoiled, now's the time to get rid of it. Fletch, you get the scout fuelled up. Now, while we're gone, I want the rest of you to get all the metal you can out of them walls and loaded up, so's we can leave in a hurry if we have to. Understand? Hop to it."

Zakarian and Joe Leedy and the others went out. Harry Axe looked at Fletcher, who had not moved. He said, "You got a question?"

"No," Fletcher said, "a statement." He glanced at the little man, who sat quietly with his helmet in his lap, thinking his own thoughts. "I think you're crazy to go down there."

"What's your reason?"

Fletcher shrugged. He went out.

The little alien bent his head over his helmet and smiled.

CHAPTER III

The scout rose up from darkness into darkness, and then plunged down again into utter night.

From this angle it appeared that the planet was split into two separate parts by the cleft, with stars showing distantly on the other side. Fletcher felt a wave of vertigo as the black walls towered up, many miles apart but definitely, solidly enclosing the small ship between them. It was like diving between the two halves of a world, and it gave him the suffocating feeling that some delicate balance might be upset by the intrusion of the scout, causing the halves to fall together.

The scout was sluggish from being overloaded with plastic crates of food—the ships' people were going to be on reduced rations all the way home, if Harry Axe succeeded in his trading. Harry sat beside Fletcher, in the co-pilot's chair. Joe Leedy and Zakarian were in the seats behind. The little man from the cleft sat between Fletcher and Harry Axe, in a jury-rigged seat, so that he could direct them. He seemed tense and anxious. Fletcher could feel the vibration of his strong wiry body as he shivered from time to time, either from fear or nervousness.

He kept his head thrust forward toward the port, and his eyes probed the darkness constantly.

"He looks to me," said Fletcher, "as though he's expecting plenty of trouble."

Harry grunted. "He's just scared. He's probably never been in a ship before." He looked sidelong at Fletcher. The wheels of speculation going around in his head were almost audible.

"I hope you're right," said Fletcher.

"What makes you think I'm not?" said Harry, unnecessarily belligerent. "Seems to me you're all of a sudden getting awful smart for a drunken bum with no spaceman's papers. You wouldn't have a job if it wasn't for me."

"True," said Fletcher. His face showed no expression beyond that of watchful care as he handled the ship. "Quite true. But it doesn't alter the facts."

"Facts," said Harry. He added a short word. "You don't know any more facts about this guy than I do."

"I know one more," said Fletcher. "It was written all over him in letters ten feet high. You think you're leading him on to the slaughter. You're not. He's leading you."

"Bull," said Harry. "Just fly your little ship, Fletch. Stick to your business, and I'll stick to mine."

The ship entered atmosphere.

It was so thin and tenuous at first as to be practically unnoticeable. But as the scout spiralled lower and lower between those colossal walls that were the riven body of a world, the air became thicker—thicker and warmer. Drops of mist condensed briefly on the ports and were dispelled by the defrosters. The last of all the atmospheric envelope of a living world, Fletcher thought, drained off into this relatively tiny puddle at the bottom of a crack. The warming had to come from underneath, and he wondered again about those foggy stars. Volcanic fire, probably. But he could not ask the stranger. He could only wait.

The ship dropped lower, and lower still. The quality of sound in the cabin had changed. It was not only inside, but outside as well. There began to be red glowings far below, scattered and ill-defined, as though someone had smeared bloody fingers across the night.

The little man caught Fletcher's arm and gestured imperiously toward the left. Fletcher altered his course, rather

gingerly. The rock walls were somewhere around seventy miles apart, as near as he could guess, and he should have plenty of room, but he didn't want to count on it. He didn't know what kind of pinnacles were below.

He swung lower, slowly, feeling his way.

A vast white cloudy shape came swooping out of the darkness. It was bigger than the ship. It cried hoarsely, in such a mighty voice that the men could hear it even through the hull and the jet-roar. The little man screamed, in a wild panic of fear. There were words in his screaming, prayers, curses, supplications, or directions on how to fight the thing—Fletcher never knew. He saw the black blaze of the little man's eyes and knew that whatever the thing was it was an enemy. And then it hit.

The scout flipped over on its side. There were confused cries from the men. The cabin ports were obscured on one side by a whitish living mass covered with some sort of downy growth that might have been fur or feathers. The fabric of the ship was shaken, violently.

Fear, cold and enormous, filled every atom of Fletcher's being except for one small portion of his brain that continued to function all by itself, undisturbed. It told his hands what to do, and they did it. They slapped the firing keys for the steering jets, the landing jets, the brake jets. Not in any particular order, just all of them, and in quick succession. The scout shuddered, its frame groaning in protest. The whitish, living substance enwrapping the ports was thrown into terrible agitation. There was a great crying out, and then the ports were clear again, and the scout righted itself, and Fletcher saw something frail and shrunken go fluttering down into the obscurity below.

The little man sat rigid, clinging to his chair, his teeth bared and his flanks heaving.

"For God's sake," said Harry Axe. He said it several times. "What was that?"

Fletcher said sourly, "I'm just a dumb slob. Ask him." He felt sick. He would have turned tail and run for the cold free emptiness above, if he had not been so mad at Harry Axe.

"Well, whatever it was, it's gone. Hurry it up there, Fletcher. Go where he tells you." Harry Axe mopped his face on his shirt-sleeve. He was white around the lips. He

turned around, and Joe Leedy said in a weak voice, "I think we oughta go back."

"We killed the thing, didn't we? We can kill anything that tackles us. Anyway, if these little runty guys can live here, we ought to be able to stand it for a few hours, to get our fortunes made. Go on, Fletcher."

Fletcher said between his teeth, "I wouldn't turn back now if you begged me." He punched the little man. "Where?" he asked, making gestures. The little man looked at him with a new respect. He pointed, and Fletcher flew that way.

He kept his own watch now for big white shapes in the sky. He did not see any more, but he thought this was probably temporary, and he wondered what other forms of life had evolved to meet the challenge of existence in the cleft.

It did not cheer him any to note that the little man was as vigilant and nervous as ever.

The scout dropped lower.

A heavy red smudge became localized some two or three miles away to Fletcher's right. It flickered and flared unsteadily. Presently he was able to make out a group of three squat cones with fire coming out of their tops. They shed light over the surrounding country much in the manner of gigantic flambeaus, and Fletcher thought he saw something else. He thought he saw a very large building in the plain below the cones, caught and half crushed in the terminus of a lava field.

He pointed at it inquiringly. The little man gave it a brief glance, shook his head and motioned Fletcher on.

Joe Leedy, though, was curious. "Must of been a lot of people living there once," he said. "That looks to be a good mile broad, if it was all in one piece."

"Remember the bearings on it," said Harry Axe to Fletcher.

"Why?"

"Ought to be a lot of salvage there. We might bring one of the ships down."

Fletcher said, "It beats me, Harry, why you aren't a millionaire."

The scout passed out of the fire-lit area into darkness again. But it was darkness in which other torches burned. The little man looked and peered and pondered, and then fastened on one of them as a beacon. He nodded to Fletcher. The scout closed on its destination, whipping through occasional veils of steam and smoke that rose up from cracks in the dark rock.

"How come so much of this volcanic stuff?" asked Zakarian. "I thought this world was dead."

"You're right down in the heart of it here," said Fletcher. "The last faint ember." He shivered. There was something about this place that made him wish desperately he didn't have to land in it.

The little man swept his arm down and spoke excitedly. The men all leaned forward.

There was a single cone ahead, higher than the three they had passed. It breathed a glorious plume of fire. A rocky plain spread out at its foot, and on the plain, well beyond the farthest flow of lava, stood a building.

It was made of the dark rock of this heartworld. It was large. A mile, two miles square—it was hard to judge in that flickering light, and from the air. Big, anyway. It did not look very high, but Fletcher realized as he came closer that that was only because it was so broad that it looked squat by comparison.

There was something wrong with it. Lights—white and steady window lights, as contrasted with the volcanic glow—showed from one part of it. The rest of it was dark, and in the dark portion Fletcher thought he could see irregularities of outline, and hollownesses where the fire-glow gleamed through.

The little man was making emphatic gestures downward.

"Well," said Harry Axe roughly, "what are you waiting for?"

With very great reluctance, Fletcher picked the smoothest place he could see that was handy and set the scout down, about fifty yards from the building.

Instantly the little man jumped up. He went to the lock door, in a fever of impatience. His eyes shone with a hard, triumphant light. Fletcher said, "If I were you I'd hold onto him, Harry. At least until we see how the land lies."

Harry hesitated. The little man looked quickly around at the faces of the four Earthmen. Then he smiled. He held out his helmet to Harry Axe and pointed to the food crates, and toward the building. He talked, and smiled, and made many gestures.

"If we hang onto him," said Harry Axe, "how can he get his people out here to trade?" He nodded to Joe Leedy. "Open the lock. Let's get things moving."

Joe Leedy opened the lock. A smell of sulphur crept in and mingled with the air of the ship. The little man scrambled out. He crouched down under the hull and peered carefully at the sky and the land around him. Then he darted across the plain, running. As he went, he voiced a peculiar shrilling cry.

Zakarian was pointing out the forward viewport, over Fletcher's shoulder.

A great glare of light had burst suddenly from the roof of the building, illuminating the small running figure of the man, waking a sullen gleaming from the surfaces of the rock, like moonlight on black water, and casting into sharp relief the tiny figures of men who stood on the roof, dwarfed by the hulking shapes of the things they stood by.

Things that could not possibly, Fletcher thought, be anything but weapons.

Zakarian said in a tight, sharp voice, "Maybe we shoulda hung onto him, Harry."

Beads of sweat had appeared on Harry Axe's forehead. But he said loudly, "I told you, it's all right. I'd as soon brought a bunch of women as you three! Relax now, will you?"

"You might as well relax," Fletcher said. "They've got us, if that's what they want. They could knock us over before we were ten feet off the ground."

CHAPTER IV

Fletcher and Joe Leedy stood outside the ship, but close to it, so they could jump in through the lock on a second's notice.

Harry Axe had been gone well over half an hour, shipboard time. The weapons, of whatever sort they were, had not spoken from the building. The little man had come back quite soon with two other men. They brought things with them—a silvery suit of armour and a helmet, some beautiful jewelled ornaments, two or three small mechanisms. They gave these to Harry Axe and made him understand that they were a present. Then, very graphically, they pantomimed a situation.

The ship and the building were some distance apart. There were many people in the building who wished to trade, but they would not venture out because the ship was small and could not hold them, and there was danger on the plain. Great

things, both flying and walking, were constantly hungry, constantly hunting.

Fletcher made a question about the roof weapons, and the little men made more flapping and humping motions to indicate that the weapons were a defense against their enemies. Remembering the white shape that had caught them in the sky, Fletcher did not doubt that for a moment. But he still did not like the look of them.

The little men then made it plain that they wished the Earthmen to bring their goods inside the building, where it was safe.

Harry Axe, holding his gifts in his thick arms, and especially fingering the ornaments with the queer jewels, smiled cunningly and agreed to take a part of his stock into the building. He made it very plain that if anything happened to alarm his friends the ship would take off at once, and return not with food but with destructive bombs.

"We ain't only got a little blasting powder," Harry said, chuckling, "but how are they gonna know that? Zak, you and Joe go and sit on that pile of crates, with your guns out. That's it. That'll give 'em the idea. Fletch, you help me load the toter."

They loaded the toter, a small power-driven cart for hauling light loads, with as many crates as it would carry.

"Okay," said Harry casually. "You come with me."

Fletcher grinned, but with the lips only. "No thanks, Harry. I might forget and turn my back on you."

Harry's face got dark. The three little men—the one still in his light armour, the other two dressed in what looked like synthetic cloth, oddly dyed and patterned and wrapped anyhow around their sinewy bodies—peeped at him curiously as they pushed past into the lock.

A screeching hissing roar tore at their eardrums, ripped at already tender nerves. Fletcher spun around to see a tongue of white fire lick out from the roof, toward a steam-veiled crevice just on the edge where the artificial blaze of light faded into the fire-shot gloom. He could not see anything there.

The little men began to talk together, urgently. They came back in and smiled and pulled Harry with them, reassuring but hastening him at the same time. Fletcher said, "You'd better go. Your market looks impatient."

"All right," Harry said, and glanced meaningfully at Joe Leedy and Zakarian. "Take care of things for me."

And he went away, taking the totter with him. The three men looked after him.

"What do you think?" said Zakarian.

Fletcher shook his head. "They have faces like wolves."

"You don't think they'll kill him, do you?" said Joe.

"No," said Fletcher, and added, "not right now."

But the time dragged on, and presently Fletcher climbed out of the lock and stood there, and in a minute or two Joe Leedy joined him.

"Queer place, ain't it?" said Joe, and shivered.

It was more than that, Fletcher thought. It was obscene and terrifying, the dark distorted negative of a normal world. Overhead the sky was a narrow rift between two towering slabs of blackness, that seemed from this angle to lean toppling together. The air was thick with sulphurous smells. It eddied with currents, now hot from the mouth of volcanoes, now bitter cold sucked down from above, laced perpetually with fumes and vapours. The red, flickering glare of the fire-cones pulsed and waned, making the whole naked landscape quiver like the unsteady imaginings of a dream.

The monstrous building reared up, a black cliff with regular rows of lights. High up on its top the weapons stood, with the tiny men beside them, and the floodlights glared, flat against the fire-glow.

Last stand of life on a planet. Fletcher thought it would have been better to perish cleanly on the surface when at last the sun went out, instead of clinging on in this freak pocket down in the bared vitals of the world. He thought how long it takes a sun to die, long and long after its planets. He thought how long that building must have stood, and how many generations had lived there, born to this night that would never know a morning.

Something passed overhead with a ponderous thundering of wings.

A portal had opened low in the face of that lighted cliff, and Harry Axe was coming out of it with ten or a dozen of the little men. He had the totter with him. It was heaped high with a wobbly load, and two of the men ran along beside it to keep the pile from falling off. Harry Axe ran ahead guiding it, shouting. His voice reached them, jubilant, ringing off the

rock and the building wall. "Look what I got ! Look here !" The others grabbed him and made him be still, and the men on the roof were agitated, bending to peer beyond the circle of their lights.

Harry Axe ran across the rock plain to the ship. His face was flushed. He was laughing and breathing hard, and his eyes glittered.

"They're crazy," he said. "Crazy, I tell you. They'd give their own skins off their backs if I wanted 'em, to get food." He was shaking with excitement. "You never seen such a place as that inside. Come on, come on, help me throw this stuff in the scout and then load up again."

Several of the little men had each brought a folded-up framework of metal. They were unfolding these now, very quickly, into small wheeled carriers. Even while they did this they watched the sky and the plain. The others acted as a guard.

Harry Axe was pitching things helter-skelter into the lock and leaving it to Fletcher and Joe Leedy to deal with them. And all the time he pitched, he talked.

"Crazy. Give away their wives, their daughters. They are starving in there, get it ? Anything for food. We've really hit it. Look at that stuff !"

Fletcher looked at it while he stowed it away. More of the silvery armour, the light alloy helmets. More ornaments and fabrics. More artifacts, more delicate things of metal and wire and crystal and incomprehensible uses. The lot was worth, to the scavengers, a genuine fortune, not only in the relatively paltry worth of gems but in the new processes and principles intrinsic in the manufactured articles.

He wondered what they might be worth to the people of the building.

"Bring those cases out," said Harry Axe. "Every last one of 'em. Hurry it up. Get 'em moving—"

He was in a fever. Zakarian began to heave cases from the pile and pass them to Joe Leedy, who passed them to Fletcher in the lock, who handed them down to Harry Axe. The little men moved in to help. Pretty soon one of them was in the lock with Fletcher, and then two or three more were in the ship, including the original one Joe Leedy had caught up on the surface. They worked fast. Their faces were intent, their words few and short. Outside, the cases were being piled on the carriers.

"Come on," cried Harry. "Hurry it up!"

They hurried. But the stack of crates in the ship was only a little more than half transferred when a huge bawling broke out in the darkness, and at once the snarling beams snapped out from the roof batteries, probing along the edges of the light.

The faces of the cleft-dwellers tightened. They all stopped what they were doing and waited, poised for instant flight or action, their hands on the firetubes at their belts.

The Earthmen stopped, too.

A thing like a mountain heaved into sight. It moved slowly, as a mountain would move, and it bawled as it came, in the kind of a voice a mountain might have. Fletcher peering out of the lock, thought he could see a head on a thick high neck, a head shaped square and rough as a boulder, and a great jaw hanging to it like the scoop of a power shovel.

The weapon-beams found it. White fire sparked and flashed, and the mountain floundered heavily aside, but it was not killed. It lay quiet behind a ridge of rock and watched.

The little men grabbed up cases and threw them out of the ship.

The mountain piped, boomed, and charged.

Harry Axe jumped in through the port. "Good God," he said. "That thing'll crush us. It'll crush the ship." He shoved past Fletcher and made for the pilot's chair. "Come on, let's get out of here. Fast, for God's sake!"

Outside the white beams struck again, and this time the mountain rolled completely over, a stunning and titanic vision, but still it was not dead. It flopped back behind its ridge and sulked, making the cliffs ring with its hunger and its rage.

Harry Axe, his hands shaking, began to paw at the controls. The little man who had guided them here went up to Harry. He shook his head and pointed to the stack of crates still remaining. His fellows were still passing them out as fast as they could while Zakarian and Joe Leedy stood petrified.

Harry reached around without even looking and gave the little man a backhanded blow. "Get 'em out of the ship," he said. "Hell with 'em. It's not worth getting killed for."

From where he sat on the deck, the little man burned two neat holes through Harry Axe's wrists, one to each arm.

Harry screamed. He looked at his wrists and then he clapped them between his knees and rocked back and forth. He began to cry.

The little man moved, very fast. Joe Leedy already had his gun out, because of the huge thing outside. He almost fired it, but not quite. The fire-tube made a hole through his chest on the left side, and he died in the middle of a step, without making a sound.

In the same instant one of the other two little men inside the ship hurled a plastic crate at Zakarian's head from the back and brought him down.

In the lock, Fletcher had whirled around, his gun out. He sprang forward to where he could get a clear shot into the cabin, but like Joe Leedy he had no time. With ferocious swiftness, the little men outside swarmed into the lock and took him from behind.

They bore him down by sheer weight of numbers to the deck, hanging to his arms and legs, battering at his head. He thought they would kill him, but they did not. He kicked and struck and rolled, but the violent blows on his head were making him sick and faint, and their powerful little bodies held him tight.

All right, he thought, hearing their quick animal breathing through the gathering dark. All right, if that's what you want, you can have it.

He relaxed and became utterly limp.

The little men grunted, and hauled him out of the lock. They dumped him in a heap at one side, and took his gun away, and left him there.

The hungry mountain boomed and sobbed behind its ridge of rock.

CHAPTER V

What happened after that happened with the same grim, fierce speed.

Fletcher saw it. At first he watched through the dark edge of unconsciousness, lying still on the hard stone. The figures of the little men jumped and leaped between the ship's lock and the carriers, bearing crates, stacking them. As soon as one of the carriers was full, the man who had brought it went running away with it toward the building. The white beams snapped and crackled from the roof at intervals, holding the mountain at bay. Fletcher smiled. What a crazy nightmare, he thought. I'll have to remember the details when I wake up.

A blinding stab of pain went through his head. There was a

running of blood in his mouth. No nightmare, he thought. This is real. Poor Joe. Poor Joe Leedy, he's dead.

The mountain danced ponderously in an agony of frustration, and now there was a new sound overhead. A sound of wings.

Cringing, Fletcher looked up and saw a monstrous white shape flapping, and then another, and another, delta-formed with long out-thrust necks. The beams from the roof shot now into the sky, and the things made a horrid screaming, wheeling heavily like monstrous gulls around the carcass of a fish.

Fletcher inched back under the curve of the ship's hull.

The little men sent the last carrier racing over the plain. They brought the last of the crates out, working with indomitable fury under the menace of the larger creatures who would also give anything for food. They stacked the last crates on the toter, less than a full load, and then they hauled Harry Axe out, reeling and sagging like a man half dead, and threw him on the load, and all the time the hissing beams played like lightning over their heads.

Fletcher moved swiftly and silently, under the stern. The main tubes showed a cluster of round black holes above his head.

The little men drove Zakarian out of the ship and put him beside the toter.

Fletcher reached up and grasped the edge of the lowest tube and pulled himself into its charred-smelling, pitted mouth.

The little men dragged out the body of Joe Leedy.

Squirming himself around in his narrow quarters, Fletcher managed to turn so that he could see out. The little men were hunting for him. Their voices were brusque and angry. Two of them, meanwhile, were pulling Joe Leedy's body, like a long rag doll, out a little way toward the hungry mountain. The fire-beams went into a perfect frenzy of flaring. Great voices howled and screamed. A white shape dipped down and a beam caught it fairly and crumpled it up. It fell thrashing, and instantly the cumbersome beast behind the ridge charged out and began to feed.

The two men dropped Joe Leedy and ran as fast as they could back toward the ship. And now it seemed that there was no more time to look for Fletcher. Probably they thought he was already dead and eaten. They bunched up around Zakarian and the loaded cart, and went away at a terrific pace

toward the building. The fire-beams from the roof threw a protective cover over them, the perimeter constantly drawing in behind them as they ran.

Two vast white shapes came down and began to quarrel over what had been left for them. And Fletcher was left alone.

The weapons fell silent. The floodlights went out. The dim fire-glow lit the plain with its red flickerings. The living mountain crunched and fed. The two white screaming brutes tore alternately at the body of Joe Leedy and at each other. Fletcher wanted to weep for Joe Leedy, but there were no tears in him. There was only rage and terror.

He thought, unless they've booby-trapped the ship, I can get back in it and fly up out of here. I can take a chance.

He thought, Harry Axe deserves what he's getting. The hell with him. Then he thought about Zakarian, who didn't deserve it, but he didn't think about any of these things more than a second. They just went through his head while he was climbing quietly out of the tube. Underneath all the thoughts was a hard core of purpose. It was not entirely a lofty purpose. Part of it said, Zakarian's a good guy and I can't just leave him.

He crept away from the creatures on the plain who were too busy just for that few minutes to notice him. He crept as fast as he could, hugging himself into hollows in the rock, creeping on all fours when he had to cross a high spot. He headed for the cliffwall of the building, with its regular rows of lights. He made the angle of his going wide, so that when he actually reached the building he would be at the part of it where there were no lights.

On the way he passed the end of the steaming crevice at which that first shot from the roof had been made. Something pale and unrocklike lay beside the crack about halfway along its length. Fletcher hesitated, and then went cautiously toward the object.

It was a body of a man, with the head burned neatly off it.

The body was small. The clothing and weapons remaining on it were similar to but not identical with the clothing and weapons of the men who came from the building. Fletcher crouched beside it, thinking.

They would hardly have killed one of their own people. And one of their people would hardly have been lurking in this crevice. Probably, then, the dead man was from some other building in the cleft. Remembering the one destroyed by the

lava flow, Fletcher knew that there had been other buildings once. Perhaps there still were, and perhaps they were like warring city-states opposed in this brutal fight for survival, spying, raiding back and forth, destroying each other with the cold fierceness of necessity.

Distastefully, Sam Fletcher reached out and took the fire-tube from the belt of the dead man. The booming of great wings overhead warned him just in time, and he fled away among the veiling mists. Behind him came the flop of a heavy body settling, and then a sound of crunching. He ran, as hard as he could, toward the dark part of the building, forgetting everything but a blind need for a place to hide.

He gained the wall. But it was solid and unbroken, and the windows were all high above his head, fifty or sixty feet high. There was no way in, and the surface felt like glass under his hands, impossible to climb.

Then he began to move along the wall, farther and farther away from the lights, into the abandoned darkness.

The building was very large. It was almost as large as the ones these same people, or their forebears, had built on the surface in the final days. Fletcher followed it for a mile, and perhaps a little more, and then he turned a corner. Another length of wall, like the face of a black mountain, stretched away in front of him, and now the tall cone with its plume of fire was in full view. The red light was stronger here. Fletcher crept in it, hugging the wall, feeling exposed and obvious. And still there was no way in, no hiding place.

He went on because there was nothing else to do.

Miles of windows, blank and blind, giving back a flat pale glimmer from the firelight. Walls of black stone, long and high, fortress walls unconquerable from without, but defeated from within by the slow attrition of time and the dying out of a people. Emptiness and desolation.

He went on, a tiny figure toiling through a dark dream.

He reached the second corner, the one farthest from the section still inhabited and so probably the first abandoned and the longest neglected.

And there was a break in the wall.

Some volcanic tremor had run a fissure right up into the foundation and cracked it. A part of the wall had subsided, and a part of the roof had fallen, making what amounted to a narrow chimney in the cliff. Fletcher sobbed and began desperately to climb.

Clutching and sliding, panting, sweating, clawing, Fletcher made his way to the top of the rubble fall and found a little opening barely big enough to crawl through. He crawled, very cautiously, envisioning a plunge through broken floors into depths below. Dim light flickered through the window-holes, showing him a floor tilted and torn away at one corner, but otherwise apparently sound. He stepped on it, and it held. He was inside.

He went to the corner of the room farthest from the break and sat down and stayed there for a bit, feeling the safety around him. Gradually his breathing eased and he stopped trembling, and then he got up again. He found a broad doorway, and went through it.

And now he saw that the ruin of this building-city was greater than he had thought.

The massive outer walls had stood firm, a tribute to their long-gone builders. But there had been inner collapses. Whole blocks had fallen together, and the fire-glow poured through the gaps in the roof, immensely far above Fletcher, lending a faint illumination to parts of what was left.

He stopped at intervals, anyway, to listen, but he could not hear anything but the quiet of the building, the countless thousands of its rooms still intact, their walls enclosing silence, their floors untrod, the myriad functions for which they had been built forgotten. It was an oppressive silence. It made him aware of the hopeless existence these people had led and still did lead, what was left of them, foredoomed, with their world dying under them. It made him wonder why they fought to live at all. It made him wonder why anybody did.

He prowled the long corridors that were like streets, moving up and down from level to level as he was forced to by fallen rubble or by the need to keep going in a particular direction. Sometimes he went in total darkness, feeling his way. Sometimes there was the flickering glow of that ominous torch to show him what he passed. The private apartments with their doors standing all ajar or fallen from the hinges, and their windows to the "street" no longer interested in who went by.

He began to notice that you could tell where each successive abandonment of a sector had ended, by the barrier walls. These seemed to be a later development, occurring as Fletcher got closer to the inhabited part. Perhaps there had not been any strife between the city-states in their earlier days. Perhaps

they still felt their brotherhood in the legion of the condemned. But later, as the shrinking population had withdrawn, they had built massive bulkheads behind them, against possible invasion from their own rear.

These ancient bulkhead walls were breached now, and Fletcher had no trouble getting through them. But he began to worry.

He clambered on through that gigantic ruin, going more and more and more cautiously as he knew he must be approaching the inhabited part. His windings and twistings had brought him close to the outer wall again, and the sudden blazing-on of floodlights outside struck like lightning through the windows, startling him. He looked cautiously out, but he could not see anything but the volcano and the flat brilliance of the lights glaring on the bare rock. The ship was opposite the other corner of the building, and he could not see it from here.

He went on, hounded by a sense of imminent change, and a feeling that all this journey had been for nothing and that very likely he would die in this great black man-built mountain. He found an avenue leading straight to where he wanted to go, and he followed it until it ended in a blank wall.

Fletcher tried rooms on either side. He tried other avenues, and in desperation he tried other levels. Everywhere the barrier wall faced him, and this one was not breached.

There was no way through.

And now he heard the sounds of battle from the plain.

CHAPTER VI

The roof-batteries spoke, with a hiss and a snarl. Other voices answered, some shrill and spiteful, others very deep, and every time the deep ones coughed Fletcher could feel the building quiver, ever so slightly. Once the noises started they never stopped, but only built and increased until the sheer violence of sound was stunning.

Apparently the little man with no head had had a companion, and apparently the companion had gone for reinforcements. He must have known that food of some kind was being unloaded from the strange ship—of course food, because what else was there in life to arouse that much energy and excitement, to make men defy the charging mountain and the flapping creatures of the sky? Probably he had believed that

the men of this rival building had established contact with a source of supply outside the cleft—an unavoidable assumption—and that the source might well be constant. At any rate it was an advantage too great for any city to allow another city to acquire and keep to itself.

So there was an all-out battle going on, and Harry Axe and Zakarian were still prisoners on the other side of an impassable wall, if they weren't already dead. And he, Fletcher, stood helpless in the middle of the mess, and what was he going to do about it?

The building quivered, slightly but ominously. The weapons talked.

Fletcher thought of the roof.

The batteries were there, and men were there to operate them, which meant there had to be ways for the men to get there. And if the men were busy watching the enemy below, they might not see one man creeping quietly over the roof from the abandoned area behind them.

It was worth trying.

He worked his way up to the topmost level and presently he found a hatch. It was ingeniously made, easily opened from the inside, impervious from without. He opened it, and emerged onto the roof.

He lay flat on his belly. Back of him stretched the enormous expanse of the building-top, a dark plain riven with gaps and fissures much like the rock on which it stood. At one side was a low parapet guarding the edge. Before him was the segment where the batteries stood in a bristling row, served by little urgent mobs of men, and where the floodlights blazed.

Above him, in the sulphurous sky, wide wings beat and hungry cries resounded, and every few minutes one of the roof-batteries would send a beam of fire shooting upward to keep the brutes away.

He risked a glance over the parapet, because it was important for him to know how the battle was going. He could see only part of the periphery from here, the midget enemy with mobile batteries—the size of toys as seen from up here—half concealed in cracks and gullies, banging away at the wall. They did not seem to have made much headway, and a number of their batteries were out of commission. He thought the defenders were winning, and he was sorry, because if the battle stopped it was going to make things a lot harder for him.

Perhaps a hundred yards away he saw an open hatch, and made for it. No one noticed him. Fletcher could not see anybody below. Probably those whose duty it was to man the roof were already up here, and there was no reason for anyone else to be on the top level. He took the chance and swung down.

He was alone in a long broad hall, brightly lighted, dusty, and defended with weapon-emplacements. No one was at them now. The emplacements looked unused.

Holding the fire-tube he had taken from the dead man ready in his hand, Fletcher began to work his way down through the building. He was in a curious state of desperation, where both fear and courage become words without meaning. He didn't even think about them any more.

The levels were all lighted, all silent and dusty with cluttered corridors and sagging-open doors, with junk and rubbish deposited in corners and against walls by the passing eddies of time. The air smelled of sulphur and decay.

Fletcher went down, by winding ramps and stairways.

A new smell began to intrude on the sulphurous air—the universal and unmistakable smell of human squalor. Shortly afterward, Fletcher heard voices.

He became cautious and cunning now, darting in and out of doorways, peering through intercommunicating windows. The voices sounded as though they were below him, but they seemed also to come from up ahead. Finally he found a glass front in the wall that showed a balcony. The door was open and the voices were quite loud. Fletcher ventured onto the balcony, and looked over the railing, his body crouched down behind a pillar.

There was a huge space below. Probably it had been intended as an amphitheatre or stadium for public games, and there were spectators' balconies, of which this was one, in tiers above the floor. The floor was full of people, mostly women and children, with a very few old men. Fletcher thought that this was the community gathering-place in times of trouble, well in the heart of the inhabited area, where the non-combatants would be safest.

There were, as nearly as he could judge, about three thousand of them. The empty balconies, that could have accommodated ten times that number, hung over them in gloomy mockery, but the people did not seem to notice. They seemed

cheerful, talking busily, nursing babies, doing small tasks they had brought with them. They did not seem in the least worried about the safety of the building. Probably they had been through this before, many times, and nothing had ever happened, and so nothing ever would.

There seemed to be a concentration of activity among the youngsters at one place in the lowest balcony, where the only young man in the place stood guard over a stall, motioning the children away with half-tolerant impatience. Fletcher could not see who was in the stall behind him, but he was pretty sure he knew.

He marked the place mentally and began his tortuous secret windings again, around and down.

The noise of battle, ominously for him, appeared to slacken. He crept hurriedly along a dirty avenue, beside a dirty wall, toward a broken door in a transparent front made opaque by the smudging of hands and an accretion of greasy dust. He stuck his head carefully around the door.

The row of stalls was slightly below him, and the one he wanted was off to his right. Harry Axe was out of sight but Zakarian was there. He could just see his head, over the dividing wall.

Zakarian turned, moving his head in the slow hopeless way of an animal that already knows his cage is tightly barred. He saw Fletcher. His eyes went wide, and his mouth opened. Frantically, Fletcher shook his own head and gestured for silence.

He got it. Not only from Zakarian, but from outside. The batteries had ceased to fire, on both sides.

And now the people in the amphitheatre grew silent, too. Even the children stopped their playing. They listened.

A man came running in from the other side, through an entrance on the floor level. He shouted triumphantly. A great burst of sound went up from the women and the old men. They laughed and waved their fists. The children screamed like young hawks. And then they began to move out of the amphitheatre. The enemy was gone, the attack had failed and the battle was over, and they were returning to their homes.

Trapped in the doorway, Fletcher looked for a place to hide and couldn't see one.

Then he noticed that they were all leaving by the lower entrances. In a few minutes, probably, all these levels would be swarming with families, but in the meantime the guard was lounging with his back to Fletcher, and there might be an outside chance—

So far outside that it was hopeless, but after all, that was what he had come for.

He went on his hands and knees through the door and along under the back partition of the stalls.

The avenues below were full of movement and voices. The men were coming back from their posts at whatever defenses they had on the ground level. The men from the roof would be down, too. Fletcher groaned to himself and crawled on.

He raised up and looked directly into the stall. Zakarian was there, his hands and feet bound, his body hunched up in a tense anguish of suspense. The guard was now standing several feet away from the front of the stall, as though tempted to go after the rest of the people.

Harry Axe was not there.

The amphitheatre was empty. The guard turned suddenly and came back to the stall as though he had made up his mind to stay. He saw Fletcher. His small hard mouth came open and his lungs expanded, and it was the last breath he ever drew. Fletcher shot him, inexpertly but fatally, with the fire-tube.

He leaped into the stall and began to tear at the bonds on Zakarian's wrists, and all the time the voices talked and shouted and the people moved in the halls and on the ramps and stairs.

"Where's Harry?" he asked.

Zakarian was crying. "I thought you were dead," he said. "I thought we were all goners." His hands were free now and he began to fumble wildly at his ankles, getting in Fletcher's way. "Fletch, we gotta hurry."

"Yes," said Fletcher, "but where's Harry? Did they kill him?"

"Kill him?" said Zakarian, his voice rising to a thin shriek. "Kill him! You know what that swine done? He made a deal with 'em. That's what they wanted with us, they wanted us to fly the scout up with some of their men in it, so they could get inside the ships by surprise and take all the food that was left. And Harry's gonna do it."

He stood up, kicking the cord away from his feet. He started to run, and Fletcher caught him. "Harry's going to fly the scout up for them?"

"They're gonna pay him and let him go. He thinks he'll make a fortune and save his own skin. How could he turn down a bargain like that?" Zakarian tried to shake Fletcher off. "Let go!"

"You turned it down," said Fletcher.

"What do you think I am, a goddamn murderer? Listen, maybe you didn't hear what I said. Harry made a deal. They just got it settled when that attack started. Now they will go as soon as they can get their men together."

"Yes," said Fletcher. "I heard you." He felt sick. He felt hopeless, and bitterly enraged. He felt unclean to be a human being and of the same species as Harry Axe.

He felt like giving up.

Zakarian was still talking. "We gotta get to the scout, Fletch. If we beat 'em to it, we can maybe stop them—"

"Yes," said Fletcher. "Sure. That's all we have to do."

Zakarian fell silent. He watched while Fletcher went and got the fire-tube from the belt of the dead guard, and he took it in his own hand when Fletcher gave it to him.

They went out into the corridor.

There were voices and movement, but no one was in sight yet. In frantic haste now, Fletcher led the way up a winding ramp to the level above, and then to the level above that, and still up, until the voices grew fainter below. Fletcher did not know whether the men had come down yet from the roof, and whether in any case they would use this ramp or another one. He decided that he might as well assume that there was no danger of meeting anyone, because if they did not get to the scout before Harry did, and if the scout took off without them, they were dead anyway. They ran up and up into the quiet heights of the building, and no one stopped them.

They came to the topmost level, and found the hatches closed. Fletcher opened one. They climbed onto the roof, and it was dark and empty in the glow of the burning volcano.

"Hurry," said Zakarian. He was gasping for breath, stumbling as he ran. "Hurry."

"This way," said Fletcher, and made for the hatch he had left open. They slid through it into the abandoned rooms, and Fletcher closed it behind them.

"Hurry," Zakarian said.

"Patience," said Fletcher. "It's a long way yet."

He stood thinking for a moment. There was no time to go back all the way he had come, and no need. From the inside

you might find a way out closer at hand. He set off across the building, close to the barrier wall, toward the side where the ship was.

They looked out the high windows, onto the plain.

"It's still there," said Zakarian. "Look, the scout's still there!"

"What's holding them up?" muttered Fletcher. Then he looked down closer to the building and saw that the field of battle was being cleaned of its dead by the mighty hungry ones, the scavengers, the blood-brothers of Harry Axe.

"Come on," said Fletcher. "We've got to go down now, lower. Keep watch for a long chain, anything that's long and still strong enough to hold us."

They went down, racing, stumbling, staggering, falling, down spiral ramps and steep stairs, in and out of the empty halls and rooms, through the silence and the dim flickering light. They found a coil of beautiful silvery cable, light, unrusty, in the corner of a huge room that had once served as maintenance depot for part of the power system. They carried it with them, down to the bottom-most row of windows.

The scout was still there on the plain.

Zakarian cried, "There's some windows here smashed already!"

The battering of the attackers' weapons had done that much damage, anyway. Fletcher looked out. The beasts had not gone away but they would have to risk them. They made one end of the cable fast and threw the other out, and slid down it to the open rock below.

They ran toward the ship, keeping low on the hollows of the rock.

The beasts were roaming now, looking for more food, quarrelling ferociously among themselves, white-winged horrors and mountains that walked and bawled.

They ran, two little dark figures in the night, and then they crouched down between rocks as the roaring and stamping came toward them.

"We're never gonna make this," said Zakarian.

And Fletcher, crouching, thought, *No we can't.*

And he thought, *God, what a way for a world and a people to come to their slow ending . . .*

The floodlights came on, slamming their flat glare across the plain, throwing the beasts into hideous relief. Fletcher and Zakarian froze as the roof batteries came alive, spitting white fire among the brutes, driving them back where there was nothing left now to eat. Fletcher noticed that none of the creatures was actually hit. If one had been killed, all the others would have stayed to devour it. They flapped and floundered reluctantly, out beyond the circle of the light.

The door in the building wall opened. Harry Axe was coming out of it, and with him were six of the little men.

Zakarian began to curse.

Fletcher pulled him out of the shelter of the rocks and they ran toward the scout, keeping low, keeping the rocks between them and the building.

They were inside the scout when Harry Axe and the others came.

Zakarian closed the lock door behind them so they could not get out again, and he and Fletcher both fired into the massed group of them in the lock chamber, with Fletcher shouting, "Don't hit Harry, he's got to go back with us!" and Zakarian's face a mask of deadly hate. Harry screamed and fell on the floor of the lock and crawled toward them like a broken snake, crying, "What are you trying to do?" Over him and behind him the hot bright beams played, and the little men died.

And Fletcher thought, "*You poor starved little devils, I don't want to kill you but I don't want to die myself so I have to, I have to—*"

But it was over in seconds, and only death and a smell of seared metal in the lock chamber. Fletcher knocked the tube out of Zakarian's hand. "No," he said.

"What's the matter with you?" Harry Axe was saying. "Didn't you know what I was doing? I was just bluffing them. I was going to get help. Didn't you understand that?"

Fletcher kicked him, not hard, merely with a weary contempt. "Get up," he said.

Harry got up. He sat in one of the seats and Zakarian watched him. Fletcher closed the inner door on the bodies in the lock. He sat down at the controls.

The batteries on the building roof obligingly cleared the sky for the scout as it rose up. Naturally. Their own men were aboard.

—Edmond Hamilton

Vengeance Of The Space Armadas

by CALVIN M. KNOX

*Earthward they raged—fifty
mighty battlewagons of space
against a pitiful handful of
defenders of a reborn planet !*

Illustrated by Ed Emsh



This is the third and final story in the "Chalice" series, the previous two being "Chalice Of Death" in No. 1 and "Earth Shall Live Again" in No. 3. The entire trilogy has just been published as a pocketbook in New York by Ace Books under the title "Lest We Forget Thee, Earth."

VENGEANCE OF THE SPACE ARMADAS

by CALVIN M. KNOX

Prologue

After thirty thousand years of darkness, Earth stood once again at the threshold of light. The age-old Terran Empire had shattered, and her children were strewn through the far-flung stars, only the misty legend of the Chalice of Death binding them to the dead glories of the bygone era.

For thirty thousand years the Chalice had held sleepers in suspended animation, ten thousand of Earth's finest men and women, put there to rest until it was time for Terra to regain her place in the galaxy. To forgotten Earth came, finally, Hallam Navarre, a man of Terran descent who had served as adviser to Joroiran VII, Overlord of Jorus, an unimaginably distant stellar system. Navarre, together with Helna Winstin, an Earthwoman born on the neighbouring world of Kariad, and half-breed Domrik Carso of Jorus found Earth once again, discovered the secret of the Chalice, and freed the ten thousand sleepers.

Navarre left six thousand of the reborn Earthmen on their own planet and transported the remaining two thousand couples to a planet of Procyon. His plan was to let the years pass and the race of Earthmen increase, until their numbers were such that they could emerge from hiding and once again claim Earth's high place in the roll of worlds.

This plan was frustrated by Carso. The halfbreed sold knowledge of it to Navarre's rival, the outcast Vegan Kausirn, who had supplanted Navarre as Joroiran's adviser on Jorus. Three Joran ships were dispatched to destroy the fledgling settlements on Earth and Procyon lest the Earthmen rise again.

With the aid of Helna Winstin, Navarre obtained three battleships from the Oligocrat of Kariad, and, using them in Earth's defence, succeeded in capturing the Joran trio of vessels, thus giving Earth a tiny navy of six spaceships of dreadnaught category. But this, Navarre knew, would be hardly enough to defend the small colony against any determined attack by the other star systems.

Two paths lay open. They could wait, and hope that Jorus would make no further threatening attempts against them. Already, the little band on Earth had nearly doubled its numbers through natural increase.

They could wait—or, thought Navarre, they could counter-attack.

Chapter 1

Hallam Navarre stood at the edge of the city—the busy, humming, growing city they called Phoenix. It was hardly a city, yet, by Galactic standards—on Jorus, he thought, ten thousand people hardly rate even the designation of a village. But city it was, and like the phoenix of old it rose from its own ashes.

The city rested between two upsweeping chains of hills ; it lay in a fertile valley that split the heart of the great continent where the Chalice had been. All around him, Navarre saw signs of activity—the rising buildings, the clack of carpenter's tools, the buzz of the paving-machines as they extended the reach of the city's streets yet a few hundred yards farther.

Women big with child ; men busy, impatient for the time when Earthmen would cover their own planet again and reach out toward the stars. Six great captured spaceships

standing in the sun, nucleus of the Terran navy-to-be. He saw Jorans and blue Kariadi working alongside the Earthmen—the captive crews of the spaceships, men to whom Navarre had given the choice of remaining on Earth as free men and workers or of dying on the spot. There was no time to waste guarding prisoners on the old-young world.

It was slow work, Navarre thought, this rebuilding of a planet. It took time.

And there were many enemies to guard against.

He began to walk through the city, heading for the Administration Building at its centre. They greeted him as he passed—*everyone* knew Hallam Navarre, of course. But he felt curiously ill-at-ease in their presence.

They were true Earthmen, sleepers for thirty thousand years, untouched by the three hundred decades that intervened between the time of their sleep and the time of Navarre's birth. They were full of the old glories of Earth, the cities and nations and the billions of people—all gone, now, all swallowed by the forest.

As for Navarre, he recognised his difference. He was the product of an older culture than these sleepers from the crypt, and an alien culture as well. Earth blood was in his veins, but his mind was a mind of Jorus, and he knew he could never truly be part of the race that was springing up anew on Earth and around Procyon.

But that did not mean he would not devote his life to their safety.

He entered his office—bare, hardly furnished—and nudged open the communicator stud. The robot operator asked for his number, and Navarre said, "I want to talk to Mikel Antrok."

A moment later he heard Antrok's deep voice say, "You want me, Hallam?"

"Yes. Would you stop off at my office?"

Antrok arrived ten minutes later. He was a tall, wide-shouldered Terran with unruly blonde hair and warm blue eyes; he had served as leader of the settlement during Navarre's absence on Jorus and Dariak. He entered the office and slouched informally against the door. Navarre noticed that he was covered with mud and sweat.

"Working?"

"Extending the trunk lines on the communicator circuit," Antrok said. "That's how you reached me so fast. I was tapping into the lines when you called. Sweaty work it is, too—but we have to keep pace with the city's expansion. What's on your mind?"

"I'm leaving," Navarre said. "For Jorus and Kariad. And I probably won't be back."

Antrok blinked suddenly and straightened up. "*Leaving*, Hallam? But we're in the midst of everything now—and you've helped us so much. I thought you were staying here for good."

Navarre shook his head. "I can't, Mikel. Earth's not safe yet."

"But we have six ships—"

"Suppose Jorus sends sixty?"

"You don't expect a further attack, do you?" Antrok asked. "I thought you said—"

"Whatever I said at the Council meetings," Navarre broke in, "was strictly for the sake of encouragement. Look here, Mikel: it's seven months since we captured those three Joran ships. That's enough time for Jorus to start wondering what happened out here. Kariad may wonder whatever became of their phony Admiral Finst and *his* three ships."

"But we're building more ships, Hallam—"

"It takes two years to build a starship, and you know it. That's still not enough. If Kausirn succeeds in working up enough imperial wrath against us, we'll have the whole Joran fleet down on our necks. So I'm going back to Jorus. Maybe I can handle the situation at close range."

"We'll miss you here," Antrok said.

"Thanks," Navarre said, shrugging. "But you know it's not true. You can manage without me. You *have* to manage without me. The day Earth finds that one particular man is indispensable to its existence is the day you all might as well crawl back into the Chalice and go back to sleep."

Antrok nodded. "When are you leaving?"

"Tonight. I waited this long only because I wanted to get things shaped up."

"You won't even stay for the election, then?"

"There's no need of that. You'll win. And I've prepared a memorandum of suggestions for you to consider after you officially take over again."

Antrok looked doubtful. "Of course I expect to win the election, Hallam. But I was counting on you to be here, to—"

He left that night, in the small Joran ship that had originally carried him across space on the quest for the Chalice, more than two years before. Just before leaving he sent a subradio message to Helna, at the court of Marhaill, Oligocrat of Kariad to warn her that he was on his way back.

Even by hyperdrive, the trip took days, so great was the gulf separating Earth and its island universe from the star-cluster containing the Joran and Kariadi solar systems. Navarre had plenty of time to think.

He thought back over the years to his childhood on Jorus, living in the shadow of the Palace. His father had been adviser to the previous Overlord, Joroiran VI, his mother a lady of the court. The plague brought by a travelling Meznian had carried off the old Overlord and Navarre's father in the same week; and suddenly a new Overlord, weak and fumbling, had come to the throne—a man more interested in dicing with his many-fingered crony, Kausirn, an itinerant Vegan who held great influence over the young prince, than in ruling a solar system.

Navarre had held the threads of Joroiran's empire together for six years, but the Vegan's influence had grown greater and greater in that time, and at length Kausirn had prevailed upon the Overlord to send Navarre out into space, in quest of the then-considered mythical Chalice.

So I found the Chalice, Navarre thought.

And the dead legend of Earth sprang into life. But now Kausirn knew that Earth was groping toward its second strength, and the Vegan undoubtedly would be taking steps to crush the upstart settlement quickly, before it became dangerous. On his last visit to Jorus Navarre had discovered that the Overload had been reduced to a pawn of Kausirn, a prisoner in his own palace.

But there was still a chance. The neighbouring system of Kariad—Jorus' ancient enemy, in more recent years a rather distant ally. The female Earthman, Helna Winstin still held influence over Marhaill, Kariad's ruler.

Perhaps, thought Navarre, the two worlds could be played off against one another, with Earth benefiting.

He reached Kariad finally, after an overlong journey during which too many plans had spun in his brain, too many strands of conspiracy had been woven. One man bottled up in a tiny warpship thinks too much ; Navarre was stale and weary of plotting by the time the mass indicator told him that his destination was in range.

Kariad, the single planet of a double sun.

He dropped down toward the Kariadi system, rapidly setting up the co-ordinates on the autopilot as the warpship lurched back into normal space ; the journey would be completed on ion-drive.

Navarre fed in the co-ordinates for a landing at the main spaceport ; he knew the detector-net was too accurate for a craft such as his, and he could never hope to slip down to the planet's surface unnoticed.

But he expected no trouble. It was seven months since he had last been in this galaxy, and he had let his hair grow ; instead of the shaven scalp of the traditional Earthman, he now presented wavy dark-brown hair. The search for Hallam Navarre had probably died down, anyway ; they might still seek him on Jorus, but he doubted if Kausirn's influence extended as far as Kariad.

He brought the ship down lightly on the broad concrete landing-apron of the spaceport and radioed Main Control for his clearance. It came promptly enough. He left the ship and joined the long line passing through the customs building.

He handed over his passport—a fraudulent one that he had had drawn up for him on Earth before leaving. It said he was Nollivar Strumo, a manufacturer of interplanetary vessels, who was vacationing on Kariad.

The customs official was a weary-looking little Kariadi whose dark blue skin was streaked with sweat ; he had been passing people perfunctorily, without bothering to ask more than the routine few questions. Waiting, Navarre had scanned the line—plenty of Kariadi, of course, and also the usual scattering of alien beings.

But no Jorans. *Why ?* he wondered.

The customs man took his passport, scanned it boredly, and asked the standard question : " Name and planet of origin ? "

" Nollivar Strumo," Navarre said. He started to add, *Of Jorus*, but the words died as he saw the expression on the official's face. The man had come suddenly awake.

"Is this a joke?" the official asked hoarsely.

"Of course not. Nollivar Strumo of Jorus. My papers are in order, aren't they?"

What's happened while I was away? Navarre wondered. *What have I done wrong?*

"In order?" the man repeated. He chuckled harshly and gestured to several nearby spaceport guards. Navarre tensed himself for a breakaway, but realised he'd never make it. "Your papers in order? Well, not exactly. You just brought a ship down on Kariad and thought you could march into the planet with a passport like this?"

"I've been travelling a while," Navarre said. "Have the laws been changed? Is a visa required now?"

"Visa! Friend, this passport's dated five weeks ago. I don't know where you got it or who you are, but the passport's obviously fake and so are you." The little man glared triumphantly at Navarre. "You may or may not be aware of it, but Kariad and Jorus severed diplomatic relations six months ago. We'll probably be at war with them within a month. This is a hell of a time to take your vacation on Kariad, Mr. Nollivar Strumo of Jorus—or whoever you are!"

He signalled to the guards. "Take him away and shut him up until Security can investigate his background. I wonder if he thought I was a fool? Next please!"

Chapter II

Navarre was growing accustomed to spending his time in prisons. He had passed an hour in a Kariadi jail once before, when he had come here with Carso on the first leg of his search for the Chalice. And he had tasted the stale air of Joran prisons more recently, when Kausirn had had him imprisoned.

Now he sat in a windowless box of a room far below the surface of the spaceport, breathing shallowly to keep the foul taste of the exhausted air from reaching the depths of his lungs, where it would linger for hours. He wondered what had gone wrong.

A state of war imminent between Jorus and Kariad, after hundreds of years of peace. And he had picked just this time to masquerade as a Joran citizen! Why, it would have been safer to try to bluff his way through under his own

identity, he realised. Or perhaps even to assume his false Kariadi guise and become, once again, Melwod Finst, Admiral of the Navy of Kariad.

He heard footsteps. The interrogators coming, at last.

The positronic relays of the cell-door lock whirred momentarily; the door swung back into its niche, and Navarre blinked at the sudden stream of light that came bursting in. When he could see again, he found himself confronted by the stout, stubby bore of a Kariadi blaster.

There were two interrogators, a large fat one and a small wizened one. They always worked in teams of opposites; it was part of the vast body of technique accumulated for the purpose of keeping the prisoner off balance.

"Come with us," said the small one with the blaster, and gestured.

Navarre pushed himself up off the cot and followed. He knew resistance was out of the question now.

They led him up a long dreary cell-block, through a double door, and into a glass-doored room somewhat larger than his cell, brightly lit, with radiant luminescent panels casting a soft, pleasant glow over everything.

Pointing to a large chair in the centre of the room, the small one said, "Sit there."

Navarre sat. The interrogators took seats against the walls, on opposite sides of him. He glanced from one to the other. They were dark blue in colour, but otherwise they had little in common. The small man was dried and wrinkled like a prune; glittering fast-moving eyes glinted at him out of a mousy face. As for the other, he must have weighed nearly four hundred pounds; he slumped relievedly in his chair, a mountain of blue flesh, and dabbed futilely at the rivulets of sweat that came dribbling down from his forehead and bushy eyebrows and lost themselves in the wilderness of his many successive chins.

"Very well," the fat one said, in a patient, friendly voice. "You say you are Nollivar Strumo of Jorus. Your passport says so also. Who are you?"

"Nollivar Strumo, of Jorus," Navarre said.

"Highly doubtful," the heavy man remarked. "I must remind you that it's within our authority to make use of any form of interrogation we may require, in order to obtain information from you. We are nearly in a time of war. You

claim to be a representative of a planet with whom we are not currently in diplomatic relations." He smiled coldly. "Now, this may or may not be true. But if you persist in claiming to be from Jorus, we'll have to treat you as if such is the case, until we find out otherwise."

While he had spoken, the character of the luminescent panels had been changing steadily. The pastel greens and oranges had faded, and were gradually replaced by harsher tones, more sombre blues and violets. It was part of the psychological approach, Navarre knew; the room colour would get less friendly as the interview went on.

The small man said, in a dry rasping voice, "Your passport is obviously a forgery. We have laboratory confirmation on that. Who are you?"

"Nolliwar Strumo, of Jorus." Navarre was determined to be stubborn as long as possible.

The fat man scowled mildly. "You have the virtue of consistency, at least. Tell us this: if you're from Jorus, as you insist, why are you here on Kariad? And why did you take no precautions to conceal your point of origin when you must have been aware that traffic between Jorus and Kariad is currently prohibited. What's your game?"

"I sell spaceships," Navarre said blandly.

"Another lie. No Nolliwar Strumo is listed in the most recent munitions directory published on Jorus."

Navarre smiled. "You've been very clever, both of you. And busy."

"Thank you. The identity of Nolliwar Strumo is obviously false. Will you tell us who you are?"

"No."

"Very well, then. Place your hands on the armrests of your chair, please," the fat man ordered.

"If I don't?"

"We'll place them there for you. If you want to keep all your fingers, you will do it yourself."

He shrugged and grasped the armrests. The fat man jabbed a button on a remote-control panel in his hands, and immediately metal clamps sprang out of Navarre's chair and pinioned him firmly.

The fat man touched another knob; a shudder of pain rippled through Navarre's body, making him wince.

"Your pain threshold is abnormally high," the fat one said. "81.3. No other Joran we've tested has run higher than 66. Would you say he was a Joran, Ruiil?"

The small Kariadi shook his head. "Highly doubtful."

"You've had a sample, Nollivar Strumo. That was just a test. The chair is capable of producing pain more than eighteen degrees above even your threshold—and I can guarantee you won't enjoy it." He touched his hands lovingly to the control panel. "You understand the consequences. Tell us your name, stranger."

A bolt of pain shot up his leg; it felt as if his calf-muscle had been ripped from his living leg. He waited till some of the pain had receded, and forced a smile.

"I—am not Nollivar Strumo," he said. "The passport is forged."

"Ah! A fact at last! But who *are* you, then?"

Another lancing burst of pain—this time, as if fleshy fingers had grasped the chambers of his heart and squeezed, gently enough, but numbingly. Navarre felt torrents of sweat come dribbling down his face.

"Who I am is not for your ears," he said.

"Eh? And for whose, then?"

"Marhaill's. And the Overlord will roast both of you when he learns what you've done."

"We simply do a job," remarked the smaller man. "If you have business with Marhaill, you should have spoken up about it earlier."

"My business is secret. But I'd be no use to him dead or mad from torture, which is why I'm letting you know this now."

The interrogators glanced at each other uncertainly. Navarre held his breath, waiting, trying to blot out the lingering after-effects of the pain. Interrogators were probably accustomed to this sort of wild bluffing, he thought.

"You are not from Jorus?"

"I'm an Earthman," Navarre said. "With my hair worn long." Cautiously he said, "Is Helna Winstin still adviser to Marhaill?"

"She is."

Navarre nodded. He had got into trouble once by making assumptions about the status quo; now he had to check every point.

"Tell Helna Winstin that a long-haired Earthman is in the interrogation chambers, and would speak to her on urgent business. Then see if she allows your quiz-game to continue any further."

The executioners looked doubtful. "If we waste her time, stranger—"

"If you fail to call her, and somehow I survive your gentle handling," Navarre promised, "I'll see to it that your fat is stripped away layer by layer, blubbery one, and that your tiny companion is smothered in it!"

There was a moment's pause. Finally the small man, the one named Ruil, stood up and said, "No harm checking. I'll call upstairs. Okay?"

"Okay."

Ruil disappeared. He returned five minutes later, looking pale and shaken.

"Well? What's the word?"

"We're to free him," he said. "There's been some sort of mistake. The Earthman wants to see him in her chambers immediately."

With consummate punctiliousness the two interrogators helped him out of the chair—he was a little wobbly of footing on the left leg, which had borne the force of the chair's neural bolt—and paused a moment as he straightened up. They led him back down the corridor, into a large and well-furnished room complete with a lavish bar. *The interrogators live well down here*, Navarre thought, as they drew a pale amber drink for him.

He gulped it and said, "Your hospitality is overwhelming. I'm impressed."

"Please don't hold this against us," the fat man said. The resonance was gone from his voice now; he was whining. "We do our jobs. You must admit we had cause to interrogate you—and you said nothing! If you had only spoken up earlier—!"

"I'll spare you," Navarre said magnanimously. "Take me to Earthman Winstin, now."

They escorted him to a glide-channel furnished in clinging soft brown damask and shot upward with him toward the surface. A dull blue landcar waited there, and the fat interrogator scribbled an order on a stylopad and handed it to the waiting driver.

"Take him to the palace. The Earthman wants to see him quickly."

Fifteen minutes later he was at the Oligocrat's palace, and five minutes after that he was being shown through a widening sphincter into the private chambers of Helna Winstin, Earthman to the Court of Oligocrat Marhaill.

She was waiting for him, a slim, wiry figure in glittering platinum-cloth and red tights, looking graceful and delicate and as resilient as neofoam webwork. Her scalp was bare, in Earthman fashion.

"I was worried about you," she said.

"I had some troubles on landing. How was I supposed to know there was friction between Jorus and Kariad? I posed as a Joran—and naturally the customs men collared me."

"I sent you a message," she said. "As soon as I received yours. But there are lags in subspace communications; you must have left too soon. Still, no damage has been done—you've arrived."

No damage, thought Navarre—except for one throbbing leg and an uneasy ache about the chest. He dropped down wearily on a richly upholstered divan and felt the faint touch of the soothing massage-cells going to work on his fatigued thighs and back.

"How is it on Earth?" she asked.

"Everything is fine." Briefly, he described the status of the settlement as of the time he had left. She nodded approvingly when he was finished.

"It sounds fine. Antrok will win the election?"

"He's a logical choice. The boy's a natural leader. But what's this brewing between Jorus and Kariad?"

She smiled secretively. "You may remember that Admiral Melwod Finst left Kariad seven months ago on manoeuvres, with three first-line ships at his command."

"And a Joran fleet of the same size departed about that time for points unknown, under the command of Admiral Hannimon Drulk."

"Exactly. Now, it became necessary for me to account for the whereabouts of Admiral Finst and his fleet. I could hardly say that Admiral Finst was in reality an Earthman named Navarre, whose appointment to the Kariadi Admiralty I had obtained by bamboozling my good Oligocrat Marhaill.

So I took the alternate path of action and caused the manufacture of a dispatch from Admiral Finst saying he had been set upon in deep space by three unidentifiable starships, and was in the midst of a fierce battle."

Grinning, Navarre said, "I begin to see."

"Likewise," she went on, "I filtered into the hands of my tame Joran spy a report that Admiral Druks's fleet had been destroyed in action somewhere in deep space. Then it was a simple matter to let Jorus accidentally find out about the similar fate that befell Admiral Finst."

"And so both Marhaill and Joroiran concluded that there was a pitched battle between fleets of Kariad and Jorus in some distant sector of space," Navarre said. "Which led each of them to suspect that the other had some designs on him. And which kept both of them from guessing that their ships were perfectly safe, and were now serving as the main line of defence for Earth!"

He leaned forward, suddenly serious. "So Jorus and Kariad are at the edge of war over six ships that they think were destroyed. Do you think that's a wise move?"

Helna said, "Of course. If I can foment friction between the two systems, it'll keep their minds off Earth. Marhaill's a weak man; he'll listen to me. And he fears Jorus more than he does Earth. I had to drive a wedge between him and Kausirn, and I did."

"Kausirn's in charge, then?"

"Evidently. Joroiran is hardly seen in public any more. He's still alive, but completely in the Vegan's power. Marhaill's aware of this."

Navarre clenched his fists; he still had a mild liking for Joroiran, spineless incompetent of a ruler that he was. And he disliked the Vegan intensely.

"Why did you come back?" Helna asked.

"I was afraid Kausirn might be stirring things up to send a fleet to Earth. Six ships couldn't hold off the full force of the Joran navy any better than six sheep could. But if Jorus and Kariad are going to go to war with each other—"

Helna shook her head quickly; an expression of doubt appeared on her face. "Don't be too confident of that."

"What do you mean?"

"The public attitude is an unhealthy one. But I think Kausirn suspects that he's being hoaxed. He's been negotiating with Marhaill for top-level talks, face to face."

"And you couldn't head such talks off?" Navarre asked.

"I don't know. I've warned Marhaill against an assassination plot, but he doesn't listen. It's inevitable that Kausirn and he will get together and compare notes. And then—"

"And then what?"

"And then Jorus and Kariad will undoubtedly sign a treaty of mutual harmony," Helna said. "And send a combined fleet out to squash Earth."

Chapter III

Two weeks later, Navarre left Kariad at night, in a small ship bearing the arms of the Oligocrat Marhaill. His pilot was a member of Marhaill's Secret Service, handpicked by Helna herself. No one was on hand to see him off; no one checked to see his passport; no one asked where he was going.

His flight clearance papers bore the code inscription XX-1413, signed by Marhaill, countersigned by Helna. That was enough to get him past any bureaucrat on Kariad; the translation of the double-X was, *Special Secret Ambassador for the Oligocrat, unlimited authority.*

Navarre chuckled every time he had occasion to glance at his image in the ship's mirror, during the brief journey between the worlds. He could hardly recognize himself, after the job Helna had done.

His youthful crop of brown hair had been shaven once again; to his bald scalp had been affixed a wig of bright glossy black Kariadi-type hair, thick-stranded and oily. His normally high cheekbones had been lowered by an overlay of moulding plastic; his eyebrows had been thickened, his lips built up into fleshiness, his ears drawn back and up by a simple bit of surgery.

He weighed twenty pounds more than usual. His skin-colour was bright blue.

He was Loggon Domell, Ambassador from the Court of the Oligocrat Marhaill to the Court of Joroiran VII, and only a skilled morphologist could have detected the fact that behind the outer layer that was Loggon Domell was one Hallam Navarre, Earthman.

This was the second time he had masqueraded as a Kariadi—but Helna and her technicians had done an infinitely more

painstaking job than he had, when he had passed himself off as Melwod Finst earlier. Finst had looked simply like Navarre with his skin dyed blue and his scalp wigged; Domell was an entirely different person.

It had all been remarkably simple. Helna had persuaded Marhaill that it would be well to send an ambassador to Jorus to discuss the galactic situation with Joroiran and with Kausirn; Marhaill, busy with his *drak*-hunting and his mistresses, had agreed and asked Helna to suggest a man capable of handling the job.

"I have just the man," she had said. "One Loggon Domell, of this city. A wise and prudent man who will serve Your Majesty well."

Marhaill nodded in agreement. "You always serve me well, Helna. Send him to Jorus!"

The little ship landed at midday at the Jorus City airport. By prior arrangement, a government car was there to meet "Loggon Domell" at the edge of the landing apron. A high-ranking Joran named Dilbar Loodig had been chosen as the official greeter.

Navarre knew this Loodig: a hanger-on at court, a man with a high hereditary title and little else to commend him. Loodig's boast was that he knew everyone at court by the slope of their shoulders and the angle at which they held their necks; Navarre wondered whether Loodig's ability would stand him in good stead now. It would cost him his life if he were to recognise Navarre.

But Loodig gave no outward sign of recognition, and he was not clever enough to have masked his true feelings had he detected Navarre behind the personal of "Domell." Navarre presented his papers to the courtier; Loodig riffled through them, smiled ingratiatingly, and said, "Welcome to Jorus."

At the Palace, Navarre was ushered speedily through the outer rooms.

"Will I be able to see the Overlord shortly?" he asked.

"I've notified him you're here," Loodig said. "The Overlord is—not a well man, these days. He may not be able to see you immediately."

"Oh. How sad!"

"He's been in poor health for quite some time now," said the courtier. "We're extremely worried about him."

I'll bet, Navarre thought. If something should happen to Joroiran, Kausirn would make himself regent for the heir apparent. The boy is only eight.

Loodig excused himself, disappeared for a moment, and returned shortly after. "The Overlord will see you, I'm happy to report. Please come this way."

Loodig led him down the winding passages toward the smaller throneroom Joroiran used for private audiences. It was not nearly as magnificent as the main throneroom, of course, but it did serve to awe visitors. Periscopic viewers allowed Security men to observe the course of the Overlord's audiences and protect him from harm.

They reached the door. Loodig knelt, making ceremonial gestures, while Navarre remained erect as befitted his post of ambassador.

"His Excellency, Loggon Domell, Ambassador Plenipotentiary from Kariad," Loodig announced.

"Let him enter," Joroiran responded, in a pale, almost timid voice.

The Overlord was showing the effects of his virtual captivity. A small, ineffectual man to begin with, he had hardly bothered to take the usual steps to cover his deficiencies; instead of the magnificent framework-robe that provided him with his regal public stature, he wore only an embroidered cloth robe that added little to his appearance. He had looked poorly the last time Navarre had seen him, nearly a year before; now, if anything, he looked worse.

Navarre made the ambassadorial bow, unfolded the charter of credentials Marhaill had given him, and offered them to Joroiran. The Overlord scanned them briefly and put them aside. Navarre heard the door slide gently closed behind him, leaving him alone with Joroiran.

There was no indication that the Overlord recognized him; instead, he fixed his gentle, washed-out eyes on a point somewhere above Navarre's left shoulder and said, "It pleases me that I can speak with someone from Kariad. This present friction has distressed me long."

"No more so than it has troubled the sleep of Marhaill," Navarre said. "It seems that groundless friction has sprung up between our worlds. I hope my visit will help in restoring harmony."

Joroiran smiled feebly. "Yes. Indeed." He seemed to be at a loss for his next words. Finally he burst out, "My adviser—Kausirn—he should be here, now. We really should wait for him. He's made a much closer study of the situation than I have."

It was pathetic, Navarre thought. Kausirn had so puppetized the Overlord that Joroiran was totally incapable of conducting business of the realm without him. But it was just as well; Navarre knew it was necessary to have Kausirn on hand when he made his play.

"The Lord Adviser is a man I've heard much about," Navarre remarked. "He seems to be a gifted administrator. He must take much of the burden of government from Your Majesty's weary shoulders."

Joroiran seemed to flinch at the telling thrust. He nodded tiredly. "Yes, he is a great help to me. A ruler has so much to think about—and Kausirn is indispensable to me."

"I've often heard Lord Marhaill say the same about his adviser—an Earthman. He finds her an absolute necessity in operating the government."

"I had an Earthman adviser once," Joroiran said distantly. "I thought he was loyal and trustworthy, but he betrayed me. I sent him on a mission . . . but he failed me. His name was Navarre."

"I often dealt with him when he served Your Majesty," Navarre said. "He seemed to me utterly loyal to Jorus. It surprises me to learn of this."

"It came as a blow to me, too. But luckily I had one such as Kausirn to take his place, when he left me. Ah—he comes now!"

The door opened. The Vegan Kausirn entered, smiling coldly. The Vegan was an angular, ascetic-looking person with the deathly pallor of his race lending contrast to the richness of his robes. Indeed, he was more finely dressed than Joroiran himself; he bore himself upright, confidently, as if he and not the other sat on the throne.

"Your pardon, Majesty. I was unavoidably detained." He turned to Navarre and said, "You are Marhaill's ambassador? I give you welcome. I am Kausirn, Adviser to the Overlord."

"Greetings, Kausirn."

The Vegan's twenty fingers curled and uncurled tensely; his eyes seemed to bore through the layers of plastic that

masked Navarre, to expose the Earthman who skulked beneath.

"Let us go to the Council-room," Kausirn suggested. "There we three may talk."

It took them perhaps ten minutes of uneasy verbal fencing in the small, well-lit room before they actually came to grips with the subject at hand. First they had to exchange pleasantries in true diplomatic fashion, approach the topic circuitously, lead up to it in a gradual manner. Navarre let the Vegan control the flow of discussion; he had learned never to underestimate Kausirn, and he feared he might give himself away if he ventured to steer the discussion in some direction that might be characteristic of Hallam Navarre.

He toyed with the drinkflask at his right, parried Kausirn skillfully, replied with grace to the inane questions of Joroiran. Neither of them seemed to suspect his true identity.

At length the Vegan leaned forward, spreading his ten-fingered hands wide on the burnished cupralloy meeting-table. With the tiny flicker of his eyelids that told Navarre he was choosing his words with particular care, Kausirn said, "Of course, the chief item of curiosity is the encounter that presumably took place between three Joran ships and three of Kariad, eight months ago. Until this matter is resolved, I hardly see how we can discuss any reaffirmation of ties between Kariad and Jorus."

"Of course," added Joroiran.

Navarre frowned thoughtfully. "You imply, then, that your three ships and ships of Kariad fought a battle?"

Kausirn quickly shook his head. "I draw no such implications! But there *are* persistent rumours."

"May I ask just where the three Joran ships were at the time of their alleged destruction?"

The Vegan nibbled a lip. "This infringes on highly secret information, Ambassador Domell."

Navarre rose swiftly from his seat and said, "In that case, Adviser Kausirn, I fear we haven't much else to talk about. If on this essential matter secrecy is to be maintained between our worlds, I hardly see how we can agree on any other major topics of current dispute. Of course—"

Smoothly Kausirn said, "Again you seem to have drawn an unwarranted implication, Ambassador. True, these matters

are highly secret—but did I say I would withhold knowledge of them from you? On the contrary: I summoned an ambassador from Kariad for the very purpose of revealing them.”

He's falling into the trap, Navarre thought joyfully. He took his seat once again and glanced expectantly at the Vegan.

Kausirn said, “To begin with: there was a traitorous Earthman in this court once, a man called Hallam Navarre. This Navarre has been absent from this court for several years. He's a dangerous man, milord, and a clever one. He has rediscovered Earth!”

Navarre's eyes widened in mock astonishment. “No!”

“Unfortunately, yes. He has found Earth and established a belligerent settlement there. His intention is to conquer the galaxy—beginning with Jorus and Kariad!”

“And why, then, were we not informed of this?”

“Patience, good sir. When we of Jorus learned of this, we immediately dispatched a punitive mission to Earth—three ships, under the command of our Admiral Druhk. A preventative measure, you might say. We intended to wipe out the Terran settlement before they could make their attack on our systems.”

“A wise move.”

“But,” said Kausirn, “our ships vanished. So far as we know they reached the region of Earth, but that's the last we know of them.”

“No dispatches whatsoever from them?”

“None.”

“Strange,” Navarre mused.

“Now,” Kausirn went on, “We learn that the Grand Fleet of Kariad suffered an oddly similar loss—three ships vanished without trace while on manoeuvres.”

“And how was this learned?” Navarre asked, a trifle coldly.

Kausirn shrugged apologetically. “Let us cast diplomacy aside, shall we? I'll tell you quite frankly: our spy network brought us the fact.”

“I appreciate frankness,” Navarre said.

“Very well, then. Jorus sends three ships out to destroy Earth; the same month, Kariad sends three ships out on manoeuvres to points unknown. By some coincidence none of these ships is ever heard from again. The natural conclusion is that there was a battle between them, and all six ships were destroyed. Now, milord: Jorus has no hostile intent against Kariad. Our fleet was on its way to Earth when the incident

occurred. I can only conclude that for reasons beyond us, Kariad has committed an unprovoked act of war against Jorus."

"Your logic is impeccable," Navarre said, looking at Joroiran, who had been following the interchange like a spectator at a kinetics match. "But faulty, nonetheless. Why should Kariad attack Jorus?"

"Exactly the question that troubles us," Kausirn said. "The rumour is rife that such an attack was made on our ships by Kariad. To be frank, again: our spy network can find no motive for the attack. We have no reason to suspect Kariad." Kausirn took a deep breath. "Let me present my *real* conclusion now. The Joran ships were not destroyed by your fleet. Instead, *both* fleets were destroyed by Earth! The Earthmen have concealed strengths; we sent a ridiculously small contingent and it met destruction. Perhaps your fleet on manoeuvres blundered into Terran territory accidentally and was destroyed as well."

Navarre said nothing, but listened with deep interest.

Kausirn continued, "I prefer this theory to the other, less tenable one of unprovoked assault on our fleet by yours. Therefore: I propose that we end quickly the animosity developing between our worlds—an animosity engendered by baseless rumour—and join instead in an alliance against Earth, which obviously is stronger than we suspected."

Navarre smiled blandly. "It is an interesting suggestion."

"You agree, then?"

"I believe not."

"What?"

"Such an alliance," Navarre said, "would involve our denying that our fleet attacked yours. This we are not in a position to do."

Kausirn looked genuinely startled. "You *admit* the attack, then? It *was* Kariad and not Earth who destroyed our ships?"

Smiling, Navarre said, "Now you draw the unwarranted implications. We neither affirm nor deny that our fleet and yours had an armed conflict provoked by us."

"Your silence on the subject amounts to an admission of guilt," Kausirn said stonily.

"This does not concern me. I act under instructions from Oligocrat Marhaill. I am not empowered to enter into any sort of alliance with Jorus." For the second time, he rose

from the table. "We seem to have reached an impasse. You boast of your spy system, Adviser Kausirn; let it discover our motives, if it can. I feel that I would not accomplish anything further by remaining on Jorus. Will you see that I am conveyed to the spaceport?"

Kausirn was glaring at him in glassy-eyed bewilderment. It was the first time Navarre had ever seen the Vegan truly off balance. And small wonder, he thought: he had hardly expected the Kariadi ambassador to reject the chance of an alliance in favour of what amounted to a declaration of war by implication.

"We offer you alliance against Earth," Kausirn said. "Earth, which may be the deadliest enemy your planet or mine may ever have. And you refuse? You prefer to let the cloud of war hover over Jorus and Kariad?"

Navarre shrugged. "We have no choice. Good day, Your Majesty. Adviser Kausirn, will you arrange transportation for me?"

With sudden shock he realised that he had spoken the last words in his natural voice, not the false one of Loggon Domell. The throat-distorter had failed!

He froze for an instant, seeing the surprise on Kausirn's face give way to abrupt recognition. "That voice," the Vegan said. "I know that voice. You're Navarre!"

He fumbled at his belt for a weapon—but by that time, the Earthman had dashed through the opening doors of the Councilroom and was racing down the long corridor that led to an exit from the Palace.

Chapter IV

It had almost worked, he thought bleakly, as he sped down the corridor. If only the distorter hadn't conked out, he could have passed himself off as the Kariadi ambassador and prevented any alliance from forming between Jorus and Kariad by the puzzlingly noncommittal character of his responses. Well, he thought, it had been a good idea, anyway.

The splat of an energy-gun brought down mortar over his head. He heard Kausirn's angry voice shouting, "Catch that man! He's a spy! A traitor!"

He whirled round a corner and came face-to-face with a surprised Daborian guard. The huge being took a moment

to consider the phenomenon before him, and that moment was too long. Navarre jabbed a fist into his stomach, kicked him as he fell, and kept running. The skirt of his ambassadorial garb was hindering him, but he made a good pace anyway. And he knew his way around the Palace.

He crossed the narrow passageway that led to the kitchen quarters, spiralled down a helical staircase, jumped across a low railing, and found himself outside the Palace. Behind him came the sound of confused yelling; there would be a fine manhunt under way any minute.

The car was waiting though. He forced himself to a calm pace and walked to it. "Back to the spaceport," he ordered. Turbos thrummed and the car glided rapidly into the streets.

The trip to the spaceport seemed to take forever; Navarre fretted impatiently as they passed through crowded streets in the centre of Jorus City, finally emerging on the highway that led to the port. Once at the spaceport he thanked the driver, got out, flashed his credentials, and made his way to the waiting Kariadi spaceship.

For the first time since his flight began, he paused for breath. He was safe, now. Kausirn would never dare to fire publicly on a vessel bearing the royal arms of Kariad.

In space, he called Helna via subradio and signalled to her to scramble. After a moment the beeping sound-patterns told him the scrambler was on.

"Well?" she asked. "How'd it go?"

"Fine—right up till the end. Then the distorter went dead and Kausirn recognized me by my voice."

"Oh!"

"I was on my way out by then," Navarre said. "He woke up too late. I'm in space and not being pursued. He can't very well attack me now."

"But the mission's a failure, then?"

"I'm not so sure of that," Navarre said. "I had him fooled into thinking Kariad *had* actually destroyed those ships, and not Earth. Now, of course, he knows it was all a hoax. There'll probably be an alliance between Jorus and Kariad after all, once Kausirn contacts Marhaill and tells him who he really sent."

"Will he do that?"

"I don't doubt it. Kausirn's deathly afraid of Earth. He doesn't want to tackle the job of destroying the settlement

himself ; he wants to rope Kariad in just in case Earth turns out to be too much for Jorus' fleet alone. So naturally he'll do his best to avoid a war with Kariad. He'll get in touch with Marhaill. You'd better not be on Kariad when that happens."

There was silence for a moment. Then Helna said, " You're right. It's going to be hard to explain to Marhaill just how I happened to send a disguised Earthman as his special ambassador to Jorus. We'd better go to Earth."

" Not me, Helna. You."

" And where will you go ?"

" I've got a new idea," Navarre said. " One that can make use of the fact that Jorus and Kariad are going to ally. Tell me ; can you think of a *third* world that's likely to be scared by such an alliance ?"

" Morank, of course !" she exclaimed.

" Right. So I go to Morank and offer them some advance information on the coming alliance. If I handle it right, this time, Morank ought to fall in line. Meantime you go to Earth and explain things to Antrok. I'll keep you posted on what happens to me."

" Good luck," she said simply.

He forced an uneasy laugh. " It'll take more than luck. We're sitting ducks if Kausiin ever launches the Grand Fleet against our six ships."

Navarre broke the contact and turned away from the myriad dials and controls of the subradio set ; behind him was a mirror, and he stared at his false Kariadi face.

That would have to be fixed. From now on, he would sail under his own colours ; there was nothing to be gained by further masquerade.

The pilot was lounging in his cabin ; the ship was on hyperdrive, now, and no human hand could serve any purpose in guiding it. The silent ultronic generators would bring the ship unerringly through the nothingness of hyperspace ; the pilot's job was strictly that of emergency standby, once the ship had entered warp.

Navarre returned to his own cabin, switched off the visual projector on his communicator, and buzzed the pilot. There was a pause ; then the screen lit, and Navarre saw the man, dressed in off-duty fatigues, trying to conceal a look of sour impatience.

"Yes, Ambassador?"

"Pilot, are you busy just now? I'd like you to come to my cabin for a moment if you're not."

The pilot's square-cut blue face showed a trace of annoyance, but he said evenly, "Of course, Ambassador. I'll be right there. Is anything wrong?"

"Not exactly," Navarre said.

A moment later the annunciator-light atop his door flashed briefly. Navarre depressed the door-control and the door pivoted inward and away. The pilot stood there, in the corridor just outside.

"You called me, Ambassador? I—*who are you?*"

Navarre's hand tightened on the butt of his blaster. "Hallam Navarre is my name."

"You're—you're an Earthman," the pilot said, backing away. "What happened to the Ambassador? How did you get aboard the ship? What are you going to do?"

"Much too many questions for one man to answer," Navarre returned lightly. "The Ambassador, I regret to inform you, is dead. And I fear I'll need the use of your ship."

The Kariadi was wobbly-legged with fear. He half-fell into Navarre's cabin, but Navarre, suspecting a trick, moved forward swiftly, caught the man by the throat, and propped him up against the left-hand bulkhead.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Put you to sleep and drop you overboard in the escape capsule," Navarre told him. "And then I'll pursue a journey of my own."

He drew a dark violet ampoule of perredrin from his jacket pocket and flicked the safety off the spraypoint with his thumb. Quickly he touched the tip of the ampoule to the man's arm and squeezed; the subsonic spray forced ten cubic centimetres of narcotic liquid into the pilot's bloodstream instantly. He turned grey-faced and crumpled forward within three heartbeats; Navarre caught him and slung him over one shoulder. The pilot's mouth hung slackly open, and his chest rose and fell in a steady, slow rhythm, one breath-intake every fifteen seconds.

The escape capsule—there were two of them aboard the ship—was situated aft, just above the drive compartment, in a womblike alcove of its own. It was a miniature spaceship, eleven feet long, equipped with its own precision-made drive unit. Navarre stuffed the slumbering Kariadi in head-first,

making sure he was caught securely in the foam webwork that guarded against landing shock, and peered at the navigating dial.

For the convenience of laymen who might need to use the escape capsules in a hurry and had no notion of how to astrogate, the engineers of Kariad had developed a shortcut ; a number of possible orbits were pre-plotted, and the computer was equipped to select the most effective one and fit it to whatever destination the escaping passenger chose.

Navarre tapped out *Kariad* on the dial, and the computer unit signalled acknowledgement and began clicking out the instructions for the drive. Navarre stepped back, slammed shut the automatically-locking hood of the capsule, and yanked down on the release-lever.

Morank was the fourth world of a red supergiant sun eight light-years from Kariad, ten light-years from Jorus. Morank itself was a large, well-populated world, a busy commercial centre, and, in the old days of the Starkings' League, Morank had fought a bitter three-cornered struggle with Jorus and Kariad for trade rights in their cluster.

That had been more than five hundred years before. The Starkings' League had endured ten thousand years, but it was dying, and its component worlds were thrusting up their own claims for independence. Morank, Jorus, Kariad—the three most powerful worlds of their cluster, the richest, the best-situated—they were foremost in the revolt against the powerless Starkings.

Still nominally federated into the League, the three worlds jockeyed for position like racing animals readying for a break from the post. After two hundred years, the break finally came—when Joroiran I and his Earthman cohort Voight Navarre rebelled from the dying League and declared the independence of the Jorus system. Morank had come right after, and then Kariad.

Three hundred years—but for the last hundred of them, an uneasy friendship had existed among the three planets, each watching the other two warily, none making any overt move toward extending its powers.

Navarre smiled. An alliance between Jorus and Kariad was sure to open some eyes on Morank.

His little ship blinked back into space within landing distance of the planet. In the sky the vast bulk of Morank's

feeble red sun Draximoor spread like an untidy octopus, tendrils of flame extending in all directions. Navarre fed the landing co-ordinates into the computer. The ship plunged planetward.

This is Earth's last chance, he thought. If Morank allows itself to be pushed in the right direction, we may yet survive. If not, there'll be no withstanding the combined fleets.

A landing-field loomed below. His radio sputtered and came to life ; a voice spoke, in the crisp syllables of the local lingua spacia.

"This is Central Traffic Control speaking from the city of Ogyglan. If you intend to make a landing on Morank territory, please respond."

Navarre flashed the answering signal. A moment later there came the okay, and with it was relayed a set of field co-ordinates, supplementing those he had already computed. He punched them into his tape and sat back, awaiting the landing.

Chapter V

The Grand Spaceport at Ogyglan was a dazzling sight : to offset the dimness of the vast pale red sun, batteries of photo-flood illuminoscreens were ranked along the areaway that led from the spaceport buildings to the landing field itself. To Navarre, it seemed as if the entire planet glowed, but it was a muted radiance that brightened without interfering with vision.

Three burly chisel-faced Morankimar waited for him as he clambered down the catwalk of his spaceship and strode across the field. The Morankimar were humanoid aliens, cut to the general biological pattern of the humanoid but approximating it not quite so closely as did the Jorans and the Kariadi; they were heavy-set creatures nearly as broad as they were wide, with dishlike oval eyes set lemurlike in independent orbital sockets, rotating with utter disregard for each other. Their skins were coarse-grained and pebbly, a dark muddy yellow in colour and unpleasant of texture. Fleshy protuberances dangled beard-fashion from their extremely sharp chins. They were sturdy, durable, long-lived creatures, quick-witted and strong.

As Navarre approached them, he observed much anguished rotating of eyes. Finally the foremost of the aliens, a bleak-visaged oldster whose skin had faded to chartreuse, rumbled

in lingua spacia, "Your ship bears royal arms of Kariad. Are you perhaps the Oligocrat's Earthman?"

"Hardly," Navarre replied, in Joran. He understood the Morankimar tongue, but it was a jawbreaking agglutinating language for which he had little fondness; only a lifelong speaker of it could hope to handle its irregularities. "I'm Hallam Navarre, formerly Earthman to the Court of Overlord Joroiran of Jorus. I've come to Morank bearing an important message for the Polisarch."

"A message from Joroiran?" asked the alien, in a thickly-accented version of Joran.

"No," said Navarre. "A message *about* Joroiran. And about Oligocrat Marhaill. And I think the Polisarch would be interested in what I have to say."

They drove at a steady clip through the enormous metropolis of Ogyglan toward the local residence of the Polisarch. Ogyglan was an attractive city, Navarre discovered; its buildings had been planned with care, with superbly-engineered symmetry, and their colour-spectrum had obviously been selected thoughtfully.

At length they came to a building that seemed to have no foundation; it drifted ten feet above the ground, terminating in a smooth glassy undersurface, mirror-bright, jet black. The building itself was a square untapering tower, a solid block of masonry.

"This is the residence of the Polisarch," he was told.

Navarre looked upward at the shining rectangle that hovered before him. Sleek, handsome, its sides icy blue and gleaming, it was a handsome sight.

"What holds it up?"

"A hundred million cubic feet of graviton repulsors. The Polisarch must never touch Morankimar soil—nor may his residence."

Navarre nodded. It was a fact he had forgotten.

A drawbridge descended from the lip of the building and they rose, the bridge rising behind them and tucking itself invisibly into place. Navarre found himself in a wide cream-coloured marble anteroom. The floor was a solid slab of milky obsidian.

Two Morankimar clad in violet robes appeared from a concealed alcove and requested Navarre's blaster. He handed it over, and also, upon request, the slim curved blade beneath

his vest. The Palace guards evidently had monitored him by fluorescreen.

Finally he was ushered into a vestibule that opened on an extensive drape-hung hall. A figure waited at the far end.

"Is that the Polisarch?" he asked his guides.

"His Secretary of State," came the soft reply. "You must discuss your business with him first. If he sees fit, he will admit you to the presence of the Polisarch."

It took perhaps fifteen minutes of genteel argument before the Secretary of State was willing to agree that Navarre's business was worth putting before the Polisarch. The Secretary was a witty and elegant man, and he found much amusement in the paradox that complicated the problem: it was his task to decide whether a given matter was important enough to merit the Polisarch's attention, and yet he was being told that this particular matter was too important for his own ears! But at length he consented to the interview.

Navarre felt a curious tremor of anticipation as he crossed the threshold of the Grand Throneroom—not only because the fate of Earth hung on his powers of persuasion at this interview, but because the Morankimar Polisarch was one of the legendary figures of the galaxy.

Navarre bowed deeply at the entrance to the throneroom; a dry deep voice said, "You may rise," and the Earthman rose, looking about for the Polisarch in some surprise. He found him, finally—eight feet above his head, a withered little figure clad in glistening querlon sheaths, sitting crosslegged on nothing in the air. The floor of the throneroom, Navarre realized in astonishment must be one gigantic graviton-repulsor plate, and the Polisarch's clothes equipped with the necessary resistive coils.

Navarre took three hesitant steps inward and the Polisarch drifted downward until his crossed feet were but three feet off the ground and his eyes level with Navarre's. Rel Dominoor was a commanding sight, even in his extreme old age. His platterlike eyes had nothing fishlike about them; both were focussed sharply on Navarre. His skin looked paper-thin, paper-dry; tiny beads of spittle flecked his lipless mouth and the fleshy barbels that dangled from his chin. His bare pale feet were limp and tiny; Navarre stared involuntarily at the atrophied members.

"Yes," the Polisarch said as if in answer. "The law compels me to remain aloft. I last walked on solid ground more than a century ago. You're Navarre, Joroiran's man?"

"I was. It's two years since I last served the Overlord."

The Polisarch nodded. "Many years ago I had an Earthman for an adviser—one Mirro Winstin. He served me well. But we grew tired of each other, and he moved on to Kariad. I think his daughter serves Marhaill now."

"She did. She has recently left him."

One of the Polisarch's eyes swivelled disconcertingly upward. "You Earthmen exchange loyalties as you would exchange greetings. I suppose she now serves Joroiran and you Marhaill? Or have you come to sell your services to me, Navarre? I stand in little need of new advisers now—though I'm always willing to receive information."

The Polisarch's jewel-studded hand swept idly across his chest, gently touching a control; he began to rise, moving upward some eight feet. Navarre craned his neck, squinted up at the ruler, and said, "I bring you information, but there's a price for it."

Dominoor scowled expressively. "Earthmen haggle well. Let's hear the price, first; the information may come after, if I care to have it."

"Very well. The price is a fleet of Morankimar battleships: twelve of them, fully armed and manned, to be placed entirely under my command with no restrictions whatever as to their use."

Abruptly the Polisarch touched his controls again and dropped rapidly until he was at Navarre's level once again. His expression was grave, almost fierce. "I had heard Earthmen were bold, but boldness carried too far becomes insolence." There was no anger in his voice, merely a sort of didactic peevishness. "You will sell your information for a mere twelve battleships, eh? I could flay you and get it for a less dear outlay."

Navarre met his gaze unflinchingly. "You *could* flay me. But then you'd be faced with solving the problem yourself. I offer a speedy and simple resolution. Your own spies will tell you what I have to tell you soon enough—but that will hardly handle the situation adequately."

Dominoor smiled slowly. "I could like you, Earthman. Twelve battleships, eh? All right. The terms are met. Now tell me what you came here to tell me, and see if you can save your skin from the hand of the flayer."

"Very well," Navarre said. "Briefly, it's this : Jorus and Kariad plan to form an alliance. The balance of power in this cluster will be upset."

The Polisarch's pale, almost white skin began to deepen in colour, passing through several gradations of chartreuse and becoming finally an angry lemon-colour that faded rapidly as the flood-tide of excitement receded. Navarre waited patiently, he saw that his words had made their effect. Victory was almost in his grasp now.

Finally Dominoor said, "Do you have proof?"

"My word as an Earthman is all I can offer."

"Hmm. Let that pass, then. Tell me : why is this alliance coming about?"

Navarre took a deep breath. It was useless to lie to the old Polisarch ; Rel Dominoor was too wise, too keen-witted, to be fooled easily. Choosing his words with care, Navarre said, "There is a settlement on Earth. Ten thousand Earthmen live there."

"I know."

Navarre smiled. "Morank has its spies too, then."

"We have sharp ears here," said the Polisarch. "But continue."

"These ten thousand of Earth desire nothing but peaceful existence. But Kausirn of Vega, the Overlord Joroiran's adviser, fears them. He thinks Earth is much stronger than it actually is. He is afraid to send a Joran fleet against Earth unaided. Hence his pact with Marhaill ; together Jorus and Kariad will dispatch fleets to crush ten thousand unarmed Earthmen."

"I see the picture," Dominoor said. "Mutual deception, leading to an alliance of cowards. Go on."

"Naturally Earth will be destroyed by the fleet—but the link between Jorus and Kariad will have been forged. This Kausirn is unscrupulous. And Marhaill is a weak man. Before too many months have passed, you'll see Jorus and Kariad under one rule."

"This would violate a treaty even older than me," Dominoor mused. "The three worlds are to remain separate and unallied perpetually outstretched at the vertices of a triangle. This to insure safety in our galaxy. An alliance of this sort would collapse the triangle. It would break the treaty."

"Treaties are scraps of paper, my lord."

"So they are. But important scraps. We would have to go to war to protect our rights. It would be painful for all of us. Our cities might be destroyed." The thick barbels at his chin had twined eerily about each other; Navarre stared, fascinated.

"War between Morank and the allied worlds could be avoided," Navarre said.

"By giving you twelve of our ships?"

"Yes. My plan is this: your ships shall be unmarked, unidentified in every way. No one will know they originate on Morank. I'll undertake to repel the Jorus-Kariad fleet that is converging on Earth, driving them off in such a way that they think Earth is incalculably powerful. With luck, it'll smash the Jorus-Kariad axis. It'll incidentally save Earth. But also Morank will be untouched by war."

The Polisarch was smiling again.

"At worst, it would cost me twelve ships. Such a loss I could bear, if needful. At best, I avoid a war in this cluster."

"You agree to the terms, then?"

"I think so," the Polisarch said. "Subject to a certain degree of preliminary checking by my informants, of course. I don't hand over twelve ships with quite so much ease, friend Earthman."

"Naturally not."

"And one further point seems to be being overlooked," Dominoor added.

"Which is?"

"That Earth once again exists," said the Polisarch. "You very speedily glossed over that fact."

Navarre felt chilled. Had this all been some callous cat-and-mouse game on the part of the shrewd Morankimar ruler?

"There are but ten thousand on Earth," Navarre said.

"They are harmless."

"They are harmless *now*," Dominoor said crisply. "In ten generations, though—? This Kausirn is no fool. He knows the time to strike at Earth is now, before it is too late. Otherwise there will be no stopping them, when they number in the billions again."

Navarre moistened his lips. *How*, he asked himself, *could I have expected Dominoor to fall for such a transparent offer as mine?*

"We offer no threat to the galaxy's peace, Your Grace," Navarre said hesitantly.

"This is the first lie you've told since entering my chamber. You *do* threaten the galaxy. It's a built-in consequence of allowing Earth to return to power. But," he added mildly, "that will be in ten generations. Perhaps I will be dead by then. We do not live forever, even hovering in air as I do."

Navarre blinked uncertainly. "Does the agreement still stand, then?"

"The agreement stands. The twelve ships are yours. Take them, Navarre—and use them well. Keep Jorus and Kariad apart. Keep war from touching Morank. Save your Earthmen from destruction. And, perhaps, thank an old man who has become a coward."

Chapter VI

There were fifty ships in the armada: fifty great golden-hulled vessels, sleek and powerful, advancing at a steady pace across the galaxy. The flagship was a mighty gleaming ship that led the pack, a shark among sharks, a giant battleship of the realm of Jorus. The armada radiated confidence. They seemed to be saying, *Here we are, twenty-five ships of Jorus and twenty-five of Kariad, crossing the universe to wipe out once and for all the pestilence of Earthmen.*

Hallam Navarre sat in his own flagship, a vessel that once had borne the name *Pride of Kariad* but now carried no designation whatever. He watched the steady advance of the monstrous alien armada.

Fifty ships, he thought. Against twenty-two.

But we know how many they have. They can't measure our numbers.

He sat poised behind his viewscreens, biding his time, thinking, waiting. They were fifty thousand light-years from Earth, now, and he had no intention of letting Kausirn's fleet come any closer than five thousand. Once even one ship eluded the inner line of defence and got through to Earth—

Helna appeared and slipped into the seat next to him. She had let her hair grow once again; it was only an inch or two long at its longest, but was a bright auburn in colour, giving promise of greater loveliness to come.

She said, "It'll all be decided now, won't it? All the thousand of years of planning, ever since the Chalice was sealed and the sleepers left?"

Navarre nodded tightly. Thousands of years of planning had all devolved down on this one day, on these twenty-two ships, ultimately on the mind of one man. He stared at his unquivering hands. He was calm, now; so much was at stake that his mind failed to encompass it, and apprehension was impossible.

He jacked in the main communication line and studied the deployment of his twenty-two ships.

Four of them remained in close orbit around Earth, in contact with each other, ready to move rapidly when needed. He hoped they would not be needed; they were the last line of defence, the desperation blockaders, and it would be dark indeed if they were called into play.

The smaller colony on Procyon had two ships guarding it.

Ten more were deployed at the farthest edges of the sphere of conflict, forming a border for the coming battle. That was his second line of defence. And four of these were mere shells, rushed to completion on Earth.

Six ships formed a solid phalanx ten light-years across, turned outward toward the advancing combined armada. Navarre's flagship was among this group. These would make the initial attack.

The twelve ships given him by the Polisarch had been carefully recoated; their hulls no longer glowed in Morankimar colours, but were an anonymous grey. Each of the ships had a complement of Earthmen aboard, aiding the Morankimar captain. The aliens knew only that they were to take orders from the Earthmen; the Polisarch had made that amply clear in his instructions to his Grand Admiral.

It might work, he thought. If not, well, it had been a game try—and perhaps there might be another Chalice on some other world. Earth was not that easily defeated, he told himself.

Time was drawing near. All the efforts, all the countless schemes, all Navarre's many identities and many journeys, converged into one *now*.

He opened the all-fleet communicator and waited a moment until all twenty-one bulbs at the side of the central monitor-board had lit.

Then, in a quiet voice, he said, "Attention, Unit A—low-

intensity defence screens are to be replaced with full screens immediately. Unit B—stand by until called into action as previously instructed. Unit C—remain at your posts in orbit round the planets, and under no circumstances leave formation. Unit D stand by for emergency use.

"The battle is about to begin."

There was a moment of silence. Quickly Navarre reached up to shut off the all-fleet communicator; what he had to say now, was directed at the armada. He signalled for a wide-beam subspace hookup.

"All right," he muttered. "Now it starts."

He drew the microphone toward him and said, in a ringing voice, "Attention invaders! Attention invaders! This is Hallam Navarre, Admiral of the Grand Fleet of Earth. Come in, invader flagship!"

He repeated the message three times each in Joran and Kariadi. Then he sat back, staring at the complex network of machinery that was the communicator panel, waiting for some reply.

Less than a thousand light-years separated the two fleets. The time-lag should have been virtually nil. But a minute went by, and another, with no response. Navarre grew cold; were they simply going to ignore him and move right on into their midst?

But after four minutes the speaker crackled into life. "This is Flagship calling Admiral Navarre." The inflection was savagely sardonic. "Come in, Admiral Navarre. What do you want?"

Navarre's heart leaped. He hadn't expected *him* to be commanding the armada in person!

"Kausirn?"

"Indeed. What troubles you, Navarre?"

"You infringe on Terran domains, Kausirn. State the purpose of your invasion."

"I don't think we need to explain to you, Navarre. The Terran Empire passed out of existence thirty thousand years before; you have no claim to a domain as such. And we're here to see that no ghosts walk the starways."

"An invasion fleet?"

"Call it that, if you will."

"Very well," Navarre said sharply. "In that case, I call on you to surrender or be destroyed. The full might of the

Grand Fleet of Earth is waiting to hurl you back to your own system."

Kausirn laughed harshly. "The full might! Six stolen ships! Six against fifty! You deceived me once, Ambassador Domell—you won't a second time!"

A moment later a bright energy flare licked out across space toward the Terran flagship. Navarre's screens easily deflected the thrust.

"I warn you, Kausirn. Your fleet is outnumbered six to one. Terra's resources are greater than you could have dreamed. Will you surrender?"

"Ridiculous!" But there seemed to be false bravado in Kausirn's outburst; he sounded uncertain.

"We of Earth hate unnecessary bloodshed," Navarre said. "I call upon the captains of the invading fleet to head their ships back to home. Kausirn is an alien; he hardly cares how many Joran or Kariadi lives he throws away for nothing."

"Don't listen!" came the Vegan's shout over the phones. "He's bluffing! He *has* to be bluffing!" It sounded a little panicky.

"All right," Navarre said. "Here we come."

He gave the signal, and the battle that had been planned so long swung into existence. The six ships that compromised his fighting wedge moved forward, charging across hyper-space toward the evenly spaced invading fleet.

"You see!" Kausirn shouted triumphantly. "They have but six ships! We can crush them!"

Navarre's ship shook as the first heavy barrage crashed into it; the screens deflected the energy and a bright blue nimbus sprang into being around the ship as the overload was dissipated.

Six ships against fifty—but six rebuilt ships, six ships so laden with defence screens that they were no faster than snails. They moved steadily into the heart of the armada, shaking off the alien barrage and counter-attacking with thrusts of their own. They were unstoppable, those six ships—but difficult to manoeuvre, slow to return fire. In time, the alien fleet could wear down their screens by constant assault, and that would end the battle.

"Six outmoded crawlers," Kausirn exulted. "And you ask us to surrender!"

"The offer still goes," Navarre said, and gave the signal for the second third of the fleet to enter the fray.

They came down from six directions at once, their heavy-cycle guns spouting flame. They converged on the Joran-Kariadi fleet, six light Morankimar vessels equipped for massive offensive thrusts. The invaders were caught unawares; four Joran ships crumbled and died in the first shock of the unexpected attack.

Kausirn was silent. Navarre knew, or hoped he knew, what the Vegan was thinking: *I had expected only six defending ships. If the Earthmen have six more, how many additional ones might they have?*

The radar screen was criss-crossed with light. Navarre's original six ploughed steadily forward, drawing the heaviest fire of the aliens and controlling it easily, while the six new ships plunged and swerved in daring leaps, weaving in and out of the alien lines so fast they could not be counted.

Navarre gave another signal. And suddenly three of his offensive ships leaped from view, blanked out like extinguished candles, and reappeared at the far end of the battlefield. They drove downward from their new angle of attack, while the remaining trio likewise jumped out of warp and back in again. Navarre picked up curses coming from the harassed aliens.

Three more ships had perished. The odds were narrowing—forty-three against eighteen, now. And the aliens were definitely bewildered.

The tactic was unheard-of: it was suicide to leave and re-enter hyperspace in an area barely a thousand light-years on a side. There was the everpresent consideration that one ship might re-materialize in an area already occupied; the detonation would be awesome.

There was always the chance. But Navarre had computed it, and the chance was infinitesimal. Like leaping silver-bellied fish his ships flicked in and out of spacetime. The aliens moved in confused circles now.

Flick!

Two astonished Kariadi vessels thundered headlong into each other to avoid a Terran vessel that had appeared less than a light-minute away from them. The proximity strained the framework of hyperspace; they were sucked downward into a wild vortex, out of control.

Flick !

Flick !

Navarre's board showed eleven invader losses already, and not one Terran ship touched. He grinned cheerfully as one of the six original attackers speared through the screens of a harassed Joran destroyer and sent it reeling apart.

"Kausirn ? Are you convinced ?"

No answer came this time.

Navarre frowned speculatively. So far the battle was going all their way ; but eventually the shattered invader lines would re-group, eventually they would realize that only twelve ships opposed them instead of hundreds.

He gave one final signal. Suddenly, four more Terran ships warped into the area.

They were dummies, the half-finished ships built on Earth, and manned by skeleton crews. They carried no arms, only rudimentary defence-screens ; Navarre had ordered them held in check for just this moment. And here they were.

At the same time the six warp-jumping ships stabilized themselves. Now sixteen Terran ships menaced the alien fleet at once, and Kausirn had no way of telling how many more lurked in hidden reaches. The armada milled hesitatingly, ships changing course almost at random.

Navarre's ships formed into a tight wheel and spun round the confused aliens. He opened the communicator wide and said, " We have already destroyed thirteen of your number at no cost to ourselves. Will you surrender now, or do we have to pick you all off one by one. Speak up, Kausirn !"

Garbled noise came from the communicator—sure sign that more than one ship's captain was trying to speak. Navarre sensed indecision ; he flashed one last-ditch signal along his communication channel, ordering the six defensive ships to leave their bases and join the fray.

He heard Kausirn's cold steely voice saying, " No ! He's bluffing us ! He *has* to be !"

The six last ships winked into being, spitting death. The subradio phones brought over an agonized scream.

The sky was full of ships, now—twenty-two Terran ships, of which four were mere shells and six more were so weighted with defense-screens that they were virtually useless on offense.

" Kausirn ? Do we have to bring out the *real* fleet now ?"

No response.

"Kausirn?"

A new voice said, suddenly, "The Vegan is dead. This is Admiral Garsignol of Kariad. By virtue of the authority vested in me by Oligocrat Marhaill, I surrender the eighteen surviving Kariadi ships."

A moment later another voice broke in, speaking in Joran. The nineteen Joran ships were likewise surrendering. Resistance was futile.

It was over at last, Navarre thought, as he stared from the window of his office in the city of Phoenix, on Earth, looking outward at the thirty-seven alien vessels the battle had yielded.

Victory was sweet.

Earth now had forty-three ships of first-class tonnage, plus four more half-finished ones, and twelve more belonging to the Polisarch of Morank. The Polisarch would never miss his ships, he thought. And Earth needed them.

Fifty-nine ships. That compromised a major armada in itself; hardly a hundred worlds in the galaxy could muster fleets of such size. And this was only the beginning, he thought.

He would be merciful to Marhaill and Joroiran; the worlds of Jorus and Kariad were at his pleasure now, virtually shipless as they were. He would grant them their lives—as vassals of Earth. There would be annual tithes, of course.

Naturally, the balance of power in the cluster could not be allowed to remain even—so Morank, too, would need to be brought under Terran sway. But that could wait, Navarre thought, at least until the old Polisarch died. He owed him that much.

Three worlds. It was beginning.

Earth herself numbered barely twelve thousand, now. But time would remedy that. The ancient legend had spoken truth: the Chalice held the key to immortal life. Earth, reborn phoenix-like from its own ashes, had once again won its place in the roll of worlds.

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