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**Battle for the
Thousand Suns**

by Calvin Knox



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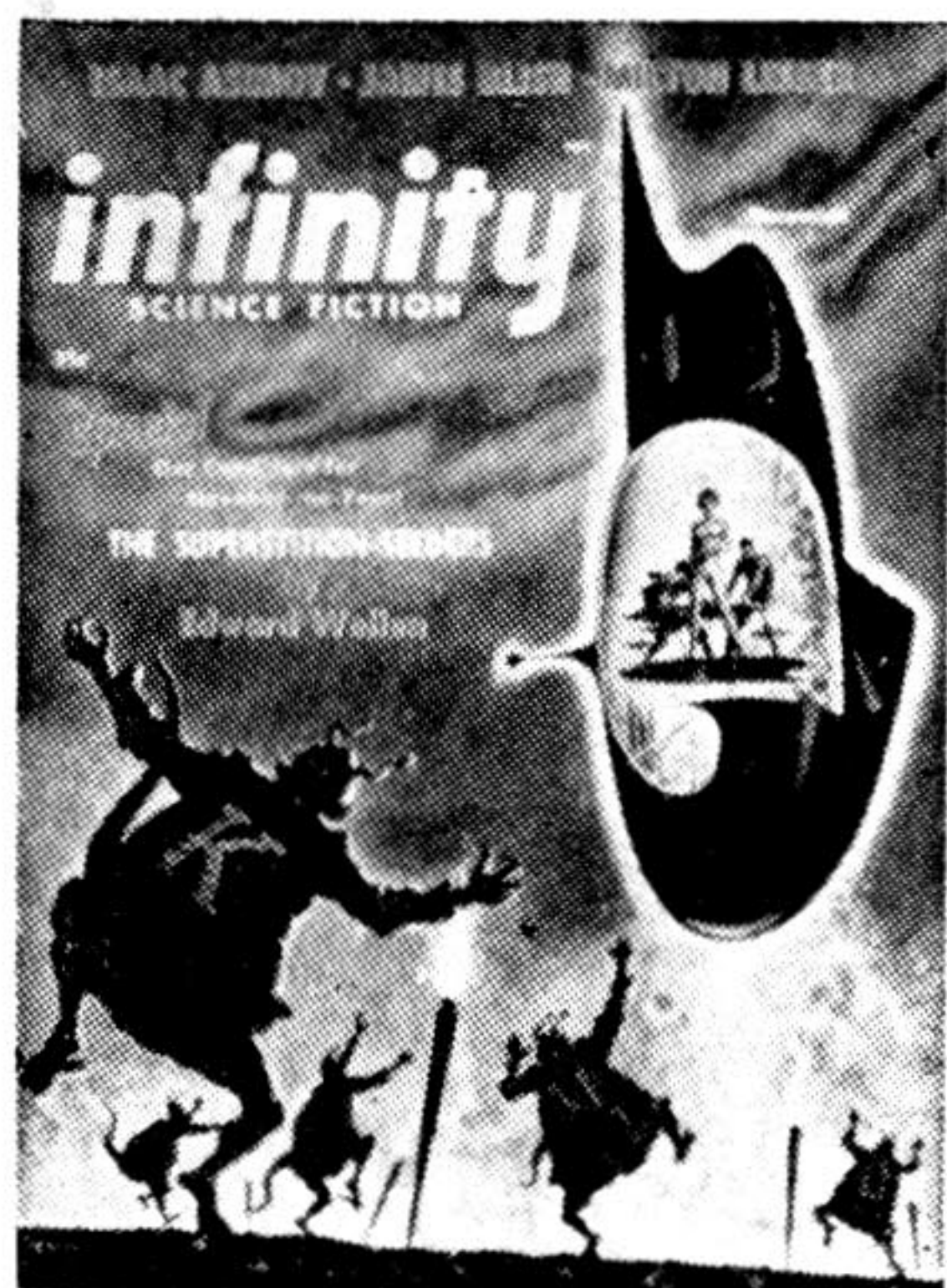


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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 1 No. 6

DECEMBER, 1956

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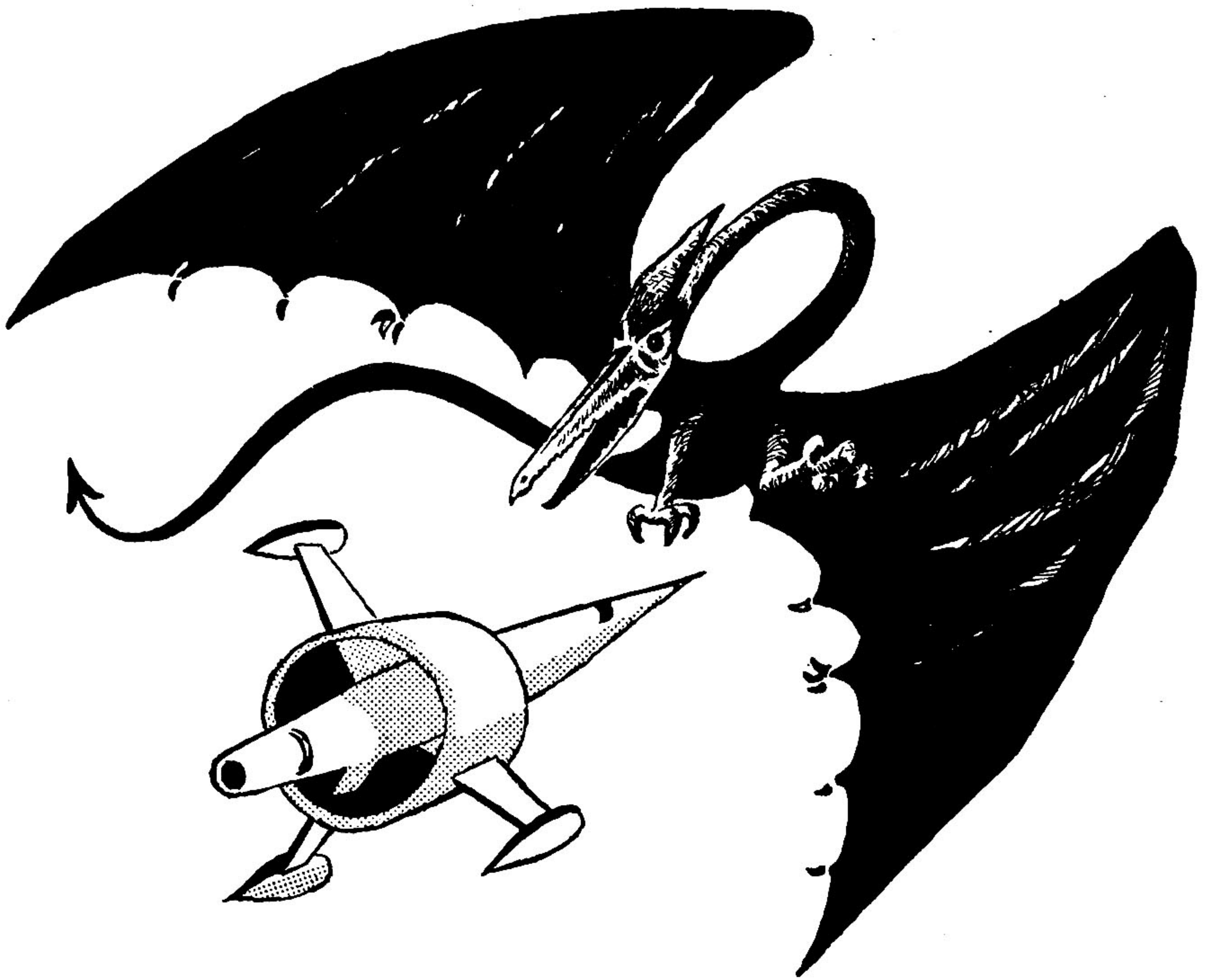
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THE STARCOMBERS

by Edmond Hamilton

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

Illustrated by Bowman

The Starcombers

by Edmond Hamilton

CHAPTER I

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

It came, finally. The voice of Sam Fletcher spoke in the cramped control-room of the *Prosperous Hope*, faint and unclear because the radio, like

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

everything else about the *Prosperous Hope*, operated on marginal efficiency.

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

"Look," said Harry Axe into the mike, "I don't care how level the place is, I want to know is it worth landing. We wasted enough time already on them other two big hunks of nothing."

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

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

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

"What's in it?"

"Black. Nothing but black. Miles deep."

"Fletch, are you sober?"

"Sober?"

"Yeah. Sober!"

"Me?" said Fletcher, and laughed.

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

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

"Yeah?" said Axe, suddenly eager.

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

"Right. And Fletch—listen, Fletch! Lay off any more of that drinking until we land. Fletch—"

Silence.

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

Joe Leedy stood rubbing his chin. He was built like a tall weed, with pale hair hanging in a thick shock over his fore-

head. He said mildly, "I searched him, Harry. But you know Fletch. He's mighty smart about hiding it."

"He's too smart for the both of you, that's the trouble," said a woman's voice from behind them. "Drunk or sober." She had come in from the main cabin aft of the control room. The bulkhead door stood open at her back and through it came a shrill clatter of children's voices and a smell of stale cooking. She was a young woman, with rather heavy lips and a mass of honey-brown hair hanging over her shoulders. She was proud of her hair. She was proud of the rest of her, too. She wore a faded coverall, pulled in here and unfastened there until she managed to look undressed in it in spite of being completely covered up. Her name was Lucy, and she was Harry Axe's second wife.

Harry Axe said, "What the hell do you want?"

"You're too good at kicking people around," she said. She looked at her brother, disgustingly. "Whyn't you kick him back, Joe?"

Joe shrugged. He said sensibly, "I don't want to get my neck broke, that's why." He went over and sat down at the radio.

"Are we landing?" asked Lucy.

"That's a dumb question," said Harry Axe. "What do you think we're doing?"

"How would I know?" said Lucy. "You expect us to hear through an iron wall? Anyway, they're your kids, not mine. If they get their little heads bashed in, you'll feel it worse than I will."

She slammed the door and went to help Joe's wife strap the kids into the recoil hammocks.

FAR BELOW, between the black star-shot heavens and the blacker world, Sam Fletcher hovered in the scout. He looked around him at the striding suns, blazing blue and crimson, white and gold, all marching in their groups and companies along the galactic road that never changes and is never the same. He looked at the dead sun close at hand, an enormous bulk occluding the stars behind it, faintly glimmering with a ghostly light. He looked at the world beneath.

He wondered, as he had wondered so many times, What are we doing out here? Why did we ever have to leave Earth, we soft little things of blood and flesh, what

crazy obsession drove us out to the stars, the stars that don't want us, that reject us, that kill us? Has one Earthman ever been happier, really happier, for leaving his own safe world? Have I been happier?

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

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

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

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

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

There wasn't any answer.

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

carefully, moving in.

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

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

"Kind of makes you think, don't it?" said Lucy, looking out the port. She had changed into another coverall, freshly washed and less faded. Her hair was tied with a ribbon, and she moved with an elaborate lack of self-consciousness, seeming to pay no attention to Fletcher. Over in the corner, nursing her youngest, Joe's wife smiled secretly.

Fletcher said, "About what?" He was sitting at the table, drinking himself methodically into a stupor. This was his bonus. For twenty-

four hours after flying the scout to guide the big ships to a landing he was not expected to work with the other men.

"Why," said Lucy. "Them buildings. Harry says they must have been miles across, from the size of the foundations. And high, too, to go that deep in the rock that nothing could tear them out." She shook her head solemnly, switching the long thick tail of hair between her shoulders. "Doesn't it make you wonder what kind of people built them, and how they lived in them?"

Fletcher grunted.

"I mean," said Lucy, turning away from the window, "it makes you think about time, and living, and dying. Big things."

She sat down at the table across from Fletcher.

"Don't you think about anything, Sam," she said. "except drinking?"

He gave her a foggy but surprisingly intelligent look. "You mean things like Harry Axe's wife?" He grinned and shook his head. "The answer is yes and no. I think about her, yes. But I don't think what she wants me to think about her, no."

Her face became harder in outline, and her voice was

sharp. "Just what do you mean by that crack?"

"You're a nice kid, Lucy. You don't mean any real harm. You just want a man to drop dead when he sees you." He poured another drink and drank it, still smiling at her. "You want me to be tormented because you belong to Harry and I can't have you." He made a gesture of negation. "Uh-uh. Not me. But you know what, Lucy? Another guy might. Another guy might make you some real trouble with Harry. So you better be careful."

Lucy's face was flushed now. Her eyes were hot. "What's so special about you, you drunken bum?" she said. "And I'll tell you something, mister. I wouldn't have you if—"

"What's special about me?" said Fletcher, rising. "I'm dead. Didn't you know that? Been dead for seven—no, nine years. Time flies." He picked up his bottle. "'Bye."

"You might as well be dead," said Lucy viciously, "for all you mean to me."

"And that is as it should be," Fletcher said. "I give you the kiss of peace." He bent and kissed her chastely on the forehead. He went out, laughing.

Lucy pounded her fists on

the table. "Who does he think he is?" she snarled. "He makes me so mad—"

"Hush," said Joe's wife. "The baby's asleep." But her head was bent forward to hide her face, and her heavy shoulders shook.

SAM FLETCHER went down the corridor to his bunk in the corner of the main deck supply room. On the way he passed the airlock. The inner door was shut and the red light was on, indicating that the outer door was open. He paused, swaying on his feet, a tall man, lean but strongly built, his face deeply lined and hollow under the cheekbones, his thick brown hair stippled with gray. His eyes were blue, rather vague now, looking with a kind of dark brilliance from under heavy brows. After a minute he set his bottle down and began to fiddle with the airlock 'scope, his head leaned forward against the viewer.

The 'scope reflected everything visible from this side of the ship. To his right, and extending back across the plateau, he could see the humped and broken lines of the foundation walls—and God, yes, he thought, they do make you wonder. How long

have they been here, and what was this world like when they were new? The machines rooted and tore at them, greedy, destructive, seeking out the metal—placed there by somebody, and of heaven only knew what molecular construction, and possibly worth an untold fortune—embedded in the timeless rock and the almost equally timeless plastic material. Tomorrow he would have to go out and root and tear with the others, and there would not be any rest until every scrap of salvage was in the holds of the four ships.

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

Fletcher looked at the machines, and again he wondered why men had ever bothered to struggle their way out to the stars. For this was all the struggle came to in the end, sordid money-making things like this. And all the men who had dreamed and died in that

struggle, so that Harry Axe and others like him could pick the bones of far-off worlds!

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

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

CHAPTER II

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

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

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

The figure was still there.

Fletcher walked toward it. He had not opened his helmet radio, so the voices of the men working the machines did not reach him, and he walked in utter silence. When he turned

his back on the plateau he could no longer see the ships or the lights, and it was as though they did not exist. His footsteps were soundless as in a dream.

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

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

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

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

He stood on the edge of

nothing, and swayed, and almost fell.

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

And down.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry Axe and Joe Leedy and a man named Zakarian from one of the other ships—Zakarian was married to a

sister of Harry Axe's first wife—came and crept gingerly to where they could grasp Fletcher's feet, and pulled him back. They got him well away from the edge. Then Harry Axe said,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who?" said Axe.

Zakarian snorted. "Who? Why, the folks he was shouting at, naturally. The little green men." He gave Fletcher a shove toward the *Prosperous*

Hope. "Go on, now. Sleep it off."

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

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

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

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

Fletcher heard the commotion of men coming into the ship. He dragged himself

heavily out of sleep, out of his bunk, and went yawning and slouching down the corridor to the main cabin. There was quite a crowd there, and a bedlam of noise. The kids' shaggy heads and sharp faces kept poking between the legs of the men, and the men swatted them absently out of the way, like flies. Fletcher pushed his way through to where Harry Axe and Joe Leedy were laying something out on one of the bunks. It was about four and a half feet long.

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

Nobody answered him.

Somebody said, "Is it human?"

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

"Ah," said Joe, "I just tapped him on top the helmet. He wasn't disposed to be neighborly, so let him take the consequences. Anyway, he ain't dead." He bent closer, fingering the silvery material that clothed the body. The head was covered too, as Fletcher remembered, by a helmet that

pretty well concealed the face. Joe Leedy whistled, and said, "Will you look at this stuff, now."

Everybody crowded forward to look.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They began to paw at the belt and pouches of the suit, getting in each other's way. Fletcher leaned closer, and his eyes narrowed. Suddenly he moved, very fast. He hit Harry Axe on the point of his jaw and knocked him

backward, and at almost the same time he butted Joe Leedy aside and into Zakarian. Zakarian swore and stumbled back into the crowd and Joe fell on his hands and knees.

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

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

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

JOE LEEDY, his face absolutely colorless, scuttled up and hit the silver helmet with a short length of pipe. The body inside the suit writhed convulsively and partially relaxed. Joe Leedy hit it again,

and Fletcher said, "That's enough."

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

"Shut it off," said Zakarian.

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

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

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

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

The thick plate of the over-deck glowed and brightened.

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

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

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

killed because of you."

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

Joe said, "We shoulda searched him first thing, Harry. Fletcher is right. Come on, let's make sure he don't do it again. And get that fire-shooter out of the way 'fore one of the kids gets hold of it."

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

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

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

Axe ignored that. Zakarian was helping to haul the wounded away, and Joe's wife was herding the young ones off. Lucy had come to stand between Harry and Fletcher.

"That looks like blood inside his helmet," she said, and

pointed to the man's head.

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

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

For a minute nobody spoke. Then Lucy muttered, "He looks so *wild*." She stepped back, half sheltering herself behind Harry.

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

blood had come from the nostrils.

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

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

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

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

"How much metal are we gonna get out of them walls?" said Harry. "Enough to fill maybe two ships at the most.

How much will it bring when we get it on the market? Maybe plenty. We hope so. But maybe not so much. Maybe not enough to buy your wife a hair-ribbon. Ain't that so, Zak?"

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

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

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

Fletcher said, "Oh, get out of the way, Harry. Lucy, can I have some warm water and a towel? A clean one. And then some food, anything you





The Starcombers

happen to have handy."

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

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

"Untie his hands," said Fletcher.

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

since I'm here I might as well get something out of it.

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

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

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

Suddenly he smiled, and spoke.

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

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

The little man spoke again, slowly. He pointed to out-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's your reason?"

Lucy had come up beside Harry. Now she leaned against him and looked at Fletcher with her eyes half closed and her lips thrust out. "He's a coward, that's his reason," she said.

"Yeah?" said Harry. "How would you know?"

She laid her head against Harry's shoulder, still looking at Fletcher. She smiled. "A man that'll try and steal an-

other man's wife when his back is turned has got to be a coward, ain't he? Otherwise he wouldn't sneak about it."

From across the cabin, Joe Leedy's wife said sharply, "Why, Lucy Axe! That's a lie and you know it."

"You mind your own business," said Lucy fiercely. She rubbed her head against Harry's shoulder.

Harry looked from her to Fletcher and back again, confused between doubt and the beginnings of rage.

Fletcher shook his head. "It is a lie, Harry, and she does know it. And I'm sorry she told it. I guess I was wrong about her. She does want to make real trouble." He looked at Lucy. "You might have waited until we got back. If we do."

"Go on," said Harry Axe, his voice getting loud. "I told you to fuel up that scout."

Fletcher shrugged. He went out.

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

CHAPTER III

THE SCOUT rose up from darkness into darkness, and then plunged down again into utter night.

From this angle it appeared

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

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

"He looks to me," said Fletcher, "as though he's ex-

pecting plenty of trouble."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe Leedy and Zakarian stirred uneasily, looking at each other. Fletcher did not

answer Harry. The cabin became silent, except for the partially muffled blasting of the jets.

The ship entered atmosphere.

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

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

The little man caught Fletcher's arm and gestured imperiously toward the left.

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

He swung lower, slowly, feeling his way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, whatever it was, it's gone. Hurry it up there, Fletcher. Go where he tells

you." Harry Axe mopped his face on his shirt-sleeve. He was white around the lips. He turned around, and Joe Leedy said in a weak voice, "I think we oughta go back."

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

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

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

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

The scout dropped lower.

A heavy red smudge became localized some two or three miles away to Fletcher's right. It flickered and flared

unsteadily. Presently he was able to make out a group of three squat cones with fire coming out of their tops. They shed light over the surrounding country much in the manner of gigantic flambeaus, and Fletcher thought he saw something else. He thought he saw a very large building in the plain below the cones, caught and half crushed in the terminus of a lava field.

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

The scout passed out of the fire-lit area into darkness again. But it was a darkness in which other torches burned. The little man looked and peered and pondered, and then fastened on one of them as a beacon. He nodded to Fletcher.

The scout closed on its destination, whipping through occasional veils of steam and smoke that rose up from cracks in the dark rock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The little man was making emphatic gestures downward.

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

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

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

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

"If we hang onto him," said

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beads of sweat had appeared on Harry Axe's forehead.

But he said loudly, "I told you, it's all right. I'd as soon brought a bunch of women as you three! Relax now, will you?"

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

CHAPTER IV

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

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

The ship and the building were some distance apart. There were many people in the building who wished to

trade, but they would not venture out because the ship was small and could not hold them, and there was danger on the plain. Great things, both flying and walking, were constantly hungry, constantly hunting.

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

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

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

"We ain't only got a little blasting powder," Harry said, chuckling, "but how are they gonna know that? Zak, you

and Joe go and sit on that pile of crates, with your guns out. That's it. That'll give 'em the idea. Fletch, you help me load the toter."

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

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

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

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

Joe said, "Oh, now, Harry, cool down. I've known Lucy longer than you have, and I know what she's up to. Fletch ain't interested—"

He stopped with a word stuck halfway in his mouth. A screeching hissing roar tore at his eardrums, ripped at already tender nerves. Fletcher spun around to see a tongue of white fire lick out from the roof, toward a steam-veiled crevice just on the edge where the artificial blaze of light faded into the fire-shot gloom.

He could not see anything there.

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

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

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

"What do you think?" said Zakarian.

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

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

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

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

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

It was more than that, Fletcher thought. It was obscene and terrifying, the dark distorted negative of a normal world. Overhead the sky was a narrow rift between two towering slabs of blackness, that seemed from this angle to lean toppling together. The

air was thick with sulfurous smells. It eddied with currents, now hot from the mouth of volcanoes, now bitter cold sucked down from above, laced perpetually with fumes and vapors. The red, flickering glare of the fire-cones pulsed and waned, making the whole naked landscape quiver like the unsteady imaginings of a dream.

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

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

Something passed overhead with a ponderous thundering of wings.

The men shrank back into the mouth of the lock, but

whatever it was went on, keeping wide of the watchers on the roof. But now Fletcher was aware of sounds, and the cleft was full of them. The deep uneasy mumbling of volcanoes turning in their sleep, the hiss of steam, the stealthy creeping whisper of movement, unseen and of unguessable origin, the crying of ungodly voices.

"Let's get back inside," said Fletcher, in a kind of psychic panic. "This is too much for me."

But Joe said sharply, "Wait—he's coming."

A PORTAL had opened low in the face of that lighted cliff, and Harry Axe was coming out of it with ten or a dozen of the little men. He had the totter with him. It was heaped high with a wobbly load, and two of the men ran along beside it to keep the pile from falling off. Harry Axe ran ahead guiding it, shouting. His voice reached them, jubilant, ringing off the rock and the building wall. "Look what I got! Look here!" The others grabbed him and made him be still, and the men on the roof were agitated, bending to peer beyond the circle of their lights.

Harry Axe ran across the

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

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

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

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

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

Fletcher looked at it while he stowed it away. More of the silvery armor, the light alloy helmets. More ornaments and fabrics. More artifacts, more delicate things of

metal and wire and crystal and incomprehensible uses. The lot was worth, to the scavengers, a genuine fortune, not only in the relatively paltry worth of gems but in the new processes and principles intrinsic in the manufactured articles.

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

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

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

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

They hurried. But the stack of crates in the ship was only a little more than half transferred when a huge bawling broke out in the darkness, and

at once the snarling beams snapped out from the roof batteries, probing along the edges of the light.

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

The Earthmen stopped, too.

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

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

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

The mountain piped, boomed, and charged.

Harry Axe jumped in through the port. "Good God," he said. "That thing'll crush us. It'll crush the ship." He

shoved past Fletcher and made for the pilot's chair. "Come on, let's get out of here. Fast, for God's sake!"

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

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

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

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

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

The little man moved, very fast. Joe Leedy already had

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

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

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

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

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

He relaxed and became utterly limp.

The little men grunted, and hauled him out of the lock.

They dumped him in a heap at one side, and took his gun away, and left him there.

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

CHAPTER V

WHAT HAPPENED after that happened with the same grim, fierce speed.

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

A blinding stab of pain went through his head. There was a running of blood in his mouth. No nightmare, he thought. This is for real. Poor Joe. Poor Joe Leedy, he's dead.

The mountain danced ponderously in an agony of frustration, and now there was a

new sound overhead. A sound of wings.

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

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

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

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

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

Fletcher reached up and grasped the edge of the low-

est tube and pulled himself into its charred-smelling, pitted mouth.

The little men dragged out the body of Joe Leedy.

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

The two men dropped Joe Leedy and ran as fast as they could back toward the ship. And now it seemed that there was no more time to look for Fletcher. Probably they thought he was already dead and eaten. They bunched up around Zakarian and the loaded cart, and went away at a terrific pace toward the building. The fire-beams from the roof threw a protective cover over them, the perimeter constantly drawing in behind

them as they ran.

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

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

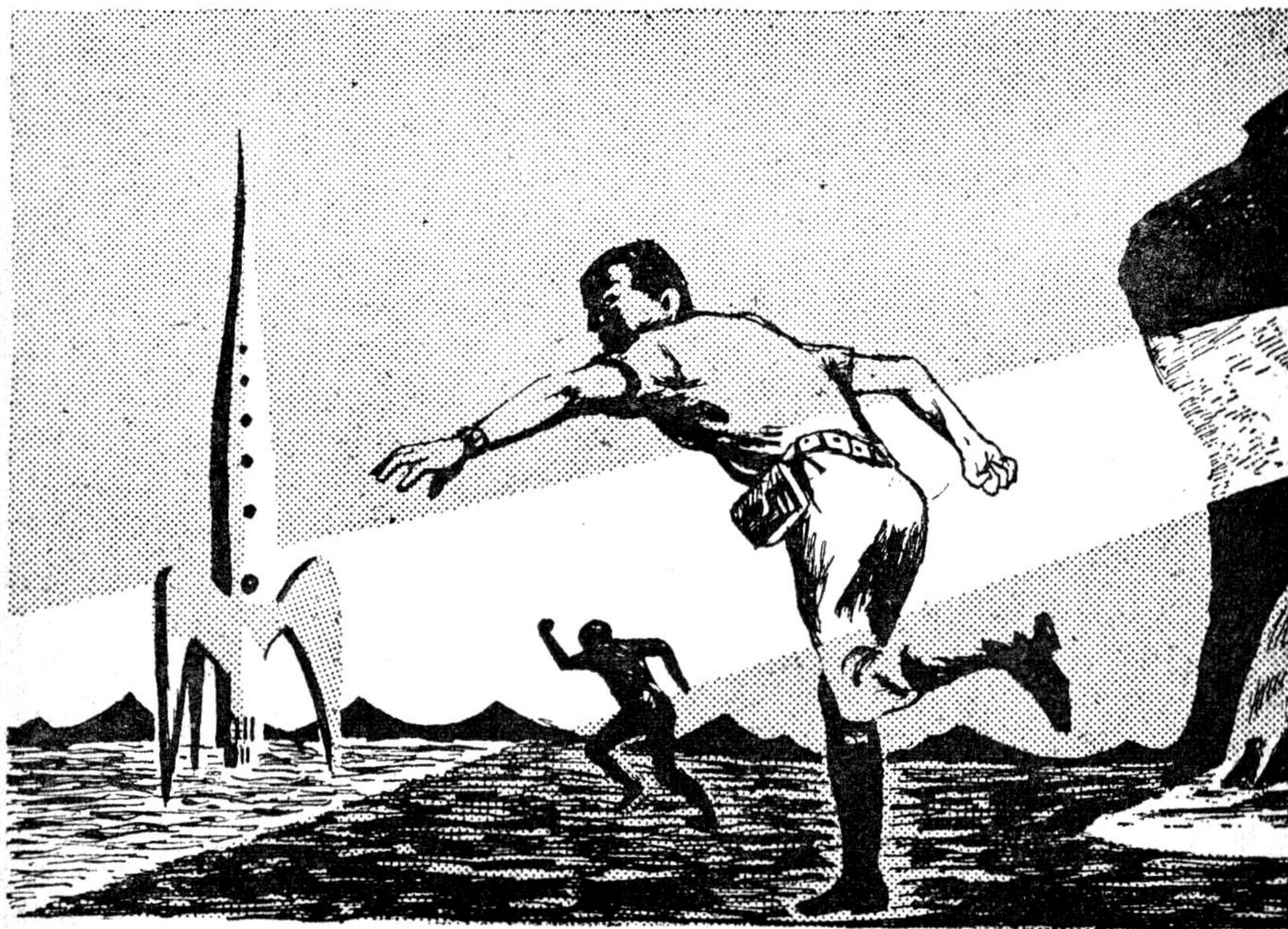
He thought, unless they've

booby-trapped the ship, I can get back in it and fly up out of here. I can take a chance.

He thought, Harry Axe deserves what he's getting. The hell with him.

Then he thought about Zakarian, who didn't deserve it, and he thought about facing Zakarian's wife and Lucy Axe. He could imagine what they would think, and say, if he came back up alone.

Fletcher didn't think about any of these things more than a second. They just went through his head while he was climbing quietly out of the tube. Underneath all the



thoughts was a hard core of purpose. It was not entirely a lofty purpose. Part of it said, Zakarian's a good guy and I can't just leave him.

But the bigger part of it said, Lucy's damn lie has got me boxed and if I go back alone now they'll think I killed the others and they'll very likely kill me for it. So I've got to get them out of there and take them back with me.

And he'd have to do it without help. It was no use going back up and calling for a massed attack on the cleft-dwellers. All he would be doing would be to get four

slow clumsy ships loaded with women and children into the range of those spitting fire-beams. And as Harry himself had said, all they had was a little blasting powder.

HE CREPT away from the creatures on the plain who were too busy just for that few minutes to notice him. He crept as fast as he could, hugging himself into hollows in the rock, creeping on all fours when he had to cross a high spot. He headed for the cliff-wall of the building, with its regular rows of lights. He



made the angle of his going wide, so that when he actually reached the building he would be at the part of it where there were no lights.

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

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

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

They would hardly have killed one of their own people. And one of their own people would hardly have been lurking in this crevice. Probably, then, the dead man was from some other building in the cleft. Remembering the one destroyed by the lava flow, Fletcher knew that there had been other buildings once. Perhaps there still were, and perhaps they were like warring city-states opposed in this brutal fight for survival,

spying, raiding back and forth, destroying each other with the cold fierceness of necessity.

He wondered how much this man had seen, and whether he had been alone. The steam-veiled, sulfur-reeking crevice led into a little narrow gorge that wound away suggestively, but did not give him any answers. He hoped the man had been alone, because if he had had a companion, and the companion had gone for reinforcements, it could make the already impossible task of getting to Harry and Zakarian a good deal harder.

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

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

sible to climb. He remained pressed against it, his heart hammering, listening, flinching, feeling death everywhere, in every sound and smell. Then he began to move along the wall, farther and farther away from the lights, into the abandoned darkness.

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

He went on because there was nothing else to do.

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

Emptiness and desolation.

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

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

And there was a break in the wall.

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

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

He went to the corner of the room farthest from the break and sat down and stayed there for a bit, feeling the safety around him. Gradually his breathing eased and he

stopped trembling, and then he got up again. He found a broad doorway, and went through it.

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

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

Fletcher looked at those holes to the outdoors, and shivered. But there was no sign that the creatures of the cleft had moved in. Only the flying things would be able to, and the honeycomb of rooms and halls, and the relatively—for their huge wings—cramped areas of the shafts would not appeal to them.

He stopped at intervals, anyway, to listen, but he could not hear anything but the quiet of the building, the countless thousands of its rooms still intact, their walls enclosing silence, their floors untrod, the myriad functions for which they had been built forgotten. It was an oppressive silence. It made him aware of the hopeless exis-

tence these people had led and still did lead, what was left of them, foredoomed, with their world dying under them. It made him wonder why they fought to live at all. It made him wonder why anybody did.

He prowled the long corridors that were like streets, moving up and down from level to level as he was forced to by fallen rubble or by the need to keep going in a particular direction. Sometimes he went in total darkness, feeling his way. Sometimes there was the flickering glow of that ominous torch to show him what he passed. The private apartments with their doors standing all ajar or fallen from the hinges, and their windows to the "street" no longer interested in who went by. The public gathering places, with transparent fronts, sometimes spreading very wide, sometimes not, with the faded lettering of signs still there to tell what the places had once been and were no longer. The bits and pieces of furniture, of personal belongings, all the rags and wreckage that people leave behind when they go. The beautiful things, torn and fallen to rot or defiantly surviving in imperishable stone, the dreaming faces of men and women, the statue of a

laughing child, colors, shapes, incomprehensible structures of silver wire and gleaming metal rods. The utilitarian things, great hulking functional shapes that had once pumped light and life to all this teeming city-state, dissolving slowly into rust. The factories, mills, synthesizing plants, all quiet.

He began to notice that you could tell where each successive abandonment of a sector had ended, by the barrier walls. These seemed to be a later development, occurring as Fletcher got closer to the inhabited part. Perhaps there had not been any strife between the city-states in their earlier days. Perhaps they still felt their brotherhood in the legion of the condemned. But later, as the shrinking population had withdrawn, they had built massive bulkheads behind them, against possible invasion from their own rear.

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

He clambered on through that gigantic ruin, going more and more cautiously as he knew he must be approaching the inhabited part. His windings and twistings had

brought him close to the outer wall again, and the sudden blazing-on of floodlights outside struck like lightning through the windows, startling him. He looked cautiously out, but he could not see anything but the volcano and the flat brilliance of the lights glaring on the bare rock. The ship was opposite the other corner of the building, and he could not see it from here.

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

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

There was no way through.

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

CHAPTER VI

THE ROOF-BATTERIES spoke, with a hiss and a snarl. Other voices answered, some shrill and spiteful, others very

deep, and every time the deep ones coughed Fletcher could feel the building quiver, ever so slightly. Once the noises started they never stopped, but only built and increased until the sheer violence of sound was stunning.

Apparently the little man with no head had indeed had a companion, and apparently the companion had gone for reinforcements. He must have known that food of some kind was being unloaded from the strange ship—of course food, because what else was there in life to arouse that much energy and excitement, to make men defy the charging mountain and the flapping creatures of the sky? Probably he had believed that the men of this rival building had established contact with a source of supply outside the cleft—an unavoidable assumption—and that the source might well be constant. At any rate it was an advantage too great for any city to allow another city to acquire and keep to itself.

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

was he going to do about it?

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

Fletcher thought of the roof.

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

It was worth trying.

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

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

Above him, in the sulfurous sky, wide wings beat and hun-

gry cries resounded, and every few minutes one of the roof-batteries would send a beam of fire shooting upward to keep the brutes away.

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

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

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

Holding the fire-tube he had taken from the dead man ready in his hand, Fletcher began to work his way down through the building. He was in a curious state of desperation, where both fear and courage become words without meaning. He didn't even think about them any more. He was like a man who for one reason or another has got himself caught in a strong current and has now no choice but to go along with it, holding himself up from minute to minute as best he can.

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

Fletcher went down, by winding ramps and stairways.

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

HHE BECAME cautious and cunning now, darting in and out of doorways, peering through intercommunicating windows. The voices sounded as though they were below

him, but they seemed also to come from up ahead. Finally he found a glass front in the wall that showed a balcony. The door was open, and the voices were quite loud. Fletcher ventured onto the balcony, and looked over the railing, his body crouched down behind a pillar.

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

There were, as nearly as he could judge, about three thousand of them. The empty balconies, that could have accommodated ten times that number, hung over them in gloomy mockery, but the people did not seem to notice. They seemed cheerful, talking busily, nursing babies, doing small tasks they had brought with them. They did not seem in the least worried about the safety of the building. Probably they had been through

this before, many times, and nothing had ever happened, and so nothing ever would. The children ran and chased each other and made noise and cried and carried on mock battles in the lowest balcony. To them, all this was natural. This was home. They had been born into it, and there was no other. It was good. They were very tiny children, and there were not many of them.

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

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

The fact that the men were busy on the building's defenses, and the rest of the population was concentrated in the amphitheater, made it possible for Fletcher to get where he wanted to go unseen. And this living part of the building was worse than the dead. Everywhere it stunk of poverty and the breaking-

down of things. Everywhere was a letting-go and a forgetting. Machines were broken, walls and doors defaced, articles of art and usage tossed into corners, so that this once-splendid building, constructed in magnificent defiance by a proud race, had become no more than a filthy tenement housing a degenerate remnant that had lost even the urge to keep itself clean. He imagined that the power units and the synthesizing plants were fully automatic and self-serving, and he imagined that when anything did finally break down it stayed broken, so that they would have constantly fewer services and supplies, including metal manufactures and cloth, and especially the synthetic foods that must be the staples of their diet. He had a brief and terrible vision of how it would be some day when the last handful of people would be forced out of a building totally dark and dead, to hunt the monsters of the cleft and be hunted, all dumb hapless brutes together.

The children shrieked faintly at their games, and laughed.

The noise of battle, ominously for him, appeared to slacken. He crept hurriedly along a dirty avenue, beside a dirty wall, toward a broken door in a transparent front

made opaque by the smudging of hands and an accretion of greasy dust. He stuck his head carefully around the door.

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

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

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

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

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

had failed and the battle was over, and they were returning to their homes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

though tempted to go after the rest of the people.

Harry Axe was not there.

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

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

"Where's Harry?" he asked.

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

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

"Kill him?" said Zakarian, his voice rising to a thin shriek. "Kill him! You know what that bastard done? He made a deal with 'em. That's what they wanted with us, they wanted us to fly the scout up with some of their men in

it, so they could get inside the ships by surprise and take all the food that was left. And Harry's gonna do it."

He stood up, kicking the cord away from his feet. He started to run, and Fletcher caught him. Zakarian looked at him as though he was an enemy.

"My wife and kids are up there," said Zakarian. He struck at Fletcher. "Let me go!"

Fletcher shook him. "Stop it," he said savagely. "We'll get out. Harry's going to fly the scout up for them?"

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

"You turned it down," said Fletcher.

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

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

He felt like giving up.

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

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

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

They went out into the corridor.

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

They came to the topmost level, and found the hatches

closed. Fletcher opened one. They climbed onto the roof, and it was dark and empty in the glow of the burning volcano.

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

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

"Hurry," Zakarian said.

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

He stood thinking for a moment. There was no time to go back all the way he had come, and no need. From the inside you might find a way out closer at hand. He set off across the building, close to the barrier wall, toward the side where the ship was.

The transverse avenues were dark, and a thousand miles long, and it took them a thousand years to reach the other wall, and all the time they knew it was too late.

THEY LOOKED out the high windows, onto the plain.

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

"What's holding them up?" muttered Fletcher. Then he

looked down closer to the building and saw that the field of battle was being cleaned of its dead by the mighty hungry ones, the scavengers, the blood-brothers of Harry Axe.

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

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

The scout was still there on the plain.

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

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

open rock below.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The door in the building

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

Zakarian began to curse.

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

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

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

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

But it was over in seconds, and only death and a smell of seared metal in the lock chamber. Fletcher knocked the tube out of Zakarian's

hand. "No," he said.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII

THE FOUR rusty rattling ships were far out in space, away from the world of the dark star.

In the main cabin of the *Prosperous Hope*, Fletcher sat at the table with a bottle and a glass in front of him. Harry Axe sat at the other end of the table, his bandaged wrists stretched out on the soiled, scarred top. Lucy stood beside him. Her face was flushed, her eyes narrow with anger. Zakarian sat in one of the bunks, with his arm around his wife. They

had moved in so Zakarian could take Joe Leedy's place, and Joe Leedy's widow had been moved out to one of the other ships so that she would not kill Harry Axe.

Harry was saying, "I'm sick and tired of this goddamn badgering. I told you I never meant to do what I promised them little thieves. I was only gonna get help."

"Help for who?" said Zakarian. "Don't try to lie to me, Harry. I was there. I saw your little piggy eyes bug out when they handed you that pocketful of stones."

He pointed to a glittering heap in the center of the table. Then he leaned over and put his face close to Harry's.

"If you was only bluffing them," he said, "why didn't you tell me that? They couldn't understand what we said. You'd have had me to help you when the time came. But no, you never peeped a word. You just pouched them stones and practically licked their hands. You let 'em take off, so's I wouldn't try to stop you."

The other men who had come aboard for the council looked at Harry Axe and said, "What have you got to say to that?"

Lucy Axe looked at Harry

and at the heap of shiny stones and her eyes burned.

"He don't have to say nothing," she said shrilly. "He's the boss. Zak's lying on him. He's jealous because Harry brought back all that stuff." She turned to Fletcher. "And as for him—"

Zakarian reached out and slapped her. "You've made enough trouble with your tongue," he said evenly. "You go sit down somewhere."

The men asked Harry, "What have you got to say?"

Harry shook his head, rocking from side to side. "I'm sick. They tortured me, can't you see that? You think a man can go through what I been through and not be sick? You ought to let me alone."

Lucy said furiously, "You get up and give 'em hell, Harry. They can't treat you that way. You're the boss."

But Harry only sat and rocked and said that he was sick.

Lucy said to Fletcher, "It's your fault. You drunk, you—"

Fletcher said slowly, "I'll tell you something. Nine years ago I was officer on the *Starbright* when she crashed in landing. I was one of three survivors. I saw the men, the women, the children, the

babies, that died trying to reach the stars. Trying to reach the stars! That's when I started drinking."

He reached out and took the bottle and poured himself one drink and drank it. Then he put the cork back in the bottle and pushed it down the table to Harry Axe.

"And this," said Fletcher, "is where I stop."

Lucy began to cry. She turned and hit Harry as hard as she could across the face, and then she ran out of the cabin.

Later, alone at the controls, Fletcher looked out at the stars and nodded to them. He knew, now, why all those men and women and children and babies had died, why so many Earthmen had died of this crazy obsession for stars.

You could be sensible. You could cling close to home, to comfort, to your own safe little world. The people of the cleft had done that, long ago, and he had seen their ending. No. In the madness of Earthmen was a greater wisdom.

The starcombers would go on their wandering way, but they would go now without him. He was going on out to the stars again.

He knew now where he belonged, and why. ▶ ▶



THE EDITOR'S SPACE

There's something missing!

Ask what it is, and everybody has a different answer. But everybody agrees that modern science fiction isn't all it could be.

Many critics say that the "sense of wonder" has vanished. Others argue that there simply isn't any science in science fiction any more. Still others speak up for such varied matters as plot, pacing and people.

Whatever the lack, it's clear that science fiction isn't as much fun to read as it used to be. Readers who are looking primarily for entertainment—not long-winded and one-sided arguments about psychology, sociology and culture—have had to go elsewhere to find it.

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES is designed to be an antidote for that situation. And the title itself is the best clue to our approach.

The best fiction—enduring classics as well as mod-

ern best-sellers—has always stressed one thing: adventure. A situation involving genuine conflict and suspense, with real people facing and solving real problems, has always been the most solid foundation for any piece of fiction. Other qualities are important, too, but they can only be carried by a good story—and the definition of a good story does not change.

The future holds the greatest adventures mankind has yet faced. The entire universe is waiting just around the corner, full of exciting discoveries and mysterious dangers.

What, exactly, will man meet in his race to the stars? Anybody can guess—but we're going to publish the best guesses we can get, presented in the most entertaining form possible. That's our entire policy. We think you'll find that by following it, we've added the missing ingredient science fiction needs.—LTS

Secret of the Green Invaders

by Robert Randall



*Centuries of alien conquest had made Earth
a slave planet, and only a pitiful handful
of men dared dream of rebellion. But they
had a weapon they didn't even know about!*

Illustrated by Emsh

Secret of the Green Invaders

by Robert Randall

CHAPTER I

11 May 3035

THIS whole situation is very amusing," Terrag Broz said. The Terran Administrator peered across his desk at his chief assistant without showing a trace of the amusement he claimed to feel. "But I think Orvid Kemron has been allowed to go far enough. Bring him here," he snapped.

"At once," said the other, rising to leave.

"It took them a long time to get this far, Gornik," the Administrator said. He per-

mitted himself a twisted smile.

"Don't tell me you're getting sentimental at last," Nacomon Gornik said.

"Hardly. You'd better get moving."

Terrag Broz gestured toward the door, and his assistant left. Broz watched Gornik's green-furred body retreating down the corridor, and heard the deep bass rumble of his voice as he gave orders to a pair of Terran soldiers waiting in the corridor.

The even clumping of four booted feet told him that the soldiers were on their way to fetch Orvid Kemron. Broz knew that the insurrectionist would be brought swiftly and silently to the Khoomish headquarters.

"What happened to the men we caught?" Terrag Broz asked, as Gornik re-entered the office.

"Still being held," Gornik replied.

"And the bombs?"

"They've all been detected and inactivated."

IT'S AN OPEN secret that "Robert Randall" is actually two people. Robert Silverberg and Randall Garrett, each a top-ranking writer in his own right, collaborate to turn out the stories that appear under this byline. With each man giving his best, the resulting stories are entirely different from what either would do alone, and polished to a sparkling perfection!

"I hope so," Broz said grimly. "It would be too bad to have this lovely building blown sky-high after the Earthmen were so kind as to build it for us."

The Administrator looked down, turning his attention to the neatly-arranged stacks of papers on his desk. He lifted off the uppermost and scanned it. "A complaint from Liverpool," he said. "Too much precipitation yesterday."

His purple lips split in a broad grin. "A great pity," he said, chuckling. "We'll see how they'll like it when the time comes for us to throw hurricanes at them instead of spring rains. Maybe then Earth will think twice about having invited us to rule them."

Nacomon Gornik glanced at his chief. "How long will that be, Terrag? How long do we have to wait?"

"I don't know," the Administrator said. "I'm afraid that all depends on Orvid Kemron."

"ORVID KEMRON!"

Someone was calling his name. He opened his eyes, and squeezed them closed immediately. Someone was shining a light into his face.

"Wake up, Kemron," said

the voice again. "Wake up. We don't have all night."

Kemron opened his eyes a little. All he could see was the glare of the light and the muzzle of a stungun held in a pair of gloved hands. Behind the dazzle of the light, he could barely make out two figures.

It was an effort to move from his bed. Finally, Kemron struggled up to full awareness and lifted himself from the bed.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

He knew good and well what they wanted.

The day had been seven years in coming, but at last it was here. He wondered how long they had known about him. Seven years of hard work, of pretending to be something he was not, of scheming and planning—all shot to ashes. The alien rulers of Earth had nabbed him, and humanity's resistance movement would be left without its leader.

"Where are we going?" he asked as he put on his clothes. "What's the idea of waking a man up in the middle of the night?"

"Don't ask questions," said one of the men.

Or were they men? They were wearing heavy coveralls,

gloves, and hoods; they could easily be the Khoomish themselves. Yes, thought Kemron. I'm important enough to have the overlords come after me in person. He wished he knew whether there was green fur underneath the concealing cloth.

He locked the magnetic clasp at his throat with slow deliberation.

"Hurry it up," the taller of the two said. The stungun nudged Kemron's ribs.

"Hold on, will you? Let me wash up a bit first." He walked to the washstand without waiting for any reply and plunged his head under the cold water. He rinsed a moment, then withdrew his head. After drying himself, he glanced up over his shoulder, noting the positions of the two armed men. They were waiting about ten feet away.

I've got to get word through to the others that I'm caught, Kemron thought. But the Khoomish, he decided, had probably picked up his bomb-layers just as neatly as they'd snagged him. There wasn't much chance they'd missed anyone.

Damn them!

"Enough stalling. Come now or we'll take you," one guard said.

"A minute. I'm thirsty."

Kemron filled his drinking-glass, but instead of draining it he whirled and threw it at the hood of the taller guard, hearing it land with a pleasing *thunk!* In the same motion he jumped at the other guard.

The uniformed figure went over surprisingly easily when Kemron leaped, and before he could regain control of himself Kemron had clubbed him senseless. But when he swung to deal with the other guard, he saw that the drinking-glass had had little effect.

He stared at the stungun in the other's hand for a moment. Through his mind flashed the sudden remembrance of the dizzying pain of a stungun's beam. He could still hear Nella's scream in his memory—she had been shot down six months ago by a Khoomish guard after she had slugged another of the green-furred beings. Her nerves had been raw for three days.

The alien's finger pressed the trigger and the darkness exploded into a brilliant flare of green.

IT WAS HARD to tell one Khoomish from another, but there was no doubt in Kemron's mind that the steely-eyed, green-furred being who confronted him was Terran

Administrator Terrag Broz. Kemron felt a sudden wave of fear wash over him, leaving him chilled and weak.

The Administrator smiled grimly from behind his huge desk, showing the surprisingly human teeth back of his purple lips. But the expression in his eyes remained cold and forbidding.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you, Mr. Kemron," he said, in an oddly soft voice. "Do sit down." He gestured with one hand, signalling the guards.

One of them pulled up a chair for Kemron, and the other pushed him down into it. Kemron saw now that his two captors were Earthmen, members of the loyal army maintained by the Khoomish overlords.

No doubt the guards thought he was the worst sort of traitor, since certainly they were aware he had been scheming to destroy the Khoomish—the beloved Khoomish, the green-furred saviors from the stars who had rescued Earth from anarchical chaos. Kemron saw the undisguised hatred in the eyes of both of them.

He wanted to tell them that they were the real traitors, not he. But he knew they would only laugh and remind

him of the provisional government. It had been Earth's only attempt at self-government in a thousand years, and a complete, miserable failure.

It's not easy to overthrow a conqueror when the conquered welcome him with open arms, Orvid Kemron thought.

The guards stepped back, their stunguns held ready. Terrag Broz reached out a thick forearm and flipped a switch on his desk. A sparkling array of lights brightened one wall. Kemron knew what they were: thousands of little electronic eyes, every one watching him. One wrong move, and a stunner would beam him down before he could do anything.

One stunning was enough; Kemron had no craving for more. He still had a prodigious headache from the first.

Terrag Broz looked at the guards. "You can go now. I don't think he'll do anything foolish."

Kemron heard the door open and close softly behind him as the guards left. The Terran Administrator waited a long few minutes before speaking.

"I might as well tell you," Broz said levelly, "that we've known about your underground for a long time, Mr.

Kemron. It has been a source of constant amusement to us. It was only when you took the—ah—unkind action of attempting to destroy our headquarters that we were forced to take you into custody.”

Kemron said nothing. He found it almost impossible to bring his head up to meet the Khoomish’s fiery eyes, and his own weakness irked him.

Abruptly Broz punched out a question. “How many are there in your organization?” he asked.

“I won’t tell you,” Kemron said stolidly.

“Ah, well. There is no need to,” the Administrator said. His smile widened. “There are exactly four hundred and sixty-eight men, including yourself.”

Kemron blinked. The fear inside him melted into dull despair. They hadn’t missed a man.

Terrag Broz stretched up out of his seat, giving Kemron a view of his awe-inspiring bulk, and came to rest leaning on his knuckles. “Don’t you think that’s a rather small number of people to man a resistance movement?” the Khoomish asked. “Out of nearly four billion human beings, you have an underground which consists of something like one one-hun-

dred thousandth of one percent of the total population. Not exactly what I would call a popular uprising.”

“We could have done it, though,” Kemron said. “We could have done it.”

“Certainly,” Broz agreed. “If you had blown up this building, our control over Earth would have snapped. Then mankind would have had to try governing herself, presumably with your party in control—and with the same disastrous results that occurred seven years ago, before we came.”

Kemron’s eyes blazed angrily. “That’s just it!” he protested. “At least mankind would be *free*! Even if we failed, it would be through our own faults, on our own shoulders—we’d be responsible *ourselves*. Suppose civilization did collapse? So what? We pulled ourselves out of barbarism once; we can do it again!”

“I don’t deny it,” said the Khoomish. “But it seems to me an awful waste of time.”

“Waste of time!” The Earthman’s voice was thick with anger. “We’ve wasted a thousand years already! First the Sslesor, then the Velks, and now you. One alien ruler after another! We’re tired of being pawns in a galactic

chess game, being shuttled back and forth from one set of interstellar aliens to another."

"I see," Terrag Broz said smoothly. He folded his arms, and Kemron watched his fingers digging into the furry skin over his biceps. "You're tired of being ruled. You want another chance for yourselves. But the rest of the people on Earth don't seem to be tired of it—do they, Mr. Kemron?"

The Khoomish smiled again. "No comment?" He paused, and his gleaming eyes narrowed. "The word describing your rebellion, Mr. Kemron, is—*premature*. A revolution now, with Earth solidly behind the Khoomish, would only lead you into the same futile trap that the earlier underground fell into."

"Earlier underground?"

"Of course. The same patterns of action recur over and over in humanity. Many other men have tried to overthrow their rulers. There have been others in the past ten centuries, all right. And during the rule of our predecessors, the Sslesor, the most nearly successful against them was a man you might have known. His name was Joslyn Carter."

Kemron was amazed. *Joslyn Carter? The head of the Provisional Government had also*

been a leader of the underground?

"Joslyn Carter it was," the Khoomish said. "I had thought you might have been more well-informed about other members of your trade. Particularly Joslyn Carter..."

CHAPTER II

3 July 3027

JOSLYN CARTER leaned across his desk and pressed the phone stud before the sound of the attention chime had died from the air.

"Carter here," he said, looking squarely into the pickup.

"Priority call from Staten Island, sir," said the operator. "Viceroy Johnson is on the line."

"Put His Munificence on," said Carter. *Viceroy Johnson*, he thought darkly. *They took on Terrestrial names because we can't pronounce half the sibilances of their language. I wonder what the Johnsons think of that.*

He knew good and well what they thought of it. They loved it. The Sslesor had ruled nearly a thousand years, and most of the time had inspired nothing but affection from their Terran subjects—with occasional exceptions, such as Joslyn Carter.

The Sslesor Viceroy's face

faded into the screen. Carter dipped his head quickly in a half-polite gesture, then looked expectantly at the reflected image of the lizardlike being. The unblinking eyes stared back out of a gray-green face topped with a fantastic crest of bone.

"Misster Josslyun Carter?" the overlord asked mildly.

"Yes, sir," Carter acknowledged. He had to suppress a grin every time he heard a Sslesor speak. Even after a thousand years, they hadn't mastered English. And they never would; their mouths simply weren't constructed for it.

"You will please reserve time on the intercontinental circuit at ten-thirty hours tomorrow for a sspecial announssement. And you will please advertise that the Government will sspeak."

"Yess, ssir," said Carter, with a straight face. "Is there anything else the people should know?"

The Sslesor appeared to consider Carter's statement for a moment. "I believe not," he said finally. "That iss all."

"Thank you, Your Munificence," Carter said.

"Not at all," said the alien. The leathery, dry skin crinkled slightly around the corners of his mouth as though

he were attempting a smile, but it didn't quite come off. Then the image collapsed from view, and Carter was left looking at a blank screen.

"Goodbye, *Misster* Johnson," he barked viciously into the dead instrument.

He punched a couple of buttons and then dialed. Another face came on the screen. This time, it was human, female, and pretty—a direct contrast to the Sslesor who had occupied the screen previously.

"News Release Division," she said politely. "Yes, sir?"

"This is Joslyn Carter. I want a release prepared immediately. Mark it *Special*. The Sslesor Administration has announced that a representative of the Sslesor will address the people of Earth at ten-thirty hours tomorrow. No other news has been released."

"I have it, sir," said the girl, smiling.

"Good enough, sweetheart. Now get it out. Distribution to all classifications." Carter cut the connection.

He glanced at the wall clock. Fifteen hundred hours. Time to get moving, he thought. No sense hanging around the office any longer. If the rest of the Terran Intercontinental Communications Corporation couldn't get

along without their president for the rest of the day, then Joslyn Carter hadn't trained them right. And that was the last thing that would worry Carter.

He slid the desk closed and flipped the radio seal. Then he walked over to the wall, opened the hidden compartment, and took out a high illegal blaster, which he shoved into a hip holster. At any time the Sslesor might find out exactly what Carter was up to, and he didn't intend to make it easy for them to get him to their interrogation chambers.

The thought of dying at the age of thirty-two was not particularly appealing, but he wasn't exactly afraid of it either. Actually, he didn't believe it would ever come to that. If a man is big enough, he can quit worrying about all the things that worry the little man.

Carter was not only big financially and politically, he was big physically. He stood six feet three and carried a two hundred and ten pound load of hard muscle on a skeleton built for the job. His head sat firmly on a heavy-muscled neck and was topped by smoothly-brushed brown hair. His face looked as though it had been chiseled from hard basalt.

The only thing on Earth bigger than Joslyn Carter was the thousand-year-old Sslesor government of the Terran Protectorate. And that was an entity of which Carter was not exactly fond.

He pushed through the door and strode through the outer office.

"I'm leaving for the day, Cindy," he told his secretary.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Carter," she said, smiling.

He blew her a kiss and headed for the elevator. When he reached street level, he entered an express tubeway, and ten minutes later he was in Passaic, New Jersey.

The apartment house looked like any other apartment house. It differed from others in only two ways: its tenants, and its basement—or rather, its sub-basement.

The sub-basement was much bigger than it should have been, and the tenants were all members of that curiously archaic but very exclusive social organization known as the United States Marines.

Joslyn Carter walked through the lobby, stepped into the elevator, and went down to the basement. There he took a special key out of his pocket and punched it into a hole in the wall near the elevator doors. The elevator

started up toward the top floor, the doors to the shaft sliding open. Carter climbed down the shaft below the elevator and thumbed a button on the wall. He gave the pickup a chance to take a good look at him. The door slid open and Carter walked inside.

"Is General Onomodze here yet?" he asked the spectrally thin young man who stood guard at the door.

"Not yet, sir," the man said, saluting.

"Send him in as soon as he reports, Lieutenant. I'll be in my office."

"Yes, sir."

Carter walked down a hallway to an office which was labelled *Gen. J. L. Carter, Commandant, USMC*. He unlocked the door and went in.

Tomorrow's the day, he thought. He looked around the empty office. *Tomorrow's the day we give it to them*.

Carter felt a shiver of anticipation. He had waited a quarter of a century for this day, ever since he had been old enough to realize that Earth was not free, that the Sslesor had been keeping the planet bound in velvet chains.

The Sslesor held men down to Earth. Above all, they held Joslyn Carter down to Earth. He wanted the moon, the

planets, the stars, and because he was Joslyn Carter he felt he had a right to have them. The Sslesor stood in the way.

Tomorrow's the day, he thought.

THE FIRST THING he did was to put on his uniform. He cared hardly at all for the thing, but it was as much a part of the job as the title—and the title was important.

When he was fully dressed, resplendent in his ribbons and decorations, he turned to look at himself in the mirror. He found himself unashamedly approving his appearance. He had to admit that the uniform looked good on him. It gave some of the men the appearance of having just stepped out of a comic opera or a historical novel, depending on the individual. Carter, on the other hand, looked as if he thoroughly belonged in the red, white, blue, and gold outfit.

Actually, he hadn't the foggiest notion of what the medals were for; they went with the uniform. But, what the hell—they looked pretty.

He transferred the blaster to the dress holster and pulled up his chair to the desk. Then he opened the radioseal and activated the controls.

He began to study once more his plans for blasting the Sslesor off the face of the Earth. He'd checked them forty times before, but now Onomodze had finally reduced them to Keslian calculus formulas, and he could run them through the computer for their last check. Not that he was worried about them; he trusted his own judgment a lot farther than he trusted a machine.

The tape slid into the computer, and the tiny relays in the brain began rustling like dry leaves being stepped on. In his own mind, Carter could see the implications of the equations clearly. For the first time in ten centuries, the United States Marines were ready to attack.

After the violent atomic destruction of the middle of the Twenty-First century, Earth was in no condition to fight off any alien invader; Earthmen couldn't even fight each other. So, when the Sslesor landed their ships all over the planet one bright July day in 2076, they had no trouble in assuming control.

But the United States Marine Corps, or at least a small core of them, led by Major General Jonathan Redmond, had not chosen to disband. Nearly ten thousand officers

and men had dedicated themselves to keeping the flame of Terran independence alive. But the original ideals of General Redmond's group had been all but forgotten during the thousand years of Sslesor occupation. After all, the Sslesor, in their long centuries of benevolent rule, had ended war and other frictions. They had brought peace and security to Earth for the first time.

Gradually, the Corps had become merely a pleasant hobby; its members grew bound up in its pageantry, its rituals, and its uniforms without ever thinking seriously of the motive for its organization. Even the ringing slogan, *Down With the Sslesor*, was all but forgotten.

To most of its members, the Corps had become an ancient and honorable brotherhood—a secret social society that was joined partly because of the little-boy-stealing-apples feeling that grown men got from being members of such an organization.

That is, until Joslyn Carter came along.

A RAP came at the door.

"Come in!" Carter said.

A tall, lean, dark-faced man stepped in through the door and snapped to attention.

"Lieutenant General Onomodze reporting for duty, sir."

"Close the door and relax, Kelvin," Carter said, pleased to see his second-in-command. "There's no one watching."

Onomodze grinned and slid the door shut. "The place will be full of men pretty soon," he said. "I wouldn't want them to think I had no respect for the ancient traditions."

Carter waved him to a chair. "I'm running those equations of yours through the calculator."

Onomodze blinked. "You mean you haven't done it before this? Great Snell, Joslyn, we're supposed to go into action tomorrow!"

Tomorrow, Carter, thought, picking up the word and rolling it through his mind. *Tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow*. For a fraction of a second he allowed himself to daydream about the consummation of his long campaign, but he snapped himself rigidly back.

"I beat my brains out to get those plans reduced to Keslian equations," Onomodze was saying, "so we'd know there'd be no slip-ups, and—"

Carter cut him off. "If those plans don't work, none of them will. All the machine can do is assure us of maxi-

mum probability. Whether the thing actually works or not will depend on how the men react, not on our timing. The weak point in the whole affair is coordination and cooperation on an interpersonal level."

"They'll follow your orders," Onomodze said.

"I know that. That's not the point. Mankind has been saying 'yes sir' and 'no sir' to the Sslesor for so long that I'm not sure how people are going to react once the Sslesor are gone. Perhaps, with the control taken off—"

Onomodze spread his hands. "If you can't handle them, no one can."

Carter ignored that. He looked up at the wall clock. "I think you said you didn't want to make a bad impression on the men. You'd better get your uniform on; we can't have an unfrocked lieutenant general running around tonight."

As Kelvin Onomodze dressed, Carter watched the answer tape slide out of the calculator. The printer clucked animatedly as it stamped the symbols out.

As his eyes scanned the sliding tape, Joslyn Carter's grim smile broadened. Finally, the printer gave one last *snick-snick* and stopped.

Carter jerked the tape out. "This is it," he said triumphantly. "We've got maximum probability of success. Taking all the factors into account, there won't be a Sslesor left alive on Earth within two days."

Onomodze took the tape and looked at it. "It looks good, Joslyn. We long-suffering Earthmen may whip the bad-dies yet."

"Very funny," said Carter dryly. "It simply means that, after being stagnant for a thousand years, the human race is going to start moving again."

"Yeah," said Onomodze. "We've become so stagnant we stink."

Another rap sounded at the door. Carter grinned lightly. The ancient ritual of door-knocking was but one of the many that had held over in the millenium-old organization of the United States Marines.

Carter said softly: "When we get rid of the Sslesor, I'm going to have an announcer put on that door." Then he called, "Come in!"

Onomodze's dark face twisted into a quick grin, which faded as the door opened and the tall, twig-thin figure of Major Hollister walked in.

The Major snapped to at-

tention. "Major Hollister reporting for duty, sir."

"At ease," said Carter. "Any word on the Staten Island pickup, Major?"

"Yes, sir. It's been installed. You can watch everything, either from here or from your Manhattan office."

"Good. Are the men all here yet?"

"No, sir, but they will be within ten minutes."

"Fine, Major," said Carter. "I'll want to talk to them as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Hollister did an about-face and disappeared through the door.

"Good man," said Onomodze as soon as the door closed. "But he's so stiff I'm afraid he'll crack every time he moves."

Carter looked at the tape again. "We won't know until noon tomorrow."

FIVE HUNDRED men stood silently at rigid attention in the vast assembly room. Their uniforms glittered with the ancient pageantry of the twenty-first century; gold braid, medals, various brightly-colored insignia, and the bars, leaves, and eagles on their shoulders all vied with each other to dazzle the eye. The uniforms were anything

but conservative, but the men wearing them gave them a hard, determined solidity that took away the stigma of gaudiness.

"Gentlemen," Carter said, addressing them from a raised dais at the end of the room: "As the New York Division of the Corps, you will have the most important job on Earth tomorrow." He smiled, and a touch of irony crept into his voice. "Tomorrow, the Fourth of July rolls around again."

A special tomorrow, he said silently.

A sardonic smile flickered across Onomodze's face. The Corps had planned their first uprising on 4 July 2088, eleven years after the landing of the Sslesor. It had failed miserably. Since then, a ritual "revolution" had been planned every July Fourth, generally a private affair of which the Sslesor never heard. A ritual failure went with each one. But this time, Joslyn Carter was going to change the last half of the formula.

"You've all been instructed on what is to be done, and I want you to keep in mind that every man jack of you has a job to do, from the rawest lieutenant right on up to the General Staff. If you do your job and do it well, there won't

be any chance of failure.

"The Sslesor have grown lax in the past few centuries. They don't think we have the ability to revolt. And, thanks to that, we've managed to do something that has never been done before—we've stolen a nuclear bomb and planted it under the Government buildings on Staten Island. And our timing will be almost perfect. Tomorrow, for some reason, most of the Sslesor bigwigs are going to be concentrated on the Island. At high noon exactly, the bomb will be detonated. And that will be our signal to move in.

"I would like to have the General Staff meet in my office immediately. Dismissed."

WHEN the Staff arranged themselves around the conference table, Carter wasted no time with preliminaries.

"All right," he said. "Let's go through this once more." He flicked a switch. A map of the world appeared on the big wall screen. Several points were outlined in red. Carter pressed a stud, and an arrow appeared beside one of the circles.

"Arizona," he said. "North American spaceport. All mined and ready to blast." He looked at one of the generals,

a tall, lean man with a thin mustache. "Jaxin, what do you do?"

"The port goes at 1000 hours," Jaxin said. "We go in immediately afterwards and mop up."

"Check," Carter said. He touched the controls and the arrow moved to another spot.

"Eisenhowergrad, Russia. Chung?"

General Chung stood up. "2230 hours. Almost the same as the Arizona deal, with one exception. We blast and then go in for mop-up. But at the same time we release dorma gas into the air intake of the Sslesor ship Swiziss, which will be in the repair docks. That will give us a usable interstellar ship."

"Check." Again the control was moved. The arrow appeared in the middle of the Australian subcontinent. "Miklowd?"

General Miklowd said: "That's Main Base. We blow up only the administrative building; we don't destroy the field itself. Gas will be sprayed all over the place, so we won't go in for the mop-up until an hour after the attack." He stopped.

Carter raised an eyebrow and glared at the General. "Fine. Is there any special hour you plan to do all this?"

The General flushed and looked sheepish. "That will be at exactly 0200 on the morning of the fifth of July," he replied crisply.

Carter nodded. "All right. That takes care of the spaceports. Now let's get a check on the rest of the Sslesor concentrations. And I want all of you to keep in mind that we must—*must* strike simultaneously all over the planet. That will be at twelve noon here in New York City."

When everything was perfectly clear to every man there, Joslyn Carter snapped off the map. He put his knuckles on the desk and leaned forward.

"Remember, gentlemen, this is not only the chance of a lifetime, but the chance of a millennium. Never before in the history of the Sslesor Occupation have so many important Sslesor occupied one building. If we bollix this one up, we'll never get another chance. Perhaps even our descendants never will. All right. Let's get going. You've only got a little over sixteen hours to get to your posts!"

"What about human casualties?" General Miklowd asked. "When we jump the Sslesor, we're going to—"

"Forget it, Miklowd," Carter snapped, silently cursing

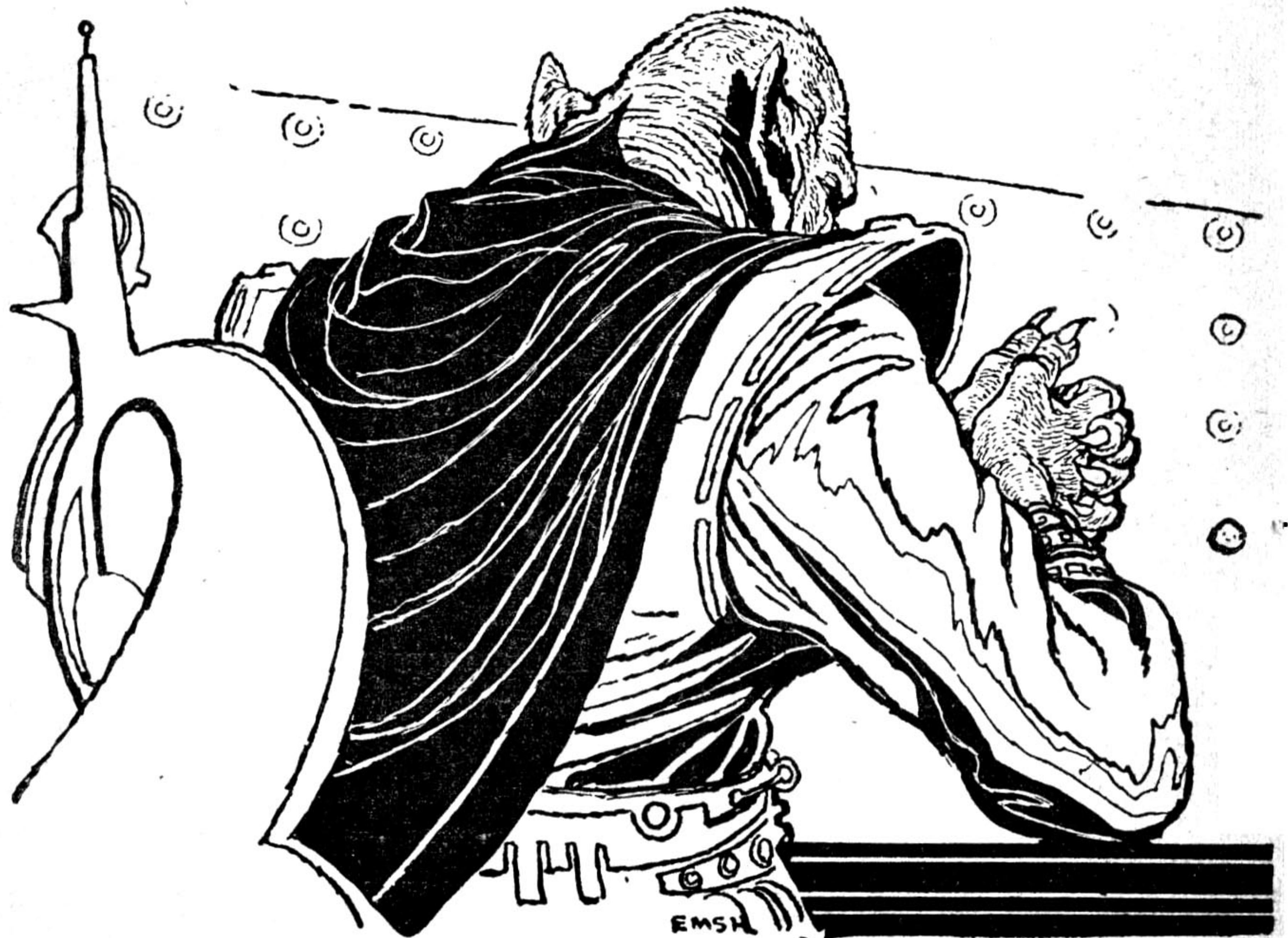
the General for a fool. "We can't worry about things like that. If there happen to be some humans in the way of our bombs, we'll just have to call them martyrs and put up a great big monument." He smiled coldly. "We're wasting time, gentlemen. Tomorrow is almost here."

They filed out slowly. Carter watched the retreating figures until the last had gone and the door slid shut.

He was right and Miklowd was wrong, he thought. The people in the way didn't mat-

ter. If they were stupid enough to get in the way, they merited what they got. It was cruel—even Carter admitted that to himself. But it was necessary. The first goal was driving the Sslesor off Earth, and any means would do to accomplish that end.

He looked at his watch. In fifteen hours plus, Earth would be free, and it was going to be up to him to keep the show moving from there on. Well, Carter thought, it's what I've dreamed of for years, and there's no point



getting worried about it now.
He wondered if the Sslesor
enjoyed ruling Earth.

CHAPTER III

4 July 3027

CARTER sat before an imposing array of television screens, keeping check on the progress in each of the cities where a major uprising was scheduled. He had passed an uneasy night since the last staff meeting; it was 1020 the next morning.

Chung was complaining

from Eisenhowergrad that there might be difficulties in taking over the Sslesor ship, but Carter refused to listen.

"There's no bug so big you can't step on it, Chung. I'll expect a report from you at 1205 telling me you've got the ship." He clicked the screen off and turned to the next, where Jaxin's face was visible.

"How does it look in Arizona, Jaxin?" Carter barked.

"Fine, sir. Men are deployed all around the outside of the invasion ring. We'll move in just as soon as the port blows.



But I'm worried about the radiation, sir—"

"*Damn* the radiation!" said Carter. "Your suits are going to be adequate for the job. I checked the specifications myself."

"Yes, sir," Jaxin said weakly.

As Carter turned to the third screen, the door to his office opened and his secretary entered. In a quick motion he shut off his communicators, blanking out the puzzled face of Miklowd from Australia.

"What is it, Cindy?"

"That Sslesor hookup, sir. The one Viceroy Johnson arranged for yesterday. They're ready to go, Mr. Carter."

Carter looked at his watch. "Blast it, yes. It's time, isn't it? All right, let it go through."

"Yes, sir."

He turned on the local screen. *Let's hear what the reptiles have to say, he thought. It'll be the last time I'll be hearing them hissing at me.*

The features of Viceroy Johnson appeared on the screen. The Sslesor leader cleared his throat and began abruptly to speak, in the dry, high-pitched whine that was so familiar to Earth. Carter heard the door open and close as Onomodze entered.

"People of Earth," the Sslesor began pompously, "People of the Sslesor Protectorate of Earth: thiss day iss indeed a ssad one."

"What the hell is this?" Onomodze whispered.

"Quiet," Carter said.

"It iss a ssad day both for you and for oursselves," the Sslesor went on. "A day which bringss an unhappy parting, a day which terminates a thousand yearss of joyful co-exisistence."

Carter shot an amazed glance at Onomodze.

"In the ten centuries that we have administered your planet, we have allowed you to remain ignorant of the exisistence of other galactic races. But," continued the Sslesor, "there are such races. One of them is the Velks, a warlike, imperialisstic people with which the Sslesor have contended for almost two thousand of your yearss. Thiss sstruggle hass at lasst been terminated."

The Sslesor paused. It was easy to see that what he had to say was difficult for him, and not only linguistically. His gray-green reptilian face reflected deep humiliation.

"The ssettlement, unfortunately, iss in favor of the Velks," he went on sadly. "In sshort, we have been defeated."

I have, therefore, the unpleasant duty of reporting that, as a part of the peace settlement we have been compelled to make, it has become necessary to transfer many of our planetary holdings to the Velkan Empire. Earth, I am deeply sorrowed to reveal, is among that group."

Carter felt his face go white. He stared at the screen almost unseeingly for a moment, experiencing a sensation completely unfamiliar to him, that of absolute bewilderment.

"The Sslesor withdrawal has already been largely effected," said the Viceroy. "Most of our property has by now been removed. The final withdrawal," the Sslesor said, "will be completed this evening, at which time none of our people will remain on Earth.

"In closing, I wish to say, on behalf of my fellow Sslesor, that we are truly sorry that this sad parting of the ways must come. We wish you joy under your new masters."

The screen went blank.

KELVIN ONOMODZE leaned back in his chair and began to laugh. It started deep in his chest as a sort of rich rum-

bling chuckle and then grew in volume until it seemed to shake the room.

"Brother!" he said, when he was able to talk again. "This is the funniest thing I've ever heard of! Big deal! Ten thousand men work like fiends to rid the Earth of the Sslesor. Fierce determination! Boldness! The master stroke is ready! Ready — aim — *fffft!* The Sslesor are ready to go — good-bye!"

He started laughing again, tears streaming down his brown face.

Carter jumped to his feet, quivering. "Shut up, Kelvin! This is no time to knock yourself silly laughing. There's plenty to do yet!"

He flipped on the multiple-channel communicator. The screens around him flashed into life, and the generals mirrored in them all tried to talk at once.

"Quiet!" snapped Carter. "You've all heard what the Viceroy said. Now we know why there were so many big-shot Sslesor on Staten Island.

"But if you think this thing is over, you're wrong. If anything, it just makes the job tougher."

He paused for a moment to outline his new plan to himself. Then, reassured, he plunged ahead.

"Here are your orders: The explosives, naturally, will not be detonated. Seal all the detonators to make sure they don't go off prematurely. *But don't defuze the mines!* We'll leave them there for the Velks—whoever they are."

"What if the Velks look for them?" Chung asked. "Might they not suspect the Sslesor of pulling a trick like that?"

"I doubt it," Carter said. "This seems to be an honorable withdrawal. And even if the Velks do find the mines and think the Sslesor did it—so what?"

Chung nodded, but said nothing.

"Meanwhile," Carter continued, "keep your men ready. As soon as the Sslesor leave, take over. Grab control of everything, lock, stock, and barrel. When the Velks come, we want to be in complete charge of everything. Got that? All right, I'll leave it up to you individually to figure out the best way of getting your men into the Sslesor's various headquarters. At the same time, you'll have to make sure that there aren't any demonstrations from the citizens. I'll try to take care of that from this end. Got it? Fine. Clear."

He snapped off the transmitter and flipped on an inter-

com. "Cindy! Get me all the tape recordings of every speech made by the Sslesor in the past fifty years or so. I want full vision and audio stuff. Get a call to Production and send Fless up here. Snap!"

"Yes, sir," said the girl.

After she left, Onomodze, who had finally stopped laughing, said, "I don't get it."

"Simple. There's only one way we can legally take over," Carter said. "And that's to have the Sslesor tell Earth that they're leaving us in charge. And that's exactly what they're going to have done, once we get through doctoring the tapes."

Onomodze grinned again. "I might have expected something like that. But what about the Velks?" he wanted to know.

"We'll figure that out later. Right now, we don't have enough data. We don't know a thing about the Velks except their name, and you can bet your sweet life that the Sslesor won't say anything about them that we can depend on. We probably won't get anything out of them at all. *But we must be in charge when they get here.*"

The door slid open, and a small, elderly man with a fringe of gray hair around his

balding head came in.

"Fless, I've got a job for you," Carter said. "We've got some plain and fancy splicing to do, and we have to make it look as natural as possible. As soon as Cindy brings in the tapes, I'll show you what we want. It'll take a lot of hard work between now and then, but the future of mankind depends on its working."

"I understand, sir," Fless said blandly.

"Good." Carter turned around to Onomodze. "Kelvin, you hop down to the Battery and take over there. Send General Preskit over to take full charge of the Brooklyn force. I want all five hundred men on Staten Island within ten minutes after the last Sslesor ship leaves."

Onomodze stood up, white teeth flashing behind his grin. "All right, Joslyn. We'll have fun. We can at least *pretend* we're chasing them off the planet."

Carter took no notice. "Get moving. I've got other things to do," he said.

As Onomodze left, Carter's secretary pushed a cart in through the door, bearing roll after roll of microtape. "Here's the tapes you asked for, Mr. Carter."

Carter surveyed the cart and nodded. "Good. Let's get

started, Fless. What we have to do is put together a speech."

THE SPEECH went out over the airwaves just as the last Sslesor ship lifted toward the sky. It had taken careful cutting and judicious blending of hundreds of tapes, but the result was good.

As far as anyone who heard and believed it was concerned, Viceroy Johnson, leader of the retiring Sslesor, gave the whole government of Earth over to Joslyn Carter. And by the time the synthetic speech was over, the Marines had landed on Staten Island and were in command of the vast empty buildings that the retreating Sslesor had left behind.

Thus, on 4 July 3027, human beings were in control of Earth for the first time in nearly a thousand years.

"Now what?" Onomodze asked.

Joslyn Carter looked out the window at the darkening sky. "Now we've got to prove that human beings are capable of standing on their own two feet. I think they are. If our ancestors hadn't bombed themselves almost out of existence a thousand years ago, I don't think the Sslesor would

have had a chance of taking over. But they came in at just the right time, and by the time we were on our feet again, nearly everyone had grown used to being ruled by them."

"One thing I never did figure out," Onomodze said. "Just why did they want control of Earth, anyway? They let us go on about our business, for the most part. They didn't want to colonize, and they didn't want to trade. They didn't want slaves. What *did* they want?"

Carter shrugged. "If you'll tell me how an alien mind works, I'll answer your question. Until then, we'll just have to let the question ride."

He looked at his watch. "I want these buildings searched tonight—searched thoroughly. If the Sslesor left anything important behind, I want to see it. They couldn't possibly have taken everything with them."

Onomodze nodded. "Will do."

Carter paced anxiously up and down. "Now, the Velks. We'll have to concentrate on them. We don't know what they're like, except that they are harder to deal with than the Sslesor—since they beat the Sslesor—but you can bet your life that no new race is

going to take over Earth if I can help it. Not now while we've got a moment of freedom."

"Yes, I—" Onomodze was cut off by the frantic chiming of a communicator.

Carter switched on the screen, and General Chung's face appeared. His leathery face looked flushed, and a grin was spread all across it.

"General Carter," he said excitedly, "we got the Swiziss after all!"

"*What?*"

"Yes! Evidently the thing wasn't in condition to take off, so the Sslesor just left it here. Maybe we can eventually figure out how their interstellar drive works, and—"

"Unlikely," Carter said, frowning. "What does it look like inside?"

Chung lost his grin. "I'm afraid it looks pretty empty. There do seem to be some sort of engines inside, but there are whole sections missing, too. But I thought maybe—"

"I'm glad we got it, Chung," Carter agreed. "But I don't think the Sslesor would have left it behind if it were any good. And what's more, I—"

Suddenly, Chung's image wavered and vanished. It was replaced by a wavering pattern of meaningless lights.

A voice came out of the

speaker, a gentle, wet sort of voice.

"Your pardon, please. As this was the only channel available, we were forced to—ah—break in. This is Fulf Quish speaking for the Velkan government. We should like to have a word with the Earth government."

Carter glanced at Onomodze quizzically, and said, "You are addressing Joslyn Carter, present head of the Terran Provisional Government."

"Ah, so. We are happy to make contact. Our ship is at this moment orbiting above your atmosphere. We will land tomorrow morning if you would be so kind as to meet with our representatives."

"Very well," said Carter, trying to peer behind the shifting pattern of lights to see what the new aliens looked like.

He told them exactly how to spot Staten Island and where to land. There was a long pause, and then Fulf Quish's voice came again.

"We have photographed the spot you describe. We will be there tomorrow. Goodbye."

Carter stared at the blank screen for a moment. He felt a burst of irrational anger because Earth, and more specifically Joslyn Carter, should

be subjected to non-human overlords from somewhere out in the galaxy; it seemed virtually a direct insult to him.

He looked at Onomodze, who was waiting patiently for some reaction from Carter. "That was short and to the point. We'll have to be ready for them, Kelvin."

"Why not simply set off the bomb as soon as they land?"

Carter shook his head. "Strategically unsound. We have only one nuclear bomb; we don't know how many more ships they may have out there. I don't like the tone of that guy's voice. He sounded too—"

"Polite?"

"Yes," said Carter. "Something like that. I wonder what the Velks are going to be like."

CHAPTER IV

5 July 3027

THEY WERE nothing like the Sslesor. The Velks were squat, four-legged, multi-tentacled beings with soft, mushy voices. They wore breathing masks which effectively concealed their faces from view.

One of the five who faced Joslyn Carter and his General Staff across the conference table waved a tentacle in the air and said:

"As I understand you, then, Earthman, your group represents the human race?"

Carter nodded.

Fulf Quish burbled something to his companions, who waved their tentacles frenziedly and burbled back. Then the Velk said, "You must pardon my poor control of your language. I am only a translator; the rest of our mission did not have the time to learn any of your native tongues."

"You speak very well," Carter said carefully.

"I presume you have questions to ask?" the Velk asked, in its wet-sounding voice.

"We do," agreed Carter. "What sort of government do you intend to set up? I assume you will be using the buildings evacuated by the Sslesor, won't you?"

Fulf Quish waved a tentacle in negation. "Oh, not at all. Not at all. I'm afraid you misunderstand us."

"How so?"

"We do not come here for the purpose of governing at all."

"I'm afraid I don't quite see your point," said Carter.

The alien paused as if considering his next phrases very carefully. "I fear that, isolated as you are from the main stream of galactic culture, you don't appreciate your

position. The Sslesor held your planet for a thousand of your years because it was a strategic military base. That situation no longer prevails, since you are now well within the boundaries of the Velkan Commonwealth. In the settlement with the Sslesor, we acquired some two thousand additional planets, of which—excuse me—Earth is one of the least important strategically. I hope you'll pardon me when I speak so bluntly?"

Carter nodded. He sat perfectly still, wondering what new surprise was going to descend on him.

"In addition," went on the Velk, "we are a very democratic people. We believe in allowing each planet within the Commonwealth to have its own government. It is very difficult for us to exercise direct control over all our planets. Our outposts are too widely spread as it is. Therefore, we must reluctantly decline to place representatives on all of our possessions. We simply do not have enough men. You see our position?"

Carter folded his hands and tried not to look at the uniformed men around him. "And so?" he asked cautiously.

"And so," continued the being, "we have not come here to govern, but merely to in-

form you that you are now wards of the Velkan Commonwealth, with the same privileges tendered to other members." He paused. "We will be unable to keep a representative on your planet at present. It is possible—*possible*, mind you, not probable—that we will be able to spare someone to act as proconsul a little later. But that must wait. Ten year, no. Twenty, no. But we might be able to provide a representative for you in, perhaps, fifty years. Not before. Frankly, we cannot spare a single man now."

"You're simply going to leave us alone, is that it?" Carter asked, trying to keep the shock out of his voice.

"Exactly so," said Fulf Quish. "We must leave for Quange—a planet in one of our other new systems—immediately, and so I must bid you farewell."

Carter stared, amazed. He felt a sense of deep frustration at the way action was continually being snatched from his hands. First the Sslesor had obligingly pulled out an hour before Carter was to have blasted them; now the Velks refused to exercise their rights over Earth. The ends were satisfactory, but the means irked him.

"But who is to govern

Earth?" Carter asked.

"That is for you to decide. This planet is now in the hands of its natives. From this moment on, my friend, the planet is yours—you Earthmen shall act as our custodians as of now. Govern yourselves well."

The five Velks rose and left the building. Through the window, Carter watched them move back to the spaceship on their oddly-jointed legs, their tentacles waving gently.

Onomodze rubbed the tip of his nose with a long forefinger. "Well, may I be eternally cursed," he said softly.

20 July 3027

PRESIDENT Joslyn Carter scribbled his signature on another paper and shoved it into the outgoing slot.

"I don't get you," said Onomodze.

"I said that we don't seem to be getting anywhere, and we have to," Carter said. "It's unfortunate that you're the only one around here I trust sufficient enough to talk to, because you don't seem to understand what I tell you any more."

"Hold it, Joslyn. I heard what you said. Now explain it in words of not more than three syllables so that a stupid blot like me can understand

what goes on inside that great mind of yours."

Carter tapped his finger on the desktop. "Listen: potentially, humanity is the most powerful and most vital of the three races that we know to exist in the galaxy."

"How do you figure that?" Onomodze asked.

"The way they act!" Carter waved a hand in the general direction of the sky. "Kelvin, until this happened I didn't realize how utterly insipid the Sslesor and the Velks are. We put up with the Sslesor so long that we got used to them; we never questioned their orders because they had tamed that out of us—almost. But the only reason they could take over Earth was because we were so weak a thousand years ago. A thousand years is a long time—plenty of time for the Sslesor to become a pushover for the Velks, or any other younger and stronger race.

"Then come our friends the Velks. Can you imagine the idiocy level required for them to leave any race so potentially dangerous as humanity alone and unwatched for another fifty years?

"The Sslesor kept the status quo just where they wanted it. They haven't changed themselves in ten centuries

that we know of—and probably a lot longer than that. That proves just one thing—they're decadent. As for the Velks, they just don't seem very bright. And, both sides are conducting an interstellar war as if it were a chess game.

"If we can get started again, we'll have them both beaten in a thousand years—less than that, perhaps. We'll eventually figure out the secret of the drive on that spaceship. There were plenty of clues scattered about. We just can't recognize them yet, that's all. When we do, we'll be on a par with both of them, and I'm betting we get a long way ahead of them. But—"

"But right now, we can't get anybody to move," Onomodze finished for him.

Carter nodded. "I can't get any cooperation from anyone! They all seem to want to go along their own way. We might just as well be dumping our executive orders into a wastebasket chute as releasing them. And since the United States Marine Corps is no longer a secret society, a lot of people aren't interested in it any more. They don't get any thrill out of it."

Onomodze's face was unusually grim. "It isn't often I've heard you talk this way, Joslyn."

"I know. But for the first time I'm starting to have a few worries. What the hell are we going to do?"

12 October 3027

THE regional governor of the British Isles announced that, since the United States Marine Corps had shown how well old-fashioned things work in government, he was restoring the monarchy, and had taken the title of King Pedro the First.

The news reached Staten Island late in the afternoon of 12 October, and was immediately forwarded to Major Hollister. Major Hollister took the report to Lieutenant General Onomodze, who waited nearly a day before he dared show it to Carter.

By that time Scotland had seceded from the new United Kingdom. The Duke of Ireland remained coldly aloof.

4 January 3028

"I have here," said Onomodze, "a petition from the Pretender to the Governorship of Mexico City. He insists that the Earth Government restore him to his rightful position."

Joslyn Carter grabbed the paper and tore it to shreds. "What did you say to him?" he demanded.

"I told him that if the two Lieutenant Governors could get together long enough to throw out the new Governor, we would send down troops, provided the troops would go."

"Stop grinning like a blithering jackass, Kelvin!" said Carter. "Don't you realize that the whole Earth is falling to pieces in front of us? Politically, we're about where Europe was in 900 A.D."

"I can't help it," Onomodze said, still grinning. "It's funny, even if it is tragic. No one will take orders from anyone else. 'Who are you to tell me what to do? You're just another Earthman.' I've just about reached the point where I'm ready to toss in the towel myself. I think I'll become an Emperor—that's a nice title. The Emperor of South Staten Island. You can have the north half."

"Aaaahh! Shut up!" snapped Carter.

7 March 3028

"It's not that we're not capable of governing them," Carter said gloomily, as the Terran Provisional Government rolled into its eighth and probably final month. "We know how to do it. It's that they are incapable of being governed by us."

"We should have known it, Joslyn," Onomodze said. "We should have called in all the Regional Governors and—"

"Don't bother," Carter said. "It's too late to start telling me how it should have been done. Even if we'd done it that way, it wouldn't have worked."

He glanced up as Hollister entered the room. "What now?"

"We've lost Chicago," Hollister said. "Our men just got chased out by Duke Richard."

"Duke Richard," Carter repeated, almost grinning a little despite himself. "Duke Richard of Chicago. I like that," Carter said. "This whole blasted planet is splitting up into dukedoms and earldoms and squirearchies and everything else. And we're no better; what we laughingly call the Provisional Government is nothing more than a noisier dukedom than the rest."

Onomodze unrolled the map that lay on the desk. "Here," he said. "Look at the checkerboard here." He pointed to the dots of color spotting the map, each indicating a township or country where some tiny independent kingdom had been set up, in defiance of the Carter government. "As long as it's all over, we

can laugh about it," Onomodze said.

"No!" roared Carter. "No. Don't ever treat it as a joke. It's a tragedy, Kelvin, even more tragic than the original conquest by the Sslesor. Because here we're on our own again, and we're flubbing it completely."

"I'm sorry," Onomodze said. "I didn't mean to joke about it."

Carter got up and walked to the window. "We didn't go wrong anywhere," he said. "We did everything the right way. When the Velks pulled out on us, we took over and announced that we were the new government of Earth. We had the administrative machinery all set up."

"Right here," said Hollister. He pointed to the bound copy of the constitution Carter had promulgated. "A government rules by consent of the governed. And we couldn't get consent."

"It wasn't our fault," Onomodze said. "We have a natural leader here, in Joslyn. He knows exactly what to do and how to do it. But it was like a poker game in which one man had a royal flush, and having everyone else drop out before he can bet. Our royal flush is Joslyn, but he has to have someone else in the game

with him for the royal flush to mean anything. We can't force people to accept our rule."

"It's not our fault at all," Carter said. "All those little dukes are going to find out the same thing I did."

"What's that?"

"Look: for a thousand years the Sslesor ruled us, telling us what to do at every step of our way," Carter said, "We grew terribly dependent on them—so dependent that now every Earthman is firmly convinced that he can be ruled properly only by benevolent lizards from the stars. The Sslesor did such a good job of ruling that the people just won't *believe* we can do as well ourselves. Those dukes are finding it out, too. Just as they refused to accept our authority, so their own subjects are refusing to accept theirs. As fast as a duchy gets going, it subdivides. Our friend Duke Richard of Chicago is going to find himself the Duke of eight or nine square blocks in a month's time, and then maybe one block."

"That means anarchy coming," Onomodze said.

"Exactly," said Carter. "We'd just better be ready to get out of the way when the roof blows off."

CHAPTER V

20 March 3028

THINGS grew steadily worse during the next weeks. New York became the scene of a pitched battle between the Earl of Manhattan and the Overlord of West Brooklyn, with Staten Island as the prize. Carter and his government, cooped up in the old Sslesor Administration Building on the Island, waited uneasily and wondered which ruler would get to them first.

All pretense at governing was dropped now. The Provisional Government had been dead almost from the start, with Earthmen unable to accept the fact that other Earthmen could successfully take the place of the Sslesor. Carter had had no control over the local governments at all.

"We might just as well call the Sslesor back," Carter said. "Because we're heading for a glorious war now, with everybody fighting everybody else and no one quite sure what the shooting's all about."

"We can't get the Sslesor back," Onomodze pointed out. "And the Velks won't be bothered with us. That means we're on our own."

"At last," said Carter. "And rapidly heading toward the junkpile. But we can't give

up," he said, suddenly fierce again.

"Why not?" the other demanded. "It's all over for us now. We've had our chance and botched it. Now we can sit back and watch the fireworks."

"That's exactly what we can't do," Carter snapped. "We're the only men capable of putting Earth together, you and I and a handful of top Marine Corps men. We've known that since before the Sslesor left. We're still able to do the job."

"But they won't listen to us," Onomodze protested.

"I think I have an idea." Carter sat quietly for a long time. "Let's start from the beginning once more," he said. "Let's analyze the whole situation all over again."

1 April 3028
THE Carter government made its formal resignation a week later. It was, of course, an empty gesture, but at least the thing had been carried out according to protocol. The hundreds and thousands of local rulers reacted jubilantly to the news.

Earth was, therefore, in an official state of anarchy when the Khoomish arrived.

Their huge, gleaming ship

put down without advance warning on Staten Island, in the great plaza that lay before the ruins of the Sslesor Administration Building. A well-placed bomb had levelled the former headquarters both of the Sslesor and of the Provisional Government, but the Provisional Government had prudently foreseen this and had been elsewhere at the time.

Thus, only a handful of Terrans were on hand to witness the landing of the Khoomish, attracted by the sight of the ship hovering over the Island and sinking down to land.

The Khoomish were tall, powerful, green-furred aliens with thin purple lips and magnificent blazing eyes. They were far more imposing to the war-weary Terrans than either the reptilian Sslesor or the nondescript Velks.

They emerged from their ship and, taking no notice of the curious knot of Terrans around them, calmly went about the business of setting up a complex, involuted piece of machinery about eight feet high. Then, the biggest and most majestic-looking of the aliens approached the machine that had been set up and spoke incomprehensible syllables into it.

The machine translated his speech to what was by now a fairly large and interested gathering of Earthmen as:

"People of Earth: Your time of troubles is over. We have come from the stars to aid you."

The bald announcement caused a ripple of conversation to wash through the crowd. Then the Khoomish leader went on to explain that the machine before them was a thought-translator which converted English into the Khoomish tongue and vice versa, and went on to request that the leaders of the local governments be brought to see them at once.

When the news reached them, the Duke of Lower Manhattan and the Emperor of Astoria were engaged in treaty negotiation. They held a hurried conference and decided to speak to the alien leader together.

"My name is Terrag Broz," the huge green-furred creature said when the two rulers approached. "While waiting for you, I have had the opportunity of learning your language—a singularly clumsy one, may I add."

The Emperor introduced the Duke, and then himself.

"You are the rulers of this area, I take it," Broz said.

They nodded.

"Might I inquire, how many subjects does each of you possess?"

The two rulers exchanged worried glances. In the past weeks, their domains had been shrinking at an exponential rate. When the Emperor of Astoria had seceded from the Dominion of Queens, he had boasted some four thousand loyal subjects. But since the establishment of the Free State of Long Island City, that number had diminished somewhat, and a threatened Republic of Inner Astoria would make further inroads. The Duke of Lower Manhattan had undergone similar experience.

"I take it from your silence," the Khoomish said, "that you have seen difficult times lately. In short, that the condition of your planet has been degenerating rapidly into utter anarchy since Earth's abrupt and, may I say, unwanted liberation."

"That's not true at all!" the Duke began, but the Emperor nudged him to be quiet.

"It is true," he admitted. He was a short, gray-haired man with close-clipped hair, who had been a provincial administrator under the Sslesor. "I would venture to predict, sir, that within a year's time I'll

have no more than one subject—if that many. And that one will be myself. Everyone wants to be a king,” he said, sighing.

The Khoomish grinned broadly. “Precisely. And that is why we have come. We offer you a strong, efficient government, a centralized administration, a unified planet. Throw in your lot with us and we will see that you are placed high in the ranks of the ruling echelon—as high, of course, as it will be possible for a Terran to rise.”

After a whispered consultation, the two rulers agreed to submit to the authority of the Khoomish.

By nightfall, the Khoomish had all of New York except a recalcitrant section of the Bronx.

In a week’s time, they were being acclaimed as saviors throughout the United States of America, as duke after duke willingly resigned his uneasy throne to them.

Within two months, the Earthmen had completely yielded their battered planet to the Khoomish. Even the most stubborn conceded that it was better to be ruled benevolently by aliens than badly by one’s self. In fact, most Earthmen had believed that all along.

Work proceeded apace on an immense central headquarters to house Earth’s new rulers.

And sanity had returned to the Earth for the first time since the Sslesor had unexpectedly departed.

11 May 3035

ORVID KEMRON glared across the desk at Terrag Broz.

“All right,” he said. “You took advantage of the right moment to come down and take possession of Earth. You waited until the Provisional Government had failed miserably and Earth was in complete chaos. And those sheep—” He waved in an all-inclusive gesture. “—were wildly enthusiastic about it. They thought that the only way any of us would survive would be to be ruled by a set of galactic overlords. Any set at all would do.”

“And you rebelled,” Broz said. “Just as Joslyn Carter rebelled—or tried to—against the Sslesor. But even if Carter had actually managed to blast the Sslesor government, the same thing would have happened. Earth was—and is—not ready to govern itself on such short notice. It’s not that Earthmen have had any of the vigor and fire bred out of

them; it's simply that they have been relying on exterior government for so long that they don't know how to handle themselves without it.

"Like any energetic, potentially brilliant child who is suddenly deprived of parental care and told to shift for himself, the human race went hogwild," he said.

"And what if our rebellion had gone through?" Kemron asked.

"The same thing would have happened," said the Khoomish leader. "Earth would have fallen into anarchy again.

"I will certainly agree that humanity would, in time, pull itself back together for another try at the stars, but by that time it would perhaps be too late. Why spend another thousand years regaining what Earth has right now?"

Kemron closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "I suppose that means that Earth will never again govern herself," he said slowly. "And I suppose it means that I will be shot."

"Wrong on both counts," Broz smiled. "Earth will govern herself again. And we're certainly not going to harm you. We need you, and more like you. But you were as I said, a little premature."

"Premature?" Kemron looked blank.

The Khoomish nodded. "That's what I said. Like Joslyn Carter, you rebelled at a time when you didn't have a united planet behind you. No one hated the Sslesor but Carter and his Marines. No one hates us but you and your underground. You're making the same mistakes that Carter did, and that's why we had to drag you out of bed in the middle of the night. It wouldn't have done for you to drive us off the Earth tomorrow. Wait until you are ready—then strike."

"I don't understand," said Kemron. His confused mind felt as though it were spinning in silly little circles.

"It's very simple," Broz continued. "If we can make the rest of the human race hate us enough, they'll drive us off and be ready to follow wholeheartedly the leader of the group that drives us off. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," Kemron said hesitantly, "yes, I think I understand, but *why*? Why do you want to do this? Don't you want to rule Earth? I don't think I'd be very intelligent if I trusted the word of a Khoomish that his race was as altruistic as all that."

At that Broz grinned. "I'm

glad I didn't underestimate you. I—" He stopped as the door to the office opened.

Behind him, Kemron heard footsteps. Another Khoomish walked over to Broz' desk and put a sheaf of papers on the hard, shiny top.

"What's this about our race being altruistic?" the newcomer asked, grinning.

Broz looked back at Kemron. "You know our Vice Administrator, Nacomon Gornik, I think?"

Kemron nodded blankly, looking from one to the other.

"I assure you," Broz said, "that the race to which we belong is the least altruistic—in that sense—of any of the three races we know to exist in the galaxy. And yet, in another manner of speaking, we—"

He didn't get a chance to finish. Kemron leaped to his feet, and strangely enough, the automatics did not shoot him down.

"*Three races! You! I get it! I get it!*" He slapped a hand against his forehead. "My God! Why didn't I see it before? Why didn't anyone else see it?"

"Because they weren't looking for it," said Broz.

"They weren't in any condition to," Gornik added. "They couldn't even bring them-

selves to admit that the possibility might exist."

"*Who are you?*" Kemron asked sharply.

"I am Joslyn Carter," said the green-furred being. "And this is Kelvin Onomodze."

KEMRON nodded. "But why? Why this insane masquerade?"

"Not insane," Broz-Carter said. "It's the most terribly sane thing we've done yet. All my earlier actions were based on the faulty premise that one determined, capable group of men could, if properly led, take over Earth.

"It wasn't. A thousand years of Sslesor rule had seen to that. What we are trying to do now will take thirty years or more of re-education. The answer to the anarchistic tendencies of Earth was obvious: we would have to turn into a set of galactics ourselves. We would have to provide Earth with what it wanted in order to rule it properly."

"I see," said Kemron. "Very neat. But if Earthmen are, as you say, too stagnant to rule themselves now, what makes you think we can ever do it? Isn't it just possible that we'll simply sink lower into stagnation?"

Broz-Carter shook his head. "Not at all. The very fact that anarchy nearly got us was proof of that. If we really were a stagnating race, we would have ruled ourselves without any difficulty. As it is, there is enough difference, even now, between various groups to allow them to quarrel with each other. And that's a very hopeful sign."

"But why tell me? How do I fit in?" Kemron asked.

"We told you for the purpose of self-preservation, for one thing," Carter admitted. "We have no desire to get killed when the rebellion finally does come. For another thing, this is the sort of rebellion that requires close cooperation in the upper echelons of both factions if it is to be successful."

"Things are running very smoothly under the Khoomish now. We've picked up all the pieces and put them back together, but we need help to keep them together."

"You're the only one who knows we're only Earthmen wearing green fur. But we don't want to keep the job for a thousand years. We want to be overthrown—desperately."

"But not yet. We want to be overthrown by a united movement of Earthmen, not a little hole-in-the-ground

movement like yours."

"We've been waiting for you, Orvid. We deliberately made it easy; we set a trap to catch an underground movement. You'll have to expand—form a real Earth faction to overthrow us. Drive us out! Send us packing! But not yet. Not until you're strong enough. And that's going to be a long time."

"I feel as if the roof's caved in on me," Kemron said.

"That's the way I felt," said Carter. "First when the Sslesor pulled out, then when the Velks crossed us up, and finally when the provisional government turned out to be such a complete failure. And I hope I feel it one more time—in a slightly different way—the day Orvid Kemron comes blasting into this building with an army of Earthmen at his back and tells us he's taking over."

Kemron's eyes glowed. "How long? When?"

"According to my calculations, thirty years. We don't dare take much longer."

"Why the rush?" Kemron asked, frowning suddenly.

Carter's green-furred face became grim. "The Velks," he said. "They said they'd come back. And then, too, there's the chance that the Sslesor might regain this section of

the galaxy. Or there may be another race out there somewhere. Human beings have never been to the stars, and it looks as though we're going to have to have a hell of a lot of fight in us to get our share when we do. I don't think the others have a chance if we're united and working together towards that goal. If we have the tools to fight with, we'll win."

He jabbed a forefinger at Kemron to emphasize his point: "But God help us if they find us in the same condition of helplessness that we were in when the Sslesor found us a thousand years ago."

"What do I do now?" Kemron asked.

"Go home and get some sleep," Carter told him. "We'll get in touch with you later to begin making complete plans for the first phase. Now get

out of here fast. The guards will take you home."

"All right—Joslyn." Kemron stood up. "I'll wait until I can talk to you before making any further plans."

He turned and headed toward the door. Carter watched him go.

"I think he'll do," he said, after the door shut.

"I hope so," said Onomodze. "It'll be a pleasure to take these getups off again."

"Don't worry. If I know Orvid Kemron, he'll have us on our way back to Khoom soon enough. Wherever Khoom is, that is."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm positive," said Carter. "He'll have most of Earth behind him when we get through with them. They're going to want to skin us alive."

Onomodze looked down at the fur on his arm. "That won't be too soon for me."



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challenge against the stars, and began his
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Battle for the Thousand Suns

by Calvin Knox and David Gordon



Battle for the Thousand Suns

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CHAPTER I

DANE REGAN stood in the observation room of the starship *Sybil*, looking at the great star cluster ahead. His face was a calm mask, but inwardly he was seething with excitement.

Fifteen years!

Fifteen years since a small boy and his elderly guardian had fled before the hounds of Jillane, fled in frantic haste to exile. Fifteen years since Dane Regan had seen the cluster.

Now, he stared at the fiery shower of stars that filled the

WE APOLOGIZE to David Gordon, whose name was inadvertently left off the cover. Mistakes like this are supposed to be almost impossible, but somehow this one got by editors, proofreaders, engravers, and printers alike. And we're doubly sorry it happened, because Knox and Gordon did a superb job on this novel, and deserve all the credit and praise we can possibly give.

skies, drinking in the sight hungrily. It was a globular cluster, situated well to the zenith of the galactic lens, and far from normal galactic trade routes. There were ten thousand mighty suns in the cluster and over a thousand habitable planets, ruled by the Empire of the Hundred Kings. Fifteen years before, when he had been a boy of ten, Dane Regan had fled the cluster to escape death at the hands of Gwyll, King of Jillane, most feared of the Hundred Kings.

And now he was returning. He stared with quiet intensity at the diamond-hard, many-colored points of light. One of them was the sun around which Jillane revolved. Dane Regan no longer feared Gwyll of Jillane. *This time, he thought, it's Gwyll's turn to know fear.*

"It is rather beautiful, close up like this," said a soft voice behind him. "I can understand why you're staring that way."

Dane turned, half-surprised, and saw lean-faced

Coleman, the captain of the *Sybil*. Regan smiled.

"Yes, it is—quite beautiful. How far are we from it now?"

"About two hundred light years," the captain said. "We'll be there in about six hours."

"Good," said Regan.

The Empire Cluster was nearly twenty thousand light-years from the Main Lens of the galaxy itself; few ships ever went to it. Dane had been lucky to be able to book passage aboard a merchant vessel. He was the only passenger. He had been aboard her for a month now, moving through the vast empty spaces that separated the globular clusters from each other and from the Main Lens of the galaxy.

"The Empire people are queer people," said the captain, reflectively stroking his hollow cheeks. "Have you ever been there before?"

"No," Dane lied. He met the captain's cold glance squarely to back the statement up. Regan didn't want anyone to know who he was, not even the men on the *Sybil*. Then he added: "Queer? What, do you mean by that?"

"Oh—*different*, you might say. All these globular cluster peoples are. They're isolated.

Their systems of government have evolved away from the galactic norm."

"Clannish, I suppose," Dane said. "Don't care for strangers?"

"Some of them. I hear that in the Ventar Cluster, on the other side of the galaxy, it's worth a stranger's life to wander around unprotected on one of their planets. They're wary of strangers in the Empire Cluster too, but it's not that bad there. If you're a good fighter, you'll win their respect."

"I can take care of myself," Dane said.

"I hope so." The captain turned his head from the viewplate to look at Dane. "You're a Solarian, aren't you? You look like an Earthman to me."

"Vegan," Dane corrected. "Vega VI."

"I knew it was some part of the Solar Federation. Well, you've got money—that's a great help. You'd end up as a peasant or a worker if you didn't. If you swing it right, you might be able to buy your way into some noble's army."

"Maybe," said Dane. "I want to look the situation over first."

"They like free-lance soldiers," the captain said. "The

peasants can't fight; it's a gentleman's profession. But a lot of the nobles don't care to fight, either."

"I'll see how I get along," Dane said.

A DAY LATER, Dane Regan was on Jillane, one of the thousand planets of the Empire, and capital of the Kingdom of Jillane, one of the largest of the Hundred Kingdoms.

The jetcopter from the spaceport had dropped him off in the heart of the city of Pellin, eight million strong, the buzzing heart of Jillane. He stood quietly in the shadow of a towering building for a moment, breathing deeply, sucking in the tangy, high-oxygen air of Jillane. He had almost forgotten what the air tasted like.

But it bit into his lungs now, and reminded him of what had been done to him, what he had been forced to relinquish, what he had lost. He glanced up. Flashing from the wall of a skyscraper was a giant portrait of Gwyll—crafty, hunchbacked Gwyll, his ugliness carefully edited for public consumption.

Regan smiled. He had no clearer image etched into his mind than that of Gwyll. He'd

borne the monarch's visage in mind for a decade and a half.

He made a mock salute toward the huge portrait and began to walk. Silent electric cars glided through the streets; occasionally, a jetcopter or some noble's private plane would hum overhead. The commoners wore drab clothing, much like Dane's, but the merchants and nobles dressed in gaudy, many-colored tunics and vests. The nobles also wore swords.

The first step, Regan thought, is clothing.

"Pardon me, friend," he said, stopping a chunky, red-bearded commoner who was hurrying by. "Can you help me?"

"Speak up, stranger. What is troubling you?"

"Where can I find a clothing shop? I need a new outfit, and—"

The commoner examined Dane's drab outfit, then looked at his own. "In faith, friend, yours is much finer than my own! Why do you think you need new clothes?"

Dane scowled. The blockhead obviously thought he wanted to replace his clothing with a new suit of drab. "I need something a bit more costly," Dane said. He gestured at the violet-and-green blaze of silk that glimmered

on the body of a youthful noble passing just then.

The commoner chuckled coarsely. "Fine plans you have, boy! Why not ask to buy a star or two as well?"

"But—"

The commoner shook his head. "I've no time to waste with madmen. What store would sell *you* a noble's clothing?"

He shouldered his way past Dane and continued down the street. Anger flared hotly in Regan for a moment; then he cooled, and realized that what the man said was true. No clothing store would sell him a noble's attire.

But there were other ways of getting what he wanted. He turned down a side street, found himself in a purple-shadowed canyon between two immense office buildings. He edged along the side of one of the buildings, slipped into a shadow-hidden doorway, and waited.

It didn't take long. A merchant, of about his own build but with a mild, vacuous expression about the eyes that hinted at flabby muscles, came along shortly. Dane glanced up and down the street; at the moment, no one was looking.

As the merchant passed, Dane stepped out behind

him. "Got the time, sir?"

"Why, it's—"

The merchant turned, and Dane chopped into the side of his throat with a straight-edged hand. The other gagged, choked, and reeled crazily. Dane calmly pumped two quick blows into the man's body and gathered him in. He hauled the unconscious merchant back into the alcove.

Five minutes later, Regan emerged, dressed in a costly tunic made of green and red teflon, encrusted with shimmering platinum mesh. He was the very picture of an upper-class Jillanian.

THE NEXT STOP would have to be an arms shop. The schedule of activities unfolded itself clearly in Regan's mind; he'd been planning and waiting for this day so long he knew precisely what each move would be.

The arms shop was not a large place, but it had the glittering sumptuousness of an expensive jeweler's. Regan entered and studied the array of swords on display while waiting for the proprietor to appear.

To an ordinary citizen of the galaxy, the habit of carrying so ancient and outmoded

a weapon as a sword seems ludicrous in the extreme. A disruptor pistol is far more efficient, and doesn't require nearly as much training and practice to make one an expert.

But for the nobles of the Empire, the disruptor pistol was *too* effective. In a duel with pistols, it was likely that both men would die—a duel with a disruptor is tantamount to suicide.

The Empire of the Hundred Kings was closely related to the feudal system of ancient history. But the division between noble and commoner was more than simply a right of birth, although that concept entered into it. Basically, the reason for its development lay in a mutation that had taken place nearly a thousand years before.

Exactly what had happened, no one knew; the truth had been covered up by ten centuries of political re-writing of history. But Regan had a fair idea of what the core of the situation was.

A cosmic ray—a heavy nucleus of an atom accelerated through tens of thousands of light years by the interacting electrostatic, magnetic, and gravitational fields of a hundred million suns—

had speared through the reproductive organs of a man or woman at a velocity close to that of light.

Chromosomes had been twisted apart and re-formed; genes had been disrupted and reassembled under the tremendous energy of that tiny bit of matter. Most of the results had been abortive or lethal changes in the germ plasm. But one was not. Somehow, through the workings of the universal laws of probability, one set of chromosomes had changed in just the right way and had been lucky enough to come together with another set and produce a human being. And that man—the first of his kind—had had the Power.

In prehistoric times, it might have been called the Evil Eye—and it is possible that this was not the first time such a mutation had occurred, in the long history of the human race. But this was the first time any individual had ever had the ability to strike another human dead with a glance and had lived to reproduce his kind.

And—naturally, in the raw environment of the frontier worlds—such men became kings.

It was evidently a sex-linked characteristic. No woman

had ever been born with the Power. And, too, it was self-defeating; no man who had it could kill another who had it. It was recessive; only a few of any generation had the Power and could use it. These became nobles—the rest were commoners, who had to watch their step lest a single glance from a nobleman drop them where they stood.

Like hair or eye coloring, the ability could be diluted. Some nobles were more powerful than others. Most nobles, in fact, could only stun—only the Kings could actually kill.

And he could become a King, who could kill.

That was the reason for the swords. Only a noble or an army officer could carry one; they were a gentleman's weapon for settling disputes. One never used the Power against anyone but a commoner; it wouldn't work. And a disruptor pistol would kill too many nobles, and thus deplete the line of those chosen few who had the Power. Therefore—they carried the sword.

"May I help you, sir?" said the small, white-haired man behind the counter.

Dane turned and lifted an eyebrow. "I'm here to buy a

sword—a good, strong, flexible rapier."

"Yes, sir. We have some excellent blades in stock, sir."

He shuffled back and produced an arms-case laden with gleaming weapons. Regan looked them over, testing their weight and temper and flexibility, and handed them all back regretfully.

"None of them satisfy you, sir?"

"I'm afraid not," Regan said. "They're not what I have in mind. Do you do custom jobs?"

The man nodded. Regan outlined what he wanted, describing and sketching it from needle point to jewelled pommel.

The little technician rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "This is a fine weapon you've planned, sir. I assure you we'll do justice to it. That electro-hardened blade will take time, though. Tomorrow evening at the earliest."

"Tomorrow evening it is," Dane said. "Your price?"

"Mmmm. Let me see . . ." He jotted down figures on a pad. "With matching scabbard, eight hundred stellors," he said at last.

Regan glanced at him coldly, and the little man quailed visibly. Regan knew what the

technician was thinking: if this stranger were a noble, as seemed likely, then his glance could be painful, if not fatal.

"Seven hundred at the very most," said Regan with an air of finality.

There was a moment of indecision. Then: "Yes, sir. Seven hundred." It wasn't too bad, Regan thought. The sword-maker would still show a worthwhile profit.

Regan smiled and handed him the money, seven clean, translucent crystal discs. "And if it's ready by 1800 tomorrow evening, you'll get your extra hundred."

"Very good, sir. And now, if I may see your arms permit . . ."

"I don't have it with me."

The little man looked pained. With great dignity, he handed back the money. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I can't sell a weapon without a permit. Why, for all I know, you could be a commoner like myself — uh — no offense meant, sir."

Regan ignored the seven coins in the man's hand. "I'll have the permit with me tomorrow," he said coldly. "If I don't, you'll have your money and your sword, too."

Again a moment of indecision. "Yes, sir; I see, sir," the technician said. "Perfect-

ly understandable, sir." Regan's gesture had apparently convinced him that the tall stranger before him was what he claimed to be. No commoner would dare risk seven hundred stellors that way.

"I hope I've not offended, sir," he said humbly.

"Not at all. It would have been much worse if you hadn't asked."

"I always uphold the law, sir. Tomorrow at 1800, then."

THE NEXT STOP for Regan was at the Supreme Military Building. It was a gleaming edifice with a frosty-white plastic facade and a row of ugly-looking eagles sculpted over its yawning door.

Regan strode in with a determined air and found the Military Procurement Office after a few moments of tentative hesitation. He pushed against the paneled black door and it slid open with faint squeaking.

There was a big, hard-looking major behind the desk. He looked up with an air of boredom. "Yes? What's on your mind?"

"I want to join the army," Regan said.

"Oh? You from these parts?" Obviously the man took him for a merchant, see-

ing him swordless.

"I'm an outworlder," Regan said.

Immediately the man's face hardened. "Let's see your papers," he said. He took them, and as he glanced over them, a sneer crossed his face. "A Vegan, eh? Solar Federation. I never heard of it. In the Main Galaxy or another cluster?"

"Main Galaxy," Regan told him.

"You Galactics are all alike. You think you're hot stuff out in the clusters. You'll learn different before you're here too long." He dropped the papers disdainfully on the desk.

"Well?"

The officer sized him up. "I guess you look healthy and strong enough, Vegan. We need good men. With a little training, you might make a squad leader."

He took one of a stack of green application-blanks and started to scrawl something on it, but Regan interrupted him. "I couldn't take less than a lieutenancy," he said.

The major looked up in open-mouthed astonishment. "Why—of all the gall!" He blinked a couple of times at Regan's audacity, then jammed down on a button on his desk.

Two husky non-coms came in.

"Sergeant! Corporal! I want you to throw this fool out—and don't be gentle."

The two soldiers grinned as they advanced toward Regan. They were tall, square-shouldered men in the red-with-gold-trim uniform of the Army of Jillane, and they looked as if they meant business. Regan waited for them to reach him.

"You going to go quietly?" the sergeant asked.

Regan chuckled and leaped forward. His fist crashed into the astonished sergeant's jaw, and, as the man's hand came up in a reflex, Regan grabbed it and used it as a lever to jerk him upward and smash him against the corporal.

The corporal stepped out from behind the sergeant's flying form and swung on Regan, who sidestepped and cracked him soundly behind the ear. The soldier folded up neatly, and Regan corralled the tottering sergeant, struck him once in the pit of the stomach, and dropped him to the floor next to the other.

Regan glanced down at the two prostrate forms and glanced at the major, who had been sitting calmly behind his desk throughout the entire affair.

"Very well done, Mr. Regan. You should make sergeant, at least. I think I can offer you that."

Regan wiped perspiration from his forehead and stared bleakly at the major. "Lieutenant, I said."

The major shook his head. "An officer is expected to be a gentleman; you'd have to handle a sword, and I never saw a Galactic yet who could use anything but a standard disruptor pistol."

"Try me," Regan suggested.

"You are an insolent pup!" The officer stepped over to a rack on the wall and took down a pair of blades. Deliberately, he threw one at Regan. Regan caught the grip neatly in midair.

"Come ahead," he said. He flicked the weapon through the air a couple of times, judging its bend, while the major moved toward him.

Swords clashed. The major smiled, lunged, struck toward Regan's heart—and was parried. His eyes widened with astonishment as Regan deftly turned the blow aside and slid within his guard just long enough to slice a glittering multi-faceted medal from the major's bosom. The trinket went tinkling to the floor.

Red-faced, the Jillanian came forward with something more than a test in mind. His sword bobbed and weaved before Regan, and once it broke through and cut a thin red line down the side of Regan's face. Regan slashed back, disengaging rapidly, thrusting his weapon across the major's wrist, and twisting upward and across with a powerful motion. There was the clang of metal on metal, and then the officer's sword went clattering across the room.

Regan smiled politely at the disarmed officer, and, without a word, restored his own weapon to the rack on the wall. He stood there, waiting.

The major glanced over at his fallen blade. "Well, I'll be damned," he said softly. There was respect in his eyes when he looked again at Regan.

"Regan, if you can pass the tests, you can have that commission." He paused, frowning. "Of course, there will be a slight—ah—fee."

"Of course. How much?"

The major grinned. "The price is fairly standard. It's a matter of having influence. If I were a colonel, say, I could do it more easily, but I'd have to make more profit."

It all evens out." He named a figure.

Regan nodded. "That's fair enough."

"Naturally, the money must be paid before you take the exam. If you fail—" He shrugged lightly.

CHAPTER II

TWO WEEKS LATER, Lieutenant Dane Regan, resplendently uniformed and wearing a jewelled sword at his side, reported aboard the battle cruiser *Dormis* for a shakedown cruise.

The *Dormis* was a standard-type thousand-man cruiser, under the orders of Noble Commander Drel Larthin, a thin, ascetic-looking martinet of an officer. Larthin shook hands coldly with his new lieutenant and turned him over to a junior officer for assignment to a cabin.

"You'll stay here," the officer told him, showing him an austere but roomy cabin.

"Fine," Regan said. He stepped inside.

The young officer paused a moment at the door of Regan's cabin. "One word, sir?"

"What is it?"

"Some advice, Lieutenant—next time you shake hands with Noble Commander Lar-

thin, don't do it so vigorously."

Regan narrowed his eyes. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Nothing much," the officer said. "Only that you showed him you mean business, and that's not always a good idea. You're an outworlder; you don't understand the Cluster. The officers here don't like to see newcomers with ambition. You can get unpopular in a hurry."

"Thanks," Regan said, grinning. "Thanks—but I think I'll manage." He closed the door and entered his cabin. He had a lot of work to do, filling himself in on the background of the Cluster conflicts of the past fifteen years.

Gwyll, the hunchbacked King of Jillane, was having trouble with King Arvin of Rineth. Presumably, the difficulty was over trade routes of the merchant vessels that plied their way through the great Cluster, but there was more to it than that.

The Emperor of the Thousand Suns was chosen by the Council of the Hundred Kings from one of their own number. Once chosen, he ruled for life, and was supported loyally by the others.



But the old Emperor, Dowain of Koreyl, was growing senile; his death was not far off. And the two recognized major contenders for the Imperial throne were Gwyll of Jillane and Arvin of Rineth. If either could cripple the other's fleet, the balance of power—and the Imperium—

would go to the victor.

Attacking the planets themselves was almost impossible. No space fleet, however strong, could hope to beat the amassed might of planetary-based weapons unless the defense was crippled by espionage and sabotage.

Regan didn't care about



that part of it. All he wanted to do was get close to Gwyll of Jillane. The King was too carefully guarded for a mere lieutenant to get close to him—Regan would have to rise in rank.

Regan would also have to see to it that Gwyll became Emperor. For on the day that

Gwyll of Jillane became Emperor over the Thousand Suns and the Hundred Kings, Dane Regan would have him where he wanted him.

THE FIRST YEAR of Dane Regan's service was relatively uneventful. The fleets of Jil-

lane and Rineth sparred with each other in minor skirmishes, doing each other little harm. On one occasion, the new officer distinguished himself by personally operating a space rifle after its automatic controls had been smashed, and was awarded a captaincy for meritorious service.

But it was at the end of his first year, during what was later to be known as the Battle of Ballin's Star, that Captain Dane Regan came to the notice of Gwyll of Jil-lane.

It began innocently enough when the master of the *Dormis*, Noble Commander Larthin, called his officers into the briefing room.

Larthin's eyes flicked around the ring of faces confronting him. Regan stared at the pale commander, whose drawn face and burning eyes had given him a well-earned reputation as a man to stay away from.

"Gentlemen, I have just received some very special orders," Larthin said crisply. "Our intelligence system has informed the fleet that a ship is leaving for the Emperor's capital from the Rineth Sector."

He paused, staring directly at Regan for a moment, then

moving on until he had glared at each of his officers in turn. "We know the route they intend to take," Larthin said. "Our job is to ambush them."

Sub-Commander Monder-rat, a heavy-set, florid man who contrasted sharply with his superior, raised his hand lazily. "Do we know who they are?"

Larthin bristled. "I do not know why this particular ship is so important, nor do I care. Nor do I want any speculation among you. I can tell you that our orders are from His Supreme Nobility, Gwyll of Jillane." His eyes closed wearily for a moment.

The officers nodded. Regan grinned inwardly. There was no need to speculate; Gwyll would have given such orders only if King Arvin himself were aboard that vessel. Everything fit neatly into a pattern. Arvin was going to appeal to the aged Emperor Dowain for aid against Gwyll—and he might possibly get it.

The Noble Commander pointed at a star map. "Here is the route. The ship we're ambushing is a fast speedster, protected by four light cruisers. They're depending on speed if they're attacked. The cruisers will hold off attackers while the speedster

gets away. And it can get away, if we let it; it can outrun us in no time."

Sub-Commander Monderrat ambled to his feet, gesturing to the red blinking of the message-signal above the door. "Call, sir."

"Never mind," Larthin snapped. "Let's finish this first." He looked around. "As I said, we have one advantage. We know where they're going to be. They won't be expecting us."

"The *Dormis* will be the flagship of a fifty-ship squadron. We will meet them here—" He tapped a spot on the star chart. "That is Balin's Star."

REGAN, as Fire Control Officer, made sure that all his heavy-cycle guns were ready for action, and then sat down to wait. He was becoming a little impatient.

It was not the impending battle. At the moment, that meant nothing. Fifty ships against five is not the sort of fight that makes a man apprehensive, if he is aboard one of the fifty.

No; Regan was impatient because he felt he was wasting time.

A year had passed, and he seemed no closer to his ob-

jective than he had been at the beginning. And that seemed odd to him, because he had waited patiently on Vega VI for fifteen years, learning the things he would need to know. He thought fleetingly of old Jorg, who had helped him escape from Gwyll's grasp. The rest of his family—his mother, his father, and an older sister—had died, but Jorg had managed to get away, fleeing to the Main Galaxy with a ten-year-old boy.

"I loved your father," Jorg had once said. "Of all the nobles of the Empire, he alone had the intelligence and the compassion to see that the eternal wars of the Hundred Kings, the stupid jockeying for power, was senseless. The nobles are incapable of seeing beyond their immediate surroundings. They can kill or stun at a glance, and that's the only use to which they have ever put their mental power."

"But you, Dane, are going to be different. I've studied the problem; there is more to the Power than the simple ability to deal sudden death. I'm sure of that. And we're going to find out what it is, you and I."

And they had, to some extent. They had experimented

and worked while old Jorg had made a precarious living on Vega VI as an atomic technician, spending little, saving much.

He had taught young Dane the manners and customs of Jillane and of the Empire, and he had schooled him well in the use of the sword. In addition, the old retainer had made sure that the boy absorbed the best of the main stream of Galactic culture.

Jorg had instilled in Dane the concept of revenge—patient, inevitable revenge against the usurper Gwyll. The time would come, Jorg assured him, when he would be able to take back the throne that was rightfully his—the throne of Jillane.

When, at last, the old man had died, he had said: "I've done my best, boy. Don't forget what I've taught you, and don't forget that there is more to learn."

Dane missed old Jorg. For over a year now, he had held his mind in abeyance, waiting for the proper time to unleash his Power. The time had not yet come.

THE FIFTY-SHIP squadron arranged itself in space, well out of detector range of the oncoming speedster from

Rineth. It was fairly easy, here in the heart of a globular cluster, where the stars averaged less than a light-year apart. The radiation from ten thousand suns blanketed out detectors except at close range.

Only one ship remained close to the estimated path of the speedster, hiding in the glare of Ballin's Star. And, as the speedster and its escort appeared, it signaled the waiting squadron.

The fifty Jillanian ships converged on the speedster from every side, englobing it, giving it no chance to escape. The four Rinethi cruisers opened fire, but they were hopelessly outclassed. In his dome, Dane Regan yawned, making no attempt to conceal his boredom.

It was the *Dormis* that fired the shot which blasted the Rinethi speedster into a cloud of flaming, luminous gas. The speedster had been built for speed, not fighting, and its weak screens collapsed under the heavy barrage of fire from the *Dormis'* high-cycle guns. The cruisers held up a little better. Their screens were holding, although it was obvious that they were rapidly weakening.

And then the unexpected happened. Seemingly from

out of nowhere, space was filled with Rinethi battle-ships!

Regan snarled as his fingers played rapidly over the fire control board. It was a trap!

Very neat, Arvin of Rineth, Regan thought. Bitterly, he saw the whole picture. The intelligence system of Jillane had been duped; the presumed trip to the Imperial capital had been nothing more than bait for a squadron of ships that Jillane could ill afford to lose.

The Rinethi ships closed in fast, their heavy guns filling space with crackling, glowing haloes of deadly energy. Fifty light cruisers—against two hundred heavy battle-ships! And the cruisers were completely surrounded.

Alarms wailed down the corridors of the *Dormis*. Bulletins poured through the intercom system. The ship had suddenly come to life, yanked from a routine task into a desperate battle for existence.

Regan heard Noble Commander Larthin's voice over the intercom, talking to Monderrat on an open beam. "The screens are holding down here," Larthin said.

"But the meters show that they're dangerously close to

overload," the sub-commander pointed out. "Should we drop back?"

"No," Larthin said crisply. "Increase defensive fire and hope that the screens hold out."

Then, suddenly, there was a sharp explosion which rocked the ship. Regan was jerked violently against the safety webbing of his seat, and swung there for a moment, groping to regain balance. The intercom stuttered aimlessly, with nothing but static coming over.

A second later, a new voice spoke. "Captain Regan! Captain Regan! Are you alive?"

"I'm alive," Regan said dizzily.

"This is Sergeant Gilmer, sir. An overloaded generator just blew on the bridge!"

Instantly, Regan was in full control of himself. "How's the casualty report?"

"You're the only officer on the ship who's still conscious, sir," Gilmer said.

"Very well. Notify all hands that I'm taking command!" Regan barked.

HE SWITCHED over to the squadron circuit. "This is the *Dormis*! We've got to get out of here, so follow orders carefully and exactly."

The Rinethi battleships were closing in in a hollow globe, firing at the fifty cruisers inside. But instead of firing back, the Jillanian cruisers did a peculiar thing. They ran towards each other, forming a tight, compact cone of ships. The ships at the base of the cone were close enough together so that their defensive screens overlapped, and they poured every megawatt of power they had into those screens.

They didn't fire; that would waste power. "Get those screens up tight and hold them!" was Regan's order.

The ships toward the nose of the cone aimed themselves at the oncoming wall of Rinethi battleships and began firing, hurling a billion kilowatts of energy out ahead in a single thrust. The flare of radiance speared out through the blackness of space like a gigantic interstellar beacon-station illuminating some dark shoal of the galaxy.

Then, in tight formation, the cone of ships began to move in the direction of its point.

With full protection from behind because of the hard-held screens, and with full firepower in front, the cone blasted its way through the

enclosing sphere of Rinethi ships. No battleship could stand up under the full firepower of thirty light cruisers hitting it at once. Before the Rinethi knew what had happened, the cone had speared its way outward, destroying four battleships as it passed. Once free, it kept going, applying every bit of speed each ship could develop.

The lighter cruisers could easily outdistance the battleships—but the Rinethi were so astounded at the ease with which the supposedly trapped squadron had broken loose that their commander ordered the battleships to give chase. It was an order given in anger, and it was a big mistake.

Regan formed his fifty ships into a ring, like a giant doughnut, and ordered them to slow down. The battleships, having built up their velocity, were unable to decelerate fast enough.

Six of them went through that ring—right through the center of it. Six times, the fifty cruisers fired simultaneously. Six times, there was a flare of incandescent gas and a splatter of molten metal as the battleships dissolved. The confused Rinethi wandered in circles, struggling to recover the upper hand in the battle.

"All right!" Regan ordered. "They're on to us! Break it up and run! Scatter!"

The order radiated outward instantly through the Jilanian fleet. Within minutes, they had left the slower battleships far behind. The Battle of Ballin's Star was over.

Losses to Rineth: Ten battleships, two cruisers, one speedster, and considerable pride.

Losses to Jillane: None.

CHAPTER III

A WEEK LATER, Dane Regan—now a lieutenant colonel—found himself at a ball given in honor of the hero of the Battle of Ballin's Star.

The grand ballroom of the High Palace at Pellin was a domed hall with thick vaulting arches high overhead and a constellation of glowing lights studded among them. Somewhere off in a distant corner, an orchestra played sweetly, and the pleasant hum of conversation drifted through the air. The ball was an unquestioned success.

Regan felt a warm glow of pleasure. The speeches were over with, his new commission had been confirmed, and the Star of Jillane had been locked to his dress tunic. He

had been praised, cheered, and toasted. And now he found himself floating over the dance floor, gliding in smooth, graceful spirals with the Lady Raleen of Jillane.

She was one of the loveliest girls he had ever seen. Sparkling metallic dust glimmered in her radiant golden-violet hair, and her bare shoulders were bronzed and handsome. Carefully moving his powered dancing boots so that they took just the right "bite" in the stratified paragravitic field, he smiled pleasantly at her and tried to keep from remembering that she was the adopted daughter of Gwyll of Jillane.

"You're a very clever man, Colonel. How did you ever think of such a trick?"

"Something I picked up somewhere," he said vaguely. "It was nothing, really. No doubt someone else would have thought of it, if I hadn't been there to do it. I just happened to be lucky."

He knew better than that. The whole trouble with space tactics in the Cluster was that they were too individualistic. The groups worked together well enough, but they worked like a loosely-knit team, not as a unit. The ships in a squadron had the habit of firing at other ships at

will, never seeming to realize that two shots hitting a screen a fraction of a second apart are not as devastating by far as two shots hitting it simultaneously. A force screen is not like a brick wall; the instant attack on a force screen ceases, it is as good as ever. It can withstand repeated fire indefinitely. Concentrated fire will crush it—collapse it completely.

Regan's tactics had worked because he'd ordered the ships to work together until the time had come for them to set up the scattering-pattern.

The girl smiled. "You're much too self-deprecating, Colonel; false modesty ill becomes you. Keep it up, and I won't give you your next medal."

"It's not false modesty, my lady," Regan said gravely. "It's cowardice."

"Cowardice?"

"Certainly. I was scared stiff, and I did the only thing I could think of to get out of there with a whole skin."

She laughed lightly. "We should have more cowards in our armed forces, then."

The music swung into the crescendo that indicated the approach of the final phrases, and Regan began to dip toward the floor. It was consid-

ered bad form to be in the air when the music stopped.

As they stepped off the floor, Noble Commander Larthin stepped forward to meet him, a gracious smile looking unfamiliar on his cold features.

"My Lady Raleen," he said, with unusual delicacy. "And Colonel Regan. Will you join me for a drink?"

Lady Raleen nodded, and Regan said, "I'd be very happy to, my Lord Commander."

They walked over to the bar and ordered drinks.

"The colonel was just telling me that his heroism is pure luck and cowardice," Raleen said. "What do you think, my Lord Commander?"

The noble officer smiled and shook his head. Regan observed that Larthin was ten times less forbidding off ship than he was in space; the coldness, he decided, must be a pose.

"Luck and cowardice?" Larthin repeated. "No, no such thing. I'd never have thought of that trick myself, and I've been in the fleet for twenty-three years."

"Aren't you just a little jealous?" Raleen asked.

The commander's face grew dark. "You presume yourself, my lady, Colonel Regan's

quick wit saved my life and the lives of the men aboard those ships. Jealous? No; I am proud."

Good for you, Regan thought. Spoken like a noble.

Raleen flushed a little. "I was jesting, my Lord Commander."

"I realize that, my lady," said the commander gently. "Forgive me for taking offense."

The girl smiled, and the incident was over.

Actually, Regan thought, Larthin hadn't needed to be so obsequious, because in a way he ranked Raleen. A woman, no matter who she might be, deserved the title "my lady" only by sufferance. No woman had the Power. Raleen's stepfather was the King, but when Gwyll of Jillane died, Raleen would be a commoner—a wealthy commoner, perhaps, but a commoner nonetheless.

Of course, she would probably be married to another noble before that happened. She was descended from nobility, and it was desirable to keep the strain as pure as possible.

"And how is His Supremacy, your father?" the commander asked.

"Quite well, as usual," said Lady Raleen, "and quite

grouchy, as usual."

"Pardon me if I offend," Regan began smoothly, "but I am, as you know, a native of the Main Galaxy, and—"

"It hardly shows," interrupted Raleen, smiling.

Regan touched his brow. "Thank you, my lady. I was about to say that, although I'm very pleased with the reception given me this evening, I missed the pleasure of glimpsing His Supremacy."

He could feel the faint chill—which was exactly what he had expected. He suppressed a grin.

"His Supreme Nobility rarely appears in public," said Lady Raleen.

She was about to say something else when a loud voice nearby said: "It's ridiculous! A young sprout like that and a foreigner, to boot. Promote him? Why? Any fool could have done what he did!"

Regan pretended not to notice; he had no desire to get himself embroiled in a duel at this particular stage in his program. And then he noticed that both Lady Raleen and Noble Commander Larthin were looking at him. They had heard the insult, and they knew he had heard it. There was nothing he could do now; if he backed out,

everything he had gained would be lost.

HE TURNED his head casually in the direction of the voice. There were three officers there. One of them had his back to Regan; the other two were trying to shush him up.

"What do you mean? I'm not talking loud. Regan isn't—"

The officer stopped suddenly and turned around, facing Regan. He said nothing, but his jaw muscles tightened.

"Were you referring, perhaps, to me, Colonel?" Regan asked softly.

The full colonel outranked Regan—but rank meant nothing in a situation like this.

He enjoyed the colonel's momentary discomfiture. The officer was obviously in the same trap. He hadn't meant for Regan to hear what was obviously a personal opinion, but he couldn't deny it now.

"I said," the colonel replied evenly, "that I did not feel your promotion was justified. I mean no personal antagonism; I am thinking of the good of the service."

A nice dodge, Regan thought approvingly. The man was not backing down; he was simply trying to shift

the purpose of the duel. He would no longer be defending his personal honor, for now the honor of the service would be at stake.

Regan decided to go him one better. "I make no claims of my own, Colonel, but am I to presume that you imply bad judgment on the part of His Supreme Nobility, whose decision it was to promote me?"

The colonel's face went white. He'd made a mistake and he knew it, but there was no way out for him at this stage of the game. "This seems to have resolved itself into a personal difficulty, sir," he said.

"Indeed it has, sir," replied Regan.

The colonel glanced at the officer standing next to him. "Will you oblige me, Major?"

Regan smiled and turned to the commander. "My Lord Commander, would you appoint me a second?"

The commander, he knew, would have to appoint a noble. No duelist could have a noble second unless his opponent also had a noble second; otherwise, it would be possible for a noble to strike down his man's opponent at an opportune moment, and a quick sword stroke would

cover up the mental death.

Commander Larthin appointed a major who was standing nearby.

"He's a good man," Larthin whispered. "You can trust him."

The four of them walked through the suddenly quiet ballroom and out to the adjoining balcony. The night air was cool and tangy, and overhead the bright glitter of the Cluster gave ample illumination.

They surveyed the balcony, drawing up an impromptu set of rules to cover the duel, and then the two combatants drew. Regan saw the shining flicker of the other man's rapier, and knew that this duel was in earnest.

The colonel drove in sharply, but Regan beat back the thrust and sliced downward, cutting the air with his sword. He drove forward, but found himself parried. The colonel was a good swordsman, no doubt about it.

But was he good enough? Regan felt the thrill of combat run through him; he stamped with his foot and lunged in the same moment.

The sword slipped through the colonel's guard and incised a long, jagged streak at the side of the man's throat. "First blood," Regan cried.

The touch seemed to intensify the colonel's attack. He came pressing inward and beat down Regan's guard long enough to pink him in the shoulder. A dribble of blood stained Dane's bright uniform.

"A touch for me, upstart!"

Dane grinned. "That evens us," he said. He feinted, dodged, and whipped his wrist over in a lightning-fast disengagement that the colonel only barely managed to parry. This was no mean antagonist, Dane thought, shaking his head to keep the sweat from rolling down his brow into his eyes.

He gripped the hilt more tightly and wove forward for another offensive maneuver. As he drove toward the colonel's heart, the Jillanian parried the thrust and stepped nimbly aside. Regan leaped back as the colonel's blade came in for a counterthrust.

Then, as Regan parried the blow, something struck his mind. It was like a bolt of lightning trying to penetrate a thick glass shield; it didn't hurt, but he could feel what had almost happened. Someone—a noble—had tried to kill him!

Regan faltered for a moment, and the colonel sprang forward with a long, savage

thrust. Regan parried, disengaged, and followed with a lunge.

He hadn't thought it would be successful; the colonel appeared much too clever to be fooled by a simple maneuver like that. But Regan was wrong!

The blade went through so smoothly that Regan hardly felt the pressure. The colonel had just long enough to look terribly astonished before he died.

Regan stood there for a moment, looking at the dead man. Then he turned and strode away, leaving the seconds to finish up with the details. He walked back to the ballroom alone, but he no longer felt like dancing. The colonel had been the first man Regan had ever killed personally. Blasting a spaceship is one thing, and spitting a man on a steel blade is another.

REGAN sat in his room in the officers' quarters that night, thinking furiously. Everything had seemed to go wrong. He had thought that perhaps such a ceremonial occasion as this would bring him face-to-face with Gwyll of Jillane. It hadn't; the hunchback had stayed in his own rooms, sending his

daughter out to do the honors. And then—

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Regan said.

He rose from his chair as Noble Commander Larthin entered. "Sit down, Colonel," the nobleman said. He was still wearing his evening finery, and his long, refined face was pale and weary.

At Larthin's gesture, Regan sat once again. The commander sank into a pneumatic chair opposite him. "That was an excellent job you did tonight, my boy."

"Thank you, my Lord Commander." Regan wondered if it hadn't been the commander who had sent that bolt of mental energy against him during the duel. Larthin had been acting especially friendly since the Battle of Ballin's Star, but still . . .

The nobleman spread his hands and tapped his fingertips together, as though formulating his next words with extra care. "You're a Vegan," he said at last. "I understand that is in the Main Galaxy somewhere."

Regan nodded.

"Now, mind you, I have nothing against you—quite the contrary; I'm for you all the way. But there are certain jealous officers in the

service—as you saw this evening.”

“Was it jealousy, sir?”

“It’s unusual for an officer to rise as rapidly as you have, though it’s not unknown,” Larthin said. He paused for a second, again choosing his words. “I’ll be frank with you, Colonel: you don’t have long to live. That duel this evening was set up; Colonel Marten was one of the best swordsmen in the Kingdom of Jillane. He picked that fight on purpose, although it was handled most adroitly. He was supposed to win. He didn’t. Someone else will try the next time.”

“I see,” Regan said emotionlessly.

“But the next time, it will be different. There are some noblemen who are jealous, too, and—well . . .”

“Go on, sir.”

“From now on, you’ll have to be treading as though you were walking on eggs. If some nobleman has the slightest excuse, he’ll nail you with his Power. Most of us can’t kill, but the constant mental pressure can be fatal in the end.”

Regan stood up slowly, fingering the newly-won Star of Jillane on his breast. “I appreciate this, sir.”

Larthin smiled unhappily.

“Your worst danger is still unmentioned. It’s the possibility that some commoner will challenge you, and some nobleman will hit you just as a thrust is coming. It’s happened before, I’m sorry to say.”

Suddenly, Regan realized that there was no way out. If he stayed, it would be eventually revealed that he was actually a nobleman. One nobleman had tried to kill him directly already, and had failed. He might attribute his failure to accident—the first time. But if Dane Regan stood up to repeated mental thrusts, it would quickly become apparent that he was not the commoner he pretended to be.

And when that happened, the sword and the Power would be thrown overboard. Someone would ambush him with a disruptor pistol.

He stood there, frowning, staring down at the patient, serious face of Lord Commander Larthin. Regan realized that by going about things Jorg’s way, he had been led astray.

The old man had told him: “Be cautious. Be careful. Hide your mental powers and pretend to be an ordinary man. Work your way up slowly, never losing sight of your

objective. And then, at the right time, *strike!*"

But it hadn't worked. It was the wrong way entirely. After a year of biding his time, he was worse off than before. Being a hero, even if it was done honestly, was the wrong way. He had made too many enemies.

There was another flaw in Jorg's reasoning too. The old man had taught him to hate the hunchbacked Gwyll of Jillane because Gwyll had killed his father and cheated him out of his rightful heritage to the throne of Jillane. But how culpable was Gwyll, really? Wasn't he simply doing what the others of this culture were doing—and succeeding at it?

Regan stood up. His decision was made.

"Thank you, my Lord Commander. I'll think over what you said."

The commander lifted himself from his chair. "I hope you will, Colonel; I'd hate to see a good man die."

He nodded politely and walked out without another word.

AFTER the commander had left, Regan changed into a fresh dress uniform, donned the Star of Jillane, and strode

over to the Officers' Club.

A hush swept over the brightly-bespangled Jillanians as he entered. They all knew the outcome of the duel that had marred the ball earlier that evening, and no doubt many of them bore deep resentment against the killer of Colonel Marten.

He approached a table at which three swarthy officers were engaged in a low-voiced discussion.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

The man on his left, a thick-bodied captain, glanced up coolly. "Suit yourself."

Regan drew forth a chair and sat down. The three at the table exchanged glances, but said nothing that might lead to a challenge. Regan snared a passing waiter, and ordered a drink.

A few moments later, it arrived. He stared at the moist-looking amber cylinder for a moment, then raised it to his lips. He let a mouthful of liquor pass his lips, swallowing just a few drops—*don't want to dull my reflexes now*, he thought—and expelled the rest of the liquor from his mouth noisily.

"Pfaaagh! What bilgewater!"

The liquor sprayed out over the costly uniform of

the captain seated opposite him. The man was too astonished to react for almost a full second, and sat there, dripping, his uniform ruined, while Regan stood up and grabbed the waiter's arm.

"Look here, fellow, what was in that drink?"

"Why, the finest rye we had, sir. Rye and *dolch*-water, wasn't that your order?"

Regan continued to haggle for a couple of seconds more, then gave the waiter a swift kick and turned back to his table. "The stuff they try to serve these days," he remarked casually.

And then, as if for the first time, he noticed the livid face of the officer opposite him. "Oh, how unfortunate," Regan said. "You seem to have spilled your drink."

"Not quite," the man said icily. He stood up. "I shall consider your act as a premeditated insult, in view of your lack of apology."

"Are you challenging me?" Regan demanded.

"It rather looks that way," said the captain.

For the second time that night, Regan found himself in a duel—this one, deliberately provoked by himself. He allowed the duel to proceed for about ten quick exchanges of thrusts, discover-

ing in that time that the captain was a merely competent swordsman whom he could finish off any time he so chose. He did not so choose, though.

Quickly, he took control of the captain's mind and the minds of the two seconds.

See the image? There's your sword, fellow, thrusting into my gizzard.

The three men went back into the club firmly convinced that the captain had killed Lieutenant Colonel Dane Regan. The news spread rapidly that the rising young officer had been lamentably snuffed out—but there were few wet eyes in Jillane that night. Dane Regan, in his short career in the Army of Jillane, had not precisely made himself popular, and his sudden death left a good many men—nobles and commoners alike—breathing more freely in relief.

Later that evening, an unscheduled flight left the planet of Jillane, bearing on it the man who had been Dane Regan.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS the same day that the aged Emperor died that a ship settled itself to the landing field in the city of Prellin

on the planet Jillane.

From it, there debarked a most resplendently-dressed figure. His clothing glittered with jewels and fine fabrics; his face was haughty, and bore not the slightest resemblance to the face of a certain Dane Regan who had been killed in a duel some two years before. But the mind behind it was the same.

This gentleman, it seemed, was one Prince Danirr of Loksann, a title which was questioned by the officer behind the desk at the spaceport.

"Prince? Is that a name or a title?"

"A title," said Regan coldly.

"What does it mean?"

"It means that I rank just below a king," Regan explained with patient disdain.

The officer blinked. "I see, sir. And you're from Loksann. Uh—what is Loksann?"

Regan lifted an eyebrow superciliously. "Dear me! You people are barbaric out here, aren't you? Loksann, my dear fellow, happens to be a globular cluster on the other side of the galaxy." It was an out-and-out lie—but a carefully calculated one.

"I see," the official said. "Then—then you rank just below the King of Loksann?"

"No," Regan corrected haughtily. "I *rule* Loksann. I rank just below the King of the Twelve Clusters."

That would sound like an awful lot of territory to the official, but he said nothing. The Prince's papers were in order. They should have been; Regan had spent plenty of painstaking time forging them.

When he was cleared at the spaceport, Regan headed for the palace of Gwyll of Jillane. No detours this time; no extraneous foolishness whatever. He went directly to the point.

As he had hoped, his reputation had preceded him. At the palace gate, the electronic portals opened, and a nobleman was there to meet him.

"Prince Danirr? You are most welcome. Come with me."

Regan followed the nobleman into a large suite of rooms. He was led into one room which was windowless, but well lit. There were several chairs scattered around, and a soft, comfortable couch. Regan strode in, knowing exactly what would happen. It did.

The door behind him slid shut, and there was the subtle click of an electrolock. Regan paid no attention; he

walked to the couch and sat down. There was a magazine on the nearby table, which he picked up and began to read idly, without paying close attention to the pages he glanced at.

At the same time, he "listened" with his mind.

This, he soon learned, was something that had never happened before in the long history of the Empire Cluster. For nearly a thousand years, no foreign dignitary had ever visited the Cluster—why should it happen now? The nobles of Jillane were, to say the least, disturbed. For ten centuries, they had gone their way untroubled—and now, here was a representative from, not the Main Galaxy, but the other side of the galaxy! He came from some culture at least fifty thousand light-years away! Regan's sensitive mind picked up emanations of uneasiness.

Gwyll of Jillane was looking through a visiscreen at him. He could tell that.

"He looks harmless enough, but—" The old King's hands clasped each other.

He's scared silly, Regan thought.

Old Gwyll didn't deserve his crown, and he knew it. And for that reason, he was

suspicious of everyone. The young Vegan he had had killed two years before worried him. The man had not faltered when a bolt of mental energy hit him, and yet he had died later that night in an ordinary duel of no consequence.

It was a puzzle Gwyll had not yet fathomed—and here was another.

Regan waited more or less patiently while Gwyll considered the situation. Finally, Gwyll reached a decision. He turned to the nobleman beside him.

"Tell him I am ill," he said. "The voting will take place in a few days; when I am Emperor, I will talk to him."

Regan smiled openly, but those who were watching him thought it was something funny he had seen in the magazine he was reading.

PRINCE DANIRR of Loksann strode into the Imperial Hotel of Pellin, trailing a cloak of fiery red silk. His flamboyant clothing made him noticeable wherever he went, and his conduct made him doubly so. He had no bodyguards; he strode in alone as though he owned the place.

He walked up to the clerk at the desk. "Prince Danirr

of Loksann. I want the biggest suite in the hotel."

The clerk blinked; he was obviously impressed. "I'm sorry, sir," he said hesitantly. "The Grand Suite is already reserved. We have a—"

"Cancel the reservation," said Regan. He produced a glistening stack of hundred-stellor coins. "I'll take the suite."

He got the suite.

It would serve as his headquarters for his short but colorful second stay on Jillane.

It was a rambling, high-ceilinged affair with soft, clinging drapes and carpets a foot thick. The rent was astronomical, but that didn't matter to Regan. If he gained the prize he sought, a few thousand stellors would not matter—and if he failed, it likewise would not matter.

He established himself, ordered a sumptuous meal, and then dialed the visiscope for news. The screen lit up, and a robot voice said, "Your questions, noble sir?"

Regan leaned forward and glared at the faceless eye of the screen. "The election for Emperor—when is it?"

"The Hundred Kings will meet in five days, sir," the bland voice said.

"Who is considered the most likely choice?"

"Our King Gwyll is considered most probable to be selected, sir."

"Fine," Regan said. He paused for a moment, thinking.

Finally, he said, "And how soon after the election will the coronation be held?"

"Within three days, noble sir."

That gives me eight days, Regan thought. *Eight days.*

"One more question," he said. "What are the present whereabouts of the Lady Raleen of Jillane?"

The robot was silent for a moment, as it checked its files. Then it said: "The Lady Raleen is at present in the city of Noricel. She plans to stay there for the next week."

"Thanks," Regan said, and shut the machine off.

So Raleen was in Noricel, eh? Noricel was the "Pleasure City"—the playground of the upper nobility. In five days, Gwyll of Jillane would become Emperor of the Thousand Suns. Three days after that, he would be crowned—crowned in a *public* ceremony.

That left Prince Danirr of Loksann more than a week to spend diverting himself. It was going to be fun, he promised himself. He was on the right track at last. Jorg had

urged him on to greater and greater caution, to an inch-by-inch method of winning his end. That was the wrong answer. Boldness would be his guide.

THE PLEASURE CITY of Noricel spread out for miles from a vast central pool where the wealthy bathed. Prince Danirr shoved his way through the laughing throngs of nobles toward the pool's edge. He was clad in self-radiating tights and a bright sash, and must have made quite a figure.

"Out of my way, please," he ordered as he jostled to the high-board. It was counter-gravitic and carefully balanced, and as he sprung downward he was caught and flipped neatly some forty feet in the air.

He jack-knifed upward and slid gracefully into the cool water, dropping down some fifteen feet below the surface and then gliding upward. He broke water some few yards from a lovely girl in a close-fitting two-piece suit.

"Very pretty dive," she said, smiling.

"Thank you," Regan said. He studied her eyes for a long moment, and found them devoid of any recognition.

The Lady Raleen of Jillane had no idea that the handsome young lord she was addressing was the same Dane Regan she had known briefly two years before.

He swam alongside her in the crowded pool until she tired and leaped lightly to the pool's edge. He followed her out.

"May I escort you home?" he asked.

She smiled prettily. "Very well, if you wish. But in whose company shall I be?"

"Prince Danirr of Loksann," he said. "And you?"

"Lady Raleen of Jillane."

"Ah," Regan said. "The daughter of the future Emperor of this cluster, eh?"

She blushed. "Not yet, Prince Danirr. The election's not been held yet, you know!"

"But the conclusion is foregone—as certain, I feel, as is the knowledge that you are the loveliest young lady I have ever met."

She blushed again—but this time, there was something in her eyes that told him she was not altogether displeased.

HIS FIVE DAYS in the pleasure city were memorable ones. Raleen had brought several of her own noble escorts

along with her, but the out-world prince speedily elbowed them out of favor.

Prince Danirr was, altogether, drawing a good bit of attention. Flamboyant, handsome, reckless, and with the extra attraction of a King's daughter at his side, Regan was seen everywhere, did everything, gamed with everyone.

At the gaming-tables, he thought nothing of dropping a thousand stellors in twenty minutes, recouping them all with a fifty percent profit an hour later. In the roller coaster, he traveled without a safety belt, defying the counter-gravitics and the merciless grade of the track. His swimming was the talk of the city; his swordplay, in the nightly duels with foils, something incredible. In five days, Danirr of Loksann had left his mark on Jillane; it had taken Lieutenant Colonel Regan a full year to reach similar prominence, and even then it had gotten him nowhere.

On the fifth day, Raleen bid him a regretful good-bye.

"I must go to Koreyl," she told him. "I must be with my father when the election is held."

Regan nodded. "I'll be seeing you afterwards," he said.

"At the coronation."

"I hope so."

She turned and left. Regan watched her trim form walking swiftly toward the waiting jetcopter, and walked back to the hotel at which he was staying. There was little point in staying at the pleasure city any longer.

"I'm checking out," he told the man at the desk. "I'll go upstairs to get my things and I'll be right back down."

"Very well," the clerk said. Regan thought the man looked at him a trifle suspiciously, and wondered what was going on. He found out quickly enough.

He opened the door of his hotel room, and saw three men inside. He knew who they were, instantly.

Hired assassins. Gwyll's men.

Prince Danirr of Loksann was getting a little too big to handle—and, on the eve of his almost certain election to the throne of the Thousand Suns, Gwyll had decided to remove the flashy out-worlder from Jillane in the most direct way.

"Won't you step inside?" one of the three asked.

"Sorry—this must be the wrong room," Regan said, and slammed the door hard. Quickly, he dashed down the

corridor, turned right, dashed up into a small alcove, and seized the shining oval cylinder of a fire extinguisher.

The three assassins came bursting out into the hall. "This way," Regan yelled, and they came toward him. He saw the glint of a disruptor pistol, and behind that two flashing swords.

"I'm over here," he said, and inverted the extinguisher. A heavy, smothering billow of plastifoam came rolling out and formed a gooey globe about the three. Regan leaped back into the alcove and watched them struggle.

He waited until they were thoroughly entangled, then circled behind and past, reached into the threshing foam, and grasped the wrist that held the disruptor pistol. The wrist jerked and the pistol coughed, once. Its radiation fanned out, blowing the side out of the wall before them. Then Regan yanked upward and grasped the disruptor.

He glanced at the deadly, efficient weapon for a moment, then tossed it out a nearby window. A man of his rank had no business playing with so degrading an instrument of butchery as a disruptor.

The three assassins were still threshing comically in the foam of the extinguisher. Regan reached in again, plucked forth someone's sword, and cut a hole in the globe of foam. He stepped through the opening, grinned derisively at the enmired thugs, and, whirling the sword rapidly, pinked each in the ear.

"Compliments of Danirr of Loksann," he said, stepping out. He used the extinguisher again to give them enough foam to keep them busy for the next hour, and returned to his room to pack his things. He would have to get back to his luxury suite in Pellin before any further trouble arose.

THE BULLETINS started coming in from Koreyl that night. Regan, in his Pellin suite, studied them happily.

GWYLL OF JILLANE ELECTED
BY THE HUNDRED KINGS

CORONATION TO BE HELD IN
PELLIN

MONARCH OF JILLANE TO AC-
CEDE TO THE THRONE OF THE
THOUSAND SUNS

He read the headlines over and over again, smiling pleasantly to himself.

The coronation would take place as soon as Gwyll and his entourage got back from Koreyl—which, as the seat of the previous Emperor, had been the planet where the Hundred Kings had met to choose the successor.

By now, Prince Danirr of Loksann was widely known on Jillane—an outworlder, daring and brave, capable of almost anything. Things were approaching their climax, now; forces had been set in motion. The time was growing ripe for Regan's final coup.

That would come on Coronation Day.

He waited impatiently for the hours to pass. Seventy-two — sixty — fifty-three — forty. Hours lengthened into days. The city of Pellin was transformed, became the jubilant, overdecorated, glossy scene of one of the great events of the Cluster. It was not often that a new Emperor acceded to the throne, and a coronation was no common event.

Regan waited. Finally, Coronation Day dawned.

He made his way through the crowds that thronged the approaches to the High Palace. The people of Pellin had rapidly become accustomed to the haughty outworld

Prince who gave ground to no man, and they were not surprised when he pushed his way to the forefront of the packed plaza.

There were thousands there—hundreds of thousands, lining the streets for miles back. Amplifiers were set up to boom the sound of the Proclamation of Coronation out over the city, and pickups would relay them to each of the Thousand Suns of the Cluster.

Regan glanced upward at the balcony of the High Palace. Figures were moving about up there—lesser kings, the Chief Justice of Jillane, nobles and grandees. Gwyll had not yet made his appearance.

Suddenly, a great cry went up from the multitude. Out on the balcony stepped the hunchbacked figure of Gwyll—Gwyll of Jillane, newly-elected Emperor of the Hundred Kings and the Thousand Suns. Regan grinned savagely.

The ceremony was about to begin.

The cry went up from a hundred thousand throats: "Long live Emperor Gwyll! Long live Emperor Gwyll!"

Sure, Regan thought. *Long life to you, Gwyll.*

He put his shoulder down

and started to shove his way forward to the entrance to the High Palace.

On the balcony, impressively-cloaked figures were preparing for the Ceremony of Investiture.

Gwyll stood there, seeming to sag beneath the weight of the hump on his back, waiting. Onry of Darmith, a tall man with a stiff black beard, stood beside him. Onry, King of one of the lesser suns of the system, was to administer the oath to Gwyll. The public ceremony was one of the Cluster's oldest traditions, and not for a thousand years had an Emperor been crowned on Jillane.

Gwyll stepped forward, Onry with him.

"Today," Onry said sonorously, "an Emperor is to be crowned."

"Long live Emperor Gwyll!"

"Today," Onry went on, "Gwyll of Jillane will take his place in the long line of Emperors of the Hundred Kings and the Thousand Suns. He will step forward to the glory that is rightfully his."

"Long live Emperor Gwyll!"

"By virtue of the power invested in me on this day by the Council of Kings, I, Onry

of Darmith, will offer the Oath to Gwyll of Jillane. But first, first we accede to the time-honored custom of the Cluster on a Coronation Day—the Challenge."

The crowd became oddly silent. The Challenge was the most impressive part of the Ceremony of Investiture. It dated back to the dim morning of the Cluster; it was a reaffirmation of the Power of the Kings.

When Onry gave the signal, a commoner would step forward—a commoner chosen from the mass of Jillanian people, a commoner who knew he was marked for certain death. He would challenge the right of the new Emperor to hold his throne—and the formula called for the Emperor to blast the challenger's mind with a single glance.

The last *bona fide* challenger had appeared more than a thousand years before. Since then, the ritual had become an empty one, with an unfortunate commoner chosen willy-nilly to play the role.

Onry stepped forward. "Today we give the Throne of the Thousand Suns to Gwyll of Jillane. Is there anyone here who would dare say no?"

The chosen challenger, a small man in the drab costume of a commoner, stepped forward hesitantly, aided by a firm push from behind. He opened his mouth to announce his challenge according to the prescribed ritual.

But at that moment, Dane Regan stepped out on the balcony. "I dare say no!" he cried ringingly. "I challenge the usurper, Gwyll of Jillane!"

A HUNDRED THOUSAND people fell silent in an instant. Regan stepped forward to confront Gwyll, while the real challenger dropped back out of sight, happy to be taken off the hook.

Onry of Darmith glared angrily at the intruder, apparently about to order him off the premises, but said nothing. He obviously realized that Regan's appearance, unexpected as it was, was perfectly within the framework of the ritual.

Mastering himself, Onry said, "State your name, challenger, and your accusation."

Regan pointed at the cowering Gwyll. "My name? Some of you know me as Dane Regan, of Vega VI. Others as Prince Danirr of Loksann." He paused.

"My name," he said, "is Dovenath. Dovenath of Jillane—son of Dovenath, former King of Jillane." He took two steps forward, standing next to Gwyll. Somewhere in the background, he saw Raleen's pale, frightened face peering at him.

"I accuse Gwyll of murdering my father and seizing the throne unlawfully," Regan said.

"A grave accusation," Onry said. "Have you proof?"

"Proof?" He pointed at Gwyll. "Let *him* supply the proof. Let him blast me to the ground."

Onry nodded. "Yes. That is right. Challenger, stand forth. Gwyll, show your might. Long live Emperor Gwyll!"

Again the cry came up—feebler, this time. "*Long live Emperor Gwyll!*"

Gwyll was white with terror; Regan, smiling and confident. The hunchback frowned with concentration and sent a mental bolt at Regan, who deflected it easily while the others on the balcony waited for him to topple dead.

"He has no effect," Regan declared. "He is false!" He seized Gwyll and ripped his costly robes from his back in a contemptuous motion. A

complex maze of transistors and tubes stood forward on the back of the Emperor-elect.

"*There's your hunchbacked King,*" Regan cried. "Wearing an amplifier on his back to step his Power up to royal proportions."

"It's a lie," Gwyll said in a strangled voice.

"Do you deny you murdered Dovenath and drove me from the Cluster?" Regan shouted. "*Can you deny it, Gwyll?*"

Angry muttering came from below. Suddenly, Gwyll fumbled in his robes and ripped forth a disruptor pistol.

Now, Regan thought. He unleashed a bolt at Gwyll, smashed through the monarch's feeble defenses, and watched as Gwyll toppled forward. He turned to face Onry.

"The challenge has not been met," he said. "Guards, remove this carrion!"

Hesitantly, two men moved

forward at Regan's imperious gesture and carried Gwyll's body away. Regan stepped to the edge of the balcony.

In the moment of triumph, he thought of old Jorg, and how the old man would rejoice. "The king is dead," Regan said.

"*Long live Dovenath of Jillane!*" came the cry from the astonished crowd below—first hesitantly, then a booming shout that sent up an almost tangible ripple of vibration.

Regan turned to Onry. "Call your Kings together," he said. "There's going to be a new election—right here and now, before the people!"

The Lady Raleen stepped forward and to his side. He smiled at her, and looked down at the wildly cheering crowd.

"*Long live Dovenath of Jillane!*" they cried again.

With an imperious gesture, he stretched out his hand as if to take possession of his re-won empire.



YOU CAN HELP US plan future issues of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES! Send your criticisms and suggestions to the Editors, 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y. We'll study them all, and print as many as possible.

*The Masters of the Universe
had an open door policy—
but not all doors are alike!*

HADJ

A Bonus Short Story

by Harlan Ellison

IT HAD TAKEN almost a year to select Herber. The year after the Masters of the Universe had flashed through Earth's atmosphere in their glowing golden spaceship and broadcast their message.

They had simply said: "Send us a representative from Earth." They had then given detailed instructions for constructing what they called an "inverspace" ship, and directions for getting to their home world, somewhere across the light-centuries.

So the ship had been constructed. But who was to go as a delegate to these Masters of the Universe? The representative had to be selected logically from the total population of the planet. For he would bear with him Earth's offer of friendship and brotherhood. He would be received as an emissary from *any* planet would be received—with stature, with deference, with

politeness and protocol. He was a being of equal standing with these golden rulers—that was Man's destiny.

The Earthmen had to be careful who they picked. So they had reasoned it was too big a problem to lay in the hands of mere humans, and set the machines on it. They had set the Mark XXX, the UniCompVac, the Brognagov Master Computer and hundreds of the little brains to the task.

After sixteen billion punched cards had gone through three times, the last card fell into the hopper, and Wilson Herber had been selected. He was the most fit to travel across the hundred galaxies to the home world of the Masters of the Universe and offer his credentials to them.

They went to Wilson Herber in his mountain retreat, and were greeted by threats of disembowelment if they didn't get the hell away and

leave him in his retirement!

But judicious reasoning soon brought the ex-statesman around. Herber was one of the wealthiest men in the world. The cartel he had set up during the first fifty-six years of his life was still intact, run entirely now by his lieutenants. It spanned every utility and service, every raw material and necessity, a growing Earth could need. It had made Wilson Herber an incalculably wealthy man. It had led him into the World Federation Hall, where he had served as Representative for ten years, till he had become Co-ordinator of the Federation.

Then, five years before the golden Masters had come, he had retired and completely secluded himself. Only a matter of such import could bring the crusty, hard-headed old pirate out of his sanctuary and throw him into the stars.

"I'll take the credentials," he advised the men who had come to him. He sat sunk deep in an easy chair, a shrunken gnome of a man with thinned gray hair, piercing blue eyes, and a chin sharp as a diamond facet. He still had all the fire and personality of his business days.

"You must establish us on

a sound footing in their eyes, and let them know we walk hand-in-hand with them, as brothers," one of the men had told Herber.

"Till we can get what we might need from them, and then assume their position ourselves, young man?" Herber had struck directly—and embarrassingly—to the heart of the question.

The young man had hummed and hawed, and finally smiled down grimly at the old ex-statesman. "You always know best, sir."

And Wilson Herber had smiled. Grimly.

So now, a year later, Herber was speeding through the convoluted expanse-nonexpanse of inverspace. Speeding toward a meeting of equality and brotherhood with the Masters of the Universe. On *their* home world.

THE PLANET rose out of inverspace. It was incredible, but the Masters had somehow devised—in their marvelous all-knowledge—a way to insert their world through the fabric of space itself, and let it impinge into not-space.

Herber, cushioned in a special travel-chair, sat beside Captain Arnand Singh, watching the half-circle that

was their planet-in-inverspace wheeling beneath the ship.

"Impressive, wouldn't you say, Captain?"

The Moslem nodded silently. He was a huge man, giving the impression of compactness and efficiency. "This is almost like a *hadj*, Mr. Herber," he noted.

Wilson Herber drew his eyes away from the ship-circling viewslash and stared at the brown-skinned officer. "Eh? *Hadj*? What's that?"

"What my people once called a pilgrimage to Mecca. Here are we, Earthmen, journeying to this other Mecca . . ."

Herber cut him off. "Listen, boy. Just remember this: we're as good as them any day, and they know it. Otherwise they wouldn't have extended us any invitation. We're here to establish diplomatic relations, but someday soon, *they'll* be calling *us* the Masters of the Universe. Right now though, we're just their equals. So get this *hadj* business out of you. This is just another friendly journey to establish an emissary."

The Moslem did not answer, but a faint smile quirked his lips at the bravado of the man. The first Earthman to visit the Masters' home-world, and he was

treating it as though it were a trip to a foreign embassy in New York.

All that was cut off in his mind as the control board bleeped for slip-out. "Better fasten those pads around you, sir," he advised, helping lay the protective coverings about the old man's body, "we're just about ready to translate."

Herber's wondrously-outfitted diplomatic ship settled down through the shifting colors of inverspace, and abruptly translated out.

In normal space, the planet was even more imposing.

Forty-mile high buildings of delicate pastel tracery reached for the sky. Huge ships plied back and forth in a matter of minutes between the three large continents.

There were unrecognizable constructions everywhere: evidence of a highly advanced science, a complicated culture. There was evidence everywhere of the superior intellect of these people. Herber sat beside the captain and smiled.

Someday all this would be theirs! Would belong to Earth! But for now they would have to share it with their golden star-brothers.

"We can learn a great deal from these people, Singh," he

said quietly, almost reverently. His pinched, wrinkled features settled into an expression of momentary rest.

"Now to offer our credentials. Hand me the beamer, will you, Singh. Ah—that's good—thanks. I hope they get the escort ships out quickly—I can't wait to see that world close up. Why, the secret of their instantaneous shipping—see how those ships disappear, and re-appear over there!—that's enough by itself to change the world! Wonderful stuff they have down there . . . can't wait to . . . well, that'll all come later."

He raised the beamer to his lips, and the transmitter arced the message out:

"I'm the emissary from Earth, here to offer you the fellowship and knowledge of our planet. I hope my brothers of the golden world are well. I request landing instructions."

They waited. Singh spotted the spaceport, a huge and sprawling eighty mile wide affair with gigantic loading docks and golden ships aimed at the skies. He settled toward it, waiting for the signal to land.

Herber watched the spaceport in the viewslash. "Some front door they've got there,"

he mused. A port that big could rule the shipping of the starlanes.

Still they waited for the answer. This was the moment to end all moments. The word would come out, and they would streak in to the port, to share the life of these marvelous star-beings.

Finally, the sound came back:

"Owooooo, oowah wawooooo eeeeyahh, wooooo . . ."

Herber's shriveled-gnome face split into anger. "Translate it, Captain! Dammit, man, translate! We can't take a chance on missing a syllable of that!"

The captain hurriedly turned on the translator, and the sounds were re-routed. In a moment they came through, repeating the same message over and over. Wilson Herber listened, and his wrinkled face was overcome by an expression even *he* could not name.

After a while he didn't bother listening. He just sat in the cab of the diplomatic-ship, staring out at the golden world of these brothers from space, and the words echoed hollowly in his ears:

"Please go around to the service entrance. Please go around to the service entrance. Please . . ."

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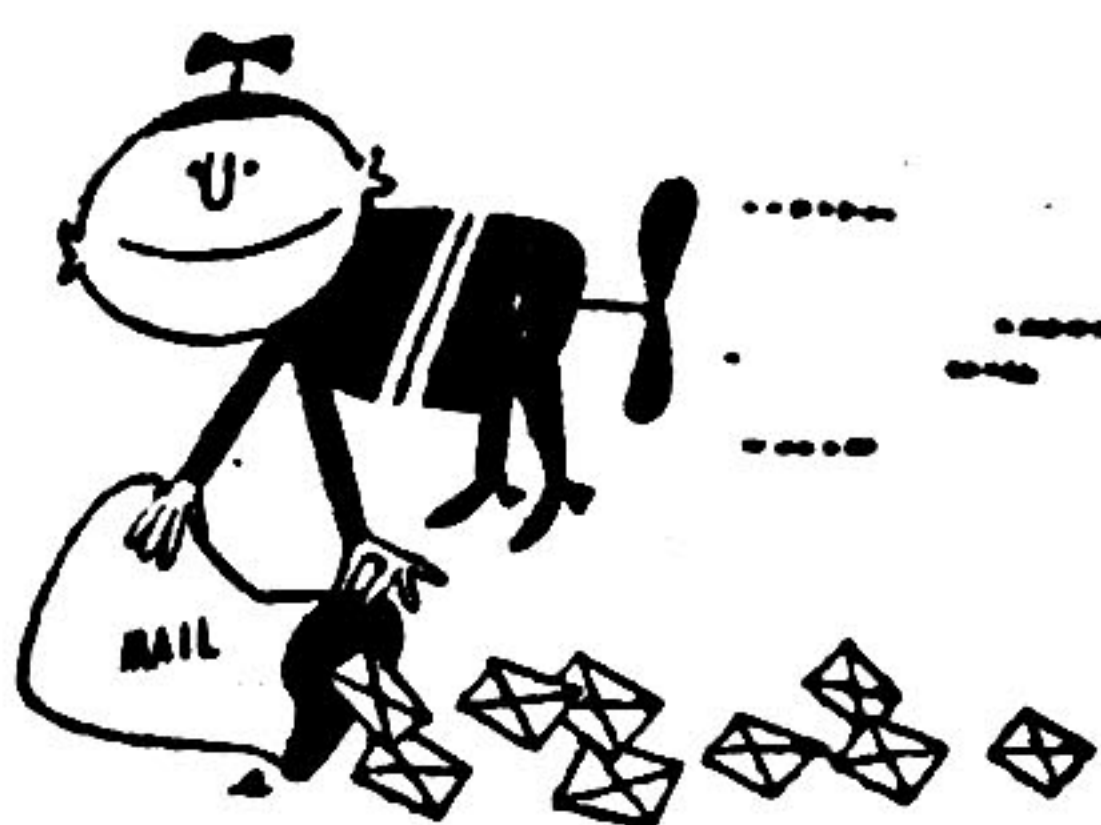
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THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

ONE SPELLING, one sound; one sound, one spelling. That's the goal—and the rallying cry—of Stan and Ellen Crouch, who are campaigning for a more sensible system of spelling English words. Ellen has developed (with help from several correspondents), a system which she calls "Representative Spelling," and the Crouches would like to exchange letters and form a correspondence group with others interested in this field. Even though they admit such a system may never come into general use, they find it a stimulating idea to work with—and if the idea does find general acceptance someday, they say, it will be a good thing to have a system worked out. Representative Spelling can be used on now-standard typewriters, which eliminates one of the big drawbacks of some older systems of simplified and

phonetic spelling. Stan and Ellen will be glad to hear from interested parties at 7700 Alpine (#4), Washington 28, D. C.



Another new fan group with a definite purpose (as opposed to the many entirely worthwhile outfits that just like to get together for sociability and good times) is the Science & Fiction Critics Club. The S&FCC is going strong now, but is anxious to obtain new members; if you're interested, apply to Alma Hill, Secretary, 230 Clarendon St., Boston, Mass. This bunch, I gather, consists mainly of young writers, who meet to discuss the fiction currently being published and to decide what (if anything) is wrong with their own. The club also acts as a central clearing house for members' manuscripts.

Groups like these, make no mistake about it, take themselves pretty seriously. It's typical of the average science fiction fan to do so—even when he's waxing humorous. No report on a science fiction convention, for instance, is complete without a reference to propeller beanies. The outsider would gather that all fans wear such outlandish headgear all the time. It isn't so. Propeller beanies are, it's true, a fannish tradition, but like the family silver, they're hardly ever seen. Only when a fan has an idea for something really spectacular—like a space helmet with jet-propelled vanes—does one of the things actually appear. I've been to numerous conventions of various sizes, and I've hardly ever seen beanies. One of the few occasions was at Kettering, England, where the normally staid and dignified inhabitants made the most of the opportunity to cut loose and have a high old time, and where the trappings actually did include battery-powered props—not to mention such things as grass skirts and extra sets of arms. The only other occasion is whenever Robert Bloch shows up.



Which all goes to show that

fans are pretty complex personalities. Anyone who wants to understand them better would do well to obtain a copy of *Stellar*, a new fanzine edited and published by "QWERTYUIOPress" (Editor, Larry Stark; Publisher, Ted E. White) at 1014 N. Tuckahoe St., Falls Church, Va. This is a new fanzine whose purpose is to present (in addition to the usual editorials, reviews, and readers' letters) fiction *about* fans, fandom and science fiction. Some of it will be obscure, if you're a newcomer, but the stories are all so well-written that any reader can enjoy them even if he misses some of the more esoteric allusions.



And that about wraps this up for now. Except for a mention that Marty Fleischman, 1247 Grant Ave., Bronx 67, N. Y., would like to have other teen-aged fans write to him. And a notice that "The Fan-Space" will serve as a bulletin board for other fans who have anything to say to their widely-scattered fellows. Send your club news, personals, or fanzines for review to Archibald Destiny, c/o SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, 47 East 44th St., New York 17.

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