

Once There Was A Giant

1

It was one of those self-consciously raunchy dives off Cargo Street that you can find in any port town in the Arm, serving the few genuine dockwallopers and decayed spacemen that liked being stared at by tourists, plus the tourists, but mostly the sharpies or would-be sharpies that preyed on both brands of sucker. I came in with just enough swagger to confuse the issue: which kind was I? There was that subtle rearrangement of conversational groups as the company present sorted themselves out into active participants and spectators, relatively few of the latter. I saw my mark right away, holed up in a corner booth with a couple of what he probably thought were tough guys. All three swiveled their heads in a leisurely way long enough to show me matched insolent snickers. Then one of the side-boys rapped on the table and rose; he said something to the mark, an ex-soldier named Keeler, and pushed off for the bar, which put him behind me. The mark made a production of not looking at me as I worked my way over to his corner, while appearing to be a little bewildered by it all. I fetched up at his table just in time to get jostled by hard boy number two, just getting up. I gave him an uncertain grin for his trouble, and took his still-warm seat, opposite Keeler. The hard case drifted away, muttering. That left me and Keeler, face to face.

"—if you don't mind," I was saying when he poked a finger at my chest and said, "Beat it, bum." in a voice as friendly as a slammed door.

I sat tight and took a good look at him. I knew a little more about this mark, more personal detail, that is, because twenty years before he had been the paid-off lieutenant who had let a Mob ship through his section of the Cordon to raid the mining camp on Ceres where I had been spending my time growing up to the age of twelve. I remember wondering "twelve what?" and not quite understanding why it had something to do with the number of times one of the brighter nearby stars—the double one, really a planet—went from left of the sun to right and back again, which seemed pretty screwy to me. Bombeck and his raiders hadn't left much of Extraction Station Five, but a few of us kids hid in an old cutting and came out after the shooting was over. Time does strange things, and now I was Baird Ulrik, licensed assassin, and Keeler was my current contract. Well, it's a living.

2

It's not often a fellow gets paid well to do what he'd like to do for free, and it made a lot of difference. No contract man can afford to be picky, but I had always made it a point to accept contracts only on marks that I agreed needed killing: Dope-runners, con-men, rabble-rousers-for-money, and the like, of which there was an adequate supply to keep our small but elite cadre of licensed operators busy. When Keeler came along, I tried not to look too eager, to keep the price up. It wasn't any life-long dream of mine, to get the man responsible for the slaughter of what passed for my family, including burning the old homestead with them in it, alive or dead, nobody knew—but I thought there was a certain elegance, as the math boys say, to my being the one to end his career for him. After he was cashiered, he'd

signed on with the Mob, and worked his way up to top son-of-a-bitch for this part of the Ring. Maybe you're surprised that it made any difference to a hardened killer, but I'd never really gotten much satisfaction out of my work, because it came too easy to me. Sure, I'm a contract killer—and if not proud of it, at least not ashamed of it. Like they say, it's a tough, lonely, dirty job—but someone has to do it. It's really a lot more civilized to give the condemned man a gun, if he wants one, and let him run as far as he likes, to exercise his instinct for self-preservation, rather than locking him up on Death Row to wait for an impersonal death by machine, like I understand they used to do in more barbaric times. Keeler knew he had it coming to him, but not when, or how, or by whom. He'd find out soon enough; I didn't keep him in suspense.

"Don't kid me, Keeler." I told him. "Do you want it right here in front of all your friends, or shall we take a little walk?"

"You wouldn't dare," he hoped aloud. "Buck is right behind you, and Barney's watching, don't ever doubt it."

"Sure, you have to speak your lines, Keeler," I conceded, "but you know better." Then he fooled me: he had more gall than I'd figured. He got up and walked away, and Barney and Buck closed in, front and back, and off they went, with everybody looking from them to me. Just as they reached the door I called after them:

"Buck and Barney, better hit the deck fast," and I fired from under the table close enough to Buck's ear to lend substance to my suggestion. Keeler looked as alone as the last tree in the woods when the timber harvesters finish, but he did his snappy hip-draw and I let him put two hard slugs into the paneling behind me before I got up and went over and took it away from him. He gibbered a little and tried to wrestle, but after I broke his arm the fight went out of him. Then he tried to deal, and that disgusted me and I got a little angry and broke his neck, almost accidentally.

3

Barney and Buck seemed a little uncertain about what to do next, after they'd gotten up and dusted themselves off, so I told them to get rid of Keeler in a discreet way, because even though my license has the endorsement that allows me to clam up in self-defense, I'd still have to stand trial and prove necessity. I always avoid that kind of publicity, so I shoved them out of my way and went out into the rutted street and along to the cracked and peeling plastic facade of the formerly (a very long time ago) tourist-elegant hostelry, done in the Early Delapidated Miami Beach style, and holed up in my quarters to think about my next move. I was just getting adjusted to the lumps in the sawdust mattress when the boys in blue arrived. They pointed some guns at me and told me they were Special Treasury cops, and showed me little gold badges to prove it. After they finished the room they told me not to leave town, that they'd have a fishy eye on me and, oh yes, to watch myself. While I was working on a snappy answer to that one, they left. They seemed to be in a hurry. The visit bothered me a little because I couldn't figure what it was for, so I gave it up and got a few hours' sleep.

Before dawn, about two hours later, I was at the broken-down ops shed, clearing my shore-boat, which went fast because I'd taken the time to put on the old uniform I kept in my foot-locker for such occasions. It was all "Yes, sir, Cap'n, sir" and "anything more I can do for you, sir?" A line captain still impresses the yokels in all those border towns. I made it to my bucket, which that year happened to be a converted ex-Navy hundred-ton light destroyer, and by the time I had unpacked, and downed a number-three-ration lunch, I was on track for home, with the job done, my hard-earned quarter-mil waiting, and not a care in the world. Just after I cleaned the disposal unit and reset it, feeling about as good as anybody in my profession ever gets to feel, they hit me.

It was only a mild jolt of EMS, that didn't even heat the brass buttons on my fancy suit, but it put my tub into a tumble and blew every soft circuit aboard. I made it to the special manual-hydraulic-combustion panel I'd had installed very quietly at one of the best hot-drops on Callisto, and prepared my little surprise. The primitive optic fibre periscope showed me a stubby black fifty-tonner with the gold-and-blue blazon of the Special Treasury cops holding station parallel to my axis of spin and about a hundred yards away. Two men were on the way across, using the very latest in fail-safe EVA units, and towing a heavy-duty can opener, so I opened up before they could use the cutter, and was looking at the same pair who'd frisked my room back on Little C.

They were almost polite about it; it seemed they took my blue suit seriously, called me "Captain" ten times in five minutes. They didn't waste a lot of time on preliminaries, just went directly to the cargo access hatch and broke the lock on it before I could key it, and after a good ten seconds inside, came out and told me my rights. It seems they'd found a load of the pink stuff that would have half the population of the System yodelling Pagliacci from the top of the nearest flagpole if it were evenly distributed. Now I knew what they'd been in a hurry to do after their informal call at my flop.

I explained that it was all just one of those snafus, that I must have gotten somebody else's baggage by mistake, but they weren't listening. Instead, two more glum-looking fellows arrived, and after a very brief conference, they went to my quarters and straight to the shore-pack I'd had with me on Ceres, and came up with an envelope full of documents that proved that I had bought and paid for the dope in the open market on Charon, about three weeks before I had been released from the hospital at Pluto Station. I told them about my alibi, and they checked a little and the boss cop, a skinny, big-nosed little bantam they called Mr. Illini, took me aside.

"Why a man in your position would think you could sneak a load in past us, is beyond me," he confided. "You know as well as I do, Captain, that we've got the Inner Line sealed with the best equipment there is. No way can a tub like this get by us. Get your stuff, we're going in to Mars Four to book you. And by the way, are you really Navy? If so, it seems you blew your retirement, pal."

It seemed the boys had something in mind, so I didn't spring my little surprise, but let them take me in tow.

Along the way, Illini gave me the dirt in small doses, starting with some cultural orientation on an extra-solar planet called Vanguard, an almost-but-not-quite Earth-type in a lonely orbit out near Alpha, and all about how the first colonists had almost made it, in spite of a few problems like low G, so they had to learn to walk all over again, and an average surface temperature well below the freezing point of H₂O, and all that. Seems the low G had the effect of confusing the body's growth control system, and the third generation males averaged nine feet in height, all in good proportion and fully functional, so the last few survivors hung on and stretched the original homestead rights past the three hundred year mark. "A damn shame," Illini told me: "A handful of oversized squatters sustaining a Class Four Quarantine that prevents proper development of all that territory! Territory we need, dammit!" He worked up a little righteous wrath, going over all this stuff that he knew I knew at least as well as he did; then he got to the point:

"Just one left," he said. "One man, one oversized clodhopper, and now they've raised the classification to Q-5! Not a damn thing we can do about it legally, Ulrik—but there are a few of us that think the needs of the human race take precedence. So—once this big fella is gone—Vanguard is wide open. Need I say more?"

I was in no position to argue, even if I'd wanted to. They had me cold, and aside from the details of the planted dope and the planted papers, it was all perfectly legit. They were bona-fide T-men, and nobody, not even I, took jazreel-smuggling as a harmless, boyish prank.

I picked the right moment and tripped the master switch to cancel the surprise party for the boys, having decided I wasn't quite yet ready for suicide. They never knew how close they'd come. Well, it would have been a flashy exit, for all hands.

It wasn't a fun voyage home, but finally it was over, and they hustled me right along to jail, and the next day into court.

It wasn't a real courtroom, but that figured, because it wasn't a real court-martial, and a good thing, too. The load of pink stuff I'd been caught with would have gotten me cashiered, and life plus twenty in the big lockup at League Central, if the line-captain's uniform I'd been wearing hadn't been phony. Still, the boys weren't kidding, so I played along solemnly as they went through the motions, found me guilty as hell, and then got down to business.

"Baird Ulrik," the big fellow with the old-fashioned whiskers said in his big, official-sounding voice. "It is the judgment of this court that such disposal shall be made of you as is prescribed by itself."

"That means we do as we like with you, Ulrik," the smooth character who had been appointed my defense counsel said—the first time he had opened his mouth since the 'trial' began.

"It is therefore directed," Whiskers went on, not laughing, "that you shall suffer capital punishment, not in an orthodox manner, but in a fashion which will serve the public interest."

My counsel leaned close again. "That means we've got a use for you, Ulrik," he told me. "You're a lucky man: your valuable talent won't be wasted."

It took them another hour to come out with all the details; even to Boss Judd, willfully breaking a Class Five quarantine was sweaty business. And there was more:

"The public has a corny idea this big bum is some kind of noble hero, holding onto the ancestral lands all alone, against all the odds," my counsel summed up.

"Sure," I agreed. "That's old stuff, counselor; what's in it for the Mob?"

"There's no occasion to sneer," my lawyer told me. "'Mob' is a long-outdated term. The Organization exercises, de facto, at least as much power as the so-called "legitimate" government, and has indeed been delegated the police and judicial functions here in the Belt, where the not-so-long arm of the Assembly can't reach."

"Sure," I agreed. "These days, you can't hardly tell the hoods from the Forces of Righteousness. Well, maybe you never could. So what's it got to do with little old law-abiding me?"

"With Johnny Thunder dead—get that name some sob-sister hung on this slob—there's no legal basis for Q-5," the shyster told me. "That means a wide-awake developer can go in and stake a claim to two million squares of top quality real estate—and Boss don't sleep much."

"It's so silly it might work," I had to admit. "So when you couldn't hire me for the hit, you framed me with a half-million units of jazreel—and here I am, ready to do your dirty work."

"Don't knock it, Ulrik," Illini said smoothly. "It works."

And the dirty part of it was, he was absolutely right. I had no choice.

6

From a half-million miles out, Vanguard was a sphere of gray cast-iron, arc-lit yellow-white on the sunward side, coal-mine black on the other, with a wide band of rust-red along the terminator. The mountain ranges showed up as crooked black hair-lines radiating from the white dazzle of the poles, fanning out, with smaller ridges rising between them, forming a band of broken gridwork across the planet like the back of an old man's hand. I watched the detail grow on the screen until I could match it up with the lines on the nav chart, and it was time to go into my routine. I broke the seal on my U-beamer and sounded my Mayday:

"King Uncle 629 calling XCQ! I'm in trouble! I'm on emergency approach to R-7985-23-D, but it doesn't look good. My track is 093 plus 15, at 19-0-8 standard, mark! Standing by for instructions, and make it fast! Relay, all stations!" The lines were corny, but at this point I had to follow the script.

I set the auto-squawk to squirt the call out a thousand times in one-millisecond bursts, then switched to listen and waited while forty-five seconds went past. That's how long it would take the hype signal to hit the beamer station of Ring 8 and bounce back an automatic AK.

The auto signal came in right on schedule; another half a minute passed in silence, and a cold finger touched my spine. Then a voice that sounded like I shouldn't have disturbed its nap came in:

"King Uncle 629, Monitor Station Z-448 reading you three by three. You are not, repeat not cleared for planetfall. Report full detail—"

"Belay that!" I came back with plenty of edge. "I'm going to hit this rock; how hard depends on you! Get me down first and we'll handle the paperwork later!"

"You're inside interdict range of a Class Five quarantined world. This is an official navigational notice to clear off—"

"Wise up, 448," I cut into that. "I'm seven hundred hours out of Dobie with a special cargo aboard! You think I picked this spot to fuse down? I need a tech advisory and I need it now!"

Another wait; then my contact came back on, sounding tight-lipped: "King Uncle, transmit a board read-out."

"Sure, sure. But hurry it up." I sounded rattled, which didn't require much acting ability, under the circumstances. Boss Judd didn't pay off on unavoidable mission aborts. I pushed the buttons that gave Z-448 a set of duplicate instrument readings that would prove I was in even worse trouble than I claimed. It was no fake. I'd spent plenty to make sure the old tub had seen her last port.

"All right, King Uncle; you waited too long to make your report, you're going to have to jettison cargo and set up the following nav sequence—"

"I said special cargo!" I yelled back at him. "Category ten! I'm on a contract run for the Dobie med service. I'm carrying ten freeze cases!"

"Uh, roger, King Uncle," the station came back, sounding a little off-balance now. "I understand you have living casualties under cryothesis aboard. Stand by." There was a pause. "You've handed me a cozy one, 629," the voice added, sounding almost human.

"Yeah," I said. "Put some snap on it. That rock's coming up fast."

I sat and listened to the star-crackle. A light and a half away, the station computer would be going into action, chewing up the data from my board and spitting out a solution; and meanwhile, the sharp boy on duty would be checking out my story. That was good. I wanted it checked. It was solid all down the line. The passengers lashed down in the cargo cell were miners, badly burned in a flash fire three months ago on Dobie, a mean little world with no treatment facilities. I was due to collect five million and a full pardon when I delivered them to the med center on Commonweal in a viable condition. My pre-lift inspection was on file, along with my flight

plan, which would show my minimum-boost trajectory in past Vanguard, just the way a shoestring operator would plot it, on the cheap. It was all in the record. I was legitimate, a victim of circumstances. It was their ball now. And if my calculations were any good, there was only one way they could play it.

"King Uncle, you're in serious trouble," my unseen informant told me. "But I have a possible out for you. You're carrying a detachable cargo pod?" He paused as if he expected an answer, then went on. "You're going to have to ride her down, then jettison the pod on airfoils inside atmosphere. Afterwards, you'll have only a few seconds in which to eject. Understood? I'll feed you the conning data now." A string of numbers rattled off to be automatically recorded and fed into the control sequencer.

"Understood, 448," I said when he finished. "But look—that's a wild country down there. Suppose the cooler's damaged in the drop? I'd better stay with her and try to set her down easy."

"Impossible, King Uncle!" The voice had warmed up a few degrees. After all, I was a brave though penny-pinching merchant captain, determined to do my duty by my charges even at the risk of my own neck.

"Frankly, even this approach is marginal," he confided. "Your one chance—and your cargo's—is to follow my instructions implicitly!" He didn't add that it was a criminal offense not to comply with a Monitor's navigational order. He didn't have to. I knew that, was counting on it.

"If you say so. I've got a marker circuit on the pod. But listen: how long will it take for you fellows to get a relief boat out here?"

"It's already on the way. The run will take . . . just under three hundred hours."

"That's over twelve standard days!" I allowed the short pause required for the slow mental process of a poor but honest spacer to reach some simple conclusions, then blurted: "If that freeze equipment's knocked out, the insulation won't hold low-O that long! And . . ." Another pause for the next obvious thought to form. "And what about me? How do I stay alive down there?"

"Let's get you down first, Captain." Some of the sympathy had slipped, but not much. Even a hero is entitled to give some thought to staying alive, after he's seen to the troops.

There was little more talk, but the important things had all been said. I was following orders, doing what I was told, no more, no less. Inside the hour, the whole Tri-D watching public of the Sector would know that a disabled hospital ship was down on Vanguard, with ten men's lives—eleven, if you counted mine—hanging in the balance. And I'd be inside the target's defenses, in position for phase two.

7

At ten thousand miles, the sound started up: the lost, lonely wail of air molecules being split by a couple thousand tons of overaged tramp

freighter, coming in too fast, on a bad track, with no retros working. I played with what was left of the attitude jets, jockeying her around into a tail-first position, saving the last of my reaction mass for when and where it would do the most good. When I had her where I wanted her, I had less than eight thousand miles of gravity well to work with. I checked the plotting board, pin-pointing my target area, while she bucked and buffeted under me and the moans rose to howls like gut-shot dire-beasts.

At two hundred miles, the drive engines cut in and everything turned to whirly red lights, and pressures like a toad feels under a boot. That went on long enough for me to pass out and come to half a dozen times. Then suddenly she was tumbling in free fall and there were only seconds left. Getting a hand on the pod release was no harder than packing an anvil up a rope ladder; I felt the shock as the cargo section blasted free and away. I got myself into the drop-suit and into position in the escape pod, clamped the shock frame down, took a last lungful of stale ship air, and slapped the eject button. Ten tons of feather pillow hit me in the face and knocked me into another world.

8

I swam up out of the big, black ocean where the bad dreams wait and popped through into the watery sunshine of semi-consciousness in time to get a fast panoramic view of mountains like shark's teeth ranked in snow-capped rows that marched across the world to a serrated horizon a hundred miles away. I must have blacked out again, because the next second a single peak was filling the drop-suit's bull's-eye screen in front of my face, racing toward me like a breaking wave. The third time I came up, I realized I was on chutes, swaying down toward what looked like a tumbled field of dark lava. Then I saw that it was foliage, green-black, dense, coming up fast. I just had time to note that the pod locator marker was blinking green, meaning that my cargo was down and intact, before my lights went out again.

This time I woke up cold: that was the first datum that registered. The second was that my head hurt; that, and all the rest of me. It took me long enough to write a will leaving everything to the Euthanasia Society to get unstrapped and crack the capsule and crawl out into what the outdoorsy set would have called the bracing mountain air. I tallied my aches and pains, found the bones and joints intact. I ran my suit thermostat up and felt some warmth begin to seep into me.

I was standing on pine needles, if pine needles come in the three-foot length, the diameter of a swizzle stick. They made a springy carpet that covered the ground all around the bases of trees as big as Ionic columns that reached up and up into a deep, green twilight. Far off among the tree trunks I saw the white gleam of snow patches. It was silent, utterly still, with no movement, not even a stir among the wide boughs that spread overhead. My suit instruments told me the air pressure was 16 PSI, oxygen content fifty-one per cent, the ambient temperature minus ten degrees centigrade, all as advertised. The locator dials said the cargo pod was down just over a hundred miles north by east from where I stood. As far as I could tell from the gadgets fitted into my fancy wrist console, everything there was operating normally. And if the information I had gathered was as

good as the price said it ought to be, I was within ten miles of where I had planned: half a day's walk from Johnny Thunder's stamping ground. I set my suit controls for minimum power assist, took a compass reading, and started hiking.

9

The low gravity made the going easy, even for a man who had been pounded by a few hundred miles of thin atmosphere; and the suit I was wearing helped, too. You couldn't tell it to look at it, but it had cost somebody the price of a luxury retirement on one of those rhodium-and-glass worlds with taped climate and hot and cold running orgies. In addition to the standard air and temperature controls, and the servo-booster that took the ache out of my walking, it was equipped with every reflex circuit and sense amplifier known to black market science, including a few the League security people would like to get their hands on. The metabolic monitor-and-compensate gear alone was worth the price.

My compass heading took me upslope at a long slant that brought me to the snow line in an hour. Scattered, stunted trees continued for another few thousand feet, ended where the sea-blue glacier began. I got my first look at Vanguard's sky: deep blue, shading down to violet above the ice-crowned peaks that had it all to themselves up here, like a company of kings.

I took a break at the end of the first hour, gave myself a squirt of nutrient syrup and swallowed some water, and listened to eternity passing, silently, one second at a time. I thought about a shipload of colonists, back in the primitive dawn of space travel, setting off into a Universe they knew less about than Columbus did America, adrift for nine years before they crash-landed here. I thought about them stepping out into the great silence of this cold world—men, women, probably children—knowing that there would never, ever, be any returning for them. I thought about them facing that—and going on to live. They'd been tough people, but their kind of toughness had gone out of the world. Now there was only the other kind; my kind. They were pioneer-tough, frontier-tough, full of unfounded hope and determination and big ideas about the future. I was big-city tough, smart-tough, and rat-tough; and the present was enough for me.

"It's the silence," I said aloud. "It gets to you." But the sound of my voice was too small against all that emptiness. I got to my feet and started off toward the next ridge.

10

Three hours later, the sun was still hanging in the same spot, a dazzle of green above the big top, that every now and then found a hole in the foliage and shot a cold shaft of light down to puddle on the rust-red needles. I had covered almost forty kilometers as the buzzard flies. The spot I was looking for couldn't be far off. I was feeling a little fatigued in spite of the low G, and the sophisticated suit circuitry that took half the load of every muscular contraction, and the stuff the auto-med was metering into my arm. At that, I was lucky. Back home, I'd have been good for two weeks in a recovery ward after the beating I had taken. I cheered myself with that idea while I leaned against a tree and breathed the

enriched canned air the suit had prescribed, and thought positive thoughts to counteract the little lights whirling before my eyes. I was still busy with that when I heard the sound. . . .

Now, it's curious how, after a lifetime surrounded by noises, a few hours without them can change your whole attitude toward air vibrations in the audible range. All I heard was a faint, whooping call, like a lonely sea bird yearning for his mate; but I came away from the tree as though it had turned hot, and stood flat-footed, my head cocked, metering the quality of the sound for clues. It got louder, which meant closer, with a speed that suggested the futility of retreat. I looked around for a convenient sapling to climb, but these pines were born old; the lowest branch was fifty feet up. All that was left in the way of concealment was a few thousand tree trunks. Somehow I had the feeling I'd rather meet whatever it was out in the open. At least I'd see it as soon as it saw me. I knew it was something that was alive and ate meat; a faint, dogmatic voice from my first ancestor was telling me that. I did the thing with the wrist that put the bootleg miniature crater gun in my palm, and waited while the booming call got louder and more anguished, like a lovelorn sheep, a heart-broken bull, a dying elk. I could hear the thud of big feet now, galloping in a cadence that, even allowing for the weak gravity field, suggested ponderous size. Then it broke through into sight, and confirmed great-grandpa's intuition. It wasn't a hound, or even a hyaenodon, but it was what a hyaenodon would have been if it had stood seven feet at the shoulder, had legs as big around at the ankle as my thigh, a head the size of a one-man helicab, and jaws that could pick a man up like Rover trotting home with the evening paper. Maybe it was that last thought that kept my finger from tightening on the firing stud. The monster dog skidded to a halt in a slow-motion flurry of pine needles, gave a final bellow, and showed me about a yard of bright red tongue. The rest of him was brown and black, sleek-furred, loose-hided. His teeth were big, but not over six inches from gum line to needle-point. His eyes were shiny black and small, like an elephant's with crescents of red under them. He came on slowly, as if he wanted to get a good look at what he was eating. I could hear his joints creak as he moved. His shoulders were high, bunched with muscle. At each step his foot-wide pads sank into the leaf mould. I felt my knees begin to twitch, while what hackles I had did their best to stand on end. He was ten feet away now, and his breath snorted through nostrils I could have stuck a fist into, like steam around a leaky piston. If he came any closer, I knew my finger would push that stud, ready or not.

"Down, boy!" I said, in what I hoped was a resonant tone of command. He halted, hauled in the tongue, let it out again, then lowered his hind quarters gingerly, like an old lady settling into her favorite rocker. He sat there and looked at me with his head cocked, and I looked back. And while we were doing that, the giant arrived.

11

He came up silently along an aisle among the big trees, and was within fifty feet of me before I saw him, big as he was.

And big he was.

It's easy to talk about a man twelve feet high; that's about twice normal, after all. Just a big man, and let's make a joke about his shoe size.

But twice the height is four times the area of sky he blanks off as he looms over you; eight times the bulk of solid bone and muscle. Sixteen hundred pounds of man, at Earth-normal G. Here he weighed no more than half a ton, but even at that, each leg was holding up five hundred pounds. They were thick, muscle-corded legs that matched the arms and the chest and the neck that was like a section of hundred-year oak supporting the big head. But massive as he was, there was no distortion of proportion. Photographed without a midget in the picture for scale, he would have looked like any other Mr. Universe contender, straight-boned, clean-limbed, every muscle defined, but nothing out of scale. His hair was black, curly, growing in a rough-cut mane, but no rougher than any other man that lives a long way from a barber. He had a close-trimmed beard, thick, black eyebrows over wide-set, pale blue eyes. His skin was weather-burned the color of well-used cowhide. His features were regular enough to be called handsome, if you admire the Jove-Poseidon style. I saw all this as he came striding up to me, dressed in leather, as light on his feet as the dog was heavy. He stopped beside the pooch, patted its head carelessly with a hand the size of first base, looking down at me, and for a ghostly instant I was a child again, looking at the Brobdingnagian world of adults. Thoughts flashed in my mind, phantom images of a world of warmth and love and security and other illusions long forgotten. I pushed those away and remembered that I was Baird Ulrik, professional, out on a job, in a world that had no place for fantasies.

"You're the man they call Johnny Thunder," I said.

He let that pass. Maybe he smiled a little.

"I'm Patton," I told him. "Carl Patton. I bailed out of a ship." I pointed to the sky.

He nodded, "I know," he said. His voice was deep, resonant as a pipe organ; he had a lot of chest for it to bounce around in. "I heard your ship fall." He looked me over, didn't see any compound fractures. "I'm glad you came safely to ground. I hope Woola did not frighten you." His Standard sounded old-fashioned and a little stilted, with a trace of a strange accent. My trained poker face must have slipped a couple of feet at what he said, because he smiled. His teeth were square and porcelain white.

"Why should he?" I said without squeaking. "I've seen my three-year-old niece pat a Great Dane on the knee. That was as high as she could reach."

"Come back with me to my house. I have food, a fire."

I pulled myself together and went into my act: "I've got to get to my cargo pod. There are . . . passengers aboard it."

His face asked questions.

"They're alive—so far," I said. "I have a machine that tells me the pod landed safely, on her chutes. The cannisters are shock-mounted, so if the locator gear survived, so did they. But the equipment might not have. If it

was smashed, they'll die."

"This is a strange thing, Carl Patton," he said after I had explained, "to freeze a living man."

"They wouldn't be living long, if they weren't in low-O," I told him.

"Third-degree burns over their whole bodies. Probably internals, too. At the med center they can put 'em in viv tanks and regrow their hides. When they wake up, they'll be as good as new." I gave him a significant look, full of do-or-die determination. "If I get there in time, that is. If they come out of it out there . . ." I let the sentence die off without putting words to the kind of death that would be. I made a thing out of looking at the show dials on my wrist. "The pod is down somewhere in that direction." I pointed away up-slope, to the north. "I don't know how far." I shot a look at him to see how that last datum went over. The less I gave away, the better. But he sounded a little more sophisticated than my researches had led me to expect. A slip now could queer everything. "Maybe a hundred miles, maybe more."

He thought that one over, looking down at me. His eyes were friendly enough, but in a remote way, like a candle burning in the window of a stranger's house.

"That is bad country, where they have fallen," he said. "The Towers of Nandi are high. You would die on the way there."

I knew it was tough country; I'd picked the spot with care. I gave him my manly, straight-from-the-shoulder look.

"There are ten men out there, my responsibility. I've got to do what I can."

His eyes came back to mine. For the first time, a little fire seemed to flicker alight behind them.

"First you must rest and eat."

I wanted to say more, to set the hook; but just then the world started a slow spin under me. I took a step to catch my balance and a luminous sleet was filling the air, and then the whole thing tilted sideways and I slid off and down into the black place that always waited. . . .

12

I woke up looking at a dancing pattern of orange light on a ceiling of polished red and black wood twenty feet overhead. The light was coming from a fire big enough to roast an ox in, blazing away on a hearth built of rocks the size of tombstones. I was lying on a bed not as large as a handball court, and the air was full of the odor of soup. I crawled to the edge and managed the four-foot jump to the floor. My legs felt like overcooked pasta. My ribs ached—probably from a long ride over the giant's shoulder.

He looked across at me from the big table. "You were tired," he said. "And you have many bruises."

I looked down. I was wearing my underwear, nothing else.

"My suit!" I barked, and the words came out thick, not just from weakness. I was picturing sixty grand worth of equipment and a multi-million credit deal tossed into the reclaimer—or the fire—and a clean set of overalls laid out to replace them.

"There," my host nodded toward the end of the bed. I grabbed, checked. Everything looked OK. But I didn't like it; and I didn't like the idea of being helpless, tended by a man I had business with later.

"You have rested," the big man said. "Now eat."

I sat at the table on a pile of blankets and dipped into a dishpanful of thick broth made of savory red and green vegetables and chunks of tender white meat. There was a bread that was tough and chewy, with a flavor of nuts, and a rough purple wine that went down better than the finest vintage at Arondo's, on Plaisir 4. Afterward, the giant unfolded a chart and pointed to a patch of high relief like coarse-troweled stucco.

"If the pod is there," he said, "it will be difficult. But perhaps it fell here." He indicated a smoother stretch to the south and east of the badlands.

I went through the motions of checking the azimuth on the indicator; the heading I gave him was only about three degrees off true. At 113.8 miles—the position the R&D showed for the pod—we would miss the target by about ten miles.

The big man laid off our line of march on his map. It fell along the edge of what was called the Towers of Nandi.

"Perhaps," he said. He wasn't a man given to wasting words.

"How much daylight is left?" I asked him.

"Fifty hours, a little less." That meant I'd been out for nearly six hours. I didn't like that, either. Time was money, and my schedule was tight.

"Have you talked to anyone?" I looked at the big, not quite modern screen at the side of the room. It was a standard Y-band model with a half-millionth L lag. That meant a four-hour turn-around time to the Ring 8 Station.

"I told the monitor station that you had come safely to ground," he said.

"What else did you tell them?"

"There was nothing more to tell."

I stood. "You can call them again now," I said. "And tell them I'm on my way out to the pod." I gave it the tight-lipped, no-tears-for-me delivery. From the corner of my eye I saw him nod, and for a second I wondered if maybe the famous Ulrik system of analysis had slipped, and this big hunk of virility was going to sit on his haunches and let poor frail little me tackle the trail alone.

"The way will not be easy," he said. "The winds have come to the high passes. Snow lies on the heights of Kooclain."

"My suit heater will handle that part. If you can spare me some food. . . ."

He went to a shelf, lifted down a pack the size and shape of a climate unit for a five-room conapt. I knew then my trap was closing dead on target.

"If my company will not be unwelcome, Carl Patton, I will go with you," he said.

I went through the routine protestations, but in the end I let him convince me. We left half an hour later, after notifying Ring station that we were on the way.

13

Johnny Thunder took the lead, swinging along at an easy amble that covered ground at a deceptive rate, not bothered by the big pack on his back. He was wearing the same leathers he had on when he met me. The only weapon he carried was a ten-foot steel-shod staff. The monster mutt trotted along off-side, nose to the ground; I brought up the rear. My pack was light; the big man pointed out that the less I carried the better time we'd make. I managed to keep up, hanging back a little to make it look good. My bones still ached some, but I was feeling frisky as a colt in the low G. We did a good hour without talking, working up along the angle of a long slope through the big trees. We crested the rise and the big fellow stopped and waited while I came up, puffing a little, but game as they come.

"We will rest here," he said.

"Rest, hell," I came back. "Minutes may make all the difference to those poor devils."

"A man must rest," he said reasonably, and sat down, propping his bare arms on his knees. This put his eyes on a level with mine, standing. I didn't like that, so I sat too.

He took his full ten minutes before starting off again. Johnny Thunder, I saw, was not a man to be bullied. He knew his best pace. Even with all my fancy equipment, I was going to have my hands full walking him to death on his own turf.

That was the plan, just the way they'd laid it out for me, back at Aldo: no wounds on his big corpse when they found it, no dirty work, just a fellow who'd died trying: bigger than your average pictonews hero, but human enough to miscalculate his own giant abilities. Boss would welcome investigation, and he'd check out as clean as a farmhand waiting for the last bus back from the county fair. All I had to do was use my high-tech gear to stay close enough to urge him on. Simple. Not easy, but simple. On that thought I let sleep take me.

14

We crossed a wide valley and headed up into high country. It was cold, and the trees were sparser here, gaunter, dwarfed by the frost and twisted by the winds into hunched shapes that clutched the rock like arthritic hands.

There were patches of rotten snow, and a hint in the sky that there might be more to come before long. Not that I could feel the edge of the wind that came whipping down off the peaks; but the giant was taking it on his bare arms.

"Don't you own a coat?" I asked him at the next stop. We were on a shelf of rock, exposed to the full blast of what was building to a forty-mile gale.

"I have a cape, here." He slapped the pack on his back. "Later I will wear it."

"You make your own clothes?" I was looking at the tanned leather, fur side in, the big sailmaker's stitches.

"A woman made these garments for me," he said. "That was long ago."

"Yeah," I said. I tried to picture him with his woman, to picture how she'd move, what she'd look like. A woman ten feet tall.

"Do you have a picture of her?"

"Only in my heart." He said it matter-of-factly. I wondered how it felt to be the last of your kind, but I didn't ask him that. Instead I asked, "Why do you do it? Live here alone?"

He looked out across a view of refrigerated rock. "This is my home," he said. Another straight answer, with no sho-biz behind it. It just didn't get to this overgrown plowboy. It never occurred to him how he could milk the situation for tears and cash from a few billion sensation-hungry fans. A real-life soap opera. The end of the trail. Poor Johnny Thunder, so brave and so alone.

"Why do you do—what you do?" he asked suddenly. I felt my gut clench like a fist.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I got it out between my teeth, while my hand tickled the crater gun out of its wrist clip and into my palm.

"You, too, live alone, Carl Patton. You captain a ship of space. You endure solitude and hardship. And now, you offer your life for your comrades."

"They're not my comrades," I snapped. "They're cash cargo, that's all. No delivery, no payment. And I'm not offering my life. I'm taking a little hike for my health."

He studied me. "Few men would attempt the heights of Kooclain in this season. None without a great reason."

"I've got great reasons; millions of them."

He smiled a faint smile. "You are many things, I think, Carl Patton. But not a fool."

"Let's hit the trail," I said. "We've got a long way to go before I collect."

Johnny Thunder held his pace back to what he thought I could manage. The dog seemed a little nervous, raising his nose and snuffling the air, then loping ahead. I easy-footed it after them, with plenty of wheezing on the upslopes and some realistic panting at the breaks, enough to make me look busy, but not enough to give the giant ideas of slowing down. Little by little I upped the cadence in an inobtrusive way, until we were hitting better than four miles per hour. That's a good brisk stride on flat ground at standard G; it would take a trained athlete to keep it up for long. Here, with my suit's efficient piezoelectronic muscles doing most of the work, it was a breeze—for me.

We took a lunch break. The big man dug bread and cheese and a Jeroboam of wine out of his knapsack and handed me enough for two meals. I ate a little of it and tucked the rest into the disposal pocket on my shoulder when he wasn't looking. When he finished his ration—not much bigger than mine—I got to my feet and looked expectant. He didn't move.

"We must rest now for an hour," he told me.

"OK," I said. "You rest alone. I've got a job to do." I started off across the patchy snow and got about ten steps before Bowser gallumphed past me and turned, blocking my route. I started past him on the right and he moved into my path. The same for the left.

"Rest, Carl Patton," Goliath said. He lay back and put his hands under his head and closed his eyes. Well, I couldn't keep him walking, but I could cut into his sleep. I went back and sat beside him.

"Lonely country," I said. He didn't answer.

"Looks like nobody's ever been here before," I added. "Not a beer can in sight." That didn't net a reply either.

"What do you live on in this place?" I asked him. "What do you make the cheese out of, and the bread?"

He opened his eyes. "The heart of the friendly-tree. It is pulverized for flour, or made into a paste and fermented."

"Neat," I said. "I guess you import the wine."

"The fruit of the same tree gives us our wine. He said 'us' as easily as if he had a wife, six kids, and a chapter of the Knights of Pythias waiting for him back home.

"It must have been tough at first," I said. "If the whole planet is like this, it's hard to see how your ancestors survived."

"They fought," the giant said, as if that explained everything.

"You don't have to fight anymore," I said. "You can leave this rock now, live the easy life somewhere under a sun with a little heat in it."

The giant looked at the sky as if thinking. "We have a legend of a place where the air is soft and the soil bursts open to pour forth fruit. I do not think I would like that land."

"Why not? You think there's some kind of kick in having things rough?"

He turned his head to look at me. "It is you who suffer hardship, Carl Patton. I am at home, whereas you endure cold and fatigue in a place alien to you."

I grunted. Johnny Thunder had a way of turning everything I said back at me like a ricochet. "I heard there was some pretty vicious animal life here," I said. "I haven't seen any signs of it."

"Soon you will."

"Is that your intuition, or. . . ?"

"A pack of snow scorpions have trailed us for some hours. When we move out into open ground, you will see them."

"How do you know?"

"Woola tells me."

I looked at the big hound, sprawled out with his head on his paws. He looked tired.

"How does it happen you have dogs?"

"We have always had dogs."

"Probably had a pair in the original cargo," I said. "Or maybe frozen embryos. I guess they carried breed stock even way back then."

"Woola springs from a line of dogs of war. Her forebear was the mighty courser Standfast, who slew the hounds of King Roon on the Field of the Broken Knife."

"You people fought wars?" He didn't say anything. I snorted. "I'd think as hard as you had to scratch to make a living, you'd have valued your lives too much for that."

"Of what value is a life without truth? King Roon fought for his beliefs. Prince Dahl fought for his own."

"Who won?"

"They fought for twenty hours; and once Prince Dahl fell, and King Roon stood back and bade him rise again. But in the end Dahl broke the back of the King."

"So—did that prove he was right?"

"Little it matters what a man believes, Carl Patton, so long as he believes it with all his heart and soul."

"Nuts. Facts don't care who believes them."

The giant sat up and pointed to the white peaks glistening far away. "The mountains are true," he said. He looked up at the sky, where high,

blackish-purple clouds were piled up like battlements. "The sky is true. And these truths are more than the facts of rock and gas."

"I don't understand this poetic talk," I said. "It's good to eat well, sleep in a good bed, to have the best of everything there is. Anybody that says otherwise is a martyr or a phony."

"What is 'best,' Carl Patton? Is there a couch softer than weariness? A better sauce than appetite?"

"You got that out of a book."

"If you crave the easy luxury you speak of, why are you here?"

"That's easy. To earn the money to buy the rest."

"And afterwards—if you do not die on this trek—will you go there, to the pretty world, and eat the fat fruits picked by another hand?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not?" I felt myself sounding mad, and wondered why; and that made me madder than ever. I let it drop and pretended to sleep.

16

Four hours later we topped a long slope and looked out over a thousand square miles of forest and glacier, spread out wide enough to hint at the size of the world called Vangard. We had been walking for nine hours and, lift unit and all, I was beginning to feel it. Big Boy looked as good as new. He shaded his eyes against the sun that was too small and too bright in a before-the-storm sort of way, and pointed out along the valley's rim to a peak a mile or two away.

"There we will sleep," he said.

"It's off our course," I said. "What's wrong with right here?"

"We need shelter and a fire. Holgrimm will not grudge us these."

"What's Holgrimm?"

"His lodge stands there."

I felt a little stir along my spine, the way you do when ghosts come into the conversation. Not that ghosts worry me; just the people that believe in them.

We covered the distance in silence. Woola, the dog, did a lot of sniffing and grunting as we came up to the lodge. It was built of logs, stripped and carved and stained red and green and black. There was a steep gabled roof, slate-tiled, and a pair of stone chimneys, and a few small windows with colored glass leaded into them. The big man paused when we came into the clearing, stood there leaning on his stick and looking around. The place seemed to be in a good state of preservation. But then it was built of the same rock and timber as the country around it. There were no fancy trimmings to weather away.

"Listen, Carl Patton," the giant said. "Almost, you can hear Holgrimm's voice here. In a moment, it seems, he might throw wide the door to welcome us."

"Except he's dead," I said. I went past him and up to the entrance, which was a slab of black and purple wood that would have been right in scale on the front of Notre Dame. I strained two-handed at the big iron latch, with no luck. Johnny Thunder lifted it with his thumb.

It was cold in the big room. The coating of hard frost on the purple wood floor crunched under our boots. In the deep-colored gloom, I saw stretched animal hides on the high walls, green and red, and gold-furred, brilliant as a Chinese pheasant. There were other trophies: a big, beaked skull three feet long, with a spread of antlers like wings of white ivory, that swept forward to present an array of silver dagger tips, black-ringed. There was a leathery-skinned head that was all jaw and teeth; and a tarnished battle ax, ten feet long, with a complicated head. A long table sat in the center of the room between facing fireplaces as big as city apartments. I saw the wink of light on the big metal goblets, plates, cutlery. There were high-backed chairs around the table; and in the big chair at the far end, facing me, a gray-bearded giant sat with a sword in his hand. The dog whined, a sound that expressed my feelings perfectly.

"Holgrimm awaits us," Johnny's big voice said softly behind me. He went forward, and I broke the paralysis and followed. Closer, I could see the fine frosting of ice that covered the seated giant, glittering in his beard, on the back of his hands, across his open eyes.

Ice rimed the table and the dishes and the smooth, black wood of the chairs. The bared short-sword was frozen to the table. Woola's claws rasped loud on the floor as she slunk behind her master.

"Don't you bury your dead?" I got the words out, a little ragged.

"His women prepared him thus, at his command, when he knew his death was on him."

"Why?"

"That is a secret which Holgrimm keeps well."

"We'd be better off outside," I told him. "This place is like a walk-in freezer."

"A fire will mend that."

"Our friend here will melt. I think I prefer him the way he is."

"Only a little fire, enough to warm our food and make a bed of coals to lie beside."

There was wood in a box beside the door, deep red, hard as granite, already cut to convenient lengths. Convenient for my traveling companion, I mean. He shuffled the eight-foot, eighteen-inch diameter logs as if they were bread sticks. They must have been full of volatile resins, because they lit off on the first match, and burned with a roaring and a smell of mint and

camphor. Big Johnny brewed up a mixture of hot wine and some tarry syrup from a pot on the table that he had to break loose from the ice, and handed me a half-gallon pot of the stuff. It was strong, but good, with a taste that was almost turpentine but turned out to be ambrosia instead. There was frozen bread and cheese and a soup he stirred up in the big pot on the hearth. I ate all I could and wasted some more. My large friend gave himself a Spartan ration, raising his mug to our host before he drank.

"How long has he been dead?" I asked.

"Ten of our years." He paused, then added: "That would be over a hundred, League standard."

"Friend of yours?"

"We fought; but later we drank wine together again. Yes, he was my friend."

"How long have you been . . . alone here?"

"Nine years. Holgrimm's house was almost the last the plague touched."

"Why didn't it kill you?"

He shook his head. "The Universe has its jokes, too."

"How was it, when they were all dying?"

The big man cradled his cup in his hands, looking past me into the fire. "At first, no one understood. We had never known disease here, until the first visitors came. Our enemies were the ice wolf and the scorpions, and the avalanche and the killing frost. This was a new thing, the foe we could not see. Some died bewildered, others fled into the forest where their doom caught them at last. Oxandra slew his infant sons and daughters before the choking death could take them. Joshal stood in the snow, swinging his war ax and shouting taunts at the sky until he fell and rose no more."

"What about your family?"

"As you see."

"What?"

"Holgrimm was my father."

17

The rest of the family, a brother, an uncle, his mother and a few sisters had all gone out alone when the time came, and set off for a spot high up on a peak they called Hel; Johnny didn't know if they'd made it. But I could see it was better that way than burdening the dying survivors with the corpses to dispose of.

Johnny didn't seem to be affected by all this. He just seemed a bit bored.

"Tell me of your own world, Carl Patton," he suggested. "Are all the folk as you, small, but stout of heart for all that?"

I told him I was an exception; most people had sense enough to stay home and enjoy life. He nodded, "Even as I," he said. I pointed out that most folks had a lot more fun than he did, and described the wonders of trideo and electronic golf, and cards and dice and booze. Somehow, I didn't manage to make it sound like much, even to me.

"I would have tools, Carl Patton," he told me. "Such as I have seen in the Great Catalog, for the working of our native stone and woods. This would please me deeply." He looked at his huge hands. "The skill is here, I know it," he said. "To make the beautiful from the raw substance is a great thing, Carl. Do you have such tools at your home?"

I told him I'd built a few model ships as a young fellow, before I'd gotten fully involved in my 'adventurous' life as a free-lance spaceman.

"I finally got my own ship," I explained to him, since he seemed interested. "It was a luxury cruiser, rebuilt from a captured Hukk battlewagon. I kept the armament in place just for the hell of it, but it seemed a lot of people got the idea I wouldn't be above using it. I discovered I could trade in and out of some of the toughest hell-ports in the Arm, with no squawks from the Mob. Then, one day, a Navy destroyer hailed me, and boarded and took me in tow. Claimed they'd discovered contraband aboard; then the captain let on maybe there was a way out. Somewhere along then I realized I'd been conned at my own game. The Mob had hijacked the destroyer, and planted the pink stuff on me, and it didn't matter much how it got there; if they sicced the real Navy on me, there I'd be: me and my explanations, but I still had an out. . . ."

"No doubt you defied these miscreants to do their worst, eh, Carl? As any true man would do," he added.

"Not exactly," I told him, wanting to save face for some reason. "I listened to their proposition and let them think I'd play along."

"A dangerous game, Carl," he told me seriously. I shrugged that off and got him to tell me about hunting the ice wolf, which was a native arthropod species: like a man-eating spider, but it supplied furs as fine as any. Hunting warm-blooded tarantulas ten feet high wasn't my idea of sport, I told him. I'd had no sleep for about twenty hours and I dozed off while he was telling me about the big fight between the wolves and the scorpions over the settlement after the snow-patrol broke down.

18

We slept rolled up in the furs Johnny Thunder took down from the walls and thawed on the hearth. He was right about the heat. The big blaze melted the frost in a ten foot semi-circle, but didn't touch the rest of the room. It was still early afternoon outside when we hit the trail. I crowded the pace all I could. After eight hours of it, over increasingly rough ground, climbing all the time, the big fellow called me on it.

"I'm smaller than you are, but that's no reason I can't be in shape," I told him. "And I'm used to higher G. What's the matter, too rough for you?" I asked the question in an offhand way, but I listened hard for the answer. So far he looked as good as new.

"I fare well enough. The trail has been easy."

"The map says it gets rougher fast from here on."

"The heights will tell on me," he conceded. "Still, I can go on awhile. But Woola suffers, poor brute."

The dog was stretched out on her side. She looked like a dead horse, if dead horses had tails that wagged when their name was mentioned, and ribs that heaved with the effort of breathing the thin air. Thin by Vangard standards, that is. Oxygen pressure was still over Earth-normal.

"Why not send her back?"

"She would not go. And we will be glad of her company when the snow scorpions come."

"Back to that, eh? You sure you're not imagining them? This place looks as lifeless as a tombstone quarry."

"They wait," he said. "They know me, and Woola. Many times have they tried our alertness—and left their dead on the snow. And so they follow, and wait."

"My gun will handle them." I showed him the legal slug-thrower I carried; he looked it over politely.

"A snow scorpion does not die easily," he said.

"This packs plenty of kick," I said, and demonstrated by blasting a chip off a boulder twenty yards away. The car-rong! echoed back and forth among the big trees. He smiled a little.

"Perhaps, Carl Patton."

We slept the night at the timber line.

19

The next day's hike was different, right from the beginning. On the open ground the snow had drifted and frozen into a crust that held my weight, but broke under the giant's feet, and the dog's. There was no kidding about me pushing the pace now. I took the lead and big Johnny had a tough time keeping up. He didn't complain, didn't seem to be breathing too hard; he just kept coming on, stopping every now and then to wait for the pup to catch up, and breaking every hour for a rest.

The country had gotten bleaker as it rose. As long as we'd been among the trees, there had been an illusion of familiarity; not cozy, but at least there was life, almost Earth-type life. You could fool yourself that somewhere over the next rise there might be a house, or a road. But not here. There was just the snow field, as alien as Jupiter, with the long shadows of the western peaks falling across it. And ahead the glacier towering over us against the dark sky, sugar-white in the late sun, deep-sea blue in the shadows.

About the third hour, the big man pointed something out to me, far back along the trail. It looked like a scatter of black pepper against the white.

"The scorpion pack," he said.

I grunted. "We won't outrun them standing here."

"In their own time they will close the gap," he said.

We did nine hours' hike, up one ridge, down the far side, up another, higher one before he called a halt. Dusk was coming on when we made our camp in the lee of an ice buttress, if you can call a couple of hollows in the frozen snow a camp. The big man got a small fire going, and boiled some soup. He gave me my usual hearty serving, but it seemed to me he shorted himself and the dog a little.

"How are the supplies holding out?" I asked him.

"Well enough," was all he said.

The temperature was down to minus nine centigrade now. He unpacked his cloak, a black and orange striped super-sheepskin the size of a mains'l, and wrapped himself up in it. He and the dog slept together, curled for warmth. I turned down the invitation to join them.

"My circulation's good," I said. "Don't worry about me."

But in spite of the suit, I woke up shivering, and had to set the thermostat a few notches higher. Big Boy didn't seem to mind the cold. But then, an animal his size had an advantage. He had less radiating surface per unit weight. It wasn't freezing that would get him—not unless things got a lot worse.

When he woke me, it was deep twilight; the sun was gone behind the peaks to the west. The route ahead led up the side of a thirty-degree snow slope. There were enough outcroppings of rock and tumbled ice blocks to make progress possible, but it was slow going. The pack on our trail had closed the gap while we slept; I estimated they were ten miles behind now. There were about twenty-five of the things, strung out in a wide crescent. I didn't like that; it suggested more intelligence than anything that looked as bad as the pictures I'd seen. Woola rolled her eyes and showed her teeth and whined, looking back at them. The giant just kept moving forward, slow and steady.

"How about it?" I asked him at the next break. "Do we just let them pick the spot? Or do we fort up somewhere, where they can only jump us from about three and a half sides?"

"They must come to us."

I looked back down the slope we had been climbing steadily for more hours than I could keep track of, trying to judge their distance.

"Not more than five miles," I said. "They could have closed any time in the last couple of hours. What are they waiting for?"

He glanced up at the high ridge, dazzling two miles above. "Up there, the air is thin and cold. They sense that we will weaken."

"And they're right."

"They too will be weakened, Carl Patton, though not perhaps so much as we." He said this as unconcernedly as if he were talking about whether tomorrow would be a good day for a picnic.

"Don't you care?" I asked him. "Doesn't it matter to you if a pack of hungry meat-eaters corners you in the open?"

"It is their nature," he said simply.

"A stiff upper lip is nifty—but don't let it go to your head. How about setting up an ambush—up there?" I pointed out a jumble of rock slabs a hundred yards above.

"They will not enter it."

"OK," I said. "You're the wily native guide. I'm just a tourist. We'll play it your way. But what do we do when it gets dark?"

"The moon will soon rise."

In the next two hours we covered about three-quarters of a mile. The slope was close to forty-five degrees now. Powdery snow went cascading down in slow plumes with every step. Without the suit I don't know if I could have stayed with it, even with the low gravity. Big Johnny was using his hands a lot now; and the dog's puffing was piteous to hear.

"How old is the mutt?" I asked when we were lying on our backs at the next break, with my trailmates working hard to get some nourishment out of what to them was some very thin atmosphere, and me faking the same distress, while I breathed the rich mixture from my suit collector.

"Three years."

"That would be about thirty-five Standard. How long . . ." I remembered my panting and did some, " . . . do they live?"

"No one. . . knows."

"What does that mean?"

"Her kind . . . die in battle."

"It looks like she'll get her chance."

"For that . . . she is grateful."

"She looks scared to death," I said. "And dead beat."

"Weary, yes. But fear is not bred in her."

We made another half mile before the pack decided the time had come to move in to the attack.

The dog knew it first; she gave a bellow like a gut-shot elephant and took a twenty-foot bound down-slope to take up her stand between us and them. It couldn't have been a worse position from the defensive viewpoint, with the exception of the single factor of our holding the high ground. It was a featureless stretch of frozen snow, tilted on edge, naked as a tin roof. The big fellow used his number forty's to stamp out a hollow, working in a circle to widen it.

"You damn fool, you ought to be building a mound," I yelled at him. "That's a cold grave you're digging."

"Do as I do . . . Carl Patton," he panted. "For your life."

"Thanks; I'll stay topside." I picked a spot off to his left and kicked some ice chunks into a heap to give me a firing platform. I made a big show of checking the slug-thrower, then inobtrusively set the crater gun for max range, narrow beam. I don't know why I bothered playing it foxy; Big Boy didn't know the difference between a legal weapon and contraband. Maybe it was just the instinct to have an ace up the sleeve. By the time I finished, the pack was a quarter of a mile away and coming up fast, not running or leaping, but twinkling along on clusters of steel-rod legs that ate up the ground like a fire eats dry grass.

"Carl Patton, it would be well if you stood by my back," the big man called.

"I don't need to hide behind you," I barked.

"Listen well!" he said, and for the first time his voice lacked the easy, almost idle tone. "They cannot attack in full charge. First must they halt and raise their barb. In that moment are they vulnerable. Strike for the eye—but beware the ripping claws!"

"I'll work at a little longer range," I called back, and fired a slug at one a little in advance of the line but still a couple of hundred yards out. There was a bright flash against the ice; a near miss. The next one was dead on—a solid hit in the center of the leaf-shaped plate of tarnish-black armor that covered the thorax. He didn't even break stride.

"Strike for the eye, Carl Patton!"

"What eye?" I yelled. "All I see is plate armor and pistons!" I fired for the legs, missed, missed again, then sent fragments of a limb flying. The owner may have faltered for a couple of microseconds, or maybe I just blinked. I wasn't even sure which one I had hit. They came on, closing ranks now, looking suddenly bigger, more deadly, like an assault wave of light armor, barbed and spiked and invulnerable, with nothing to stop them but a man with a stick, a worn-out old hound, and me, with my popgun. I felt the weapon bucking in my hand, and realized I had been firing steadily. I took a step back, dropped the slug thrower, and palmed the crater gun as the line reached the spot where Woola crouched, waiting.

But instead of slamming into the big dog at full bore, the pair facing her skidded to a dead stop, executed a swift but complicated rearrangement of

limbs, dropping their forward ends to the ground, bringing their hindquarters up and over, unsheathing two-foot-long stingers that poised, ready to plunge down into the unprotected body of the animal. . . .

I wouldn't have believed anything so big could move so fast. She came up from her flattened position like a cricket off a hot plate, was in mid-air, twisting to snap down at the thing on the left with jaws like a bear trap, landed sprawling, spun, leaped, snapped, and was poised, snarling, while two ruined attackers flopped and stabbed their hooks into the ice before her. I saw all this in a fast half-second while I was bringing the power gun up, squeezing the firing stud to pump a multi-megawatt jolt into the thing that was rearing up in front of me. The shock blasted a foot-wide pit in it, knocked it a yard backward—but didn't slow its strike. The barb whipped up, over, and down to bury itself in the ice between my feet.

"The eye!" The big man's voice boomed at me over the snarls of Woola and the angry buzzing that was coming from the attackers. "The eye, Carl Patton!"

I saw it then: a three-inch patch like reticulated glass, deep red, set in the curve of armor above the hook-lined prow. It exploded as I fired. I swiveled left and fired again, from the corner of my eye saw the big man swing his club left, right. I was down off my mound, working my way over to him, slamming shots into whatever was closest. The scorpions were all around us, but only half a dozen at a time could crowd in close to the edge of the twelve-foot depression the giant had tramped out. One went over, pushed from behind, scrabbling for footing, and died as the club smashed down on him. I killed another and jumped down beside the giant.

"Back to back, Carl Patton," he called. A pair came up together over a barricade of dead monsters, and while they teetered for attack position I shot them, then shot the one that mounted their threshing corpses. Then suddenly the pressure slackened, and I was hearing the big man's steam-engine puffing, the dog's rasping snarls, was aware of a pain in my thigh, of the breath burning in my throat. A scorpion jittered on his thin legs ten feet away, but he came no closer. The others were moving back, buzzing and clacking. I started up over the side and an arm like a jib boom stopped me.

"They must . . . come to us." The giant wheezed out the words. His face was pink and he was having trouble getting enough air, but he was smiling.

"If you say so," I said.

"Your small weapon strikes a man's blow," he said, instead of commenting on my stupidity.

"What are they made of? They took my rounds like two-inch flint steel."

"They are no easy adversaries," he said. "Yet we killed nine." He looked across at where the dog stood panting, facing the enemy. "Woola slew five. They learn caution—" He broke off, looking down at me, at my leg. He went to one knee, touched a tear in my suit I hadn't noticed. That shook me, seeing the ripped edge of the material. Not even a needler could penetrate the stuff—but one of those barbs had.

"The hide is unbroken," he said. "Luck was with you this day, Carl Patton. The touch of the barb is death."

Something moved behind him and I yelled and fired and a scorpion came plunging down on the spot where he'd been standing an instant before. I fell and rolled, came around, put one in the eye just as Johnny Thunder's club slammed home in the same spot. I got to my feet and the rest of them were moving off, back down the slope.

"You damned fool!" I yelled at the giant. Rage broke my voice. "Why don't you watch yourself?"

"I am in your debt, Carl Patton," was all he said.

"Debt, hell! Nobody owes me anything—and that goes both ways!"

He didn't answer that, just looked down at me, smiling a little, like you would at an excited child. I took a couple of deep breaths of warmed and fortified tank air and felt better—but not much.

"Will you tell me your true name, small warrior?" the giant said.

I felt ice form in my chest.

"What do you mean?" I stalled.

"We have fought side by side. It is fitting that we exchange the secret names our mothers gave us at birth."

"Oh, magic, eh? Juju. The secret word of power. Skip it, big fellow. Johnny Thunder is good enough for me."

"As you will . . . Carl Patton." He went to see to the dog then, and I checked to see how badly my suit was damaged. There was a partial power loss in the leg servos and the heat was affected, too. That wasn't good. There were still a lot of miles to walk out of the giant before the job was done.

When we hit the trail half an hour later I was still wondering why I had moved so fast to save the life of the man I'd come here to kill.

21

We halted for sleep three hours later. It was almost full dark when we turned in, curled up in pits trampled in the snow. Johnny Thunder said the scorpions wouldn't be back until they'd eaten their dead, but I sweated inside my insulated longjohns as the last of the light faded to a pitch black like the inside of an unmarked grave. Then I must have dozed off, because I woke with bluish light in my face. The inner moon, Cronus, had risen over the ridge, a cratered disk ten degrees wide, almost full, looking close enough to jump up and bang my head on, if I'd felt like jumping. I didn't.

We made good time in the moonlight, considering the slope of the glacier's skirt we were climbing. At forty-five thousand feet, we topped the barrier and looked down the far side and across a shadowed valley to the next ridge, twenty miles away, silver-white against the stars.

"Perhaps on the other side we will find them," the giant said. His voice had lost some of its timbre. His face looked frostbitten, pounded numb by the sub-zero wind. Woola crouched behind him, looking shrunken and old.

"Sure," I said. "Or maybe beyond the next one, or the one after that."

"Beyond these ridges lie the Towers of Nandi. If your friends have fallen there, their sleep will be long—and ours as well."

It was two marches to the next ridge. By then the moon was high enough to illuminate the whole panorama from the crest. There was nothing in sight but ice. We camped in the lee of the crest, then went on. The suit was giving me trouble, unbalanced as it was, and the toes of my right foot were feeling the frost.

Sometime, about mid-afternoon, I noticed we'd veered off our route as if to skirt a mesa-like rock formation ahead. I registered a gripe about the extra mileage and proposed to get back to the direct route.

"Go if you will, Carl Patton. Perhaps I have not been fair to you, thus to indulge my personal taboo."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I yelled at him. I was too beat to be diplomatic. He ignored the bad manners and turned to look at the mesa.

"Yonder rises Hel," he said. "I would prefer not to know the fate of my sisters and their young."

I did a 'shucks, fella, I didn't mean . . .' number, and we went on, following his detour. An hour or two later, Woola, scouting ahead, halted and began skirting something that looked like a low mound of snow. Then she whined and her ears and tail drooped. She turned and came back to put up a paw for Johnny Thunder to take while he patted the big shaggy head. He went forward to look at what she'd found and I trailed along, wondering what it was that could make the old war-dog wilt like a whipped puppy. The giant had knelt to brush away snow, and when I came around him I saw the face, as beautiful as any ancient image of a love goddess, and on the same heroic scale; a young face, almost smiling, with a lock of red-gold hair across the noble ice-pale forehead. All of a sudden I was all out of wisecracks. Here was a beauty that wars could have been fought over, dead and frozen these hundred years. Too bad I didn't have the magic spell that would waken her.

"Adainn was the youngest," the giant said. "Only a girl, barely of marriageable age. Now she is the bride of the ice, lying in his cold embrace."

"Good looking dolly," I said, and all of a sudden I felt a sense of loss that almost blacked me out. I heard myself saying "No, no! NO!" and struggling against Johnny's big arm, barring my way, while Woola rose from her haunches, and took a position standing protectively over the corpse. After a while I was sitting in the snow, with water running out of my eyes and freezing, and big Johnny saying:

"Be none ashamed, Carl. Any man must love her when he sees her, be he

large or small."

I told him he was nuts, and got up and arranged my load, not looking at her somehow, for some reason, and then Johnny covered her face again, and said, "Fare thee well, my little sister. Now we must tend the living," and we went on. Johnny was more silent than usual all day, and in spite of the hot concentrates I sucked on the sly as I hiked, and the synthetic pep the hypospray metered into an artery, I was starting to feel it now. But not as badly as Big Johnny. He had a gaunt, starved look, and he hiked as though he had anvils tied to his feet. He was still feeding himself and the dog meager rations, and forcing an equal share on me. When he wasn't looking I stuffed what I couldn't eat in the disposal and watched him starve. But he was tough; he starved slowly, grudgingly, fighting for every inch.

He never complained. He could have gotten up and started back any time, with no apologies. He'd already made a better try than anyone could expect, even of a giant. As for me, all I had to do was picture that fat bank account, and all the big juicy steaks and big soft beds with beautiful women in them and the hand-tooled cars and the penthouse with a view all that cash was going to buy for me. As long as I kept my mind on that, the pain seemed remote and unimportant. Baird Ulrik could take it, all right. And after all, Big Boy was only human, like Woola and me, and as long as he could get up and go on one more time, so could I: I almost felt sorry for the big mutt, who went on just because she couldn't imagine anything else to do, much less a fancy doghouse with plenty of bones but I stifled that. It was no time to be sentimental. At least, Big Johnny was no longer asking me those strangely embarrassing questions of his. The big dope couldn't even imagine treachery and betrayal. And to hell with that, too.

That night, lying back of a barrier he'd built up out of snow blocks against the wind, he asked me a question.

"What is it like, Carl Patton, to travel across the space between the worlds?"

"Solitary confinement," I told him.

"You do not love your solitude?"

"What does that matter? I do my job."

"What do you love, Carl Patton?"

"Wine, women, and song," I said. "And you can even skip the song, in a pinch."

"A woman waits for you?"

"Women," I corrected. "But they're not waiting."

"Your loves seem few, Carl Patton. What then do you hate?"

"Fools," I said.

"Is it fools who have driven you here?"

"Me? Nobody drives me anywhere. I go where I like."

"Then it is freedom you strive for. Have you found it here on my world, Carl Patton?" His face was a gaunt mask like a weathered carving, but his voice was laughing at me.

"You know you're going to die out here, don't you?" I hadn't intended to say that. But I did; and my tone was savage to my own ears.

He looked at me, the way he always did before he spoke, as if he were trying to read a message written on my face.

"A man must die," he said.

"You don't have to be here," I said. "You could break it off now, go back, forget the whole thing."

"As could you, Carl Patton."

"Me quit?" I snapped. "No thanks. My job's not done."

He nodded. "A man must do what he sets out to do. Else is he no more than a snowflake driven before the wind."

"You think this is a game?" I barked. "A contest? Do or die, or maybe both, and may the best man win?"

"With whom would I contest, Carl Patton? Are we not comrades of the trail?"

"We're strangers," I said. "You don't know me and I don't know you. And you can skip trying to figure out my reasons for what I do."

"You set out to save the lives of the helpless, because it was your duty."

"It's not yours! You don't have to break yourself on these mountains! You can leave this ice factory, live the rest of your days as a hero of the masses, have everything you'd ever want—"

"What I want, no man can give me."

"I suppose you hate us," I said. "The strangers that came here and brought a disease that killed your world."

"Who can hate a natural force?"

"All right—what do you hate?"

For a minute I thought he wasn't going to answer. "I hate the coward within me," he said. "The voice that whispers counsels of surrender. But if I fled, and saved this flesh, what spirit would then live on to light it?"

"You want to run—then run!" I almost yelled. "You're going to lose this race, big man! Quit while you can!"

"I will go on—while I can. If I am lucky, the flesh will die before the spirit."

"Spirit, hell! You're a suicidal maniac!"

"Then am I in good company, Carl Patton."

I let him take that one.

22

We passed the hundred-mile mark the next march. We crossed another ridge, higher than the last. The cold was sub-arctic, the wind a flaying knife. The moon set, and after a couple of eternities, dawn came. My locator told me when we passed within ten miles of the pod. All its systems were still going. The power cells were good for a hundred years. If I slipped up at my end, the frozen miners might wake up to a new century; but they'd wake up.

Johnny Thunder was a pitiful sight now. His hands were split and bloody, his hollow cheeks and bloodless lips cracked and peeling from frostbite, the hide stretched tight over his bones. He moved slowly, heavily, wrapped in his furs. But he moved. I ranged out ahead, keeping the pressure on. The dog was in even worse shape than her master. She trailed far behind on the up-slopes, spent most of each break catching up. Little by little, in spite of my heckling, the breaks got longer, the marches shorter. The big man knew how to pace himself, in spite of my gadfly presence. He meant to hang on, and make it. So much for my plans. It was late afternoon again when we reached the high pass that the big man said led into the badlands he called the Towers of Nandi. I came up the last stretch of trail between sheer ice walls and looked out over a vista of ice peaks sharp as broken bottles, packed together like shark's teeth, rising up and up in successive ranks that reached as far as the eye could see.

I turned to urge the giant to waste some more strength hurrying to close the gap, but he beat me to it. He was pointing, shouting something I couldn't hear for a low rumble that had started up. I looked up, and the whole side of the mountain was coming down at me.

23

The floor was cold. It was the tiled floor of the creche locker room, and I was ten years old, and lying on my face, held there by the weight of a kid called Soup, age fourteen, with the physique of an ape and an IQ to match.

When he'd first pushed me back against the wall, knocked aside my punches, and thrown me to the floor, I had cried, called for help to the ring of eager-eyed spectators, most of whom had more than once felt the weight of Soup's knobby knuckles. None of them moved. When he'd bounced my head on the floor and called to me to say uncle, I opened my mouth to say it, and then spat in his face instead. What little restraint Soup had left him then. Now his red-bristled forearm was locked under my jaw, and his knee was in the small of my back, and I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Soup was a boy who didn't know his own strength, who would stretch his growing muscles with all the force he could muster—caught up and carried away in the thrill of the discovery of his own animal power—would bend my back until my spine snapped, and I'd be dead, dead, dead forevermore, at the hands of a moron.

Unless I saved myself. I was smarter than Soup—smarter than any of them. Man had conquered the animals with his mind—and Soup was an animal. He couldn't—couldn't kill me. Not if I used my brain, instead of wasting my strength against an animal body twice the size of my own.

I stepped outside my body and looked at myself, saw how he knelt on me, gripping his own wrist, balancing with one outflung foot. I saw how, by twisting to my right side, I could slide out from under the knee; and then, with a sudden movement . . .

His knee slipped off-center as I moved under him. With all the power in me, I drew up, doubling my body; unbalanced, he started to topple to his right, still gripping me. I threw myself back against him, which brought my head under his chin. I reached back, took a double handful of coarse red hair, and ripped with all my strength.

He screamed, and his grip was gone. I twisted like an eel as he grabbed for my hands, still tangled in his hair; I lunged and buried my teeth in his thick ear. He howled and tried to tear away, and I felt the cartilage break, tasted salty blood. He ripped my hands away, taking hair and a patch of scalp with them. I saw his face, contorted like a demon-mask as he sprawled away from me, still grasping my wrists. I brought my knee up into his crotch, and saw his face turn to green clay. I jumped to my feet; he writhed, coiled, making an ugly choking sound. I took aim and kicked him hard in the mouth. I landed two more carefully placed kicks, with my full weight behind them, before the rudimentary judgement of the audience awoke and they pulled me away. . . .

There was movement near me. I heard the rasp of something hard and rough against another hardness. Light appeared. I drew a breath, and saw the white-bearded face of an ancient man looking down at me from far above, from the top of a deep well. . . .

"You still live, Carl Patton." The giant's voice seemed to echo from a long way off. I saw his big hands come down, straining at a quarter-ton slab of ice, saw him lift it slowly, toss it aside. There was snow in his hair, ice droplets in his beard. His breath was frost.

"Get out of here." I forced the words out past the broken glass in my chest. "Before the rest comes down."

He didn't answer; he lifted another slab, and my arms were free. I tried to help, but that just made more snow spill down around my shoulders. He put his big impossible hands under my arms and lifted, dragged me up and out of my grave. I lay on my back and he sprawled beside me. The dog Woola crawled up to him, making anxious noises. Little streamers of snow were coming down from above, being whipped away by the wind. A mass of ice the size of a carrier tender hung cantilevered a few hundred feet above.

"Run, you damned fool!" I yelled. It came out as a whisper. He got to his knees, slowly. He scooped me up, rose to his feet. Ice fragments clattered down from above. He took a step forward, toward the badlands.

"Go back," I managed. "You'll be trapped on the far side!"

He halted, as more ice rattled down. "Alone, Carl Patton . . . would you turn back?"

"No," I said. "But there's no reason . . . now . . . for you to die. . . ."

"Then we will go on." He took another step, and staggered as a pebble of ice the size of a basketball struck him a glancing blow on the shoulder. The dog snarled at his side. It was coming down around us like rice at a wedding now. He went on, staggering like a drunk, climbing up over the final drift. There was a boom like a cannon-shot from above; air whistled past us, moving out. He made three more paces and went down, dropped me, knelt over me like a shaggy tent. I heard him grunt as the ice fragments struck him. Somewhere behind us there was a smash like a breaking dam. The air was full of snow, blinding, choking. The light faded. . . .

24

The dead were crying. It was a sad, lost sound, full of mournful surprise that life had been so short and so full of mistakes. I understood how they felt. Why shouldn't I? I was one of them.

But corpses didn't have headaches, as well as I could remember. Or cold feet, or weights that crushed them against sharp rocks. Not unless the stories about where the bad ones went were true. I opened my eyes to take a look at Hell, and saw the hound. She whined again, and I got my head around and saw an arm bigger than my leg. The weight I felt was what was left of Johnny Thunder, sprawled across me, under a blanket of broken ice.

It took me half an hour to work my way free. The suit was what had saved me, of course, with its automatic defensive armor. I was bruised, and a rib or two were broken, but there was nothing I couldn't live with until I got back to base and my six million credits.

Because the job was done. The giant didn't move while I was digging out, didn't stir when I thumbed up his eyelid. He still had some pulse, but it wouldn't last long. He had been bleeding from the ice wounds on his face and hands, but the blood had frozen. What the pounding hadn't finished, the cold would. And even if he came around, the wall of ice behind him closed the pass like a vault door. When the sob sisters arrived to check on their oversized pet they'd find him here, just as I would describe him, the noble victim of the weather and the piece of bad luck that had made us miss our target by a tragic ten miles, after that long, long hike. They'd have a good syndicated cry over how he'd given his all, and then close the book on another footnote to history. It had worked out just the way I'd planned. Not that I got any big kick out of my cleverness once again. It was routine, just a matter of analyzing the data.

"So long, Johnny Thunder," I said. "'You were a lot of man."

The dog lifted her head and whined. I made soothing sounds and switched the lift-unit built into my suit to maximum assist and headed for the pod, fifteen miles away, in that direction. I heard Woola's tail flopping as she wagged goodbye. Too bad; but there was no way I could help a mutt as big

as a shire horse.

25

The twenty-foot-long cargo unit was nestled in a drift of hard-packed snow, in a little hollow among barren rock peaks, not showing a scratch. I wasn't surprised; the auto gear I had installed could have soft-landed a china shop without cracking a teacup. I had contracted to deliver my load intact, and it was a point of pride with me to fulfill the letter of a deal. I was so busy congratulating myself on that that I was fifty feet from it before I noticed that the snow had been disturbed around the pod: trampled, maybe, then brushed out to conceal the tracks. By then it was too late to become invisible; if there was anybody around, he had already seen me. I stopped ten feet from the entry hatch and went through the motions of collapsing in a pitiful little heap, all tuckered out from my exertions, meanwhile looking around, over, and under the pod. I didn't see anything.

I lay where I was long enough for anybody who wanted to to make his entrance. No takers. That left the play up to me. I made a production out of getting my feet under me and staggering to the entry hatch. The scratches there told me that part of the story. The port mechanism was still intact. It opened on command and I crawled into the lock. Inside, everything looked normal. The icebox seal was tight, the dials said the cooler units were operating perfectly, not that they had a whole lot to do in this natural freezer of a world. I almost let it go at that, but not quite. I don't know why, except that a lifetime of painful lessons had taught me to take nothing for granted. It took me half an hour to get the covers off the reefer controls. When I did, I saw it right away: a solenoid hung in the half-open position. It was the kind of minor malfunction you might expect after a hard landing—but not if you knew what I knew. It had been jimmied, the support bent a fractional millimeter out of line, just enough to jam the action—and incidentally to actuate the heating cycle that would thaw the ten men inside the cold room in ten hours flat. I freed it, heard gas hiss into the lines, then cracked the vault door and checked visually. The inside gauge read +3° absolute. The temperature hadn't had time to start rising yet; the ten long boxes and their contents were still intact. That meant the tampering had been done recently. I was still mulling over the implications of that deduction when I heard the crunch of feet on the ice outside the open lock.

26

Illini looked older than he had when I had seen him last, back in the plush bureaucratic setting of League Central. His monkey face behind the cold mask looked pinched and bloodless; his long nose was pink with cold, his jaw a scruffy, unshaven blue. He didn't seem surprised to see me. He stepped up through the hatch and a second man followed him. They looked around. Their glance took in the marks in the frost crust around the reefer, and held on the open panel.

"Everything all right here?" the little man asked me. He made it casual, as if we'd just happened to meet on the street.

"Almost," I said. "A little trouble with a solenoid. Nothing serious."

Illini nodded as if that was par for the course. His eyes flickered over me. "Outside, you seemed to be in difficulty," he said. "I see you've made a quick recovery."

"It must have been psychosomatic," I said. "Getting inside took my mind off it."

"I take it the subject is dead?"

"Hell, no," I said. "He's alive and well in Phoenix, Arizona. How did you find the pod, Illini?"

"I was lucky enough to persuade the black marketeer who supplied your homing equipment to sell me its twin, tuned to the same code." He looked mildly amused. "Don't be too distressed, Ulrik. There are very few secrets from an unlimited budget."

"One is enough," I said, "played right. But you haven't said why."

"The scheme you worked out was clever," he said. "Somewhat over-devious, perhaps—but clever. Up to a point. It was apparent from the special equipment installed in the pod that you had some idea of your cargo surviving the affair."

"So?"

"You wanted to present the public with a tidy image to treasure, Ulrik. Well and good. But the death of a freak in a misguided attempt to rescue men who were never in danger would smack of the comic. People might be dissatisfied. They might begin investigating the circumstances which allowed their pet to waste himself. But if it appears he might have saved the men—then the public will accept his martyrdom."

"You plan to spend ten men on the strength of that theory?"

"It's a trivial price to pay for extra insurance."

"And here you are, to correct my mistakes. How do you plan to square it with the Monitor Service? They take a dim view of unauthorized planetfalls."

Illini gave me his I-just-ate-the-canary look. "I'm here quite legally. By great good fortune, my yacht happened to be cruising in the vicinity and picked up your U-beam. Ring Station accepted my offer of assistance."

"I see. And what have you got in mind for me?"

"Just what was agreed on, of course. I have no intention of complicating the situation at this point. We'll proceed with the plan precisely as conceived—with the single exception I've noted. I can rely on your discretion, for obvious reasons. Your fee is already on deposit at Credit Central."

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you?" I said, trying to sound sarcastic. "But you overlooked one thing: I'm temperamental. I don't like people making changes in my plans."

Illini lifted a lip. "I'm aware of your penchant for salving your conscience as a professional assassin by your nicety in other matters. But in this case I'm afraid my desires must prevail." The hand of the man behind him strayed casually to the gun at his hip. So far, he hadn't said a word. He didn't have to. He'd be a good man with a sidearm. Illini wouldn't have brought anything but the best. Or maybe the second best. It was a point I'd probably have to check soon.

"Our work here will require only a few hours," Illini said. "After that . . ." he made an expansive gesture. "We're all free to take up other matters." He smiled as though everything had been cleared up. "By the way, where is the body? I'll want to view it, just as a matter of routine."

I folded my arms and leaned against the bulkhead. I did it carefully, just in case I was wrong about a few things. "What if I don't feel like telling you?" I asked him.

"In that case, I'd be forced to insist." Illini's eyes were wary. The gungel had tensed.

"Uh-uh," I said. "This is a delicate setup; A charred corpse wouldn't help the picture."

"Podnac's instructions are to disable, not to kill."

"For a hired hand, you seem to be taking a lot of chances, Illini. It wouldn't do for the public to get the idea that the selfless motive of eliminating a technicality so that progress could come to Vanguard, as the Boss told it, is marred by some private consideration."

Illini lifted his shoulders. "We own an interest in the planetary exploitation contract, yes. Someone was bound to profit. Why not those who made it possible?"

"That's another one on me," I said. "I should have held out for a percentage."

"That's enough gossip," Illini said. "Don't try to stall me, Ulrik. Speak up or suffer the consequences."

I shook my head. "I'm calling your bluff, Illini. The whole thing is balanced on a knife's edge. Any sign of trouble here—even a grease spot on the deck—and the whole thing is blown."

Podnac made a quick move and his gun was in his hand. I grinned at it. "That's supposed to scare me so I go outside where you can work a little better, eh?"

"I'm warning you, Ulrik—"

"Skip it. I'm not going anywhere. But you're leaving, Illini. You've got your boat parked somewhere near here. Get in it and lift off. I'll take it from there."

"You fool! You'd risk the entire operation for the sake of a piece of mawkish sentiment?"

"It's my operation, Illini. I'll play it out my way or not at all. I'm like that. That's why you hired me, remember?"

He drew a breath like a man getting ready for a deep dive, snorted it out. "You don't have a chance, Ulrik! You're throwing everything away—for what?"

"Not quite everything. You'll still pay off for a finished job. It's up to you. You can report you checked the pod and found everything normal. Try anything else and the bubble pops."

"There are two of us. We could take you barehanded."

"Not while I've got my hand on the gun under my arm."

The little man's eyes ate me raw. There were things he wanted to say, but instead he made a face like a man chewing glass and jerked his head at his hired hand. They walked sideways to the hatch and jumped down. I watched them back away.

"I'll get you for this," Illini told me when he finally decided I was bluffing. "I promise you that," he added.

"No, you won't," I said. "You'll just count those millions and keep your mouth shut. That's the way the Boss would like it."

They turned and I straightened and dropped my hands. Podnac spun and fired and the impact knocked me backward twenty feet across the hold.

The world was full of roaring lights and blazing sounds, but I held onto a slender thread of consciousness, built it into a rope, crawled back up it. I did it because I had to. I made it just in time. Podnac was coming through the hatch, Illini's voice yapping behind him. I covered him and pressed the stud and blew him back out of sight.

27

I was numb all over, like a thumb that's just been hit by a hammer. I felt hot fluid trickling down the inside of my suit, felt broken bones grate. I tried to move and almost blacked out. I knew then: this was one scrape I wouldn't get out of. I'd had it. Illini had won.

His voice jarred me out of a daze.

"He fired against my order, Ulrik! You heard me tell him! I'm not responsible!"

I blinked a few times and could see the little man through the open port, standing in a half crouch on the spot where I'd last seen him, watching the dark hatchway for the flash that would finish him. He was holding the winning cards, and didn't know it. He didn't know how hard I'd been hit, that he could have strolled in and finished the job with no opposition. He thought tough, smart Baird Ulrik had rolled with another punch, was holding on him now, cool and deadly and in charge of everything.

OK. I'd do my best to keep him thinking that. I was done for, but so was

he—if I could con him into leaving now. When the Monitors showed up and found my corpse and the note I'd manage to write before the final night closed down, Illini and Company would be out of the planet-stealing business and into a penal colony before you could say malfeasance in high office. I looked around for my voice, breathed on it a little, and called:

"We won't count that one, Illini. Take your boy and lift off. I'll be watching. So will the Monitor scopes. If you try to land again you'll have them to explain to."

"I'll do as you say, Ulrik. It's your show. I . . . I'll have to use a lift harness on Podnac."

I didn't answer that one. I couldn't. That worried Illini.

"Ulrik? I'm going to report that I found everything in order. Don't do anything foolish. Remember your six million credits."

"Get going," I managed. I watched him back up a few steps, then turn and scramble up the slope. The lights kept fading and coming up again.

Quite suddenly Illini was there again, guiding the slack body of his protégé as it hung in the harness. When I looked again they were gone. Then I let go of whatever it was I had been hanging onto, and fell forever through endlessness.

When I woke up, Johnny Thunder was sitting beside me.

28

He gave me water. I drank it and said, "You big, dumb ox! What are you doing here?" I said that, but all that came out was a dry wheeze, like a collapsing lung. I lay with my head propped against the wall, the way he had laid me out, and looked at the big, gaunt face, the cracked and peeling lips, the matted hair caked with ice, the bright blue eyes fixed on mine.

"I woke and found you had gone, Carl Patton." His voice had lost its resonance. He sounded like an old man. "Woola led me here."

I thought that over—and then I saw it. It almost made me grin. A note written in blood might poke a hole in Illini's plans—but a live giant would sink them with all hands.

I made another try and managed a passable whisper: "Listen to me, Johnny. Listen hard, because once is all you're likely to get it. This whole thing was a fix—a trick to get you dead. Because as long as you were alive, they couldn't touch your world. The men here were never in danger. At least they weren't meant to be. But there was a change in plan. But that's only after you're taken care of. And if you're alive . . ." It was getting too complicated.

"Never mind that," I said. "You outsmarted 'em. Outsmarted all of us. You're alive after all. Now the trick is to stay that way. So you lie low. There's heat and emergency food stores here, all you need until pickup. And then you'll have it made. There was a jammed solenoid, you understand? You know what a solenoid looks like? And you freed it. You saved the men.

You'll be a hero. They won't dare touch you then . . ."

"You are badly hurt, Carl Patton—"

"My name's not Carl Patton, damn you! It's Ulrik! I'm a hired killer, understand? I came here to finish you—"

"You have lost much blood, Ulrik. Are there medical supplies here?"

"Nothing that will help me. I took a power gun blast in the hip. My left thigh is nothing but bone splinters and hamburger. The suit helped me some—but not enough. But forget that. What's important is that they don't know you're alive! If they sneak back for another look and discover you—before the relief crew gets here—then they win. And they can't win, understand? I won't let 'em!"

"At my house there is a medical machine, Ulrik," Big Boy told me. "Doctors placed it there, after the Sickness. It can heal you."

"Sure—and at med center they'd have me dancing the Somali in thirty-six hours. And if I'd stayed away, I wouldn't have been in this fix at all! Forget all that and concentrate on staying alive. . . ."

I must have faded out then, because the next I knew someone was sticking dull knives in my side. I got my eyelids up and saw my suit open and lots of blood. Big Johnny was doing things to my leg. I told him to leave me alone, but he went on sawing at me with red-hot saws, pouring hot acid into the wounds. And then after a while I was coming up from a long way down, looking at my leg, bandaged to the hip with tape from the first aid locker.

"You have much strength left, Ulrik," he said. "You fought me like the frost-demon."

I wanted to tell him to let it alone, let me die in peace, but no sound came out. The giant was on his feet, wrapped in purple and green fur. He squatted and picked me up, turned to the port. I tried again to yell, to tell him that the play now was to salvage the only thing left: revenge. That he'd had his turn at playing Saint Bernard to the rescue, that another hopeless walk in the snow would only mean that Podnac and Illini had won after all, that my bluff had been for nothing. But it was no use. I felt him stagger as the wind hit him, heard my suit thermostat click on. Then the cotton-wool blanket closed over me.

29

I don't remember much about the trip back. The suit's metabolic monitors kept me doped—those and nature's defenses against the sensation of being carried over a shoulder through a blizzard, while the bone chips separated and began working their way through the crushed flesh of my thigh. Once I looked into the big frost-scarred face, met the pain-dulled eyes.

"Leave me here," I said. "I don't want help. Not from you, not from anybody. I win or lose on my own."

He shook his head.

"Why?" I said. "Why are you doing it?"

"A man," he said. "A man . . . must do . . . what he sets out to do."

He went on. He was a corpse, but he wouldn't lie down and die.

I ate and drank from the tubes in my mouth from reflex. If I'd been fully awake I'd have starved myself to shorten the ordeal. Sometimes I was conscious for a half an hour at a stretch, knowing how a quarter of beef felt on the butcher's hook; and other times I slept and dreamed I had passed the entrance exams for Hell. A few times I was aware of falling, of lying in the snow, and then of big hands that painfully lifted, grunting; of the big, tortured body plodding on.

Then there was another fall, somehow more final than the others. For a long time I lay where I was, waiting to die. And after a while it got through to me that the suit wouldn't let me go as easily as that. The food and the auto-drugs that would keep a healthy man healthy for a year would keep a dying man in torture for almost as long. I was stuck on this side of the river, like it or not. I opened my eyes to tell the giant what I thought of that, but didn't see him: what I did see was his house, looming tall against the big trees a hundred yards away. It didn't take me more than a day to crawl to it. I did it a hundred miles at a time, over a blanket of broken bottles. The door resisted for a while, but in the end I got my weight against it and it swung in and dumped me on the plank floor. After that there was another long, fuzzy time while I clawed my way to the oversized med cabinet, got it opened, and fell inside. I heard the diagnostic unit start up, felt the sensors moving over me. Then I didn't know any more for a long, long time.

30

This time I came out of it clearheaded, hungry, pain-free, and with a walking cast on my leg. I looked around for my host, but I was all alone in the big lodge. There was no cheery blaze on the hearth, but the house was as hot as a skid-row flop in summertime. At some time in the past, the do-gooders had installed a space heater with automatic controls to keep the giant cozy if the fire went out. I found some food on the shelves and tried out my jaws for the first time in many days. It was painful, but satisfying. I fired up the comm rig and got ready to tell the Universe my story. Then I remembered there were still a few details to clear up. I went to the door with a vague idea of seeing if Johnny Thunder was outside, chopping wood for exercise. All I saw was a stretch of wind-packed snow, the backdrop of giant trees, the gray sky hanging low overhead like wet canvas. Then I noticed something else: an oblong drift of snow, halfway between me and the forest wall.

The sound of snow crust crunching under my feet was almost explosively loud in the stillness as I walked across to the long mound. He lay on his back, his eyes open to the sky, glazed over with ice. His arms were bent at the elbow, the hands open as if he were carrying a baby. The snow was drifted over him, like a blanket to warm him in his sleep. The dog was

beside him, frozen at her post.

I looked at the giant for a long time, and words stirred inside me: things that needed a voice to carry them across the gulf wider than space to where he had gone. But all I said was: "You made it, Johnny. We were the smart ones; but you were the one that did what you set out to do."

31

I flipped up the send key, ready to fire the blast that would sink Podnac and crew like a lead canoe; but then the small, wise voice of discretion started whispering at me. Nailing them would have been a swell gesture for me to perform as a corpse, frozen with a leer of triumph on my face, thumbing my nose from the grave. I might even have had a case for blowing them sky-high to save Johnny Thunder's frozen paradise for him, in view of the double-cross they'd tried on me.

But I was alive, and Johnny was dead. And six million was still waiting. There was nothing back at the pod that couldn't be explained in terms of the big bad scorpion that had gnawed my leg. Johnny would be a hero, and they'd put up a nice marker for him on some spot the excavating rigs didn't chew up—I'd see to that.

In the end I did the smart thing, the shrewd thing. I told them what they wanted to hear; that the men were safe, and that the giant had died a hero like a giant should. Then I settled down to wait for the relief boat.

32

I collected. Since then I've been semi-retired. That's a nice way of saying that I haven't admitted to myself that I'm not taking any more assignments. I've spent my time for the past year traveling, seeing the sights, trying out the luxury spots, using up a part of the income on the pile I stashed away. I've eaten and drunk and wenched and sampled all the kicks from air-skiing to deep-sea walking, but whatever it is I'm looking for, I have a hunch I won't find it, any more than the rest of the drones and thrill-seekers will.

It's a big, impersonal Universe, and little men crave the thing that will give them stature against the loom of stars.

But in a world where once there was a giant, the rest of us are forever pygmies.