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The Star Virus by Barrington J. Bayley

I

Suddenly Rodrone understood why the scene before his eyes held such fascination for him, and why he returned again and again to worlds like this one. Lurid, offbeat and infernal, it offered the exaggerated symbolism of a painting rendered by a schizophrenic; and so drew him to that attractive realm of mental aberration where thoughts and actions could all be bizarre without feelings of shame...

The landscape had the combination of sharpness and gloom that typified an airless planet, and the grotesquely large ruby-colored sun gave it a gory glow in every shade from dark wine to cherry red. Except, that is, for the river of molten ore that slithered down the side of a nearby mountain like a writhing white-hot snake, lighting up the gloom for miles around.

The mining technique was crude but effective. A beat-en-up space freighter, centuries old, hovered on its tail low over the mountain, using its main engines to direct a blast of nuclear heat that smelted the metal directly out of the lode.

Men in white spacesuits moved slowly along the banks of the metal river, gesticulating to one another. From his vantage point on the observation ledge of his spaceship, the *Stond*, they seemed like malicious little imps, eager to hurl one another into the deadly current to be swept along to where it cooled to a glowering red in the collecting bowl that had been blown out of the ground earlier.

A mile away stood the third ship of his expedition, the *Revealer*. Rodrone lifted a space helmet he carried and placed it over his head; not because he needed its protection—the ledge where he stood was covered with a shimmering transparent film that clung to the hull of the ship like a soap bubble—but because of the communications set it contained. Faintly through the tuned-down speaker, he could hear the men on the ground laughing and daring one another to edge closer to the white-hot stream and take a chance on its suddenly changing course.

He pressed a stud, putting him through to Kulthol down by the collecting bowl. By turning his head slightly, he could see the tiny screen inside the helmet; at the same time Kulthol's sandy-haired, stubbled face sprang on to the plate.

"Anything?" Rodrone asked.

"Not an atom. We're wasting our time."

The molten stream was iron; but it was not iron they were looking for. Occasionally there occurred in ores of this type, on planets of this type circling suns of this type, silicon diamonds: denser and harder than ordinary diamonds and therefore useful industrially. With difficulty, they could be synthesized, but there was a steady market for the natural variety and Rodrone, against the judgment of his fellows, had decided to make a try. Kulthol was vainly sifting the molten metal through a detector grid for signs of the gems, and this was the third location in the past few hours.

"The iron's good," Kulthol remarked. "Maybe we could do business in that."

"Forget it." Iron was the commonest metal in the universe, and though there were rare times when its price in the metal exchanges made it just worthwhile to make deliveries, this was not one of them. "Pack up the gear," he ordered. "We've done enough."

- The huge ungainly freighter, shaped like two squat towers locked together, swung away from the mountain and settled its creaking bulk on the plain. Rodrone turned his back on the scene, which a moment ago had almost sent him into a psychedelic trance, and entered the hull of the *Stond*. The ledge withdrew after him, and as the port closed, the air-containing bubble—which was in fact composed of liquid and maintained by pressure—collapsed and vanished.

He laid the space helmet down in an alcove and was confronted for a moment by a full-length mirror. Like many men whose uncertain temperament hid a secret vanity, he could not resist a second or two of self-contemplation. The image facing him was of a tall, spare man with dark skin and thick brown hair. A fringe beard framed a mournful countenance and made his sensitive, almost negroid lips and liquid brown eyes even more brooding, volatile, dangerous. It was the face of a vacillating dreamer, a wastrel and an adventurer. Even in space he wore a short black cloak and thigh-length boots to match the rich brown cloth of his other garments, and a small golden handgun was clamped to the front of his left thigh.

"No dice, eh?"

His reverie was interrupted by a young baritone voice, and he turned to the figure who had entered the corridor from the other end.

"No dice," he answered. The other laughed slyly.

Clave Theory was about twenty-five years old and in appearance seemed to be made of chalk. His flaxen, almost colorless hair was combed back to spread carelessly over his shoulders. His bony frame was clad in loose-fitting, puce-colored clothing, and his broad face was so pale as to seem consumptive, a deathly impression exacerbated by its expression: the eyes had a staring, glassy quality and the lips were habitually drawn back in a half-grin of sinister amusement.

But the deathly quality was belied by Clave's easy, quick movements and his obvious health and liveliness. He would take an interest in anything and dare anything, the more outlandish the better. Rodrone liked him immensely, partly because despite Clave's own picture of himself as an unwavering cynic he was in fact utterly ingenuous.

"We'll probably have trouble from the bondsmen," Rodrone said, following Clave into the roomy compartment at the end of the corridor.

"Well, I guess you can handle it."

The trouble was not long coming. The chamber was one of several distributed through the *Stond*, sandwiched between the control room and engine and storage spaces. Egg-shaped and about thirty feet on the long axis, it was well furnished but suffered from the chronic untidiness of men

living casually. Rodrone sat down and helped himself from a dish of bread and assorted meats, half-aware of voices and the clumps of heavy boots from below.

A door opened. A dozen men crowded through, some still wearing spacesuits, minus helmets. Others wore, on the breasts of tunics of coarse fabric, the insignia of the Merchant House of Karness.

They were led by a burly black-haired man with a look of sullen anger on his face.

"Don't you know enough to leave your suits downstairs?" Rodrone said mildly. "What kind of house-training did they give you in Karness's barracks?"

The man flushed. "Enough of that, Rodrone. We want a reckoning!"

"We don't have a complaints department," Rodrone said.

"When we joined up with you we expected a better deal," another told him, struggling to get out of his suit. "After three months we've got nothing to show for it"

"Oh no? I observed that you seemed to be enjoying yourselves »down on the ground. Like a bunch of damned kids."

"Now look here," the big man put in, his tone softening slightly, "there's plenty of material to be picked up in this cluster. Titanium, gold and beryllium just lying there for the taking. Then there are the organics. It all fetches a decent price, and it only takes a little hard work and application."

"Oh, so it's *work* you're looking for," Rodrone sighed mockingly.

"It all fetches a decent price!" the other repeated, his voice rising. "But no, we go chasing off to planets not worth a damn. Ferr told you there would be no gems here"—he gestured to one of their number—"and so did your own man, Harver. So why in hell did we *come* here?"

"I like it here," Rodrone replied in a maddeningly bored, affected tone. "Pleasant spot for a vacation."

They glanced at one another with looks of disgust, then seemed to stiffen as Kulthol entered with one or two of Rodrone's regular men. Kulthol cast a ferrety glance around the room, then walked across it to place himself strategically near one wall, from where he looked on with evident interest.

Rodrone sighed again, this time to himself. He could see what was coming. The malcontents had originally been bondsmen to the merchant house of Karness and had reneged to join Rodrone's outfit at his last call on a Karness-dominated planet. Habitually careless as to whom he took on, he had accepted them without question.

In a way, their dissatisfaction was saddening. Reared as serfs in the service of their masters, their notions of how freebooter gangs like Rodrone's operated were apt to be naive. They had expected to work to a steady schedule, mining metals and other minerals on unpopulated planets and selling them in the metal exchanges, feeding the trade network that extended indefinitely throughout the stars of the Hub. The idea of illegal operations against the merchant houses had probably not entered their minds, and they had certainly not reckoned on being under the orders of a wastrel who was little interested in work, who had set down on this planet by whim and merely used the search for silicon diamonds as an excuse.

In short, they believed in the orderly universe their former masters liked them to believe in. They did not understand the droves of individualists and misfits at large in the colorful, chaotic Hub worlds. Eventually, if Rodrone was right, most of them would crawl back to Karness and take their punishment. A few might stay free.

The spokesman was steeling himself for the final confrontation. "We want to pull out," he said. "We're setting up on our own."

"Go ahead."

"We need a ship."

Rodrone paused, appeared to be considering. "Sure," he said with a shrug. "You can take the old freighter."

"Are you joking? We'd rot in that thing!" That was unfortunately true. Its ancient engines had broken down three times in the last month

already, and Rodrone intended to scrap the old crate anyway.

"Three months spent with me hardly entitles you to make off with the *Revealer*," he pointed out.

"We know that." The black-haired man wiped his brow. "Name your price. We'll lodge a promissory note with any bank you like and pay off within a stated period."

"You forget you are renegade bondsmen and the banks might not accept your signature. Besides, I don't wish to part with the *Revealer*. I am sorry you are so disappointed with your new life, gentlemen, and if you like I will set you free at our next port of call—even on a Karness planet, if that's what you want."

The man spat. "We're not going back to Karness! We mean to take that ship!"

"A pity you couldn't have come to the point sooner. Well, you know, there's only one way to get it."

As he spoke, Rodrone rose to his feet, calmly lifting both hands palms outward to a level with his stomach, as if in a placating gesture.

The bondsmen had probably counted on the fact that if it came to a fight they outnumbered all the loyal followers Rodrone had in the expedition. This was a situation into which most experienced freebooter captains would never have backed themselves, but which did not distress Rodrone unduly.

Automatically the men measured the distance between Rodrone's hand and the gun on his thigh, at the same time keeping a nervous eye on Kulthol and the others ranging about them. All except Clave, that was. He was eating his meal, outwardly oblivious to the conversation.

As it happened, several already had weapons in their hands, in pockets or behind backs. But as they brought them into view the little golden gun on Rodrone's thigh suddenly vanished and reappeared in his left hand with a slapping sound. All motions froze.

They stared, incredulous. Rodrone worked his magic trick again, reversing and re-reversing the magnetic control field between the plate on

his thigh and the one attached to his wrist. The gun reappeared on his thigh, then flew back to his hand again, quicker than they could move or even see.

"My eye is as quick as my draw, gentlemen," Rodrone warned them in a low voice.

"They can't take us all," growled the black-haired man. "*Get them!*" He fired, dropping to one knee.

He never rose again. The shot from his bullet-firing weapon zipped past Rodrone, but the thin beam from the freebooter's tiny gun bored a hole through his skull.

At almost the same instant there was a deafening crash. A flashing shaft of pure energy burned a smoking hole in the wall behind the bondsmen.

Clave was standing, holding a two-handed beam tube before him. "The next burst takes you all," he said affably.

Kulthol, lounging against a table, laughed.

The bondsmen could scarcely believe their eyes. The beam tube was hardly a weapon for use indoors. They looked at the gaping, still-hot hole, then at the body of their leader sprawled on the floor. Silently, sullenly, they threw down their weapons.

"That's better," Rodrone said, returning his gun to its place. "You have behaved very foolishly. Allow me to inform you that the penalty for mutiny, out here beyond the reach of law, is generally far more severe than anything you would suffer at the hands of Karness."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked one, glowering and afraid.

"Nothing. Punishment bores me." Rodrone flung himself on a couch, propping a booted foot on a low table. "You may decide for yourselves how you wish to spend the future. If you wish to remain with me, then you will have to accustom yourselves to my ways. Otherwise..." He shrugged. "There are other outfits more assiduous than we are in their search for an honest living. As most of you are trained technicians, in time you may no doubt find a place with them. However, I may as well tell you that I am not

completely without plans for some acceptable pickings in the near future, and you can decide shortly whether my methods are really as distasteful to you as you currently imagine. Finally, let me say that it is a matter of complete indifference to me what you do. I don't care if you end up as slaves of the Vine."

They all shuddered slightly at the reference to the notorious Dravian Vine, a vegetable growth that secreted a pearly mist instantly addictive to a number of species, of whom man was one, after which they became suppliant servants possessing an eager rapport with the Vine's wishes. Although lacking sentience in the true sense, the Vine had by one means or another succeeded in establishing itself on a number of worlds close to its planet of origin, and the number of men who spent their lives in its grip certainly ran into the tens of thousands.

"And by the way," ended Rodrone, pointing with distaste to the floor, "please remove your friend. I'd also like you to repair the wall tomorrow. We like to keep things in good order."

Saying nothing, the bondsmen picked up their dead spokesman and left the room. It had been very silly of them, Rodrone reflected, to heed the dead man's counsel.

Kulthol all but spat. "Stupid groundhogs!" he said in contempt.

"Don't blame them too much," Rodrone answered absently. He had, he realized, been unkind. It would have been possible to handle the situation more compromisingly. The reason for his behavior was no doubt the contempt he shared with Kulthol for the huge Merchant Houses and the limited lives they imposed on all their serfs from birth to death. A man had to be a rough-hewn individualist to be happy in the loosely-gathered band around Rodrone. Because it was easy to enter did not mean it was easy to live with, and the bondsmen were bewildered. Oddly enough, it was their lifelong habit of obedience that made them rebellious now.

Shortly afterwards, a few others began to drift in, including some from the *Revealer*. They brought in the girls— another addition netted by a recent landing—and the atmosphere began to warm up. Wine was produced from somewhere. Pulsing music filled the air, and suddenly one end of the chamber dissolved into a three-dimensional picture screen showing wild, half-naked dancers that made the blood race.

The bondsmen did not put in an appearance. Rodrone watched for a short while, then smiled wryly, got up and left. He was in no mood for the orgy which the gathering would shortly become.

He withdrew to his private cabin and relaxed in its quiet, soothing atmosphere. Around him were his maps, his books on every conceivable subject—mostly science. A few scientific instruments were littered about, more for decoration than for any purpose they could serve here, and the smell of oiled steel mingled incongruously with the scent from a bunch of exotic pink orchids.

Rodrone was a man caught in an unstable tug of war between the poles of action and thought. Here he could sink into the latter state, brooding and dreaming, seeking to satisfy the cravings of his imagination by erratic dabblings in history and the sciences.

Idly he picked up one of his favorite tomes, a history of prehistoric Earth. It told of the drama of human nations in the confused period before interstellar flight, of Egypt, America, Pan-Asia. Turning the pages, he came to the lavish illustrations of Egyptian religion and gazed for the hundredth time at a picture that would never cease to hold him spellbound: the Barque of Millions of Years, carrying Ra and its crew of the lesser gods on a steady course through the universe.

Rodrone often wondered if the writer of the book, who seemed to have gained his information from haphazard sources, was not wrong in one major fact. Was it not more likely that the civilization of Egypt could have come *after* that of America, that is after the advent of spaceflight? The preoccupation with solar energy, the bright colors and stiff, stylized depictions of gods and cosmic processes did not belong on a world softened by a rich atmosphere and abundant biological life. They belonged here in alien space, light-years away from human populations, on an airless world whose sharp outlines stood out in a wash of lurid color. This, he felt, was the kind of universe the Egyptian myths understood; it seemed incredible to him that Egypt should have known nothing of other worlds while the Pan-Asian Commune, with its earthbound and totalistic philosophy, should have been the civilization to carry man's activity into the galaxy before dissolving in its last determined effort to maintain mankind as a single political entity and prevent the explosion of its authority into a never-ending frontier.

There would never be such a thing as unity again... because of the Hub:

the dazzling, star-packed swirl visible in every planet's sky, offering such a plethora of worlds that the very concept of "world" had disappeared from men's lives. Boundaries had not existed in the five hundred years since men came to the Hub and realized that the age of fences, was over. There were a billion places to go, and under such conditions regular authority became impossible. There were no nations. There were no governments except those partially attempted by the moguls of interstellar trade. It was a half-civilized age of free men, and there seemed no reason why it should not go on forever.

The outlying stellar districts of man's origin, where stars were thinly spread and separated by tens of light-years, were forgotten as the Hub became man's habitat. The location of Earth was not to be found on any of Rodrone's maps.

The ensuing disorganization of human populations was increased by the fact that technology too had exploded and was no longer associated with an organized body of thought. Every man was his own engineer, his own technician, and numerous techniques existed locally which were not known generally. There were scores of different types of spacedrive, for instance. Such scientific contact as did take place was mainly due to men of Rodrone's caliber—"fuz-zy-brains," to use an ambiguous term that meant execration in some quarters and grudging praise in others. The big Merchant Houses, always ambitious to coagulate political power, hated and feared such men; for while a simple adventurer caused little trouble apart from some rowdyism, and could always be depended upon to transport a cargo or escort it to ward off marauders, thinkers seemed to pose a perpetual threat to their unsteady power, especially if they were the half-hearted kind like Rodrone. To Rodrone, however, the Houses were a parasitic growth little better than the Dravian Vine. His reading of history had strengthened his natural distaste for political institutions of any kind.

In an earlier age he might have been a university professor or an academician. Today he lived by the strength of his arm and the quickness of his wits, and his knowledge in all directions was patchy and bizarre. But tonight he had promised himself a treat. He laid aside the book, pushing the colorful Egyptian gods from his mind, and took down an advanced text on physics heavily larded with mathematics.

But before taking the next step, he paused. There was a little job he wanted to do first. Moving to a servo-panel he made settings, bringing to

life the transmitter in another part of the ship. His base on the planet Brüde was currently inside the ten light-year radius within which the space-tensor communicator worked instantaneously, and he had been waiting for a certain piece of news for several weeks now.

After about a minute the picture screen lit up to show an empty room bathed in the golden sunlight of a summer afternoon. Through the window opposite he could see a stretch of the crater floor where he had made his permanent camp for a number of years, covered with lilac grass and dotted with fruit trees. In the far wall of the crater gaped the cavern that he used as a hangar for his motley collection of spaceships.

A teenage face framed with golden curls slid into the screen in answer to his call. "Well?" Rodrone snapped.

The youngster's hazel eyes flashed as he smiled languorously. "We've got what you wanted, Rodrone," he drawled. "Crule came in with it this morning. Want me to lase you the store?"

Rodrone nodded. The youngster was speaking slang based on computer jargon. His words meant roughly "Shall I give you the griff."

He disappeared for a few moments, then came back. "The planet is called Sultery, Kriga IV. It's in a small town there on the edge of a desert. Maintown is the name of it; sounds like a lotta fun. Here are the coordinates."

He lifted up a small plastic card printed with a string of figures and symbols. Rodrone leaned forward and pressed a button, recording the image.

"It's in a building in the main street, supposed to be the Desert Trading Company. That's a front, of course. I think they squeeze some ldnda juice out of plants in the desert."

"Crule didn't go there himself?"

The other shook his head. "No, he did just what you said. It would have been too far, anyway. He's outside somewhere. Do you want to speak to him?"

"Don't bother, there won't be time." Instantaneous space-tensor

communication always faded out after a few minutes, after which a period of hours or days was needed for the tortured space strains to smooth themselves out again. "We'll be heading for Sultery. I'll call again later."

Cutting the connection, he leaned back, feeling a warm glow of anticipation at the good news. Although he also engaged in legitimate mining operations, his preferred activity was to hold up freight ships in space and force their captains to sell their cargoes at rates highly favorable to him-self. If he was in a particularly impatient mood, he took their cargoes for nothing.

The finesse lay in not coming too much to the attention of the Guild of Merchant Houses. They found it difficult to protect their shipments and almost impossible to trace where they went after requisition. But if their losses became too troublesome, they would sometimes mount heavily-armed expeditions of war to hunt down a suspected pirate.

The difficulty for a marauder was in knowing what cargoes would be going where at what time. Rodrone had hit on the idea of getting his information at source, from the Houses' own computer records. His early investigations had soon revealed, however, that the Houses were already alert to this possibility; they kept their information in out-of-the-way places whose locations were known to only a few. Crule, Rodrone's master con-man, had spent six months as a spy in the Jal-Dee household to find out where this one was.

But now for the pleasurable experience he had promised himself. It was a very cerebral pleasure. Normally the book that lay on his table would have been all but unintelligible to him. His way of thinking was too ephemeral, his interests too widely scattered for concentrated study. That was why he had recourse to the drug DPKL-59. It brought on enhanced consciousness, coupled with such a fantastic heightening of comprehension that meaning glowed at him from equations that otherwise would have left him baffled. So speeded up was his thought that he could race through a book of this kind at twenty times his natural pace.

Afterwards he often understood little of what he had read. But meantime he had the experience of plumbing mysteries and entering extraordinary realms of the intellect, and the flavor of that experience stayed with him.

"Genius in a bottle," he murmured to himself, taking a little phial of the

drug from a locked cabinet. As he poured it carefully into a pressure injector, his mind went back momentarily to the disappointed bondsmen. They were unlucky, he reflected, to have got caught up in his affairs. Rodrone, for all his introspection, had never been sure whether to sum himself up as an unusually strong man or an unusually weak one, for though he was given some sort of allegiance by enough men to man a whole squadron of ill-assorted ships, that was no criterion; men of their sort tended to congregate around the most unlikely characters. He often had the feeling that there was no aim to his leadership, that in the end his willfulness would send the men who trusted him to irrevocable disaster.

But he was not one to feel regret or guilt about his shortcomings. Tomorrow they would set out for Sultery and action. For now, there was the heady delight of thoughts he had never before experienced. With a slight hiss the injector sprayed the drug in a high-pressure mist that penetrated the skin of his wrist and mingled with his bloodstream. His senses reeled; he went hurtling deep down into a fever of mystic abstraction where bodiless intelligence was lord of all.

II

They landed some miles out in the desert. It was dry, dusty and yellow; uneven plains were strewn with what looked like dirty sulphur. The *Stond* and the *Revealer*—the elephantine, clapped-out freighter had been abandoned after the fifth breakdown—settled down amid clouds of tawny dust and stood there like twin castles standing guard over a desolated chessboard.

They were close to sunset. The stars, visible even at noon, were brightening into the familiar blazing aspect of the Hub by night. In the distance, on the edge of the wilderness, could just be seen the flat-roofed buildings of Main-town.

Kulthol clapped his hands together with relish. "It looks like a real border town. Well, I could do with a night out!"

"Not a bad procedure," Rodrone mused. "No point in trying to be inconspicuous. We'll all go in and sample the local color. While that's going on, Clave and myself will get the print-out."

He phased up the external view screen to maximum magnification. Lights were flicking on in the town as the sun faded. The buildings were of colored plastic, the universal building material that in the last few hundred years had crawled all over the galaxy like a gaudy cancer, creating camp towns, transit towns, and endless stretches of quickly erected temporary shelters that lasted forever.

At nightfall Rodrone took eighteen men and five girls and made off over the desert in runabouts. None of the ex-bondsmen were among them—they had elected to drop out during a stopover in order to seek quieter employment—but he would never have included them in a job like this anyway.

They parked in the main street. Superficially the town was much like a thousand others, although very few people seemed to be about. A dusk wind blew up and spilled desultory veils of dust into the streets, moaning between the buildings. Rodrone's gaze traveled the frontages on either side of the street, locating the Desert Trading Company, an undistinguished building sandwiched between a bar and a small processing plant.

Despite its tawdry air, there was an undercurrent to the town, Rodrone decided. A gauntness, a skeleton-in-the-cup-board feeling. He fingered his beard thoughtfully. Probably they didn't get many visitors here, he mused.

Further down the street was a larger bar, fronted with a lit-up advertising display. Kulthol pointed. "Let's tank up." Pushing through swing doors, they crowded into a big, dusky room. A group of locals seated at a table inspected them curiously, warily. Noisily Rodrone's people debouched on to a cluster of tables, calling to the bar at the other end of the room for drinks. But Kulthol headed straight for the bar and Rodrone, Clave and a few others drifted after him.

Kulthol's practiced eye ranged over the rows of bottles and casks. "What's that green stuff?"

The barman was chewing a stick of something that gave off a faint flavor of spice. "The local brew. 'Roadrunner.'

Til try some of that."

The man poured out several glasses. Kulthol picked up one and knocked it straight back. Rodrone took one too, drank it more cautiously. At the

first sip a thousand red-hot needles seemed to be gouging out the inside of his mouth, but after that he became numb and it was fairly pleasant.

"What the hell do you make this poison from?" Kulthol demanded, taking another.

"It's brewed from a desert plant. It pulls its roots up and migrates with the seasons."

"You mean to say you have seasons out here?"

"The plants think so, but I don't."

They laughed briefly. "We saw your ships coming down," the barman said. "You here on business?"

"Just dropped in for a drink," Clave said. The barman looked uneasy but moved off to serve the others.

Probably scared we're going to loot the town, Rodrone thought. He glanced around at the locals in the bar, then became aware of moaning harmonies emanating from some-where above them. Clave's gaze went to the ceiling as if in fascination.

"Listen to that!" he murmured.

The barman returned in time to hear his evident praise. "That's Ruby," he declared proudly. "Plays just beautifully, doesn't she?" He jerked his thumb. "We've got another place upstairs. You can go and listen if you want. It will be pretty crowded soon, though."

"I think I will." Clave made for a stairway. Rodrone moved to restrain him, then thought better of it.

"What's wrong?" Kulthol whispered a few moments later. He was quick to notice any change on Rodrone's face.

Rodrone stroked his beard uncertainly. "Let's go upstairs," he said finally.

The upper room was more luxuriously furnished than the one down below. The lights were warm, soft and skillfully arranged. The drinks were dispensed from a decorated counter.

"Just listen to it. That's real music."

The remark was made reverently by a man sitting at a corner table. A girl sat with him, her face as rapt as his own.

From the opposite end of the room came an apallingly ugly noise compounded of gut-jarring discords and childish travesties of melody. A grossly fat woman sat at an electronic instrument, the flesh of her upper arms rippling as she attacked the keyboard. She was dressed in a frilly, flowered frock grotesquely inappropriate to her bulging form.

Something in Rodrone's mind began to crawl. Clave, he saw, was as hooked as the locals. Kulthol seemed slightly puzzled but apparently was not sure whether he had noticed anything unusual. He drifted between the occupied tables towards the bar.

Suddenly the music changed slightly, giving out sharp, irregular bursts. Rodrone saw the barman's face go into a seizure of uncontrolled twitches, and at the same time felt tentative tugs at the muscles of his own face.

He walked across to the seated fat woman, leaning low so that she could hear him.

"You certainly are talented," he said pleasantly. She made a small tossing movement with her head, her lips pursing in the tight smile of a woman who drinks praise. "Thank you," she murmured. Meanwhile her hands continued to roam at random over the keyboard, producing her atrocious parody of music.

"Can you play the *Maid of Arrailis*?" "Of course."

"I'm surprised," Rodrone told her. "Well, listen: you're going to play it *all night long*. And the minute I start getting any strange feelings, I'm going to blast your head right off your shoulders." He tapped the handgun on his thigh. The woman shot him a glance of pure hatred from beady eyes. Her fingers faltered; then her hands withdrew to her lap.

Rodrone made his way back to Clave and gave him a nudge. "I think this job is best dealt with as soon as possible." Then to Kulthol: "Keep things under control. If anything funny happens, get out fast."

Clave followed him down the stairs and into the street Rodrone gave

scarcely a glance at the others. He stood on the sheened surface, glancing up and down the street. He didn't trust the woman upstairs to obey him, but there was little he could do about it for the moment if he was to carry out his mission.

"Rodrone..." Clave's usually glassy stare contained a dazed, puzzled look. "Did something happen in there?"

"That woman at the organ," Rodrone said. "She rules this town, though the people here don't know it. It's all to do with that or^an she plays."

"Organ? She plays damned well, but—"

"She doesn't play it at all," Rodrone told him. "She fust makes you think she does. I've come across one like it just once before in my life, and it's lucky for us I did. There's not much to it, really: the resonators are precisely tuned to rhythms in the nervous system. She can give those suckers up there any emotion she wants to. With a bit more skill she can take control of the motor system, make them walk, run, turn cartwheels. If she's really skilled, which I don't think she is, she can make them have thoughts, hallucinations. But as a matter of fact I don't think she can even control it at motor level more than enough to play a few nasty tricks."

Clave stared at him in amazement. "Why does she do it?"

"She enjoys it. She likes being Queen of the May. They all sit there and talk about how wonderful she is."

Clave chuckled. Something of his old air came back as he struggled to overcome the degradation he felt at having been emotionally manipulated. "I guess we all have our thing."

Yes, thought Rodrone, but few people found a way to such complete realization of such tawdry desires, as had the woman upstairs. When he thought of it, he had met her everywhere. Fat women in drinking places playing keyboard instruments of every description, jealously guarding the attention they imagined their position brought them and spitefully resentful towards any interloper.

Something of a mystery surrounded the origin of the nerve organs. Rodrone believed there were only a few in existence, created by some twisted master of the art. Many men had tried to make replicas, but they

just didn't work reliably.

"Say," said Clave, "wouldn't the Merchant Houses like to own gadgets like that!"

They sauntered down the street and slipped into the shadow in the porch of the Desert Trading Company. Clave slipped an instrument from his pocket, waved it about vaguely in the air. "No response."

There wouldn't be. The House of Jal-Dee was relying on subterfuge to guard its secrets, not alarm systems. Clave applied a small slab of metal to the door, near the lock. It clicked and hummed. Clave pressed a stud and pushed the door open.

"Enter O King," he said, turning to Rodrone with a grin. They went inside, slipped on goggles and surveyed the interior by the light of an ultraviolet flashlamp so as not to be seen from outside. They were in an office: a couple of desks, chairs, and a cupboard. Three doors led to other rooms further back.

Clave waved his gadget about, expertly interpreting a series of writhing images that incoming pulse-trains built up on an image plate. "They've got it in the cellar," he said. After trying all the doors, they located a flight of descending steps.

The computer stood in a steel mesh cage. The only access was through a tiny door which appeared deceptively simple to open.

"Yeah... well, this one has alarms, naturally." Clave flashed the ultraviolet beam about in the darkness, then on a sudden thought switched to visible light and pushed back his goggles. He dipped into his tool-bag and pulled out something looking like a gun with a six-inch wide barrel

"Any problems?" Rodrone asked.

"No, there's nothing very elaborate here. This thing should keep the alarm happy." Locating the alarm, he fixed the* gun to the wall nearby. Any changes in the flow of current which might trigger the alarm would automatically be compensated.

Stooping, they stepped into the cage and looked the computer over. It

was a standard model with high capacity and an autonomous internal economy, befitting its function as an unsupervised storage unit. It would be in constant contact with Jal-Dee offices light-years away, using a short-burst space-tensor communicator that was suitable for computers, though inconvenient for normal human conversations.

A print-out unit was also attached. Clave had been worried that this part of the equipment might have been removed when the computer was installed, complicating the operation; all he had to do now was to induce the computer to render a print-out without notifying its masters, which wasn't hard.

For the purpose he had brought along what was practically a miniature computer in its own right. It was box-shaped, just small enough to pick up with one hand. One surface was metallic and perfectly smooth; the other had a glistening picture plate, at the moment blank.

He blew dust off it, leaned with one hand on the computer to steady himself. He was, Rodrone realized, slightly less than sober. The Roadrunners he had drunk had taken effect.

"Say, I just thought." Clave started to laugh. "All the others back there, being put through their paces by the Queen of the May. They'll never live it down."

Rodrone looked at him somberly. "Your humor could be classed as misplaced," he said evenly. "That woman is evil and vicious. And that thing she plays can make your muscles contract so as to break every bone in your body."

"What? And we left them in there?"

"It was either that or foul up the job. Besides, she can't do much immediately. We're strangers, not the usual townfolk. There's a warming-up period before the average nervous system begins to respond properly in resonance to the vibrations."

"But what about me? I was—"

Rodrone could not help but smile, unable despite himself to save his friend from further indignity. "I said the average nervous system. You're different. A perfect mark!"

Looking down at the floor, Clave considered the proposition wryly. "Well, we'd better not waste time," he said finally.

Previously he had prepared some programs for the electrotronic computer thief. Placing the smooth side against the casing of the larger machine, he slid it about, searching for the best site. Numbers, symbols and evanescent diagrams flickered across the screen. Crouching, Clave studied them, found a convenient point to inject his signals. As he pressed a button, electronic probe beams passed through the casing and linked up with the computer's circuits.

A brief clatter came from the print-out unit. Rodrone stepped over to it and ripped off a sheet of paper.

It was all there. Details of cargoes, and space-time coordinates for all planned shipments within fifty light-years for the next three months.

"This is what we want, let's go."

Clave stood up and put away the little box. They turned to leave.

But suddenly the print-out clattered again, breaking the silence of the cellar with a life of its own.

"What's that, a second copy?"

"I guess it's still obeying the order to print out," Clave answered dubiously, "but it must be something new."

Rodrone ripped off the new sheet and held it to the light. The computer was receiving a fresh input from somewhere. On the slick paper an angry conversation was emerging between Jal-Dee officials and an unknown interlocutor.

"We demand that you hand over the object."

"Impossible. Ownership is in the hands of our clients."

Evidently they had missed the first part of the argument while obtaining their own print-out. After a pause, the machine delivered another burst. Rodrone bent to read it.

"Human ownership of the object is not admissible. Streatt claim is

absolute. You will notify of whereabouts."

"*It is already in transit.*" Jal-Dee seemed to be weakening.

"*We will intercept. Notify.*"

"*Your claim must be made through the courts.*" Even in the neutral print it was possible to detect the note of tired desperation.

"*Human courts mean nothing to the Streall. Either you comply or Streall fleets will occupy the Kantor system"*

Kantor was more or less owned by Jal-Dee. Rodrone waited to see what the result of this bellicose threat would be. There was a long, suspenseful pause. Then, without further comment, a string of figures followed giving the route of the contended cargo. "*The item you require is cargo item 401*."

"*The Streall!" Rodrone breathed. "Trust Jal-Dee to back down, the spineless worm!"

Before Clave could answer a faint but regular *phttt-phut-phttt* sounded from the direction of the street. It was the sound of an alpha gun being fired. The two men glanced meaningfully at one another. Wordlessly, Rodrone ripped off the last sheet and squeezed through the cage door.

He waited while Clave swiftly closed the door and gathered up his equipment from where he had clamped it on the wall. Together they mounted the steps and peered through the windows of the front office.

From here the hideous noise of Ruby's organ swelled out into the street, pouring hatred into the wretched town. Ro-drone's people were retreating from the drinking house, firing into it as they did so. It was easy to guess what had happened. Ruby, determined to have her way, had whipped up the townspeople into a frenzy of resentment against the newcomers. The rest was inevitable.

Worriedly he glanced at Clave. It was impossible to say how he would respond to the weird harmonies in this new situation.

"Go to the runabouts and stay there," he ordered firmly. "Don't move, just wait for us."

Clave nodded uncertainly. Outside, they took opposite directions, Rodrone keeping close to the wall. Most of his people seemed to be already in the street, covering the bar entrance with a fusillade of fire to prevent anyone else coming out. But answering shots were beginning to come from the upstairs windows.

The men and girls were edging towards the runabouts, watching carefully for attack from another quarter. Rodrone sought out Kulthol.

"Damned planet-bound trash!" the redhead cursed. "They started it, not us. We lost four inside: three men and a girl. We ought to hammer this town right into the ground."

"Never mind about that, let's get out of here."

Kulthol yelled a command. They all broke into a run, quickly covering the remaining distance to the runabouts. Less than a minute later they were roaring towards the outskirts of Maintown in a reckless convoy. As they struck the desert, Ruby apparently turned her instrument up to an unexpectedly powerful amplification, for the howling shrieks of the organ reached out to them to set their skulls vibrating.

The lights receded behind them, the wheels of the trucks riding quietly over the yellow dust. Rodrone's pity for the town was mingled with contempt, as well as disgust for the woman responsible for its degradation. Behind them, headlights probing the darkness told him that a pursuit was in progress. Picking up a bulky beam tube from the floor of the truck, he sent a searing bolt of destructive energy crackling over the desert. Let them bite on that.

But the danger was past, apart from a few random shots that zipped occasionally past them. In minutes they had reached the ships and without delay winched the trucks aboard. Rodrone made straight for the control room, where he sat brooding for some minutes, vaguely aware that some of his crew had excitedly manned the ship's armaments and were sending warning shots crashing into the desert floor. If he gave his men their head, he thought, they would probably wipe out the pursuers in revenge for the killings, and follow it up by destroying the town.

Kulthol's face appeared on an image plate, transmitting from the *Revealer*. "Shall we sit here or take off?"

"Take off. This place nauseates me."

"Me too. How about dropping a shell on the whole nasty little mess? They deserve it."

"No, let them alone, they've got punishment enough." Kulthol did not understand him, but made no reply.

Thoughtfully Rodrone took the pilot's seat and gave the warning takeoff signals. The air thrummed momentarily as the *d rover* engines took effect, herding atoms so as to produce an irresistible net motion in one direction, and the *Stond* slid smoothly into the air. Swiftly they rose beyond the atmosphere. Kulthol's face showed itself again. "Orbit? Or do we have a destination?"

"We do." Rodrone fished in his pocket and brought out the last piece of paper he had torn from the Jal-Dee computer's print-out unit. He held it up to the scanner tube. "Take a record of this. We'll intercept at the earliest point possible. Work it out for me, will you, and give me the figures."

"A cargo, yet!" Kulthol crowed. "Have they got something nice?"

"We're not robbing Jal-Dee this time," Rodrone told him. "We're doing a snatch from the Streall."

He noted the startled look on Kulthol's face, followed by a pensive, nervous look in his eye. But he gave him no time to argue.

"Call me back with the figures. I'll explain when we're en route." With that, he cut the connection.

III

Rodrone pointedly ignored the divided opinion that he knew had arisen both within his own ship and the *Revealer* coasting on a parallel course some dozen miles distant. Loyalty, obedience and faith in his judgment were qualities that he never attempted to cultivate in any under his command. He led by pure nerve. He did not believe in permanent coercion, either physical or psychological.

Paradoxically, it was the best method of creating a dependable following, though not always conducive to the interests of safety. The fool, the madman, the crank, obstinately oblivious to dangers frighteningly obvious to anyone else, often took up the lead at the point where the nerve of the more cautious faltered.

At any rate, Rodrone was adamant in his resolve and the misgivings of a few crew members soon ceased to reach his ears, as he had known they would. And in one companion at least, he had every possible support: Clave delighted in the prospect of an escapade that would enrage both the house of Jal-Dee and the awesome Streall in one blow.

He knew little, of course, of the heady, crazed moment of feeling that had prompted Rodrone's decision. It had felt like pulling out the rock that would bring an avalanche down on his own head; but once he had formed it, he refused to reverse his intention. Anything over which the inhuman Streall took such trouble must possess unusual properties. Probably it was a Streall artifact, which itself was sufficient to arouse Rodrone's interest.

Much of the voyage Rodrone spent lying on a couch, watching the stars through an observation window. The Hub was a sight familiar to him all his life, yet nevertheless it could still keep him spellbound for hours. The stars piled up in clouds, snowdrifts, glowing globular clusters and shapeless masses; suffused through the generally white light were delicate colors, pinks, faint blues and yellows. And throughout the endless continent of drifting stars the species *Homo sapiens* was spreading relentlessly, haphazardly; no one knew quite how far, still less where the limit lay. It was an endless universe of worlds, of opportunities, of possibilities.

In view of that, it was a jarring fact, to Rodrone's mind, that in the whole of the known hub there was only one race to maintain an interstellar presence, and it was even more strange that in such a plethora of worlds the Streall should so coldly resent man's entry on to the scene. But then the Streall did not have minds like men's minds. They did nothing that was not part of a centuries-old plan, and their vision of the universe was authoritarian and strict.

At first there had been much conflict. The Streall had seemed to be bewildered by man's debut and coldly resentful of his lack of a central authority which could enforce agreements. But their disdain soon led them to shun even military contact, and their depredations fell short of

all-out war. To this day they occasionally moved into systems to stall potential human colonists, and sometimes they claimed ownership of already settled planets and enforced massive eviction, but their attitude generally was characterized by an icy, distant enmity.

Rodrone had already gained some personal experience of them. He had briefly been their prisoner during one of their aggressive campaigns, and had gained an incomplete but chilling insight into their way of thinking. They viewed themselves as created by nature to be the dominant life-form in the galaxy, and man as a disrupter of cosmic order.

It puzzled Rodrone that there should be only two races at large in the galaxy, and that they should be so different in nature. Streall philosophy frightened him. It had a relentless, mathematical logic, and furthermore, the Streall were a truthful race not given to prevarication or opinion-forming. The hard-fact nature of their thought gave their assertions a threatening credibility.

Nevertheless their philosophy was utterly repugnant to Rodrone. He subscribed to no belief in a supreme deity, in an overall cosmic plan or even in immutable physical laws. If he could be said to harbor any religious feelings at all, then his was a religion of unrestrained action, of spontaneous enterprise and disregard for any authority, whether biological or divine. In short, he believed in a universe with the safety valve taken off.

And so Rodrone lay staring at the stars, while in his turmoil of a soul lay the seeds of unimagined deeds, waiting any opportunity to burst bizarrely into flower.

The only flaw in the plan was that the Streall might already have overhauled the merchant ship. Certainly they would not be long in coming, and for that reason Rodrone had already contacted Brüde to arrange a rendezvous, to which they could retire with better chances if it came to a running fight.

Because of their perfect knowledge of their prey's whereabouts, they fished into its vicinity with all the advantage of surprise, coming within striking range before its radar could give effective warning. The *Stond* and the *Revealer* took up positions on either side of the Jal-Dee vessel. Electric beams prodded threateningly, cracklingly, on its hull.

Rodrone quickly established a television link. He wore a space helmet to obscure his face—an elementary though ineffective safeguard against the inevitable check that would be made later in Jal-Dee's records. When the captain of the other ship appeared on his screen he wasted no time in argument.

"Open your personnel ports. We are coming aboard."

The merchant captain's face was a mask of fury. "You've made a mistake this time, my man—"

"That's my affair. Open the ports or we'll blast a way through. If you attempt to accelerate, we will open fire."

Abruptly he cut the connection, then motioned to Clave. Together they lumbered off, clumsy in their suits, to join the party that had already gathered in the space-raft.

Wordlessly they took their seats in the open raft, gripping a bar to keep them in their places. With only a faint vibration, the raft jetted across the void to the other ship. Minutes later a smooth hull loomed over them as they approached the port.

At first Rodrone thought the captain was going to disobey his order. But at the last minute the circular port slid open. Following a long established procedure, the pilot of the raft landed it squarely against the hull and fixed it there with adhesive clamps; they had abandoned the use of magnetic clamps when an enterprising defender had expelled their attack raft by applying a reverse magnetic field, leaving the boarders stranded in a hostile ship. A dozen men clambered out of the raft and drifted cautiously to the opening.

Rodrone was half expecting a trap. The captains of most house-owned ships did not have the stomach for a fight, but the present one would be in a state of fright because of his expected encounter with the Streall. But the chamber within was empty. Using their gas jets they moved to the inner port and operated the lock. The outer port closed, and in the next instant the inner one opened.

Facing them was a broad-shouldered man in a gaudy uniform. His insignia announced him as the second officer.

"You can put those away," he said, waving nonchalantly at their weapons. "You're in luck; the captain has decided to do business with you. If the rest will remain here, your leader may accompany me to the control room."

Rodrone pointed to Clave and stepped forward, accompanied by his sidekick. The second officer frowned. "I did say *one* . . . but... well, all right then."

Before leaving, Rodrone turned to the others. "If anything seems fishy, do something. The initiative's yours."

With a dignified, hurt silence the officer conducted them along corridors of plastic metal. Once he invited them to break the seals on their space helmets, but they declined. It was bad tactics to rely on an air supply which could easily be contaminated by the other party.

The control room was already occupied by three men, the captain and two crew members. Rodrone knew from their shifty looks that they were armed, though the weapons were not visible.

"All right," the captain began in clipped tones. He looked as if he was under great strain. "I suppose you want my cargo. Well, it's a good haul. We're carrying Daimler silks and quinquiline, mainly. Very costly materials. So make me an offer. I don't expect to get a *fair* price from you scoundrels, but let me tell you that I'll fight rather than let it go for a ruinous one..."

He trailed off. Something in Rodrone's ominous silence unnerved him.

"Well dammit, get on with it!" he cried in exasperation. "You robbers are absolutely intolerable. You board my ship at gunpoint, you jam my communicators—an even worse breach of principle—and then you stand there like robots without even the courtesy of uncovering your faces!"

Rodrone broke his silence, his voice sounding through the speaker on his chest.

Item 401."

The captain's face paled. He seemed unable to believe that the very worst was happening. "What do you mean?"

"Your silks and quinquelines are safe this time. We only want one small item. No. 401 on your list of lading."

"Impossible." The captain had to lean on a panel of the capacious control boards, as if in danger of falling. "I don't know where you heard about it or why you want it, but in any case it's—it's—"

"It's wanted by the Streall," Clave finished for him. His dry voice chuckled eerily from his suit speaker. "Don't worry, honor's satisfied. You can't do a thing against our firepower."

As Clave spoke, Rodrone moved against the two crew-men, his suited body bulking frighteningly over them. They made no move under the threat of his battle beamer and he quickly disarmed them. Then he moved ponderously about the control room, hurling open cupboards, pulling open drawers and flinging stacks of papers to the floor.

At the same time he switched off his suit speaker and put himself in contact with the men by the entrance port. "Proceed to the stowage area," he instructed. "You are looking for cargo item 401."

"What do you want; what are you doing?" shouted the captain, his fear drowning in fury.

"Your stowage listing!" Rodrone boomed at him. "We could spend hours rummaging in that hold of yours!" He wanted to move fast, to offset the chance that the crew might be well-informed enough to prepare a fake cargo item.

"We don't have stowage listings. Everything's sorted out at the unloading."

Rodrone didn't believe him. In the interests of rapid delivery there was nearly always a pattern to the stowage dispositions.

He continued to search. But a scant ten minutes later his communicator beeped.

"We've found it, chief. We managed to persuade one of the staff to be our guide."

"Is it portable?"

"Yeah, if you've got two or three pairs of spare hands."

"Good, then it will go through the personnel port. Move it to the raft and we'll join you there."

"Are we taking anything else? They've got some good stuff."

"I'd like to but... we'll have trouble on our hands if we don't put a bit of distance between ourselves and here." He had not bothered to deaden his suit speaker for the last exchange and the captain evidently took great exception to his attitude. "You don't care how much trouble you leave in *my* hands," he objected in an aggrieved tone.

Clave lifted his gloved hand in a mock salute. "Some people are just born with the cards stacked against them," he said. "Don't worry, it wasn't your fault."

"Would you like to have to explain *that* to the Strell?" The captain's fear of the aliens was exaggerated and superstitious. Rodrone did not bother to explain that their cold logic would attach no blame to him, once they were persuaded that he was telling the truth.

Leaving the control room they made their way quickly to the personnel port. The others were coming up the corridor, pushing a big crate on a set of castors. Rodrone operated the port lock.

The inner lid should have swung open. But nothing happened.

Rodrone cursed. It was clear what was taking place. The captain had decided upon a last desperate attempt to foil the bandits, even if only for the sake of the record, now that the danger to himself personally was remote. By means of the central controls he had locked the ports fast, and now would be dispatching armed men to attempt to recover Rodrone's prize.

"Cover the corridor," he snapped. He had barely spoken when figures appeared around the corner and let loose a few zipping pencil-beams from handguns. No harm was done, and the assailants soon took cover when Rodrone's men returned the fire. Like most bondsmen, they did not have the stomach for a really determined fight.

Consequently only an occasional energy pencil flashed at random down

the corridor. Rodrone motioned to a man who held a heavy-duty beam tube, silently indicating the inner door of the port. The man directed the broad beam on to the edge of the door, blasting a head-sized hole. Savagely Rodrone kicked the panel with the heel of his boot, then yanked at the emergency manual handle. Reluctantly the door slid back, its clamping field broken.

From then on their exit went without difficulty. Roughly they manhandled the crate through the door. Once free of the ship's artificial gravity, it floated in the globular cavity, drifting and rotating with inertia. Rodrone beckoned his men into the interport chamber, while the outer door received the same treatment as the first. As the panel was punctured, an automatic bulkhead slammed down behind them, cutting them off from immediate attack. A second or two later a *woosh* of air pushed them all out into space.

Then, clumsily because they had only their gas jets for leverage, they maneuvered the crate to the raft. Even while it was being lashed down the pilot took off, vibrating away towards the *Stond* that nestled gleamingly against the brilliant background of stars.

Behind them the Jal-Dee ship dwindled, leaving a crew who were pathetically wishing they were a thousand light-years away.

Rodrone had scarcely unsuited himself before the approach detector watch was sounding the alarm.

"Something coming up fast, roughly zenith-zero-zero-west. Estimated time of contact, twenty minutes from now."

"Looks like we only just beat them to it," Rodrone grunted. "And in five minutes time they'll know what's happened. All right, you know what to do."

Signals flashed between the *Revealer* and the *Stond*. They hurtled away, accelerating rapidly on divergent courses. With luck, the oncoming Streall would lose track of them before fully appreciating the situation.

But for once luck was not with them, or at least not all the way. They were lucky in that the Streall had sent only one ship, but it immediately tracked and pursued, and the ploy of separate courses failed in that it followed the *Stond*. Able to change direction with greater facility, it

quickly began to close the distance.

When it came close enough for the detectors to form an outline, Rodrone realized he had problems. He had expected that the Streall, if they sent a warship at all, would send their equivalent of a light cruiser, somewhat comparable to the *Stond* in firepower and in keeping with the importance he imagined they attached to the mission. But the vessel now menacingly near was one of their rare capital ships, easily capable of taking on a dozen *Stonds*.

He calculated he had one advantage. The Streall would not want to risk destroying the article in the crate that now rested on the floor of his control room. With this in mind, he decided to attack on the instant and then try to slip out of sight.

The elongated, turreted shape swelled in the vision screens. Rodrone moved to the weapons desk console, rapping orders to the missile and gun crews.

"Masking volley away."

Two waves of missiles sped away from the *Stond* in rapid succession. Each missile in the forward wave masked from the enemy's defense scanners a partner in the rear echelon, so that in the split second after the former was destroyed the latter could slip through unopposed. It was a use of misdirection that Rodrone himself had devised.

There were two ways of meeting a missile attack: with anti-missiles or deflector fields. Either method was a matter of precise focusing and tended to leave the defender wide open for a few microseconds after application. The Streall ship, however, clearly had very quick responses. Rodrone's battle display plate showed the first wave meet total destruction, then most of the second wave immediately afterwards by a fresh defense volley. Even so, a few flashed onwards to blossom satisfyingly among the assemblages of turrets and casings.

Momentarily the Streall ship disengaged itself into three parts, assessing damage and considering procedure. All big Streall ships seemed to be capable of fractioning themselves indefinitely, as if held together by willpower.

Against such a ship, an opening masking volley had been the biggest

gun in Rodrone's armory. Its comparative ineffectiveness made escape even more imperative. He issued crisp orders to Braxon, the man in the pilot's seat. Despite the fact that the interior of the ship was normally proof against inertial changes, they all felt a sudden surge as the *Stond* slipped into overdrive.

Moodily Rodrone slipped from the weapons desk, prowling around the control room with a worried scowl on his face. He tried to remind himself that their lives need not seriously be in danger. If overhauled and trapped by the Streall, it would be easy to get away scot-free once they got what they were after. The Streall were not vindictive in a personal sense. But it was as if a fever had gripped him. The thing in the crate, whatever it was, had acquired an exaggerated, ludicrous value in his eyes.

In the first few seconds the Streall almost lost them. Interstellar travel is of necessity faster than light; and while the Streall ship could pace them easily, escape maneuvers depended on the fact that if the velocity difference between two ships was itself in excess of c , they found it hard to locate each other. Each time they knew the Streall had a fix on them, they changed direction, slipping once again into a murky half-invisibility until the pursuers, somehow, guessed their quadrant and once again moved into the same velocity bracket.

"They're getting closer." It was Clave speaking. As usual he tried to sound unconcerned, but there was a tension in his dry voice.

"Hurry it up, dammit!" Rodrone growled at the pair who were meantime busy on the other side of the control room. They were scanning star maps of the district, at the same time trying to build up a local picture by taking space-strain readings. Such a project would normally take hours to do properly; Rodrone, unreasonably, was expecting them to come up with results within minutes by using their intuitive instincts. The possibility that there were no results to come up with he refused to admit to himself.

Savagely he kicked the crate that was the focus of all the trouble, tying to catharsize his frustration.

"Stellar comet!" one of the map readers announced. They had found what they were looking for.

"Is it big enough?"

"Maybe. Anyway there isn't another near enough."

They typed on keys, conveying coordinates to the pilot board. Almost immediately the ship changed direction again.

"Here we go," Braxon said tightly. "Keep your fingers crossed!"

Dead silence suddenly permeated the whole ship. Most of them had never experienced this tactic before, and those who had did not wish to do so again. Stellar comets, swift, ceaseless travelers that swung in blazing parabolas around one slow-moving star after another, occurred by the million all over the galaxy, even in the outer parts of the lens. But the comets that were commonly found in the outlying regions were midgets; here in the Hub they were simply enormous, streaming islands of gas and rubble extending for light-years.

Although incredibly tenuous, the interior of such a comet was dense by the standards of interstellar space. To plunge into one at super-light speeds was little short of suicidal. There was no possibility of avoiding collisions with the scattered chunks of rock, and the gas that made up the bulk of the comet could build up an intolerable friction at high velocity despite being constituted of only a few atoms per cubic foot.

But actually they were safer at super-light velocities than they would have been at just below the speed of light. Some collisions would be inevitable; but it was a feature of travel faster than light that solid bodies could pass straight through one another without disturbance, provided their velocity relative to one another was well in excess of the speed of light and that the transit time was short. If contact lasted for longer than a scant few microseconds, then the result was that of a normal collision at very high speeds. The danger to the *Stond* was that they might encounter two or more rock clusters in rapid succession, aggregating a lethal time period.

Rodrone was muttering a figure to himself. "Sixty-seven... sixty-seven..." This was the probability percentage that the worst would happen. The figure was known to him because he had worked it out long ago for obvious reasons. Twice before he had entered a comet similar to this one in order to evade pursuit. With each repeat performance, he knew, his personal probability of disaster rose. But he still clung to the previous figure, like an incantation. Fleeting pictures of Egyptian gods flitted through his mind, as if he were praying to them.

A comet provided an escape route for two reasons. The danger to the pursuer was equally as great as to the pursued, and the former was rarely seized with the same nerve born of desperation. Secondly, detection became extremely difficult. The quarry stood a good chance of leaving the comet in a random direction without being spotted. If, that is, he had not perished first.

Vision screens turned milky as they penetrated the comet. Vague lumps coalesced momentarily out of the murk, fading just as quickly. Every man's stomach knotted in reaction to the awareness of jagged rock passing through metal and air and flesh, too fast for the electromagnetic fields surrounding their respective atoms to interact.

Only the rear vision screen showed a sharp image. The Streall ship unhesitatingly followed them into the danger area, splitting itself into five sections as it did so. Then the picture abruptly vanished. Braxon was making random course changes to send the *Stond* bouncing about the interior of the comet like a flitting ghost.

"Release the mass torpedoes," Rodrone ordered. If their luck held, the Streall would be unlikely to find them now. This was the second part of the strategy. Eight torpedoes, able by means of their specially adjusted *drover* engines to increase their inertial mass. Long-range detector techniques would find them indistinguishable from a large vessel like the *Strond*.

As soon as the torpedoes had been launched to follow their own random patterns through the murky inside of the comet, they thankfully turned the nose of the *Stond* to the nearest point of exit from this perilous mass of gas, dust and rock. But shortly before they broke into free space, someone pointed to one of the long-range screens with a gasp.

The remains of what had until recently been one section of the Streall ship was drifting unpowered. It was a mangled, junked pile. One half had vanished completely in some cataclysmic explosion. The other exuded a stream of bodies, objects, fragments, gases and liquids.

Five times sixty-seven, Rodrone thought. That made three hundred and thirty-five per cent. Dead certainty.

IV

After he had set course for Brüde, Rodrone took a crowbar and levered open the crate to unpack his find.

Inside the splintered boards he encountered first fluffy white packing material, which he scattered impatiently about the control room until he came to a smooth, glossy surface. Then, like a man who has caught his first glimpse of gold, he broke open the remaining boards and strewed aside the packing material until the supposed Streall artifact stood revealed.

It was a flawless, crystal-clear lens about four feet in diameter and three thick, with a beautifully brilliant sheen superior to any plastic Rodrone knew, but more like ancient glass. His fascinated, attention was immediately trapped, like a moth attracted to a flame, by a glowing swirl of light that occupied the central region, a blazing coruscation. At first he was fooled into thinking that it moved, but in fact it was frozen. The effect came from the impression it gave of ceaseless energy.

Rodrone blinked. Why did it amaze him so? It was only a gimcrack gadget, he told himself. Anybody could make one.

Nevertheless the impression of something remarkable and magical remained. He was about to examine the lens further when one of the men lounging about the control room and watching with interest suddenly murmured in bemusement.

"Say, look at that_____"

Rodrone looked. So far, apart from the inner swirl of light, the cylindrical prism had seemed to be perfectly transparent and limpid. Now colored shadows were developing in it, growing swiftly stronger until definite pictures formed. It was as if the device was warming up, for suddenly the definitions sharpened and the images became solid. The whole outer part of the prism surrounding the central light turned into a kaleidoscope of moving pictures, each different and with no apparent relation to the others.

Could it be some kind of picture show, an alien magic lantern? Or perhaps a communicator, or instruction device? Rodrone leaned close, peering into the glass and focusing on one scene. As he did so it seemed to expand and fill his vision, though dimly he was aware that objectively it was no larger than any of the others.

He saw a flat landscape dotted with spindly trees. Stilt-like beings, tall with angular stick limbs, worked on the construction of a machine as skeletal as themselves. As Rodrone watched, an aircraft sped swiftly out of the distance, borne on wide, flat wings. The stilt-beings whirled around, tugging frantically to bring weapons to bear on the aircraft, but in vain. A splayed beam shot down at them, and everything it touched exploded. The airplane banked and swung low over the scene, surveying the broken sticks of beings and machinery that were scattered over a wide area. The picture dwindled to nothing as the plane leveled off and vanished again into the distance.

He turned his eyes to another scene. He seemed to pan in on a gleaming white city, approaching it from the air. A sparkling tower rose like a huge finger, and some distance from it a vast screen had been erected. Somehow or other the tower was projecting symbols and pictures on to the screen, visible from all over the city. A flurry of curly glyphs was followed by a foxlike face, mouthing and gesticulating angrily.

With a deep sigh Rodrone straightened. There was a varied succession of such screens, each one in its own way fascinating. They seemed to range over a dozen worlds, all unknown to him, and he had no doubt that the full repertoire would number thousands. But what was the purpose of it all?

By now all the crewmen present had clustered around the prism and were watching it avidly. Among the comments, Rodrone caught one from Clave.

"Eh, there's a man in this one."

He hurried around to the other side of the big lens, and saw that Clave was right—at least, he thought so. It was impossible to say whether the figure in the glass was genuinely a member of *Homo sapiens* because his back was turned and he was dressed in a brown robe and cowl, like the garment of a monk from ancient Earth Rodrone had once seen in a picture. But the hands, which were visible, were fully human. The monk sat brooding on a rock in some indeterminate place, his head resting on his hand.

"He's just sitting there," Clave said emptily.

Though surprised to see a human being included in the Streall picture show, Rodrone gave the vision barely a glance. He still could not be certain

whether the lens would repay study or not, but something in him insisted that it would. Suddenly, he felt savagely possessive about it.

"Take it to my cabin," he ordered curtly.

"What, don't we get to see the pictures?" someone complained. "It's boring in here."

But Rodrone ignored the grumbles and affirmed his wishes with an irritable wave of his hand. Nobody questioned his mood. They knew when to humor him.

For the rest of the voyage, he decided, he would study the lens alone. When he got to Brüde, he would find means of tearing every secret from it; he was bent on that, after the trouble he had already taken.

But, he reflected, he would need help.

The sun was slowly traversing the western rim of the crater as Rodrone returned from his daily walk around his base. Already half the crater was in shadow, but a mellow wash of light struck the further wall and penetrated into the mouths of various openings to storage caverns, living quarters and so on.

Brüde was a warm, balmy world, well suited to the life of carefree sensuality his men liked to indulge in when they were not roaming space on the pretext of making a living. The sights and sounds of the usual evening bacchanalia on the point of warming up met his senses as he passed through a low-slung entrance.

The recreation area was the size of a small dance hall. Perfumes wafted into the air from diaphanously clad girls whose presence, however, left Rodrone cold despite his hardly having touched a woman for years. That was due to the drag he took, DPKL-59, which as a side effect to its artificial stimulation of the intellectual function also took away the sex drive. For a time he had occasionally combated this unlooked-for by-product by taking an aphrodisiac drug, L-dopa or Maire Rodex-5, but for some reason synthetically induced sex left him unsatisfied and he soon abandoned the practice.

He supposed he could also thank DPKL-59 for his not having seen his wife in the past five years. His information was that she was alive and well

on Land V, where he had last left her, but he had no immediate plans to contact her. Yet, with typical ambivalence, he still regarded her as his wife and constant companion. He felt that their relationship went deeper than the need for the repeated reassurances that frequent meetings would have given. For both of them, just the knowledge that the other existed somewhere in the Hub was enough.

At the moment his wife was as far from his thoughts as she was in space from his body. He scanned the room until catching sight of the most flamboyant figure there: Redace Trudo.

Redace was the man Rodrone had invited to help him fathom the secrets of the lens, as he had come to call the mysterious Streall artifact. As Rodrone approached he looked up from his earnest conversation with a reclining girl

"Greetings," he offered mockingly in his broad, lilting voice. "Why, it is just *too* much if you think you are going to tear me away from this *gorgeous* creature here."

Redace was an unashamed, outrageous dandy. Handsome to the point of caricature, he affected a foppish manner that led many, unacquainted with his enormous sexual appetites, to presume him to be homosexual. Sometimes Redace encouraged this impression for his own amusement.

He took great care over his clothes and had a taste for elaborate hats. At the moment he wore an embroidered, padded jacket in violet and silver with flaring side-skirts, and a hat constructed of a number of interleaving arcs, like the petals of a flower, topped by a jaunty feather. Slung from his waist was an old-fashioned mother-of-pearl holster. The decorated gun it carried contained specially tuned lasers to fire deadly beams in all Redace's favorite colors—lavender, apricot, rose pink and a pale, pretty green.

Rodrone had a considerable, though unspoken admiration for the man. He was what he would have liked to be himself: a released personality in complete harmony with himself. He had two qualities rarely found in one man; he was sensual and extrovert, but he also had a mind which mastered any subject with systematic ease. His knowledge of science was wide and penetrating, and he could read any book in Rodrone's library without the aid of DPKL-59. Yet despite his abilities, his outlook on life was unremittingly anarchistic. Scorning trade or productive enterprises,

he and his raggle-taggle band lived purely by piracy, which they pursued with such enthusiasm that more than -once the Merchant Houses had sent ships to destroy him* failing to winkle him out of the asteroid belt a few light-months from Brüde where he lived in a chaotic jumble of warrens.

"Have you finished the test?" Rodrone asked.

With an affected sigh Redace gestured elegantly, inviting him towards a nearby doorway.

Closing the door on the noise outside, Rodrone soaked up the already familiar scene in the workroom. The lens lay on the floor, surrounded by the equipment Redace had brought with him when his spacer thundered down into the crater. For nearly a month now they had applied every test and experiment they could think of, provided it seemed unlikely to damage the specimen.

Redace was something of an expert in vibratory techniques. Withdrawing behind soundproof baffles, he had bombarded the lens with vibrations of every frequency until the air sang and throbbed and their bodies ached with the dangerous pulsations. Then he had fed the results through a computer.

The computer's verdict had been interesting. The material of the lens—which they still could not analyze—was doped with atoms in a peculiar state of vibration. They were what gave off the glowing swirl in the center. Just what the atoms were they couldn't say, except that they were trans-plutonian.

Beyond that, they had discovered nothing concrete and were forced back on speculation. Redace still clung to the theory Rodrone had abandoned, that the lens was a picture device showing fictional playlets.

"But why are the Streall so desperate to have it back?" Rodrone objected.

The other shrugged. "Who knows what goes on in their outfit? Maybe it's some big chief Streall's kid's favorite toy, so he's sent out the army and the navy to find it."

Rodrone disliked any explanation that smacked of the trivial. He was

much too in awe of the lens to accept that. Hour after hour he sat gazing spellbound at the myriad shifting scenes. As he watched, his whole perspective on the universe seemed to change, twist and distort itself, so that several times he had to wing himself back to his normal way of thinking with a snap.

Only rarely did the lens show anything familiar. Most of the scenes were utterly alien. Also rare was any scene taking place in space. Almost invariably the brief dramas enacted themselves on planetary surfaces, under the sea, or sometimes deep underground. Duration varied between a few minutes and a few hours. The one exception to both this and the first rule was the picture that had begun shortly after the lens first came to life. For weeks the brown-garbed monk had sat on his hillock, head on hand, shifting position every now and then. One day he had sprung to his feet and gone walking, on and on. Eventually he met a group of ill-dressed men—thus putting an end to any doubts about his human nature—and harangued them vigorously until they turned to go. At that, the monk took a whip from his belt and lashed out at them, driving them before him like cattle.

The bizarre procession still continued, over arid hills, plains, fording sluggish rivers. Of all the stories to be seen so far in the lens, it was at once the most tedious and the most compelling.

Then, one day, Rodrone himself had jumped up as a new idea occurred to him.

"Got it. It's a communicator!"

"Hmm? Who's on the other end?"

"Nobody. And the scenes aren't fiction. Somehow or other the lens picks up real happenings from all over the galaxy. It's a sort of universal observer."

"Not tenable," Redace said after a moment's thought. "Some of the pictures clearly *are* fictional. Their meaning is symbolic."

Rodrone had to admit that was a flaw in his theory, but he refused to reject it on that account. The symbolic stories, he argued, could be codified versions of situations not readily comprehensible in direct form to the viewer for whom the lens was designed.

His theory suggested two tests. Firstly, there should be selective controls for the lens. Secondly, it seemed reasonable that the central swirl of light should represent the Hub of Thiswhirl, or the Milky Way, to give the galaxy its archaic name.

Even Redace had admitted himself to be knocked over by the suggestion. "Every atom a sun! But that's incredible."

But Rodrone urged that the avenue should be explored. The first part of their plan failed miserably. By no means could they influence or alter the kaleidoscope of pictures in the outer parts of the lens. Either its controls were beyond their reach, or it was a law unto itself. The difficulties involved even in contemplating the second part made Redace threaten to go back to his asteroids. Rodrone wanted him to map the doped atoms, not one at a time, which was impossible with their equipment, but by density and agglomeration. The intention was to compare this map with a similar one of suns in the galaxy, or failing that, in the Hub.

This latter scheme was the one that Rodrone hoped had now been completed. As soon as they entered the workroom Redace minced over to his computer-operated collator and turned to give Rodrone a teasing smile.

"Yes, our labor of love is all finished, sweetheart, and though I do say so myself it's all been a gorgeous waste of time." <

"The maps don't match?"

"No more than I would with a Vegan duck."

Rodrone sat down and looked at the monk, still driving his unwilling herd, whipping them now through rain and slush. Lightning flashes crashed down on either side of them, as if daring them to go on. And indeed, one thunderbolt struck a straggler and converted him to a charred mass. Against desperate protests, the monk took no notice and lashed his slaves on.

"Well, perhaps the doped atoms aren't meant to be a literal representation," he suggested. "Conceivably they play no part in the working of the thing at all. They could be ornamental, just a symbol of what it's for."

"Could be, could be. Excuse me, love, but do you know what I think? Eventually you'll see a picture you might have seen before. Then another one you *know* you've seen before. The whole sequence will repeat itself. There's a record of it all in there somewhere, which you have accidentally switched on."

"If that's all it is, why do the Streall want it so badly?"

"Do they? You may be overestimating that, you know. Take my tip, Rodrone dear, and relax for a bit. Anyway, who knows? I didn't say there was only *one* record. Maybe another one gives all the addresses where some Streall politician gets his kicks. The only copy, and *very* embarrassing if it falls into the wrong hands."

The trouble with Redace, Rodrone thought, was his conviction that the sordid explanations were usually the right ones. In exasperation he stood up and gave the lens a kick.

The door opened and he glanced around irritably at the stocky, pale-faced man who entered.

"Something's happening on the communicator, chief."

"What do you mean, 'something's happening'?" Rodrone almost snarled.

"It's—the Streall are through to us!"

Rodrone pushed him aside and went charging through the door, Redace following. The news had evidently spread, for there was consternation in the recreation area.

In the communicator room he found Clave and Kulthol. The redhead was scowling and rubbing the stubble on his chin. Clave, for all his death's grin, looked a little stunned.

The communicator screen was blank, but odd squawks came from the speaker, breaking eventually into intelligible speech. When the Streall spoke to one another it sounded like a cat spitting; when forced to use human speech, they made grotesque gobbling noises in a travesty of the human voice.

"You will please answer."

Rodrone noticed that the transmit key was still switched off. "Don't answer," he said. "Just let the signal fade."

"It doesn't show any sign of fading, chief," Kulthol told him gruffly. "They seem to have an angle that keeps space-tensor contact going for as long as they like."

"Well how in hell did they *find* us?" Clave shrugged. "I'd say they just tried hard." That might be possible, he realized. Under pressure from the Streall, a Jal-Dee investigation could eventually have come up with an informed guess. "What did they say?"

"Don't tell me you can't guess."

The room was beginning to fill up with curious visitors. Rodrone stepped forward and flicked the transmit key. "Repeat your message."

The gobble voice came through again in exaggerated and weird inflections which the speaker probably imagined were human ones.

"You possess an article we desire, stolen by you while in transit to us. We desire the return to us of the article." "Why?"

A pause. *"We will pay."*

"What do you offer?" Rodrone asked, intrigued. *"Name your price."* "We don't wish to sell."

"One million tons of a material known only to us, lighter than and of a tensile strength superior to any man-made material" "No."

A pause. *"One complete planet, uninhabited, eight thousand miles diameter, temperature, atmosphere and humidity equitable with Terra-standard, organically developed, already surveyed for minerals. Suitably placed for human trade routes."*

"No." Rodrone was enjoying this incredible game. *"Then we offer secrets of Streall science unknown to mankind."*

Now he was interested. "Will you advance, in speculation, a full explanation of the object we hold and a set of instructions for operating

it?" "No." "Then there's no trade."

"A cluster of twenty solar systems, comprising a total of a hundred and five usable planets and assorted moons, in the Karaga region currently controlled by us. The cluster contains a number of inferior but able races amenable to ma' nipulation. Ownership will be guaranteed to you and your descendants, with stipulations for defense against all comers?" "Listen to that!" breathed Crule. "Our own empire!"

"No!" said Rodrone harshly. "But how can we turn down an offer like that?"

"No!" His refusal this time was directed at his own people. At this, the gobble voice was silent for a moment. Then: *"Wait. We have new offers."*

Evidently Redace's evaluation of the lens had been totally inadequate. These fantastic attempts to buy it could only mean that its importance was equally fantastic;

He waited attentively to hear what they would offer next. But over a minute passed with no further sound from the speaker. He began to feel restless; then he noticed that a tingling sensation was passing through his body, as though trains of unaccustomed impulses were passing along his nerves.

At the same, time a thought, a compulsion, was growing in his mind. *"Make a trade,"* the compulsion urged. *"Strike a bargain."*

For a while the urge seemed to have the insistence of hunger or sexual desire. "All right," he started to say, **but** when he opened his mouth nothing but a wailing croak came out.

Alarmed, he moved his hand to his head—or tried to. **The** movement produced only an uncontrolled, shuddering shake. His body no longer worked properly.

But then the trembling feelings seemed to smooth themselves out and alarm passed away. The course open to him was becoming clear: the lens was no real use to him, whereas what he could take in exchange for it surpassed his wildest dreams. His limbs and voice came under his control again, albeit shakily. It was only in the momentary transition period, when thoughts tumbled wildly, that he was still sufficiently confused to know

that his mind had been interfered with.

Without stopping to think further he made a special movement with his wrist. Immediately his tiny gun was in his hand and he fired. Lagging only a bare second behind him, a rose-pink beam from Redace's gun followed suit, and then a sizzling laser ray from Kulthol added to the destruction.

Rodrone **siahed** with relief. Leaving only a slight ache, his mind was clear again and his muscles functioning without tremor.

And the space-tensor communicator was a smoking ruin.

Everyone looked at the others nervously.

"That was a pretty neat trick," Redace said finally. "They sent through **sub-audible** signals aimed at taking command of our nervous systems. They could have got what they wanted by remote control."

"But why didn't it work?" Rodrone queried, waving away black smoke from the still-hot equipment.

"If you ask me, it damn nearly did," Kulthol said, and added a few curses. The experience seemed to have frightened him.

"That's right," Redace said thoughtfully. "Obviously their knowledge of the human body is imperfect—the brain command signals didn't take hold properly. Even so, I think they might have been able to make the right adjustments if we hadn't been quick off the mark."

Something was tugging at Rodrone's mind. Suddenly he had it. Ruby and her electronic organ. He knew now where the device had originated: the Streall had a hand in it somewhere. Probably the organs had been made with the help of **a** human scientist, that was why they worked so well. It also explained why copies made of the organ worked hardly at all: they lacked the special touch of Streall skills.

"Listen everybody," he said out loud, "the Streall have made a psychological attack and failed. Their next attack will be physical. We have only a few hours at most before they are here, and possibly only a few minutes. We can't fight them off because they can simply pile on more force until we break. There's only one alternative: we have to get out."

To some, who had lived permanently on Brüde for years, the decision came as a shock. But once Rodrone convinced them all of the urgency of the situation activity was intense. The great hangar doors opened and ship after ship trundled out into the open. Storage spaces were ransacked of equipment, stores, ammunition and valuables. There was no knowing when they would be able to return to Brüde again, or if the base would even be in existence after the Streall had called.

One by one the spaceships took off from the crater, bringing into action half a dozen different types of spacedrive. Only the fast, reliable ships were used: older and slower vessels were best discarded. A haze of smoke began to fill the crater, drifting and blazing in the arc lights that had been turned on.

The very first ships to reach orbit had already set up a space watch to scan far ahead for approaching raiders. Their warning came when only three ships, the *Stand* included, were still on the ground. One of them was Redace Trudo's one-man spacer, a sleek crimson boat with a control cabin and bunk, engine and storage hold and nothing else.

Rodrone accosted his friend as the last man raced for the *Stand*. "Well, where are you going?" he asked. "Back to your rats' warren?"

Redace had abandoned his billowing hat and adopted a cheeky little beret with a prowlike front. "I think not," he replied, "that pack back there are quite competent to tear each others' throats out without my help."

Rodrone smiled. In fact, Redace had no regular companions, only a drifting crowd of murderous ruffians whose high turnover reflected in part his inability to keep his hands off their women.

"Besides," he continued, "you were right about one thing. There's something very funny indeed about the lens and I want to know more about it."

As he spoke he was already walking towards the *Stond*. A minute later they were airborne, surging upwards towards space. Meanwhile Rodrone was in touch with the space watch.

"Looks like heavy stuff and plenty of it," a matter-of-fact voice told him. "We could probably make a fight of it. But it would be a fight, no doubt about that, and there's probably more behind. Contact about half an

hour."

Ludicrously, Rodrone's main thought was not for the safety of the men and women in his fleet but his need to keep the lens, and keep it undamaged. He put through a general call.

"Hear this," he said. "You all have your code calls. The regroup code is *Cassius*. Now scatter."

At his command a score of ships surged into motion in a score of different directions to lose themselves amid the close-packed stars. The *Stand* now had a better than even chance of escaping unchallenged, and the same chance of being equally matched if she was challenged. The Streall had made a big mistake in giving him this brief breathing space. That was due, he was sure, to their miscalculation of the human mind. They had never understood that its workings were not forthright, as the workings of their minds were. They had expected that their first communication would produce results.

Redace broke into his musings. "We won't get much further with examining this gadget ourselves," he was saying. "We need to go where they *really* understand atomic physics. I think I know a place. There's a fellow there who's an absolute *marvel*."

Rodrone nodded. He was watching the rearward detectors. Behind them, the Streall fleet was chasing vainly after an already vanished quarry. Ahead, he hoped, lay knowledge.

V

The planet Kelever was the sixth orbital of a white, intense sun that baked its four innermost worlds beyond any possibility of life. Kelever itself lay in a position that in most solar systems would have been occupied by a gas giant, and indeed long ago it might have been a gas giant. **Its** atmosphere still possessed an unpleasantly pervasive ammonialike tang.

Most of the time the surface was gloomy, roofed with cloud and drenched with rain. The *Stond* put down at a spaceground on the edge of a city five million strong. On **the** way down Rodrone had noted that the planet was industrially well-developed, busy transport belts conveying

endless streams of goods and materials across its broad surface.

While the ship's computer argued with the ground controller over landing fees, Rodrone stared out over the rain-washed expanse, dotted with the humped shapes of spaceships. One worrying thought that had occurred to him was whether the Streall would be able to track him down here, **too**. But the possibility was slight. The Merchant Houses maintained no regular information service, and the *Stond* was just one ship among thousands.

Beyond the spaceground the city bulked gray and enormous, and thoroughly uninviting. It was strange that five million people consented to live in such a place, he thought. "Do you have an address for this man Sinnt?" he asked Redace. "Or do we have to go hunting for a needle in a haystack?"

"Unfortunately... no address," Redace answered. "But I can guarantee to find our man in a fairly short period of time. Kelever is a scientist's world, you see. They form clubs, societies. Some of them, I'm afraid are... well, a bit kookie. But there are a few silks among the rags, and Sinnt is one of them. He should be well known; we only have to ask around in the right quarters."

"Sounds like a rave," Clave commented sardonically. "Wild Science Rites on the Rain Planet. But supposing this character tells us to go and stuff our lens? It's a long journey just for a brush-off."

Redace regarded him quizzically. "My dear fellow, have you *no* idea what impels we scientific types? Sinnt will be *forced* to make an investigation of the lens, even if only because if he doesn't he knows we'll pass it on to one of the other kooks. He's much too jealous of his reputation to risk that"

"One of the *other* kooks?" Clave echoed in dismay. "I thought you said this guy was the silk among the rags?"

Rodrone ignored the exchange. Clave, of course, was not deeply interested in the lens and was only along for the ride, like all the others except Redace.

At length the shipboard computer finished its haggling with the ground computer and they were free to go into the city. To guard against the

unlikely event that Jal-Dee might be trying to trace him through the *Stond*, Rodrone decided to take the lens with them, where they could lose themselves if need be in the endless drabness of Kel-ever's main town.

He, Clave and Redace took a runabout and soon were driving through wet streets thronged with traffic. Many of the streets were roofed, but even those leaked and incessant rivers ran along the gutters.

The favorite color on Kelever seemed to be red; but there was not very much even of that. Dull red neon outlined the low entrances lining the buildings on either side, burning sullenly in the gray atmosphere. Many of the entrances seemed to lead to underground cellars, for the city appeared to be as extensive underground as it was above, possibly obeying an unconscious urge to burrow away from the dismal, ammonia-laden atmosphere.

Kell, as the city was called, was one of the many pockets of relative isolation scattered through the Hub. It had decayed into a certain staidness in its fashions. Tradition would count for more than was normally the case elsewhere, and the flamboyant Redace stood out like the visitor from another planet that he was.

Far from being abashed by his noticeable uniqueness, however, the pirate thrived on it. In a matter of minutes he had found them a hotel where they could leave the lens in a Guaranteed Safe Room.

"And now, dear colleagues," he said, **turning** to them with a flourish, "we will proceed to the most enjoyable part of our mission: to search the dens of this place for Mard Sinnt!"

In the next few hours they learned what he had meant when trying to describe the "science clubs" with which Kell abounded. Some of the neon-outlined entrances on the streets gave access to such clubs, though the latter were more in the nature of drinking places with a particular kind of clientele. They plunged into a dim half-world of smoke-filled rooms and bizarre talk. Redace and Clave drank heavily, and seemed to be developing a close comradeship. But Rodrone drank little and said little. To the others, he seemed to be sulking.

Diagrams and microphotographs adorned the walls of many of the places they visited. Much of their content was semimystical nonsense or downright crankiness, but there were also what seemed to Rodrone many

interesting ideas that he had not encountered elsewhere.

He also found evidence of latter-day sun worship. One reason why atomic science flourished here was that Kelever's hot dense sun provided an excellent object for study in the field of nuclear physics. To the inhabitants hiding beneath their perpetual umbrellas of cloud, it had come to resemble the fount of all knowledge, showing itself clearly only in brief flashes when the clouds parted or from satellite research stations. The reverence many of the men he met that night held for their sun reminded him of the attitude of the ancient Egyptians towards Ra.

But their search for Mard Sinnt, the man Redae insisted should be consulted about the lens, was not at first successful. Although everyone had heard of him, no one knew where to find him. He did not frequent any of the well-known clubs and societies. He had not made known any new work lately. Some believed him to be dead.

Eventually they were directed to a back-street tavern on the other side of the city. Coming in out of downpouring rain, they found themselves in a low-ceilinged dive, the upper stories of the building supported by thick pillars of the local wood, jet black and immensely strong. Only old men were drinking there, and they looked on suspiciously at the entrance of younger faces.

The man they had been told to ask for sat alone in a corner, a saucer of syrupy fluid before him. It seemed to be the favorite beverage here; it could not be drunk directly, but was best lapped and slowly swallowed. Rodrone suspected that it also helped to relieve the bronchial troubles which must be rife in this humid, unhealthy atmosphere. "So you look for a man of science, do you?" the old man answered to their question, speaking laboriously. "You young fellows don't know what science is all about."

"Hmm. Well, you know, at least we have time to learn. You couldn't say the same for your case." Redace put this not-too-kind point in a tone of affable reasonableness.

"Young pups, always think you can do better than your fathers," the other continued, ignoring him. "But you can't. Your half-cocked notions are so much water down the drain. In our time it was different—no deduction, no philosophy, only induction. Hard empirical fact. That's the only method. Stray from it and you might as well bury your head in a

barrel of muck." He lifted his saucer, sipped and swallowed painfully. "Pah! They think of energy as if it was something to worship. Bad, very bad... projection of subjective feelings. They seem to think the sun is a purposive intelligence. Yes, these youngsters even talk about *deities*."

He uttered the last word in a tone of incredulous disgust, then went on to remark on the mental decadence of the younger generation. Fascinated, Rodrone prompted him further and began to piece the picture together. The men in the tavern represented an older generation of hard-liners who perhaps for the first time in centuries had tried to put physics back on a solid line of planned progress. They had stuck strictly, almost fanatically, to the experimental method and had ruthlessly thrown out any idea or theory that was not a suitable subject for demonstrable proof. But the generation they had reared had grown tired of their tough, colorless doctrine. They had begun to philosophize, and the insistence on fact had foundered in a morass of cults and cosmic speculation. Embittered and excluded, prevented even from pursuing their own brand of research, the elders now spent their time reminiscing and cursing their children.

For a moment Rodrone wondered whether this man, or one of his colleagues, might be a more suitable recruit than Sinnt for the investigation of the lens. But he rejected the idea. If the old man had once possessed the right qualities, he no longer did so. He lacked the necessary spark of creative imagination. His power was spent, his mind wandering in disappointment and endless recriminations.

Rodrone bought him another saucer of syrup. "But you knew Mard Sinnt."

"Don't speak that name to me," the other said bleakly. "He is dead, gone, useless. Ten years I spent drawing up the plan for him to follow, and he rejected it."

"Plan?"

He hesitated. "The plan for a lifetime's research, already mapped out. If it had been followed, it might..." His fist clenched and unclenched. "One lifetime is not enough for some things."

"So you *do* know him?" Clave was becoming exasperated.

"He is my nephew. His father entrusted him to me and charged me to

see that he carried out the task. But he was more rebellious than a sea dragon." He smiled, shaking his head. "The dragon that destroys itself, devouring its own body and drinking its own blood..."

He gave a deep sigh, then seemed to come out of his mood somewhat. With yellowed eyes he glanced sharply at the three.

"Why do you want him?"

Rodrone decided to be rash. "We have a Streall artifact. We need him to help us examine it."

"Indeed?. What kind of artifact?"

"A very sophisticated one. We know little about it yet."

"Hmmm... The Streall do have some interesting gimmicks. Perhaps we could..." His eyebrows rose speculatively.

"If you want to know more about it, ask Sinnt," Redace said harshly. "If we ever find him, of course."

"Well, I suppose young Mard has ability, given to him by his father and myself. Wasted, of course, utterly wasted." Shipping his syrup, he laid the saucer down again and waited expectantly.

With bad grace, Rodrone ordered more drinks.

The night was well advanced by the time they left the tavern and drove to a run-down district on the south quarter of the city.

The house of Mard Sinnt was old and decrepit, fronted with Kelever's black wood which, however, had begun to rot and looked like rusted iron. The building had an indeterminate number of stories, perhaps four or five, and gave the appearance of being endlessly ramified within.

Rodrone climbed stone steps and placed his hand on an arrival signal plate. After some seconds a voice whispered from a speaker in the door.

"Who is it?"

He was aware of a television eye scanning the three of them. "You don't know us," he answered. "We have something of interest to Mard Sinnt."

"Who sent you?"

Redace stepped forward. "Your fame has traveled far and wide, honorable one. At any rate, it has traveled as far as Cantilever City, that's on what they call the Broken Planet—nothing but cliffs and chasms and other vertigo-inducing phenomena. A chap there by the name of Diron Mactire told me of you, and since we are looking for an expert, you naturally came to mind."

"I never heard of the Broken Planet, but I know Diron Mactire. Follow the lights."

The door swung open. Within, the passageway was gloomy, almost dark. Along the walls arrow-shaped lights began to stream away, leading them along the corridor and down a long flight of stairs.

Mard Sinnt, sitting at a large table strewn with papers, rose to meet them as they entered a long corridorlike room. At first they could see very little except the papers and books on the table, which were illuminated by a reddish lamp. Sinnt himself was no more than a humped shadow in a strange, purple darkness.

"You prefer normal light, perhaps?" the figure said in a hollow voice. An arm moved, and lights sprang to life.

Now they could see Sinnt clearly. He was not young, as the old man in the tavern had led them to believe, but approaching fifty. He was short, and slightly bowed, but his shoulders were broad and looked strong.

The face was startling, horrifying. Its expression was sharp and alert, but it was the expression that might be seen on a statue: there was no life in it. And the eyes were blind, completely blank and unpupiled, just like the dead eyes of a statue.

This last puzzled Rodrone for a second. Blindness was usually remediable, if the eyes were useless, either by eye transplants or the fitting of artificial eyes which looked only slightly different from the real thing. But Sinnt had chosen to fill his eye sockets with steel balls. His sight came from a camera apparatus fixed to his right shoulder. As Rodrone stepped forward to meet him, the camera turned to keep him in view, its two lenses glowing slightly. He noted the cable that joined Sinnt's skull two inches behind his ear, connected no doubt directly to the optic nerve.

The reason why Sinnt had chosen this arrangement to restore his sight became clear to them a short time later. Rodrone shook him by the hand, trying to ignore the creepy feeling he got from looking a man in the face and being looked at in return from a point some inches to the left. "We had some trouble finding you," he said. "Eventually we were helped by a relative of yours. Verard."

Sinnt gave a croaking laugh. "Uncle Verard! Poor old fool! He told you I was lost in limbo, I suppose? Wasting my substance in useless speculation?"

"Something like that."

Sinnt nodded, an unexpectedly live gesture from his eyeless head. "Sometimes I feel sorry for that clique of old drivelers. You should visit their data library sometime. They maintain it like a holy shrine—thousands upon thousands of completely unrelatable facts."

"Facts are what science is about," Redace said thoughtfully, stroking his chin.

"True, but they think the universe is constructed logically, brick by brick. They don't realize how immensely mysterious and basically irrational it all is." He invited them to be seated. "Well, you're not here to discuss metaphysics. What's it all about?"

Briefly Rodrone explained about his find and what conclusions they had been able to draw. Sinnt listened without interruption until he had finished.

"Yes... well you were right to come to me. Atomics is my field, and if it is an atomic device, as you think, I may be able to find out something. Let's have a look at it, then. Where is it?"

"We have it in a Safe Room."

"Bring it here, I don't go traveling these days."

Clave and Redace left to fetch the lens. Rodrone was alone with the bizarre scientist.

They sat facing one another, Sinnt staring unblinkingly from his

shoulder camera. Rodrone knew he was being coldly, calmly appraised. For his own part, he found that it cost him a slight effort to be at ease with the man. It was hard to get used to the fact that he almost never turned his head; if he wished to shift his gaze, only the camera swiveled.

There was a strained silence for some seconds. Then, suddenly, Sinnt spoke in an unnatural voice.

"I had not ruled out the possibility that you were a Streall robot."

The question was so unexpected that Rodrone laughed. "But why?"

"The Streall are normally very jealous of their artifacts. Your own story testifies to that. But your story could be an ingenious cover. Who knows that you are not a Streall tool, sent to take rather than to give?"

Completely mystified by these remarks, Rodrone asked, "To take what? Have you got something belonging to them too?"

Sinnt did not answer and for nearly a minute neither spoke. Then, to break the silence, Rodrone said, "And do you still consider me to be a robot?"

"No. I have given you a searching internal examination. I am satisfied that you are a human being and that you have not been tampered with. The Streall experience certain difficulties in understanding the human body, which are hard to mask. I would take the condition of your nervous system to be conclusive proof of your normality. In particular, they have never succeeded in following the complicated connections between the neocortex, the rear cortex, and the pineal gland, which is what makes man what he is and is unique to him."

Rodrone remembered his own experience of the StrealFs off-beam attempts to control human nervous systems. But this thought was pushed aside by his amazement of Sinnt's claim. While he had been sitting here the scientist had examined his body in every detail, even down to the functioning of his brain. This unparalleled feat explained why Sinnt had foregone the use of more normally aesthetic eyes. He was not content to limit his vision to the visible spectrum. His shoulder camera must be sensitive to all wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation from radio waves to high-frequency gamma rays, and no doubt was capable of receiving images from many other kinds of radiation as well. It would be able to

function as an electron microscope, of course, and probably it had some sensitivity to the host of subtle, ghostlike radiations given off by atoms, but whose ultimate nature was completely unknown.

Sinnt had adapted himself to the needs of his research. Rodrone had noticed that the luminosity and color of his eye lenses seemed to vary slightly, but he had taken this to be due to the waxing and waning of his attention. Instead, it betokened his constant switching to alternative modes of vision.

But Rodrone was also surprised by the other's interesting and informative remarks concerning man's nature; How did he come to know so much about it, and furthermore how did he know so much about the Streall? There was something offbeat and *odd* about the way Sinnt launched into a conversation.

"Perhaps it is *you* who are the Streall robot," he suggested.

"No such luck." Sinnt broke into his creaking laughter. "Tell me," he continued calmly, "have you never thought how extraordinary it is that there should be only two star-faring races in the galaxy?"

Indeed, Rodrone had exercised his mind with his question often. Other life there was in plenty, and numerous other species with intelligence—of a kind. But it was intelligence without the spark, the fire, that had enabled man— and presumably the Streall—to reverse his natural subservience to the environment. Thousands of civilizations in **the** Hub had risen to high levels, but always slowly and painfully, imbued with a passive acceptance of their limitations. It amazed Rodrone that nowhere—with the one exception—was man's technological explosion repeated. True, there were a few who had succeeded in traveling to nearby moons and planets in huge, clumsy rockets; but where this happened it was invariably as the final triumph of a dying race. And Rodrone had always felt sympathetically for the occasional species which, on the last verge of extinction, had wonderingly discovered atomic energy much too late to save itself.

"You seem to think you know the answer," he said somewhat sullenly to Sinnt.

"I know the answer, but I don't know the reason. Man's brain is constructed differently from that of any other intelligent species. That's why he is so abnormally quick to discover, to invent, and to spread

through the universe. In general the sentient brain conforms to a basic pattern throughout the galaxy. It is a logical, predictable pattern. Only man is the maverick, the sport, the freak that has broken nature's rule. I say 'rule,' **but** for man's presence, one would probably call it a law."

"And you attribute it to the cortical connections?"

"Yes."

This idea was new to Rodrone. He was pleased and intrigued by it. "But what about the Streall? They equal us in everything. They must also have these illogical 'connections.' "

"The Streall? Not a bit of it. Their brains are pretty much like the others."

"Then I'd say your theory breaks down, unless you have yet another explanation for *their* superiority."

Sinnt grimaced, an extraordinarily ugly spectacle. "They've been around for a long time. They did it all slowly. If you think about it, they must find us pretty bewildering. A million years ago we couldn't even add two and two, yet suddenly we jump up and challenge them."

"I'm not challenging anybody," Rodrone said. "Furthermore it seems to me that your last answer is a pure evasion. There must be some evolutionary principle at work here."

He would have continued further, but a sharp whistling tone sounded. Sinnt pressed a lever under the edge of the table, at which the faces of Clave and Redace appeared on a small screen.

The scientist pressed another lever to admit them. "I only mention these matters," he said casually, turning his shoulder apparatus towards Rodrone, "because the, er, *lens* your friends are bringing seems in some roundabout way to relate to them. At any rate, I have an idea that it may give us a new *ansje* on this, er, evolutionary principle, as you call it." He spoke haltingly, as though hedging around something he did not wish to speak about.

"So you think my theory that the lens is a galactic observing instrument is wrong?"

"Oh, not necessarily. I think your theory is a very good one. But in view of the Streall's desperate attempts to recover it—using tactics reminiscent of a political power struggle—it is more than likely that it will be able to tell us something fundamental about the confrontation of the two races."

At that moment Clave and Redace entered pulling the lens on a small trolley. Swiveling and bowing, Sinnt's camera turned to look at it. Then he rose, beckoned, and stiffly led them through a sliding panel and down a short, light-less corridor. Lights sprang into being to illuminate a large, cavernlike space.

This, Rodrone guessed, must be his main laboratory. The floor space was strewn with a maze of radiation baffles arranged around banks and humps of apparatus. Many of the pieces he recognized; and from the look of it, Sinnt possessed every item of equipment he had ever heard of, and many he had not.

Sinnt gestured irritably, telling them where to place the lens. The lenses on his shoulder glowed and flashed in changing colors. "Remarkable," he murmured. "Quite an entertainment."

"At one time we thought the lighted part in the center represented a map of the galaxy," Rodrone informed him, "but it doesn't check out."

"Indeed?" Sinnt stroked his chin, then stepped to a nearby computer and pulled out an extensible cord. With a slight shudder Rodrone watched him lift a lock of his hair and plug the end of the cord into a tiny silver socket embedded in his skull, after which he returned to the lens, trailing the cord behind him.

For a full minute he stood stock-still, a frown of concentration on his face. His unseeing eyes stared straight ahead, but the compact camera, with rapt attention, was trained on the lens.

"Your surmise was not as wrong as you think," he said finally, speaking slowly and wonderingly. "As closely as I can compute, then atom for atom, the doped light-producing region *does* match the stars of the galaxy—but the galaxy as it existed roughly a trillion years ago. Not surprisingly, you failed to recognize it, the formation having changed considerably since then."

Rodrone and Redace glanced unbelievably at one another. They had

spent weeks in comparing a galactic map with an estimated distribution of the "dope" content of the lens. Sinnt, in a breathtaking feat, had carried out a vast range of such comparisons in only a minute. There was no point in even admiring such an ability, springing as it did from a technique of linking a brain with a computer. Briefly Rodrone wondered what it would be like to think that way, what godlike feeling it might bring.

"So what do you infer?" he asked huskily.

"As yet, nothing. But we have much work to do. My son will help us."

He turned, murmured into a communicator unit. Shortly, a door opened and a young boy entered. Rodrone judged him to be about twelve years old. His head was a mass of dark curls. Unlike his father, he had alert, shining blue eyes; nevertheless, a twin to his father's camera squatted incongruously large on his right shoulder, and the lenses glowed with life. Further, a freshly shaved bald patch showed where a computer input socket had been surgically implanted into his skull.

Sinnt must have noticed their expression of distaste. "It is a duty to instruct one's children. To put them on the right path," he said sternly.

"Isn't that the mistake *your* father made?" Clave asked softly.

The scientist refused to answer, but he smiled scornfully. It was the first time they had seen him smile, and it was to be the last.

VI

On and on staggered the demented monk. His band had grown on the journey until now it was a jostling mass which in some way was still controlled by his lashing whip. Cripples, deformed and mutilated people made up a good part of the horde. They streamed ahead of the monk, dressed in tatters, quarreling among themselves and exchanging spiteful blows.

The end of their journey was in sight. It was a walled city. The tall, gleaming ramparts were leveled off with mathematical precision, and beyond them, alabaster towers and elevated streets formed a perfect, symmetrical design. The whole city exuded orderliness and method. The banners that depended from the walls and square-cut buildings also

proclaimed mathematical order. There were pythagorean triangles, ellipses, parabolas and golden sections.

The monk's rabble camped before this splendid city, jeering and screaming obscenities. The intention was all too plain: to tear down the walls, to destroy and kill until nothing remained but smoking ruins.

His body tense, the monk sent his whip snaking out over the throng. At his bidding they rushed the walls, piling against it and trying to scramble over each other's bodies. But the walls were too high, too smooth and too strong. They fell back, cursing and spitting, denied the spoils that had been promised them.

Throughout, one companion had stood close by his brown-garbed leader. He had relayed orders, supported the monk when he stumbled and brought food to him when they stopped for rest. Now, in his exasperation, the monk took a long wavy-bladed knife from beneath his cloak and stabbed to death his only friend. Contemptuously he pushed the body aside with his foot. The rabble howled, shaking fists at the gleaming city, spreading out before it and threatening siege.

The monk sat down on a rock, brooding.

Eventually Rodrone forced himself to avert his eyes from the compelling scene. Unaccountably, he was sweating. It was like waking from a nightmare.

He had no idea why the story of the faceless monk affected him so, any more than he knew why, in contrast to all the other picture-dramas, it continued indefinitely. Or why it alone had human beings for participants. Could it be, he wondered, that the lens was trying to tell him something?

Moodily he sighed. He felt tired, and lonely, now that Clave and Redace no longer came to the house.

That development had saddened him, but he had permitted it will-lessly, with the kind of lassitude that sometimes overcame him when faced with conflicting interests. Clave rarely visited them anyhow; their activities bored him and he found the atmosphere depressing and uninviting. For a time Redace had stayed to participate in the investigation program drawn up by Sinnt; but the two men did not get on well together. Redace was unimpressed by Sinnt's uncompromising

fanaticism, and he failed to hide his repugnance for his treatment of his son, or his distaste for the rambling, dark house. In return, Sinnt resented his criticisms. More and more he absented himself and took to roaming Kell, amusing himself in the scientific clubs that titillated his sense of the absurd. "My dear chap," he told Rodrone, "some of them are absolutely, delightfully *whacky*."

Then had come the day when, on his return to the house, Sinnt had refused to admit him. Unperturbed, Redace had eventually gone away, neither asking for nor receiving support from Rodrone.

Though Rodrone knew he could have thrown his weight in Redace's favor, he was by now steeped in the atmosphere of Sinnt's outlook. His desertion of a friend had been touched with the sense of wild abandonment that came from total immersion in an unfamiliar situation. There was something inhuman about Sinnt that both attracted and repelled him.

At the same time he felt disturbed by Redace's own attitude. It was unnerving that Redace, with his enviable brilliance of mind, should abandon his interest in the lens so easily where it conflicted with personal values, while he himself, with his fumbling intellect, should be the one to pursue his ambition at any cost. These tormenting doubts had filled his stay in the comfortless house with tension.

Nevertheless Sinnt's program had produced results. They now knew more about the lens than the freebooters could ever have hoped to learn by themselves. Sinnt had arrived at a position where he could form definite theories regarding its nature.

There was a sound behind Rodrone. Foyle, Sinnt's son, stood there.

"Sir," the boy said respectfully, "my father is in his study. He would like to talk to you, if you are ready."

Rodrone nodded and rose, trying not to notice that Foyle's eyes were steadfastly closed. He often walked around like that. Apparently the camera gave sharper vision, and in addition the images from his organic eyes interfered with its full effectiveness. Rodrone wondered if his father would go so far as to remove the real eyes altogether.

In the study, Sinnt greeted him heartily. He was seated at his huge

table, which was scattered with piles of books, manuscripts and other papers. As elsewhere in the house there was visible lighting for Rodrone's benefit: dim but adequate.

"Well, old fellow," Sinnt began with his usual directness, "I think the time has come to recapitulate our finds and, er, talk about the future."

He tilted back his head and his camera lenses died as he withdrew into himself to gather his thoughts. "Item: we know that the seeding of light-emitting atoms towards the center of the lens corresponds to the formation of Thiswhirl, our galaxy, at a date some trillion years in the past. However, the dating may not be significant: we have detected movement of the atoms, of such a speed and nature that this 'galactic orrery,' if we may call it that, will have caught up with us and be up to date in something like a hundred years from now. From that we may infer that the lens is not a representation static in time, but that it is meant to cover a whole span of galactic history. Perhaps, given enough centuries, it repeats the birth and death cycle of the galaxy endlessly.

"Item: it has been known for centuries that the scale of electromagnetic radiation—radio waves, X-rays, light waves, gamma rays and so—is only the heaviest and coarsest type of radiation emitted on the atomic level. Below that is a subtler radiation, the so-called Fermann range. These radiations are concerned with 'keying in* each individual atom into the matrix of four-dimensional space, a matter for which electromagnetic radiation is too coarse and without which the atom would vanish from existence. I can say with some pride that I am the first human being to see directly by the light of Fermann radiation." He tapped his shoulder camera meaningfully. "However, our investigation has yielded an unprecedented result: there is present in the lens a third, subsidiary range of an even more subtle order. This radiation is responsible for the projection of the picture dramas in the outer parts of the lens.

"Item: the rim of the lens is lined with an extremely powerful force-field of unknown nature, which in some way acts as a screen for the picture dramas. These dramas are derived from the 'dope' atoms themselves, again in a manner we have not been able to deduce."

"That force-field is a funny coincidence," Rodrone interrupted, "in view of what happened to the Andromeda expeditions." He was referring to the failure of any spaceship to travel for more than one galactic diameter outside the galaxy. Although technically, with the space drives available,

in tergal actic travel should have been feasible, every mission and probe ever dispatched had come up against some kind of space-time barrier preventing further progress. The other galaxies, it appeared, were forever beyond reach.

"Probably not a coincidence," Sinnt said. "But to continue. The line of research that automatically presents itself to us is to investigate further the third order of radiations, with special reference to how they generate the picture sequences."

"And what's your opinion of the pictures themselves?"

"I believe they represent real events taking place in various parts of the galaxy, either in the present or both in the present and in the past."

"And in the future, father?" put in Foyle, who sat across from his father on the other side of the table.

Briefly Sinnt's lenses glowed, as if taking a quick glance. "That," he said, "is the operative question. Somehow or other these very subtle, almost undetectable radiations accomplish the feat of communicating with all parts of the galaxy and of drawing visible observations from them. How they stand in relation to the time dimension is... at present a matter for speculation."

"Good grief," Rodrone muttered. "We might have a method here of observing through time—perhaps of traveling through time!"

"Perhaps, though I doubt it. The Streall do not appear to possess that ability. I incline more to the view that the lens's communication is with the present moment—with reference to the time dilation effect that exists over vast distances, of course—but that it can also store sequences from the past and display those too. I imagine the lens is of great antiquity. It might even predate the human species."

Another question was bothering Rodrone. "And what of the *meaning*, the selection of the picture-stories?" he asked hesitantly. "Surely there must be something there?"

"Probably the selection is entirely random." But this did not satisfy Rodrone. "There must be *something* to it," he insisted, "some meaning or significance. Otherwise what is the lens *for*?"

"Your attitude is unscientific," Sinnt told him shortly. "The point is, the significance of the lens lies precisely in the use that is made of it. It must be possible to control the selection. If we find those controls, we have in our hands an observing instrument of unparalleled excellence. No corner of the galaxy will be denied to us!"

"And do you think we *can* find those controls?"

"The determined intellect overcomes all," Sinnt stated dogmatically. "However, I confess that for the moment I am at the end of my resources. That is why I have decided upon another strategy..."

He shifted position, and the glowing camera swung around to focus on Rodrone. Because of his facial blindness, it was always hard to guess what Sinnt was thinking from his expression.

"If there is anyone who could finally answer our questions, it is the Streall."

Rodrone snorted. "Ridiculous! Do you propose we should go to them and politely ask? As a matter of fact, I've already been through that scene, at my base on Brüde. Believe me, the Streall are not helpful."

Sinnt did not answer for a moment. Rodrone became aware that he was nerving himself to something, or trying to weigh up something.

"There is a Streall on this planet," he said at last. "In this very city, in fact."

The news astounded and alarmed Rodrone. "*Here?* For God's sake, man, it's the lens they're after and they must know it's here!"

"No, no, you don't understand at all." Sinnt shook his head vigorously. "Please let me explain. Some years ago a Streall individual came secretly to Kell. He came here because he had somehow heard that for a long time—over a generation, in fact—there had existed here a secret society devoted to the study of Streall philosophy. Seffatt, to give him his name, rightly guessed that the society would give him refuge, and they have sheltered him ever since."

Had the story not been so amazing, Rodrone would have laughed out loud. It was typical that Kell should harbor, among its assorted zaniness, a

clique with a bent towards the enemy of mankind.

"The society calls itself the Society of the Orderly Plan, a name whose meaning may become clearer to you later on. Normally what I have told you is a closely guarded secret, but because I believe our interests are identical, and because of the present situation, I feel it is only right that you should be brought into the know. I have already contacted the society and suggested that they collaborate with us."

Furiously Rodrone stormed to his feet. "Do you realize what you've done? By now the Streall navy will be on its way to annihilate us!"

"Please, you still do not understand. There is no danger. No word will pass outside the society. I know you find this hard to believe, because in the normal way every individual Streall has a common accord with the interests of the race as a whole. But what we have here is not normal. Seffatt is quite isolated because he is a fugitive, a criminal."

"I certainly never heard of that before," Rodrone muttered. "What did he do?"

"He is branded as a thief."

"Thief?" He was puzzled.

"Yes, I know. Streall civilization is totally communist. There is no property and no crime as we understand it. Exactly what Seffatt did I don't know, but it was serious enough for him to be a hunted outcast. It may have been more in the nature of an error, or a serious dereliction of duty."

"Could it have been a doctrinal error?" Rodrone wondered, remembering his reading of the intellectual tyrannies existing in early times in human communist and religious societies.

"No, it was a definite act on his part. But it must have been a long time ago. The Streall have a long life span, you know. Seffatt is several thousand years old. But he's senile now."

Rodrone had a sudden insight. "*You're* a member of this society, aren't you?"

"Not now, but I was once. I left because the thinking of the other members does not meet my vigorous standards."

"But you are asking them for help now."

"Seffatt's help."

Rodrone felt his dislike of the Streall bubbling up. "Tell me," he said nastily, "what did it feel like to be part of something inimical to all humanity?"

"Persons and feelings are not relevant to knowledge. Truth is relevant."

They must certainly have got to you, Rodrone thought. He knew now what was so odd about Sinnt. His inhuman streak came from his being tainted with Streall thought.

Sinnt coughed, glanced at a clock on the wall. A high-pitched whistle sounded from a tiny speaker, and he manipulated levers.

"That's the society now. Right on time."

Into the room came five men, dressed identically in sober charcoal-colored garments that followed the contours of the body elegantly but unobtrusively. They all wore matching hats with stiff curly brims.

"Hello, Sinnt," said the leader in lisping, prissy tones. "You're not as much of a renegade as you thought, then."

Sinnt introduced them to Rodrone, then led the way to the laboratory and showed them the lens. "Well," he said gruffly, "there it is."

"Very pretty, too. Seffatt says we are to take it to the temple."

"Is that necessary?" Sinnt said uneasily. "I was hoping he would inspect it remotely and... make suggestions."

"Hopes do not make intentions, Sinnt," the other said, in a voice which led Redrone to believe he was quoting a litany.

"I'm sorry," the scientist said more firmly, "but I do not intend that the lens should leave this building."

"Please be advised not to obstruct the plan," replied the society man in the same fussy tone. "You know we always realize our plan. All right, chaps, let's get moving."

The other four cleared away equipment that was clustered around the lens and with surprising strength lifted it. Foyle glanced questioningly at his father. For once Sinnt's marble face was furrowed in a torment of doubt.

"All right—all right!" he said harshly. "Agreed, Rodrone?"

Rodrone was torn between an unwillingness to risk losing control over his possession and a desire to know what the Streall would have to say about it. He nodded. "Provided we go too."

Outside, the society men had a large vehicle. Twenty minutes' ride brought them to a deserted street lined on one side with a palisade made of Kelever's black wood. A section swung open to let the vehicle into an endless vacant lot tangled with weeds, stunted trees and all manner of junk.

Whining, the car crunched along a gravel track until they reached what looked like a fantastically extended and ramified shack, built of tawdry plastic and the ubiquitous black wood. From the look of it, it had reached its present size piece by piece over the years.

Rodrone was wondering just how far the society's study of Streall beliefs went as they carried the lens into a bare anteroom and paused there. Another door opened. Into the room stepped another black-garbed man, wearing a hat similar to the others but taller. Probably hats were a badge of rank. At any rate he looked over the group command-ingly.

"Glad to see you back in the fold, Skint." Rodrone was fascinated to hear him speak in the same prissy voice as the others. "But there are one or two matters to be settled."

"Yes, leader," Sinnt muttered timidly.

"Firstly, your indiscretion in disclosing the presence of Seffatt to an outsider. You know what penalty that carries."

"Yes, leader."

"We will not go into your failure to tell us about the artifact at an earlier date. Being renegade, you probably did not feel yourself bound to do so. But there remains the question of future relations. The artifact is now ours, and though your services would be useful, we cannot permit permanent participation except under the conditions prescribed."

"The lens is *my* property," Rodrone exploded. "Get that straight!" The leader waved his hand unconcernedly.

Sinnt spoke in a choked voice. "I will renew my vow, leader."

"What good is your vow? It has been broken once." _ Sinnt hung his head. For some reason the leader seemed satisfied.

"Very well, you may reenter our ranks, under suspended sentence of death, in view of your infractions. And your son?"

"The boy is not old enough."

"Nonsense, he is at a perfect age to begin training."

"Very well, him too."

"And what of him?" Insolently the leader flung out a finger at Rodrone.

"I think he would be unsympathetic, leader."

"Then disarm him."

Men closed in. Before Rodrone could move to defend himself, he was helpless. His golden gun was taken and expertly he was frisked for other weapons.

"We will not make any definite decision over him yet," the leader pronounced. "It is surprising what happens in the minds of men when they have been shown the truth. If he remains unchanged, we will dispose of him tomorrow."

"And now, we will take the artifact before Seffatt. He is anxious to see it. You"—pointing to Rodrone—"will accompany us in case he has questions."

Silently, with an air of ceremony, they were ushered through an

assortment of chambers and then down some steps and into a large room smelling of strange perfumes. Rodrone could not avoid the impression of being in a place of worship. The walls were hung with intricate designs whose meaning totally escaped him. At one end was a plush curtain before which low tables were laid out with various unrecognizable objects like an altar.

Deferentially the lens was laid on one of the tables. The leader stood to attention, facing the curtain.

"This is the artifact, Master."

There was a long, suspenseful silence. Then, from behind the curtain, there came a whispering cough, growing until it took on the proportions of the StreaH's gobbling man-talk. The voice was shot through with the resonant organ-tones which, in a Streall, betokened advanced age.

"Is it here, then? After so long, is my agony at an end?"

"Master?"

"It is too much, too much, to see it after so long. The oracle of the galactic plan!"

Even through Seffatt's imperfect intonation, it was possible to realize his distress and excitement. Sinnt opened his mouth to speak, but the alien voice burst forth again.

"Leave me, leave me! It is too much for an old being."

The leader turned sharply, exultation on his face. He gestured vigorously, and the visitors were bundled quickly from the room.

"This is a great day indeed!" he breathed when he joined them seconds later. "Did you hear the Master? The artifact is an oracle—*an oracle which will teach us the galactic plan!*"

Rodrone was not so sure that this meaning" could be put so hastily on Seffatt's words. Neither had he ever heard of any "galactic plan."

"Isn't it true Seffatt is senile?" he said spitefully. "I'd say his mind's wandering."

The leader looked at him haughtily. "It is not possible for a diseased one to know the state of mind of a Master."

"Who are you calling diseased?"

"We are all diseased, friend, diseased with our humanity." He turned to Sinnt, "Are you ready to take your vow?" Sinnt nodded.

"All is ready. Your friend may watch too, to show him what it means to acknowledge the truth."

In an adjoining room, two men waited. One held a rod in an electric heater, while the other directed Sinnt to kneel and bared his back for him. The smell of hot iron filled the room.

The leader took his place in front of Sinnt. "What do you swear?"

"I swear to seek the truth," Sinnt intoned. "I swear to uphold the Universal Vision. I swear to do all in my power to assist in the unfolding of the Orderly Plan by which alone existence is justified. I swear to work, where necessary, towards the elimination of undesirable life-forms."

The leader stepped around the kneeling man and was given the heated rod, on the end of which was a glowing brand. "With this iron I seal your vow."

On Sinnt's back there was already the mark of an earlier brand, the mark of a curved cross. The leader applied the iron just below it and held it there. The iron hissed; Sinnt shuddered, but managed to make no sound.

For once, Foyle's blue eyes were wide open, and the lenses on his shoulder camera were dead. Rodrone drew him to one side.

"Do you propose to practice this barbarity on the child, too?" he asked angrily when Sinnt had risen.

"Not yet," the scientist said weakly. "He must be instructed first. The vows must be taken willfully."

A healing ointment was being rubbed on his burned back. The look of pain began to leave his face.

"You must all rest now," the leader said. "Later, we will talk again."

He withdrew. Rodrone contemplated attempting an escape, but realized that the building was probably filled with people and the society seemed to have a fetish about efficiency. He decided to bide his time.

They were taken to a room containing three couches and locked in. Rodrone stared at Sinnt sullenly.

"What was that part about 'eliminating undesirable life-forms'?"

"That refers mainly to *Homo sapiens*," Sinnt told him without any trace of embarrassment. "You see Streall thinking differs radically from the human outlook, or even from human science. The idea of random events, entropy, or of spontaneous processes developing by themselves and, uncontrolled simply does not occur in their world-picture. There's no place for chance and probability in the Streall view of the universe; they see it as an immense machine developing in orderly fashion towards a predestined end. Hence the name of the society. But the Streall *do* admit that chance developments *might* occur, in certain conditions. This would constitute a disease of existence, a cancer of space and matter, if you like, that endangers the harmony of the whole. *Homo sapiens* is held to be such a disease, because it has broken the normal pattern and is spreading across the galaxy far too rapidly. According to the Streall, we should still be on Earth."

"And therefore we should be eliminated? Well, that's no surprise. We've always known the Streall harbored a sneaking desire to wipe us out. The only reason they haven't tried is because they're scared of us wiping them out instead. The astonishing thing is to find a group of human beings with the same beliefs."

"But doesn't truth rise above personal interests?" Sinnt asked. "What if the Streall *are* right? What if we *are* a danger to Thiswhirl? Doesn't the search for truth demand that we acknowledge the fact?"

"Do *you* believe it?" Rodrone asked sharply.

Sinnt sighed. "Well, you know, when the society began it was merely a group of men who decided to examine Streall philosophy as a kind of academic project. They had very little to go on: the Streall have never laid themselves open for study. They gathered together whatever scraps they

could. Gradually the doctrine began to take hold of them—of us, I should say—until we became convinced of its superiority to all human thinking."

He paused, and seemed to be thinking nostalgically of those days. "We probably know more than anybody about Streall science. It really does have extraordinary depth, you know. The human race and all its works came to seem pale and shabby to us, to seem, well, *evil*. But still we had only scraps. Then Seffatt arrived. He taught us more, and we advanced further."

"Yet you left the society."

"Pah! There seemed no point in remaining. I became convinced that the society understood only a distortion of the true doctrine: their minds were not keen enough. As for Seffatt, he taught us as much as he thought fit and then stopped. Besides, he is rarely very coherent now... he is prematurely aged. Kelever's atmosphere is very bad for him, you see. These days the society fills his private quarters with purer air, but by the time we realized it, the damage was done."

Rodrone turned over in his mind what Sinnt had told him. He had already known that human terms scarcely applied where the Streall were concerned. Their science was like a philosophy, their philosophy warlike a science: and it was this remorseless philosophical oasis of theirs which sometimes made Rodrone sweat. They had no thought for themselves, but they had an irrevocable commitment to what they thought to be right. It was a logical clarity verging on madness.

Rodrone knew how powerful a philosophy could be, even when it was wrong. It was the scientific, hard-fact nature of Streall thinking that scared him. They could only be right.

Unlike a Streall, a human being would carry on in his own way irrespective of whether he was right or not. Rodrone felt himself to be very human. "I don't give a damn whether what the Streall say is true or not," he half snarled. "I'm a man, and I'll carry on being a man even if I reduce the whole universe to tatters. Furthermore I'm getting out of here and I'm taking the lens with me. It's mine!"

Leaning over, Sinnt gripped his arm hard. "But think! The lens undoubtedly contains the ultimate knowledge of atomics! With Seffatt's help that knowledge can be ours!" His lenses glowed with fervor.

Rodrone shook him off. "Damn your knowledge!" he shouted. "They're going to shoot me tomorrow!"

"Not if you... embrace the faith, as it were."

"Hmph. And how do I get away with it? You know as well as I do that they had a cephalogrator trained on you the whole time to make sure you meant what you said."

"I can arrange that." The scientist tapped his camera. "This apparatus isn't only a receptor. It can emit. Leave it to me, I'll beam the cephalogrator with the right brain waves while you're taking the oath."

"You're certainly full of surprises!" Rodrone could not help but laugh. "But no thanks, it's not my kind of scene. I'll tell you something else, too. For a generation these people have indoctrinated themselves with Streall values and debased human values. Don't you see what that means?"

The strain is too much for anyone. The human mind can't accommodate its own rejection of itself. No wonder they're all kinky."

He stared steadily at Sinnt. "You're the lucky one: you got away. As for the others, by now they're all mad. They've got to be."

Suddenly he became aware of Foyle, sitting quietly in the corner. The boy was always quiet and attentive, and in a way he had grown quite fond of him. It was sad to think of the future that lay ahead for him.

"Quite mad," he muttered, and turned away.

There seemed to be a lot of activity in the temple that afternoon. Hurrying feet paced up and down the passage outside the door. Using his X-ray vision to maximum effect, Sinnt announced that work was going on connected with the lens.

"They don't understand it properly," he said glumly. "They think it's some kind of oracle, or totem. I think they're getting ready for ceremonial worship."

"Isn't an oracle what Seffatt called it? Maybe it can foretell the future after all."

"Maybe. Seffatt doesn't choose his words carefully. 'Oracle' coming from him could mean almost anything."

In the evening the door to their room opened. The leader stood there, accompanied by three others.

"You are privileged to join us this evening. The Master has revealed much. Tonight we will taste the delights of galactic experience!"

Doubtfully Rodrone allowed himself to be led back to the Streall shrine. The room was filled with about thirty people, both men and women, seated cross-legged on cushions. The women wore the same costume as the men: carefully tailored jacket and trousers, and curly-brimmed hat. They all seemed excited, expectant.

The lens occupied pride of place before the plush red curtain. Everything else had been cleared away and replaced by a spread-out machine arranged on either side of the lens and sporting two big curved horns whose open ends yawned towards the audience. Lying between them, the lens's endless picturama flickered colorfully.

Ceremonially the leader faced the assembly. "It is an operator-controlled universe," he proclaimed. "We in the Society of the Orderly Plan are pledged to the vision of galactic harmony." On the wall to his left, a ten-foot screen sprang to life, displaying a fluid succession of diagrams which meant nothing to Rodrone. "Inexorably the cosmic process proceeds towards destiny, the fulfillment of the Grand Design."

The lisping voice stopped and they all gazed attentively as the screen rendered up its finale, a beautifully colored set of pictures which faded slowly one into the other. These were the *major arcana* of the society's symbolic doctrine, each image bearing its appropriate title: The Galactic Arch; The Traveling Wave; The Circling Wfcü*, The Dazzling Hyper-Cube...

And so on. There was certainly a fascination in them, and several seconds pause followed the return of blank-ness to the screen.

The leader coughed. "Tonight is a special night in the life of the society. You all know of the Streall artifact that has fallen into our hands. It is an artifact of special importance, no less than an embodied revelation of the galactic plan! It surely can be no diseased event"—Rodrone noted with

interest the use of this term—"that had brought it to us, but a true note in the unfolding of the galactic symphony. Perhaps this glad occasion is a sign to us that the discoloration that lately has been spreading over the glorious cosmic radiance, and of which we are a part, will shortly be at an end, and we and all human beings can at last cast off our misery, purging our criminal being in the eternity of non-being.

"But for the moment, let us pass on the unique experience that currently awaits us. With the help of the scientific techniques long ago taught to us by the Master, we are able to project what the artifact is revealing directly into our consciousnesses. Thus we shall be in direct contact with the basic order of existence!" He raised his hand to subdue the rising murmurs of anticipation. "First, a few words from the Master."

Turning, he picked up a jeweled striker, then hesitated and added in a low tone, "The Master is, er, a little indisposed today."

He struck a small golden gong, sending a musical tone singing through the room. "Master, we are ready, if it pleases you to speak."

From behind the curtain, hoarse breathing. Then an inhuman, prolonged coughing, through which the gobbling voice eventually struggled in an exhausted, agonizing whisper.

"Friends, the secret of life... must be kept..."

First the coughing, then the hoarse breathing, faded. They waited in silence, but no further sound came.

"The Master... has retired to his quarters," the leader said quietly. Stepping up to the machine, he depressed a number of levers and retreated immediately to take his place on a vacant cushion.

It seemed to Rodrone, squatting tensely on his own cushion, that the scene was pregnant with delusion. From this distance the lens's pictures were only a swirling rainbow flicker; but the excitement was infectious and he waited eagerly for the outcome.

The beginning of it was a faint, intermittent noise that passed to and fro between the two horns, coming and fading, exactly like the sound of a speeding airboat that flashed from the horizon, passed close by and just as quickly sped away again. Louder the sound swelled, and then Rodrone no

longer knew whether he heard it, for a numbing shock seemed to hit his consciousness. It was as if something hard and hot was pressing against the membrane of his mind, striving to enter his brain.

Just as suddenly, the moment of tumult was over. They all sat quietly staring at the flickering lens, and the only difference was the strained, shocked look on all their faces. The twin horns purred quietly, the sound swinging rhythmically to and fro...

But something else had changed. After a pause of a few seconds a spot on the lens seemed to swell up until it occluded everything. With a rush like a sudden gust of wind, the room, the people, everything was swept away and replaced by something utterly alien.

In the instant before the ability to think was stripped from him, Rodrone realized that the society was wrong about what the machine did with the lens. It revealed no "cosmic order," it merely projected selected picture-dramas from its outer ring, giving its beneficiaries the added thrill— or horror—of participation. But he was unable to develop the thought further. All will, all ability to help himself, was absent.

He seemed to be standing on a wide, windy ledge. Over the edge of it could be seen a flat yellow landscape laced with rivers, which were at least two miles below. Dimly he was aware that the ledge was part of a building, a palace, and that some sort of regal struggle was nearing its end.

Roughly he was pushed forward. His arms were bound tight to his sides. Around him stood a number of figures, bipedal but not human, with jeering skull-like faces.

The wind rose, keening a dirge. Vainly he struggled as he realized he was being propelled inexorably towards the edge. Hoots of weird laughter rained about him. Then, with a final lunge, he was over, the air rushing past him, falling, falling...

The sense of terror did not leave him buty_ the scene abruptly altered. He was in some underground jflace. A dim chamber whose boundaries were indefinite, hidden by the grotesque instruments that filled it. Screams and groans echoed weirdly through the chamber, which flickered from occasional fires and glowing metal.

Rodrone became frighteningly aware that this was a torture chamber,

and that something was being prepared for him. Bound this time at both arms and legs, he was carried to a tangle of a machine and fitted into it. White-hot blades closed in on him, to cut and burn in a hundred cunning ways.

Mercifully the unbearable agony lasted only a few seconds, for the selector moved on to another part of the lens, a part with which Rodrone was already familiar. For once his limbs were free. He was a member of a motley rabble army gathered before the walls of the gleaming city. The siege, though frustrated, was still in full progress. Catapults and ballistae had been constructed, attempting to hurl spiteful masses of rock and filth over the towering walls, which were also being attacked by primitive flame-belching cannon plastering them with gobs of burning substance which clung momentarily and then slithered groundwards, leaving behind a blistered black trail.

Clearly the city was withstanding all this crude fury. Rodrone looked around him and spied the demented monk, railing his slaves for their failure to breach and destroy the walls. He tried to perceive his face, but beneath the cowl there was only shadow.

The monk's features were obscured even when he suddenly looked Rodrone's way. For some reason he became enraged and the lean frame that poked through his rough-spun habit exploded into action. His whip came whistling through the air to catch Rodrone with a stinging blow. He staggered back before the monk's onslaught, unaware that he was being driven towards one of the ballista machines.

With a hard laugh, the monk sent him stumbling across the shaft of the ballista just as it was being released. Up sprang the solid beam, and bone and flesh were crushed horribly between it and the upright restraining bar...

And at that moment, the scene again switched. The selector seemed to have a trick of rescuing its victims just ahead of the moment where they would have lost consciousness and died. When he had recovered from the shock sufficiently to take in his new surroundings, Rodrone became aware that he was under water, breathing like a fish. There was only a little light, green and fluorescent. He got an impression of great pressure and constriction, as if he was miles down in the deeps.

He and a group of others were being herded towards the entrance of a

cave. His companions, he saw, were vaguely fish-shaped and seemed reluctant to enter. But there was no real possibility of refusal. Those who drove them hither were armed with goads that delivered an unbearable sting.

Before he knew it he was inside the cave. Here, the real horror began. The cave was populated with strange growths that extended from the walls in a watery jungle: mouths, jaws, waving polyps and spiked traps, evil staring eyes and huge flaccid suckers.

Worse than the repulsive appearance of the deadly jungle was the sense of fear it exuded into the water, the paroxysms of terror with which it liked to imbue its victims before seizing them. Rodrone turned tail and tried to swim away, seeing that already some of the hapless herd had been caught and were being ingorged caressingly into the writhing mass. But it was too late. A slimy tentacle seized him and drew him slowly inwards. A sensual frenzy seemed to have come over the population of the cave; it moved in an obscene rhythm, squeezing, crushing and tearing to pieces its prey until the water was cloudy and dark.

Stingers pierced Rodrone's skin. And then, with a mind-numbing abruptness, the dark nightmarish experience stopped and he was plunged into bright uproar.

All around him was screaming and jostling. In an orgy of terror, the members of the society were scrambling for the door, frantic to escape from the effects of their imagined ordeals. Rodrone might have fled, too, but the *spatt* of weapon fire brought him to his senses and he struggled to control his shaking nerves.

An energy beam had smashed into the equipment surrounding the lens, thus bringing them suddenly back into the present world. The horns still purred, but with the plaintiveness of a broken machine. Pushing their way through the crowd at the door were Clave and Redace and two more of Rodrone's crewmen.

Pulling apart from the mob, they stood gun in hand and surveyed the room. The pallor of Clave's face was normal; but on Redace it showed that he was shaken.

Of sterner stuff than the others, the leader had not joined the general rush. On the other side of the room, he drew a gun of his own.

"Invaders of the blessed sanctuary!" he spat. A thin, fiery beam spurted apparently at random from his weapon. The intruders scattered, returning the fire. The leader toppled, but not before one crewman was dead and Clave had received a bad burn in his gun arm, sending his weapon clattering to the floor.

The second crewman died from an unexpected source. Both Sinnt and Foyle had stood their ground; probably the projections from the lens had not terrified them as much as they had the others due to the extra sensibilities they gained from their camera vision. Now a pencil-thin scarlet beam shot across the room from Sinnt's camera, hitting Rodrone's man right between the eyes. Soundlessly, he slumped to the floor.

"Don't move," Sinnt said calmly. "I hope you realize the effectiveness of *my* weapon. Whoever I or Foyle look at we can instantly kill."

"Don't be a fool, Sinnt," Rodrone urged. "This is our chance to get away from this pack of bunglers and take the lens with us."

Now the room was empty except for the five of them. In the distance could still be heard the sounds of the society fleeing in panic.

"You forget that I am a society man and that I have taken the oath."

Rodrone snorted. "You're as insane as the rest of them."

At that, Sinnt's camera wavered, then turned to train on Rodrone. Whether he meant to kill Rodrone or merely to look directly at him they would never know; for Redace, presuming the former, and being alone armed among his companions, brought up his own weapon. With reflexlike swiftness the camera swung back and the scarlet pencil-beam hit him, too, between the eyes.

In the same moment Clave acted. Springing across the few feet to where Foyle stood, he seized the cord connecting his camera to his skull and yanked with all his strength, tearing it loose. The boy screamed in pain and fell to his knees, clutching his head where the cord had been fixed.

"Father! Father!"

The expression on Sinnt's face became agonized and his camera swung

towards him, seeking out Clave. Nimbly Clave danced back, forcing Sinnt to turn, then skipped back again, always keeping himself to the scientist's left, and gesturing urgently to Rodrone.

Taking his cue, Rodrone stepped to where the loosely-constructed contraption lay around the lens. Finding a heavy metal tube that was part of the machine, he wrenched it loose, lunged forward and brought it crashing down on Sinnt's shoulder-camera.

The blow almost brought Sinnt to his knees. The camera buckled, fragments from the lenses tinkled to the floor. A faint whiff of smoke rose from inside the casing.

Sinnt recovered his balance and stretched out his hands before him. Truly blind, now, he stepped forward uncertainly, then turned, attracted by the sound of his sobbing son.

Stumbling, he made his way towards him. "My boy, my poor boy. Can you stand? Come, we will make our way home somehow. The damage is reparable. Ignore the pain. Come, come."

No one moved to help them as, clinging to one another, they fumbled their way to the door, Foyle acting as his father's eyes. Rodrone had to admit to himself that Sinnt's exit did not lack dignity.

He did not speak until they had gone. "How's your arm?" he asked Clave.

Clave's tight grin masked his pain. "It's okay, thanks. A mediseal will hold it until we get to the ship."

"Well, thanks anyway. You handled Sinnt pretty well."

"It was pretty obvious, really," Clave said. "Sinnt's camera is mounted on his right shoulder. That means he has a permanently blind sector on his left. All you have to do is stay in it and he can't see you. I felt bad about hurting the kid, though."

"Don't. He would have beamed you down with his evil eye. But how did you get here, anyway?"

Clave managed a laugh. "You don't think you got clean away with

giving us the brush-off, do you? Redace didn't like what was going on in that house. He thought you were getting into something, so we didn't spend all our time sampling the delights of Kell. We kept a watch on the house. When you left we followed you here, and it didn't seem to us that you were under your own power, so to speak. So we gave you a few hours and then came in. I must say I never bargained for... this! What the hell was going on?"

"Did you see anything?" Rodrone asked curiously.

"Only everybody screaming like crazy."

"These people study the Streall. They've actually got a Streall here. Somehow they managed to project the lens's pictures into our consciousness. But they didn't know that their contraption was accidentally tuned to select particularly terrifying events. Let me tell you, it beats nightmares."

Walking around the table that bore the lens, he tried to pull back the plush red curtain. When it held, he yanked harder and brought it tumbling down. Behind it, on a small platform, lay Seffatt. He was quite dead. At the back of the platform was a narrow tunnel, presumably leading to his private living quarters.

What had he tried to tell them, in those last seconds when death finally claimed him? Rodrone did not think he had really been able to control the society for some years now. The leader had not even realized he was dying. Yet from the look of it, he had hung on to life only by a miracle. The long armadillo-like body was shriveled with age, the natural skirts of hide that normally covered the six legs were discolored and shrunken. Seffatt lay on his side, so that the short, weak legs showed, pitifully curled up. Rodrone could not avoid a feeling of pity.

"Let's get out of here," he said brusquely.

After he had applied medication to Clave's arm they managed to get the lens to the runabout outside. He considered taking the bodies of Redace and the others too, but decided against it. What was the point? There was nothing he could do for Redace in return for what he had done for him.

On the way to the spaceground they passed Mard Sinnt and Foyle, the boy slowly guiding his father along the street. "Redace didn't like Sinnt,"

Clave remarked. "He didn't like what he was doing to his son. He said he was turning them both into research instruments, not human beings at all."

"This city is full of kookies," Rodrone agreed gruffly.

Though the cost had been heavy, on direct balance the visit to Kelever had paid off. He now knew a lot more about the lens. For one thing, his recent experience demonstrated that the information displayed in it was not merely pictorial; if one knew how to extract the data, it could inform every sense—hearing, smell, touch, and the indefinable sense of being *there*.

He was certain now that the lens was some sort of plan of the galaxy. Not a physical plan, but perhaps a schemata of all the events taking place in it, building up to some pattern understood only by the Streall. But he did not mention these things to Clave. In the coming weeks he did not mention them to anybody. The only man aboard the *Stand* with whom he had once been able to converse usefully about the matter, Redace Trudo, would not converse with anybody any more.

VII

Stundaker spacebound was a lusty, brawling, untidy sprawl which Rodrone took in with half his attention. He was used to such sights, and now his mind brooded elsewhere.

His black cloak flowing behind him in the hot breeze, he fitted well with the boisterous wastrels and adventurers who swarmed over the rigidified concrete. He moved easily among stalls, quarreling merchants, and the variegated forms of spaceships that were scattered about, not yet ready to take off—and so regarded as fixtures by the ever-shifting populace of the ten-mile 'ground. In his thoughts, he recounted his interview of a few minutes ago at the Council Chambers of the Merchant's Guild.

The *Stand's* departure from Kelever had left Rodrone with a simple problem: what now? It was still his ambition to gain total knowledge and control over the lens, but at first he was at a loss for ideas. On the one hand, he felt that Streall knowledge was necessary; on the other, the Streall were the people he must at all cost avoid.

In the end he had decided to put in at Stundaker. Atomic scientists of repute were known to live there, and in addition there had been tentative Streall contacts in the past, so perhaps he could gain a lead. Also, the planet was not tightly controlled. It remained a frontier planet, and was largely decentralized—a salient factor where a freebooter's safety was concerned. Believing he had long ago shaken off pursuit, Rodrone had deemed it no risk to land.

In that, he was mistaken. Others besides himself had been undertaking research in the past few months. No sooner had the *Stand's* engines cooled than he had received a summary order to appear at the elegant building on the

edge of the 'ground. The building was an office of the House of Drone, which held sway over the local cluster. Though Rodrone, in common with most space-adventurers, had little respect for the Merchant Guilds which were constantly trying to constitute themselves into a form of interstellar government, he had imagined that their powers of action on Stundaker were probably limited and had decided to appear.

He had been surprised to find that he was not dealing with Drone alone. Representatives from the houses of Jal-Dee and Kormu were also present. They presented a richly-bedecked, self-satisfied crew to Rodrone, but he was keenly aware that their apparent smugness veiled a well-informed appreciation of the real nature of the doings of the free traders and hired captains who sustained man's presence in the center of the galaxy.

He had taken one look at their costly furs, their apparel whose tailoring would have taken a lifetime's wages from one of their bondsmen, and above all at their gross forms and money-dominated faces, and then had simply waited to hear what they had to say.

Jal-Dee's spokesman began without preamble. "We believe that there has come into your possession a certain... article, named, by our information, the lens."

Rodrone scanned their faces. "I have an article fitting that description," he admitted.

The spokesman grunted in satisfaction. "Glad there's no argument about that, then. The lens belongs to the Streall. They're demanding it

back. I'm afraid you'll have to hand it over."

Rodrone lauerhed shortly. He felt no fear of the Guild. He was a freeman, accustomed to behave as he pleased. "The whole damned lot of you collected to tell me that? Oh no. The lens is mine."

Jal-Dee's man sighed heavily and unpleasantly. Another merchant spoke up.

"The Streall's claims are of long standing," he said in a reedy voice. "Don't think that we will risk antagonizing an alien race—a powerful and potentially friendly race, I might say—because of the personal greed of a... man like yourself."

"What claim do the Streall have on the lens?" Rodrone asked them. "They merely say that they own it. But the lens is very old. It might have been made by a race now extinct. At any rate it's mine and I'm keeping it."

He stood, thinking to leave. "As to the friendliness of the Streall, I've had some experience of them. Going by their past actions, I'm astonished to hear you call them friendly."

The man from Jal-Dee snorted impatiently. "I know they've taken over systems, but they were ruled by inferior races for the most part, not by humans. In any case we have received their guarantee that they have no further stellar ambitions in the Hub. In the face of this, we must recognize their claim to the lens."

Rodrone wanted to laugh even louder at this, but an icy sense restrained him. As a student of history, certain patterns had meaning to him. But when he tried to explain where he had heard a similar phrase to the Streall's, none of the merchants had ever heard of Hitler.

Unlike them, Rodrone was not reassured by the Streall's philosophical, placatory moves. To the Streall humans also were an inferior race whose disorderly conduct was regarded as one would regard the playfulness of unruly pets or vermin. Rodrone did not think that the Streall's actions were without a pattern.

"You fools, you think you can negotiate with the Streall," he told the merchants. "You're afraid of them; you want to appease them. Yet we could be a match for them if we put our minds to it. For that matter, why

do you think they want the lens?"

He paused to let that sink in. "The lens has strange properties, gentlemen."

The Jal-Dee spokesman became visibly uncomfortable. He placed an open file before him on the table. "Well, let's see now, what we know about you. Name: Rodrone Chang. A lot of veiy disturbing reports of piracy. Oh yes, we know all about that private fleet of yours, armed to the teeth. Chang, we won't be lectured to by a man like you!"

"There was no piracy!" Rodrone expostulated angrily, and untruthfully. "We simply overhauled cargo ships and forced them to sell at a reasonable price. Would you have us starve?"

"Never mind." He waved his hand in annoyance. "This is an order: hand over the lens, and all is well."

"The lens is mine," Rodrone repeated. "It cost me a lot of effort to come by it, and I have uses for it. You have no jurisdiction over me, and that's an end to it."

He realized as he said it that the last statement was unwise. But he would not back out now. He pulled on his gloves, and tossed aside his cloak to reveal his handgun meaningfully.

As he turned to go, the Kormu representative, who up to now had not spoken, turned red. "It was an order, you scum! We know who we're dealing with: a waster, a no-good, a goddamned pirate and a fuzzy-brain!"

This time Rodrone flushed at the ambiguous term, but made no answer. He left the building in a hurry, still defying the blunt command and realizing that he would have to leave Stundaker immediately.

He was honest enough to admit that the contempt had stung, even though it was no different from what he had expected. They had classified him, no doubt, according to their own values, and their estimate could hardly be favorable: a brooding, uncertain man, with a doubtful past and doubtful emotions. Not a man to be trusted, not a man to whose word one attached much importance. It would have been no use trying to persuade them that a basic seriousness underlay his errant nature.

Besides, he thought as little of them as they did of him. In this kind of culture, the only one humanly possible in the Hub, the sediment separated out, but the sediment carried all the weight.

He felt more free on the spaceground. Most spacemen shared varying degrees of disgust for the overfed detritus that had sunk to the bottom of economic activity, taking untold wealth with it. He could expect sympathy and, if there was trouble, help here. He had to get away quickly; there was no knowing how long it would take the House of Jal-Dee—clearly the strongest voice in the current council—to act.

And above, the stars shone down in brilliant daylight, providing the reason for it all: the Hub. The dazzling, star-packed plethora of worlds where anything could happen. Stundaker's primary blazed down on the spaceground, slightly blue in color, and with it a scattering of extra-hard points glittered: nearby suns of the local cluster, many of them only light-weeks away.

He relaxed, enjoying the bustle around him. Hard-eyed men busied themselves with a multitude of tasks. Here, a bargain was struck, there, a fight was in progress. Further off, a woman in billowing skirts sat by a pile of luggage. About sixty percent of the men wore side arms, not because violence was particularly prevalent, but because it added a flamboyance which was in style. There were literally thousands of ships on the ground, of every size, range and mode of propulsion, and seemingly of every age. It required a second look to realize that some of those outlandish lumps of metal actually were ships. Rodrone walked by a stubby, streamlined shape that rested on a quartet of vanes each about three times the vessel's breadth and nearly its height. Bowsers were busy pumping some fluid into it, and he imagined it was taking aboard water as propellant for an old-fashioned nuclear engine. Interplanetary traffic, most likely. Then he caught a whiff of alcohol. By space, a chemical rocket! He smiled, amused but not really surprised.

He skirted around the bowsers and started walking towards his own ship, the *Stond*, whose battered hull reared up a quarter of a mile away.

Then he stopped. Long, low armored vehicles were parked near the *Stond*, and even from here he could make out the insignia of the House of Jal-Dee. Men, armed and uniformed, stood guard at the portal ramps. They looked as if they were there to stay.

Casually Rodrone stepped back, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, until he was hidden by the bowzers again. He trembled with a sudden, sick fury. They were after the lens.

But the lens was not aboard the *Stond*. For safety's sake he had removed it the minute they landed to a hotel in the town that surrounded the spaceground on all sides.

As he stood there he heard the sound of an approaching motor. One of the police cars swept by, containing members of his crew who struggled angrily with green-uniformed thugs. The driver, taking no notice of the scrimmage in the back of the vehicle, surged across the field at top speed, scattering bystanders and overturning a flimsy stall selling cold drinks.

The muffled, outraged shouts of Rodrone's men faded into the distance. Rodrone pulled his cloak around him and glowered.

"What's up, you been impounded?"

A mechanic had stepped out of the nearest bowser and was checking the meters. He glanced at Rodrone over his shoulder and gave a half-chuckle, half-grunt.

"Well, maybe this old crate won't go far or fast, but at least it's a ship. They might need an extra man."

Rodrone walked away without answering. The mechanic had immediately sized up his situation, but a glorified firework wouldn't take him far enough from Stundaker.

He made his way cautiously to the edge of the 'ground, and then threaded his way through the surrounding town. Any spaceground made for a fast-moving community; most of the buildings of the town were semipermanent structures made of plastic board, gaudy and in bad taste. Rodrone's hotel was typical: a five-story edifice deriving its structural strength from an external scaffolding. Inside, however, it was fairly pleasant.

He took a lift to the fourth floor and let himself into the suite he had rented. Clave looked around as he entered.

"How's things?"

"Bad." Rodrone told him what had happened.

Clave showed no sign of surprise or alarm, though he probably felt it. He made a gesture, crossing the room. "I've been looking at this thing while you were out. It's great."

Rodrone joined him and looked down at the lens, experiencing for the thousandth time the familiar fascination of it. Not for one second since he first set eyes on it had that fascination completely left him. Nor had he grown tired of the scenes and dramas of endless variety, both within and beyond the reach of his imagination, that sprang to life and played themselves out in its limpid outer parts. Not one of them was even mediocre or nondescript, and each had a clearly defined beginning and an end—except, that was, for the one that he had now come to look on as his own private personal serial: the mad monk and his rabble in their assault on the beautiful city.

He had definitely discounted the idea that it was merely an alien version of a fictional picture show. The playlets seemed too authentic for that, fantastic though they were. He was convinced that they represented actual events.

Hypnotically his gaze focused on the glowing swirl in the center, the swirl that was a homologue of a past age of the galaxy, atom for star. He basked in the feeling that came over him when he thought of the innumerable suns hissing in the Hub, that condensation from which the spirals radiated, pouring electromagnetic energy into space. There was a significance in it he could not put his finger on, something unvocalized, ungraspable, something that would explain the whole sweep of history.

Could it be, he thought, that the final understanding of history was to be found in atomics? The science of inciting atoms was very ancient, beginning with the utilization of electricity well over a thousand years ago. Even now, electronics was the basis of nearly all control systems, but in addition other atomic particles, and whole atoms, were induced to agitate, to migrate, to change places instantaneously, to give up scores of different kinds of energies and effects. Rodrone doubted if the engineer or physicist lived who knew everything that was being done with atomic science, for there were no such things as universities these days.

If Rodrone was right, the lens contained the ultimate use of the atomic world, implying absolute knowledge. It was no wonder that the Streall

wanted it. But Rodrone wanted it for himself, to be the one to know the meaning of events. All he needed was the key; but that was becoming increasingly difficult to find.

Clave jerked him out of his reverie. "What makes those Guild creeps so keen on making a present of this gadget?"

"Appeasement. Most people don't realize how the Streall regard us, Clave. We're something on the level of vermin, or perhaps domestic animals. The merchants *do* know this, but it suits them. They're rich, so why should they worry? The result is, they don't want trouble."

He glanced at the slanting sunlight. "We've got to get away from here. As soon as it's dark I'll go back to the 'ground and try to get us passage on a ship. You'd better stay here."

"What about the rest of the gang?"

"We can't do anything for them without losing the lens. They won't be harmed. Jal-Dee will have to let them go eventually and they can take the *Stond* back to the squadron."

He paced the room, stroking his beard, and sank into himself. For a few moments he gazed at himself in a mirror, intrigued as usual by his own soft, mournful brown eyes and the perennial question: an unusually strong man, or an unusually weak one?

They did not talk much for the rest of the afternoon. Rodrone spent most of it seated on a stool, watching the pictures in the lens. When it became night, he went out.

Activity on the spaceground underwent no abatement at night, but there were plenty of shadows and if anything it was even more crowded. Rodrone did not think he would have to worry much about being arrested unless he was careless; the local police would not dare to throw too much weight around in the presence of freemen from all over the Hub.

Of the first ten captains he approached, seven were not going his way and the other three laughed at him when he mentioned an item of luggage that had to be loaded in secret. News had got around.

The eleventh captain was more promising. To begin with, he was not

particularly sober. Rodrone judged him to be approaching sixty years of age, but he seemed to have stopped maturing mentally about fifty of those years ago, and as a child he must have been uncontrollable. Rodrone had met men of his type before and he got on well with them. His face was cragged and seamed, surmounted by unkempt tufts of graying hair. He wore no uniform, but the individual dress of a free trader.

Cordially he invited Rodrone up to his quarters and poured him out a glass of pale blue *foment*. "Name's Shone," he said. "Gael Shone. This ship's called the *Stator*. A fine ship—got her just recently, damned cheap too." Draining his glass, he offered Rodrone more *foment*, then poured himself another. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm heading for the Skelter Cluster. I want passage for myself, a friend, and a small cargo. We'll pay well, if you're leaving soon."

"Dammit, we're leaving tonight, but Skelter's a bit out of our way. We've got a cargo for Tithe."

Rodrone rose to leave, nodding in disappointment. "I see. Well, sorry to have bothered you."

"Hey, wait a minute." Shone waved him back to his seat. "What's doing in Skelter? Anything I can cash in on? There's no hurry with our delivery and we've got no more work."

"Nothing special, but we can manage."

"Yes? What's the cargo, anyhow?"

Rodrone became tight-lipped. "That's a secret."

Shone cackled in delight. "I thought so!" He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Trouble with the Guild, eh?"

Rodrone took a chance. He nodded.

"Good," the captain said in satisfaction. "*I* hate those swine. They took your snip apart by the beams, incidental-iy.;

"I didn't know that."

"Yup. Well they did. Whatever they wanted, they wanted it bad."

"It's no use to anybody but me."

Shone studied him. "Well, I can believe that. Skelter's quite a few degrees off course for us, Mister, but well detour for a mere fifty thousand credits."

Rodrone lost his breath at the exorbitant fee. The decision was out of his hands, however. "I'll pay at the other end," he said. "You can't expect me to carry that money in my pocket."

"I'll trust you." Gael Shone stood up. "Welcome aboard, then. You'll like it here; my crew are good lads, some of them have been with me for years. Now, if we're to get off Stundaker in one piece we'll have to move fast. Jermy will go with you in our runabout and you can collect this thing of yours together with your mate. Then we'll be off." He lowered his voice warningly. "I've heard the Guild are asking the 'ground owners for a ship-to-ship search."

Jermy, a small dark dapper man who was also rat-faced, met them at ground level by the cargo portal—situated where the drive unit was in most ships. Shone waved them goodbye as they drove off in the runabout, and then disappeared inside.

Although there had not been time for Shone to say more than a few cursory words to Jermy, he nevertheless seemed to be imbued with the urgency of the situation. Rodrone guessed that such was his usual mode of operation. He leaned tensely forward over the steering bar, darting through the semidarkness and too intent to say a word.

It was not until they burst in on Clave that the spacer spoke. Clave lifted his lank form off the couch where it had been draped, took a look at Rodrone and a more absorbed one at Jermy.

"Okay," Jermy rasped, his eyes darting about like a rodent's. "Is that it? Throw a blanket over it and let's get it out."

It was Rodrone and Clave who carried the lens, handling it carefully while being herded and snapped at by Jermy all the time. Rodrone felt glad at his efficiency—he had been well-trained as a criminal somewhere^—as they bore the clumsy blanket-draped object through the brightly lighter foyer and on to the street. Soon they were hurtling back to the 'ground, Rodrone anxious for the safety of the lens which was

bouncing dangerously in the back.

They arrived at the spaceground to find that a situation had developed that must have been in the making all the afternoon. The police had begun the search, and a group of three ships was resisting. Enfiladed by police cars, the ships were answering an attack by rifles and handguns with similar fire. Rodrone noticed a heavy-weapons blister halfway up one of the ships. It wouldn't be long, he thought, before the spacemen became angry enough to resort to that.

The whole spaceground was in an uproar. Some of the ships were warming up to lift off if the trouble spread, and the sound of engines was deafening.

"What the hell-"

Jermy swerved to avoid a bunch of excited crewmen who were slapping their hip holsters and handing out energy charges. The runabout drove through a blast of hot gases from the pretakeoff vent of an interplanetary freighter, and then they were in sight of the *Stator*. Jermy accelerated over the final stretch, nearly crushing them with his sudden stop at the cargo portal.

"Get it aboard," he ordered briefly.

"Look at that!" Clave said suddenly.

The three besieged ships were lifting, a magnesium-bright haze at the stern of each. They were using the maximum-force propulsion system—maximum force, minimum deadweight, was how engineers described it—and it took from half an hour to an hour to ready the system for use. The battle must have been going on for at least that long, even though few had been aware of it.

A uniformed figure strode up and spoke to Jermy through the open window. "Everybody out of this car," he said, "this is a search."

Jermy took a small handgun from an alcove in the dashboard and with complete unconcern shot him.

"Now get a move on," he snapped to the two men in the back. He opened the car door, kicking aside the body.

As they were transferring the lens from the runabout, an amplified voice rang out.

"SHIP SEARCH, SHIP SEARCH. LOWER YOUR PORTALS AND PRESENT FOR SEARCH. LOWER YOUR PORTALS AND-HEY, YOU THERE!"

"Hurry it up!" Jermy snarled impatiently, his voice clipped. He still did not offer to help with the awkward burden, but slammed shut the door of the runabout. "Now we shall have to leave the car behind," he said in exasperation.

The police voice continued, offstage as though the speaker had turned his head away from the microphone. Rodrone did not allow himself time to see where the voice was coming from.

"Lieutenant, I think I've found it! They're taking something aboard that big bus over there." Then there was a gasp. "They've killed Roily!"

A siren howled, accompanied by the sound of running boots. A huge, beefy man appeared at the entrance of the cargo portal and reached down, almost tearing the lens from Rodrone's hands and hauling it inboard. Taking Rodrone's arm, he pulled him in after it.

Rodrone winced as the lens clanged to the floor. A gun-shot splattered white-hot metal from the side of the portal. Then the lid descended, cutting them off from the confusion of the spaceground...v Gael Shone's voice boomed from the loudspeaker set high on the wall. "What news down there?"

"All aboard, chief!" the beefy man called. "Fine!" Shone's voice rolled. "Then off we go!" Rodrone fancied he heard a faint *thwang*, but there was no sensation of acceleration and none of **the** expected engine noise. Jermy started climbing up a ladder.

"Here we are, gentlemen," the loudspeaker continued. "Five hundred miles aloft, gathering speed and heading *out*. The captain invites his passengers for a short drink in the control gallery; see you when you're ready."

The loudspeaker clicked. Rodrone raised his eyes at the beefy man, who shrugged and led them up a side passage. The interior of the *Stator* was

not without character of an austere, depressing kind. Its inner construction was mainly of a metal identical in appearance and texture to pig iron, and it consisted of holds and galleries, connected and surrounded by corridors and ledges, many protected from a steep drop only by flimsy railings. It was the most monochromatic environment Rodrone could remember seeing: the lighting was stark, and there was not a scrap of color anywhere. The whole effect reminded him strongly of a prison he had seen on the Frozen Continent of Bofor.

The control gallery, the center of Captain Shone's life, was no different. It was oblong, forty feet long, fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet tall, and it was cold. A control desk stretching nearly the length of the gallery was its main item of furniture, though trophies, weapons and clothing hung on the walls, and Rodrone noticed that the ceiling possessed a purely ornamental scrollwork in black iron, without doubt the only decoration on the entire ship. A mattress and a heap of blankets thrown in one corner completed the picture.

One item in the control gallery, however, was of particular interest to Rodrone. It was located on the wall directly behind the console desk, so that the ship's controller could see it only if he twisted around to look behind him.

At first glance it appeared to be a tunnel, or cavity inset in the wall, filled with an eerie light, or perhaps an illuminated sculpture.

But a few seconds scrutiny convinced him that it was in fact a picture of remarkable depth. The picture represented space for perhaps a hundred light-years around. By some miracle of ingenuity it managed to scale down distances, yet fit into the space a sizeable representation of each star—and hold it in proper relationship as the ship moved.

The effect of drawing together masses of suns already close in terms of astronomical distances was remarkable. The assembly seemed to be endowed with design and calculation. It was like a building for the gods, or like a great glowing machine.

The stars shone from the cavity with a hard steely light; but they seemed to hold back all kinds of tints and hues that glimmered beneath the outward appearance. It was a deep show of hidden color—the nearest thing to color itself aboard the *Stator*.

Captain Gael Shone, seated on the main throne of the console desk, favored them with a bleary, dark-eyed smile. He had already set out three glasses in front of him.

"Come and fill up, friends, and damn all police and planet-bound trash, eh?" He laughed slyly.

He noticed Rodrone staring at the picture behind him. "You like my little indicator, eh? I use it for navigation."

"It's magnificent," Rodrone murmured.

"Yeah. You can't see 'em, but the whole lot's just crawling with men, like disease viruses in a golden palace."

Rodrone smiled at the colorful metaphor, but he was struck by the image. He's right, he thought. We don't have any rightful place there. Even the stars obey celestial dynamics, but we're all for lawlessness.

He shrugged. "I like it that way."

"So do I." Shone poured more drinks.

Rodrone tore his eyes from the picture. "Well, you're expensive, Shone, but you do a good job. Thanks. What kind of drive do you use, by the way? I never heard of a completely silent technique before."

"No thunder of the rockets in this outfit," Shone agreed. He turned his attention to Clave. "I've met your boss, but I haven't been introduced to you yet. What's your name?"

"Clave Theory."

"Of the old Theory family?" Shone looked interested.

Clave nodded, keeping his fixed glassy smile.

"Glad to have somebody aboard who comes from such a notable line. Old John Theory and his sons did great things for science, even if they did throw it in too many directions. He was a fine man. Still that was some time ago, and I guess the family's scattered since then... he was uneducated, that was his trouble."

Clave did not alter his expression. "It has scattered," he agreed.

Rodrone took the proffered glass of *foment* and sipped it. "How long do you estimate for the trip?" he asked.

"About two weeks, subjective ship time."

"What about Jal-Dee? We might be pursued."

"Why then, we man the blisters! A *foment* rotation for every man, death to the first who takes his finger off the firing stud." Shone chuckled lengthily. "Actually, the big fat merchants aren't keen enough to chase us. They'll simply tell the Streall we got away and then forget it. It's the Streall we shall have to watch for."

A silence descended, and all at once the atmosphere became calmer. Shone looked at Rodrone steadily, taking a pull on his drink. He shifted his feet to a higher ledge on the fronting of his desk and leaned back.

"You know what's up with you?" he said suddenly. "You're haunted. Haunted! It's in your face. You were born with it. An incurable desire to follow up and find out, that's your trouble. You just can't let go, can you?"

Rodrone felt uncomfortable, but once he had decided not to answer the captain, he felt strangely relaxed.

Shone coughed. "You feel things to* much, you know." It seemed to Rodrone that the man had somehow deflated, that his moment of penetration had passed. "You ought to live just for whatever comes to hand, like me."

The remark made Rodrone meditative. Later, when the conversation between the three of them had reached a deeper level of congeniality, and a great deal of *foment* had been drunk, he asked gently; "Have you happened on a planet called Sunder recently?"

"Sunder?"

"It's Land V. I've got a wife there. I haven't seen her for five years."

"You don't look like a wife deserter to me. How come she doesn't move with you?"

Rodrone shrugged. Men who spent a lot of time in space generally kept their wives with them, especially in view of the time-dilation effect of interstellar voyaging, but he never had. "Just didn't get around to it," he answered simply.

He made no attempt to explain further. How could he explain their attunement with one another, their free attitude that obviated the need to be continually in each other's presence? It would have embarrassed him to try.

"Sunder," Shone repeated. That's a strange kind of name."

"Yeah." Rodrone turned away. Most planets—many stars, for that matter—had names connected with their histories, and he did not feel like going into his home world's now. It was a familiar enough story, in any case, of an emigrant fleet reaching an unknown star after considerable hardship, only to quarrel violently with consequences of disastrous war, when they reached safety.

He felt tempted to hire Captain Shone to make a further detour to the nearby Land system and pick up his wife. It would make a difference of about nine months, Objective Galactic Time, and a few weeks by subjective ship time. But time was one thing he did not wish to waste.

His intention now was to rejoin the squadron which he had learned was cruising somewhere in Skelter, and then continue with his study of the lens. He could not learn much from it on his own; his part of the investigation in the past year had mainly consisted of simply watching its fascinating dramas. He had to find help, but next time he sought that help he intended to take the protection of the squadron with him.

The idea had taken hold in his mind that in the lens he would discover the pattern of history. He was convinced that historical processes could be put on the same firm basis as physics or chemistry; like the ultimate particles of matter, they had to have causes, origins and intrinsic properties.

When Rodrone had first mulled over these questions many years ago, a fantastically simple, apposite guide to his actions had come to him, like a formula to guide a man's life.

A man could either be an adventurer, taking what came and ready to

take on more, or he could be an investigator, the scientific type, and try to discover where it came from. Rarely, individuals like Redace Trudo managed to combine both modes of life. Rodrone would have liked to think that he did, too, but he was aware of how weak he was scientifically.

The only alternative to these two was to stagnate, becoming more and more dull-minded according to the time and place. In this category were the bonded servants of the big merchants. Rodrone scarcely ever thought of these slaves and sycophants. They were like beasts of burden.

And the Streall? Did they actually have the answers to the questions that burned in Rodrone's mind? Possibly they did, but if so, then Rodrone was almost frightened to learn them, so much was he repelled by their inhuman, predestined outlook.

Shone broke into his sudden moodiness, grinning sheepishly. "Drink up, man! You'll come out of this all right!"

Wordlessly Rodrone took the proffered *foment*.

VIII

In the next few days Rodrone and Clave had no choice but to fraternize with the crew; their boisterous, nearly violent ways precluded reclusiveness.

There was a weirdness about them that Rodrone couldn't place at first. There was Jermy, completely without humor, methodical, and with the intentness of a pervert. There was Jublow, an ungainly man with a brick red bull neck and a little-boy enthusiasm for the roughneck entertainments they all indulged in. And so on to unsmiling, melan-choliac Krat, Pirn, coarse and caustic, and others, about ten in all. They had the unity of a gang, but there was the same seedy, unhealthy aura about them all. Their eyes never really seemed to live, only to peer.

The only man who seemed to be in a brighter state of health was Feeldonet, the beefy man who had helped Rodrone at the portal, and apparently he was new.

Captain Shone ruled over them all like a well-meaning bully. He rarely joined in their more frenetic activities, such as the frenzied dancing and

the rapid-fire target practices. Usually he sat back and watched, a bottle of *foment* leaning against one shoulder, smiling genially.

On the third day the crewmen raided Rodrone's own quarters and commandeered the lens and carried it up to the control gallery. He flushed angrily at first, but they were unruly and in an advanced state of intoxication, and Shone gave no sign that he intended to control them. Every one on board was in the party except Clave, who had gone off by himself to stargaze in one of the weapons blisters.

The lens slammed to the floor as the men released their burden. There was a scuffle as they all jockeyed for good vantage points around it, then suddenly Pirri seemed to assume command.

"Let's see some pretty pictures," he said.

They fell momentarily silent and gawped open-mouthed. To be honest with himself, Rodrone couldn't blame them for not keeping their hands off it. In this frigid ship anything new was an attraction and the lens was certainly a stunner.

Pim squatted and pressed his nose flat against the surface of the lens. Then he stood up and tried to mark the glossy surface with a knife. "I want to see some space battles!"

"Yeah!" It was an enthusiastic chorus.

"There's no control over it," Rodrone informed them sourly. "The scenes are all random."

"Aw." Pim screwed up his face. "You'd think—here y'are then, what's this comin' up? Eh, it looks good!"

Rodron shouldered the others aside to look. Pim was right. From the center, a region of blackness was spreading towards the periphery. In it, ships appeared, rectilinear rods almost as black as space itself but shiny. Partitions continually slid open and shut on the long rods. The ships were fighting one another, directing energy and missiles through the openings and glinting inwardly with the urgency of contention.

It was as compelling and alien a sight as the lens had ever produced.

"Look!" moaned Jublow. "There's another one!"

On the opposite side of the lens, wedge-shaped vessels stood out against a brilliant globular star cluster. They seemed to be fighting over possession of a nearby planet, and were warding one another off by creating fields of faint blue nimbus. Rodrone could almost hear them humming and crackling.

"How did you do that?" he demanded sharply.

"Do what?"

"How did you control the visions?"

"Who says I did?"

"I've never been able to get the pictures I wanted from it." He did not mention the second reason for the unlikelihood of such scenes, namely the paucity of space-traveling races in the galaxy. *

Pim cackled. "You ought to come down with us and play our little game, mate, and you'll find out what wishing for things can do. I swear I've held that pile down by sheer damned willpower more than once!"

He looked around him for approbation, receiving it in an applause of chuckles and sniggers.

Captain Shone laughed out loud. "You're surprised too often, old pal," he remonstrated to Rodrone. "You want to be more flexible. If old John Theory was here, now, noth-ing would faze him." He took a swig and spluttered. "There was a mind for you."

Rodrone swung around, his puzzlement forgotten in the face of a fresh surprise. Suspicion flowered into certainty almost as soon as it was born.

"You *knew* him!"

"Of course I did."

So that was it. The weirdness of the crew was totally explicable now. Shone had been personally acquainted with Clave's distant ancestor, a man whose very family name had changed because of his scientific contributions, and who had lived two hundred years before. With that one

datum, everything clicked into place.

Now he knew what sort of a ship he had bought passage on. These were men who would take cargoes on the long hauls across hundreds of light-years, where the time-dilation effect ensured that they could never return to the generation from which they departed. They were the most abandoned of men. They were called deadliners, because their utter removal from the warmth of human society gave them a close affinity with death. They no longer had the ordinary reasons that made a man want to stay alive; they had nothing but their existence in this mausoleum of a freighter.

It was not long before the deadliners grew tired of the lens and wandered off together, leaving Shone asleep at the control desk.

Rodrone sat moodily for a few minutes, then felt restless. The atmosphere of the deadliner ship made him more agitated than usual. He got up and explored sternwards.

The *Stator* was in complete silence. The galleries echoed his footsteps and the walls felt rusty to his touch. Near to where he believed the propulsion unit and power plant to be, he saw a yellow light and heard the murmur of voices.

The crew of the *Stator* were sitting on the floor of a small room, playing cards. One wall of the room was covered with the control mechanisms of a nuclear reactor of some antiquity, to judge by its design. The attitude of the deadliners was one of intense concentration. Rodrone had never seen them so quiet.

Pirn laid down a card on the pack and moved a counter forward on a board by his side. "Check," he said.

Someone got up and pulled a handle on the wall. Rodrone watched incredulously. He knew what the deadliner was doing: he was withdrawing one of the damper rods.

Jermy looked up as he entered. "You come to join us?"

"What's the game?"

"Brag. Half skill, half chance."

Rodrone nodded to the wall. "And what about the reactor? It's a pretty dangerous thing to include in a game of cards. What sort is it?"

"It's a fast one. It becomes a bomb without the moderators."

He swallowed. There was no need to ask how that figured.

Pirn noticed his discomfort. "Whassamatter? We were playing when you came aboard."

"What? You mean you played this mad game aground on Stundaker?"

"Sure."

"But you might have taken half the spaceground with you!"

"The whole of it, mate. This is a fair old reactor we've got here. Well, shall I deal you a hand?"

Rodrone sat down as Jublow shifted over to make room. "Yeah, what the hell..."

As the game progressed, Rodrone picked up the details. It was a game in which there were no gains, only one ultimate loss. As the scores mounted, so the reactor's moderating rods were withdrawn; the idea was to win by beating all other opponents while the scores were still low enough to come out alive, and that needed both skill and luck.

The deadliners called the game Brag, but a better name would have been Dare. In a showdown, the scores of all the hands were added, and the leading player who forced the showdown could rarely be sure of what the others held.

It was rather like a game of pistol roulette Rodrone had once seen, where each player took a chance that the heat charge he fired at his head was not the one in five that was actually live. But in this game, no one put down any money. The stakes were purely negative... and why shouldn't they be, Rodrone thought. In a sense, these men were dead already.

There was one final grisly touch of murder, to prevent the game from becoming spurious. A player in a winning position who lost his nerve and tried to back out paid a forfeit, by being locked in the cavity behind the

reactor's shielding. Rodrone did not know if there were currently any bodies there.

He played cautiously and well, but the others were experts. One by one the rods moved out, occasionally one being pushed back in as the score momentarily dropped. Suddenly he was aware of someone standing in the entrance. Clave had also been attracted by the light. He stepped in, taking in the scene with one glance around. "Brag, eh? I'm good at it."

There was hardly a word spoken as he took a place and accepted a hand. Did the youngster realize what he had walked in on? Rodrone started to voice a warning, but the heavy dead ethic of the deadliners fell down on him like a stifling blanket, damming the impulse.

To judge by the quick and easy way in which Clave ran up a good score, he had not given a thought to what the stakes were. The deadliners became very tense. Rodrone could almost see them thinking "this is it."

After about half an hour, however, the significance of the manipulations of the reactor controls gradually seeped in on Clave. He studied his hand, still sinister of aspect and smiling, but, Rodrone knew, very thoughtful.

This must be it, Rodrone told himself. Apart from the fact that Clave ran up a high score without knowing what he was doing, they don't scale down to account for there being two extra players.

"Yeah," said Clave, slightly breathless-sounding. "Well, this has gone far enough." He laid down his cards.

"You can't do that, mister," Krat, the melancholiac, informed dourly.

"But dammit—" Clave glanced at the radiation meter, which was glowing brightly. "Just look at it already."

"It's hot in there," Jenny agreed. Briefly he explained about the forfeit.

Clave gave Rodrone a wild look. "Are you in on this?"

"It's the rules, Clave!" Rodrone said in a tortured voice. Clave jumped up. "You're not putting me in there—" In an instant the others were on him. Clave's hair swung around his shoulders as they lifted him off his

feet. Rodrone leaped forward to put a stop to it, but he was cuffed back.

Then it was done. A thick section of wall swung open. A narrow passage opened up behind it, and into this Clave was stuffed, between the two reactor casings. The heavy door slammed shut.

Rodrone was in a state of stunned horror. The deadliners stood around silently, shifty-faced and avoiding one another's glances.

Then they suddenly broke out into one of their spontaneous dancing sessions, thumping the floor with enthusiastic exertions. From somewhere musical instruments were produced, and three of their number filled the room with surprisingly expert swing music from a now forgotten era. Energetically, they all danced. Jublow danced, his huge hunched shoulders twisting back and forth and his red neck straining. Even Jermy joined in, snakelike, his back crouched and his face intent and deadpan. All their faces seemed corpselike, out of place with the convulsions of their bodies.

Rodrone left, sickened, and made his way back to the control gallery. Shone had woken up, and was staring blearily into nothing.

Limply Rodrone sat down. "That death-wish gang of yours has just killed Clave," he said dully.

"Killed him? How?"

Rodrone explained.

Shone looked regretful. "He was a likable lad."

The epitaph struck Rodrone forcibly. He grunted in disgust. "Have you nothing to say for those murdering bully-boys of yours?"

"Eh? Hah! So you're complaining." Shone stuck his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the picture cavity behind him, with its closely-drawn designs of suns. "Remember what you said? You said you liked it like this. Lawlessness. Disorder! Well, this is it!" He peered at Rodrone, leaning forward. "The way things are, anything can happen in this universe. Some good things, some bad, some pretty ghastly. But who are you to set a limit on what should happen in the whole cosmos?"

Rodrone stared sullenly at him for a long moment. He slumped. Then

he grunted again, this time with a hint of grudging humor. "Tell me," he said, "why do you seem a bit more human than the rest—and yet you still stick with them?"

For answer, Shone flicked a switch. On a small vision plate something appeared.

This time it was not the artificially condensed image that glowed behind him. It was a vaster view, more like what the naked eye would see.

"Just look at that."

Rodrone saw—suns. Billions of suns, congregated in piling clouds and clusters, space edging black between them.

"That's excuse enough for anything," Shone said.

"Then we're brothers under the skin," Rodrone told him, laughing shortly.

Shone flicked off the vision plate. "Business acquaintances, anyway. The Streall are on to us. I've detected them coming up fast—three or four ships. I think we'd better slip out of the way."

He climbed down from the throne and walked unsteadily to one end of the desk, where he made an adjustment. Then he came back and began to work with the controls.

After a minute or two concern showed on his face. "Something's wrong."

He continued working for about another minute, and spoke into a communicator.

"Feeldonet!" he bellowed.

A voice answered. "Yep?"

"The drive's acting up. It doesn't work! Fix it will you?"

"Right."

Shone glanced at Rodrone. "It'll mean a pitched battle if they catch up

with us, but we mount some pretty powerful weapons."

Half an hour later Feeldonet came up to the control gallery. He was embarrassed. Somewhat diffidently, he explained how fluctuations in the power supply—caused by tampering with the reactor—had disturbed the drive and thrown it out of action. Then he described his efforts to put it right, ending apologetically with a story of failure.

Then he admitted that he knew nothing about the drive in question.

Rodrone was amazed. "Is this your ship's engineer?" he said to the captain.

Shone sighed. "I took him on a couple of stops back. He seemed good enough, and he certainly put up a good case for himself. You gulled me!" he said accusingly to Feeldonet.

Feeldonet shifted his feet. "All right, it's true I'd never heard of this system before, but I'm a good technician and I thought there wasn't anything I couldn't get the hang of. I won't be so cocksure again."

Rodrone questioned him, intrigued. He "had traveled under dozens of different space propulsion systems: number-ous sophistications of the reaction-mass principle, "space-compression," and even on the new *drover* engines. But of them all, the method used by the *Stator* was the most bizarre. The mathematics that described it made no reference to motion at all—Feeldonet did not think that they made any reference even to the ship. Consideration was given to the surrounding matter in space, viewed from various separated points. Somehow the ship was hauled from one to another of these points, by means of a change of observer, as it were.

It was as close to a practical application of sheer metaphysics as Rodrone was ever likely to see.

"Now you know why the ship was cheap," the engineer told Shone. "Only three of these units were ever built. Just after you gave me the job, a fellow told me that was because there were only ever three technicians who understood it."

Shone looked at a suddenly winking screen before him.

"And you thought you could make it four, eh? Well, keep trying. We've got trouble on our hands."

Rodrone peered over his shoulder. On the screen, three long, angular Streall ships flashed into existence.

From the deadliners' point of view, the Streall had not necessarily come with hostile intentions. But Rodrone urged that they be fought off and the deadliners were quick and eager.

Rodrone retired to one end of the gallery during the battle. An unspeakable weariness had come over him, more profound than anything he had felt before. The death of Clave had shaken him. His failure to act in his defense also bothered him, and he realized that having fallen in with the deadliners, he had taken up their ways with frightening readiness, as if hypnotized.

Men became deadliners because they had been "squeezed out" of normal life because of personality defects or an irremediable need to fail. The long-haul ships swept up a human detritus of psychotics, would-be suicides, and people who were unable for one reason or another to form proper relationships with healthy human beings. They were the desperadoes of the psyche, inviting death, defying life to have any meaning. What stroke of fate was it that had thrown Rodrone in their midst?

Captain Shone stooped intently over the desk console. The sounds of searing shots from the heavy weapons came from the distant parts of the ship. Then there was a shuddering crash as the Streall returned the fire.

The *Stator* shook and buckled. Captain Shone hung on to his quivering desk with one hand, manipulating controls with the other and giving orders through the intercom at the same time. There came another, heavier crash that caused the control gallery to keel over and almost toppled Shone from his seat. Rodrone glanced up, and even from this distance he knew that Shone was sweating.

The frequency of the *Stator's* firing increased. The flat hoarse sounds of the big guns echoed almost desperately through the metal and air of the ship.

Rodrone began to feel concern. He climbed to his feet, ventured

forward. "How's it going?" he called uncertainly.

The floor vibrated under him as the Streall scored another hit. The magnificent navigation picture behind Shone winked suddenly out.

It was followed by all the lights in the control room, including those on the desk console.

Captain Shone shouted and cursed in the darkness. The noises of battle continued. Rodrone decided to take no further interest until the outcome was known, and he dropped his head and let his mind drift to other thoughts.

He was still in that revery twenty minutes later when the lights came on again. Shone was grinning down at him.

"Come out of your sulk. We've won. They were patrol craft—there must be a Streall system nearby. What's more, we've got a prisoner."

He learned that Jermy, rigging a spacecraft from an emergency rocket motor, had crossed over to the wreck of one of the alien vessels and had brought back a survivor. Rodrone stepped forward as they herded it into the control gallery.

It seemed to be a specimen in good condition. The long armadillo-like body and broad, pointed snout were a healthy blue color. Natural skirts of hide reached from the sides to the ground so that it seemed to glide along, but Rodrone knew that beneath them were six legs and a pair of arms which folded underneath the chest.

Its sapphire eyes regarded Rodrone, then swung to the lens which still lay on the floor of the control gallery.

"So it is true. You have it."

Rodrone nodded.

"And what do you intend to do with it?"

He had no qualms about revealing his purpose. "I intend to understand it."

"How?"

"There must be a way."

An explosive sound came from the Streall, like a cat's sneeze.
"Ridiculous. That is only for the Streall."

"Do *you* understand it?" Rodrone probed.

"I? Of course not. I am only an engineer, a drive engineer on a patrol ship. The lens is completely understood only by those who live on the Contemplation Worlds."

At this Rodrone became agitated. It had already occurred to him that the secrets of the lens might be beyond the ingenuity of the human intellect to uncover. If that were so, then any risk would be worthwhile.

"Where are these Contemplation Worlds?"

"That is unimportant to you. Your only sane action is to deliver the lens to its rightful possessors, the Streall."

"Not until I understand what its uses are," Rodrone suggested speculatively. "Perhaps then I would be persuaded to give it up."

The Streall sank to the floor in a resting position, like a Sphinx, its skirts spreading around it. "If that is all you want, then go to a Contemplation World. The philosopher there can perhaps explain it to you. Afterwards, you will give it up."

"I said I *might*."

"There will be no choice. Ships will be arriving soon. They will follow you to the Contemplation World. But if you do not go, you will never achieve your ambition."

Rodrone laughed at how neatly the Streall had led him into a dilemma.

"This *is* crazy," Shone said. "We're not going anywhere. We're stranded!"

"We have a faulty space drive," Rodrone told their prisoner. "We don't know how to repair it. Perhaps you would have better luck. If you can put it in order, we will proceed to the Contemplation World, as you suggest. That is, if Captain Shone agrees."

Shone shrugged characteristically. "We're walking right into a trap, but okay."

The Streall rose. "It is better for the lens to be on a Streall world than to be lost in space. Show me your drive."

IX

The Streall engineer did not tell them what he thought of the *Stator's* propulsion unit, but half a day later he had brought it into working order. After a journey of a few more days they were hovering above the Contemplation World.

It was a desolation, a planet covered in red rust. A tiny blue sun glittered in the sky, giving the atmosphere an icy appearance and reflecting off the scattered lakes in the southern hemisphere.

The *Stator* sank down under the Streall's direction. The creature had already artlessly confirmed what Rodrone al-ready knew by rumor: that the planet had a population of one; that was the usual case with Contemplation Worlds. The philosopher dwelt in underground chambers, devoting himself to philosophy and science.

Before they landed Rodrone put in one last call on the *Stator's* space-tensor transceiver. They were near enough to Skelter for communication now, and he had already summoned the squadron to his assistance.

The red-haired visage of Kulthol looked blandly from the screen. "We'll be there before you're ready to leave, chief. Depend on us."

The image faded. Kulthol was not sentimental and did not indulge in long conversations.

The *Stator* crunched into the surface of the planet, sinking a foot into the red rust on landing. Led by the alien, Rodrone stepped out into the thin air, bringing only Shone to help him carry the lens. They walked for about a hundred yards before the Streall stopped.

A mound grumbled up from the ground, russet particles tumbling from its sides. A down-slanting opening gaped. The Streall set off down it,

followed by the others.

It was dark at first, but as they proceeded a gentle glow drifted, up in quiet shades of green and orange. A warmth of air came to meet them, bearing the essence of delicate perfumes.

The philosopher's apartments were extensive and varied. Some were lavish, paneled in deep-colored woods and rich in furs and tapestries. Some were bare metal, not unlike the interior of the *Stator*. But they were all silent—except for the almost imperceptible hissing of a burning perfume stick in a translucent blue holder—and at first seemed to be deserted.

Then someone came to meet them. But it was not the philosopher. It was a human woman.

"I thought you said the philosopher was alone?" Rodrone said to their guide.

"Evidently not," the other replied softly. "It is not mandatory, merely customary."

The woman was tall, and dressed in a loose flowing gown. At the sight of Rodrone she hurried up to him, reaching out her hand to touch his cheek.

He drew back as he saw the expression on her face, but instantly he felt sorry for the instinctive reaction. Her face was melancholy, lost, beyond the frail pale of sanity. But despite that, there was a grace about her that was irresistible.

"Who are you?" he asked in a shocked tone.

"Sana." Her voice was mournful. She inclined her head and reached out with her bare foot to stroke the carpet "I was a singer once. Famous. A singer on Gurtlede... but now I exist only for the pleasure of the Streall thinker."

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know. Years... always..."

A door opened behind her. The Streall philosopher appeared. He glanced over the room, and glided forward.

He was a dignified being. His skin was wrinkled with age, and the luster of his eyes had faded to a faint sky blue. He looked first at the ler>, and then at Rodrone and Shone. A spitting, sneezing exchange took place between the two Streall, full of overtones some of which were beyond the range of human audibility.

"So the great plan returns, as it must, after an aeon of wandering." He was looking at Rodrone.

His words excited the freebooter. "So I was right. It is a plan!"

"I have just been told," the philosopher said after a pause, "of your desire to know the truth about the lens, after which you will be willing to give it up to its rightful owners."

"I didn't promise that."

"No matter. When you know, you will surely agree."

Rodrone found himself staring at the lens with its ever-present picture show. His voice refused to speak.

"Your first error," the philosopher continued calmly, "is in thinking that the lens is of Streall manufacture. It is not. It was created by pregalactic beings, by beings of immense intellect who exist somewhere in the universe. Your second mistake is in thinking that it is a map, or copy, or reflection, of galactic development. It is not. *It is the original design*, the schematic from which the stars of Thiswhirl were formed."

"That's impossible. The galaxy evolved from a condensation of hydrogen gas."

"So we believe."

"Then what part could the lens play in it?"

"If a saturated solution is seeded with a small crystal, crystals will grow throughout the solution. A tiny seed can gather material and make a huge plant out of it. The lens is a resonant device linking macrocosm and

microcosm. By means of very subtle radiations it is in contact with all parts of the galaxy *and controls what takes place there.*"

"But that's fantastic! That's impossible!" The Streall's claims were so fantastic, so total, that Rodrone was becoming angry through his own inability to grasp it. "And what about all the other galaxies? Do they also owe then-existence to these 'cosmic gods'?"

"Some, perhaps. The special function of the lens is the formation of life. Nature makes dead galaxies. The makers of the lens make galaxies with life. And indeed, we know there is a difference between galaxies where life is present and where it is not.

"But that is not all. The lens is a four-dimensional plan, but a plan with an element of uncertainty in it. That is inevitable due to the quantum mechanical nature of the subatomic world." As he said this, Rodrone realized that the Streall world-outlook had been misinterpreted by Mard Sinnt. "Hence, it constitutes a control of events, but a control that has to be exercised if the development is to go according to plan. This constitutes a feedback safety mechanism between the lens and Thiswhirl itself, ensuring that the system does not collapse. Certain races, at certain times, are entrusted with the task of exercising this control."

The philosopher's voice rose in volume. "At the present period of galactic history, the Streall are the chosen race, the only people given the freedom of the galaxy. But, just as the lens must exist to counteract the uncertainty of nature, and just as a guardian race must exist to counteract the subatomic indeterminacy of the lens, what is there that can safeguard against the incompetence of that chosen race? It was at this point, the weak link in the chain, that disaster struck. One and a half thousand years ago the lens was in transit from one place of safekeeping to another, under the supervision of the despised Seffatt."

"Seffatt?" Rodrone echoed. "*He* had something to do with it?"

"You know the name? Perhaps you have heard legends. The ship in which the lens traveled was struck by an un-predicted and unusually powerful charge of radiation from a supernova. The crew lost consciousness and the ship, out of control, wandered into an asteroid belt. Automatically it separated into sections, as our ships are designed to do. The section carrying the lens was never recovered despite all efforts. Yet, centuries later, it must have been found by someone, for only recently the

lens became an item of merchandise in man-carried interstellar traffic. Thus you see the burden that has lain on the Streall race all these years."

"It hardly seems to be Seffatt's fault," Rodrone muttered.

"There remains the possibility that, by choosing an alternative route, he could have avoided the catastrophe. Therefore the blame is his."

Silence descended for nearly half a minute before the Streall spoke again. "The loss of the lens meant that the destiny of the galaxy was at the mercy of random happenings, of chance biological mutations. Our worst fears were realized with the emergence of man and his intrusion into the Hub. There should never have been men in the Hub. You should not have become space creatures. You were only an atom in the galactic drama, to be played on the stage of a single planet and vanish in a little time. Instead, men have become a horror of multiplication, like electrons streaming away from a heavy atom which is constantly replenished, creating new electrons where none should be.

"Men are a cancer, a dangerous virus spreading endlessly!"

"That may be bad fortune for some, but it is good fortune for us," Rodrone retorted.

"It is bad fortune for everybody. There is in your lives none of the orderliness which the proper function of the lens brings to planetary creatures. You are a horror of chaos and disorder. With you, anything can happen. How perfectly you demonstrate the wisdom of the lens, which ordains that there should at any time be only one star-traveling species in the galaxy! But now, we shall be able to rectify the error. The lens is not limited in its action to the present, it can also range through the future and the past. By amending the fault at the right point, we shall wipe our *your* past. Humanity will have thrived hardily and fallen into decay, without ever reaching beyond the atmosphere of the home planet."

"Is that so?" said Rodrone savagely. "Well I like things as they *are*."

"Can it really be that your mind does not submit to necessity, now that you have learned the truth?" the philosopher asked in amazement.

"You are truly naive if you think I will submit to being cast into a planetary prison! I think the galaxy is doing all right as it is."

"It will end in dissolution and disaster!"

Rodrone laughed.

Tentatively, the Streall shuffled towards the lens. "I have often dreamed of such a thing..." he murmured, and bent, staring intently.

Something made Rodrone follow his gaze. As he did so, a strange sense of distance came over him. Following it, he experienced the same speeded-up consciousness that came from the use of the drug DPKL-59.

Perhaps it was his long-standing connection with the drug that caused to happen what happened. It took him some moments to realize exactly what was taking place. The Streall philosopher, impatient to taste the lens's secrets, was using his knowledge of special mental techniques to enter it. Here at last was the key to controlling it that Rodrone had sought. And as the philosopher created an opening, Rodrone was sucked in alongside him...

Rodrone was hanging in space, yet it was not space as he knew it. It was atomic space, where energies hum and flash with an urgency not known in the slow-moving macrocosm. Although there was no sound, he heard things with his mind—in fact he had no body. He heard a huge grinding noise, which his instinct told him was the change in quantic states of subatomic particles. Then he penetrated further into the great swirl of the atomic galaxy, extending his mind into the very atoms themselves.

Worlds existed within those atoms. They were not the same as planets, there was nothing corresponding to that spatial phenomenon, but they were analogous. And in these worlds, analogy creatures lived.

He recognized that these creatures were identical to the creatures of the macrogalaxy, in that there was a one-to-one relationship. He could not understand how the relationship was maintained, or how the one remained always identical to the other—but what, after all, was cause and effect? Physics had already proved that they didn't exist.

With a thrill, he realized that this was the world of possible change. This was the meaning of indeterminacy. There was a hint of split paths, as a result of which mutually contradictory events existed simultaneously.

This was the point of contention. In the macrocosm only one out of all the possibilities could become actual. The makers of the lens had carefully prepared their drama and written the script of galactic history, but they had been unable to eradicate indeterminacy from the atomic world. Thus they were faulted by the nature of things. Thiswhirl, Rodrone saw, was becoming the rogue galaxy, splitting up into its own fragmentary playlets as the cancerous energies of man radiated through the Hub. And this was what he wanted! In that disorganized Hub, nearly everything that could happen did happen somewhere. So what if some of it was bizarre? He thought of the deadliners, of Mard Sinnt and his son... but even so, it pleased him more than the vast, orderly system that the Streall wished to institute at the behest of the makers of the lens. The indeterminacy of the atomic world was what made the lens—and through it the real world, the macrocosm—subject to alteration by the action of purely mental forces. All that was needed, in fact, was to cross the protective force-field surrounding it. This the Streall had done—unwittingly, for the both of them! Rodrone felt the presence of the Streall philosopher now, like a powerful, adult system of mental vectors arrowing through the abstract, evanescent realm, bent on change. He intended to enter the past and form a mirror-barrier around an electron that somehow had become too energetic. In this way he could prevent the spread of man.

For a bare moment Rodrone was appalled at his own foolishness in letting the mind of the philosopher loose on the lens. Then, in a flash, he was after him, plunging past humming atoms and speeding transient packets of neutrino energy. He felt the Streall philosopher's mind ranging alongside his. When either tried to move the other knew it and moved his own powers in to block him. A tussle developed, each trying to confine the fight to themselves and not spill energy that might detonate suns.

For a long time they seemed to altercate, kicking each other up and down the scale of discreet energy. Rodrone knew that it was a life-and-death struggle; but the philosopher's mind was stronger, and he felt himself beginning to vanish, to disperse into a fading wave, leaving the philosopher free to remake the cosmos.

Nevertheless, Rodrone won. Because he was a philosopher, and had lived for so long in solitude, the Streall had become detached from physical things. Unlike Rodrone, it never occurred to him to transfer part of his attention back to his body existing in the physical macrocosm. He hardly knew it when Rodrone burned him down with his handgun.

Rodrone did not leave the lens immediately. Their struggle had not been without consequences. Two dissonant energy systems that already reverberated faintly through the lens had been exacerbated. He knew what they signified: the confrontation between man and Streall. He hung, bewildered, as they resonated, pinged and sang around him like an unholy chant, aware that he could kick events one way or the other.

Something like a wicked, mocking laugh echoed from

Rodrone's mind. They had tried to destroy man's freedom. So why not? Why not war?

The discordant clashes of energy mounted in intensity, making his consciousness vibrate. Then he withdrew to the underground apartments.

The remaining Streall had fired at Rodrone with a silver slab which now lay on the floor, its pale beam still emitting. Captain Gael Shone had stepped in to take the shot in the stomach and then had killed the Streall with his own handgun,

Sana pressed herself against the wall, wide-eyed, holding her dress to her bosom. Rodrone glanced at her briefly, then knelt to the captain.

"Shone," he said quietly, "sorry to see you die like this."

Shone grinned painfully. "Don't offer me any hope, will you?"

"I'm sorry," Rodrone told him, but there it is. "You're going to die."

Captain Shone struggled as if to raise his head, then lay back, resigned. He seemed to be looking a long way off.

"I know. But I don't care... Listen, I've seen everything I want to see. I've seen worlds you've never even heard of. Once we went into deep space outside This-whirl, right up to the Barrier. From there you can see the whole galaxy in one sweep, with Andromeda on the other side. What a sight! The whole galaxy in one sweep!"

He had seemed to speak without too much effort, but it must have been for show. His head dropped suddenly to one side.

Rodrone stood up and looked at Sana, seeing the lissome allure of her

body. He realized that it was a long time since he had looked at a woman in that way. But he had stayed off DPKL-59 for over a year now.

"You had better come with me, Sana." He moved to touch her.

She merely pulled back her head with a willowy, graceful movement and stroked her hair wistfully into place over her shoulders. "No. I live here now."

"But you were his prisoner, his slave. Now he's dead."

"I live here, now."

Turning, Sana stepped through a doorway, down a step and into a set of low-ceilinged, elegant compartments. "He made me over for his pleasure," she said, half to herself.

Rodrone was not sure she was even aware he had followed. Determined, he came up behind her, stroked her neck, then seized her and swung her around to lay her down on a couch.

As she went unresistingly down, her gown fell partly away to reveal a perfect, shapely body. Desire rose in him. But as he was about to sink down on her, he noticed the look on her face. It was absent-minded, gone, yielding only by default.

Despite his urges, he could not continue. It would have been rape with consent, but rape nevertheless.

"You must come with me," he repeated, thinking that perhaps he could do something for her. But for answer she only sighed.

He started to argue with her, but suddenly he hadn't the heart. He took one long last look at her slight form. He didn't know if she realized he was watching her, but if so, she was completely unpretentious about it. His eyes lingering, he slipped through the door. As he left, she began to sing, as she had been wont to do for the Streall philosopher. Her slow, sad song curled like an eddying vapor through the silent, heavy chambers. It was like something eternal, finding a melancholy repose, hopelessly, as if it would last forever.

She had stirred desire in his blood, reminding him that he had a wife

on Sunder. He had been a long time without a woman.

He called the ship and summoned help to collect the lens. When he returned he made bare explanations and walked past the crewmen, climbing silently into the control gallery to brood.

Jermy found him there ten minutes later in a deep revery. "What now?" he interrupted rudely. Rodrone looked up. "What?"

"The captain didn't come back. He was our Daddy, now he's dead. You're our Daddy now. The men want to know where we head for."

You're our Daddy now... Rodrone echoed to himself, wondering at the bizarre words. But it was completely understandable. The deadliners needed someone like Shone, or himself, who was a little more alive than they were, less neurotic and with qualities of leadership. Gael Shone was, in many ways, like a father to them, albeit as unnatural as they were.

"Sunder," Rodrone told him, coming to life and searching the desk for charts. "I'm going to see my wife."

Half an hour later he gave the order to head into in-tersystem space.

The *Stator* moved swiftly towards rendezvous with the squadron while Rodrone, aided by Feeldonet, calculated a course to Land. He looked forward to meeting his wife now.

As their trajectories crossed, Kulthol's face came up on the screen. "I see you've changed ships," he said curtly. "A pity you had to lose the *Stond*. Well, are you coming over to join us?"

"No, I'll stay here."

"What, with that bunch of-" Kulthol broke off. He had already heard something about who crewed the *Stator*. "Forgive me, but you might do better to cross over to the *Revealer*."

Kulthol was talking sound sense, but sense was not something that had played too large a part in guiding Rodrone's actions lately. "Maybe, but I'm staying here. Formate the squadron and make for the coordinates I gave you."

Without waiting for a reply he cut the connection. Luckily he could count on Kulthol to remain loyal despite any churlishness on his part.

Perhaps, he reflected, his real reason for staying with the deadliners was that he did not want to stand face to face with Kulthol and have to tell him how Clave died.

Irritably he dismissed the matter from his mind and turned his attention back to the lens. Since his mental battle with the philosopher he had watched it eagerly to see if the flavor of its dramas would undergo any change. He had not been disappointed. There was a new feverishness in the playlets, an explosiveness in the situations they portrayed.

The insane monk, too, had undergone a change of fortune in his wild ambition. Month after month the superb city had withstood his assaults, until one day a new weapon had been placed in his hands. Where it came from was not certain; but suddenly someone approached him and proffered a strange silver trumpet, its horn fluted and convoluted with elaborate extrusions.

For a while the monk held the trumpet, examining it wonderingly. Then he put it to his lips and blew a blast. The sound must have been withering to hear, for everyone present in the picture flung their hands to their ears, their faces contorted with agony. The banners and flags of the city trembled, and the walls themselves quivered.

Again the monk blew, straining with exertion. Tiny cracks in the glistening white walls, growing and flaking slowly, until with a sudden rush a whole chunk of the ramparts came avalanching down.

The rabble screamed with delight. The brown-garbed monk lifted the trumpet aloft, waving it in triumph. Again and again he blew in a frenzy of destruction, urging his slaves through the breaches which the vibrations of his instrument made in the walls.

Since then, he and his raggle-taggle army had been engaged in a hideous sacking of the city.

Rodrone's enjoyment of this scene was interrupted by alarm calls that came simultaneously from Kulthol and the *Stator's* own warning system manned by Pirn.

A sizeable Streall fleet was bearing down on them. As Rodrone saw the angular ships speed into view on the detector screen he felt a cold but thrilling shudder pass down his spine.

There was barely time to put into effect the prearranged battle strategy. The *Stator* took its place in the motley collection of spaceships, which spread out to form a ring, the ring elongating continuously into variously shaped ellipses according to a computer-operated program, so as to confvise the Streall ranging mechanisms.

The ploy worked well at first. The Streall ships, closely formatted, lunged into the ring almost before realizing it and were subjected to a rapid barrage of fire from all sides. In reaction the Streall ships disengaged their various sections and Voke up into sub-units, thus losing their chance of adopting a concerted battle plan. For some time the crowd of units milled around, punished by the continuous and deadly fire from the encircling ring.

But gradually the Streall's superior firepower told. The units spread out, oblivious to losses, until the gathering extended as far as Rodrone's ships.

Rodrone considered giving the order to scatter, but quickly realized it would be a mistake. There were enough Streall units here to pursue every one of them, pinning them lethally down.

The *Stator* clanged and stank with the fury of the battle, but received relatively few hits; the deadliners, he thought, seemed to have an understanding with the Angel of Death. Or perhaps their practice at nuclear Brag, the same that had enabled Jermy to manipulate the lens, gave them a head start when it came to picking off approaching missiles. Their manner of fighting was bloodcurdling: the iron in-terior of the ship echoed to their screams of enjoyment as death crashed all about them, to their hoots and yells of expectation as their own shots were let loose.

But Rodrone's tally board told a depressing story. The *Revealer* gone. The *Mendicant* gone. The *Maire Rodex-5* gone. Towards the end, the battle assessor computer became confused. It was no longer possible, in the far-flung junk heap of Streall sections, wreckage, ships and fragments of ships, to tell what was functional and what was dead.

A silence descended, as the surviving units of each side scanned the

enemy in attempts to determine where there was still life and the ability to attack or defend. At least, that was what the *Stator* was doing. The occasional explosions grew rarer, then ceased altogether. No one was firing, for fear of revealing himself.

Nevertheless Rodrone located several functioning enemy units. But so far he had no evidence that anything of his own squadron still lived.

Jermy tugged at his arm. "We can get away, you know."

"Eh?"

"Our drive is undetectable."

Doubtfully Rodrone regarded the assessment board. Somewhere out there some of his people might still be alive and needing help, or perhaps injured in crippled ships. But what could he do to help them? Any move to go to their aid would mean his being blasted out of existence.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly, and prepared to make the maneuver. Unobtrusively they slipped behind a floating wreck, then while masked from the Streall watchers, switched to main drive. In minutes the *Stator's* silent, mysterious mode of propulsion had whisked them to safety.

Out of curiosity they began to tune in at random to space-tensor broadcasts. Everywhere the story was the same. Fighting, battles, landings on alien planets. All over the Hub the tension between man and Streall had broken into open war as the two races locked in a titanic struggle. The news filled Rodrone with a sense of dread. He had expected it to happen gradually. The suddenness of events made him feel like an incendiarist.

Still, he told himself, now man would never be intimidated.

For some reason he felt even more anxious to see his wife.

A few weeks later they pulled into the Land system. Rodrone's joy increased as he saw the gentle violet sun and found the tracteries of eleven planets on the miracu-lous picture-plate behind the desk console. On one of those traces, the fourth from the sun, lived his wife.

But as they penetrated deep into the system he knew that something was wrong. The planet seventh from the sun was *smoking*. Lurid streams

of poisonous vapor rolled out from it into space as it moved in its orbit, the deadly pyre of what had once been a fair world of fifty million inhabitants.

Horrified, he moved closer in to the sixth and seventh worlds. They, too, were blasted lifeless, their atmospheres transformed into radioactive soups. His brief inspection of them brought his anxiety to certainty. After that, he moved on to Sunder almost as a matter of formality.

Jermy and Jublow were with him in the control gallery when they edged close to the planet and Rodrone was able to see it for himself. The Streall had come and gone, blasting the Land system to hell. Sunder was ravaged, blackened, practically ripped apart and scorched down to the very rock mantle. It was inconceivable that even a bacterium could still be alive down there.

Jermy looked at the sight and grinned. "Another dead 'un, eh, Captain?"

Rodrone's fists clenched convulsively. Seeing the expression on his face, Jermy added, "It's happening all over, Chief. All over the Hub, on our side and theirs. Don'tcha remember? We picked up lots of pictures."

"Yeah!" Jublow butted in with little-boy glee. "Lots of planets blowing up!"

Rodrone felt an impulse to kill them both, but he restrained himself and nodded absently. He could hardly expect a deadliner to grieve over either death or parting.

X

Counters clicked and hummed. In the distance, the atomic explosion flared briefly like a lighted match, sending an expanding wave of light and radiation into the eternal night. Patiently Rodrone waited for the debris of released energy to disperse, then the *Stator* moved silently in, probing with its radar fingers.

A tight little dot appeared on the radar screen, traveling swiftly to zenith-east from the force of the explosion. Effortlessly the *Stator* tracked it, closed in, extended waldo arms.

Rodrone sighed. The lens was intact. No radiation, no signs of burning, not even a hairline crack on its glossy sur-face. Spinning unconcernedly in space, it displayed its never-ending picture show to the void.

Apparently the lens was indestructible. Appalled by the fate of the Land planets, appalled by the tales of holocaust that reached them every day from all over the Hub, he had come to the conclusion that it must not be allowed to exist.

In the past weeks he had tried everything. He had tried explosives, he had tried to dissolve it in acids, and he had tried to burn it away in an electric arc. But nothing worked. "Maybe it's *right*, boss," Feeldonet said as they hauled the undamaged lens inboard. "Maybe it *should* exist. Remember how it influences events. What would happen if we did destroy it?"

Feeldonet was the most intelligent of the deadliners. By watching the Streall technician he had learned the knack of understanding the *Stator's* drive, and having only recently joined the crew, he was not quite as far gone as the others. In fact, if he had not taken ship aboard the *Stator* he might eventually have overcome the personal tragedies that had made him turn his back on normal life. But there was no chance of a recovery among the company he kept now.

"Nothing," Rodrone answered him simply. "I've thought about that. Do you know what I think? I think the Streall have perpetrated an outstanding example of putting the cart before the horse. The galaxy doesn't *have* to have the lens controlling it. The lens is a construct, something artificial, extra. Possibly it did kick off the process of life in the first place, I'm not sure about that, but it certainly isn't vital now. Somehow the Streall came into possession of it millions of years ago and used it to bolster up their own view of the universe, a view which not unnaturally favors them. They *used* the lens to make themselves the supreme species of the galaxy, while at the same time claiming some kind of divine right.

"There's another thing, too. I don't believe in the Streall's interpretation of the lens. I don't think it can control a narrow, ordered sequence in the way they prescribe. You wouldn't be able to make a particular thing happen to a particular person on a particular planet, for instance. I think it deals in probabilities, like endlessly throwing a set of dice. Maybe some of the stories it shows have never happened at all—they merely *could* have

happened."

"But the *voar*" Feeldonet objected. "You triggered that off, Captain."

I suppose so, but it doesn't prove anything. It was always a possibility, because there are always points of tension between men and the Streall. Up to now the Streall have always soft-pedaled for reasons of their own. All I did was increase the general tensions until they reached breaking point at some spot or other. You can use the lens to increase the probability of a thing happening, that's all. In fact," he added thoughtfully, "I wonder how many races the Streall have exterminated in the past in order to rectify their own 'errors of control'?"

While they talked, the other deadliners clustered eagerly around the screen of a space-tensor transceiver. During the short periods each day when it was in operation they were in the habit of -phasing through all available frequencies to get an exciting, panoramic view of the holocaust as desperation increased on both sides. Rodrone found that his cynicism had finally broken; the spectacle sickened him. But to the deadliners it was the spice of life.

One thing was becoming clear: the Streall were in retreat. They lacked the flexibility to handle the bewildering variety of techniques that were thrown against them by the far-flung patchwork of human-populated planets, by privateer outfits and all manner of independently operating groups. Surprising, too, was the number of alien races that now appeared in space to add their weight against the ages-old supervisors of existence. For centuries many of these races had been quietly learning human techniques of space travel; but they rarely ventured more than a few light-years from their home suns because the Streall, having learned their lesson from the upstart from the outer districts of the galaxy, kept an efficient police watch on the lookout for a repeat performance.

Rodrone felt empty, drained of any reality in life. Behind him, the space-tensor screen faded as space-strains spanning the light-years rippled and smoothed beyond the possibility of continued communication. The deadliners turned away, wiping their mouths.

After a pause Jermy turned to Rodrone. "When're we gonna go?"

"Go where?" Rodrone asked.

Jermy moved his shoulder uneasily. "We've been hanging about for a month. We're taking no cargo anywhere, we're not doing anything. The boys wanna know where we're going."

Of course, Rodrone thought. These men, whose lives were one long monotony, felt restless if they were not on the move.

Briefly he considered throwing "the lens into a sun. No... he did not trust the largely unmapped complexes of energy inside some stars. There was no saying that they would not produce influences on the lens without destroying it.

There was one other alternative: to lose it where there was little chance of its ever being found again, in the deep space beyond the galaxy.

It would be a long journey and time-dilation would remove them from the present time by hundreds of years— nearly a thousand years. But it would be worth it. He did not want to see anything of this age again.

"Were you with Captain Shone when he went out to the Barrier?" he asked.

"I was," said Jermy. "Not the others, though."

"Would you go again?"

"Sure." Jermy shrugged. "Don't know why, though. Once you've seen it, you've seen it."

"Well that's where we're going."

XI

At one galactic diameter, the sight permitted to few blazed across the sky in a torrent of light.

The straggling wheel of Thiswhirl, seen end-on at only a small angle, was blinding, and gave such an impression of immensity that the mind simply gave up trying to encompass it. On the other side, the spiral majesty of Andromeda floated like a smaller balance wheel. Otherwise, the blackness was dotted only with smudges of light, the distant galaxies, or with occasional hard points that were extragalactic stars.

Whatever had transpired in the struggle of microbes in the Hub of Thiswhirl was now in the past. Centuries in the past, and Rodrone had ceased to think about it. The vision of extragalactic space interested him much more.

The *Stator* had made good time. Its silent, almost mystic drive unit—which Rodrone now learned not only involved no reaction mass but also involved no expenditure of energy—was bearing them steadily towards the space-time barrier surrounding the galaxy, and beyond which they knew they could not go.

At times all the deadliners, Jermy, Feeldonet, Krat, Pirn, Jublow and the others, came together to the control gallery to see Rodrone, but mostly they wandered listlessly through the cold, dismal ship, amusing themselves with childish games. For the duration of the voyage Rodrone had forbidden them to tamper with the nuclear reactor supplying power to the *Stator*, thus spoiling their favorite pastime, but they obeyed with less grumbling than he had anticipated.

A signal beeped. Feeldonet came through from the drive room.

"We must be getting close to the Barrier, Captain."

"How do you know?"

"The drive is behaving a little peculiarly."

This was interesting. Normally the proximity of the Barrier would show first of all on the ranging instruments, in that the distance traveled would not correspond to the drive force expended. So far, the range finder showed little discrepancy.

"Our drive would be unusually sensitive to space-time anomalies, wouldn't it?"

"That's true, Captain."

"Hmm." The first ships to attempt to cross to Andromeda had bravely forged their way ahead past the point of no return and finally had disintegrated. More cautious followers had turned back when danger threatened before their fuel reserves ran out.

"Keep on going into the Barrier," he ordered. "Don't stop until I tell you."

"Sure thing, Captain." Feeldonet seemed pleased at the prospect. Perhaps he was becoming proud of the *Stator's* unusual engine and wanted to test it to the full. Or perhaps it was the idea of disintegration that attracted him...

Rodrone cut the connection. Briefly he glanced over the chilly control gallery at the star-display which now showed Thiswhirl and Andromeda together like twin Catherine wheels, and at the mattress and heap of rags in the corner where once Gael Shone—and now he—slept. He had ordered Feeldonet to continue on regardless to see whether the drive would produce any new surprise, but if it came to it, well, disintegration in the wall surrounding the world—why not? Where, he wondered, would that leave the lens?

Already he had guessed one fact: that the galactic barrier and the force-field lining the rim of the lens were related phenomena. What, he wondered, was the reason for them both? Was it to guard the galaxy from intrusion, to make sure that events within it developed without interference from outside?

He gave Feeldonet orders to inform him of any changes, and waited.

Days passed. Rodrone gave himself up to watching the lens. It had been hard to put a finger on the quality of its stories since they left Thiswhirl. If anything they became wilder, more extravagant, and many of them he failed to comprehend altogether. Some of them seemed purely abstract, like an exercise in mathematics. Could this be the result of the defeat of the Streall?

But one story followed its course with predictable inevitability. The monk and his army continued to ravage the now defenseless city. Tower after tower crashed amid clouds of dust and rubble. The inhabitants—not all of them human—were killed, raped, driven from the city and on to the plain to survive as best they could. In the end, not one wall was left standing. The monk, climbing to the top of the highest heap of rubble, stood there, laughing and laughing.

The black shadow beneath his cowl swelled into close-up, larger, larger, until it occupied all of one half of the lens. Disquietingly, all other pictures

in the lens faded out. Then, with an energetic movement, the monk threw back his cowl to reveal his face. The face was Rodrone's own.

Involuntarily he jumped to his feet, flinging back the chair on which he sat. Deep down, he had always known that this was so, that the story of the monk was spinning out to him his *oxen* story. With a feeling of horror he remembered how it had forecast his betrayal of friends, his unleashing of destruction on a realm of peace and order. The lens itself, he realized with a start, was symbolized by the silver trumpet. Always its message had been in symbols and homologue, so that he could read its message if he really wanted to, but not if he wanted to deceive himself.

But could he have done anything differently, he asked himself, staring as if in a mirror at his sullen visage. Was the lens *rchukins*, him? Did it *blame* him?

The communicator bleeped. "Chief," came Feeldonet's voice, "something's happening!"

"What?"

"I don't know. We've stopped!"

"Stopped? D-^n't be crazy! How can we stop?" He glanced down at the lens. It was then that the first impossible transformation took place. One instant he was standing in the control gallery looking down at the lens on the floor. Then everything was reversed. The lens had become about a mile across. *He, the control gallery, everything was inside the lens, which contained them all as if they were frozen into an iceberg.*

"The lens!" Rodrone howled wildly, feeling his sanity slipping. "The lens!"

Then just as suddenly things were back to normal again. "Chief, don't you see?" Feeldonet's voice resumed. "The lens is in resonance with the galaxy's field. We're trying to remove it from that field—there's no telling what will happen!"

"No telling what will happen," Rodrone repeated. The words seemed to turn into solid objects and hang thickly in the air before him. NO TELLING WHAT WILL HAPPEN. NOOO TELLING WHA-A-AT WILL HAP-PEN.

NOOO TEELLING WHA-A-A-A...

Rodrone, Jermy, Pirn, Krat, Feeldonet and an indistinct gathering were standing in a corridor that was apparently endless in both directions. Rodrone remembered a rushing sensation, a feeling of having scooted an impossible distance; but now everything was quiet.

"Are you in this trip?" said Jermy to Rodrone.

"Get out of my dream," groaned Krat.

"It's no dream," Rodrone told him. "This is for real."

There was no opportunity for further exchanges. The corridor alternately telescoped and elongated with bewildering speed, separating them as it did so. It seemed to be shuffling them like a pack of cards. Rodrone glimpsed his companions strung out at intervals in the distance. Then he saw them no more. He was being rushed forward. The corridor vanished. He was being impelled across an infinite space.

With that, he was plunged into a nightmare of cosmic proportions, peopled by giant intelligences that merely to sense struck terror into his soul. It was not through malevolence that they were terrifying; their dreadfulness came through their very neutrality, their indifference to the fate of any conscious being. Rodrone felt as if hot pokers of fear plunged into his being as he whipped past their presence like a fly.

But out of this nameless, formless realm there gradually emerged images. Rodrone *saw* the superintelligent beings who had made the lens.

From this point on he realized that the image-forming capacities of the human mind were inadequate to the task of perceiving what was presented to him. His mind's interpretation was perforce partly symbolic, analogous. He continued to be carried through a vast, formless space, as if on a ride on a cosmic carousel. The makers of the lens appeared to him as vast figures like the pictures from ancient tombs of gods and heroes. Their faces were not human; yet they were not alien. They were merely detached, magnificent, evoking feelings of worship.

And they danced. A ritualistic, stiff dance. Sometimes the light that flashed from their adornments would have filled a million galaxies; sometimes they would all have fitted into the space of an atom. In this

realm, it seemed, there was no such thing as relative size, no large or small. The dancing ceased, and Rodrone became aware that the beings were engaging in certain operations, as it were carrying out experiments on a vast workbench. Energies and odors drifted up from the bench, filling the universe with mind-blowing perfumes. Then one of the beings lifted up what looked like a giant horn, and tipped it. From the mouth of the horn spilled millions upon millions of inhabited worlds!

The carousel upon which Rodrone rode spun faster until everything was blurred. When he could see again, it was to perceive a realm of desolation. The stupendous experiments were over; the makers had vanished.

Instinctively, he understood. The makers of the lens did not create the sidereal universe which was Rodrone's universe, but they had meddled with it, experimenting with it as human scientists might experiment with inanimate matter. Now the makers were dead; they had been destroyed billions upon billions of years ago, but their stupendous experiments still continued blindly, meaninglessly, and the lens, an instrument of one of those experiments, had somehow found its way into the realm of space-time. Dizzily the imaginary carousel speeded up. Automatically Rodrone reached out for something to hang on to, but there was nothing—then his hand grabbed at something. He was holding the handle of a cupboard fitted near the control desk in the *Stator's* control gallery. Everything came abruptly back into focus: the chilly gallery, the broken hum of outworn scanner equipment. The ride on the cosmic carousel was over. Rodrone's knees felt weak and he pulled a stool under him. His experience had been no hallucination, no dream. It had possessed the *texture* of reality, the undeniable clarity of something that actually existed. He looked around at the lens, wondering at the instrument that could do such a thing to him; but even as he looked, the lens was gone, crumbling into a fine white powder. With a cry he fell to his knees and scooped up a handful of it. It was so fine that it barely touched him, like something halfway between water and air. And even as he touched it, the powder all dissolved, like candy floss in the mouth.

For some moments he knelt there, staring at the empty space where the lens had been. Suddenly the voices of the *Stator's* crew came crackling over the communicator, echoing from different parts of the ship.

"Get a load of that!" Jermy was saying intensely and eagerly. "That's a kick I'll repeat *any* time!"

Rodrone guessed that it was the horror of it all that appealed to Jermy. Not all the deadliners had enjoyed their trip as much. Jublow was moaning painfully. Others argued in tight, frightened voices.

A far different, more collected response came from Feel-donet.

"Captain! *The Barrier is down!*"

"What did you say?" Rodrone snapped.

"There's nothing holding us back any more. It shows up on the drive. We're in free space, symmetrical in all directions—we can go as far as we like!"

It took some time for the fact to sink in. But it was a logical outcome: with the dissolution of the lens, the hermetic seal around Thiswhirl was gone too.

"Did you hear that, you trash?" Rodrone shouted exultantly. "Do you know where we're going? Andromeda! Andromeda!"

A stunned silence followed his words. Jermy croaked, "Is it true, boss?"

"Damn you all for scum, of course it's true!"

"Andromeda!" Jermy echoed disbelievingly.

Infectiously the others took up the cry, echoing it all around the *Stator's* iron galleries.

"ANDROMEDA! ANDROMEDA!"

With a sourness he could not quite dispel, Rodrone wondered whether it was true after all that mankind was the dangerous "star virus" that the Streall believed it to be. If so, then the damage was done and it was irreparable, for all constraints on man's actions had now been removed. The virus was about to spread to other bodies.

Silently the *Stator* put herself in motion to cross the immense sea between the galaxies.