

# Doomstar

## Edmond Hamilton

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### 1

The dancers leaped and swayed in the circle of blue-green light. They wore stylized, semihumanoid masks because their own faces might have been displeasing to the Earthly viewers, but otherwise their silvery bodies were unadorned. There were seven of them. Angular and curiously jointed, their movements seemed grotesque at first, and only gradually, as they wove their intricate patterns, did their extreme grace become apparent.

Sandra shivered. "They give me the creeps," she muttered.

"Now, now," said Ketrick. "You're letting your species discrimination show."

"I don't care. I'm just a poor little Earthbound provincial, and I don't like people-sized things that talk, but aren't peo-ple." She twirled her glass between tapering, perfectly mani-cured fingers. "I need another drink, Johnny."

He ordered it, watching the dancers.

"You're really enjoying it," Sandra said, and shrugged her perfect shoulders. It was the fashion that winter to be covered up, and her considerable stock of perfections were largely concealed beneath a sort of ornate sack that fell to the floor and was buoyed out over the hips by a light hoop. Her hair, artificially padded and stiffened, curved out in two sweeping circles over her ears, and in the centers of these circles jeweled bells chimed and swung when she moved her head. "But then," she went on, "I guess you got pretty used to the beastie types out there in the Hyades."

"Mm," said Ketrick. "Well, now. *Australopithecus Africanus* was a fine little fellow. He was my grandfather, and I inherited a great deal from him. But he was just as much a beastie as any other prototype, and I'll tell you something else, my pretty. They *all* think of themselves as human, and the rest of us as not quite. So don't get too toplofty."

"All right, Johnny, don't get sore." She accepted a fresh glass from the waiter and sipped it. "I guess you miss being out there a lot, don't you? I mean, every time I mention it you get all snappish."

Ketrick smiled. "The solution to that should be quite sim-ple, shouldn't it?"

"I don't know." Her eyes were a light blue, heavily outlined and shadowed under artificial brows of white metal that glit-tered even in the dim light. "I used to think it was all that money you lost, and being barred out and all, but now I don't think so. Not all of it, anyway. I've been going with you for two years, and I still can't get through to you, not really, not to *touch* you, if you know what I mean. Johnny, was there a woman out there in the Hyades?"

The dancers on the floor struck their final attitudes, bowed gracefully to the applause, and glided

away. The lights went up. The music started again and couples began to move out onto the floor. After a while Kettrick reached over and pat-ted Sandra's hand with a curious gentleness.

"Don't try to think," he said. "It'll only get you a bad pain in the head. Just take things the way they are, and if you aren't happy with them, you can always quit."

In a small choked voice she said, "Johnny, let's dance." And he realized that she was afraid of him, that she had deliberately waited until they were in a public place to ask him that, and he was ashamed. He stood up and held out his hand, and her big shiny eyes looked at him worriedly, and he suddenly thought what a shabby trick he had done her, choos-ing her as he had because she was everything he despised in a woman and so he could have both the present flesh and the untouched memory.

She put her hand in his and stood up, and she must have seen the change in his expression because she smiled, rather tremulously. And that was when Tighe came up and touched Kettrick's shoulder, and said, "Johnny, there's a couple of men who want to see you."

He pointed to the silk-draped entrance where two men stood with the snow melting on the shoulders of their in-sulated suits, un-festive, unsmiling, waiting.

Kettrick looked at them. He patted Sandra's hand again and said, "I'll only be a minute." She sat down slowly and watched him as he walked away with Tighe.

The two men greeted him quietly, their faces remotely pleasant and very businesslike. They might have been a su-perior class of salesman. They were not. Kettrick looked stonily at the identification they showed him—he didn't need any, but it was regulation—and he said, "What the hell more do you want from me?"

One of the men said, "I don't know, Mr. Kettrick. But we have orders to bring you in."

They waited. Kettrick stood still. He stood easily, his shoulders dropped slightly forward, his dark eyes regarding the two men with a kind of bright speculation. Tighe, who towered over him by several inches and outweighed him by some fifty pounds, said pleadingly, "Please, Johnny, do your arguing outside? Please?"

Kettrick shrugged. "What's the use of arguing?" He glanced back to where Sandra was still watching him anx-iously, and he waved to her. He gave Tighe a fifty credit note and said, "See that she gets home all right." He re-claimed his evening cloak, snicked the thermostat to on, pulled the hood over his head and walked out between the two quiet men, and that was the last time Sandra ever saw him.

The cold air hit his face with a clean ringing slap that was very pleasant after the overwarm, overscented air of the club. Snow was still falling, melting on the heated roadways. There was a dark unobtrusive car standing at the curb. The driver lounged behind the steering lever with the timeless patience of a man who had waited just so outside a million doors on a million days and nights. Kettrick and his escort got in and the car glided off, its turbine humming softly.

For a time it kept to the streets, running between the banked-up lights of the buildings that reared enormously into the sky, and Kettrick expected to be taken to the gov-ernment building that had become familiar to him through far too many previous visits. He noticed that the rear-mounted fisheye was operative, and that the men were watch-ing the traffic behind them on the small monitor screen. He wondered who they thought would be following them, or him, but he did not bother to ask. He knew from experience that these lads did not answer questions.

They passed through the gaudy brilliance of Times Square, and then one of the men said something to the driver and the car turned aside into the narrower crosstown streets and began a series of well-calculated maneuvers, which a skillful tail might follow but only at the price of betraying himself.

And now Kettrick began to be really curious.

The monitor showed only the normal random traffic behind them. One of the men said, "Okay, Harry," and the driver grunted and sent the car spinning down the nearest high-speed road to Long Island.

They were not going to the government building, that much was sure. Kettrick tightened his jaw and waited.

The eventual road was long and lonely, running dark between the walled gardens of estates. The car slowed and turned into a barred gateway, which presently opened to admit them into a place of snowy lawns and skeletal shrubbery, with a clean-scraped driveway curving up to a large house with lights shining from its windows.

Kettrick went inside with his escort.

In a broad and beautiful hall, a butler took his cloak and bade him wait. The two men remained with him, impassive, until the butler returned. Then they accompanied him to a doorway and saw him through it, and closed it firmly behind him.

Kettrick looked around the room. It was a library, solid, masculine, and comfortable. Heavy curtains masked the windows. An archaic but pleasant wood fire blazed on the hearth. Kettrick was aware, in a vague fashion, of the warm tones of book bindings and polished wood and leather, and the subdued glow of a magnificent carpet. But only vaguely. It was the faces of the men who sat looking at him that held all his attention.

There was Fersen, Under-Secretary for Interstellar Trade representing Earth in that sector of space that contained the Hyades. Him Kettrick knew, personally and too well. The others, except one, he knew only by reputation, but he knew them. And a small pulse of alarm began to beat deep inside him, because it was unnatural that these men should have sat in this room waiting for one Johnny Kettrick.

They studied him, these men, for a long quiet moment. Howard Vickers, thin and stooped and schoolmasterish, responsible for the safety of nine planets and a sun. His aide, a deceptively willowy chap with the most perfectly trimmed mustache Kettrick had ever seen, Marshall Wade. Fersen, sour-faced and frowning. The bull-shouldered, big-jawed man from the Department of Prosecutions, Arthur Raymond, otherwise known as The Minotaur. Dr. Hayton Smith, the astrophysicist. And two tall slender dusky-gold men who sat close to the fire and watched him with eyes of a bright and startling blue.

Howard Vickers, Chief of Solar System Security, broke the silence.

"Please sit down, Mr. Kettrick."

Kettrick hesitated, and the younger and shorter of the two dusky-gold men said, in the sweet slurred cadence of his native speech, "Better do it, Johnny. It may be a very long night."

## 2

Kettrick answered, in the same slurred speech, "Your advice was always good, Sekma, even if I didn't take it. So I'll take it now."

He sat down in the one empty chair, which had been placed as though by accident in such a position that all of the men could watch his every gesture and change of expression. Kettrick had a strange feeling that he was doing all this in a dream, a rather unpleasant dream, one of those things that seems quite normal on the surface but which the sleeper knows is a developing nightmare from which he will presently wake up screaming. But perversely, now that he was well into it, he did not want to wake up. He was consumed with curiosity.

"Would you like a drink?" asked Vickers.

"No, thank you," said Kettrick. There were times when the instinct of self-preservation was stimulant enough, and better left to itself.

"Very well. Then first of all, Mr. Kettrick, I will ask you to listen without interrupting. You know Mr. Sekma. I believe you do not know Dr. Takinu. He is chief of astro-physical research for the Bureau of Astronomy at Tananaru."

Kettrick bowed slightly to Takinu, who returned the acknowledgment. He was older than Sekma, beginning to show white circles in the tight copper-wire curls that covered his narrow head, and his face bore lines of strain, great and immediate, that one might look for in the face of a states-man but hardly in that of an astrophysicist concerned only with the remote crises of stars. Kettrick shot a quick glance at Smith and saw the shadow of the same thing in the Earthman's eyes.

Fear?

"Dr. Takinu will tell you himself what he has already told us."

Vickers leaned back, and Takinu looked at Kettrick. "It is convenient for you that I speak my own tongue?"

"It is convenient," Kettrick said.

*Fear?*

"Good," said Takinu. "That way is quicker." Warily, as though he had repeated these same words until he hated them, he went on, "Our instruments picked up and recorded a change in one of the outlying stars of the Hyades—a small fringe sun with no habitable planets. It was a routine sweep of the sky and the new data was only noticed when the computers found the discrepancy in the gamma radiation level for that portion of the sweep. We pinpointed the source of emission and made very exhaustive studies. Very exhaus-tive, Mr. Kettrick, very careful. The small star had suddenly become lethal."

Takinu paused, frowning, and Sekma spoke.

"What he's trying to find the layman's language for, John-ny, is the explanation of how a star might suddenly, over-night, become deadly. How the solar processes might be changed, the cycle altered by some interference with the chemical balance, so that the output of gamma radiation is increased until every living thing on every planet of that star—if it had habitable planets—would be blasted out of existence. I don't think you have to go into the physics of it, Takinu. I think Johnny will accept the fact that it happened."

"That is not difficult to accept," said Takinu. "It is as you say, a fact, demonstrable, actual, unarguable. What he may not so easily accept is our speculation as to the cause of this fact."

His haunted eyes lingered on Kettrick, and now there was no doubt about the shadow. It *was* fear.

"I did not rely on my own judgment alone. I communi-cated with my old friend and respected colleague, Dr. Smith, of your Lunar Observatory." Takinu gestured to Smith and said in *lingua franca*, "It is your story now."

Smith said, "I made my own observations. Our instruments had of course detected the same aberration. My findings agree in every respect with those of Dr. Takinu."

There was a moment of complete silence in the library. Not really silence, because Kettrick's stretched nerves were aware of every small rustle of cloth and whisper of breath-ing, the preternaturally loud noises of burning from the hearth. Then Smith said, completely without dramatics: "We do not believe that the phenomenon was a natural one."

Now again there was silence, and everybody seemed to be waiting for Kettrick to say something.

Instead it was Sekma who spoke, in the *lingua franca* so that everybody could understand him.

"I'll make it plainer, Johnny. Somebody did it. Somebody has found the way to poison a star."

"You were always a hard-headed man," said Ketrick slowly. "Damned hard, as I know to my sorrow. Dr. Takinu and Dr. Smith have their particular reasons for believing this unbelievable thing. What are yours?"

"Talk," said Sekma. "Rumors. Myths. Whispers. In my business I hear them. On a dozen planets, Johnny—not much, just here a word and there a word, sometimes in a city dive, sometimes at a jungle fire, but the word was an odd one and always the same. The word was *Doomstar*."

He let the word hang in the air for a moment, and Ketrick heard it like the solemn clang of a distant bell.

"I don't put too much faith in talk," said Sekma. "Any creature, human, semihuman, or nonhuman, with an articu-late tongue, can be depended on to wag it, and most of them prefer marvels to cold truth any day of their lives. But when I read Takinu's report, the coincidence was just a little too much to accept."

Ketrick thought about it. "How did the tongue-waggers react to the news that an actual *Doomstar* had appeared?"

"Well, that's the odd part of it. They never knew it had. The occurrence was so obscure that only astronomers could be aware of it, and most of them would pass it by as a natural accident."

"Wouldn't it be simpler," said Ketrick, "to assume that it is just that?"

"Oh, much simpler, Johnny. Yes. But suppose it isn't. Sup-pose there is, say, only one chance in a million that it isn't." He smiled at Ketrick, a smile that had in it very little humor. "To quote one of your great poets, I am myself indifferent honest. But supposing you knew, or thought, that I *might* just possibly have in my hands the power to poison your sun. Would you sleep easily of nights?"

Ketrick nodded. "All right, I won't argue that." After a minute he said, "I won't argue that at all. My God, what blackmail! One demonstration, announced and carried through, and every solar system in the Hyades would be cringing at your feet."

"And no need to stop with the Hyades," said Sekma.

Ketrick frowned and shook his head. "But there wasn't one. A demonstration would be a necessity, and there wasn't one. Just one small obscure star."

"We believe this was a test, Johnny. Every new weapon needs a field test. And this was successful. We believe our demonstration will come later, if..."

"If what?" asked Ketrick, knowing the answer.

"If we don't stop it."

"And if there is, in truth and fact, a weapon."

"This is what we have to find out. Is there a weapon—in truth and fact—and if there is, who has it, and where."

"That could take a long time."

"But we don't have a long time. Assuming that there is a weapon, we have only as much time as those who control it choose to give us. How long would you guess that to be?"

"Well," said Ketrick, with a small edge of venom in his good-natured tone, "I'm a little out of touch with your cal-endar, but let's see. There was a meeting of the League of Cluster Worlds just before I—ah—left the Hyades. So the next one should be..." He muttered and grumbled to him-self. "This

interstellar arithmetic always did give me a head-ache. Say the next meeting of the League will be within six units of Universal Arbitrary Time..."

"Close enough," Sekma nodded. "But why pick that particular event?"

"Because if I wanted to make a startling announcement, I would prefer to do it at a time when the representatives of the various solar systems were gathered together. Think of the money it would save in interstellar cables. Think of the vastly greater impact." Ketrick shrugged. "Of course, I'm only saying what I would do."

"It happens that we agree with that theory, Mr. Ketrick," said Vickers. He rose and stood before the fire, a professor with thin spread legs about to lecture his students. "Would you like a drink now?"

Again Ketrick said, "No, thank you." And he noticed that the eyes in that professorial face was flint-hard and flint-cold and direct as spear points.

"Perhaps," said Vickers, "you are beginning to understand why you're here?"

Ketrick shook his head. He still sat easily, apparently re-laxed, in his chair, but the palms of his hands were sweating and his belly was full of hot wires.

"I'd rather have you spell it out."

Vickers nodded. "It's quite simple. We want you to go to the Hyades and find out what you can about the..." He hesitated very briefly before he said the word. "The Doomstar."

"Well," said Ketrick softly. "Well I'll be damned." He looked around, from Vickers to Fersen, from Fersen to Sekma. "Whose idea was this?"

"Not mine," said Fersen acidly. "I can assure you of that."

Sekma spread his hands in an eloquent gesture. "Johnny, who else knows the Hyades as well as you? You taught me at least a dozen places I didn't know existed, and I belong to the Cluster." He smiled. "You have a special talent, Johnny. The years I spent trying to catch up with you were the most exasperating and lively fun I've ever had. In my official capacity, that is. When it became obvious that we needed some-one to undertake this mission, of course I thought of you."

Ketrick stared at him, eyes wide-open and astonished as a child's. "By God, that's magnificent," he said. "I'm not even angry, Sekma. Just awed." He got up, looking at Vickers. "I think I'd like that drink now."

"Help yourself."

There was a superbly stocked cellaret open and waiting. Ketrick poured himself a double shot and took it down neat, and felt the small explosion cancel out the rhythmic nerve stabbings in his middle. They were crying *Danger!*, but he had already received that message loud and clear and the repetitive warnings were merely distracting.

He realized that Fersen was speaking.

"...myself clearly on record. I consider it an act of sheer insanity to send this man on such a mission. Suppose he did find this—thing. If it does exist. What would prevent him from simply appropriating it for himself?"

"Johnny is an honest man," said Sekma, "in his own way. And besides..." He swung his blue gaze to Ketrick, smiling sweetly, speaking softly. "He knows that if he did that I would kill him."

Ketrick grinned. "You forget, I could destroy your whole solar system the minute you showed your ugly face."

Sekma said, "It wouldn't save you."

And Kettrick knew that he was telling the truth.

"Well," he said, "it doesn't arise, because I'm not going. Get a Clusterer, Sekma...one of your own people. What do you want of an Earthman, anyway?"

"Not just any Earthman. You have another talent, Johnny. You get along with people, even people that aren't human. They like you. They trust you. And being an Earthman, you cut across all the lines. Any Clusterer, regardless of what world he comes from, has X number of enemies ready-made before he ever leaves home. We've had interstellar flight in the Hyades a lot longer than you've had it, and all the fools and knaves in the universe don't originate on Earth. You know all that, Johnny. I'm just repeating the explanation. Because of course that was the first question these gentlemen asked me."

"All right," said Kettrick. "And now I'll ask one." He faced them. Sekma, Vickers still standing before the fire and watching with his cold flint eyes, The Minotaur sitting with his heavy head bent over a drink, not speaking and apparently not even listening, Fersen stiff-spined and purse-mouthed as an angry dowager. The two astrophysicists had subtly with-drawn themselves from the fray, brooding over their particular nightmare.

"Sekma, you and the Department of Trade Regulation took my license away from me. You cost me close to a million credits. You barred me out of the Hyades. And for a year and a half after I came back here this pipsqueak Fersen sweated me up one side and down the other trying to find some excuse to throw me to Mr. Raymond, the well-known maneater, and sobbing his little heart out when he couldn't do it. I assume you know this, Mr. Vickers."

Vickers nodded. "I do."

"Then you tell me," said Kettrick quietly, "why I should bother to walk across the street to please any of you?"

Vickers glanced at Raymond, who said in a kind of off-hand rumble, "Because you don't have any choice, Kettrick. If you refuse, I'll clap you under hatches so deep and for so long you'll forget what the sky looks like."

Fersen smiled venomously.

"On what evidence?" asked Kettrick. "I paid my fine, and that's as far as anyone was ever able to carry it."

"Oh," said Raymond, "there are ways and means. Of dis-covering new evidence, that is. Mr. Sekma and I have dis-cussed them."

"Disgusting, isn't it, Johnny?" said Sekma. "Dishonest, cruel, quite revolting. We frame you, we force you, and all the time we know that we may be sending you to your death."

There was a look in Sekma's blue eyes that Kettrick had never seen before. It held him silent, even while anger shook him like a great hand. And Sekma said very quietly, "You will see that our need is great."

Kettrick turned abruptly and walked away from them all and stood for some time staring at a blank curtained win-dow. Nobody spoke to him. After a while, when he could trust himself, he went back to them and said in a perfectly steady voice, "All right, throw me behind bars and be damned to you."

Fersen opened his mouth and said shrilly, "Hah!" or some similar noise, and Kettrick hit him, very hard, so that he doubled up and hung sideways over the arm of the chair.

"I'm terribly sorry," Kettrick said to Vickers. "I've wanted to do that for such a long time."

Fersen put his hands over his face and began to whimper. Vickers nodded to his aide, who went over and helped Fer-sen to the door, closing it briskly behind him. The aide re-turned, smiling briefly at

Kettrick.

"As you say, a pipsqueak."

He sat down again, resuming his alert impassivity, guard-ing his master's briefcase like a well-trained dog.

Raymond looked at Vickers and shrugged. "It's all one to me."

Kettrick said, "If your need is great, you can do better than that."

"Such as?" asked Vickers.

"Reinstate my license. Let me free of the Hyades again." He turned on Sekma. "You can't force me, you ought to know that even if they don't. I'll go back as a free man, or I won't go at all." In the liquid speech that only he and the Clusterers understood, he added, "You cost me something more than money when you barred me out. I will not pay that cost again."

Sekma appeared to think for a moment. Then he nodded and spoke to Vickers.

"Perhaps it is better this way. It gives him a stake then in the future, something to work for. If he fails, his license will be worth nothing. The Hyades will be all chaos, no good for trade. And if he lives, there will be a bar against him that can never be lifted. So I am willing to accept his terms."

"The mission is the important thing," said Vickers, "not the terms under which it is done. Since you consider Kettrick to be the man for the job—very well, I agree." He glanced at Raymond. "I assume you have no objection?"

Raymond said again, "It's all one to me." Then he looked squarely at Kettrick for the first time since he came in the door. "But it does seem odd that nowhere in this discussion has a single flicker of altruism shone forth—that is to say, that Mr. Kettrick might have taken on this job not to evade punishment or to gain a reward, but simply because it is in the best interests of all humanity that this power should not reside in the hands of any individual or group of individuals."

Kettrick laughed. "The answer to that is that I don't really believe in Sekma's Doomstar, any more than Mr. Vickers does." He was rewarded by a startled look, quickly hidden, in the Security Chief's eyes. "Mr. Vickers is in a position where he must investigate, now that the possibility has been raised, but I think he is quite confident that the eventual report will be negative. I agree, and therefore I feel that he can justly pay for the use of my neck."

He helped himself to another drink and sat down. I'll expect the reinstatement of my license tomorrow, and preferably over FerSeri's dead body. And now that that's settled, suppose we get down to the essentials, like what's the best way to do this and where do I start."

He smiled at them, feeling expansive, triumphant, and full of love even for The Minotaur. Something deep inside him was singing, and the song was a woman's name, and he was drunk with the light of far-off suns.

"Gentlemen?" he said. "I'm waiting."

### 3

It was night when Johnny Kettrick came back to Tananaru, second world of one of the great mild orange suns of the Hyades.

He had come by devious ways. Vickers and Sekma had insisted, and he had been forced to agree with them, that a sudden reversal of the official position in regard to him would make him instantly

suspect to those persons he was supposed to seek out. So his reinstated license lay securely in a bank vault, and Kettrick was, as far as anybody here but Sekma and Dr. Takinu knew, reentering the Cluster illegally.

It had chagrined Kettrick somewhat to find out that Sekma was still one step ahead of him.

"It would not do," he had said, "for you to take all the risk and trouble of going back merely to engage in some more trading activities. No one would believe this either. But fortunately, Johnny, you have an excuse that anyone, even the maker of a Doomstar, would believe."

And Kettrick had looked at him, and Sekma had smiled.

"When I did finally lay you by the heels, you were on your way to the White Sun, with your alien and illegal hands outstretched to grasp the best part of that million cred-its you have just now reproached me with. One quick, easily portable haul of those beautiful stones and you...But Johnny, didn't you think I knew?"

"No," said Kettrick, "I did not. But I might as well tell you that I've had exactly that idea in mind, to sneak back into the Cluster just long enough to finish that transaction." He shook his head. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to make friends with the Krinn, to get them to trade with me? And then you had to step in."

"Even I," said Sekma, "felt that such skill and courage de-served a better reward. But the Krinn are protected under Cluster law. And how fortunate it turned out that way, be-cause now you have what Mr. Vickers would call the perfect cover."

And they had left it to Kettrick to find his own way back to Tananaru, technically as illegal an alien as ever. Even Sekma's department would not be instructed to let him alone. It was up to him not to get caught.

That was all right with Kettrick. And he thought he might have a surprise or two for Sekma yet.

It had taken him some time to lose his identity. He had done that on the swarming waystation worlds of Aldebaran, where he had altered the tint of his skin and hair and sub-merged himself in the masses of humanity and near-humani-ty that mingled around the starports. Using a forged Aldebaranian permit, he had found a job in the crew of a small freighter bound for the Hyades, of which Tananaru was the port of entry.

And so he came home.

Carrying his duffel bag over his shoulder, he shuffled with the rest of the shabby gang of men and man-things through the fourth class gate of the fourth class docking area of the starport, waited while the relays of the electronic scanner clicked over his permit and found no black mark against it or the fingerprints thereon, which were not his own, and passed freely on into the noisy squalid streets beyond.

He walked, not hurrying, breathing the air and feeling the presence of this earthly-unearthly world that had always seemed more home to him than the world of his birth.

He left the vast port area behind, and at length was in the old winding streets of the city that had been here long be-fore the starships and the outland men, long before the age of power and the machine. This was Ree Darva, the change-less, the beautiful. Her people could look both ways, and be-cause they were excited by the future they did not forget to love the past. They were a warm people and liked warm friendly things, and they found the high glittering glass-and-steel geometries of Earthly cities both cold and repellent. They modernized their plumbing and their lighting and all the other things that gave them comfort, but they still pre-ferred to build low sprawling structures of the red-brown stone that kept them cool in the hot summer noons and warm in the mild winter midnights, and they crowned the flat roofs as they had always done, with gardens of flowers and graceful shrubs. Now it was summer, and from the roofs came the sounds of music and laughter and women's voices.

Kettrick smiled, and wandered, but always in the same direction.

Along these narrow ways, more than twenty years ago, he had run with the golden Darva boys and regretted his ugly sunbrowned skin and straight dark hair. Later, among these same roof gardens, he had pursued the golden Darva girls and been pleased that his exotic appearance sometimes gave him an edge over the local swains. His father, Byron Kettrick, had headed the first trade mission to the Hyades from Earth, and stayed there so long that his youngest child thought of Earth only as a place of exile. When the senior Kettrick and the rest of the family returned home, Johnny Kettrick bade them farewell, got a license to trade, and lost himself in that drifting archipelago of suns. Lost himself so well that he forgot about certain laws and regulations governing alien trade, perhaps in part because he did not think of himself as an alien. That, and Sekma's perseverance, had been his down-fall.

And now he was home again.

But not safe.

He remembered that with an abrupt start when he saw some men walking ahead of him where two lanes met. This was a residential area, and a slovenly tramp crewman from Aldebaran would be hard put to explain what he was doing in it, so far from the port and so late at night. He stepped into the dark archway of a service gate until the men were out of sight, and then retraced his steps to the last crossing and began to work his way westward, not dreaming any more.

Three of the five small coppery moons were in the sky, weaving shifting light and shadow. He stayed in the shad-ows. The busy parts of town where the streets were thronged all night with pleasure seekers were off to the southeast, and here there was little traffic of any sort. He saw no more pe-destrians. Once he had to jump to the top of the wall and lie there while a ground car went chirring by in the narrow lane, its open body filled with laughing youngsters. But that was all, and presently he came to a house that stood on the bank of a placid little river, where the water gleamed softly in the moonlight.

Kettrick stood a while in the darkness under some orna-mental trees and examined the house. Lamps still glowed among the shrubbery of the roof garden, light pleasantly subdued so that it aided the shining of the small moons but did not glare it out. A breeze blowing across the river brought the scent of flowers and, he thought, a murmur of voices. He shook his head, frowning. He would have preferred the house to be silent in sleep. It would be awkward if the place was full of guests.

Still, he had to get off the streets, before daylight or a cruising patrol caught him there. He crossed quickly to the shadow of the house and pressed against it, listening.

He could hear only two voices, speaking quietly in the high garden. He could not hear the words they were saying. He could not even be sure he recognized them, they were so re-mote. But one of them was the voice of a woman, and Kettrick's heart gave a sudden wild leap.

He moved on then along the wall to the service gate. It was not barred, and that should have warned him, but he was impatient now to see the face of the woman on the roof and he slipped in silently, closing the gate behind him. The paved area behind the house contained two of the small ground cars. Around the walls were the neat little buildings for the storage of tools and necessary items, with the inevi-table trees, tall shrubs, and clambering vines making black clots of shadow here and there. The back of the house was dark, and there was no sound but the breeze and the mur-mur of voices from above.

Kettrick dropped his duffel bag out of sight in some shrub-bery and started for the stone stairway that led up from the courtyard to the roof.

He was less than halfway there when he heard a rushing whisper of movement in the shadows and there was a loom-ing of tall shapes, and great horny hands caught him and lifted him and flung him down breathless on the paving stones, shaken like a child in the hands of strong men. Crushing weight descended on him. He struggled briefly, startled and gasping for air, seeing in silhouette above him the shapes of massive bending shoulders and smooth heads against the sky. A smell of dry clean fur came to

him. There was a low, almost gentle growling, and then the suggestive pricking of claws at his throat.

Kettrick began to laugh.

"*Hroo, hroo!*" he said to them in their own tongue. "Khitu, Chai...it be Johnny. John-nee!"

A brilliant light sprang on, slamming away the shadows. Half blinded, Kettrick looked up into the two broad faces bent above his own, seeing the round dark eyes begin to brighten.

"John-nee?"

The claw tips went away from his throat.

"John-nee! John-nee!" they clamored, and bared their white teeth, laughing. Their strong arms lifted him up, and the great hands were now as gentle as velvet. "Long go away," Chai said. "You play with us, see if we forget."

Khitu shook him reproachfully. "You come by dark. Look different. But smell the same, same John-nee!"

"Same Johnny," he said, and patted them with rough affection, as he would two great dogs, rumpling the fine smoke-gray fur. Then he looked up and saw the two people standing on the stone steps, looking down at him.

One was a man, a golden Darvan with copper curls. He wore light summer clothing, shorts and sandals and a thin shirt that left his supple body half bare above the waist. His name was Seri Otku, and he had used to be Kettrick's partner. He had a shocker in his hand.

The other was a woman, a golden Darvan also, but her skin was pale and warm like honey in the sun, and her hair had a softer luster and it was long enough to brush her bare shoulders when she turned her head. Her eyes were blue and her mouth was red, and she was built and curved and balanced so that every move she made was music. She wore a gown of soft green like a flowing of mist around her. Her name was Larith, and she had used to be something to Kettrick too.

Now she came down one step, and then another, looking at him as she might have looked at a ghost come rattling unbidden at her door.

"Johnny," she whispered. "Johnny, you shouldn't have come back!"

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## 4

Kettrick walked to the steps and stood for a long moment without saying anything. She was as he remembered her, as he had dreamed of her and wanted her ever since his exile had begun. He did not want to speak. He only wanted to look at her, standing there in her green dress, with the light shining on her hair. As if it were in some remote distance behind her, he saw Seri lay aside the shocker and move forward.

And now a question formed itself in his mind. It was not a new question. It was as old almost as his exile. He did not want to ask it, but it was necessary.

"Why, Larith? Why shouldn't I have come back?"

He heard Seri answer. "Because it only means trouble, for you, for us...Are you out of your mind, to come here?"

"Is that all, Larith?" asked Kettrick. "Or is there more?"

There was something different about her, after all. Her face had always been as transparent to him

as though it were made of glass, and perhaps, now that he thought of it, that was simply because she had never tried to hide anything from him before. Anger, love, boredom, impatience, joy; it was all there, take it or leave it and be damned to him. But now her face was like a mask and he could not read it.

And yet she said, "I belong only to myself, Johnny, as I always did."

Her eyes were so steady on his, so wide and startled, as though, he thought, she still hoped that they might be mis-taken in what they saw. The light breeze lifted her hair and stirred the soft green stuff against her body, and she seemed to shiver, as though its touch were cold.

"You shouldn't have come," she said again. And then she turned and went back up the steps, thrusting hard past Seri, and disappeared into the leafy obscurity of the garden.

Kettrick looked after her, his own face closed and impassive. Seri continued to stare at him. "Well," said Kettrick, "it has been a long time." He shrugged, and smiled at Seri. "Don't look so stricken."

"How should I look?" asked Seri. "Tell me. Joyous? Happy? Because you come in the middle of the night, my old friend, my dear friend, and I should be glad to see you? Listen, Johnny, I'm doing well again after all the trouble, and now if you're caught in my house..." He was furiously angry. "This time they won't just deport you. This time it will be Narkad." Narkad was the prison world of the Hyades, not a bad place as prisons went but unattractive even so. "And will Sekma believe that I didn't know, that I had nothing to do with your being here? You'll ruin me, Johnny!"

Kettrick said mildly, "I can't blame you for being annoyed. But Sekma isn't hammering on the gate just yet, so why not calm down? Take a few minutes to get over the shock. And you may find there's a brighter side for you. Perhaps as much as half a million credits brighter." He looked down at himself. "In the meantime, I'd appreciate some soap and water."

"Half a million credits," Seri repeated, and came down the intervening steps. "What are you talking about, Johnny? What did you come back for?"

"To finish what I started at the White Sun."

He only half saw Seri's face, only half noted the look of stunned realization. He was thinking of Larith. He had not tried to picture to himself how their meeting would be, or what she would say to him. But he had not expected any-thing like this.

Of course, he had been gone for more than two years. And of course, she had not known that he was coming back, to-night or any night. They had said goodbye.

And yet...

Tears, anger, or the simple statement that she belonged to someone else; these he could have understood. Instead she had closed a door against him, and this he could not understand.

He started past Seri to the steps, on a sudden impulsive wish to find Larith in the garden and break open that door by whatever violence might be required. Then he caught himself, thinking, "No, the hell with her, let her do what she wishes." That struck him as funny and he laughed to himself. He might come clear across space for a woman, but he was damned if he'd go up a flight of stairs.

He stopped, and Seri said, "The White Sun. Yes. I might have known."

"You might have known something else, too," said Kettrick equably. "Which is that I wouldn't have come back at all if I didn't know I could do it, without getting caught myself or getting you into trouble." He looked curiously at Seri. "You didn't used to be so timid."

Seri answered sharply, "I didn't use to have a reason."

Khitu and Chai came to the foot of the steps, flanks heaving as though they had been running hard. They grinned at Kettrick.

"We look out there, all ways. No one on your trail. You stay now, John-nee?"

"Little while," Kettrick said. "Thanks."

They growled happily and loped off back to their duties. Seri looked after them, his face abstracted.

"You always did have a way with them," he muttered. "They serve me willingly enough, but you they love. Well!" He shook his head and sighed. "All right, Johnny, I'll listen to you." For the first time he made a gesture of friendship, his hand on Kettrick's shoulder. "Go and bathe yourself, you stink like a dirty crew hole. And I suppose my clothes will still fit you. Take whatever you need." He pushed Kettrick ahead of him. "Go along. We'll wait for you in the garden."

Kettrick went into the house. It had not changed since he had seen it, and it brought poignant thoughts of the house he himself had once lived in, a mile or so away on the other side of the river. Well, if things worked out, he would live there again. With or without Larith.

He was still angry and hurt.

In the bath, he laid aside the money belt that contained his emergency funds and dropped his dirty clothes thankfully into the disposal chute. He shaved while Seri's big sunken hot tub was filling, and then he scrubbed himself, wash-ing the dye from his skin and hair. The shallow disguise would not help him now if he were caught, and it made him feel uncomfortable and foolish. Deliberately forgetting Lar-ith, he abandoned himself to the simple sensual pleasure of being clean again. After the hot bath he plunged into the cool one, went through the aerospray, and emerged looking and feeling like a new man.

Seri's closets were well-stocked as always. He was almost finished dressing when Larith knocked on the door and called his name.

He opened the door. She came in and stood, looking into his face, and now the mask was gone, or at least it had slipped aside.

"That was hard to take," she said. "Coming like that...without warning. I'd made up my mind I would never see you again."

"Didn't I tell you I'd be back?"

"And we both knew it wasn't possible."

"But I'm here."

"For how long? How many days till they catch you? And Seri's right. This time they won't send you politely away. This time it will be Narkad, and you'll be an old man before you see Earth again."

He moved a little closer to her. "Suppose they don't catch me?"

"All right, suppose they don't. Suppose you get what you want at the White Sun, then what? Will you buy a house in Ree Darva, and ask Sekma to be your first dinner guest? No, you'll be running, harder and faster than you ever ran be-fore, to get clear of the Hyades. And wherever you spend your half million credits, it won't be here."

"So?" asked Kettrick, and reached out to touch the warm golden curve of her neck just where it met the shoulder.

She struck his hand away.

"Why should I break my heart again for a day or two? It's too hard, Johnny! I won't do it."

For a moment the old remembered Larith looked at him hot-eyed and angry-mouthed, and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that there might be a way. And then the mask had slipped back into place again and she was saying with every aspect of earnestness: "If you love me, if you care for me at all, go away. Don't try this. It'll only mean trouble, great trouble, for all of us. I've been talking to Seri. We can

put you on a ship tonight and you'll be safely out of the Cluster by morning."

And now he understood. She might not "belong" to Seri, which was the Darvan way of saying "married," but they had a comfortable thing going and they did not want it broken up.

He did not trust himself to speak, though he saw that she was waiting anxiously for his answer. He turned away, holding hard to his anger, trying to be fair about it. She was within her right, and he had no just cause to feel the way he did. It was only that he had always thought of Larith as being his. Even when his reason told him that she was not existing in a vacuum, inert, outside of life, waiting for his return, some deep part of him had clung to the idea that she was doing just that, if not physically then at least in her emotions. As he had done. He felt sold and foolish, and his rage was not lessened because he knew it was unjust.

"Please, Johnny?" she said. "Will you do it?"

Ridiculously, he thought how glad he was that he had not climbed the stairs.

He shook his head. "No. But you needn't worry, Larith. Whatever arrangement you have with Seri is your own business. And his. I'll not question it."

"It isn't that easy," said Larith softly, and he thought there was a throaty hint of tears in her voice. "I won't see you again, Johnny. Goodbye."

The door clicked gently and she was gone. Kettrick finished dressing. As he went up the inner stair to the roof he heard the sound of a car leaving the courtyard, the gate swinging shut behind it. Seri was alone in the garden.

"You should take her advice, Johnny. It's good."

Kettrick said viciously, "Let's get down to business."

"No reason to be nasty. What did you expect us to do, urge you on to break your neck?" He handed Kettrick a goblet of the cool, potent drink he had always liked best in the summer nights, and sat down. "Well, we tried. Now, what did you expect me to do to earn these half million credits?"

Kettrick did not answer at once. He walked among the fragrant shrubs and the flowers that were washed of color by the moonlight but not of scent. He stood by the low wall and saw the lights of Larith's car diminish, turn, and disappear. He drank the cool drink and forced himself to forget everything hot and impractical, like the impulse he had to throw Seri off the wall, and to concentrate solely on the important matters.

He kept reminding himself that if he failed, if he were caught before he had fulfilled his mission, his license was again forfeit, and there might well be a term at Narkad before he was through with the Hyades forever. The passing thought that without Larith the Hyades meant nothing to him was only that, a passing thought. He could love as well as the next man, but he had loved the Cluster long before he ever heard of Larith.

He looked up at the sky, the familiar sky with the copper moons and the great orange stars of the Cluster like beacon lamps beyond them, and far away, tiny and brilliant, the glitter of the White Sun. He began to be excited and joyous and there was a certain defiant satisfaction in feeling that way. He was at no pains to hide it from Seri.

"I need a ship," he said.

Seri grunted. "Well, that doesn't surprise me. I have two in port. I've already posted the itinerary for one of them, but the other is unscheduled."

Kettrick looked up at the sky again. Earth had developed long jump starships because her isolated position and the disappointing barrenness of her sister planets had driven her to it. Anywhere she wanted

to go was a long way off. Here in the Hyades the Darvans had not needed long jump ships. They were not practical within the Cluster, on the same principle that the big globe-girdling ultrasonic jets were not practical for local flights. And since the Cluster had provided its populations with all the trade and excitement they needed, nobody had bothered to go outside of it. The space-minded Darvans were just beginning to think about enlarging their horizons when the first ships from Earth arrived and made the whole question irrelevant.

Feeling pretty chagrined at learning that they were not the sole lords of space as they had believed, still the Darvans were quick enough to adjust. They adopted the long-distance Rod-man drive and the much larger, heavier ships for extra-Cluster use, and for some domestic purposes, especially periphery patrols. Within the Cluster, though, the same small short-jump Darvan ships still moved between the suns, and this was good for Ketricks's purpose.

He had the course all clear in his mind, exactly where he would make worldfall and exactly what he would do there. Some of the planning was based on talks with Sekma; there were certain planets where the mythical Doomstar seemed to be particularly strong in the minds of the natives. Some of it was based on Ketricks's own ideas. From Seri's roof he could see much of his itinerary spread across the heavens. The stars were old friends, and the many-colored worlds that circled them seemed suddenly very close. He shut his eyes, remembering.

"When can she go?" he asked.

"Three days."

"Good. Which one is she?"

"Starbird."

"Who's skipper now?"

"A new man, Johnny. You wouldn't know him. I suppose you have all the answers, but I'd like to hear them. I couldn't guarantee the skipper or crew..."

"Skipper's no problem. Give him a vacation with pay. Same with the crew. I'll supply my own, if they aren't all in jail."

Seri said impatiently, "But you've got to land! You've got to service and take on supplies and at least a semblance of cargo. And there isn't a port official in the Cluster that doesn't know you."

"And there isn't a port in the Cluster that I don't know, including the ones where I will be safer than a babe in its mother's arms. You can leave that to me."

"But..."

Ketricks looked at him. "Seri, friend, you are a good man with charts and figures and all the necessary labors of business. The company couldn't have operated without you. But I don't recall that you ever claimed to be an expert on my end of the business."

Seri shook his head, "I don't know why I listen to you."

"Because you're greedy, like the rest of us."

"I can't deny that."

"And because you've been busy weighing up the risk against the possible profit and you've decided that it's worth it."

Seri said harshly, "I haven't had time to weigh anything. You're too sudden, Johnny." He rose and moved restlessly across the open space where they sat, into the dappled shadows of an arching vine. There he stopped and turned, but Ketricks could no longer see his face.

"Suppose I say no, Johnny. Then what happens?"

Kettrick shrugged. "I'll make other arrangements. And the half-million will go to somebody else. Hell, man, you were my partner. I had to give you first chance at it."

Seri stood in the shadow of the vines and did not speak.

Kettrick laughed. "A knotty problem to be faced with in the middle of the night, I'll admit that. I'm sorry I can't be more considerate. Ponder it a while. And remember that as far as Sekma's Interworld-Commerce boys are concerned, I'm light years away on Earth. By the time any notion that I'm not could get back to them—assuming, of course, that you and Larith don't betray me..."

Seri made a gesture of denial.

"For friendship's sake, I trust you," Kettrick said, "and also because if you did turn me in you could count firmly on going right along with me to Narkad, remembering various things I could have, but did not, reveal to Sekma's Board of Inquiry. So as I started to say, by the time the I-C could get word that I'm back in the Hyades, I'll be all through and gone again. Meantime, they won't be looking for what they know isn't here."

Seri was silent while the breeze shook sweetness from the flowers and rustled the cool leaves overhead. Then he said, "All right, Johnny. You can have the ship."

Kettrick rose and stretched. "Good. You won't regret it."

New energy seemed to have been released in Seri by the simple act of making up his mind.

"You can't stay here. Too many people coming by. How about the island? Nobody will bother you there for three days, and you can come and go quite safely at night. You can even gather your crew there."

Kettrick nodded. "Good enough." He did not want to stay in Seri's house, not only because the risk of being seen was great, but because he did not know how long he could maintain this attitude of practical neutrality about Larith. The less he saw of Seri the better, especially if Larith should decide to come back to the house.

Seri seemed pleased. "I'll get the launch ready. The hut is pretty well stocked, but there are a few things you'll want. Sit still and have another drink, it won't take long. I'll send Khitu and Chai with you to help you settle in, and they can bring the launch back. The skimmer's at the island, and better for your purposes. The launch would attract too much attention."

He went away down the stairs, Kettrick poured himself another drink and looked at the stars and tried not to think of the times he and Larith had spent together on the island. Ree Darva was too full of the sound of her voice and the graceful shadow of her passing. He would be glad to leave it.

Presently Seri called to him and he went down into the courtyard and through the back gate to the landing. The white launch hung purring softly at her mooring.

"I tried to think of everything," Seri said. "If there's any-thing more you need, tell them, and I'll send it over tomorrow night."

Khиту said, "Come, John-nee." He and Chai had always loved boats. They were happy as two kittens and eager to be gone. Kettrick stepped into the launch. Seri reached over and took him by the hand.

"I'll let you know when *Starbird's* ready," he said. His hand tightened and then let go. "We'll do it, Johnny." He pushed the launch away, out onto the quiet water, all coppery in the moonlight.

Khиту made the launch purr louder, his large hands expert on the controls. It slid away down the river, a white arrow point cutting the still water. Seri stood on the landing and watched, and grew small in

the distance, and then was gone.

The city passed by on either bank. The somnolent houses gave way to mooring basins and fisheries as the river widened and then melted imperceptibly into the lake. Looking back Ketrwick could see the towering shapes of the starships far to the south, where the spaceport dominated all this shoreline, and as he looked a ship went skyward with the long muted drumroll of thunder that never failed to shake his heart.

Now there was nothing but sky and lake and the small launch driving over a lifting swell.

And then suddenly the night went out in blast and fire. A great fist drove Ketrwick down into the yielding water and slammed it shut over his head. Very briefly he was aware of pain. Then he ceased to be aware of anything.

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## 5

He was still in the water. It wrapped around him, warm as milk, and he could feel it move his flaccid body. He pictured himself in the water, waving dimly like the ribboned weed, and he thought that it was rather pleasant to be drowned and have nothing to do but rock forever with this gentle motion.

Then he breathed.

The breathing hurt. He strangled and coughed, and that hurt even more. He opened his eyes. Through a wet blur he saw that he was up to his chin in water, with nothing under him or around him but more water, and panic came clawing at him because when he tried to put out his arms and swim the pain doubled him up and his head went under again.

Something, somebody, held him. Somebody dragged his head up into the air.

"John-nee, stay still. Not fight..."

Somebody. Wet fur, a powerful arm around him.

"Khitu..."

"Khitu dead. It be Chai."

Strange to hear a furry throat sob like a woman's, to know that tears were running salt into all that fresh wetness that was trying to drown them both. Strange to be so fog-brained that only the pain in his side was real.

"Here. Hold."

"I can't..."

Chai told him fiercely, "Hold!" And he held, with his left hand, to some buoyant scrap of wreckage she thrust at him. He could hear her sigh, as though relieved of a too-heavy burden, and the grip of her arm on him slackened. For a time they hung there together, panting, and Ketrwick's head cleared a bit. He began to understand that the launch had for some reason exploded and dumped them both into the lake, that Khitu was dead—dead? So quickly, between breaths? Dead. And Chai had kept him from being dead too.

"You hurt?" he asked her.

"Only little."

He could feel her treading water strongly, and he thought she was telling the truth. She had been in the stern, farthest from the blast. Poor Khitu would have been right on top of it.

Poor Khitu. Poor Chai. She was still sobbing, though more quietly now. He laid his head against her shoulder, the only gesture he could make, and said, "I'm sorry."

He felt her shiver. Then she said, "What we do now, John-nee?"

"Can you see the shore?"

She let go the bit of wreckage and raised herself high in the water, dropping back again with a splash.

"I see."

She laid hold of the wreckage and began to swim slowly, strongly, pushing it and Kettrick ahead of her.

"Give me a minute," he said, "and I can help."

"Bad?"

He tried to figure just how bad it was. "Broke some ribs, I think." Everything else seemed to work all right, and if he did not breathe too deeply or thrash about too wildly the pain was bearable. He began to kick, helping Chai as much as he could.

They churned slowly through the water, while the moons dropped one by one out of the sky and it grew darker.

The lake was illimitable, the shore an illusion. Kettrick became very tired and discouraged. But every so often Chai would lift herself up seal-like and tell him that she saw the shore and that the lights were closer, and then her big powerful body would be close beside him again, urging its strength into him, and he would continue to kick and gurgle along, ashamed to think that his human manhood was endowed with less than her courage.

He realized that after the explosion she must have had to search for him, perhaps even dive for him, stunned as she must have been.

"I'm grateful, Chai. I won't forget."

She swam in silence for a time, and then she asked him, "What made boat kill Khitu? He go in it many times..."

Kettrick shook his head, "I don't know. An accident."

An accident.

For the first time his brain came fully out of shock and began to function.

An accident?

Perhaps. Certainly accidents did happen, volatile fuels did explode. People had died in the lake before this and would again.

But suppose it wasn't an accident.

Suppose he had been too sure of Seri, too sure of himself. Suppose he had forced on Seri a set of problems so great that Seri had felt there was only one way to solve them.

Erase Kettrick, and the problems vanish as though they had never been. Erase Khitu and Chai, and Kettrick vanishes as though he had never returned to Ree Darva, leaving only Seri and Larith to remember in discreet silence.

And Sekma. But of course Seri didn't know that.

Khitu and Chai, the simple creatures who loved Johnny Kettrick and who could not be trusted to keep their mouths shut about his having come to Seri's house. Put them and Kettrick literally into the

same boat, and arrange to have that boat destroyed...

Kettrick groaned, stabbed by a pain much sharper than the one in his ribs. If that were true, he himself would be re-sponsible for the death of Khitu.

"John-nee?"

He did not dare tell Chai what he was thinking.

And anyway, no, he thought. Wait now. Seri had said, "Sup-pose I say no?" And he had answered, "I'll make other ar-rangements."

He hadn't backed Seri into a corner. He hadn't faced him with anything worse than a decision. All he had to do was say no.

So why kill?

Unless there was some other reason.

Larith? Was Seri afraid she would leave him and go back to her old love?

Maybe. They had both wanted him to go away and he had refused. Perhaps that strange mask Larith had worn had been designed to hide from Seri how she still felt. Perhaps Seri had seen that, and decided to remove the threat for good and all.

He would like to think that Larith still loved him that much.

Maybe, though, it wasn't Larith at all. He remembered Seri's rage at the first sight of him. "You'll ruin me," he had said. Maybe he was so afraid for his position and profits that he felt Kettrick would be safer at the bottom of the lake than anywhere in the Hyades.

Whatever the reason, he had stepped into something, all brash and cocksure, and now his brilliant planning had lit-erally blown up in his face.

He began to get angry. It was the first time in his life that anyone had tried to murder him, and that was enough to make him angry, but the business of Khitu and Chai really made him see red. They had nothing to do with any of it. They had served Seri faithfully for nearly eight years. Yet he could do this to them, as casually as he would swat a couple of flies.

It was very strange. He did not remember Seri as this kind of a man. If he had, he would never have been his partner. It must be that he had simply not known Seri Otku as well as he thought he did.

Or else Seri Otku had changed.

"Look," said Chai.

There were lights in front of him. He could see the more solid blackness of the shore, the outlines of buildings, the outward-jutting shape of a pier marked at its end with warn-ing lights. A breeze began to move from off the land, brush-ing Kettrick's face, and in the east there was an imper-ceptible lessening of the darkness.

Chai swam more strongly, steering them toward the pier. "Get help, John-nee."

"No."

He felt her check and stare at him. He was exhausted. His head felt as dry and empty as an old jack o'lantern, and he wanted nothing more than to be hauled up and taken away somewhere to be tended and comforted of his hurts. If it had not been for his anger against Seri he might have quit and let that happen, because at the moment he could not have cared less about the Doomstar or the White Sun or any part of the Hyades. He didn't care about deportation or a term on Narkad. He did not even care about Larith. Love, greed, ambition, and duty had all soaked away out of him into the lake.

But he was mad, and being mad made him stubborn, and vengeful, and mean. He was determined to see Seri in hell, and in order to do that he had to be both alive and free.

He explained to Chai that he had broken a human law and that if men saw him they would take him and put him in a cage. She understood that well enough.

"Where, then?"

He pushed on toward the pier. "Go underneath. Quick. The day is chasing us."

They swam in under the pier, into black shadow that began to lighten even as they came there. They moved care-fully among the steel pilings, and the husk of Kettrick's mind continued to spin off ideas.

Most of them were beyond him right now. He would con-sider them later. Only one stood out clearly in the thickening haze that was rilling up the emptiness inside his head.

For some reason, Seri wanted him dead. So the smart thing to do was to be dead. Then he could do what he liked about Seri, and Seri would all the time believe that he was safely at the bottom of the lake.

The piece of wreckage in his hands was important. He stared at it as he paddled along, trying to think why. The reason refused to come clear, but instinct made him drag the fragment with them out of the water when they reached the land end of the pier, a quiet cave only just high enough to crawl in, floored with dry sand and sibilant with the rubbing of the lake against the piling.

He made Chai understand that they would hide there until dark. She accepted that with animal patience, shaking the water from her fur, and made a kind of burrow in the sand, taking Kettrick into it with her and holding him against the clammy dampness of her body.

He was cold and miserable. And he began to think that he had been a fool. Why would Seri want to kill him? "I won't see you again, Johnny," Larith had said. "Goodbye." And she was gone. And what threat could he be to Seri if he went to the White Sun in somebody else's ship? Even if he got caught, it would be obvious that Seri had had nothing to do with him.

Shock made him imagine things. Of course it was an ac-cident. Just a clean, simple accident. He felt greatly relieved. He thought of Seri's house, of food and liquor and a warm bed. There was no reason at all to huddle here in this hole. He would send Chai to get Seri...

He spat sand out of his mouth and started to speak, but it was already too late. The heavy mist rolled over him and blotted out the words.

For a long while it was dark and cold in the mist. There was no shape to anything, no time, no place, nothing. He hung in the deep heart of nothing, buoyed by the packed nothingness beneath him, pressed by the weight of it above, in such delicate balance that he could not rise nor sink, nor even turn.

Then it began gently to grow warmer.

The warmth felt good. He stirred on his bed of nothing-ness, desiring to move toward the warmth, and the nothing-ness split apart. He could see it tearing, though no sound came to his ears. The riven edges curled away as clouds curl on the wind, and then he knew why it had grown so warm.

A huge sun burned in the sky, burning away the nothing-ness with its kindly fires. He felt very happy and pleased with the sun. It was a tawny orange like the sun of Tananaru, and he loved it. He wanted to be closer to it. He began to walk. There was a landscape around him now but it was quite vague, as though none of the detail had been filled in yet. He walked happily toward the big orange sun on the horizon.

He had no idea how far he had come when he realized that there was something wrong with the light.

He paused, staring at the sun. The tawny orange had turned murky and evil, staining the landscape with ugly colors. He thought that the sun writhed and pulsed, and breathed out evil. And now its poisoned light began to sting him, and he was naked, without shelter, in a vast open place.

He cried out in panic, "What is it?" And Sekma said casually, "Oh, that's the Doomstar."

He was standing quite close to Kettrick, though Kettrick had not seen him before. He smiled and waved his hand at the sick sun. "Don't bother about it, Johnny. It's only a myth." He walked away, whistling.

Kettrick ran after him. "It isn't a myth!" he cried. "Can't you feel the burning?"

Sekma did not hear him. He continued to walk, whistling, and though Kettrick ran as hard as he could he could not catch up with him.

He kept screaming, "It is not a myth! It's real."

Nobody heard him. The sick light intensified and filled his throat like water. He ran and ran down the streets of a city, shouting. He knew that no one heard him because the people in the streets were already dead, and the Doomstar came down upon them like a flood.

He woke to Chai's efforts to quiet him.

Still webbed in the dream, he thought that the Doomstar was there, just beyond the end of the pier, and he started up in terror. Pain lanced through his side. Chai's big hands gentled him. The dream ebbed away. He clung to the animal warmth of Chai and trembled with relief. The Doomstar was only the sunset, lighting up the space beneath the pier.

*"Don't bother about it, Johnny. It's only a myth."*

Why would he dream that? Guilty conscience?

No matter now. It was only a dream.

The sun went down. It was night, and he was hungry. He put his hand on Chai's shoulder.

"Let's go," he said, "and see what it's like to be dead."

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## 6

They moved like ghosts. The darkness shrouded them. They kept to areas that had finished the day's business, where lights and people were few. By night, in the distinctive Darvan dress, Kettrick could pass for a native if the observer didn't come too close. And Chai's huge gray shadow towering beside him discouraged closeness. The semi-human Tchell were familiar enough, but their chief employment was as bodyguards, and no one cared very much to tangle with them.

Chai asked where they were going.

"To the house of a friend."

"Seri?"

"No. Not Seri."

"Why? Seri friend."

Kettrick said, "Yes..." He was over the shock now. He was light-headed with hunger and his untended injury, but he could think clearly and calmly. He was not at all sure that the explosion had been an attempt to kill him and the two Tchell. He did not want to believe it had been because he did not want to believe that his old friend and partner could so casually bend himself to murder. Also he had no

evidence and no real motive to support the murder theory.

On the other hand, it was not a situation you took chances with.

"I told you I broke a law, Chai. If I go to Seri again, they will put him in a cage too."

He heard her sigh in the darkness. "I go with you, John-nee. Seri no good without Khitu." They had been hired as a pair, and Ketrick could imagine that she would not want to go back alone. It was Tchell custom anyway to change huts when one died.

Then she added, "No one to love but you."

He was deeply touched. "I'll take you home, Chai. Back to your world."

"No." She shook her round smooth head. "I go with you."

"All right," he said. "You go with me." And muttered in his own tongue, "I could do worse."

He was glad of her when they passed into the squalid alleys that fringed the Out-Quarter. He was in no shape to fight off even the casual riff-raff that slunk here, prowling for small change, a bottle, a pinch of narcotics. With Chai beside him he passed unmolested, into wider and better-lighted streets.

And now he deliberately sought the crowds. In the Out-Quarter of Ree Darva one Earthman more or less was nothing to stare at, unless he happened to meet someone who knew him. There were people here from every world in the Hyades and a dozen or two outside of it, human and non-human, of every shape, size, and color, sporting every kind of costume along with the conventional Darvan dress. These were people who lived more or less permanently on Tananaru, connected with one or another kind of business, legal or il-legal, and preferring the polyglot anonymity of the Quarter to the Darvan city.

The mixture of building styles was as fantastic as the population. When they built, each group tended to build as far as it was practical in its own familiar fashion, and there were streets of towers, and domes, and truncated pyramids, circles, squares, pentagons, great ugly masses with no discernible shape to them at all, plastered or painted in every color the solar spectrum was capable of producing.

Ketrick had always loved the Quarter. He knew it like the back of his hand. He led Chai through the thronging streets, past shops and marketplaces where the lights never went out, past the joy streets where every sin known to forty breeds of man was available and the sunlight never came in, past theaters and gambling halls and certain obscure buildings where no one was admitted except those of one particular race and only the members of those races knew what went on in them. Ketrick had let his imagination play with these barred places, picturing all sorts of exotic goings-on, knowing that actually most of them were full of middle-aged people drinking their tribal intoxicant and listening to the tribal screechings of some bard, or else were engaged in the perfectly innocent and wildly uninteresting rituals of their particular faiths.

There were many eating places, all spilling their fruitful odors on the night. Chai stopped a couple of times. He knew she must be even more ravenous than he was, but he had no small money, and the last thing he wanted was trouble. He promised her food in just a little time, and she came willingly enough.

There was a section where the buildings were chiefly conical monstrosities with outside stairways giving access to innumerable openings—something between a Babylonian ziggurat and a dove cote. They were as murmurous as dove cotes, with voices and laughter and jarring snatches of music, some in the native mode and some in the popular jingle jangle that came over the home entertainment circuits. The native mode was, to Ketrick's ear, quite hideous, and he preferred the jingle jangle because it didn't force you to listen to it.

He found the particular building he was looking for and began to climb the steps, feeling very weak in the knees.

Now that he was here, he was assailed by a thought that he had resolutely suppressed. Suppose

Boker were gone...moved away, deported, in jail, dead, or in a ship somewhere on the other side of the Cluster. What was he going to do then? Turn himself in to Sekma and give up?

The prospect made him feel physically sick. He kicked his way resolutely upward through an accumulation of trash, and small weird beasties that yipped and hissed and scuttled for doorways at the sight of Chai, and numbers of small blue-skinned children who howled and scuttled for doorways at the sight of Chai. Once he swayed and almost lost his footing, and Chai held him. He shut his jaw tight and went on, damning Boker for living up on the tenth level, as though damning him would ensure his presence there.

On the tenth level he found the low round doorway that had been Boker's. It was open to the warm night. He had barely enough strength left for the ritual knock, and then he bent and went in, with Chai behind him doubled down on all fours to get under the lintel.

Three blue-skinned kids with fuzzy white topknots stood up from a table, their eyes bugging and their hands arrested in the act of cramming their mouths with food. A buxom blue-skinned woman with a rill of white hair down her back dropped a wine cup into her lap and rose up with a cry, shaking her skirt and staring.

A blue-skinned man sat with his back to Kettrick. He had a magnificent silver mane, trimmed to run down the center of his skull and neck. He was naked except for a pair of grimy shorts, his body squat and immensely strong. Across the humped muscle of his left shoulder ran the white weal of a scar, and in the lobe of his left ear a flawed red stone gleamed like a drop of blood.

Kettrick said, "Boker!" like a lover greeting his adored one. Relief came over him in a wave. He felt Chai catch him and set him in a chair, and then there was a lot of talking and Boker was shoving a wine cup at him. He drank greedily. The kids had retired to the far corner of the room and were staring mostly at Chai. The woman was talking and no one was paying any attention to her. Boker was swearing very profanely, his teeth flashing, his silver mane shaking like a fretted stallion's.

"Where did you drop from, Johnny? Are they after you? What happened? What do you need? A hole to hide in, a couple of murders, or both?" He talked loud to cover his surprise, and poured more wine into Kettrick's mouth. His eyes were concerned. "You look like you tangled with a Cetian soldier."

"He's hurt," the woman said. "Let him breathe." She came over to Kettrick, keeping a ginger eye on the big gray Tchell crouched behind him. "Hello, Johnny." Her name was Pedah. "Can I get a doctor?"

"I'm an illegal alien. No doctor."

"Where is it, then?"

He pointed to his ribs. "But I'm starved. Give me some-thing to eat first."

"You'll only heave it up again," she said matter-of-factly, and felt his side. He decided she was right.

"Feed Chai, anyway. We've both had a long swim, and a long day."

"What does she eat?" asked Boker.

Kettrick laughed. "I doubt if she'll be picky." In her own tongue, he said to Chai, "Feed, rest. We be safe."

"Good," she answered, and settled down against the wall. Boker brought her food and she ate. But she never once took her eyes from Kettrick while Pedah was binding up his side.

When that was done she let him eat. And Kettrick talked to Boker, in the *lingua franca* which Chai did not under-stand, telling him about his meeting with Seri and what had happened afterward.

"I wasn't sure, you see. I couldn't be. But I couldn't trust him, either."

"Wise man," said Boker. He and Kettrick had met out on one of the wilder worlds, in the days when

Kettrick was still young and green. Boker had given him some excellent ad-vice about poaching on posted preserves, and then they had helped each other out of a tight spot with an I-C patrol, and after that they had been friends. In later times Boker had skippered one of Kettrick's ships after he lost his own, and they had gone many voyages together, especially in the years immediately before Kettrick's exile.

"You were going to go this one with me," Kettrick said. "At least I hoped you were. Unless you've got timid too."

Boker laughed. "No, I'm still at it, Johnny. It's duller than when you were here, and the I-C boys have got smarter, but I can still run into a quiet harbor here and there and make a dishonest credit robbing the natives." He had drunk a lot of wine but he was not drunk, only excited. His eyes shone, small and black and bright in his broad-featured face. He got up and began to stride around the room, flexing his shoulders, slapping his bare flanks with his hands. "The White Sun, eh? A million credits, eh? Hell, man, you don't need Seri's *Starbird*. For that kind of money I'll take you in my jaws like a cub and fly you there myself!"

A small pulse of hope beat in Kettrick. "Have you got a ship?"

"A ship, Johnny?" The silver crest shook in the lamplight, the white teeth gleamed. "Depends on what you call a ship. If you call a dropsical-bellied, rust-eaten old excuse of a tin tub a ship, then I've got a ship. Mind you, I don't own all of this beautiful creature, only a third share. Glevan and Hurth own the other two, or better let's say we three own the mort-gage on her. But she'll get to the ground. At least she always has."

Kettrick said, "Glevan and Hurth. They haven't reformed either?" Hurth was a blue Hlakran like Boker and had been his mate for as long as Kettrick had known them. Glevan was an engineer from Pittan, a small swart ugly man who had been chief with Boker in the later days. These were the men Kettrick had meant when he told Seri he would get his own crew. "Would they go along on this?"

"If they don't," said Boker, "I'll know it's time to shoot them. A million credits. Ah, and we came so close before!"

"You got into trouble before, too."

"Not the first time, Johnny. And probably not the last. Hey, now, it'd be worth doing for nothing, just to wipe Sekma's eye for him. Eh?"

"Better get hold of them and be sure," Kettrick said. He felt like a heel, not telling Boker the whole story. But Sekma had impressed upon him the danger of trusting anyone, even those he would ordinarily trust with his life, and so he salved his conscience with the thought that whatever he did about the Doomstar would not affect at all what he did about the White Sun.

He was perfectly determined to do what he said. . .om-plete the interrupted million credit deal he had started with the Krinn. He intended to do this right under Sekma's nose and get away with it.

It occurred to him, as it had occurred several times since the explosion, that it would make things a lot easier if Sekma thought he were dead, too. Then nobody would be looking for Johnny Kettrick.

Boker had been busy on the communicator, bawling in his own language, presumably to Hurth on the other end. He came back to Kettrick.

"He'll get Glevan. They'll be here in a few minutes. I only told him it was important."

"Good." He hesitated. "Boker, was there anything in the news about Seri's launch blowing up?"

"Don't remember anything. Pedah? She follows the news-casts, Johnny. Just like gossip."

"There wasn't a thing," said Pedah. "I'd have remembered that."

Kettrick hadn't supposed there would be. If it were murder, certainly not. If it were an accident... well, Seri wouldn't want to publicize the fact that Kettrick had been using his launch.

But it made a difficulty. Sekma knew that he was going to contact Seri, and was expecting to hear from him. If he did not hear from him, he would not necessarily think that something had happened to Kettrick. Much more likely, he would think that Kettrick was trying to doublecross him... which he was... and that would only make him angry and more inquisitive. Unless he knew that there had been an accident. But Kettrick could hardly be the one to tell him, and no-body else could, either.

Dying was harder than he thought.

Boker was frowning about something, rubbing his nose with his thumb. "*Starbird*, you said?" Kettrick nodded. Boker got up. "Something sticks in my mind about that ship. Back in a minute."

He went out. Pedah brought Kettrick more wine and asked how he was doing.

"Fine," he said. "Thanks to you." He looked up at her. "How do you feel about Boker going with me?"

"Let him go," she said, and laughed. "I got enough babies, for now. She patted the curve of her stomach where another one was just beginning to show. "You keep him out there for a while, eh?"

"I'll try."

"Just one thing, Johnny. You've been gone a long time, and where you were you wouldn't hear about it. Boker, he can handle the White Sun, and he can eat the little I-C boys for supper, I don't worry about that, but there's something else. Something the men don't like to talk about. I don't know if they really think it's silly, or if maybe they're scared. But don't you laugh, Johnny. And when you're out there, you watch and be careful."

A small cold stillness formed in the pit of Kettrick's stomach, down below the warmth of the food and wine.

"What shall I watch for, Pedah?"

"I don't know exactly," She stared at him, her eyes unfocused so that he knew she was looking not at him but at something in her own mind. "I hear it in the marketplace. And one of the Gurrans women that runs a fish stall, we got to be pretty good friends, I buy so much fish... all these kids, and it's cheaper. She told me that in their meeting hall a man told them that trouble was coming soon. I hear it, Johnny. Men think women are all silly fools, but we have ears and tongues, and sometimes a little sense between them. I hear it. Trouble is what they say, and something called the Doomstar will bring it."

The cold stillness spread and moved down deeper into Kettrick's belly. The memory of his dream came back to him with the force of physical reality. "When do they say the trouble will come?"

"Soon. I don't know. Some say one thing, some another."

Kettrick remembered his own brilliant piece of deduction back in Vickers' library. The meeting of the League of Cluster Worlds, he had said, would be the time to show the power of the Doomstar. If there were one. And he had calculated six units of Universal Arbitrary Time until that meeting.

There were three and one quarter units left now. Not much. If there were a Doomstar.

He would have asked more questions of Pedah, but Boker came stooping in through the low door.

"Something damned strange," he said. "Tell me again, Johnny. What did Seri tell you about *Starbird*?"

"That I could have her. That she was unscheduled. That she'd be ready to go in three days."

"Three days, eh?" Boker grunted. "I went down to the Spaceman's Hall to check the day's posting

again, just to make sure. *Starbird* had a full cargo, scheduled to Gurra, Thwayne, Kirnanoc..."

"Had?"

"When she took off," said Boker. "As of this morning."

"I'll be damned," said Ketrick. The icy coldness in him dissolved in a burst of heat. He began to shake. "I'll kill him," he whispered. "Accident, is it? Go to the island and I'll let you know, Johnny. Three days, Johnny." He gripped the edge of the table, tried to stop his shaking. "I'll kill him."

"You'll have to jump fast, then," Boker said. "After *Starbird*. Because he went with her."

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## 7

It was good to be in space again.

*Grellah* was every insulting thing Boker had said about her, but she had gotten off the ground. Her name was the Hlakran equivalent of *Beautiful Queen*, a joke that Boker and Hurth were very proud of; you changed one letter and got a dirty word instead.

Ketrick's emergency fund, or part of it, had stocked her, with Boker making the most of the money by dealing bits of it here and there to his creditors. The only thing Ketrick had insisted on was trade goods of top quality and suited for their markets.

It was absolutely essential that they should trade as they went, keeping a semblance of normality. The I-C had a vile habit of dropping in for spot checks on many worlds where they did not maintain a permanent office, and where there no formal port facilities and therefore no records. Ketrick might rely on his friends to keep his own presence secret, but just in case an I-C ship should happen by, he wanted Boker to look completely legitimate.

Ketrick had been smuggled aboard without much trouble. And in the end he had done nothing about contacting Sekma because there did not seem to be any way of doing it short of calling him up on the communicator and talking with a full audience listening in. Their prearranged meeting had become impossible, and so he let the whole thing slide.

Chai had been more of a problem to get on board. She could hardly be passed off as anything but what she was, and the Tchell were rigidly protected. To move one from place to place required papers they did not have and could not possibly get. The boys would just as soon have forgotten the whole thing, but Ketrick was obdurate and they had finally sneaked her in with a load of supplies.

They had posted a fraudulent manifest and sweated blood until they got their clearance. Then, grumbling and creaking, *Grellah* heaved up off her pad and waddled away into the dark seas of the Cluster that washed the island suns, outbound for Gurra, Thwayne, Kirnanoc, and Trace.

The route of Seri's *Starbird*.

"Why?" Boker had asked him, when they planned their course. "I know you want to kill the traitor, but..."

"Because," said Ketrick, "this is the course I would take to get to the White Sun. You look at the chart and tell me if there's a better one."

He did not tell Boker that it was also almost identical with the course he and Sekma had discussed, choosing worlds where the rumors of the Doomstar sounded loudest.

An odd one for Seri to pick. Except for Kirnanoc, they were backward worlds and not especially lucrative for traders unless, like Ketrick, you had the right touch with the people. Kirnanoc was not

backward, but it was famous for the very odd ideas its quite odd people cherished about humans. It too needed a special touch.

Boker had admitted that there was not a better course, except that there were a couple of equally good alternates for Gurra, as far out as Kirnanoc. But from there on...

"Trace," he said, "is ridiculous as a jumping-off place for the White Sun. From Kirnanoc it's right away in the wrong direction."

"I know that," said Kettrick. "That's why we won't really go there. We'll jump straight from Kirnanoc."

Boker stared at him. "You crazy?" He stabbed a thick blue forefinger at the chart. "You lost your touch or something, Johnny? Look at the distance. Your big Earth-built ships could do it in one hop, all right, but not these inter-Cluster cans. Your jump unit can only wind up so much power, to jump you so far. You go over that peak, and boom! Your whole unit blows, and they post another black-edged notice in the Spaceman's Hall."

"Very true," said Kettrick. "And I have seen *Grellah's* jump unit, so I'm aware that her peak is more like a trough."

"So?"

"So even *Grellah* ought to be able to do it in two jumps." He indicated points on the chart. "Come out of the first jump about here and run on conventional power..."

"Johnny, look. Look where you're waving your finger around. The first jump would put us right in the middle of the Lantavan Bank, the worst jungle of drift in the Cluster. Like throwing yourself out of the window into a cement-mixer. It..."

"No. We come out of the first jump this side of the drift, in clear space. Then we go *through* the Bank on conventional. We're bound to find a piece of drift big enough to set down on, so we can service the jump unit and recharge the fuel loads. Then..."

"We go *through* the Bank?" said Boker.

"Right here." Kettrick sketched a diagonal line through the darkened area on the chart. "Where it's narrowest."

"And thickest." Boker had a spaceman's natural horror of drift. "Look, be sensible. From Whard you can do it easy in one jump. Even Mardir would be better, in spite of the patrols."

"That's where we got into trouble before," Kettrick re-minded him. "Mardir is the gateway for a whole sector that's barred to general trade, so we knew better than to try that. But Whard looked like a very attractive back door. It even worked a couple of times. By the third trip the I-C boys had caught on. What do you want to bet they've got it marked in red on the charts now?"

He shook his head. "Kirnanoc is perfect. It's clear out of that complex, too far away for a normal jump, with a barrier of the drift in between. Only it isn't a barrier if you don't think of it that way. That's the way I planned it. And the only way I know that might work."

"Okay," said Boker. "How do we get back?"

"The same way. Only from the Bank we jump for Trace, instead of Kirnanoc, thus fulfilling our posted i-t, and go on our merry way, rich and unsuspected."

He faced Boker squarely. "There's a risk, I won't try to deny that, but I think we can make it. I haven't been in the Lantavan, but I've been in other banks and gone through them. If we go the safe, logical, simple way we'll never make it at all." He paused. "You can still say no."

Boker shut his eyes. "I am thinking hard," he said, "about one million credits. If I think hard enough, I

might forget the rest."

Then his eyes popped open, bright with alarm. "Johnny, did you tell Seri about jumping off from there? Could he be trying to pick off that million credits for himself?"

Kettrick shook his head, frowning. "No, I didn't tell him. And I don't see how he could, without me. The Krinn wouldn't trade with him. They'd be much more likely to eat him."

Boker grunted. "That's true enough. I guess it's just a coincidence. But it's damned funny..."

"What is?"

"Seri going into space himself. It must be the first time in history that he's pried himself away from the elegant life and the pretty ladies."

"He must have his reasons," said Kettrick grimly.

Reasons, yes. A reason to lie, a reason to kill. Kettrick was viciously determined to find out what those reasons were. In the meantime, he wondered. He wondered if Larith had known when she talked to him what Seri meant to do. Won-dered if she was with him in *Starbird*.

Jump time was a good time for wondering. Before that, when they were making their first run out of the planetary safety zone, there was much to do and much to see. Kettrick had looked with the joyous eye of the returning exile into the heart of the Hyades, the dark magnificent heart studded with the fires of the orange-red giants that made up most of that starry archipelago, with here and there the scattered blaze of the few white stars, of which their destination was one. The Cluster was an open one, not like the close-packed globular star swarms of Cygnus and Hercules. Here a man might drift for a lifetime between the lazy drifting suns, finding such beauty and terror as he might wish for, with a quiet haven always waiting somewhere close at hand.

He could look at it and believe that it had not changed. Except that the star charts now showed, far out on the western fringes, an area marked in red. **Deadly radiation**, it said. And if he looked closer, using the long range 'scope turned up to full power, he could see the star at the center of that zone of red. The poisoned star. And he could wonder with a chill unease whether the killer shark had not indeed entered the lagoon, the serpent come to Eden.

Jump time, there was nothing to see, nothing to do but watch the gauges, bear a hand with Glevan as he nursed the grumbling and uncertain unit, eat, sleep, and listen to the sounds of disintegration chattering along *Grellah's* seams. And hope.

And think.

He brought up the subject of the Doomstar.

They were all in the bridgeroom, the only place in the ship where the lighting system worked adequately and where the energy-bleeders functioned well enough to keep the temperature down to a tolerable level. It tended to build up during jump; if your bleeder system failed, you fried. The subspace, or hyperspace, or whatever you chose to call the notness into which the FTL unit took you, apparently did not conduct anything away from a body passing through it. It was as though the ship were received encapsulated like a pill in its own skin and shot through an environment that hated and violently rejected it, passing it on and out of itself as quickly as possible. There were a lot of beautiful equations and theories to explain the phenomenon, but it still remained, like electricity, a mystery. The scientists knew how it worked, and they knew what they could do with it, but they didn't know *why*. For all practical purposes, it didn't matter.

Even with the bleeder system working full blast, it was hot enough. They were all stripped to their sweating skins, except for Chai, who sat as close to Kettrick as she could get, her gray fur lank and her jaws wide open as she breathed.

"I heard some talk," said Kettrick. "A couple of the hands on the Aldebaranian ship I came out in were full of some-thing they called the Doomstar." That was not true, but he did not want to tell them the truth, at least yet. "Then Pedah mentioned it. What's it all about, anyway?"

"Blibber blabber," said Boker. "Pedah's as good as they come, but she's female, and she waggles her tongue as hard as she does her behind. She's always coming home with some great tale the market women told her."

Glevan, the little dark Pittanese, shook his head. The blue Hlakrans were a sanguine breed. Glevan was not. Around his village fires men spoke seriously of serious things. His monkey face was drawn with thinking, his eyes puckered from peering at mysteries.

"I have heard the same story, and not from women in the marketplace. That little star out there, Johnny, that one with the ring around it...that was a sign."

"Sign?" said Hurth. He was not as massively built as Boker and his crest was less impressive. On the other hand he had ten children, a fact he did not let Boker forget. Now he laughed at Glevan. "A sign of what? That things go wrong sometimes even with stars?"

Boker said, "Oh, no. A deity will come forth, his feet straddling the Cluster, and his voice will be as thunder, crying 'Woe, woe!' Hey, Johnny, why don't they ever cry, 'Hooray,' or something pleasant? Eh? How about the ones you got on Earth?"

"Deities," said Kettrick, "tend to be rather doleful every-where. What kind of a sign, Glevan? Ignore these pigs."

"A sign of trouble," answered Glevan darkly.

"God-made? Or man-made?"

Glevan stared at him in honest surprise. "Johnny, if a man could do that to a star he'd *be* a god."

Boker and Hurth began to build on that idea a fantasy of such riotous obscenity that soon even Kettrick was laughing. But underneath it he thought that Glevan was right. And he thought that Boker and Hurth did laugh too much, as men will when they fear something and try to charm it away with ridicule, pretending that Medusa is really a clown.

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## 8

Kettrick was glad when they came out of jump. It was al-ways a dull, nerve-wrangling time, and he had been worried about Chai. She seemed better as soon as the heat abated, physically at least. She ate well again, and for the first time she began to groom herself, asking a brush from Kettrick and then spending hours brushing her coat to its old smooth gloss.

And still...

There was nothing he could put his finger on, except that ever since Khitu's death she had been quiet and withdrawn, and a broody Tchell was an unchancy thing to have around. Kettrick was well aware that they could become so morose as to be dangerous. The others were clearly unhappy in her presence, and he had nightmares about the possible conse-quences. He hoped that some relief from the confinement of the ship would help her.

He stood with her at the bridge window, showing her the big orange sun ahead beyond the safety screens. You could see the fire fountains leap up, see the flames shoot in beauti-ful plumed arcs a thousand miles long. You could see the whirlwinds, golden red and shining, dance and bow to each other along the burning equator. After a while a tiny bright ball came whirling out of the sun glare, and Kettrick

said, "Gurra. We land there."

"Go outside?"

"Yes."

"Good," she said, and stretched her mighty arms as though she would break through the cramping iron walls. "We find Seri there?"

"I don't know," said Kettrick, startled. "Why?"

"You talk now, John-nee. Seri make Khitu die."

Her big round eyes met his, uncannily intelligent, pathetically animal, direct and fierce. "Why you not talk true before?"

"I was afraid you'd kill him."

"Why not kill?" she said, with a curious softness. "You still love Seri?"

This was what she had been brooding about. She had seen Kettrick's outburst in Boker's place, and she had heard them talk about Seri, recognizing the name even if she could not understand what was said. And all this time she had been puzzling in her half-human, half-animal mind, trying to make sense in her own way of the only partly understood behavior of the people around her.

The conclusion she had come to was frightening.

He said, "No, not love Seri. You forget. Seri make me die too, only you held me. But Chai, you listen. Man-law punish Seri. You try, they lock you in cage, for always. You hear?"

She continued to study him. Gradually the fierce light died out of her eyes, and she nodded.

"We catch Seri?"

"We catch him."

"You talk true?"

"We catch him. Maybe not soon. His ship runs faster than ours. But we catch him: And you not kill."

"Not kill." It was equivalent to a promise.

Somehow Kettrick did not entirely trust it.

The bright ball of the planet rushed to meet them, growing huge, blotting out the sun. *Grellah* stuck her blunt nose into the atmosphere and sank with a despairing shriek toward the midsection of the main land mass of the eastern hemisphere.

There were two trading ports, one in the east, one in the west on the other side of the world. Sekma had mentioned the eastern one as a center of the Doomstar rumor. *Starbird* might have landed at either and there was no way of telling until they were down.

Kettrick chose the east.

The dark land opened up below them, clumped trees, jungle tracts, mountain, valley, broad savannah, a winding river, all in shades of brown and ochre, yellow and dull red, the colors turning drab and strange as clouds boiled up against the sun. *Grellah* slid her puny fires down the great black belly of a thunderhead, a pinprick against the lightning. Boker brought her tottering in to a landing on a dirt field scorched and bullied with rocket fire, steadied her on her tripod gear, and cut his switches.

Chai was the first one out the lock. The men followed her, hurrying to try and beat the storm, and Kettrick saw her running in the wild gloom, a gray ghost stretched to the wind. Thunder rolled. Fat silver lightning threaded the sky. Except for *Grellah* and the rusting bones of an old wreck, the field was empty.

They took the trail to the village, sweating in the heavy heat. The air reeked with the overrich perfumes of growing things. Tall red-leaved trees on either side of the path shook down showers of petals from their massed white blossoms, so that the men seemed to move through a fall of snowflakes. Chai came up from behind them, panting, her fur dappled with the swirling whiteness.

The storm broke.

Kettrick fought through a blind smother of wind and rain, yearning to be out from under the trees that he could hear but no longer see. Then as the first edge of the storm passed he saw movement ahead, and heard laughter, and a few moments later he and the others were in the midst of a crowd of small, bright-skinned people who stretched on tiptoe to throw robes of woven fibre about the men's shoulders, shaking their wet hair and skipping like children in the rain. They ooh-ahed at Chai and left her alone, but the men they half carried, pushing and hurrying along the trail.

They came out into the broad square of the village, with the little high-peaked houses around it leaning their reed thatch into the wind, and they ran across it toward the Tall House where all strangers were brought because it was the only one built high enough to receive them comfortably.

Inside it was dry, with a raised floor of earth and fiber beaten hard. The air still held the stale prestorm heat. The roof rattled and the walls rocked, but Kettrick had been in this house before in a storm and it was welcome shelter.

He looked around and saw a small man coming toward them, wrapped in the red robe of office. There was no sign of age about him except that his boy's face was beginning to get a wizened look like a pink fruit kept past its time. Kettrick disengaged himself from the general laughing, shoving flurry and called out, "Whellan!"

The little man gave him a startled look and then cried, "Johnny!" He began to hug Kettrick and pound him with his small fists, gabbling all sorts of questions. Over the top of his head Kettrick saw the girl staring at him, and he stared back.

She had been little more than half as high the last time he had seen her. Her thin child's body had rounded into a slender miniaturization of womanhood, delicate and lovely as a sprite. But he knew her in spite of the change, and she had not forgotten him. Her amber eyes lighted up. She smiled and came to him, considerate of her new dignity, and put her hands in his.

"Welcome back, Johnny."

He wanted to pick her up and tousle her hair as he had used to do, just to spite her, but instead he bowed over her hands and said, "Thank you, Nillaine."

Whellan, with a father's disregard for such affectations, smacked her affectionately across the lower drape of her garment. "Go and fetch food for our guests, and wine, lots of wine. This is a time for celebrating." He grinned at Boker and Hurth and Glevan. "I am always happy to see you, thieves though you are. But this is a special, a very special day."

He turned again to Kettrick, looking puzzled. "But Johnny, how does this happen? Only three, four days ago Seri was here, your friend and partner. We asked him then about you, and he said it was the same as before, that the I-C would never let you come back."

Kettrick said in a flat, mild voice, "Seri trades with you now?" He did not look at Boker.

"Oh yes," said Whellan quickly. "In your place, Johnny, though it's not the same. Only I don't understand. Why didn't he..."

"The I-C haven't changed their minds, Whellan. So I just didn't tell them that I was back. I didn't tell Seri either. No reason to get him in trouble." Kettrick smiled, just a little savagely. "Only my three thieving friends know, and now you."

"Oh," said Whellan. He began to laugh delightedly. "Oh, ho! Good for you, Johnny! Good! We never loved the I-C here, you know that." Kettrick did indeed. Sekma's lads had been very firm about stopping the export of a certain drug that Whellan's people made and which had been their chief commodity. They had not forgotten it.

Whellan led the way across the room, and Kettrick followed him, and Boker said in Kettrick's ear, "So your old friend and partner trades with them now in your place? That's interesting."

"It is indeed. And obviously, this is not his first trip into space."

Three years ago, Whellan had never heard of Seri Otku.

Whellan waved them to the seats of honor on the wide bench that ran around the room. Kettrick sat cross-legged on the thick matting, feeling the house move at his back. Rain rattled like shot on the roof, and the thunder cracked. Chai settled herself tactfully close to the door, watching Kettrick. Whellan chattered.

Kettrick said, "It's bad luck, though, coming just after Seri. I suppose he's traded you out."

Whellan turned to take wine from his daughter's hands. "No," he said carelessly. "No, he offered poor prices. We didn't do much trade. Now, let's drink eh? We worry about business tomorrow."

They drank. Nillaine brought food and served Kettrick her-self, and then sat close by him, studying his face.

"What are you looking for?" he asked her.

"Myself," she said. "Three of our years ago. You looked at me differently then."

"You were different then. Shall I rumple your hair and hold you on my knee, and feed you exotic sweets from other stars until you get the bellyache and your mother hates me?"

"I thought you were a god then." She had an exquisite smile.

"And what do you think now?"

"You're too big, your hands are coarse and your chin is bristly. You are most certainly not a god. But it's all right, Johnny. I still love you." She laughed and poured him more wine.

Much later, Kettrick asked if Seri had had a woman with him, and Nillaine said no.

They feasted in the Tall House until long after the storm was gone. Kettrick got pretty drunk on wine and the happy feeling of being there, and the drunker he got the more a peculiar clarity affected his vision, so that he saw in the laughing faces of the beautiful little people who danced and sang and ate and drank with him a salting of new malice, a new excitement burning just beyond his sight, gleaming in the quick sidelong glances and secret smiles. Sometimes when the young men danced they made gestures like warriors, stamping their feet and tossing up their heads, and then the girls would run in and stop them and they would all laugh together and turn to some other dance, a little too ostentatiously. They reminded Kettrick of children who knew a big secret. They were keeping it from the adults...himself, Boker, Hurth, and Glevan.

He wondered why.

When it was quite late and he was quite drunk, and Whellan was drunker, Whellan leaned over and looked at him with deep affection and whispered, "Johnny, you stay here with us. Eh? Just a little while. After that, the I-C..."

Nillaine interrupted. Whellan never finished what he was about to say. And Kettrick wondered.

After that, the I-C what?

Next morning, Kettrick thought that perhaps he had been imagining things. In the soft warm sunlight the village seemed as peaceful as it ever had. The child-sized houses steamed as last night's rain dried out of them. Children as tiny as dolls ran about the green, their little voices piping, sweetly shrill. The grownups woke late after the feast and began without haste to make ready for the trading. It would go on for several days, until all the people from the out-lying villages had had time to come in. There was no hurry. There was never any hurry here.

The peoples on the other side of Gurra were of different stocks, physically larger and temperamentally more aggressive. They were developing a more complex and technologically advanced society, readily assimilating ideas brought in by the traders and adapting them to their own uses. Quite a few of them had begun to migrate, anxious to see what wonders lay beyond their own sky.

Whellan's people, on the other hand, were indolent, incurious, completely self-satisfied. They already had the best of everything and they were happy with it. Mountains and jungle protected them. They had no enemies. The soil, with a minimum of labor, provided them with ample food, clothing, and building materials. Comfort came to them naturally in the gentle air.

Some articles, such as synthetic fabrics in brilliant colors, jewelry, cosmetics, metal knives and pots, and simple medicines, they were glad to get from the traders. Other things like electric generators and farm machinery they looked at with amused disinterest and total incomprehension, so that basically their culture had not been altered by the establishment of interstellar trade.

Whether it ever would be depended entirely on them. The League of Cluster Worlds forbade missions of any sort to sell people on anything, and the I-C enforced the ban. The appurtenances of many cultures were displayed for all to see. If people wanted them and were willing to work for them, they were welcome to have them. If they did not, the things were useless to them anyway. All over the Cluster could be seen the rusting remains of water works, power stations, and what have you designed to improve the lot of local populations who could not possibly have cared less and who never bothered with the contraptions. Since those early days, technological advances had been put on a strictly do-it-yourself basis.

Whellan's people had chosen not to do it. Some day, Kettrick supposed, their more energetic neighbors would swamp them under. But that was their lookout, and in the meantime they were blithe as babies playing in the sun.

He decided that what he had thought he had seen last night at the feast was only a sort of fever dream brought on by excitement and too much wine in that hot and busy room.

Then Chai, who had slept beside him on the floor and who had come with him now to stand outside the door of the Tall House, blew a long breath out through her nose and said, "Not like this place, John-nee."

Surprised, he asked her why.

She shook her head, peering slit-eyed at the sunny green. "Smell wrong," she said, and grunted, indicating that it was not possible to explain to a human why she felt that way.

Then Kettrick remembered again the sly glances and the hushed triumphant laughter, and he remembered Whellan saying, "Stay here with us, a little while..."

He went back inside and shook Glevan and the two Hlakrans awake.

After that for four days they were busy. Kettrick took care of the trading. The others took care of *Grellah*, getting her ready for the next jump. All that time a singular nervousness stayed with Kettrick.

Until she was ready for space, the planet-bound ship was a trap.

He did not know why he felt this way. Everything went smoothly. The trading was good. The people were as friendly as ever, and Nillaine hung at his elbow like a cheerful sprite, just as she had used to. Whellan entertained them all royally each night. But he did not repeat to Kettrick his invitation to stay a while. And Kettrick did not refer to it.

One thing became increasingly clear. Seri had not traded with the people. They came out to *Grellah* with their little carts and baskets stacked high with goods; fine-woven native cloth, carved things of rare wood and great delicacy, the much-prized purple-bronze skins of the big river snakes. They were rich.

Boker said shrewdly, "Maybe he didn't take his pay in goods."

"Drugs?" said Kettrick. He knew the little people still made and used their particular narcotic, in some religious rites. They were permitted to, as long as they didn't sell it. "I wouldn't put it past him. The stuff would be worth a lot now, being so scarce. Only they certainly wouldn't have given it to him for nothing, and there isn't a sign of anything new in the village. You can tell that anyhow by the way they're trading."

Boker shrugged. "Whellan did say Seri's prices were too high. Maybe he did just have his trip for nothing." He scratched his silver mane with a grease-blackened hand and added, "But I'm damned if I see why he bothered to come at all. Seri, I mean, himself, in person. Not once, but several times. The market's hardly worth it."

That was on the morning of the fourth day. At noon Boker came to tell him that the refitting job was done.

"Take over the trading," Kettrick said.

"Where are you going?"

"To ask a couple of questions." He frowned, feeling a little foolish as he went on. "I want you to stick close, all of you. We might just want to take off in a hurry."

"Huh," said Boker. "You get it too, eh?"

"Get what?"

"I don't know," said Boker, "and that's a fact. But don't trust your little friends too far, Johnny. They've got some kind of a bee in their bonnets." He leaned closer. "Glevan says it's a sign." He grinned, but his eyes were serious. "You watch, huh?"

"I'll watch." Kettrick walked away through the fair-ground cluster of carts and little matting shelters and holiday people under *Grellah's* rusty bulk. Her cargo hatch was open, the lift mechanism clanking and groaning as loads went in and out. It was such a normal, peaceful scene, and the idea of being afraid of these people was so ridiculous, that he almost laughed.

"Ask a couple of questions, that's all," he thought. "And then we'll go."

Chai roused up from the trade booth's shadow and followed him.

The avenue of trees glowed in the sunlight like huge fan-tastic torches, white flowers massed against the red leaves. The trodden way underfoot was dusty-warm, fragrant with crushed grasses. It seemed perfectly natural that he should meet Nillaine coming toward him from the village.

"Johnny!" she cried. "I was just on my way to see you." She wore a length of peacock blue silky stuff, a present from him, draped around her, and there were flowers in her strange bright hair. "Is the trading finished?"

"Not yet," he said. "I wanted time to roam a little. It's a long while since I've been here."

Her amber eyes smiled at him. "I'll roam with you." Then she saw Chai, gray and huge in the tree shadows. "Oh John-ny, send it back, please. It frightens me."

Kettrick shrugged and spoke to Chai briefly in her own tongue. She turned obediently and went back toward the ship. Nillaine's shoulders lifted in a little shudder of relief.

"Such a great, fierce, sad creature. I cannot laugh when it's around." She took his hand. "Where shall we go?"

"Where it pleases you. After I speak with your father."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Johnny. My father has gone to the Third-Bend Village." She was referring to one on the third bend of the river, north. "He will be back before sunset. Speak to him then."

"Well," said Kettrick, "in that case, I have no choice." But he was irritated, as though Whellan had done this deliberately to avoid him. Which was foolish, of course. Whellan could not possibly have known that he would come.

They walked down the avenue of trees and Nillaine held to his hand just as she had used to, and he matched his stride to her little sandaled feet.

The village was quiet in the warm noon. There were smells of cooking. A few children played. The door of the Tall House stood open and there was nothing inside but shadow. Kettrick and Nillaine crossed the green. There was a wide dusty lane beyond. It went between meandering rows of the small thatched houses, leading eventually and without haste to a tract of semijungle and then, much farther on, to another village.

The houses seemed to Kettrick to be unusually still this day, as though many of the people were gone, or were sitting inside waiting for something. He tried to explain it by saying to himself that they were all out by the ship. Only he knew this was not so. The villagers had already done their trading, and the people around *Grellah* now were almost all from the more distant places.

Nillaine chattered happily. About Kettrick. About Earth, about Tananaru, about what he did there and what he was going to do.

"What *will* you do, Johnny?"

"What I've always done. Trade."

"But suppose they find out. The I-C. Surely you can't trust everyone as you do us, surely someone will tell them you've come back."

He laughed and did not answer.

"Suppose you meet Seri," she said. "You almost did. Will he not tell?"

"Don't you worry about it," Kettrick said, and turned aside from the main track into a narrower one. Trees pressed closer on either side, making deep shadows shot with glancing copper light that moved with the movement of the branches. Very quickly the path began to climb, toward a line of hills that thrust above the jungle.

Nillaine let go of his hand and walked a while in silence, a bright blue butterfly dancing down the shadow tunnel ahead of him.

"Seri won't tell," Kettrick said. "He's my friend, you know that."

"Oh, yes."

"I won't tell on him, either."

She paused, ever so slightly. "About what?"

"About what he does here."

Nillaine stopped and turned, standing beside a crimson-flowered vine that was slowly and beautifully strangling a tree.

She said blandly, "But Johnny, he trades. Like you."

"Not like me. Or there would have been nothing left for me."

She laughed. "That's true."

"What is it, then? Narcotics? Pretty little girls who want to see faraway worlds?"

She came close to him, her amber eyes alight. "I'm not supposed to tell."

"Oh. And what do I have to do to make you?"

"I'm greedy." She bent her head to one side and stretched out her arms. "I want to glitter and shine, and make music when I walk."

"I will deck you," said Kettrick, "as no other woman was ever decked before. I will make every girl in every village hate you."

She laughed again. "I will love that!" She caught his hand, all mischievous child again. "Come on, then. I'll show you. But you have to promise not to tell my father."

He promised, and they went on to a place where the path forked. Here Nillaine turned aside, leading the way into a narrow gorge that presently offered no path at all but the water-worn rock that floored it. The gorge climbed steeply, and widened, and then they were clambering up a broad slope with the forest thinning on it and the top of the jungle solid as a floor below them.

The sun struck hot at their shoulders, and a wind blew. Once or twice Kettrick thought he saw movement among the trees, and twice or more he thought he heard a sound, as though more than they two were on that slope. But he could not be sure.

They came at length to a high place held privately in a cup of the hills. It was very still there, walled with forest and the higher peaks on three sides so that even the wind was cut off. The floor of the cup had been made level, and paved with many-colored stones set in a kind of mosaic that seemed to have no pattern, and yet Kettrick knew there was one. Dotted about this level floor, apparently at random, were tall slim carvings of wood set upright.

Kettrick stopped at the edge of the floor.

"Why have you brought me here?" he asked.

Nillaine turned and looked at him, standing by one of the tall pillars. "You know where you are?"

"This is the Woman Place, isn't it?"

She said, "Yes," and leaned against the pillar. The pillar had arms and hands. These held a sheaf of grain between two swelling breasts.

He moved carefully back from the colored stones. "Why, Nillaine?"

"You'll have one chance, Johnny. We could not do less."

"The chance Whellan started to give me on the first night?"

Her bright head bobbed against the pillar. The wood was polished and very dark. "Whellan's a man, and trusting. He didn't realize that you were lying."

"Lying?"

"About coming back to trade. Just now I gave you a chance to tell me the truth, but you lied again."

She smiled. "We know a little of the law here, we know something of how it is done."

"Very well," said Kettric. "Suppose I did lie. How could it concern you?"

"We love you, Johnny. We want you to live." The sun shone on the polished wooden breasts above her head. The fingers of the carven hands held the sheaf of grain with infinite tenderness. "Stay here with us a while. You'll be quite safe. And after it's over, you'll be free."

Ketrick said slowly, "After what is over?" And his tongue was dry in his mouth.

Angrily she cried out, "I'm grown now, I'm a woman, not a child! Don't treat me as one, because I'm smaller than you! You know. You must know. You followed Seri. You wanted me to show you what he did here. He warned us that someone might follow, he told us that men were trying to stop what is to come. Another man we would have killed outright, but you..."

The sun was hot on Ketrick's back. He could feel the sweat run, and wondering how it could be so cold on his hot skin. He shook his head and said,

"But you're wrong, Nillaine. I only asked about Seri be-cause I was curious. And I lied about why I came back because I was afraid you might give me away without mean-ing to, if the I-C should happen to come." He pointed sky-ward. "My business is out there, at the White Sun. The same business they arrested me for, and sent me away from the Cluster. I don't care what Seri's doing. I wouldn't care if he had the Doomstar in his pocket..."

He saw her eyes flare bright as fire in the sunlight, and he hurried on, pretending not to notice.

"I'm only interested in finishing my deal. Money, Nillaine. A million credits. And then I'm gone from the Cluster for-ever."

"Money," she said, and laughed. "I almost believe you. Well, then, and so you don't care if Seri has the Doomstar in his pocket. Then wait, Johnny. The White Sun will wait. Ev-erything will wait. And afterward you can go where you will and the I-C won't stop you."

She stepped toward him, away from the pillar. "Will you stay?"

She was pleading with him. Her eyes were fond and hopeful, her hands outstretched. He smiled, a stiff and sickly coun-terfeit, and shook his head.

"No."

He turned to walk away from the paved floor and the pillars. He did not see, behind him, what gesture she made. Perhaps the only one needed was his own gesture of de-parture. In any case, he stopped, because suddenly all the slopes and the edges of the woods were alive with tiny figures among the trees.

The women of the village, with flowers in their hair, and each one holding in her right hand a little shining knife.

## 10

They came scuddering like bright leaves on a wind, up the slope, out from the trees. Ketrick retreated before them.

"This is not the sacrifice time," he said. Each year, he knew, the women chose a victim from among the young men and hunted him to this place and did to him what they felt was necessary, so that trees should again bear fruit and fields produce their grain. But that was in the spring, and it was now late summer, though in this golden place all sea-sons were much the same.

Nillaine answered, "This is not a sacrifice, not yet, though perhaps it will come to be one." She stood again by the pillar, her small face sober and pitiless. "This is something we could not trust to the men. They would think of friendship, and stay their hands."

The colored paving stones came hard beneath his feet. He was moving backward all the time toward Nillaine. He watched the women, and now he could hear the soft rustle of them treading the grass, the ripple of their draperies around their slender legs. He wanted to laugh, but he was terrified. There must have been fifty or sixty of them, their little knives all glittering.

"The men would think of friendship," he said. "What are you thinking of, Nillaine?"

"My village. My father. My husband and children. Seri promised that the Doomstar would never shine on us."

"There are other villages, other people."

"I don't know them. They are nothing to me."

"Let me go, Nillaine. I can stop Seri, so that the Doomstar will never shine for anyone."

"There are more than Seri, many more. You couldn't stop them. No, Johnny. Well be safe, and afterward we'll be strong, stronger than the Westpeople. They promised us."

"How will they make you strong?" asked Kettrick, and grasped her by the arm so quickly that she did not quite have time to get away. She sank her teeth and nails into his wrist, squealing all the while like a furious little animal. He slapped her head across the side of the head and she stopped all that. He picked her up and held her, a limp doll, across his body, and he said to the women,

"Your knives will strike her first."

They were already faltering, their eyes and mouths wide with astonishment. He imagined that it had never occurred to them that a male would commit such an act of blasphemy in this place where they were supreme. Probably no sacrifice had ever objected before.

"Chai!" he shouted. "Chai!"

The women made cat-cries of outrage. They screamed at him to put Nillaine down, and some of them rushed to-ward him again, waving their knives. He held Nillaine out, a kind of living buckler against the blades, and moved slowly backward, away from them.

"Chai?"

"Hroo!"

Out of the tail of his eye he saw her loping from the trees at the back of the cup. She had had to make a long swing around to keep out of sight, as he had told her to do when he had pretended to send her away. He had not really be-lieved then that anything would happen; it was a matter of just in case. Now he backed toward her and they met beside a pillar pregnant with carved fruits.

The women stared at Chai fearfully. She looked at the women.

"Kill, John-nee?"

"Not unless you have to." The women were gabbling now, tossing their hands wildly as they argued between themselves what to do. It was a long way to the trees, a longer way to the village. Kettrick wondered if they could ever make it, and he tightened his grip on Nillaine.

"Hit?" asked Chai.

"Hit," he said. "Yes. And I don't care if you break a few of their pretty little bones."

Chai grunted. Nillaine whimpered abruptly, twisting in Kettrick's arms. He was briefly occupied in

quieting her again. He heard a noise behind him, and then there was a demoniac shriek from the women and they surged forward in a body. He turned to see Chai finish uprooting the pillar.

"Big stick," she said, and swung it whistling around her head. She bounded at the women.

She was more than twice as high as they, and the pregnant pillar was eight or nine feet long. She swung it like a great flail. They screamed and fell, and ran, and scattered, screaming, and some of them lay on the ground and wept or moaned. Chai came back, breathing hard. The bulk of the women now stood in ragged clumps a long way off, looking at them in helpless rage. The bolder ones moved back to help the injured. Ketrick shouted at them.

"Let us alone, or I'll kill Nillaine!"

He raised her up and shook her at them so they would understand. Then he whispered to Chai, "For God's sake let's get out of here." They ran together for the woods, Chai with the carved fruits laid across her shoulder.

The tree shadows closed around them. Ketrick shifted Nillaine to a better position and went down hill with long strides. His heart was thundering and he felt sick, as though he had touched something unnatural.

They passed through the gorge and into the jungle. Nillaine's small body lay lightly over one shoulder, her loose hair brushing his neck. He had almost forgotten her. In the forefront of his mind was the image of the ship and the need to reach it. Apart from that he walked in the roaring blackness of nightmare, where nothing was substantial, where time and distance stretched maliciously into strange dimensions, and underneath it all was fear, the gut-twisting, breath-locking, sweat-running fear that came with a word, and the memory of a dream.

Doomstar.

Don't bother about it, Johnny. It's only a myth.

He went down the shadowy tunnel, walking so fast that he was almost running, and there wasn't any end to the damned thing, it went on forever.

Nillaine was stirring. He thought, in a distant sort of way, that he would presently have to hit her again. All his attention was ahead, where he strained to see the end of the narrow track.

Chai barked. He felt a sudden buffet across his back, mingled with a stinging pain. Nillaine cried out. "What is it?" Ketrick snarled. "What the hell is it?" He was startled and shaking. Nillaine had begun to sob, hanging over his shoulder. He put his free hand up across his back. It came away bloody.

Chai held up a small knife. "Not hurt deep," she said. "I see."

He understood then that Nillaine had drawn a hidden knife and tried to kill him, and that Chai had slapped it away in the bare nick of time. Ketrick stopped and searched Nillaine, and she lay all limp and unprotesting, sunk in misery. When he was sure she had no other weapon hidden in the blue silk he picked her up again and went on, a little sicker than before.

He came out at last into the main track. There he stopped and said to Chai, "We can't go through the village, there are too many of them. See if you can find a way around."

Chai ran on ahead. Presently she vanished. Ketrick walked more slowly now, watching ahead for any sight of someone coming from the village, watching behind lest any of the women from the place of sacrifice should try to take him in spite of his warning. He pictured himself hamstrung by a sudden blow, waiting on the ground for the little bright blades to flash down. Above him the familiar trees were as friendly as ever, showering him with fragrant petals.

Chai appeared again, beckoning. He followed her into what at first appeared to be trackless jungle,

and then became in-dubitably a path, narrow and carefully concealed with vines. He did not bother to ask her how she had found it, and she could not have told him anyway. It seemed to go in the right direction, toward the landing field, bypassing the town. It was a very odd sort of trail, obviously not much used, but carefully kept clear.

They hurried along it, and now Chai carried the pillar club dragging from one hand because it caught in the creepers above and on both sides. She would have dropped it, only Kettrick said no. Apart from Nillaine's little knife, it was the only weapon they had.

When they were, as near as he could judge, about even with the village and some distance east of it, they came to a cleared space not over ten feet in diameter. At one side of it was a little squat structure of heavy plastic sunk deep into the ground. Just recently it seemed to have been completely covered with vines and sods of mossy turf. These had been torn away and the top of the structure opened, revealing a metal-lined cavity below.

Something had rested there, like a strange jewel in an improbable case.

He set Nillaine down and held her by the shoulders. "Where?" he asked her. "Where will they take it?"

"I don't know. Seri wouldn't tell us." And then she cried out, "You can't stop him! How can you stop him when no-body knows where he's going?"

She covered her face with her hands, and they went on.

Kettrick was sure now that the path led to the landing field, and it did. They emerged from an innocent, vine-curtains section of the jungle wall no different from any other section, and there was *Grellah* showing her dark rusky bulk into the sky, perhaps half a mile away. The little booths of the trading fair seemed to have packed up and gone away from around her feet.

"Let me go now," Nillaine whispered.

And Kettrick said, "Not yet."

He started out across the landing field with Chai, running over the black scars of old flames, stumbling on calcined rock and ridges of glassy slag like cheap obsidian, flawed and stained. He had gone only a little way when he heard the tumult of many people pouring down the broad path from the village.

They burst out from the avenue of trees to his left, far to his left but closer than he was to the ship, a bright-colored spate of running, leaping, shouting, crying men and women that spread and fanned across the landing field toward him. They carried knives and other things, but that many would not need weapons. In the end they could pull him and Chai to pieces with their little hands, like monkeys.

*Grellah's* hatches were all closed. He filled his lungs once and cried despairingly, and after that he kept his breath for running.

His legs were longer than theirs. But they ran swiftly. Their legs scampered like those of children in some wild game that would end only when they dropped exhausted.

He could have run faster without Nillaine. Nevertheless he clung to her as a last desperate resort until he saw *Grellah's* hatch slide open, and Boker and Hurth came out of it with two of the bell-mouthed heavy rifles that fired stun-gas shells. They began to fire into the forefront of the crowd. Puffs of dark vapor blossomed and spread. The movement of the crowd became suddenly broken and erratic. Kettrick paused and set Nillaine on her feet.

"You will never be strong," he told her. "Your brains are like feathers, and you have no more purpose than birds."

She appeared not to have heard him. She only whispered. "You have killed us, Johnny. You have killed us."

Chai let the pillar fall in the blackened dust beside Nil-laine. She and Ketrick ran on and left her there, a tiny drooping figure by the profaned fruits, her blue silk garment soiled and torn, the flowers tangled in her hair. Her cheeks were dirty with tears and one small hand was streaked with Ketrick's blood.

Ketrick climbed the ladder with Hurth and Boker hauling at him and Chai pushing from behind. He heard the hatch shut and the warning hooter start to blow. He groped his way blindly to his seat, his own eyes hot with a stinging moisture.

The Doomstar poisoned more than suns.

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## 11

They were in jump again. There was the same sweating heat, the whine and hum of the unit, the blindness of not-space. They had gone into jump long before the prescribed distance out from Gurra had been reached on conventional, impelled by a great desire to hide themselves in this nothing-ness where no star could shine at all.

Now Boker was doing a second and much more careful job of patching up the cut on Ketrick's back. The others hunched about on the bridgeroom seats, Glevan looking gloomily triumphant, While Hurth, like Boker and Ketrick, looked just plain scared.

"They tried to get us to leave the ship," Boker was saying, for perhaps the third time. "Wanted us to come in and have a feast, and I guess we'd have gone if you hadn't said that about sticking close. Funny. Even though I thought there was something wrong..."

"You warned me," said Ketrick.

"I know. But I guess I couldn't quite *believe*."

Ketrick felt the sting of the antibiotic and shook his head. "Neither could I."

"They'd have killed us all," said Glevan. He leaned forward, his intense dark eyes fixed on Ketrick. "So Seri has the Doomstar."

Ketrick said, "I think rather he has a part of it. A component. I saw the hiding place, and it was small."

Glevan said heavily, "How great a thing does it take to kill a star?"

"Oh, shut up that bull," said Hurth. "Something bigger than what Johnny said, it would have to be." He pulled at his white mane with nervous fingers and laughed a curious little laugh. "And here I am talking about the damned thing as though it was ordinary as cheese and a few hours ago I didn't even believe it existed."

"Neither did I," said Ketrick. "Not really."

*Only a myth*, said the mocking voice in his dream, echoing his own carelessness. He thought of Seri, somewhere ahead of them in space, speeding somewhere with his load of death, and suddenly he was furious.

"He used my name," he said. "He used my friendship with those people." Another thought struck him. "I wonder how many more of my friends he's bribed and frightened and lied into helping him."

"There must be more," Boker said. "That would make good sense. They couldn't keep the whole

mechanism together, whatever it is; it'd be too dangerous, too likely to be found. And whatever stuff it is they use to, well, to make the change in the sun cycle, they wouldn't want that around, either. I'll bet they've got caches scattered all around the Cluster, a bit here and a piece there, so it could never all be found and destroyed before they were ready to use it."

He finished with the cut and began to put the first aid box neatly back together again. About some things Boker was scrupulously neat.

"Primitive people," Kettrick was muttering. "People with no science, with a lot of superstition, and no knowledge of anything in the whole wide universe outside their own villages. It would be easy to use them, easy to frighten them and make them feel important at the same time. They're all human, they're all greedy little thieves, every one of them with something in his mind he'd like to have without really going to any trouble to get it. Seri promises to give them what they want, threatens to destroy them if they don't help and promises them safety if they do... 'The Doomstar will never shine for us,' Nillaine said... and all they have to do is keep a small thing safe for him until he wants it."

"Pride," said Glevan. "That is the great sin. They feel that they are godlike with the power to destroy."

"Very likely," said Hurth sourly. "I take more pleasure in creating, and better for them if they did too, but that's all by the way. The thing is now, what are we going to do about it?"

A silence fell, accentuated by the drone-whine-clack of the ship. They looked at each other, their eyes oddly glistening in the sickly light.

"I mean," said Hurth, "like you said, Johnny, he's going somewhere with that thing, and there could be only one reason. They're going to use..."

"Whoever *they* are," said Boker.

"Well, we know one of *them*, Seri Otku, and he's going to use it. So what do we do? Mix in or stay out? Me, I'm scared. Who knows, we could come out of jump by Thwayn and find it's already poisoned."

"You could go anywhere and find that," said Boker. He paced up and down the cramped floor, runnels of sweat creeping down his chest and back. "Maybe we ought to go back to Tananaru. What do you think, Johnny? We could tell somebody there about it and let them do the worrying."

Kettrick had been wrestling with the same problem. It was not possible just to send a message from where they were to, say, Sekma. There was no communication at all in jump, and out of jump it took too long, even at the speed of light. By the time the message got there it would be out of date by several years. Communication between the Cluster systems was carried on by fast ships which moved in a constant stream between the worlds that had use for them. A world like Gurra or Thwayn, on the other hand, which had few or no messages to send, depended on traders to carry what mail they had. There had not been any other traders at Gurra; they had radiochecked with the still primitive but growing spaceport in the western hemisphere, because Kettrick had had some idea of trying to get a message back.

So it might be better to return to Tananaru, find Sekma or someone else in authority...

Then he shook his head. "It would take too long. There wouldn't be any chance then of stopping Seri. Even with fast I-C ships, he'd have had too big a start, and anyway we don't know where he's going, for sure. I think we've got to try and keep track..."

"Thwayn, Kirnanoc, Trace. It could be any of those systems," Boker said, and shuddered. "God. All those planets."

"It wouldn't have to be any of them," Kettrick said. "We only know where he *said* he was going

when he posted his i-t."

Hurth said, "But he has to follow it! Or the I-C will damn well want to know why."

"The I-C?" said Kettrick. " 'After it's over,' there won't be any I-C."

"That's right," muttered Hurth, more shaken than he had been at the thought of any other change. And Glevan observed that *they* were armed with a mighty power.

"We have one advantage, maybe," Kettrick said. "Seri doesn't know we're following him... assuming that we are, of course. He doesn't even know I'm alive. And no wonder he didn't want me meddling around! If the I-C had caught on to me and started investigating *him*..." Kettrick groaned. "Oh, lord, if they only had! Well..."

Boker had stopped his pacing. They were all looking at him curiously. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"Sekma," he said. "What a bargain he made! Straight as an arrow to the mark I fly, without even trying, and he doesn't know it, and I can't tell him."

Boker said politely, "Sekma, Johnny? I think I lost you somewhere."

"No you didn't. It's just a side issue, that didn't seem important until now."

He told them about Sekma, being now sure that they had nothing to do with the Doomstar. As though he had ever believed they might have, but who would have thought it of Whellan or Nillaine?

They listened. When he was all through, Boker said, "Sekma knew you were back in the Cluster, he sent you back himself, and you still intended to go to the White Sun?"

"I did? That's one reason why I wasn't too unhappy about dropping out of sight there, after the explosion. I didn't report to Sekma. He doesn't know I'm alive either."

It was Kettrick's turn now to pace. He could feel them watching him, feel the temperature rising.

"You've got a right to be sore," he said. "And I am in a mood to heap dust on my own head. I didn't believe in the Doomstar. I thought I could use Sekma while he was using me, get back to the Cluster, get my license reinstated, *and* pick off that million credits at the White Sun, all at the same time. And I could have done it. I could still do it. Except..."

He turned to face them. "Except the damned thing's real. And I'm scared, and I'd just as soon run back to Tananaru and take the first ship out of there for Earth. Only trouble with that is, I can't."

"Why not, Johnny?" asked Boker.

"Two reasons. Seri and the White Sun. In that order. I can't make you go on with me, I can't even ask you to. But I'll make a deal with you to take me on to Kirnanoc. I can get another ship there..."

"Seri," repeated Boker. "*And* the White Sun?"

"Why not?"

"But Seri first."

"Naturally. If I don't stop him it'll be because I'm dead, in which case I won't have any use for a million credits." Kettrick found suddenly that he was shouting in a most melodramatic and undignified fashion. "He made a jackass out of me! A complete jackass. He murdered Khitu. He tried to murder me and Chai. Now he's on his way to murder a solar system, using my friends to help him, using my name to ruin, poison..." He was running out of breath. "Any-way, after I'm through with Seri, I might as well go out and see the Krinn. Why not?"

"You're an optimist, Johnny," Boker said. "Or maybe just a jackass. You talk about stopping Seri, as though that's an end to it. That's like saying you'll just take one little step out the airlock door. Seri's

only a piece of it. You don't know how big the whole thing is, how many people, how much force. You think you can handle all that? You think *we* can handle all that?"

Kettrick did not answer. It was Hurth who said, very un-happily, "It looks like we're stuck to try."

Boker looked at him. Then he looked at Glevan.

"It will be a worthy battle," Glevan said, and grinned, a grimace of frightening solemnity. "We'll lose, of course. But proudly. That's the thing."

"Sure," said Boker, and shook a drop of sweat off the end of his broad nose. "Sure, that's the thing. Well, and so. How do you see this, Johnny? How will it go?"

Kettrick swore. "I don't know any more than you do. All I know is that Seri has a piece of the thing and is taking it somewhere. Maybe he'll pick up more pieces along the way. Maybe if we could just catch up with Seri we could stop the whole thing by taking, or destroying, the pieces he has, assuming that each piece is vital to the operation of the whole." He started to pace again, restless with thinking, and Chai watched him from the corner where she sprawled and panted, her large eyes dark and troubled. "If we could catch up with him... *Starbird's* faster than *Grellah*, but miracles do happen..."

"Aye," said Glevan, "to some. Not to old, rusty, battered ships. They do not turn into space hawks."

He rose and left the bridgeroom.

"At Kirmanoc," said Kettrick, "there's an I-C office. We could get help there. We certainly could get help there."

Boker brightened. So did Hurth. "Yes." they said. "Of course."

"Well, then," said Kettrick. He sat down. Then he sprang up again. "What the devil's going on?"

The whine-drone-clack had changed pitch slightly. An un-pleasant small quiver ran through the fabric of the ship. Boker sprang to his feet and roared into the intercom.

"Glevan! If you blow that unit, I'll hunt you down through all the halls of hell...!"

Glevan's voice came back muffled and booming. "I'm only trying to make a very little miracle, Boker. Don't you worry." He gave a triumphant cackle. "We're important men now. We can't afford to die."

Boker turned without a word and opened up a locker underneath the seat. In a padded honeycomb inside the locker were plastic cylinders. He took one out, uncapped it, drank from it, and passed it on.

They killed the thing between them and then gave up. They should have been drunk. Never, Kettrick thought, had men more needed to be drunk. They were still as sober as Chai.

The Doomstar was not that easily escaped, even in the mind.

And Larith. Was she part of that monstrousness?

He tried not to think of her. He did not have too much success.

Glevan achieved his little miracle, a very small one indeed. They came out of jump with their hearts in their throats and every eye on the radiation counters. They showed a normal reading. Thwayn's sun, older and redder and more tired than most of the Cluster stars, rolled heavily along as it al-ways had, shaking its mane of fire with a sort of sad, diminished glory.

*Grellah* lumbered in toward the third world, a frosty planet all aglitter with the whiteness of snow.

Long before they landed it was obvious that *Starbird* was not there. There was now only one field on that whole planet, and the scanners pictured it windswept and empty. As *Grellah* settled down on her ragged tailfires, Kettrick thought he saw through the whipped clouds of dust and smoke the fresh scar of a similar landing. That was all.

They opened the airlock. Kettrick and Boker went outside and waited. Hurth and Glevan were already at work in *Grellah's* bowels. Once again Chai stretched her legs like a hound let free of the kennel. The wind was cold and clean, blowing off the southern snowfields.

Here in this vast equatorial basin it was still warm enough to support life. Herds could graze and crops could grow in the summertime, and the winters were not unbearable. There was game, and water, and the deepest river hardly ever froze. Kettrick walked about, looking at the white snow-banks left from the coming winter's first fall. He crushed a handful of it and tasted it, and felt a pang of recognition. Here and on Earth, it was the same.

He passed by the burned scat he thought he had seen in the scanner. It was there, the edges clear and fresh.

He went back to the ship. Boker was bundled up in heavy coveralls, not much liking the chill. The Cluster worlds tended to be mild. Even Chai was shivering a little in spite of her thick fur.

"If it was *Starbird*" Kettrick said, "we're close on her heels."

Boker nodded toward the low range of hills that screened the west. "Here comes our welcoming committee."

A line of riders mounted on shaggy, thick-legged beasts came at a shuffling trot out of the hills.

Boker drew a long breath and straightened his shoulders. "It's easy," he said. "Just act as though you never heard of the Doomstar."

"Don't work so hard at it," Kettrick muttered. "You couldn't look any guiltier."

He knew that his own manner must be just about as strained.

The riders came thumping up, powerfully built men in woollen tunics and trousers, with fur-lined boots on their feet and hooded coats on their backs, the coats open and the hoods thrown back because of the warmth of the day. They carried a primitive but quite adequate type of rifle slung across their backs, and in their belts were heavy pistols as well as the ever-useful skinning knives. They were a dark-skinned people, of a greenish cast, with much hair, generally of rusty red.

There was no shouting, no welcoming with open arms. These were men of dignity. They formed a crescent, about twenty strong, in front of the ship and simply sat there on their broad beasts, which breathed heavily and peered through shaggy forelocks. The men examined Kettrick and Boker as though possibly they had never seen them before.

Kettrick and Boker stood with arms folded and stared at a point above the riders' heads. When enough time had gone by to prove to anyone that the men of Thwayne were not impressed by ships or traders, nor in any way anxious to do business with them, one man detached himself from the crescent and rode forward.

"May the Frost King spare your flocks," he said, in his own harsh tongue.

"And may the Sun King warm your croplands," answered Kettrick formally, in the same tongue. Then he switched to *lingua*. "Hello, Flay."

"Johnny," said the man. His rusty beard so long, braided in two braids, and his hair was braided too, and coiled above his ears. He smiled, showing strong yellow teeth. "Johnny, I'll be damned! Hello, Boker." Then he looked at Chai. "What is that?"

"My friend," said Ketrick, "and not so thick-pelted as you, Flay!"

Flay looked doubtful. "Can your friend ride?"

"She can run."

Flay grunted. "Well, keep her off my hounds. Where's the rest of you?"

Boker indicated the ship. "In there. We have trouble, Flay. The ship has broken her intestines. Look." He reached over and with Ketrick's help exhibited a heavy socketed bar that had been leaning against the tripod gear. One end was snapped off. "Can you forge us a thing like this? If not, we are your guests till the next ship comes."

Flay sat silent for a moment, considering the bar. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. The thick beard masked his face and his eyes were blank and pale, narrowed under heavy brows.

"Have you the missing piece?" he said at last.

"We have." Ketrick held it up. He had broken it off him-self with a sledge. They did not really need the bar. They had two more like it in stores. It had seemed a good idea to make Flay think they did need it, just in case.

"Our forges," said Flay, "are second to none. We will make you a bar."

"Good," said Ketrick. "How soon?"

"A week," said Flay. "Are you in great haste?"

"Haste?" said Boker. "In this tub?" he laughed.

Ketrick said, "A week is fine. It will take us at least that long to fix the damage this did when it broke."

"Then," said Flay, "let us go into the city."

He beckoned forward two led beasts. While Ketrick and Boker mounted, other men strapped the broken bar to a third animal. Ketrick spoke briefly to Chai and she came up close beside his mount, frightening it into what was almost animation. The cavalcade went thumpeting off toward the hills.

The "city" lay in a sheltered valley. Compared to Ree Darva it was not much, either in size or beauty. But it had its own uniqueness. It was the only city on a whole planet, just as Flay's people were the only population.

Thawyn had been a dying world for a long, long time, and throughout the centuries her peoples had been cramped into smaller and smaller areas, fighting for survival there, fighting for warmth and arable land. Long ago the weak, the lazy, the tender-minded, the numerically or militarily inadequate, had either perished or taken their remnants thank-fully to other planets when the advent of Darvan ships gave them that literally heavensent alternative.

Flay's people had held out, and now they had a planet all their own. *Firgals*, they called themselves, meaning in their own tongue The Ultimate Ones, and they intended to ride their world proudly to its end, refusing to leave the sacred soil where their ancestors were buried, and whence their seed was sprung.

From the crest of the hill above the town it was possible to see why they were so resolute about staying.

The lines of the opening valley guided the eye onward and outward until presently it was lost in the vastness of grass-lands that rolled on to the horizon, red-gold under the huge red sun. In the spring they were green like a green ocean. Great herds of animals grazed on this richness. Here and there were lines of trees along a river bed, or isolated clumps that gave the cattle shelter. The shadowy, whale humps of distant ridges rose out of the grass and away be-hind them rose the smoke of little hamlets or scattered

steadings. At the farthest reach of vision, hanging like dreams in the dusky sky, were the high peaks of mountains wrapped in eternal snow.

They stopped on the crest of the hill, to look over over this their world, and Flay looked up at the old red sun as a man looks at his father.

"He will last out my time," said Flay, "and the time of my youngest children's grandchildren, and they tell me perhaps a thousand or two years beyond. Why should a man worry longer than that?"

"Why, indeed?" said Ketrick, and they rode down into the city.

The houses were more like warrens of stone, some of them sunk into the ground like windowed storm cellars, others one or two or even three stories high, all huddled together as though for warmth and mutual assistance against snow and bitter winds, clambering in rows up and down the hills, thrusting their backsides into the slopes behind them. Chim-neys poured up smoke. The most sheltered places were not for human habitation but for winter pens and cave shelters for stock. Shaggy creatures of various breeds and sizes clattered or rooted about in the straggling lanes. There were forges and tanneries, industries of various sorts geared to the materials and the needs at hand. It was the Firgals' boast that they were completely self-sufficient.

"We do not need the traders," Flay had told Ketrick on his first landing here. "We would live just as well if none of you ever came again." Ketrick had found that this was true, and he thought they were a very wise people.

The wisdom of their insistence on staying here was an-other matter, but that was their own business. And perhaps it was not as foolish as it seemed. Here they had the pick of what there was. On another world, they would have to fit themselves to what was left after others had already settled their order of dominance. Ketrick thought that any planet that took the Firgals in would live to regret its generosity.

People passing in the streets looked at Ketrick and Boker with polite unconcern. Meanwhile, Ketrick was chafing with impatience, sweating to ask Flay whether the last ship had been Seri's, and resolutely forcing himself to silence. These were not the little butterfly people of Gurra. One wrong word could finish *Grellah's* voyage right here and now.

Of course the Firgals might not be involved at all with Seri and the Doomstar. But Ketrick thought there had been an odd note to Flay's question about their being in a hurry.

The cavalcade began to break up. The parts of the broken bar were taken off to one of the forges. Flay halted in front of a three-storey dwelling, one of a long rambling line, its back wall melting into the hill behind it. They dismounted and went inside.

The room within was low and smoke-smelling, the black-ened roof beams close over Ketrick's head. Low doorways led into other chambers at the back and at either end, and on to still other chambers. Flay's clan inhabited a considerable stretch of housing, and it seemed to Ketrick that the clan had grown since he had been here last.

Flay's brawny wives and daughters and daughters-in-law and their innumerable young swarmed about busily. From one room came the mingled clacking of looms and female tongues. In another place a group of youngsters were carding wool, making a game out of it with a singsong chant and much laughter, and another group, slightly older and stronger, took turns thumping at a churn. The one who first made butter got a special reward, and the children kept shouting, "Let me, it's my turn!" The older boys and the men were out with the stock now, or gathering fuel, or working in the forges or the tannery or some other industry. Four old women sat by a fireplace spinning yarn, their dark faces strong as weathered wood, their voices cheerful. Only the very little children tumbled about the floors like puppies with nothing to do.

Flay steered the two outlanders through the rooms and up a narrow flight of stairs that turned upon itself at right angles, requiring some nimble footwork. The upper levels were quieter. In a room with little

shuttered windows Flay motioned them to seats in comfortable hide-frame chairs, and set a tall clay bottle and cups before them on a table.

Kettrick resisted the impulse to gulp down the fiery liquor. It was not proper manners. Even so, the warming sips steadied his nerves. The Firlgals didn't fool around with effete wines and the like. They lived a hard life in a hard world, and when they wanted a drink they wanted a drink. They made the best whiskey in the Cluster, and kept it, being too short on grains for export.

"Well," said Flay, "and welcome." He filled their cups again and then said quite casually, "Seri didn't tell us you were back, Johnny."

Kettrick made a show of being surprised. "Seri? Seri Otku, who used to be my partner? Has he been here?"

"Only a day and a half ago."

"Well," said Kettrick, "if that isn't a strange coincidence!" He was afraid to pick up his cup, much as he wanted the drink. He was afraid his hand would shake.

"Coincidence?"

"Yes. That we should come so close to meeting here." Eagerly, with all the false sincerity he could muster, he asked, "How is Seri? Is he well and flourishing?"

"He is well," said Flay. "He did not tell us you were back."

"He doesn't know it."

"Oh?" said Flay. "Well, it is different in different lands. With us, a friend and partner would be the first to know."

"Not," said Kettrick, "if your friend and partner is an honest man and wishes to stay that way...and you con-template a crime."

Now he reached resolutely for the cup and laughed to cover his unsteadiness.

"You knew, perhaps, that the I-C drove me out of the Cluster, under pain of arrest if I ever came back."

"I knew that. Seri himself told me when he first came here."

"Ah," said Kettrick. "Then you must understand that I came back secretly."

He drank, aware that Flay was watching him with eyes like two little bright hard stones. Aware of Boker drinking, desperately silent. Aware of Chai in a corner, always in a corner watching, and her muzzle twitching as it did when something smelled wrong to her.

"Secretly?" said Flay. "And yet you are trading."

"Boker is trading. My friend and I are only shadows." He grinned at Flay. "Boker is transporting shadows to a certain place, and in the meantime we're depending on my friends to keep the secret in case the I-C asks." He leaned a little closer. "Because of that the trading will be extra good...if you haven't already stripped yourselves for Seri. We can afford it, you see, because in a very short while we'll be rich."

"Shadows," said Flay. "Well, well. And when will the shadows come out into the light? Where does a trader who cannot trade go to get rich in the Cluster?"

"To the White Sun," said Kettrick, "to buy heartstones from the Krinn. That's where I was going when they caught me, just a hair's breadth away from a million credits. I couldn't forget that, Flay. That's why I came back, and that's why Boker is risking a stretch at Narkad to help me."

Flay's eyes opened wider, losing some of their hard glaze. "A million credits," he repeated. Suddenly he was roaring with laughter. "We don't give a hang for money here, but we like courage, and we like independence, and we don't greatly like the I-C, who come meddling with their damned spot-checks every so often to see if we're sending out drugs or poisons."

He leaned over and shook Ketrick by the shoulder. "Good luck, Johnny. I'm glad to see you again, and since I will not see you again after you go, we must make this week a special one, a sort of hail and farewell from the Firgals." He filled the cups again, all bluff good fellowship and honest joy. "How's that? We'll hunt, and eat, and drink, and shower each other with gifts, and we'll trade, even though Seri was just here. We'll do you better than you did on Gurra." He thrust the cup at Ketrick and another at Boker. "The women have been weaving a great deal of cloth, and last winter's pelts were especially..."

Ketrick caught it. "Gurra?"

"You just came from there, didn't you?" asked Flay. "I thought you said..."

"No," said Ketrick. "We came from Pellin—" naming one of the alternates to the Gurra route "—and the trading was good there."

"Pellin," said Flay, shaking his head. "I must have heard wrong. Well, it's no matter. No matter at all." He went to the stairway and hollered down it in his own tongue. While his back was turned both men tossed back their drinks and wiped the nervous sweat off their faces, and Boker's lips formed silently a word that meant, "There was a dirty one!"

The tension seemed to have disappeared. A buxom girl with thick red braids swinging down her back brought up a huge tray of food, and they ate, and Flay's strapping sons began to come in from their work, and they ate and drank, and after a while everyone was happy and roaring out songs.

At a quite early hour, because the Firgals went early to bed, Ketrick and Boker rode back to the ship in the dark blowing dusk, loaded with food and drink. Three of Flay's sons went along as escort, to keep them from straying in the hills. When they reached the ship the sons went in with them, smiling and interested, chattering in fluent *lingua*. They were fascinated by ships, they said, and wanted to look around.

They looked, while Hurth and Glevan stuffed themselves and fell gratefully into their bunks. Ketrick had half expected something like this, so the sons peered everywhere without finding the spare bars hidden among the cargo, seeing only the obvious break in the pump linkage that fed the air supply. They stood around watching for quite a while after Boker and Ketrick went to work on the jump unit, and Ketrick fumed inwardly because they had to keep the pace leisurely while the audience was around. Finally the sons got bored and drifted off to the bridgeroom and went to sleep on the seats. After that Boker and Ketrick worked like madmen.

When at last it was Ketrick's turn to sleep it was easy to believe that everything would go all right now. The sons would be a nuisance, but as long as that link bar was missing they would be content. Boker and Hurth and Glevan would work around the clock. Ketrick would do the trading and keep Flay happy, and help the others as much as he could. They would have *Grellah* jump ready in record time and...

And go on after Seri with their hands reached out to catch the Doomstar.

And how much chance did they have to catch it, or stop it, or even slow it down.

The Firgals were in on it. They knew. Perhaps some-where in that honeycomb town they had hidden away a piece of another world's destruction, bribed by Seri's glibly friendly, subtly threatening tongue. Just one thing promised to them would be enough for these people... safety for their own sun, their own cherished world. "The Doomstar will never shine for us." They had given their lives, their devotion, and endless hard work to this dying land. It would be a little thing to them to sacrifice some

other planet, some other sun, to the ambitions of other men, as long as Thwayn was safe. The quarrel was none of theirs. All they knew was what belonged to them, what they made with their own strong hands and kept at the price of their own blood.

He did not know that he could entirely blame them.

But he could and did hate Seri with a vicious and dreadful hatred.

He slept and dreamed, and this time he walked in the sick light of the Doomstar with Boker and Nillaine and Flay and a host of others, all led by Glevan beating solemnly on a muffled drum. Presently Kettrick left them and ran by him-self, searching and calling through the twisted streets, because Larith was somewhere there and needed him. He heard her voice quite clearly, crying out his name. Once or twice he saw the vanishing flutter of her skirts. He did not find her.

Next day he began the trading. It was too cold for an outside fair around the ship such as they had had at Gurra. Long lines of pack animals carried the bales of boxes into the city, to the Council Hall, and carried the furs and woollens and raw yarns back to *Grellah*.

If Seri had actually done any trading here, it had not made a noticeable dent in the Firgals' wealth. Kettrick traded all day and then took his turn with the others at night in the rusty bowels of the ship, getting glassy-eyed for lack of sleep but pleased all the same that *Grellah* would be ready in a little over two days instead of four.

Next morning Flay came out to the ship with no pack animals, but with a dozen men accoutred for the hunt, and a gaggle of "hounds," hairy creatures all tooth and claw and snuffling eagerness.

"There is no haste, Johnny," he said. "My son the smith, and he is the best smith even though he is my son, says it will take him more than seven days to make your bar. Perhaps as many as ten, because he must get a special metal."

Kettrick allowed his face to fall, but not too far.

"So," said Flay, "let the trading wait for a while. The goods will keep, but my hounds are spoiling for a run. Come and hunt."

Kettrick hesitated. "Ten days," he said. "That's too bad."

"Why, Johnny?"

"It's still a long way to the White Sun."

"Learn patience. It will wait."

"Well, since there's no help for it..." Kettrick shrugged. "Maybe it's a good thing at that, when I think about it. Kirnanoc is the next jump from here..."

Flay appeared to be waiting politely for him to explain.

"I mean, Seri has to go there, too, so it's just as well for us to sit here for a while, give him time to do his business and clear out. I wouldn't want to run into Seri, especially on Kirnanoc." Kettrick's smile was dazzling in its sincerity. "Part-ner or not, I wouldn't trust him not to turn me in to the I-C office there. He had enough trouble on my account two years ago."

He knew that this possibility was exactly what was on Flay's mind, only in reverse. He was worried about Seri, not Kettrick, and he wanted no risk of a chance meeting.

Kettrick went hunting with Flay. Chai ran by his stirrup. The hounds did not like her, nor she them, and they stayed apart. The hounds killed twice. Something red and strange came into Chai's gaze. When they sighted a third quarry she said, "Kill, John-nee?"

He spoke to Flay and the hounds were leashed. The men watched while the great gray Tchell went

coursing, transfig-ured with a deadly beauty. Her body bent and swayed and stretched itself in the steps of a ballet dancer with a horned and fleeing creature across the red-gold grass, a swift ballet climaxed with a single leap. Flay grunted, with mingled ad-miration and distaste.

"You have a peculiar friend."

"She is loyal," Kettrick said. "Her people are still too close to the beast for treachery."

They rode back toward the city with the lolling carcasses strapped behind saddles and Chai cleaned herself daintily with handfuls of grass.

It was dusk and coming on to snow when they met a boy, riding like the wind.

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## 13

The company reined up, waiting while the boy talked to Flay, his voice urgent and excited. Because of the way the boy kept glancing at him, Kettrick knew that this was no do-mestic matter. It concerned him. He sat very still in the saddle, his hands tight on the reins. Snowflakes brushed his face with their cold, delicate touch. It seemed a very long time before Flay turned to him and said in *lingua*, "An I-C ship has landed, Johnny."

Kettrick's heart gave a great leap. Luck was with them for once. They would not have to wait until they reached Kirmanoc. Help was here. They could tell the I-C men about Seri and the Doomstar, and with their faster ship they...

A veil of snow blew between him and Flay, and through it in the dusk he could feel what he could not clearly see; Flay's eyes straining to read his face.

And he realized that luck was not with them at all.

Until the two ships were jump ready, they were all guests of the Firgals. And if the Firgals became suspicious, because of one slight word or action, that either or both groups might be on the track of Seri and the Doomstar, then none of them would live to take off.

And the I-C could not possibly have chosen a worse time for a random spot check of Thwayn. Their arrival so close behind *Grellah*, and both of them so close behind *Starbird*, was enough to make anyone suspicious.

He was surprised at the steadiness of his own voice when he spoke.

"This is what we were afraid of, why we brought the trade goods and tried to make everything look normal. But now comes the real test, Flay."

"Test, Johnny?"

"Boker and the others can take care of themselves. The I-C has nothing against them. So it comes down to me, and you. Will you hide me, or will you turn me in?"

He had never thought to see the day when he would hope that the answer would be, "I'll turn you in and be damned."

"Turn you in, Johnny? My friend? May the Frost King freeze me into white, stone if I could think of such a thing?" Flay pondered a moment, shaking the snowflakes from his red braids. Then he spoke to the boy, who moved over beside Kettrick. "Go with him, Johnny. Don't worry about the I-C!"

In a minute Flay and his party had vanished into the dark-ening snowfall. Kettrick looked after his friend with some-thing less than gratitude, and prayed that Boker and Hurth and Glevan would keep their mouths shut. The boy called to him and started away in a different direction. Kettrick fol-lowed, keeping

close so as not to lose him. Chai ran easily beside him with her hand on his knee.

Presently, in what was now full dark and increasing cold, Ketrick smelled smoke and the heavy sweet-sour reek of penned animals. Stone walls appeared on either side of him, narrow as a cattle chute, and he realized that that was what it was. The boy halted and opened a gate, and they passed through into one of the big caves, half natural and half man-made, where stock was held over the winter.

Ketrick was aware of dim shuffling mass movements as the creatures got Chai's scent and shifted away from it, snorting. The air became warmer and free from snow. The boy leaned over and took hold of Ketrick's bridle. They moved on very slowly and then stopped in pitch darkness. Ketrick heard the boy jump to the ground. A moment later a sulphur match spluttered brightly, dimmed, and brightened again to the larger glow of a lantern. The boy beckoned.

Ketrick dismounted and followed him with Chai, into a hallway or tunnel cut in the stone at the back of the cave. They followed it for a long way. The floor slanted sometimes up, sometimes down. In places, the rock walls and ceiling were replaced by stout timbers chinked with clay. At irregular intervals there were doorways. Those on his left hand opened into buried storerooms. Those on the right belonged to houses, and through them he could hear the many sounds of families getting their dinners. The boy had brought them in at the lower end of one of the streets and they were now going behind the houses in one of the network of tunnels that gave access to storage cellars and to the cattle pens on days when extreme cold or heavy drifting made the street undesirable.

At length the boy halted and knocked on one of the doors. It opened a crack and Ketrick saw the same buxom red-braided girl who had brought the food up to them, and he knew they were back at Flay's.

There was some hurried low-voiced conversation, only this time Ketrick knew it did not concern him. The boy caught one of the red braids in his hand and pulled on it until the girl's face was in a position where she could not avoid being kissed, and she pushed at him with a great show of rage but no determination, and they both laughed, and Ketrick was glad that there were some people still with no more on their minds than kissing. He wished he were one of them.

The girl beckoned him in finally, with a sidelong look at Chai. This was a different part of the house from the one Ketrick had seen before, and temporarily deserted, though there was noise enough beyond. The girl whisked him up another narrow stair that was like a ladder, her thick sturdy legs in knitted stockings as agile as a goat's. Under her woollen skirt she wore knickers made out of material as thick as a horse blanket. It was a cold world, Ketrick thought, and wondered if he would ever see another.

At the top of the ladder was a room with a close bed and a shaggy hide rug on the floor. A tray of food and a clay bottle were laid ready on a table, and a lantern burned. A feeble fire struggled against a draught in the small hearth, so that the room was well supplied with smoke but little warmth. The girl crooked her finger importantly and he followed her to the bed. She scrambled into it and pointed with her finger to a place in the wall where the chinking was gone from between the stone and a massive support post. He was about to ask her a futile question when she made a gesture of wild impatience, as though to a very stupid child, bidding him be quiet. At the same time he heard voices from beyond the wall.

The girl wriggled out of the bed and went away, shutting the door carefully behind her. Ketrick put his eye to the chink.

On the other side of the wall was the room where Flay had entertained him and Boker. Flay and Boker were there now. They had just come in, and with them were two men in the dull-green uniforms of the I-C.

One of them was Sekma.

Ketrick drew back, feeling physically sick. He could hear them talking, but for the moment he was too stunned to lis-ten. Chai started to speak to him and he caught her just in time, warning her to silence. Then he pointed to the table. "Eat," he whispered. "Not hungry now, bring the bottle."

She brought him the clay bottle and then settled herself to eat from the tray. Ketrick pulled one of the heavy blankets around him and hunched up in the corner of the bed where the chink was. He took a long pull at the whiskey and then laid his head against the cold stone.

On the other side of the wall the men had sat down and Flay was pouring drinks for them, and everything was friend-ly. The second I-C man, a plum-colored, loose-jointed chap from Shargo on the other side of the Cluster, was just at the edge of Ketrick's view. His rather blobby features ap-peared free from all strain. Boker, his silver mane bristling down over the neck of his coverall, had his back to Ket-trick. His voice sounded as jovial and careless as ever. It was only because Ketrick knew him so well that he could tell by the set of his back and rather overlargeness of his gestures that he was inwardly anything but careless.

Sekma was facing Ketrick. The narrow head, the tight curls like a copper helmet, the chiseled bones, the brilliant blue eyes...there he was, so close, so tantalizingly close. Ketrick had only to cry out through the chink in the wall...

He bit hard on hiis tongue to keep from doing it.

"Just a routine check," Sekma was saying. "Thank you, Flay." They all drank politely.

And why the hell, thought Ketrick, couldn't you have made your routine check a little earlier, when Seri was here? You could have caught him then...

No. Seri would have set up shop for an innocent trader. He would have had the components of the Doomstar well hidden, most certainly beyond the range of any ordinary search. And if by chance he had been caught, the Firgals would have seen to it that Sekma did not profit by his interference.

"Everything is in order," Boker was telling Sekma. "You're welcome to inspect the ship."

"I shall," said Sekma, and accepted another cup from Flay, who now sat down beside him.

"You may inspect the trading place, too," said Flay. "Al-though every time you do it is the same thing. Some day I will have to arrange a few parcels of narcotic just to make you happy."

"It's a kind thought, Flay," said Sekma. "We like to have some justification for these trips, which are quite as tire-some for us as they are for you."

"At least," said Flay, "Interworld-Commerce is democratic. It sends its high officers to work as well as the rank-and-file."

Sekma smiled. "It doesn't 'send.' The choice is mine."

"Then I would say that your devotion to duty is almost as good as a Firgal's." He flourished the bottle again, though Sekma had hardly touched his second cup. "Here, make your routine visit less tiresome with this. And perhaps tomorrow we will hunt, eh? This snow will not lie deep."

"That would be enjoyable," said Sekma. "Thank you." He lifted his cup and sipped from it. Apparently his attention now was centered entirely on the liquor. Ketrick knew better. Sekma's whole body was a quivering antenna, sensitive to the flicker of an eyelash, the silence of a held breath.

Boker said, "On Pellin I was offered a piece of contraband...a very attractive piece, I might say...but I declined it."

Sekma's gaze never lifted from the smoky liquid in the cup. "You're learning virtue, Boker. I'm pleased." He savored the rather musty bouquet and then drank. He set the cup back down. "This trip has one aspect that is not routine, I must admit."

"Ah," said Flay. "Aha."

Boker's back stiffened. Only the Shargonese continued to sip his drink contentedly, unaware that death in the shape of strong red-braided men filled all the house and all the town around him. If he were not unaware, Kettrick envied him his iron nerve.

"I have heard a rumor," Sekma said, "that Johnny Kettrick is back in the Cluster." Now his blue gaze flashed like lightning from Boker to Flay.

"Johnny Kettrick?" said Boker.

"Johnny?" said Flay. "Is he indeed? I should like to see him again. He can hunt and he can drink, he leaves my women alone, and he gives me the best barter of any trader. Boker is all right, Boker is good, but there was never another one like Johnny. You should not have driven him away."

"Ah huh," said Sekma. "I have heard that tune sung before. Of course, then, you haven't seen him?"

"Not I," said Flay, "Not here."

"And you, Boker? Not here, of course, but say, at Ree Darva? There was word that he had been seen there, in the Out-Quarter."

"That may be," said Boker, "but it must have been after I left."

Sekma pinned him with that sharp gaze. "Why do you say it *must* have been? Do you know that he's back?"

Of course, thought Kettrick, Sekma couldn't be sure that he had ever reached Tananaru. He might have gone anywhere from Aldebaran. He might have died there from sickness, or been killed by some squalid idiot with a share-the-wealth plan, or perished of an accident.

Boker said, "You know we shipped together, you know we were friends. He'd have come to see me. That's why I say he must have come after I left, if he came at all, and that I can't tell. This is the first I've heard of it."

Admirable liar, Boker. Convincing liar. Kettrick knew how he must be suffering. He found himself starting to laugh hysterically, and pulled hard on the bottle to stop it. Here for the first time in their lives he and Boker wanted to level with Sekma, and they couldn't. All because the Doomstar was true.

He crouched in the close bed, peering through the chink and shivering with cold and frustration, until the men left. Before they did they had eaten a great deal, and drunk a good bit, and some of Flay's many sons had joined in, and somewhere along the line Flay asked Sekma where he had come from, and Sekma said, "Kirnanoc."

"Ah," said Flay. "Then you will go south across the Clus-ter?"

Sekma nodded. "To Gurra. That was another of Kettrick's favorite haunts. They may have heard of him there."

"There was no word of him on Pellin," Boker said. "If there had been, I'd have heard it. Everyone remembers that we were friends."

"It is possible," said Flay carelessly, "that your rumor about Johnny is like most rumors, mere wind blowing from one empty space to another."

They went away, leaving the room dark and silent. Leaving Kettrick, on the other side of the wall, to lie and think. To pray that Boker or Hurth or Gievan might find a time when he could speak to Sekma alone. Surely such a time would come...it only needed a moment. During the inspection of the ship, perhaps...

But Flay's sons would be there. They did not speak Darvan, and it would be easy for Boker to talk

to Sekma in a language they could not understand. Except that a name is a name in any language, and so is a word like Doomstar. And in any case, the Fingals were no fools. Even if Boker were actually only telling Sekma the latest dirty story, they would be instantly suspicious, wondering what was being said that the speaker wished to hide from them. The fate of their world hung on it. If they had to make a mistake, it would be at the expense of the outworlders, not their own.

He hoped that Boker and the others would think of that.

Unable to lie any longer in the stifling bed, Ketrick rose and stood looking out the tiny window into the freezing night, with the snow drifting gently down in the lee of the house. The confinement of the little room was almost more than he could bear.

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## 14

He bore it for two days, largely with the help of the clay bottles that the broad girl kept him supplied with. Even so it was not easy. He waited with leaping nerves for the sound of feet on the stairs, the sudden angry crashing of the door.

Each night in the next room Sekma and Boker and Flay and such of Flay's sons as were not on duty elsewhere ate and drank and danced delicately around the truth, while Ketrick listened with what finally became impatience for the one in-avoidable wrong word. Sometimes he was tempted to shout it out himself, just to get the thing over with.

Other times he slept uneasily, passing from the first blank slumber induced by the bottle to a succession of bad dreams wherein he strove endlessly to catch up with Seri and was endlessly balked. The number and variety of frustration dreams his mind could produce on this subject were simply astounding.

Again, he paced the floor in a rage of impatience. *Grellah* would be ready now. They ought to be taking off. How long was Sekma going to stay? Was Flay going to try and hold him here "until it was over," as he thought he was holding Ketrick?

Several times he heard Flay, in his shrewd manner, question Sekma about his route. Each time it was the same. Out of Kirnanoc, bound for Gurra.

Ketrick wondered how Sekma, who must have left Tananaru after *Grellah* did, had managed to get to Kirnanoc so far ahead of them. He supposed it could be done. A long jump ship could certainly do it, by going clear out of the Cluster and then in again; the longest way, but the quickest. Or a relay of the fast I-C ships, taking a more direct route than *Grellah's* and wasting no time on stopovers.

Why would he bother? Mere accident? Or had Sekma seen the posting of *Grellah's* itinerary and decided to intercept her in the hope of catching the missing Ketrick?

Maybe. Only then why hadn't Sekma challenged Boker's assertion that he had come by way of Pellin?

Ketrick's head ached, and from more than the fumes of the whiskey. And he felt like weeping when he thought how close Sekma must have come to meeting Seri at Kirnanoc, all unaware.

I am the hell and all of a spaceman, Ketrick thought, a great success as a trader, and loved by all with fur, skin, or feathers. But as a man entrusted with a vital mission which all these qualities uniquely fit him to perform, I am a Cluster-wide disaster.

Sekma must know that by now. Then why was he looking for Ketrick when the Doomstar was so much more, so infinitely more, important?

Perhaps he wasn't, really...

Kettrick held and nursed this little flicker of hope, afraid to blow on it and let it grow, afraid to let it die. Because if he were wrong and Sekma really was looking for him, there could only be one reason; it was too late to keep the Doomstar from shining, and Sekma desired to give his thanks to the man who had failed him so abysmally.

He would not blame Sekma one little bit.

Just before dawn of the third day he was brought up out of a thin sleep by the thunder of a ship's rockets firing for lift-off. He rushed to the window and saw a streak of flame van-ishing across the sky beyond the hills. And he had a moment of sheer panic, wondering if Boker had decided to sacrifice him to the common good.

A short time after that Flay came in and said, "They're gone, Johnny, those busy I-C men. Gone to pester the Gurrans, looking for you." He pushed Kettrick jovially toward the door. "Come out, breathe the air. Your friend looks as though she would enjoy a run. Let us hunt today."

Kettrick went down the steep stairs carefully because his legs were shaky. "Hadn't we better get on with the trading, Flay?"

"There's no hurry. The bar is not done yet, and we can trade when the weather's bad. Today is a good day for hunting."

"All right," said Kettrick. "Fine. We'll ask Boker to go with us." He looked down at himself and scratched his stubbled jaw. "I've got to get clean clothes, and a shave. You can wait that long?"

"I'll wait for you." Flay laughed and shook his head. "Why does a man wish to go with a naked face like a wom-an's? Let your beard grow, Johnny. It was given you to keep you warm."

"Other worlds," said Kettrick, "are not so cold as this one." He held out his hand. "I'm grateful to you, Flay."

"But Johnny, we are friends! Go on, make yourself pretty, only be quick about it. I'll be after you as soon as my hounds are out of the kennel."

Kettrick smiled and nodded, closing his coverall tight against the outside cold. He tweaked the broad girl's braid and kissed her, and promised her a present from the ship, and she laughed, and Flay began to bawl out orders for the hunt to get under way.

There were already saddled animals waiting, and the boy was bringing up more. Kettrick took one of them and rode leisurely out of the city, with Chai padding beside him in the trampled snow.

When they were in the hills he kicked the beast into a lum-bering run, pulling it down only when they came in sight of the ship. The huge red sun slid up the eastern sky, staining the snow with a bloody light, turning the clouds to sullen fire. The mounts of Flay's sons were tethered to the tripod gear, standing patiently with their backs to the wind. Kettrick tied his beast beside them and went up the ladder to the hatch. He met Boker just inside, with two of Flay's big red sons behind him.

"Saw you coming, Johnny." Boker threw his arms around Kettrick and pounded him, laughing. "We did it, didn't we? Sent the I-C packing off like puppies on a false trail. Flay was tremendous. I wish you could have seen him..."

"I did," said Kettrick. "I was on the other side of the wall." And he brayed with laughter, looking at Flay's sons. "Your father is a great man, listen to him and learn." The sons beamed happily. Kettrick spoke again to Boker. "He wants us to hunt with him today. I have to hurry and wash up. He's on his way."

"Go ahead, then," Boker said, and pushed Kettrick ahead down the companionway. Kettrick felt

one brief sharp pres-sure of his fingers and that was all the warning he had.

Boker hit the nearest son.

He hit him hard and clean and with such concentrated pur-pose that Kettrick heard the jawbone crack. The second son, reacting with the swiftness of a man whose life depends on his reflexes, hit Kettrick, but Kettrick was already moving and the blow glanced like a piledriver off his hip instead of disem-boweling him. Kettrick dug his own knee into the man's groin and battered him as hard as he could around the head. He seemed to be battering a rock. The man grunted and appeared to withdraw into himself like a turtle, and with the hand that was not busy fending off Kettrick he reached for the pistol in his belt. The first son had sunk to one knee. He was shaking his head dazedly, but he was by no means out. He too was pawing for his gun.

Kettrick caught a mighty smash in the face that drove him back against the wall. His ears sang and his nose gushed blood. It had become suddenly very dark. Through the dark-ness he saw the red-haired man, apparently quite slowly and leisurely, draw the clumsy pistol from his belt.

Kettrick lurched forward and caught the man's wrist with both hands. The wrist was like an iron bar. It flung him to and fro and another iron bar was pounding him over the head. He was blind mad now and he hung on. There was great con-fusion beside him in the companionway, a roaring and a lumbering of shapes. It quieted abruptly and one of the shapes, very large and gray, flung itself toward Kettrick. There was a growl and a grunt and the iron arm went limp and fell away. Kettrick and Boker stood panting, staring at each other out of bloody faces, while Chai stood over two uncon-scious sons and licked her fingers reflectively.

Kettrick pointed to the hatch. "Out," he said.

Chai leaned over and picked up one man by his collar. From inside the ship came an outcry of voices and then the crashing roar of a gun going off in an enclosed space.

Boker said, "The bridgeroom."

They ran down the companionway and up the ladder into the bridge. Glevan was standing over the third son, who lay on his face on the floor. Hurth also lay on the floor. The pistol lay between them. The heavy steel pin in Glevan's hand was covered with blood.

"He was trying to smash the controls," Glevan said. "I think I killed him." He dropped the pin and kneeled beside Hurth, touching him gently. "Hurth tried to stop him. Hurth?"

There was no answer. Boker bent over the red-haired man. "He's dead, all right. Help me get him out . . ."

He broke off as Kettrick pointed through the bridge win-dow. Flay's hunt was coming from the hills, and coming fast. Much too fast.

"They must have seen my tracks in the snow," Kettrick said, "and wondered why I started running as soon as I was out of sight."

Boker said, "We've got to have fifteen minutes to ship that link bar. See that we have it, Johnny." He pulled Glevan to his feet. "Come on."

Glevan shook his head and stumbled out after Boker. Hurth still had not moved.

Kettrick opened the arms locker and took two of the bell-mouthed rifles. He stuffed his shirt with extra clips of the gas shells and went down the ladder.

At the foot of it he met Chai. "Men come, John-nee."

"I know." The companionway was clear. Chai had tumbled the two red sons out into the snow. He sent her up after the third one and walked onto the hatch opening, oddly calm now, quite cold. All the

heat had run out of him at the sight of the two men lying on the floor of the bridge. His hands were perfectly steady as he loaded the rifles without haste and leaned one against the wall beside him. All the time he could see Flay and a dozen riders coming at a pounding run across the field.

He fired, laying the shells carefully across the front of their advance.

The dark puffs of vapor blossomed, obscuring the riders. Some of them reappeared, carried onward by their forward momentum. They did not go far before the mounts stumbled and went down and the riders fell out of the saddle.

Chai appeared behind him, carrying the dead Firgal over her shoulder. She pitched him out through the hatchway. A heavy slug rang off the metal beside her. Rifles began to bang as the vapor blew away and revealed seven or eight men who had escaped the first volley. Flay was among them. Kettrick pulled Chai back and spun the manual control wheel beside the hatch. The thick steel door slid almost shut. A rattling sound came from the other side of it like hail on a tin roof. Kettrick fired through the slit.

The men, who had bunched together again to rush the hatchway, broke apart and when the gas-cloud cleared only Flay and three others were still able to sit on their mounts.

There was a bullhorn beside the hatch, useful on occasion for directing too large and eager crowds at a trading. Kettrick took it down and spoke into it.

"Throw down your rifles. You have five minutes to get your people out of blast range. Flay, come and get your sons."

He repeated the message three times, his voice thrown huge and metallic against the bitter morning. Below him he saw one of the red-haired men get up and steady himself against the ladder, and then help the second one, who lurched up holding his broken jaw. The third lay awkwardly where he had fallen, his legs and arms all askew. By the end of the second message the riders had begun to drop their rifles. By the beginning of the third, Flay was coming.

Kettrick held the bell-mouthed rifle pointed down, his own body sheltered behind the door. Out on the field the three re-maining men worked hard to get the fallen out of range. The two red-haired men below were now bent in an unmis-takable attitude over the body of their brother.

Flay came up beneath the hatch. He looked first at his sons and then at Kettrick.

"You lied to me, Johnny."

"And you to me, Flay."

"I spared you, and my son is dead."

"Hurth is dead also."

Flay's broad dark face glistened as though with sweat, although the frost of his breathing whitened his beard.

"Why, Johnny?"

"What did Seri promise you, Flay? That your old red sun would live his time out undisturbed?" He saw that this was true and he shook his head, remembering the little people of Gurra and the words he had said to Nillaine. "Others love their worlds, Flay. Others wish to live." The two brothers were lifting the body of the third to lie across his saddle. Ket-trick nodded toward them. "So much the Doomstar has done for you. Now get them out of here."

Flay looked at him a moment longer and then he turned and lifted his gaze to the red sun. His shoulders bent and the straightness left his spine. He moved to help his sons and in a minute or two they rode away, leading the dead man's beast. None of them spoke again, nor looked again at Kettrick.

*Grellah* sprang suddenly to life with a hum and whit of systems cutting in. Kettrick pushed the

automatic control to close. The hatch clicked shut and sealed itself for space. The ladder retracted into its slot with a hollow grinding sound. Ketrick motioned to Chai and they walked back along the companionway, past the safety door that closed and sealed in its turn behind them, forming one of *Grellah's* two airlocks. The warning hooter began. Ketrick climbed the ladder to the bridge.

Boker was already at the controls. Hurth had been lifted onto one of the seats and Glevan was holding him. Ketrick sent Chai to help, noticing that Hurth was at least still breathing and able to groan. His skin was a hideous drowned color, but the blood on his shirt was bright enough. Ketrick sat down in Hurth's accustomed place beside Boker. Through the window they could see Flay's people getting the last of their comrades to safety. Ketrick watched them until the erupting flame and smoke of ignition blotted them from view. Then he said, "This is another place I can never come back to." *Grellah* rose up slowly past the huge red sun.

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## 15

Hurth lived. That was one good, fine, happy thing. The slug had plowed along his heart ribs, knocking him unconscious and losing him a considerable amount of blood, but he lived.

Otherwise, there was nothing to cheer about.

"I did not get one minute alone with Sekma," Boker said furiously. "None of us did. Those three red apes, or their brothers, were with us every breath we drew. They wanted to be sure, I guess...in case there was any collusion, they wanted to know about it. And I didn't dare take a chance. None of us was armed, and they were set on a hair trigger, waiting to pounce on the first wrong move."

"Also," said Ketrick, "there was me."

"I love you, Johnny," Boker said, "like a brother. But if I'd thought I could do it and get away with it..."

"Sure," said Ketrick. "I know. So now what? Sekma's on his way to Gurra, so we can forget him."

"Johnny, there was something not quite right. When he inspected the ship, he saw the stuff from Gurra, and of course I had to say I'd got it on Pellin. Flay's sons didn't know the difference but you know damn well Sekma did, and yet he never batted an eye. He's a smart man, a very smart man, as nobody should know better than we. Maybe he got the message. Maybe he's really on Seri's track himself, and just using their story about you as a cover."

"I clung to some such hope myself," said Ketrick. "I hope it's true. However, just in case it isn't, we'd better think what we're going to do when we hit Kirnanoc." And he added grimly, "There's one good thing about Kirnanoc. I don't have any friends there."

"Nobody does," said Boker. "And for that reason, you'd better stay in the ship, out of sight, while we're there. I'll do the footwork."

They discussed it over and over while they were in jump.

"Unless we find that Sekma is on the job," said Boker, "We'll have to tell the I-C what we know, there's no doubt about that. Only I'm wondering when."

"What do you mean, when?" asked Hurth, who was in a constant chafe lest his wound not heal quick enough to let him be in on everything that happened.

"If we go to them first thing," said Boker, "right after land, we might never take off again. They might want to hold us for questioning, or until somebody higher up comes and tells them what to do. They might want to throw Johnny in the pokey and the rest of us along with him."

Hurth nodded. "I never thought of that."

"I have," said Kettrick. "The Doomstar is more important than what happens to us, but on the other hand... Hell, they might not even believe us. They might think it was all just a big grandstand play to take the heat off us. And by the time they could get hold of Sekma and check with him, it would be too late."

"My suggestion," said Boker, "is to wait until we're ready to jump, meanwhile finding out all we can about Seri... Then send the I-C a message and run like hell."

"Unless," said Kettrick, "*Starbird* is still on her pad when we get there. If she is, we'd better yell for help, loud and clear."

Glevan, who had little time for talk between nursing Hurth and nursing the jump unit, was of the opinion that they would never catch up with Seri and neither would the I-C, and that the Doomstar would presently be shining for the whole Cluster to see and bow to.

He was also of the opinion that Sekma had gone to Gurra just as he said he would. Kettrick was afraid to think other-wise himself. Yet when they came out of jump and entered their landing pattern at Kirnanoc, he found that he was hoping, wildly hoping, that they would find Sekma waiting for them when they hit the dirt.

The starport of Achera, Kirnanoc's principal city, was as busy as Kettrick remembered it. Achera was the center from which all flowed, blessing and curse alike, to the remainder of the planet. There were some small fields scattered abroad for emergency medical or military use, but they were not open to traders. They were among the human tribes of Kirnanoc, and on this world the human was not the dominant animal. They had nothing to trade, and they supplied neither useful hides nor edible meat. Humans from other planets found them depressing in the extreme.

Kirnanoc, because it was situated at a kind of crossroads in the Cluster, had worked up quite an enviable position as an exchange and clearing house where traders often came to barter with other traders, as an easier means of obtaining goods from very distant or difficult worlds than by going after them personally. Kettrick had often done business here in the Market, selling cargoes from the special touch places like Gurra and Thwayn for a better price than he could get at Tananaru.

Port Authority guided them in to a pad in the northwest quadrant of the field. There were several score of ships ranged in orderly rows as far as the eye, at this level, could see. It was impossible to tell whether or not *Starbird* was among them.

"I'll go sign in, and check the board," Boker said. "Back in half an hour."

He went out into the tawny glare of the afternoon. Ket-trick watched him walk out to the transport strip and catch one of the trams. He rode away in it toward the Adminis-tration Center and was lost to sight among the looming ships.

*Grellah's* fans were going, sucking in the outside air. The smell of heat and water and the faint indescribable sweet-ness like a wicked spice that was the true ancient breath of Achera began slowly to replace the stale metallic-tasting stuff inside the ship. Overcome with restlessness, Kettrick went below to work with Glevan and Hurth on the jump unit Chai, who had been forbidden to go outside, sat forlornly peering out the open hatch.

For all his fatalistic pessimism, Glevan had an obsession now about getting that unit ready. He had hardly waited for *Grellah* to sit down before he was grubbing at her vitals. Hurth, still sore and wobbly, was handing him tools and making insulting answers to Glevan's running commentary concerning the woes that were about to befall the Cluster.

"And soon. Very soon." Glevan's hands worked swiftly, his monkey face screwed up and his eyes intent on the mass of relay terminals he was checking. "If *Grellah* should turn into a space hawk as quick-flying as thought, she still would be too slow to catch the Doomstar."

"Then why work so hard?" demanded Hurth.

"Because I am a man, and a man is made of folly." His hands flickered among the colored wires, the many-colored posts, checking, tightening. One loose contact could mean disaster. "Man is also made of vanity. Between foolishness and vanity I fashion my own downfall. I like to think that I, with the skill of my hands and brain, can make this old ship do what she cannot do." He glanced abruptly at Ketrick. "Do you know, Johnny, there is a little less than one unit of Universal Arbitrary Time left before the meeting of the League of Cluster Worlds?"

"I do," said Ketrick. "I do."

And Hurth said gloomily, "Why is it that there's always some crazy idiot that has to make trouble?"

"The great cry of the human race," said Ketrick. "Nobody ever answered it yet."

They worked. The half hour passed, and few minutes more, and then Chai barked down the ladder well.

"John-nee!"

They jumped up, thinking it was Boker. But she said, "Men come. No Boker. Strange men."

They raced up the ladder to the companionway. Through the hatch Ketrick could see a small carrier bouncing toward them over the scorched concrete of the pad. There were several men in it, or rather several Achernans. He could make out the yellow tunics of spaceport guards.

"What do they want?" said Hurth. "And where's Boker?"

"I don't know," said Ketrick. "But my guess would be that we've stepped into a hornet's nest."

They stood for a moment, a little stunned by the sudden-ness of it, watching the carrier speed toward them.

"I never did like Kirnanoc," said Glevan softly. "There's a smell of evil about it." He struck Ketrick across the chest, pushing him away. "Get out of sight, Johnny, you and Chai. They've got no way of knowing you're aboard."

Ketrick hesitated.

Hurth said, "Go, Johnny. We may need you, awful bad."

He went then, swinging up the ladder as fast as he could, with Chai behind him. In *Grellah's* swagging mid-belly was the hatch into the cargo holds. He went through it with Chai and closed it very quietly behind him, and as he did so he heard the carrier stopping far below, and a challenging of voices.

In the close darkness he groped his way among the fixed cargo cradles until he judged he was hidden from anything but a determined inspection. He sat down on the cold iron that was a deck on land and a bulkhead in flight. Chai sat beside him.

They waited, in the silence and the blind dark.

After a short while Ketrick heard the muffled clatter of persons going up the ladder to the bridgeroom. There were voices. Even through the bulkhead door he could tell by the sound and cadence of them that they were not any of his. A little later they came down again pausing at various levels, and the pauses were accompanied by the clanging of hatch doors.

The steps approached their own hatch, and Ketrick put his hand on Chai to stop her growling.

"Freeze," he whispered.

They froze, hugged tight against the bolted frame of a cradle. From the baled goods within it a faint scene of crushed grasses and far-off sunlight touched him and made him think of Nillaine. The door was

flung open. The power-ful beam of a torch probed here and there. The alien voices spoke again, with a soft sweet sibilance that to Kettrick had always been profoundly unpleasant. Then they went away, leaving the hatch open. The light from, the center well made a small puddle in the blackness.

The noises from below were muted but unmistakable. Voices raised in angry protest; a brief confusion; the sound of the carrier starting up and going away; silence.

Kettrick wondered if they had left a guard. He waited a long time, listening. At length he sent Chai to find out. Her ears and nose were far keener than his. She came back shaking her head and snorting with displeasure.

"No one, John-nee. Bad smell, like footless thing." In the light from the door she made a gesture indicating a writhing movement.

"They're warm-blooded, just like us," said Kettrick. "They bear their young alive. They have really very pretty skin. But I agree with you."

"What now?"

"We wait till dark."

He looked at his wrist chronometer. It would not be a long wait. After that he would do something. He had no idea what it would be. But he knew that he had better think about it, and think fast.

He sat by the hatch, where he could hear if anyone came. The ship was uncannily quiet, hollow, creeping with faint echoes. Chai watched. And Kettrick felt most terribly alone.

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## 16

The worst of it was that he did not know at all what was going on.

The sequence of events was simple. They had landed. Boker had gone to sign in and check the spaceport board for *Starbird*. Boker had not returned. Spaceport guards had come and taken away Hurth and Glevan. Perfectly simple.

The question was why.

And Kettrick kept thinking, "It would be easier to figure this out if I weren't so scared." He was getting awfully tired of being scared. He wondered if you ever got to a point where the fear nerves were all so calloused that you couldn't feel them any more; if you ever got so bored with fear that you simply forgot it.

He could hear the wind thrumming on the hull, and the sense of aloneness was overpowering.

Boker, Hurth, and Glevan. What was happening to them, in the slender hands of the soft-spoken, black-eyed men of Achern, the men with the blunt jaws and the faint stripes running from the corners of the eyes to the fluted ear holes, and the lingering suggestion of folded skin at the throat?

The anger which had been there all along since the first sight of the approaching carrier finally asserted itself. It had a fine cleansing heat to it. People who talked piously against anger were people who had never had any real enemies, and people who preached against hate, all hate, under any circumstances, were people who had never been in fear of their lives. It was easy to love when you were not fighting for survival, and more than survival, against those who had never heard the word. Kettrick was full of hate, and he welcomed it. He held it, alone in *Grellah's* iron belly, and it drove the fear away.

Wherever they were and whatever was happening to them, Boker and Hurth and Glevan were depending on him.

Well, and so. Think.

Boker had gone to sign in and check the board for *Starbird*. He would have entered the central rotunda of the Administration Building. Ketrick remembered it well, a huge cube-shaped structure, very neat and glistening, a black floor, walls faced in an odd shape of pink, a native stone that took a high polish. There were mosaic murals, weirdly fluid things that had a way of wriggling if you looked at them too long.

Boker would have gone to the desk at the right of the entrance, marked registry. He would have placed the plastic square with *Grellah's* code number in the scanner and then punched the tape machine with his name, the names of his crew, his lading, port of origin, last port of call, next destination, and his pad number. Then he would have crossed to the board, a huge lighted panel that dominated the rotunda, with the service wing of the building to the right and the office wing to the left; the office wing where the I-C was.

Boker would have looked for *Starbird* among the many ships listed there. If the name did not appear, meaning that the ship had departed, he would then have gone to the small booths beside the board. Here on a keyboard he could punch the name *Starbird* and a data storage center would automatically provide him with the date of departure and destination of that ship.

Routine procedure, comfortably confined to incurious electrons. Only Ketrick was sure that that particular set of relays must have been altered to give notice to somebody that *Starbird* was being paged. And somebody had arrested Boker at once.

Somebody in authority, since the spaceport guards had come to take in Boker's crew.

Which meant to Ketrick that Achern was an active center, dedicated to the ultimate victory of the Doomstar, with at least a part of its high officialdom involved.

It was not easy to decide what to do, and he wished for the simple unaffected savagery of Thwayn where there was not such a huge, sophisticated apparatus arrayed against him. One thing was sure. The port Administration Building was no place to go for help or information. And Sekma, obviously, was not at Achern or he would have reacted by now to *Grellah's* landing. So much for hope.

When he knew that it must be dark outside he went very quietly up the ladder to the bridgeroom and took from the arms locker a skinning knife that Flay had given him as a gift. Then he went into the cubicle he had shared indistinguishably with Boker and cleaned himself of the grease and stains of the afternoon's unfinished labor.

He put on fresh clothing, hiding the knife in his tunic. Under Hurth's bunk in the adjoining cubicle he found a bat-tered round cap with a second officer's badge on it and a limp peak that would partly shadow his face. He also took what money he could find, including small coins. He still had his money belt, but it did him no good for casual spending.

He went down the ladder again, this time to the lower depths where Glevan kept his tools. Here he got a pair of heavy wire cutters. Then he returned to the companionway where he had left Chai on watch.

The ship's lights were out, except for those in the center well. The companionway was dark, showing the open hatch as a lighter area. Chai blew softly through her nose, and touched him.

He crouched close to her. He could see nothing. The out-side floods had not been turned on and the wide space of the pad was dark except for the glimmer of a cloudy sky. The glare of the administration area was too far off to matter. But he trusted Chai.

"Man?"

"Under ship. Not move."

They had left a guard, then, or more properly a spy. He wanted to tell Chai to kill, but he only said,

"Hit him."

She went down the ladder like a puff of smoke and there was no noise at all until somebody pulled in his breath in a startled half cry that was broken off by a heavy slap. A second later she called. He went down the ladder. In the black shadow under *Grellah's* tripod gear there was a lighter blob. He did not stop to examine it. With Chai running be-side him he went off between the lines of ships.

He went all the way on foot, avoiding the transport strips with their too-many passengers. Fortunately *Grellah's* pad was in one of the outermost rows. Even so it was a long way, and he expected every moment to hear a warning hooter sound for liftoff, and he prayed that they would not be caught on the pad.

They were not. Ships landed and took off, but they were in other quadrants. The tall wire fence appeared at length be-fore him, topped with intricate barbs to prevent climbing.

Kettrick cut the heavy mesh quickly and let Chai and him-self through. An interrupted impulse would show up on a board at Administration, warning that the fence had been cut, and where, and the guards would be sent at once. But they would be looking for thieves breaking in to pilfer from the docked ships, not for someone going the other way. At least he hoped so. Somebody would probably put two and two together when the spy came to and yelled. In the meantime, he had better make what speed he could.

He took time to bend the ends of the cut strands back in the right direction with the plier teeth of the cutters. Then he ran like the devil across the periphery road and the cleared space beyond, into a belt of trees that followed the moss-grown ditch of a disused canal.

He headed for the city. Behind him he heard a carrier come along the fence line looking for the break. There was no pursuit.

Achern was an old city. Much of it was built of the pink stone, which was extremely hard and enduring, and parts of it were quite incredibly old. It had not changed too greatly with the impact of new technologies and the influx of new races and ideas. The Achernans had greedily assimilated what they wanted and rejected the rest, including any resi-dent alien population. They disliked humans intensely and saw to it that there was no little coagulation of permanent intruders that might develop into a political force.

Humanity flowed off its ships into the Market, the taverns and shops and business houses and the other houses along the Canal of the Blue Lanterns, leaving money in Achernan pockets all the way, and then it flowed back into its ships and departed. Diplomatic and other unavoidable human per-sonnel such as the I-C and corporation staffs were rotated on a three-year basis.

There had of course been some new building, chiefly around the starport and chiefly of an industrial nature. In the main, the Achernans found their ancient city adequate just as it was, and if the humans did not they were welcome to go elsewhere.

It was a beautiful city, one of the loveliest in the Cluster. The truly massive, piled, pinnacled buildings of pink stone were made to look as delicate as clouds, afloat above the mirroring canals, their hard outlines all softened with carv-ing as though the wind had fretted them. The Achernans loved carving. Even the boats on the canals were carved, and the graceful spans of the bridges. Lamps like silver moons hung in the warm night, and the flowering vine that gave the city its peculiar spicy smell clambered everywhere with branching sprays of white.

Yet Kettrick felt, as always, a tightening of the skin across his back and a deep distaste in which all his senses joined. The design of the buildings was subtly unhuman, the motifs of the carvings not at all subtly unpleasant to the human eye. The boats glided too quietly on the oily water, the sound of voices was too soft, the footsteps too undulant. The pretty flowers shed poison on the air, the sweetness of the opium poppy. And all the piled-up windows and the deep-arched doorways and the curtained boats held glib black glossy eyes that watched and blinked with ophidian disdain.

Underneath it all, and perhaps most potent of all, was the faint dry body odor that set his ape hackles on end and made Chai grunt and blow.

He was by no means alone on the streets. The evening was young. There were many places of entertainment. Crowds of outworlders moved freely through the maze of streets and waterways; merchants, traders, officers and crews from the ships, employees of many firms and diplomatic establishments. Nobody looked twice at Kettrick. Chai got an occasional startled glance, but the Tchell were not unknown here; merchants often used them for guards and Kettrick had seen them more than once around the Market. He walked as quickly as he dared without seeming to hurry, keeping as much as he could to the darker or less crowded ways.

The Spaceman's Hall was in one part of a very ancient building. Dim shapes of pink stone writhed up the massive doorway on either side and met overhead with a flourishing of time-worn wings. Inside was a great blank room, shorn of every fitting that might have told of its former uses. There were cheap wooden benches in it now, where spacemen could wait for a berth or make contact with friends or sleep off a drunk.

A big board hung on one wall, with a few Wants scrawled on it. Beside it, in untidy bunches, the postings of current shipping dangled from pegs. In one corner a man from a world way over on the western fringe of the Cluster sat in the midst of a complex of pigeonholes, message boards, files, and a teletype machine. Silky white hair covered his head, the tops of his shoulders, his chest and back. He looked like a melancholy white rabbit, except for his eyes, which were a pale yellow and more like a coyote's.

Kettrick left Chai to sit by the door and went to where the postings hung, moving with a sort of dreary slouch as though he did not greatly care whether he found what he was looking for or not. He began to flip through them, as idly as he could with his nervous hands. He wondered if the Spaceman's Hall were being watched, if the yellow-eyed man were a spy, if one of the crewmen snoring on the benches were working for the Doomstar.

The teletype began to clatter, chewing out another listing from the spaceport. Kettrick's eye ran down the lists of ships, searching. The machine fell silent. He heard the yellow-eyed man get up and start toward him.

Kettrick turned the page. He continued to turn pages while the man inserted the new paper into one of the bunches. He could not find any listing for *Starbird*. That meant she had left, and he would have to go to the back files for time and destination.

He said, "Uh..."

The yellow-eyed man looked at him, smiling. "Help you, mister?"

"Looking for a friend of mine," said Kettrick.

"Know when he landed?"

Kettrick shook his head. "I'm not even sure he has."

"What's the name of the ship?"

As in a dream, Kettrick heard himself saying, "*Starbird*"

It caused not a ripple. "Oh, yes," the man said. "I remember her, she's the one had to dump her cargo and go into repair dock." He went back and shuffled through his files. "Here." Kettrick stared at the typed sheet, not really seeing it. "She'll be tied up a couple of weeks, at least. But I guess they did all right in the Market, so it's not a calamity. You'll probably find your friend at one of the hostels. You can leave a message on the board, if you want to, in case he comes in."

"Thanks," said Kettrick. "Maybe I will." He was shaken. He wanted to go somewhere and think. He

added, "If I don't find him."

He started for the door.

The yellow-eyed man trotted alongside. "Earthman, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Long way from home," said the man. "What ship?"

"*Venture*" said Ketrick. It was a common name. There would be at least six *Ventures* in any given port at any given time. He beckoned to Chai.

"Quite a playmate you've got there," said the yellow-eyed man. "Well, good luck."

"Thanks again," said Ketrick, and went out into the street.

He went well away from the Hall. Then he found a carved stone bench beside a canal and sat down, and stared at the black water.

*Starbird* had ended her flight. Her cargo was sold in the Market. And where was Seri?

Where was the Doomstar?

Gurra, Thwayn, Kirnanoc, Trace. Only we never got to Trace. *Starbird* dumped her cargo and went into repair. Had she really had a breakdown, or was Seri burying his trail? Ketrick did not believe it was a simple breakdown. It could happen, of course. Ships were ships, even one carrying the Doomstar. They did crack tubes or blow their relays. But if *Starbird* really had, her crew would not be sitting in a hostel. Time was too short. Seri could not wait two weeks, or three. He would have to find another ship and go on.

Only we never got to Trace. We broke down at Kirnanoc, if the I-C or anyone else should ask. And we're still there. A ship can't carry a Doomstar, can she, if she's sitting in repair?

Well, of course. It was just too easy, tagging Seri from Point A to Point B. The itinerary had to be posted because of I-C regulations, and therefore it might be followed. But no-body can follow you if you're not going anywhere.

End of trail.

Ketrick got up. He went back to the busy streets, with the many-colored crowds and the tall pale Achernans moving through them, cold and proud, wrapped in silken cloaks. At random he selected a place that catered to outworlders with food and entertainment. In the lobby there was a bank of public communicators, each one enclosed in a plastic bubble for privacy.

Ketrick went into one and called the I-C.

A bored female voice answered. Ketrick asked to speak to the agent. The voice required him to please state his business.

"Contraband," said Ketrick, and she said, "Oh," and put him through. A man's voice, rather sharp and irritable, came on.

"All right, what is it?"

Ketrick said, "Is your recorder started?"

Sounding a little startled, the agent said, "Yes."

Forcing himself to speak slowly and clearly, Ketrick said, "This afternoon the ship *Grellah*, P.O. Ree Darva, Tananaru, landed on pad number 895dashGYdash4...in case they've moved her. Her skipper and crew were arrested by the space-port guards and are being held by somebody, if they're still alive. I'd appreciate if it you'd call the appropriate embassies. Boker, Captain, and Hurth, Mate, from

Hlakra. Glevan, En-gineer, from Pittan. I'd appreciate it if you'd call the em-bassies right away. The only thing these men did was ask about a ship named "*Starbird*."

There was a sound on the other end as though the agent had leaned forward abruptly. "Who is that? Who's speak-ing?"

Kettrick asked, "Are you bugged?"

The agent said grimly, "As of the last two hours, I think we're clean. Unless they've worked awfully fast. We're get-ting to be experts around here."

"I'll take a chance. This is Johnny Kettrick..."

"Kettrick? Kettrick...!"

"Shut up and listen. Seri Otku, in *Starbird*, picked up one component of the Doomstar on Gurra, and a second on Thwayn. *Starbird* is now here at Achern, in the repair dock. She was i-t'd to Trace, but she isn't going there. Do you have any information on the whereabouts of Seri Otku?"

The agent said, "None. Kettrick, where are you? Ket-trick..."

"Stand by, I'm going to see what I can find out. And call those embassies!"

He flipped the switch, cutting short the urgent clamorings on the other end. The last thing he wanted now was to be picked up by the I-C and badgered about his old sins. Or about anything.

How much good it would do to call the embassies he didn't know. He didn't even know whether Boker and the others were still alive. If they were, the quickest and best way to help them would be to break this business wide open.

In the meantime, he had done all he could.

He went out again with Chai, into the streets. He kept glancing back whenever he could without being obvious about it, to no avail. In the kaleidoscopic swirl of the crowds it was impossible to tell if he were being followed.

At the first canal he found a public livery. The Achernan boatman watched with enormous distaste as Chai clambered in after Kettrick and settled herself in the curtained house.

"The Market," Kettrick said, and the boatman pushed off, the little motor in the stern purring almost inaudibly.

It was only after some minutes of threading the waterways that split upon the towering pink cliffs of palaces and diverged to flow beneath carved temples from which a thousand faces watched with time-bleared stony eyes, beneath the fretted peaks of many-chambered dwellings, and past green prome-nades heavy with the poison sweetness of the white vine, that Kettrick noticed a particular boat always behind them.

## 17

The boat had at its forepost a lantern with a crack in it. Otherwise he might never have seen it until too late. There were many boats, coming, going, drifting, with sounds of music and laughter coming softly through their curtains. The music was sweet and haunting in the extreme, and it set his nerves on edge. The crack in the lantern was a thin one, shaped roughly like an old long S. It was in the colored outer shell, so that the cold light sphere inside showed a bright white thread against the soft green. He saw it once shortly after they started. He saw it again after the first branching, and yet again after the second.

From that time on he watched it.

It was perfectly possible that someone else was bound for the same destination. The Market never closed, and many outworlders preferred to do business at night because of the daytime heat. There were also an infinite number of destinations along the way. But he remembered the white rabbit man with the coyote eyes, and he wondered if there had not been a call to somebody about the Earthman with the big gray Tchell who came asking for *Starbird*.

They entered a long stretch where there chanced to be no other boats at the moment, and suddenly the green lantern put on speed and began to close.

An Achernan voice, speaking Achernan, hailed Kettrick's boatman, and he slowed to answer. The green lantern slid closer and a tall Achernan in a pale cloak appeared, standing by the forepost. He talked to the boatman, reaching out to grasp the sternpost of Kettrick's boat.

Kettrick came out of the house, moving very fast. He hit the boatman. The boatman flung up his arms and fell toward the bow of the other boat, catching at the outstretched arm of the Achernan in the pale cloak. They fell together into the water. Kettrick pushed the motor control to its highest notch. The boat sped away with what seemed like agonizing slowness. Looking back, he saw four Achernans in the boat with the green lantern, two looking after him while the other two worked to pull their comrade out of the water. They cuffed the boatman away and he began to swim toward the bank. In a minute they were coming on again, coming fast.

The canal stretched ahead of Kettrick, a darkly gleaming road down which he moved with the silence of a dream. The great buildings rose on either side, their windows full of enigmatic lights. The boat came on behind him.

And there was no escape.

"Very well," thought Kettrick. "Then I will fight." He called to Chai to be ready, and swung the boat around.

For a moment or two the Achernans did not seem to understand what he was doing. The prow of his boat leaped at them, drawing a long V of ripples across the quiet water behind it. They seemed to think that he was trying to break past them, and they swerved as though to bar his way, and he laughed and braced himself and rammed into them at full speed.

In the light of his own forepost lantern he saw their startled angry faces, the black eyes with the faint stripes at the corners, the narrow supercilious heads. Then the heads and faces bounced wildly about and the lantern went out with a thin shattering crash. Kettrick bent double over his own knees, sliding forward. There were splashing noises, and cries, and wooden sounds of breaking. Kettrick threw the motor into reverse.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the boat wrenched and shook itself and backed away. The other one was settling fast and the Achernans were all in the water, either thrown there by the impact or caught by the quick subsidence. Kettrick continued to run backward away from them.

Chai came back to him. "Water come in front, John-nee."

"I'm not surprised."

"No fight."

"Don't worry, Chai. The night is still young."

He looked for a place to stop. There were landings and water stairs by every building, only these were too brightly illuminated to suit him. However, there was nothing in between, and he could not continue this sternwise flight forever. His own boat was filling, the forepost sinking visibly. He bowed to the inevitable and pulled in to the nearest landing.

They left the boat to do as she wished and went up the water stairs. The stone treads had been

hollowed by a thousand generations of feet, and not one of them human. Or unhuman, depending on where you sat; Kettrick remembered a small lecture he had once given on Earth, roughly a million years ago before the Doomstar, to a girl who did not like people-sized things that talked. *They* all think of *themselves* as human, and us as not. The Achernan name for non-Achernans was "beast-born," which nicely covered all origins from ape to anything. So his feet were the interlopers, the unclean. He was glad he had Chai for company.

The building loomed massively above them. There were lights inside, and a long high hall of stone with a polished floor. This was a private landing and there was no way out of it to the public street except through the building.

They entered the hall. Even Chai's soft footsteps seemed to echo like thunder from the vault. Faces watched them, coldly smiling faces arched on slender necks, the necks poised on fluidly graceful bodies that seemed to coil upward along the spaced pillars. Kettrick felt extremely unwelcome. He had a sudden horror of being trapped in this hall, with the wet Achernans slithering out of the canal behind him and others in front, all enemies whether they served the Doomstar or not.

He began to run, with Chai loping beside him.

Just as they approached the outer entrance a couple came in, the man in a cloak of yellow silk, the woman in clinging white that emphasized her supple lines, her pale skin fired here and there with jewels. Her eye stripes were sharper, a brighter blue than the man's. The two froze staring as Kettrick and the big gray Tchell went past them. Kettrick heard their voices, in a manner remarkably human, begin to chatter in astonishment behind him. Then the night streets enfolded him and Chai and covered them, at least partially.

Kettrick slowed down to a fast walk. They seemed to have shaken the pursuit for a moment. How long that would last he didn't know. He felt the knife inside his tunic, to make sure it was still there. He paused a moment to get his bearings and continued on his interrupted way to the Market.

The Market could be heard long before it was seen. It had a busy sort of beehive sound, mingled with the lighter noises of a carnival. Guided by the sound, Kettrick came out of a quiet street onto the bank of the wide barge canal that brought the cargoes down from the spaceport, and the Market burst upon him from the other side.

It took up all the space on a good-sized island. There were closed storage sheds, and long open sheds for bartering, and all around the edges, like a wall against the ophidian world beyond, there were taverns and restaurants and sleeping units, all human. All the business done there was done by humans. The Achernans made their handsome profit simply by taxing the cargoes as they entered, as they changed hands, and as they left.

Kettrick crossed the nearest bridge over the canal. The brazen glare of the Market lights was harsh after the gentle lamps of Achern's streets. He loved them. He loved the loud, coarse voices of beast-born men arguing over the price of something. He loved their laughter. He even loved the smell of them, the acrid reek of humanity after a day of sweltering heat.

As he entered the covered walk around the Market it began to rain, a hard straight downpour that smoked off the shed roofs. Puddles appeared magically in the paving of crushed shell. Business continued uninterrupted, and in a matter of minutes the rain stopped and the puddles drained away. The night was only a little steamier than before.

Kittrick did not immediately see anyone he knew. He discovered that he was terribly hungry and badly in need of a drink. There was a tavern he had used to prefer, close to the southeast corner of the market. He cut across in a long diagonal between the sheds, where bales of goods from all over the Cluster were being opened and shaken out and touched and chattered over and packed up again, flinging out a unique perfume of mingled scents on the heavy air, the exhalations of a hundred planets, enormously

exciting. This was one part of Achern that Kettrick liked.

He passed one shed where the blue-skinned, white-crested men from a Hlakran ship were sweating bales off a loader, and he thought of Boker and Hurth and felt sick all over again. Then one of the men turned and saw him, stared, and shouted.

"Johnny! Johnny, am I seeing ghosts?"

"Clutha." Kettrick embraced him like a brother. The Hlakran was a friend of Boker's, a frequent visitor to his home in the Out-Quarter when he happened to be at Tananaru, and a cheerful pirate with whom Kettrick had gotten happily drunk on a dozen different worlds.

"But, man," Clutha asked him, "how does this happen? The last I heard..."

"I'll tell you about it over a drink."

Clutha glanced doubtfully at the bales. "Well..."

"Please," said Kettrick.

Clutha looked at him. Then he said something to the men and went with Kettrick.

The tavern was busy but not crowded. Kettrick found a place in a corner where they could talk.

And all of a sudden it was Old Home Week.

A small butterball man whose skin was pied black and white like a spaniel puppy came to take their order, looked twice at Kettrick, and let out a squeal of joy, bouncing on his short legs. "Johnny, Johnny! When did they let you back?"

His glad cry made the men at the nearest occupied table turn around, and one of them jumped up and came over. He was bald and lank, with huge pointed ears and a long face and a skin the color of a spanked baby. "Johnny," he said. "By all that's unholy."

A great horse-toothed grin split his face. He clapped Kettrick on the shoulder with one long arm and fetched the little pied man a swat on his rump with the other.

"Drinks are on me, Quip. Hello, Clutha. Where'd you find him, floating around somewhere in mid-space, poaching sun-beams? Does the I-C know you're back, Johnny?" Abruptly he turned and bawled to a man on the far side of the room. "Nedri! Come here, I've got a surprise."

The man rose and came over, carrying a drink in his hand. Kettrick watched him come. Nedri was a copper-haired, golden-skinned Darvan, and the last Kettrick knew about him he was skipper on one of the ships that he, Kettrick, had used to own in partnership with Seri Otku.

Old Home Week, for fair.

Nedri gave the glad cry, the crushing handshake, and they seemed as genuine as the others. But now Kettrick was feeling brittle and edgy, and hating it, because they were all his friends.

Well, that was what he had come to the Market for, to meet friends and talk. Might as well jump in with both feet and get it over with. The time, he thought, will not be long.

The little pied man brought a tray of drinks and put them down. "You can all pay," he said to the others. "This is on the house, for Johnny." He pulled a nearly full bottle of good Terran bourbon out of his tunic and banged it down in front of Kettrick.

Kettrick said, meaning it, "I have never seen anything so beautiful, Quip. And I am going to drink a great deal of it. So if you can dig me up a good thick Terran steak, or the equivalent thereof, to serve as blotting paper..."

"Oh, yes," said Quip. "I know what you like."

"And the same for my friend here, but heavy on the meat." He turned to Chai, who had sat down beside his chair. In her own tongue he said, "Look at me and say no names. Did this man come often to the house where you used to live?"

She knew perfectly well which man he meant. "No. Once, twice. Long time ago. Then never."

Kettrick nodded and turned again to Quip. "And she'd like a pitcher of water. She's too smart to drink the stuff we do."

Quip bounced away. Nedri was looking hard at Chai.

"Is that one of Seri's?"

"No," said Kettrick. "Why?"

"I remember he had a pair of them, that's all."

"How is Seri?"

Nedri shrugged. "Haven't seen him to speak to for almost two years. He fired me, not long after you left." He added cheerfully, "I've managed to live without him."

"Seri Otku?" said Clutha. "Hell, he was here just a few days ago, in the Market. Had to put his ship in repair and decided to sell off his cargo."

"I'd like to see him," Kettrick said. "Do you know where he's staying?"

Clutha grunted. "He didn't exactly tell me, Johnny. I'd met him a few times at Ree Darva, you remember, when Boker was with you, so I said hello, and he like to froze me in my tracks. Seemed he just didn't want to be bothered with old acquaintances."

"Not only Seri," the Darvan said. "The whole damn crew. The engineer in *Starbird* used to be with me. Used to be a nice guy. I went over to say hello too, after they went into repair. Thought we could have a few drinks together, a night on the town, like old times. He wasn't interested. Definitely." Nedri shook his head. "It all changed after you left, Johnny. I'd have quit anyhow. Seri began bringing in new people, people I didn't like, and then he took to shipping out himself and leaving the main office to somebody else to run, and I didn't like those people either."

"Well, the hell with Seri," said the long-faced man, whose name was Enago. "I never met him and he doesn't sound like much. Let's talk about Johnny."

"Wait," said Kettrick. "Just a minute." He took a bit swallow of bourbon and the hot shock of it hitting his stomach seemed to trigger off something in his mind. A thought that had lain dormant there banged suddenly into the open. "Nedri, what else beside *Starbird* was in the repair dock?"

Nedri frowned. "Oh, this and that. A couple of traders, the usual thing. *Starbird* was kind of off by herself, sitting one-two with a yacht, as though she was too snooty to associate with her own kind." Nedri grinned and held up his glass. "Excuse me for getting cute. This stuff always hits me on a hot day."

"A yacht?" said Kettrick.

"Yes." Nedri gave him an odd look. "Is this important?"

They were all looking at him now. Quip chose that moment to come with the food, bustling, chattering, so full of un-affected good nature that Kettrick could have strangled him. Finally he went away.

Kettrick said, "Let's get back to that yacht. Did you happen to notice..."

"I always notice a beautiful ship, Johnny. Fact, I walked around her to admire her from all sides. She was the *Silverwing*. Belongs to the *curodai* of Achern, what's his name...?"

"Ssessorn," said Clutha, imitating the soft sibilants of Achernan speech. "What's the matter, Johnny? You look kind of green."

"Nothing," said Ketrick. "Not a thing." He ate mechanically, because in spite of everything he was hungry as a wolf. The *curodai* of Achern. Not the head of the local government, but close to it, and about fourth in the government of Kirnanoc. Ssessorn, a powerful and important man, whose private space yacht happened to be in the repair dock at the same time as *Starbird*, and side by side.

"Hey," said Enago, "this party's gone sour. I think our Johnny has got troubles."

"Well, I knew that from the beginning," said Clutha, "I've just been waiting for him to open up."

They sat, letting him take his own time, drinking quietly.

Ketrick washed the last of his dinner down with some of the bourbon. He felt better now, well able to march to his execution.

"We landed *Grellah* this afternoon. Boker, Hurth, Glevan...and us, not listed. The spaceport guards arrested Boker, Hurth, and Glevan."

Clutha leaned forward. "Why?"

"Because Boker asked about *Starbird*" Ketrick rose abruptly. "I've got to call the I-C."

"But Johnny..."

"Later." He went to the opposite side of the room, where the plastic bubble of the communicator booth shone dimly at the end of the bar. "The *curodai* of Achern," he thought. "That tears it. They won't dare touch the damned yacht because if they're wrong..."

Oh yes they would, because what would happen if they were wrong was nothing at all compared to what would happen if they were right.

The one who would really suffer was Johnny Ketrick, if he had guessed wrong.

But if he were wrong, and *Silverwing* did not carry the Doomstar, then it wouldn't matter, because then certainly the Doomstar would shine, and nothing would matter any more. Nothing, at least, as small as the affairs of one man.

He opened the plastic bubble and was about to step inside when Chai grunted behind him and he turned around and saw five Achernans in wrinkled cloaks and damp tunics come in the front door, accompanied by three more Achernans in the black-and-gold tunics and polished helmets of the police.

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## 18

They saw Ketrick. One of the five pointed, there was a soft hissing explosion in the Achernan language, and one of the police called out to Ketrick to stand where he was. They advanced toward him, cutting off any escape route to the rear of the tavern.

At the same time the men who had been sitting with Ketrick jumped up from the table and headed for the Achernans. Behind them all, outside, Ketrick was aware of a large muttering tumult that seemed to be coming closer. Quip stood poised beside the bar, a tray of drinks forgotten in his hand.

Nedri, looking as haughty and contemptuous as any Achernan, said, "What seems to be the trouble?"

The policeman who had spoken before said with icy politeness, "We have a complaint against this man. Please to stand back."

Under the rim of his helmet his black eyes were shifting here and there as the other men in the tavern began to get up by twos and threes to slouch over and join Nedri and the others. They were not at all interested in Johnny Ketrick and his problems, but Johnny Ketrick was human and the Market was a human enclave, and they disliked the Achernans coming into it to arrest one of them. They disliked the Achernans, period.

"Perhaps," said Nedri, "it would be better to discuss this?"

"That is impossible. We have a complaint. Please to..."

The muttering from outside had grown louder. Now it spilled in through the door. It looked to Ketrick as though half the men in the Market were there and the rest coming.

Abruptly Quip set down the tray and pointed to the back of the room. "Go quick, Johnny. Out the left-hand door."

He plunged forward into the knot of men, pushing one of them so that he lurched forward and pushed somebody else and the whole group swayed a little into the forefront of the Acheranian group. They gave back a step. More and more men poured in the door, around the Achernans, who were talking among themselves now and beginning to look ugly.

Ketrick called to Chai and ran, toward the left-hand door at the back.

He had almost reached it when there was a sudden flurry around the front door and a man's voice shouted, "Johnny!"

Ketrick stopped as though something had hit him.

"Just stand still, Johnny," the voice said. "Quite still."

Ketrick stood, but he turned around enough that he could see.

Sekma was there, with three or four others in the green I-C uniform. They had their shockers drawn, and pointed chiefly in Ketrick's direction. Sekma was talking now to the crowd.

"Let's hold it quiet, boys. There won't be any trouble. Suppose you all step back a little and give the gentlemen room."

The crowd began to move doubtfully back from the Achernans. Sekma nodded to a couple of the I-C men, who walked quickly toward Ketrick.

Chai said, "Fight, John-nee?"

"No," said Ketrick. "For God's sake no." He held his hands up as the men came to him. One was the placid plum-colored young Shargonese he had seen at Thwayn. He let them go over him and remove the knife from his tunic, trying to keep his face expressionless. Without looking at them directly he could see that at least two of the Acheranian police had drawn their own weapons, nasty little black tubes not nearly so humane as the shockers, from which you could be expected to recover. He shivered, wondering whether he and Chai would really have reached that door.

The I-C men closed in on either side of him and he stood between them. Chai remained behind him, puzzled but obedient. Imperceptibly the center of the I-C group shifted toward Ketrick and away from the Achernans, who were still surrounded but not quite so closely as before.

Sekma smiled at the Acheranian police and spoke to them politely. "I am grateful to you. We have been after this man for a long time."

The civilians hissed furiously in their own tongue. Their eyes were hot with anger.

The policeman said, "We have a complaint against this man. I must ask that you let us have him."

"Oh?" said Sekma. "May I hear the complaint?"

Again the civilians interposed.

The policeman said, "That is not necessary. Please sur-render the..."

Sekma began to recite. "Article Four-Nine-Three-Nought-Seven, Paragraph A, of the League Code governing interworld commerce, to which Kirnanoc is signatory, states as follows: 'When there is disputed jurisdiction between local authorities and officers of the Bureau of Interworld Commerce, etcetera etcetera, an offense against the Code shall take precedence over an offense against a local ordinance.'" Sekma smiled again at the policeman. "I'm sure it would be simpler to settle the matter here than to go to all the trouble of a court hearing. What is the complaint?"

The policeman capitulated to Article 49307.

"Drunkenness, physical assault, malicious destruction of property, and unlawful flight."

One of the civilians said in *lingua*, "He attacked us on the canal. He deliberately rammed and sank our boat. We were nearly drowned."

"Ah," said Sekma. "Regrettable. And exceedingly wicked. Keep it in mind, and when he gets out of Narkad you can have him brought back here for trial. In the meantime, he is wanted for illegal entry into the Cluster, for illegally engaging in trade within the Cluster, for illegal operation of a ship engaged in interworld commerce, and for other Code violations with which I will not bore you. I don't believe there is any dispute?"

There was a moment's silence. The three police, very stiff now and looking as ugly as ever, hesitated, still holding their drawn weapons. Kettrick knew what was in their minds. They hated to have to back down in front of all these stinking humans who had swarmed around to challenge them. He knew they were weighing the alternatives, and he thought that if there had been a shred of legality to back them up they would have risked a full-scale riot to take him.

There was not, and so they decided against it. Sekma was clearly in the right, and while their respect for the rights and laws of humans would never have stopped them, they did not quite want to tangle with the whole League of Cluster Worlds, which the I-C represented.

The police turned and marched out, the crowd parting to let them through, and they said a few words to the protesting civilians, who looked at Kettrick and Sekma and the I-C men with the eyes of basilisks and then hurried after the police not wishing to be left behind among the humans.

Sekma, in a very quiet voice, said, "Let's get the hell out of here. No, out the back, Johnny. You wouldn't have gotten away even if you'd made it." He looked at Nedri and the others. "That wasn't very smart, you know. You could have gotten yourselves killed." He smiled. "But you'll never know how grateful I am."

"Me too," said Kettrick, thinking it was about the lamest thing a man had ever said. At the moment, he couldn't think of anything better.

Enago said, "I'm kind of sorry they decided not to fight. What about it, Johnny? You happy now? There's a lot of us here..."

"I'm happy," Kettrick said. "Thanks anyway."

Clutha came up, looking from Kettrick to Sekma. "What about Boker? And Hurth? Johnny said..."

"They're all right," said Sekma. "Article Four-Nine-Three-Nought-Seven."

Kettrick gave a rebel yell and pulled a wad of crumpled credit notes out of his pocket. He tossed them to Quip. "Ev-erybody get drunk for me, I won't have time."

He passed into the dark corridor, moving fast with the I-C men around him. A door swung open. Warm night air hit him, and a dash of rain. There was an I-C launch in the river at the back of the tavern,

with more men waiting beside it.

They all piled in, finding space on the narrow seat that ran around the cockpit. There was an awning, and curtains which were drawn tight except for some unobtrusive spyholes. Sekma spoke to the man at the wheel and then sat down beside Kettrick, on the other side from Chai. The launch rushed forward, away from the island. It swept into the barge canal. The Market dropped behind and the lights of the spaceport grew brighter ahead.

Sekma drew a long breath and let it out again. Kettrick realized suddenly that he was shaking.

"What a chase you've led me, Johnny." He swore, in a way that Kettrick had never heard from him before. "By God, I'd throw you into Narkad for the rest of your life, if..." He left the "if" hanging in the air.

"I'm sorry," said Kettrick meekly. "Things happened aw-fully fast. I..."

In the dim glow of the cockpit lights he could see Sekma's face, robbed of all its color and vivacity, showing only as a lined mask, infinitely tired, shockingly old. It spoke, so smoothly and naturally in the Tchell tongue that it might indeed only have been saying hello to an old acquaintance.

"Chai," he said, "you watch. And man not talk."

And Kettrick understood that even here he was not safe.

The launch docked at the I-C landing on the barge canal. An official carrier was waiting to take them the rest of the way, along the perimeter road to the Administration Building. Ket-trick noticed that the driver avoided going into the garage underneath the wing where the I-C offices were. He pulled up instead in the open lot by the front of the building. They went in through the Personnel entrance.

When at last he and Chai were in Sekma's office and Sekma said, "You can talk now," Kettrick shook his head, appalled.

"Even in the I-C?"

"Didn't you ever wonder why I wouldn't notify my own to look the other way if they happened to see you? You have no idea how the poison of the Doomstar has spread. I believe every one of the men with me tonight is loyal, but I can't be sure. So most of them believe that you were wanted simply for breaking the law." He sank wearily into the chair behind the desk. "You took an awful chance with that call, Johnny. However, it saved your neck, because I was able to get there in time."

"How did you know where to look for me?"

"You said you were going to see what you could find out. Where else would you go but to the Market?" Sekma leaned forward and said furiously, "But the next time, goddamn it, don't be so clever. I could have picked you up right where you were calling from, only you had to cut the switch and run."

"The last I heard," said Kettrick, "you were on your way to Gurra. How did I know you were here? You never made any effort to contact us at the port, and you could have had me there all afternoon." He was a little bit sore about that. "Any-way, if I hadn't run, I wouldn't have found out what happened to the Doomstar."

Sekma said, "What did you find out, Johnny?" His eyes were desperate, though his voice was soft and almost without expression. "I hope it's good, because otherwise we seem to be at a dead end."

"The yacht *Silverwing* was in repair with *Starbird*. The components of the Doomstar were obviously not sold with the cargo. They are obviously not sitting in *Starbird*, either, not with the timetable so short. I believe the components were transferred to *Silverwing*." He added unnecessarily, "She belongs to Ssessorn, the *curodai*..."

"I know," said Sekma, and he left the office.

After a few minutes he came back.

"*Silverwing* left repair the day after *Starbird* entered. She took off that same afternoon."

Kettrick groaned. "I don't doubt it. For where?"

"You know better than that, Johnny. She's a private craft, not engaged in commerce. She doesn't have to file an i-t, nor state her cargo. Do you suppose she's carrying just those same components that Seri brought? Or do you suppose that she's got the whole lot with her, the complete mechanism? This is a hot bed, Johnny. No better place in the Cluster for final assembly, the final jumpoff. And no better ship to do it than the sacrosanct private yacht of the *curodai* of Achern."

He turned to a chart of the Cluster that filled all one wall of the office. "I guess we can take our pick of destinations. And we had better be right the first time. There won't be any second guessing."

He stared at the chart as though he hated it. He had lost weight since Kettrick had last seen him.

"Any ideas?"

"No," said Kettrick. "Not at the moment." He was too old to have ideas any more. Too old and too tired. He stood be-side Sekma staring at the chart. Two old, tired men, he thought, and the Cluster is passing from us and ours to the people of the Doomstar, away from a rule of law to a rule of men, and terror, and there is nothing more we can do to stop it. We were just a little too late, a little too slow.

*Starbird* had reached the appointed end of her journey. How many more ships had reached theirs, coming by other ways from other worlds? And now, somewhere out there among the charted suns, *Silverwing* was flying, and in a matter of days one of those suns would die.

He remembered Boker's thick blue finger stabbing at these same charted suns, his own pointing out the dark smear of the Lantavan Bank. He shook his head. He did not quite laugh. Somehow it seemed not really funny.

"It looked so simple," he said. "What I was going to do, I mean, because I didn't believe in the Doomstar." He traced the route. "Tananaru, at your invitation. Then Gurra, Thwayn, Kirnanoc...going through the motions, you understand, be-cause they suited me as well as you. Then here." He touched the Lantavan Bank.

"But your i-t said Trace."

"Sure it did. But we weren't really going there. Until later, that is, on the way back. Jump from Kirnanoc, go through the drift, and jump again..." He flicked the White Sun with the gesture of a man saying goodbye. "I still yearned after that million credits, Sekma. I could have done it, too."

Sekma muttered, talking to himself. "Gurra, Thwayn, Kir-nanoc, Trace. That was Seri's i-t, too."

"Yes. But he never meant to make it, either."

"Except," said Sekma, "maybe on the way back?"

Sekma was studying the chart, his shoulders hunched, his head thrust forward.

Kettrick said stupidly, "But they wouldn't have any reason to go to Trace. I had to have a way back from the White Sun

He stopped, his mouth still open. Sekma had picked up a pointer and was using it like a rapier, as though he would skewer the stars out of Uhe sky.

"Where would you go from Kirnanoc, Johnny, if you want-ed to poison a star? Not Trace, obviously, because you have said you are going there." The pointer rapped a planet. "Here? Possibly. But this system is a populous one, perhaps too large a murder for this stage of the game. Fear has to be fed adoitly. In too great doses it can cause revulsion. So..." The pointer rapped again. "Here? Or here?"

Both possible, but also popu-lous. And apart from psychology or foolish notions of mercy, populous systems have heavy traffic, many eyes to see and ears to hear, and this time...this one time, Johnny...they must still work in the dark. How much easier and safer to poison a sun that has few children, and backward ones at that."

His pointer stabbed the White Sun.

"Somebody has to die in this demonstration, or the true power of the Doomstar will not be apparent to everyone. It is not, however, necessary nor desirable to slaughter too many. Think of the economic loss to the conquerors; popu-lous systems produce wealth. Wouldn't the Krinn just about ideally fill the bill? They're human enough to die like hu-mans, but they would be small loss. Even the heartstones would be a small sacrifice. And Seri knows all about the White Sun and the Krinn, because he had a partner once that was interested in them. How logical to point out the excellence of this choice to his fellow conspirators. A little difficult to get to, but once there, privacy in which to set up their appara-tus is practically guaranteed."

He laid the pointer down and walked away and stood with his back to Kettrick.

"Am I talking nonsense, Johnny? Grabbing at any straw because I can't bear the thought of losing?"

Kettrick said slowly, "I don't think so. I think I know now exactly when it was that Seri decided he had to kill me."

Sekma's head came up sharply.

"I told him," said Kettrick, "that I was going to the White Sun. He asked me what would happen if he refused to have anything to do with the venture. I said I'd make other ar-rangements and the half share of the money would go to somebody else. And that was when he promised to give me *Starbird*, knowing I'd be dead before morning."

Sekma turned and faced him. They looked at each other, and away outside a ship came down in a roll of thunder, and the fabric of the office quivered.

The buzzing of the communicator on Sekma's desk sounded incredibly loud and close at hand.

Sekma answered it. He listened briefly, and Kettrick thought that whatever had been said had startled. "All right. Yes," he said, and broke the connection. He looked oddly at Kettrick and walked to the door.

He opened it and stood waiting, and in a moment Larith came.

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## 19

She took Sekma's hand and greeted him. She seemed uncer-tain, her voice subdued, her eyes a little downcast, as though she might be afraid. She was wearing a garment of thin dark silk, closely belted around the waist and with loose sleeves that covered her arms and shoulders, the sort of cos-tume a woman might wear if she wished to be inconspicuous. As though, Kettrick thought, Larith could ever be incon-spicious.

She came into the office, and then she saw him and stopped, and her eyes widened and her hands made a startled gesture. She said his name, in a voice so low he could hardly hear it.

He said, "Hello, Larith."

She looked from him tor Sekma and back again. Then she shook her head and sat down.

"Just give me a minute," she said. "I wasn't expecting this." She glanced at Kettrick, and he saw the

flash of tears in her eyes, though her mouth was smiling. "You do appear at the most unexpected moments..." She turned to Sekma. "I told him it would end this way."

Sekma said, "I'll be back shortly." He went out.

Kettrick stood looking down at Larith. She sat still, her hands clasped, her head bent so that he could only see the mass of copper curls.

"I did tell you, Johnny," she said at length. "I hoped it wouldn't happen, but I told you..."

"Where is Seri?"

"He's left me. Or I've left him." She rose and moved away from him, to stand by the curtained window. "I seem to have made a very bad mistake, but I don't want anything from you, not reproaches or condolences or words of wisdom."

"Fair enough."

In sudden anger she faced him. "Why didn't you go away when I asked you to? Why were you so stubborn? You'll be caught now with the rest of us..."

"Caught?"

"Even if you could run, I'm afraid it's too late. I could cry for you, Johnny."

"Could you, Larith?" He reached out and lifted the hair at the back of her neck. It was warm in the palm of his hand, crisp and springy like fine wire. He closed his fingers on it and she gave a little cry, and he held her, forcing her to turn and face him.

"Did you cry that night, when you thought I was dead?"

"I never thought you were dead. I don't know what you mean." Her eyes met his steadily, defiant and angry.

"That's nice," he said. "I'm glad to hear that. But weren't you curious? Didn't you ask Seri what had happened, where I'd gone?"

"Of course I did."

"And what did he tell you?"

"That he'd refused to get involved. That you'd gone to find somebody else, he didn't know who or where."

"And did you believe him?"

"Why shouldn't I have believed him?"

"Yes," said Kettrick. "Why shouldn't you?" He released her and she stepped back, but not far. She continued to watch him. "What did he tell you about Khitu and Chai?"

"Nothing."

"Didn't you notice they were gone?"

"I didn't go back to the house. Seri left early that morning, only a few hours after you..." She caught her breath, looking past him. Chai had stirred at the sound of Khitu's name and it seemed now that Larith saw her for the first time. "I don't understand, Johnny, I don't understand any of it."

Sekma spoke from the doorway. Kettrick had no idea how long he had been there, listening. Now he came in and closed the door.

"Why don't you tell her what happened, Johnny? I'm sure we'd both like to know."

"No," said Larith, "Not now, it isn't important now." She went to Sekma. "I found out something

about Seri, just a little while ago. Since I came here to join him. I'm not sure of all the details. This isn't a thing that's safe to talk about, he warned me of that." She paused to get her breath, and then plunged on.

"He's been involved in this for a long time, I guess. Now he and the others...some of them very highly placed, Sekma, right here in Achern...they're about to do something they've planned for years. They're on their way now."

She paused again, and when she continued her voice had a different note.

"Have you ever heard of the Doomstar?"

"Yes," said Sekma. "I have."

"Then..."

She broke off. The plum-colored young Shargonese had ap-peared in the doorway.

"All ready, sir," he said.

Sekma nodded. He took Larith's arm and escorted her to-ward the door. "Come on, Johnny. Chai."

Larith said, "But where are we going?"

"I hope you can tell us that, Larith. In the meantime, just away from Kirnanoc. I've pulled rank here about as long as I can, and there are rumblings of approaching trouble."

Larith halted, turning a startled face to Sekma. "You mean you're taking me away? But I can't go, I hadn't planned I..."

"My dear," said Sekma, "after what you just told me, you have no choice. I wouldn't dare leave you here now, to the mercy of Ssessoria."

"Oh," she said. "Then you know already."

The Shargonese said tactfully, "I think we'd better go along, sir."

"Some of it," said Sekma to Larith, and steered her firmly down the hall. "Not all, and that's another reason why I must take you with me. You may know something I don't, but I can't stay here to question you. Don't worry about it, we'll make the discomforts as light as possible."

She did not argue any more.

They passed quickly through the building and out the door to the private landing field. Several I-C men were already there. So were Boker, Hurth, and Glevan, but there was no time for much in the way of a reunion. They were hustled into trams and carried out toward the three ships on the I-C pads.

There appeared to be two of them readying for takeoff. One was a small light-armed cruiser of the type used for regular patrol duty. The other stood about twice as tall in its pad, and there were ominous hatches here and there where no hatches ought to be. This was one of the powerful Big Brothers...the ones the little cruisers sent for when they couldn't handle a job themselves.

Kettrick knew they were fast. Certainly faster than *Grellah*, faster than *Starbird* or any merchant craft. Perhaps faster than a yacht like *Silverwing*?

He did not allow himself to hope.

He looked at Larith in the seat ahead of him, sitting quietly beside Sekma, her shoulders bowed a little and the night wind in her hair. He did not allow himself to hope there, either.

The trams split up, taking some of the I-C men to the small cruiser. The rest continued on to the big one. In a very few moments Kettrick was scrambling up the steps after *Grellah's* crew, with Chai and the Shargonese and a couple more I-C men behind him. Sekma had gone first, with Larith.

The inside of the ship was not at all like *Grellah*. Every-thing was clean and unruined. Everything

worked. There was military order and efficiency, none of the slovenly com-fort of *Grellah's* bridgeroom. Kettrick saw Boker looking around him with a sneer for all the spit-and-polish.

"Poor old *Grellah*," he said. "I hate to leave her."

"You can stay if you like," said Sekma.

Boker shivered. "Thanks," he said, "but I don't love even my mother that much."

Hatches were clanging shut and the warning hooter was going before they were strapped in. The recoil chairs were part of the furniture of a small but comfortable wardroom and the cushions were deep and resilient, not lumpy and beaten down like *Grellah's*. Chai's large frame fitted one of them well; the I-C had members of all shapes and sizes, and the chairs were adjustable. Kettrick leaned back in his. He caught a glimpse of Larith's face, unusually pale, the eyes large and shadowed, and he thought, "Either way, she didn't count on this."

The thunder of ignition deafened him. The cruiser started, quivering all down her length, a great cat gathering her haunches under her for the spring. For a moment she poised there. Then with a roar and a squall like the mother of all great cats, she leaped skyward.

The sounds faded as she cleared the atmosphere. The enormous pressure on Kettrick's body lessened. He saw the all-clear light go on. Sekma unfastened his straps and let them roll back into their receptacles. He stood up.

"That's good," he said. "Now we can talk." He assisted Larith with her straps. "Are you quite comfortable? Can I get you anything? A drink, perhaps?"

She shook her head.

"Very well," said Sekma. "Now. You were about to tell me something, concerning Seri and the Doomstar."

Kettrick saw the astonished expressions on the faces of Boker and Hurth and Glevan, who had already been sufficiently astonished by the presence of Larith.

"Yes," she said. "I was about to tell you that Seri has gone in Ssessorn's yacht, with some of Ssessorn's men and some others, I don't know who. They have all the parts of the Doomstar..."

"That is to say, the mechanism by which a star is poi-soned." Sekma's manner was very direct now, very harsh, quite different from his former politeness. Larith seemed to flinch a little.

"Yes. I can't tell you much about that, I don't know..."

"Never mind, that doesn't matter. Go on."

"They are going," said Larith, "to poison a star, as a sign to the whole Cluster that their group is in power and must be obeyed. The time will coincide with the meeting of the League of Cluster Worlds..."

Sekma said impatiently, "All this we know." He leaned forward intently. "Can you tell me *where* he's going?"

Kettrick's own senses were so strained that he could hear the soft sound of Larith's breathing, see the slightest motion of her lips. It seemed a thousand years before she spoke.

"Yes," she said, "I do. Quite by accident, because he didn't tell me. Or perhaps not *quite* by accident. I was deliberately listening at a locked door. He's going to Trace."

The name hit Kettrick like a blow between the eyes. In a kind of dumb anguish he looked at Sekma, who ignored him, his face still close to Larith's and his expression unchanged. He seemed to be studying her, and she met his gaze as straightforwardly as she had met Kettrick's when she said she didn't know what had happened that night in Ree Darva.

She said, "I don't know whether you can get to him in time. He's had a long head start, and *Silverwing* is very fast." She looked away and her shoulders quivered. "I wish I'd known before..."

Sekma took her hand in his. "I'm very grateful, Larith." He rose and went to the door. "Gentlemen, you might as well come with me. VarKovan will find quarters for you. Larith, you'll find the cellaret behind that panel; just touch the button. Make yourself comfortable. We weren't expecting a lady, and it will take a little longer to find a place for you."

He swept them out into the corridor, waiting with a trifle of impatience while Chai came through after them, and then closed the bulkhead door, signing fiercely for silence. He led them quickly along the passage and up a level to the chart-room, which was empty.

"Sit down, Johnny. I know exactly how you feel." He sat on the edge of the table and leaned his head on his hands. "Tell me, for God's sake, you know her. Is she lying? Or is she telling the truth?"

Kettrick said, "If she isn't telling the truth, she's awfully good." He shook his head. "I don't know, Sekma. I just don't know."

And he didn't. Larith had slipped so far away from him that he no longer knew at all what was in her mind. Or at least, he could no longer be sure that he knew.

He went to the wall chart viewer and punched the sector-number of the chart he wanted. He was aware of Boker and Hurth and Glevan standing by, waiting for an explanation but nobly restraining themselves from breaking in. The chart appeared, brilliantly lighted, a tri-di navigational chart that showed the true positions of the stars. Kirnanoc, Trace, the Lantavan Bank, the White Sun.

"Trace would fill the bill," he said. "One inhabited planet, with a dominant species several steps above the Krinn but no great loss to anyone except themselves."

"Might fill it even better," Sekma said. "The people of Trace are a lot friendlier than the Krinn."

Kettrick stared, frowning, at the bright little suns and their tiny planets, at the dark cloud of the drift.

"We thought Trace had to be out because he had said he was going there," Sekma said. "Perhaps he was counting on that."

"Perhaps." Kettrick stared at the little stars, not seeing them now, seeing instead Larith's steady-eyed and honest face. "She might be telling the truth," he said, "as she be-lieves it. Seri might have let her get the wrong information deliberately, knowing she'd pass it on."

"The wrong information," Sekma said sharply. "You be-lieve it is wrong."

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

Kettrick did not answer at once. He closed his eyes, re-membering. "I stood on the steps of Seri's house. I told him I had come back to finish what I started at the White Sun. I remember now the look on his face when I said that. Larith heard it too. Then they both tried to make me go away. When I wouldn't, and when Seri found he couldn't stop me by re-fusing me a ship, that was when he knew he had to kill me. Now why would he care if I went to the White Sun, unless he were going there himself? Unless he were afraid that I might interfere with his own plans?"

He faced Sekma. "Why would he care? But he did, enough to kill Khitu and Chai and me, and no fault of his that he didn't succeed. Why would he care, Sekma? Why would he give a damn whether I

went to the White Sun or not?"

Sekma was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "It's a hard choice, Johnny. I think you're right, but can I be sure?"

"No, you can't," answered Kettrick savagely. "And does it help any to think that Larith came only at the last minute, when Ssessorn must have begun to think we were too close for comfort on Seri's trail? The penitent girl friend, divulging vital information..." He made a harsh gesture. "What are you going to do?"

"I have two ships," said Sekma. "If I split my force I weaken it. I will need two ships to scan a whole planet quickly enough to find *Silverwing*, or the apparatus, in time...assuming that we are not already too late. Yet I have two possible destinations. I dare not take the chance that Larith is indeed telling the simple truth and that Seri had some other reason for wanting to kill you; perhaps as elementary a reason as that your presence anywhere in the Cluster was an embarrassment, since you might be picked up at any time, and that would inevitably draw attention to himself as your old friend and partner. Attention he could not very well afford, with the Doomstar in his pocket."

He turned to frown at the lighted chart.

"So I will have to split my forces. The small cruiser will jump for Trace, and I will radio back to the cruiser still at Achern to proceed there at once. Ssessorn will undoubtedly get the message and believe that we have all gone there. I hope he'll be happy. Otherwise he may feel that he has to commit some heavy Achernan armament to the cause. And we'll go to the White Sun."

He smiled at Kettrick, a strange fleeting smile with no humor in it. "Gambling, Johnny. How does it feel to gamble with a whole Cluster? Ha! Who wants to be God?" He shook himself, as though to shake away the doubt and fear as a swimmer shakes away water. "There's one thing in our favor, assuming that we have chosen the right target. Big Brother has a little more push than *Grellah*. We don't have to go through the drift. We can do it in one jump."

Boker muttered, "Thank heaven for that."

Kettrick said, "What about *Silverwing*?"

"I don't know. But if she were mine, and I were going to use her on a mission like this one, I would have installed in her the most powerful unit I could lay my hands on."

"Ah," said Glevan, "then she will be well ahead of us. Now, supposing that we're a little late...can we jump back again?"

They all knew what he meant. Out of range of the Doomstar.

"Not immediately," Sekma said.

Glevan nodded. "If I'm not mistaken, you have on this cruiser an electronic check system which is much faster than the type we use, and an improved system of recharging, so that you can service your unit in, say, half the time it takes a poor merchantman."

"Less than half, if we forget some of the regulations. But you had still better hope we're not that late."

Because if we are, thought Kettrick, what happens to the Cluster afterward will be of no concern to us.

Sekma spoke into an intercom and then motioned them all out.

"You'll have to clear the chartroom, we've got work to do. And there'll be plenty of time to talk while we're in jump. Don't forget there's a lot I don't understand, either."

VarKovan, the Shargonese, was waiting for them in the corridor. He smiled, his teeth startlingly white against the glossy purple-red of his skin. "You'll have to sleep watch-and-watch-about, I'm afraid."

Having the lady aboard makes problems."

They followed him to a cabin the size of a broom closet, with two stacked bunks, normally assigned to any extra personnel who might be riding the big cruiser.

"It's fine," Boker said, "Except for one thing. It's dry."

"The I-C thinks of everything," said VarKovan, and produced two bottles from a locker. "Sekma's instructions."

He refused to join them and left. They sat on the bunks and the floor and Boker served out the liquor. Then he looked at Kettrick.

"I am damned glad you got away, Johnny. The I-C boys had us loose just fifteen minutes after you called."

"Before that," said Glevan, "it was a long afternoon, trying to convince those children of perdition that Boker was an old friend of Seri's and only wanted to say hello."

The cruiser went into jump before they had emptied half the bottle.

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## 21

Later that night, or what passed for night, after Larith had gone to her cabin and they had the wardroom to them-selves, Sekma listened to the full account of Kettrick's meeting with Seri and what had happened afterward.

And he asked, "Why didn't you get in touch with me?"

"Because I wanted to go to the White Sun. I wanted that million credits. I didn't believe in the Doomstar, and I didn't connect Seri with it even then. Not till Gurra."

Boker said, "You were following us when you came to Thwayn." Sekma nodded. "How?"

"I was keeping a close eye on everything that moved from Ree Darva. Seri took off in *Starbird*, and a few days later you took off in *Grellah* on the identical course. If you'd been anybody else I might not have thought much about it except you'd have poor pickings. But being Johnny's old friend and shipmate Boker, I thought it a remarkable coincidence. Particularly after it developed that you had suddenly come into money and laid in a stock of trade goods that were pronouncedly Kettrick in choice."

He turned a cold eye on Kettrick. "You're lucky I didn't catch up to you at Gurra. Because I knew what you were up to."

Boker looked curiously at Sekma. "Then you knew all the time he was with us at Thwayn. Why didn't you say something about it? You must have known Flay was hiding him."

"When I was at Gurra," Sekma said, "I talked to Nillaine. She told me that Johnny had been there, and that he was on his way to the White Sun to rob the Krinn. She wanted to be very sure that I would go after him and catch him quickly. It didn't seem right, remembering how Nillaine had used to love him."

Kettrick winced, and Sekma nodded. "It is a pity. There was something wrong about the whole village, something scared and secret. They wouldn't talk about Seri, but they wanted Johnny caught. I suppose they believed that even though you would tell me about the Doomstar, the delay would be enough to guarantee that Seri could accomplish his mission. On top of that, like spiteful children, they wanted you punished."

He turned again to Boker. "When I did find you at Thwayn, and you told that lie about Pellin which you must have known I'd catch, and you had Flay's three sons breathing down your neck, it was not so

difficult to imagine what was going on."

He smiled briefly. "At that point, to be blunt about it, you became unimportant. The vital thing was for me to get after *Starbird*, which I did at the earliest possible moment. I was prepared to fight it out with Flay, using the whole ship's armament if necessary, even though it would have meant the end of you. Fortunately he believed my story."

"Even so," said Kettrick, "you got to Kirnanoc too late."

"That's right. *Silverwing* didn't even enter into the picture then. She was gone. All I had was *Starbird* in the repair dock, her cargo just sold, her crew sitting around waiting for the work to be finished, and Seri...well, Seri was supposedly on his way elsewhere as a passenger on an Achernan ship, to arrange for new loadings so *Starbird* wouldn't go home empty. We were shown his name on the list. I began to wonder if I were wrong. I was hoping the Firgals hadn't killed you because there were an awful lot of questions I wanted to ask."

"Then why," said Kettrick, "the hell weren't you watching for us?"

"I was. But the minute they got Boker at the board asking for *Starbird*, they caught his listing and withdrew it, so that it didn't come through. We had no way of knowing that you had landed, or that Boker and the others had been picked up. Under normal circumstances I would have asked Port Authority to let me know directly you requested a landing, and not have waited for the official teletype. As it was, I didn't dare to call attention to you.

"The Achernans had done everything they could to block and hamper us. They spied on us, tapped our communicator lines and bugged our offices...there were excellent reasons for my being in such a hurry to get away. If they'd caught you, Johnny, or if Ssessorn had had just a little more time to add up all the items...the man Chai knocked out under the ship, the cut fence, what you were doing in the Market...I don't think he'd have let us take off, I-C or not."

Hurth had been listening, frowning, occasionally rubbing the still tender scar on his side. Now he said, "Why is it only us, Sekma? Only us against the Doomstar? There's the whole Cluster, and it's their necks as well."

Kettrick said, "Something must have been done since we talked on Earth. Through official channels, I mean...planetary security forces, the I-C, the general intelligence network. You certainly were not depending entirely on one weak reed named Kettrick."

"We've done what we could," Sekma said, "but you know how it goes. On every civilized world the politicians are worrying about the next election, and the intellectuals are terribly busy with their theories on the perfectibility of man-kind, and mankind itself is sitting on its broad duff, stuffing its face and procreating, and none of them want to be bothered with nasty things like Doomstars. They refuse to believe, just as you did. And the people who do believe in the Doomstar and are actively working for it simply smile blandly and lie to us. So the most we've had is the repetition of rumors we had already heard, and a few leads that didn't go anywhere, or at least were not conclusive enough to warrant any action. Oftentimes the local authorities haven't been too eager to give us information."

He sighed, the weariness and frustration of the past months showing clearly in his face.

"And all the time you're walking on eggshells, because you don't know. The official, the security man, the tribesman, the semiape you're talking to, the governor or the *curodai*... any one of them may be the enemy, and you don't know, not even in the I-C. I can swear that more than once our enquiries have been deliberately buried. There are people like Ssessorn on many worlds, fighting a delaying and beclouding action while they await the Word, and these are the ones who will shout the loudest for surrender when it comes."

"The lust for power," said Glevan heavily, "is a greater evil than the lust for gold."

"Quite," said Sekma, "but of course they don't call it that any more, even to themselves. They do these things for the noblest of motives. Even Ssessorn, I'm sure, would never admit that he's acting out of sheer greed for power and hatred of the human races."

"Well, the hell with their motives," said Kettrick. "I'm only interested in beating them. What kind of a thing is it that poisons a star? How is it delivered? You talk about scanning the planet, as though you expect it to be set up on the ground."

"According to the best scientific conjecture...and I assure you that we've had some of the best brains in the Cluster, the ones we could trust, wringing themselves dry...the launching mechanism would have to be on the ground. It's a seeding operation, apparently. That is to say, the change in the sun is not made at one stroke, but in a number of strokes that continue to stimulate a growing re-action. The theory is that a fairly small launcher is set up, capable of delivering a series of very high-speed missiles. The warheads carry an artificially made cobalt isotope and a catalyst. These react with the cobalt atoms normally present in the sun and create still another isotope, violently unstable. Up to a certain critical point the action is reversible. Beyond that point the reaction is self-feeding and the sun turns itself into a gigantic cobalt bomb, destroying all life that may exist for millions of miles around it.

"Obviously, the missiles could not be launched from a ship, because the occupants thereof would fry in their own gamma rays if they waited around for the full operation. If the launcher is on the ground, they can rack up their warheads in an automatic loader and depart in safety."

Kettrick nodded. "All right. Let's get out the charts, then. I know the world of the Krinn probably better than anyone in the Cluster, though that isn't saying much. Maybe we can figure the likeliest spots. And you could almost double your capability by using the lifeboats as auxiliaries..."

"Not both of them. I'd have to keep one in case we spotted the launcher somewhere that the cruiser couldn't land. But the other one, yes." He got out the charts.

Most of the remainder of the time they were in jump was spent in planning, except for the mealtimes and the sleeptimes, and one time when Kettrick found himself alone with Larith.

She had kept to her cabin a great deal. She had known early on, of course, that they were not bound for Trace. When Sekma told her she had only said, "I am sorry you didn't believe me." And her face had been as masklike and unreadable as Kettrick remembered it that night at Ree Darva. Since then she had hardly spoken, joining the others briefly at meals and then vanishing again, tightly wrapped in a shell of...what? Hurt pride that she had not been trusted, despair that she had failed in her mission? Or was it fear...fear of the Doomstar, of what might happen to Seri, and again, despair that she had failed in her mission? Kettrick didn't know.

When he came upon her unexpectedly in the wardroom she looked at him with eyes so deeply shadowed that he wondered if she had slept at all. "I'm sorry," she murmured, and tried to move past him to the door. He caught her and held her.

She was wearing a green I-C coverall, loaned to her so that she might change out of her single dress. He could feel her body through the hard masculine cloth, the beautiful body he had once joyed in, softly firm and supple and smoothly curved and vibrantly alive. Now it was rigid under his hand, and the feeling of vibrancy in it was only the all-pervading, nerve-rasping quiver that permeated every fiber during jump, the straining of each separate atom to retain its identity against a force that willed it to dissolve into chaos.

She brought her head up and said, "Let me go, Johnny. You have nothing to do with me any more. Nothing."

"I believe you," he said. He did not let her go. She was so close to him that he was aware of her warmth and the faint fragrance of her hair. She was beautiful. Deep inside him he felt something like the stabbing of a knife. "Did you ever love me, Larith?"

"That's a foolish question, Johnny."

"I suppose it is." He took his hand away. "All right."

He left her, crossing the small room, and she spoke from behind him with a bitterness that shocked him.

"You shouldn't have come back. Did you think we needed you? Did you think we were dying for lack of you? Why didn't you just leave us alone!"

She was gone then, pushing with a small shiver of revulsion past Chai. Ketrick remembered that Seri had never permitted the Tchell inside the house when she was there.

Chai snorted gently. She did not say anything. The perfect lady, Ketrick thought, in spite of her fur.

He poured himself a drink and did not drink it. He sat staring at it and forgot it was there.

After a long while he realized that for almost the first time since leaving Earth he had thought of a girl named Sandra and wished her well.

Some time later they came out of jump.

The White Sun blazed in the sky ahead of them, one of the few hot white stars in the Hyades, a savage young warrior among the middle-aged and mellow suns. The fierce light beat at the cruiser's safety shields.

The radiation counters showed normal.

"Temporary reprieve," muttered Ketrick. "Or were we wrong?"

Sekma did not answer.

They stared from the shielded windows of the bridge at the world of the Krinn swimming through the glare. There was no doubt about which planet might have been chosen as a platform from which to launch the Doomstar. The two small inner worlds were semi-molten, the outer three impossible because of poisonous atmosphere, gravitation, or cold. The world of the Krinn alone supported life. After its own fashion.

The surface markings of the planet began to show in patchy glimpses between high cloud cover and the much lower clouds of smoke and dust. Ketrick made out the heliograph flash of white deserts, the black lava blotches of volcanic zones, the crinkled desolation of mountain ranges still raw and cruel with youth, the basins of shallow seas drying in the sun. Still closer, and he could see the great winding river courses and the green of the fertile belts.

The radarman said sharply, "Sir!"

At almost the same instant, while Weapons Control was in the act of starting to range and the ports were sliding open, according to prearranged plan, Communications cried out, "Sir! A message coming through..."

It came through clearly, in spite of the hiss and crackle of atmospheric.

"*Silverwing* to cruiser. Watch your counters and consider whether you wish to live. Too bad you came so late." With a hint of sibilant laughter, the voice added, "Goodbye."

In the intense silence that followed, the radarman said, "She's gone."

No radar, no killer beam nor missile could follow *Silverwing* into the limbo of not-space. The men in the bridge stood still, a little stunned by the swiftness of what had happened. Ketrick saw that Sekma's face was ashen under the golden bronze and he thought that his own must be the same.

The world of the Krinn raced toward them. The White Sun blazed.

And the radiation counters gave a small premonitory leap.

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## 22

Sekma was the first one to break the silence. His voice was low but it was steady, and it had a hard, iron ring to it.

"We will conduct the sweep of the day side, as planned. There is a chance that we can find the launcher and de-activate it before the critical point is reached."

The acting skipper, a Darvan like Sekma and a good solid man, said, "How long would that give us?"

"It is estimated," Sekma said, laying a small stress on the word, "that the point beyond which the reaction will not reverse itself is reached in approximately twelve hours from the impact of the first missile. That would have been at sunrise." He paused briefly. "Unfortunately we have no way of guessing at the longitude of the launcher emplacement, so it doesn't help us much."

It did not help at all. And the mocking voice had said, "Too bad you came so late."

"After the critical point is reached," Sekma was saying, "the progression is more rapid. The radiation becomes lethal in something like six or seven hours. Normal shielding such as we have is no protection. Therefore..."

"Therefore," said the skipper, "we had better make the most of our X-number of hours."

He did not mention that if the search were called off the cruiser might land, be hastily serviced, and gotten off again in time to clear the planet and jump for safety. Ketrick knew it must be in his mind. It was in his own mind and he knew that every man there was thinking the same thing. Only one force held them silent, and judging by himself it was not courage but shame; no one wanted to be the first to suggest that they turn tail and run.

Sixteen hours? Maybe. Maybe only half that. There wasn't any way of knowing. Nobody had observed the birth of a Doomstar before, to gather data. They were the lucky first. It was a pity that their observations would be lost to science.

To change the subject in his own mind, he said, "De-activating the launcher by hand makes it tougher. Is it im-possible just to blast the thing?"

"Not impossible," Sekma said. "Impractical, Unless you don't care about the planet."

"The cobalt warheads," Ketrick said. "Yes, of course."

"Unless," said Sekma quietly, "we had no other choice."

The cruiser thrummed powerfully ahead. The skipper had returned to his seat. He and the copilot were checking off the coordinates of the initial orbit. A great big beautiful coffin, Ketrick thought, all polished steel and pride and enormous, useless strength, carrying a lot of good men to their deaths in the hope of finding one small needle in a planet-sized haystack, while Seri was safely away in *Silverwing*. And at Tananaru the League of Cluster Worlds would be faced with an ultimatum.

He wondered if Seri would feel much pain when he learned that the Doomstar had robbed him of Larith.

"Watch your counters," the voice had said, "and consider whether you wish to live." The voice that might have been Seri's. Then it had laughed. The hot blood came up in Ketrick's face.

"We may have more time than we think," he said. "He was telling us that we had time to land and

service for jump before the radiation becomes lethal...if we forgot everything else. That's what he hoped we'd do. Why would he say that if he weren't afraid we might find the launcher in time to stop it?"

Sekma said cynically, "Hold to that thought, Johnny. We only have half a world to search. Just the side that faces the sun. Sunset will be cut-off time, but we don't know when that will be exactly...we don't know where the daylight started, so we can't tell where it should end. We need hope, so if you think of anything more like that, let us know."

"I'll do better," Kettrick said. "I'll go down and enlist the Krinn. After all, it's their sun." He laughed at Sekma's expression. "What are you worried about? Afraid I might pick up some heartstones along the way?"

"Just habit, I guess," said Sekma in an odd tone. "I wish I had a lifeboat to give you." He smiled suddenly. "If you find any heartstones, you can keep them. We're going to drop Number One in exactly eight minutes."

Kettrick went down the ladder to the wardroom where Boker and Hurth and Glevan had been sweating it out because there was no room for them in the bridge. They had had the intercom open.

"I guess you heard it all."

"We did." Boker was busy at the cellaret, stowing bottles in his shirt. "I figure we'll need these before we're through, either to celebrate or...not." He tossed one to Kettrick. "Catch."

Kettrick stowed it, cold against his skin. "I thought maybe you'd want to go down with me."

"Anywhere out of this hole. We've all had enough of sit-ting."

"Let's go then. Chai?"

She too had been excluded from the bridge. And she too was tired of sitting.

"Go outside, John-nee?"

"Yes. And run hard, for a little while." He walked with her down the corridor, his hand on her strong gray shoulder.

They passed the door of Larith's cabin. Kettrick stopped. "We'll wait for you," Boker muttered. He and the others went on to the lifeboat lock hatch.

Kettrick tried the door. It was locked, and he called through it. "Larith! You were a little bit wrong about Seri. Don't you want to hear?"

The latch was drawn back. The door opened. She had put on her dress and fixed her hair and put the little touches of color in her face that brought out the beauty of it more clearly. Only her eyes were huge and still and there was no light in them.

"I tried to save you," she said. "If you had gone to Trace, you would have lived." She paused. "How long, Johnny?"

"As long as we used to spend on the island," he said, "when we found it pleasant to make love."

She nodded. "I did love you, Johnny, the best I knew how. Not enough to follow you when you went away. I weighed what I would lose and what I would keep, and I stayed. I'm sorry if it wasn't good enough, but I never promised more. I always knew you might have to leave me."

"We could still live, Larith."

He thought there was a brief flicker deep in those dark still eyes. "How?"

"If we find the launcher in time, we can stop the Doomstar before it grows too big."

"I would tell you if I knew," she said. "I don't want to die. I would tell you this minute if I knew, but I

don't. They never said more to me than that this time the Doomstar would be the White Sun."

This time he did not doubt her.

"I'm going down," he said. "Goodbye, Larith."

She stared blankly, as though she were thinking of some-thing far off.

"Seri is safe," he said, "if that helps."

"Seri? Oh." She shook her head. "Yes, I weighed, Johnny. I've always been good at that, very good. Only this time I lost. Everything. Because of you."

And now at last there, was light in her eyes, deep and smoldering.

"I will hate you, Johnny, as long as I can think. And the only thing that helps is that I will know you're dying too."

"Very true," said Kettrick. "Only I won't die alone." He cupped her cheek in his hand and it was cold as alabaster. He felt an odd remote twinge of pity for all that wasted love-liness. "But," he said, "you've always been alone, haven't you?"

She drew away from him, back into the cabin, and shut the door, and he went with Chai to the lifeboat bay and through the hatch, and heard it seal behind him.

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## 23

The pilot of the lifeboat, a grim-faced and joyless man in a vicious hurry, landed them at the place Kettrick had desig-nated and barely gave them time to scramble clear of his jets before he was away again. Kettrick did not blame him. The small personal counter he had taken from the lifeboat's supplies showed radiation still well within limits. Yet the sunlight seemed to sting and burn on his skin, and he re-membered his dreams, and was afraid.

They stood at the very knife edge of a vast desert, blind-ing white in the fierce glare. It was only about three hours after sunrise here, and already the air was parched and hot. Far off in the sand was the upside down reflection of a bitter lake, rimmed with white bands of alkali.

In the other direction, beyond the knife edge, was a deep and fertile sink many miles in breadth that wound with the windings of a river across half a continent. Beyond the sink was another knife edge and more desert, with a loft of mountains at the end of it. To the west, downstream, the sink curved out of sight around the base of a series of buttes like ancient battleships sailing in line ahead. To the east, up-stream, it curved the other way around the broken cone of a small volcano, long dead, and the land there was stained black with lava. Smoke and dust darkened much of the horizon,

"Well," said Boker, "and here we are, exactly where we planned to be. And how easy it was, after all."

Hurth gave him an answer that made the air seem cool. And Glevan said, "Our lifetimes are short enough. Let us not waste the minutes."

They gathered up the things they had brought from the lifeboat, chiefly anything that would serve as gifts, along with sidearms, rations, capsules for purifying water...hope-ful precaution!...and the contents of Boker's bottles trans-ferred to canteens. They had also brought a minipak field radio, which Kettrick carried on his back; a slender link with the feverish activity going on far up in the sky.

They began the descent of the escarpment, along a steep path treacherous with loose rock and sliding sand, that led to the green floor of the sink something more than a thou-sand feet below. And as

he went, Ketrick thought to himself that they...all of them, below and aloft...were going to need more than mere good luck. They were going to need a miracle.

Given time, there would be no problem. Reconnaissance techniques were so good that practically nothing escaped them. Given time. But there was no time.

The cruiser and the lifeboat between them would sweep the globe from daybreak to the edge of night, covering every mile of every latitude where human life might survive, with special attention to the high probability areas. They would use every aid possible for visual sighting and instrument detection. Yet their chances of spotting the launcher were very slight.

The powerful sunlight would drown the flare of a rising missile, unless it were very close. Vast clouds of sand, volcanic dust, and smoke made any kind of sightings difficult over large areas, and there were always the random distractions present everywhere to make things tough for the radarman. The small, ultra-high-velocity missiles would be difficult to detect unless they were ejected in a sufficiently steady stream to form a recognizable pattern, and the best guess was that they were not. Interval of delivery for the seeding warheads was estimated at slightly over an hour.

Given time, all these obstacles could be overcome. Careful scanning, endless streams of data running through the computers, endless comparisons, endless study of photographs...But there was no time for all this technical proficiency. They had, like savages or children, to do it the simple way.

There was one bright hope, and that was that Seri and his friends might have been sufficiently careless, sufficiently sure that they were safe, to neglect to camouflage the launcher. The glint of metal carries a long way, and on this metalless world would be an instant revelation.

Once or twice on the blistering descent Ketrick switched on the radio. The cruiser was out of his range now, away south over the bulge of the equator, but the lifeboat was still receiving her and Ketrick could hear the lifeboat. The talk was brief and negative. He switched it off quickly.

They passed into the heavier, moister air of the sink and there began to be vines and creepers along the path. Ketrick was watching for the Krinn, but it was Chai who saw them first, or smelled them. She growled and pointed.

There were trees below, tall things with shiny trunks and limber branches weighed down by leaves as big as carpets, all glossy green. There was movement underneath them, in the dim aisles that ran through a sweating undergrowth of ferns and saw-toothed grasses. A second later a wooden spear stuck quivering in the middle of the path ahead of them.

Ketrick went ahead of his companions. He stood by the spear and called out, in the grunts and clicks of a speech almost as primitive as Chai's, "Djunn will make talk with Ghnak. He will give presents to Ghnak, and to the People of the River."

He held up both hands, palms out, and waited. It was a long time since he had been here, and the Krinn had short memories. Ghnak might be dead and eaten long since. Or he might just be in a bad mood today and give the sign to spear them all.

He waited. And the sun appeared to race toward the zenith. The needle of his small counter had inched closer to the red. His skin prickled. He yearned, childishly, for the illusory shelter of the trees.

Ghnak stepped out into the path and retrieved the spear.

"We make talk," he said.

They followed him into the shade of the forest.

The village of the Krinn was dirty. Rude shelters made of branches and the huge leaves kept off the rains after a fashion. They were scattered anyhow under the trees, but there was a wide central space with all the undergrowth cleared out and here the sacred fire burned in a pit and the god had a house of

leaves with bones piled in front of it. The god was a log set upright, the top hacked into the suggestion of a head. It was daubed with bright colors and hung with heartstones. Ketrick had once counted fifty of them in its necklace and girdle. Few peoples in the Cluster had such a wealthy deity.

The men sat in the visitor's side of the clearing, farthest from the god's house, and Ketrick kept Chai close to him, forbidding her to growl. She was obedient, but her neckhairs stood up even so. There was a second fire here, and the Krinn crouched around it facing them, hairy, bristling, hump-shouldered creatures out of ancestral nightmare, or worse; the Krinn had kept their tails, and their antecedents were apelike only in that they were not birdlike or fishlike. The terms were relative to the worlds of their origin.

The Krinn had teeth, large and strong for tearing. Their hands were strong and clever for the making of weapons and simple tools. They stank with a vile, strong smell as human as it was animal. The hair that clothed their powerful bodies ranged in color from black to brindled red and they did not bother with other garments, except that the dominant males ornamented themselves with heartstones according to the order of their dominance. Ghnak had as many as he had fingers and toes, more than any other man but significantly less than the god. The others scaled down to a single gem. They had not the skill to pierce them. The women wove strands of tough fibre around them and made them fast to collars of hide, and even through the fibre webs and the dirt the stones burned with their beautiful inner light. They were the reason why the Krinn were so rigidly protected.

According to Krinn protocol, beginning with the one-gem men, Ketrick served out the gifts he had brought, a weird assortment raided from the lifeboat's supplies, anything that was shiny or important-looking. He was sick with impatience, but he knew it was no good trying to hurry. At the very last he handed Ghnak the showiest item, a spare helmet, and said, "I give this to the god, who has called me."

There was some astonished grunting. Ghnak took the hel-met and laid it on top of the bones in front of the god's house, and came back again, peering very sharply at Ketrick.

"The god makes talk only to Ghnak," he said.

"True," said Ketrick. "So he has told you why we come." And he thought, Oh lord, you stupid apeling, I have to go through all this to get it into your bean-brained head that your sun is going to run amok and kill you.

"The god is powerful, like Ghnak. He can make his voice very loud. He can call across between the stars. He said to me, 'Evil spirits in the shape of men have come. They stand upon my high places. They make magic. Ghnak the great chief, my brother, has seen this. He knows the magic they make. He knows what they mean to do.'"

Ghnak's small eyes were now very bright but also puzzled and uncertain. If the god had indeed said these things he did not wish to deny them, nor to admit to his tribe that he was ignorant of them. So he grunted and thumped his chest and said, "Ghnak is brother to the god. He knows."

Gracefully yielding him the ploy, Ketrick said, "Ghnak knows that the man-things came to kill the sun."

Ghnak's eyes opened wide. A burst of grunting ran through the males. Behind them and apart, the hairy women and the young made shriller noises. Automatically, every face turned upward.

"They kill the sun!" Ketrick shouted. "They stab it with their magic." He pulled Flay's knife from his belt and struck it into the dirt before him. "They stab it as I stab the ground. They wound the sun with magic!"

He thrust the knife again and again into the ground, and because what he said was true, the conviction and the fear carried over to his audience. Ghnak stared at the blade, ap-palled.

Ketrick dropped it and sprang to his feet. "Ghnak and his brother the god will save the sun. They

have called us here to help, because we know the ways of the Tailless Ones and can use their own magic against them." His voice rang in the hot green shadows under the trees, over the ranks of stunned, half-terrified, half-uncomprehending faces, snouted and toothed and hairy faces with perpetually angry eyes.

"Ghnak will save the sun! Lead us, strong chief! Make talk with all the People of the River, so the god can quickly tell you where to find the Tailless Ones and kill them." He made the Krinn kow-tow before Ghnak. "Lead us, Ghnak, to where the evil spirits make magic with flame and thunder, with big noises, with coming and going from the sky. Hurry, oh chief, and save the sun!"

Ghnak continued to stare at Kettrick, his mouth open like that of a man winded by a sudden blow. Kettrick held the pose. Behind him Boker, who understood the Krinn speech, nudged Hurth and Glevan and they bent their foreheads to the ground. Then a sub-chief of ten heartstones bent and cried out, "Lead us, Ghnak!," and the rest of the men followed, shouting, "Ghnak! Ghnak!"

Pride swelled Ghnak's chest and brought his tail up in a stiff arc until the tip almost touched his shoulderblades. He still did not quite understand what he was about. But it is the business of a chief to lead his people, and the magnitude of the idea set his ego afire. He stamped his feet and pound-ed himself and roared.

"Ghnak will save the sun!"

He moved away quickly, with half the tribe at his heels, adding, "The god will speak through the talking logs."

"Suppose he doesn't," said Boker under his breath to Ket-trick. "Suppose the People of the River don't have a thing to say about big noises and comings from the sky."

"You won't live past morning, anyway," said Kettrick, "What difference does a few hours make?"

"Because of the vanity of man," said Glevan, "I will make a large prayer for a miracle."

The flat rattling voices of the talking logs began to speak, calling up and down the river to the scattered tribes of the Krinn. Kettrick understood very little of the drum talk. He switched on the radio, but the lifeboat now seemed to be out of range and all he got was static. He turned it off.

The sun was higher. The heat increased. The needle of the counter crept toward the red. The clack of the primeval jun-gle telegraph halted and stuttered. A feeling of unreality came over Kettrick, a detachment psychotic in its cheerfulness. He was no longer afraid. He no longer worried. He looked across at the god who sat in his house beyond the sacred fire, and he said, "If you let your brother down, friend, there will be no more offerings for you."

In a semistupor he sat and waited and listened to the drums.

Boker shook him. "Wake up," he said. "I think they've heard something."

## 24

Kettrick started up. He could hear Ghnak's deep grunting bass crying out that the god had spoken. Other voices shout-ed "Ghnak! Ghnak!" Women began to howl shrilly. There was a lot of stamping about, and the drums were still.

Kettrick and the others ran.

They met Ghnak between walls of fern and sawgrass, on the trail that led to the talking place and the bank of the river.

"The god my brother has told me," he said. "The tribe of Hhurr beyond the Many Hills has seen the magic of the sun-slayers."

Kettrick said, "Ghnak will lead us." He looked at his companions, seeing their faces as blank as he knew his own must be. They did not believe it. He did not believe it.

They did not dare believe it.

"A volcanic upheaval," said Hurth. "Or an earthquake."

Glevan said nothing. His lips moved without sound.

Ghnak was chanting. The tribesmen answered him. They stamped their feet and performed ritual obscenities of a de-fiant sort, their tails erect and quivering. In a moment there would be a rush to pick up weapons and then a surge back to the river bank. Kettrick stepped aside into the clearing where the talking log lay on its supports. It was hollow and had a long slit on its flattened top surface. The sticks were hung beside it. Kettrick switched on his radio and called the lifeboat.

After what seemed a moderate eternity the copilot answered, sounding very distant and rather peevish.

"Negative so far," he said. "Nothing but dust and volcanoes. This is a hell of a world. I've lost the cruiser now but her last transmission was negative."

"I may have something," Kettrick said, and explained rapidly, leaving out the supernatural embellishments. "The Many Hills are the line of buttes west of where you dropped us. How far beyond them this tribe lives I don't know. The country is a mess seen from the air..."

"I know. I saw it this morning. We'll give it a closer look when we reach it." Kettrick heard him talking to the pilot, and then he added, "That will be our next westward sweep. We're almost at the terminus now and about to head east."

Kettrick said, "You don't think it would be worth your while to go a little bit out of your way."

"We were assigned to a definite sweep pattern, Kettrick. We can't just drop out a few thousand miles of it because one of your apes down there saw a thunderstorm or an..."

"Volcanic upheaval," said Kettrick. "Sure. Suit yourself."

He cut the switch. He was angry, though he knew he had no right to be. The copilot was completely correct.

The tribe came streaming back down the trail with their weapons slung over their shoulders, following Ghnak. Kettrick and the others joined them. At the edge of the water the tribe's two river craft were pulled up onto the mud. The Krinn, quite nonape-like, were fearless and expert in the water. They swam, hunting the aquatic mammals with great skill. For long voyages they built a kind of rude catamaran out of two long buoyant logs sharpened at both ends and lashed together with cross branches about four feet apart. The river was the great highway, and from it other rivers branched, and the Krinn traveled for astonishing distances, sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of desire for conquest or sheer curiosity. They were a gutty, energetic breed. In another million years or so they might amount to something. If they lived.

The craft were pushed off. Holding long paddles, a dozen or so Krinn bestrode each log. The men found places among them and Chai, holding herself rigidly in check, climbed obediently up behind Kettrick. The Krinn had found it convenient to ignore her, but she was finding it not so easy to ignore them. Kettrick laid his head back against her and said, "Soon over now. Be patient."

The Krinn began to churn the water, one of them on each craft calling out, "Ough! Ough! Ough!" rhythmically to mark the time. They picked up the beat and the logs shot away downstream, toward the

Many Hills and the tribe of Hhurr who had seen the magic.

And here we go, thought Kettrick, a brave little band with our tails in the air, to save the sun.

Once more the strange feeling of unreality came over him, but this time the comfortable detachment was lacking. *I have done this before*, he thought. And he had. He had ridden a smooth log in the midst of a line of Krinn rowers, watching their hairy backs bend and the paddles swing, flashing in the sun. He had seen the banks of the river gliding past and felt the warm suck of the water on his legs and smiled at the way the tails of his fellow sailors were carried daintily aloft out of the wet.

Yet after a while he understood that this was not what he meant.

He understood that at last he was living the dream.

They went downriver with the current. They moved swiftly, but not so swiftly as the sun that hastened to reach its zenith, rushing toward its doom. A sick sun, a dying sun, and to Kettrick it seemed that a strangeness came into the light and turned all the landscape into such a place as one might see in fever. Dim shapes flopped and floundered and swirled in the tainted waters. The great buttes reared high, their flanks torn to the bleeding red rock, their foreheads shattered by lightning. The forest crept darkly along the banks, full of sounds and furtive motion, and far on the other side of the sink, atop the desert wall, the yellow curtain of a sandstorm blew and trailed its raggedness down and down across the treetops. The rowers, humped and fanged, churned tirelessly from nowhere into nothing, under the shining of the Doomstar.

The lifeboat, its delta wings extended, appeared high in the western sky.

The Krinn broke their rhythm, shouting that the sun-slayers had come. Kettrick, shaking off his daze, cried out that this was some of the help that the god and his brother Ghnak had sent for. He clawed at the radio.

The copilot still sounded peevish. But he said, "We decided to come back this way, just to break the monotony. It is a high probability area. You said west of that line of buttes? And north of the river. How large an area do you suggest?"

"Not too large, if the visual and aurak phenomena could be detected from the river. But I don't know how far west the tribe is."

"The scanner shows a bunch of critters gathering on an open landing place on this side of the bend. They seem to have spotted us. That's probably your tribe."

The lifeboat swerved and dropped and presently was out of sight behind the buttes, for the catamarans had not yet turned the bend of the river.

"It is a mess," the copilot complained. "Old craters, old lava beds, rugged little mesas..."

"Do you see anything?" said Kettrick into the transmitter. "Anything?" He was aware of Boker and Hurth and Gevan straining from their log perches.

"Nothing yet. We're circling, as low as we dare." A long silence. "No..." Some background gabble with the pilot. "Nothing." Another silence. Then, wearily, "Oh, hell, we might have known. It was a good try, Kettrick, but we should have stuck with our pattern..."

The pilot's voice cut suddenly across his, loud and curiously flat. "Look at that."

The copilot made the beginning of a startled cry.

Then nothing. A crackle of static, but nothing more.

Kettrick worked furiously with the radio, shouting until he was hoarse. Finally he understood that they were not going to answer. The boat's radio was dead.

The boat itself had not reappeared, nor would it.

"They may have crashed," said Boker. "Or they may have landed. But did they sight the thing, that's what I want to know. Did they sight it?"

Kettrick shook his head. He kept the radio open but there was not a whisper from it, all the way down the bend of the river to where the tribe of Hhurr waited at the landing beyond the Many Hills.

And now the sun was beginning its last journey to the west.

Kettrick let the two chiefs have the first and most important part of their ceremonial greeting, and then he said, "It is known to Ghnak, and no doubt to Hhurr also, for they are both great chiefs, that the sun must be saved before its setting. Where has Hhurr seen the magic of the sun-slayers?"

Hhurr, a muscular Krinn with many scars and the twenty heartstones around his thick neck, pointed to the tumbled land beyond the belt of forest.

"On the Black Hill the magic has been done."

"Ghnak will lead us," Kettrick said, "and also Hhurr. They will lead us as swiftly as the wind."

They set off, two tribes of Krinn now, or the males there-of, numbering something over a hundred, with the four men and Chai. The chiefs apparently were impressed by the need for haste. They ran, and the Krinn could run like deer. Chai kept up with them easily, though her tongue lolled and dripped in the heat. The men, weakened by two or three million years, soon had to submit to the indignity of being helped, and then carried by relays of grunting tribesmen.

They left the forest and the shade behind them. They ran in the naked blaze of the sun across stony slopes where scaled things hissed at them and slid away. There were lava beds and scattered malpais, and in a half circle to the west and north a nest of old volcanic cones thrust up. At their feet were the eroded remnants of a plain, flat rock tables of which the largest was the Black Hill.

It was black, with old lava, black against the charred stumps of the volcanoes, and it was impossible to see its top. But as they strained toward it, all at once they saw a quick bright flash against the blackness, and heard the unmistakable crack and whish of a missile going skyward, and Kettrick said, "It is."

The ragged file of tribesmen had stopped. They pointed, shouting harshly, at the already silent mesa and the sky. "The magic! The magic!" cried Hhurr.

Ghnak thumped his chest and screamed with rage and fright. The men shook their weapons. Kettrick licked his parched lips and summoned all the voice he had.

"They throw spears at the sun! The sun-slayers! Kill! Kill!"

"Kill! Kill!" shouted the tribesmen. They leaped forward. The sun threw their tailed shadows long across the sand,

"There won't be anyone there to kill," said Glevan.

"We'll kill the launcher," Kettrick answered. "It's all one to them." He looked at the sun and the length of the shadows. "How many more of them until sunset?"

"At least two," Boker said. "Maybe three." He too looked at the sun and then at the distance they had yet to go. "Better hope it's three. Unless you can raise the cruiser." He glared at the fatuously crackling radio with a species of hate.

"Not yet," said Kettrick. He turned it off. "They had the bigger part of the globe to cover. They're working this way, but I don't think we'd better count on them."

"What happened to the lifeboat?" Hurth muttered. "That's what they must have seen, a missile going

off. But what happened?"

Kettrick said, "Don't worry about it now."

The radio was an encumbrance and he shed it. They ran stumbling in the hot sand, blinded with glare, hauled and hurried by stinking tribesmen with the rank sweat dried and crusted on them. The shadows of the old crones lengthened and the Black Hill seemed to come no closer, and once again from its unseen summit a flaming spear went up to wound the sun. Kettrick felt himself very oddly empty of emotion. He was not excited or triumphant or even greatly interested. He had set himself to run toward a certain place, and he was running, and his energies were entirely absorbed in the performance of that act. He thought that probably he was just a little out of his head.

A broken wall of rock appeared before him. He began to climb it. On both sides of him and before him ragged lines of Krinn went clambering swiftly. He knew then that they had reached the Black Hill. He was not conscious now of being tired. He was astonished at how quickly he was able to scale the rock. And Chai, who was not so good at climbing, was beside him.

Strangely, here and there, Krinn began to lose their footing and fall.

Chai said urgently, "John-nee..."

There were men on top of the mesa, firing at them. Beams from their weapons whiplashed downward, crackling, flicking away the tribesmen wherever they struck.

Kettrick shouted, "Hug the rock! Stay close!" He did not know whether anyone heard him or not. The Krinn were screaming, howling their war cries. Some of them continued to scramble up toward the summit, spurred on by the sight of actual enemies. Others hesitated, fierce and furious as ever but daunted by the powerful magic of weapons that made the rock smoke and brushed their brothers away like flies. Kettrick thought that in a minute or two they would break and run.

He hunched himself into the rock as tight as he could and pulled out the weapon he had brought from the life-boat. He began to fire upward at the heads and leaning-out bodies silhouetted above him against the sky. There were not many of them, no more than eight or ten. Other sidearms now began to crackle where Boker and the others were. Wooden spears flew upward ineffectually and fell back and one of them hit Kettrick a glancing blow, nicking his buttock. One of the silhouetted heads above him appeared to disintegrate. The body belonging to it came bumping and sliding down. Another head hung at a broken angle over the rock edge. The others drew back. The fire slackened and stopped altogether as a third man who had reached out to take careful aim at somebody, Kettrick or another of the humans who had punishing weapons, lost his own weapon and the hand that held it.

Kettrick shouted, "Ghnak will lead us! Kill! Kill!" He began to climb again as quickly as he could. The Krinn howled and swarmed upward, their tails lashing. Boker shouted something but Kettrick could not hear what it was. Boker and Glevan came on. Only Hurth remained where he was. Rather incredibly, it seemed, he had grown tired of the battle and curled up to sleep between the rocks. Kettrick saw him and called to him twice before he realized that Hurth was dead.

The mesa rim was close above him now. The first wave of the Krinn went over it. There were more whiplash noises, and screams mingled with the war cries. Kettrick hauled himself over the edge, lying as flat as he could, and a dead Krinn gave him shelter.

The men who had fired from the edge had now withdrawn toward a structure erected on the flat top of the mesa. It was a moment before Kettrick's sun-dazzled eyes could distinguish its outline, even though he knew what it had to be. Then he understood why the lifeboat had been able to pass over it repeatedly at a low altitude without seeing it until the actual firing of the missile gave it away.

The top of the mesa was black with the old lava that gave it its name. The launcher was all black, the entire assembly, even the missiles in the slotted track of the loader. Every-thing was black, with no single

glint of bright metal, and overhead a black camouflage net covered the whole assembly except for the firing tube, so that not even a too-regular or too-solid mass of blackness should reveal its outline.

Beyond the launcher, at a distance dictated by the force of its landing jets, a lifeboat stood erect on its tripod gear. At first Kettrick thought it must be the one from the cruiser, but then he saw the difference in its size and shape and knew that it was from *Silverwing*, and that the vanishing of the yacht in jump had been only a deceptive maneuver. And now he was quite sure what had happened to the cruiser's boat.

The seven surviving men formed a wall between the attackers and the launcher. Behind them the carrier track of the loading mechanism moved with a heavy, measured clicking sound as inexorable as the ticking of a clock, bearing another missile toward the tube. In front of them, far in front, the first wave of Krinn lay dead or dying, the few survivors dropping back desperately over the edge.

The body that was giving Kettrick a little shelter was the body of Ghnak. The necklace of heart-stones burned and shimmered about the neck. Otherwise Kettrick would not have known. But the Krinn knew, and the men of Ghnak's tribe were wavering. Kettrick reached to unloose the collar.

Beside him Chai gave a sudden whimpering cry, and then she was gone.

He saw her running, stooped low and running like the wind. The Krinn who saw her cried out in astonishment and surged forward over the edge, and perhaps that distracted the man for a second or two, or perhaps it was simply the shock of seeing her there alive and rushing toward him like a gray vengeance. She was already in midspring when he fired. She screamed, a high, terrible cry, but her clawed hands, outstretched, did not waver. They struck down, and the man fell beneath her and was hidden by her body.

Kettrick yelled, as hoarse and wild a cry as any animal might make. He stood up with the necklace of heartstones in his hand and held them up like a banner and rushed forward, firing, too wild with hate and grief to think of death. There were other weapons firing beside him. He saw two of the men fall, and then the others wavered and the Krinn rolled over them like a wave.

Kettrick did not see the very last of it. He was holding Chai in his arms. She said, "Not kill, John-ee." She had not. Seri still lived, though her claws had torn him cruelly. She moved her head against Kettrick's shoulder, the old affectionate thrust, and started to say his name, and never finished it.

The launcher still had two missiles in its carrier track, one of them only six minutes from firing, when Boker and Glevan shut off the power supply and stopped the steady clicking march of the Doomstar.

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## 25

It was late at night and two of the planet's three small moons were shining when Kettrick climbed the steep path up the scarp from the village that had once been Ghnak's. The Krinn came with him, men and women both, their tailed forms crowding around him. There were two chiefs now in the village, Hrach and Djunn, and Djunn wore a chief's collar around his neck. It had only eighteen heart-stones in it because he had given two to the god in memory of his brother Ghnak, who had saved the sun.

The fires still burned in the village and the drums of the chief-making still talked, telling the People of the River that Djunn was going home. Djunn was drunk and he should have been happy, happy that he was chief because of his victory over the sun-slayers. But he was not happy. He missed the gray shadow that had followed for so long behind his shoulder, and now was there no more.

At the top of the scarp he stopped and said goodbye to his brothers, promising to return. Then he walked alone across the desert to where the cruiser stood with her lights all blazing, finishing the last

checks before takeoff.

*Silverwing* had escaped her, on the day they stopped the Doomstar. Kettrick remembered how they had succeeded in raising the cruiser on the radio of *Silverwing's* lifeboat. She came swiftly, but the yacht had vanished for the second time and this time it was no deceptive maneuver. She was on her way back to Kirnanoc with the news of defeat.

Sekma had got the full story, not from Seri but from the other survivor, the wounded man who had fled to safety in the boat. And Kettrick remembered all too clearly how Sekma had told it to them when he and Boker and Glevan came back from building the two cairns that were now in the desert below the Black Hill.

"We were closer behind them than we thought," Sekma said. "We actually almost caught them on the ground. *Silverwing* sent that message hoping to frighten us into putting all our energies into escaping, and then went into jump, but only long enough to carry her out of radar range. Then she sneaked back to check on us, and of course our radio conversations told her exactly what we were doing. She hung there all day, listening, with one of the moons as a shield, using her lifeboat as a relay station and auxiliary. Once our pattern of sweeps was established, the boat could keep out of our way and still effectively watch the vital area.

"Their boat carried two light missiles. They used them when it became obvious that our boat had sighted the launcher."

The wreckage of the lifeboat had been spotted in one of the craters near the Black Hill. They had not tried to bring out the bodies.

"Seri knew by then that you were trying to make it on foot, and they came down on the mesa to defend the launcher in case you should make it. They were so close, so desperately close!"

Kettrick thought of how Seri had looked at him, still lying where Chai had struck him down, and how he had said, "If you had only come back a day sooner, I'd have had time to make sure of you with my own hand. You and that wretched beast. Or a day later, and I'd have been gone. If you had to come back at all, damn you, oh damn you, Johnny..."

He was in a locked cabin of the cruiser now, with Larith to tend his hurts. The other man was alone and much more ready to talk. Sekma was drawing up an astonishing collection of names.

"A lot of them will slip away," he said, "but we'll have an end to the Doomstar."

As he approached the ship, Kettrick saw that he was not the only one walking in the desert. Boker was there with Glevan, looking off across the moonlit sand toward the Many Hills. He knew what was in their minds. It was heavy also in his.

Nobody thought to mention the collar of heartstones. It was not important.

Boker sighed, and then he looked at Kettrick. "Anyway, Johnny," he said, "this is one place we can come back to."

The three of them went together into the ship.

The warning hooter sounded. The cruiser rose skyward, riding a plume of flame.

Down in the sink the Krinn heard the thunder and scream of her going.

And presently the sun came up.

THE END

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