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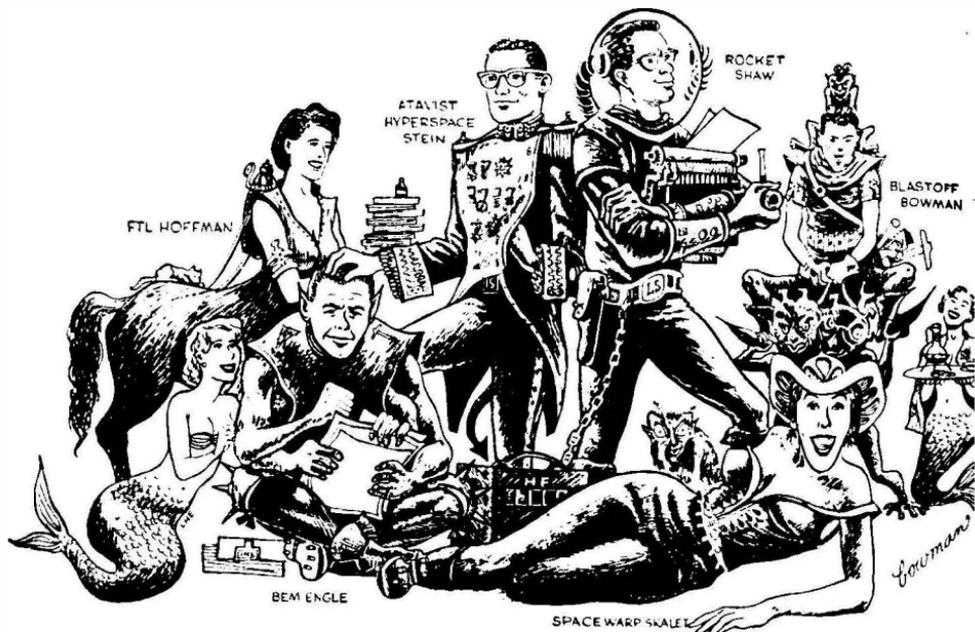
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Vol. 1 No. 6

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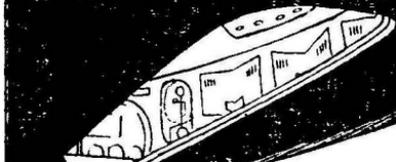
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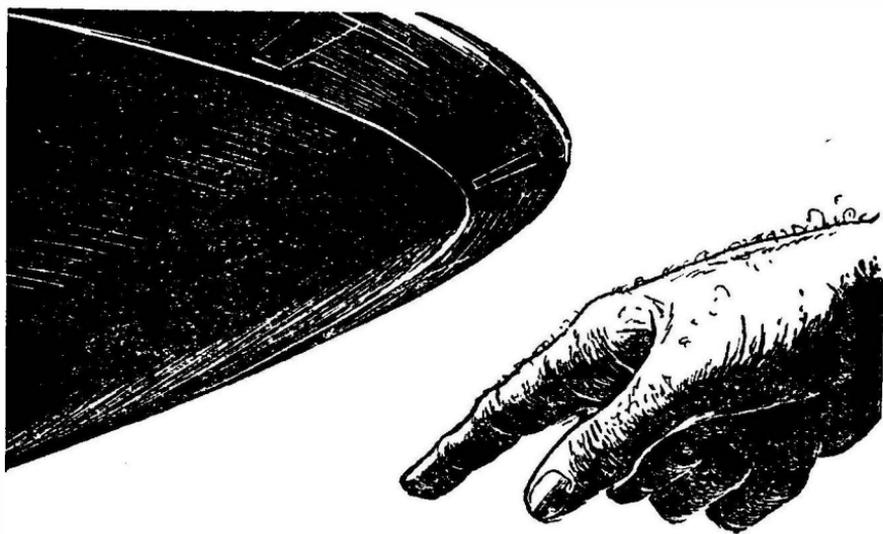
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THE

SLAVE



Illustrated by Emsb



by C. M. Kornbluth

*To become a man again, he had to be two men,
fighting an enemy who had conquered billions!*

CHAPTER I

THE DRUNKEN BUM known as Chuck wandered through the revelry of the New Year's Eve crowd. Times Square was jammed with people; midnight and a whole new millennium were approaching. Horns tooted, impromptu snake-dances formed and dissolved, bottles were happily

passed from hand to hand; it was minutes to A.D. 2,000. One of those bottles passed to Chuck and passed no further. He scowled at a merry-maker who reached for it after he took his swig, and jammed it into a pocket. He had what he came for; he began to fight his way out of the crowd, westward to the jungle of Riveredge.

The crowd thinned out at Ninth Avenue, and by Tenth Avenue he was almost alone, lurching through the tangle of transport machinery that fed Manhattan its daily billion tons of food, freight, clothes, toys. Floodlights glared day and night over Riveredge, but there was darkness there too, in patches under a 96-inch oil main or in the angle between a warehouse wall and its inbound roofed freightway. From these patches men looked out at him with sudden suspicion and then dull lack of care. One or two called at him aimlessly, guessing that he had a bottle on him. Once a woman yelled her hoarse invitation at him from the darkness, but he stumbled on. Ten to one the invitation was to a lead pipe behind the ear.

Now and then, losing his bearings, he stopped and turned his head peeringly before stumbling on. He never got lost in Riveredge, which was more than most transport engineers, guided by blueprints, could say. T.G. was *that* way.

He crashed at last into his own shared patch of darkness: the hollow on one side of a titanic I-beam. It supported a freightway over which the heaviest castings

and forgings for the city rumbled night and day. A jagged sheet of corrugated metal leaned against the hollow, enclosing it as if by accident.

"Hello, Chuck," T.G. croaked at him from the darkness as he slid under the jagged sheet and collapsed on a pallet of nylon rags.

"Yeh," he grunted.

"Happy New Year," T.G. said. "I heard it over here. It was louder than the freightway. You scored."

"Good guess," Chuck said skeptically, and passed him the bottle. There was a long gurgle in the dark. T.G. said at last: "Good stuff." The gurgle again. Chuck reached for the bottle and took a long drink. It was good stuff. Old Huntsman. He used to drink it with—

T.G. said suddenly, pretending innocent curiosity: "Jocko who?"

Chuck lurched to his feet and yelled: "God damn you, I told you not to do that! If you want any more of my liquor keep the hell out of my head—and I *still* think you're a phony!"

T.G. was abject. "Don't take it that way, Chuck," he whined. "I get a belt of good stuff in me and I want to give the talent a little workout,

C. M. KORNBLUTH is one of those rare writers whose straight science fiction has become highly popular among a wide audience of people who do not read science fiction regularly. His novels, like *Takeoff* and *The Syndic*, have won universal critical acclaim; his shorter stories are invariably anthologized, not once but over and over again. *The Slave*, we think, in every way maintains the high level of his usual work.

that's all. You know I would not do anything bad to you."

"You'd better not. . . . Here's the bottle."

It passed back and forth. T.G. said at last: "You've got it too."

"You're crazy."

I would be if it wasn't for liquor . . . but you've got it too.

"Oh, shut up and drink."

Innocently: "I didn't say anything, Chuck."

Chuck glared in the darkness. It was true; he hadn't. His imagination was hounding him. His imagination or something else he didn't want to think about.

The sheet of corrugated metal was suddenly wrenched aside and blue-white light stabbed into their eyes. Chuck and the old man cowered instinctively back into the hollow of the I-beam, peering into the light and seeing nothing but dazzle.

"God, look at them!" a voice jeered from the other side of the light. "Like turn-

ing over a wet rock."

"What the hell's going on?" Chuck asked hoarsely. "Since when did you clowns begin to pull vags?"

T.G. said: "They aren't the clowns, Chuck. They want you—I can't see why."

The voice said: "Yeah? And just who are you, grampa?"

T.G. stood up straight, his eyes watering in the glare. "The Great Hazleton," he said, with some of the old ring in his voice. "At your service. Don't tell me who you are, sir. The Great Hazleton knows. I see a man of authority, a man who works in a large white building—"

"Knock it off, T.G.," Chuck said.

"You're Charles Barker," the voice said. "Come along quietly."

Chuck took a long pull at the bottle and passed it to T.G. "Take it easy," he said. "I'll be back sometime."

"No," T.G. quavered. "I see danger. I see terrible danger."

The man behind the dazzling light took his arm and yanked him out of the shelter of the I-beam.

"Cut out the mauling," Chuck said flatly.

"Shut up, Barker," the man said with disgust. "You have no beefs coming."

So he knew where the man had come from and could guess where the man was taking him.

AT 1:58 A.M. of the third millennium Chuck was slouching in a waiting room on the 89th floor of the New Federal Building. The man who had pulled him out of Riveredge was sitting there too, silent and aloof.

Chuck had been there before. He cringed at the thought. He had been there before. and not to sit and wait. Special Agent Barker of Federal Security and Intelligence had been ushered right in, with the sweetest smile a receptionist could give him. . . .

A door opened and a spare, well-remembered figure stood there. "Come in, Barker," the Chief said.

He stood up and went in, his eyes on the gray carpeting. The office hadn't changed in three years; neither had

the Chief. But now Chuck waited until he was asked before sitting down.

"We had some trouble finding you," the Chief said absently. "Not much, but some. First we ran some ads addressed to you in the open Service code. Don't you read the papers any more?"

"No," Chuck said.

"You look pretty well shot. Do you think you can still work?"

The ex-agent looked at him piteously.

"Answer me."

"Don't play with me," Chuck said, his eyes on the carpet. "You never reinstate."

"Barker," the Chief said, "I happen to have an especially filthy assignment to deal out. In my time, I've sent men into an alley at midnight after a mad-dog killer with a full clip. This one is so much worse and the chances of getting a sliver of useable information in return for an agent's life are so slim that I couldn't bring myself to ask for volunteers from the roster. Do you think you can still work?"

"Why me?" the ex-agent demanded sullenly.

"That's a good question. There are others. I thought of you because of the defense you put up at your depart-

mental trial. Officially, you turned and ran, leaving Jocko McAllester to be cut down by the gun-runners. Your story was that somehow you knew it was an ambush and when that dawned on you, you ran to cover the flank. The board didn't buy it and neither do I—not all the way. You let a hunch override standard doctrine and you were wrong and it looked like cowardice under fire. We can't have that; you had to go. But you've had other hunches that worked out better. The Bruni case. Locating the photostats we needed for the Wayne County civil rights indictment. Digging up that louse Sherrard's wife in Birmingham. Unless it's been a string of lucky flukes you have a certain talent I need right now. If you have that talent, you may come out alive. And cleared."

Barker leaned forward and said savagely: "That's good enough for me. Fill me in."

CHAPTER II

THE WOMAN was tall, quietly dressed and a young forty-odd. Her eyes were serene and guileless as she said: "You must be curious as to how I know about your case. It's quite simple—and

unethical. We have a tipster in the clinic you visited. May I sit down?"

Dr. Oliver started and waved her to the dun-colored chair. A reaction was setting in. It was a racket—a cold-blooded racket preying on weak-minded victims silly with terror. "What's your proposition?" he asked, impatient to get it over with. "How much do I pay?"

"Nothing," the woman said calmly. "We usually pay poorer patients a little something to make up for the time they lose from work, but I presume you have a nest-egg. All this will cost you is a pledge of secrecy—and a little time."

"Very well," said Oliver stiffly. He had been hooked often enough by salesmen on no-money-down, free-trial-for-thirty-days, demonstration-for-consumer-reaction-only deals. He was on his guard.

"I find it's best to begin at the beginning," the woman said. "I'm an investment counselor. For the past five years I've also been a field representative for something called the Moorhead Foundation. The Moorhead Foundation was organized in 1915 by Oscar Moorhead, the patent-medicine millionaire. He died very deeply embittered by the

attacks of the muck-rakers; they called him a baby-poisoner and a number of other things. He always claimed that his preparations did just as much good as a visit to an average doctor of the period. Considering the state of medical education and licensing, maybe he was right.

"His will provided for a secret search for the cure of cancer. He must have got a lot of consolation daydreaming about it. One day the Foundation would announce to a startled world that it had cracked the problem and that old Oscar Moorhead was a servant of humanity and not a baby-poisoner after all.

"Maybe secrecy is good for research. I'm told that we know a number of things about neoplasms that the pathologists haven't hit on yet, including how to cure most types by radiation. My job, besides clipping coupons and reinvesting funds for the Foundation, is to find and send on certain specified types of cancer patients. The latest is what they call a Rotino 707-G. You. The technical people will cure you without surgery in return for a buttoned lip and the chance to study you for about a week. Is it a deal?"

Hope and anguish struggled in Dr. Oliver. *Could* anybody invent such a story? *Was* he saved from the horror of the knife?

"Of course," he said, his guts contracting, "I'll be expected to pay a share of the expenses, won't I? In common fairness?"

The woman smiled. "You think it's a racket, don't you? Well, it isn't. You don't pay a cent. Come with your pockets empty and leave your check book at home if you like. The Foundation gives you free room and board. I personally don't know the ins and outs of the Foundation, but I have professional standing of my own and I assure you I'm not acting as a transmission belt to a criminal gang. I've seen the patients, Dr. Oliver. I send them on sick and I see them a week or so later well. It's like a miracle."

Dr. Oliver went distractedly to his telephone stand, picked up the red book and leafed through it.

"Roosevelt 4-19803," the woman said with amusement in her voice.

Doggedly he continued to turn the "W" pages. He found her. "Mgrrt WINSTON invst-mnt cnslr RO4-19803." He punched the number.

"Winston investments," came the answer.

"Is Miss Winston there?" he asked.

"No, sir. She should be back by three if you wish to call again. May I take a message?"

"No message. But—would you describe Miss Winston for me?"

The voice giggled. "Why not? She's about five-eight, weighs about 135, brown hair and eyes and when last seen was wearing a tailored navy culotte suit with white cuffs and collar. What're you up to, mister?"

"Not a thing," he said. "Thanks." He hung up.

"Look," the woman said. She was emptying her wallet. "Membership card in the Investment Counselors' Guild. U.M.T. honorable discharge, even if it is a reduced photostat. City license to do business. Airline credit card. Residential rental permit. Business rental permit. City motor vehicle parking permit. Blood-donor card."

He turned them over in his hands. The plastic-laminated things were unanswerable, and he gave himself up to relief and exultation. "I'm in, Miss Winston," he said fervently. "You should have seen the fellow they showed me after an operation like mine."

He shuddered as he remembered Jimmy and his "splendid adjustment."

"I don't have to," the woman said, putting her wallet away. "I saw my mother die. From one of the types of cancer they haven't licked yet. I get the usual commission on funds I handle for them, but I have a little personal interest in promoting the research end. . . ."

"Oh. I see."

Suddenly she was brisk. "Now, Dr. Oliver, you've got to write whatever letters are necessary to explain that you're taking a little unplanned trip to think things out, or whatever you care to say. And pack enough things for a week. You can be on the jet in an hour if you're a quick packer and a quick letter-writer."

"Jet to where?" he asked, without thinking.

She smiled and shook her head.

Dr. Oliver shrugged and went to his typewriter. This was one gift horse he would not look in the mouth. Not after Jimmy.

Two hours later the fat sophomore Gillespie arrived full of lies and explanations with his overdue theme on the Elizabethan dramatists, which was full of borrowings and

evasions. On Dr. Oliver's door was pinned a small note in the doctor's handwriting: *Dr. Oliver will be away for several days for reasons of health.*

Gillespie scratched his head and shrugged. It was all right with him; Dr. Oliver was practically impossible to get along with, in spite of his vague reputation for brilliance. A schizoid, his girl called him. She majored in Psych.

CHAPTER III

THE MOORHEAD FOUNDATION proved to be in Mexico, in a remote valley of the state of Sonora. A jetliner took Dr. Oliver and Miss Winston most of the way very fast. Buses and finally an obsolete gasoline-powered truck driven by a Mexican took them the rest of the way very slowly. The buildings were a remodeled *rancheria* enclosed by a low, thick adobe wall.

Dr. Oliver, at the door of his comfortable bedroom, said: "Look, will I be treated immediately?" He seemed to have been asking that question for two days, but never to have got a plain yes or no answer.

"It all depends," Miss Winston said. "Your type of

growth is definitely curable and they'll definitely cure it. But there may be a slight holdup while they're studying it. That's your part of the bargain, after all. Now I'll be on my way. I expect you're sleepy, and the lab people will take over from here. It's been a great pleasure."

They shook hands and Dr. Oliver had trouble suppressing a yawn. He was very sleepy, but he tried to tell Miss Winston how grateful he was. She smiled deprecatingly, almost cynically, and said: "We're using you too, remember? Well, goodbye."

Dr. Oliver barely made it to his bed.

His nightmares were terrible. There was a flashing light, a ringing bell and a wobbling pendulum that killed him, killed him, killed him, inch by inch, burying him under a mountain of flashes and clangs and blows while he was somehow too drugged to fight his way out.

HE REACHED fuzzily in the morning for the Dialit, which wasn't there. Good God! he marveled. Was one expected to get *up* for breakfast? But he found a button that brought a grinning Mexican with a breakfast tray. After

he dressed the boy took him to *los medicos*.

The laboratory, far down a deserted corridor, was staffed by two men and a woman. "Dr. Oliver," the woman said briskly. "Sit there." It was a thing like a dentist's chair with a suggestion of something ugly and archaic in a cup-shaped headrest.

Oliver sat, uneasily.

"The carcinoma," one of the men said to the other.

"Oh yes." The other man, quite ignoring Oliver as a person, wheeled over a bulky thing not much different in his eyes from a television camera. He pointed it at Oliver's throat and played it noiselessly over his skin. "That should do it," he said to the first man.

Oliver asked incredulously: "You mean I'm cured?" And he started to rise.

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, rapping a button. Dr. Oliver collapsed back into the chair with a moan. Something had happened to him; something terrible and unimaginable. For a hideous split-second he had known undiluted pain, pure and uniform over every part of his body, interpreted variously by each. Blazing headache, eye-ache and ear-ache, wrenching nausea, an agony

of itching, colonic convulsions, stabbing ache in each of his bones and joints.

"But—" he began piteously.

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, and rapped the button again.

He did not speak a third time but watched them with sick fear, cringing into the chair.

They spoke quite impersonally before him, lapsing occasionally into an unfamiliar word or so.

"Not more than twenty-seven *vistch*, I should say. Cardiac."

"Under a good—master, would you call it?—who can pace him, more."

"Perhaps. At any rate, he will not be difficult. See his record."

"Stimulate him again."

Again there was the split-second of hell on earth. The woman was studying a small sphere in which colors played prettily. "A good surge," she said, "but not a good recovery. What is the order?"

One of the men ran his finger over a sheet of paper—but he was looking at the woman. "Three military."

"What kind of military, *sobr?*"

The man hastily rechecked the sheet with his index finger. "All for *igr' i khom*. I do

not know what you would call it. A smallship? A killship?"

The other man said scornfully: "Either a light cruiser or a heavy destroyer."

"According to functional analogy I would call it a heavy destroyer," the woman said decisively. "A good surge is important to *igr' i khom*. We shall call down the destroyer to take on this Oliver and the two Stosses. Have it done."

"Get up," one of the men said to Oliver.

He got up. Under the impression that he could be punished only in the chair he said: "What—?"

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, and rapped the button. He was doubled up with the wave of pain. When he recovered, the man took his arm and led him from the laboratory. He did not speak as he was half-dragged through endless corridors and shoved at last through a door into a large, sunlit room. Perhaps a dozen people were sitting about and turned to look.

He cringed as a tall, black-haired man said to him: "Did you just get out of the chair?"

"It's all right," somebody else said. "You can talk. We aren't—them. We're in the same boat as you. What's the

story—heart disease? Cancer?"

"Cancer," he said, swallowing. "They promised me—"

"They come through on it," the tall man said. "They do come through on the cures. Me, I have nothing to show for it. I was supposed to survey for minerals here—my name's Brockhaus. And this is Johnny White from Los Angeles. He was epileptic—bad seizures every day. But not any more. And this—but never mind. You can meet the rest later. You better sit down. How many times did they give it to you?"

"Four times," Dr. Oliver said. "What's all this about? Am I going crazy?"

The tall man forced him gently into a chair. "Take it easy," he said. "We don't know what it's all about."

"Goddamn it," somebody said, "the hell we don't. It's the commies, as plain as the nose on your face. Why else should they kidnap an experienced paper salesman like me?"

Brockhaus drowned him out: "Well, maybe it's the reds, though I doubt it. All we *know* is that they get us here, stick us in the chair and then—take us away. And the ones they take away don't come back."

"They said something about cruisers and destroyers," Oliver mumbled. "And surges."

"You mean," Brockhaus said, "you stayed conscious all the way through?"

"Yes. Didn't you?"

"No, my friend. Neither did any of us. What are you, a United States Marine?"

"I'm an English professor. Oliver, of Columbia University."

Johnny White from Los Angeles threw up his hands. "He's an English professor!" he yelled to the room. There was a cackle of laughter.

Oliver flushed, and White said hastily: "No offense, prof. But naturally we've been trying to figure out what—they—are after. Here we've got a poetess, a preacher, two lawyers, a salesman, a pitchman, a mining engineer, a dentist—and now an English professor."

"I don't know," Oliver mumbled. "But they did say something about cruisers and destroyers and surges."

Brockhaus was looking skeptical. "I didn't imagine it," Oliver said stubbornly. "And they said something about 'two Stosses.'"

"I guess you didn't imagine it," the tall man said slowly. "Two Stosses we've got.

Ginny! This man heard something about you and your old man."

A WHITE-HAIRED MAN, stocky in build and with the big, mobile face of an actor, thrust himself past Brockhaus to confront Oliver. "What did they say?" he demanded.

A tired-looking blonde girl said to him: "Take it easy, Mike. The man's beat."

"It's all right," Oliver said to her. "They talked about an order. One of the men seemed to be reading something in Braille—but he didn't seem to have anything wrong with his eyes. And the woman said they'd call down the destroyer to take on me and the two Stosses. But don't ask me what it means."

"We've been here a week," the girl said. "They tell me that's as long as anybody stays."

"Young man," Stoss said confidentially, "since we're thrown together in this informal fashion I wonder if I could ask whether you're a sporting man? The deadly dullness of this place—" He was rattling a pair of dice casually.

"Please, Mike!" the girl said in a voice near hysteria.

"Leave the man alone. What good's money here?"

"I'm a sporting man, Ginny," he said mildly. "A friendly game of chance to break the monotony—"

"You're a crook on wheels," the girl said bitterly, "and the lousiest monte operator that ever hit the road."

"My own daughter," the man said miserably. "My own daughter that got me into this lousy can—"

"How was I supposed to know it was a fake?" she flared. "And if you do die you won't die a junkie, by God!"

Oliver shook his head dazedly at their bickering.

"What will this young man think?" asked Stoss, with a try at laughing it off. "I can see he's a person of indomitable will behind his mild exterior, a person who won't let the chance word of a malicious girl keep him from indulging in a friendly—"

"Yeah! I might believe that if I hadn't been hearing you give that line to farmhands and truck-drivers since I was seven. Now you're a cold-reader. My aching torso."

"Well," Stoss said with dignity, "*this* time I happened to have meant it."

Oliver's head was throbbing. An indomitable will behind a mild exterior. It

rang a bell somewhere deep inside him—a bell that clanged louder and louder until he felt his very body dissolve under its impact.

He dismissed the bizarre fantasy. He was Dr. Oliver of Columbia. He was Dr. Oliver of Columbia. He had always been.

The Stosses had drifted to a window, still quarreling. Brockhaus said after a pause: "It's a funny thing. He was on heroin. You should see his arms. When he first got here he went around begging and yelling for a fix of dope because he *expected* that he'd want it. But after a few hours he realized that he didn't want it at all. For the first time in twelve years, he says. Maybe it was the shocks in the chair. Maybe they did it intentionally. I don't know. The girl—there's nothing wrong with her. She just came along to keep the old man company while he took the marvelous free cure."

A slight brunette woman with bangs was saying to him shyly: "Professor, I'm Mitty Worth. You may have heard of me—or not. I've had some pieces in the *New New Review*."

"Delighted," Dr. Oliver said. "How did they get you?"



Her mouth twisted. "I was doing the Michoacan ruins. There was a man—a very handsome man—who persuaded me that he had made an archaeological find, that it would take the pen of a poet to do it justice—" She shrugged. "What's your field, professor?"

"Jacobean prose writers."

Her face lit up. "Thank God for somebody to talk to. I'm specially interested in Tom Fuller myself. I have a theory, you know, about the *Worthies of England*. Everybody automatically says it's a grab-bag, you know, of everybody who happened to interest Fuller. But I think I can detect a definite *structure* in the book—"

Dr. Oliver of Columbia groped wildly in his memory. What was the woman running on about?

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the work," he said.

Mitty Worth was stunned.

"Or perhaps," Oliver said hastily, "I'm still groggy from the—the laboratory. Yes, I think that must be it."

"Oh," Mitty Worth said, and retreated.

Oliver sat and puzzled. Of course his specialty was the Jacobean prose writers. The foolish woman had made a mistake. Tom Fuller must be

in another period. The *real* writers of Jacobean prose were—

Were—?

Dr. Oliver of Columbia, whose field was the Jacobean prose writers, didn't know any of them by name.

I'm going crazy, he decided wildly. I'm Oliver of Columbia. I wrote my thesis on—

What?

THE OLD FAKER was quite right. He was an indomitable will behind a mild exterior, and a ringing bell had something to do with it, and so did a flashing light and a wobbling pendulum, and so did Marty Braun who could keep a tin can bouncing ten yards ahead of him as he walked firing from the hip, but Marty had a pair of star-gauge .44's and he wasn't a gun nut himself even if he could nip the ten-ring four out of five—

The world of Dr. Oliver was dissolving into delirium when his name was sharply called.

Everybody was looking at him as if he were something to be shunned, something with a curse laid on it. One of—them—was standing in the door. Dr. Oliver remem-

bered what **they** could do. He got up **hastily** and **hastily** went through an aisle that cleared for him to the door as if by magic.

"Stand there," the man said to him." "The two Stoss people," he called. The old man and his daughter silently joined him.

"You must walk ahead of me," said the man.

They walked down the corridor and turned left at a command, and went through a handsome oak door into the sunlight. Gleaming in the sunlight was a vast disk-shaped thing.

Dr. Oliver of Columbia smiled suddenly and involuntarily. He knew now who he was and what was his mission.

He was Special Agent Charles Barker of Federal Security and Intelligence. He was in disguise—the most thorough disguise ever effected. His own personality had been obliterated by an unbroken month of narcohypnosis, and for another unbroken month a substitute personality, that of the ineffectual Dr. Oliver, had been shoved into his head by every mechanical and psychological device that the F. S. I. commanded. Twenty-four hours a day, waking and sleeping,

records had droned in his ears and films had unreeled before his glazed drugged eyes, all pointing toward this moment of post-hypnotic revelation.

People vanished. People had always vanished. Blind Homer heard vague rumors and incorporated them in his repertory of songs about the recent war against the Trojans: vague rumors about a one-eyed thing that kidnaped men—to eat, of course.

People continued to vanish through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the growth of population and the invention of census machines. When the census machines were perfected everything was known statistically about everybody, though without invasion of privacy, for the machines dealt in percentages and not personalities. Population loss could be accounted for; such and such a percentage died, and this percentage pigged it drunkenly in Riveredge, and that percentage deserted wife and kids for a while before it was inevitably, automatically traced—

And there was a percentage left over. People still vanished.

The F. S. I. noted that three cancer patients in

Morningside Heights, New York, had vanished last year, so they gave (Temporary) Special Agent Charles Barker a cancer by nagging a harmless throat polyp with dyes and irritants, and installed him in Morningside Heights to vanish—and do something about it.

The man marched the two Stosses and Barker-Oliver into the spaceship.

Minutes later a smashing takeoff acceleration dashed them unconscious to the deck.

CHAPTER IV

IN AN EARTHLY NAVY they would have called Gori "Guns" in the wardroom. He didn't look like an officer and a gentleman, or a human being for that matter, and the batteries of primary and secondary weapons he ruled over did not look like cannon. But Gori had a pride and a class feeling that would have made familiar sense in any navy. He voiced it in his needling of Lakhnut: a brother officer but no fighting man; a sweat-soaked ruler of the Propulsion Division whose station was between decks, screwing the last flicker of drive from the units.

Languidly Gori let his fingertips drift over a page of

text; he was taking a familiarization course in propulsion. "I don't understand," he said to Lakhnut, "why one shouldn't treat the units with a little more formality. My gun-pointers, for example—"

Lakhnut knew he was being needled, but had to pretend otherwise. Gori was somewhat his senior. "Gun-pointers are one thing," he said evenly. "Propulsion units are another. I presume you've worked the globes."

Gori raised his fingers from the page in surprise. "Evidently you—people between decks don't follow the Games," he said. "I have a Smooth Award from the last meet but one."

"What class vessel?"

"Single-seater. And a beauty! Built to my orders, stripped to a bare hull microns in thickness."

"Then you know working the globes isn't easy. But—with all respect—I don't believe you know that working a globe under orders, shift after shift, with no stake in the job and no hope or relief ever is most infernally heart-breaking. You competed for the Smooth Award and won it and slept for a week, I dare say, and are still proud—don't misunderstand me: *rightly* proud—of the effort.

But the propulsion units aren't competing for anything. They've been snatched away from their families—I'm not certain; I believe a family system prevails—and they *don't* like it. We must break them of that. Come and see the new units."

Gori reluctantly followed Lakhnut to the inport where unconscious figures were being stacked.

"Pah! They stink!" he said.

"A matter of diet. It goes away after they've been on our rations for a while."

Gori felt one of the figures curiously. "Clothes," he said in surprise. "I thought—"

Lakhnut told him wearily: "They have been wearing clothes for quite a while now. Some five thousand of their years." That had been a dig too. Gori had been reminding him that he was not greatly concerned with the obscure beasts between decks; that he, Lakhnut, must clutter his mind with such trivial details while Gori was splendidly free to man his guns if there should be need. "I'll go and see my driver," he snapped.

When he left, Gori sat down and laughed silently.

Lakhnut went between decks to the banks of units and swiftly scanned them. Number Seven was sleeping,

with deep lines of fatigue engraved on his mind. He would be the next to go; indeed he should have been shot through the spacelock with Three, Eight-Female and Twelve. At the first opportunity—His driver approached.

"Baldwin," he snapped at the driver, "will you be able to speak with the new units?"

Baldwin, a giant who had been a mere propulsion unit six months ago and was fiercely determined never to be one again, said in his broken speech: "Believe it. Will make to understand somewise. They may not—converse—my language called English. Will make to understand some-wise."

BARKER AWOKE staring into dull-red lights that looked unbelievably like old-fashioned incandescent lamps. Beside him a girl was moaning with shock and fear. In the dull light he could make out her features: Ginny Stoss. Her father was lying unconscious with his head in her lap.

A brutal hand yanked him to his feet—there was gravity! But there was no time to marvel over it. A burly giant in a gray kilt was growling at him: "You speak English?"

"Yes. What's all this about? Where are we?"

He was ignored. The giant yanked Ginny Stoss to her feet and slapped her father into consciousness as the girl winced and Barker balled his fists helplessly. The giant said to the three of them: "My name's Baldwin. You call me mister. Come on."

He led them, the terrified girl, the dazed old man and the rage-choked agent, through spot-polished metal corridors to—

A *barber shop*, Barker thought wildly. Rows and rows of big adjustable chairs gleaming dully under the red lights, people sitting in them, at least a hundred people. And then you saw there was something archaic and ugly about the cup-shaped head rests fitted to the chairs. And then you saw that the people, men and women, were dirty, unkempt and hopeless-eyed, dressed in rags or nothing at all.

Ginny Stoss screamed sharply when she saw Lakhrut. He was not a pretty sight with his single bulging orb above the nose. It pointed at her and Lakhrut spat guttural syllables at Baldwin. The burly giant replied, cringing and stammering. The monster's orb aimed at Bar-

ker, and he felt a crawling on the surface of his brain—as if fingers were trying to grasp it.

Barker knew what to do; more important, he did it. He turned off Barker. He turned on Dr. Oliver, the erudite scared rabbit.

Lakhrut scanned them suspiciously. The female was radiating sheer terror; good. The older male was frightened too, but his sense of a reality was clouded; he detected a faint undertone of humor. *That* would go. The younger man—Lakhrut stooped forward in a reflex associated with the sense of smell. The younger man—men?—no; man—the younger man—

Lakhrut stopped trying to scan him. He seemed to be radiating on two bands simultaneously, which was not possible. Lakhrut decided that he wasn't focusing properly, that somebody else's radiation was leaking and that the younger man's radiation was acting as a carrier wave for it. And felt vaguely alarmed and ashamed of himself. He ought to be a better scanner than he was.

"Baldwin," he said, "question that one closely."

The hulking driver asked: "You want name?"

"Of course not, fool! Question him about anything. I

want to scan his responses."

Baldwin spoke to the fellow unintelligibly and the fellow replied unintelligibly. Lakh-rut almost smiled with relief as the questioning progressed. The odd double-band effect was vanishing and the young man radiated simple fright.

Baldwin said laboriously: "Says is teacher of language and—tales of art. Says where is this and why have—"

"That's enough," he told the driver. "Install them." None of this group was dangerous enough to need killing.

"**S**IT THERE," Baldwin told Barker, jerking his thumb at an empty chair.

Barker felt the crawling fingers withdraw, and stifled a thought of triumph. They had him, this renegade and his cyclops boss. They had him like a bug underfoot to be squashed at a whim, but there had been some kind of test and he had bluffed them. Wearing the persona of Oliver, he quavered: "What is this terrible place, Mr. Baldwin? *Why* should I sit there?"

Baldwin moved in with a practiced ring shuffle and swung his open palm against the side of Barker's head.

The agent cried out and nursed the burning cheek. Baldwin would never know how close he came that moment to a broken back. . . .

He collapsed limply into the chair and felt it mould to him almost like a living thing. Plates slid under his thighs and behind his shoulder blades, accommodating themselves to his body.

"Just to show you nobody's fooling," Baldwin said grimly. He pressed a button on the chair and again something indescribably painful happened, wringing his bones and muscles to jelly for a timeless instant of torment. He did not faint; it was there and gone too quickly for the vascular system to make such an adjustment. He slumped in the chair, gasping.

Baldwin said: "Take hold of the two handles." He was surprised to find that he could move. He took hold of two spherical handles. They were cold and slimy-dry. Baldwin said: "You have to make the handles turn rough, like abrasive paper. You do it different ways. I can't tell you how. Everybody has a different way. Some people just concentrate on the handles. Other people just try to make their minds a blank and that works for them. You just find your

own way and do it when we tell you to. Or you get the pain again. That's all."

Barker heard him move down the line and repeat the speech in substantially the same words to the Stosses.

Baldwin was no puzzle. He was just a turncoat bastard. The wrecked, ragged men and women with lackluster eyes sitting around him were no puzzle. Not after the pain. Baldwin's boss, the cyclops—

How long had this been going on? Since Homer?

He bore down on the spherical handles. Amazingly they went from silk-smooth to paper-coarse and then to sandstone-gritty. Baldwin was back, peering to look at an indicator of some unimaginable kind. "That's very good," the big man said. "You keep that up and some day you'll get out of the chair like me."

Not like you, you bastard. Not like you. He choked down the thought. If the boss were here it would have undone him.

There were mechanical squeals and buzzers. Those who were sleeping in their chairs awoke instantly, with panic on their faces, visible even in the dim red light.

"All right," Baldwin was shouting. "Give, you bastards!

Five seconds and we cut you in. Give, Morgan, or it's the Pain! Silver, make it move! I ain't forgetting anything, Silver—next time it's three jolts. Give, you bastards! Give!"

Barker gave in a frenzy of concentration. Under his sweaty palms the globes became abrasive. In five seconds there was a thudding shock through his body that left him limp. The globes went smooth and Baldwin was standing over him: "Make it go, Oliver, or it's the Pain. Make it go."

Somehow, he did.

It seemed to go on for hours while the world rocked and reeled about him, whether subjectively or objectively he could not tell. And at last there was the roar: "Let it go now. Everybody off."

Racking vibration ceased and he let his head nod forward limply.

From the chair in front of him came an exhausted whisper: "He's gone now. Some day I'm going to—"

"Can we talk?" Barker asked weakly.

"Talk, sing, anything you want." There was a muttering and stirring through the big room. From the chair in front, hopefully: "You happen to be from Rupp City? My family—"

"No," Barker said. "I'm sorry. What is all this? What are we doing?"

The exhausted whisper said: "All this is an armed merchantman of the A'rkhov-Yar. We're running it. We're galley slaves."

CHAPTER V

THREE FEEDINGS LATER the man from Rupp City leaped from his chair, howling, and threw himself on a tangle of machinery in the center aisle. He was instantly electrocuted.

Before he died he had told Barker in rambling, formless conversations that he had it figured out; the star-people simply knew how to amplify psychokinetic energy. He thought he could trace eighteen stages of amplification through the drive machinery.

The death was—a welcome break in the monotony. Barker was horrified to discover that was his principal reaction to it, but he was not alone.

They were fed water and moist yellow cakes that tasted like spoiled pork. Normally they worked three shifts in rotation. Only now and then were they all summoned for a terrific surge; usually they had only to keep steerage way on the vessel. But eight hours

spent bearing down on the spherical handles, concentrating, was an endless agony of boredom and effort. If your attention wandered, you got the Pain. Barker got it five times in fifteen feedings. Others got it ten or twelve. Ginny Stoss was flighty of mind; she got it twenty times, and after that, never. She mumbled continuously after that and spent all her time in practice, fingering the handles and peering into the bad light with dim, monomaniac eyes.

There was an efficient four-holer latrine, used without regard to sex or privacy. Sex was a zero in their lives, despite the mingling of men and women. When they slept in their chairs, they slept. The Pain and then death were the penalties for mating, and also their energy was low. The men were not handsome and the women were not beautiful. Hair and beards grew and straggled—why not? Their masters ignored them as far as clothing went. If the things they wore when they came aboard fell apart, very well, they fell apart. They weren't going any place.

It was approximately eight hours working the globular handles, eight hours sleeping,

and eight hours spent in rambling talk about the past, with many lies told of riches and fame. Nobody ever challenged a lie; why should they?

Bull-necked Mr. Baldwin appeared for feedings, but he did not eat with them. The feedings were shift-change time, and he spent them in harangues and threats.

Barker sucked up to Baldwin disgustingly, earning the hatred of all the other "units." But they knew next to nothing, and what he desperately needed was information. All they knew was that they had been taken aboard—a year ago? Six years ago? A month ago? They could only guess. It was impossible to keep track of time within the changeless walls of the room. Some of them had been taken directly aboard. Some had been conveyed in a large craft with many others and then put aboard. Some had served in other vessels, with propulsion rooms that were larger or smaller, and then put aboard. They had been told at one time or another that they were in the A'rkhov-Yar fleet, and disputed feebly about the meaning and pronunciation. It was more of a rumor than a fact.

Barker picked a thread

from his tie each day to mark the days, and sucked up to Baldwin.

Baldwin liked to be liked, and pitied himself. "You think," he asked plaintively, "I'm inhuman? You think I want to drive the units like I do? I'm as friendly as the next guy, but it's dog eat dog, isn't it? If I wasn't driving I'd be in a chair getting driven, wouldn't I?"

"I can see that, Mr. Baldwin. And it takes character to be a leader like you are."

"You're Goddamned right it does. And if the truth was known, I'm the best friend you people have. If it wasn't me it'd be somebody else who'd be worse. Lakhrut said to me once that I'm too easy on the units and I stood right up to him and said there wasn't any sense to wearing them out and not having any drive when the going gets hot."

"I think it's amazing, Mr. Baldwin, the way you picked up the language. That takes *brains*."

Baldwin beamed modestly. "Oh, it ain't too hard. For instance—"

INSTRUCTION BEGAN. It was not too hard, because Baldwin's vocabulary consisted of

perhaps four hundred words, all severely restricted to his duties. The language was uninflected; it could have been an old and stable speech. The grammar was merely the word-order of logic: subject, verb, object. Outstandingly, it was a guttural speech. There were remnants of "tonality" in it. Apparently it had once been a sung language like Chinese, but had evolved even out of that characteristic. Phonemes that once had been low-toned were now sounded back in the throat; formerly high-toned phonemes were now forward in the throat. That sort of thing he had picked up from "Oliver."

Barker hinted delicately at it, and Baldwin slammed a figurative door in his face. "I don't know," he growled. "I don't go asking smart questions. You better not either."

Four more threads were snapped from the fringe of Barker's tie before Baldwin came back, hungry for flattery. Barker was on shift, his head aching with the pointless, endless, unspeakably dull act of concentration when the big man shook his shoulder and growled: "You can lay off. Seven, eight—it don't matter. The others can work harder."

He slobbered thanks.

"Ah, that's all right. I got a good side to me too, see? I said to Lakhrut once—"

And so on, while the other units glared.

"Mr. Baldwin, this word *khesor*, does it mean the whole propulsion set-up or the energy that makes it work? You say, '*Lakhrut a'g khesor-takh*' for 'Lakhrut is the boss of propulsion,' right?"

Baldwin's contempt was kindly. "For a smart man you can ask some Goddamned stupid questions. What difference does it make?" He turned to inspect the globes for a moment and snarl at Ginny Stoss: "What's the matter with you? You want the Pain again? *Give!*"

Her lips moved in her endless mutter and her globe flared bright.

The bull-necked man said confidingly: "Of course I wouldn't really give her the Pain again. But you have to scare them a little from time to time."

"Of course, Mr. Baldwin. You certainly know psychology." *One of these days I'm going to murder you, you bastard.*

"Sure; it's the only way. Now, you know what *ga'lt* means?"

"No, Mr. Baldwin."

The bull-necked pusher was triumphant. "There is no word for it in English. It's something they can do and we can't. They can look right into your head if they want to. '*Lakhrut ga'lt takh-lyur-Baldwin*' means 'Lakhrut looks right into underchief Baldwin's head and reads his mind.'"

"Do they do it all the time?"

"No. I think it's something they learn. I don't think all of them can do it either—or maybe not all of them learn to do it. I got a theory that Lakhrut's a *ga'lt* specialist."

"Why, Mr. Baldwin?"

Baldwin grinned. "To screen out troublemakers. No hard feelings, Oliver, but do you notice what a gutless bunch of people you got here? Not a rebel in a carload. Chicken-livered. Don't take it personal—either you got it or you don't."

"But *you*, Mr. Baldwin—why didn't the screening stop you?"

"I got a theory about that. I figure he let me through on purpose because they needed a hard guy to do just what I'm doing. After I got broke in on the globes it wasn't hardly any time at all before I got to be *takh-lyur*."

You're wrong, you bastard. You're the yellowest coward aboard.

"That must be it, Mr. Baldwin. They know a leader when they see one."

FOUR THREADS LATER he knew that he had acquired all of the language Baldwin had to give him. During his sleep period he went to old Stoss' chair. Stoss was on rest. He was saying vaguely to a gray-haired woman in the chair in front of his: "Boston, Atlanta, Kansas City—all the prominent cities of the nation, my dear lady. I went in with a deck of cards and came out of each with a diamond ring and a well-filled wallet. My hands were sure, my voice was friendly—"

"Atlanta," the woman sighed. "The Mathematics Teachers Association met there in '87, or was it '88? I remember gardens with old brick walls—or was that Charleston? Yes, I think it was Charleston."

"—In one memorable session of stud behind locked doors in the old Muehlbach Hotel I was high on the third card with the Jack of clubs and the ten of diamonds, with the ace of clubs for my hole-card. Well, madam—"

"—We had terrible trouble in the school one year with the boys and girls gambling in the reactor room, and worse if you can believe it. The reactor man was their 'look-out,' so to speak, so naturally we tried to have him discharged. But the union wouldn't let—"

"—Well, madam, there was seven hundred-odd dollars in the pot—"

"Mr. Stoss," Barker said.

The old man studied him coolly for a moment and then said: "I don't believe I care to talk to you, sir. As I was saying, ma'am, there was—"

"I'm going to kill Baldwin," Barker told him.

He was instantly alert, and instantly scared. "But the danger," he whispered. "Won't they take it out on all of us? And he's a big brute—"

"So maybe he'll kill me. But I'm going to try. I want you to go to the latrine when Baldwin shows up next. Don't quite go in. Watch the corridor. If there's anybody coming, lift your hand. I'll only need a few seconds. Either way, it'll be finished by then."

"The danger," whispered Stoss. His eyes wandered to his daughter's chair. She was asleep. And her lips still moved in her endless muttering. "All right," the old man

said at last. "I'll help you."

"Can you imagine that?" the woman said, still amazed after all these years. "The man was caught *in flagrante delicto*, so to speak, and the union wouldn't let the principal discharge him without a full public hearing, and naturally the publicity would have been most distasteful so we were forced to—"

Barker padded back to his chair, a gaunt man in stinking rags, wild-haired and sporting a beard in which gray hairs were beginning to appear.

There had to be a lookout. Three times since takeoff Lakhрут had appeared in the doorway for a moment to stare at the units. Twice other people had actually come into the room with Baldwin to probe through the tangle of machinery down the center aisle with long, slender instruments.

It might have been one hour; it might have been seven. Baldwin appeared, followed by the little self-propelled cart. It began to make its rounds, stopping at each chair long enough for the bottle of water and the dish of soggy cake to be picked off. Stoss, looking perfectly innocent, passed Barker's chair.

CHAPTER VI

Barker got up and went to the pusher. Stoss was looking through the door, and did not wave. The cart clicked and rolled to the next chair. "Something wrong, Oliver?" Baldwin asked.

"I'm going to kill you, you bastard."

"*What?*" Baldwin's mouth was open, but he dropped in to a fighter's crouch instinctively.

His ankle hooked behind Baldwin's foot. The bull-necked man threw a punch which he ducked, and tried to clinch when he butted him in the chest. Baldwin went sprawling into the tangle of machinery at the same spot where the man from Rupp City had fried. There were sparks and stench. Then it was over.

Baldwin's mouth was still open and his body contorted. Barker could imagine him saying: "You think I'm inhuman? You think I want to drive the units like I do?" And he could also imagine him roaring: "*Give, Goddamn you!*"

Steadily Barker went back to his seat in time for the cart to click by. Stoss, his face a perfect blank, padded back from the latrine. A murmur and stir grew louder in the big rectangular room.

LAKHRUT was lying in his hammock in the dark, his fingers idly reading. It should have been a manual; instead it was an historical romance. His fingers skipped a half-page describing an old-style meal and slowed to absorb the description of the fight in which it ended.

"Yar raises his revolver charged with powder and ball. Who is so brave as Yar? He pulls back the trigger and presses the hammer of the death-dealing tube! The flash of flame shows the face of Lurg! But smoke from the tube obscures—"

His fingers jerked from the page as the commander's voice roared through his cubicle: "*Lakhrut! Look to your units! We have no steerage way!*"

He leaped from the hammock and raced through the vessel cursing Baldwin, the maintenance crew, the units and every soul on board.

He took in the situation at a glance. Baldwin lying spread-eagled and charred against the conversion grids. The units yammering and terrified in their chairs, none of them driving. Into a wall mike he snapped to the

bridge: "My driver's dead, Commander. He got the charge from the conversion grids—"

"Stop your gabbing and give me power, you fool!"

Deathly pale, Lakhрут turned to the disorganized units and tried to talk to them in remembered scraps of English. (He should have worked more with his driver on it. He should have worked more.) They only gawked at him, and he swore in A'rkhov—

But one of the units was doing something that made sense. He was yelling in English, pointing to the chairs. And a dozen of the units resumed their places and began to drive, feebly at first and then better.

That was taken care of. He turned to the machinery and checked rapidly through the stages of amplification. They were clear; the commander, curse him, was getting his power. The fellow who had yelled at the units was standing by him when the inspection was completed. Startlingly, he said in A'rkhov, though with a fearsome accent: "Can I serve Lakhрут-*takh*?"

With considerable effort, Lakhрут scanned him. Obedience, fear, respect, compliance. All was well. He asked

him coldly: "Who are you that you should speak the tongue?"

"Name is Oliver. I studied languages. Baldwin-*takh-lyur* taught me the tongue." Lakhрут scanned; it all was true.

"How did he die?"

"I did not see. Oliver was not looking. I was in darkness."

Asleep, was he trying clumsily to say? Lakhрут scanned. There was no memory of the death-scene in the scared, compliant mind of this unit. But something nagged Lakhрут and teased at his mind. "Did you kill him?" he snapped.

The flood of horror and weakness he scanned was indubitable. The unit babbled brokenly: "No, Lakhрут-*takh*! No! I could not kill! I could not kill!" Well, *that* was true enough. It had been a silly thing to ask.

"Take me," he said, "to each unit in turn and ask them whether they killed the *takh-lyur*."

This Oliver did, and reported twenty-two denials while Lakhрут scanned each. Each was true; none of the twenty-two minds into which he peered was shuddering with the aftermath of murder; none seemed to have the killer's coldness and steel.

Lakhrut said to the wall mike: "Power is restored. I have established that my driver's death was accidental. I have selected a new driver from among the units." He turned off the mike after a curt acknowledgment and said to Oliver: "Did you understand? I meant you." At the mike again he called two maintenance men to clear the conversion grid and space the body.

"Establish unit shifts and then come with me," he told Oliver, and waited for the new driver to tell off the gangs. He ceased scanning; his head was aching abominably.

BARKER felt the fingers leave his brain and breathed deeper. Dr. Oliver of Columbia, the whining incubus on him, was bad company. His own memory of the past few minutes was vague and fragmentary. In jittery terror Dr. Oliver had yelled at the units to man their chairs before they all were killed for disobedience. In abject compliance Dr. Oliver had placed himself at Lakhrut's orders. And he had heard that he would be the new slave-driver with almost tearful gratitude. To be shaved and clean again!

To dine again! Barker wanted to spit. Instead he divided the units into new shifts and followed Lakhrut from the oblong room.

He washed and used a depilatory powder that burned horribly as the cyclops monster called Lakhrut silently watched. Somebody brought him shorts that fit. Apparently the concept of a uniform was missing—so even was style. He saw passing on the upper decks crew "men" in trousers, gowns, kilts and indescribable combinations of these. The only common note was simplicity and a queer, vulgar absence of dash, as if nobody cared what he looked like as long as the clothes didn't get in his way.

"That's enough," Lakhrut said, as Barker was trying to comb his wetted hair with his fingers. "Come with me."

Back between decks they went to a cubicle near the drive room—a combination of kitchen, cramped one-man office and hammock-space. Lakhrut briskly showed Barker how to draw and prepare the food for the units—it was the first time he suspected that Baldwin had cooked for them—and how to fill in a daily report on the condition of the units. It was hardly writing; he simply had to

check a box in the appropriate column next to the unit's number. His "pen" flowed clear plastic which bonded to the paper in a raised ridge. The "printed" form was embossed with raised lines. Barker could make nothing of the numerals that designated the units or the column-headings; the alphabet rang no bells in his memory or the Oliver-memory. But that would come later.

THE COMMANDER was winding up his critique, and his division officers were perspiring freely.

"As to the recent gun-drill, I have very little to say. What, gentlemen, *is* there to say about the state of training, the peak of perfection which enabled Gori-*takh's* crews to unlimber, train and dry-fire their primary and secondary batteries in a mere two hundred and thirty-six and eleven-twelfths *vistch*? I am sure the significance of this figure will be clear to us all when I point out that the average space engagement lasts one hundred and eighteen *vistch*. Is the significance clear to you, Gori-*takh*?"

"Yes, Commander," said the division officer, very pale.

"Perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Commander," Gori said, wishing he were dead.

"Good. Then we will go on to pleasanter subjects. Propulsion has been excellent and uninterrupted since our last meeting. Steerage way has been satisfactorily maintained, units are in reasonable health, mechanical equipment checks out between Satisfactory and Excellent. The surprise-drill calls for driving surges were responded to promptly and with vigor. Lakhrut-*takh*, you are to be commended."

He left the compartment on that note, and the division officers sprawled, sighed and gave other signs of release from tension.

Lakhrut said to Gori, with the proper blend of modesty and sympathetic blandness: "It's just luck, you know. Your bad luck and my good luck. I happen to have stumbled on the most extraordinary driver in the fleet. The fellow is amazing. He speaks the tongue, he's pitiless to the units, and he's wild to anticipate my every wish. He's even trying to learn the mechanism."

A *takh* vaguely corresponding to the Paymaster of a British naval vessel, with a touch of Chaplain and Purser thrown in, said: "What's

that? Isn't there a *Yongsong* order about that? Perhaps I'd better—"

Lakhrut hastily balanced the benefit of a lie at this point against the chance that the *takh*, a master-scanner because of his office, might scan him for veracity. Since scanning of equals was bad manners and he felt himself the *takh's* equal at least after the commander's sweet words of praise, he lied. "'Trying' does not mean 'succeeding,'" he said, letting his voice sound a little hurt. "I'm surprised that you should think I'd let an Outworlder into our secrets. No; the man is merely cracking his brains over an obsolete manual or two of advanced theory. He can barely read, as I've repeatedly verified by scanning. His tactile-memory barely exists. What brutes these Outlanders are! I doubt that they can tell fur from marble."

The *takh* said: "That is extremely unlikely in view of their fairly-advanced mechanical culture. Take me to him; I shall scan him."

Gori tried not to look exultant as Lakhrut, crestfallen, led the *takh* from the room.

The *takh* was somehow alarmed when he saw Lakhrut's driver. Even before scanning he could see that the

fellow was tough. Vague thoughts of a spotter from Fleet Command or a plant from some enemy—or nominally friendly—fleet drifted through his head before he could clamp down on them. He said to the driver: "Who are you and what was your occupation?" And simultaneously he scanned deep.

The driver said: "Name is Oliver, *takh*. Teacher of language and letters."

The personality-integral included: Inferiority. ? Self-deprecation/Neurosis. ?

Weakling's job/Shame. ? Traumata.

A light. A bell. A pendulum.
Fear. Fear.

Being buried, swallowed,
engulfed.

The *takh* was relieved. There was no danger in such a personality-integral. But the matter of security—he handed the driver a fingering-piece, a charming abstraction by the great Kh'hora. It had cost him his pay for an entire tour of duty and it was quite worth it. Kh'hora had carved it at the height of his power, and his witty juxtapositions of textures were unsurpassed to this day. It could be fingered a dozen ways, each a brilliant variation on a classic theme.

The driver held it stupidly. "Well?" demanded the *takh*, his brows drawing together. He scanned.

The driver said: "Please, *takh*, I don't know what to do with it."

The personality-integral included:

Fear. Bewilderment.

Ignorance. Blankness.

"Finger it, you fool!"

The driver fumbled at the piece and the *takh* scanned. The tactile impressions were unbelievably obtuse and blurry. There was no emotional response to them whatsoever except a faint, dull gratification at a smooth boss on the piece. And the imbecile kept *looking* at it.

It was something like sacrilege. The *takh* snatched the piece back indignantly. "Describe it," he said, controlling himself.

The fellow began to maunder about its visual appearance while the *takh* scanned. It was true; he had practically no tactile memory.

The *takh* left abruptly with Lakhрут. "You were right," he said. "If it amuses the fellow to pretend that he can read, I see no obstacle. And if it contributes to the efficiency of your department, we all shine that much brighter." (More literally, with full-

er etymological values, his words could be rendered: "If it amuses the fellow to pretend that he fingers wisdom, my hands are not grated. And if it smoothes your quarry wall, we all hew more easily.")

Lakhрут's hands were not grated either; it was a triumphant vindication of his judgment.

And so, for departmental efficiency, he let his marvelous driver have all the books he wanted.

CHAPTER VII

BARKER'S head ached and his eyes felt ready to fall out of their sockets. He did not dare take rubbings of the books, which would have made them reasonably legible. He had to hold them slantwise to the light in his cubicle and read the shadows of the characters. Lakhрут had taught him the Forty-Three Syllables, condescendingly, and the rest was up to him. He had made the most of it.

An imagery derived more from tactile than visual sense-impressions sometimes flooded him with subtleties—as, he was sure, an intensely visual English nature poem would have flooded Lakhрут. But he progressed.

Lakhrut had brought him a mish-mash of technical material and trashy novelettes—and a lexicon. The *takh* who had made such a fuss about the chipped pebble had brought him something like a Bible. Pay dirt!

It seems that in the beginning Spirit had created Man—which is what the A'rkhov-Yar called the A'arkhov-Yar—and set him to rule over all lesser creation. Man had had his ups and downs on the Planet, but Spirit had seen to it that he annihilated after sanguinary, millennium-long battles, his principal rivals for the Planet. These appeared to have been twelve-footed brutes who fought with flint knives in their first four feet.

And then Spirit had sent the Weak People to the Planet in a spaceship. Schooled to treachery in the long struggle against the knife-wielding beasts, Man had greeted the Weak People with smiles, food and homage. The Weak People had foolishly taught them the art of writing, had foolishly taught Man their sciences. And then the Weak People had been slain, all twelve of them, in an hour of blood.

Barker somehow saw the Weak People as very tired, very gentle, very guileless

survivors of a planetary catastrophe beyond guessing. But the book didn't say.

So the A'rkhov-Yar stole things. Science. People. Let George do it, appeared to be their morality, and then steal it from George. Well, they'd had a hard upbringing fighting down the Knifers, which was no concern of his. They'd been man-stealing for God knows how long; they'd made turncoats like the late Mister Baldwin, and judas goats like neat Miss Winston, disgusting creatures preying on their own kind.

From the varied reading matter he built up a sketchy picture of the A'rkhov-Yar universe. There were three neighboring stars with planetary systems, and the cyclopes had swarmed over them once the guileless Weak People had shown them spaceflight. First they had driven their own ships with their own wills. Then they had learned that conquered races could be used equally well, so they had used them. Then they learned that conquered races tended to despair and die out.

THEN," he said savagely to old man Stoss, "they showed the one flash of creative intel-

ligence in their career—unless they stole it from one of their subjects. They invaded Earth — secretly. Without knowing it, we're their slave-breeding pen. If we knew it, we'd either fight and win, or fight and lose—and die out in despair."

"The one flash?" Stoss asked dryly, looking about them at the massive machinery.

"Stolen. All stolen. They have nations, trades and wars—but this is a copy of the Weak People's ship; all their ships are. And their weapons are the meteor screens and sweepers of the Weak People. With stolen science they've been stealing people. I think at a rate of thousands per year. God knows how long it's been going on—probably since the neolithic age. You want proof of their stupidity? The way they treat us. It leads to a high death rate and fast turnover. That's bad engineering, bad economics and bad housekeeping. Look at the lights they use—low-wattage incandescents! As inefficient lamps as were ever designed—"

"I've got a thought about those lights," Stoss said. "The other day when Lakhрут was inspecting and you were passing out the food I took two cakes instead of one—just to

keep in practice. I used slight of hand, misdirection—but Lakhрут didn't misdirect worth a damn. He slapped the pain button and I put the extra cake back. What does it mean when the hand is quicker than the eye but the sucker isn't fooled?"

"I don't get you."

"What if those aren't very inefficient lamps but very efficient heaters?"

"*They're blind,*" whispered Barker. "My God, you've got to be right! The lamps, the tactile culture, the embossed writing. And that thing that looks like an eye—it's their mind-reading organ, so it can't be an eye after all. You can't perform two radically different functions with the same structure."

"It's worth thinking about," old man Stoss said.

"I could have thought about it for a million years without figuring that out, Stoss. How did you do it?"

The old man looked modest. "Practice. Long years of it. When you want to take a deacon for a long score on the con game, you study him for his weaknesses. You don't assume he hasn't got any just because he's a deacon, or a doctor, or a corporation treasurer. Maybe it's women, or liquor, or gambling, or greed.

You just play along, what interests him interests you, everything he says is wise and witty, and sooner or later he lets you know what's his soft spot. Then, lad, you've got him. You make his world revolve around his little weakness. You cater to it and play it up and by and by he gets to thinking that you're the greatest man in the world, next to him, and the only real friend he'll ever have. Then you 'tell the tale,' as we say. And the next sound you hear is the sweetest music this

side of Heaven, the squealing of a trimmed sucker."

"You're a revolting old man," said Barker, "and I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad you're here too," the old man said. And he added with a steady look: "Whoever you are."

"You might as well know. Charles Barker — F. S. I. agent. They fished me out of the Riveredge gutter because I may or may not have telepathic flashes, and they put me on the disappearance thing."



Stoss shook his head unhappily. "At my age, cooperating with the F. S. I. I'll never live it down."

Barker said: "They've got sound to go on, of course. They hear movements, air currents. They carry in their heads a sound picture—but it isn't a 'picture'; damn language!—of their environment. They can't have much range or discrimination with that sense; too much noise hashing up the picture. They're probably heat-detectors, too. If bedbugs and mosquitoes

can use heat for information, so can these things. Man could do it too if he had to, but we have eyes. The heat-sense must be short range too; black-body radiation falls off proportional to the fourth power of the distance. It's beginning to fit together. They don't go very near those incandescent bulbs ever, do they? They keep about a meter distant?"

"Yes, I've noticed that. Anything closer must be painful to the heat sense—'blinding,' you might say."



"Then that leaves their telepathy. That specialist came into this room to examine me, which tells us something about the range. Something—but not enough."

Stoss said: "A person might pretend to throw something at one of them from a distance of ten yards. If the creature didn't notice, we'd know they don't have a ten-yard range with sound, heat or telepathy. And the next day he could try it at nine yards. And so on, until it noticed."

"And blew the person in half with those side-arms they carry," said Barker. "Who volunteers for the assignment, Stoss?"

"Not I," the old man said hastily. "Let's be practical. But perhaps I could persuade Miss Trimble?"

"The math teacher? Hell, no. If things work out, we're going to need all the mathematical talent we've got."

They conferred quietly, deciding which of their fellow-Earthmen would be persuaded to sacrifice himself. The choice fell on a nameless, half-mad youngster in the third seat of the second tier; he spoke to nobody and glared suspiciously over his food and drink.

"But can you do it?" asked Barker.

Stoss was offended. "In my time," he said, "I've taken some fifty-five really big scores from suckers. I've persuaded people who love money better than life itself to turn their money over to me, and I've sent them to the bank for more."

"Do your best," Barker said.

WHAT APPROACH the old swindler did use, he never learned. But the next day Third Seat, Second Tier, rose during the doling out of the food and pretended to hurl his plate at Lakhрут. The cyclops, ten meters away, stalked serenely on and the young man collapsed in an ecstasy of fright.

The next day it was eight yards.

The next day six.

And other things filled the days: the need for steady driving of the ship, and whispered consultations up and down the benches.

They needed a heat source, something that would blaze at 500 degrees, jangling, dazzling and confusing the senses of their captors. But it was an armed merchantman, a warship, and warships have nothing on board that will burn. Their poor clothing heaped together and somehow

ignited would make a smouldering little fire, doing more damage to the human beings by its smoke than to the A'rkhov-Yar by its heat.

Barker went exploring in the cargo spaces. Again and again he was passed in the corridors by crew "men." Huddling against the glowing bulbs, choking down his rage and fear, he imitated the paint on the walls, and sometimes they broke their stride for a puzzled moment, sometimes not.

In a cargo space on the next day he found cases labeled with worms of plastic as "attention sticks" or possibly "arresting or halting tubes."

They were the close equivalent of railroad flares in appearance. He worked the tight-fitting cap of one to the point where he felt gritty friction. A striking surface—but he did not dare strike and test it. These things would have to put out hundreds of degrees of heat, or, if they were intended for use at any appreciable distance, thousands. They were thermal shrieks; they would be heard from one end of the ship to the other. In three trips he smuggled 140 of the sticks back to the propulsion room. Stoss helped him distribute them among the seats. He

grimly told the lack-luster eyes and loose mouths: "If anybody pulls off one of the caps before I say so, I am going to hit the pain button and hold it down for five minutes."

They understood it for the death threat it was.

"Today's the day, I think," said Stoss in a whisper as Lakhrut made his benevolent entrance. "He sensed something yesterday at four meters. Today it's going to be three."

Barker pushed his little food cart, fingering the broken-off knob of a propulsion chair resting on its lower tray. He moved past Third Seat, Second Tier, Lakhrut behind him. The mad young man rose, picked up his plate and pretended to throw it at the cyclops.

Lakhrut drew his side-arm and blew the young man's head into a charred lump. "Oliver!" he cried, outraged. "Why did you not report that one of your units was becoming deranged? You should have put him through the space-lock days ago!"

"Oliver's" reply was to pace off a precise four meters and hurl the broken-off knob at the monster. He took a full windup, and rage for five thousand years of slavery and

theft drove his muscles. The cyclops eye broke and spilled; the cyclops staggered in circles, screaming. Barker closed in, twisted the side-arm from the monster's convulsed hand and gave him what Third Seat, Second Tier, had got.

The roomful of men and women rose in terror, screaming.

"Quiet!" he yelled at them. "I've talked to some of you about this. You saw what happened. Those things are blind! You can strike them from five yards away and they'll never know what hit them."

He snatched up one of the fusees and rasped off the cap; it began to flare pulsatingly, not very bright, but intensely hot. He held it at arm's length and it scorched the hair on the back of his hand. "These things will dazzle what sensory equipment they do have," he yelled, "and you can confuse them with noise. They'll be coming to get us in a minute. All you have to do is make noise and mill around. You'll see what happens when they come for us—and then we'll go hunting!"

IN LESS than a minute his prediction was verified. A squad of the cyclops crew

burst in, and the screaming of the Earth people left nothing to be desired; the creatures recoiled as if they had struck a wall. From six meters away Barker and the Stosses carefully ignited the flares and tossed them into the squad. They made half-hearted efforts to fire into the source of the trouble, but they were like men in a darkened boiler works—whose darkness was intermittently relieved by intolerable magnesium flares. Lakhrut's side-arm made short work of the squad.

Barker ripped their weapons from their fingers and demanded: "Who wants one? Who wants to go hunting? Not you, Miss Trimble; we'll need you for later. Stay in a safe place. Who's ready for a hunting party?"

One by one, twitching creatures remembered they were men and came up to take their weapons.

The first hunting party worked its way down a corridor, hurling fusees, yelling and firing. The bag was a dozen cyclopes, a dozen more weapons.

They met resistance at a massive door with a loophole. Blasts from a hand weapon leaped through the loophole, blind but deadly. Three of them fell charging the door.

"Warm it up for them," Stoss said. He snatched a dozen fuses, ducked under the fire and plastered himself against the door. Meticulously he uncapped the sticks and leaned them against the door, one by one. The blast of heat drove Barker and his party back down the corridor. Stoss did not collapse until he had ignited the last flare and wrenched open the door with a seared hand.

Through the door could be seen staggering cyclops figures, clawing blindly at the compartment walls. The Earthmen leaped through the brief, searing heat of the dozen flares and burned them down.

In the A'rkhov-Yar language, a terrified voice spoke over the ship public address system: "To the leader of the rebels! To the leader of the rebels! Return to your propulsion room and your crimes will be forgiven! Food will be doubled and the use of the Pain discontinued!"

Barker did not bother to translate. "Let's head for the navigation room," he said. "Try to save a couple of them."

One hour later he was telling the commander and Gori:

"You two will set courses for Earth. You will work separately, and if your results don't agree we will put you each in a chair and hold down the button until you produce results that do agree. We also have a lady able to check on your mathematics, so don't try anything."

"You are insane," said the commander. "Other ships will pursue and destroy you."

"Other ships," Barker corrected him, "will pursue and fail to overtake us. I doubt very much that slave ships can overtake a ship driven by free men and women going home."

"We will attack openly for this insolence," snorted Gori. "Do you think you can stand against a battle fleet? We will destroy your cities until you've had enough, and then use you as the slaves you are."

"I'm sure you'll try," said Barker. "However, all I ask is a couple of weeks for a few first-rate Ph.D.'s to go over this ship and its armaments. I believe you'll find you have a first-rate war on your hands, gentlemen. We don't steal; we *learn*."

"And now, if you please, start figuring that course. *You're working for us now.*"





THE EDITOR'S SPACE

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

I mean, of course, the International Geophysical Year, which begins about the time you read this, and will actually be a year and a half long. When it ends, at the end of December, 1958, man's knowledge of Earth and its atmosphere should be tremendously greater than it is now.

IGY's most spectacular aspect, of course, will be the launching of the "basketball" satellites. These little, 20-pound metal spheres will start zipping into the sky early in 1958. From them, we'll learn a lot about the upper air, the airless space surrounding it, the way larger space stations will behave in those areas, and many other things—including the exact shape of Earth itself.

(Incidentally, few people are better equipped to predict what life on the first manned space stations will be like than Arthur C. Clarke, and in the current INFINITY Clarke does

just that. The issue contains three Clarke stories which you will definitely find instructive as well as entertaining.)

Meanwhile, it has begun to appear that the satellites will stay up there a lot longer than anyone previously thought. Dr. Theodore E. Sterne, Professor of Astrophysics at Harvard University and associate director of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, now makes the startling statement that the satellites may go on circling Earth for as much as nine years. (Previous estimates ran from two weeks to a year.) Dr. Sterne's calculations are based on the latest Air Force "model" of Earth's atmosphere, and should be as accurate as any that could be made at the present time.

So Happy New Year—and many happy years to come! If knowledge is power, man should become about twice as powerful in the next decade as he's ever been before!—LTS



MISSION TO OBLIVION

by John Victor Peterson

*For Earthmen, Mag was a ghetto planet—with rules
that were death to defy, and impossible to obey!*

Mission to Oblivion

by John Victor Peterson

PREFACE

FOR FIFTY YEARS, Mag, the second and only habitable planet of the system of Lalande 21,185, was to impatient transient Terrans little more than a way station on their outward exploratory burst toward farther stars in the sector. To those swiftly passing explorers, eager as they were for more promising conquests, the strange regulations which governed the conduct of the Terran personnel at the two small, restricted bases on Mag were the subject of an occasional bewildered

shrug. But to those Terrans serving on Mag, each harshly discriminatory word was etched forever in the mind:

Pursuant to authority vested in me under Solar Law 2219, I, Gordon Leems, Commander, LEO (Lalande Expedition One), do hereby establish these regulations after the requisite post-contact year of exhaustive study of the conditions, law, mores and religion prevailing on Mag, Lalande 21,185-II:

1. The hierarchy of the great leader Rams shall be considered absolute.

2. Such areas as the hierarchy shall designate shall be out of bounds to all Terrans, including, but not limited to, the island of Daskanerf, the surrounding Central Sea and the Dwod Peninsula.

3. There shall be no inter-racial association whatsoever except with Ramsies, and no attempt to secure by representations of friendship, by bribery, theft, force, or any means

JOHN VICTOR PETERSON works for the CAA, as Chief of the Property Management Branch at New York International Airport. When he writes of future developments in radar, instrument landing systems, and similar devices, it is with the authority of long experience in this field. Though his fiction has been appearing for almost 20 years, he is strictly a "spare-time" writer—unfortunately for his many fans!

whatsoever, any knowledge not freely yielded of the spoken or written language or of the mores, history, habits, science or religion of Mag.

4. All Terran knowledge shall be revealed to Ramsies upon request and without equivocation.

5. No female Terran shall be permitted to surface on Mag unless exceeding thirty Terran years in age.

6. No Terran shall be stationed on Mag in excess of five Terran years unless physically unfit for interstellar transit.

7. A single violation of these articles shall result in (a) return of the violator to Terra if physically fit or (b) imprisonment at hard labor for not less than ten Terran years.

8. Multiple violations shall be punishable by memory erasure or death, as a Terran General Court may direct.

The regulations existed for fifty years without historical record of their reason for being. When they were suddenly abolished, the Galactic Historians failed to record anything but the fact of abolition.

But there *is* a record, drawn from the recollections of some of those men and, for the greater part, from the diary of the most burningly inquisitive of them all.

This is that record.

It begins, appropriately, in an hour of darkness.

CHAPTER I

WHEN HILL BARRIS first heard the erratic, distant thunder from the fogbound Maggian night, he dismissed it as that of another atmosphere ship approaching Be-bryan Spaceport from distant Dwod. Surely others were coming from Terran Base Headquarters at the Maggian Capital to meet the passengers who would surface in shuttles from the nearly-due starship *Star of Kenya*. A throng invariably came to greet newcomers out of Terra for firsthand accounts of home.

Barris sat alone in the ready room for communications personnel at the Be-bryan Spaceport Tower, holding and bleakly viewing his diary. He recalled a thousand other nights here or at Dwod when he had searched for words no one save himself would ever read. How often had he asked Silvy Ward, the

Terran Base Administrator, or Hyman Modlin, the Surgeon General, to burn the diary unread upon his death and to throw its ashes into the East with his own?

Hill Barris had been on Mag for ten years and for ten years he had fought lurking death within himself while those physically fit had come, served their duty tours and thankfully gone home. They seldom returned.

Thank God that Julian Ortiz was coming back! Julian would have word of Valinda—

He found it difficult to remember Val's features. He had seen her last at the Sands in New Mexico just before he'd enshuttled for the orbiting starship. Her face had been distorted then with tears, her fine body, blossoming into full womanhood, trembling against him.

He strained to see her face in memory but another face came between—that of the lovely Maggian girl who had helped care for him after he had been stricken. He remembered the Maggian girl's slender fingers caressing his temples in the height of his strange illness, her warm voice speaking liquid words which were so soothing but which he did not understand.

And he remembered with growing warmth that magic night before he'd been released for duty—

No, no! He must forget. She, too, was lost to him. Forever lost, as Val was.

It was then that he recognized the growing sound out of the night. He had only heard that intermittently pulsing-spitting blast once before: as a child on Terra when a starship returning from sterile Sirius, wracked in translation from hyperspace, had whirled uncontrollably to its doom on the Mojave Desert.

This had to be the *Star of Kenya*! She was the only starship due. Oh, God! She was almost certainly doomed! She, as all starships, had been built aspace near Luna's orbit. She had never touched an atmosphere, never would except in direst emergency. She had no airfoils, vanes or chutes. Only expert blast juggling and utmost coordination between pilot and ground-controlled tractor beams could surface her safely.

A visifone buzzed. As he responded he viewed the strained face of Roger Sullivan, the Spaceport Tower Chief.

"Hill, the *Kenya* translated too close to the star. Her ray

shields collapsed. All aboard were badly exposed before they hyperjumped to Mag's orbit. They decided to surface; waiting for shuttles would have meant death to most aboard. We need a magnetonar expert in case the tractors malfunction. If we get the *Kenya* in we'll need every available atmosphere ship to get the injured over to Dwof General Hospital. You're the expert and you've got a heli, so come on, Hill!"

"Coming, Sully. Out!"

He pocketed his diary, forgetting his brief case, his mind filled with the blazing thought that Julian Ortiz might be among those dying.

Could the magnetonar tractor beams stabilize the unwieldy dumbbell-shaped starship in a rigid descent cone? True, they wove the unusually strong magnetic lines of force which banded Mag into a temporary funnel—but was the reactor's output adequate to sustain the weight and thrust of a Mark XXII starship?

HE BOUNDED UP the stairs to the tower. His eyes flashed to the radarscopes and caught the *Kenya's* unstable, revolving approach. He glanced at the meter bank. The tractor

beams were holding—but the spinning ship's blips were strengthening too quickly!

"Brake descent! Counterblast!" Sullivan screamed into a microphone.

Cursing, they threw their eyes upward to the transparent dome.

The roiling pinkish-purplish flare of belatedly applied atomic counterblasts lighted the fog then and, unseen to them, the spinning starship screechingly ground its twin spheres into the hard surface of the port.

"God!" Barris cried, his face drained of color.

"There's a twin hull," Sullivan said. "I hope it stood up under that!"

The rumbling roar of decontamination tugs came then from below. They'd certainly need decons to bring the *Kenya's* people in. The spaceport was hot. The *Kenya* had poured out more radiation in her final blasting than any unshielded human could possibly endure.

Barris went wordlessly to the elevator and dropped to Customs' quarantine room. The room, hopelessly inadequate for so great an emergency, held only a doctor, three aid men, three Health Instrument men — and a Ramsi.

The Ramsi caught Barris' instant attention. He was taller than any other Barris had seen and clad in a flowing blue robe of a deeper hue than most. His cowl was down, revealing silky golden hair. A curly, golden beard softened the strong features of an almost godlike face.

The Ramsi's eyes locked with his disconcertingly.

Unquestionably the Ramsi's strong features bore a family resemblance to the delicate features of the slender native girl he once had known. He was on the point of ignoring regulations and asking of her when a decon tug clamped noisily upon a quarantine lock.

The Health Instrument men quickly maneuvered shielding around the lock's gaping aperture and into the decon's snout. Aid men began emerging with stretcher cases.

Barris stood watching, his thin face twisted, forgetful of the Ramsi. This was how it had been with him ten years before. Twenty-one then, fresh out of Stellar Technological Institute, burning for the stars. A kid who had through chance been bunked near a defective shielding plate when that other starship's navigator had misjudged the translation point

from hyperspace and come through too close to the system's primary. He, too, had absorbed Lalande's savage rays, going into convulsion and coma. Luckily they'd shuttled him down quickly to Dwod General Hospital—in time to save for him at least a half-life.

Julian! They were carrying Julian Ortiz forth on a stretcher, his dark face puffed and blistered. He was limp, a sure indication of life—

"I know him," Barris said thickly to the doctor. "I've a helijet and can take him and another to Dwod."

"We must be systematic!" the doctor snapped.

"He's a personal friend. I'm Barris, Chief of Planetary Facilities. He's Ortiz, our chief patrol pilot."

"All right!" the doctor said with sudden deference.

Barris found the golden bearded Ramsi beside him.

"There's another of your boys here," the Ramsi said, his voice deep, strangely soothing. "One Arthur Ashley—"

But as the Ramsi was speaking, Barris observed the short, barrel-chested Chief of Terran Base Security Police—Joseph Dargo—enter a far door and stand, surveying the room with dark, slumbrous

eyes, his completely hairless face inscrutable. With Dargo watching, one could not be overly cautious. Anything vaguely resembling fraternization could easily be interpreted as a direct violation of the regulations and Dargo's enforcement of them was ruthless.

"Your interest amazes me," Barris snapped.

Shrugging, the Ramsi turned to the doctor. "May I suggest, Doctor Kaufman, that the ambulance craft cut across the Central Sea? The protective field over the island of Daskanerf will be reduced to a ten mile perimeter to permit a direct route to Dwod during the emergency."

"Then—" Barris started, and paused as the Ramsi turned toward him, palms up-raised.

"Delay and death run on the same time track," the Ramsi said. "Your own time is running on the track of delay—"

My own time, Barris thought. Oh, God! He did not have the brief case containing the medicines and food concentrates without which he could not hope long to live. But he couldn't go back for it now. There wasn't time. There was Julian to think of—and Ashley. He had to

take the chance that nothing would happen. He *had* to!

He turned quickly to an aid man.

"Bring these two to my ship," he said.

He looked back briefly as he followed the stretcher bearers into the hangar, wondering fleetingly how the watching Ramsi had come to address him so familiarly, and wondering what lurked behind Joseph Dargo's inscrutable gaze.

CHAPTER II

THE STRETCHERED MEN were quickly placed in Barris' helijet. He taxied from the hangar and, cleared by Be-bryan Tower, blasted the ship up through the befogged night on madly spinning vanes.

He leveled off in the eternal murk at five thousand feet, set the autopilot on the magnetonar omnirange frequency, opened the atomics wide and retracted the vanes. The flight chart showed his nose dead on the Mount Murro omnirange; he'd stick to that guiding navigation aid and then follow others up around the eight-thousand-mile curve of the Central Sea on the coastal airway to Dwod.

But wait! The Ramsi had

announced that the supposedly impenetrable electromagnetic field around the forbidden island of Daskanerf would be drawn in. Curious! That was the first time Barris had heard a positive statement that the field was controllable.

Julian Ortiz had been flight-checking facilities along the airway some months before a family crisis had called him back to Terra and had flaunted the regulations to skirt the edges of the field. Julian had told him in utmost secrecy afterwards that everything electronic in the patrol ship had malfunctioned and it was only by the grace of a greater god than Rams, as Julian put it, that his ship had been on a course that took it back out of the field without his guidance.

Barris had thought, without a basis for his conclusion, that the field was natural; the Ramsi's statement could be construed to mean it was not.

Could he—dared he—believe the Ramsi had been sincere? It would save an hour if he could take an airline course, striking from Mount Murro straight across the Central Sea to Dwod.

He would — and damn Joseph Dargo if he called it a violation!

He was sick and tired of

Mag anyway. If a violation were recorded against him, though, it would mean ten years at hard labor—

He would decide when he reached Mount Murro.

His mind fled to the Maggian girl. He had never known her name. They had known no common tongue, only a great natural attraction that was a flame still in his memory. If only the regulations had permitted their marriage—but the question could never be asked, for the morning after their secret rendezvous she had vanished from Dwod General Hospital. He had never seen or heard of her again. He had never even inquired for her; that might have made Dargo suspicious.

Dargo was an enigma. There was no precise record of his birth, his father being listed as Philip Dargo of LEO, his mother's name curiously omitted. Rumor said Dargo's mother had been a Maggian but Dargo claimed complete Terran ancestry. It was generally accepted that Dargo had been born on Mag just before Leems issued the regulations and allowed to remain because the regulations simply did not cover people of Terran ancestry conceived on Mag.

Dargo's sullen features,

hairless as the adult Maggian men except the Ramsies, was again in Barris' mind. If anti-social, ruthless Dargo were indeed the result of Terran-Maggian inter-marriage, could Barris have married a Maggian without wondering what the union might produce?

Barris had tried to forget the Maggian girl, had sought through his diary to concentrate his lost dream on Val, whose age would bar her from Mag for a long, long time—long enough for her to forget that he had ever been. And Julian Ortiz would have made it final now. He could trust Julian to have painted a sordid picture of one Hill Barris gone native, a worthless degenerate.

But—would he ever know if Julian had succeeded?

He turned sharply to survey his unconscious friend and the young newcomer, Ashley. Immediately he recognized that they were in the final stages of coma. He knew that to follow the long curve of the airway would mean certain death to them.

Unhesitatingly he cut the autopilot, heading directly east. There! They would pass ten miles north of Daskanerf, well outside the perimeter the Ramsi had mentioned.

Moments later he saw the visual fringes of the field, first as a convoluted smoky black arch fluttering in the swirling obscurity; then suddenly flinging crimson streamers toward the veiled stars—streamers that turned, auroralike, to violet and yellow and green—

Even for Mag with its strange electromagnetic manifestations, a natural aurora could not exist so near the surface. And there was a rhythmic pulse in this display that spelled electronic manipulation—a definite polarization of transmitted magnetonar microwaves — to an electronics engineer such as he who had frequently spent endless hours at the scope of a polarstatic indicator.

Magnetonar was an outgrowth of radio and radar, a superior communications system the early Terrans on Mag had developed to combat the great constant humidity and electromagnetic flux. It made accurate communication possible through polarization of microwaves and application of electronic filters.

He realized then that the Ramsies must have studied magnetonar (certainly it, as all Terran science, was available to them under the regulations!) and created a simi-

larly polarized field over Daskanerf. That *must* be the answer!

His eyes went to his compass. He found that he had without conscious thought turned squarely into the field—toward Daskanerf!

He started to change the heading; then vast trembling and great sweating nearly convulsed him. He fumbled behind the seat for his brief case; then realized, aghast, that the food concentrates needed to raise his dangerously low blood sugar level were back at Bebryan Tower!

He had to—*had to* change the heading! He strained forward to the controls; then realized that the instruments were completely erratic, unreadable. He was caught in the field of Daskanerf. They were lost! And he was going helplessly into shock!

The autopilot— No! That was electronic; it wouldn't function.

There was but one chance: the mechanical gyrolanding device *might* surface the ship somewhere on Daskanerf.

He reached out his thin, palsied right hand, snapping on the device—and fell back. The diminishing screech of automatically smothered atomics was a fugitive banshee in his oblivion.

CHAPTER III

SOMETIME, SOMEWHERE, his mind came swimming up out of darkness and there was light.

Blinding light in a white aseptic room and a golden-bearded Ramsi smiling down at him gently, a hypodermic syringe poised in gloved hands—

And there was darkness—

Awareness came again—briefly, dimly—came and went and came again and he lay in unseen mire in dense darkness. Fog swirled palpably about him. He was cold, wet, shudderingly weak.

He explored the darkness with trembling, cautious hands, encountering nothing but sloshy mud. He laughed shakily, senselessly, lost, lonely, a little mad.

"Hill!"

Not Julian's voice! It can't be! He's dead—dead. . . .

He felt groping hands.

"Julian, is that you?"

"Yes, Hill, Ashley and I are here."

But the couldn't be. They had been in coma, dying.

"Hill," Julian said, "buck up; we've got to get into the fan marker building."

"Fan marker?" Barris asked perplexedly.

"Yes. And fast—the dawn flood fog's coming in. You know what *that* brings! Come; it's this way."

Lurching. Feet dragging in the mire. Knees weak.

The fog was brightening.

Suddenly before him was the intricate latticework of a marker counterpoise and, above, the disc-cone radiators for which it formed a stable ground. The pattern of it was familiar. . . . Yes, it was an experimental facility he had personally designed and installed, located on the Central Sea's eastern shore only ten miles from Dwod. *How—how had they come to be here?*

He halted, wavering, groping uncertainly for the door's dialock.

"Damn it!" burst a young man's voice—Ashley's, Barris realized. "Something slashed my ear!"

The wind-driven fog had turned to frothy sheets of palpable whiteness. There were fitting butterflylike blacknesses in it, the hungry razor-piranhas which swarmed in Mag's flood fogs.

Frantically Barris spun the dialock, thankful that he recalled the combination. *There!*

The door burst suddenly outward with an escaping blaze of automatic light. They

shoved into the single room, Ortiz skipping agilely around the transmitters as Barris and Ashley were pinned immovably against the equipment by the swiftly closing door. The building was designed to admit one and swiftly close against Mag's equipment-destroying humidity.

They were silent, thankful beyond speech that they had all managed to enter and escape the devouring razor-piranhas which scratched futilely now against the dura-steel shelter.

THEY DRANK IN the efficient humming of the transmitter, sending its signal out to the disc-cone radiators. These sent a field pattern vertically upward in a vast fanshape which would intersect the course of any atmosphere ship approaching from Bebryan and automatically warn the pilot he was nearing the descent cone for space shuttles into Dwod and should hold, circling, over the marker until Dwod Tower cleared him in to surface. They knew that here was the means for them to contact any ship passing overhead and relay a call to Dwod.

Barris realized that Julian Ortiz was regarding him as

though about to speak but hesitant.

"What's on your mind, Julian?" he asked.

"I don't know whether I should tell you, Hill, but you'll have to know sometime. Hill, Valinda was on the *Kenya*!"

The words burned into Barris' brain, burned and twisted amid the memories of the Bebryan Tower Chief saying that all aboard had been badly exposed, of the *Kenya's* dumbbell-shape grinding itself resoundingly against surface.

"Is she—" he started. "Oh, God, you couldn't know—"

"I'm sorry, Hill. But I can tell you that when we translated from hyperspace she—well, nearly everyone—was under sedation; most people don't care to face the pain of translation. Luckily a few of us chose to endure it and were conscious to carry Val and the others to safety. I don't *think* she was badly exposed; her cabin wasn't directly sun-side when we broke through and you can be sure that I saw to it that she was the first I helped carry into the heavily shielded emergency quarters."

"Thanks, Julian, thanks—"

Ortiz went on to say that he'd briefly seen a Ramsi here

near the fan marker, a Ramsi carrying clothing, he thought, but Barris only half heard.

Val had been on the *Kenya*, might now be dying or—dead! She should never have come across those two and a half parsecs from Terra, should never have dared the transit to see the half-man that he was.

He fumbled shakily for the diary which had so long been Val to him. It was gone! Somewhere between his blackout in the helijet and now he had lost the book or—and the thought unaccountably came and nagged—it had been taken from him.

"She should never have come," he said thickly. "You failed, Julian, failed," he accused.

His mind wandered into irrationality, tumbling back nearly ten years to the forbidden rendezvous with the Maggian girl. He was with her again and her lips were ardently fluttering against his own and he was swearing that he would take her to himself not just for now but until the time came (rumors of the religion of Rams said), to her as it did to every Maggian girl, to hide behind thick veils and high walls and never again be seen by Terrans—

"Hill, snap out of it!"

He came back to reality with considerable effort, realizing that he wasn't coordinating properly, that he felt sensations within his body that he had never felt before even at the height of his illness.

Suddenly he recalled that brief waking moment in the white aseptic room, the golden-bearded Ramsi—the same one, he was sure, who had been at Bebryan—

Full realization came to him as he viewed the alert dark face of Julian Ortiz, as he turned his head to see young Ashley surveying him curiously.

"My God!" he burst. "Do you two realize that you came off the *Kenya* in coma and badly burned? The *Kenya* translated too close to this system's sun just as the ship did that I was on when I came here ten years ago. Exposure to Lalande's rays plays hell with the pancreas, creating an almost completely uncontrollable combination of hyperinsulinism and diabetes mellitus. I was hospitalized for seven months before I became competent to recognize suddenly approaching shock or coma and to self-administer glucose or insulin. I've been living close to death ever since!

"You were brought off the *Kenya* in as bad shape as I was at first but now—" He glanced quickly at his chronometer. "—now, only thirty hours later, you appear remarkably well. You couldn't recover without treatment. And Terran medicines could not give such results in any event.

"We've been on Daskanerf and been treated by a Ramsi with miracle medicines our own science hasn't dreamed of. That medication worked wonders on you two. What it's doing to me right now only God knows!

"But, fellows, we can't tell them this at Dwod. Accidental or not, penetration of the field of Daskanerf is a direct violation of the regulations. If Joseph Dargo learned that we not only penetrated the field but actually landed on the island, I'm afraid that the phrase 'multiple violations of sanctity' would go on a list of charges against every one of us!"

He felt himself going suddenly unutterably weak, felt a great sweating bursting from his every pore. He knew he was going into shock again.

"Julian," he cried hoarsely, urgently, "relay a call to Dwod Tower. Tell them we

crashed and are stuck here."

He was blacking out, sagging against the transmitters. Dimly he heard Ashley say, "That doesn't add. The doctors will only have to take one look—"

"If you'd been on Mag as long as—" Julian was saying.

Barris heard no more.

CHAPTER IV

HE WOKE ONCE—OR SO dreamt—to a great sense of personal danger. In semi-darkness he dimly beheld a large figure looming over him—a Ramsi with pointed black beard and jet black robes. Light glinted on a charged hypodermic syringe. In the dark, twisted face Barris saw only menace. He screamed in panic and the sinister figure abruptly fled into nothingness—

Full awareness returned in daylight, and the darkness and fear went from his mind as his eyes opened. He had most certainly dreamed.

He realized that he was comfortably abed in a private room at Dwod General Hospital, and recognized with mounting amazement a greater sense of well-being than he had felt in years.

He heard footsteps, turned toward the doorway and

cried, "Doc Modlin! What hap—"

Modlin cut him off, regarding him searchingly.

"I should be asking that, Hill. You've been in shock for two days. We've been forced to feed you glucose incessantly; your blood sugar was persistently and dangerously low. But it's been normal now for thirteen hours. Although the lab techs will have to run other tolerance tests, I believe you're *completely cured!*"

Barris swallowed hard. Thankfulness for what a Ramsi had apparently accomplished overwhelmed him.

"Well," Modlin said, "how do you account for it?"

Barris hesitated. Hyman Modlin was an old and great friend, but dared he admit to the doctor what could be construed as a violation of sanctity? A single violation of record meant immediate return to Terra for a healthy man—return under armed guard in disgrace. And—*what of Val?*

"Doc, is there a Terran woman here named Valinda Hathaway?"

"There has been," Modlin said gently, "but not as a patient. She fortunately suffered no ill effects on the *Kenya.*"

"Thank God!" Barris said fervently.

"I wish I could say the same for all who were aboard. Of the two hundred, twenty-seven were dead when brought off. There are forty-three here and, well, Hill, they're in about the same condition as the records show you were ten years ago."

"Ortiz and Ashley?"

"Comparatively mild cases, but enough to keep them on Mag forever. But, Hill, Max Kaufman was at Bebryan and from what he said Ashley and Ortiz should be as seriously affected as—"

"I know," Barris cut in. "Look, doc, I *must* see Ortiz and Ashley!"

"Then you won't tell me now?"

"Perhaps after I've talked with them."

"Well, I'd rather you remained in bed. I'll send them in. You need rest; you suffered exposure as well as shock. And you've got to look your shining best, since Valinda Hathaway said she'll be in at two."

And Modlin went out.

The phrase, *you can't go home again*, crossed Hill Barris' mind. It didn't apply to him any longer, but it did to Julian Ortiz and Arthur Ashley—and to forty-three

others doomed to be half-men as he had been unless the Ramsies were willing to treat them—or could be *forced* to do so. Oh, damn the regulations!

Ortiz and Ashley came in. "Hi, lucky!" Ortiz said. "And you're the guy who thought *we* were cured!"

"You *will* be," Barris said almost savagely. "And, look, Julian, I'm sorry if I was nasty to you about Val's coming."

"Forget it. Honestly, I tried to persuade her *not* to, but you know Val; you just can't lie to her and she can be damnably stubborn and, further, she knew I could cut through the red tape and get her passage."

"By Heaven, I almost forgot that Val's under thirty! Julian, they can't prove that, can they?"

"Not unless Customs did some fast verifying with Vital Statistics before the *Kenya* translated from Terra. All the documents Val's carrying are in order."

"Well, let's hope they didn't check," Barris said. "If so, Val may make a quick round-trip!"

Ashley cut in, "Say, what's wrong on this crazy planet? These regulations everyone follows—how can any self-

respecting Terran abide by them? We're a free people everywhere else we've been in the entire universe except here."

"Well, you know the Stellar Exploratory Code," Ortiz said. "Article One says the commander of the first expedition to any star system shall personally prescribe the regulations which shall thenceforth govern the conduct of any Terrans visiting the system. Leems apparently determined that the Maggians and their culture should remain inviolate as the Ramsies wished and for just as long as the Ramsies wished. It's as simple as that!"

"I wonder," Barris mused. "There are no records of what transpired that first year. No, I'll take that back. There is one datum—the record of Joseph Dargo's birth, something less than a year after the landing. Maybe it means nothing. Dargo's father's name is on the record; his mother's is not. That omission could have been deliberate. Was his mother a Maggian? Is there something sexually or biologically strange on this world which Leems felt should be buried forever beneath a set of incredibly discriminatory regulations? There's—"

HE STOPPED abruptly, staring at the open doorway, refusing to believe his eyes.

"What's the matter?" Ortiz asked.

"A Ramsi—a black-bearded one with black robes—went by. The same one I dreamt about—"

"Dreamt about?" Ashley echoed.

Barris told them of the dream.

"Are you sure you dreamt it?" Ortiz asked.

"You didn't," Ashley said. "There's a hypo under you bed. The Ramsi must have dropped it when you yelled."

"There is?" Barris cried. "Well, get it—"

"Shush," Ortiz said. "Someone's coming—"

It was Doctor Modlin.

He asked sharply, "Has Valinda been here?"

"Why, no!" Barris said. "You said she'd come at two. It's not—"

"She came early," Modlin cut in. "She was most upset, said she had to see you urgently. I sent her up. Are you sure she hasn't been here, Hill?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why?"

"Dargo called just now and wants her seized and held incommunicado. Multiple offenses, he said. Underage for

landing, masquerading as a native woman and entering the native quarter of Dwod. We've got to find her and work out something to mitigate the offenses. Ridiculous as it may seem, she could be condemned to death!"

"Well, let's find her!" Barris cried.

Modlin turned toward the visifone and called the desk.

"One Valinda Hathaway entered ten minutes ago. Check all rooms for her immediately through viseye and follow up with an immediate physical check of viseye-occluded areas if viseye's negative."

Barris cut in, "Check for a Ramsi, too, doc!"

"Also for a Ramsi," Modlin echoed, snapping off when the desk acknowledged.

He turned and regarded Barris silently, his lips pursed.

The visifone buzzed and Modlin responded. He snapped it off after a moment and turned to them in bafflement.

"There are no non-patients present, Terran or Ramsi," he said. "At least not within range of the viseye pickups. They're running a room by room check. We may find Val but as far as a Ramsi's concerned, the desk says none has been here for three days."

"But I saw one not five minutes ago!" Barris said forcefully. "I'll swear it, doc! He went from right to left, toward the escalator from the lobby. It must have been just about the time you say you sent Val up."

"Then there's only one place they could be," Modlin said. "The library's the only room between here and the escalator. There's no viseye pickup in there."

Barris swung from the bed and they all hurried down the hall to the library door. It was locked but Modlin spun the diallock combination expertly and they pushed inside, each rushing to a narrow aisle. Their search was fruitless.

"What's that?" Ashley suddenly asked, pointing to the room's eastern wall.

Barris turned to the familiar sight of a Ramsi prayer plaque mounted shoulder high—a spread of white angel wings with an opalescent bubble in the center.

"The Ramsies have them mounted in lounges and libraries throughout our installation," Dr. Modlin explained. "Their religion calls for prayers at regular intervals and they were granted permission long before our time here to mount them where

they could temporarily find seclusion."

"Is there another door to this room?" Ashley asked.

"No," Modlin answered. "And there's no window either. There's only one means of ingress and egress—the door."

"Then it's impossible," Ashley said.

Barris was eyeing the prayer plaque. He had heard rumors—you heard so many on Mag—of Ramsies seen at Dwod by patrol pilots departing for Bebryan and being at Bebryan when the same pilots arrived. He'd never given much credence to their tales. Now, however, he recalled the fact that the golden-bearded Ramsi whom he had seen at Bebryan had treated him on Daskanerf, undoubtedly shortly after the helijet had made its automatic landing there, and the fact that a Ramsi had somehow transported Ashley, Ortiz and himself from Daskanerf to the fan marker near Dwod.

And—of course! There was a little Ramsi shrine near the fan marker with a prayer plaque such as this.

Suddenly it added. The Ramsies had no atmosphere ships of their own. They had no surface ships plying the monster-thronged Central Sea.

They had to have some means of transportation to and from Daskanerf.

The prayer plaques must tie into that transportation!

"Doc," Barris said, "may I call headquarters? We've got to bring Silvy Ward in on this. He's the Base Administrator, sure, but he's a wonderful guy and a close friend of mine. He's sworn to uphold the regulations but this situation has reached a point where I think even he will say the regulations be damned!"

Modlin nodded and Barris sat at the visifone. Barris paused before using the instrument, saying, "Doc, there is a hypo under the bed in my room. Will you check it, please?"

Barris had finished the call when the doctor returned, features blanched.

"Hill, where did it come from? It contained the Maggian drug *menlethicin*—which has been used since Leems' time to induce permanent and total amnesia in those with multiple violations proven against them!"

"I suspected something like that," Barris murmured.

"But how did the hypo get there?"

"I'm sorry," Barris said, "but you'll have to wait, doc, until Silvy comes."

CHAPTER V

TEN MINUTES LATER Henry "Silvy" Ward entered. Tall, well built, perfectly poised, he radiated an infectious confidence.

He placed a square black box on the library conference table with infinite care and extended a strong hand to Barris.

"Glad you're cured, Hill; Hy Modlin told me. Now, I'm not sure why you want the magnelectrograph, but guard it with your life. It's been in the depot safe since every other one of its kind on Mag vanished two years ago. Chuck Wilson — our shop manager, Ashley — damned near wouldn't let *me* have it!"

Ward paused, looking at them one by one.

"What's wrong, fellows? You look as if the world were about to end!" he said, raising his right hand to smooth back the prematurely silvery hair at his temples which had earned him his nickname.

"This is in strictest confidence, Silvy," Barris said, regarding Ward searchingly. "It may be a frank admission of multiple violations. The life of an awful lot of Terrans may be at stake. One—a Terran woman—has been abduct-

ed. Will it be kept in confidence?"

"You've got my word, Hill."

Barris told everything that had occurred since the Kenya's crash landing at Bebryan Spaceport.

Ward stared down at his clenched hands for a long time; then said, "You're right, Hill; it's time for us to take positive action in spite of our oath to uphold the regulations.

"As Administrator I've had access to many secret documents, records which previous administrators had kept and passed down without Joseph Dargo's knowledge. They're incomplete, but I'll give you what I have for what it's worth.

"When I came here from Terra and found this planet a repair base and little more, a way station where strangers condescended I might eat and sleep and work if I minded my own business and stayed within the bounds of the two Terran bases and the one airway, I didn't think it was too strange.

"I had come to the only place where there was a humanoid race that would at that time begin to associate with us. I felt I must respect the fact that there are others in creation, others who had

been, supposedly, thoroughly investigated by a man whom galactic history names as a great leader, others whom he had decreed should remain inviolate.

"Oh, I've often wondered why and then stopped wondering, telling myself Leems must have done the proper thing for the welfare of Terrans.

"Rams was alive at the time of LEO. So was Morga, who is now leader of the Ramsies. He must be fairly ancient, though he certainly doesn't look it. An arrogant creature. As far as I know, he's the only Ramsi with black hair. Sports a pointed beard and wears black robes; all others I've seen are blond and wear royal blue."

Barris cut in, "Then that must have been Morga who was here!"

Ward nodded. "He and Rams must have persuaded Leems that peaceful continuance of the hierarchy could only be achieved through non-contact between their worshippers and Terrans.

"Leems was all-powerful with the Stellar Exploratory Code behind him. What he dictated would remain law until good and sufficient reasons arose to change it. And, if you know the Terran High

Council, 'good and sufficient reasons' means incontrovertible proof that Terran citizens are suffering extremely!

"When the regulations were issued, the Centaurians had rejected us as primitives unfit for association. At least here we'd gained a way station for farther stars. That's important when you're limited to five parsecs by the hyper-space drive.

"Certainly we've given the Ramsies the full benefit of our science. All I can say is that it's just as well that we have; otherwise they'd have stolen it!"

Barris exclaimed.

"Surprises you, doesn't it?" Ward asked. "Well, previous administrators decided to keep certain equipment that came into the depot secret and in every instance that equipment vanished from the depot even though it was locked and closely guarded!

"You wondered at their transportation, Hill. It's obvious to me that they've some means of moving themselves and things around that far surpasses our atmosphere ships *and* hyperspace drive. And, fellows, there's a prayer plaque in the depot!

"So where does it bring us? Right up against the wall of the regulations!"

"But, Mr. Ward," Ashley said, "there were a dozen Terran High Councilmen on the *Kenya*. Most of them are well. They should be sympathetic."

"I'm sure they would be," Ward said. "And they'd be glad to take their recommendations back to Terra! This calls for action *now*, not six months from now when the Council meets again!"

"Look," Barris said, "why don't we simply invade their holy of holies—Daskanerf? An old map I saw here shows it mostly to be a vast, level plain. My helijet apparently landed there without crashing; the three of us couldn't have been hurt badly in the landing. I'm sure the field over Daskanerf is so polarized as to disrupt our communications. I'm also sure that we can counter it and take an ordinary atmosphere ship in for a landing."

"I can't give you my official sanction," Ward said slowly. "But, Hill, don't you think I suspect what you have in mind? This magnelectograph I brought is the only one left here—the others vanished from the depot as I said. They were unquestionably stolen by Ramsies so that the field of Daskanerf couldn't be tested.

"You're free to use any equipment you'll need. In your own official capacities you've free access to the depot and shops. I'm with you to the limit unofficially, and if you get into trouble I'll do everything I can officially to get you out of it!"

"But, Hill, I still can't see how you can get to Daskanerf! Airborne radar won't do it; you know we've never been able to make it work here."

"How about an instrument landing system?" Barris asked.

Ward's eyebrows went up. "But how would you get an I.L.S. on Daskanerf without flying a ship in first—which, without airborne radar, is impossible to begin with?"

Barris pointed to the prayer plaque on the library wall. "There's your answer," he said. "Chuck Wilson must have decontamination tugs in the depot; they're overhauled regularly. Load a pair of them with suitable I.L.S. equipment. Veil them in mystery. Toss out the bait and equate, my friend, and we're on Daskanerf.

"Silvy, you've got to arrange a flight to show the Councilmen and some Ramsies the efficacy of our omnirange system and the

need for extending the airway. Then if Julian can pilot the ship and bring it to Daskanerf, we may be able to force the Ramsies to release Val unharmed and to cure these suffering men from the Kenya."

He turned to Modlin. "Doc, I must be released from the

hospital immediately." He turned back. "Silvy, I'm taking your vehicle; you can easily call another. I'm going out on the Dwod Peninsula and I'm going alone; it's better that way. I've got to measure the field of Daskanerf or we'll never be able to adapt an instrument landing



system to penetrate it. And I want all of you to get out of this room and to stay out. Keep it locked. It's dangerous!"

He picked up the magnelectograph. "So long, fellows," he said, and left.

It was a wild plan, he knew—but it had to work!

CHAPTER VI

THE ETERNAL FOG was soup-thick on the coastal road and he was thankful for the vehicle's infra-reds. He drove at top speed and reached the base of the peninsula in record time. Driving the vehicle



off the road, he secreted it in the fern forest and dismounted, hiking the magnelectograph up on his shoulder.

He moved forward now through light surface mist with the thick fog hanging but feet above his head. Light, head-high ferns brushed at him wetly, silkily.

He had gone less than half a mile when he suddenly found a featureless wall confronting him. He stared upward. Ten feet of glistening wet surface met his gaze and shiftings of the fog layer showed it went even higher, how much higher he could not guess.

He had never known there was a barrier here on the peninsula—but then no Terran could have known. To his knowledge, no Terran had ever dared to come here before.

Shrugging, he turned right and went north. He had proceeded scarcely a dozen yards when he was arrested by the sight of a prayer plaque on the adamantine wall.

Why should a prayer plaque be located here in the middle of nowhere?

He shrugged again, perplexed, and continued on with waning confidence, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder.

A hissing, threshing thunder crescendoed from the obscurity ahead.

He paused on the verge of a dishearteningly sheer cliff. It was impossible to look upon the sea, for another fog blanket of unknown thickness lay upon it. The sea was audibly alive with the movements and ululations of unseen leviathans, survivors of a paleozoic which must have made that of Mother Earth tame indeed by comparison. He shuddered, turned, and retraced his steps along the frowning wall.

Suddenly he paused in amazement. A door had opened inward in the wall, the prayer plaque he had seen proving now to be in its center. There had been no slightest sign of an opening when he had paused here before!

Unease gripped him and he strained his eyes through the eastward arc of fronded fern and swirling fog. He detected no movement.

Hesitatingly he went on through the portal, paused and surveyed this other silent arc of fog and wet green fern. Nothing came to his ears save dripping sounds from the drenched vegetation.

A slight whisper of sound came from behind him. He whirled around. The portal had closed.

Fear swept him then. He was cut off on the wall's westward side! Nervously he darted glances at the thicker fern growths, certain there must be lurking forms behind them; then his eyes went back to the wall. There was a prayer plaque on this side of the portal also. His gaze was held by it almost as though a hypnotic spell were being cast from it.

He approached the wall, noting now the faintest line tracing out the portal's frame. There seemed to be no way whatsoever of opening the door.

His eyes went back to the plaque. There seemed to be a swirling of color in the opalescent bubble at its center. As he watched it the fear seemed to ebb and his confidence to return.

Suddenly then he turned westward with high resolve and, hiking the magnelectrograph higher on his shoulder, stepped forward at a quick pace. He had gone a mile without incident when the instrument began clicking like an activated Geiger counter. Its synchroscope trigger had unquestionably detected the fringe of the electromagnetic field broadcast from Daskan-erf. It told him that the field had been restored so that it covered again the entire Cen-

tral Sea and the intruding Dwod Peninsula.

Half a mile farther on he visually found the pulse of the auroral effect rising up, a curving arch in the milky obscurity. He moved swiftly on into the convolutions of shifting shades and at length drew to an abrupt halt where the peninsula ended in a sheer, jagged-edged cliff over the invisible, fog-wrapped sea. He found to his amazement that there was no sound from below. Did the monsters of the Central Sea shun the aurora? The sea had been thunderously alive with them back at the peninsula's aurora-free base.

Or was there something else, some eldritch menace lurking here which even the gargantuan monsters shunned?

He was trembling. Moving back from the cliff's edge, he again apprehensively scanned the eerily pulsating fog. Certain that he was alone, he swung the magnelectrograph's strap around behind his neck, holding the instrument like a counter before him.

He extended tiny, intricate disc-cones from their recesses, snapped on the magnetonar converter and bent his eyes to the dial series. He made slight adjustments to the carrier-operated cavity. The resulting

pulses of purple snaking across the twin scopes of the polarstatic indicator and wave band indicator verified his earlier suspicions: the field of Daskanerf consisted wholly of circularly polarized interference which swept almost instantaneously across the entire magnetonar waveband!

No wonder his helijet's instruments had gone awry near Daskanerf! And no wonder the Ramsies had stolen the other magnelectrographs! The secret of their field was not safe as long as such an instrument was on Mag.

Ferns rustled suddenly behind him. He spun around as a dark figure leaped at him—the dark Ramsi, Morga—with arms outflung to thrust him over that awesome precipice.

Barris leaped desperately sidewise toward a small outcropping of rock, grasping its harsh surface with frantic fingers.

Morga tried to halt his charge, flailing at Barris with clawing hands, but went plunging past, screaming with rage, past and over the cliff, falling and vanishing into the foggy depths.

Barris clung trembling to the slippery, ragged rock, ears straining to catch a further outcry of the sound of the Ramsi's body plunging

into the tideless sea. But as the shuddering seconds went into minutes no other sound broke the foggy stillness—

With supreme effort Barris dragged himself up and regained his footing. He cast one last, panic-stricken glance down over the broken precipice and, heading east, ran blindly through the wet, softly clutching wilderness toward the wall, refusing to believe that the portal would be still closed.

It was not closed. He dashed through it; then arrested his flight, turning, thinking.

The portal proceeded to close silently behind him and on its adamantine surface the bubble of the prayer plaque gleamed enigmatically.

Did the bubble hold a scanning pickup for some far remote equipment at which a Ramsi watched—the golden-bearded one, perhaps? Or the other, the lovely one of long ago?

Oh, God, Mag! he thought, *what is your secret?*

Darkness was gathering and with it fear began to mount in him again. He had to leave this lonely and dangerous place and get back to his own again lest the secret of the field of Daskanerf die with him here in the unknown terrors of alien night.

CHAPTER VII

BY THE TIME Barris reached Silvy Ward's vehicle the sharp edge of panic had dulled and he was thinking clearly.

Time, he told himself, was now most certainly of the essence. Unless positive action were taken with a minimum of delay, all would be lost.

Silvy was the Terran Base Administrator but Joseph Dargo was Chief of the Security Police. With full authority for enforcement of the regulations vested in him and backed by the Extraterrestrial Security Code, Dargo could remove Ward from his command by simply declaring him unfit. Only the Terran High Council—when next in session on Terra—could question his edict.

Barris was certain that Morga had not fallen to his doom. The Ramsi had been conscious when he went over the cliff but his scream had been of rage, not of fear—No person consciously falling to his death would have remained silent. And he had certainly heard nothing to indicate that Ramsi's body had hit a ledge or the sea. He had only the nebulous beginnings of an understanding of the means of transportation which the

Ramsies employed but he felt sure that it had saved Morga from death.

There were two sources of certain danger—Dargo and Morga. Both unquestionably had numerous cohorts. Dargo had the Terran Base Security Police completely under his thumb. Morga as head of the Ramsies undoubtedly could if he chose send many agents to work his will. It seemed strange, indeed, that Morga had not already done so.

Valinda—what of her? Morga had apparently abducted her. It seemed likely that he had taken her to Daskanerf.

Barris was certain that the answer to every strangeness on Mag lay on fog-wrapped Daskanerf. He knew now how to get there. But he must move quickly.

What had the golden-bearded Ramsi said? "Death and delay run on the same time track—" Yes, that was it.

He must get Arthur Ashley to meet him at the depot. They could adapt the necessary equipment together.

A check of the magnelectrograph proved he was well outside Daskanerf's broadcast field. He immediately activated the transceiver in Ward's vehicle and pushed the number sequence for the desk

at Dwod General Hospital.

"Dr. Modlin, please," he said urgently when the desk clerk responded.

Dargo would probably have men monitoring the magnetonar communications band; he'd have to speak cryptically.

"Modlin here—"

"Doc," he said, "this is your ex- but nameless patient. I need a double-A assist at the main vanishing point. Catch?"

Modlin hesitated briefly; then said, "Caught! More?"

"Alert big A little g for finalization. Over!"

Modlin hesitated again; then acknowledged.

"Out!" Barris said and killed the transceiver. Quickly he started the vehicle, gained the road and headed at top speed for the depot adjoining the spaceport near Dwod, confident that Modlin had understood that the *double-A* meant Arthur Ashley, the *main vanishing point* the depot, *Ag* the symbol for silver, hence Silvy, and *finalization* the planned flight to end on Daskanerf.

BARRIS HAD BEEN with Charles "Chuck" Wilson, the stocky, middle-aged depot super, for ten minutes when a hospital vehicle dropped Ash-

ley at the door and departed.

Barris was hurrying Ashley toward the magnetonar shop when the visifone buzzed in Wilson's office. Wilson went to answer it; they saw his heavy face go stolid.

"Haven't seen Barris. Never heard of the other fellow. . . . Sure I'll keep an eye. . . . Oh, I'm here cleaning up paperwork. We lost a lot of incoming equipment on the Kenya. Have to requisition more. . . . Sure! Glad to! Out!"

He switched off and came out. "Dargo sniffing after you two. Wouldn't say why."

Morga, irate from failure, had probably reported violations of sanctity. Dargo would give the investigation his personal attention.

"Can you keep him out if he comes here?" Barris asked.

"Of course not!" Wilson said, "but I'll warn you by dimming the shop lights. Customary procedure to get the boys on a shiny jet when brass comes."

"Okay!" Barris said and hurried with Ashley to the magnetonar shop buried in shielding screens in the depot's heart.

Barris quickly related his findings, concluding with, "We just have to find some other way of polarizing magnetonar so that our signals

will cut through the interference."

"Sixty-one Cygni," Ashley said.

"Cygni?" Barris frowned.

"Sixty-one Cygni Expedition One struck an electromagnetic field a few billion miles short of Cygni's outermost planet's orbit which ripped them out of hyperspace into the normal space time continuum. They had to stay in free fall in that; they couldn't translate back and didn't have a reliable piece of equipment to permit astrogation. They'd never have reached Cygni anyway; not enough fuel, food or time.

"Their electronics boys developed spiral polarization equipment and installed it in the field perception unit of the drive. It worked. We can adapt the idea to magnetonar. Rotating goniometers is the basis. The whole apparatus is governed by gyroscopic action and the phase angle of the emitted wave follows the sine angle in degrees as determined by the relationship of the goniometer primary and secondary fields. You'll get the idea; let's get to work!"

Their trained fingers flashed, welding together gyroscopes, disc-cones, helipots, magnetstriction lines—

Two hours later they were

tired but triumphantly regarding the two compact units and the unusually shaped antenna unit they had made.

The lights flickered.

"Dargo!" Barris cried. He seized a unit, dove into one of the big cases that held the tugs. Quickly entering the decontamination tug, he slipped the unit into the empty communications rack.

There were approaching footsteps and Dargo's flat voice:

"Lights wouldn't be on at this hour with the place vacant. You're not that bad a super, Wilson! Furthermore, Ward's vehicle is outside and he's been at headquarters for hours. It was last seen by my men racing away from Dwod General as they approached from the prison area. I believe that Barris either borrowed or stole it."

"I drove it here," Wilson said. "Sure, mine's out there but one of my boys had been using it and I happened to be—"

"Don't lie to me, Wilson!" Dargo snapped. "This detector measures any heat radiation. Both motors show recent use. Now shut up while I test!"

Silence; then Dargo said, "Barris, I've spotted both you and your companion. I've a

stunner and will use it in precisely thirty seconds if you don't come out!"

Barris knew that a stunner's radiation could reach him at practically full force despite the surrounding metal of the tug. He also knew that the thermocouple device which Dargo unquestionably held had betrayed his hiding place. He went quickly forth, calling to Ashley to join him.

Dargo confronted them, squat, incredibly muscular in his tight green uniform. His hairless head was bare. His heavy jowled face showed a twisted triumph. He said sneeringly, "So you broke under the regs at last, Barris! Leems was right; five years is enough for one not born here. I'm surprised you stood ten. Perhaps you'll be so fortunate as to be sent back to Terra now that you're cured, but I don't think so. Multiple violations mean death or at least mental erasure!"

Wilson, beside Dargo, chopped down sharply with the heel of his right hand, knocking the leveled stunner aside. Barris and Ashley leaped forward together.

Dargo swung his thick arms, sending stocky Wilson and slender Ashley sprawling and then catching Barris' wrists with crushing grasp.

Barris butted Dargo in the chest but the great arms tightened and Dargo brought his heavy chin down on Barris' head with stunning force.

Then Barris found himself wavering on his knees, semi-conscious, freed, staring dumbly at Dargo unconscious before him.

Wilson waved a steel bar. "Well, now I'm also eligible for the Dargo treatment! Maybe a trip home, I hope!"

"What can we do now?" Ashley asked nervously.

"Hide him," Barris said, rising dizzily.

"Can't you take him to the hospital?" Wilson asked. "Maybe you could talk Modlin into keeping him under sedation. Hy Modlin's a good—"

"He's on our side already," Barris cut in. "But we couldn't get Dargo into Dword General without being seen. Dargo's men are probably swarming all over the place. We'll be lucky not to get arrested, even without Dargo with us!"

"Well," Wilson said, "Silvy called while you were working and told me about an inspection tour and a flight tomorrow. I'm to expect Councilmen and Ramsies tomorrow morning. I couldn't very well hide Dargo here." He paused, pondering. "But, wait—maybe

I can! The reactor room's the place. It's off limits because of potential radiation poisoning but I can jury-rig shielding to protect Dargo and can give him enough sedation from the first aid kit to keep him unconscious—forever if you want!"

"If we can't finish what we're planning in twenty-four hours, we'll give up," Barris said. "Come on; we'll help you with him."

MOMENTS LATER they were in Wilson's office again.

"Chuck," Barris said, "when the Ramsies and Councilmen are here, tell the Councilmen—acting like they already know about it—that *that* new equipment damaged on the *Kenya* has been repaired and is to be shipped out on the *Star of Botrodus* which is due in. Make sure the Ramsies overhear it. Okay?"

"I get it," Wilson said. "After a while things start to penetrate even as thick a skull as mine. Why did Silvy bring you the magnetrograph? Why do you want decon tugs and portable instrument landing system equipment? Why do you want to make something attractive to our thieving friends, the Ramsies? Why, also, did Silvy order me

to close the depot smack on mid-day tomorrow? Why the big shindig and the flight? It's all rather obvious, Hill.

"Now you two go back to the hospital and rest. Take Dargo's vehicle and dump it in the fern forest. Don't worry about Dargo; he's set for not just tonight but a couple of nights. Get going now before some of his boys start missing him."

"Thanks, Chuck!" Barris said fervently.

"Don't thank me," Wilson answered. "Thank God Almighty that we're coming to our senses at last!"

CHAPTER VIII

MIDNIGHT. Ashley and Ortiz were sound asleep. Barris, on another bed squeezed into the thoroughly searched and now securely locked room, tossed restlessly.

Dargo was out of the way. Two of the Terran Security Police had questioned Barris and Ashley when they had returned to the hospital, but they had cleverly parried.

As Barris stared upward in the dimly lighted room, the image of a prayer plaque came unbidden into his mind, its opalescent bubble a hypnotic eye between white wings.

He thought then of the prayer plaque in the locked

library, of the beauty of it that brought remembrance of forbidden loveliness—and he knew that he must go and gaze upon it—

He felt no fear; danger seemed far away.

He let himself out into the dim corridor, relocking the door behind him and walking swiftly and surely to the library. His right hand twirled the diallock with automatic precision. The door fell open. The golden-bearded Ramsi faced him from within.

Barris sensed a great physical magnetism emanating from the Ramsi and knew, without fear, that some strong alien persuasion was here at play.

This Ramsi was the antithesis of everything Morga was. Dark menace was constantly in Morga's face; this strong face held only kindness—or godliness! From the flowing golden hair to the very fringe of the deep blue robes, this Ramsi was every inch an angel of another god indeed!

There was urgency in the Ramsi's face.

"Hill Barris," he said, "I am Himar of Daskanerf. I have only moments but I had to warn you of the science that may be used against you. Morga was injured in a fall from the Dwod Peninsula,

grazing against the cliff before managing to project to Daskanerf. I arranged for sedation but one of Morga's friends may countermand my orders at any moment.

"I know of your plans. I was observing through the focus-point—prayer plaque, you Terrans call it!—which was mounted here when you spoke with Ward, Modlin, Ashley and Ortiz. Fortunately it was I and not Morga at the master viewing console then! I've dismounted the focuspoint now; no other Ramsi can project to here or observe this room henceforth."

Barris, gazing at the prayer plaque in the Ramsi's hand, knew then that he had to believe in Himar's sincerity; otherwise all was lost!

"Morga suspects that I've helped you, not only by treating Ashley, Ortiz and you, but also in observing through the focuspoints and using my influence upon you. In Morga's absence, I observed you through the focuspoint on the peninsula and remotely opened the portal both upon your entrance and departure. I assume that Morga tried to kill you there."

Barris nodded, speechless with thanks for the one who had cured him.

"Morga does not yet know

that I stole Valinda from this very room, and have her in seclusion on Daskanerf. She is infinitely safer there than she would be here.

"I should tell you this: I am the only living descendant of Rams. I would now be ruler of the Ramsies, as you call us, had not Rams willed that Morga should succeed to the supreme power for life with such power thereafter to revert to the blood of Rams.

"Morga is as your Leems was—a racial purist to the point of fanaticism. I feel that the regulations should be abolished and that Terrans and Maggians should intermingle and intermarry freely for the common good. Morga, on the other hand, wants to eliminate completely even the insignificant exchange of knowledge that has existed. I'm sure you understand; your own history reveals that discrimination has not always been non-existent on Terra!"

Barris asked suddenly, "But if Morga holds supreme power, how good are our chances of success?"

"If you can bring a ship to Daskanerf, that will be enough," Himar answered. "Morga has kept the majority of the Ramsies in agreement through convincing them of the superiority of our science.

His continual thefts from the Terran Base Depot helped him do so.

"If you can reach Daskanerf through cleverness in using our means of transportation, and then prove that yours can also circumvent the field of Daskanerf, I think that an unjust and jealous leader will be overthrown. Rams must not have wholly trusted Morga; the Code prescribes that succeeding leaders may be removed by majority action of our council."

Himar paused as a faint buzzing sound came from the dismounted focuspoint.

"I must go now; Morga is conscious. A friend now warns me."

Barris found the Ramsi suddenly handing him the diary which he had thought lost.

"I'm sorry for having taken this from you on Daskanerf. I had to be sure that I was right and Morga wrong. I am sure now; your written words have told me all I need to know of the innate decency and sincerity of Terrans. You and your companions will, I know, be welcome on Daskanerf.

"The library is safe now but, Hill Barris, beware of Dargo, for he is a friend of Morga and, most curiously, an even greater purist than Leems was.

"And mark this well: a Ramsi can only project to a focuspoint—or prayer plaque, if you will—but not when it is moving. Moreover, the focuspoint must be clear.

"Good luck, Hill Barris. Safe passage to Daskanerf! Val awaits you there—and a cure awaits your friends!"

So saying, the Ramsi touched his hands to something beneath the robes at his waist—and instantly vanished.

My God! Barris thought. *This is like hyperspace travel. The theory and math must be basically akin—*

He stood alone and suddenly very lonely. He had had so many questions to ask—

Why had Himar said Val was safer on Daskanerf than she would be here? There must be more than the menace of Dargo and the threat of enforcement of the regulations. What did the regulations mean anyway when they said no female Terran under thirty should be allowed to land on Mag? Was there something here that endangered younger Terran women, something that didn't exist on Daskanerf or from which a woman could be shielded there?

His mind seized upon Himar's last phrase: "—a cure awaits your friends!" He himself had been cured on Das-

kanerf. Was that because a curative dose was determinable when the disease was of comparatively long duration but not when newly contracted? Or had Himar deliberately failed to cure Ortiz and Ashley to give them all a great incentive to tear away the veil from Daskanerf? Had Himar taken Val away for the same reason?

Barris wandered from the library, leaving its door ajar, and returned to his bed.

He felt he would not—could not—sleep, but fell almost instantly into heavy, dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER IX

THERE IS A GREAT nervous tension when you know full well that danger lurks all about you against which you have but little defense—danger that can whisper in on the very magnetic lines of force which band this alien world, whispering out of some strange focuspoint, suddenly real and strong and overpowering!

Barris said nothing to his companions of Himar's visit. Can you tell a man of Sol that someone of another sun hadn't fully cured him because the alien thought, for reasons at least partly selfish, that the

fact he wasn't cured might help him? Can you do that without instilling in the Terran a sudden hatred, however unreasonable, of the benefactor who had failed to be completely beneficent?

Barris briefed Ortiz at breakfast; then they and Ashley sped to the hangar adjoining the depot in a hospital car.

They found that Wilson's men had already mounted the twin antenna bank on the patrol ship. Barris and Ashley left Ortiz at the ship. Wilson waved them into the depot, his faint smile telling them that Dargo was still safely secured.

No one was in the depot proper. Since the Ramsi focuspoint was in a secluded room down a corridor they could not be observed from it. They realized, however, that the depot would not be vacant long and each of them hastily entered a tug case.

The hurrying was done and the waiting began.

As the moments dragged by in the tight darkness of the tug, doubts began to assail Hill Barris.

Did the Ramsies' robes hold the secret of sustaining life during their flashing passage through a space-time warp? Lacking such shielding, were he and Ashley going to death?

Had Himar really taken Val? Or had it been Morga? Were Himar and Morga really hand in hand to reject Terrans from Mag? Was it Alpha Centauri all over again?

And Barris recalled the terse words of the third regulation: "There shall be no inter-racial association whatsoever except with Ramsies—"

What of the native girl of ten years ago? Was some dark, twisted revenge coming now because of his brief but burning acquaintance with her? It was certainly Val he loved but the other had been so lovely—and so near—

And, Val, if she were on Daskanerf—was she truly safe?

Whatever was to come he had to believe in Himar's representations of friendship—

Muffled voices were passing the case: Wilson's rumbling bass, Councilmen and Ramsies—

Barris could just barely hear them. He managed to make out a few of Wilson's words, enough to know that the seed had been planted.

The depot was silent again.

I must keep my mind occupied, Barris thought. He ran his hands lightly over the equipment he and Ashley had made: the glidepath localizer unit and the transceiver; and

then over the tug's twin control columns and around to the bulkhead of the engine compartment. His fingers paused on the capsules of fuel for the atomic motor. *Fuel enough*, he thought, *for all the time we'll probably have—*

He urgently wished to review with Ashley what they planned to do when and if they reached Daskanerf. Better judgment told him that magnetonar silence must be kept. Ramsies might be monitoring the waveband. Dargo's men *certainly* would be. Any unreadable, unexplainable signal would provoke the curiosity of one group or the other.

Time crawled by. He found himself nodding, fought sleep, lost.

WHEN HE WOKE with a start he found that nearly six hours had passed. 1545 hours. Time was getting short; Julian would long since have landed at Bebryan, would now be heading back on the airway!

He reached out in the darkness and ran his hands over the equipment again. Once the localizer was pointed due west along Daskanerf's central plain, the unit would send out a carrier beam to the heli-disccone radiators. Two spirally

polarized patterns would be obtained, upon each of which would be superimposed a different modulation frequency. The patrol ship's receiver with its similarly polarized twin antenna bank coming from the west would find the two modulations equal. The vertical needle of the ship's movable cross-pointer indicator would remain vertical. As long as the ship stayed on course, that needle would not deviate, but if the ship strayed horizontally and received one modulation frequency stronger than the other, then the needle would move correspondingly downward to right or left until Ortiz guided the ship back to the sharp course between the two patterns.

Barris' mind jerked back from conjecture. A faint sound came from outside the case, as of something being attached to it with utmost stealth.

Silence save for the whisper of racing pulse.

His mind returned to the equipment. *If—*he thought, and thrust the word from his mind. *When* they reached Daskanerf in or near the Temple of Rams on the island's only reported highpoint, they would break out of the cases with the tugs and descend the mountain to the plain. Ashley would have to reach a point

adjacent to the proposed touchdown point for the ship so that his glidepath could throw up its twin patterns, each with its superimposed modulation frequency, to form the angle for the ship's descent, to activate the horizontal needle of the ship's indicator and complete the vibrant cross which would guide Julian in for a landing.

It sounded easy. Chances were it wouldn't be.

Unaccountably, he thought suddenly of Joseph Dargo. With the spying devices at their disposal, the Terran Base Security Police would certainly soon find their strange leader. On the other hand, they might already have found him.

Himar had said that Dargo was a friend of Morga. Were Morga and Dargo working together, Morga playing upon the fact that Dargo was Mag-born and apparently of half-Maggian blood? Were Morga and Dargo together somewhere now, waiting to spring some unthinkable trap for Ashley and himself?

His mind whirled into a maelstrom—

And he was giddy, nauseous—and he *whisked*—and he was still in the darkness of the tug inside its case, but he knew then as surely as he

knew there was a greater god than Rams that the case was no longer in the depot at Dwod!

There was excited murmuring from outside: voices speaking the liquid language of Mag. Ramsies, certainly, *many* Ramsies!

Time: 1639. Only a minute since he last had looked!

As he reached for the transceiver, he heard the case's outer latches being torn free. Unhesitatingly he activated the transceiver and said, "Ashley, answer!"

"Here," Ashley responded. "Wherever here is!"

"Rams' Temple, I think. Let's break out before they pry us out. Once oriented, we'll move accordingly. Follow me. Once we reach the plain, you get a half mile west of me and four hundred feet right of the centerline so Julian won't drop on you. Use gyrosteering so we'll be lined up properly."

"Right! Let's go!"

Barris activated the tug's atomic motor. The caterpillar tread surged. The vehicle's heavily shielded snout smashed through the case's hinged end.

Upon the tug's periscreen flashed the interior of the Temple: fluted columns, rich, blue draperies, dozens of star-

tled, berobed Ramsies rushing from his path.

An arch ahead. Stairs down which the tug rolled buoyantly, tread blocks clattering sharply.

Out of the massive building now, the mountainside falling away before him, jagged, nearly precipitous, its slope strangely naked of the low-hanging clouds overhead and of the fogbanks writhing on the valley floor far below.

Twisting down that tortuous slope was what had once been a road, a rutted, eroded trace of a trail now, mute evidence that those who once used it traveled now via another means of transportation.

Barris headed down that shadow of a long-dead road, praying the tug's protesting bogey wheels would stand the pounding of the raggedly eroded surface and not cast off the spinning tracks.

He turned toward a sheer precipice on his left, jerked urgently on twin steering columns and slowed on the verge of a deep, rock-rimmed washout. He called a warning to Ashley over the transceiver as he slowly navigated the gulch.

Out of the washout now, the road suddenly clean and clear, straight down into the dense fog on the plain. Knowing im-

possibly there was nothing to obstruct him, he dove into the fog with the swooping descent of a preying hawk.

"Heading East, Art!" he cried exultantly.

"West, Hill! See you later, I hope!"

The atomic motors whined. The tugs blindly separated on whirling tracks, racing into white, turbulent obscurity.

DN AND ON.

We're blundering. Barris thought. Going nowhere on through endless fog. 1650 hours with the beams not fixed.

Now here we are! Positions! Stopping, turning, heading west. Localizer on!

There you are, Julian! There's your runway center-line on this blasted island! There's the line from me to you and I hope to God you're there!

"Art, are you in position?" he cried at the transceiver.

"Yes, Hill. Glide path on just—but look at the time! If Julian passed Mount Murro—"

"Maybe he received the localizer signal. I've had it on for a minute now."

"I wish we knew!"

"We never will know until he goes subsonic. He'll have

nearly landed before we get the sound wave."

"Yeah," Ashley said pessimistically, "if he's coming. Perhaps we were—*Now*, what the devil? Something's just dropped in through the antenna port! Bouncing around

like a rubber ball. It's stopped. Hill, it's glowing like a prayer plaque! It's—*oh, God! here's Morga!*"

The transceiver's speaker crackled and heterodyned. Ominous silence followed.

"Art!" Barris cried. "For God's sake, answer!"

Silence—and then another voice came:

"This is Morga, Barris. I did not die on the peninsula as you probably thought. Don't worry about Ashley; I have only stunned him for now. He must, however, suffer complete memory erasure or death as will you and all other violators.

"Your scheme is wrecked now, Barris. I have turned off this primitive beam unit; you will not bring a ship to Daskanerf now!"

Barris quickly activated the glide path unit in his duplicate equipment so that both it and the localizer beam were



emanating from his tug. Pulling the beams' sources together made his tug the precise touchdown point for the incoming ship—if it was incoming! He was a sitting duck with twin beads converging on him, but there was no choice!

His mind cried, *Whatever Morga has done to Ashley I must prevent being done to me!*

"Morga," he cried into the transceiver, "the ship cannot reach Daskanerf now. It must be dropping uncontrollably into the sea—a great loss to Terra but equally a loss to Mag! At least ten Ramsies are aboard; do you not wish to save them?"

Morga's exultant voice rasped in the speaker. "So Himar hasn't told you of our projection! I thought you knew when you tricked us into removing the cases from Dwod. No, those of Daskanerf have nothing to fear!"

"But, Morga, I do not understand," Barris said, hoping to temporize.

There was no response.

Morga must have left Ashley's tug, must now be striding through the swirling fog toward him—

If he could only close the antenna port! But he could not do so while—if—the ship were on the beams.

Ashley had said that something—a focuspoint in sphere form, surely—had been dropped into his tug before Morga had projected himself inside.

What had Himar said? That a focuspoint must be motionless?

Could he oscillate the tug sufficiently to maintain a rideable pair of beams yet deny Morga a usable focuspoint?

He moved the tug forward, slamming on the brakes so the vehicle bobbed wildly on its springs, slammed it into reverse before the shock absorbers took hold, slammed the brakes again.

Forward — backward — forward — backward — oscillating, oscillating —

The beams were certainly penduluming but they must be fanning out sufficiently so that Julian Ortiz would still receive them until he was within a few miles of the landing. Then the beams' paths would be so tight and close together that the transmitting units would have to be kept stationary to make the beams reliable.

He would be forced to stop oscillating the tug when the ship throttled to subsonic speed for landing!

Something came hurtling down through the antenna port then, bouncing as Ashley had

said another something had bounced; then rolling back and forth on the rocking floor.

Morga was surely clinging outside, waiting for the oscillation to cease so that he might project himself within—

Above the tug's whining motor Barris heard the throbbing of jets. *The patrol ship was coming in!*

His teeth clenched, he cut the tug's motor. Simultaneously Morga's voice cried exultantly outside the tug.

A focuspoint must be clear! Barris thought frantically.

He turned and dove for the stationary focuspoint sphere, seized it, straightened, and snapped open the motor's tiny fuel compartment. He thrust the sphere inside—and was instantly splattered with blood and sundered flesh and splintered bone fragments bursting expansively from the open door of the compartment which could not have contained the body of a dwarf—

Barris was seized then with violent nausea. In that retching, tortured moment he was dimly aware that the incoming ship had apparently made visual contact since it was taking evasive action, zooming overhead, rocking the tug sickeningly with fierce turbulence of frantically blasting jets.

He dragged himself weakly from the malodorous, blood-stained tug, gulping in the clean damp air of the plain, almost completely oblivious to the sounds from the eastern fog which told him the ship was safely down and taxiing back.

The ground was solid beneath his numbed and weary feet, solid for a moment and then it was spinning on a shifting, mad eccentric and he was toppling forward, exhausted and ill—

CHAPTER X

A DREAM AGAIN—

Not a nightmare of swirling, eternal fog enfolding the dark, dead, bloody face of Morga but instead a dream of Val—

Oh, God! Val, how many dreams have I dreamt of you?

The dream was reality, the miasmatic fog of a lonely decade gone. He lay upon a padded table in that dimly remembered white aseptic room on Daskanerf and Val was smiling down at him.

"Val!"

Warmth of unforgotten lips on his own again, full breasts aflame against his chest, long blonde wavy hair tumbling silkily against his tear-wet cheeks.

"Hello, Hill!"

Oh, Val! he thought, *how could I have ever even for a moment embraced another?*

"It's been a long time," he said.

"Too long, darling!"

Her vibrant voice sang through him. Her arms were helping him now to a sitting position, caressing him, and her body was strong and warm against his.

He sobbed. The years had been so long, the emptiness so great—

"Hill Barris!" Himar's voice came now, softly comforting across the room.

He told himself that the nightmare was truly gone. Morga's blood was no longer upon him. He was cleansed, new.

"Sorry," he said, "things caught up with me."

Val's slender fingers were disturbing yet soothing magic on his temples.

"Hill," Himar said, "time may still be of the essence. Your stay on Mag may have to end."

"But surely you are not considering expelling us as Morga wished!"

"No. Your friends shall, of course, hereafter have full access to all Mag. What I meant is that Valinda may have to return to Terra without delay.

I feel you would wish to go with her.

"When I learned from your diary that she is only twenty-six, I brought her here hoping to shield her. I hope I was successful!"

"Shield her?" Barris asked puzzledly.

Himar surveyed him compassionately. "Think carefully on this, Hill. Can you face the fact that Valinda might one day bear you a son as physically unattractive to your way of thinking as Joseph Dargo must appear not only to you and her but to all Terrans?"

"But Dargo was a cross. His mother was undoubtedly a Maggian!"

A twisted smile appeared upon the Ramsi's lips. "A cross? So Leems and Rams and Morga said to conceal the fact that Dargo was the son of Leems' younger daughter and of Philip Dargo of Terra, thus completely of Terran ancestry!"

"Why do you think Leems established the Fifth Regulation? Because, Hill, Leems was a fanatical purist. His two daughters were with LEO. Both wed Terrans, conceived on Mag and bore male children here. One daughter was thirty-one, the other twenty-five. The older daughter's child was normal for his parentage; the

younger daughter's was not.

"On that basis, substantiated by the findings of his medical staff, Leems established the fifth regulation. He established the others to obviate a recurrence and also to prevent intermarriage of our races.

"It is an established fact that Lalande's rays affect the chromosomes of women of your race under thirty so that their offspring will be in every respect physically identical to the Maggians you have seen. You may correctly gather from that that we would be as you of Sol were it not for our sun. To us it is normalcy; to you it may seem as monstrous as Morga taught Dargo it is. I hope it does not."

Another Ramsi had entered the room and drew Himar aside, speaking swiftly in the Ramsi tongue.

Barris swung stiffly to the floor and leaned back against the table, right arm around Valinda's waist. He thought silently of hairless, thickset Dargo, one of solely Terran ancestry who undoubtedly was handsome according to certain Maggian standards.

You had to discount the Ramsies, he thought; they must be of a slightly different race. Perhaps here on Daskan-erf the Ramsies had learned to shield their women until past

the age when Lalande's rays would affect their offspring. That should account for the fact that the Ramsies were different from Dargo and the hairless men of Mag whom Barris had so often seen in both Bebryan and Dwod.

Well, whatever happened the barriers between the races were down now.

Mag would welcome colonists—and permanent colonies could not be established without children and children's children as a consequence. Terra needed a permanent colony on Mag. Only Terra of all of Sol's worlds was truly habitable; and in all the systems searched within five parsecs, only three other habitable worlds had been found—that in Alpha Centauri which had rejected them, one just found in Procyon and, of course, Mag of Lalande 21,185.

Someday there would certainly be an intermingling of the races of the suns, humans and humanoids. Perhaps interbreeding of the finer strains of Terra and Mag might produce a civilization welcome to the austere Centaurians. The fanaticism of Leems could not stand in the way of a truly Galactic race!

Barris smiled perplexedly. One day Val might, indeed, bear him a son. But might he

not be like the Ramsies, tall, splendid, strong?

Whatever Himar might say would make no difference, really. If not here and now, then sometime somewhere else Terran genes or chromosomes would be altered by the rays of other suns. And obviously from what he had heard of Morga and others, those of Mag looked forward to a life expectancy much greater than that of Terrans—

He had turned to Val when Himar spoke again.

"I'm afraid it's too late, Hill; the tests we've made of Val are positive!"

A strangely satisfied smile came to Val's face where Barris had thought to see quick dismay. He turned back to Himar then and said, "Why should Val seem *pleased*?"

"Perhaps not exactly pleased," Himar said, "but I believe that Valinda realized some time ago that mankind, including both our races, must accept change if we are to spread to other stars.

"Valinda entered the walled city of Dwod. She learned what no other Terran since Leems has known, but I'm sure she faces the knowledge much differently than Leems.

"I asked you if you could

face the fact that Valinda might bear a son like Dargo—a fact which you now must squarely face. Can you also face the fact that any daughter she may bear will be a normal female human being—a normal *Terran*, shall we say?—except that as maturity comes she will grow a little taller and infinitely more hirsute than even Terran males and, unless veiled as other mature Maggian women, will certainly be taken for one of those whom you have apparently thought to be males, namely we Ramsies?"

Hill Barris, regarding Himar's compassionate, bearded face, realized with a flooding of mixed emotions that that slender Maggian girl of long ago and Himar of Daskanerf were one!

But love or passion—whatever had been between them—had waned in the lost years between. Only friendship—a great and true friendship—remained.

His eyes locked with Himar's and the Ramsi's fixed glance sealed him to secrecy in that silent exchange.

He turned to Val then and found the promise of a fine and new tomorrow in her smiling, tear-streaked face.



by Robert Silverberg

The Flame and the Hammer

*The fate of Aldryne
depended on a weapon
that didn't exist!*



Illustrated by Bowman

The Flame and the Hammer

by Robert Silverberg

CHAPTER I

THE NIGHT the torturers of the Imperial Proconsul came to take his father away, Ras Duyair forced himself to carry out his Temple duties as usual. They had seized the old man just before sundown, as he was about to enter the Temple. Ras heard about it from one of the acolytes—but, setting his teeth determinedly, he went mechanically about his task. It had to be done. His father would not want Temple routine disturbed.

With straining muscles Duyair wheeled the ancient

atomic cannon on the Temple wall about on its carriage, and pointed it at the star-spattered sky. The snout of the antique weapon jutted menacingly from the parapet of the Temple of the Suns, but no one on Aldryne—least of all Ras—could take the cannon too seriously. It was of symbolic value only. It had not been fired in twelve hundred years.

But ritual prescribed that it be pointed at the skies each night. Duty done, Ras turned to the obsequious acolytes of the Temple who watched him. "Has my father returned?" he demanded.

An acolyte clad in ceremonial green said, "Not yet. He's still under interrogation."

Angrily Ras slapped the cool barrel of the giant gun and looked upward at the canopy of stars that decked the night sky of Aldryne. "They'll kill him," he muttered. "He'll die before he'll give up the secret of the Hammer. And then they'll come after me."

And I don't know the secret! he added silently. That was the ironic part of it. The Hammer—a myth, perhaps,

ONLY A FEW days ago as this is written, Robert Silverberg's first adult novel, The 13th Immortal, was published by Ace Books. We read it in a hurry, and found it excellent. But when Silverberg dropped into the office, he had lost none of his usual composure over the exciting milestone in his career. He had done a job, it was finished, and he hoped it was good—but now he was more interested in the next one!

out of the storehouse of antiquity. Suddenly, the Empire wanted it.

He shrugged. The Empire probably would forget all about it in a few days; Imperial people had a way of doing that. Here on Aldryne, they had little to do with the Empire.

He crouched in the firing bucket of the cannon. "Up there are ten dreadnaughts of the Imperial fleet. See them? Coming out of the Cluster at four o'clock. Now, watch!" His fingers played over the impotent control panel. "Pouf! Pouf! A million megawatts at a shot! Look at those ships crumple! Watch the gun dent their screens!"

A dry voice behind him said, "This is no time for games, Ras Duyair. We should be praying for your father."

Duyair turned. Standing there was Lugaur Holsp, second only to his father in the Temple hierarchy—and, standing six-three without his buskins, second only to Ras' six-six in height among the men of the Temple of the Suns. Holsp was wiry, spidery almost, with deep shadows setting his cheekbones in high relief.

Duyair reddened. "Ever since the age of fifteen, Lugaur, I've raised that cannon

to the skies at nightfall. Once a day for eight years. You might forgive me a fantasy or two about it. Besides, I was just amusing myself—breaking the tension, you might say."

A little self-consciously, he climbed out of the bucket. The acolytes seemed to be grinning at him.

"Your levity is out of place," Holsp said coldly. "Come within. We have to discuss this situation."

IT HAD BEGUN several weeks earlier, on Dervonar, home world of Emperor Dervon XIV and capital-planet of the Galactic Empire.

Dervon XIV was an old man; he had ruled the Empire for fifty years, and that was a terribly long time to preside over a thousand suns and ten times as many worlds.

He had been able to rule so long because he had inherited an efficient governing machine from his father, Dervon XIII. Dervon XIII had been an adherent of the pyramid system of delegating responsibility: at the top of all was the Emperor, who had two main advisers, each of whom had two advisers, each of whom had two advisers. By the time the system reached

the thirtieth or fortieth level, the chain of command spread out over several million souls.

Dervon XIV in old age was a tired, shrunken little man, bald, rheumy-eyed. He was given to wearing yellow robes and to sighing, and by now his mind clung to just one *idée fixe*: the Empire must be preserved.

To this end, too, were the endeavors of his two advisers bent: Barr Sepyan, Minister of the Near Worlds, and Corun Govleq, Minister of the Outer Marches. It was Govleq who came before Dervon XIV, map in hand, to tell him of trouble along the Empire's outer rim.

"A rebellion, sire," he said, and waited for the aged eyes to focus on him.

"Rebellion? Where?" There was a visible stiffening of the old Emperor's manner; he became more commanding, more involved in his immediate surroundings, and put down the gyrotoy with which he had been diverting himself.

"The name of the system, sire, is Aldryne, in the Ninth Decant. It is a system of seven worlds, all inhabited, once very powerful in the galactic scheme of things."

"I know the system—I think," the Emperor said doubtfully. "What is this talk of rebellion?"

"It springs from the third world of the system, which is named Dykran—a world chiefly given to mining, and populated by a stubborn, intransigent people. They talk of rebelling against Imperial control, of paying no more taxes, of—your pardon, Grace—of somehow assassinating Your Majesty."

Dervon shuddered. "These outworlders have high plans." He picked up the gyrotoy again and spun it, peering deep into its depths, staring fixedly at the lambent kaleidoscopic light that burnt there. Corun Govleq watched patiently as his master played with the toy.

At length the Emperor lowered the gyrotoy and, picking up a crystal cube that lay at his right hand, said sharply, "*Aldryne!*"

It was a command, not a statement. The crystal transmitted it instantly to the depths of the royal palace, where the Keepers of the Records toiled endlessly. The Hall of Records was, in many ways, the capstone and heart of the Empire—for here were stored the facts that made it possible to govern a dominion of fifty trillion people.

Within instants the data was on the royal desk. Dervon took the sheets and scanned

them, blinking his tired eyes frequently.

ALDRYNE — seven-world system affiliated with Empire in Year 6723 after war duration eight weeks. Formerly independent system with vassals of its own. Current population as of 7940 census, sixteen billion.

Capital world Aldryne, pop. four billion, now ruled by theocracy stemming from ancient form of government. Chief among many splinter religions is a solar-worship cult whose main attraction is alleged possession of the legendary Hammer of Aldryne.

(HAMMER OF ALDRYNE—a weapon of unspecified potency now in possession of the ruling Thearch of Aldryne, one Vail Duyair. Attributes of this weapon are unknown, but legend has it that it was forged at the time of Imperial assimilation of the Aldryne system and that, when the proper time comes, it will be used to overthrow the Empire itself.)

DYKRAN—second most populous world of the Aldryne system, inhabited by some three billions. A harsh world, infertile, chiefly supported by mining opera-

tions. A tax rebellion there in 7106 was quelled with loss of fourteen million Dykranian lives. Dykranian loyalty to Empire has always been considered extremely questionable.

Emperor Dervon XIV looked up from the abstract of the report on the Aldryne system. "This Dykran—this is the world that rebels? Not the name-world Aldryne?"

"No, sire. Aldryne remains calm. Dykran is the only world of the system that rebels."

"Odd. The name-world of a system is usually the first to go." Frowns furrowed Dervon's forehead. "But I'd venture a guess that they won't be long in joining, if the Dykranians make any headway in their rebellion."

The Emperor was silent for a long while. Minister Corun Govleq remained in a position of obloquy, body bent slightly forward at the waist, waiting. He knew that behind the old man's faded eyes lay the brain of a master strategist. One had to be a master strategist, Govleq reflected, to hold the Imperium for fifty years in these troubled times.

At length the Emperor said, "I have a plan, Corun. One which may save us much fu-

ture difficulty with the Aldryne system, and particularly with the name-world."

"Yes, sire?"

"This semi-legendary Hammer the name-world has—the thing that's supposed to overthrow us all when the time comes? I don't like the sound of that. Suppose," Dervon suggested slowly, "suppose we get our proconsul on Aldryne to confiscate this Hammer, if it actually exists. Then we use the Hammer itself to devastate the rebellious Dyranians. What better psychological blow could we deal the entire system?"

Corun Govleq smiled. "Masterful, sire. I had merely thought we could despatch three or four cruisers to level Dykran—but this is much better. *Much* better!"

"Good. Notify the proconsul on Dykran of what we're doing, and ask our man on Aldryne to find the Hammer. Have them both report back to me regularly. And if there are any other problems today, solve them yourself. I have a headache."

"My sympathies, sire," Corun Govleq said.

As he backed out of the Imperial presence, he saw the old man lift the gyrottoy and peer once again into its soothing, mysterious center.

THE EMPEROR'S word travelled down the long chain of command, from functionary to functionary, from bureau to bureau, until at length, a good many days later, it reached the ears of Fellamon Darhuel, Imperial Proconsul for Aldryne of the Aldryne System.

Darhuel was a peaceful, philosophic man who much preferred translating ancient poetry into the Five Tongues of the Galaxy to collecting taxes from the sullen people of Aldryne. He had only one consolation in his job: that he had drawn Aldryne for his assignment, and not the bleak neighbor world of Dykran, where the malcontents spoke up loudly and the Proconsul's life was ever in danger.

The Hammer of Aldryne? He shrugged when the message-crystal delivered its burden. The Hammer was a legend, and one that did the Empire no credit either. Now the good Emperor wanted it?

Very well, Fellamon Darhuel agreed. The Emperor's word could hardly be ignored. He summoned his sub-prefect, a slim Sobralian youngster named Deevog Hoth, and said, "Order up a squad of men and take a jaunt over to the Temple of the Suns. We're going to have to make an arrest."

"Certainly. Who's the pick-up?"

"Vail Duyair," the Proconsul said.

Deevog Hoth recoiled. "*Vail Duyair?* The high priest? What goes?"

"It becomes necessary to interrogate Vail Duyair," Darhuel said blandly. "Bring him to me."

Frowning in mystification, Deevog Hoth made a gesture of assent and departed.

Less than an hour later—he was ever a punctual man—he returned, bringing with him Vail Duyair.

The old priest looked as if he'd given them a hard time. His green robe was rent in several places, his white hair was uncoifed, the sunburst insigne at his throat was hanging slightly askew. He faced Darhuel defiantly and said, "For what reason do you interrupt evening services, Proconsul?"

Fellamon Darhuel flinched before the old man's stern gaze. He answered, "There are questions that must be asked. There are those who would have you reveal the Hammer of Aldryne."

"The Hammer of Aldryne is no concern of the Empire's, at this stage," Vail Duyair said slowly. "It will be . . . some day. Not now."

"By order of His Majesty Dervon XIV, Emperor of All the Galaxies," Darhuel said sonorously, "I am empowered to interrogate you until you yield to me the location and secret of the Hammer. Be reasonable, Duyair; I don't want to have to hurt you."

With great dignity the priest straightened his hair and re-arranged the platinum insigne at his throat. "The Hammer is not for the Emperor's command. The Hammer will some day crush the Emperor's skull."

Fellamon Darhuel scowled. "Come on, old man. Enough oratory. What's the Hammer, and where's it kept?"

"The Hammer is not for the Emperor's command," Duyair repeated stonily.

The Proconsul drew a deep breath. His Interrogators were not subtle men; the priest would surely not live through the treatment. But yet, what choice did he have?

His nervous fingers caressed the vellum manuscript of *Gonaidan Sonnets* he had been studying. He was anxious to return to his work.

Sighing regretfully, he pushed the communicator stud on his desk, and when the blue light flashed said, "Have the Interrogator come up here, will you?"

CHAPTER II

LATER THAT NIGHT a long dark car drew up before the Temple and waited there, turbo-electric engines thrumming, while the body of Vail Duyair was brought inside. As silently as they came, the men of the Proconsul left, having delivered the corpse to the priests of the Temple.

The old man was committed to the pyre with full ritual; Dugaur Holsp, as ranking priest, presided, and offered the blessings due a martyr. When the service was over, he shut off the atomic blast of the crematorium and dismissed the gathered priests and acolytes.

The next morning, Ras Duyair was awakened by the forceful arm of an acolyte.

Sleepily he said, "What do you want?"

"Lugaur Holsp summons you to a Convocation, Ras Duyair!"

Duyair yawned. "Tell him I'll be right there."

When he entered the Inner Room of the Temple, Holsp was seated at the High Seat, garbed in ceremonial robes. At his right and left sat the ranking priests of the heirarchy, Thubar Frin and Helmat Sorgvoy. Duyair paused before the

triumvirate and automatically made the genuflection due a High Priest in ceremonial garb.

"Are you, then, my father's successor?" he asked.

Lugaur Holsp nodded solemnly. "By a decision rendered early this morning. The workings of the Temple shall continue as before. There are some questions we must ask you, Ras."

"Go ahead," Duyair said.

"Your father died for refusing to yield the secret of the Hammer." A skeptical note crept into Holsp's cold voice. "You were closer to your father than any of us. Did he ever admit to you actually being in possession of the secret?"

"Of course. Many times."

Lugaur Holsp's eyes grew beady. "It was his conviction, was it not, that the secret of the Hammer should reside always with the High Priest of this Temple. Am I right?"

"You are," Duyair admitted, wondering what Holsp was driving at.

"The incumbent High Priest, who is myself, is *not* in possession of this secret. It is my opinion that the true secret of the Hammer is that there *is* no secret—and no Hammer! That it is a carefully-fostered myth, which the

priesthood of this Temple has nurtured for centuries, and which was so important to your father that he died rather than reveal its mythical nature."

"That's a lie," Duyair said promptly. "Of course the Hammer exists! You, the High Priest of this Temple, doubting that?"

Duyair saw Holsp exchange glances with the two silent priests flanking him. Then Holsp said: "I am relieved to know this. The late Vail Duyair must, then, have made provisions for transference of possession of the secret."

"Quite possibly."

"I am the duly elected High Priest, succeeding your father. I do not have possession. I assume, then, that your late father must have entrusted the secret to you—and I call upon you, as a loyal junior priest of this Temple, to turn the secret over to its rightful possessor."

"You?"

"Yes."

Duyair eyed Holsp suspiciously. Something was exceedingly wrong here.

It had been generally known for some time that Holsp would succeed the elder Duyair, whenever the old priest's time came. Ras had known that; his father had known

that. In that case, then, why hadn't Vail Duyair taken steps to see that the Hammer secret was given to Holsp?

It didn't make sense. The old man had frequently told his son of the existence of the secret—though never the secret itself. Ras Duyair did not know it. But he had assumed Holsp was party to it, and to find out that he was not—!

Duyair realized his father must have had some good reason for denying Holsp the secret. Either, the Hammer was a myth—no, that was inconceivable—or Holsp was in some way untrustworthy.

"Your silence is overly extended," Holsp said. "Will you turn over to me at once the secret?"

Duyair smiled grimly. "The secret is a secret to me as well as you, Lugaur."

"What!"

"My father never deemed me worthy of knowing it. I always assumed it was *you* he had told it to."

"This is impossible. Vail Duyair would never have left the secret die with him; he *must* have told you. I order you to reveal it!"

Duyair shrugged. "Order me to slay the Emperor as well, or halt the tides. The secret is not mine for the giving, Lugaur Holsp."

Holsp was openly fuming now. He rose from his graven seat and slammed his hand down on the table. "You Duyairs are stubborn to a fault! Well, the Emperor is not the only one who knows the art of torture."

"Lugaur! Are you crazy?" Dayair shouted.

"Crazy? No: I merely object to defiance on the part of— Duyair, will you yield the secret willingly to its rightful possessor?"

"I tell you, Lugaur, I don't know the secret and never did."

"Very well," Holsp said bitingly. "We'll pry it out of you!"

PROCONSUL Fellamon Darhuel spent the better part of that morning on the dreary business of dictating a report to the Emperor. He covered the Duyair incident in full, describing how the most refined Imperial tortures failed to bring forth the desired secret, and philosophically concluded that these outworld peoples seemed to have hidden reserves of strength that some Imperials might do well to copy.

Concluding his work, he activated the playback and listened to his words. The last

few sentences jarred him; they sounded insulting and arrogant. He deleted them.

Lifting his voicewrite again, he patched on a new ending: "The stubbornness of these religious fanatics is beyond belief." That sounded much better, he thought. He punched the permanizer and a moment later the message sprang forth, inscribed on a coiled tape the size of his thumb, coded and ready to go.

He took from a shelf a tiny crystalline capsule, inserted the message, sealed the capsule. He dropped the capsule in the diplomatic pouch being readied for the courier who departed for Dervonar that afternoon.

There. The Emperor would have a full report of the matter, and Darhuel hoped it would do him much good.

I wash my hands of the thing, he thought, turning back to the delicate acrostic verses of the long-dead Gonaidans.

Gradually, he regained his calm.

BUT THOSE who received the capsule felt no such calm. A hypership brought the courier across space from Aldryne to Dervonar in one huge gulp; later the same day, the tiny crystal was delivered, along



Boorman

with three thousand similar crystals from three thousand other proconsuls scattered across the galaxy, to the main sorting room of the Imperial Diplomatic Clearing-House.

It lay at the bottom of a heap for the better part of an hour, until a nimble-fingered, eager-eyed clerk, aware of the order that any messages from Aldryne were to receive top handling priority, found it.

From there the capsule worked its way rapidly upward through the chain of bureaucrats of increasing authority until the Undersecretary for External Affairs brought it to the Assistant Secretary for External Affairs, who took it to the Secretary, who took it to the Minister of the Outer Marches, Corun Govleq.

Govleq was the first one in the entire string with authority enough to read the message. He did, and promptly sought an audience with His Majesty, Dervon XIV.

Dervon was busy, listening to a new musictape brought him by an itinerant tonesmith of Zoastro; Govleq took the rare liberty of entering the royal presence without being announced.

Clangorous tones thundered in the throne-room as he entered. The Emperor glanced

up wearily, unreproachfully, and sighed.

"Well, Govleq? What crisis now?"

"Word from Aldryne, Highness. A report from your Proconsul there has reached us." Govleq proffered the message-cube in his palm.

"Have you heard it?" the Emperor asked.

"Yes, sire."

"Well? What does it say?"

"They have interrogated Vail Duyair—he's the High Priest of that solar cult. The old man refused to yield the secret of the Hammer, and died under interrogation!"

The Emperor frowned. "How unfortunate. What is this Hammer you mention?"

Govleq manfully refrained from swearing, and set about tactfully refreshing the Imperial memory. Finally Dervon said, "Oh. *That* Hammer. Well, it was a fine idea, anyway. Too bad it didn't work out."

"The rebellion on Dykran, sire—"

"Bother the rebellion on Dykran! No, I don't mean that. I'm very tense this morning; I think it's that damned music. What of the rebellion, Govleq?"

"Status remains quo, so far. But word from Dykran is that an explosion is due almost mo-

mentarily. And now that a High Priest has been tortured to death on the neighboring world of Aldryne, we can expect the entire Aldryne system to rebel."

"A serious matter," the Emperor said gravely. "These things have a way of spreading from system to system. Hmm. We'll have to stop this. Yes. Stop it. Send special investigators to Aldryne and Dykran. Get full reports. Take care of it, Govleq. Take care of it. This could be bad. Very bad."

"Of course, sire," Govleq said. "I'll expedite the matter at once." He rolled his eyes despairingly to the ceiling, wondering just how he was going to put down what looked like a noisy insurrection-in-the-making.

But he'd find a way. The Empire would prevail. It always had, and it always would.

"Turn up the volume," the Emperor said. "I can hardly hear the music."

THE VAULT of the Temple of the Suns was a cold, dank place, wet with ancient slime. Duyair remembered vaguely having played here as a child, and enjoying it despite his father's reproaches; he remem-

bered also being taken down to the vault for some hazily-recalled indoctrination on his thirteenth birthday.

But now he walked between two priests of the Temple, and Lugaur Holsp walked behind. They entered the vault.

"It will be quiet down here," Holsp said. "Ras, don't be stubborn. Tell us where the Hammer is."

"I've told you. I don't know. I honestly don't know, Lugaur."

The High Priest shrugged and said, "As you wish. Thubar, we'll have to torture him."

"A little on the primitive side, aren't you?" Duyair asked.

"No more so than the Empire. When information is needed, it must be extracted."

"That's the theory they used on my father. Much good it did them."

"And much good it did him," Holsp said. "If necessary, the same will befall you. Ras, why not tell us?"

Duyair was silent for a moment. The two sub-priests appeared with sturdy rope to bind him, and he let them approach without protest. Then he shrugged away.

"No."

"Bind him," Holsp ordered. "I'll tell you where the

Hammer is!" Duyair said. He took a deep breath. What he was about to do went against all his conditioning, all his beliefs. To strike a priest of the Temple—

But Lugaur was no High Priest. Had he been, Vail Duyair would have given him the Hammer.

Holsp frowned. "A change of heart, eh? All right, let go of him. The Hammer is where?"

"Right here," Duyair said. He smashed a fist into Holsp's pale face, and the High Priest staggered backward under the impact of the blow. The platinum sunburst fell from his throat and clinked hollowly against the stone of the floor.

Ignoring Holsp for the moment, Duyair turned to the other two, Thubar Frin and Helmat Sorgvoy. Helmat was short and heavy; Duyair caught him by one fleshy arm and, using him as a battering ram, swung him crunchingly into Thubar Frin. Both priests grunted at the crash.

Letting go of Helmat, Duyair sprang forward into the shadows. Now some of his childhood memories returned; he recalled passages, catacombs leading beneath the Temple grounds and into sun-

light through a hidden exit.

"After him!" he heard Holsp's outraged voice cry. But the sound was growing more distant with each moment. "Don't let him escape!" came the echoing half-audible cry.

Duyair grinned at the thought of the growing blossom of red that had sprouted in Holsp's pale, supercilious face. More than ever, now, he was convinced that Lugaur Holsp held the High Priest's throne by fraud; Duyair would never have been able to strike down a true priest.

Panting, he emerged at the border of the Temple grove. He realized he would have to flee Aldryne; having raised a fist against Holsp, he would have all men's hands lifted against him.

But where? Where could he go?

He glanced up. In the gathering shadows of late afternoon, the sky was growing dark. He saw the dull red globe that was Dykran, the sister world of Aldryne.

To Dykran, he thought. Yes, to Dykran!

CHAPTER III

HE ARRIVED at Aldryne Spaceport later that day, almost at sunset; the star Al-

dryne was mostly below the horizon. A bored-looking young man at the ticket-window squinted at him when he requested a ticket for Dykran and said, "No more flights to Dykran."

"Eh? Last one's left already? But it's harly sundown yet. There ought to be at least two evening flights, if not more—"

"No more flights, period. By order of the Imperial Government, for the duration of hostilities on Dykran."

"What sort of hostilities?" Duyair asked, surprised.

The clerk gestured with his hands. "Who knows? Those miners up there are always striking for something or other. Anyway, I can't give you passage to Dykran."

"Umm. How about Paralon? Any flights there tonight?"

"Nope. Matter of fact, no flights anywhere tonight within the system. I can offer you half a dozen out-system flights, if you're interested."

Duyair rubbed his chin perplexedly. He had only a hundred credits with him, hardly enough to pay for an out-system flight. And he did not dare return to the Temple for more cash. He had been counting on making an early flight to one of the other worlds in the Aldryne system.

"Nothing at all in the system?" he asked again.

"Look, friend, I thought I made it clear. You mind moving along?"

"Okay," Duyair said. "Thank you." A look of bleak abstraction on his face, he left the line and walked away.

No flights anywhere in-system? Why, that just didn't make sense, he thought. Trouble in Dykran, maybe—but why couldn't he go to Paralon, or Moorhelm, or any of the other three worlds?

He felt a tug at his tunic-sleeve. Quickly he turned, and saw a short, space-bronzed young man at his side.

"What do you want?"

"Shhh! You want to get us jugged? I just heard your troubles at the ticket-window, friend. You interested in going to Dykran tonight?"

"Y-yes," Duyair said tentatively. "What's the deal?"

"Private flight. Two hundred credits will get you there in style."

"I've only got a hundred," Duyair said. "And I can't take time to raise any more. I'm a priest," he improvised. "I have to attend a special conference on Dykran tomorrow, and if I'm not there it'll be bad."

"Priest? What Temple?"

"Temple of the Suns," Duyair said.

The spaceman thought for a moment. "Okay. A hundred credits will do it. But I want to be paid in advance."

Cautiously Duyair unfolded his five twenty-credit bills and showed them. "This ought to cover it, yes?"

"Yes."

"Good. They're yours the second we blast off for Dykran."

THE FLIGHT was short, the ship cramped and uncomfortable. Duyair had made the interplanetary journey more than a dozen times, and so none of the phenomena of conventional ion-drive space travel were new to him. He weathered acceleration well, rather enjoyed the weightlessness of free fall, and, once the ship began to spin to provide gravity, settled in a hammock and dozed.

He had sized up the ship-board picture fairly quickly. The pilot was obviously a privateer running some illegal cargo between worlds. Just what, Duyair didn't care. But it was apparent that the shrewd pilot had seized on a way of making a few extra credits by admitting passengers. There were perhaps a dozen on board, and doubtless each had some good reason for

travelling to Dykran. They had all been caught short by the unexpected embargo.

He was awoken by a bell—the signal for a shift to deceleration, pending planetfall. And the small ship dropped down to the surface of Dykran.

They had landed, it seemed, in a bare treeless plain somewhere far from civilization; a cold wind was whining, kicking up gray clouds of dust, as Duyair dropped through the open hatch and touched ground.

He turned to the pilot, who was supervising the unloading of crates. "Are we supposed to find our way to the city by ourselves?"

The pilot laughed. "You expect limousine service with an illegal flight? Wake up, boy. You're on your own. For another hundred credits I'd drive you into town, but you don't have the hundred, do you?"

"No," Duyair said bitterly, and turned away. He had come away too quickly; he was penniless and not dressed for the bitter Dykranian climate.

But there were priests here, and Temples; he could find shelter. He started to walk across the barren plain. Some of his fellow-passengers, grumbling disgruntledly, followed him.

He had gone about half a mile and was shivering with every step when a jetcopter descended almost directly in front of him. Through the swirling dust he saw the emblem on the 'copter's side: the purple-and-gold star-cluster insignia of the Imperial Police.

He debated fleeing. The Imperial Police were a good deal more to be feared than the relatively easy-going local Dykranan police corps.

But the sight of a blaster pointed unwaveringly at him changed his mind. He stood where he was, waiting for the Imperial policeman to draw near.

The policeman was short and stubby, with a lined face that told of long service on this dreary planet. His opening gambit was the inevitable, "Let's see your papers!"

"Certainly, officer." Duyair handed the sheets of identification over. The corpsman read through them thoroughly, returned them, and said, "According to these you're Ras Duyair of Aldryne. What are you doing on Dykran?"

"Visiting, officer. I'm a priest."

"So I noticed. I didn't happen to see any spaceport verification on your papers, though. How'd you get here?"

"By spaceship, of course," Duyair said mildly. He towered more than a foot over the corpsman, but the blaster held steadily in his ribs did not encourage violence.

"Don't get wise," the corpsman snapped. "Suppose you tell me how long you've been on Dykran."

"About half an hour."

"Half an hour? And you came by spaceship? Very interesting. There's been an embargo on interworld transportation in the Aldryne system in effect for the past eight hours. Suppose you come down to the Proconsul's headquarters, and explain yourself."

ee **A**RE YOU Ras Duyair?"

"That's my name, yes. It says so right there."

"No insolence," said the questioner. He was Rolsad Quarloo, Imperial Proconsul on Dykra, a small, weather-beaten little man with a grim, doggedly tough look about him. "I want to know why you're on Dykran when there's an Imperial embargo on interworld traffic. How'd you get here?"

Duyair was silent. The corpsman standing behind him said, "He came in on that smuggler's ship. We picked up about a dozen that way."

"I know that, fool," snapped the Proconsul. "I want *him* to say it. It has to go down on tape."

"All right," said Duyair. "I came in on a smuggler's ship, if that's what he was. I wanted to go to Dykran, and none of the ticket windows were selling tickets. Then this fellow came along and offered me transportation for a hundred credits. He brought me here, and then you picked me up. That's all."

The Proconsul scowled. "You must have known the trip was illegal! Why did you want to come to Dykran so badly?"

"To visit," Duyair said. He had decided earlier that the safest course was to play the role of a simple bumpkin, and let his questioners do most of the talking.

"To visit! That's all—just a visit? And you defied an Imperial embargo just for a visit? I give up." Rolsad Quarloo touched a stud on his desk, and the door opened.

A tall, stately-looking man, magnificent in his purple-and-gold robes, entered. He glanced contemptuously at the Proconsul and said, "Well? Did you get anything from him, Quarloo?"

"Not a thing. You want to try?"

"Very well." The magnificent looked at Duyair. "I am Olon Domyel, Imperial Legate from the Court of the Emperor Der-von XIV. You are the priest Ras Duyair, of Aldryne in the Aldryne system?"

"That's my name, yes."

"Are you the son of the late Vail Duyair, priest, of Aldryne?"

Duyair nodded.

"Do you know how your father died?" Domyel asked.

"At the hands of the Imperial interrogator. They were trying to find out a secret of our religion."

"The Hammer of Aldryne, you mean," said Domyel.

"Yes. That was it."

The ponderous Legate strode up and down in the Proconsul's tiny office. At length he said, "You know, we could have you tortured to obtain the same secret. We of the Empire are very interested in this Hammer, Duyair."

Duyair grinned. Everyone seemed interested in the Hammer, suddenly. And many torturers were having booms in business.

"You grin?"

"Yes, milord. This Hammer—it does not exist, you see. It's one of our legends. A myth. My father tried to tell your interrogators this, and they killed him. Now you will

interrogate me, and probably kill me as well. It is really very funny."

The Legate eyed him sourly. "A myth, you say? And for a myth I've crossed half a galaxy—"

"The rebellion brewing on Dykran is very real," Proconsul Quarloo reminded him gingerly.

"Ah—yes. Rebellion. And this Hammer of Aldryne—a myth? Ah, me. Boy, what brought you to Dykran?"

"I came here to visit," Duyair said innocently.

THEY turned him loose, finally, after another half hour of questioning. He stuck fairly closely to his bumpkin role, and it became quite clear to the exasperated Legate and to the Proconsul that they were going to get nothing from him. He promised not to stray far from the city, and they let him go.

The moment he stepped outside the Proconsul's headquarters, a shadowy figure moved alongside him, and a whispered voice said, "Are you Ras Duyair?"

"Maybe."

"You were just questioned by the Proconsul, weren't you? Speak up or I'll knife you."

"I was," Duyair admitted. "Who are you?"

"Quite possibly a friend. Will you come with me?"

"Do I have any choice?" Duyair asked.

"No," said the stranger.

Shrugging, Duyair let himself be led down the street to a small blue teardrop-shaped auto that was idling there. He got in, at the other's direction, and they drove off.

Duyair made no attempt to remember the streets as they passed through them; his driver was taking such a deliberately winding, tangled route that any such attempt would be hopeless.

They stopped, finally, in front of a squat gray-brown brick building in the ugly, antiquated style popular here.

"We get out here," Duyair's mysterious captor told him.

Duyair and the stranger left the car and entered the old building. Two blank-faced guards stood within. Duyair wondered what nest of intrigue he had stumbled into now. He wondered whether he might not have been safer remaining back on Aldryne.

"Is this Duyair?" asked a cold-faced man with a strange accent.

Duyair's captor nodded.

"Bring him within," ordered the cold-faced man.

Duyair was shoved into a brightly-lit room ringed with packed bookshelves—and furnished with shabby, out-of-date furniture. Three or four other men were sitting in battered chairs.

The cold-faced man turned to Duyair and said, "I must apologize for a number of things. First, for not getting to you ahead of the Empire men—and second, for the mysterious handling you've had since Quarloo turned you loose."

"Apology tentatively accepted," Duyair said. "Where am I, and what's going on?"

"My name," said the cold-faced man, "is Blair Marsh. I'm a native of Dervonar. You know Dervonar?"

"The capital of the Empire, isn't it?"

"That's right. I've seen the Empire first-hand, from within. It's rotten. It's ready to fall, given a push."

"So?"

"So I came to Dykran. I've established an organization, and I'd like you to join it. We're getting set to give the Empire that one push."

CHAPTER IV

EMPEROR DERVON XIV had been giving more than usual attention to the des-

patches from the Aldryne system. In fact, he had dwelled on the doings in that system with a single-minded fascination that left him little time for supervising the manifold complexities of the other worlds of his Empire.

But he felt the time was well spent. More so than anyone, he was aware of the shakiness of his throne—and he foresaw serious trouble arising out of Aldryne.

"Is there any report from your Legate on Dykran today, Govleq?" the Emperor asked the Minister.

"Not yet, Majesty."

"Mph. See that the routing office gets about its business faster. This is serious business, Govleq."

"Of course, Majesty."

The Emperor rubbed his hairless scalp and picked up the Legate's last report. "Can you imagine this? They had the son of that priest Duyair in custody on Dykran, and released him! The Hammer—this fool of a Legate of yours tells me sententiously it's a myth. Myth? A myth that will topple us all yet, Govleq. Who is this Legate?"

"Olan Domyel is one of our finest men, sire. I chose him myself."

"More discredit to you," Dervon said testily.

The signal light flashed twice, blinking on and off. "Messages have come through," the Emperor snapped. "Get them and read them."

"At once, sire."

Govleq crossed the room to the message-bin that had been installed there, and deftly abstracted the two tiny message crystals from the chute. "One is from Dykran, the other from Aldryne, Majesty."

"Go ahead, read them. I want to know what they say, not where they're from!"

The Minister moistened his lips and split one of the crystals with his fingernail. He scanned the message, gasped a little, and opened the other crystal. The Emperor, beady-eyed, was watching him impatiently.

"Well?" Dervon demanded. His voice was a raven's croak.

"One from Aldryne, one from Dykran," Govleq repeated inanely, "Which do you want first, sire?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, sire. The one from Dykran is dated somewhat earlier. Its from Legate Domyel. He says there are rumors of a rebel army gathering somewhere on the planet, though he's not sure where."

"The idiot! What of the one from Aldryne?"

Govleq shivered a little. "The — one — from — Aldryne — is from Proconsul Darhuel. He says—"

"Get on with it!" Dervon raged.

Govleq took a deep breath. "Darhuel says he's evacuating all Imperial forces from the planet Aldryne at once, and removing his base to one of the neighboring worlds. It seems there's an insurrection on Aldryne too, only it's already broken out. It's led by a priest named Lugaur Holsp, who claims to be wielding—shield us, Majesty—the Hammer of Aldryne!"

RAS DUVAIR huddled intently on the floor of Bluir Marsh's room, listening to the Dervonian insurrectionist outline his plan.

"They're definitely aware of what's going on on Dykran," Marsh said. "We have plenty of evidence for that. Yesterday this Legate arrived from the capital—this Olon Domyel. He promptly slapped an embargo on travel between Dykran and Aldryne, and then the fool expanded it to cover every world in the system.

"Now, there's only one reason why he'd do that. The Emperor suspects trouble brewing in this system, and the quick-

est and safest way of quelling it is to isolate the planets so no germs of insurrection can wander from world to world." Marsh chuckled. "Unfortunately, a few stray spores drifted in on the tides of the ether. Young Duyair, for one. But for all intents there's no contact between Dykran and Aldryne.

"All right. First a Legate comes, and second he imposes a travel restriction. The time has arrived to make our move—now, before the Emperor sends a few million Imperial troops to quarter here and sit on us. We have our organization. We'll have to attack. Our only hope is to re-establish contact with other planets, get them to follow along. The Empire has a big fleet—but it can't be everywhere at once. Simultaneous revolutions on a hundred worlds would wreck the Empire within a week."

A man sitting near Duyair raised his hand. "Tell me, Bluir. How many worlds do you think will go along with us?"

"There are revolutionary organizations on at least fourteen worlds in twelve systems," Marsh said. "I've built them myself, over the last decade. The one on Dykran is the strongest, which is why we're touching the thing off

here. But it'll spread. The Empire's a relic of the past; no one wants to pay taxes to a useless monarchy, simply to support a doddering old Emperor. Duyair, how is it on Aldryne?"

Duyair said, "No one cares much for the Empire on my world. We have the legend of the Hammer, of course. It keeps our hatred of the Empire alive, knowing that the Hammer will one day smash the Empire."

Bluir Marsh frowned. "The Hammer—yes, I know the legend. Is there any basis to it?"

"I honestly don't know," Duyair said. "My father might know—but the interrogators got him. He always insisted to me that there was really a Hammer, and that he knew where it was, but he died without telling me. And his successor as High Priest doesn't know either."

"Hmm. That's too bad; a psychological focus like the Hammer could be useful. We could always fake a Hammer, I guess. As soon as the thing's touched off on Dykran, suppose we ship you back to Aldryne to spread the good word there."

"I'll do it," Duyair said.

"Good." Marsh glanced around. "You all understand the parts you're to play?"

There was general agreement. For once, a grin passed over the insurrectionist's cold face. "We're ready to go, then. The first operation is to seize the Proconsul and that Legate, and then to get the word rolling around the galaxy of what we've done."

A SWIRLING MOB swooped down on the office of the Proconsul of Dykran, Duyair among them. There must have been a hundred of them, armed with makeshift weapons of all sorts.

As the tallest and most powerful man in the group, Duyair almost unconsciously gravitated toward the fore of the mob as they approached the office. Two stunned-looking Imperial corpsmen stood on guard outside, but the tide swept over them before they could do more than threaten ineffectually.

Duyair hooked out a long arm and plucked a blaster from one of the guards; he jabbed it in the other's ribs, ordered him to turn, and clubbed him down. Men of the mob spirited the guards away somewhere.

"Inside!" Duyair yelled. He realized he was somehow becoming leader of the insurrection. Bluir Marsh was no-

where to be seen; obviously he had no taste for actual combat.

The photonically actuated doors caved in beneath the horde that pressed against it. From within came confused shouts of, "Guard! Guard! Protect the Proconsul!"

The Legate, Olon Domyel, appeared. He was unarmed, clad in his splendid robes. Duyair's appraising eyes saw he wore lift-shoes and shoulder-pads to enhance his size.

"Hold back, rabble!" the Legate roared. "This is the Proconsul's office! What right have you in here?"

"The right of free men," Duyair said, wiggling the blaster in his hand. "The right of those who no longer bow to the Emperor."

"Rebellion! Open revolution! You must be mad!" Domyel shouted. "Back! Away from here!"

Behind him, Duyair heard some of the men muttering doubtfully. The magnificence of the Legate, he knew, was having the affect Domyel desired.

"Seize and bind him," Duyair snapped.

"No! I'm a Legate of the Emperor! My person is sacrosanct!"

"Bind him!" Duyair repeated, and this time four of the Dykranians produced rope and

seized the struggling Legate. Dornyel kicked and pummelled in all directions, but in a moment or two he had subsided, sputtering, his arms tied.

"Proconsul Quarloo?" Duyair called. "Come out of there, unarmed!"

"You can't do this!" came a quavering voice. "It's illegal! You can't rebel against the Empire!"

"*Come out of there!*" Duyair said loudly. Quarloo appeared, trembling woefully, clutching his cloak about him. He looked an utterly dismal figure; the weatherbeaten toughness Duyair had noted earlier had vanished totally from his face.

"What is the meaning of this?" Quarloo asked.

"An end to Empire rule in the Aldryne system," said Duyair. He turned and ordered: "Bind this one too! Then search the place for weapons."

"We've caught three more Imperial guards, sir," whispered a man at his right. "They were sneaking out the back way."

"Armed?"

"Yes, sir."

Duyair laughed. "The cowards! Well, distribute their weapons and bind them with the rest. We need every blaster we can lay hands on."

WITHIN five minutes the place was completely in the possession of the revolutionaries. Now, from somewhere, Blair Marsh appeared.

"Fine work," he said. "I like the way you led the assault, Duyair."

"Thanks. But where were you?"

Marsh smiled slyly. "A leader never endangers his own life unnecessarily. Besides, you're a much more commanding figure than I am. Someone your size gets followed; they can see you."

Duyair grinned at the small revolutionary. "I understand. What now?"

"We have the entire building under occupation, yes?"

Duyair nodded.

"Good. We seize communications now, and flash the word to as many systems as we can. Then we proceed to round up as many of the Empire guards on Dykran as we can find. They're our hostages."

Duyair and Marsh stepped over a bench someone had thrown down in a futile attempt at barricade, and entered the office of the deposed Proconsul. A battery of communication devices covered one wall; the communications-links of the Empire were still strong.

Marsh strode immediately to the sub-radio set and began setting up coordinates. Duyair idly picked up some papers that lay on Quarloo's desk.

He read them, blinked, read them again. He heard Marsh announcing word of the rebellion in vivid tones to the people of some other star system.

"Hey," Duyair said, when Marsh was through. "Listen to this. I just found it on Quarloo's desk—it's a message that came through from Aldryne."

"What about?"

"It's from Proconsul Darhuel, on Aldryne. He—says he's going to evacuate Aldryne and move his base to Moorhelm—Aldryne VI. Seems there's been an uprising on Aldryne too."

Marsh looked startled. "But there was no organization on Aldryne! A spontaneous rebellion? Who's leading it—does Darhuel say?"

"Yes," Duyair said strangely. "The leader's a priest, name of Lugaur Holsp. He has a tremendous popular following that's sprung up overnight. He—he claims to have the Hammer of Aldryne!"

BY NIGHTFALL, Dykran bore no trace of Imperial rule: the Proconsul and the contemptuously small handful of men

who had guarded him were prisoners, the Imperial Legate as well. A provisional government had been established, with one Fulmor Narzin at its head. A blue-and-gold Dykran flag appeared surprisingly atop the Proconsul's headquarters.

Within headquarters itself, Bluir Marsh and several of his lieutenants, including Ras Duyair, tried to plan their next steps.

"I don't understand this Hammer maneuver," Duyair said. "Holsp can't possibly have the Hammer, unless he pulled off a miracle. So far as I know the secret of its location died with my father."

"Whether he has the true Hammer or not," pointed out Marsh, "he has a Hammer. The people seem to believe it—to the point of expelling their Proconsul. I think we should make contact with this Lugaur Holsp and join forces with him. The symbol of the Hammer is known through the galaxy as that which will smash the Empire. If we get the snowball rolling fast enough—"

Duyair shook his head. "I know this Holsp. He's not the kind to be interested in overthrowing the Empire except for his own personal advantage. I don't trust him, Marsh."

"Trust? How does that matter? First the revolution," Marsh said. "With the Empire crushed, we worry about sorting the trustworthy from the treacherous. Go to Aldryne, Duyair. Find Holsp. And don't worry whether this is the real Hammer or not. The thing is what we call it, and if the galaxy believes the Hammer is being raised against the Empire, the Empire is doomed." Marsh mopped away sweat. Turning to one of his men he said, "Any word from Thyrol on the rebellion there?"

"Heavy garrison of Imperial forces there. They're yielding."

"Damn. We'll probably lose Thyrol." Marsh scowled. "I hope we haven't touched this thing off prematurely. As of now only half a dozen worlds are rebelling, two of them in this system. Thousands are still loyal. Dammit, Duyair, we need the Hammer! That's the symbol everyone waits for!"

Suddenly a Dykranian radio-man came dashing into the office. "Marsh! Marsh!"

"Well? What news? Anything from Thyrol?"

"No! I was trying to reach Aldryne, and I tapped a super-secret direct wire from Aldryne to the Emperor!"

"What?"

"I tapped a conversation between Lugaur Holsp and the Emperor himself. We're being betrayed! Holsp is selling out!"

CHAPTER V

"I WISH this had waited five more years," the Emperor Dervon XIV said peevishly aloud, to himself. "Or ten. Let my son worry about it."

Then he realized he was weakening. The rebellion had happened *now*, after threatening all through his lifetime. That he was old and weary was irrelevant. The rebellion would have to be put down. The Empire had to be preserved.

"Give me the report," he commanded, as Corun Govleq entered the throne-room.

Govleq looked seriously preoccupied, but the shadow of a smile appeared on his face. "Good news, sire. For a change."

"Well! What is it?"

"The rebellion seems to be confined to a handful of worlds—Aldryne, Dykran, Thyrol, Menahun, Quintak, and a few others. We've just about got the situation in hand on Thyrol, and word from Quintak is encouraging."

Dervon smiled. "This gladdens me. I think strong action

is called for now. Order out a battle-fleet, Govleq."

"To where, sire?"

"To Aldryne. The rebellion is confined. Now we can safely devastate Aldryne and Dykran, the instigator-worlds, and re-establish control."

Govleq nodded. "Excellent, sire."

"This Hammer," Dervon said. "What of it?"

The Minister of the Outer

Marches shrugged and said, "We have heard nothing save that the people of Aldryne are massed behind it."

"Ah. Order full fleet to Aldryne, then. We'll bathe the world in fire. Then let the worlds of the galaxy shake this Hammer at us!"

"Very good, sire."

A yellow-clad page appeared timidly at the entrance to the throne-room and knelt there,



waiting to be noticed. At length Dervon said, "Well, boy?"

"Message for Minister Govleq, Your Majesty."

"Speak out," Govleq ordered.

"A sub-radio message has arrived from Aldryne, sir. From Lugaur Holsp. He says he would talk of treaty with you, Minister Govleq."

Govleq's drooping eyes opened wide. "What? Have the call transferred up here, at once!"

"Of course, sir."

The page vanished. Govleq turned to the monarch and said, "Well, sire?"

"Order out the battle-fleet anyway," Dervon said. His lips curved upward in a wan smile. "Methinks this Holsp plans to use his Hammer as a bludgeon. But we'll speak to him, nevertheless."

A TECHNICIAN'S voice said, "You can go ahead with the call now, Aldryne."

Humming clatter came over the wall-speaker in the Imperial throne-room. Then a cold, deep voice said, "This is Lugaur Holsp, Your Majesty, speaking from the planet Aldryne of the system Aldryne."

"What would you with me?" Dervon said.

"Are you aware, Majesty, that the Imperial Proconsul has been driven forth from Aldryne, and Imperial rule destroyed both here and on the sister-world of Dykran?"

"I have heard something to this effect," the Emperor remarked sardonically. "I believe it's more than a rumor."

"Indeed it is. By virtue of the Hammer of Aldryne—which I hold—this has been done."

"Well, pig?" The Emperor's voice rose above a dry murmur for the first time in three decades. "Did you call to boast to me about this? A fleet of Imperial warships make their way to Aldryne this moment, to lay waste your entire planet."

"This is the expected reaction," Holsp said. "I desire to avoid this needless slaughter."

"How, traitor?"

"I am no traitor. I am loyal to the Empire."

"You show odd ways of demonstrating this loyalty," the Emperor said.

"I offer to surrender," said Holsp. "I offer to let it be known widely to all that the Hammer of Aldryne failed against Your Majesty, that the insurrection collapsed of its own accord, that Aldryne remains loyal to you. I furthermore will turn over to you

those conspirators who plotted against your rule. In return I ask only the Proconsulship of Aldryne—and ten percent of the annual tax money.”

Dervon gasped at the man’s audacity. He glanced at the thunderstruck Govleq and said, “Give us a few moments to consider this, Holsp.”

“Very well, Majesty.”

Dervon shut off the transmitter. “What do you think?”

“The man’s a callous schemer,” Govleq said. “But this is infinitely better than destroying the world. The show of force is necessarily limited in its appeal: it *frightens* men. Word of the collapse of the Aldryne insurrection will teach them that the Empire is so all-powerful it need not fire a shot.”

“So be it,” Dervon said. “This Holsp is incredible.” He opened contact again and said, “Holsp, we accept your offer. The insurrection is to cease; the ringleaders are to be turned over to the Imperial fleet shortly to reach Aldryne, and you are to issue a public statement saying that the might of the Hammer failed. In return, we grant you the Proconsulship of Aldryne and ten percent of collected tax moneys.”

“Accepted, sire,” Holsp said unctuously.

THAT CONVERSATION stood out clearly in Ras Duyair’s mind as his small ship settled slowly into its landing orbit and spiralled down on Aldryne.

His purpose was clear. The traitor Holsp would have to die.

It was obvious to Duyair that the false priest could not possibly have the Hammer. The Hammer was something too precious, too sacred to Aldryne; no man who had penetrated its secret could lightly sell his world to the Emperor as Holsp had done.

No. Holsp had committed fraud, sacrilege, blasphemy: he had pretended to have the Hammer. The people of Aldryne had rallied round him and driven forth the Proconsul Darhuel—and this was their reward.

The spaceport looked strangely different as Duyair’s little ship came down. The Imperial pennons were down, except for one which hung in rags, a flickering streamer of purple and gold.

The ship landed. Moments later, Duyair was among his fellow men. They had changed, too.

Their eyes were brighter, their shoulders more square. They had thrown off the yoke

of Empire, and it showed.

How would they look, he wondered, if they knew that at this moment their leader, Lugaur Holsp, was conspiring with the Emperor to sell them back into Imperial bondage?

He hailed a cruising jet-copter. "To the Temple of the Suns," he said.

"Yes, sir. Are you a priest there?" the driver asked, as Duyair took a seat.

"My name is Ras Duyair."

"Oh! So you've returned! Funny; Holsp told us you'd been killed in the insurrection."

Duyair smiled grimly. "The report has been somewhat exaggerated. In fact, I've been on Dykran ever since the insurrection began. I aided in *their* revolt."

"Dykran too," mused the driver. "I didn't know they kicked over the traces too. We don't get much news. But we have the Hammer, and that's what counts. It's a pity your father's not alive. But he's probably glad, wherever he is, that Lugaur Holsp has continued his work."

"I'm sure of that," said Duyair absently. "Very glad. Aldryne is completely independent now, you say?"

"Last we heard of Darhuel and his bunch, they were running headfirst for Moorhelm.

There isn't an Imperial soldier left anywhere on the face of the planet."

"Wonderful," Duyair said without enthusiasm.

The Temple of the Suns came in sight. The 'copter swooped low and began to descend vertically. It came to rest before the great gate. Duyair paid the man and alighted.

The Temple looked much as before, a sprawling, heavily-ornamented building surrounded by a triple row of parapets, with gargoyles leering down from the uppermost floors. The giant cannon was as he had left it, in its housing.

He began to walk up the path to the Temple entrance. Several acolytes were tending the grounds; they stared at him with unconcealed curiosity as he went past.

He covered the flagstone steps two at a bound, reached the main door, knocked loudly.

The bland face of Helmat Sorgvoy appeared. "Yes, my son?" the priest inquired automatically. "What would you here?"

"I'd like to see Holsp," Duyair said bluntly.

Sorgvoy gasped. "Ras! What are you doing on Aldryne? I thought you—"

"Get out of my way," Duyair snapped. He shoved the priest aside and entered the Temple.

LUGAUR HOLSP was in the Room of Devotion when Duyair found him. Duyair stood at the entrance for a moment, watching. Holsp was kneeling, whispering prayers to himself inaudibly; his pale, fleshless face bore a look of deepest piety.

"All right, Holsp," Duyair said, after a while. "You can get off your knees. I want to talk to you."

Startled, Holsp wheeled jerkily and said, "Who are—*Ras!*" He backed up automatically, hate hardening his cold face. Within the Temple, Duyair knew, no priest dared carry a weapon. Of course, there was little trusting Lugaur Holsp, but some taboos seemed inviolable.

"Yes. *Ras*. I understand you've been telling everyone I'm dead, Lugaur."

"You vanished. The son of the great Vail Duyair—there were questions—what could I say?"

"That I had escaped after your fumbling attempt to torture the secret of the Hammer from me? No, you couldn't very well tell them *that*, Lu-

gaur. So you told them I was dead."

"Where were you?"

"On Dykran. I helped overthrow the Imperial Proconsul there. We heard you had a little revolution of your own, here on Aldryne."

Holsp smiled balefully. "We did. By virtue of the Hammer we drove Proconsul Darhuel from our midst. It was a glorious victory."

Duyair ignored that. "The Hammer?" he repeated questioningly. "You found the Hammer, so soon after my—ah—departure? Tell me about the Hammer, Lugaur. Where was it kept? What did it look like?"

"These are priestly secrets," Holsp rasped, a little desperately.

"I'm well aware of that. It's simply that I doubt very much that you *have* the Hammer, Lugaur. I think you put up a magnificent bluff, and won the people of Aldryne over to your side long enough to stage a rebellion against Darhuel. But you didn't need a Hammer for that; Darhuel was a weakling, and any united action would have been sufficient to throw him out."

Holsp was eyeing him uneasily. Recklessly, Duyair went on. "You know why I don't think you have the Hammer,

Lugaur? It's because the Hammer is a weapon big enough to wreck the Empire. And if you had the Hammer, you'd go ahead and wreck the Empire. You wouldn't be content with merely selling out to the Emperor for ten percent of Aldryne's tax money!"

Holsp's already-pale face seemed to drain of blood. "How can you know that?" he whispered harshly. Then, without waiting for an answer, he lifted a smoking censer and hurled it at Duyair's head.

Duyair had foreseen the move. He stepped nimbly to one side; the jewelled censer crashed against the wall half a foot from his head. The pottery crumbled; incense spilled out over the floor.

Holsp sprang.

Duyair met the charge full on; he was three inches taller than the High Priest, and forty pounds heavier. For a moment the fury of Holsp's attack drove Duyair backward; he felt the coolness of the Temple wall at his back, and the driving ceaseless blows of Holsp in his stomach. Duyair grunted, bent slightly, heaved Holsp backward. The High Priest's eyes were glittering with rage.

Suddenly Holsp broke away and executed a whirling pirouette; when he faced Duyair

again, the gleaming white blade of a knife was in his hand.

"A weapon? In the Temple?" Duyair asked. "You'll stop at nothing, Lugaur." He stepped forward, moving warily, and for a frozen moment the two men faced each other.

Then Holsp slashed upward with the blade. Duyair's right hand descended, clamped on Holsp's wrist in mid-slash. He extended his arm rigidly, holding Holsp away from him, and began to tighten his grip. Bones cracked. Holsp grimaced, but held on to the knife.

Calmly, Duyair wrenched the knife from the High Priest's hand and advanced on him. For the first time, fear entered Holsp's features.

"I heard your conversation with the Emperor," Duyair said relentlessly. "You sold out Aldryne, didn't you? For ten percent, Lugaur! *Ten percent!*"

Duyair raised the knife.

"In the Temple?" Holsp asked hoarsely, incredulously. "You'd *kill?* Here?"

Duyair chuckled. "Your scruples ill befitted you at this late hour, Lugaur. But the Temple code proscribes murder; it says nothing about execution."

"Ras!"

"Appeal the matter to the

Emperor, Proconsul Holsp,"
Duyair said coldly.

He drove the knife home.

THERE was a moment of exultation as he stood over Holsp's body, but it faded quickly. He had executed a traitor; Holsp had deserved death.

But now, what?

Dervon's fleet was surely on its way to Aldryne to receive the conspirators Holsp had promised to hand over; they would arrive soon enough. They would receive no conspirators. And the Emperor would undoubtedly order a reversion to his original plan, total destruction of Aldryne as an object-lesson for would-be rebellious worlds.

Hopelessly Duyair wondered whether it might not have been better to let Holsp live and yield to the Emperor. *No!* He banished the thought. There would be a defense of some sort.

The task immediately before him was to restore the minutiae of life: the routine of the Temple, the way of life of Aldryne. The people had to be told of Holsp's treachery. They could not be allowed to continue thinking of him as a hero.

"Thubar! Helmat!"

Duyair called the priests together—and, there in the Room of Devotion, told them the story. They listened in bewilderment, staring frequently at the bloody corpse of Lugaur Holsp.

When he was finished, Thubar Frin said, "I often doubted Holsp's claims of the Hammer. But the people believed him."

"The people believed wrongly," Duyair said.

Helmat Sorgvoy said, "The Temple is without its High Priest. I propose Ras Duyair to take the place of the false Lugaur Holsp, and sit upon the throne his father distinguished."

Duyair glanced around at the assembled priests and acolytes. No one spoke.

"I accept," he said. "We shall have the investiture at once."

Silently, he led the way to the High Priest's throne-room. There, Helmat Sorgvoy, as ranking priest of the Temple, pronounced the brief rites that elevated Ras Duyair to the High Priesthood.

With trembling feet he ascended the throne of his father. He paused before sitting and said, "I now accept the duties and tasks of the office."

He sat.

The trigger in his mind was touched off.

In a sudden overwhelming burst of revelation his mind was cleared; fog rolled back. He heard his father's words again, reverberating loudly around him:

"The day you take your seat as High Priest of the Temple, my son, will be the day all this will return to your mind—

"The Hammer is for you to wield. It will be for you to break apart the Empire and bring freedom to Aldryne and the worlds of the galaxy."

Suddenly, as of the moment he had touched the throne, he knew. He knew where the Hammer was, how it operated, when it would be needed. He knew now that Lugaur Holsp could not possibly have had the Hammer—that its location was a secret old Vail Duyair had planted in his son's mind alone, so deeply that not even Ras had known it was buried there.

He rose again.

"The Hammer is ours. It will soon be brought into play."

CHAPTER VI

AGAINST the sharp blackness of the night sky, eight colored shapes could be seen, illuminated by the brightness of the Cluster.

They were spaceships of the Empire—massive hundred-man vessels whose heavy-cycle guns were capable of destroying a world within hours. Their yellow and red-violet hulls glittered in the night sky. They ringed themselves in a solid orbit around Aldryne. They waited.

Duyair made contact with them from the communications rig he had improvised in the Temple.

"This is Commander Nolgarr Millo, of the Imperial Flagship *Peerless*. I'm instructed to contact Lugaur Holsp, High Priest of the Temple of the Suns."

"Hello, Commander Millo. This is Ras Duyair, successor to Lugaur Holsp, High Priest."

"Duyair, you know why we're here?"

"Tell me."

The Imperial Commander sounded irritated. "To pick up the consignment of conspirators your predecessor was planning to turn over to us. Or don't you know anything about the arrangement?"

"I do," Duyair said. "Be informed that there will be no 'consignment' for you to pick up—and that I order you to return to your base at once and leave the Aldryne system."

"You order us? By whose grace?"

"By grace of my power," Duyair said. "Leave at once—or feel the Hammer of Aldryne!"

There was silence at the other end. Duyair paced tensely in his room, waiting. But he knew the tension aboard those ships must be infinitely greater.

Time passed—just enough time for Commander Millo to have contacted the Emperor and receive a reply.

Millo said, "We are landing. Any attempts at hostile action will result in complete destruction of this planet, by direct order of the Emperor."

"You will not land," Duyair said. He stepped to the Temple parapet and lightly touched a stud on the newly-rehabilitated cannon. A bright, white-hot energy flare streaked across the heavens, was deflected by the screens of the *Peerless* and splashed harmlessly away.

Duyair waited. There came angry sputtering—then Commander Millo said, "Well enough, Duyair of Aldryne. That shot has killed your world."

The ships of the Imperial fleet swung into battle formation; the heavy-cycle guns ground forward on their gim-

bals, readied for fighting.

Smiling, Duyair nudged a switch on the big gun's control panel.

A moment later, the sky went bright red with energy pouring from the Imperial guns.

The high-voltage barrage rained down. A thousand megawatts assaulted Aldryne.

And ten thousand feet above the planet's surface, an invisible screen turned them back.

YOU CAN'T have the whole planet shielded!" Commander Millo shouted. "Keep up the barrage!"

The Imperial ships continued. Duyair, head inclined upward, watched the spouting guns. Energy-glare lit the sky; flares of brightness speared downward, to be turned away inevitably by the ten-thousand-foot shield.

"Your eighth ship," Duyair radioed. "Watch it, Commander Millo."

He touched a switch. The atomic cannon thrummed for a moment—and a bolt of force creased the sky, leaping upward toward the ship Duyair had designated. For an instant the ship was bathed in brightness as its screens strained to hold off the energy-assault. Then the screens, ter-

ribly overloaded, collapsed.

Duyair's bolt seared right through the ship, gutting it in one long thundering flash. It split; by the illumination of the continuing bombardment, it was possible to see tiny figures tumbling outward.

"One ship had been destroyed," Duyair said. "The other seven will follow. This is the Hammer of Aldryne, Commander Millo."

Duyair glanced out at the Temple grounds. They were filled with kneeling townfolk—people who, seeing the armada in the skies, had come to pray, and remained to cheer. He heard them shouting now:

"The Hammer! The Hammer!"

The sub-radio brought in Millo's puzzled words: "A one-way screen that shields you from our guns and lets you fire at our ships? Impossible!"

"Impossible? Your seventh ship, Commander."

Again Duyair's fingers touched the firing switch. Again a bolt of force leaped skyward—and again a ship's screens dissolved under the pressure, and a ship died. Two of the eight Imperial ships now spun slowly, gutted wrecks drifting sunward.

"This is fantastic!" Millo

said. "Double the charge! Destroy them!"

Duyair chuckled. Lightly he depressed the switch; a third ship died, and a fourth.

"The Hammer!" the people cried. "It destroys the ships of the Empire!"

The Hammer descended again, and the fifth ship blazed fitfully. And the sixth.

"An unstoppable gun, Commander Millo, coupled with an impregnable planet-wide force-screen. This is the Hammer of Aldryne," Duyair said. "This we have held in reserve, waiting for the day we could use it—waiting until the time was ripe to crush the Empire!"

He jabbed down again. Lightning flashed—and when the sky cleared, only the Imperial flagship *Peerless* remained still intact in the skies.

"We surrender! We surrender!" cried Commander Millo over the sub-radio. "No more, Aldryne! Surrender!"

"Surrender accepted," Duyair said. "I order you to return to the Emperor, Millo. Tell him of what happened this day on Aldryne. Go; I spare you."

Commander Millo did not need any further commands. The hulking flagship blasted jets rapidly; it spun, turned over, headed outward, slinking away toward Dervonar, sole

survivor of the proud Imperial fleet.

Duyair waited until the ship was out of sight, then turned to the priests at his sides.

"Man those radio sets," he ordered. "News of this victory is to be relayed to every planet in the Empire. Tonight is the night we rise against Dervon!"

He paused to swab his forehead. He grinned; the Hammer had worked, the installation had been correct. The old gun, idle all these years, had been an ideal channel for the mighty force the Hammer held.

The screen—and the gun. It was a combination with which Duyair could rule the galaxy, if he so chose. But he had no desire to found a new Empire.

"Word from Dykran," said a priest. "From one Bluir Marsh. He sends his congratulations, and reports that three thousand worlds are striking against the Emperor tonight."

"Send him an acknowledgment," Duyair said. He stepped out on the parapet once again. By now, several thousand citizens had gathered there.

"In a short while," he said loudly, "a ship armed with the Hammer of Aldryne shall leave this planet—and, since

it is unstoppable, it will destroy the Imperial fleet single-handedly. Tonight an Empire falls—and ten thousand independent worlds will take its place!"

"Duyair!" they roared. "Hammer! Duyair! Hammer!"

The time had come, Duyair thought. Tonight the Empire died—felled by the Hammer of Aldryne!

CHAPTER VII

TO WITNESS the death of an Empire that had endured three thousand years is not pleasant—but to be the final Emperor of your line is agony.

Dervon XIV sat alone in his throne-room on that final night. His ministers were long since dead, dead by their own hands. The capital was in chaos. The revolt had struck even here—here, at Dervonar itself!

He eyed the map that told of the spreading of the rebellion—out of the Aldryne system into the Cluster of which it was a part, then through the Cluster like a raging blaze.

And then across the skies.

Dervon shook his head sadly. The Empire had been foredoomed—but that it should end this way, at this time! He realized that his own attempts to preserve it had been the

mainspring of the Empire's destruction.

He had known of the rebellion on Dykran. A stronger Emperor might have obliterated those two worlds at once, while he had the chance. But Dervon had been devious. He had feared losing the support of the rest of the galaxy by such a terrible action. And thus he had given Aldryne time to loose its Hammer.

Now they all rebelled, all fell away. He saw coldly and clearly that nothing he could have done would have saved the Empire. It had crumbled

of its own weight, died of its own extreme age.

Gloomily he peered at the gyrotoy in his hand. From far away came the sound of pounding, a constant reiterated *boom . . . boom . . .*

The Hammer, he thought. Coming ever closer, here on the last night of the Empire. Smiling bitterly, the dying Emperor of the dead Empire stared at the delicate patterns shaped within the gyrotoy. Sighing, he waited for the end, while the blows of the Hammer sounded ever louder, ever closer, in his ears.



YOU ASKED FOR IT!

YOU, THE READERS, have told us that you like our usual policy of running three short novels an issue. But you've also told us that if a really outstanding novel comes along, we should print it no matter how long it is. Well, a really outstanding novel did—and we're going to print it!

Thunder Over Starhaven by Ivar Jorgenson is twice as long as the novels we usually publish, but it's so crammed with excitement and ideas that it couldn't possibly be cut, and so good that we couldn't possibly reject it. It's the story of a planet completely shielded by an impregnable metal globe, with a population of 20,000—and every man and woman among them a hunted criminal. It's the story of Ben Thurdan, the dictator who ruled Starhaven with a hand as hard as the globe that surrounded it, and of Johnny Mantell, the one man who had the courage to defy him. It's a story with thrills and surprises on every page.

You'll find it, with another short novel, short stories, and departments, in the next SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, on sale the middle of August!



THE READERS' SPACE

WELL, after four issues I'm finally writing. Such repeated success as yours can't be mere luck. All I can say is that INFINITY had better watch out. For me at least, you fill a void in sf that has long been empty. I much prefer to read a few really good novels which are long enough to get into the mood of than, say, one novel and a lot of short stories. Don't get me wrong, I like short stories, too, but there are so many of them. For my money, INFINITY and SFA are the two best magazines I can buy.

As for rating the stories, well, it's pretty difficult but: best for issue 1—"Battle for the Thousand Suns," no. 2—"Assassin," no. 3—"Spawn of the Deadly Sea," no. 4—"Chalice of Death."

As the best writer so far in SFA, I'd name Calvin Knox for his two superior efforts. It was hard to choose between "Chalice . . ." and "Spawn of . . ." Close second was Rob-

ert Silverberg for "Spawn of the Deadly Sea." It was, to say the least, terrific.

Departmentwise, there is but one thing to desire. I have noticed a trend in sf magazines to have columns for pen pals, and I am wholly in favor of it. Sf fans should get to know each other better by corresponding. Hop to it, boys! (*Archibald Destiny will be glad to run requests for pen pals in "The Fan-Space."*—LTS)

I'm rooting for SFA to become monthly, too. Although frankly, I don't see how you manage to dig up such good stories in two months' time. So long for now. Thanks for a swell mag.—David Rolfe, 3136 11th Avenue, Spokane, Washington.



I have just gotten ahold of my first issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES and I'm mighty glad I did. The issue

happened to be the June one, and as far as I'm concerned I won't miss any from now on.

I often read the "ratings" in literary magazines of the mags in the sf field and although I've never seen SFA on one, I'm firmly convinced that it should be. I think your magazine is real stiff competition for some of the "older and more established magazines."

How about a story soon by Poul Anderson or Murray Leinster? I like those writers anyway, and I have an idea that it might help your mag more than some might think.

I write a little sf myself (under another name) and from what I've seen I'd say you know how to pick your stories. For a writer of sf I'm not much of a judge, but here's how I'd stack up the stories in the June issue:

1. "Chalice of Death"
2. "Run for the Stars"
3. "Yesterday's Man"

If I was the editor of SFA there's only a few minor changes I think I might make. I think it would be a good idea to print only two novels per issue, and fill it out with a couple of good shorts, but this is only an idea. I think you've got a mighty good mag just the way it is.

Keep up the good work and

I'll keep reading SFA!—Paul Van Avery, 187 Cornelia Street, Plattsburgh, New York.



Quite a few readers will hate me for this, but I don't mind. In front of me I have the first four issues of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, and I enjoyed most of the stories in them.

But I cannot stand this Calvin M. Knox. He appears in your first and fourth issues, with the most ridiculous stories I have ever read. I'm only one reader, but I wonder if there are others who agree? Who you need is Leigh Brackett. On page 128 of your first issue, you mention her name in an ad. I hope that means you have a story for us by Leigh!—Jim George, Box 72, Kilgore, Texas.

(Leigh Brackett has promised us a story, but it will have to wait until she finishes the mystery novel she's writing for hard-cover publication.—LTS)



Just bought the June copy of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES magazine. I think it's very good except for the drawings.

I'll tell you why I like the

mag. Other mags I've tried to read are too much detail of complicated gadgets that we don't understand and don't care about anyway. I want something to read that's new, exciting and different. People get tired of picking up the paper and reading the same old thing every day. It gets monotonous.

I've always been interested in science fiction anyway and am happy to find a mag that's just right. So thanks for getting one out.—Edith Beebe, 1415 Flower Street, Apartment #18, Bakersfield, California.



Finished the 4th SFA only a few moments ago and here are my opinions of it.

This, the fourth, issue, is definitely the best since #1; the second and third issues were very poor compared to such a slam-bang first issue! For a while, I thought that SFA was prematurely fizzling out, but thankfully the fourth issue made me revise my opinions. All the stories were excellent.

The very best was "Chalice of Death" by Calvin Knox. It sparked Ye Olde Sense of Wonder within me and very few stories, nowadays, can accomplish this. Knox seems to

be a potential *great* and with only a little more experience I should say he will be one of the best in the field. (That is, if he keeps up thoroughly entrancing stories such as "Chalice of Death.") (*There will be a sequel to "Chalice" in an early issue.—LTS*)

"Yesterday's Man" by Budrys didn't affect me in the slightest way. From the cover splashes, it was apparent that you thought Budrys' novel was the best. 'Twasn't! It was entertaining, yes, but nothing special as far as the average science fiction story. Let's say it was definitely not a *bad* story but it wasn't too exceptional.

"Run for the Stars" had some good psychological potential but was ruined by Ellison's passion for the "Run! Run! . . . and the chase is on!" type of story. It, too, had a high standard of quality compared to the stf magazines who are falsely boasting "real space opera." (Only yours can truthfully make that statement.) Oh, yes, the ending was terribly disappointing! Who the hell wants to see a rat like Tallant conquer the universe?

"Moths": Not Fontenay's best but still *very* good. Could have led up into a really suspenseful novelet but the ending came too quick and as a

matter of fact, there wasn't anything to the ending! It left me up in the air . . . sort of like a story which reads: "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and the war was over."

With this criticism on the four stories, you wonder how I could say that this was the best issue since #1. Because #2 and #3 were written well enough but the plots were entirely too thin! On the contrary, the plots in issue #4 were very substantial and I only wish novels could have been written out of each one and more time spent on them. Would you perchance accept novels longer than the ones you're now featuring? The disadvantage of having a story of the standards you require and harder yet finding a story of the right length! I say, if you see *anything* holding the standards of SFA, grab it up! Don't stick to a policy of three short novels an issue; that could ruin you. Spend your time finding good material; as to the length of the stories, let that work itself out. (*You win. See the announcement on page 126.—LTS*)

Which leads me to the let-

tercol. There is a great difference between the "science fiction fan" and "science fiction enthusiast." A science fiction fan does not necessarily *love* science fiction. A stf fan and an enthusiast both believe in space travel thoroughly, they both have an open mind and an eye for the future. But there the resemblance ends. A fan will buy all the fanzines he can get, take part in all fan activities, join all fan organizations possible and soon publish a fanzine of his own. He's solely devoted to fandom while he buys only a few choice prozines which he reads occasionally! An enthusiast will buy almost every prozine out, read all the science fiction he can get his hands on, and only buy a *few* fanzines such as *Fantasy-Times*; hardly anything fanish because he regards it as "nonsense."

Who draws those *fabulous* BEM's on the inside front covers of INFINITY and SFA? (*Bill Bowman.—LTS*) They are utterly beautiful! Positively the best art in the whole zine! Keep 'em up!—Bill Meyers, 4301 Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga 11, Tennessee.



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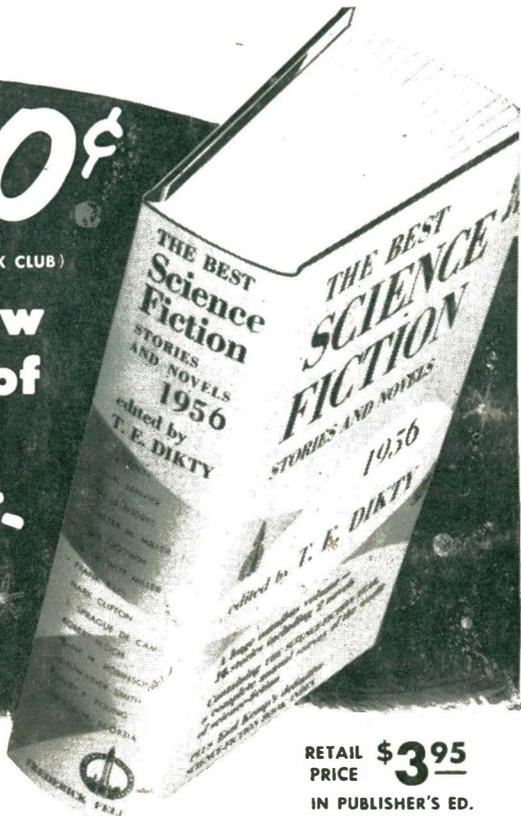
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