

Thunderhead

1

It was a small room, with an uneven floor, exposed, hand-hewn ceiling beams, a rough fieldstone fireplace. There was furniture: a narrow bunk, a table, a bookcase, straight-backed chairs, all meticulously dusted. A pot of sickly snow-flowers stood in the center of the table. A thick quartz window in a vacuum-tight alloy frame was set in the south wall—a salvaged DV port from a deep-space liner. The view through the window was of black night, whirling snowflakes, a moonlit mountain peak thrusting up towards the sprawling configuration of the constellation Angina Doloris.

Beside the window, a compact Navy issue WFP transmitter was set up on a small gray-metal desk. The man standing before it was tall, wide-shouldered, with graying hair, still straight-backed, but thickening through the body now. He studied the half-dozen instrument faces, then seated himself, began noting their readings in a worn notebook. As he worked, the teen-aged boy who stood beside him watched intently.

"I've been working on my Blue codes, Lieutenant Carnaby," the lad was saying. "I'll bet I could pass the Academy exam now." His eager tone changed. "You s'pose I'll ever get the chance, Lieutenant?"

"Sure, Terry," Carnaby said. His voice was deep, husky. "A Navy ship's bound to call here, any time now."

The boy stood by as Carnaby depressed the tape key which would send the recorded call letters of the one-man station flashing outward as a shaped wavefront, propagated at the square of the speed of light.

"Lieutenant," the boy said, "every night you send out your call. How come you never get an answer?"

Carnaby shook his head. "I don't know, Terry. Maybe they're too busy fighting the Djann to check in with every little JN beacon station on the Outline."

"You said after five years they were supposed to come back and pick you up," the boy persisted. "Why—"

There was a sharp, wavering tone from the round, wiremesh covered speaker. A dull red light winked on, blinked in a rapid flutter, settled down to a steady glow. The audio signal firmed to a raucous buzz.

"Lieutenant!" Terry blurted. "Something's coming in!"

Swiftly, Carnaby thumbed the big S-R key to RECEIVE, flipped the selector lever to UNSC, snapped a switch tagged RCD.

". . . riority, to all stations," a voice faint with distance whispered through a rasp and crackle of star-static. "Cincsec One-two-oh to . . . Cincfleet Nine . . . serial one-oh-four . . . stations copy . . . Terem Aldo . . . Terem . . . pha . . . this . . . message . . . two . . . Part One . . ."

"What is it, Lieutenant?" The boy's voice broke with excitement.

"A Fleet Action signal," Carnaby said tensely. "An all-station, recorded. I'm taping it; if they repeat it a couple of times, I'll get it all."

They listened, heads close to the speaker grille; the voice faded and swelled. It reached the end of the message, began again: "Red priority . . . tions . . . incsec One-two . . ."

The message repeated five times; then the voice ceased. The wavering carrier hum went on another five seconds, cut off. The red light winked out. Carnaby flipped over the SEND key, twisted the selector to VOC-SQ.

"JN 37 Ace Trey to Cincsec One-two-oh," he transmitted in a tense voice. "Acknowledging receipt Fleet TX 104. Request clarification."

Then he waited, his face taut, for a reply to his transmission, which had been automatically taped, condensed to a one-microsecond squawk, and repeated ten times at one-second intervals.

"No good," Carnaby shook his head after a silent minute had passed. "From the sound of the Fleet beam, Cincsec One-two-oh must be a long way from here."

"Try again, Lieutenant! Tell 'em you're here, tell 'em it's time they came back for you! Tell 'em-"

"They can't hear me, Terry." Carnaby's face was tight. "I haven't got the power to punch across that kind of distance." He keyed the playback. The filtered composite signal came through clearly now:

Red priority to all stations. Cincsec One-two-oh to Rim HQ via Cincfleet Nine-two. All Fleet stations copy. Pass to Terem Aldo Cerise, Terem Alpha Two, and ancillaries. This message in two parts. Part one: CTF Forty-one reports breakthrough of Djann armed tender on standard vector three-three-seven, mark; three-oh-five, mark; oh-four-two. This is a Category One Alert. Code G applies. Class Four through Nine stations stand by on Status Green. Part Two. Inner Warning Line units divert all traffic lanes three-four through seven-one. Outer Beacon Line stations activate main beacon, pulsing code schedule gamma eight. Message ends. All stations acknowledge."

"What's all that mean, Lieutenant?" Terry's eyes seemed to bulge with excitement.

"It means I'm going to get some exercise, Terry."

"Exercise how?"

Carnaby took out a handkerchief and wiped it across his forehead. "That was a general order from Sector Command. Looks like they've got a rogue bogie on the loose. I've got to put the beacon on the air."

He turned to look out through the window toward the towering ramparts of the nine-thousand-foot volcanic peak gleaming white in the light of the small, brilliant moon. Terry followed Carnaby's glance.

"Gosh, Lieutenant-you mean you got to climb old Thunderhead?"

"That's where I set the beacon up, Terry," Carnaby said mildly. "On the highest ground around."

"Sure-but your flitter was working then!"

"It's not such a tough climb, Terry. I've made it a few times, just to check on things." He was studying the rugged contour of the moonlit steep, which resembled nothing so much as a mass of snowy cumulus. There was snow on the high ledges, but the wind would have scoured the east face clear.

"Not in the last five years, you haven't, Lieutenant!" Terry sounded agitated.

"I haven't had a Category One Alert, either," Carnaby smiled.

"Maybe they didn't mean you," Terry said.

"They called for Outer Beacon Line stations. That's me."

"They don't expect you to do it on foot," Terry protested. "Not this time o' year!"

Carnaby looked at the boy, smiling slightly. "I guess maybe they do, Terry."

"Then they're wrong!" Terry's thin face looked pale. "Don't go, Lieutenant!"

"It's my job, Terry. It's what I'm here for. You know that."

"What if you never got the message?" Terry countered. "What if the radio went on the blink, like all the rest of the stuff you brought in here with you-the flitter, and the food unit, and the scooter? Then nobody'd expect you to get yourself killed-"

"But it didn't," Carnaby reminded him gently.

Terry stared at the older man; his mouth worked as though he wanted to speak, but couldn't find the words. "I'll go with you," he said.

Carnaby shook his head. "Thanks, Terry. But you're just a boy. I need a man along on this trip."

Terry's narrow face tightened. "Boy, hell," he said defiantly. "I'm seventeen!"

"I didn't mean anything, Terry. Just that I need a man who's had some trail experience."

"How'm I going to get any trail experience, Lieutenant, if I don't start sometime?"

"Better to start with an easier climb than Thunderhead," Carnaby said gently. "You better go along home now, Terry. Your uncle will be getting worried."

"When . . . when you leaving, Lieutenant?"

"Early. I'll need all the daylight I can get to make Halliday's Roost by

sundown."

2

After the boy had gone, Carnaby went to the storage room at the rear of the small house, checked over the meager store of issue supplies. He examined the cold-suit, shook his head over the brittleness of the wiring. At least it had been a loose fit; he'd still be able to get into it.

He left the house then, walked alone up the steep, unpaved street, past the half-dozen ramshackle stores that made up the business district of the single surviving settlement on the frontier planet Longone.

At Maverik's store, the evening's card game had broken up, but half a dozen men still sat around the old hydrogen space heater. They looked up casually.

"I need a man," Carnaby said without preamble. "I've got a climb to make in the morning. A Fleet unit in Deep Space has scared up a Djann blockade runner. My orders are to activate the beacon."

"Orders, eh?" Sal Maverik spoke up. He was a big-faced man with quick, sly eyes. "I don't reckon any promotion orders were included?" He was grinning openly at Carnaby.

"Not this time," Carnaby said mildly.

"Twenty-one years in grade," Sal said genially. "Must be some kind of record." He took out a toothpick and plied it on a back tooth. "Twenty-one years, with no transfer, no replacement, not even a letter from home. I figured they'd forgot you're out here, Carnaby."

"Shut up, Sal." The man named Harry frowned at Carnaby. "Orders, you said, Jim? You mean you picked up a Navy signal?"

Carnaby nodded. "I just need a man along to help me pack gear as far as Halliday's Roost."

"You gone nuts, Carnaby?" Sal Maverik growled. "Nobody in his right mind would tackle that damned rock after first snow, even if he had a reason."

"Halliday's hut ought to still be standing," Carnaby said. "We can overnight there, and-"

"Jimmy, wait a minute," Harry said. "All this about orders, and climbing old Thunderhead; it don't make sense! You mean after all these years they pick you to pull a damn fool stunt like that?"

"It's a general order to all Outer Line stations. They don't know my flitter's out of action."

Harry shook his head. "Forget it, Jimmy. Nobody can make a climb like that at this time of year."

"Fleet wants that beacon on the air," Carnaby said. "I guess they've got a reason; maybe a good reason."

Maverik spat loudly in the direction of a sand-filled can. "You been sporting that badge for the last twenty years around here," he said. "It's time you turned it in, Carnaby." He riffled the cards in his hand. "I'll play you a hand of showdown for it."

Carnaby rubbed a thumb across the tiny jeweled comet in his lapel, smiled slightly. "Fleet property, Sal," he said.

The big-faced man showed a glint of gold tooth in a sardonic smile. "Yeah," he said. "I guess I forgot."

"Listen, Jim," Harry said urgently. "I remember when you first came here, a young kid still in your twenties, fresh out of the Academy. Five years you was to be here; they've left you to rot for twenty! Now they come in with this piece of tomfoolery. Well, to hell with 'em! After five years, all bets were off. You got no call to risk your neck--"

"It's still my job, Harry."

Harry rose and came over to Carnaby. He put a hand on the big man's shoulder. "Let's quit pretending, Jim," he said softly. "They're never coming back for you, you know that. The high tide of the Concordiat dropped you here. For twenty years the traffic's been getting sparser, the transmitters dropping off the air. Adobe's deserted now, and Petreac. Another few years and Longone'll be dead, too."

"We're not dead yet."

"That message might have come from the other end of the Galaxy, Jim! For all you know, it's been on the way for a hundred years!"

Carnaby faced him, a big, solidly-built man with a lined face. "You could be right on all counts," he said. "It wouldn't change anything."

Harry sighed, turned away. "If I was twenty years younger, I might go along, just to keep you company, Jimmy. But I'm not. I'm old." He turned back to face Carnaby. "Like you, Jim. Too old."

"Thanks anyway, Harry," Carnaby looked at the other men in the room, nodded slowly. "Sal's right," he said. "It's my lookout, and nobody else's." He turned and pushed back out into the windy street, headed home to make his preparations for the climb.

3

Aboard the Armed Picket Malthusa, five million tons, nine months out of Fleet HQ at Van Diemen's World on a routine Deep Space sweep, Signal Lieutenant Pryor, junior communications officer on message deck duty, listened to the playback of the brief transmission the duty NCOIC had called to his attention:

"JN 37 Ace Trey to Cincsec One . . . Fleet TX . . . clarification," the voice came through with much crackling.

"That's all I could get out of it, Lieutenant," the signal-man said. "I wouldn't have picked that up, if I hadn't been filtering the Y band looking

for AK's on 104."

The officer punched keys, scanned a listing that flashed onto the small screen on his panel.

"There's no JN 37 Ace Trey listed, Charlie," he said. He keyed the playback, listened to the garbled message again.

"Maybe it's some outworld shepherd amusing himself."

"With WFP equipment? On Y channel?" the NCO furrowed his forehead.

"Yeah." The lieutenant frowned. "See if you can get back to him with a station query, Charlie. See who this guy is."

"I'll try, sir; but he came in with six-millisecond lag. That puts him halfway from here to Rim."

The lieutenant crossed the room with the NCO, stood by as the latter sent the standard Confirm ID code. There was no reply.

"I guess we lost him, sir. You want me to log him?"

"No, don't bother."

The big repeater panel chattered then and the officer hurried back to his console, settled down to the tedious business of transmitting follow-up orders to the fifty-seven-hundred Fleet Stations of the Inner Line.

4

The orange sun of Longone was still below the eastern horizon when Carnaby came out the gate to the road. Terry Sickle was there, muffled to his ears in an oversized parka, waiting for him.

"You got to get up early to beat me out, Lieutenant," he said in a tone of forced jocularly.

"What are you doing here, Terry?"

"I heard you still need a man," the lad said, less cocky now.

Carnaby started to shake his head and Terry cut in with: "I can help pack some of the gear you'll need to try the high slope."

"Terry, go on back home, son. That mountain's no place for you."

"How'm I going to qualify for the Fleet when your ship comes, Lieutenant, if I don't start getting some experience?"

"I appreciate it, Terry. It's good to know I have a friend. But--"

"Lieutenant-what's a friend, if he can't help you when you need it?"

"I need you here when I get back, to have a hot meal waiting for me, Terry."

"Lieutenant . . ." All the spring had gone from the boy's stance. "I've known

you all my life. All I ever wanted was to be with you, on Navy business. If you go up there, alone . . ."

Carnaby looked at the boy, the dejected slump of his thin shoulders.

"Your uncle know you're here, Terry?"

"Sure. Uh, he thought it was a fine idea, me going with you."

Carnaby looked at the boy's anxious face.

"All right, then, Terry, if you want to," he said at last. "As far as Halliday's Roost."

"Oh, boy, Lieutenant! We'll have a swell time. I'm a good climber, you'll see!" He grinned from ear to ear, squinting through the early gloom at Carnaby. "Hey, Lieutenant, you're rigged out like a real . . ." he broke off. "I thought you'd, uh, wore out all your issue gear," he finished lamely.

"Seemed like for this trek I ought to be in uniform," Carnaby said. "And the cold-suit will feel good, up on the high slopes."

The two moved off down the dark street. The lights were still on in Sal Maverik's general store. The door opened as they came up; Sal emerged, carrying a flour sack, his mackinaw collar turned up around his ears. He swung to stare at Carnaby.

"Hey, by God! Look at him, dressed fit to kill!"

Carnaby and Terry brushed past the thick-set man.

"Carnaby," Sal raised his voice, "was this poor kid the best you could get to hold your hand?"

"What do you mean, poor kid?" Terry started. Carnaby caught his arm.

"We're on official business, Terry," he said. "Eyes front."

"Playing Navy, hah? That's a hot one," the storekeeper called after the two. "What kind of orders you get? To take a goony-bird census, up in the foothills?"

"Don't pay any attention, Lieutenant," Terry said, his voice unsteady. "He's as full of meanness as a rotten meal-spud is weevils."

"He's had some big disappointments in his life, Terry. That makes a man bitter."

"I guess you did, too, Lieutenant. It ain't made you mean." Terry looked sideways at Carnaby. "I don't reckon you beat out the competition to get an Academy appointment and then went through eight years of training just for this." He made a gesture that took in the sweep of the semi-arid landscape stretching away to the big world's far horizon, broken only by the massive outcroppings of the pale, convoluted lava cores spaced at intervals of a few miles along a straight fault line that extended as far as men had explored the desolate world.

Carnaby laughed softly. "No, I had big ideas about seeing the Galaxy, making Fleet Admiral, and coming home covered with gold braid and glory."

"You leave any folks behind, Lieutenant?" Terry inquired, waxing familiar in the comradeship of the trail.

"No wife. There was a girl. And my half brother, Tom. A nice kid. He'd be over forty, now."

The dusky sun was up now, staining the rounded, lumpy flank of Thunderhead a deep scarlet. Carnaby and Sickle crossed the first rock slope, entered the broken ground where the prolific rock lizards eyed them as they approached, then heaved themselves from their perches, scuttled away into the black shadows of the deep crevices opened in the porous rock by the action of ten million years of wind and sand erosion on thermal cracks.

Five hundred feet above the plain, Carnaby looked back at the settlement; only a mile away, it was almost lost against the titanic spread of empty wilderness.

"Terry, why don't you go on back now," he said. "Your uncle will have a nice breakfast waiting for you."

"I'm looking forward to sleeping out," the boy said confidently. "We better keep pushing, or we won't make the Roost by dark."

5

In the Officer's off-duty bay, Signal Lieutenant Pryor straightened from over the billiard table as the nasal voice of the command deck yeoman broke into the recorded dance music:

"Now hear this. Commodore Broadly will address the ship's company."

"Ten to one he says we've lost the bandit," Supply Captain Aaron eyed the annunciator panel.

"Gentlemen," the sonorous tones of the ship's commander sounded relaxed, unhurried. "We now have a clear track on the Djann blockade runner, which indicates he will attempt to evade our Inner Line defenses and lose himself in Rim territory. In this, I propose to disappoint him. I have directed Colonel Lancer to launch interceptors to take up station along a conic, subsuming thirty degrees on axis from the presently constructed vector. We may expect contact in approximately three hours' time." A recorded bos'n's whistle shrilled the end-of-message signal.

"So?" Aaron raised his eyebrows. "A three-million-tonner swats a ten-thousand-ton side-boat. Big deal."

"That boat can punch just as big a hole in the blockade as a Super-D," Pryor said. "Not that the Djann have any of those left to play with."

"We kicked the damned spiders back into their home system ten years ago," Aaron said tiredly. "In my opinion, the whole Containment operation's a boondoggle to justify a ten-million-man Fleet."

"As long as there are any of them alive, they're a threat," Pryor repeated the slogan.

"Well, Broadly sounds as though he's got the bogie in the bag," Aaron yawned.

"Maybe he has," Pryor addressed the ball carefully, sent the ivory sphere cannoning against the target. "He wouldn't go on record with it if he didn't think he was on to a sure thing."

"He's a disappointed 'ceptor jockey. What makes him think that pirate won't duck back of a blind spot and go dead?"

"It's worth a try-and if he nails it, it will be a feather in his cap."

"Another star on his collar, you mean."

"Uh-huh, that too."

"We're wasting our time," Aaron said. "But that's his lookout. Six ball in the corner pocket."

6

As Commodore Broadly turned away from the screen on which he had delivered his position report to the crew of the great war vessel, his eye met that of his executive officer. The latter shifted his gaze uneasily.

"Well, Roy, you expect me to announce to all hands that Cincfleet has committed a major blunder in letting this bandit slip through the picket line?" he demanded with some asperity.

"Certainly not, sir." The officer looked worried. "But in view of the seriousness of the breakout . . ."

"There are some things better kept in the highest command channels," the commodore said shortly. "You and I are aware of the grave consequences of a new release of their damned seed in an uncontaminated sector of the Eastern Arm. But I see no need to arouse the parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins of every apprentice technician aboard by an overly candid disclosure of the facts!"

"I thought Containment had done its job by now," the captain said. "It's been three years since the last Djann sighting outside the Reservation. It seems we're not the only ones who're keeping things under our hats."

Broadly frowned. "Mmmm. I agree, I'm placed at something of a disadvantage in my tactical planning by the over-secretiveness of the General Staff. However, there can be no two opinions as to the correctness of my present course."

The exec glanced ceilingward. "I hope so, sir."

"Having the admiral aboard makes you nervous, does it, Roy?" Broadly said in a tone of heartiness. "Well, I regard it merely as an opportunity better to display Malthusa's capabilities."

"Commodore, you don't think it would be wise to coordinate with the admiral on this-"

"I'm in command of this vessel," Broadly said sharply. "I'm carrying the vice admiral as supercargo, nothing more!"

"He's still Task Group CINC . . ."

"I'm comming this ship, Roy, not Old Carbuncle!" Broadly rocked on his heels, watching the screen where a quadrangle of bright points representing his interceptor squadron fanned out, on an intersecting course with the fleeing Djann vessel. "I'll pinch off this breakthrough single-handed; and all of us will share in the favorable attention the operation will bring us!"

7

In his quarters on the VIP deck, the vice admiral studied the Operational Utter Top Secret dispatch which had been handed to him five minutes earlier by his staff signal major.

"It looks as though this is no ordinary boatload of privateers." He looked soberly at the elderly communicator. "They're reported to be carrying a new weapon of unassessed power, and a cargo of spore racks that will knock Containment into the next continuum."

"It doesn't look good, sir," the major wagged his head.

"I note that the commodore has taken action according to the manual." The admiral's voice was noncommittal.

The major frowned. "Let's hope that's sufficient, Admiral."

"It should be. The bogie's only a converted tender. She couldn't be packing much in the way of firepower in that space, secret weapon or no secret weapon."

"Have you mentioned this aspect to the commodore, sir?"

"Would it change anything, Ben?"

"Nooo. I suppose not."

"Then we'll let him carry on without any more cause for jumpiness than the presence of a vice admiral on board is already providing."

8

Crouched in his fitted acceleration cradle aboard the Djann vessel, the One-Who-Commands studied the motion of the charged molecules in the sensory tank before him.

"Now the death-watcher dispatches his messengers," he communed with the three link brothers who formed the Chosen Crew. "Now is the hour of the testing of Djann."

"Profound is the rhythm of our epic," the One-Who-Records sang out. "We are the chosen-to-be-heroic, and in our tiny cargo, Djann lives still, his

future glory inherent in the convoluted spores!"

"It was a grave risk to put the destiny of Djann at hazard in this wild gamble," the One-Who-Refutes reminded his link brothers. "If we fail, the generations yet unborn will slumber on in darkness or perish in ice or fire."

"Yet if we succeed-if the New Thing we have learned serves well its function-then will Djann live anew!"

"Now the death messengers of the water beings approach," the One-Who-Commands pointed out. "Link well, brothers! The energy aggregate waits for our directing impulse! Now we burn away the dross of illusion from the hypotheses of the theorists in the harsh crucible of reality!"

"In such a fire, the flame of Djann coruscates in unparalleled glory!" the One-Who-Records exulted. "Time has ordained this conjunction to try the timbre of our souls!"

"Then channel your trained faculties, brothers." The One-Who-Commands gathered his forces, feeling out delicately to the ravening nexus of latent energy contained in the thought shell poised at the center of the stressed-space field enclosing the fleeing vessel. "Hold the sacred fire, sucked from the living bodies of a million of our fellows," he exhorted. "Shape it, and hurl it in well-directed bolts at the death-bringers, for the future and glory of Djann!"

9

At noon, Carnaby and Sickle rested on a nearly horizontal slope of rock that curved to meet the vertical wall that swelled up and away overhead. Their faces and clothes were gray with the impalpable dust whipped up by the brisk wind. Terry spat grit from his mouth, passed a can of hot stew and a plastic water flask to Carnaby.

"Getting cool already," he said. "Must not be more'n ten above freezing."

"We might get a little more snow before morning." Carnaby eyed the milky sky. "You'd better head back now, Terry. No point in you getting caught in a storm."

"I'm in for the play," the boy said shortly. "Say, Lieutenant, you got another transmitter up there at the beacon station you might could get through on?"

Carnaby shook his head. "Just the beacon tube, the lens generators, and a power pack. It's a stripped-down installation. There's a code receiver, but it's only designed to receive classified instruction input."

"Too bad." They ate in silence for a few minutes, looking out over the plain below. "Lieutenant, when this is over," Sickle said suddenly, "we got to do something. There's got to be some way to remind the Navy about you being here!"

Carnaby tossed the empty can aside and stood. "I put a couple of messages on the air, sub-light, years ago," he said. "That's all I can do."

"Heck, Lieutenant, it takes six years, sub-light, just to make the relay station on Goy! Then if somebody happens to pick up the call and boost it, in another ten years some Navy brass might even see it. And then if he's in a good mood, he might tell somebody to look into it, next time they're out this way."

"Best I could do, Terry, now that the liners don't call any more."

Carnaby finished his stew, dropped the can, watched it roll off downslope, clatter over the edge, a tiny sound lost in the whine and shrill of the wind. He looked up at the rampart ahead.

"We better get moving," he said. "We've got a long climb to make before dark."

10

Signal Lieutenant Pryor awoke to the strident buzz of his bunkside telephone.

"Sir, the commodore's called a Condition Yellow," the message deck NCO informed him. "It looks like that bandit blasted through our intercept and took out two Epsilon-classes while he was at it. I got a standby from command deck, and-

"I'll be right up," Pryor said quickly.

Five minutes later, he stood with the on-duty signals crew, reading out an incoming from fleet. He whistled.

"Brother, they've got something new!" He looked at Captain Aaron. "Did you check out the vector they had to make to reach their new position in the time they've had?"

"Probably a foulup in Tracking." Aaron looked ruffled, routed out of a sound sleep.

"The commodore's counting off the scale," the NCO said. "He figured he had 'em boxed."

The annunciator beeped. The yeoman announced Malthusa's commander.

"All right, you men." Broadly's voice had a rough edge to it now. "The enemy has an idea he can maul Fleet units and go his way unmolested. I intend to disabuse him of that notion! I'm ordering a course change. I'll maintain contact with this bandit until such time as units designated for the purpose have reported his neutralization! This vessel is under a Condition Yellow at this time, and I need not remind you that relevant sections of the manual will be adhered to with full rigor!"

Pryor and Aaron looked at each other, eyebrows raised. "He must mean business, if he's willing to risk straining seams with a full-vector course change," the former said.

"So we pull six on and six off until he gets it out of his system," Aaron growled. "I knew this cruise wasn't going to work out, as soon as I heard

Old Carbuncle would be aboard."

"What's he got to do with it? Broadly's running this action."

"Don't worry, he'll be in it before we're through."

11

On the upper slope, three thousand feet above the plain, Carnaby and Terry hugged the rockface, working their way upward. Aside from the steepness of the incline, the going was of no more than ordinary difficulty here; the porous rock, resistant though it was to the erosive forces that had long ago stripped away the volcanic cone of which the remaining mass had formed the core, had deteriorated in its surface sufficiently to afford easy hand- and footholds. Now Terry paused, leaning against the rock. Carnaby saw that under the layer of dust, the boy's face was pale and drawn.

"Not much farther, Terry," he said. He settled himself in a secure position, his feet wedged in a cleft. His own arms were feeling the strain now; there was the beginning of a slight tremor in his knees after the hours of climbing.

"I didn't figure to slow you down, Lieutenant." Terry's voice showed the strain of his fatigue.

"You've been leading me a tough chase, Terry," Carnaby grinned across at him. "I'm glad of a rest." He noted the dark hollows under the lad's eyes, the pallor of his cheeks.

Sickle's tongue came out and touched his lips. "Lieutenant-you made a try-a good try. Turn back now. It's going to snow. You can't make it to the top in a blizzard."

Carnaby shook his head. "It's too late in the day to start down; you'd be caught on the slope. We'll take it easy up to the Roost; in the morning you'll have an easy climb down."

"Sure, Lieutenant. Don't worry about me." Terry drew a breath, shivering in the bitter wind that plucked at his snow jacket.

12

"What do you mean, lost him!" the bull roar of the commodore rattled the screen. "Are you telling me that this ragtag refugee has the capability to drop off the screens of the best-equipped tracking deck in the Fleet?"

"Sir," the stubborn-faced tracking officer repeated, "I can only report that my screens register nothing within the conic of search. If he's there-"

"He's there, Mister!" the commodore's eyes glared from under a bushy overhang of brows. "Find that bandit or face a court, Captain. I haven't diverted a ship of the Fleet Line from her course for the purpose of becoming the object of an Effectiveness Inquiry!"

The tracking officer turned away from the screen as it went white, met the quizzical gaze of the visiting signal lieutenant.

"The old devil's bit off too big a bite this time," he growled. "Let him call a court; he wouldn't have the gall."

"If we lose the bogie now, he won't look good back on Vandy," Pryor said. "This is serious business, diverting from Cruise Plan to chase rumors. I wonder if he really had a positive ID on this track."

"Hell, no! There's no way to make a Positive at this range, under these conditions! After three years without any action for the newstapes, the brass are grabbing at straws."

"Well, if I were you, Gordie, I'd find that track, even if it turns out to be a tramp, with a load of bootleg dran."

"Don't worry. If he's inside the conic, I'll find him . . ."

13

"I guess . . . it's dropped twenty degrees . . . in the last hour," Terry Sickle's voice was almost lost in the shriek of the wind that buffeted the two men as they inched their way up the last yards toward the hut on the narrow rockshelf called Halliday's Roost.

"Never saw snow falling at this temperature before," Carnaby brushed at the ice caked around his eyes. Through the swirl of crystals as fine as sand, he discerned the sagging outline of the shelter above.

Ten minutes later, inside the crude lean-to built of rock slabs, he set to work chinking the gaping holes in the five-foot walls with packed snow. Behind him, Terry lay huddled against the back wall, breathing hoarsely.

"Guess . . . I'm not in as good shape . . . as I thought I was," he said.

"You'll be OK, Terry." Carnaby closed the gap through which the worst of the icy draft was keening, then opened a can of stew for the boy. The fragrance of the hot meat and vegetables made his jaws ache.

"Lieutenant, how you going to climb in this snow?" Sickle's voice shook to the chattering of his teeth. "In good weather, you might could have made it. Like this, you haven't got a chance!"

"Maybe it'll be blown clear by morning," Carnaby said mildly. He opened a can for himself. Terry ate slowly, shivering uncontrollably. Carnaby watched him worriedly.

"Lieutenant," the boy said, "even if that call you picked up was meant for you-even if this ship they're after is headed out this way-what difference will it make one way or another if one beacon's on the air or not?"

"Probably none," Carnaby said. "But if there's one chance in a thousand he breaks this way-well, that's what I'm here for."

"But what's a beacon going to do, except give him something to steer by?"

Carnaby smiled. "It's not that kind of beacon, Terry. My station's part of a system-a big system-that covers the surface of a sphere of space a hundred

lights in diameter. When there's an alert, each station locks in with the others that flank it, and sets up what's called a stressed field. There's a lot of things you can do with this field. You can detect a drive, monitor communications-

"What if these other stations you're talking about aren't working?" Terry cut in.

"Then my station's not going to do much," Carnaby said.

"If the other stations are still on the air, why haven't any of them picked up your TX's and answered?"

Carnaby shook his head. "We don't use the beacon field to chatter back and forth, Terry. This is a Top Security system. Nobody knows about it except the top command levels-and of course, the men manning the beacons."

"Maybe that's how they came to forget about you-somebody lost a piece of paper and nobody else knew!"

"I shouldn't be telling you about it," Carnaby said with a smile. "But I guess you'll keep it under your hat."

"You can count on me, Lieutenant," Terry said solemnly.

"I know I can, Terry," Carnaby said.

14

The clangor of the General Quarters alarm shattered the tense silence of the chart deck like a bomb through a plate glass window. The navigation officer whirled abruptly from the grametric over which he had been bending, collided with the deck chief. Both men leaped for the Master Position monitor, caught just a glimpse of a vivid scarlet trace lancing toward the emerald point targeted at the center of the plate before the apparatus exploded from its mounting, mowed the two men down in a hail of shattered plastic fragments. Smoke boiled, black and pungent, from the gutted cavity. The duty NCO, bleeding from a dozen gashes, stumbled toward the two men, turned away in horror, reached an emergency voice phone. Before he could key it, the deck under him canted sharply. He screamed, clutched at a table for support, saw it tilt, come crashing down on top of him . . .

On the message deck, Lieutenant Pryor clung to an operator's stool, listening, through the stridency of the alarm bell, to the frantic voice from command deck:

"All sections, all sections, combat stations! We're under attack! My God, we've taken a hit forward-"

The voice cut off, to be replaced by the crisp tones of Colonel Lancer, first battle officer:

"As you were! Sections G-987 and 989 damage control crews report! Forward armaments, safety interlocks off, stand by for firing orders! Message center, flash a code six to Fleet and TF Command. Power section, all selectors to

gate, rig for full emergency power . . ."

Pryor hauled himself hand-over-hand to the main message console; the body of the code yeoman hung slackly in the seat harness, blood dripping from the fingertips of his dangling hand. Pryor freed him, took his place. He keyed the code six alarm into the pulse-relay tanks, triggered an emergency override signal, beamed the message outward toward the distant Fleet headquarters.

On the command deck, Commodore Broadly clutched a sprained wrist to his chest, stood, teeth bared, feet braced apart, staring into the forward imagescreen at the dwindling point of light that was the Djann blockade runner.

"The effrontery of the damned scoundrel!" he roared. "Lancer, launch another covey of U-95's! You've got over five hundred megaton-seconds of firepower, man! Use it!"

"He's out of range, Commodore," Lancer said coolly. "He booby-trapped us very neatly."

"It's your job to see that we don't blunder into traps, by God, Colonel!" He rounded on the battle officer. "You'll stop that pirate or I'll rip those eagles off your shoulders myself!"

Lancer's mouth was a hard line; his eyes were ice chips.

"You can relieve me, Commodore," his voice grated. "Until you do, I'm battle commander aboard this vessel."

"By God, you're relieved, sir!" Broadly yelled. He whirled on the startled exec standing by. "Confine this officer to his quarters! Order full emergency acceleration! This vessel's on Condition Red at Full Combat Alert until we overtake and destroy that sneaking snake in the grass!"

"Commodore-at full emergency without warning, there'll be men injured, even killed-"

"Carry out my commands, Captain, or I'll find someone who will!" the commodore's bellow cut off the exec. "I'll show that filthy, sneaking pack of spiders what it means to challenge a Terran fighting ship!"

On the power deck, Chief Powerman Joe Arena wiped the cut on his forehead, stared at the bloody rag, hurled it aside with a curse.

"All right, you one-legged deck apes!" he roared. "You heard it! We're going after the bandit, full gate-and if we melt our linings down to slag, I'll have every man of you sign a statement of charges that'll take your grandchildren two hundred years to pay off!"

15

In the near-darkness of the Place of Observation aboard the Djann vessel, the ocular complex of the One-Who-Commands glowed with a dim red sheen as he studied the apparently black surface of the sensitive plate. "The death watcher has eaten our energy weapon," he communicated to his

three link brothers. "Now our dooms are in the palps of the fate spinner."

"The death watcher of the water beings might have passed us by," the One-Who-Anticipates signaled. "It was an act of rashness to hurl the weapon at it."

"It will make a mighty song," the One-Who-Records thrummed his resonator plates, tried a melancholy bass chord.

"But what egg-carrier will exude the brood-nourishing honeys of strength and sagacity in response to these powerful rhymes, if the stimulus to their creation leads us to quick extinction?" the One-Who-Refutes queried.

"In their own brief existence, these harmonies find their justification," the One-Who-Records attested.

"The death watcher shakes himself," the One-Who-Commands stated. "Now he turns in pursuit."

The One-Who-Records emitted a booming tone. "Gone are the great suns of Djann," he sang. "Lost are the fair worlds that knew their youth. But the spark of their existence glows still!"

"Now we fall outward, toward the Great Awesomeness," the One-Who-Anticipates commented. "Only the blackness will know your song."

"Draw in your energies from that-which-is-extraneous," the One-Who-Commands ordered. "Focus the full poignancy of your intellects on the urgency of our need for haste. All else is vain, now. Neither singer nor song will survive the vengeance of the death watcher if he outstrips our swift flight!"

"Though Djann and water being perish, my poem is eternal," the One-Who-Records emitted a stirring assonance. "Fly, Djann! Pursue, death watcher! Let the suns observe how we comport ourselves in this hour!"

"Exhort the remote nebulosities to attend our plight, if you must," the One-Who-Refutes commented. "But link your energies to ours or all is lost."

Silent now, the Djann privateer fled outward toward the Rim.

16

Carnaby awoke, lay in darkness listening to the wheezing of Terry Sickle's breath. The boy didn't sound good. Carnaby sat up, suppressing a grunt at the stiffness of his limbs. The icy air seemed stale. He moved to the entry, lifted the polyon flap. A cascade of powdery snow poured in. Beyond the opening a faint glow filtered down through banked snow.

He turned back to Terry as the latter coughed deeply, again and again.

"Looks like the snow's quit," Carnaby said. "It's drifted pretty bad, but there's no wind now. How are you feeling, Terry?"

"Not so good, Lieutenant," Sickle said weakly. He breathed heavily, in and

out. "I don't know what's got into me. Feel hot and cold at the same time."

Carnaby stripped off his glove, put his hand on Sickie's forehead. It was scalding hot.

"You just rest easy here for a while, Terry. There's a couple more cans of stew, and plenty of water. I'll make it up to the top as quickly as I can. Soon as I get back, we'll go down together. With luck, I'll have you to Doc Link's house by dark."

"I guess . . . I guess I should have done like Doc said," Terry's voice was a thin whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"I been taking these hyposprays. Two a day. He said I better not miss one, but heck, I been feeling real good lately--"

"What kind of shots, Terry?" Carnaby's voice was tight.

"I don't know. Heck, Lieutenant, I'm no invalid! Or . . ." his voice trailed off.

"You should have told me, Terry."

"Gosh, Lieutenant-don't worry about me! I didn't mean nothing! Hell, I feel . . ." he broke off to cough deeply, rackingly.

"I'll get you back, Terry-but I've got to go up first," Carnaby said. "You understand that, don't you?"

Terry nodded. "A man's got to do his job, Lieutenant. I'll be waiting . . . for you . . . when you get back."

"Listen to me carefully, Terry." Carnaby's voice was low. "If I'm not back by this time tomorrow, you'll have to make it back down by yourself. You understand? Don't wait for me."

"Sure, Lieutenant, I'll just rest awhile. Then I'll be OK."

"Sooner I get started the sooner I'll be back." Carnaby took a can from the pack, opened it, handed it to Terry. The boy shook his head.

"You eat it, Lieutenant. You need your strength. I don't feel like I . . . could eat anything anyway."

"Terry, I don't want to have to pry your mouth open and pour it in."

"All right . . . but open one for yourself too . . ."

"All right, Terry."

Sickle's hand trembled as he spooned the stew to his mouth. He ate half of the contents of the can, then leaned back against the wall, closed his eyes. "That's all . . . I want . . ."

"All right, Terry. You get some rest now. I'll be back before you know it." Carnaby crawled out through the opening, pushed his way up through

loosely drifted snow. The cold struck his face like a spiked club. He turned the suit control up another notch, noticing as he did that the left side seemed to be cooler than the right.

The near-vertical rise of the final crown of the peak thrust up from the drift, dazzling white in the morning sun. Carnaby examined the rockface for twenty feet on either side of the hut, picked a spot where a deep crack angled upward, started the last leg of the climb.

17

On the message deck, Lieutenant Pryor frowned into the screen from which the saturnine features of Captain Aaron gazed back sourly.

"The commodore's going to be unhappy about this," Pryor said. "If you're sure your extrapolation is accurate-"

"It's as good as the data I got from Plotting," Aaron snapped. "The bogie's over the make-or-break line; we'll never catch him now. You know your trans-Einsteinian physics as well as I do."

"I never heard of the Djann having anything capable of that kind of acceleration," Pryor protested.

"You have now." Aaron switched off and keyed command deck, passed his report to the exec, then sat back with a resigned expression to await the reaction.

Less than a minute later, Commodore Broadly's irate face snapped onto the screen.

"You're the originator of this report?" he growled.

"I did the extrapolation," Aaron stared back at his commanding officer.

"You're relieved for incompetence," Broadly said in a tone as harsh as a handsaw.

"Yessir," Aaron said. His face was pale, but he returned the commodore's stare. "But my input data and comps are a matter of record. I'll stand by them."

Broadly's face darkened. "Are you telling me these spiders can spit in our faces and skip off, scot-free?"

"All I'm saying, sir, is that the present acceleration ratios will keep the target ahead of us, no matter what we do."

Broadly's face twitched. "This vessel is at full emergency gain," he growled. "No Djann has ever outrun a Fleet unit in a straightaway run."

"This one is . . . sir."

The commodore's eyes bore into Aaron's. "Remain on duty until further notice," he said, and switched off. Aaron smiled crookedly and buzzed the message deck.

"He backed down," he said to Pryor. "We've got a worried commodore on board."

"I don't understand it myself," Pryor said. "How the hell is that can outgaining us?"

"He's not," Aaron said complacently. "From a standing start, we'd overhaul him in short order. But he got the jump on us by a couple of minutes, after he lobbed the fish into us. If we'd been able to close the gap in the first half hour or so, we'd have had him; but at trans-L velocities, you can get some strange effects. One of them is that our vectors become asymptotic. We're closing on him-but we'll never overtake him."

Pryor whistled. "Broadly could be busted for this fiasco."

"Uh-huh," Aaron grinned. "Could be-unless the bandit stops off somewhere for a quick one . . ."

After Aaron rang off, Pryor turned to study the position repeater screen. On it Malthusa was represented by a bright point at the center, the fleeing Djann craft by a red dot above.

"Charlie," Pryor called the NCOIC. "That garbled TX we picked up last watch; where did you R and D it?"

"Right about here, Lieutenant." The NCO flicked a switch and turned knobs; a green dot appeared near the upper edge of the screen.

"Hey," he said. "It looks like maybe our bandit's headed out his way."

"You picked him up on the Y band; have you tried to raise him again?"

"Yeah, but nothing doing, Lieutenant. It was just a fluke-"

"Get a Y beam on him, Charlie. Focus it down to a cat's whisker and work a pattern over a one-degree radius centered around his MPP until you get an echo."

"If you say so, sir-but-"

"I do say so, Charlie! Find that transmitter, and the drinks are on me!"

18

Flat against the windswept rockface, Carnaby clung with his fingertips to a tenuous hold, feeling with one booted toe for a purchase higher up. A flake of stone broke away, and for a moment he hung by the fingers of his right hand, his feet dangling over emptiness; then, swinging his right leg far out, he hooked a knob with his knee, caught a rocky rib with his free hand, pulled himself up to a more secure rest. He clung, his cheek against the iron-cold stone; out across the vast expanse of featureless grayish-tan plain, the gleaming whipped-cream shape of the next core rose ten miles to the south. A wonderful view up here-of nothing. Funny to think it could be his last. H was out of condition. It had been too long since his last climb.

But that wasn't the way to think. He had a job to do-the first in twenty-one

years. For a moment, ghostly recollections rose up before him: the trim Academy lawns, the spit-and-polish of inspection, the crisp feel of the new uniform, the glitter of the silver comet as Anne had pinned it on . . .

That was no good either. What counted was here: the station up above. One more push, and he'd be there. He rested for another half minute, then pulled himself up and forward, onto the relatively mild slope of the final approach to the crest. Fifty yards above, the dull-gleaming plastron-coated dome of the beacon station squatted against the exposed rock, looking no different than it had five years earlier.

Ten minutes later he was at the door, flicking the combination latch dial with cold-numbered fingers. Tumblers clicked, and the panel slid aside. The heating system, automatically reacting to his entrance, started up with a busy hum to bring the interior temperature up to comfort level. He pulled off his gauntlets, ran his hands over his face, rasping the stubble there. There was coffee in the side table, he remembered. Fumblingly, with stiff fingers, he got out the dispenser, twisted the control cap, poured out a steaming mug, gulped it down. It was hot and bitter. The grateful warmth of it made him think of Terry, waiting down below in the chill of the half-ruined hut.

"No time to waste," he muttered to himself. He stamped up and down the room, swinging his arms to warm himself, then seated himself at the console, flicked keys with a trained ease rendered only slightly rusty by the years of disuse. He referred to an index, found the input instructions for code gamma eight, set up the boards, flipped in the pulse lever. Under his feet, he felt the faint vibration as the power pack buried in the rock stored its output for ten microseconds, fired it in a single millisecond burst, stored and pulsed again. Dim instrument lights winked on, indicating normal readings all across the board.

Carnaby glanced at the wall clock. He had been here ten minutes now. It would take another quarter hour to comply with the manual's instructions-but to hell with that gobbledygook. He'd put the beacon on the air; this time the Navy would have to settle for that. It would be pushing it to get back to the boy and pack him down to the village by nightfall as it was. Poor kid; he'd wanted to help so badly . . .

19

"That's correct, sir," Pryor said crisply. "I haven't picked up any comeback on my pulse, but I'll definitely identify the echo as coming from a JN type installation."

Commodore Broadly nodded curtly. "However, inasmuch as your instruments indicate that this station is not linked in with a net capable of setting up a defensive field, it's of no use to us." The commodore looked at Pryor, waiting.

"I think perhaps there's a way, sir," Pryor said. "The Djann are known to have strong tribal feelings. They'd never pass up what they thought was an SOS from one of their own. Now, suppose we signal this JN station to switch over to the Djann frequencies and beam one of their own signal

patterns at them. They just might stop to take a look . . ."

"By God," Broadly looked at the signal lieutenant, "if he doesn't, he's not human!"

"You like the idea, sir?" Pryor grinned.

"A little rough on the beacon station if they reach it before we do, eh, Lieutenant? I imagine our friends the Djann will be a trifle upset when they learn they've been duped."

"Oh . . ." Pryor looked blank. "I guess I hadn't thought of that, sir."

"Never mind," Broadly said briskly, "the loss of a minor installation such as this is a reasonable exchange for an armed vessel of the enemy."

"Well . . ."

"Lieutenant, if I had a few more officers aboard who employed their energies in something other than assembling statistics proving we're beaten, this cruise might have made a record for itself-" Broadly cut himself off, remembering the degree of aloofness due very junior officers-even juniors who may have raked some very hot chestnuts out of the fire.

"Carry on, Lieutenant," he said. "If this works out, I think I can promise you a very favorable endorsement on your next ER."

As Pryor's pleased grin winked off the screen, the commodore flipped up the red line key, snapped a brusque request at the bored log room yeoman.

"This will make Old Carbuncle sing another tune," he remarked almost gaily to the exec, standing by with a harassed expression.

"Maybe you'd better go slow, Ned," the latter cautioned, gauging his senior's mood. "It might be as well to get a definite confirmation on this installation's capabilities before we go on record-"

Broadly turned abruptly to the screen as it chimed. "Admiral, as I reported, I've picked up one of our forward beacon towers," Broadly's hearty voice addressed the screen from which the grim visage of the task force commander eyed him. "I'm taking steps to complete the intercept; steps which are, if I may say so, rather ingenious-"

"It's my understanding the target is receding on an I curve, Broadly," the admiral said flatly. "I've been anticipating a code thirty-three from you."

"Break off action?" Broadly's jaw dropped. "Now, Tom-"

"It's a little irregular to use a capital ship of the line to chase a ten-thousand-ton yacht," the task force commander ignored the interruption. "I can understand your desire to break the monotony with a little activity; good exercise for the crew, too. But at the rate the signal is attenuating, it's apparent you've lost her." His voice hardened. "I'm beginning to wonder if you've forgotten that your assignment is the containment of enemy forces supposedly pinned down under tight quarantine!"

"This yacht, as you put it, Admiral, blew two of my detached units out of space!" Broadly came back hotly. "In addition, he planted a missile squarely in my fore lazaret-"

"I'm not concerned with the details of your operation at this moment, Commodore," the other bit off the words like bullets. "I'm more interested in maintaining the degree of surveillance over my assigned quadrant that Concordiat Security requires. Accordingly-"

"Just a minute, Tom, before you commit yourself," Broadly's florid face was pale around the ears. "Perhaps you failed to catch my first remark: I have a forward station directly in the enemy's line of retreat. The intercept is in the bag-unless you countermand me."

"You're talking nonsense. The target's well beyond the Inner Line-"

"He's not beyond the Outer Line!"

The admiral frowned. His tight, well-chiseled face was still youthful under the mask of authority. "The system was never extended into the region under discussion," he said harshly. "I suggest you recheck your instruments. In the interim, I want to see an advice of a course correction for station in the length of time it takes you to give the necessary orders to your navigation section."

Broadly drew a breath, hesitated. If Old Carbuncle was right-if that infernal signal lieutenant had made a mistake-but the boy seemed definite enough about it. He clamped his jaw. He'd risked his career on a wild throw; maybe he'd acted a little too fast, maybe he'd been a little too eager to grab a chance at some favorable notice, but the die was cast now. If he turned back empty-handed, the entire affair would go into the record as a major fiasco. But if this scheme worked out . . .

"Unless the admiral wishes to make that a direct order," he heard himself saying firmly, "I intend to hold my course and close with the enemy. It's my feeling that neither the Admiralty nor the general public will enjoy hearing of casualties inflicted by a supposedly neutralized enemy who was then permitted to go his way unhindered." He returned the other's stare, feeling a glow of pride at his own decisiveness, and a simultaneous sinking sensation at the enormity of the insubordination.

The vice admiral looked back at him through narrowed eyes. "I'll leave that decision to you, Commodore," he said tightly. "I think you're as aware as I of what's at stake here."

Broadly stiffened at what was almost an open threat.

"Instruct your signal officer to pass full information on this supposed station to me immediately," the senior concluded curtly, and disappeared from the screen.

Broadly turned away, feeling all eyes on him. "Tell Pryor to copy his report to G at once," he said in a harsh voice. His eyes strayed to the exec's. "And if this idea of his doesn't work out, God help him." And all of us, he added under his breath.

As Carnaby reached for the door to start the long climb down, a sharp beep! sounded from the panel behind him. He looked back, puzzled. The bleat repeated, urgent, commanding. He swung the pack down, went to the console, flipped down the REC key.

" . . . 37 Ace Trey," an excited voice came through loud and clear. "I repeat, cut your beacon immediately! JN 37 Ace Trey, Cincsec One-two-oh to JN 37 Ace Trey. Shut down beacon soonest! This is an Operational Urgent! JN 37 Ace Trey, cut beacon and stand by for further operational Urgent instructions . . ."

On the Fleet Command Deck aboard the flagship Vice Admiral Thomas Carnaby, otherwise known as Old Carbuncle, studied the sector triagram as his communications chief pointed out the positions of the flagship Malthusa, the Djann refugee, and the reported JN beacon station.

"I've researched the call letters, sir," the gray-haired signal major said. "They're not shown on any listing as an active station. In fact, the entire series of which this station would be a part is coded null; never reported in commission."

"So someone appears to be playing pranks, is that your conclusion, Henry?"

The signal officer pulled at his lower lip. "No, sir, not that, precisely. I've done a full analytical on the recorded signal that young Pryor first intercepted. It's plainly directed to Cincsec in response to their alert; and the ID is confirmed. Now, as I say, this series was dropped from the register; but at one time, such a designation was assigned en bloc to a proposed link in the Out Line. However, the planned installations never came to fruition due to changes in the strategic position."

The vice admiral frowned. "What changes were those?"

"The task force charged with the establishment of the link encountered heavy enemy pressure. In fact, the cruiser detailed to carry out the actual placement of the units was lost in action with all hands. Before the program could be reinitiated, a withdrawal from the sector was ordered. The new link was never completed, and the series was retired, unused."

"So?"

"So . . . just possibly, sir, one of those old stations was erected before Redoubt was lost-"

"What's that?" The admiral rounded on the startled officer. "Did you say . . . Redoubt?" His voice was a hiss between set teeth.

"Y . . . yessir!"

"Redoubt was lost with all hands before she planted her first station!"

"I know that's what we've always thought, Admiral-"

The admiral snatched the paper from the major's hand. "JN 37 Ace Trey," he read aloud. "Why the hell didn't you say so sooner?" He whirled to his chief of staff. "What's Broadly got in mind?" he snapped the question.

The startled officer began a description of the plan to decoy the Djann vessel into range of Malthusa's batteries.

"Decoy?" the vice admiral snarled. The exec took a step backward, shocked at the expression on his superior's face. The latter spun to face his battle officer, standing by on the bridge.

"General, rig out an Epsilon series interceptor and get my pressure gear into it! I want it on the line ready for launch in ten minutes! Assign your best torchman as co-pilot!"

"Yessir!" The general spoke quickly into a lapel mike. The admiral flicked a key beside the hot-line screen.

"Get Broadly," he said in a voice like doom impending.

22

In the Djann ship, the One-Who-Commands stirred and extended a contact to his crew members. "Tune keenly in the scarlet regions of the spectrum," he communicated. "And tell me whether the Spinners weave a new thread in the tapestry of our fates."

"I sensed it but now, and felt recognition stir within me!" the One-Who-Records thrummed a mighty euphony. "A Voice of the Djann, sore beset, telling of mortal need!"

"I detect a strangeness," the One-Who-Refutes indicated. "This is not the familiar voice of They-Who-Summon . . ."

"After the passage of ninety cycles, it is not surprising that new chords have been added to the Voice, and others withdrawn," the One-Who-Anticipates pointed out. "If the link cousins are in distress, our path is clear!"

"Shall I then bend our fate line to meet the new Voice?" the One-Who-Commands called for a weighing. "The pursuers press us closely."

"The Voice calls; we will pervert our saga by shunning it?"

"This is a snare of the water beings, calculated to abort our destinies!" the One-Who-Refutes warned. "Our vital energies are drained to the point of incipient coma by the Weapon-Which-Feeds-On-Life! If we turn aside now, we place ourselves in the jaws of the destroyer!"

"Though the Voice lies, the symmetry of our existence demands that we answer its appeal," the One-Who-Anticipates declared.

The One-Who-Records sounded a booming arpeggio, combining triumph and defeat. "Let the Djann flame burn brightest in its hour of extinction!"

"I accede," the One-Who-Commands announced. "Though only the Great

Emptiness may celebrate our immolation."

23

"By God, they've fallen for it!" Commodore Broadly smacked his fist into his hand and beamed at the young signal lieutenant. He rocked back on his heels, studying the position chart the pilot officer had set up for him on the message deck. "We'll make the intercept about here." His finger stabbed at a point a fractional light from the calculated position of the newfound OL station.

He broke off as an excited voice burst from the intercom screen.

"Commodore Broadly, sir! Urgent from Task-" the yeoman's face disappeared from the screen to be replaced by the fierce visage of the vice admiral.

"Broadly, sheer off and take up course for station, and then report yourself under arrest! Commodore Baskov will take command. I've countermanded your damned-fool orders to the OL station! I'm on my way out there now to see what I can salvage-and when I get back, I'm preferring charges against you that will put you on the beach for the rest of your miserable life!"

24

In the beacon station atop the height of ground known as Thunderhead, Carnaby waited before the silent screen. The modifications to the circuitry had taken half an hour; setting up the new code sequences, another fifteen minutes. Then another half hour had passed, while the converted beacon beamed out the alien signal.

He'd waited long enough. It had been twenty minutes now since the last curt order to stand by; and in the hut a thousand feet below, Terry had been waiting now for nearly five hours, every breath he drew a torture of strangulation. The order had been to put the signal on the air, attempt to delay the enemy ship. Either it had worked, or it hadn't. If Fleet had any more instructions for him, they'd have to damn well deliver them in person. He'd done what was required. Now he had to see the boy. Carnaby rose, again donned the backpack. Outside, he squinted up at the sky, a dazzle of mist-gray. Maybe the snow squall was headed back this way. That would be bad luck; it would be close enough as it was.

A bright point of light caught his eye, winking from high above, almost at zenith. Carnaby felt his heart take a leap in his chest that almost choked off his breath. For a moment he stood, staring up at it; then he whirled back through the door.

". . . termand previous instructions!" A new voice was rasping from the speaker. "Terminate all transmission immediately! JN 37, shut down power and vacate station! Repeat, an armed enemy vessel is believed to be vectored in on your signal! This is, repeat, a hostile vessel! You are to cease transmission and abandon station immediately-"

Carnaby's hand slapped the big master lever. Lights died on the panel; underfoot, the minute vibration jelled into immobility. Sudden silence

pressed in like a tangible force—a silence broken by a rising mutter from above.

"Like that, eh?" Carnaby said to himself through clenched teeth. "Abandon station, eh?" He took three steps to a wall locker, yanked the door open wide, took out a short, massive power rifle, still encased in its plastic protective cover. He stripped the oily sheath away, checked the charge indicator; it rested on FULL.

There were foot-square windows set on each side of the twenty-foot room. Carnaby went to one, by putting his face flat against the armorplast panel, was able to see the ship, now a flaring fireball dropping in along a wide approach curve. As it descended swiftly, the dark body of the vessel took shape above the glare of the drive. It was a small, blunt-ended ovoid of unfamiliar design, a metallic black in color, decorated fore and aft with the scarlet blazons of a Djann war vessel.

The ship was close now, maneuvering to a position directly overhead. A small landing craft detached itself from the parked ship, plummeted downward like a stone, with a shrill whistling of high-speed rotors settled in across the expanse of broken rock in a cloud of pale dust. The black plastic bubble atop the landing sled split like a clam shell; a shape came into view, clambered over the cockpit rim and stood, a cylindrical bronze-black body, slung by leathery mesenteries from the paired U-frames that were its ambulatory members, two pair of grasping limbs folded above.

A second Djann emerged, a third, a fourth. They stood together, immobile, silent, while a minute ticked past. Sweat trickled down the side of Carnaby's face. He breathed shallowly, rapidly, feeling the almost painful thudding of his heart.

One of the Djann moved suddenly, its strange, jointless limbs moving with twinkling grace and speed. It flowed across to a point from which it could look down across the plain, then angled to the left and reconnoitered the entire circumference of the mountaintop. Carnaby moved from window to window to watch it. It rejoined the other three; briefly, they seemed to confer. Then one of the creatures, whether the same one or another Carnaby wasn't sure, started across toward the hut.

Carnaby moved back to a position in the lee of a switch gear cabinet. A moment later the Djann appeared at the door. At a distance of fifteen feet, Carnaby saw the lean limbs, like a leather-covered metal, the heavy body, the immense faceted eyes that caught the light and sent back fiery glints. For thirty seconds, the creature scanned the interior of the structure. Then it withdrew. Carnaby let out a long, shaky breath, watched it lope back to rejoin its companions. Again, the Djann conferred; then one turned to the landing craft . . .

For a long moment, Carnaby hesitated: he could stay where he was, do nothing, and the Djann would reboard their vessel and go their way; and in a few hours, a Fleet unit would heave into view off Longone, and he'd be home safe. But the orders had been to delay the enemy . . .

He centered the sights of the power gun on the alien's body, just behind

the forelegs, and pushed the firing stud.

A shaft of purple fire blew the window from its frame, lanced out to smash the up-rearing alien against the side of the sled, send it skidding in a splatter of molten rock and metal. Carnaby swung the rifle, fired at a second Djann as the group scattered; the stricken creature went down, rolled, came up, stumbling on three limbs. He fired again, knocked the creature spinning, dark fluid spattering from a gaping wound in the barrel-like body. Carnaby swung to cover a third Djann, streaking for the plateau's edge; his shot sent a shower of molten slag arcing high from the spot where it disappeared.

He lowered the gun, stepped outside, ran to the corner of the building. The fourth Djann was crouched in the open, thirty feet away; Carnaby saw the glitter of a weapon gripped in the hand-like members springing from its back. He brought the gun up, fired in the same instant that light etched the rocks, and a hammer-blow struck him crushingly in the side, knocked him back against the wall. He tasted dust in his mouth, was aware of a high humming sound that seemed to blank out his hearing, his vision, his thoughts . . .

He came to, lying on his side against the wall. Forty feet away, the Djann sprawled, its stiff limbs out-thrust at awkward angles. Carnaby looked down at his side. The Djann particle gun had torn a gaping rent in his suit, through which he could see bright crimson beads of frozen blood. He groped, found the rifle, dragged it to him. He shook his head to clear away the mist that seemed to obscure his vision. At every move, a terrible pain stabbed outward from his chest. Ribs broken, he thought. Something smashed inside, too. It was hard for him to breathe. The cold stone on which he lay seemed to suck the heat from his body.

Across the hundred-foot stretch of frost-shattered rock, a soot-black scar marked the spot where the escaping Djann had gone over the edge. Painfully, Carnaby propped the weapon to cover the direction from which attack might come. Then he slumped, his face against the icy rock, watching down the length of the rifle barrel for the next move from the enemy.

25

"Another four hours to shift, Admiral," General Drew, the battle commander acting as co-pilot aboard the racing interceptor said. "That's if we don't blow our linings before then."

"Bandit still holding position?" The admiral's voice was a grate as of metal against metal.

Drew spoke into his lip mike, frowned at the reply. "Yes, sir, Malthusa says he's still stationary. Whether his locus is identical with the LN beacon's fix or not, he isn't sure at that range."

"He could be standing by off-planet, looking over the ground," the admiral muttered half to himself.

"Not likely, Admiral. He knows we're on his tail."

"I know it's not likely, damn it!" the admiral snarled. "But if he isn't, we haven't got a chance . . ."

"I suppose the Djann conception of honor requires these beggars to demolish the beacon and hunt down the station personnel, even if it means letting us overhaul them," Drew said. "A piece of damn foolishness on their part, but fortunate for us."

"Fortunate, General? I take it you mean for yourself and me, not the poor devil that's down there alone with them."

"Just the one man? Well, we'll get off more cheaply than I imagined then." The general glanced sideways at the admiral, intent over the controls. "After all, he's Navy. This is his job, what he signed on for."

"Kick that converter again, General," Admiral Carnaby said between his teeth. "Right now you can earn your pay by squeezing another quarterlight out of this bucket."

26

Crouched in a shallow crevice below the rim of the mesa where the house of the water beings stood, the One-Who-Records quivered under the appalling impact of the death emanations of his link brothers.

"Now it lies with you alone," the fading thought came from the One-Who-Commands. "But the water being, too, is alone, and in this . . . there is . . . a certain euphony . . ." The last fragile tendril of communication faded.

The One-Who-Records expelled a gust of the planet's noxious atmosphere from his ventral orifice-array, with an effort freed his intellect of the shattering extinction-resonances it had absorbed. Cautiously, he probed outward, sensing the strange, fiery mind-glow of the alien . . .

Ah, he too was injured! The One-Who-Records shifted his weight from his scalded forelimb, constricted further the flow of vital fluids through the damaged section of his epidermal system. He was weakened by the searing blast that had scored his flank, but still capable of action; and up above, the wounded water being waited.

Deftly, the Djann extracted the hand weapon from the sheath strapped to his side, holding it in a two-handed grip, its broad base resting on his dorsal ridge, its ring lenses aligned along his body. He wished briefly that he had spent more li periods in the gestalt tanks, impressing the weapon's use syndromes on his reflex system; but feckless regrets made poor scansion. Now indeed the display podium of existence narrowed down to a single confrontation: a brief and final act in a century-old drama, with the fate of the mighty epic of the Djann resting thereon. The One-Who-Records sounded a single, trumpet-like resonance of exultation, and moved forward to fulfill his destiny.

27

At the faint bleat of sound, Carnaby raised his head. How long had he lain

here, waiting for the alien to make its move? Maybe an hour, maybe longer. He had passed out at least twice, possibly for no more than a second or two; but it could have been longer. The Djann might even have gotten past him-or crawled along below the ridge, ready now to jump him from a new angle . . .

He thought of Terry Sickle, waiting for him, counting on him. Poor kid. Time was running out for him. The sun was dropping low, and the shadows would be closing in. It would be icy cold inside the hut and down there in the dark the boy was slowly strangling, maybe calling for him . . .

He couldn't wait any longer. To hell with the alien. He'd held him long enough. Painfully, using the wall as a support, Carnaby got to his hands and knees. His side felt as though it had been opened and packed with red-hot stones-or were they ice-cold? His hands and feet were numb. His face ached. Frostbite. He'd look fine with a frozen ear. Funny, how vanity survived as long as life itself . . .

He got to his feet, leaned against the building, worked on breathing. The sky swam past him, fading and brightening. His feet felt like blocks of wood; that wasn't good. He had a long way to go. But the activity would warm him, get the blood flowing, except where the hot stones were. He would be lighter if he could leave them here. His hands moved at his side, groping over torn polyon, the sharp ends of broken wires . . .

He brought his mind back to clarity with an effort. Wouldn't do to start wandering now. The gun caught his eye, lying at his feet. Better pick it up; but to hell with it, too much trouble. Navy property. But can't leave it here for the enemy to find. Enemy. Funny dream about a walking oxy tank, and-

He was looking at the dead Djann, lying awkward, impossible, thirty feet away. No dream. The damn thing was real. He was here, alone, on top of Thunderhead-

But he couldn't be. Flitter was broken down. Have to get another message off via the next tramp steamer that made planetfall. Hadn't been one for . . . how long . . . ?

Something moved, a hundred feet away, among the tumble of broken rock. Carnaby ducked, came up with the blast rifle, fired in a half-crouch from the hip, saw a big dark shape scramble up and over the edge, saw the wink of yellow light, fired again, cursing the weakness that made the gun buck and yaw in his hands, the darkness that closed over his vision. With hands that were stiff, clumsy, he fired a third time at the swift-darting shape that charged toward him; and then he was falling, falling . . .

28

Stunned by the direct hit from the energy weapon of the water being, the One-Who-Records fought his way upward through a universe shot through with whirling shapes of fire, to emerge on a plateau of mortal agony.

He tried to move, was shocked into paralysis by the cacophony of conflicting motor- and sense-impressions from shattered limbs and organs.

Then I, too, die, the thought came to him with utter finality. And with me dies the once-mighty song of Djann . . .

Failing, his mind groped outward, calling in vain for the familiar touch of his link brothers-and abruptly, a sharp sensation impinged on his sensitivity complex. Concepts of strange and alien shape drifted into his mind, beating at him with compelling urgency; concepts from a foreign brain:

Youth, aspirations, the ring of the bugle's call to arms. A white palace rearing up into yellow sunlight; a bright banner, rippling against the blue sky, and the shadows of great trees ranked on green lawns. The taste of grapes, and an odor of flowers; night, and the moon reflected from still water; the touch of a soft hand and the face of a woman, invested with a supernal beauty; chords of a remote music that spoke of the inexpressibly desirable, the irretrievably lost . . .

"Have we warred then, water beings?" the One-Who-Records sent his thought outward. "We who might have been brothers . . . ?" With a mighty effort, he summoned his waning strength, sounded a final chord in tribute to that which had been, and was no more.

29

Carnaby opened his eyes and looked at the dead Djann lying in the crumpled position of its final agony against the wall of the hut, not six feet from him. For a moment, a curious sensation of loss plucked at his mind.

"Sorry, fellow," he muttered aloud. "I guess you were doing what you had to do, too."

He stood, felt the ground sway under his feet. His head was light, hot; a sharp, clear humming sounded in his ears. He took a step, caught himself as his knees tried to buckle.

"Damn it, no time to fall out now," he grunted. He moved past the alien body, paused by the door to the shed. A waft of warm air caressed his cold-numbered face.

"Could go inside," he muttered. "Wait there. Ship along in a few hours, maybe. Pick me up . . ." He shook his head angrily. "Job's not done yet," he said clearly, addressing the white gleam of the ten-mile-distant peak known as Cream Top. "Just a little longer, Terry," he added. "I'm coming."

Painfully, Carnaby made his way to the edge of the plateau, and started down.

30

"We'd better make shift to sub-L now, Admiral," Drew said, strain showing in his voice. "We're cutting it fine as it is."

"Every extra minute at full gain saves a couple of hours," the vice admiral came back.

"That won't help us if we kick out inside the Delta limit and blow ourselves into free ions," the general said coolly.

"You've made your point, General!" The admiral kept his eyes fixed on his instruments. Half a minute ticked past. Then he nodded curtly.

"All right, kick us out," he snapped, "and we'll see where we stand."

The hundred-ton interceptor shuddered as the distorters whined down the scale, allowing the stressed-space field that had enclosed the vessel to collapse. A star swam suddenly into the visible spectrum, blazing at planetary distance off the starboard bow at three o'clock high.

"Our target's the second body, there." He pointed. The co-pilot nodded and punched the course into the panel.

"What would you say, another hour?" the admiral bit off the words.

"Make it two," the other replied shortly. He glanced up, caught the admiral's eye on him.

"Kidding ourselves won't change anything," he said steadily.

Admiral Carnaby narrowed his eyes, opened his mouth to speak, then clamped his jaw shut.

"I guess I've been a little snappy with you, George," he said. "I'll ask your pardon. That's my brother down there."

"Your . . . ?" the general's features tightened. "I guess I said some stupid things myself, Tom." He frowned at the instruments, busied himself adjusting course for an MIT approach to the planet.

31

Carnaby half jumped, half fell the last few yards to the narrow ledge called Halliday's Roost, landed awkwardly in a churn of powdered wind-driven snow. For a moment, he lay sprawled, then gathered himself, made it to his feet, tottered to the hollow concealing the drifted entrance to the hut. He lowered himself, crawled down into the dark, clammy interior.

"Terry," he called hoarsely. A wheezing breath answered him. He felt his way to the boy's side, groped over him. He lay on his side, his legs curled against his chest.

"Terry!" Carnaby pulled the lad to a sitting position, felt him stir feebly. "Terry, I'm back! We have to go now, Terry . . ."

"I knew . . ." the boy stopped to draw an agonizing breath, "you'd come . . ." He groped, found Carnaby's hand.

Carnaby fought the dizziness that threatened to close in on him. He was cold-colder than he had ever been. The climbing hadn't warmed him. The side wasn't bothering him much now; he could hardly feel it. But he couldn't feel his hands and feet, either. They were like stumps, good for nothing . . . Clumsily, he backed through the entry, bodily hauling Terry with him.

Outside the wind lashed at him like frozen whips. Carnaby raised Terry to his feet. The boy leaned against him, slid down, crumpled to the ground.

"Terry, you've got to try," Carnaby gasped out. His breath seemed to freeze in his throat. "No time . . . to waste . . . got to get you to . . . Doc Link . . ."

"Lieutenant . . . I . . . can't . . ."

"Terry . . . you've got to try!" He lifted the boy to his feet.

"I'm . . . scared . . . Lieutenant . . ." Terry stood swaying, his slight body quivering, his knees loose.

"Don't worry, Terry." Carnaby guided the boy to the point from which they would start the climb down. "Not far, now."

"Lieutenant . . ." Sickle caught at Carnaby's arm. "You . . . better . . . leave . . . me." His breath sighed in his throat.

"I'll go first," Carnaby heard his own voice as from a great distance. "Take . . . it easy. I'll be right there . . . to help . . ."

He forced a breath of sub-zero air into his lungs. The bitter wind moaned around the shattered rock. The dusky afternoon sun shed a reddish light without heat on the long slope below.

"It's late," he mouthed the words with stiff lips. "It's late . . ."

32

Two hundred thousand feet above the surface of the outpost world Longone, the Fleet interceptor split the stratosphere, its receptors fine-tuned to the Djann energy-cell emission spectrum.

"Three hundred million square miles of desert," Admiral Carnaby said. "Except for a couple of deserted townsites, not a sign that any life ever existed here."

"We'll find it, Tom," Drew said. "If they'd lifted, Malthusa would have known-hold it!" He looked up quickly, "I'm getting something-yes! It's the typical Djann idler output!"

"How far from us?"

"Quite a distance . . . now it's fading . . ."

The admiral put the ship into a screaming deceleration curve that crushed both men brutally against the restraint of their shock frames.

"Find that signal, George," the vice admiral grated. "Find it and steer me to it, if you have to pick it out of the air with psi!"

"I've got it!" Drew barked. "Steer right, on 030. I'd range it at about two thousand kilometers . . ."

33

On the bald face of an outcropping of wind-scored stone, Carnaby clung one-handed to a scanty hold, supporting Terry with the other arm. The wind

shrieked, buffeting at him; sand-fine snow whirled into his face, slashing at his eyes, already half-blinded by the glare. The boy slumped against him, barely conscious.

His mind seemed as sluggish now as his half-frozen limbs. Somewhere below there was a ledge, with shelter from the wind. How far? Ten feet? Fifty?

It didn't matter. He had to reach it. He couldn't hold on here, in this wind; in another minute he'd be done for.

Carnaby pulled Terry closer, got a better grip with a hand that seemed no more a part of him than the rock against which they clung. He shifted his purchase with his right foot-and felt it slip. He was falling, grabbing frantically with one hand at the rock, then dropping through open air-

The impact against drifted snow drove the air from his lungs. Darkness shot through with red fire threatened to close in on him; he fought to draw a breath, struggling in the claustrophobia of suffocation. Loose snow fell away under him, and he was sliding. With a desperate lunge, he caught a ridge of hard ice, pulled himself back from the brink, then groped, found Terry, lying on his back under the vertically rising wall of rock. The boy stirred.

"So . . . tired . . ." he whispered. His body arched as he struggled to draw breath.

Carnaby pulled himself to a position beside the boy, propped himself with his back against the wall. Dimly, through ice-rimmed eyes, he could see the evening lights of the settlement, far below; so far . . .

He put his arm around the thin body, settled the lad's head gently in his lap, leaned over him to shelter him from the whirling snow. "It's all right, Terry," he said. "You can rest now."

34

Supported on three narrow pencils of beamed force, the Fleet interceptor slowly circuited the Djann yacht, hovering on its idling null-G generators a thousand feet above the towering white mountain.

"Nothing alive there," the co-pilot said. "Not a whisper on the life-detection scale."

"Take her down." Vice Admiral Carnaby squinted through S-R lenses which had darkened almost to opacity in response to the frost-white glare from below. "The shack looks all right, but that doesn't look like a Mark 7 Flitter parked beside it."

The heavy Fleet boat descended swiftly under the expert guidance of the battle officer. At fifty feet, it leveled off, orbited the station.

"I count four dead Djann," the admiral said in a brittle voice.

"Tracks," the general pointed. "Leading off there . . ."

"Put her down, George!" The hundred-foot boat settled in with a crunching of rock and ice, its shark's prow overhanging the edge of the tiny plateau. The hatch cycled open; the two men emerged.

At the spot where Carnaby had lain in wait for the last of the aliens, they paused, staring silently at the glossy patch of dark blood, and at the dead Djann beside it. Then they followed the irregularly spaced footprints across to the edge.

"He was still on his feet-but that's about all," the battle officer said.

"George, can you operate that Spider boat?" The admiral indicated the Djann landing sled.

"Certainly."

"Let's go."

35

It was twilight half an hour later when the admiral, peering through the obscuring haze of blown snow, saw the snow-drifted shapes huddled in the shadow of an overhang. Fifty feet lower, the general settled the sled in to a precarious landing on a narrow shelf. It was a ten-minute climb back to their objective.

Vice Admiral Carnaby pulled himself up the last yard, looked across the icy ledge at the figure in the faded blue polyon cold-suit. He saw the weathered and lined face, glazed with ice; the closed eyes, the gnarled and bloody hands, the great wound in the side.

The general came up beside him, stared silently, then went forward.

"I'm sorry, Admiral," he said a moment later. "He's dead. Frozen. Both of them."

The admiral came up, knelt at Carnaby's side.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," he said. "Sorry . . ."

"I don't understand," the general said. "He could have stayed up above, in the station. He'd have been all right there. What in the world was he doing down here?"

"What he always did," Admiral Carnaby said. "His duty."