

CROWN OF INFINITY
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PROLOGUE

THE SHIP WAS READY.

Soothed by the soft stuttering of the computers and the myriad tiny ship noises that spelled life, Captain Corrindus clasped his hands behind his back. Actually, in terms of human reference, he joined two jade blue pseudopods across the gelatinous mass of that part of his body directly opposite the light-sensitive group of cells that went into action whenever his brain decided to take in visual stimuli.

He looked out the control module port at the sweeping and majestic panorama of the multicolored stars of the worlds of Civilization. The closest of them visibly moved from right to left against the backdrop of space as the battle fortress *Warrior of Civilization* crawled slowly ahead.

Corrindus sighed, his boneless body quivering in the master cup before the control panel, conscious of the weight of the presence of his officers. Citizens of a half dozen planets, members of an equal number of species, they clustered behind him, waiting. He knew they were expecting answers, but answers were lacking.

The silence was broken, finally, by Guidi, the impatient feathered creature.

"The ship is ready, Captain. We are ready."

Corrindus sighed again, the upper portion of his amorphous bulk rippling in imitation of a movement once observed on one of the legendary Star Kings.

The ship was ready—but for what? There was no enemy at hand, no orders to give. Only the unceasing questions that came first from his own crew, and then as the news spread throughout the galaxy, from ships and planet-bases far away.

"Advice, gentlemen?" asked Corrindus, almost begging, as he extruded an eyestalk. The humanoid and hominid members of the staff shrugged shoulders in a fashion painfully reminiscent of the vanished Star Kings. None spoke.

"We're wasting time," said Corrindus. His body shifted and *plopped* in the cup. The ship spoke in its normally quiet voice, unaware that the Universe had changed—not physically, but in a subtle way that registered only as the presence or absence of a race.

The ship was bred for battle—needed battle as the very stuff of its life, bred as it was from half-sentient non-life crystal cultures in a region of the galaxy mist-thick with dust clouds that might someday be part of stars. The weaponry bristled behind the ready shields, storage cells half-drained against the possible surge of power from enemy beams . . .

But there was no enemy, and the absence was a pang almost as deep-hurting as the absence of the Star Kings.

The ships of the vanished past still existed. The rolling names came easily to mind:

Omaha!

Pacific!

Lancaster!

Rio Grande!

Meaningless syllables to these representatives of races not from the planets that had given birth to the mightiest race the galaxy had ever known. Even so, they were capable of stirring strong emotions.

Alps!

Britain!

Harvard!

The mighty ships of the Star Kings, deserted hulks now, populated only by withered husks that had once been flesh and bone, husks no longer recognizable in the absence of the moving spirit.

The Star Kings were dead. The news tolled throughout the galaxy and beyond, shocking, numbing, stirring a million races to unreasonable anger with the heart-rending knowledge of irreplaceable loss.

The Star Kings were dead, but they did not die quietly. At the instant of annihilation, their Death Calls burst forth, spreading through the entire galaxy, speeding ever onward to the very end of Existence. This great lament marked their passing, tolled the end of a race, and gave the friendly races of the Universe the hope of vengeance.

There was a reason for the sudden death of a race, and answers did exist—somewhere. The galaxy decided to find that reason.

The galaxy declared vengeance, a vengeance that would spread across the vast canvas of eternity. The peoples of the galaxy embarked on the journey of vengeance, examining the entire history of the Star Kings for a clue toward the mysterious disappearance.

On one ship, one commander was struck by sudden in-spiration that he intuitively knew to be right.

I

the main ramp fell to the bare, burnt rock ground without a sound since there was no air to carry it. For a moment he stood there, a space-suited silhouette against the lights from within the ship. Then he walked down the ramp to place his thick soled boots upon the hard ground.

The landscape of pitted, charred, glazed rock blurred as Fleet Commander Grey, a citizen of the obsolete national division known as the United States of America, stood surveying the home planet of Mankind.

This lifeless region was once known as the District of Columbia. It was no exception to the general rule, no minor spot of ruin and devastation. The entire planet was now but a ball of scorched rock.

His hand went briefly to the blue and gold insignia of a Fleet Commander on the helmet and shoulders of his silver space suit. He resisted the urge to claw those painted markings off. Tears rolled down his sunken cheeks as his eyes swept the barren wastes.

He had been born on this planet, in this city that no longer was. He had sworn to protect it, and every other city of every other planet of the United Stars of Man.

He had failed. He had not kept his word. The United Stars were dead now, lifeless, airless worlds like the Earth. His slight muscular body trembled with rage and futility.

Why? he screamed silently, clenching his hands until they ached. He ignored the pain; the physical sensation was as nothing to that he felt in his heart.

More than just a world had died here; an ethic of being had been swept from the galaxy. Contradictory, obstinate, unreasoning, the greatest race the galaxy had known was gone.

Not that there was anything particularly holy about the passing, for Man the race had been in the midst of one of the interminable wars of his history. For no good reason, they fought the Shraix, golden creatures whose ancient empire commanded an even larger volume of space than their own. Oh, there were great battles! Glories were being won on both sides . . .

And then a third force, a civilization incredibly more ancient than either Human or Shraix, stepped in and annihilated both.

The worlds of Man and Shraix were scorched clean of life and artifacts. And of the outposts, fleets, secret bases— of every being of two great races, only Command Division, 43rd Terran Fleet, survived. Everything else had been detected and destroyed, leaving no life trace to indicate that they had once been there.

The tears stopped, the last tears Man would ever know. Commander Grey turned back to survey the remnants of his command, the heavy cruiser, *Crusader*, and the protective light missile ships that was all that remained of Command Division, 43rd Fleet. This display of former military might was all that was left of Man.

And Grey knew why! It was the only thing that kept him alive, that kept him from opening his face plate there on that airless plain, as a number of his men and women already had.

His, the crack 43rd, was to have been the first fleet to be equipped with the new device that would have given victory to the hard pressed fleets of Man: the Ramdic Shield. A fleet so equipped would have been undetectable at FTL speeds since vibrations in the fabric of space were cut to a minimum and radiations from the Ramdic FTL Drive were neutralized.

Eager to test the device, he had taken the Command Division out on a communications-silenced shakedown cruise instead of waiting for the eleven remaining home divisions to have theirs installed. While the 43rd cruised outside the fabric of normal space, the unknown murderers struck. The attack, the computer section calculated, had totally destroyed the worlds of Man and the Federated Stars of the Shraix in less than thirty seconds!

Grey, Commander of the last few men and women alive, cast one final look around at the desolate, barren planet. There was a coldness in the region of his heart. He stared up at the uncaring stars, bright and brittle over the airless world, and made a personal vow.

Vengeance.

He recognized the futility of his vow, but even more futile was the senseless destruction of those two races.

Man and Shraix would be avenged—in full!

Slowly he entered the ship. It was a long walk to the Command Room, the nerve center of a fleet that was no more. He could have taken a gravity tube, but he wanted the time to think.

All heads swiveled around to watch him as he entered. He ignored their pleading eyes, snapping orders, his training taking over. The *Crusader* rose to become part of the umbrella that had protected it. He followed Standard Operating Procedures: scouts ahead, flankers out, rear guard behind. All radiating

devices were cut off; all communications prohibited except for tight beamed directional rays.

He gave more orders; the twenty warships pointed their blunt, black noses at Mercury and began accelerating.

The blowers whirred loudly in the Command Room as the uniformed officers stood stiffly at attention. Grey knew they were trying not to think of the fellow men and women they had just buried, of the men and women under sedation in the Med-wards, or of those in straitjackets in compartments aft.

He read their faces. Young and old, man and boy, woman and girl; there would be no help from any of them. Numbed and shocked, they all looked at him. At twenty-seven, he was younger than the most senior of them. They had once resented his meteoric rise to Fleet Commander—but that was all forgotten now.

The future of humankind was in his hands.

As he hit the com-switch, he found himself staring at the red-headed woman rating who hooked him into the fleet's broadcast system. He hesitated a moment, and then she smiled at him, shyly.

He spoke. "Men and women of the 43rd Fleet, we've been together a long time. We've fought many battles, we've buried our fallen comrades on alien worlds; we've grown to know and love and respect one another."

Suddenly the past years of fighting came back; the as-saults upon the Shraix defensive sphere, the silent, deadly battles in deep space with the nearest star light-years away; the times they had fought, alongside their sister fleets, turn-ing back the thrusts of Shraix suicide fleets.

"It will not be easy to do what must be done, yet I know you will do it." He remembered the time when the 43rd had encountered a complete Shraix invasion force— six fleets—and held them until reinforcements had arrived. Then there was the time they had been assigned to take out a key Shraix planet and how the 43rd had fought its way through everything the Shraix could throw at them for two hundred light-years to accomplish their mission. And, like the others, he remembered the long fight coming back, and the ships that had not made it.

"We're proceeding to Mercury. Indications are that the robot supply dumps there were unknown to the attacker. We may be able to construct additional ships fitted with the Ramdic Shield. Suitably armed, and manned by crews consisting of one fertile man and one fertile woman, Com-mand Division, 43rd Fleet will then be disbanded forever. All ranks abolished. The United Stars themselves must be for-gotten. We must break completely with the past. There will be no time for nostalgia, homesickness or tears. We can never go back. The past is finished, as is the Earth.

"Once away, no ship shall ever contact another again. The race must survive, somehow. The single ships will disperse to the far corners of the galaxy, seeking out colony worlds. It will be the duty of each ship to populate their world."

A grizzled gray-haired woman in her sixties held up her hand. She wore the arm patch of a biotechnician. Grey recognized her.

"Impossible, Commander. One couple can't populate a planet. Genetic drift—inbreeding. You'll have total disaster within a very few generations."

"Duplicates of the Master Life Banks were included in the Mercury Dumps, Technician. I propose each ship carry a miniature Life Bank. The women can host other ova, while the sperm of the ages is available for the taking.

"We're setting a monumental task for the children that are yet to be born. We must locate the home base of the enemy, learn his secrets—above all, we must bide our time. The day of vengeance may not come for a thousand—for ten thousand years.

"But it will come! That I promise! That I promise as a Man!"

II

It was on its return sweep, as it came hurtling out of the black depths, that the Master's Patrol Vessel picked up the Ramdic radiations that could only be an attempt at communication. Stars leaped as the huge nonreflecting surfaced ship, driven by the power equivalent of a half dozen suns, raced for the source of those radiations.

Twenty miles of ultra-pressurized seamless-hulled alloyed metal, ten miles in diameter, came to a halt over the radiating object. Like a large black egg it hovered over the offending object which was buried beneath the surface of Earth.

Invisible probe rays flashed out, passing through the ve-hicle's hull as if it weren't there. The buried vessel was analyzed down to each particle of errant dust. The languages of the system's inhabitants were plucked from the minds of the thousand collected specimens in cold vaults within the Master's craft.

Computers went through the scores of major languages and silently broke the code. Then the broadcasting

vessel was vaporized, leaving only a wisp of fast dispersing white mist.

The message was totally without purpose; therefore the strange, lizard-like creature in charge reasoned that the ship had not been left as a purposeful transmitter. He smelled a trap; someone had wanted to attract him while that someone observed from a safe position.

The creature set up the computers to search the system of Sol cubic yard by cubic yard. Only minutes elapsed before they found the prey hiding in a lunar crater. The patrol vessel swooped down, instruments measuring and analyzing defensive and offensive capabilities of the ship. The information was noted and sneered at—billions of years old his species might have had a ship like it.

In microseconds every map, book, tape, pad and drawing on the ship was in the memory banks of the Master's com-puter. Then the Master unleashed the mind probes; they bored in, scooping up whatever thoughts and information they could detect from the poorly shielded life-force.

At last, all the mighty armament of the *Crusader* was loosed, but the Master's screens barely registered the attack. The creature calmly continued his examination of the crew of the Terran ship. When the probes were finished, the creature touched a button and the *Crusader* followed the unmanned decoy into oblivion.

Seconds later an instrument just below the frozen crust of Pluto sensed the vaporizing of the *Crusader*. It immediately began to broadcast a continuous burst of nondirectional Ramdic radiations.

Across the system, another instrument picked up the signals and proceeded to relay them across the galaxy.

The Master gave the equivalent of a smile. At last he had found something to break the monotony of endless patrols. He set up a search pattern and began hunting.

The Master had early decided that the continued dominance of the Universe could be possible only by the instant and utter destruction of intelligent life as soon as it appeared. Any exception could spell their end, for nature could evolve superior races fantastically fast, when the time span was measured against the clock of galactic history.

The first Masters, creatures of the first planet to bear life after the creation of the Universe, made their choice billions of years ago, after they had barely escaped complete destruction at the hands of the Tashi, a race of equally intelligent beings that had later evolved on the same planet. After centuries of bloody warfare, the Masters decided that they would rule or they would die, but they would never live in the shadow of another species.

As the Masters expanded into the Universe, they at first found few other races to compete with them. These were quickly overcome. But as the Universe aged and the sphere of the Masters' influence increased geometrically, the problem became greater and greater, until finally the major portion of their economy was aimed toward support of the myriad Patrol Ships that swept across the length, breadth, and depth of the galaxy.

The Masters multiplied many times over as they expanded to fill the galaxy, until finally they were homed upon nearly ten thousand worlds, all formerly homes of other races. Even so, and even though the number of their ships was uncountable except to the uncaring minds of computers, the galaxy was so large that certain less likely areas were patrolled only at long intervals.

Perhaps fifty thousand years had passed since the last patrol of the Terran sector, during which time both Man and Shraix had achieved a level of intelligence recognizable as dangerous to the Masters.

The Master's smile increased, the long, forked tongue darting out; he could imagine snouted heads flying as a result of his discovery of *two* intelligent, space-faring races in an unpatrolled Sector!

He punched a second message through subspace to Com-puter Prime, the great brain that filled a planet, situated so far outside the galaxy proper that the light from the now-red sun that shone down upon it would not reach the dead Earth for a million years.

The patrol ship's computer passed on the information the mind probes had ripped from the humans—everything except the directions the fleeing two-man ships had taken, for Grey had blanked all screens whenever one left, and all crews had been commanded to keep courses and destinations secret. For a moment the Master felt a spark of admiration for Commander Grey—but only for a moment. He snarled as he picked up the reply to his message coming in from Computer Prime.

A hundred full-strength battle cruisers were flashing from nearby Sectors to hunt the survivors of Man's end. The patrol scout, its presence no longer required, continued its interrupted homeward journey.

But the operation that Commander Grey had code-named *Star King* was already well under way. At the time that the Master's scout was sending its call for aid, thousands of the two people ships were already many light-years away in all the directions of the star-filled heavens, traveling as fast as their engines could carry them. When the steady burst of directionless Ramdic radiations reached them, phase two of Operation *Star King* began.

They buried themselves and their almost undetectable ships on the nearest planets—or the bottoms of oceans, in the hearts of mountains; when forced amidst the silently howling electromagnetic storms of interstellar space. Others pushed their engines to the limit while still others coasted amid vast meteor drifts, engines silent, power off, while they slept the deep sleep of suspended animation.

But wherever they were hidden, no matter how deep the ocean, how dense the rock or violent the storms of space, the little ships were found and the thoughts of their passengers brutally torn from them, the ships and their records searched molecule by molecule, atom by atom, and then destroyed so that no trace was left.

But here and there a ship was missed.

To those few, last minute messages on directionless Ramdic were constant reminders of their foe's efficiency. So, too, were the lifeless worlds they always found. Like Earth, they had been scorched clean of life, some of them millions of years before.

Eventually even the stubbornest and bravest of the last of mankind realized that an Earth ship was no match for a Master. The bases and planets of the awesome enemy could not be infiltrated, nor their ships captured, or even damaged in the least amount. The Masters were invincible. At last, the handful of survivors realized that their generation had no chance of avenging the Earth; it would be up to their children, or their children's children.

So they turned to their offspring.

It was in the third generation that the breakthrough was made.

III

caesar augustus smith was transferred immediately from his mother's womb to a specially-designed life support sys-tem, without ever tasting unsupported existence. His brain, denied normal outside stimuli, was plugged into a network of false nerve endings; a computer, also specially designed, began feeding into his carefully nurtured brain cells the sum total of human knowledge that had been saved from the destruction of the race.

Ninety-two years passed as his physical body expanded to fill an area the size of a human coffin and his mentality expanded into and beyond the limits of the galaxy. More than half of the time was taken up by the mere recording of the information; the balance came in educating him into its use. Never knowing hunger, he never tasted food, yet his mind knew the most delicate nuances of the most subtle spices, recorded by some unknown race-ancestor a hundred or a thousand years before.

In the ship about him, his brothers and sisters were born, played, grew into adulthood and eventually married and departed in ships of their own, each departure adding to the chance of racial survival. Countless star systems were visited and left behind; new weapons were invented, old ones discarded; a thousand disasters threatened and avoided as he lay in his artificial womb.

His parents, once beautiful and handsome, grew old and wrinkled. They who used to come and watch his nude, brown-haired body grow into adolescence and manhood came no more as he drifted toward old age, his hair snow white.

More years, long and endless, went by. His father died after a month's sickness, was ejected from the ship and forgotten. Through the lonely corridors lined with mementos of a hundred sons and daughters and playrooms filled with their toys, his mother sometimes came to look down upon her remaining son's aged face. At times there were streaks of moisture down her cheeks, but then she would square her frail, bent shoulders and beneath her now shallow breath there was the old glorious anthem of the United Stars that her own mother had taught her.

Onward the lonely ship went, sneaking quietly through the vast depths, somehow always managing to be just missed by the countless patrols of the Masters that combed the Universe for the few, the now so very few, that had some-how escaped them.

Gradually she grew less able to take care of the ship; a robot broke down and went unrepaired, and dust settled over everything, furniture and equipment alike, until it seemed that the ship was uninhabited, a derelict eternally floating through the vast blackness of space, lifeless except for a hermetically sealed glass coffin in which a man lay thinking.

Gray-haired, his Star King mother slowly came back from the drugged fantasy world that had become her refuge as the long, endless years crawled by. With her husband gone forever, reality no longer held any meaning. All she had left now were dreams, and the drugs. The one kept the other alive.

Then, in a half-lucid moment, activated by an impulse she could not understand, she passed beyond the closed door of her room for the first time in years. Through the corridor carpeted with the dust of memories, into the dimly lit hall untrodden for nearly a decade, she dragged her ancient frame. Fear welled up inside her and her shriveled hands began to tremble. Her breathing was shallow, dry, raspy; her frame shuddered as a frail bone snapped when it settled against its socket, a tiny chip working loose and digging with a twinge into the desiccated muscles that were almost pulled away from the bone.

Reluctantly she found herself approaching the door to the life-support room. Her hand pushed it open, the hinges faintly squeaking with disuse. She forced herself in and to the side of the glass coffin. She looked down at the visible head of her son, almost as mummified as herself, and stifled a cry of horror.

For the first time since birth, his eyes were open, staring up at her. A watery blue in color, there appeared to be no human life within them—only a cold that was as deep as the cold of space itself.

A never-used speaker hummed as it came to life. Softly, in a voice that could hardly be heard, Caesar Augustus Smith began to speak.

"Mother?"

She screamed and fainted, falling forward across the coffin, and sliding to the ground. Hiding from the horror, her brain called out for the release of death, but death refused to come.

Then, gradually, she returned to consciousness to hear her son's voice speaking as though her faint had passed un-noticed.

"... For all eternity I've lain here, longing for this day, knowing other people's memories, but never knowing one that I could call my own."

The words weren't passing the atrophied lip and throat muscles, but were being generated elsewhere.

"I have never played, never known love, never known laughter, or peace, or happiness, or children. Only

endless time. I've prayed to the Almighty Creator for release from this suffering, but he answered me that I cannot find release. Not until my duty is done.

"Why is it my duty, Mother? Why me?"

Her wrinkled face relaxed and a measure of sanity re-turned as the memories of the past were stirred and brought to the fore. She forced herself erect, ignoring the pain of cracked and shattered bones, and leaned on the coffin. A look of serenity came to her face, and her voice was firm when she spoke.

"Have you solved the problem we set you so long ago, my son?"

"Yes, I have the solution, Mother. What else could I do with these years of imprisonment? I have a program that can bridge eternity itself. It will take much time, but it can be done."

"Then the sacrifice was worth it," she said.

"What sacrifice, Mother? I am the one who sacrificed."

She gazed down at him with love. "You were my first son. I would have taken your place myself, rather than do to you what we did. I would have given an arm or a leg to prevent your suffering. But it was necessary, my son, if we were to avoid the final and utter destruction of our race.

"The human mind is the greatest creative, intuitive computer known, but it has several serious weaknesses. It ages, and as it ages, it forgets. It seldom operates at anything near peak capacity. Its attention wanders, and the body that houses it fatigues quite easily.

"With this equipment and the use of drugs we were able to eliminate those shortcomings without impairing the strength. We were unable to prevent the aging of the body, but we could stop the aging of the brain cells.

"A hundred years went into the design of the genetic blue-print that would become you. Once you were chosen, the die was cast. You were created to save the race of Man, my son. Have we succeeded?"

"Yes, Mother," he replied, his voice growing even softer. "But . . ." The question was still uncertain in his mind. "Was it worth it?"

IV

it was black—big and black and silent—as its ovoid shape slid effortlessly through the depths of space, its Ramdic Shield not permitting its mighty engines and power plant to betray its presence to those who searched endlessly and ruthlessly for its kind.

The multitude of sensory information received by the Star King Ship *Yale* from without was fed into the computer which digested it and relayed the result via the headgear designed by Caesar Smith directly into the brain of British descended, professorial George Bronson, who was at that moment brushing his stubby moustache and puffing on a pipe that burned tobacco that had never seen the soil of Earth, while walking among the stainless steel artificial wombs that housed his experiments.

Bronson was a short, graying individual with a tendency to lecture. Inside the ship he knew the condition of each and every element, transistor and fuel cell; the air pressure in every compartment; how efficiently machinery—including even the watch on his wrist—was working, and approximately when replacements and/or repairs would have to be made. In a score of labs, experiments were being carried out by automatic equipment.

He knew the results of each experiment as soon as it occurred, without consulting one meter, dial, or other data receiving device; he also knew the age, overall temperature, abnormalities, measurements, gene history and present general health of each of the thirty embryos at that exact moment as they floated within their vats.

In addition, if anything of a hostile nature were detected, he could locate, track and fire a whole arsenal of weapons that ranged from recoilless guns shooting explosive steel slugs the size of an ear of corn to the deadly hellfire of the pure energy blasters, again without consulting any controls, instrument banks or pushing any button, switches or toggles except those that were in his mind in the form of the Caesar Smith—shortened by the normal evolution of human language to C-S—headgear.

At that particular moment everything was working smoothly; the detection screens were clear, so he was free to concentrate on the embryo designated as D-866. The gleaming sides of the stainless steel artificial womb rolled to him. He stood in a professorial pose as a check on the instruments showed everything perfect.

In each and every one of the two hundred artificial wombs in the various labs about the ship was a human embryo at some stage of development.

He called them his experiments and few deserved the name; most did not. They were the result of pairing re-activated sperm and egg cells that Grey had put aboard each ship and that had remained in the deep freeze vaults until such time as they could be used to continue the race, also making sure that as few genes as possible were lost to the gene pool.

The others were the result of hormone stimulation of his wife's ovaries, a practice that had produced hundreds of eggs within an extremely short period of time, and artificial insemination fertilization with his own sperm cells. Except for the few units used in his special experiments, the majority would grow up into normal healthy human beings.

He looked at the microsimulator on a far wall that showed the fertilized egg with its chromosomes, without any unusual interest or excitement; over the past thirty years he had looked at such electronic reproductions thousands of times. His father, a genius of a man, had started the experiments long ago. Bronson was merely carrying on, although he had added a few refinements of his own.

Before fertilization, he had operated with lasers on the sperm and egg. Now that fertilization had occurred despite his tamperings, he was ready for the next stage.

Without moving, except for more frequent puffs on his pipe, he checked the lasers, examining the future Star King, then began the ordeal. By proper manipulation and use of temperature and drugs, he forestalled further development of the fertile egg. It remained dormant during the ten hour gene altering operation.

Eventually the egg became a foetus, its umbilical cord attached to an artificial placenta within the stainless steel womb.

Each day Bronson returned to the lab, each day another sperm and egg underwent the cold cutting fury of the lasers. The failures were fewer now. D-866 had been the break-through. Day by day, and night by night, the manipulation and alteration of genes—before managed only by chance radiation and the accidents of nature—became less hap-hazard, more of an exact science. No longer tied by the strictures of a planetary time structure, the Star Kings continued their experiments for as many hours as interest continued and fatigue could be warded off.

D-866 died. It was just as well, for in the end it was a misshapen monster which Bronson, despite all the advanced surgical techniques at his command, could not have corrected. But soon the monsters became

fewer and fewer; the physical and mental shortcomings less gross.

Years went by.

The ship became scarred and pitted. Bronson saw hundreds of his normal sons and daughters born, educated, mated and gone on their own mission to save humanity, never to be seen again. Their fate remained unknown except in those rare instances when one might manage to get off a message before they were blown into wispy vapor by patrols of the Masters.

Machinery broke down and was repaired, power sources diminished and were replenished; the mammoth task of creating starships for his children used energy that would have lasted a single planet a normal human lifetime.

The experiments continued despite all.

V-101 was the next breakthrough. It was also significant in that it was the beginning of a different line of experiments.

It became a perfectly normal-looking foetus, preliminary tests estimating optimal I.Q. development to be in the genius-plus category, off the numerical scale. The optimal Sanity Quotient potential measured an astonishing plus 2.3 on a scale that ran from a minus fifty to a plus fifty—0.0 being the theoretical normal of all human beings.

The S.Q. was a major achievement in itself, recognition of the fact that a person can be either mentally unstable or mentally *too stable*. In the latter case, a too-stable person is basically unadaptable.

In the sixth month V-101 was removed from its protective tank and placed in a standard pure oxygen incubator.

More years passed along.

At three, V-101, sitting quietly and calmly with his golden haired head propped up by his tiny hands, beat him in tri-d sphere chess despite all Bronson's sputtering and spitting and pipe puffing.

Tri-d sphere chess is an offshoot of cylindrical chess which is, in turn, an offshoot of regular chess. In regular chess all pieces are hemmed in by the four sides of the board and the four rook pawns (two per player) are only half as powerful as the inner pawns. These two facts are not so in cylindrical chess; the pieces are hemmed in by only two sides of the board and the rook pawns are just as powerful as the others. In addition, a rook can attack a piece on an open rank from two directions at the same time and once if the rank is blocked once. The bishops and queens can attack the opposing player's castled position twice each from opposite directions. The castled king finds himself flanked by two rooks and two knights (providing the queen knight is developed at queen rook three—in ordinary chess, a very unpromising and bad move in the vast majority of positions).

Sphere chess is cylindrical chess with the open ends of the board or cylinder joined. The squares are of varying sizes, but that is of little importance as far as the game is concerned. In sphere chess the king and queen become of paramount importance since in two moves either can be at any point in their circular camp that is under direct attack. No piece is restricted in its movements except by other pieces. It is possible for the queen, via ranks—files and diagonals—to attack a piece six times from six directions, and in special circumstances, eight different directions at the same time.

Bronson had been playing tri-d sphere chess against the ship's computer for over thirty years, winning occasionally— after programming it to lose. So he had not expected to lose the first game he played with V-101.

The little golden haired prodigy also won consistently at all card games.

At five, V-101 took over his experiments, over Bronson's protests.

At six, V-101 located a Sol-Mercury type planet and built a smaller but more deadly edition of the *Yale*. After having christened it Star King Ship *Earth* in remembrance of the place it would never ever see, he set out by himself.

At eight, just when Bronson was finally admitting to worry, V-101 returned—with a Masters' battle cruiser-of-the-line!

She was god-awful big, thought Bronson, as the infamous silhouette of the battle cruiser centered itself in the cross-hairs of the *Yale's* forward vision-screens. All courses of action were examined and discarded. The Masters' ship was faster, more maneuverable, and carried enough fire power to vapor-ize him in milli-microseconds through the best defensive shields he had.

His own weapons, triggered microseconds after the de-tection of the Masters' ship, proved just as useless as he had expected. No ship in Star King history had ever pene-trated the shields or ultra-pressurized alloyed hull of a Masters' ship.

Bronson waited, ready to self-destruct to prevent him-self and any information he possessed from falling

into enemy computer banks.

A signal came in on the com-screen. The C-S headgear imbedded within his skull made the *Yale's* computer with its colossal memory and deductive and computing abilities an inseparable part of his mind and as the thought formed, the computer adjusted the controls until there was the head of a male human child visible.

His mind automatically absorbed the findings of his com-puters as everything on the other ship, down to the last molecule, was analyzed and compared against Star King standard and mutation-probability charts.

The computer said his visitor was a Star King or a duplicate so well manufactured that differences were undetectable. Bronson admitted it to the control room, barren of anything but numerous vision screens. There were no controls, no gauges, dials, lights, switches, buttons or levers; the C-S headgear had done away with that. The Star Kings now lived in a symbiotic relationship with their computers and their ships.

They sat in the deep chairs, watching the splendor of the Universe unfold on the master forward view screen. Bronson had hooked his visitor into the *Yale's* computer with his C-S headgear and so their talk progressed much faster than it would have if they had used their vocal cords. The headgear connected both to the computer, which in turn linked both brains together and permitted a limited form of telepathy. In addition, any desired information the computer possessed on any subject they were discussing appeared immediately in the mind of each.

The capture of a Masters' ship was utterly impossible; yet V-101 merely sat there, a slight smile upon his face, as if he had done something of no difficulty. Bronson could not understand how it had been accomplished.

"Guess," he insisted. "How would you capture a Masters' ship?"

Bronson thought, puffing furiously on his pipe. But it was just impossible! Every fact that the computer held was re-viewed and fitted together in every imaginable combination. All he came up with was that a Masters' ship of any class was faster and more maneuverable, and packed more fire power than all the ships of the Star Kings combined.

Therefore, by deduction, that left an abandoned vessel— which didn't make any sense.

"That's the answer!" cried Bronson. "Their ships are shielded against every type of radiation known to us at present. Somehow you found a chink in their armor and duplicated the ship."

V-101 smiled, eyes far away, as if looking at vistas such as Bronson could never know.

"It was quite simple. The technique has been around since before the United Stars was destroyed. The Masters' ships are shielded to screen out all radiation and to absorb all detection rays, but there is one thing nothing can screen out: gravity. They can, as we do, minimize its effect, but they can't ignore completely the basic force of the Universe.

"The United Stars had gravity generators. I merely adjusted one to produce a particle gravity, extremely weak, so as to escape detection, that bends in proportion to the mass of the substance acted upon. A thousand such generators and receivers placed to form a huge sphere through which a ship passing gave all the data my computer needed to compute composition and design of that ship."

V-101's chart read Japanese-Italian-Brazilian-Kenyan, yet he bore no resemblance to any of his ancestral groups. He brushed back strands of golden hair. "I have done what I could; I have accomplished the mission you set me before I was born. Now I must leave you."

"Leave?" said Bronson, his mind on the great ship a few yards away from his outer hull.

Sweat came to V-101's forehead; he seemed about to faint. Bronson started forward, but the boy warned him away.

"No. Time is short. Insanity is but an idle thought away. I have loved you despite what you have done to me. If Caesar Smith could give his life for the Star Kings, I can do no less.

"This ship gives you a fighting chance against the Masters, but their numbers and resources are such that to increase the odds you may have to resort to more gene manipulation. I pray, if you do, that you wait until your techniques and instruments are vastly better. And even then, afterwards replace the fertilized egg in the mother's womb and let it be brought into the world in normal fashion. Perhaps even keeping their origin a secret is better, although sooner or later they will deduce the true circumstances of their birth. Even to a foetus, vat and womb are not the same.

"Always have I lived with the thought that I was conceived in a test tube, harbored in a stainless steel vat and begotten into the world through a porthole!"

Then before Bronson could act, for he himself had altered his son's body so that his reaction time was a third that of his own, V-101 raised a laser rod to his temple. There was no sound. He slumped to the cold metal deck.

Bronson cradled him in his arms, and closed the lids of the staring blue eyes. And in his grief, there was anger.

V

hundreds of years passed; generations lived and died; ships were built and destroyed. Gradually anti-Star King activity died down and became almost nonexistent. It was in the third century of this lull that there began to appear in the dark, airless voids small artificial worlds, ranging in size from several miles to several hundred miles in diameter. Supporting structures and hulls were fabricated of ultra-condensed metallic alloys of incredible strength. Many of these worldlets had more than five thousand levels.

More fortress than home, they were shielded. Not with ordinary shields; these were capable of withstanding the total destructive output of a score of super novas. Nor was their armament to be lightly considered, as more than one impetuous Master admiral found out, watching his fleets flare into nothing.

In time the Masters—accustomed by more than a billion years of history to the fact that no race could stand against them—developed a racial blindness to the existence of these strange new worlds. Rather than face the insanity of admitting their existence, they left them completely alone, and it was to these vast, seemingly impregnable fortresses that the Star Kings gradually gathered. They mothballed their mighty fighting ships and set about living as men should live. These great artificial worlds became known in time as Star King Centrals.

They duplicated in the many worldlets all that they had seen, read about in the ancient pre-Star King tapes, or imagined. Tropical paradises, snow covered mountain slopes, windy lakes for sailing; there was no environment they did not duplicate. Living creatures, large and small, peaceful and deadly, were imported from more than ten thousand planets.

The Star Kings themselves had a wonderful time as they gradually forgot their true history. There were dances and parties and weddings, orgies, concerts, games, births and merry doings until all but a few had forgotten their mission, and the ones who called themselves the Masters of the Universe.

Then, one day, after generations had lived and died with-in the fortress walls of the Centrals, the leaders of those few caught a prisoner—a Master.

The Lizoid creature came to his full nine feet of height and stared defiantly at his captors while from the corners of his eyes he sought escape or death.

The Star Kings were more powerful than any Master had conceived. His capture while aboard a fully manned ultra-D-class battle cruiser with full escort of ten destroyers had convinced him of that. It also explained the ever grow-ing number of Master vessels reported missing without trace. This information he must get back to his superiors, but even more important was that he could not let these Star Kings know of the Plan that had been developed centuries ago and that was now nearing fruition.

He could move, but his movements were restricted by in-visible bonds that were vectored force beams, controlled with a dexterity and fineness that astonished him.

Helpless, yet defiant, he looked at the five steel-eyed, gray-haired, well-muscled men that sat on the raised dais, looking down upon him. He noticed that each wore the same black military uniform upon which was a circle of scintillating red with a night black S superimposed over an equally black K within it.

"So you consider yourself a Master of the Universe," mused one of the Star Kings, looking down with a faint look of contempt upon his face. He shifted slightly, and the flesh of his face seemed to ripple under the onslaught of a bad odor.

The Master stared up defiantly. Then he felt his bonds fall away; he immediately lunged forward across the room, a towering gray-snouted lizard with bloodshot eyes, trying to reach the puny creatures who had presumed to capture him. One Star King moved. He vaulted the red plastic table and the Master found himself not in the grip of the vectored force beams, but in a pair of human hands with a grip more powerful than any ordinary being could possibly have. He was completely helpless.

The lean hard-muscled man with olive toned skin spoke as he effortlessly held the Master.

"With my Caesar Smith headgear and mini-lasers I can cut atoms. With that same headgear and the vectored force beams I could have restrained you as soon as the sensory equipment within the bulkheads told me you were flexing your muscles to move. But I wanted you to see and know what you and your kind are up against. My skeletal structure is entirely composed of hollow bones of collapsium alloyed with vedium. Within these ultra-light bones are enough sensory, offensive, defensive and survival equipment to make me nearly impossible to kill.

"I can lift fifty times the weight a normal human could. My distance to time ratio has been so altered that I can run a mile in one minute flat. My heart has been altered until it is the toughest, most efficient pumping engine ever derived of organic materials. My blood and the protective organisms within it have likewise been altered. My flesh can no longer even be called organic.

"As for my eyes, they are capable of perceiving via infrared, ultraviolet, x-ray, cosmic ray and the ordinary spectrum. And while no Star King has as yet installed eyes in the back of his head, every ship and fortress of the Star Kings contains enough sensory equipment in every room and corridor and lab, all connected through the C-S head-gear, so that the end result is just the same. And the wonders of our redesigned and rebuilt bodies pale beside what we have done to our ships and fortresses, the Star King Centrals.

"So know that you are totally in our power and that we shall not rest until we know everything you know of your civilization and science. And know we will. You shall not die without our knowing. You may go insane, but even that mercy shall not be left you. Whatever measures you and your kind take to prevent such an invasion of your mind as we now intend will be of no avail. The questioning shall begin now."

It took a week, but finally every physical and mental defense of the Master's mind had been removed and the information poured forth. Everything he had ever done, every thought he had ever thought, was theirs. But in their minor victory, the Master read their eventual defeat and the triumph and glory of its own species. By holding out for a week, he had allowed the Plan to be completed.

When the humans realized what was being done, they reacted violently.

A brown-skinned hand chopped in a deadly blow and the Lizoid fell, his huge neck broken. Before the blow had started, the process of evacuation of the Star King Centrals was already under way, the alarm having been given via the C-S headgear.

"Amazing and utterly devilish," said the director, Luc San. The thin, severe faced director had managed to grasp the Plan despite the Master's attempt to confuse them.

"Clever," said Mahli, the Indo-European. "And beautiful. To let us live in peace and without any worries for generations so that we would give up our nomadic ways and settle down. There was little danger for them, because they knew that our scientific progress would slow down to a minimum once all conflict and tension was removed.

"Unfortunately for them, the ancient Star Kings fore-saw such a calamity and prepared for it by altering certain personality traits in our genes so that all future Star Kings would abhor planetary surfaces, thus carrying their own built-in tensions and conflicts. Our mission is written in every gene of every cell of every tissue of our bodies. We can never forget it."

"True," said Luc San. "But even our ancestors couldn't foresee that the social instincts would be so strong we would circumvent their orders and build these fortress Centrals. The Masters, by watching these focal points of Star King activity from afar, could judge just how strong we are.

"And when the moment is right—they strike!"

But even as the Star Kings prepared to evacuate their fortress Centrals, it was too late. With the mysterious disappearance of the slain Master, who was Director-General of the Plan, the Plan was moved up and implemented immediately after a last few hastily determined changes had been completed.

New ultra-W class battle cruisers had quietly and efficiently replaced the ultra-D class under the guidance of Computer Prime. Simultaneously, at a signal from the computer via its channels of communication in subspace, the new battle cruisers, the epitome of the last four centuries of Masters' weapons research, began to move.

Connected through instantaneous subspace communication, the ultra-Ws were in actuality eight million Computer Primes: an entire star cluster extension of the finest computer ever constructed.

It was not long before the Star Kings found that they were totally outclassed. They fought valiantly, cornered as they had allowed themselves to be, with a tenacity that amazed the Masters, but one by one their ships were destroyed and the Centrals overwhelmed and blasted into dust until finally Computer Prime signaled *Plan Completed*.

No longer did the Star Kings exist.

VI

but. ...

As there are atheists, so exist the orthodox. Here and there in space, there coasted through the black, cold depths ships whose owners had shunned the Star King Centrals, who had followed Commander Grey's Command and not had contact or communication with any other Star King ship.

As there are extroverts, so are there introverts. Hermits, some would have called them, loners, the self-reliant, the explorers. They had followed the Command unconsciously.

As there are the merely prepared, so are there those who foresee every eventuality. On a thousand lifeless ships floating in the depths, the death signals of the Star King ships and fortresses were received. In a hundred lifeless bases on un-marked planets and their satellites, the death signals were received.

And in those bases and ships automatic machinery re-moved fertilized human eggs from the cold vaults and gently warmed them. Soon movement was noticed and the cells were alive. The fertilized eggs were then placed in the artificial wombs where they were forced to maturity in a matter of a few months.

Not too long after, the full grown Star Kings were ex-pelled from the wombs and cared for by almost human hands.

A few years after the destruction of the Star Kings and the Centrals, a new generation, smarter, faster, more dedi-cated, was ready to take their place and carry on.

The Masters of the Universe had won a battle But centuries passed, and the Centrals and their bloody end were forgotten. Newer, deadlier Star King ships forced the Masters ever more on the defensive.

Star King Reed Deal idly scratched the tip of his nose as he gazed at the well curved form that filled the main viewscreen.

"Thank God!" the woman said, fervently.

"How did you escape the Master?" asked Deal.

"It ... It seems like a dream. My husband was killed in the first attack. The embryos—all gone! I stumbled into the life craft and cast off just as the main drive imploded. The Master missed my ship in the resulting debris. It's been ... I don't know. Weeks, perhaps months."

The C-S headgear rested lightly on Deal, almost an ex-tension of his own body. He seemed to hear the distant clattering of myriad tiny insects as the cells of the headgear compared stimuli from the drifting life craft. He smiled to himself as the origin of the little craft was traced through its cellular history, down to the very origin of the mineral ores.

At the same time, the infinitely complex structure con-tained within the headgear was examining the woman's every thought and action, comparing them against the master file of human impressions from the living, and when no analogue was found there, against the vastly more complex file of the past.

Another portion of the man's conscious mind was aware of the woman as a woman, and felt a stirring deep inside. Her deep green eyes struck a responsive chord, a chord that was also pleased by the jet black shoulder-length hair and the small-boned face, the skin of which showed long hours under the ultraviolet lamps of a solarium.

Reed Deal himself was tall, black of hair and trim of body; the perfect picture of a Star King, laughingly defiant of the Universe and its terrors.

"You'll come aboard, of course," he said, his mind sending the commands that brought vectored force beams to bear on the small craft, reeling it into the emergency lock. He imagined he could hear the gentle bump through the fabric of the ship. The lock cycled through the decontamination process, during which he made his way from the control room. He arrived at the lock just as the computer signaled completion of decontamination.

The lock slid open and he stepped within, bending over the hatch of the little ship to help the woman out. His fingers noted the callous-hardened edge of her hand without surprise. He stepped out into the corridor, muscles tensed deeply as his back was turned, but the expected death-chop did not come.

He stopped in the corridor, turning back to her, noticing her seeming confusion in what should be a perfectly natural atmosphere. "You're tired, of course, but you'll feel better after an hour in the 'fresher."

"Of course." She smiled her thanks and accepted his es-corting arm to the living quarters. She stepped behind a door and a moment later he heard the soft rush of water in the shower stall. He went back to the control room to await her reappearance.

Seated once more in his chair, Reed Deal permitted his mind to follow the wandering tentacles of the C-S headgear, feeling out the life-beat of the ship, running quickly through the reproduction lab, making sure that there were no unwarranted mutations suddenly developing.

Directed from habit that meant life in time of danger, the C-S headgear ran over the ship's defenses,

checking the shields and the tiny Ramdic communicator that was kept constantly warmed, ready to throw the death-cry of the ship across the reaches of the galaxy should it be caught and defeated by the Masters.

His thoughts went into the tiny sector of the ship that was now inhabited by other adult life, and he chuckled grimly. He commanded the ship's robot steward to prepare a meal for two, and then put the command on *Hold*, waiting until the woman reappeared.

Suddenly a tiny alarm tingled; the headgear had completed its search of known humans. The information poured into his mind: date and planet of birth, parentage, lineal descents and antecedents. He chuckled again as he knew her name.

Time passed in normal routines as the headgear tended to the minor details of running the complex ship. There was little to tell that Deal was the only normal adult member of the complement. There was place and space for a wife, should he ever decide to encumber himself so, but for the present, the ship bore only superficial traces of personality that marked it as owned by one.

The woman reappeared after an hour, summoned to the control cabin by his soft-spoken instructions. He took the steward off *Hold* and by the time she arrived the meal was spread.

"Oh, thank you!" she said. "I've been dreaming of a decent meal for I don't know how long."

Deal knew, but he left the comment unsaid. "Wine, Miss Ryder? A rather gentle vintage from the Sagittarius Sector."

She looked up at the sound of her name, and he imagined the faint tinge of a flush spreading upward on her cheeks.

"Thank you, Mister . . . ?"

"Reed Deal," he said, quickly. "At your service."

"Thank you, Mr. Deal." She sighed, and squirmed in her chair. "It's all been . . . such a horrible dream. To know that I'm safe back in Star King society . . ."

"As safe as you could be anywhere in the galaxy."

"The Masters . . ." She shuddered. "A horrible dream!"

The food disappeared quickly; famished or not, she was obviously sick of the bland bare-support rations of the life craft. With each course, the steward produced a different wine; after the dessert, she was offered a pale blue liqueur. Deal ordered the remnants of the meal away and watched her settle comfortably in her chair.

"What are the Masters like?" he asked. "I mean in person. I've seen the pictures, of course, but I've never been lucky enough to see one in the flesh."

"Ugh!" She grimaced. "I wouldn't call that luck. Anyone who can live his life without meeting a Master in the flesh is really lucky. They're hideous, and the smell is indescribable!"

"Still they're intelligent."

"I suppose." Her eyes closed and she seemed to sink into slumber. A smile still playing over his face, Deal permitted his own chair to transform itself into a couch. He relaxed totally, willing his body toward sleep. His eyes closed.

Long moments passed, and then the headgear caught the first stirring of the woman. He willed himself to perfect quiet, laying dead still, until the soft rustle of fabric moving through the air told him it was time to make his own move.

He rolled off the couch and came to his feet, crouching on the balls. His hand shot out and grabbed the woman's wrist, halfway down in a judo chop toward the place where his unprotected neck had been less than a second earlier. He forced her to follow through with the movement, grunt-ing with satisfaction as her wrist cracked against the edge of the couch and a scream escaped her lips.

"Damn you!"

"Naughty, naughty," he said, pulling her to him, over the couch, keeping her off balance so that her other hand had no chance of bringing into play the plastic needle that was designed to penetrate his eye socket and his brain. He twisted her arm behind her back, dragging her over and off the couch and hauling her to her feet. He forced her back into her chair, his mind ordering bonds that appeared from the arms and legs, holding her tightly.

"It isn't nice to kill people," he said, disposing of her blade. "Particularly not members of one's own race."

"Monster!" she spat.

"Strictly a matter of opinion. From where I sit, the creatures that sent you after me are the true monsters. Just how do you like to have a Master for a master?"

"The Masters are kind and good! Not like you perverted beasts who want to destroy all other life in the galaxy!"

"Whoa, now! Hold on there a moment. That's a familiar story, but it seems to me you've got the roles

mixed up a mite."

"Human!" she said, and in the saying, the name was a curse more foul than any other ever dreamed or uttered.

"You're human, too."

"And I curse the fact. The only thing I can be thankful for is that the Masters have given me the chance to expiate some of the sins of you ... creatures!"

It was common knowledge that the Masters held humans prisoner—they held a few members of all of the defeated races of the past, prisoner in suspended animation, against that day when they might wish to study or adapt a physical characteristic or anomaly.

"Do you know how long you've been with the Masters, Miss Ryder?"

"Not long enough," she answered bitterly.

"A thousand years," he continued, as though she had not replied. "Since the first destruction of the human race. You should remember a time when life was good, worth living."

"I remember the Shraix!"

"Ahhh!"

"Deny, human, that our race was not attempting to wipe the Shraix from the Universe!"

"I would say your words are a little strong. We warred with the Shraix, yes. But it was not a war of annihilation, but one of glory. Both our races were born to glorious deeds, the waging of wonderful battles. War is necessary to the human soul; if there be no stranger, then we will war upon friend. It's as much a part of our beings as our very flesh and blood."

"And you call the Masters creatures!"

"There is a difference," insisted Deal. "Shraix and Man were alike, battling for the same reasons. Neither intended to see the other wiped from the pages of time. But the Masters—your Masters—want no life but their own, admit to the right to life for none but their own."

He rose. "They did a terrible job on you, Miss Ryder. I'll do my best to change you back to what you were."

"Keep your hands off me, you filthy beast!"

Deal voiced a mental command and a Med robot appeared, rolling to the side of her chair. She screamed, and tried to struggle against her bonds, but the struggle was useless. The robot placed a hypnospray against her arm and the drug was injected through the pores. She stiffened, then slumped back.

Deal went to her side, looking down at her. His ship had been lacking a wife. Perhaps it was time for a change.

VII

the years fluttered past like the leaves of a book. Masters and Star Kings alike died, to be replaced by others of their respective species. But for the new generations of Masters things were not so bright. Plan after plan failed, battle after battle was lost, but still they tried. They could not give up a Universe without a fight.

Down through the black void it fell, its mighty bulk hidden behind a maze of defensive shields and screens. Then its instruments began picking up the basketball sized black painted metal spheres.

Examination found them to be detection and communication linkage devices. They were set up in an unending cubical pattern, each a half mile from its nearest neighbors.

Then, out of the depths of space, from almost every point of the star filled heavens, there came black fleets of needle shaped ships, as bulky and heavily screened and shielded as that first strange one. It tried to run, but it had delayed too long. The battle was brief; a few seconds of awesome conflict with weapons that smashed solar systems as if they were nothing and the ship's screens and shields went down. The lone ship vanished—but not before it had emitted its death call and informed the Star Kings of the new plan of the Masters.

The Star Kings acted at once, for the plan was deadly, though time consuming. The Masters planned to put those detection and communication linkage devices into every sector of the galaxy. When finished, the Star Kings would not be able to travel a single light-year in deep space without showing up, despite all their antidetection systems, on the screens of every Masters' ship and command center in that galactic sector!

The S.K.S. *Volga*, the *Coral Sea* and the *Calcutta* swept down upon the seeding ships, the pregnant hens ready to lay their rotten eggs, the metal balls that could mean the end of the Star Kings. A brilliant, blinding flash and the seeding ships were gone along with most of the already seeded devices.

The "protection" came snarling in from all directions except one, the million mile wide corridor of space through which the Star King trio had blasted its way. They could have raced for that escape route if they had desired, but they disdained it and turned to meet their enemies bow on.

The two forces clashed.

The very fabric of space and time shook and strained under the awesome, terrible, deadly energies that were hurled, clashing and neutralizing each other there. Although out-numbered, these latest Star King ships vastly outmatched the inferior ultra-Y class battle cruisers of their foes.

Screens flared and ships died until there was but one Master and one Star King left.

Seeing how easily its fellows had been annihilated, the Master heeled about and plowed through its own sea of seeds, its communications center calling frantically for help. The blunt black shape of the *Volga* flung itself after the fleeing needle ship.

Awesome energies played across the Master's rear, sending its shields flaring into incandescence. Then, suddenly, where the ship had been, there was only a brief distortion in the ether.

"What is it?" asked Josephine, a strawberry blonde who entirely filled her syn-leather tights in all the correctly computed places, seeing the energy beams of the *Volga* striking a similar beam from another *Volga* situated against the same backdrop of stars.

Her husband, a giant of a man with vaguely Nordic features, plucked the answer from his C-S and tried to simplify it.

"Computer says it's a sphere of high speed energy moving around the ship so fast that an attack on any one point is the same as that attack being distributed or shared on the surface of the entire thing. We'd need thirty *Volgas* to crack it. The energy particles are moving so fast that the energy sphere's really composed of only a few particles, being constantly renewed. Each and every particle of energy is at each and every point of space at the same time so that they could compose their screen out of only one particle of energy, if they wished. All things are relative; since their energy is moving so fast that it's stationary, it behaves as if it is in fact stationary, and mass is no problem."

He laughed in a deep baritone.

"If it doesn't make sense to you, don't worry about it. I married you for your figure, not your brains. If I'd wanted a genius, I would've married the ship's computer." He briefly swept her into his arms, then returned his attention to the battle.

"Stand by. I'm constructing similar generating equipment in labs R through W, auxiliary power units in labs X through double F."

Ten minutes after having blasted the seeding ships, the *Volga* had overtaken, passed, turned and was already heading back for the energy shielded ship at full speed. Then its own shield snapped on as the two

objects drew near.

"Hold on," the giant said. "Since the energy is stationary and in motion simultaneously, the two shields are impervious and interactive with each other simultaneously. Something has to give."

It did.

The Master drifted, a lifeless and powerless space wreck, seemingly content to float throughout all eternity unless it fell into some far sun or crashed upon some far world. Then, suddenly, it began to transmit to the emergency powered and likewise battered *Volga*.

"So, traitors of mankind! You have won this round. Enjoy it; it will be your last. You who have destroyed countless helpless races, intelligent and not, on a billion defenseless planets, shall be defeated! For we, the free humans of the Earth you destroyed in your lust for domination of the Universe, have at last been allowed by the valiant Masters, who alone have been able to stop your power-hungry lusts from coming true, to fight along side them. Beware, Star Kings! Let fear grip your hearts! I know it will, for you no longer fight Masters, but fellow human. And no matter what you do, no matter where you go, we shall be there too."

Then, as it somehow sensed the mind probes and paralysis rays leaping forth at the end of the high speed message transmission, the other willed its ship to destruction.

And so across the star depths the message went forth. No longer could they afford to let time slip so wastefully by. A deadline was reached: the Masters and their new allies must be defeated within one generation ...

Or never.

VIII

in the years that followed the Star Kings quadrupled their efforts. A thousand great battles were fought, and slowly the Masters and their human allies were driven back.

Their backs were to the wall; all was crumbling. There was only one thing left—a plan so deadly that its success might also mean the end of its users.

But they were to the wall. . . .

On a world so far from blast-seared Earth that the light of its sun had yet to shine upon it, a world guarded by the pride of the Masters' fleets with their ultra-BB battle cruisers and ultra-C battle fortresses, by shields so massive and numerous that star systems would die in milli-milli-microseconds from the drainage of energy necessary to maintain them under attack, there was located the heart of the Masters' vast empire, Computer Prime and the First Master of the Universe.

Star King Sev Reid of the S.K.S. *Tibet*, a tall, dark-bearded man, had always wanted to solve that puzzle. The new deadline meant that chances had to be taken. So he created a hundred super-geniuses like himself with the same desire built in and went into C-S headgear linkage with them and the ship's computer for fifteen solid years of research.

Deep within the tropical climated planet, in a sheltered fortress capable of withstanding even a direct sub-atomic device hit, sat a Lizoid creature. Before him was a tri-d tank capable of visualizing any part of the Universe from the records in the memory banks of Computer Prime, that mon-ster of a brain that totally surrounded him. It was for-tunate for the Star Kings that Sev Reid had decided to crack this nut, for this First Master was not merely another who had climbed to the top of the barnyard; he was the first truly great leader in all their history. It was he who, in his early youth, had thought of reviving the human prisoner specimens, indoctrinating and training them to hijack Star King ships.

It was he who had conceived the plan of seeding space. And again, it was his plan, after realizing that following their past ways would lead to eventual defeat, to enlist human aid in defeating their own kind.

He had also fathered a hundred different weapons until they were already building the ultra-EE class battle cruisers, an achievement that a generation ago would not have been thought possible for another million years.

Sev Reid and his super-geniuses experimented in utter secrecy for fifteen years.

The First Master of the Universe had no way of knowing that they had solved their problem, learning to warp space, until a Star King materialized amidst a visualization of the system of Sol, and scrambled his brains.

One, a volunteer from among Sev Reid's hundred, went forth. He appeared amidst a visualization of a star system that the First Master was studying in the room-sized tri-d map tank. He managed a blast of energy that disintegrated the First Master's head before the defense mechanisms could be activated.

The dead Master toppled forward, over the scribbled out-lines of his last plan—the details of which he had already communicated to his subordinates throughout the Universe.

Another of Sev Reid's men appeared before the control board of Computer Prime. But while he was figuring out how to do in fact that which he had only done in theory, the *Tibet*, with the space warping device capable of being operated only across short distances and with tremendous ex-penditures of energy and accompanying disturbances, was detected and, in its power diminished state, helpless against the onslaught of the ultra-BB super fortresses' weapons.

Star King Blandi Nobis recognized the dials and knobs the minds of a hundred Master prisoners had told him about. There seemed to be no way he could go wrong; yet a second after he altered the directives of the mammoth brain, he and the brain were totally and almost instantaneously destroyed while at the same time the secret duplicate com-puter took over all operations.

Unfortunately not only had the Star Kings failed here, their killing of the First Master had come too late. Several minutes before the arrival of the assassin Star King, the Lizoid leader had received Computer Prime probability curves which demonstrated that S-K activity had climbed to fantastic new levels. Computer predictions were that the S-K would win—unless the Masters counterattacked.

Seconds before his death he had communicated his newest and most desperate plan: all specimens, no matter what race, in suspended animation were to be revived and set to work finding ways and means of defeating the Star Kings.

And how hard a decision that must have been to make, for there were beings of races in the deep freeze vaults of the Masters whose brains had intelligence potentials hun-dreds of times greater than

Master and Star King combined!

IX

star cross end.

The Star Kings remembered that name and place. Some called it the Battle of Star Cross End, but it was not a battle; it was slaughter. The Masters hadn't been able to run, for it was their home galaxy: their last place, their dying place. Human and alien allies had remained at their side to the homeland, but their help had been as useless as the once mighty fleets that had sought to stay the avenging ships of the Star Kings.

Now the Star Kings hovered over the Masters last fortress, their home world itself. Their fleets were gone, the far flung worlds of their empire were dust, their allies, tricked into the role though they were, were dead.

They accepted their fate. Survival of the fittest had been their code and they died by it. But they did not intend to submit meekly. Here was where they began, where the first Master crawled upon land and developed legs. Here was where they achieved civilization and sprang out to the stars. Here was where they decided to make their own destiny; to let no other species survive to someday outclass them. Here they would die among their ancestors, not in disgrace, but Masters of the Universe.

They waited now, futile weapons ready. Tattered remnants of a once invincible fleet stood ready for the final battle.

But the Star Kings did not blast them with the awesome weapons the TEMS had given. The TEMS—the mere thought of it sent shivers up and down a man's vertebrae. When they had learned of the last plan of the dead leader, all Star King minds had joined together, linked through the C-S headgear. If the Masters managed to breed the beings in their specimen vaults, then they did not have even one generation to find a way to victory.

It was a period of total stress that gave them the answer: a Total Environmental and Mental Simulator. A computer that could simulate or duplicate the mental processes of any actual or artificial being, and through simulated total environmental stimuli create a situation of maximum stress upon that entity. An incredible machine, against which Master and ally were powerless. No matter how much in-telligence potential Master or ally had, the TEMS always came up with a simulated being that was superior. It had no limiting factor as do the brains of living creatures. It could always be added to.

Now they were linked, Star King to Star King. And a method that was completely new gave them the answer to their doubts.

They could not destroy the race that called themselves Masters of the Universe. If they did they would be exactly what they had fought so long against.

Now they turned their great engines of destruction from that last place of the Masters and headed into deep space. Where they were going they did not know.

The Masters of the Universe were broken. There were young races springing up over the Universe now and hostile creatures assailing the newly liberated galaxy from without. Some went to explore to the ends of Existence. Some settled down eventually and forgot the Star Kings.

Without a common menace to bind them together any longer, the end of the Star Kings, sought by the Masters for a hundred generations, came about within a short period of time.

"How wrong they were," said Guidi in the heavy silence. Like the others, he had heard that story many times, but it always managed to stir something inside.

Corrindus agitated his body mass; it always helped his thinking to rearrange the internal organs.

"Spot anything?" he asked. Guidi shook his head. So, too, did the rest of the men and officers on the Bridge of the *Warrior of Civilization*.

"Anyone among the crew spot anything?" The com-board remained silent and unlit.

"It has to be there somewhere!" Corrindus said, slapping a chair arm. "I know I'm on the proper course."

"Remember Thas Bort," cautioned Guidi.

"Thas Bort?" Corrindus asked, puzzled.

"He was a Captain and he was sure of something, too. Records Central, run the Thas Bort incident." Guidi looked at his Captain. "I'm sorry—with your permission, sir."

"Run it," Corrindus commanded.

"When Star Kings gather . . ." mused the humanoid, Thas Bort, Commander of Civilization's battle cruiser *Handmaid-en of Death* as that mighty craft drifted against the back-drop of two distant galaxies, an almost invisible ghost, power down, shields barely active.

Flesses Ses, his Secondary Commander, a massive human-oid denizen of the 3.2 Star King G. world of Whil, sent a questioning look. He too had received the Detection Section's report. Another ship of the legendary Star Kings had been detected. It made the third. So what?

Evidently those thoughts conveyed themselves to Thas, for he explained as he gave orders and the *Handmaiden of Death* got under way, accelerating quickly to the ship's highest nonwarp FTL speed.

"If you extend the courses of those three Star King ships that we detected within the last twelve ship hours, you get a point in the Megalese Galaxy known as Sandow Cluster."

The stars had already shifted into the red. The great engines throbbed, hurling the mighty fighting machine through the cold, hostile depths of dark space.

"After computing from the courses of the first two S-K ships, I sent an information request to Combined Intelligence. We should be getting an answer very soon; then we can go into warp."

Behind them yawned the black gulf of darkened stars. The ship was always ready for a battle; yet its strange crew, of beings from a score of the thousands of species that formed the mighty, all-encompassing, glorious thing known simply as Civilization, readied it.

"If the Star Kings are gathering, believe me, it is for a reason," he said smugly. He had risen far in the service of Civilization because of his ability to guess correctly when there were no facts to act upon. "I once studied them. There were conflicting opinions among my wombmates and I as to whether the Star Kings did in fact give Civilization the weapons that now hold it supreme against all its enemies. Eventually I came to believe that they did not exist. For the fantastic legends had it that they were the survivors of a destroyed planet somewhat like ours, called Earth. That they, or their ancestors, a handful of near-primitives, had turned their backs upon each other and sought their un-known enemies in the vast depths of interstellar space. One, a Caesar Smith, slept a thousand years and gave them something called a Caesar Smith Headgear. That, and a plan that allowed them to skip a billion years of evolution and scientific exploration and meet the mysterious Masters of the Universe on an even level. It is said that thence forth they were only a little less than gods. They could multiply themselves or create other creatures at will, see into your soul, into every atom of every cell of your body. It is said that nothing harms them—their bodies are indestructible fortresses capable of unbelievable speed and deeds. Without any apparent aid, they can out-think the greatest computers of Civilization.

"Even as an adult it was hard to believe in them. Until I joined the Space Forces and detected, myself, their mighty craft as they plied so majestically through the ether."

A light glowed and the high speed message that he had been trained to assimilate and decode instantly blared forth.

"As I thought; other Civilization ships have detected the Star Kings. Most of their originations have been plotted out to the same region in the Megalese Galaxy."

He spoke now with that same self-assuredness into the device that connected him with the Communications Section. "Priority Triple A: all ships, all Sectors. Rendezvous, co-ordinates. Have Navigation supply a suitable point near Sandow Cluster." He switched over to Piloting. "Get co-ordinate from Navigation and proceed via warp."

There was a stomach twisting lurch. Suddenly the *Hand-maiden of Death* was surrounded by stars and a host of mighty ships warping in.

"What you've said is all very interesting, but why this?" Flesses indicated the vast armada quickly coming into being around them.

"As I said"—Thas Bort adopted the manner and tone of a lecturer, sure of the facts he has spouted endlessly, day after day, knowing that none in his class can prove him wrong—"I've studied the Star Kings and there is only one time in all their long glorious history that they have ever all gathered together: the Battle of Star Cross End!"

Flesses Ses' broad, massive yellow face blanched. His eyes widened to an impossible diameter.

"Aye," said Thas grimly, but nonetheless in a professorial, confident manner. He was never wrong. "Star Cross End! There they gathered and met the Masters of the Universe in the battle of battles. Whole galaxies flamed and died and were reborn. The Universe itself trembled and shook at the fury of the weapons unleashed that day. Half the mighty host of Star Kings were destroyed, but in the end they had avenged the murder and destruction of their people and planet.

"Think, Flesses, how much more powerful are these Star Kings of today. Think!" He paused, making sure Flesses was faithfully taking in every word. "Think what enemies they face now if for the second time in their history they must once again gather together.

"But whatever it is, they shall not face it alone. They broke the Masters of the Universe and lifted the yoke of instant destruction that had hovered over the races of the Universe since that first world begot life;

they watched us form the Civilization where a hundred thousand species live in peace and harmony and gave us the weapons to see that it would always be so. This time, they will not fight alone!"

"You've been appointed Fleet Commander," Ses informed him. "Information Central has reported on Sandow Cluster. All records negative. We'll have to go in blind. DTR Section reports S-K have ringed Godog IV. Basic standard type A humanoid world. Gravity: one standard Star King G."

Thas acted.

"ComSec: Get coordinates for Godog IV from Navigation and transmit. Warp at third period."

Civilization's mighty fleet warped in. Men and half-men and not-men were tense; eyes, ears, all the myriad kinds of sensory equipment conceived by nature strained, aided by ultra-efficient electronic gear, to detect an enemy or hostile action. Shields, screens, offensive and defensive weap-onry; all were ready.

A milli-microsecond and the fleet would be an interlocked fighting machine such as only the legendary Star Kings them-selves could have conceived.

The fleet waited, ready, for when Star Kings gather . . .

DTR Sections ranged the planet below, for the impene-trable, indestructible ships of the Star Kings revealed nothing, did nothing. Hours passed slowly as the realization of dis-appointment grew on Thas Bort.

Later, the ships of Civilization sneaked quietly away via warp, as on Godog IV, where the Star Kings had gathered, a football game continued.

Corrindus' jade blue skin turned a sickly green, a sign of annoyance among his kind.

"I see no similarity between Thas Bort and myself. He was a nonmentally gifted humanoid—I am of a race of intuitive nonhumanoids. The weight of generations of ancestors tells me that I am right; somewhere in the mass of data we have on the Star Kings is the answer to our questions: Why were the Star Kings killed? And by whom?"

He extended a speech organ-tipped pseudopod and spoke into the mike.

"Records Central, proceed."

X

centuries passed like drops of rain in a storm. Races sprang up like planted crops to fill the worlds of the Universe. Still more time passed; the young races evolved, many of them attaining high-technology civilizations. And some of the Star Kings started to change, to embrace new ideas. But in the end, they went back to the old. . . .

The planet loomed large in the space window. Fred looked somewhat dubiously at it. He had never liked planets, even when they were .999 Earth-type. He couldn't understand why his wife had suddenly gotten this urge to live on a planet. Of course, she'd given him the complaints she'd been uttering for the last year of ship's time—stuff about how the children would be better off; a spaceship's no place to raise children; there'd be chances to party and socialize, and they could walk in the rain, make snowballs, swim beneath the sun, get a *real* suntan.

He'd built the artificial environments on ten levels within the ship just to please her. He'd put in all the snow, rain and water for swimming that *anyone* could possibly want. But it had only made her worse.

"The artificial environments are nice," she would say. "But think how much nicer it would be if it were the real thing and not just something manufactured by the ship's computer and a batch of robots."

He'd tried to ignore her, but she persisted. In a weak moment, he had given in, and now here he was, looking for a planet. Since then he had kicked himself more than once. Just what in the Hell he would do on a ball of dirt, he didn't know. They were okay for a planetfall every so often, but as a regular thing? He shuddered. Whoever heard of a Star King settling down on a planet and becoming a hick planet lover?

"Is that it, Fred?" she called as she bounced into the Control Room. It was questions like that that exasperated him. She knew damn well that that was the planet; the computer was, through the C-S headgear, channeling the same information into her brain that it was putting into his.

She was about the same age as he, somewhere in the middle years. In another age, he might have been a balding, potbellied, beer swilling guy, content to sit in front of the TV on days off and watch a football or baseball game. But he was a Star King and the mass of equipment crammed within the ship made him six feet of wiry, handsome he-man—outside. Inside, he was a balding, potbellied . . .

Harriet might have been taken in another society as an Amazon, for at five eleven, whenever she wore high heeled boots and built up hairdo, she towered over lesser mortals, male and female. But inside, she was really the keep-the-house-clean, don't-put-your-feet-on-the-furniture, watch-where-you-put-the-ashes type. Fred hadn't minded. In a way, they were both a beautiful match—except for this planet thing.

"Dasin II, .900 Earth-type. Atmosphere, 30 percent oxy-gen, 69 percent nitrogen and 1 percent trace elements. One moon. Four seasons." He rattled off facts until she gave him that "let's-have-none-of-that-nonsense" look; she was getting all that information through the C-S same as he.

"Send down a probe," she told him. He sighed and shrugged. She was perfectly capable of sending down a probe herself, but she for some reason thought that he should do such things. Man things, she had once called them. Only in an emergency would she ever have anything to do with the mechanical aspects of running the ship.

"It looks like a beautiful world," she said as the probe beam slid over the planet's surface above the atmosphere. There were lots of white, fluffy clouds that made one think of sleeping. Fred sent the probe deeper. Continents wheeled past.

"Beautiful," she whispered. Down and down the probe went. Now forests and rivers and lakes could be made out—and cities. Fred swung the probe back and locked onto the city. It had an unkempt, run-down look. The probe slid in among the buildings.

"How disgusting," she noted. The city was literally a pigsty. Dirt and dung, animals and insects and vermin were everywhere. The people, humanoids, walked unconcernedly through the low-technology streets on foot or rode on horse-back. People tossed garbage and waste products into the streets and onto any passersby who weren't nimble enough to duck, or were without a well-developed sense of warning. Children played in the muck, making balls of the stuff and flinging it at anyone they thought they could outrun.

Fred swung to another city. This one was just as squalid, just as crusted with filth, but there was a difference. There were bodies in this one.

"Plague," Fred said, raising the magnification and using various beams to pry, move and examine one of the bodies. Then the ship's computer ran down the symptoms, matched them up with what it had on its tapes, and came up with Bubonic Plague. He set about estimating the population of the city and all the cities of the planet.

Working at the speed of thought, the Star King cleaned up the cities, buried the dead, inoculated the living and sterilized disease carrying vermin. Then he planted, in the minds of certain individuals, the rudiments of medical care, cleanliness and simple facts of science.

Finished, some weeks later, he turned to his wife.

"Well, that's that. They're clean now. Fit for the company of their new neighbors."

She turned and looked at him.

"I hope you don't mean us? I wouldn't live next to people who would live in such filth if they were the last creatures in the Universe."

Fred shrugged fatalistically, used to the perversities of his wife. Under his thought impulses, the big ship began to gather speed.

"We'll try this one," she said, indicating with her mind the desired planet on the star charts in the memory banks of the ship's computer.

Under Fred's guidance, the probes shot down. It was a large world with a healthy yellow sun glaring down on it. It also had a great deal of water—in fact, too much. Vapor hung in the atmosphere in great, thick blankets of cloud or mist, permeating the warm air. Fred whistled.

"Humidity, 98.8. All the rain you want." The probe slid down farther. There were cities and people.

"Those poor people," Harriet said. "All that humidity and the rain!" In some sections of the planet it was literally raining bathtubs.

"They seem to be enjoying it," Fred pointed out. The probe had stopped on a group of children playing and wrestling in the mud and water.

"But there!" Harriet pointed out as a building built on a low hill collapsed into a heap of soaked brick, clay and stone. And now they noticed that a whole section of the city was sliding away down the hill upon which it had been resting as people scrambled for their lives. Fred flung a beam to grasp the falling buildings. To the people it must have appeared miraculous, but none stopped to ask questions. They were too busy scurrying for safer ground.

"How could life evolve on such a wet, miserable planet?" Harriet demanded. Fred shrugged.

He began burning the water in the atmosphere, turning it into vapor which he then shot into space where it wouldn't harm any primitive spaceships that these people might some day send up.

Then he went down with his multi-purpose rays and artificially suntanned the natives.

"They'll need that protection until they form a natural

one of their own. With most of the clouds gone, the sun'll be more than they're used to. Soon as the land is dried out, they'll be able to grow—wait a minute; they've got nothing but sea plants or high water environment plants. Nothing else has developed. Well, I guess they won't mind a few things. Let's see, potatoes, corn, carrots, peas, cotton, peanuts, tomatoes." He muttered as robots gathered the reproductive center of the items in the hydroponics levels.

Then, out of sight of any cities, he dried out several acres of land and planted his collection of seeds, cuttings and bulbs. Finished, he said to his wife:

"Well, dear, there's your planet."

"I'm afraid a ball of mud with a lot of dying water lilies isn't what I had in mind."

Without a word, Fred got the great ship in motion for the next planet on their star maps.

And so they continued, visiting worlds where earthquakes came at unpredictable intervals, worlds where there was barely enough moisture to form caps at the poles, worlds ravaged by insect plagues and diseases, worlds with civilizations wrecked by planets that had drawn too near, causing the resulting upheaval of land masses and bodies of water.

There was Lindstur, whose inhabitants had cloaked the world in an atmosphere of black soot, invisible sulphur oxides and carbon monoxide. Fred cleaned it up for the Lindsturians, but Harriet had no desire to live with people who were stupid enough to do such a thing to themselves.

They found worlds destroyed by suns that had gone nova, and worlds that life would never know. And at last they came to Snowhi.

"Good God!" Fred said in amazement, although he had by then become hardened to the ills that could befall planets—or so he had thought. Snowhi was supposed to have been a .998 Earth-type planet, but when they broke out of warp to hover over the planet's surface, they found themselves looking at a heaving green ball.

Fred probed the planet-sized mass of greenery and found the skeletons of cities and men beneath it.

"What is it?" Harriet asked, watching several ripples go through the green ball. It seemed to sense the

probe rays and reared up toward the spaceship far out in space. Then, as if realizing the futility of its act, it settled down to enjoy the sunlight and continue extracting the minerals of the world.

"It's a huge fungus of some kind. It's covered the entire planet from pole to pole."

"All those people. It must have been a horrible way to die." Harriet shuddered. In her travels through the star ways she had seen many unpleasant sights, but looking at a green ball of parasitic plant that had consumed an entire planet's people was too much. "Let's get out of here, Fred."

"Can't. That thing propagates by means of space spores. This entire region of stars is filled with those spores and they are slowly and surely spreading. No planet-bound society can fight a voracious fungus that is falling upon the entire planet every second from the sky. If we don't stop them here and now, someday they'll devour every planet in Existence!" His thoughts guided the ship to work. He hated to do it, but he sent every planet of the system hurtling into its sun. Then he blasted every cubic inch of the system with lethal radiations until he was certain not even one spore of the planet-eating fungus remained.

He swung around and followed the trail of spores back to their source, making sure that not one spore survived in space along that route.

On and on, through devoured system after system, they went, destroying the space spores and cremating any planets that might have been contaminated.

Finally they came to the point of origin, a small planet completely covered with the green heaving mass. The spores hung in space for millions of miles around the planet. Again he blasted or bathed them in the radiations to which they had no defense. He probed the planet of origination, but found nothing.

"Probably a mutation," conjectured Fred. "Look!" As they watched, the green mass covering the planet depressed it-self, creating a large bowl-like area. Then, like rubber that has been stretched over a jar mouth and pushed in and then released, the bowl suddenly shot forward and threw into space most of the balls of spores that had been resting in it. There in the cold depths the balls broke up into individual, almost microscopic spores which then proceeded to rapidly spread out. Fred lost no more time; he killed the latest spores and heaved the planet into its sun.

Then he drove the ship through the star, bathing every inch of the fantastically strong hull with that intense heat that nothing unprotected by the Star Kings could live through.

He checked the ship's path of flight to the star and found nothing. Relieved, he set course for the next planet.

"What're you doing?" Harriet asked, still trying to get over the thing she had just seen. He told her.

"Well, you go ahead, Fred Mudd, but I'm telling you, nothing and nobody's going to ever get me or my children on a planet. Now, you . . ."

Fred gave a small, almost inaudible sigh of relief. Praise the Lord for a woman with brains, he thought, and with a roar he flung the ship away toward the distant beckoning stars.

Star Kings forever!

XI

he caught up with the long rakish ships of the fleeing hordes of invading Aieun far from the scene of their last crimes. Their weapons useless against the great black hull of his ship, they tried to scatter and thus evade his wrath. It might have worked—some might have escaped in the vast void of space to plunder and raid helpless worlds again another day. It might have worked—if the man who was hunting them had not happened to be a Star King.

One by one, the devices of his ship hunted them down and through all their defenses; awesome weapons vaporized their ships until there was but one rakish, spear-shaped demon-painted ship of the Aieun left. This he stripped of all armament and sent back across the depths of the space between universes with a message:

Raid no more, plunder no more—or the Aieun will be no more.

Then he turned the great black ovoid battleship which was also home and sped back along the route he had come.

Takara was, like most of the worlds that Star Kings liked and occasionally visited, Earth-type and populated with humanoid creatures. Takara, in particular, was extremely Earth-like, even to the point of similar plants and wild animals. Its people, like those of old Earth, were both peaceful and warlike. They were great warriors and great lovers and, at times, great peacemakers.

They had developed a high level of civilization and had explored several near stars before the Star Kings began visiting their beautiful world. And like the people of Earth, in their later years of advanced technology, they had come to reluctantly give up their warlike ways. They had instituted a world government and a system of rights for every man, woman and child.

They worshiped the Star Kings. Those creatures of almost god-like beauty and handsomeness, who lived longer than the oldest Takaran many times over, who traveled Uni-verses as the Takarans traveled the planets of their system, became the gods that they wanted to be like. Children played with toy models of the great black ships of the Star Kings, complete even to the black S superimposed over a black K in a circle of scintillating red upon the bows. The adults wore black tunics and pants with a black T in a circle of scintillating red upon their chests.

For generations the Star Kings had come to peaceful Takara. They gave the people of Takara music from across unthinkable distances, great stories, new clothing styles, and occasionally a bit of information such as how to wipe out a certain plague, insure against dental caries, regenerate lost limbs, raise crop production, and a few other trifling things.

But that was all. They told them not how to rove the star lanes at will, not how to live nearly forever, and gave them not any of the mighty weapons with which they had slaughtered the Masters of the Universe at Star Cross End. So it should not be surprising that in time, that love, that worship for the Star Kings should turn into a kind of jealousy which in turn became hatred. The Star Kings were great, why couldn't the Takarans be so also? Would it hurt the Star Kings to part with some of their great knowledge? The Star Kings were selfish arrogant beings, trying to pass themselves off as gods!

So it is no wonder that when Max Post of the Star King Ship *Monte Carlo* returned to devastated Takara after hunting down the Aieun who had devastated that beautiful planet, and stood at the side of his friend Toth Karman, nobleman of Takara, while the body of his wife was brought out of the ruins of his house, Toth Karman turned on the Star King who had been his friend.

"Friend, you call yourself!" Toth shouted. "My wife lies dead! My sons lie dead! My friends lie dead! My planet lies ruined and wrecked! But the Star Kings! Their ships are untouched. None of them lie dead on the soil of Takara. If you were our friend, why did you not help us? You destroyed the Aieun, but that does not bring my wife, my sons or any of those killed and maimed by the Aieun back.

"*Friend*, why didn't you give us weapons so that we could defend ourselves? Keep your secrets, Star King! We won't upset you by begging for them. But take this message to the rest of you imitation gods! Never set your filthy boots on the soil of Takara again!" With that, Toth Karman spat upon the black tunic of Max, upon the black S superimposed over the black K in a circle of scintillating red. "Go to Hell, Star King! Never set boot on Takara again, or we will try with what little we know to destroy you!"

Max Post sat silent, with shoulders bent, in the control room of the *Monte Carlo*, watching the filtered image of Takara's sun shine through the space window. For long moments he sat thus, thinking. Then he used the C-S and upon Takara there came the voice of a Star King.

"Toth! I give your people the knowledge of the Star Kings. Not all—but enough. No longer shall you depend upon the presence of a Star King for your protection. Take this knowledge and use it. I give it to

you and to the rest of the races of the Universe."

And then he was gone, the *Monte Carlo* warping away from the planet its owner had once loved.

It was a long job, a tough job. Since Star Cross End new races had come into existence like flies about water-melon. There were many races in the Universe and those who were not ready for such knowledge had to be weeded out. But finally the job was done. The races of a virtually unprotected Universe (now that the trillions of Masters of the Universe warships no longer guarded every light-year of its immense boundary), could now defend themselves against the more advanced invaders from without.

At last the circle closed and Max Post came upon Takara. He would never set foot on the planet, but he did stop to see what had been accomplished.

Armed at last with great knowledge and great weapons, the Takarans had built mighty ships to fly the star lanes, but they had run into the Brodinie, a race but a few stars away. Both races, so young, so arrogant, and so proud, both armed with the newly gained knowledge he had given them, had clashed, like Terrans and Shraix before them, a thousand centuries before. How it started he had no way of knowing. Perhaps a disputed planet which both wanted to colonize, perhaps something else. For whatever reason, they had clashed.

Max Post broke his word; he set foot on the dead Takara.

At last he came to the spot where he had last seen Toth, to the very spot where the Takaran had spat upon the emblem of the Star Kings. Post stood and let the tears roll down as the planet's star set below the ruined horizon.

Then Max became aware of someone standing near him. He turned. It was a tall man wearing a black tunic and pants with boots; upon his chest was a black S over a black K in a circle of scintillating red.

"They trusted you and you betrayed them," the Star King said.

"I?" Max asked.

"You. You gave them knowledge and mighty weapons and you expected them to build them, then let them rot. Give a boy a gun and his first thought is to use it. Give a boy a loaded gun and the first person whom he thinks has slighted him will most likely get shot.

"You have, in your grief and hurt over what he said to you, made a great mistake. You must rectify it."

"How?" Max asked, but the fellow Star King was gone, wafted away like a ghost by his ship.

Max swept the dead world, using the oxygen within his lungs since there was so little air left on the planet.

"How?" Max whispered. He could not take the knowledge back nor destroy all the weapons that he now knew must have been built by them. Then his eyes caught part of an old building he had seen many times. It was a building that any civilized world had.

It was a courthouse.

"Of course," he said and was drawn up to the waiting *Monte Carlo*.

It took a long time—much longer than his first mission. He was an old man, white-haired, withered and bent by time, when it was finished. But his debt to Toth and Takara was at last paid that day when every intelligent species of the Universe had a representative at the first session of the Council of Civilization.

XII

in their mighty ships, the Star Kings voyaged to far Universe, everywhere the masters, the rulers, the strong preyed upon the weak. Tired of the slaughter, the waste and the ravage that they saw, the Star Kings at last acted.

Bonny Saunders rang the alarms with her C-S headgear, alerting any of the family who might not have been monitor-ing the Search and Identify probes of the Star King Ship *Marienbad* with their own headgear.

Acting on her own, she brought the massive *Marienbad* to a dead relative stop before the strange object. The kids came flying into the control room, turning effortless cart-wheels with the aid of force beams. Charles plunked himself down in one of the miniature padded chairs that was long recognized as his. Marie continued to hover in the air, looking out of the space window.

Seconds after them, Rory Saunders, in the grip of force beams, came hurtling into the control room to be put gently down in the Command Chair. He checked over the command console, making sure it was ready in case the C-S centers of the ship were knocked out.

The last one to enter was Ella, who came at a more dignified pace since she was seven months pregnant. She eased herself into her seat next to her husband and buckled the broad belts.

"Marie!" Rory shouted. She scooted from the space window where she had had her little nose pressed. Rory slapped her across the rear with a force beam. Wisely she settled down in her chair and buckled the thick safety belts. Charles turned to her and gave her an "I-told-you-so" look. She stuck out her tongue and turned back to the space window.

Bonny had already picked up a dozen shots of the object from different directions with the aid of the little robot scouts she had released.

"It's awfully big," Ella commented. "I don't think I've ever seen anything so big."

"It's a planet. Right, Dad?" Charles put in. The elder Saunders upped the magnification of the space window which gave the largest picture of all the viewscreens.

They examined the object in detail. It looked round, like a ball, from where they were situated, but the robot scouts showed it to be egg shaped. It gleamed with a metallic sheen since its hull had never been painted with nonreflecting and antidetection covering. Whoever had built it must have thought they would have no enemies, but they had been wrong; the great planetoid (Rory could think of no other word for it) was battered and gouged and there were great holes in its flanks where explosive weapons had detonated and ripped out huge chunks.

Rory tried to establish contact. Radio, light and energy waves all went unanswered.

"They're all dead, huh, Dad?" Charles inquired.

"Looks that way. Somebody sure mauled 'em bad. They had a high technology, just to build it, and the probes don't penetrate that metal of theirs too well. I'm going over to take a look." The two younger kids looked eagerly at him. "Okay, come along." These were Star King children; some-day they would be given ships of their own and would have to live or die on their own. They were not to be pampered. "Bonny, you stay here and help your mother conn the ship."

"Oh, Dad," she said. "Do I have to?"

"Rory, I could handle the ship by myself," Ella said. Rory sighed. The kids were whirling around his head.

"Charles! Marie!" he shouted and they darted out of the control room screaming with excitement.

"Everybody goes." He looked at his wife. "Including you, Fatso."

She looked down at her enlarged stomach and swatted him playfully with a force beam.

"Well, you're the one responsible."

The kids came darting back in, now black and silver in their skintight personal armor. Marie loosed a jet of oxygen at Charles' rear as they engaged in a dogfight. But Rory won it by shooting them both out of the air and pinning them to the deck with force beams.

"There you stay until we're ready to leave." They kicked and screamed, using their C-S to try and pry themselves loose, but their projected thoughts were continually over-ridden by their father. "Come along, ladies. This way to the latest in fashionable wear for milady."

Robot hands helped them into their suits.

"Why, I look ridiculous," Ella said, looking at herself in a full-length wall mirror. "Who ever heard of a pregnant woman wearing a space suit?"

"At least you're unique," Rory said, and he and Bonny laughed. Ella swatted at him with a force beam

which he easily countered with one of his own.

Light from the distant stars shone upon them weakly as they were carried out into the cold vacuum. Force beams carried them across the interval to the other space vehicle.

Up close, it towered over them, dwarfing them into insignificance. Rory guided them around to one of the breaches in the planetoid's hull. He took a reading again. There was no radioactivity, but that gaping hole had been made by a thermonuclear device. They drifted in, Rory releasing everyone for independent action.

Here and there bits of wreckage hovered, waiting until they touched it and sent it drifting slowly away. They set off deeper into the maze of tangled wreckage, the kids quiet for once. Finally they came to an airtight door. Rory sent a force globe of sterile air over from the *Marienbad* and clapped it against the door in a hemisphere around them. Bonny directed a hand laser and cut through the door.

They stepped through into what they expected to be the air of the planetoid, but there must be other holes in the hull; here was nothing but more vacuum. Behind them beams from the ship sealed the door. There was an eerie glow from still shining emergency lights. Charles pointed and they moved forward to stand over the body of a naked woman— or what little that was left of her body that could still be identified as that of a nude woman. Ella looked away. Charles and Marie crowded close, eyes agog.

"She looks like Bonny," Marie said, rearranging the hair.

"Marie!" Ella cried upon seeing what she was doing.

"She does look like me, Dad." Her father nodded.

"Yes. They were as human as we." He turned up the corridor, reinforcing the weak light with the spot on his helmet.

They plodded on through the carnage. The great planetoid had been attacked and boarded. Everywhere they found bodies of women, men and children, tortured and killed in most horrible ways.

It was a city. That much they learned.

"Imagine it," Rory said as they plodded through the lifeless, looted planetoid. "A city within a hull and drive units. More than ten thousand population and going some-where. It was a great accomplishment, but the poor devils forgot about weapons. Deep space is no place for pacifists. You kids remember that."

They came to the nerve center of the great space going city. It was empty; the captain and crew must have gone to try and repulse the boarders. Charles tried a few switches. Nothing happened.

"Any maps, charts or anything?" Rory asked. "Something that'll tell us where they're from." They looked. They found space charts but none that indicated anything about their origin. "Well, there's nothing else here. Come on, everybody, let's go home." They marched back by a different route, and so, they found it.

It had died with a cluster of the ship's people around it, people it had already killed. Charles and Marie took one look and moved back. Ella stayed with them while Rory and Bonny went for a closer look.

"It took guts to go after something like that with a mere handgun," Bonny said, looking at the clump of bodies. Men and women had finally overcome it, but the price lay as a marker around the creature. Rory walked around the mon-strosity from Hell, examining it.

It was headless, the brain being within the gray, hairless body. The skin was thick; there were scratches here and there where the knives of the men and women around it had tried to cut it. There were four legs projecting from the giant sausage-like body; when erect, the body hung suspended below the double hinged legs like that of a spider. There was a huge mouth ringed with sharpened teeth and stalked eyes. The legs, two feet in diameter, ended in four hands, each with four stubby fingers. The monstrosity was naked, carrying no artifacts, obviously depending upon brute strength.

Everyone was quiet as they returned to their ship and sat in the control room after having let the robots peel the suits from them. Then Rory latched onto the huge space city with a force beam and the *Marienbad* got under way with it in tow. Bonny looked at her father's face.

"You're going after them."

He didn't bother to answer.

They followed the trail of the space city, the atoms of air, the particles of debris that it had left behind it in the trackless voids of space.

And then, far across the galaxy, they found the beacon.

The broadcast was pure hate, directed against the sentient life of the galaxy. They came from outside the galaxy proper, gray hided, hairless creatures that were vaguely reminiscent of spiders. Long bloated cigar bodies hung below the top joint of legs that ended in prehensile four-fingered "hands."

The Marauders!

The broadcast was an epic history, a warning, a telling of crimes and passions. Since time immemorial, they had knifed through the space depths, preying upon the helpless and weak, glorying in the degradation of all that was decent. The most demeaning acts were their source of ex-treme pleasure. The Marauders studied the very souls of the subject races, finding their innermost secrets, the hiding places of the terrors of racial memory.

Once they took a planet of humanoids and cut off the hands and feet of every human upon it, then released swarms of blood-seeking insects from a pestilential world. They danced in the blood as they recorded the screams of terror.

Another time they burned out the eyes of every child on a world, after slaughtering their parents, then hunted down the blind creatures, torturing each captive so that the rest could hear their final drawn-out screams.

They were proud of the designation the other worlds gave them—*The Marauders!* Their race had never met de-feat in fifty thousand years of star-haunting. In the early days they learned the use of wile; later, making use of the captured sciences of their victims, pure strength was sufficient and more delightful.

Countless worlds were scorched into balls of bare glazed rock. All weaker forms of life paid the penalty of that weakness as they died under cold, uncaring stars. The Marauders considered the weak to be created for their perverted pleasures. Even the technologically superior always turned out to have exploitable weaknesses.

Glorying in their own poison, they raged through the Universe, setting their beacons of fear in sectors not yet thoroughly ravaged. And then the Star Kings appeared.

Six months later, the Marauders were gone from the Uni-verse, wiped out without a trace of their former existence. The Star Kings turned to the beacons, wiping away the message of hate and fear and replacing it with one of their own.

"We are the Star Kings! Take heed! Take this message to all who prey upon the weak and unwarlike. We give notice that any intelligent race harmed by another will be avenged!"

"And so," said Corrinus, "the word went forth, across the galaxies. The work never ceased, for there was always a new race, bold and brash in its youth, willing to risk the wrath of the Star Kings for what they considered glory."

"Their work shall be continued," said Guidi.

Both fell silent as the screen began to form a picture.

XIII

at the intersection of five distant, barely visible galaxies, it floated, a huge metal ball, pocked and studded with the nubs and bubbles and housings of mind-staggering defensive weapons.

All approaches to the burnished metal world were protected by units of six heavy fleets of Civilization in three spheres. Ships coming on official business were checked thoroughly—all, that is, except those of the Star Kings; they never submitted to any sort of search of their vessels, and their punishment for those trying to masquerade as Star Kings was known to all the corners of the Universe.

In the heart of the metal ball was an auditorium, sphere shaped, and without gravity. Stranger, still, were the thousands of creatures occupying the tanks around the first half of that immense place. There were the winged and feathered, armor-hidden mammoths with tusks twenty feet long, wispy beings with a mass of less than an ounce even though they were larger than the average humanoid. There were those that were all mouth, or all eyes, or all stomach. Some moved slowly, taking hours to move a few inches within their glass enclosed tanks, while others were nothing but blurs, so fast were their reaction rates.

But if these creatures were strange, then there was no word for the things whose images were visible in the banks upon banks of view screens that lined the curved surface of the other half of that great spherical auditorium; the ones whose environments were so weird that they could not be duplicated or moved with safety, or whose places of habitation were so far away that it was impractical to have a representative there in the flesh.

Taking the two halves of that auditorium, every form of intelligence conceivable by nature, every means of loco-motion, ingesting of food or energy, of seeing or perceiving, of thinking, of natural body covering from hair to steel scales, was represented. There were even humanoids—or, rather, humans, for now it was the Star Kings who were humanoid.

Off to one side, apart from the thousands of tanks and not amidst the rows of viewscreens or among the other humanoids and the small area reserved for visitors who were responsible for their own gravity, atmosphere, temperature and pressure, stood a lone humanoid, dressed in black tunic, with an emblem of black and scintillating red upon his breast.

Star King Allen Drake of the S.K.S. *Babylon* looked at the formidable gathering of representatives of the Council of Civilization and smiled. It was almost a taunting smile, a challenge to the humanoid group that it was directed at. Let them do their worst!

The walls were a slate gray, a color that had been arrived at as the least annoying to the majority of light visual races. It was on one of those gray wall sections—protruding so that all could see it, that the chairman's box was located. The chairman, a humanoid who was Star King to nine decimal places externally, pressed the red button at his fingertips.

Like Allen Drake, he was not in a tank nor did he carry a small atmosphere supply. Clustered around the chairman were scores of humanoids—the real power and brains of Civilization. All of the creatures present ceased minor activities and gave their full attention to the chairman of the Council of Civilization.

The chairman stood, uncoiling his six feet of rock-hard muscled body. His long wavy blond hair glistened despite the indirect lighting. Even by Star King standards he was handsome. On his chest he wore the insignia of an Admiral of the space forces of Civilization. His blue tunicked uniform rivaled that of Drake himself for simplicity.

Drake now felt all eyes fall upon him, but he felt no fear or worry; only a sense of letdown, and a little anger. He returned the stares of the arrogant and righteous humanoids around him.

Even as the chairman of the Council of Civilization began to speak there were occurring events that would have important bearing upon what he was saying. . . .

It was a frozen planet, far from its red dwarf parent sun. But the cold didn't bother its visitors, for they were far below the frozen atmosphere that now formed the planet's surface.

The planet and its sun were situated in an extremely remote region of the Prime Universe; it was depressing for an inner system inhabitant to stand on that bleak landscape and see only a handful of faint stars. But the creatures below the harsh-climated planet's crust had chosen it for exactly the reason that it was so isolated. Here, far away from snoop-ing eyes and efficient electronic devices, they could plot and carry out their schemes of vengeance unnoticed.

They relied not upon distance and isolation alone to shield them. Their base was hundreds of miles beneath rock and frozen atmosphere. And to that natural shield they had added a host of scientific masking devices. There the Lizoids talked openly and freely.

It was a large, cavernous room, well lit and well heated. About the plastic green oval table there

squatted eight massive, slate gray Lizoids, their huge tails jutting straight out behind them like the markings on a clock face.

Cromvox, their leader, was the largest and oldest. He signaled to one of those around the oval green table, acknowledging what had been said. The signaled one had just arrived on the planet and had just given a report of his finished mission.

"So," said Cromvox to the Committee. "All is ready. The Plan conceived nearly a hundred Star King years ago is near completion. Field Section reports the energy neutralizer is in place and that the Goog have begun their space mi-gration."

"Science Section reports that the genetic manipulation of the Goog—their abhorrence of humanoids—is still breeding true," said another.

"Intelligence reports the *Virgin Isles* and the *Arabia* shall both pass the planet Cedir. The representatives whose minds we altered have gone undetected, and they are pressing for the policies that we desire. It is reported that the ideas have met with such ready agreement by the humanoids of Civilization that even the knowledge of our tampering would not change or stop the passing of our desired policies." He gloated.

"And Intelligence reports that Cedir will do its part. There is nothing more to do now but wait and watch—watch a minor planet whose destruction will mean the end of the Star Kings!"

There was Civilization.

The Star Kings, after breaking the Masters of the Uni-verse at Star Cross End, had protected and watched over the myriad new races that suddenly began to spring up. In time, many of those races reached adulthood, and created their own mighty civilizations. They spanned the stars. And like all intelligent races, they had great wars and many entire races were wiped out.

Aloof for a time, the Star Kings finally decided to take a hand. Although the young races had advanced greatly, they were nowhere near the ultra science of the Star Kings. The Star Kings gave them the weapons and benefits of their far superior technology, helping the many races of the Uni-verse to form a thing that became, in time, Civilization.

And in time Civilization came to rule over all the beings of the Prime Universe—except the Star Kings.

As Jine Adwen of the First Institute of Science and Learning of the planet Cedir walked with his red-haired wife in the rooftop gardens of the Institute's Student Hall, his role in the coming events was already determined.

Cedir was a peaceful world, a world of bright sunshine, beautiful flowers and sparkling rivers. Its people had long ago risen out of the dark webs of ignorance and barbarism. Their last war had taken place over two centuries before and the weapons of destruction lived on only as curious objects in the Institute's museum.

The people of Cedir had since devoted their time to the pursuit of scientific accomplishments and the enrichment of each individual's life. Indeed, it could be said without a doubt that Cedir and its people were the happiest planet and people in the Prime Universe. Exploitation, killing, rape, genocide, torture were words only in their unabridged dictionaries.

To those interested in such things Jine and his wife were .992 similar in appearance to the Star Kings. They held hands, for they were in love and it was spring, and all the things of nature were in bloom about them in the garden.

"Jine!" she cried, pointing to the sky. "Look!" Others on the roof garden stopped and looked. Jine, six feet three with coal black hair, blue eyes, an athlete's build and amorous thoughts about his stunningly attractive wife, was slow in looking up. By the time he did so, a great black thing had eclipsed the sun. Recognition was instant. Cedir had carried out the usual deep space probes and exploration flights, although there had not been much ambition in that field. Cedir and its people would now pay for their shortcomings.

The mighty ship moved on but another night-black craft, fully as massive, took its place. Jine could see them now, a mighty fleet of nonreflecting monsters. Then, as Jine and all Cedir watched, a tremendous voice began to speak.

"We are the Goog. This that you see before you is the vanguard of the Great Migratory Horde. We are here to prepare you as a suitable resting place for the main horde."

Then, as those upon the roof garden and others in the city watched, a great white beam flashed down upon a cluster of buildings. They flared and melted into a pile of molten slag.

It was only the beginning. One by one, the great ships landed and dropped their massive ramps with loud

clangs. Out of the dark interiors, waving mandibles and hand lasers, came thousands of towering misshapen ant-like creatures. Their fat, thick, overripe bodies hurtled down the ramps and after any Cedirian in sight.

Then out of the tops of the huge craft came swarms of winged Goog. From the roof garden Jine and his wife could see what was happening below in the streets; a blood orgy was in process. Cedirians were caught, arms, legs, hands burned away. A fire had been built and screaming Cedirians were thrust into the flames, held there for a moment, removed with their hair afire and thrust in once again. The Goog continued this game until their victims were dead. Jine saw a Goog grab a Cedirian child and take a bite. It kept taking bites until the child was gone and it turned to the unconscious mother.

"Inside!" shouted Jine as he saw some of the swarming hordes head for them. The people upon the roof garden hurried toward the doors. A stark white column stabbed ahead of them, cutting into the stone and steel, cutting the hundreds upon the roof garden off from escape.

Men and women screamed and died as the bloated shapes dropped down among them. One Goog landed on Jine's wife. Jine flung himself upon the creature, gouging at a multi-faceted eye. Something clubbed Jine and he fell. Through a fog, he saw Leara, his wife, sprinkled with a white powder from a rubber bag at the Goog's side and set afire. Jine screamed and tried to rise.

That was all he remembered of that day.

A man can be wounded so deeply that he wants only to die. That was Jine. First aid crews found him upon the roof garden and, although he was not badly hurt, it was some days in Cedir's leading hospital before he no longer lingered on Death's sharp edge. But Cedir could not afford to lose him. Jine was a brilliant man. If Cedir was to survive, his brain would be needed. He knew this.

Jine rallied, and in his lust for revenge worked many days around the clock, kept going by artificial stimulants. It had been a long time since the last weapon upon Cedir had been made, but the know-how had never been absent. Cedir prepared itself for war.

When the main Migratory Horde arrived, Cedir was ready—or so they thought.

The carnage to be visited upon Cedir that day is too sickening to be recounted. The Cedirians had encountered only lasers and other minor weapons with the Advance Guard of the Goog. Now met with stiff resistance, the Goog turned all their weapons loose.

Not one city remained standing, not one being of Cedir escaped the horrors of that two week visitation of the main Migratory Horde.

At last the Goog moved on, but not before telling the humbled people of Cedir that they would have to endure a visitation from the Rear Guard.

Cedir was a broken planet. It had been trampled, used, shamed. With lifeless eyes, they awaited the Rear Guard. But one man, his legs gone, refused to surrender. It would have been better if he had, but he did not. He rallied all Cedir. For the first time in ages, blood lust burned in the hearts of the Cedirians. They worked as they had never worked before.

They had learned from the visitation of the main Horde and they put that knowledge to work with their own vast learning and intelligence capabilities. So, when the Rear Guard was due to arrive, Cedir boasted planetary and system defenses unlike anything seen in the Prime Universe since the Star Kings faced those of the Masters of the Universe at Star Cross End.

Jine, in the newly constructed Command Room deep within the heart of Cedir, watched all the dials, all the screens. Reports from Cedir's new space fleet poured in re-assuringly. The massed batteries on the system's planets and satellites stood silent and ready. Orbital space forts ringed Cedir, ready to pour a torrential rain of energy into the Goog.

A massive night-black shape appeared on the screens before Jine. Sirens howled, lights blinked crazily. Jine pressed the studs, yelled orders, spun dials. The massed might of an angry people poured out upon the ship and engulfed it. But as the ship vaporized, there was a burst of energy.

If he had known what that burst meant, there might have been a way for him to save Cedir; but he did not. So the burst of energy went on its way across hundreds and thousands of light-years, until it was picked up by someone who translated it:

star king ship arabia attacked and destroyed coordinates 669-287-8964 no survivors.

Sam Drake of the *Virgin Isles* snarled, his face turned an ashen white. His fist tore into a bulkhead, denting it. Then the *Virgin Isles* sprang the intervening gulfs in less than milli-microseconds.

The avenging might of Cedir confronted htm and opened up on him. Another Star King might have looked first, might have wanted to know why the *Arabia* was attacked and destroyed, but the Masters' Intelligence had picked the right man. Drake asked nothing, sought no answers. He merely unleashed the awesome, stupendous might of the *Virgin Isles*.

He smashed the energy neutralizer, which proved impotent against his ship. Not once did it occur to him that it might not belong to the people of Cedir.

One by one he destroyed the planets of the system, saving Cedir for last. Then slowly, methodically, Sam Drake, whose name would be the curse of Civilization, hammered and burned and pounded until Cedir was a lifeless, crusted ball of glowing slag.

Allen Drake had just discovered the mind tampering of those few who had started the proceedings to outlaw the Star Kings, when the Death Call of the *Arabia* was relayed to him by the *Babylon*. And suddenly, because he knew of Cedir and the harmless nature of its people, he was able to extrapolate the course of coming events.

The Star Kings could not be outlawed—unless they were first discredited.

Before the eyes of the members of the Council of Civilization, Allen Drake disappeared, leaving only a thunderclap of in-rushing air where his form had been.

At the speed of warp, almost in an eye blink, the *Babylon* pulled into orbit about Cedir—too late.

Allen, his brother's thought came to him. *They killed her. But their kind will never kill again.*

Allen Drake, aboard the *Babylon*, stared in cold horror at the smoking ruin of Cedir.

It was too late now, he knew. All would agree that the Star Kings were too powerful to remain beyond the power and reach of Civilization. Too powerful—and too irresponsible. And the Star Kings would not fight against Civilization; they loved the young races too much. But neither could the Star Kings bend to the wishes of the few of Civilization who wished to bring them down.

But, thought Allen Drake, there was one way that trouble might yet be avoided. And his brother had to be punished. There was a way to show the people of Civilization that the Star Kings were not irresponsible.

Allen Drake knew that way.

My brother, beamed Allen, *let me come aboard and be with you in your hour of grief.* He brought his ship hull to hull with his brother's.

The shields and screens of the *Virgin Isles* lifted.

There were tears in the eyes of Allen Drake as he poured death into the unprotected side of his brother's ship.

The word spread fast. And the Council of Civilization acted even faster. The death of Sam Drake appeased the axemen not one bit.

The Star Kings were outlawed, ordered to turn their mighty ships and settle down upon the planets of Civilization, and to obey all the rules and regulations of Civilization.

In the heart of the frozen planet of the lonely red dwarf star, a group of Lizoids celebrated. It had taken a long time, but their ancestors had at last been avenged.

But then, in the midst of their celebrating, a ball of burning flame appeared in the room. Before the Masters of the Universe were burned to charred hulks, they heard five words from the thin air:

"For Cedir—and my brother!"

"They outlawed them," said Guidi. "But can you outlaw the wind, the rain, the laws of nature? The Star Kings turned their backs on Civilization and ignored it. They went where they pleased, when they pleased. And they found they were welcome. ..."

XIV

one of virh's deep space Research and Observatory Labs detected the night-black warship of the space deeps. Its now legendary insignia was instantly recognized and its presence beamed back to the Virh home planet and the nearest Space Force Base of Civilization.

The Copogus Base reply was quick in coming. That particular ship was being shadowed; such was a sign of the times. Ever since the infamous Drake had gone berserk and blasted an innocent world into oblivion, Civilization had grown antagonistic toward the Star Kings. Forgotten were the Masters of the Universe, those devilish monstrosities who had so callously and casually destroyed all intelligent life until a hundred generations later the descendants of Sol III, after overcoming a technological gap of a million billion years, met them in the Battle of Star Cross End and broke them forever.

Forgotten were the Star Kings who had watched over the young races that had sprung up when instant death no longer hovered over them in the form of battle cruisers of the Masters of the Universe.

Forgotten, too, were they who had judged the myriad in-telligent species to be ready and had helped them form the thing that they now called Civilization, giving them weapons and knowledge to govern and police themselves.

Now each of their mighty starships was shadowed by a battle fortress of Civilization—although Civilization was aware that any Star King could outrun his shadow.

It was no ship of a usurper of that legendary insignia that had come to Virh, but an actual ship of the greatest warriors in all the Universe—survivors of a world long destroyed, who called no planet home, but went where they pleased when they pleased.

The venerable First Elder of Virh smiled down at his blond-haired grandson who would some day take his place as leader of the Virh and confessed.

"I, too, wonder why one comes to our modest world. All here are happy, healthy, and well fed. Injustice, oppression and warfare have undarkened our portals for two hundred Star King years. Nor is our science unusually advanced; we have no super weapons with which they can stock their armories."

"They are Virhoid—perhaps he comes to marry one of our women," posed little Cheva, still but a few years from his mother's womb.

The Elder laughed softly; more a chuckle than a laugh. "Perhaps, and perhaps in his endless journeys he has seen Virhoid women of such great beauty as to make ours seem drab by comparison."

Then someone spoke behind them: "You underestimate the beauty of your women, First Elder. I find them quite beautiful and extremely graceful."

Elder and boy whirled. Standing in front of the closed double doors leading from the study to the sunlit garden was a strange black-haired and moustached young man, of immense but sleek proportions. He had no visible weapons, but everything about him said warrior.

He wore black military tunic and boots. The insignia upon his tunic betrayed who he was. That black S superimposed over a black K in a circle of scintillating red was worn only by one people. It explained how he had appeared out of nowhere. It was well known that the Star Kings were but a step from being gods.

He introduced himself: "Star King Jones of the starship *Nevada*."

And so they met the Star King and learned of his quest.

"So you seek to study us, to read our books, to know our history and ways. Why? And why not do it from a thousand light-years from here, as I understand you are capable of doing—unless the prowess of your scientific achievements has been overestimated."

Jones of the *Nevada* smiled in answer to the Elder's question.

"I could *study* you from afar, but I am not a sociologist. I am a bard, poet, dramatist—whatever you wish to call me. I seek immortality. Have you ever heard of any Star King as an individual—except for Drake?"

"I wish to go down in history as more than just another member of a nomad band of warrior scientists. I seek to write a story; a story of such greatness that every intelligent being shall not have lived until he or she or it has read it. Perhaps that story is here on the pages of your history books, in the hearts and souls of your people living now, or perhaps the combination of sights, sounds, smells, customs, accents, gait or sky hue will bring it to me. I know not where or when or how I shall find the inspiration for such a story, so I come in person to experience everything through my own senses.

"Have I your permission to make such a quest?"

The Elder said, "Yes."

All Virh watched Jones of the *Nevada* as he searched; wherever he went, there were throngs. Whatever he did, he did amidst a crowd. He told stories of such wondrous beauty that all would sit entranced for hours. He left copies of books written by the greatest writers of the Universe, and took copies of Virh's best, assuring them of a life far beyond what their authors could have reasonably expected, but he did not find the great story that would make his name immortal.

He basked in Virh's sun, bathed in its waters, roamed its mountains and fields. He threw its snowballs and played the games of the people of Virh. He drank their liquors and ate their foods. He wore their clothes, heard and laughed at their jokes, and when he was tired, Jones of the *Nevada* slept in their beds.

He learned of Virh's mightiest warriors and most famous men. Tears came to the eyes of Jones of the *Nevada* as he learned of Virh's bloody rise to civilization.

He sighed as he listened to the tales of great lovers who had been destined for each other. He heard Virh music and songs and reciprocated with songs he remembered from other worlds or of his own people, such as the *Anthem of the United Stars*.

He breathed their perfumes, attended their houses of worship, viewed their entertainment, thrilled to Virh's competitive events, and watched silently as they helped a loved one take the last sleep.

All too soon, he was finished. Standing at one of the *Nevada's* massive ramps, surrounded by huge adoring crowds, he bade farewell to all Virh and departed, for some other world.

The Elder and Cheva watched his mighty night-black ship disappear into the golden purple evening sky.

"I liked him, Elder. I wish he could have found what he was looking for."

The Elder smiled, tousled Cheva's blond curls.

"But he did, little Cheva, and he shall continue to. He will visit world after world in his quest, and long after the Great One has stilled his heart forever, beings of all kinds shall always remember Jones of the *Nevada*, the Star King who searched for the greatest story."

"Too bad he is dead," said Guidi. Corindus roused himself from his posture of deep thinking.

"Yes. Too bad they are all dead."

"I didn't mean exactly that. I meant that he spent his life looking for the great story to write, and now when it is here, he is dead."

"What story?" Corindus asked.

"The Life and Death of the Star Kings. From the First to the Last. The saga of the greatest space fighters of all time!"

Corindus motioned him to silence. Once more a picture began to form on the screen. Corindus refocused his battery of eyes. . . .

XV

the young man read his instruments. He stood about six feet tall, with black hair and eyes. He was lean and stringy, with fine, long-boned hands that handled the ship's console with the ease of long practice. The girl at his side was not much shorter, giving up only a few inches. Like him she was black-haired and black-eyed. While there was little excess weight on her, she was not in any way skinny and had quite a remarkable shape. Both wore tight fitting pressure suits. Their helmets were off, lying in the easily accessible baskets to the left of their padded chairs. He flipped several switches, centering the detected space vehicle on the TV screen between them on the control console.

"Is it one of theirs?" she asked, looking at him. He shrugged.

"Doesn't look like it, but it could be." He reached over and took one of her small delicate hands in his. He squeezed it reassuringly. *Now*, he thought, *I need someone to re-assure me*. He turned back to the console, his eyes going to the weapon section. The missiles were armed and in the firing chambers. The lasers were locked on the as yet un-moving object, along with the craft's six recoilless, armor piercing cannon.

"Better put your helmet on, Chare," he said, not looking away from the space vehicle on the TV screen. When she had, she leaned over, took his out of the basket, slipped it over his head and fastened it. She took over the controls as he checked to make sure the helmet was airtight to the suit.

He guided them closer to the spaceship. He was positive now that it was not a Hodrin warship. It was old and pitted; its once black hull now gleamed here and there with metal showing through. There were no signs of major damage or life. No lights showed. On his instruments, there was no indication of power within the ship.

He rechecked and realigned his detectors and sensors. Again he evaluated the data. And again he arrived at the conclusion: the ship was without power. He maneuvered closer with confidence.

The hull of the ship showed up clearly. It was ancient. Time and space had raked the hull. The metal itself was old and worn out. Now he began to debate with him-self. His mission was to find help somewhere in the galaxy. His planet, Sasdec, had been invaded and overrun by space raiders some time ago. They had stayed on to make it a subject world.

But his people had learned much while bowing and cringing before the conquerors and new rulers. They had learned to make weapons and ships like those of the Hodrin, but handweapons were no good for fighting a space borne enemy who can stand off from a planet and bombard it with hydrogen, atomic and oxygen bombs until submission is complete. And there was no way to build large space warcraft while the planet was dominated and every activity suspect.

Small ships, like the *Sasdec*, which he now commanded with his wife, could be built with a maximum of secrecy. But even a horde of such small ships could not overcome the might of the huge Hodrin warships with their thick hull plates and layer after layer of electronic and energy shields.

It was his mission to find an ally to aid them. The Hodrin had told tales of a teeming galaxy with weak races and strong races. And about some far off creatures called Star Kings who were self-styled peacemakers.

Should he endanger his mission to examine a craft that was certainly dead and might well be booby-trapped? But the ancient craft had a strange fascination. It must have drifted through the dark lonely depths for hundreds—perhaps thousands of years! What wonders or great stories might lie within?

In the end, his curiosity prevailed.

Cold! Cold! So cold! He shivered, and started to wrap his arms around himself, but they refused to obey.

Helen! he screamed, and sat up, his bones creaking as though rusty from long disuse. Pain shot up to his brain from his joints. The scream was not a scream, but a feeble dry croak. Gradually he became aware of someone support-ing him and feeding him with some sort of nipples bottle. The taste was unfamiliar, but he liked it and sucked greedily. He had not eaten in a long time. A very long time.

One of his hands came into his still unclear field of vision and he saw that it was but a claw of bones with a leather-like covering that might have been skin. His memory was unclear. *Helen*, he tried to call, but his throat still refused to function correctly. He croaked. They had removed the nipples bottle as he began to open his mouth. He croaked again. He thought, *It must be Helen who is helping me. It must be she who is dressed in a pressure suit and feeding me*. With that thought, he lay down and went to sleep.

He sat up. There was a hum and throb of powerful engines. He opened his eyes and gaped. Where was the *War Carnation*? Where was Helen? His eyes came to rest on the two young people sitting side by side

before a control console.

"Where's Helen?" he asked as the young girl got up and came back toward him. She smiled, not understanding his words.

It was several weeks before he could converse with them. The ship was plunging through space at a respectable speed. All detection instruments were full out, so there was no need for them to baby the console. They joined the emaciated, leather-skinned old man who sat sipping a hot cup of *corak*.

"So, she is dead," he said, as if closing the cover of a good book. "I loved you, Helen," he whispered, and the two youths cast down their eyes to avoid seeing his grief. "And the *War Carnation*?" he asked huskily.

"We left it there with her. We did not know if there was anything you might want to do with her. She will remain, and someday perhaps your people will come and bury her."

"My people?" he asked. "I have no people. They are gone. I am the last. The last," he repeated and stared into the cup of *corak*.

"But your planet. Surely your people are still there. Judging from the age of your vehicle and the advancement, you set out long ago. By now, they must be quite far technologically."

He shook his head.

"My people are gone. They were butchered. Slaughtered. We set out to avenge them. They burned our world to a cinder. Not one man, woman or child survived—only a small group out in space. We set out to avenge our people, but I am all that's left. They hunted us down like animals. Every day another of our ships would be found and destroyed. Then they came close to us. We depowered the ship and went into suspended animation to escape. We might as well have died fighting." But then he looked up at them.

"Who are you? You're human. Are you of us? Have you ever heard of Earth?" They nodded.

"There are many humanoid races in the Universe, or so the Hodrin have told us. We were not spacefarers when they came, so we have no first-hand knowledge. As far as we know, we evolved upon Sasdec."

"Hodrin," the old man repeated, rolling the name over his tongue. "Have they told you of burning any planets?"

"No," the young man said. "They are not that kind. They loot, raid, torture and pillage. And rape humanoid females. That's their style. From what we gather, they're petty criminals. They have their fun and leave—or so they used to operate. We think they have decided to give up their roving ways. There's a tale they tell whenever they get drunk or careless, of a mighty godlike race that has declared war on all who would take advantage of weak or peaceful races. They are afraid of them. We have heard stories that the Hodrin are being hunted for their crimes. So they are trying to give up their old ways. But not completely. They want slaves and concubines for their fun and pleasure.

"We are seeking those hunters. Perhaps when we find them, we can also help you find the slayers of your planet."

Alarms sounded. Mardec leaped to the console. Chare was in and buckled seconds after he. She slipped on her helmet as he located the contacted object.

"Hodrin cruiser astern!" he cursed. "Coming up fast. We can't even touch their speed." He watched the dials and screens. The old man had come up behind them now. He stood braced against the back of their chairs.

"Strap yourself to a couch," Mardec ordered as Chare slipped on his helmet. "We're going to have to fight." He caressed the rows of firing buttons. It was not as he had planned, but at least some of the Hodrin would pay for their murders of the people of Sasdec.

The ship heeled, coming around in a great circle, the gyros screaming. He removed the dampening rods from the reactor as far as safety would allow. The little ship pulsed with power.

"For Sasdec!" he cried, and loosed the missiles. The little ship, without very much mass to take up the shock, shook and rocked as each left its firing chamber. Others dropped down to take their place and in turn were fired off. The Hodrin cruiser launched interceptors. Little flame tailed needles bored out from the Hodrin cruiser. The *Sasdec's* missiles split up, some accelerating, some decelerating, some boring straight in, others bounding this way and that in random jerks that nevertheless took them at the Hodrin vessel.

Lasers opened up. There were flashes as the *Sasdec's* missiles exploded against the sides of the Hodrin ship—or rather at a space some yards from the ship's hull.

"Antimissile screen," Mardec muttered. "It'd take a lot of luck to penetrate that." They moved head on toward the black hulled enemy vessel. The lasers had ceased. Mardec let the recoilless cannon have their head once they were locked on the Hodrin cruiser. The ship shuddered every time a projectile was hurtled from the cannon. But the shields of the Hodrin ship handled everything with ease. "They are more powerful than we thought," Chare whispered.

Silent in defeat, Mardec nodded.

They let the Hodrin cruiser take them aboard. Huge slabs of metal slid apart in the underside of the cruiser, revealing a large brightly lit chamber. A beam pulled them up within the craft. The slabs slid back, shutting the little ship off from freedom. Mardec pushed the buttons on the weapon section of his console. Nothing happened.

"Somehow they've disarmed us," he said. There came an imperious knock on the rear hatch. Chare looked at him. They both knew what Hodrin soldiers did to Sasdec women in their power. He clasped her frail hands in his. There were tears in his eyes.

"Perhaps, Chare, some day . . ." He let the thought die. "I love you." She kissed him gently. Then she put the tiny pill in her mouth. Seconds later, she was dead.

They went out to meet the Hodrin. The first one allowed Mardec to step to the metal deck before he clubbed him with a rifle stock. Mardec spat out broken teeth and blood. He came off the deck. A dozen guns swung to bear.

The old man leaped. They were caught off guard. He had appeared old and incapable of fast motion. He broke a neck, booted one in the groin, gouged out two eyes, snatched a gun out of startled hands and burned down the Hodrin remaining.

"For the United Stars!" he shouted, and ran for the nearest hatch. He could see startled Hodrin inside a glass partitioned room looking out at him. He burned them down, the years of practice with small arms in the gallery of ships of the United Stars Space Forces coming back.

Mardec burned a way into the main section of the ship. They crashed through together. A dozen Hodrin went down before they could turn from their duties. Alarms rang. Doors began clanging shut. But Mardec merely cut through them with the beam energy gun in his hands. They plunged into a dormitory of Hodrin who had just come off duty. They milled about like fish in a barrel as the two beam guns cut them down.

The old man turned in time to crisp a man who had been sighting behind them. They raced through the dormitory, spraying death left and right. Into the heart of the cruiser they raced, ducking and dodging death from all quarters.

They got the old man with a leg shot. Mardec grabbed him and they hobbled up toward the heart of the warship. How they did it, Mardec could never recall, but they cut down the guards and stormed the cruiser's Bridge. Hodrin died beneath their overheating guns as others came up to take them from the rear. Mardec and the old man cleaned out the Bridge. Then they planted their backs to the great consoles and poured their combined firepower into the Hod-rin trying to reach them. They burned out the very innards of the Hodrin ship, until they stood at the edge of a great chasm. Across from them, at the opposite side, Hodrin blazed away with weapons of their own.

"They're afraid of triggering their own destruction," the old man said, keeping the gun trigger pressed down. "Other-wise they could have finished us long ago." He dashed to a power console. Mardec followed. They were out of sight of the Hodrin. The old man studied the consoles of communication and power.

"I think I can do it," he said. He set the dials and switches. "Flip this button when I give the word."

"But . . ." Mardec started. The old man had already hobbled away. He sent a spray of energy toward the creep-ing Hodrin, jumped to the consoles and swept them quickly with his eyes. He sent a burst of energy at the advancing Hodrin. He depressed buttons while Mardec took over the task of pinning the Hodrin down.

"Now!" the old man shouted, pulling a lever. Mardec turned and did as he had been told. When he turned back, he saw the old man crumbling to the deck, cut in two by energy beams.

Mardec flung himself into the chasm, feeling the still operating artificial gravity of the Hodrin cruiser pushing him down. He kept the trigger of the rifle pressed down all the while he was falling to his death.

"Chare!" he cried. "I'm coming." The ship exploded, vaporizing into a flare of energy that spanned galaxies before it became too weak to be read.

He was surprised to get the message. Never had he heard of such a thing happening before. Nevertheless he warped the *Essex* to the point where the *War Carnation* of the United Star Space Forces had sent its Death Call.

And he found the Hodrin that he hunted.

He also found the small ship, the real *War Carnation*. He found the body of the young girl, still so life-like in her suspended animation tank.

He buried her beneath the rocks of Earth.

XVI

multicolored spots of light moved back and forth across the high ceiling, blending and mixing to make a never-static surface of living color. But the people in the ballroom never stopped to notice or bother watching it. Like even the most spectacular works of art, it had become commonplace, un-deserving of even a casual glance, after one has been exposed to it too long. But it was not for that reason that John Holmes of the Star King Ship *Nottingham* also gave no more than a look at the colliding spots of colored light. He had, in his travels of far Universes, seen much greater works of beauty that nature herself had created. In fact, to him, the ceiling of living color was somewhat third-rate.

He looked around the ballroom, at the men and women in their dress suits and gowns. The men carried themselves with a grace and dignity that belied their tights. Holmes had to smile as he looked at some of the knees, thighs and rear-ends that showed beneath the electromagnetically sealed, high collared jackets of the men. Boots of dark brown or black were the rule. Holmes, dressed like them, was not out of style, nor attention gathering, except for his genetically acquired good looks.

The women wore long flowing gowns of a wispy material designed to tease and titillate the male eyes. But again, Holmes found most of them unattractive in comparison with the Star Queens he had known. Perhaps someday when these people had learned to alter genes at will, they would make a race of beautiful people. Standing there he noticed more than a few women casting wistful looks in his direction. Some made their thoughts quite plain. He looked away from them.

This was Otoni III, a major world of the Hert Federation which ruled rather benevolently over a large complex of clusters while trying to extend their rule to the uncivilized warring sections without. He was far from the Universe of Sol—far even from the gaggle of Universes of which Sol Universe was a part. Why he had come here, he could not say, except that he had tired of stars and empty space. He had wanted to look at real faces again, and hear people talk of trivial things. And so he had come here and now the faces were too-real and the talk too-trivial.

Then he saw her.

Somehow the dancing, milling crowds parted for an in-stant—and there she was. Hair like the space depths them-selves, eyes like star fire and lips as ruby as wine, she had a small pointed royal nose and the face of a queen, of a person born to rule over lesser beings. He felt himself drawn across the floor. The dancing crowd swirled about and in front of him, shutting off his view of her. He pushed through but was only halfway across when she came out of nowhere between two couples and glided into his arms. She wore a misty, twinkling gown of sheer fabric that allowed him to see two brown nipple tipped breasts bobbing beneath. For a second he stared, but then they were dancing—floating, soar-ing about the dance floor. The other dancers melted away, moved aside to watch these two so perfect creatures dance the *Roda Waltz* as it had never been danced before.

Women sighed and looked with contempt at their own partners. Men looked with lust and envy, not even wasting time to look at their present partners. On the two danced, every move a masterpiece of perfection. Off in another world, they danced, as if before a host of gods rather than where they actually were.

The ball ended. Hand in hand, he walked her home. And there at the door he kissed this creature, this woman of such beauty that even a Star Queen could not compare, Reluctantly, he bid her good night.

The next day, as planned, they met at one of Otoni III's white sanded beaches with the emerald green sea lapping wetly at their feet. She wore a snow white one-piece net swimsuit. That night they lay beneath the twin moons on the cool sand and made love as restless seagulls wheeled back and forth overhead.

The next day they met high in the frosty mountains, at a ski lodge overlooking a great white valley. They yelled and listened to their echoes coming back from across the silent, wind caressed depths. They swept down the slopes, laughing and playing, to tumble into snowbanks where they lay arm in arm, body to body.

For weeks they adventured, playing and loving over Otoni III, but at last he could feel the restlessness of his kind creeping over him, beginning to spoil the happiness they were having. He cursed the fates that made him a ceaseless nomad. He tried to ignore it, but it was not possible. At last he knew he could no longer stay. The dark, unknown places of the space deeps called to him, commanded him to come.

And so on the last night, he asked her to marry him. He did not tell her that he was not of her Universe. He did not want to turn her against him, or influence her unduly. She might feel that to marry a Star King would be like marrying a god, and a human girl would be a fool to miss such a chance.

So he told her only of how much he loved her. Anything she wanted would be hers. He would see that she never had an unhappy moment.

She refused.

It was like a laser through the heart. But he recovered. He pleaded. He begged. He ranted and he raved

and he demanded, but her answer was always no. She loved him, she explained, but for reasons she could not tell him, she could not marry him—ever.

In the end, she tired of his attempts to question her and left. He hurried after her, but she was gone. Never in his long life had he had such a feeling of hopelessness. He resolved to find her, to win her somehow, to find out the reason she could never marry him.

He commanded the *Nottingham*, hidden in one of the craters of the two moons of Otoni III, to search the planet, to find the woman who had captured his heart.

But she was not to be found. He searched the planet, female by female—there was no sign. Dismayed, he allowed himself to be drawn up to the *Nottingham*. How could she have disappeared? He lifted out of the crater, screens and detection foiling devices on full. Deep in thought and hopelessness, he rounded the moon, not sure of where he was going.

There was a crash that nearly jolted him through the padded chair. He almost rebounded into the featureless con-trol console. Only force beams directed by the C-S head-gear saved him from injury.

The mighty screens and shields of the *Nottingham* flashed up. Awesome energies washed over the *Nottingham*, but the screens and shields held. He switched on view screens to establish who had fired upon him. A form began to merge out of the lines of coalescing color.

"You blind, motherless, fool, can't you see where—" She stopped in mid-sentence. Both looked incredulously at the other, at the black S superimposed over a black K in a circle of scintillating red over the heart, and they both cried. Later they would laugh and tell the story to their children.

They spent their honeymoon exploring the other worlds of the Hert Federation.

XVII

though outlawed by civilization, the Star Kings watched over it, fought its battles ...

It was empty space, the nearest galaxies but pinpoint; of light on the screens of the massive heavy cruiser of Civilization. Captain Boladerius, sitting beside his second-in-command, the silicon being Posy, of Terb IV, watched the instruments carefully on the full board of the command console in front of him. His eyes were blue and human. Boladerius being a Sarin, a people noted for their outwardly amazing similarity to the legendary and outlawed Star Kings; they turned upon Posy's light gray and slightly transparent form.

"What do you make of it?" he asked. He had never heard of such. Posy shook his head.

"Some sort of disturbance in the ether. I don't like it. We'd better call Civilization."

Boladerius started to speak into the radio, but before he could get out even one word in that fantastically fast code, the heavy cruiser was engulfed in a gray blanket of —*something*. His reaction was fast, almost instantaneous. The weaponry of the ship was unleashed. Mighty generators roared and screamed.

"What's happening?" he inquired of Science Section. Detections had already given readings of an impenetrable sphere of unknown material enclosing them. He listened to the hurried explanation of the S Section head. "Energy of some type, eh?" Boladerius' hands played back and forth over the command console. "More power! Missiles, stand by. Launch!" Boladerius read his instruments. Nothing! His ship was pouring a flood of energy and destructive projectiles at the enclosing sphere, but there was no indication that any of it was having any effect. It was as if they were passing through without reacting upon the gray substance.

"At three, full emergency speed. One, two, *three!*" The great engines roared, the ship trembled, but as far as he could tell, they had not moved an inch.

"All Hands, stand by to Warp. Warp Section, give it everything available. We don't know if we're in the same position as when this thing first got us, so forget about coordinates.

"Just get us out of here!"

The Warp Section officer's voice came through the ship. "Stand by to Warp. Prepare for Warp." Then his voice came in a scream: "*Warp!*" The ship trembled and bucked.

"Warp!" Vibrations ran through the mighty ship's hull. Bulkheads ripped and groaned.

"WARP!" cried the Warp Section officer. Again the heavy cruiser of Civilization sought to tear itself from the spot that it now existed in.

The officer shrieked. Boladerius was thrown against his straps. The ship heaved and shuddered. He felt a wave of heat, and then smoke was rapidly filling the Bridge.

"Warp Section exploded . . . Break out the equipment the— Flames in ... Ship hulled sections six through nine ..." came the damage reports.

Boladerius looked at Posy, who had remained silent throughout. He now shook his head.

"Cut engines. All weapons cease fir—" A great savage wind swept through the ship, blinding everyone. It was the last he remembered.

Slowly Boladerius came back to consciousness. It was as if he had merely taken a nap and was now waking up. He opened his eyes and found that he was no longer aboard the *Devasti*, but in a large room, standing before a huge dais. He had to crane his neck to see the strange creature seated behind it and who was looking down at him. It was a plain room, and somehow Boladerius got the feeling that it was an arena of sorts. There was nothing to back up the feeling, but it persisted.

"Who are you? Where is my crew and my ship?"

The creature, whom he judged to be at least eight feet tall, pointed to a featureless gray wall on Boladerius' right. He turned to look. A picture formed and then as he watched, he saw his ship ripped apart, his crew plucked out and de-positated within a glowing red globe that was obviously a spacecraft of some sort. Then, before his eyes, his crew was pitted, one by one, against monstrosities such as he had only seen in his worst nightmares. One by one his crew was devoured, dissolved, torn apart and slain. The last was Posy himself, fighting valiantly to the end.

"You—!" Boladerius cried and leaped for the dais. In midair something invisible grabbed him and held him there suspended. Now, looking straight at the thing that had captured him, he saw that he had been deceived. At first, he had thought it humanoid like himself, nearly identical to the Star Kings, but he saw that the creature shimmered and changed slowly about the edges.

"Yes, Captain Boladerius of the Civilization heavy cruiser *Devasti*, I am not what I seem. I have many shapes and many sizes, and inhabit many dimensions and levels of Existence. Having recently tired of

happenings where we have been, we decided to force an entry into this alien dimension. We came slowly for we knew not what we might encounter. But it turns out that our caution was wasted. We can detect nothing in this dimension that we need fear. I have already sent for others of my kind, that we might divide this vast new territory between ourselves and dominate it and make its inhabitants perform for us."

"Perform?" interrupted Boladerius; the death of his crew was still too big a thing for him to accept. He was dreaming and had to wait until it was time to awaken.

"Perform! Die! Suffer! It is all the same to us. You lower forms of life are so amusing when you know that pain and death are near. Already your crew has performed for us and now it is your turn, Captain!"

There was a roar, and then Boladerius was fighting for his life against a ten foot tall clawed and fanged shaggy haired beast of unrecognizable origin. Boladerius jumped back and went into the All Points Defense, his hands open and straight in the deadly fashion of the unarmed combat training of Civilization. Adrenalin cascaded into his veins.

The beast came out of its crouch with a lightning-like leap that carried across the room. It was fast, but not as fast as peak-conditioned Boladerius. He met it in midair and his hands flashed in arcs too fast for a normal human-oid's eyes to follow.

He stepped over the dead carcass with its broken neck and swung around to look at his captor. Behind the dais, upon the walls, a score of shimmering not-men things now watched.

"Well done, Captain. You are indeed a worthy performer!"

Boladerius judged the distance between the dais and himself. He forced himself to relax; it was too far. He heard a slide opened behind him. Boladerius turned in time to see a small mountain of thumb-sized insects start through it toward him. He started toward the dais. Again something restrained him, holding him to the spot.

"Come, Captain, let us see how your defense works." Boladerius struggled. The white, slug-like mass of insects moved closer, crawling on hundreds of hairy legs. He could move freely within a three foot circle, but no farther.

Boladerius watched the mass crawl within a foot.

"Let me . . ." Then they were all over him, biting and secreting a burning acid that apparently helped their digestion of him. Boladerius crushed them underfoot and beat them off with his hands, but more kept crawling out of the open door. Soon he was on his knees, and then his hands. They swarmed over him, covering his eyes, nose and mouth, eating and burning his flesh away.

"You perform well!" the creature said.

An insect-covered head raised itself from the floor and a half eaten arm lifted in defiance.

"Star Kings! Star Kings!" Boladerius cried.

The shimmering being laughed. "Ah, the Star Kings! Watch, Performer, creature of lower orders! Watch your Star Kings die!" A viewscreen appeared in the bottom of the dais, and pictured there was a tremendous night-black warship with a black S superimposed over a black K in a circle of scintillating red upon the bow. "They come to investigate! Watch, Performer! Watch!" There descended upon the great ship, a rain, a hail of white rays. The mighty ship's shields and screens went down and the ship flared into nothingness.

But the brilliant flare caught the shimmering being by surprise. It jumped slightly. Boladerius laughed. His head fell slowly to the floor where the bugs resumed their fever-ish feeding, but Boladerius laughed. He knew that flare; now he and his men would be avenged. Civilization would not fall prey to these monstrous creatures, for that flare was the Death Call of a ship of the Star Kings. Even as he died he knew that it was being received. Even as the last spark of life within him faded, he knew mighty ships were flashing and warping to the scene of the Shern breakthrough.

Star King Carruthers of the Star King Ship *Valley Forge* was spending a pleasant holiday on the humanoid populated planet Valwo II incognito when the Death Call of the *Hamburg* was picked up by his ship and relayed via the headgear to him. In mid-stroke he was picked from the water and brought through the atmosphere to meet the *Valley Forge*. An invisible blanket of force protected him from the heat of his passage and the cold of space.

He landed in the airlock and immediately robot hands stripped the still-wet suit from his lean and tanned body and clad him in black. Already the ship was under way, traveling slowly while he was establishing contact with Star King ships in the neighborhood—they had learned from the Drake incident.

Hamburg was investigating sub-ether disturbances, came the news. Then the measurements of the energy were re-leased with a barrage of other information that had been gathered and deducted. Carruthers' mind raced over the facts while force beams jetted him to the control room. While it was not

necessary for him to be physically present in the control room, it nevertheless made him feel better to be there where he could take over manually if the C-S center of the ship was damaged or destroyed.

Frances, his beautiful brown-haired wife, kissed him as he dropped down in the control room. He went to the command chair and buckled himself in place. His wife had already begun hooking in the incoming signals. He looked up and saw a hundred male and female faces of all racial types and nationalities looking back at him. He signaled *Ready*.

A gray bearded man toward the center of the massed squares of pictured faces, spoke. "Davies of the *Honduras*." He gave his I.Q. and S.Q. "I believe I'm qualified to lead this discussion." There were no written laws or rules that any Star King had to obey. They had found it a survival help if they cooperated, but each was still law and ruler unto him or herself. All agreed he was qualified.

Via C-S, he flashed all information gathered so that everyone could be sure they had everything that was known. Carruthers, like the others, had most of it. But the destruction of a heavy cruiser of Civilization was news to him. Faces turned grim. You could destroy a ship of the Star Kings, but you asked for trouble if you harmed one of the ships of the mighty governing structure that the Star Kings had helped create and still watched over. Weapons were rechecked and instruments reread. Additional layers of protective hull shielding were put on. Engines were enlarged and stars drained of their energy. A hundred awesome machines of destruction were ready to go.

"We cannot rush in," Carruthers warned. Again he ran down the data. "I believe we are up against a force from outside this dimension or level of Existence. We have had no experience with such a force. I suggest we proceed with caution and employ the overkill." They agreed. It would be folly to rush in as had the *Hamburg*.

Davies gave orders. "We shall take as many ships as we can, lock them under a mutual neutralizer shield and ram those monsters back wherever they came from. We shall create one great globe of protective radiation."

The place was known as Samedi on the charts of the ships of Civilization. It was there, at the edge of that vast emptiness between galaxies, that the hundred ships of the Star Kings warped in. They formed a hollow globe. Then the hundred mighty ships began to move toward the disturbance in the sub-ether. Toward the red glowing globes of the invaders.

Carruthers, his wife strapped in at his side, concentrated on the dials and pictures coming through the C-S. His wife likewise did, ready to take over if anything happened to him. About him Carruthers felt the great armada. Not since Star Cross End had there been such an array of Star King power.

Shern! Here we come!

Needles began to twitch. The neutralizer and energy shields began to pick up heavy stuff. He switched in more power to the shields at the same time—having been informed via C-S—as the others did. The needles settled back down.

Carruthers watched the stars sweep past in the huge space window before him as the great armada picked up speed. Onward the hundred starships raced down the slot formed by two distant galaxies. Needles twitched and settled down again as the last reserves of power were thrown into the immense shield protecting the silent, relentless globe of night-black starships.

Then, at ultra magnification, Carruthers saw the glowing red globes of the Shern. The word was passed: "Enemy sighted." Speed up a notch. The avenging horde of Star Kings hurtled down the slot straight at the glowing globes and the disturbance in the sub-ether where dimensions crossed.

Full Speed! The Star Kings charged in—into a torrent of deadly energy and not-energy.

Carruthers watched his dials. They were near peak. Closer now, they could see the mind-rending markings of other dimension writing on the hulls of the glowing Shern vessels.

Engines screamed and howled. A barrage of energy such as no creature of the Star Kings' level of Existence had ever seen was thrown at their shields. Needles threatened to go over the mark, to break, but there was no thought of turning back. A heavy cruiser of Civilization had been destroyed. The Star Kings wanted blood!

Carruthers sweated. Where in Hell were the Shern getting such power? But he did not devote much time to such thoughts. The Star Kings were going in. Nothing would stop them.

Come Shern! Answer to the Star Kings!

Up to the very muzzles of the Shern craft, through Hell and worse than Hell, the Star Kings drove, a globe of avenging force.

A little closer, thought Carruthers, and then we'll blow the Shern so far Universes will be born, live and die before any of their kind ever come back!

"That ship!" his wife cried.

"Hadley—*Soviet Union!* Get back! Get back!" But the ship did not get back. It broke formation and left a gaping hole in the once tight-knit shield of the Star Kings for a tenth of a second—a tenth too long.

Carruthers screamed. Ships vaporized left and right. Men cursed and died. Up to the muzzles of the Shern weapons the Star Kings had fought. Now they died beneath those muzzles. Carruthers' mind reeled at the Death Calls sounding like shots from an automatic weapon: the *Calais*, the *Burma Road*, the *Troy*, the *Khyber Pass*, the *Las Vegas*, the *Houston*, the *Honduras* of Davies, the *Wellington*, the *Paraguay*, the *Eur-Asia*, the *Coney Island* . . .

Carruthers had to blank out his mind. He fought his ship and he unleashed the TEMS. Working overtime, that dreaded instrument began thinking and building weapons that the Star Kings had always feared. Now fighting for their lives, they unleashed their devil.

The ship rocked and reeled and shivered. Panels flared, only to be replaced by others. Needles broke and were re-placed by C-S directed robot units. Leads broke, fused or vaporized. Grimly, desperately, the handful of Star Kings still alive beneath the Shern weapon muzzles fought. They hurled their own awesome bolts of lethal energies and watched the Shern craft recoil under that fire.

They came warping in.

From a hundred far-flung Universes they came. Wherever the rain of Death Calls had carried, they came. Thousands and thousands and thousands, all the Star Kings alive, came warping in, weapons blazing!

Carruthers had no time to pause. He worked his weapons, he fought his ship. Globe after globe of the Shern withered and died. Carruthers saw the last globe flee into the di-mensional rift. He hurled the *Valley Forge* into it. The ship hit an edge and stopped violently. He corrected and lashed out at the Shern globes trying to close the rift. Then other Star King ships were blasting their way through, coming to his aid. The Shern globes withdrew. The Star Kings followed.

But then, as if they had set a trap, trillions of Shern globes closed in over the Star Kings. Surely it was the end of the Star Kings. They had at last met their match. But the TEMS had been unleashed. Untouched for generations because of the undreamed of methods of destruction that it could conceive, it was at last put to work.

"Destroy those vessels," commanded Carruthers and in-stantly the TEMS was creating and destroying entire systems of logic and mathematics, creating and discarding scores of new sciences. Before the sensory apparatus of the Shern the Star King ships grew in firepower and defensive capa-bilities. Weapons were loosed that destroyed entire Uni-verses of the Shern dimension.

"Cease fire!" Carruthers ordered as he watched his space window in that eerie other dimension. Huddled in a battle scarred mass, the Shern waited, shields down, at the mercy of the Star Kings. Carruthers caught a signal, broke it down and put it on a viewscreen. A being shimmered into view.

"For many cycles of Existence we have found none to oppose us; we have forced many to perform for us. You Star Kings have shown us that we are not almighty. We beg your mercy. We have been decimated. We have been humbled. Never again will a Shern ask any creature to perform. This we swear."

Carruthers spoke for the Star Kings. "We want no sons of Shern, as we had sons of Masters of the Universe. Next time, we shall not leave *one* Shern."

Then the mighty starships of the Star Kings turned and made their way to the original rift.

"They were too forgiving, too merciful," said Guidi. "Per-haps that is why they are gone."

"No," said Corindus. "They could be ruthless when they had to be...."

XVIII

he tracked for a long time, across distant galaxies and through foreign Universes. He did not want to, but in linked conference with his fellow Star Kings, it was decided that he should be the one to follow. He transferred his wife to another ship. While Star King women fought and died at their husband's sides, this time he had no choice but to leave her.

Through barren realms of space where no star shone, through star filled heavens where no black of empty space could exist, he tracked. The other did not try to hide at first. He merely flung himself headlong in whatever direction he chose, but then he began to get more clever and tried to disguise his trail. The hunter deduced that the other had loosed his TEMS, for his job grew much more difficult. But his own TEMS had been operating for a far longer period of time than the other's.

On he went, and at last he caught the other's ship. It was empty. He destroyed it, listening with a heavy heart to its Death Call. None would come to answer; all knew of this mission. Back along the other's trail the hunter went, searching galaxies and thousands of planets with their teeming populations. At last, he found him.

He left his ship and descended to the planet in a bubble of force. It was an Earth-like planet with zones of temperature, comfortable feeling nights and days, oceans, forests, blue skies, myriad species of wildlife and Earth-type people. Of course, they were humanoid; the other would not have been able to hide so long if they had not been.

The hunter's ship dematerialized the wall of the other's room and rematerialized it after the hunter set down within. The planet had a high level of technology. There was a TV set, plastic and alloyed items of decoration and furniture. A window air conditioner whirred somewhat loudly, while an electric powered clock, accurate only to seconds, hummed serenely.

The one hunted sat in a large overstuffed chair of ridiculous design, but the hunter did not laugh. The other stood up; he did not return the hunter's gaze. He bowed his head and waited.

The other looked the same: a handsome man with whitening hair and an athlete's body. Even with his head hung down, he towered over the hunter by four inches. He wore the regional garb of shorts and T-shirt. Even here, he had chosen the black of a Star King.

"Why?" the hunter asked. He had to know.

The other looked at him; there was a sadness in his eyes. The hunter wanted to go to him, but he did not. He had come here for other reasons.

At last the other spoke: "A man lives for a long time, yet he may never know certain things about himself until it is too late. I don't know how it could have happened, yet it did. I am the first Star King coward."

Cowardice. Bravery. Heroism. They are but words. This man . . . The silence grew between them. What he had done could never be forgotten. Because of this man, Star Kings would never again fight side by side in the same way as before. Because of this man, the legend of the Star Kings would be forever tarnished. Because of this man, there was a place known as the Graveyard of the Star Kings.

"You destroyed the *Soviet Union*," the other said. The hunter nodded. "Too bad, she was a good ship." He stood there, looking so miserable. How could he do it?

"I'm sorry," he said.

It didn't make any difference—it was too late for regrets. What must be, must be.

"Goodbye, Son," he said.

"Goodbye, Father," the hunter said and blasted him to atoms.

XIX

wounded, torn and ripped and slashed in a hundred places, the once mighty ship leaped unimaginable distances across strange galaxies and huge voids. Raging winds howled as they buffeted Star Queen Mara Lance of the *Stockholm*. A tiny girl, though with a woman's body, she was not yet out of her teens. Her black silken tresses swirled madly around her head, obscuring the vision of her green eyes. But since she could perceive by other than light rays, her progress was steady and sure.

The control room was near. Another quarter mile and she would be with her parents.

No, said the ship's laboring computer in her mind. The computer had been badly damaged and she knew most of its components were busy trying to save the *Stockholm*, *You must abandon ship. The Stockholm will never fight again.*

Mom! Dad! Mara screamed through the C-S headgear. She stopped and concentrated with her mind, trying to hear them. There was no answer. Never before had they not answered. Anxiously she continued on against the wind, rising heat, unfelt radiations. The C-S informed her that lethal radiations were getting stronger—that, at any moment, the *Stockholm* would vaporize.

Mom! Dad! she cried desperately, both mentally and vocally. But nothing came through the C-S headgear that was supposed to connect all members of the ship to one another through the ship's computer. Only the howling of the wind and the crackling of the flames.

They are dead, the computer again informed her, taking part of its meager remaining resources to see after her. *They cannot hear or answer you. You must abandon ship!*

But Mara did not heed. Onward she continued through the dying ship toward the control room. Wind, heat, and deadly radiations beat about her, once bringing her to her knees. She fought her way up and tried to go on.

Star Queen Mara Lance! Nine-nine-six-two-Alpha! She froze as the ship's computer transmitted her name and that number. Now she could hear her father and mother.

Mom! Dad! she cried, blinded by the violent forces beat-ing upon her womanly body. Then she was silent as the words came at the speed of thought.

Mara, dear, someday something may happen to us and it will be necessary for the ship's computer to give you orders that you don't wish to obey. Because of that we have implanted a post-hypnotic suggestion that you follow the computer's orders upon hearing your name and the code phrase "nine-nine-six-two-Alpha!" May you always be happy, Mara.

Now the ship's dying computer was giving her orders through the C-S at that same speed of thought.

She turned and made her way to a recessed cubby. Winds buffeted and punched her while flames tried to damage her space-tanned, restructured skin. Black, thick smoke filled the once magnificent corridors that were lined with the strange and beautiful art from a thousand visited worlds, but her redesigned lungs, which could supply her body with oxygen for a full day without forcing her to inhale, made it a nuisance only. In the cubby stood a black capsule, six and a half feet tall. Robot hands, operating on the last dregs of emergency power, helped her into the capsule and fastened it after her.

The computer checked it over and gave her the *all clear*.

"Goodbye, Mara," it said sadly, and then the little black capsule was thrown clear of the ship, clear of the wounded beast that moments later vaporized, leaving nothing but a burst of cryptic energy that was known as a Death Call.

Rolus' brown eyes stared with hatred and futility at the slime-colored craft of the Overlords of Sen hovering in the halo of the setting sun. His fists were clenched, his teeth gritted, holding back the burning hatred. Once he had given vent to that hate and with others of his subjugated race, had destroyed one of those craft and its multilegged occupants with a makeshift *doralizer*. For days a bitter battle had raged between the super-science supported Sen and the almost unarmed and unsupported Rensilens of the city of Ardus.

Alone, they had fought and died, the rest of Rensilen helplessly watching, knowing that participation would mean the visitation of Sen's ruthless Planet Assault and Subjugation Fleets.

Now Rolus stood tattered and dirty with his friend Liano upon the still-warm rubble of what had once been Rensilen's proudest city. Centuries of subjugation had failed to break that great city and its population. Now, as far as the eye could see, the city was rubble and smoking ruin. The tall, defiant towers, built by free Rensilens long ago, were gone, pounded into dust. And except for one slime-colored Sen craft, the conquerors had turned their backs upon their day's work and retreated to their mountain fortresses.

"Someday we shall be free!" Rolus told the slime-colored craft, but he said it softly, lest the audio

amplifiers of the Sen pick it up.

"Come," Liano said. He had a slight but painful flesh wound. He kept a hand clasped to his side; the hand was now covered with warm red blood. "There is nothing here. Your wife is dead."

Rolus looked at the fused, blasted, seared stone. Then he nodded slowly. "I know, Liano. Someday they shall pay for her—and the city. This I know."

They turned and walked away from the Sen craft toward the far boundaries of the now desolate city. The last rays of the sun died before they had gone more than half a mile in the wreckage and devastation of the city. They paused to look up at the star filled sky and the little moon above.

"She liked to watch the moon," Rolus said softly.

"Look!" Liano cried and pointed. In the heavens, amid the star strewn space, there was a flare. It grew rapidly, suddenly blinding them. Rolus and Liano clutched at their eyes. When they could see again, the sky was as it had always been.

"What—" both of them started to ask when they were suddenly thrown to the devastated ground. The tons of debris around them heaved and trembled. Rolus got up, wiped a hand across his bloody mouth and helped Liano to his feet.

"Something fell . . . came down over there," Liano said, pointing to a low place in the rubble not far from them.

"I know," Rolus said. "But what? We'd better investigate before any Sen come nosing around. They'd never let us know what it was—even if it's only a meteorite."

They scrambled and crawled to the point Liano had indicated. They came to the small crater. A fire burned sullenly in and about it.

"Look!" cried Liano. Rolus had seen it and was already halfway down the crater when Liano cried out. A girl, a beautiful teenaged girl, wrapped in some kind of fireproof material, was lying in a half demolished capsule amid the flames.

Rolus ignored the heat and smoke and scrambled down into the crater. He gathered her in his strong, bronzed arms, pulling the gray material tighter around her, and lifted her out. There was a boom as something in the wrecked city exploded. Sparks and searing drops of flame showered them. Rolus scrambled back up the crater, handing her small form to Liano when he was near the top. Both their faces shone sweatily in the faint light of the flames.

Lights moved on the horizon.

"Sen!" Rolus swore. And together they hurried away, carrying their small bundle.

Modam walked back and forth on his ten multijointed, stiff-haired legs before the wall charts displaying the vast territory of the Sen Empire. He was a large individual who considered himself quite handsome. His compact round body, from which the legs projected in a circle, had a varicolored sheen to it that the female of his species found irresistible. But at the moment mating was the thing farthest from his mind. He swung around on the score of officers he had called in. His four advisors—he was entitled to five but the fifth had died in the recent Rensilen city uprising—flanked the astral charts.

"The recent revolt of the city of Ardus has not put us in a good section of the Web. I, in particular, as Occupational General, have come under some very unpleasant scrutiny. And now this . . ." He paused for effect as an underling rolled in an oblong object, pitted and scarred from heat and contact with objects that no ordinary material would ever be able to withstand.

"As you know, there was a disturbance somewhere about . . ." He swung around to the star charts and located one that showed galaxies instead of individual stars. He now located a spot and pointed it out to the score of officers, "There." He swung back around to face them and the object retrieved from the city.

"Our *scientists*," he said with the warrior's disdain of men who spend their time with computers, tapes and test tubes, "have deduced that it was a spaceship that so vaporized. Seconds later, this"—he indicated the capsule—"penetrated our defenses and monitoring devices with ridiculous ease. It landed somewhere in the ruins of Ardus. It landed and someone found it and removed its occupant. We have deduced from the apparatus within the capsule that there was a living creature aboard, since that apparatus was used to protect, nourish and transport said creature.

"What do these facts mean? A spaceship exploded near another galaxy and seconds later a capsule lands on this planet. Please remember that it was not light, subject to a limited velocity, that you saw, but some form of energy.

All this adds up to a creature of very high intelligence somewhere on this planet.

"As I said before, the Home World does not look with pleasure upon us or our accomplishments. They are particularly not pleased by our slow response to the capsule's penetration. We must find the creature

of the capsule in order that it may teach us its secrets, so that we can extend the rule of Sen over more than a minor spiral arm and get once more into the good section of the Web. Failing that, we must kill the creature before it gives aid to the scum of Rensilen."

Rolus watched the white bearded man known as the Kalvus of Rensilen. Though the Sen did not allow them to pick their own leaders, the Kalvus was the man they followed, having been selected by the regional representatives. He bent over the girl Rolus and Liano had brought to him in his quarters deep beneath the great mountain upon which the mighty Sen perched themselves so nobly, unaware that for generations the leaders and hunted of Rensilen had lived and plotted beneath their very feet.

"Who is she?" the Kalvus asked. Rolus explained the circumstances of their finding her. Halfway through, a doctor arrived and set about examining her. Rolus' voice trailed off as the doctor removed the fireproof fabric Rolus had wrapped around her. Their eyes widened when they saw the small circle over her right breast.

"The Sign of the Gods!" the doctor said, moving away from the still and unmoving body. The Kalvus moved forward. "Sign or no, she is hurt. Tend her." The doctor, his hands shaking, moved back to the girl's side. He took her pulse, heartbeat, blood pressure, opened up his bag and continued with a whole series of tests meaningless to the onlookers. At last he straightened up.

"There is nothing I can do. She is not human."

"Not human?" Rolus said. "What nonsense is this? I carried her here in my arms. That is the body of a woman—a damn beautiful woman." Rolus walked to the girl and picked up a hand. "You call this *unhuman*?" he asked, hold-ing the small, delicate hand within his own. The doctor walked to his bag and took out a hypodermic needle. "Explain this!" he said and thrust it at her arm. They stepped forward, but stopped in amazement, for the hypo-dermic needle had shattered against the whiteness of her bare skin. "And this!" The doctor ran a gleaming surgical knife across her arm. Nothing happened. There was no incision, no blood.

The door burst open and one of the Kalvus' advisors rushed in. "The Sen have issued an ultimatum: they want the creature that fell into the city last night or else they will leave Rensilen a planet that will never again support life."

"So knives don't bother her," Rolus said. "That doesn't mean she's not human." He walked to the girl and held up the fireproof material. Then he fingered the black tunic she wore, untouched by the fire. He remembered the flash in the sky and the shock of the capsule landing. "She's obviously from an advanced civilization, which proves noth-ing as far as her humanness is concerned. If I could ar-range it so that my skin isn't susceptible to injury every-time I fall, shave, fight or have an accident, I'd damned do it. She'll never have to worry about infection or gangrene setting in because her tender skin was punctured and not cared for properly."

The Kalvus stared at the snow white face, so peaceful and innocent. He suddenly walked to a table where a video-phone setup lay.

"Emergency! Get me Harmdi and the Records." They waited for the connection. Harmdi appeared within seconds. He was a tall, studious looking figure; one who did not know would not have guessed that the previous day he had commanded a laser battery and had it blown from under him. "I want information on . . ." He turned and looked at the doctor. "... the Sign of the Gods. A black S figure superimposed over a black K figure in a circle of scintillating red." Harmdi clicked off. The Kalvus turned back to the room; Harmdi would call when he had the informa-tion.

"She has a concussion and internal injuries," the doctor said. "There is nothing I can do for her. The only ways I have of operating would probably kill her. She's in shock or a coma, or maybe she is just unconscious—I don't know." The videophone rang. The Kalvus answered at once. A man none recognized came visible in the small screen.

"They just destroyed Apasdi! The whole city went up in a ball of flame! Nobody got out." The Kalvus nodded and switched off. He asked for another number.

"Cromos, get someone who knows nothing of the where-about of this creature from space and send him to the Sen. He is to tell them that the space creature was in Apasdi."

"It won't work, sir. Apasdi is on the other side of Rensilen. The Sen know we don't have any transportation that could have taken her there in the little time available. They're going to hit the cities one by one, working their way back to the ruins of Ardu. They're gambling that we'll give her up before they destroy her themselves."

The Kalvus thought.

"Evacuate the cities. Mobilize everything and everybody—but don't do anything. Anybody that starts

something will have to fight alone—as did the city of Ardu. I will have more instructions as soon as I hear from Harmdi." Cromos faded out, to be replaced by Harmdi.

"There is some information. It was picked up by the Sen from some of the people they conquered or had contact with. It seems that there is a race of space nomads—mighty warriors who are the descendants of a people who had their planet destroyed and who were almost wiped out. They finally settled with their enemy at a place known as Star Cross End. They are known as Star Kings. The black S superimposed over a black K in a circle of scintillating red is their insignia.

"They are supposed to be extremely long lived, nearly invincible, and all knowing. Because of this and other accomplishments of theirs, many of the lesser races have come to consider them gods. Hence the name for their insignia: the Sign of the Gods.

"And one last item, sir. When one of the ships of these godlike beings is destroyed, it sends off a flare of energy—"

Rolus and Liano started. They opened their mouths to speak, but the Kalvus waved them to silence.

"They are known as Death Calls," Harmdi continued. "And one of the Star Kings comes to find out why the ship was destroyed. Of course, this was all thought to be legend by the Sen. There has never been anything to prove otherwise. Nor should there be, if you stop to think of it. These Star Kings creatures are Universe spanners. With millions of planets in just a single large galaxy, I would say that if they do exist, very few living creatures have actually ever seen them."

"These Death Calls," the Kalvus asked. "You say they are usually investigated right away."

"They are supposed to be capable of traversing galaxies in seconds. Since they are supposed to be Universe spanners, it seems logical."

"If such creatures really exist, and one of their ships did explode last night, and one of them did land, what reason would there be for their not showing up immediately?" the Kalvus asked.

Harmdi mulled it over. "They are known as great warriors. You don't call people warriors unless they are fighting something every so often. I would say that they got into a fight and probably got mauled—if not utterly destroyed. I would say that at the moment they have had no time to look for any ships or people that may have been damaged or wounded in combat. But it's only conjecture."

"Conjectures from a man of wisdom are better than facts from a fool. Tell me, Harmdi, if you had one of these mythical creatures, what would you do? Would you protect her? No, that's the wrong word. The Sen might not harm her—they might even restore her to well-being."

Harmdi smiled. "Not the Sen I know. They would try to torture every bit of information she had out of her, and then destroy her so that if any of these Star Kings did come, they would find nothing. I say protect her. We are slaves. For generations we have dreamed of being free. For services rendered, our price of the Star Kings shall be freedom."

"And if they do not come, or we are destroyed before they come, it is the end of Rensilen," the Kalvus pointed out.

Harmdi looked at the Kalvus and said softly, "Better Rensilen scorched clean of life than the race of Rensilen exist at the whim of spiders!"

"Thank you, Harmdi. Join your unit. May your Star Kings come quickly." He switched off and turned to the others. "Join your units, gentlemen. Today there will be no more raids or skirmishes. Today we declare war on Sen!"

The night-black monster came hurtling out of the star filled depths. Its hull and sides were pitted and scarred and in places even huge gouges had been taken out of it. It swept past the burning suns of the galaxy at an un-believable velocity until it reached the point of transmission. But there was nothing. It searched the galaxy, sun system by sun system—there was no sign of the survivor.

Then into another galaxy it plunged, its ultra science instruments searching and searching. Near the base of the spiral arm, the young man in charge of the great vessel felt an impulse in his head from his C-S headgear. The ship halted instantly, narrowed its field of search, and spotted the planet and the residual radiation from an ejection capsule. The great ship majestically approached the planet.

Again the great instruments went to work, sifting through the billions of humanoid inhabitants for the one that it had come for. Beneath a sheer faced mountain he found her.

Tremendous beams of force leaped down, going through rock and stone to the hidden, caverns below. Through man-made plastic and metal, it drove its beams. When they reached their objective they were reversed and the limp body of the girl was brought out of the mountain's heart, up through the atmosphere and, in a bubble of force, through space, to the hatch in the side of the great planet-sized vessel. While she was being taken in, other beams were busy repairing the damage to mountain and quarters that he had

done.

Stars, brilliant in their burning fury, swept slowly past the huge space window. It had taken but five minutes for the Med robots to restore her to health. Now she sat enjoying the great panorama of nature's splendor. About them the mighty warship tended its wounds, repairing and replacing equipment.

"It must have been horrible," she said to her rescuer. He smiled. He sat beside her in the huge, thickly padded chairs of the featureless and controlless control board, his implanted C-S headgear effortlessly relaying his orders to the ship's brain and computer. He stared out at the passing giants of gas and flame, thinking, remembering.

"Yes, a lot of good Star Kings died there. We had to go through the dimensional rift to avenge them. We crushed the Shern completely—destroyed their Universes. But the Star Kings who will never wander the spaceways again . . ." "Thank you for rescuing me," she said. "Rensilen. What a funny name."

He shrugged and said, "The spiders were funny. The Sen, I believe they were called. They'd carved themselves a little empire in the spiral arm. Of course I put a stop to that. I took all their fancy hardware and gave it to the masses of their Empire. You should have seen the look on the Ren-silens' faces. One minute they were fighting super-science weapons with primitive junk—the next they had the super weapons and the Sen had nothing! There must be at least forty planets mounting vengeance expeditions against Sen tonight." He laughed and lapsed into silence.

He pointed to the insignia over their chests, the black S superimposed over a black K in a circle of scintillating red. "You know what they call these?"

She watched as the stars began to stream past. They were picking up speed. "No."

"The Sign of the Gods," he said and then grinned.

EPILOGUE

"indeed," said Guidi. "They *were* like gods."

"And so, too, were the Masters of the Universe!" stated Corridus.

Guidi looked questioningly at his superior. "How do you mean?"

"The Star Kings appear as gods to beings of lesser civilizations. Well, to the lesser civilizations of the United Stars of Mankind and the Federated Stars of the Shraix, the Masters of the Universe with their super-science and Com-puter Prime must have been as gods."

Guidi considered, then nodded reluctant agreement.

"Yet," said Corridus, "a handful of humans in obsolete, primitive ships managed to defeat them."

"Luck and brainpower. Don't forget Caesar Smith."

Corridus nodded. "Apparently. But if we analyze the events of the past of the Star Kings, we notice a pattern."

"Pattern?" Guidi asked.

"First, an entire galactic sector was left unpatrolled."

"So? Computer Prime had . . . Let's see. The Milky Way Galaxy alone contains some 100,000 million stars. The task of patrolling an *entire Universe* is nearly impossible."

"Yet Computer Prime was designed to do just that and it failed. The best brains of the Masters of the Universe de-signed it. It should not have failed."

Guidi shrugged. "A freak accident or malfunction. So what?"

"Secondly, a search pattern was set up. A hundred full-strength battle cruisers under the guidance of Computer Prime could not—despite an advantage of some ten million years technologically—find them. Tell me, Guidi, does it seem logical? The Star Kings should have been found by the superior detection equipment of the Masters of the Uni-verse—and found and destroyed!"

"Obviously, Computer Prime was not as well designed as it was supposed to have been. There were obviously spots in its search pattern. But I see no connection with the present."

Corridus looked at his second-in-command. "Don't you, Guidi? Must I go to the third point?"

"Third point?"

"Star King Sev Reid of the *Tibet* warped one of his hundred geniuses into Computer Prime. Why, Guidi?"

"So that, by altering the directives of Computer Prime, the computer would aid the Star Kings, instead of working against them. It would have been like having a double agent within the Masters of the Universe hierarchy."

"But the scheme failed. Why?"

"Because Sev Reid's genius found duplicate directive con-trols."

"Does that not give you the answer, Guidi? For what reason would the Masters of the Universe protect their computer in such a way?"

"But it doesn't make sense," Guidi protested.

"It does!" Corridus contradicted. "Answer me why."

"Because of previous unauthorized altering of the directive controls."

"Correct," said Corridus. "Someone tampered with Com-puter Prime."

"It seems logical," Guidi conceded.

"Then, take the ideal location of Man and Shraix in their galactic sector and the location of our Universe. The battles of the Star Kings were a direct result of those locations. No matter where they turned, hostile enemies of awesome power awaited them. Against their will, they were forced to continue fighting, forced to devise newer, more efficient weapons. Their technology was forced brutally upward.

"Even when they rebelled and refused to use their TEMS, circumstances at last forced them. It comes down to the fact, Guidi, that the alterer of Computer Prime is somehow connected with the birth and death of the Star Kings. This logic and intuition tell me." Corridus became silent. There was something about the air in the control room. Then, from nowhere and everywhere, a voice spoke:

"Well done, Corridus of Civilization. I see that someday your species will advance even to mine. You are right. On another plane of Existence, so different and remote from ours that I cannot even explain it to you, long before our Universe began to cool and form suns, there began a tremendous battle, a battle upon whose outcome the fate of a billion Universes depends. The one who sought to save those Uni-verses I shall call as you did, Alterer of Computer Prime, for want of a better name. He knew he was fighting a losing battle. He had to have a weapon to aid him, but so much of his power was engaged in a holding battle that he could spare little more than a few thought impulses—only enough to alter the flow of a few electrons. He created the Star Kings.

"But, at last, the enemy learned of the new weapon and destroyed what they thought was all of it. I was the first of the new Star Kings. It was my maturing brain which impinged upon the consciousness of the enemy and gave my people away. I am the only one who escaped.

"But enough, Captain Corrindus. There is a battle being fought far from here. Tell Civilization not to worry. I, the last and the greatest of the Star Kings, am even now fighting at the side of the Alterer for the fate of that billion Universes. And, by the Star Kings, I swear that we shall avenge the destruction of the weapon the Alterer had forged over the long centuries to help him in his fight."

Corrindus sighed as the voice faded and the presence that accompanied it disappeared. He knew what the weapon was, and the Universe was a poorer place for its destruction. Yet, there was the promise that some day the weapon would be born again, in him and in his fellow members of Civilization.

Once more the Universe would know the Star Kings!