

Look Back to Earth

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A MANOR BOOK

Manor Books, Inc.

432 Park Avenue South

New York, New York 10016

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Published by arrangement with the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN CODE0-532-15299-9

Chapter One

William Byrne squirmed restlessly in the center seat of the front row in the fleet command center of the *Myriad*, overlooking the battleship's busy control deck and fire control center below. Just behind him stood a young, blonde woman with striking golden skin, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder, her eyes more on him than on the bustle of activity as the mighty ship was prepared for battle.

On the situation screens in front of him, currently set to search out to the limits of their range, the little points of light that indicated the position of the main Imperial battle fleet sparkled in a cloud too dense to resolve into individual ships. Out there, on a collision course with his fleet, were nearly five thousand warships, which in slightly less than an hour would be locked in combat with the *Myriad* fleet.

The computer projection had indicated to Byrne that over a hundred thousand men would lose their lives in the coming battle, and briefly he wondered if the end, any end, could be worth such an expenditure of human life. Wondered if perhaps he might have chosen a better course, a way of achieving his goals that would not have demanded open warfare between *Myriad* and the Empire, would not have cost so much in money and material, and, above all, lives.

"Fleet tactical dispersal complete, sir," an older, gray-haired man in the uniform of a full admiral reported.

"Very well, Admiral. This is the last fleet, you know. The last battle. Let's make a good one, and hope it was all worth it."

Byrne's job was finished. His fleet was de-ployed, and the tactics were set. Unless something unexpected occurred, something requiring a major strategy decision, the rest of the operation was in the hands of the individual ship commanders and the giant computers aboard the *Myriad*. No one man could control a battle fleet that stretched across three-quarters of a million miles, or even comprehend the actions that would fill a volume of some 5,400 quadrillion cubic miles. So Byrne sat back in his seat, then reached up and gently squeezed the hand of the woman standing quietly behind him. Then he let his mind drift back over the tortured, twisting path that had led him to this point in time and space.

Actually, it had all started with Byrne's father. That man, the hereditary Citizen of Myriad, one of the richest of the outer systems independent of the Empire, had chosen to marry one of the liberated women of Imperial Earth. The absolute leader of a rugged, male-oriented society, bred to a woman who acknowledged no man's superiority, had produced the explosion that was William Byrne. A man and a woman each endowed with considerable temperament—and temper—had married, and the result had been a son with more temperament, and temper, than either of his parents.

Knowing that his chances of inheriting the Citizenship of Myriad were next to nonexistent, considering the care that would be taken of his older brother, and unwilling to accept a life of comfortable but totally boring uselessness, Byrne had taken his yearly stipend, borrowed against his inheritance from his brother, and bought himself a commission in the Imperial forces as soon as he was of age, over the objections of both his parents. He had spent five happy years as a combat leader in the marches of the Empire, advancing from flight lieutenant to colonel. Advancing until he'd been assigned to the new fleet battleship *Novi Sad*, under the command of Brigadier General Harrison Caldwell.

Byrne thought of Caldwell as a fool. A man only a few years his senior who had advanced to staff rank without ever leaving the surface of Mother Terra or the comforts of the Imperial Court. But a space command had been necessary if Caldwell was going to advance any further in the Imperial Service, and he had been given command of the combat forces aboard the newly commissioned *Novi Sad*. Which included the squadron of Wasp-class combat boats led by Colonel Byrne.

The *Novi Sad* was in high Lunar orbit launching from the shipyards of Mare Crisium, taking on supplies and undergoing space-worthiness tests, when an inspection team of minor functionaries from the Court arrived. Anxious to show off his new command, General Caldwell sent for Byrne.

"Colonel, I want you to take one of the combat boats out. Copernicus Base is going to launch an empty mail drone as a target for you."

"Sorry, General," Byrne had said from where he was standing, still at attention in front of his commanding officer's large desk, his eyes centered on the gigantic portrait of Emperor Halim IX behind Caldwell, "but the boats haven't been flight tested since shipment up from Earth. None of them are ready for training missions yet, sir."

"They were tested before they left Earth, Colonel."

"But, sir..."

"That's an order, Byrne." Caldwell's voice was shrill, and Byrne could feel the eyes of the visitors from the Court on his back.

"Yes, sir."

With a jar that spoke volumes about the level of training of the men handling the cradle controls, the combat boat was ejected from its turret near the nose of the *Novi Sad*. Byrne's second officer, in the right-hand seat, was Paro Pessem, a colonial from New Ilium, just out of the Academy. Byrne had picked him for the mission because he was the sharpest of the new officers at ship handling, and he had marked him down for rapid promotion despite the fact that he had insufficient funds to advance in the normal manner. In the weapons officer's seat, centered behind Byrne and Pessem, was Captain C'taro, an O-human officer from Haven who had served under Byrne for three years, and one of the best gunners in the fleet. Many of Byrne's fellow officers refused to serve with C'taro, or any other natives of Haven, because of the slight odor of hydrogen sulfide they gave off. But Byrne was glad to trade a bit of nasal discomfort for the knowledge that his gunnery officer had the highest score in kill-torp shooting in the fleet.

Smoothly feeding power into the gravitic drive nodes, Byrne dropped the boat down out of the *Novi Sad's* orbit, down towards the moon's surface, quickly picking up the beacon of Coper-nicus Base on the display panel in front of him.

"We have a redline event on engine two," Pessem shouted. Then the ship spun crazily, and the grav field began to pulse between zero and plus-five, and Byrne's head banged solidly against the colestat hanging down in front of his position ready for a navigation check, and for long, crucial moments he lost consciousness.

Their landing, in the heart of the Lunar Appenines, was almost soft. The ship was no-thing but crumpled wreckage after the dust had settled, but at least they hadn't left a new crater on the moon when they came down. And, in a spaceship, any crash that didn't leave a crater had to be counted as a good landing.

Dazed, Byrne shook his head, trying to clear his vision, and a burst of red exploded in his mind as wave after wave of pain raced through his body. Fighting back the agony and the blackness that threatened to overwhelm him, he held his head perfectly still, and slowly his vision began to clear, the white blur in front of his eyes slowly becoming the helmet of his pressure suit, still hanging on the bracket in front of his couch. But now it was hanging at an odd angle, and Byrne realized that the ship was down on its side and the internal grav field was off.

The gimbals in Byrne's seat had evidently come unlocked during the crash, and the seat had swung enough to partially compensate for the unnatural angle of the control room. He turned to look at Pessem, whose seat was still locked, Pessem still strapped to it as if to a vertical wall.

And when Byrne looked at his young second officer, he knew, from the angle the man's head was hanging, that there was nothing he could do for him. He heard a moan behind him, and turned to look at C'taro.

The gunner was hanging against his straps, but he seemed to be at least partially conscious, his large,

protuberant eyes glazed and unfocused, yellowish-red blood running around the fine tendrils that surrounded his mouth, his four hands twitching slightly.

"Hang on," Byrne called back to him, unsnapping the complex of belts holding him to his couch, then unplugging the unused emergency oxygen umbilical. "I'll be with you in a minute. Just hang in there." Byrne tried to lift himself off his couch, but again the waves of pain lashed through his body. Slowly, grimacing, he levered himself off the couch and down onto the wall that was now a floor, taking stock of his injuries.

His right leg was broken, along with several ribs, judging from the way his chest felt every time he took a breath. His entire back was an agony of fire, and his neck felt as though it had just spent a couple of hours at the wrong end of the Imperial Hangman's rope.

Because of the angle at which the ship had come down, Byrne had to crawl over the communication panel to get to the gunner, and he did so as gently as possible, dragging his broken leg along the edge of the panel. He almost screamed from pain as a toggle switch caught on the fabric of his suit, pulling on the leg and grating the broken ends of the bone together. But, painful though it was, he doubled back and gently dis-engaged himself from the switch, afraid to pull too hard on it for fear it would further damage the radio equipment. He had only the roughest idea of where they had come down, and he didn't know how good a fix Copernicus Base had gotten on them. But he knew that eventually he was going to need radio communications if they were going to get out of there alive.

Byrne reached the gunner's couch just moments too late. He was releasing the gimbal locks on the couch to let it swing upright when the O-human shuddered, a froth of bright pink blood spewing from his mouth. Then he was dead. Byrne looked at him for a moment, then shook his head and began to crawl away from the couch, back towards the dead communications panel.

The primary communications channel was obviously cut. Otherwise there would have been a roar of questions coming over the control panel speakers. Byrne switched on the emergency backup, at the same time releasing the lock on the crash locator and beacon and flicking the red toggle underneath. He heard a low hum from the speakers as power flooded into the backup system, but that was all. No voices issued from the gray metal grills over the pilot's couches. Mentally, Byrne reviewed the present attitude of the ship, then the locations of the various communications antennae. They were all under the ship, and he was sure they had either been ripped completely off or crushed in the landing. There was only one mast on the upright side of the ship, and although it wasn't a primary communications antenna, it was one that Byrne thought would, after a fashion, work.

As he quickly ripped the paneling from the front of the communications console, Byrne discovered that, in addition to his other injuries, he also had several broken fingers on his right hand. Using his left, he began unplugging vibration-proof connectors, reconnecting them in new locations. And as the last connection was made, he was rewarded with a sudden crackle of sound from the speakers.

"Easy-nine, do you read? Easy-nine, do you have a copy on this transmission?"

"Easy-nine here, Copernicus Base," Byrne croaked into the microphone, spitting up some blood in the process. "I've got you three-by-five."

"Roger, Easy-nine. We've got you. Is that you, Byrne?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, we have you weak but clear. This is Colonel Carsos." Byrne had served with Carsos the year before, and he knew him to be a good officer, not likely to panic in an emergency situation. "What's your status, Byrne?"

Byrne, slightly in shock, chuckled. His status? Terrible! But that wasn't what they wanted to hear. "We're down, Copernicus Base. But we still have cabin integrity. Second officer and gunner dead."

"How about you, Byrne?" Carsos asked.

"Banged up pretty bad, but I can function."

"We're getting you very weak, Byrne. Your signal is fading in and out badly. Can you switch to your emergency backup?"

"Negative, Copernicus. Both primary and backup antennae are out. I'm feeding you the emergency comm signal through the Bee-three-ten telemetry spike."

"Roger. Your signal's too weak to get a good directional fix on your location. What about your crash locator beacon?"

"The beacon seems to be operational, but if you aren't getting the signal, the antenna for it must be gone, too." While he was speaking, Byrne quickly checked the connectors for the crash locator beacon, hoping that one of them might have jarred loose. "Just before the crash, I saw a small crater with three domes near the center. It looked like the mine head at Wallace, and if it was, I'm someplace just the other side of it. Possible just into the Apennines."

"That checks with our last radar fix on you, Easy-nine. Which ain't too good, buddy."

"I know," Byrne answered slowly. "Can you get anyone to me from the observatory at Archimedes? I can't be more than a couple of hundred kilometers from them."

"Negative, Easy-nine. Their only long-range rover is here, picking up supplies. We'll have to get you out from here, unless you're near a level area where we can put a boat down. There are several jump bugs at Lambert and I'll have them take a shot at it. But if you're back in the hills, they'll never make it, so I wouldn't count on it too much."

"Yeah. Well, I can hook the crash locator beacon into the telemetry spike, but then I won't be able to talk to you."

"That sounds like the hot set-up, Byrne," Carsos said. "How are your consumables?"

"Hang on while I check." Byrne quickly ran his eyes over the readouts on the front panels. He knew he had plenty of oxygen, but there were two other commodities he needed just as much to stay alive. Water, for component and cabin cooling, and power, to keep things running.

"Copernicus, everything looks good. The primary water tanks are still registering full, and both are on the up side of the ship, so I shouldn't have any trouble with them freezing. They'll keep the temperature livable, if not exactly comfortable. And both fuel cells are producing, so even though the engines are out I won't have to touch the batteries for quite a while. I should be able to hold out for at least three weeks."

"It shouldn't take us that long to get to you," Carsos said.

"I sure as hell hope not. But you know as well as I do that getting a rover across here to the Apennines, then however far back into them you might have to come, isn't something you're going to do in the next eight hours. Probably not even in the next eight days."

"Roger that, Easy-nine. You didn't exactly pick the best place on the moon to crash. But we'll be cooking."

"You'd better be, Copernicus Base," Byrne said, "or I'll be freezing. It's only ten days 'til nightfall." He knew that his chances of surviving the two-week-long lunar night were next to non-existent. "I'm switching the crash locator beacon to the Bee-three-ten now. I'll come back on the circuit for an update in one hour."

"Roger, Easy-nine. Hang in there, Byrne. We're on our way."

It took the rescue party nine full days to reach the crash site. Nine days of agony for Byrne. Agony that could be alleviated only for short periods by the pain medication he found in the emergency kit. Nine days of laying still in a cramped cabin, six feet in diameter and four-teen feet long, with two dead men, one T- and one O-human. One of whom had been a shipmate and friend for a long time. Staring at them because there was no place else to look, while their bodies began to decompose and stink in the humid, ever-warmer atmosphere of the cabin. Nine days that snapped something in Byrne's mind.

Byrne spent three long months in the base hospital at Copernicus after the rescue. Three months of slowly healing physical damage, and slower healing psychic damage, his every hour of sleep broken by nightmares of crashing ships and rotting corpses. Finally, though, he was discharged, fit for duty, and he reported back to his post aboard the *Novi Sad*, now in a parking orbit around Earth awaiting orders for her first cruise.

"Colonel William Byrne, reporting as ordered, sir." Byrne stood stiffly at attention in front of the desk of General Caldwell, trying to repress the flood of hate that filled his mind and body when he saw the slightly plump officer shuffling papers from one basket to another, serving out his time in command of the combat forces aboard the *Novi Sad* before returning to the politics of the Court and his probable eventual peerage.

"Ah, Byrne. Glad to see you back from your little adventure. There's a lot of work waiting for you. At ease, man. At ease." Caldwell sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette, completely at ease, a slight smirk on his face.

Something snapped in Byrne's mind, a flood-gate opened that he had held firmly closed since his first days in the hospital. In a single quick and sure movement he rounded Caldwell's desk, reached down and grabbed the lapels of the general's jacket, jerking him to his feet. "You bastard!" Byrne said simply, then he smashed one fist into the general's face, satisfaction flooding into him as he felt Caldwell's nose mash flat, blood spurting out around the sides of his fist.

Caldwell tried to stumble back away from Byrne, but the younger officer still held him by the jacket with one hand. Byrne's fist shot out again, thudding into the general's temple, and the senior officer crumpled to his knees, unable to support himself even with Byrne's clenched hand still holding tight to his lapel.

"Send us out on a mission in an untested ship just to amuse your Court friends," Byrne grunted, whipping his hand around in a hard slap across Caldwell's face. "Kill two good men to prove what a hot-shot line officer you are now," he said through clenched teeth as his hand flashed back the other way, splitting the

general's lips open. "I should kill you, you son of a bitch!"

Caldwell groveled on his knees, his lips pouring blood down the front of his uniform, his nose mashed flat, both eyes rapidly swelling closed. Byrne looked down at him, and slowly the red haze faded from his mind and he stood there, trembling with reaction to his outburst, the consequences of what he had done slowly penetrating his mind. With a grimace of distaste he released his grip on the general's jacket, then turned and walked out of the room. He went straight to his quarters, lying down on his bunk and staring at the ceiling, waiting for the arrest orders he was sure would be on their way as soon as Caldwell could round up a Marine guard.

Much to Byrne's growing concern and anxiety, it took two full days before the orders he had been expecting came. Two days before he was called before Admiral MacMillan, captain of the *Novi Sad*. He found MacMillan and Caldwell waiting for him, as well as an armed Marine guard, when he arrived on board.

"You have a choice, Byrne," MacMillan told him, her voice as frosty as the frozen green ice of her eyes. "A general court martial for striking your commanding officer, or your immediate resignation from the service."

"Resignation?" Byrne blurted out, surprised at the unexpected turn of events. Surprised at being offered a choice of actions.

"For the good of the service," the admiral answered, looking down at some papers, unwilling to meet Byrne's eyes.

"For the good of General Caldwell, you mean," Byrne said, suddenly understanding what was going on. "If I opt for a court martial, the reasons why I acted as I did would be sure to come out. Which would put a blot on the general's record and ruin his image at Court."

MacMillan looked up at him sharply, and now there was fire in those green eyes. Byrne couldn't help thinking that once she must have been an outstandingly beautiful woman, her green eyes and milky complexion hinting that once her iron-gray hair had been fiery red. He wondered if her present rank came because of her beauty, as a favor from the Court, or from her ability to command a capital ship.

"Whatever the reasons," she said coldly, "your commanding officer has seen fit to give you a choice in the matter, Colonel. One that I would not offer, were you an officer under my direct command."

"I assume," Byrne said slowly, "that you will 'stat headquarters requesting that my resignation be accepted at once?"

"As soon as you write it up, Colonel."

It had been over as simply as that. Five years of service to the Imperium ended in less than an hour. Three hours after his resignation had been approved, Byrne, now dressed in civilian clothes, had been on a special shuttle flight from the *Novi Sad* down to Earth.

The big Imperial field outside Hyderabad was near the nightline when the shuttle landed, and Byrne had dinner in a little Sirian restaurant on a side street just outside the main gate. In a drugstore he picked up a few essentials to replace those packed away in his luggage, which he hadn't bothered to pick up after

leaving the shuttle. Luggage filled with uniforms, books of regulations, and other accouterments of a military life he was through with. By 2100 local time he had checked into a small hotel patronized by laborers from the base, where there was little chance of running into anyone who knew him, and by 2200 he had fallen into a shallow sleep, filled with those same recurring nightmares of crashing ships and rotting corpses that had haunted his every night since the crash in the Lunar Apennines.

In the morning Byrne caught a PaxAir flight to Denver, where he purchased a cheap suitcase, some shirts, and an off-the-rack worksuit, after which he registered at an out-of-the-way hotel not far from the big commercial spacefield. For a week he scoured the shipping line offices and the tramps of half a hundred worlds in port on Earth for cargo, interviewing masters and mates, line captains and port stewards for a job, but none were to be had. To secure even the lowliest position aboard a zero-space ship, he had to belong to the Spaceman's Guild, and even with his savings from five years of service he could not afford the initiation fee. Finally, in desperation, he secured an appointment with the secretary of the Guild, hoping for a waiver of the fee because of his training and experience.

"William Byrne to see you, sir," the girl had said as she ushered him into the office of the secretary of the Spaceman's Guild, after a three-hour wait in an anteroom.

In contrast to the Court-appointed flunkies Byrne had been forced to deal with in the service, Calto Webb looked like a man who was competent in his job. Tall, with a deep tan on his elongated face, Webb looked up at Byrne with gray-blue eyes holding a hint of arctic cold. Eyes which told Byrne nothing of how the man would react to his request for a waiver.

"Mr. Byrne," Webb said, rising from behind his desk and reaching forward to shake hands. His grip was firm, his handshake brisk. "Please sit down."

Byrne slid an antique-looking chair slightly closer to the desk, then sat down in it, slouching slightly, consciously *not* sitting at attention, with his legs out in front of him, feet resting against the lower edge of the desk. Webb glanced down at some papers in front of him, then looked up, and the two men stared at each other for a moment, sizing each other up, each basically liking what he saw in the other. "I've read your application," Webb said finally. He waited for an answer, but Byrne just sat there, looking at him.

"And I'm afraid I have some bad news," Webb said after several seconds of silence.

"You can't waive the fees," Byrne said, a statement rather than a question.

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"How about extended payment of them, then? Say, half now and half at the end of my first trip?"

"Sorry, but even if you had the full fee in cash, I couldn't accept you into the Guild."

"What? Why the hell not?" Byrne exploded.

"Are the reasons really that important?"

"You're damn right they are!"

"Well, I'm afraid that what it boils down to is that you have made some enemies. Influential enemies."

"Enemies at Court, you mean."

"Exactly." Webb grimaced with distaste. "As much as I'd wish it otherwise, I'm afraid the Guild cannot operate without Imperial approval. And the word has come down that if we were to accept you into the Guild, some influential people at Court would be *very* unhappy."

"I didn't think I was that important," Byrne said bitterly. "Or Caldwell either, for that matter."

"I don't know who Caldwell is, but you don't have to be important," Webb said. "Just on the *out* list of someone who *is* important. But in your case, you are important, in a way. Very important."

"What do you mean?"

"Your father. So long as Myriad is rich, and not a member of the Imperium, your family, yourself included, is going to be unpopular with the Court."

"That's ridiculous!" Byrne said. "I haven't even seen my father, or any other member of my family, in five years. I'm not even a citizen of Myriad any more."

"But you're still your father's son, and potentially the Citizen of Myriad. Should something unfortunate happen to your brother, that is."

"Unlikely."

"Be that as it may, so long as Myriad is rich, the Empire will want it. And, as we both know, those very riches are what keeps Myriad strong enough to stay out of the Empire. And so long as that situation holds, there are people at Court who will make their displeasure known to anyone who thinks of hiring you as a spaceman. Or as anything else."

"That doesn't leave me much choice except to return to Myriad, then."

"That's entirely up to you, of course. However, if I might make one suggestion?"

Byrne nodded, already rising to his feet.

"Not all ships in space are crewed by members of the Guild, although all who port here must carry Guild crewmen. And not all captains demand documentation of ability."

"I'm sorry," Byrne said, settling back into his chair. "I'm not sure I understand."

"You might find it easier to get a berth in one of the outsystems. And easier still if you didn't let your future employer know who you are, or your background."

"I see. Well, thank you very much for your assistance, sir."

"Sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

"Yeah."

Byrne had a few drinks at a dive near the Spaceman's Guild tower, and he was barely started on his second one before he made up his mind to accept Webb's advice. He had no desire to return to Myriad, and there was no-thing for him on Earth or any of the nearer systems of the Imperium. Which left only the

frontier worlds for him, out where the wave of T-human expansion was meeting and interacting with the other spacefaring races of the galaxy.

An hour later, Byrne had bought one-way passage on a passenger and cargo ship headed out-ward.

Chapter Two

The planet was a healthy one, with a native race that had barely graduated into the Iron Age before the first visitors arrived from space. Within three hundred years, the T- and O-human population of Cassandra had equaled the native, both from a high birth rate and immigration from other, more crowded worlds closer to the Imperial center. And, thanks to its location near the edge of the small globular cluster M-46, which contained a number of new colonies, Cassandra quickly became a shipping and ship manufacturing center. It was there, six thousand light years from the Imperial Court, that Byrne hoped to find a new life for himself.

Ten days after landing on Cassandra, Byrne found himself in an outlying section of the main spacefield, looking up at the squat hull of a small freighter, almost lost between the towering globes of two Pseudo-bug slavers in port to take on supplies before heading in again toward the galactic center. The once highly polished sides of the ship were badly pocked from light-speed collisions with interstellar dust, and when Byrne approached the open lock he got a whiff of smells that told him of the many cargoes the old ship had carried, from farm machinery to farm animals, and probably even an occasional load of colonists too poor to afford transportation on the giant ships that specialized in founding and servicing new colonies.

Byrne stepped into the lock, which was standing open, and after looking around to see if there was anyone on watch he punched the comm button for the bridge.

"Yeah? Who's there and what do you want?" The voice spoke in blurry Ulishi, and Byrne had the feeling that the blurriness wasn't from a malfunction in the comm circuit. It sounded more like the voice on the other end of the comm line had been drinking, and for quite a while.

"William Byrne, and I want a job."

"Are you T-human, and have you ever been in space before?"

"Yes on both questions."

"Then you've got a job—sight unseen, aboard the fast and commodious freighter *Kassala*. Come on up."

Byrne rode the lift toward the bridge, half-way up the ship's three-hundred-foot length. A small corridor connected the lift shaft and the bridge, and as he walked along he noticed an open door with light spilling out into the hallway, highlighting the blistered paint on the walls and accumulations of dirt where the walls and floor met. The light was spilling from the captain's flight cabin, and it was there he found the master of the *Kassala*.

A decrepit military acceleration couch was bolted to the floor near one wall, and in it a large man lay at ease. From a hollow recess in the right hand arm that had once held a damage control readout a bottle protruded, and in the man's hand was a glass filled with a milky, fuming liquid that Byrne supposed was maha, the slightly narcotic drink that had become so popular after its introduction into T-human space by

the Permal fifty years before.

The man was long, raw-boned and powerful-looking, between fifty and sixty standard years of age, with a bleak, weather-beaten face and quick, perceiving eyes rather close to a high nose that reminded Byrne of the beak of a predatory bird.

"I was wrong. I'm afraid you won't do, mister."

"Why?"

"Because you don't look like a man who should be seeking service aboard the *Kassala*."

"But I am."

"Obviously. Had much experience?"

"Some."

"Ex-military man?"

Byrne hesitated for a moment. He hadn't intended telling anyone about his prior service in the Imperial Terran Outforces, or his reason for no longer being in that service.

"Never mind," the captain said before Byrne could make up his mind what to say. "I can tell you're a saluting Johnny just by the way you're standing there. Any experience in ship handling?"

"Yes."

"How about navigation? Zero and norm space?"

"I can handle both. What kind of computers do you have?"

"General Products Navmasters."

"I can work them." Privately, Byrne added an *hope* to that statement. G.P. Navmasters had been obsolete a hundred years before he had been born, and he had never even seen one. But he handled computers a hundred times more sophisticated, and he was sure he could dope out their operation before he was called on to actually demonstrate his skills.

"Do you speak any O-human languages?"

"Permal, Pseudo-bug and Vogtish well enough to understand and be understood."

"Good enough. You still look too civilized, but I need a second navigator and a hand that speaks some of the outworld languages. We're bound for the far side of the cluster, and there aren't many T-human colonies there. But there's money to be made and goods to be traded."

"I suppose you're wondering why I want to ship with you?" Byrne asked.

"No, I never wonder about a man's past. Only about how he does aboard my ship. If you want to ship without papers, that's your business."

"Thanks; I get the berth, then?"

"Second navigator and purser, if you can handle it. Two thousand Shields a month, payable at the end of the cruise. You can draw against it if you need ready cash. Get your duffle aboard right away. Zu'matra, my second officer, is signing a crew now. My name is Hunza, and I'm a bad man to cross. Keep that in mind, and we'll get along fine."

"Yes, we'll get along fine, Captain Hunza," Byrne said. "But I can be a pretty bad person when someone gets on my back, too."

Hunza smiled a thin smile. "You do your duty, mister, and we won't have to find out who's baddest. Zu'matra is a good ship's officer, but he couldn't find the surface from a hundred-mile orbit. I'll need your navigation abilities if I should get sick, or anything like that. Have a drink?"

"I'd love to, sir. But not with you. I'm a ship's officer now, not a visitor aboard."

"Oh, God! A little tin soldier," Hunza said with a theatrical groan. "Okay, pick up your stuff and get in inboard. We're lifting at 1900 local."

Byrne picked up his gear from the hotel, then, in an outfitting store just outside the field, he bought two new spacesuit liners, the all-purpose coverall that was normal spacewear, two sets of dungarees, and looked at, but then rejected, a 2-mm. Remington tracer. Half an hour later he met Zu'matra, a husky, middle-aged native of Rolf's World, Hunza, and four O-human ordinary spacemen Byrne wouldn't have let clean the outside of a ship, much less serve inboard. They all signed the ship's articles at the port captain's office, then went straight to the ship. Zu'matra immediately headed for the engine room, while Byrne settled into the second officer's vacant couch in the control room.

Three hours later, in high orbit around Cassandra, Hunza fed the power of the gravitic engines into the drive nodes, and at steadily increasing speed the *Kassala* headed outsystem, toward the cluster.

The *Kassala* was neither clean nor efficient, having been in space too many years without the services of an overhaul dock. Her engines showed a marked tendency to drift off frequency, lessening acceleration and, unchecked, eventually threatening an explosion that would destroy the *Kassala* and everything within a million miles of her. Her air purifiers couldn't cope with the smell of old cargoes and decay that filled her, and when Byrne visited the galley for some neocaf he even found cockroaches aboard, those Terran insects that had advanced across the galaxy in an expanding wave nearly matching the advance of human society.

Byrne learned from Zu'matra that, rather than carry a regular third officer, Hunza stood a watch himself, he and Zu'matra splitting the duty into six-hour shifts. The four ordinary spacemen were divided into two watches, one man in the control room and the other in the engine room at all times. They weren't actually qualified to do anything in either place, other than routine instrument watching, but should an emergency arise, they could spot it and put in a call for the off-duty officer to assist the watch officer.

Although from Rolf's, Zu'matra spoke excellent standard Imperium English with only the faintest bit of an accent. He was big even for his race, standing over two meters tall from his horned feet to the limp

fleshy crest that crowned his head. His skin was a dusty gray-green, completely hairless, and his hard, somber face was highlighted by twin egg-shaped pale red eyes. He questioned Byrne on his knowledge of space, and did not seem surprised at the short-ness and evasiveness of the answers he got.

"Whatever your experience, mister," Zu'matra told Byrne, "it won't take you long to learn how we operate here on the *Kassala*. Within a week you'll be standing a watch alone in control, and we'll each have six on and twelve off, instead of six and six. That's probably what Hunza had in mind when he hired you on, al-though it's hard telling what he has in mind at any given time. He may not be the smartest man in space, but he can see a hole in a ladder. And now a tip for you. Be cheerful and willing when he sends for you. Answer on the bounce, and keep out of his way when you aren't on duty. And for the Spirit's sake, watch your mouth around him. He's got a drinking problem, on and off duty, and one hell of a temper when he's got a skinful."

"There's not much he can do but yell at me, and that I'm used to," Byrne said with a smile.

"Like hell there isn't. He can kick the hell out of you if you cross him. I've seen him do it before. Don't let his age fool you. He's tough."

"He might try. But he might also find out that when I'm kicked, I kick back."

"Well, just take it easy, and maybe the situa-tion won't come up," Zu'matra warned. "And don't forget that this ship isn't Empire registered. Her home port is Karlooma, and while Karlooma may have some spaceways laws, I've never heard of anybody paying any attention to them. Hunza is the law aboard the *Kassala*. If he stuffed you out the lock in zero-space, nothing would ever come of it."

For a moment Byrne's expression was grim, then, for the first time in weeks, he truly began to relax. He felt, all of a sudden, free, responsible to no one. After five years of military discipline it was a pleasant change to be aboard the *Kassala*, a free man. For him life had done a complete about-face, and he felt he was going to enjoy it to the fullest, Hunza's temper and drinking problem notwithstanding. He laughed, and Zu'matra looked at him with a faint gleam of humor in his somber red eyes.

From the corridor outside, Hunza roared: "Hey, laughing boy. See anything about this ship that might improve her performance?"

"Yes, sir, I think I do," Byrne answered, his laugh cutting off, but the merriment remain-ing in his eyes as he looked at Zu'matra. "The engines are drifting off frequency. The secondary stages need retuning before they drift so far off the engines overload and blow."

"Can you handle it?"

"With a little help from Zu'matra."

"Then get your ass in gear and take care of it. You aren't getting a free ride aboard this ship."

Zu'matra, under Byrne's direction, kept the gravitic engines on frequency by hand while Byrne retuned the secondary stages. He found that the stage crystals were too burned to take a permanent resetting, but when he finished realigning them, the engines were running much truer than when he had started, and he was sure that the drift would need to be corrected only every couple of ship days now, instead of hourly. After cleaning up, he and Zu'matra had dinner. Hunza had already dined alone and was on watch. After a simple but well-cooked meal from the ship's autochef, steak and potatoes for Byrne and jellied Klathi hoof for Zu'matra, the O-human invited Byrne to his cabin for a couple of games of Tangent, which took

them to midnight, time for Zu'matra to relieve Hunza on the bridge. Byrne accompanied him up to the control deck.

"How'd he do, mister?" Hunza asked his second officer while ignoring Byrne's presence in the control room.

"He'll do," Zu'matra replied, quickly checking the engine performance instruments. To Byrne he murmured in English, "He's been drinking again. Watch it."

"He'd better do, or I'll have him scrubbing the outside of the ship in zero-space. Which might take some of the Imperial snottiness out of him." Hunza turned to leave the control deck, and as he was about to step over the lower seal of the integrity door, Byrne grabbed him and pulled him back into the room.

"Let's understand each other, Captain Hunza," Byrne said in soft Ulishi. "All my life I've considered myself a gentleman, and I've always insisted that other men treat me as one. I fully understand that you're the law aboard this ship. However, whether in the cluster, in Empire space, or anywhere else, the powers of a master are limited by what the men under him will accept. And I consent to serve aboard the *Kassala*, under your command. But I do not consent to be your slave, or to take any abuse from you. I'm a navigator and purser, not an ordinary space-man. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Sure," Hunza replied pleasantly. Then, without warning, he swung a roundhouse blow at Byrne's jaw.

Byrne ducked under the swing and drove a hard right into Hunza's ribs, causing him to double up and grunt with pain. For an instant his guard was down, and Byrne snapped a left and right to the captain's defenseless chin, and Hunza went down, unconscious.

"That's mutiny," Zu'matra said in an un-emotional tone.

"We're a long way from Karlooma, Mr. Zu'matra. And like you said, nobody pays much attention to their space laws, anyway."

"Hunza will kill you when he comes a-round."

"I doubt it. He's got a temper, but I think what just happened will teach him to hold it a little tighter in check. I learned a long time ago that the best defense is a swift attack, followed through. The best strategy is to grab the initiative and keep it. Nor should the value of a surprise attack ever be underestimated. He didn't expect me to hit back, simply because nobody has ever hit back at him before. I've taught our captain a little lesson, but I'll continue to obey him as long as he acts like a captain."

"I think you overrate the captain's capacity for rational thought," Zu'matra said. "Take the control seat for a moment." He slipped out of the couch and Byrne settled into his place, quickly checking the nav and engine performance panels, then turning to keep an eye on the unconscious man on the floor. Zu'matra left the control room, but was back a moment later, and strapped prominently to his hip was an old, but efficient-looking Empire military-issue traser.

Only a few minutes later Hunza groaned, then sat up, feeling his jaw. He grinned ruefully at Zu'matra, his eyes avoiding Byrne. "I picked us a tiger, didn't I?"

"He'll behave himself and do his work, Captain," Zu'matra said. "But he's touchy on social etiquette, and I wish you'd leave him alone, sir. He knows his business, and we need him, remember?"

"I guess I'm getting old," Hunza said, getting slowly to his feet. "Very well, mister," he said to Byrne. "We understand each other now."

"Then the fight's over."

"Not by a damn sight," Hunza yelled in a sudden change of mood. He ducked out of the control room, then was back in seconds with a gun in his hand. Instantly Zu'matra stepped in front of Byrne.

"Kill him and I'll have to kill you, Captain," he warned. "Kill me, and before you can finish me off, he'll kill you. What he did, regulations or no, was justified."

"If I kill him, and you kill me, you'll never get there. You don't know where it's at, or even how to get back to Empire space."

"But neither will you."

"You've been a good officer for an O-human, Zu'matra. And you stand to become a very rich one. Why the sudden interest in a complete stranger?"

"Because ..." Zu'matra started to say something, but then thought better of it. "We need Byrne, and you know why. So why take a chance on screwing things up just to settle a personal grudge?"

"Very well," Hunza said. "But there'll be another day, when we don't need him." And with that he turned and stepped out of the control room, closing the integrity door behind him.

"Thanks," Byrne said.

"You're welcome. And you were right. Someone had to draw the line somewhere, and I'm glad it was you."

"You indicated there was a reason why you need me on the ship. I mean, over and above my usefulness as a spare navigator."

"Yeah. I'll tell you about it later."

Byrne realized that he wasn't going to get anything else out of Zu'matra right then, and the two men made only light, inconsequential conversation for the rest of the watch. At 0600 the captain came back into the control room and without saying a word to Byrne he relieved Zu'matra. The two of them went below, to Zu'matra's quarters, where he pulled out a bottle of grain alcohol and poured two glasses almost full, adding a taste of fruit juice to Byrne's and some unidentified powder to his.

"Who are you?" Zu'matra demanded suddenly.

"Does it matter?"

"Not really. But whoever you are, what you've *been* might matter very much to our future. And it appears that you're a man who's mighty anxious to lose himself. And the why of that might well affect the future—my future."

"I'm not wanted for anything, if that's what you're worried about. Let's just say that I wanted to get out of the Empire for a while, and this seemed like a good way to do it."

"Well, the cluster is about as far as you're going to get out of the Empire aboard any commercial ship. So, if I were you, I'd think about jumping a ship at Kadesh when we ground there next week. You can lose yourself quite thorough-ly there, for as long as you like. And you stand a lot better chance of staying alive than if you remain on the *Kassala*."

"Sorry," Byrne said, "but that just won't work. I spent nearly all the money I had just getting to Cassandra, and if I jumped ship on Kadesh as you suggest I'd be on the beach, flat broke. And I can't send for money from the Empire, or even contact anyone at home. I've no friends left back there, and, to all intents and purposes, I'm dead."

"In that case," Zu'matra asked with a wolf-ish grin, "you won't mind dying again, will you?"

"I've lived near death for a long time with-out getting caught."

"Well, I'll give you what help I can, but there are a lot of nasty ways to die in space, and I can't be on watch with you all the time."

"Then I'll just have to take my chances."

"Okay, but I still think you'd be smart to jump ship on Kadesh. It may take a little while, but eventually you'd be able to find another berth there. The cluster's far enough out to at-tract all sorts of people on the run from the Empire, for one reason or another, and a lot of them come out as ordinary spacemen, then jump ship at one of the new colonies like Kadesh."

"To do that I'd have to abandon my wages. Payoff isn't until we get back to Cassandra, according to Hunza."

"That's right. But it might be better for you to be broke than broken. And we're heading out to the other side of the cluster. Virtually unexplored territory."

"That's fine with me," Byrne said, taking a big sip from his drink. "I've always had an urge to see new worlds."

"Well, I'm afraid you won't see too many aboard the *Kassala*."

"Why not? I thought this was a trading trip."

"That's what the clearance papers say, but all the trading we're going to be doing is in one place."

"Seems like there wouldn't be much money in that, unless we're carrying, illegal weapons or something of that sort."

"Nope. As a matter of fact, we aren't carry-ing much of anything in the hold."

"I think," Byrne said, putting his glass down on a table and leaning forward slightly in his chair, "that this is a good time to let me in on whatever the mystery is about the *Kassala*."

"Yeah, I guess maybe it is," Zu'matra said. "What do you know about the Masters?"

"The what?"

"You heard me. The Masters. You must have heard something about them."

"Of course I have. I heard about them at my mother's knee, as the old saying goes. They're a fairy tale. Something to scare children with."

"But they're also real. Or at least they were."

"Nonsense."

"We've found proof." Zu'matra's voice was calm, and when Byrne looked at him he saw that Zu'matra believed what he was saying was the truth.

"What kind of proof?"

"A ship. Or at least some bits and pieces from a ship, and we were told that the ship the pieces came from is still there, in one piece."

Byrne took another swallow from his drink, a big one, and reviewed what he had heard about the supposed Masters. The legends, the whispered reports, the fanciful tales in the shock magazines. A race from somewhere in toward the galactic center, as far ahead of man as man was ahead of his neanderthal ancestors. Most of the tales said the Masters had died as a race many millions of years before, but every time a ship was reported missing out on the fringes of explored space someone was sure to blame it on a run-in with a Master ship.

"If they actually exist, how come we haven't come into contact with them?" Byrne asked.

"How should I know? Maybe they really did die out millions of years ago. Or maybe we've just never penetrated into their sphere of influence. Yet."

"How do you know these 'bits and pieces,' as you call them, didn't just come from a ship built by some O-human race we haven't come into contact with? What makes you so sure they're from a Master ship?"

"I'll show you." Zu'matra went over to a cabinet and removed a small box. "Look at this," he said, handing Byrne a small object.

Byrne looked it over carefully, finding it totally unfamiliar. It was box shaped, about three by three by ten centimeters in size. There was a small knob on one surface with a pointer and twelve divisions, and an inset window just ahead of the divisions with strange markings showing through the transparency. Beneath the knob was a small button inset into the surface. On the opposite face was a strip of some milky translucent substance set so perfectly into the surface of the box that even with his fingernail Byrne couldn't detect the dividing line.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," Zu'matra answered. "But I know what it does. Press the button while you're holding the bottom of it against some-thing, and it cuts into whatever you're holding it against. The knob and pointer are gross set-tings, and when the button is held halfway down the figures in the window advance. Sort of a vernier setting."

"What's so special about that?" Byrne asked. "Any laser will do the same."

"But this does a slightly better job. The minimum depth setting seems to be about two molecules into whatever you're going to cut. And the maximum about half a millimeter. And it cuts anything, in a perfect plane. Even crystals, across the natural shear plane. I tried it on an old frequency control crystal. And another thing," he said as Byrne started to say something. "The cuts it makes are so near perfect, they may be perfect for all I know, that if you cut two pieces of the same material, then slap them together, there is no way I've been able to find to discover where the two pieces were joined. You ever hear of a laser cutter, or any other kind of cutter, that could do something like that, in one cut?"

"No," Byrne said slowly, "I can't say I have. What other things did you find?"

"Nothing else I've been able to figure out yet. Instruments with unknown functions, something that looks like a memory cube. But I haven't figured out any way to key it yet."

"Well, maybe you're right, and I'm wrong. Maybe there are Masters out there somewhere. Where did you pick up these things?"

"Inner planet of a two-planet F-5 over on the far side of the cluster. I can't give you a location closer than that. Hunza kept the location to himself, and I couldn't read the nav panels. As far as we know, though, we're the only T-human ship to visit the place. Or O-human, for that matter. Except for one, that is."

"That Master ship," Byrne said.

"Right—in a way. We stopped there almost a year ago, hoping that the natives would have something to trace. It hadn't been a good cruise for the old *Kassala*, and one more stop wouldn't have made much difference in the amount of red ink on the books, or the empty spaces in the hold."

"What's the tech level of the natives?"

"Pretty primitive. A tribal society, and no world-wide communications. They're O-humans, but just barely. We even saw some stone knives in use. Just as a guess I'd say they evolved from a reptile form, although it's hard to be sure, now. No scales or anything, but the general impression is reptilian. Of course, I'm no exo-biologist."

"And you got the Master gadgets off the natives?"

"Sort of. We had been down a couple of days, trying to work out some sort of mutually understandable language with the natives, when, out of a clear blue sky, this T-human woman shows up. We thought we were the first humans to visit the place, and her presence was quite a shock."

"I can imagine," Byrne said. "Who was she?"

"We never found out. She didn't understand English, Ulishi or Skanda, the only languages Hunza and I have between us. And we couldn't get her aboard the *Kassala*. After the natives had brought us the Master instruments, I think Hunza would have grabbed the woman if he could, hoping that she would lead him to the ship. But she must have sensed what he had in mind, because she would come around the ship only with a bunch of natives, who seemed to have adopted her. Never alone, and never inside the ship."

"So who told you there was a Master ship on the planet?"

"One of the natives we eventually reached a working agreement with. And he told us the woman had come in it, with an older man who had died some years—their local years—previously. As close as we can figure, about fifteen standard years ago."

"You think she's a Master?" Byrne asked.

"No, I'm pretty sure she's as T-human as you are. But it appears she did come on a Master ship, with someone else. And I have to assume she knows where the ship is. We could never get an answer to that question out of the natives. They didn't say they didn't know—they just wouldn't answer any questions about that one subject."

"So what are your plans now?"

"Pick up the woman, find the ship, and bring them both back to Empire space. We should be able to get a bundle for the ship, and I think Hunza wants the woman for himself. You should know by now what sort of man he is. He wants what he wants when he wants it, and he'll get what he wants if he has to kill for it. And I'm afraid you might object to him getting what he wants, and a funeral would result. I can't see Hunza getting killed. Aside from the potential profits I might lose from the sale of the ship, I own an interest in the *Kassala*, and I don't want to lose it. So you take my advice and jump ship on Kadesh."

"Again, I'm afraid I can't do that. One thing I don't understand, though. If you're going after the Master ship, why did Hunza sign me on in the first place?"

"I'm not sure, but there are a couple of possible reasons," Zu'matra said. "One of which was that he was probably thinking that with you on board he could safely get rid of me, and save a fifty-percent cut of whatever he can get for that ship. He'd have to pay you something, but nowhere near that much. Now he's probably wishing he had left you back on Cassandra, though. With you on board, able to navigate, I don't need him once we've found the ship. You can get us back to the Empire, while I can't. Which is another reason he would want to get rid of you. As long as you're aboard, he can't trust me."

"If I were Hunza," Byrne said, "I wouldn't trust anyone. He has a positive knack for making enemies."

"Yeah. Well, as I said, watch yourself, and try to stay alive at least to Kadesh. And, if you've got any sense, you won't be aboard when the *Kassala* lifts."

Chapter Three

As the *Kassala* penetrated the cluster, Hunza pushed her engines to the maximum, and with every day that passed his temper became worse. He didn't, however, bother Byrne anymore, nor did he even speak irritably to his second officer, Zu'matra. Byrne had a feeling, though, that because of the captain's repression of his true feelings the men he had shipped aboard at Cassandra as ordinary spacemen were coming for a double share of grief.

Hunza gradually ceased drinking, and as the process proceeded he went from ignoring Byrne completely to speaking to him occasionally, albeit never disrespectfully. Byrne met the captain's half-friendly advances respectfully and courteously and was quick and willing about the work assigned to him, which long included a regular shift standing a regular watch with Zu'matra on the control deck.

As a matter of fact, Byrne was enjoying his new form of existence. Since his eighteenth birthday and subsequent departure from Myriad, discipline had, in a manner of speaking, been ground into his bones. He had known no other precept save that of the Imperial service. That if a job was to be done at all it must be done as well as it could be done. Although fit, he had never worked, in a laboring sense. Athletics had kept him in excellent physical condition, and he continued a program of strenuous exercise each day after he came off watch, piling into his berth pleurably fatigued, sleeping more soundly than he had since childhood, and with none of the nightmares that had plagued him constantly since his crash on Earth's moon. The life was new to him, and he felt that he was just beginning to live, that he had left convention behind when he signed aboard the *Kassala*. If he did not choose to be a gentleman, nobody would force that state upon him, because nobody cared what he was or what he would be, provided he did his work aboard ship in a proper manner.

Byrne, even during his years of service to the Imperium, had always regarded himself as a free citizen of Myriad, even though he often denied his homeland, protesting that the Imperium had his only loyalty. But now, the ties to both places cut, he realized that he had never really tasted freedom. He had always been re-sponsible to something or somebody. Now he was responsible only to himself. He was in that state in which his continued existence, or lack of it, would be productive of neither joy nor grief to any human being, no matter what happened to him. It was a condition that usually evoked loneliness in people, but Byrne was a spaceman, a combat pilot, used to being on his own. Space had been his habitat for so long he had ceased to thrill at his mastery over it, but now, with freedom of action added to the freedom of space, he was discovering a new thrill to life. He felt surging within him the spirit of a little boy long-ing for far horizons, for strange new scenes, for new people and new adventures.

The *Kassala's* first week out from Cassandra was spent with Byrne learning the operation of the ship from Zu'matra. The native of Rolf's had been a spaceman his entire adult life, and there was little he didn't know about spaceship and engine operation, with the exception of navigation. He had never stayed on any planet long enough to attend navigation school, and nobody had ever taken the time to teach him while in space. So Byrne taught him. While Hunza was off watch, Byrne showed Zu'matra the basics of computer programming, how to secure a starsight in rational space, how to get a gravitic fix reading in zero-space. He would let Zu'matra feed a problem into the computer, then watch as the O-human reduced the results to get a position and course. Then Byrne would run through the same problem himself to check Zu'matra's answers against his own. And it wasn't long before their answers began checking to five decimal places. Zu'matra was highly intelligent and had a sound grounding in mathematics, and before a week had passed he had enough of the basics of navigation down pat to handle himself under normal circumstances, and perhaps even in an emergency. He wasn't a qualified navigator, but he was getting there.

"I know the worlds of the cluster as well or a little better than any man spacing among them," Zu'matra told Byrne one evening when they were on watch together. "I know damn near every settled world by name, what they want, and what they have to trade. Who to see on each planet to sell or pick up cargo, and who has to be bribed how much to get the cargo off. If I'd known navigation I could have been the master of my own ship a long time ago."

"Well, when I graduate you," Byrne assured him, "you can go for a license as a master. You'll be ready to go before the proper officials when we get back to Cassandra, or any of the Empire planets."

The O-human nodded. "And what, William, are you going to do here in the cluster? It's no place for a man like you. You're too civilized for life out here. I can't see you becoming a dirt farmer on some new colony, scratching out a living and raising snot-nosed cubs. And unless you're willing to divulge a bit more of your past life, no one's ever going to give you command of a ship."

"I guess I'll have to burn that bridge when I come to it, friend."

"Good luck. You'll need it. I suppose you've noticed the change in attitude of our cap-tain," Zu'matra said, changing the subject.

"I have. With pleasure."

"Don't trust him."

"I'm not that crazy. Not yet, anyway. Why do you trust him though?"

"I don't. But he has to trust me. He hasn't been able to kill me, though there have been a couple of times when I think he's tried."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Nothing I could definitely pin on him, no proof I could confront him with or take to court, but..."

"Here on the ship?"

"No. That would be too obvious. And if it didn't work, he knows I'd come after him. And kill him. But there was a fight in a bar back on Cassandra one night that was a little too carefully staged to include me, and before that, someone tried to dump me one night after we made land-fall on Kadesh."

"Why didn't you sign on another ship? You're certainly a good enough officer to get a berth on one of the big commercial ships."

"Because it all started happening after we found those Master artifacts. And I'm not about to leave the *Kassala*, and leave all that money to him. Besides, aboard the *Kassala* I make a pretty good living. A lot better than I could make as second officer on any other ship."

"How?"

"Oh, just a little smuggling here and there. There are a lot of things out here that the Empire doesn't approve of, but that Empire citizens will pay good money for. And a lot of other things that these frontier planets won't allow to be im-ported. I've even dealt with the Pseudo-bug slavers a couple of times, although I can't say I liked it."

"I can't say I blame you there, even if deal-ing with them isn't against the law anymore. The whole idea of what they do to people gives me the shudders. I saw a man once who had been 'rescued' from the Pseudo-bugs."

"What was he like? As bad as the stories I hear?"

"Worse. He was taken off a Pseudo-bug ship that had run into a Fassail raider. He went into a deep depression that even stimulants wouldn't pull him out of. Wouldn't eat, wouldn't talk, wouldn't even go the 'fresher. Just sat in his own mess and stared at a wall. Eventually they tried feeding him through a tube, but every time they turned their backs on him he'd pull the tubes out, then try to kill himself with the needles. Eventu-ally he succeeded. "

"I wonder what it is the Pseudo-bugs do," Zu'matra said, "that makes a man so dependent upon them?"

"I'm not at all sure 'dependent' is the right word. It isn't like they're drugged, or anything like that. It's just that they get something from their slavery to the Pseudo-bugs that they want so badly they'd rather die than go on living without it."

"Personally, I'd rather die first. I'm not made to be anyone's slave, or pet, or whatever it is they are."

"Likewise," Byrne said with a grimace. "But, back to the original subject. I imagine that smuggling out here pays pretty good money, doesn't it?"

"Damned good. I gambled everything on our latest trip, and now I've got close to a hundred thousand Shields saved up, right here on the ship with me."

"That doesn't seem too smart," Byrne said. "Having it here on the ship, that is. What's to keep Hunza from dumping you and taking off with it?"

"Not much. But I didn't want to leave it in an Empire bank back on Cassandra. They ask too many questions about where the money came from, and report it to the government for tax purposes. So I've got it here on the ship, in a case hidden in your cabin. I'll bank it when we get to Kadesh."

"In my cabin?" Byrne asked incredulously. "Why there?"

"Can't think of a safer place for it. Hunza is pretty sure I've got it on board, and I imagine by now he's already searched my cabin pretty thoroughly. I doubt that he'll think of searching yours, though. If he tries to take me out, well, I'll be waiting for him. If he succeeds, you get the money, and I hope you'll do me the favor of getting rid of Hunza for me. If he tries anything and I kill him, I won't get the Master ship, but I'll have my money, and the *Kassala*. There's plenty of time to decide the issue between here and Kadesh."

"Why are you telling me this? What makes you think you can trust *me*?"

"I don't really know. I guess because you're one of the few T-humans I've met that I've really liked." He placed a paw on Byrne's shoulder. "I've rigged a scanner in the control room, in a spot where I don't think Hunza will notice it. With it we can keep an eye out for each other. When it's time for me to relieve him, one of the ordinaries will come and wake me up. And as soon as he leaves I'll wake you, and you can come to my cabin and keep an eye on the scanner. And I'll do the same for you when you get a watch of your own."

"If he tries anything," Byrne said, "I'll do my best to save you, notwithstanding that it would be in my interests to let him kill you. If you die I'm your heir, plus I'd get a cut of the proceeds from the Master ship. And that's a powerful lot of temptation to put in anyone's path."

Zu'matra nodded. "That's understandable," he said simply. "But I trust you."

Zu'matra's next watch in the control room started at 0600 ship's time, and at 0700 Captain Hunza came to the control deck, where Byrne was drilling Zu'matra on feeding line corrections into the computer. They stopped as soon as they heard Hunza coming, and by the time the captain entered the control deck they were sitting in the twin control seats, relaxed, exchanging small talk with no sign that Byrne had been teaching Zu'-matra navigation.

"Well, mister," Hunza said, addressing Zu'matra, "isn't it about time this young fellow took a watch of his own?"

"He can handle it, sir," the second officer said.

"Very well, then, he can relieve you at the controls at 1200, and I'll relieve him at 1800. Is that understood and acceptable, Byrne?"

"Understood, sir. But not acceptable."

"Why?"

"You hired me on as a spare navigator and purser. Neither of which are required to stand a control deck watch. If I'm to take the duties of third officer, I think it would be only fair if I was paid an extra 500 Shields a month."

Hunza glared at Byrne ferociously, then nodded his acquiescence. "He's still a bit fresh, isn't he?" he said to Zu'matra. "Oh, well. One of these days I'll take the starch out of him." And he went below.

"Well, if he's going to try to dump you," Byrne said humorously, "he can't very well do it until you relieve him at midnight. So I think I'll get some sleep."

"It's three weeks before we get to Kadesh, Byrne. And the captain's in no big rush. He'll want to break you in, and probably try to break your will again, before he takes a chance on get-ting rid of me."

"Okay, I'm going to knock off then. Send one of the men after me at 1245, will you?"

"On the button."

Byrne stood his watch on the control deck with one of the ordinary spacemen without incident, and just before 1800 he sent the man below to awaken the captain. Promptly at 1800 Hunza came on deck.

"The man you sent to awaken me has been sent to the crew's quarters to rouse out my watch," he said, leaning over Byrne's shoulder and checking the nav and engine panels. "All right, I'll take over now," he said, and Byrne slipped out of the control seat.

"You have the conn, sir."

"Okay, mister. We don't need all that fancy talk aboard the *Kassala*, though. I see number three node's losing power. Are those damn en-gines drifting off frequency again? I thought you fixed them."

"I don't think it's drift, sir," Byrne said, checking the gauges himself. "They checked out okay last watch. Feels more like a problem with the focusing coils themselves, sir."

"Then you'd better check it out."

"That's an outside job, sir."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Byrne. I have spent a few years on these ships, you know."

"Yes, sir," Byrne said stiffly. "But I've been on watch here for six hours, and I think, considering that we're in zero-space and I won't have any qualified help, that it would be a bit better if I got a little rest before trying to go outside to refocus the coils."

"Very well, Byrne. I'll have Zu'matra rouse you out halfway through his watch. Take care of it then."

"Yes, sir."

After leaving the control room, instead of going straight to his cabin, Byrne took the lift shaft down to the engine room deck. There was an ordinary spaceman on duty in the engine room itself, a Lassali, who Byrne found stretched out on the acceleration couch in front of the main control panel, sound asleep.

"Hey, wake up," Byrne said loudly, shaking the man's shoulder.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, sir. I guess I must have dozed off for a minute."

"Yeah, I noticed. Better get on up to the galley and get yourself some neocaf. I'll keep an eye on the board until you get back."

"Thanks, sir. I'll just be a minute."

As soon as the Lassali spaceman left the control room Byrne got busy removing a panel from the master control console. Inside he quickly traced the circuits that controlled the stasis field, which was used to protect the ship during reentry from zero-space to rational space. Should that field accidentally come on while he was outside the ship, and should he come into contact with it, not even an atom count of the zero-space medium outside the ship would reveal traces of his former existence. He quickly unplugged two vital connections, and had the panel back in place before the spaceman on watch returned with a liter of hot neocaf.

"Care for some, sir?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. I'd better get some rest. And, you'd better do the same. But *after* you go off watch."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that, sir."

"Pod One to control. Comm circuit check."

"Loud and clear," Zu'matra said from the control room. "You're clear to evacuate the lock."

Inside the pod Byrne started to reach for the switches that would seal and evacuate the cargo lock, but then he drew his hand back, staring thoughtfully at the line of spacesuits hanging against the far wall of the room. They weren't normally worn inside a pod, there hardly being enough room for an unencumbered man, but Byrne had a hunch, and he followed it.

"Going to be a slight delay," he told Zu'-matra over the comm circuit. "I want to check something out."

"Okay. Everything going all right down there?"

"Yeah, fine. Just a safety precaution." Byrne unsealed the pod and climbed out, clam-bering into one of the spacesuits and quickly sealing it. Then, awkwardly, he fitted himself back into the pod, locking the hatch.

The pumps quickly sucked the air from the lock, and when the large cargo doors swung open the internal grav field automatically cut off, and Byrne ballooned upward against his belts, which he had left somewhat loose. He quickly tightened them, then with small spurts from the reaction controls he maneuvered the pod out the door, letting it drift out until he was ten meters from the ship, halfway to the invisible capsule of the drive field that was holding the ship in zero-space.

"Okay," Byrne said into his comm unit. "I'm outside. You can close the lock."

"Roger," Zu'matra answered. "Lock closing."

Byrne watched the heavy door swing shut, then he twisted the pod around ninety degrees and headed back toward the stern, toward the gravitic drive nodes. "Heading for the nodes. You'd better cut them off, and make sure the safety switch is locked. I'd hate to have them come on while I'm working on them."

"They're already off," Zu'matra said. "And the safety is locked and computer override locked out of the circuit. There's no way those engines are going to fire until you're back inside the ship."

"Thanks," Byrne said. "Number three node is just below me, and I'm going to pull the focus-ing coils out now." One long extensor reached out from the pod and, turning quickly, released the four latches on the coil cover. Byrne touched a control button, and a tiny surge of current through the extensor activated an electromagnet in the tip, which fastened itself to the cover, pull-ing it open.

The circuit boards for the focusing coils were plug-in types, and they came free easily. Byrne retracted the extensor, bringing the boards up against the pod, plugging them into the exter-nal test and repair unit. In minutes the repair computer in the pod had spotted the trouble, made the necessary adjustments, and flashed a green light on the board in front of Byrne. He plugged the boards back into their slots below the drive node, refastened the cover, and turned the pod to head back toward the lock door. "Job finished," he said into the comm circuit. "Open the lock."

There was no response from Zu'matra, and the lock door remained flush with the skin of the ship. Byrne quickly ran a check on the comm cir-cuit, and found that the sending side was dead. He smiled to himself, wondering if it was an acci-dent, or if Hunza had sabotaged the pod's com-munications. If he had been hoping that Byrne wouldn't be able to get the lock doors open again, he was in for a surprise. The spacesuit Byrne was wearing had a comm unit, too. Byrne started to switch it on, but he never completed the move.

Tremendous pressure flung Byrne forward against the belts holding him to the pod's seat, and he saw the instrument panel suddenly flash red, then frost over as the air rushed out of the pod. Behind him the explosive bolts holding the hatch in place had blown, evacuating the pod and sending it tumbling back away from the drive node he had just repaired. Had Byrne not been wearing his spacesuit, he would have been dead in seconds. But even with the suit his chances of surviving were almost nonexistent unless he took immediate action.

The pod slammed against the hull of the *Kassala*, then bounced off at a tangent, away from the ship. Out toward the encapsulation field, which would destroy both the pod and its passenger in an instant. Byrne, cursing the clumsiness of the spacesuit that had saved his life, slapped the quick release on his belts, then

fought his way around the seat, diving out through the space where the hatch had been, hoping that he wasn't diving away from the ship, toward the field.

As soon as he was clear of the pod Byrne hit the switches controlling the reaction units on his suit, killing his forward velocity. He quickly oriented himself, and saw that he was moving parallel to the ship, about eight meters away from the hull. The pod, though, was heading out toward the field at a forty-five degree angle, and while he was looking at it the blown hatch cover hit the field and exploded in a glare of light that dazzled Byrne's eyes. He swung his suit around, at the same time dropping a filter over his visor, just in time to avoid being blinded by the flash when the pod itself hit the field.

On the control deck Zu'matra picked up the malfunction report on the pod when the emergency release bolts for the hatch blew. "Pod One, answer. Byrne, can you hear me?" As he was calling, Zu'matra switched on the screens showing that side of the ship, just in time to catch the flare when the pod hit the field. For a fraction of a second the inside of the control room was lit brightly by the glare from the screen, then the receptor burned out from the overload and normal lighting returned.

Zu'matra slapped the comm switch, at the same time hitting the control to open the cargo lock door. "Captain to the bridge. Captain to the bridge. We have an emergency."

Captain Hunza stepped in through the control room door only seconds later, almost as if he had been waiting for Zu'matra's call. He staggered a bit, then walked over to the control seat, grabbing the back of it to maintain his balance. Zu'matra could smell the sweet odor of mixed maha and cinnamon on his breath, and he knew that the captain was too drunk to be of any assistance in the emergency.

"Something happened out there," Zu'matra said. "The pod hit the field and blew."

"Was Byrne in it?"

"Where the hell else would he be?" Zu'matra demanded.

"Well, if he was in it, there isn't any emergency, is there?" Hunza asked, smiling. "He's dead, and there's nothing we can do for him."

"What did you do to that pod?" Zu'matra asked in a low, deadly voice.

"Not a thing. I've been in my cabin since I went off watch. Asleep."

Zu'matra looked at the captain with hate in his red gaze, but he knew that there was nothing, right then, he could do. Byrne was dead, and there was no way he could prove that the captain had anything to do with it. Whatever evidence there might have been of tampering with the pod was destroyed completely when the pod hit the field.

"Why don't you go below?" Hunza asked. "I'm awake now. I'll take the rest of your watch. Have a drink. It'll help you forget. It's a shame what happened. Byrne and I had our difficulties, but I think that he would have made a good officer in time."

Zu'matra shook his head, trying to adjust to the sudden turn of events, then got up from the seat and slowly walked out of the control room. He took the lift down to the next deck and opened the door to his room, stepping in and hitting the light switch. Then he stopped dead in his tracks. Still clad in his spacesuit, less the helmet, Byrne was waiting for him, sitting on his bunk, a glass of alcohol in his hand.

"But you're dead!" Zu'matra blurted.

"Oh? I hadn't noticed," Byrne said with a smile.

"What the hell happened? The pod—I saw it blow. How did you get back inside?"

"Through the after safety lock. I was afraid our captain might have some more surprises waiting for me in the cargo lock, just in case the business with the pod failed."

"What happened to the pod?"

Byrne quickly filled Zu'matra in on what had happened, finishing two glasses of alcohol while he was talking.

"Look," Zu'matra said when Byrne had finished his narrative, "I've got a nasty idea. Captain Hunza's going to be pretty shook when he sees you again, since he's sure you're dead. And I want to see the fun when he finds otherwise. He's a superstitious man, so how about, when I go up to relieve him, we play on those superstitions a little? First we'll need to get some dyes and goop from the autochef to doctor you up a little. Blood running out of your eye sockets and ears, burst blood vessels all over your face, and so on."

"You mean so it'll look like I was caught in an explosive decompression?" Byrne asked, mystified by what Zu'matra was planning, but willing to go along with it.

"Exactly. When he isn't looking, but before he leaves the control room, I'll switch one of the outside scanners to an empty compartment. You be waiting in there, with all the lights out except for the emergency lightbar over the door. That should illuminate you, but not the rest of the room. It'll look like you're still out in space. Especially considering that Hunza is already half drunk and not seeing too well."

"And I'll stare at our captain sadly and ac-cusingly," Byrne said with a chuckle. "I'll point one long finger at him and say something nasty."

"That's the idea. I'll open the compartment sound pickups so that he can hear you," Zu'matra said, shaking with laughter.

They spent half an hour making Byrne up, then sat and talked until it was time for Zu'matra to relieve Hunza on the bridge. When the second officer went up to the control room he found that Hunza had been drinking heavily during his watch and could hardly walk. That made it easier for Zu'matra to surreptitiously make a small change of setting on the control panel, rigging the scanner to pick up the compartment Byrne was waiting in.

As Hunza started to step out of the room, he looked up at the screens, and there stood Byrne. Hunza stopped as if frozen in his tracks and stared pop-eyed with horror at the screen. Slowly Byrne's arm came up and his index finger pointed silently at the captain. Then slowly and silently he backed away from the pickup and out of sight. As soon as he was gone Zu'matra shifted the screen control back to an outside view.

"God!" Hunza breathed. "Did you see that?"

"What, sir?" Zu'matra asked, ignoring the screen.

"It was Byrne—there on the number seven screen."

"Byrne?"

"Yeah. He was all-bloody, and he pointed at me. It was his ghost," Hunza cried hysterically. "He stood there in space and pointed at me."

"Ghosts never come back to haunt anybody but murderers," Zu'matra said soothingly, trying not to laugh. "Of course, if you *did* have any-thing to do with the pod explosion ..."

"No!" Hunza screamed. "It was an acci-dent!"

From the control deck speakers Byrne chanted like a high priest. "He-blew-me-up!" He was intoning the lines in a sepulchral voice, and over and over he repeated it, finally adding:

"And-I'll-haunt-him-forever! I'll take him—take him—take him—out into cold—cold space. He took me—and I'll take him!"

"Oh, God, Zu'matra, don't you hear him?" Hunza shrieked. "He's come for me. Save me!"

"I don't hear a thing, captain," Zu'matra persisted. "You're hallucinating. Unless you blew him up, you have nothing to fear. Did you blow him up, Hunza? Tell me, man. You T-humans preach that confession is good for the soul. I don't give a damn what you did to him, but if this ship's haunted, I want to know it—and why. I'm not going to get mixed up with any vengeful ghosts."

"Confess! Confess! Confess!" Byrne keened over the speaker.

"Yes, I did it," the captain screamed. "For-give me! Forgive me!" He fell to his knees on the control room floor, covered his face with his hands and commenced a pitiable jabbering and mewling. Zu'matra walked up to where he was kneeling, and with the edge of his hand struck downward in a chopping stroke at the back of Hunza's neck. The blow was not a hard one, but the captain dropped as if dead.

"Come on up," Zu'matra said into the inter-ship comm. "He's out."

"Okay, what do we do now?" Byrne asked when he got to the control room.

"Dump him?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Why not? That's what he tried to do to you."

"Because you don't know the coordinates of that world with the Master ship. And I'd like to see it."

"So what do we do?" Zu'matra asked.

"We take him back to his cabin," Byrne said, thinking quickly. "When he comes to he'll be in his berth. I'm going to put him there. When he babbles about ghosts, tell him he had a bad dream. That you relieved him quite regularly and he went below. I'll have a talk with the man who was on duty with him here in control, and I think he'll cooperate. There was no pod explosion. I fixed the focusing coils, and

that was it. I'll not accuse him of trying anything, and neither will you. He'll be so mystified he'll think he's going crazy, and we'll tell him it's delirium tremens, the aftermath of too much drinking. Something tells me he's going to be a lot easier to get along with from here on out."

"And if he isn't?"

"Then we'll try something else."

Byrne picked the captain up and carried him below, tossing him into his berth. Then he went to his own cabin and scrubbed the makeshift makeup off and dressed in fresh dungarees and rejoined Zu'matra on the bridge. Ten minutes later they heard moans and screams from below and Byrne went down to investigate. At the sight of him Hunza shrieked in mortal fear, covered his head with a blanket and pleaded for mercy. Zu'matra left the control room in the hands of the ordinary spaceman on watch and came down to the captain's cabin.

"He's gone crazy," Zu'matra said after one quick look at Hunza. "We'd better lock him up before he kills somebody." He locked the cap-tain's emergency control board, checked the room for weapons, picking up a big Colt slug-thrower, then locked the door.

"I think," he said when he and Byrne got back to the control deck, "that you and I can run the ship until we get to Kadesh."

"Shouldn't be any problem. I think I know why he wanted to get rid of me, too."

"Why?" Zu'matra asked.

"He decided to get me out of the way before he tried to dump you. He probably figures I would have testified against him in court if he killed you, and he also assumed you had probably told me about the money you have aboard. So, if he dumped you, I could put him in jail. And if I didn't, he'd still have to account for the money if you died aboard ship. That was part of it. The other part was just that he wanted to feed his grudge against me."

"Are you going to bring charges against him when we hit Kadesh?"

"Nope."

"Then you've finally decided to jump ship there?"

"Hell no! Jump ship and leave that Master ship for the two of you to find? Besides, I'm enjoying this. I haven't had this much fun since my first visit to a pleasure palace."

"You don't understand," Zu'matra protest-ed patiently. "Hunza will kill you—the first chance he gets. I'd have killed him a long time ago, but I was afraid to. I don't know navigation, so I couldn't get the ship back to port. I didn't want to drift around in space until the supplies or the power metals give out, to die a lingering death. It isn't the fact that the man doesn't need killing. He's killed many a native on planets we've touched, and there are even stories that he commanded a Fassali raider. And it isn't his fault that he didn't kill you—twice. I hate him, but it's profitable for me to stay with him until I can get a ship of my own. And getting that Master ship will give me the money to do just that. So you'll be doing us all a favor by getting off the *Kassala*."

"I believe I understand now," Byrne said. "You want me off the ship so there won't be any inconvenient

witnesses to what might well happen to Captain Hunza after you've found the Master ship."

Zu'matra looked at Byrne for a moment, an unreadable expression in his red eyes. "Exactly."

"Well, I've got to admit you're honest about it," Byrne said with a laugh. "And the most likeable would-be pirate I've ever met. Shake."

With the naivete of a child, Zu'matra took Byrne's hand in his own and solemnly shook it.

"Now, then," Byrne said, "we're friends as well as shipmates. You've saved my life, and perhaps by being smart and refusing to be blown up I've saved yours. I'll finish out the voyage, and if some morning the captain fails to show up for breakfast and you tell me he had an unfortunate accident, I'll keep my mouth shut. I owe him no loyalty. His sudden demise would be my idea of what constitutes infallible evidence that there is a supreme being who marks the sparrow's fall. I've always held that there is entirely too much to-do made over the execution of a murderer. You have trusted me with your hundred thousand Shields. Why not trust me with your secrets? Better let me stick around, Zu'matra. I might be a big help to you if things get sticky."

"And you might get in my way. Look, you were worried about being stuck on the beach, broke, if you jumped ship on Kadesh. So I'll tell you what I'll do. You miss reporting to the *Kassala* when we lift, and I'll loan you five thousand Shields. You can pay me back, with interest, when you land another berth. The *Kassala* is bound on what's sure to prove to be a dirty mission, and your kind doesn't belong aboard her."

"Sounds like you're trying to get rid of me," Byrne said with a laugh.

"You're damn right I am! Because I'm try-ing to save your life. You come with us, and Hunza will kill you or maroon you sure as the Emperor loves life. I've got too much on him. He's afraid of me, and sooner or later he'll try to kill me. If he kills me, and you're still aboard the *Kassala*, may the Spirit help you."

"And what about the Master ship?" Byrne asked.

"Damnthe Master ship! I wish I'd never told you about it."

"I'm curious about it," Byrne said. "And when I'm curious about something, I have to go and see it for myself. Thanks for your offer, Zu'matra, but I'm still going along with you."

Zu'matra shook his head, his crest flopping from side to side. "I just don't understand you T-humans. You're just not practical." He shrugged. "Well, three of us are going after that ship, then. And only one of us is going to come back with it. You understand that clearly, Byrne? I will not fool you in this matter."

"I understand, and I appreciate your frank-ness," Byrne said, no longer laughing.

"We'll talk no more on this subject, Byrne. You are a good person for a T-human, but you aren't my kind, you're a fool, and you have en-tirely too much nerve to suit me. You come along after the Master ship at your own risk." He sighed deeply and began to pace back and forth across the deck plates, apparently lost in profound thought.

The next day Byrne was on the control deck with Zu'matra, continuing the O-human's lessons in navigation as if nothing had happened to interrupt them, when word came up that Hunza would like to speak to his second officer. Zu'-matra went below, and half an hour later he re-turned to the control deck, the captain coming into the room behind him.

"There he is, Captain," Zu'matra said, and Byrne looked at Hunza with a puzzled expression on his face.

"You're right," Hunza admitted. "He's alive."

"If he'd been killed in a pod explosion while he was fixing that drive node, he obviously couldn't be here on watch now, could he?"

"I guess not. For a while last night I must have gone crazy."

"You certainly acted like a crazy man. That's why I took the action I did. I locked you up because I was afraid you might get violent."

"I guess I'd better lay off the maha," Hunza muttered, then he left the control room.

"He doesn't know what to make of us," Zu'matra said with a smile. "He's sure he rigged the pod to blow up on you, but you aren't dead, aren't accusing him of trying to kill you, and now he's more than half convinced that he really is going nuts."

"He is nuts!"

"Perhaps," Zu'matra admitted. "I don't claim to understand the workings of the T-human mind. But I don't think he'll try anything else between here and Kadesh. While I was below convincing him he'd been seeing things last night I took the precaution of telling him that if he ever went crazy again and tried to kill you, I'd kill him rather than just locking him up. And that if he tried to kill me, or if I had any unexplained accidents, you would do the same."

"That was a good move," Byrne said. "At any rate, he's a frightened man now, and a sadly puzzled one. He knows what he knows, but can't quite make himself believe it. And a sadly puzzled man is, usually, an inactive one."

"Here," Zu'matra said, handing Byrne the slugthrower he had taken from Hunza's cabin the night before. "Even if he seems calm, it might be a good idea for you to wear this. I'm going to keep my traser on me until we hit Kadesh. That way we're not only protected from Hunza, but from each other."

Chapter Four

Throughout the remainder of the voyage to Kadesh, Hunza's efforts to be friendly were almost pathetic. The sight of the guns strapped to Zu'matra and Byrne passed without comment from him, nor did he pay any attention to the crew. He remained below most of the time, coming to the control deck only to stand his watch.

On the twenty-ninth day after leaving Cassandra, the *Kassala* slid out of zero-space and two hours later took up a parking orbit around Kadesh. And after being checked by Kadesh Customs, Byrne and Zu'matra, with no help from the captain, took the old ship down to a landing at the planet's one

spacefield. Within minutes after cutting the drive, Hunza was off the ship, heading for the ship's agents to report on the voy-age out from Cassandra. A little later robotrucks pulled up alongside the *Kassala* and the crew fell to work discharging the cargo that had been brought out from the Empire.

Zu'matra bossed the job of discharging the cargo, and Hunza remained in the city—a sure sign, the O-human second officer said, that he was off an another binge. His failure to return and give the crew an advance on their wages led to a strike on the second day after their grounding. The crew left the port for the city, looking for Hunza and an advance on their salaries. Finally: they found him in a bar, drunk, and after getting drafts against their wages they disappeared into the floating population of unemployed spacemen, leaving the *Kassala* crewless except for Zu'matra and Byrne.

The second officer recruited a fresh crew to stand the ship's watches while they were on Kadesh, then he took his money into the city and banked it with the ship's agents. When he returned to the ship, he looked up Byrne, who was in his cabin studying the navigation charts for the cluster.

"How'd you like to go into town with me?" Zu'matra asked. "I've got a bit of business to take care of, then we can go get ourselves some dinner."

"Sounds good. Give me a minute to change clothes, and I'll meet you in the lock."

As they were leaving the ship a large robotruck pulled up alongside the *Kassala*. Cen-tered on the flat bed of the truck was a new pod.

"Oh-oh. Look at that," Byrne said.

"Looks like our captain finally thought of checking the pod bay to see if one was missing."

"Yeah. And now he knows it wasn't a nightmare. He did try to kill me, and he'll probably try again before long."

"Having second thoughts about staying here on Kadesh?" Zu'matra asked.

"Nope."

When they left the ship, Byrne found that getting off the field was a lot more difficult on Kadesh than on the other planets—all in the Empire—that he had visited during his period of military service. The Kadeshi government had a long list of items they collected stiff import duties on, and they were searched quite thorough-ly before being allowed into town. Among the things the government absolutely would not allow to be imported were weapons of any sort, so Zu'matra and Byrne had to check their sidearms at the gate, accepting receipts for them, to be picked up later.

"You said you had some business to con-duct," Byrne said once they had cleared Customs. "What's up?"

"I picked up a cylinder of Mowli happy gas back on Cassandra," Zu'matra said, "and I think I know where I can find a buyer for it. I want to check it out. It'll only take half an hour or so."

"That's taking a pretty big chance, isn't it? I mean, happy gas is outlawed just about every-place. Hell, back on Earth mere possession is an automatic mindwipe. And sales rates a visit to the hangman."

"They aren't quite so fanatical about it here," the O-human said. "As a matter of fact, the government sort

of winks at most narcotics. Keeps the populace from thinking too much about the taxes they have to pay."

Zu'matra rented a skimmer at a lot just out-side the field gate, then drove them across town to an area that seemed to be mostly bars and restaurants—none overly fancy. He parked the skimmer in front of a dark, disreputable-looking building with a beep-flash that proclaimed it the Offworld Haven, then led Byrne inside.

They stood just inside the door for a mo-ment, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the dim lighting, peering through the gloom at the shabby furniture, sniffing at the unappetizing odors of food left too long on plates. Eyes finally adjust-ed, Zu'matra spotted the O-human he was looking for, Uniunea Scriitorilor, and his Fellenian symbiote, sitting at a table near the back of the room. Zu'matra threaded his way through the closely packed tables, followed by Byrne, and sat down at the table next to Scriitorilor, nodding a greeting.

Scriitorilor didn't bother looking up from the Grabal he was slicing into small pieces, merely grunting a greeting at Zu'matra. The willowy, boneless-looking and supremely beautiful Felleni-an stretched its face into an angelic smile, then glanced down at the small metal chalice of fuming maha on the table in front of it.

"I wish I could stop drinking this vile stuff," it trilled in a voice that T-human poets had com-pared to the singing harps of heaven. Then it drank the rest of the liquid down in one long draught.

Scriitorilor looked up briefly and held up his hand to signal for a waiter. Someone brought three more chalices of maha, setting two of them in front of Zu'matra and Byrne, giving the other to the Fellenian. "Been gone a long time, Zu'-matra," Scriitorilor said between bites. "You got something to say, or are you just using up table space?"

Zu'matra checked a sudden flare of anger. "I've got something for you." He quickly drank his glass of maha.

"What?" the Fellenian trilled.

"Two liters of Mowli gas, tested pure. Not a trace of methane. You can buy it for ten thousand Shields. Cash," he said with a smile. At the same time he signaled to the waiter, who brought him another glass of maha, setting a plastic shaker of cinnamon next to it. Zu'matra shook some of the brown powder into the gently foam-ing drink, then took a sip, feeling the warmth of the mild narcotic already beginning to wash through his system.

"How are you going to get it off the ship?" Scriitorilor asked without looking up.

"It's already off. I've got it stored at the agent's office, to be released only on my signed receipt."

Scriitorilor looked over at Zu'matra, really looking at him for the first time since they had come into the restaurant. "I'll give you eight thousand for it," he said abruptly. His voice was flat, and Zu'matra knew that the eight thousand was not just his first, but also his final offer. He held out his hand, Scriitorilor nodded his head, and the Fellenian counted a stack of yellow chips of plastic into Zu'matra's grasp. Without closing his hand Zu'matra pulled a receipt ticket, already signed, from his pouch and handed it to the Fellenian. Then he leaned back and took a long, deep swallow from his cooling maha.

Scriitorilor raised his hand, and a furtive-looking T-human scurried over to the table. The O-human

whispered something to him, then he hurried out the door. Byrne sat watching the whole thing, wondering if smuggling was always this easy, not realizing the risks Zu'matra had already taken in buying the gas and getting it to Kadesh.

The waiter brought another round of maha, and before they finished it the T-human was back, a bulky parcel in his arms. Scriitorilor wiped his face and hands on a large napkin, got up, and vanished into a back room with the package. A few moments later he was back, nodding his head to Zu'matra, who visibly relaxed.

"Okay," Zu'matra said to Byrne. "We can go now."

"What would have happened if we had tried to leave before that guy got back with the pack-age?" Byrne asked as they were leaving the building.

"We'd never have gotten out the door alive."

"Nice friends you have."

"Not friends. Just business acquaintances. I've never tried to pull a fast one on Scriitorilor, and he's been honest with me. As honest as it's possible for him to be. But no one in this business ever takes unnecessary chances."

The street outside was deserted. Zu'matra bent to key the door of the skimmer, and as he did so Byrne heard a soft sound behind him. He started to turn, but never completed the move. He was shoved roughly out of the way, and he saw a form swing an overhand blow at Zu'matra's head. The O-human went down hard, then the dark form turned back toward Byrne, who was just struggling back to his feet from where he had fallen near the skimmer's front fan.

Byrne could see now that their attacker was probably a T-human, but if it was, he had been born on a high-gravity planet, which had short-ened and enormously widened his body, giving him a squat, deadly appearance. He moved toward Byrne like a wrestler, bent slightly for-ward at the hips. But Byrne had no intention of fighting his attacker's fight. He had been forced into the situation without weapons, without even a knife, and that sharpened his every sense. He knew without thinking about it that fighting the other man's fight would put him at too much of a disadvantage.

Byrne waited for the man to get within range, then let go a short, arcing uppercut that caught him on the side of his outthrust jaw, straightening him up from his semicrouch. Byrne put a lot of force into the punch, the full power of his arm and shoulder muscles, but it didn't seem to bother the man much. His only visible reaction was to lose the grin that had been on his face, his eyes taking on a look of surprise and growing anger instead.

The attacker came in again, fully upright and more cautious this time, no longer thinking of Byrne as meat on the table, and this time Byrne caught him with three fast jabs in the face, then stepped in close and pumped a hard left-right-left combination into the bulging stomach. A gasp of pain told Byrne that the man had felt his punches that time, but as far as he was con-cerned, hitting the man's stomach was like hitting a rock. And in the end he was sure it would have the same effect. The rock would win.

As a wrestler, the man may have been ex-cellent, but as a boxer he couldn't have hit Byrne if he had been tied to a tree. Byrne pounded him repeatedly with lefts and rights, but then the attacker seized his wrist and pulled him in close. Legs entwined, they fell together onto the pave-ment, fighting for position. The attacker won position advantage, coming out on top of the frantically heaving Byrne, straddling his

chest, ready to end the fight.

The man quickly grabbed Byrne's throat, ready to snap the lighter man's neck with a quick twist of his strong hands. But Byrne caught his wrists before they could get a grip on his throat, forcing them away, and the two began a contest of arm power that froze both of them into strain-ing immobility, the fight marked only by grunts and the gasping of their labored breathing.

Again and again blunt, hooked fingers almost grabbed the skin of Byrne's throat, but again and again those fingers were forced back bit by bit. Then, with a mighty sideways lunge, Byrne unseated the man, and the two of them rolled again, out into the street, still locked together, then back until they crashed into the side of the skimmer. And with his sudden loss of advantage, the attacker seemed to sense, for the first time, the possibility of defeat, felt the first cold touch of fear.

The man tore himself free from Byrne, and both of them tried to scramble to their feet, rolling away from the skimmer. But the attacker was frantically quicker, and while Byrne was still trying to get to his feet, the man swung his boot-ed foot up in a kick to Byrne's unprotected face that sent him crashing over backwards. He tried to jump into Byrne, to pin him to the ground again, but Byrne caught the diving body with bent legs, straightening them suddenly, kicking upward with all his strength, to send the man crashing off to one side.

Before his assailant could recover, Byrne got to his knees and with fists clenched together he crashed a kidney punch into the wide, dust-streaked back, bringing a howl of rage and pain from the kneeling man. The attacker spun about, still on his knees despite the kidney punch that would have incapacitated a lesser man, and the two men came together again, twisting and rolling across the pavement, each straining powerfully to get on top. Again they separated, and again the attacker was first to his feet. But Byrne plunged forward from his knees, grabbing the man's thick legs, fingers locking tightly into the loose fabric of his pants, pulling forward to flop him over onto his back.

Now it was Byrne's turn to jump onto his downed opponent, a mistake that earned him a stabbing kick in his already bruised and bleeding face. Byrne staggered back, falling, and the attacker straddled him again and, learning from past experience, began to rain a hail of punches on the man under him. Byrne touched his head from side to side, frantically trying to avoid the shower of blows, blood running freely from his nose and mouth, and then suddenly the man's hands were again at his throat, choking him.

Byrne caught the man's wrists, keeping him from breaking his neck with a twist of those strong hands, and he began to exert every ounce of strength in his body to break the stranglehold. But the man's strength matched his own, and he couldn't break the fingers free from his neck. Byrne was choking, his vision going back, his tongue swelling to fill his mouth, and he knew that the fight would soon be over, that he would soon be dead. Suddenly, taking a chance that the man would continue to try to choke the life out of him, Byrne pulled his hands away from the wrists above his neck and reached down between their bodies, his hands going into the man's loose trousers. He grabbed the man's genitals and twisted and wrenched at them. The man screamed with pain and released Byrne's neck to grab his arms, but Byrne hung on tight, twisting and tugging with all the strength he could muster.

For long, straining minutes, Byrne kept up the torture of the man's body while his screams rent the air, then he let go and the man pitched over onto his side. Byrne got slowly to his feet, lungs laboring to replenish his body with oxygen, dazed mind trying to plan his next move.

Byrne stood uncertainly, his chest heaving, wiping the blood from his face with the back of one hand. There was no hurry now, and he knew it. The fight was over. For a few seconds more he watched the man twisting and writhing on the blood-splattered pavement, then he stepped back, and the man started

to get to his feet. It took him several seconds, but the man was finally upright, his legs stretched wide apart, hands clasped between them. Byrne was standing less than a yard away, and he took one short step forward, bracing himself, then pivoted on the ball of his right foot as he hit the man with all the power he could muster. The man went down like a falling tree, his head hitting the side of the skim-mer with a sound like a ripe melon dropped from a height. And without looking at him, Byrne knew the man was dead, his skull caved in.

Stumbling slightly, shaking his head to clear it, Byrne staggered over to the side of the skim-mer and released the door. He pulled the still unconscious form of Zu'matra into the passen-ger's seat, then climbed behind the tiller and guided the vehicle out into the still deserted street. Despite the noise of the fight, despite the man's screams when Byrne had gained his advan-tage, no one had come to investigate.

Ten blocks away from the Offworld Haven, Zu'matra groaned, then opened his eyes. "What the hell happened?" he asked.

"Someone jumped us."

"Who?"

"I didn't ask him for identification. But he wasn't too friendly."

"I take it you took him?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks. But you should have held on to him. Maybe we could have found out who sent him after us."

"I don't think you would have gotten much out of him. I'm afraid I left him sort of dead."

"Oh." Zu'matra felt the back of his head, then looked at his hand to see if there was any blood on it. "Well, I can't say I'm too sorry."

"I don't think there's too much question about who sent him after us, though," Byrne said. "Your friends in there wanted the gas and their money, too."

"Perhaps," Zu'matra said. "But they've never tried anything like that before. And there've been other things I've brought them that were worth a lot more than a mere eight thousand Shields."

"Who, then?"

"How about the captain?"

"Yeah, I guess it could have been," Byrne said thoughtfully. "What do we do now?"

"Find a hotel. Get cleaned up, then have some dinner. And a whole bunch of drinks. I have a feeling I'm going to have one hell of a headache before long."

Zu'matra's promised headache appeared soon after they found a restaurant, and after eating they checked into a hotel near the space-field rather than going through the formalities of reentering the field to

sleep on the ship. Zu'-matra fell asleep almost immediately after the two were shown to their room, but Byrne was feeling restless, so after tossing on his hard bed for an hour he decided to go out for a while, to see what sort of nightlife Kadesh had to offer.

He found a small bar that advertised Earth whiskey two blocks from the hotel and settled down for what promised to be an evening of increasing boredom. Kadesh didn't seem to have a nightlife, a not unusual circumstance on frontier planets, and even less surprising on one with a repressive government. After an hour, Byrne was nursing his third glass of genuine artificial Ken-tucky bourbon, which had never been within a thousand light years of Earth, and the M'vuvu bartender was beginning to look at him with the suspicion plain on his rubbery chrome-yellow face that he was pretty soon going to have to throw the T-human out of his bar. The Universal Declaration of Allhuman Rights, which Kadesh had signed some years previously under the guns of an Empire fleet, gave T-humans the right to drink in his bar, but, by the Cave Dweller, the bartender was going to see to it that Byrne did drink, or leave.

Aching from the fight he had been in and frustrated by his inability to sleep, Byrne began to swear in a low monotone at his drink, hoping that the five-armed M'vuvu would start something with him, just to give him an outlet for his rage.

"It can't really be that bad, can it?" asked the golden-skinned Fellenian who had been sitting two stools down from Byrne for the past ten minutes.

Byrne turned his head to look at the O-human symbiote for the first time. He had noticed it casually when it had first come into the bar, but he had always been leary of Fellenians since trying some of their highly illegal shared ecstasy once back on Myriad. It would have been altogether too easy to get hooked on it.

"Oh, yes it can," Byrne said shortly, turning his back to his drink.

"Bored?"

"I'd rather not take about it."

"Why?" it persisted.

"If for no other reason," Byrne said, turning on the stool to face it, "than because there are laws concerning T-humans and the people of your race. And frontier planets are notorious blue-noses when it comes to that sort of fraternization. I don't really feel like getting my head caved in by some local cop just to share ecstasy with you."

"Did it ever occur to you," it asked, the anger plain in its voice, "that I might have spoken to you simply out of friendliness?"

"Nope. Did you?"

The Fellenian looked at Byrne for a long moment, its face tight, then it relaxed and it laughed, the musical tinkling harp of its voice filling the room. "No. I guess you had me pegged right. I saw you sitting there alone, and I couldn't help wondering what sharing ecstasy with you would be like. I've never tried it with a T-human."

Byrne looked over at the Fellenian, then he, too, laughed. "Sorry, I shouldn't have been so nasty," he said.

"Or so honest," it said, laughing with him. "Don't you know that a few little lies are the lubrication for social intercourse? You could have simply said you weren't in the mood."

"Sorry, but social intercourse isn't exactly the kind I'm most experienced in."

"I'm Ctah, by the way," the Fellenian said. "And why don't we get out of here before the cop you're so worried about shows up?"

Byrne quickly finished the rest of his watery drink, threw a two-Shield chip on the counter next to his empty glass, then turned to the Fellenian and said: "Let's go." And as they went out the door, arm in arm, Byrne could feel the staring hatred of the M'vuvu boring into his back.

Byrne helped the Fellenian slide into the passenger seat of the skimmer Zu'matra had rented, then he walked around the other side, climbing in and opaquing the bubble top as he started the engine.

"Why not retract the top?" Ctah asked. "It's too hot in here with it sealed."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"That cop might see us."

"That really bothers you, doesn't it?"

"You know it," Byrne said. "Doesn't it worry you?"

"Not really. We have none of the com-punctions against intra-species sharing you T-humans seem so concerned about. Where are we going?"

"I don't know. Any ideas?"

"I have a suite at the Skytower. Environ-mentally matched to Felix. We can swim. First."

The suite Ctah led Byrne into looked like a little piece of Felix, green sky and soft coppery grass, a cool blue-green pool filling the center of the living area. The water was soothingly cool after the mugginess of the night air outside as Byrne followed Ctah into the pool, swimming quickly across to the other side, arriving at almost the same moment as the Fellenian, laughing and out of breath. Byrne levered himself up onto the edge of the pool, his hard-muscled body shining wetly in the soft glow from the ceiling, then he reached down and helped the Fellenian up, admiring the softly curved golden body, so in-human, but so beautiful. Byrne pulled it close, then his lips sought out those of Ctah, finding them just as the tendrils of the Fellenian's wrists penetrated the skin of his back, working between two discs and into his spinal column.

A burning wave of passion roared through Byrne's body, and as he pressed against it the Fellenian sent surges of its ecstasy inducers flow-ing from its body into Byrne's. But then, unbal-anced, they fell into the water, breaking apart, coming to the surface laughing.

Quickly they swam back to the other side of the pool, Byrne stopping and catching hold of Ctah when they were still two meters from the edge. The water barely rose to the middle of Byrne's chest as he

pulled the Fellenian close again, kissing it, their bodies fitting tightly together in the cool water.

Byrne kissed the Fellenian long and hard, his hands roaming over its back, then he released it and let it up to the edge of the pool, climbing out and reaching back to help Ctah out of the water. He picked it up, holding its body close to his, kissed it again, then carried it into the small sleeping room. For a moment, as he laid Ctah on the bed, Byrne wondered why he was here with this Fellenian when he had other, more serious problems he should be worrying about. Then, as he laid down next to it, he forgot all about future problems. Instead, his thoughts were filled only with the sight of the smooth, golden body lying next to him, to the emotions that were beginning to crash through his body. Emotions ignited by the small quantity of ecstasy inducers the Fellenian had already injected into him, as well as the workings of his own body.

Byrne's hard, tan body blended with Ctah's soft goldenness, and he felt and tasted the differing textures of its being, the fragile, dimpling smoothness of its wet eyelids, the satiny, slightly furry warmth of its belly, the firmness of its thighs, branching from the genitalless smoothness of its crotch. Ctah slid its probing tendrils back into Byrne's spine, and the warm glow of shared ecstasy flowed through its body as it sent its essence to mix with Byrne's spinal fluid, blinding his mind to the world around him, filling him with exquisite emotions no human had ever been able to describe.

Two hours later, Byrne's mind swam slowly back to consciousness. He looked around and saw the Fellenian on the bed next to him, and for a moment, he had an almost overpowering desire to wake Ctah, to share ecstasy with it once again. But then he shook it off, knowing that such an act would be the first step to never leaving Kadesh. Instead he slipped gently out of bed, careful not to wake Ctah, found his clothes, and let himself out of the suite.

The haze of Fellenian-induced pleasure remained in his mind all the way back to the hotel, and it was only broken when he entered the room and found Zu'matra gone. He quickly checked with the desk and found out that the O-human had checked out over an hour before. Byrne grabbed the only bit of clothing he had left in the room, his jacket, and headed for the spacefield at the top speed he could squeeze out of the skimmer.

"May I see your pass, sir?" the guard at the gate asked him after Byrne had dropped the skimmer off at the rental yard.

"Yeah. Here." Byrne handed the plastic pass to him, his eyes looking through the gate, trying to penetrate the darkness to see if the *Kassala* was still at her berth. He didn't notice the flashing red light on the console that lit when the guard slid his pass into the identification slot.

"I'm sorry, sir, but this pass is invalid."

"What? It was just issued this afternoon."

"I can see that, sir. But according to our records you signed off your ship. You are no longer authorized to enter the field as a crew-member."

Byrne started to protest, but then realized that this could only be Zu'matra's work. A way of forcing him to jump ship on Kadesh. "How can I get on the field?" he asked the guard.

"You can get a visitor's pass, sir."

"Fine. How?"

"By applying at the field administration center tomorrow after 0900."

"By 0900 my ship will probably have lift-ed," Byrne protested. "I need to get there tonight."

"I'm sorry, sir," the guard said, his hand dropping slightly toward his sidearm. "I'm afraid you'll just have to wait until morning to get your pass. We cannot issue them here."

Byrne knew that he would have to get into the field tonight or be stuck on Kadesh. He caught a robocab back into town, and in the downtown district he found an open store, where he bought a large pair of wireclippers. Another robocab took him around the field, to the side facing out into the empty countryside. He got out a quarter mile from the field perimeter, then walked the rest of the way, until there was only a large field filled with trees and bushes between him and the spacefield fence.

Byrne moved slowly through the thick underbrush, not sure what sort of guard might be maintained on the fence. Then, twenty meters in front of him, he spotted a glint of moonlight reflecting off metal. He froze, crouched over, not dropping to the ground, not making any move that might give him away as his eyes probed the darkness around him. Nothing moved, no sound reached his ears except those made by small animals and birds in the brush, and finally Byrne moved again, toward the galvanized wire fence that had caused the reflection, now clearly visible in the moonlight ahead.

Ten meters from the fence Byrne dropped to his knees, and five meters short of it he went down on his belly, wiggling forward through the wet grass, silent as a snake, every sense alert for the slightest touch of strangeness in the night around him. When he reached the fence he laid with the stillness of the dead for a full five minutes, then, sure that he was alone in the area, he slipped the pair of wire cutters out of his belt and, working quickly, but as quietly as possible, he made a series of cuts in the wire, opening three slashes, in the fence, two horizontal and one vertical, which left him with a flap in the fence barely large enough for his body to slip through when it was bent inward.

Once through the fence, Byrne stopped only long enough to bend the flap back into place and throw the wire cutters over the fence, into a patch of thick underbrush, then he took off at a trot across the field, toward the dark line of ship nearly a mile away.

Byrne was still a quarter mile from the ship when the warning sirens signaled the *Kassala's* impending takeoff. He sprinted the rest of the distance, resolutely not thinking about what would happen to him if the ship's engines fired before he got into the lock.

He was gasping for breath and his vision was swimming when he slapped the release plate on the same small lock he had used to enter the ship after the pod explosion. It seemed to take an eternity for the door to slide open. Then he was inside, and seconds after the door slid shut again he felt the deck vibrate as the *Kassala* lifted off Kadesh.

Captain Hunza and Zu'matra were standing together in front of the nav panel when Byrne stepped into the control room. At the sight of Byrne, Zu'matra commenced to chuckle, but Hunza was instantly furious.

"Where the hell did you come from?" he roared.

"You were sneaking off without paying me my wages, sir. So I came back to collect them. I don't think it

was very nice of you to try to maroon me on Kadesh without a Shield in my pocket."

"How'd you get aboard?"

"Be being quicker than you are. But, if I can't have my money, I think I'll take my old job back."

"Give me a hand, Zu'matra," the captain said. "We'll dump this joker out the lock, and that'll be the end of that particular problem."

"Sorry, Captain, but I can't see killing him," Zu'matra said mildly.

"Then we'll put him in a suit with a beacon. Someone will pick him up. But by God I'll have him off my ship!"

"I don't think so, sir. I'm not any happier than you are at having Byrne aboard again, but he signed on for the entire voyage, and if you start anything with him, I'll finish it."

"And if you start anything with Zu'matra, *I'll* finish it," Byrne reminded the captain. "You haven't got a great deal of authority on this ship any more, and it's time you began to realize it." He turned to Zu'matra. "You knew I couldn't afford to be left on Kadesh, yet you tried to dump me there. And I thought you were my friend."

"I was—and am, Byrne. If you had waited until tomorrow the manager of the hotel would have brought you an envelope. In it was a thousand Shields and a first-class ticket back to Cassandra aboard the *Yivelu*, scheduled to leave in two days. The best evidence of my friendship is that I stood with Hunza to get you off this ship. But you wouldn't take my advice, and now you'll have to plot your own course from here on out."

"He must be crazy!" Hunza muttered.

Zu'matra grinned. "Well, he does have some peculiar notions."

"For instance?"

"He likes to travel, sir."

"There's a deeper reason."

"I know it."

"The ship," Hunza said simply, glaring at Byrne. "You told him about it."

"I did," Zu'matra admitted.

The captain looked at Zu'matra, shook his head slowly, then went below without saying anything further.

Byrne and Zu'matra stood looking at each other, grinning. "Well, you can't say that I didn't try my best to get rid of you, for your own sake," Zu'matra said at last. "But I'll admit I was never so glad to see an unwanted man back aboard this old ship as I was to see you. On Kadesh, Hunza shipped another hand without telling me anything about it. A Fassali renegade. Ostensibly he's an ordinary spaceman, but I think he's one of Hunza's old crew from his raiding days. I think the idea was to get rid of me, then have

him take over my job."

"What did you intend to do?" Byrne asked.

"Kill him—the first chance I got."

"The Fassali, or the captain?"

"The Fassali, first. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to locate the Master ship."

"A rather drastic solution."

"But a workable one," Zu'matra said, "which I hope won't have to be extended to other parties aboard ship."

"You still consider me an embarrassing presence?"

"Certainly."

"I imagine Hunza must feel pretty much the same way about you and me."

"Undoubtedly. He wants that Master ship for himself. And I've been pretty mutinous from time to time—and particularly since you came aboard and set me such a splendid example. First my money tempted him, and now I've gotten on his nerves. I'm in his way, and he's in my way. And so are you. And neither of you will get out of my way unless I shove you out. Byrne, you are a very great nuisance, but I like you and do not care to hurt you unless you insist."

"Same here, Zu'matra," Byrne said with a certain grimness.

"Well then, pending our inevitable parting, let's be as happy as we can in our strange friend-ship."

Chapter Five

Byrne took a regular watch that night, but when he sent a man below at midnight to awaken the captain the man returned and reported that Hunza was in a drunken stupor, so Zu'matra had to be roused to take the master's watch. The O-human was not at all ill-humored about it. He had long since inured himself to Hunza's ways. It seemed to Byrne that there was something deadly about the second officer's patience, some-thing fatalistic in the calm with which he had set himself to risk death in order to achieve his objective of owning his own ship.

As Byrne was about to go to his cabin, Zu'matra said—and there was authority in his voice: "Bring some blankets up here, Byrne, and sleep in the spare couch, where I can keep an eye on you. I don't want you strangled in your sleep. And here, take this." He handed Byrne the big Colt slugthrower he had last seen when they checked out of the Kadesh spacefield.

Byrne did as instructed, but it was a long time before he drifted off to sleep. For nearly two hours he simulated sleep, to see what Zu'-matra might do. He had half a fear of attack by the O-human, who had told him repeatedly that he was a nuisance aboard the *Kassala*. For a moment Byrne almost wished he had stayed on Kadesh with the Fellenian. Any man, he told himself, who shoves his nose into other

people's private affairs must expect to have that nose punched.

Things had occurred aboard the *Kassala* since he had signed on that he would never have imagined happening in his wildest dreams while he was still a member of the Terran Outforces. And because of those things his life was a thing of no consequence to either Hunza or Zu'matra, should he get in their way. But risking his life was something Byrne was used to. Life never seemed as sweet to him as when death rode in the next seat. What use, really, was that Master ship to him? None. He knew that he had no real use for the money the sale of the ship would bring, and as far as the woman was concerned, he couldn't develop any vital interest in the welfare of a person he had never met. He had an almost malevolent desire to thwart Hunza's scheme, and because of it he had yielded without struggle to an impulse that might well end up costing him his life.

Byrne needed some answers, but there was no one on board the *Kassala* who could give them. Who was this T-human woman? How had it happened that she was on that planet? Was she the sole survivor of a shipwreck? One of the many missing ships that had been credited to the mythical Masters? How long had she been there and what was her attitude toward her environment? Had she adopted that environment? Was she even still human? Was she happy in that alien environment and would she grieve to be taken forcibly from it to become the property of a man who had all the instincts of a freebooter of an earlier day?

"Did that planet have a name?" Byrne suddenly asked Zu'matra, startling the O-human.

"What? Oh, I thought you were asleep."

"I've been thinking."

"As far as we could tell from the pidgin language the computer was able to work out, the native name for the place was simply 'dirt.' Hunza said it wasn't on any of the charts, even the new ones he picked up when we got back to Kadesh. Of course, he could have been lying. I have no idea of the coordinates. The price," he added bitterly, "of my ignorance of navigation."

"Well, your navigational ignorance is now a thing of the past."

"And for that I thank you, Byrne."

"I still find it strange," Byrne mused, "that Hunza would bring you along on this trip when he knows that you're going to dispute the ownership of the Master ship with him."

"Not at all strange," Zu'matra said. "I'm a good officer, and the only one he can get along with—or who can get along with him. And he figured he could dispose of me after he got the ship. The situation is simple. He knew I couldn't dump him on the planet, because I wouldn't be able to navigate back to Kadesh. Now that I can navigate, and he doesn't know it, the situation is reversed. I'll have that ship, *all* of it, peaceably if I can, and forcibly if I must, and if you behave yourself after I get it, you and I will continue to be friends, and I'll make your services worth while."

"That's a subject for future discussion, Zu'matra. It might be a good idea to wait and see if she's worth fighting over. After all, you still haven't absolutely convinced me that it's a Master ship we're dealing with."

Over the next few days Hunza, much to Byrne's surprise, remained sober. He came to the control room at least twice each day to check and correct the *Kassala's* course, and by the time they were a week out of Kadesh, Byrne had come to the conclusion that Hunza was taking them to the planet of the Master ship by a roundabout route, to keep him from plotting its location from the course figures he had been feeding into the nav computer. He spent most of his time in his cabin, and he spent his few visits to control dividing black scowls impartially between Byrne and Zu'matra.

On the fifty-seventh day out from Kadesh, Byrne came on watch to find the *Kassala* had broken out of zero-space and was less than thirty light minutes from a sun. Over the next three hours Hunza held control of the ship, bringing it in toward a greenish-red planet, carefully setting up a synchronized orbit that held them in one place over the planet, above a tongue of land sticking out into an ocean from an almost circular continental land mass.

"Well, Byrne," Zu'matra said, "here we are. Now the fun starts."

"Byrne," Hunza yelled from where he was standing in front of the control panels, shutting down the deep-space portions of the ship's drive system, "get below and break out the number two shuttle."

"Yes, sir," Byrne said. He turned and left the control room, dropping down the lift shaft to the shuttle bay. As he activated the lock controls for the small spaceship, his eye was caught by two large crates standing against one wall. Crates he hadn't seen when he had checked out the shuttles after signing aboard the *Kassala* on Cassandra. Whatever they were, they must have been brought on board at Kadesh.

Byrne hesitated for a minute, then walked over to one of the crates, thumbing the release latch on one side then stepping back as the cover swung open. Inside, somewhat battered but still usable-looking, was an Imperial battle suit. A quick check showed that the weapons systems had been removed, probably when the suit was sold as surplus, but the drive and environment units were intact. The *Kassala* was now carrying what amounted to two one-man spaceships capable of almost anything except zero-space flight. For a moment Byrne wondered what use Hunza had planned for the suits, then he shrugged, resealed the crate, and went back to preparing the shuttle for flight.

Hunza, Zu'matra, and Byrne, along with one of the ordinary spacemen, the Fassali Hunza had signed on, dropped down to the surface, landing half a mile from a large village. As soon as the engines were shut off Zu'matra opened the upper lock door, twenty feet above the ground.

From a line of woods about two hundred meters away came the thumping of drums, then suddenly the clear area around the shuttle began to fill with natives. They came in an orderly procession, led by what Byrne assumed was the local headman, carried on a strange cart, low bodied, drawn by two of the strangest-looking creatures Byrne had ever seen. And then, when he got a look at the being in the cart, he revised his opinion of the draft animals. They were thesecond -strangest looking things he had ever seen.

The chief, if that was what he was, was vaguely humanoid, but the resemblance was very vague. His legs were like tree trunks in size, firm-ly planted on the flat bed of the cart, and from them he tapered upward like a pyramid. His chest was less than half the circumference of his hips, and twin ropey arms sprouted from the top of his torso, where Byrne had been expecting to see a head. Assuming that nature likes to put sense organs near the brain, to shorten neural paths, his brain must have been mounted where a T-human would have his stomach, a hemispherical bulge on bony-looking plate filled with two pro-truding eyes, a single hole Byrne assumed was for breathing, and a mouth full of fangs and a long, slender tongue that seemed to be constantly test-ing the air.

Beside the chief stood a young T-human woman, slightly above-average in height, golden-skinned, golden-haired, with a bright cloth garment that hung from one shoulder, leaving the other bare. She leaned on a long spear to maintain her balance as the cart rocked across the uneven ground, and as it pulled to a stop next to the shuttle, the woman looked up into Byrne's face as he leaned over the edge of the lock.

My God! he thought. A viking princess. She's more than beautiful! She's regal.

She was gazing up at him impersonally, as if he did not exist. Byrne stood erect and bowed, and a flash of interest showed on her face. An instant before she was coldly, classically beautiful, like a marble goddess, but at his bow an alert interest swept over her face and left it warmly human, more lovely than beautiful. She inclined her head slightly, returning Byrne's bow, and appraised him critically.

"See if she understands any of your languages," Hunza said in a rasping voice, breaking Byrne's reverie.

"If you understand what I say," Byrne said in his rusty Permal, "scratch your right ear. I'm your friend. Don't answer back."

Her right hand came up, and she scratched her ear casually.

"Don't set foot aboard this ship," he warned her.

"Don't worry, I won't," she answered in the soft, lilting vowels of Vogtish.

"Can you understand her?" Hunza asked impatiently.

"No, sir," Byrne lied. "Whatever it is, it's so full of vowels it can't be any Earth-based tongue."

"Well, try something else, damnit."

"You know the other two, so how about Pseudo-bug?" he asked in that language. And again she scratched her ear. "Good," Byrne continued, "but for God's sake don't admit you understand anything I'm saying. And under no circumstance come aboard ship. You're in danger, but I'm going to do my best to save you."

"I take it you're still not having any luck, mister?" Hunza asked.

"No, sir. She looks like a T-human, but perhaps she isn't. I've seen that golden skin before, and while I admit that it does occur in some T-humans, it's more normal among the Prediki half-breeds."

"The what?"

"Prediki half-breeds," Byrne repeated. "The Prediki are one of the few O-human races that can interbreed with a T-human. Of course about eighty percent of the births are monsters or are born dead, but the other twenty percent come out looking something like her. And if she is a Prediki, there's very little chance I'll be able to communicate with her. They cut themselves off from all other life forms about two hundred years ago for religious reasons, and I doubt if she's ever seen a T- or O-human before."

"If they cut themselves off, where'd you see one?" Hunza asked suspiciously.

"On a captured Fassali raider."

Hunza looked sharply at Byrne. "And how did you come to be aboard a captured Fassali, Mr. Byrne?"

"I once served with the Imperial forces, sir," Byrne admitted, knowing that Hunza had already guessed about his past.

"Nice to hear you finally admit it," the cap-tain said with a grunt of satisfaction. "Well, whoever or whatever she may be, she looks good to me."

For a second, burning anger flooded through Byrne's body, and he was on the verge of attack-ing the captain, but then the woman's voice stopped him.

"Easy," she called out in Vogtish. "Not yet."

Byrne smiled down at her, and in her corn-flower blue eyes there was the light of a thousand welcomes.

The arrival of the shuttle meant a break in the routine daily lives of the natives who clustered about the ship. People who, many of them, remembered the last visit of the *Kassala*. The rapid clicking that was their laughter filled the air, and their arms waved in intricate patterns as they circled around, jabbering at each other. Captain Hunza pressed the stud that released the inset ladder in the shuttle's side, and with quick, scrambling movements the chief came aboard, followed by one of his advisors. Hunza motioned for the woman to come aboard as well, but she ignored him, walking off to blend into a knot of natives fifty meters away from the ship, where a small tent was being set up.

"Lend me a hand here, will you, Byrne?" Zu'matra asked, rolling a large, drum-shaped container over to the edge of the lock.

"What's that?"

"Maha. For the natives to have a party, compliments of the captain."

"Is that a good idea?" Byrne asked. "You don't know their metabolism. It might poison them."

"It won't. The chief drank some the last time we were here, and all it did was get him totally smashed."

Byrne helped Zu'matra lower the container, which held a hundred liters of the narcotic drink, to the ground, then they rolled it over to the tent. Byrne looked around for the woman, but she had disappeared.

Zu'matra opened a bag he had brought along, and from it he took a bundle of cheap alloy cups, passing them around among the natives. A line formed leading out of the tent, and Zu'matra poured each native a cup nearly full of maha. Byrne, watching him, realized that the maha, enough to give even a confirmed maha drinker like the captain a buzz, would probably knock out most of the natives pretty quickly. But, to his amazement, Zu'matra started pouring out seconds as fast as the natives emptied their cups.

Soon some of the natives were beginning to stagger and give out high-pitched chirping sounds. Then, one by one, they slumped slowly to the ground in a drunken stupor. And as each native collapsed he was dragged away from the tent by his still conscious fellows, to make room inside for more natives. Before

long, Zu'matra had to call back to the shuttle for more maha, which was brought by the Fassali.

Hunza showed up a few moments later, weaving a bit, showing the effects of his own attack on the maha supply. "Hey, Zu'matra," he called when he was still ten meters from the tent. "what happened to the woman?"

"I don't know, sir. By the time we got here with the maha, she was gone. And I haven't seen her anywhere since the party started."

"Okay, we can leave her here for now. Get back aboard the shuttle and get ready to lift. Byrne, I want you to stay down here for now. I'll leave two more drums of maha. Take them up to the village and get a party started there, too. Then check around and see if you can find out where the woman went, and where that Master ship is."

"Okay," Byrne said, looking at one of the animal-drawn carts. "I'll use one of the native wagons to get the stuff over there."

"We'll be back in a couple of hours," Hunza said with a wave as he headed back toward the shuttle. "Just as soon as we take care of a few things back aboard the ship."

The shuttle lifted, crushing flat a cart that was caught beneath one of the gravitic drive nodes, and when it was no longer visible Byrne turned, climbed onto the cart, and headed the animals toward the line of trees. He was still another five meters short of them when the woman stepped out from behind the trunk of a large tree.

"Hello," Byrne said. "Do you understand English?"

"Yes."

"Good. It's a lot easier for me to handle than Permal or Vogtish. My name is William Byrne. I'm glad you didn't give yourself away back there. Whether you know it or not, you're in serious danger."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Byrne," she replied. "Unfortunately I met your captain the first time he was here, and I've got a pretty good idea of what he wants now. And I'm not exactly stu-pid."

"So I gathered," Byrne said dryly.

"And exactly what are you after, Mr. Byrne? Why are you so interested in your captain's intentions toward me?"

"I'm not really sure," Byrne admitted. "But shouldn't I be concerned?"

"That's for you to decide. Isn't going against him dangerous for you, though?"

"Probably. The captain and the second officer both have certain plans regarding me, none of which I would appreciate having come to fruition. The captain wants to capture you, get the ship you came in, and either kill me or maroon me here. Then, at an opportune time, he plans to dispose of the second officer. Zu'matra, he's the second officer, wants the captain to succeed in his plans, to a certain point. But he's figuring on getting rid of the captain before the captain gets rid of him. Personally, I'm hoping the captain and Zu'matra will get rid of each other, where-upon I will take command of the *Kassala* or your ship, if there is such a ship, and take it back to Kadesh. If that happens I shall be delighted to invite you

to accompany me, and if that plan does not meet with your approval I shall inform whatever government you are a citizen of and another ship will be sent to pick you up. I understand you've been here for quite a few years, so I imagine you can spend a little more time here waiting if you'd rather not go back with me."

"I've been here," she answered, "more than fifteen years, as close as I can figure. And there's nothing I want more than to get back to civilization."

"I can't say I blame you."

"You seem to be a kind man," the woman said, her eyes filling with tears. "And a kind man is usually a good man. I trust you, Mr. Byrne."

"Thank you. I shall try to deserve your trust."

"I see you're armed," she said, nodding to the heavy slugthrower strapped to Byrne's belt. "Were you expecting trouble from the natives?"

"The gun isn't for the natives here," Byrne said, smiling. "Second officer Zu'matra loaned it to me for protection from the captain."

"And yet this man who gave you the gun would kill you if he got the chance?"

"Undoubtedly. He would not like it, but he will not allow my life to stand in the way of his desires. And even if I do not insist on getting in his way, my continued existence will be a constant threat to him later if his plans regarding the captain work out as he hopes."

The woman traced a pattern in the dirt with her bare foot, thinking about what Byrne had told her, then she looked up at him. "Your captain's plan is very simple, I think. He now has the chief aboard your ship, probably very drunk. He has sent more of that liquor with you to get the remainder of the village drunk. He'll probably wait a couple of hours, then come back down, kill you, grab me, and take me back up to the ship. He knows that with the chief as hostage I'll have to go with him, and once I'm aboard it won't take him long to get the location of my ship out of me. Once he has that he can start back, and the only problem he'll have is his second officer. So, for the time being, I'll ask that you not distribute whatever it is you have in those casks."

"As you wish, Miss ..."

"Tiala. Tiala Vandeen."

"Vandeen? There's an admiral Vandeen at the Imperial Court."

"A distant relative."

"You're an Imperial, then."

"By citizenship. Half Imperial by birth. My father was from the Empire, but my mother was a colonist from Farstop."

"An intriguing mixture," Byrne said. "Well, I suppose we'd best get on to the village. Will you ride with me? You can probably control these whatever-they-are animals better than I can."

When they arrived at the village, Tiala took Byrne to a large wooden building, where a party of some sort was evidently in progress.

"What are they celebrating?" he asked. "Our arrival?"

"No. They aren't celebrating anything. This is the way the Taparas take their evening meal. It's almost a ritual with them."

Inside the building Byrne ran into a wall of sound, a general buzz and hum and click of talk, counterpointed by the native's clicking laughter. Through the fog of sound a medley of odors drifted into Byrne's nostrils, of the natives, of the fire burning in a large fireplace, and a rolling, spicy smell that could only be cooking foods. Tiala took his arm and led him through a door-way into what was evidently the dining area, a place of soft pastel colors and wild, primitive artwork.

There was a wide, five-meter-long table in the center of the room, and from the doorway Byrne could see little through the eager throng of natives gathered around it. They moved into the room, and Byrne saw that the natives were serving themselves buffet style, grabbing from a table groaning from every inch of surface being heavily laden with food. There were steaming dishes and cold dishes, heaps and mounds and mountains of food, and at the far end of the table a native was cutting thick pinkish slabs from the roast body of some animal or bird or thing, with a meter-long sword.

The natives were slashing away at the panorama of food like Tiala scavengers at the dead carcass of a Bandersnatch, and by the time Byrne plowed his way through the crowd to the table, Tiala tucked in behind him riding in his wake, major chunks had disappeared from the feast.

The chatter, the clanking of plates and cups, the clicking laughter of the natives, filled the room like a waterfall, and when Tiala said some-thing to Byrne he only saw her lips move, not the slightest coherent sound reaching his ears. He shrugged and smiled, bending down to get his ear closer to her lips. Her body scent was like the sweetest of flowers, faint but wild and promising, and he felt a stirring, firmly repressed without conscious thought. Tiala yelled into his ear, with the touch of her warm breath again stirring excitement in him, "Just grab anything. We'll sort it later."

Byrne nodded his head, grabbed plates, and began shoveling food onto them. His manners left much to be desired by normal standards, but in the crowd around the table he was just one of many filling their plates like starving men just rescued from a shipwreck.

In minutes both their plates were full, and they broke out of the crowd, this time with Tiala leading, both of them laughing. Laughing as much at each other as at the absurdity of the situation. "Come on," Tiala said between laughs. "I know a quiet place."

Tiala led the way out of the dining room. Slightly in back of her Byrne found himself looking more at the young woman than at where he was going. She was wearing no jewelry other than a curious pin on one shoulder, holding together the loose cloth of her dress. Her yellow hair was arranged in easy flowing lines, and she moved more like a girl than a woman, with an easy, swaying lightness. And her wide-eyed look, with her golden eyebrows and long lashes framing her sky-blue eyes, gave her a certain shy and innocent air.

Tiala led Byrne to a small, empty room in, the back of the building, and, despite his attempts' to maintain control of his emotions, Byrne found that the crudest of sexual desires were coming to life in his mind and body. Sexual desires he simply could not fight. Everything about the woman was beginning to seem as

tormentingly and provokingly lovely as Byrne's most desiring dream of a woman, and now, without warning or explanation, Byrne found that dream coming true.

Tiala's attitude as she crouched, setting her plate of food on the floor in front of a large fire-place, was exciting beyond words. When she dropped naturally into a sitting position on the floor, leaning on one hand, her legs tucked under her, and began to eat, Byrne had to fight off the urge to throw himself down beside her and start kissing her.

After a moment Tiala looked up at Byrne, holding a forkful suspended just off her plate. After what seemed like an eternity she asked, "What is it? What's wrong?"

As if released by the sound of her voice, surrendering to his innermost desires, Byrne dropped down beside Tiala on the soft carpet that covered the floor. Tiala never lost her self-possession, though her passion soon matched, then even surpassed, Byrne's. Fired by his touch, she remembered to stop him for a moment, a brief fraction of time that seemed to stretch interminably, while she rose and latched the door to insure their privacy, then released the shoulder pin on her dress.

The soft cloth swept down her flowing, feminine curves, revealing a softly golden body that was a wonder to Byrne. A wonder he was not sure he could endure. Tumbling and drown-ing in ecstasy in the minutes that followed, Byrne found, for the first time in his life, that there are times when it as important to give as to receive pleasure.

Tiala lay on the floor in the center of the room, her dress bunched next to her. And she was still unbelievably beautiful to Byrne, still burningly desirable. He sat a few feet away from her, and that few feet was a light-year-wide gulf. He groped for a proper word or gesture, afraid that what he had done might well seem to her as nothing more than a rape, and unable to find the words he wanted, he said nothing.

"Don't worry about it," Tiala finally said into the silence. "I understand. And after fifteen years here, I needed that as much as you wanted it. Come on," she said, rising to her feet and picking up her dress. "Let's get out of. here. I'll show you my place."

Tiala took Byrne by the hand and led him out of the building, through the village, and out of it again on the side opposite the shuttle's landing site. They passed through a grove of trees, then over a small, merrily rushing stream. On the bare trunk of an old, fallen tree next to the stream she sat down and indicated to Byrne a seat beside her.

"And now," she said, "I guess it's time to tell you about myself, about that ship, which is, I imagine, what you want to hear most about."

"I don't really give a damn about the ship any more," Byrne said. "I hope you believe that."

Tiala looked into his eyes for a long mo-ment, then she sighed. "Yes, William. I believe you." Then she leaned forward and kissed Byrne lightly on the lips.

"Okay," Byrne said, somewhat shaky and out of breath after the kiss was over, "Who are you and how did you end up here all by your-self?"

"My father," Tiala began, "Hermann Van-deen, though not of the noble line of that admiral you

mentioned, was pretty well off back on Old Earth. Our family, for many generations, have been shipbuilders, almost since the start of space-flight. They built both military ships for the Imperium and commercial vessels. A few years before I was born, the family, not content with just building ships for others, began operating them throughout the Empire. My father captained one for a while, before taking his place in the company's offices. It was during one of his trips that he met my mother on Farstop. Three days after meeting her he asked her father for permission to marry her, as was the custom on Farstop."

"And a lot of other places," Byrne muttered.

"Yes. Well, for whatever reason, his request was refused, so he quite literally stole my mother. With her permission, of course. He smuggled her aboard his ship and brought her back to Earth, where he married her.

"During the Flacku War, my father's company built and also bought up a great number of ships, operated them at a good profit for nearly ten years, then sold the shipping company when the war ended. He retired from the shipbuilding company that had formed the backbone of all his enterprises, turning control over to his younger brother. We toured Earth for a couple of years, then my mother died and father decided to go out into space again. I was just out of the university, and I convinced him that he should let me go along. He had a ship built in his yards—the *Valkyrie*— and we took off with a small crew to do some touring and exploring outside the Empire. We had been out a little over a year when we decided to visit this cluster. It was the last place we were to visit."

"What happened?" Byrne asked, reaching down to take hold of Tiala's hand. She was staring off into the dark forest, not seeing anything—or at least anything that existed in the present time—and she took no notice of his hand.

"It wasn't until later, much later, that we figured out what must have happened. We were punching out of zero-space to get a nav fix and a look around this area, which was completely uncharted, and at the last moment, after we were back in rational space but just barely, the stasis field must have failed. And the sudden strain almost tore the ship in half.

"The *Valkyrie* carried a small crew, six spacemen, a mate, a steward, a cook, and an engineer. Plus my father and me. We had two shuttles, both small, so my father took me, the cook, steward, and engineer in one shuttle, and the mate took the ordinary spacemen in the other. Luckily none of us were killed when the ship came apart. We got the shuttles away, but the one commanded by the mate didn't get away soon enough. The engines on the *Valkyrie* blew, and it was caught in the blast. There were no survivors.

"Strictly by chance we weren't too far from this system. The charts didn't even show a system here. As it happened the two planets were almost 180 degrees apart in their orbits, and the other one was closer. So that's where we headed. But even under maximum acceleration it was doubtful whether or not we'd make it. We were just too far out. My father rationed the food and water, but he saved some out for me when our main supplies ran out. He starved and thirsted along with the men. And all of them except my father died. The cook of starvation, and the steward and engineer went out the lock hand in hand, without suits.

"Well, we made it, but I don't know how. For the last week before landing I was either in a delirium or unconscious. I don't know how my father managed to stay alive and functioning long enough to get us down, but he did.

"The planet was only marginally habitable. The gravity is almost twice Earth normal, and although it has an oxygen atmosphere there's also a high concentration of ammonia, which made breathing a decidedly

unhealthy occupa-tion. It wasn't quite bad enough to kill us, but an hour outside meant two days of coughing and vomiting inside. Luckily the air purifiers could clean it, there was potable, if evil-smelling, water, and the vegetation was usable by our autochef, so we didn't starve.

"The shuttle's tanks were almost dry by the time we landed, and there was no chance of us developing a fuel source for the power metals to convert. So the first thing father did was start rigging a comm system, hoping that the other planet might have a civilization on it, or there might be some other ships in the area. There weren't, though. He tried and tried, but got no answer to any of his calls. But he kept on trying, on the off-chance that a ship might come into the system and pick up his signal. Then, one day, he was sort of playing with the comm system, running up and down the frequencies, and on a band way off the normal comm channels he picked up a carrier wave.

"Of course he immediately tried calling whatever ship was putting out the signal, but he got no reply. No signals of any kind indicating they heard him, just that carrier. Then it faded out, and I'm sure he thought for a while that he had imagined in—that he was losing his mind from what he had been through. But then, the next day, the carrier was back. He did a quick plot on it, and found it was coming from something in orbit. Well, it didn't make much sense, but it pretty much had to be a ship. And since eventu-ally, when the power metals finally ran out, we were going to die, he decided we had to take a chance and try to reach whatever it was up there. We had barely enough fuel in the shuttle to match orbits, but not enough to get down again, so we loaded the ship with all the vegetation we could carry, to feed the autochef, and went for broke."

"And you found the Master ship, and used it to come here?" Byrne asked.

"You make it sound so easy," Tiala said with a smile. "Yes, we found the Master ship up there in orbit. With not a soul aboard, nor any sign of what might have happened to the crew. We transferred our autochef and stores aboard, and eventually came here. But that eventually covered a lot of time and a lot of hard work. It took us two months to figure out how to tap the power system of the ship, another month to adapt it to our needs, and over a year to work out the engine controls. And we never did find out how to use whatever form of zero-space drive the ship has, assuming it has one. It may be just a shuttle from a mother ship, for use in rational space only, and abandoned in orbit for some reason when the mother ship went home."

"So that's why you never tried to use it to get back to the Empire?"

"Right. We were lucky to get here in it without blowing ourselves up. We were afraid to touch even two-thirds of the controls, for fear of what might happen. We got the main panel turned on, but we couldn't use it. The sym-bology just didn't make any sense, even the math problems we tried to feed into it."

"Well, if necessary," Byrne said, "we can grapple it to the hull of the *Kassala* and I can tune a bulge into the field to enclose it. What hap-pened after you landed here?"

"We made contact with the natives easily enough—they're a pretty easy-going bunch—then settled down to wait for another ship to come along. Five years after the landing my father died, of old age and the complications of what we went through after escaping from the wreck of the *Valkyrie*. That was ten years ago."

"And the natives haven't bothered you?"

Tiala smiled. "Not a bit. Unless you count the insistent desire of the chief to marry me, despite the fact

that what passes for sex among them wouldn't be even remotely possible between us. However, he hasn't been too put off by my refusals, especially since I'm regarded as having brought good luck to them. Since my father and I landed this tribe's only been raided once by others of their own race, another tribe that lives about fifty kilometers north of here. And I stopped that raid with a few shots from my hunt-ing traser."

"You have a gun?"

"Yes. One that my father brought along from the wreck of the *Valkyrie*. I think he realized that we might be stranded on a primitive planet, and he prepared for it as best he could in the short time we had before we had to abandon ship. These people had never seen a traser, or any other kind of gun, and the flash and sudden unexplained death of whoever that flash touched must have seemed like magic to them. It threw them into a complete panic. And I suppose my appearance also knocked them a bit off stride. Since then I've been treated as some sort of minor goddess by the natives."

"How's your health been?" Byrne asked, thinking about the damage that can be done to the human organism through lack of some trace elements.

"It's been excellent. There is little disease among these people, and whatever bugs do occasionally bite them don't seem to like T-human flesh. When the natives die it is usually of old age or wounds or drowning. Or some other accident. I've never seen anything that resembled a contagious disease. Their birth rate is high, but so is the mortality. Only the very fittest survive for long here."

"If there are no contagious diseases, why is the mortality rate so high?"

"There is food for just so many people in the forest hereabout. And they've never developed systematic agriculture or animal hus-bandry. The unfit are destroyed by the tribe. And when a native is injured or becomes so old he is helpless or blind and becomes a burden to himself and the community, he is destroyed. Nature maintains her own balance. Such govern-ment as exists is totally sadistic, with the excep-tion of an hereditary chief. Food is gathered for the common store and most meals are taken by the community as a whole, as you saw tonight. Theft is almost unknown—probably because there is no incentive to steal and the punishment is death. The people are too simple and happy to bother with lying. They are affectionate and demonstrative in their affection. Mostly they sleep by day and hunt and gather food at night. Their eyes are much more night sensitive than ours."

"Sounds like an idyllic life," Byrne said.

"In many ways it is. They eat, drink, play little jokes on each other, tell weird and impossible stories, fish, swim, dance, and sing. They are very musical, and I've even taught them some classical Terran dancing."

"That I've got to see," Byrne said with a laugh. "With those legs, it ought to be some-thing."

"I'll admit they aren't too graceful," Tiala said, returning the laugh. "Now tell me about yourself."

Byrne sketched his life up to the present, leaving out nothing, even his reasons for being kicked out of the Imperial forces and why he had chosen to leave the Empire.

"I want to go back to the world I've lost," Tiala said sadly. "But it seems there's no place for you."

"With you back in that world, I've every reason to want to return to it," Byrne said, smiling and squeezing her hand.

There was a dull roar of thunder away over the horizon, and Tiala suddenly gripped Byrne's hand tightly. "The shuttle is coming back," she said. "I must go to the village. Follow this stream. There is no path, but it is easy to wade, and you won't have far to go. About a quarter mile upstream you will see the roof of a house just off the stream. That's where I live. I'll meet you there later."

Chapter Six

She was quickly gone, splashing back down the little stream, and it occurred to Byrne that she was leaving no trail that might be followed. He rose and started up the stream toward where she said her house was, then he turned and head-ed back toward the village.

He quickly circled around the collection of wooden buildings, staying out of sight of the natives, and finally picked up the path through the woods that led to the open meadow where the shuttle had landed. Only ten meters along the trail was the spot where he had dropped off the drums of maha, and it was there that he found Captain Hunza, examining the casks. He looked up when he heard Byrne coming down the trail, and anger blazed in his eyes.

"I thought I instructed you to dispense this stuff to the natives, Byrne."

"The woman canceled your orders, sir."

"And you let her do it? You obeyed her orders, rather than mine?" He started to say something else, then stopped suddenly, straight-ening up and looking closely at Byrne. "She canceled my orders?" he repeated. "You mean that you've been able to talk to her?"

"Yes, sir. We found a common language after all. And she's an Empire citizen."

"So what? The important thing is, did you find out anything about the ship? Did she say anything about where it is, what kind of condi-tion it's in?"

"Yes, sir. She said it was up there." Byrne waved at the rolling hills off to one side of the village.

"Show me where," Hunza commanded.

"Go into the village, and turn right. You'll find a trail leading up into the hills. I don't know how far it is to the ship, though. She didn't tell me." Byrne hoped, while he was saying this, that there *was* a trail out the other side of the village. And that the ship wasn't in that direction.

"I told you to show me, Byrne. Not tell me." His hand dropped to his side, and Byrne noticed that Hunza was now wearing a sidearm. It looked like the traser Zu'matra had been carrying when he had seen him last.

"Okay, I'll show you. But please be good enough to walk in front of me. I have an uncomfortable suspicion that if I walked ahead of you, I might catch a beam in the back."

"You're a fool, Byrne. And you're throwing away a fortune."

Byrne drew the slugthrower out of his holster. "I don't think so, Hunza. Now hand me that traser. Slowly

and butt first, or I'll be forced to blow a hole in you big enough to drive the shuttle through."

Silently Hunza handed the weapon over, but his eyes burned like twin coals. "Where's the woman?"

"That's none of your business, Captain. She's well out of your way, though. And I think she's got sufficient intelligence to stay out of it until you're gone."

"Not if she's as dumb as you," Hunza sneered. "I suggest you get back to the ship. We can discuss this later."

For an instant Byrne hesitated in the face of a suspicion that Hunza might be able to find Tiala. But back to the ship was where he wanted to go, and he decided that the captain wouldn't have much hope of finding her unless she wanted to be found. So he slowly backed away from the captain until a turn in the trail blocked his view, then he ran toward the shuttle.

The shuttle was empty, and after quickly checking it over to make sure there were no obvious booby-traps, Byrne gunned it skyward, using the radar and his piloting skill rather than the computer to match the *Kassala's* orbit. Zu'matra met him as soon as he cycled through the lock. He noticed at once that Byrne was wearing both the slugthrower and his traser, tucked into his belt. "Did you and the captain have a little run?" he asked pleasantly.

"Sort of. I thought it best to relieve him of your gun. How did he get it?"

"I gave it to him."

"What?Why?"

"To see what would happen when you two ran into each other. May I have it back?"

Byrne hesitated slightly, then handed the O-human his traser. "How about the native chief?" Byrne asked. "Is he still aboard?"

"He and his flunky are laid out below. Dead drunk." Zu'matra stepped over to the lock door Byrne had just come through and hit the cycle switch. "I think I'm going to take a little ride down to the surface. I should be back in an hour or so. I hope."

"I hope you're a good shot," Byrne said, grinning as Zu'matra stepped into the lock. "Hunza hasn't got a gun, but I don't imagine that's the only way he knows to kill."

"Byrne, you're too damn smart for your own good," Zu'matra said as the lock door slid shut.

After the lock had cycled and the shuttle moved off from the *Kassala*, Byrne began to check the ship over. He found a small stateroom just behind the galley locked, and a quick check through the viewer showed the chief and his advisor unconscious on the floor inside. Byrne thought for a moment about trying to cut the door open, but he decided it was too soon for such desperate measures. Either Hunza or Zu'-matra would be back before too long, and one of them was sure to have the keys to the room. Byrne would worry about getting possession of those keys later. Byrne wondered for a minute which of the two men would show up when the shuttle returned. It was possible, he knew, that it would be both of them, but right now the odds were against it. Had Byrne not signed aboard the *Kassala* on Cassandra, or had

he been left on Kadesh, their partnership might have continued uninterrupted. But now each had willed that the other, and Byrne, must die, since the profit from the Master ship would be so much greater un-divided. Moreover, there was Zu'matra's yearning for a command of his own, something not possible until Hunza was out of the way and he, Zu'matra, had shown his ability before the boards as a ship's captain. Which he could do simply by bringing the *Kassala* back to Kadesh on his own.

And now Zu'matra, knowing that Hunza was unarmed, had gone down to the surface to kill him, thinking that the opportunity to do so without witnesses would, in all probability, not come again. And should Zu'matra manage to kill the captain and return to the *Kassala* to kill Byrne, there was but one thing for him to do, and that was to kill the second officer. Byrne didn't like the idea, but he realized that if he did not kill Zu'matra, the O-human would probably spare him for a while, because of his abilities in ship handling and navigation, but those abilities would become redundant a few days out from Kadesh, or whatever system Zu'matra decided to head for.

Better, therefore, for Byrne to meet the problem now, while he still might have some element of surprise on his side.

Byrne went up to the control deck and pulled the tapes from the computer, working out their exact position in the cluster. Then he pulled the small silver cube that was the ship's navigation chart for the area from its slot, inserted it in the computer, and brought the general computer onto the main navigation screen.

As Tiala had said, there were no suns listed in the area. The space wasn't even marked unexplored—just empty. Which meant that there was little chance any ship would come upon this world unless it was doing short trading hops, where the sun would show up on its screens a few light years away. Which is how Hunza must have discovered the place to start with.

Byrne fed the star's coordinates into the cube, a small spot appearing on the screen with a line of fourteen letters and numbers next to it to show that the cube had accepted the correction, then he started to put the cube back into its slot. A sudden inspiration stopped him. He instead pulled all the other cubes from their slots, stacking them on a clipboard. To the stack he added the four primary navigation memory plates from the computer, then he took everything down to the shuttle bay, where he stowed the cubes and memory plates in one of the still-crated battle suits.

Three hours later the shuttle came alongside the *Kassala*, and minutes later Zu'matra cycled through the lock. "We're pulling out," he told Byrne. "Get the shuttle into the bay, then come up and give me a hand with the nav computer."

"Aren't you going to pick up the captain, Zu'matra?" Byrne asked with a smile.

"No," the second officer replied sharply.

"What about the Master ship, then? And the woman? You going to leave them behind as well?"

"To the seventh hell with both of them! The woman's too much trouble, the natives are up in arms, and the ship isn't worth getting killed for. The natives think we've killed their chief, and I think the woman is the one who put the idea in their heads. I just barely got back to the *Kassala* with a whole skin."

"Before we start back," Byrne said, "permit me to make a suggestion. Without the chart cubes and the navigation memory plates for the computer, our chances of getting back to Kadesh, or any other civilized world, are pretty slim."

"What do you mean?" Zu'matra asked.

"I mean I tried to run a position check a while ago, and I couldn't find the cubes. When I tried to turn the computer on to get a tape on our course here, it was dead."

Zu'matra's pale red eyes became blazing orbs from the rage pouring through his body, and his crest stood erect, quivering, a reaction that usually presaged battle among the natives of Rolf's World. "Where are they?" he demanded with a sharp hiss in his voice, his command of the English language slipping away for a moment.

"I imagine Captain Hunza didn't care to have you or me figure out our position, and he decided to take precautions against being marooned. I'd say he took them down with him and hid them someplace. And while I realize that he badly needed killing, and I'm not at all sorry that you did the job on him, it does present something of a problem for us."

"But I didn't kill him," Zu'matra said. "I never got a chance to even look for him. I hadn't got halfway to the village when the woman intercepted me. She was carrying a rifle, and she took my traser away and told me, in very good English, to get back to the ship before she blew me apart. I started back, with the idea of circling around to come into the village from the side, but then I ran into a bunch of the natives. They chased me all the way back to the shuttle, and I didn't have much choice except to lift."

"So you came back hoping I would help you salvage the operation?"

"No. I came back figuring to get the hell out of here. We can leave Hunza down there with the woman. She can take care of herself. And when the natives find him they'll probably eat him, if she doesn't shoot him first. At least this way I've got the *Kassala*, and I'd rather be a live master of an old tramp trader than a dead would-be millionaire."

"Sound reasoning, except for the lack of navigational equipment. And what are you going to do about the chief? Take him down in the shuttle?"

"Hell, no. We'll take him along. The Pseudo-bugs are always willing to pay for a new species of intelligent life. I can probably get five thousand Shields apiece for them."

"And what about me?" Byrne asked him. "Wouldn't I still be an embarrassment to you?"

"I figured to split what I get with you, fifty-fifty. And the second officer's berth aboard the *Kassala* is yours as long as you want it. That should end any possibility of embarrassment between us, on either side."

"Sorry, I'm no slaver."

"Okay, we'll dump 'em then. Or even use the shuttle to put them down somewhere else on the planet, where we won't have to deal with the natives. Whatever you want."

"What I want is for us to pick up Hunza, the woman, and the Master ship. I don't see any sense in us leaving anything here, or giving up the deal just because a few minor details have gone wrong."

"Somehow that doesn't sound like you, Byrne," Zu'matra said suspiciously.

"Well, it is me. Let's just say I've been doing a bit of thinking about what I could do with my cut of what that ship will bring back in the Empire. Look, I met the woman, and we had a long talk. I told her what to expect from you and Hunza, and now she trusts me. So I think, perhaps, that I had better go down instead of you and see if I can find the captain, get the nav charts and memory plate, and round up the woman. I don't think it would be too safe for you down there."

"And how are you going to keep the natives from jumping on you as soon as you land?"

"The woman. I think she can stop them. I hope she can, anyway."

"Okay. I'll help you swing out the shuttle."

"I can handle it," Byrne said. "Why don't you get below and get the cutting laser out of the engine room? Start cutting the door to the storeroom open so we can get the chief out. I'll want to drop him off before we leave."

Zu'matra hesitated for a minute, then took off for the engine room. Byrne waited several seconds to make sure he was gone, then he opened the battle suit crate and, setting the external grav field controls, floated it over and into the shuttle. Two minutes later he was floating free of the *Kassala*. He oriented the shuttle, keyed the engines, and seconds later was headed back toward the surface—and Tiala.

For an hour after Byrne had left him, Hunza prowled around the outskirts of the village. Failing to catch sight of the woman, he decided to start back toward the field where they had been landing the shuttle, but a hundred feet into the woods he heard the shuttle landing, and he began to run. He was still a quarter mile short of the edge of the woods when, ahead of him, he heard a woman's voice, speaking English. He couldn't speak the language, but he had been around it long enough to, with effort, understand what was being said.

"Just drop your gun right there and turn around. Head back to your ship, and no arguments, if you please. Try anything funny, and I guarantee you'll never leave Tapar alive."

"What's the problem, woman?" Hunza heard Zu'matra's deep voice ask. "I don't mean you any harm."

"I know better. Get back to your ship, or I'll shoot you right where you stand."

"All right, I'm going." And Hunza heard Zu'matra's footsteps moving down the trail, back toward the shuttle's landing spot.

Hunza stepped into a clump of bushes and hid, and minutes later the woman passed him, her rifle at the ready, her glance roving suspiciously from side to side. He followed her back to the village, and she turned in at the largest of the native buildings. A few minutes later a large crowd of natives came boiling out the door, carrying spears and clubs, hurrying down the street to the forest's edge, then on toward the shuttle.

The woman came out of the building and sat down on the steps, her rifle across her thighs. From time to time she glanced warily up and down the village street, but she didn't notice as Hunza cautiously backed away from the village, farther into the forest, staying on his knees. When he was out of her sight he rose and made his way slowly and as soundlessly as possible in a wide circle to come into the village from the opposite side. Almost an hour had passed before he found himself in the rear of the building the woman

was presumably guarding.

Avoiding every dead leaf and twig, Hunza crept along the side of the building until he reached the corner. Keeping low, he edged his head around the corner, and saw the woman, still sitting on the bottom step, her gaze fixed on the blot of blackness where the trail through the woods opened up onto the village street.

Hunza locked his hands together, gathered his legs under him, and sprung around the corner, bringing his clenched fists together in a blow at the side of Tiala's head. At the last moment she heard him coming, and started to turn. But she was too late. His blow, instead of connecting with her head just below and behind her ear, where he had aimed it, slammed into the angle of her jaw, knocking her off the step, into the street where she collapsed, unconscious.

Hunza quickly ripped his shirt into strips, using one sleeve to gag Tiala and the other pieces to tie her hands behind her back. Then he threw her limp form over his shoulder, grabbed her rifle from where it was lying in the dirt, and carried her out of the village, into the forest. A hundred meters from the village edge he found a clump of bushes that provided cover while still allowing him to see the village, and he settled down to patiently await the return of the shuttle, which he was sure would be back sooner or later.

Of one thing Hunza was certain. The woman could speak English, and since she had, undoubtedly, met Byrne earlier in the day and had not driven him back to the *Kassala*, that argued she had talked to him. The fact that she had subsequently armed herself and been put on her guard indicated that Byrne had told her some-thing of Hunza's plans. Well, if Byrne should have the bad luck to come back down with the shuttle, he would remain on the planet. With the woman's rifle, Hunza could beam him from ambush, ending that problem once and for all.

An hour passed, and Hunza began to wonder if they were going to come down again. Perhaps Zu'matra refused to venture down to the surface again after being chased away by the woman, and Byrne might simply have refused to come down. What if they decided to maroon him here? It would be like Zu'matra to suddenly decide to chuck the whole thing and head back for Ka-desh. And Hunza suddenly realized that Zu'-matra would, if Hunza failed to return, be the new master of the *Kassala*.

Then a wave of sudden relief passed through Hunza, and his knees turned weak with reaction. Overhead he heard the thunder of a descending shuttle. It flashed over his head, the bright silver hull gleaming in the light of the setting sun, then, seconds later, he heard the engines cut off as it touched down. He waited, the woman's rifle at the ready, but no one came along the trail. Half an hour passed, and finally Hunza could wait no longer. He grabbed Tiala, who struggled briefly, ineffectually, against her bonds, and moving quietly, he made his own path through the woods, back toward where the shuttle had landed.

To all appearances the shuttle was empty when Hunza reached it, but he took no chances. He left Tiala, still securely bound, back in the woods, and using every bit of cover available he stealthily approached the ship. Inside he quickly checked the entire shuttle, making sure that no one was aboard, waiting for him, then he went back and picked up the woman, carrying her inside and strapping her to one of the acceleration couches.

Hunza didn't bother untying Tiala when he hurried from the shuttle into the *Kassala*. "Rouse two of the ordinaries," Hunza commanded as soon as Zu'matra came into the shuttle bay, "and get the shuttle inside."

"I really can't think of any reason I should continue to obey your orders, Captain," Zu'matra said. "In

fact, I should kill you right now."

"Don't be an ass! We've got a chance to get everything we came for. So let's get moving."

"I'd have been moving a long time ago, Captain, if I had those computer plates and nav cubes. Where are they?" Zu'matra pulled his traser from his holster, pointing it steadily at the captain's belly.

"Where they belong, of course," Hunza said, was not really paying attention to what Zu'matra was saying, his eyes on the gun in the O-human's hand. "In the control room."

"Come on, Captain. Give them up."

"You mean they *aren't* in the control room?" Hunza asked, suddenly realizing that Zu'matra was serious about the missing pieces.

"You know damn well right they aren't, Hunza. The plates have been pulled from the memory bank, and the cubes aren't in their rack. So what did you do with them?"

"I swear to you by whatever gods you hold holy that I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"Well, if you didn't take them," Zu'matra said, the muzzle of his gun dropping toward the deck, "where the hell are they? Byrne said they were gone."

"Then either Byrne is wrong, or he's lying and he's got them hidden someplace. Get that shuttle warped into the bay while I check the control room."

But Zu'matra didn't bother with the shuttle. Instead he went along with Hunza to try to locate the missing nav cubes and memory plates. And in their haste to leave for the control room neither of them noticed the proximity light come on in the shuttle bay, triggered by the approach of the battle suit Byrne had smuggled off the *Kassala*.

Byrne hit the air dump switch to fill the repair lock on the shuttle, which faced out away from the *Kassala's* shuttle bay lock, while keeping the inner door closed with the override switch. That gave him time to get out of the battle suit and bring his slugthrower before the door cycled open. Inside he found that the internal grav field had been shut off, and he floated across the main compartment to the lock that opened into the *Kassala*. At the last moment before opening the lock door, though, he heard a strangled moan and he turned back into the shuttle, his gun at the ready.

He found Tiala in one of the acceleration couches, her golden face pale in the red-tinged lights from the control panel, a trickle of blood escaping from under the gag in her mouth. He gently removed the gag, seeing Tiala wince as a bit of dried blood tore away from the edge of her mouth where the cloth had cut into her flesh.

"Thank you," she said softly. "And now my hands and feet, if you please."

Byrne untied her, and as she started to drift off the couch he turned and slapped the grav field switch on the panel in back of her. The load was set at half a standard gee, and when Byrne lifted Tiala out of the couch, setting her on her feet, she lurched weakly into his arms. "He hit me," she sobbed. "I think my jaw

is broken."

Byrne gently ran his hand along Tiala's jaw, over the ugly purple bruise that was forming. "No, I don't think it's broken," he said. "Just badly bruised. Who did it? Was it Hunza?"

Tiala could only nod.

In his day, Byrne had experienced a number of strong, almost overpowering, emotions. He had known the combined fear and exhilaration of space combat, the slashing pain of a laser burn, the supreme ecstasy of a Fellenian blending, the pride of promotions earned rather than bought and the hatred for a system that made money more important to those promotions than what-ever ability a man might have. But all those emotions rolled into one could not have transcended what he felt then, with Tiala in his arms.

"You're okay now," he murmured in her ear. He kissed her gently, then sat her down on the edge of the acceleration couch. "You wait here for me," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Just as soon as I've taken care of Cap-tain Hunza, once and for all."

"No," Tiala said, refusing to let go of Byrne's arm. "I would not have his blood on your hands for my sake. You're not a murderer."

"It wouldn't be murder. Hunza plans to kill me as soon as he can. He's already tried more than once. To kill him now, after what he's done to both of us, would not be murder. At most it would be the extermination of a dangerous animal."

But Tiala shook her head and continued to hold onto his arm. "Please don't leave me now," she said simply. She sobbed again, and he felt her slipping out of his grasp. Byrne eased her down onto the acceleration couch, then sat down beside her, putting his arm around her, letting her lean against him. Slowly Tiala's silent crying ended, then she sat up again, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Feel better now?" Byrne asked.

"Yes, some. My jaw hurts, though."

"It'll heal. Right now I guess we'd best get out of here." Byrne settled himself in the other acceleration couch, then released the clamps hold-ing the shuttle to the side of the *Kassala*. Using a brief spurt from the reaction controls he nudged the shuttle away from the side of the ship, then let it drift for ten long minutes, until he was far enough away that he thought he could fire the engines without anyone on the *Kassala* noticing, unless they happened to be looking out one of the ports directly at the shuttle.

Back in the *Kassala*, Hunza and Zu'matra were searching for the missing nav cubes and computer plates. The absence of the nav cubes from their slots over the computer gave the con-fident Hunza pause, and when he discovered that the plates were indeed missing from the memory bank of the computer, his apprehension turned to combined fright and anger.

"It's that damned Byrne," he said. "He's hidden them away someplace. They've got to be here on the *Kassala* someplace, and if they are, we'll find them. He wouldn't have destroyed them. If he had he would have been stranding himself here along with us, and that I don't think he would want to do. He's smarter than that."

"You sure you didn't take them down with you, Captain?" Zu'matra asked with suspicion plain in his voice. As far as he knew, Byrne had never lied to him, and he was reluctant to think the T-human had done so in the matter of the missing navigation instruments.

"I swear I didn't," Hunza said.

"Then let's search the ship."

After an hour of searching they had both been forced to the conclusion that Byrne had taken the nav cubes and memory plates with him. There were a lot of unsearched places left on the ship—it would have taken a month to search them all—but all the most likely places had been in-spected without any sign of the missing com-ponents.

"Okay, Captain," Zu'matra finally asked. "What the hell do we do now?"

"Get the stuff back," Hunza said.

"And just how do you intend to do that, Captain? Neither one of us dares go down to the surface. If Byrne doesn't get us, the natives probably will. And remember we've still got their chief locked up in the storeroom. I started to cut him out, but now that you're back we can use the keys. If we go down without him, you know damn well that we're going to end up in some-one's cooking pot."

"Byrne will give the stuff back," Hunza said confidently. "I've got something he wants."

"What?"

"The woman. She's in the shuttle."

"Well I'll be damned."

"You already have been, or you wouldn't be here with me. When I go after something, I get it. Here's what we'll do. You take the shuttle down, and leave a message cube there in the field. When Byrne hears the shuttle coming down he'll come running, and he'll find the cube. I'll tell him that if he doesn't leave us the nav cubes and memory plates, to pick up in the morning, I'll kill the woman."

"I'd rather we picked him up along with the cubes," Zu'matra said. "I've got a little score I want to settle with him."

"Yeah, that's an idea," Hunza said with a smile. "Let's get the woman into the ship and lock her up, then you can take off for the sur-face."

Zu'matra and Hunza dropped down to the shuttle bay, but when Zu'matra palmed the plate to open the lock into the shuttle, a red light glowed, indicating vacuum on the other side. "The shuttle's gone!"

"It can't be!" Hunza exclaimed.

"Well, it is. You must not have tied the woman up tight enough, and she worked herself loose and took the shuttle down herself."

"If you'd gotten the damn thing inboard when I told you to," Hunza sputtered, "she'd be here now."

"And if you had taken the time to bring her inside when you got here ..."

"Yeah, I know. I need a drink."

"I suggest you forget about drinking and figure out some way to make a deal with Byrne."

"After what I did to the woman? The only deal he'll make with me will come out of the end of his gun. If I went down there now I wouldn't last five minutes. You go. You and Byrne have been pretty good friends. You've protected him from me ..and he ought to be grateful for that. And through the woman he can protect you from the natives."

"And, Captain, just how the hell do you suggest I get down there? The shuttle's gone, and number two's no good. The main drive nodes burned out back on P'tahh, remember? And you were too damned cheap to replace it?"

"No problem. I've got a couple of surplus battle suits I picked up on Cassandra over there in those crates," Hunza said, waving at the far wall of the shuttle bay. "You can use one of them. They've got plenty of reserve in the tanks, and you'll be able to get away quicker in case some-thing does go wrong."

Zu'matra considered the prospect for a long time, then, with a sigh of resignation, he rose from where he had been sitting on the suiting bench next to the lock. "I guess it's a chance I've got to take." He walked over to the closest of the crates, thumbed the switch, then stood silently looking into it as the lid swung slowly open.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Hunza demanded.

"There's no suit in this case."

Hunza ran over to where Zu'matra was standing and peered into the empty case. "Well," he said, "now we know what happened to the shuttle. The woman didn't get loose and take it down. Byrne must have grabbed the suit last time he was up here, and he used it to follow me back up, then took the shuttle down himself. Check the other crate."

"Yeah, there's one in here," Zu'matra said after opening the second crate.

"Then get it on and get down to the surface. Make a deal with Byrne. Any deal he wants. We can worry about how to get rid of him later."

Byrne, sure that once Hunza and Zu'matra compared notes about the missing cubes and plates, one of them would head down for the surface to make some kind of deal with him, stayed in the area of the shuttle instead of going up to Tiala's house. He and Tiala waited just inside the line of trees, and not too long after nightfall, Byrne spotted a flashing beacon in the sky. It proved to be the locator light atop one of the battle suits, and as it landed, Byrne stepped out of the trees, walking toward the shuttle, clearly visible in the bright starlight cast by the packed suns of the cluster.

"Hold it right there," Byrne called out when the suit touched the ground and the small drive node on the back ceased to glow.

"That you, Byrne?" Zu'matra asked.

"Yeah. And I'd advise you not to make any sudden moves. You're beautifully silhouetted against the shuttle. There's no way I could miss."

"I didn't come down to get killed, Byrne."

"That's good. Well, what did you come down for? What's the program?"

"I don't know. I came down to ask you."

"You know that Hunza captured Tiala, of course?"

"Is that her name? Whatever—you got her back. That was a smart move you made with the other battle suit. I never would have thought to check what was in those crates."

"Which is why I'm holding all the high cards now," Byrne said with a laugh. "But I still have a score to settle with the captain for what he did to Tiala. And I want him down here—to stand trial."

"There's no law here, man."

"Oh yes there is. My law. And Hunza will have to answer to it."

"You'll have to get him down here first. And he's not about to come down on his own. He knows what he's got coming from you."

"So do you, for that matter," Byrne said. "You're an accessory both before and after the fact."

"Wrong. I'm a principal. But not for the same reasons as Hunza. I have no designs on the woman. All I want is my cut of whatever a sale of that Master ship will bring. Or, failing that, a way to get the *Kassala* back to Kadesh—preferably without the captain aboard."

"So you'll be the new captain. Okay, I'll buy that for now. Where do we go from here?"

"Don't ask foolish questions, Byrne," Zu'matra said, anger in his voice. "You've got us stopped cold, and you know it. So what do you want us to do?"

"You mean that Hunza didn't send you down with an offer to make? Some sort of trade, which he would renege on after he got the nav instruments back?"

"No, he did not. As far as I'm concerned, you're in command now, not the captain. It's for you to give the orders."

"Then here they are. Get in the shuttle, get up to the *Kassala*, and cut the chief loose. Bring him back down, and we'll talk further."

"You can come up and get him yourself," Zu'matra said. "Hunza was headed for a bottle when I left, and he should be dead drunk by now. He can't stand pressure. When it's on, he dives into a bottle."

"No chance, Zu'matra. When I come back up to the *Kassala*, it'll be on my terms, not yours or the captain's. I'm not going to give him another shot at me until I'm ready to finish him."

"I would have finished him off this morning," Zu'matra complained, "if the woman hadn't driven me back aboard the shuttle before I had the chance. It was entirely too good an opportunity to miss. Nobody would have known, there would have been no witnesses, and I'm sure that you wouldn't have given a damn."

"No," Byrne admitted, "I wouldn't have. This morning. But now his ass belongs to me—remember that. Well, I'm glad we had this talk," he said sarcastically, "but now I suggest that you follow my orders. Get aboard the shuttle and get back up to the *Kassala*. Pick up the chief or king or whatever he is and bring him back here. Then I'd suggest you get right back up to the ship again. The chief might be a bit upset over being held prisoner, and from what I've heard about him, he can get pretty nasty when he's upset. I'll give you a call over the comm unit in the battle suit when I'm ready to talk to you again."

"But..."

"I'd get moving if I were you, Zu'matra," Byrne said in a low, deadly voice.

Zu'matra turned and climbed into the shuttle, and as soon as the outer lock door slid shut, Byrne took Tiala's hand and led her back to the edge of the forest. "He's a strange man, Zu'matra," Byrne said. "He's dangerous as a Telia scavenger, yet so frank and matter-of-fact in his villainy he gives the impression of being an honest man."

"I wouldn't trust him," Tiala said.

"Don't worry—I won't. But I'm going to wait right here to make sure he brings the chief back down, and lands him alive and in one piece. You go on back to your house, and I'll see you there in the morning."

"No!" Tiala said. "I don't think that would be a good idea at all. If any of the Taparas find you, they'll kill you on sight. You'd best come with me and stay hidden until I get a chance to talk to them. They're a little upset over the chief being taken away and not returned."

"Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll wait for the shuttle, and you wait for me, back in the woods where we hid the battle suit. I don't want you here, just in case Zu'matra and Hunza decide to try something funny."

"Why don't you wait in the woods with me?"

"Because I want to make damn sure that Zu'matra follows orders. And I can't do that from back there. Now get moving." Without further argument Tiala headed back into the woods, to wait for Byrne, and he settled down to wait for the shuttle's return.

Byrne didn't have to wait long. Less than an hour had passed, when the shuttle dropped down into the field. The lock door slid open, and the chief and his aide stumbled out into the dark. As soon as they were clear of the shuttle's drive nodes, the lock slid shut and the ship climbed back into the sky, leaving the meadow lit only by the cold fire of the massed suns of the cluster.

Quietly Byrne backed away, hoping he wouldn't be spotted by the natives' superior night vision, and when he was twenty meters into the woods he called softly to Tiala. Instantly she answered him.

"Okay, he brought them back down," Byrne said. "They're headed for the village."

"You'd better wait here," Tiala said, giving his hand a squeeze. "At least until I have a chance to see what's going to happen. These people are like children in most things, but they can be terrible when

aroused."

"No, I'll follow you back to the village." Tiala started to argue, but Byrne held up his hand. "Don't worry—I won't come into the village with you. I've got more sense than that. And I'll stay out of sight. But I want to be able to keep an eye on you, just in case the chief decides that what happened was your fault as well as ours."

They moved through the woods to the edge of the village, where Byrne settled down behind a fallen tree, laying the barrel of the rifle over the trunk, pointed toward the center of the village. Tiala went on in to where most of the natives seemed to be gathered in front of the large building that was their communal dining hall.

Everybody appeared to be talking at once, and the uproar continued for several minutes, when an insistent howl, apparently from the chief, silenced the others. Byrne couldn't see Tiala, but he assumed she and the chief were in conference. Byrne hoped that she was convincing him that at least one of the visitors from the *Kassala* was on his side. The chief might believe her, and then again he might not. In emergencies and matters of vengeance the primitive mind is the mind of a direct-actionist. Having been maltreated—having had his official dignity assailed by the master of the *Kassala*—it might occur to the chief that it would be both safer and much more satisfying to treat all humans he could find, both T- and O-human, as equally guilty. Byrne flipped open the charge magazine of Tiala's rifle and counted the zap cells inside. There were only five, in a magazine that would hold fifty, and Byrne realized that they had to be at least fifteen years old. He wondered if he could depend on them in an emergency, or if their charge, over the years, might have leaked away to the point where they were useless. As a precaution, hoping that if trouble came he would have the long-range rifle to use, but wary lest it might not be usable, he pulled out the slugthrower and laid it on the tree trunk in front of him

"William," Tiala's voice said out of the darkness, startling Byrne.

"Here," he said, standing up.

"Let's get out of here. *Quietly*. Follow me."

Byrne stopped to pick up the bag he had made from his shirt to hold the nav cubes and computer plates, then he followed Tiala back into the woods, away from the village. For about two hundred meters they proceeded along a small path, then they turned and circled around the village until they reached the stream. After wading for a quarter of a mile, they stepped out onto the bank and a footpath through the brush that led to Tiala's house. Not once during their silent, hurried journey through the forest had Tiala spoken, and at the entrance she sat down abruptly on a log that served as a step up into the house.

"Well, that was a close one," she said.

"I take it you couldn't convince the chief?"

"Not tonight I couldn't. He was much too angry to listen to reason, although I'm pretty sure he'll have cooled off by morning. He's a little hung over, and that isn't helping. And on top of that, I made a bad mistake."

"What?"

"I told him that you wanted to take me back to my people, and that I wanted to go with you. I thought he'd let me go—but he won't. He doesn't want to lose the good luck I've brought them. Or my rifle."

"That's going to make things a bit more difficult," Byrne said.

Tiala stood up. "You remain here—inside my house—for now. Nobody knows you're here, and nobody is likely to find out because nobody ever comes to my house except by direct invitation. Since they decided to make me a demi-goddess, I decided to act like one, and that's one of the prerogatives I insisted on." She looked at Byrne, and in the bright starlight her face was very pale and her expression serious. "If you're discovered you'll have your brains bashed out and eaten by the chief, in person."

"No I won't," Byrne said. "He may try, but he and a good number of his friends will have been sent to their happy hunting grounds before I follow them. Cheer up—we're still in good shape."

"I don't know what gives you your optimism."

"Captain Hunza's greed. And knowing that it'll take him years, if he can make it at all, to find his way back to civilization through zero-space without the chart cubes and computer. And even if he did elect to try getting back without them, Zu'matra would undoubtedly overrule him. He's not a fool, and he knows their chances of finding their way back without them. So somehow I'll get back up there without getting killed, take control of the *Kassala*, and take it back to Kadesh."

"Will you desert me, William?"

"I might have to, for a while at least. Once I get to Kadesh, I can get another ship, an Empire warship if necessary, to come and pick you up."

"And if Hunza or Zu'matra manage to kill you, I'll either have to go with them or be stranded here forever."

"It'll be too dangerous for you to come up to the *Kassala* with me. I think I can take out Hunza, and I'm sure I can handle Zu'matra, if only by appealing to his desire to be captain of the *Kassala*. But it'll be a gamble. One I can't ask you to take."

"I am going to take it, though," Tiala said firmly.

"Okay," Byrne said diplomatically, "we'll table that for now. Something seems to be happening down in the village. Hear it? Sounds like music."

Tiala listened intently for a minute, then a shudder passed through her body. "It's their song of battle triumph," she said. "The only time they sing it is when they kill or capture a foreign chief."

"Have there been any attacks lately by other tribes? Might they have captured another chief while we've been busy with our own problems?"

"No. I would have heard."

"Then they must have Zu'matra or Hunza. One of them must have come back down for some reason."

"But we didn't hear the shuttle land," Tiala said. "And from here, up on this hill, we would have heard it easily."

"You're right," Byrne said. "Which means that whoever it was came down in the battle suit. And I'll lay

odds it's the captain, and that he didn't come down willingly. Zu'matra probably stuffed his drunk body in the suit, set it on automatic, and sent him down."

"Stay here," Tiala said. "I'll be back in less than an hour." Before Byrne had a chance to argue she was gone, splashing down the stream toward the village.

When Tiala returned, well inside the promised hour, she found Byrne asleep, his body leaning up against the door to her house. She stood for a long time gazing down at him, then she knelt and looked full into his face as if, unknown to him, she could study him in a manner not possible in his waking moments. Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked straight at her, and smiled as she started back in embarrassment.

"Well?" he asked. "Who was it?"

"The captain. They were pulling him out of the suit when I got there. He appeared confused."

"Drunk. Well, desperate circumstances require desperate measures. Zu'matra had to do something, and sending Hunza down to placate both the natives and me was an idea, at least. What do you think they'll do to him?"

"I don't know. When I left they were tying him to a tree, and he wasn't exactly cooperating. Whatever it is they're going to do, though, it won't happen for a while. At least until morning. They like a bit of ritual before they kill their enemies."

"Are you quite certain nobody knows I'm here, or is liable to come up and find me?"

"Quite sure."

"Okay, I'm going to stretch out here then, and get a little sleep. We can worry about the captain, and everything else, tomorrow."

Tiala took Byrne's hand, brought it up to her lips, and kissed it. Then she looked up at him with a sad smile. "I'm sorry I've gotten you into this, William."

"Don't worry about it," Byrne said, returning her smile. "I've been in tight spots before. We'll sleep late in the morning and I'll have my breakfast in bed, thank you. Then I'll see what I can do for the captain."

"Why would you want to do anything for him?"

"Damned if I know," Byrne said. "Maybe it's just that I want the pleasure of killing the bastard myself. But the first thing I have to worry about is getting back on the *Kassala* without getting myself killed."

"I'm going back with you, William."

"No you aren't. At least not at first. You're the one precious possession I don't dare risk in a confrontation with Zu'matra. I've only got one advantage over him. Even if he could get back to Kadesh, he doesn't know the location of this system. But you do, and somehow he'd get it out of you. It wouldn't be all that hard. So, unless he has you, it won't do him a bit of good to get rid of me on the off chance that he could find his way back here again afterwards. He has no choice but to trade with me. And even if he agrees to a trade, I still think it would be best for me to go back to Kadesh with him alone. I can either send help for you, demand it from the embassy since you're an Empire citizen, or I can come back

my-self as soon as I get hold of a ship or enough money to charter one."

"I'll not take that risk, William," Tiala said. "I'll not take a chance of being stranded here for the rest of my life. I had resigned myself to it once, but your arrival has given me hope, and I don't think I could survive the dashing of that hope. I'm going with you, and whatever risks you have to face with Zu'matra, I'll face them with you." Her voice broke a little. "Besides, I—I don't want to be separated from you—ever."

"Why?" Byrne was aware that the question was stupid, even as he asked it, but something inside of him, some devil he couldn't control, forced him to ask the question.

"Because," Tiala replied simply, looking up at Byrne with a radiant smile on her face, "I love you."

Byrne held out his arms in silence. And in silence Tiala came into them and lifted her face for his kiss.

Chapter Seven

William Byrne was no stranger to the love of women. Indeed, he was, mentally and physically, the kind of man many women find most irresistible, especially the jaded women of the Imperial Court.

Up to the time Byrne had enlisted in the Imperial Terran Outforces, he had gone to the best schools, lived in luxury, been reared as a gentleman. Toward women he had always been gracious and deferential, toward men courtly and affable, a warm, considerate lover and a man who could and would clean out a bar should the need arise. Byrne wasn't a particularly good-looking man, but he had strong, rugged, distinctive features, and when he smiled, his teeth were apt to inspire envy in the woman he was smiling at.

If Byrne had ever bothered to analyze his attitude toward women he would have been compelled to admit that he was a bit of a Don Juan. He liked women. He often loved them. He liked to be in their company, not only for the sake of the pleasure a woman could give him, but because he knew he was welcome in their company. His intense masculinity had always paved the way for him around women, but the thought of marriage had never impinged upon him at all seriously. In fact, Byrne distrusted himself as a most inconstant man, who knew only too well his own limitations. Several times he had imagined himself seriously in love, but it had always turned out to be a case of lust rather than love. His pay in the Imperial Forces had been adequate for his immediate needs and rather expensive tastes, but a small voice inside him had always whispered that to him it would be something of a chore to provide out of that pay the comforts he would want his wife to enjoy. Too well he remembered the life in his father's place on Myriad, and if he married he would want his wife to enjoy the same sort of life.

And now Byrne stood in the starlight, a hunted man on an uncharted planet thousands of light years from home, holding in his arms a castaway T-human woman, and strangely he felt no surge of desire, only a great yearning to kiss and caress, to comfort and protect this woman who, within the short period since his landing, had come to trust him and was now, apparently, prepared to love him.

Tiala was clinging to him, but she was not the clinging-vine type of woman. He knew she was brave with a bravery beyond that of most women, whom he thought merely reckless. Honestly brave himself, Byrne admired that quality in Tiala, for he had never met it in any woman before. He held her to him, fiercely joyous, aware only of the blissful moment and with no thought for what stretched before them. He stroked her golden hair back from her forehead, and he found something ineffably sweet in the way she

had come to him—so trusting, so guileless, so unaware of her slightest lack of conventionality. Quite like a frightened little girl clinging to her father in the dark. But Tiala was not a little girl—she was a woman.

"And now I'm not frightened any more," she murmured, almost as if she had been reading his mind.

Byrne's hand passed over the swelling of her jaw where Hunza had struck her, and he felt her wince a little. Hot rage boiled in Byrne's body, and he knew that if, by any intervention of the fates, the natives spared the captain, he would kill the man without compunction.

"And now you are angry again," Tiala said. "I can feel it. And I am being selfish. You are tired—and you need to get some sleep." Gently she disengaged herself from Byrne's arms. "Good night, my darling." She stepped back away from Byrne, smiled, then turned and disappeared into the gloom of the interior. Byrne heard a door close softly, and for several minutes he stood there, mentally confused, then he entered the main room of the house, kicked off his shoes, and stretched out on the couch he found against one wall—and presently slept, lulled to sleep by the soft night wind whispering gently through the trees outside.

It was late in the morning when Byrne awakened. "Hello," he called out, but no one answered him. Happily he threw his shoes at the closed door to the rear of the house and called out again, but still without result. He decided that Tiala must have gone out to round up something for breakfast, and he stretched out luxuriously on his back, not to think, but to enjoy the absolute absence of thinking or the necessity for it. Whatever was going to happen would happen. He and Tiala were in the hands of whatever gods there might be, and Byrne was quite unconcerned with what he would have to do later in the day to try to insure their safe return to the Empire. He thought rather lazily that he might suffer a worse fate than being marooned forever here with Tiala. Rather like the stories of the old Garden of Eden. A world filled with beauty, without bills, without social obligations, taxes or war. A paradise.

"But it would be one hell of a place to get a toothache," he said aloud.

"You're too young to be talking to your-self," Tiala said from the door.

"You left me no one else to talk to, wo-man," Byrne said, getting to his feet and kissing Tiala gently, only too aware of the large bruise that now covered half the side of her face. "Where have you been?"

"Out gathering up something for your breakfast, master. Which I seem to remember you demanding be served to you in bed."

"Well, I'm up now, so I suppose I'll let you off this one time and eat in the kitchen."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Perfectly."

She looked at Byrne approvingly. "You must not have any nerves, then. It took me hours to get to sleep."

"What's for breakfast?"

"Some of our famous native delicacies. A sort of fish, and something like eggs. You don't want to know

what kind of animal lays them, though."

"Okay, I won't ask. How do you fix them?"

"As an omelet is best. Fried in an oil we get from a small plant. Lots of salt and herbs make it fairly palatable. I like them, but tastes in all things are cultivated, and it may just be that I'm used to them."

"What's the latest gossip from the village?"

"I saw your captain," Tiala said with a frown. "He really looks bad. I guess a combination of a hangover and being treated a bit roughly when they pulled him out of that suit. He begged me to intercede with the chief."

"And what did you say?"

"I interceded for him."

"I'm not sure I like that idea," Byrne said. "What did his Royal Highness say to that?"

"His royal Highness was very sporting about it. As a favor to me, now that he thinks there's no chance I'm going to be leaving him, he consented not to knock the captain's brains out. At least not right away. Instead he's agreed to make him his personal slave. For life."

"Knowing the captain, that might be a worse punishment than simply killing him. It's too bad I can't meet your chief. I'd like to congratulate him on his insight into captain Hunza's personality."

"I'm afraid it would be too bad if he made your acquaintance," Tiala said with a smile. "That is, unless you desire to become a slave, too."

"Not unless it's your slave I'm to become."

"Never my slave, darling," Tiala said.

Byrne found that the fish was not particularly appetizing, and the eggs not at all so, though Tiala ate both with a healthy relish. The chinks in his appetite Byrne filled with fresh fruit, then he sat and talked with Tiala about the changes that had taken place in the Empire since she had left, until almost noon, when she left him and went down to the village. She returned in about fifteen minutes.

"I saw the captain and told him what was to become of him," Tiala said. "He took it very hard, and when I told him it was the best I was able to do for him, and that he was lucky he wasn't going to be killed out of hand, he cursed me."

"Good. That means that neither of us will waste our time or energy feeling sorry for Captain Hunza. The chief spared me a dirty job, even though in some ways I was looking forward to personally writing paid to the captain's ticket. I guess I'll always feel a pang of regret for not finishing him, as well as for not meeting your chief socially. I think I'd like him."

"I'm sure you would. The chief is a patriarch, and a good leader for his people. He can trace his blood by memory for nearly a thousand years. He recited his pedigree to me one day in an effort to demonstrate that he was worthy to have me for a wife. I had to listen to him nearly all day. He is extraordinarily kind and just, and he is a king every step of the way. When he discovered what I needed

and wanted here, he saw to it that I had it. Freedom to come and go, to be one of his people if and when I desired it, but under no circumstances to have my privacy disturbed. It is forbidden to even come within shouting distance of this spot without my invitation."

"I could stay here forever, then," Byrne said.

"You could. But would you want to?"

"You know I wouldn't," Byrne said with a smile, "unless you wanted to stay."

"And I don't. But I wouldn't want to go without you."

"Which reminds me," Byrne said. "We've got to figure out some way to get back to the *Kassala* without alerting your friends in the village."

"There's fuel enough in the ship we came here in to make it up to orbit," Tiala said. "Or at least I think there is. We were never able to figure out the fuel system, but the tanks that seem to feed the engines are over half full. We only used about ten percent of what was in them, as close as we could figure, getting over here from the other planet."

"Where's the ship?" Byrne asked.

"About fifteen kilometers from here. Would you like to go see it?"

"Yeah. That I would."

The country they had to cover lay over a succession of low hills. At first the forest was dense, making progress slow, but within half an hour of leaving the house they were moving through more open patches of woods. Byrne wished that he knew more about exobotany and biology, and that he had a solido recorder with him, for he would not have believed such a wide variety of plants, such an immense complexity of intermingled types, could have existed in one place—in one climate. Groves of oaklike trees stood next to evergreens, and the land between the trees was filled with stalks of a yellow plant much like bamboo. Vines bearing sweet grape-like fruit festooned the lower branches of the trees, and twice they stumbled over shy, six-legged deerlike creatures.

In the depths of the forest the light became dim, almost as if the night was falling, but then they would suddenly emerge into a glade of tall grasses where the light sparkled and small brightly tinted insects flew in multicolored waves of beauty. One of the deerlike animals bounded away from them, followed by a faun of the same species, soaring with stiff legs over a fallen forest giant, and a large, beautifully feathered bird stared impassively at them from the rocks at one end of the glade. And then they were back in the trees again, and light was once again muted, the clear cool air full of the musty smell of dying wood and dead leaves, interlaced with the cleaner, sharper smell of new growth.

In the next open glade, half a kilometer farther on, they found a small stream, and in one spot there was a pool where a turn in the stream had undercut the bank, leaving a deep backwater with just enough current movement to keep the water from stagnating. "The ship can wait for a while," Byrne said. "I'm going to have a swim."

He sat down on the bank and pulled his shoes off, then stood up and dropped his pants, stepping out of

them, his body shining with sweat in the dappled sunlight. He looked at the water for a minute, then sat down on the bank, sliding slowly forward using the palms of his hands to support himself, until his feet touched the bot-tom of the pool. He began to move out into the center of the pool, the water rising to the middle of his stomach, then he lay back onto his back, floating, waving his hands slowly back and forth under water to keep his head up. "Come on in," he called to Tiala, who was still standing on the bank, watching him, smiling at the childish pleasure he was getting from his swim in the cold, clear water.

Tiala hesitated for a moment, then quick-ly stripped off her clothes and jumped into the sun-warmed water of the pool. Her knees bent as she hit bottom and she went in over her head, then she came up with a sputter, shaking the water and wet hair out of her eyes. She swam slowly across the pool to the main body of the stream, stroking strongly until the rapid shallow-ing of the bottom into a bed of small rounded stones stopped her arm movements and halted her forward progress short of the stream proper.

Tiala swam back to the center of the pool, where Byrne was still standing in the water, and when she stopped he took her gently in his arms and kissed her. Byrne was a man—a man far from home, who had faced many dangerous situations in the past few days. And because he was a man, relaxing for the first time in quite a while, it was inevitable that the touch of Tiala's soft, naked body against him would create a reaction normal in any man. And, as is the nature of such things, it was also inevitable that his caressing touch and kiss would have the same stimulating, provoking effect on Tiala. When she looked up at him Byrne knew, with no talk of it being necessary between them, that Tiala was his, then and there, or anytime, anyplace, forever or for as long as he wanted her. The promise she made him with her eyes and lips was as old as man, and as binding as any marriage promise ever made.

Quickly, with an urgency that was more the result of immediate physical demand than any mental or emotional desire, Byrne led Tiala out of the pool, to a sun-warmed swath of short grass. And there Tiala's desire was as strong, as de-manding, as complete as Byrne's own. And despite her lack of sophistication in matters of love, she knew what to do as well as the most skilled courtesan of the Empire. She knew what she had to give, knew what was hers to take, and knew what was theirs to share in that magic moment.

And when they had given and taken and shared their fill, when, for the moment at least, satisfied exhaustion slowed their frantic motions, Tiala collapsed against Byrne, lying by his side in the short, tickly grass with, a sigh of content-ment that filled his mind with a pure and simple feeling of happiness that he would never have imagined he could have felt about any woman. Gently Byrne kissed Tiala's cheek, then got to his feet, swept up their clothes, and, on impulse, swept her up into his arms, then started onward, toward the Master ship with the woman who was now his bride. And because his attention was totally on the woman in his arms, Byrne didn't see the T-human shape slowly retreating from the rocks back into the woods and out of sight.

When they got to the Master ship, still where Tiala's father had landed it so many years before, Byrne was somewhat disappointed. He didn't know quite what he had been expecting to see, but the Master ship looked quite conventional in design—a long tube, gently rounded at both ends, with faired housings in the hull that evidently held the gravitic drive nodes, or whatever the Masters used for a space drive. The only out-standing unusual thing about the ship was that instead of landing on tail jacks, standing vertically as did every T- and O-human ship Byrne had ever seen, the Master ship had twin skids running the full length of the hull, on which it was now rest-ing. It was obviously designed to land horizontal-ly, like an atmospheric craft, requiring therefore a larger landing area than a human ship.

After walking around the ship and looking it over carefully, though, Byrne began to pick out the little

touches of alienness that showed, and showed clearly to the trained eye of a spaceman. The touches that said this ship had never been built by any race that Byrne had ever come into contact with.

"How do we get inside?" Byrne asked.

"There's a lock up near the nose, and it leads directly into the control room."

"The control room's in the nose?" Byrne asked. "Seems like a dangerous place to put it."

"I suppose so," Tiala said. "But that's where they put it."

"Okay, let's get inside."

Tiala led Byrne up to an airlock hatch, touched a slightly off-color spot on the hull just to the right of the hatch, and it slid silently open. He and Tiala stepped inside, and as soon as they did a soft green light came on, coming from no visible source, illuminating the inside of the ship dimly, but sufficiently for them to see clearly. The inner door of the lock was standing open, and Byrne stepped through it into the control room, with Tiala right behind him.

"You left the power for the lights on all this time?" Byrne asked.

"We couldn't figure out any way to turn it off, but I don't think it really matters. The lights came on when we first entered the ship, and we discovered that they go off automatically when-ever the ship is empty."

Byrne looked around the control room at the unfamiliar controls, counting the unusually shaped seats. "Looks like they used a flight crew of five," he said, "unless some of the seats are spares. Did you ever figure out which panel con-trols the ship's computer?"

"I think so. At least there's only one with what looks like input controls and readout screens. Over here." She led Byrne toward one side of the control room, away from what he assumed was the main control panel.

"Seems awkward to have the main control over there, and the computer controls over here. With it set up this way, you'd have to have two men on duty at all times, one to monitor ship's performance, and the other to handle the nav instruments."

"Unless there's a secondary readout at the pilot's position," Tiala said. "Father found what seems to be a calculations section there when he was figuring out how to fly the ship. But he couldn't make any sense out of the numbering system."

"Yeah, that might be how they did it," Byrne said. "Let's have a look at this first, though." He sat down in the oddly shaped seat in front of the possible computer control panel, finding that the seat was built to accept a being with a torso much narrower than his, but evident-ly one that bent at the waist, as his did. He studied the panel for some minutes, then tenta-tively reached out for a pale lavender switch.

"Do you think you should touch anything?" Tiala asked. "We were afraid to try to turn the computer on, for fear we might start an auto-matic program we couldn't control. I can show you how Father flew the ship. He taught me the functions of the controls he had been able to figure out."

"Maybe later. I'm worried about automatic programs, too, but unless I can get the computer on we won't be able to use the ship for much of anything except making rendezvous with the *Kassala*. And I'd

rather have a few more options than just that one. Look, these buttons here are all the same except for the figures on them. Numbers, I hope. There are six even rows of eleven each, with what appears to be function bars above them. Over here is another set, four rows of five each. And more function levers. Everything is in sets and in matched colors, except for this one switch. It's by itself, and there are no other purple switches. So I'm going to assume that it is the main power switch for the computer."

"But even if you can turn it on, what good will it do you?" Tiala asked. "My father tried to make some sense out of the figures on those keys and those at the pilot's position, as well as in a couple of what appear to be books, but he couldn't find any correlation between them and any number system he could figure out."

"We'll just have to face that problem when we come to it," Byrne said. "Assuming we did get it turned on, that is. For now I'll be happy just to get some power into the system."

Byrne hesitated for a minute, then decisively pressed the lavender switch, which was a rocker type, and when it clicked home, the board in front of him lit up with a variety of colors, a low hum of power coming from behind the panels. The screens in front of the main panel lit up as well with a bright green radiance, but nothing appeared on them. "Well, it looks like guess number one was right, anyway," he said when nothing else happened for several minutes. "Now let's see if we can figure out what does what on the board."

An hour later, his face dripping with sweat, Byrne slapped the power switch back *tooff* and sat in the uncomfortable seat. "Well, I guess that's it."

"Have you got it figured out?" Tiala asked.

"No," he answered. "Not by a long shot, like you said, none of the numbering systems seem to make any sense, and without a common language there's no way I can check out any of the programs. But at least I know now, or think I know, what switches and buttons control what functions. The big panel is for feeding and check-ing programs, and the small panel there, to the right, is a simple math computer. If this was an exploration ship, or a shuttle for one, then the small panel was probably used for cutting new course tapes, and the large one for general course control."

"If you can't understand the symbology, though, how can the computer be of any use to us?" Tiala asked, leaning down to put her arms around Byrne's neck, staring over his shoulder at the new dead screens above the computer panel.

"Possibly—just possibly—I might be able to do it with the *Kassala's* computer. Depending on how bright this one is. The computer aboard the *Kassala* has a set of logic circuits in it that were originally designed to be used in figuring out a working language for new cultures. The design never worked worth a damn, and it was dropped on later models, but the circuits are still there in the *Kassala's* computer. Add to that the fact that it is a pretty bright unit, and perhaps I can use it to teach this one to accept our sym-bology. Or at least initiate a subprogram to con-vert from our numbers to theirs. It's something of a long shot, but it might work. If we can get control of the *Kassala*, that is."

"And that I don't think you'll be able to do, Byrne," a strange voice said from the direction of the airlock. Byrne, deep in thought at the com-puter, hadn't heard the slight sounds made by someone stepping into the lock, and now, caught off guard, he pushed Tiala away, spun around, and dropped flat to the floor, reaching for the slugthrower in his belt. But he was much too late.

"Please don't move, Byrne," the blocky T-human in a dark green spacesuit liner said in a soft, even

voice, as if he was asking Byrne to pass the salt at a dinner table. "If you do I will be forced to shoot you, and I'd really rather not." To back up his threat he had a 2-mm. Traser gripped lightly in his right hand, pointed at the center of Byrne's body. He looked to Byrne to be a very competent man with the weapon, and after a moment Byrne recognized him. He was one of the ordinary spacemen Hunza had signed on at Kadesh.

"I'm surprised Zu'matra didn't come down himself," Byrne said.

"Zu'matra didn't send me. As a matter of fact, he isn't feeling too good. I had to shoot him just a little to convince him that there was a new commander aboard the *Kassala*. Me."

"You?" Byrne asked in astonishment.

"You find that surprising?"

"You can't just take over the ship. How will you run it? How will you get it back?"

"Oh, I assure you I'm quite competent in handling a ship like the *Kassala*. Allow me to introduce myself. Lieutenant Ashton Levis, Imperial Terran Intelligence."

"Intelligence? I—I don't understand." There was confusion in Byrne's voice.

"It's really quite simple," Levis said, and Byrne noted that although he was relaxed, the Lieutenant's traser never wavered an inch from its target. "Your captain had a fondness for maha. You might say an excessive fondness. And one night, back on Cassandra, he drank a bit too much, and couldn't resist bragging about the Master ship he was going to bring back from his next cruise into the cluster, and how much money he was going to make out of it. Well, we've heard such tales before, and so no one bothered ordering a full-scale investigation. But my superior thought there might be a chance that the captain knew what he was talking about, plus we had orders to keep an eye on you, so he assigned me to keep track of the *Kassala*. And what better way was there to keep track of it than to sign on as an ordinary spaceman? But, back to your original question. I won't have to handle the *Kassala*, or navigate it back to the Empire. Something which I admit would be difficult unless you can be persuaded to part with the nav cubes and computer plates. You see, there's an Imperial squadron on the way here right now. As soon as we made orbit and you people went down to the surface I fired off a message seed back to Cassandra. I figure the squadron should be here in two more days, and we'll all go back together. We'll even pick up the captain."

"Go back to what?" Byrne asked bitterly.

"To a promotion for me. Not all of us are rich enough to buy them, Byrne. Some of us have to earn them. And to a trial and quite probably the hangman's noose for you. I don't know what they'll do about the woman, and I can't say I really care."

"A trial for what?" Byrne demanded. "I haven't broken any Empire laws."

"For treason, of course. The same thing your father and brother are charged with. As well as assorted war crimes. But I think the treason charge will be enough to see you all hanged."

"What?"

"Oh, did I forget to mention that?" Levis asked with a smile. "In cutting yourself off from the Empire, you

also cut yourself off from news that might have been of some importance to you. The Emperor finally had enough of the insolence of the Citizen of Myriad, and he invested the planet with the largest fleet the Empire has ever put into space. Myriad capitulated within a week, and your entire family is back on Earth, awaiting trial. Myriad is now a loyal member of the Empire."

"And now?" Byrne asked, letting a tinge of defeat enter his voice. Somehow he had to catch Levis off guard.

"And now we go back up to the *Kassala*. I'll find it easier to sleep once I know you're securely locked up." With a flick of his wrist Levis motioned Byrne to his feet, the traser never wavering, then he stood aside to let first Tiala, then Byrne, walk over to the lock. Byrne, his shoulders slumped in defeat, shuffled across the room, his eyes downcast, his entire being radiating dejection and defeat.

Whether it was Byrne's act or just plain carelessness on Levis' part, Byrne got his chance just as they were about to step into the lock. Levis still had the traser in his hand, but he was relaxed, not expecting any more trouble from Byrne. And for Byrne it was so simple that he almost laughed. Straight from his classes in unarmed combat, back when he had first joined the Terran Outforces, came the knowledge to pivot at just the right time, brushing aside the slightly off-target traser before Levis could fire. A grab at the lieutenant's wrist, another pivot, and the intelligence officer rolled over Byrne's hip, hitting the deck with a solid thud.

Levis scrambled quickly to his feet, looked around briefly for the traser he had dropped, spotted it on the floor ten feet away, and made a jump for it. But Byrne was quicker. He got there before Levis, but not quite soon enough to grab the gun. In the last fraction of a second before contact Byrne threw up one arm, hitting Levis in the shoulder as he flew through the air. And that blow slightly deflected Levis' leap. Not much, but enough so he hit the floor slightly off balance, and in an instant Byrne had abandoned the idea of reaching the traser and jumped Levis, landing on top of him.

Almost instinctively Byrne's hands grabbed for Levis' neck and he flung a leg across the lieutenant's back, straddling him and dragging his weight up on top of the now frantically heaving Levis. The intelligence officer got his hands under him and tried to lever himself up off the floor, but Byrne slammed his weight down on Levis' back again and again, until he was lying flat. Then he dug his knees tight into Levis' ribs, pinning him securely beneath him.

Byrne's fingers dug deep into the flesh of Levis' neck, the nails breaking the skin, making his neck slippery with blood, but Byrne hung on and began to squeeze with all the power of his wrists and arms, knowing that if he let the thrashing body break from beneath him, if he let the man turn face up, there was the possibility that Levis, younger and somewhat stronger from being raised on Earth, a more massive planet than Myriad, would be able to snatch victory away from him.

It turned into a contest between Byrne's weight, pinning Levis to the deck, and the muscles of the man under him trying again to lever himself upward. Byrne hung on grimly, forcing all the power of his shoulder and arm muscles into and through his aching wrists, his fingers dug deep into the corded neck. But the man's struggles went on and on, undiminished, even fiercer as Levis realized that he was going to die if he didn't get Byrne off his back.

Desperately, clawing for every advantage, Byrne held on, his strength supplemented by the knowledge that the slightest slip would let Levis up, but the powerful squirming of the body under him was as strong as ever. Then, suddenly, Levis began to make choking sounds, and the flopping of his body had more the feel of panic than fight.

The sound recharged Byrne's determination just as he felt his grip begin to loosen. He made one last tremendous effort, tightening the squeeze and bearing down with every ounce of his weight. He felt the man under him weakening. He was winning, and the realization that victory was within his grasp transformed his attitude from fear to exaltation. He had the fight won, and for a moment after Levis' body went limp he hung on, silently shouting his victory to the world.

Byrne got to his feet on legs shaking with stress and reaction, stumbled back away from the body on the floor. Tiala ran into his arms, sobbing, and Byrne looked down at the dead intelligence officer with regret. He hadn't really had anything against Levis, and was almost sorry he had been forced to kill him.

"Come on," Byrne said. "Let's get out of here and up to the *Kassala*."

Byrne hit the switches that threw power into the magnetic grapples, and the shuttle that Levis had used to come down to the surface was once again locked to the side of the *Kassala*, its lock matched to the shuttle bay lock of the larger vessel. Tiala released the belts holding her to the acceleration couch and started toward the lock door, but Byrne reached out and took hold of her arm, stopping her.

"Hold it," he ordered crisply. "You're staying right here while I go inboard and check things out. We don't know for sure that Levis was telling the truth down there, and if we just walk in Zu'matra may get the drop on me, grab you, and shove me out the lock. So you stay right here, keep a gun pointed at the door, and shoot anyone who tries to come through without me. You've got those to protect," he said, pointing to the stack of nav cubes and memory plates on the spare couch. "And without them there's little chance we'll ever get home, even if we do manage to get control of the *Kassala*."

Byrne checked the magazine of the big slugthrower he had taken from Hunza, jacked a round into the chamber, then, standing well to one side, he hit the switch to open the inner and outer lock doors at the same time. When they were fully opened, he dropped to his knees and quickly checked around the edge, hoping that anyone waiting with a gun would have it aimed at where his head or chest would normally be.

There was only one person in the shuttle bay, Nul-broor, one of the O-human ordinary spacemen. "Let's have your hands in plain sight, please," Byrne said, edging the barrel of the slug-thrower around the door seal.

"I'm unarmed," the spaceman said, holding his hands out in front of him. "And alone. Nul-wap and Bratho, the Fassali, are dead, Levis left some time ago, and Zu'matra is in his cabin, wounded."

"Levis is dead, too," Byrne said. "What happened up here?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I was off watch and I heard shooting from up in the control room. I ran up and found Nul-wap and Bratho in the corridor, dead, and Zu'matra lying on the control room floor. The shuttle was just pulling off, and I assume Levis was in it. Did you kill him?"

"I did."

"Good. Nul-wap was my finger brother, and it was necessary that his death be avenged. I wish it would have been me that extracted the death payment, though."

"I wish it had been you, too," Byrne said, checking over the shuttle bay to make sure no one was hiding out of sight. "He wasn't an easy man to kill."

"He wasn't what he seemed," Nul-broor said.

"I know that now." Byrne turned back to the open lock leading into the shuttle, but he stopped short of going through it. "Tiala," he called, "it's okay. Don't shoot. I'm coming in."

"Alone?" she asked.

"Alone." Byrne climbed back into the shuttle, retrieved the navigation instruments, and when he and Tiala stepped out into the shuttle bay he handed them to the O-human. "Here, take these up to the control deck. I'll be up later." He turned back to Tiala, took her hand, and led her toward the interior of the ship. "We'd best have a look at Zu'matra," he said.

Tiala followed Byrne down the lift shaft and into Zu'matra's cabin, and in the dim glow of a single lightbar over the door they gazed down at the O-human, who, clad in a blood-stained spacesuit liner, lay on top of his berth. The thermostat in his cabin had been turned up high, to match the temperature of Rolf's World, and that, combined with the fever that was racking his body, had drenched Zu'matra with perspiration. The little room smelled like the cage of an animal, rich with Zu'matra's O-human sweat odor, and Tiala gagged slightly at the smell of it.

Zu'matra opened his eyes when they came into the room, and smiled when he saw who it was. "Glad to see you back aboard, Byrne," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Are you?" Byrne asked, returning Zu'matra's smile. "I thought I was a nuisance—an inconvenience—that you couldn't wait to get rid of?"

"Once, maybe. Byrne, I have respect for but two qualities in human beings. Intelligence and courage. Morals are but a question of location, and I have never been troubled with a duty complex. Always I have taken what I could get away with and have noticed that all men who are not cowards do this, only they often deny it because they are moral hypocrites. Especially among you T-humans. Not being a hypocrite with myself, I figured I might have to kill you if you interfered with my getting rid of Hunza on this trip. And I must admit I did not want to do that. I liked you. You were good to me. You taught me navigation. You were good company and I found diversion in your conversation. All the time my admiration for you grew, and the thought came to me one day that I would find you useful. If I worked it right you would kill Hunza for me. I admit I have shot and knifed and beaten many a T-human, but I have never killed one. It often makes trouble, for you are a vengeance-oriented race, and only a fool fails to avoid trouble where possible."

He stopped talking for a moment while coughing racked his body, then he opened his eyes again and looked at Tiala. "In not killing him, I gave you this man," he said solemnly. "I could have killed him, and perhaps I should have killed him. But I did not. So now you have him, and I warn you that never again will you find such a man as Byrne. He hasn't a Shield to his name, but he is a very rich man, because nothing will daunt him and he will fight for you. and treat you gently. You will find happiness with him, woman. So cherish him and bear many sons and daughters. I wish it could be that I would be there to see them as they grow."

"You will be," Tiala said, tears in her eyes.

"Nonsense!" Zu'matra said. "I took half a dozen traser bursts in the stomach, and Hunza never had the big autdoc set for my race. And the little one can't handle a case like this. I'll never live to see my home world again."

"What about the T-human tapes in the autodoc?" Byrne asked. "You're not too much different from us."

"No—there's too much difference. But I won't be dead for a few hours yet, and there's one thing I want to do—for the two of you. With Hunza dead, I'm the owner of the *Kassala* now. And I'd like to give her to you. There's a memory cube there on the desk with the change of ownership already registered in it. That's how sure I was that you were coming back. And now, Captain Byrne, I'd appreciate it very much if you'd get me a drink."

Byrne propped Zu'matra up against the pillows and gave him a half-full glass of the grain alcohol that was his favorite drink. He watched as Zu'matra sipped it approvingly, not gulping it, as Hunza would have done or possibly as Byrne himself would have done, had he been in as much pain as Zu'matra was obviously enduring.

"I wish I knew something of medicine, Zu'matra," Byrne said sadly. "Something of giving life rather than just taking it. There might be something I could do."

"And that would cost you the *Kassala*," Zu'matra reminded him. "It's far more profitable to let me die."

"Do you really think I'd let that stop me?"

"No—I suppose you wouldn't. Your trouble is you're entirely too honest for your own good, Byrne. Would you really care to try patching me up?"

"Of course I would."

"Then, between the two of us, maybe some-thing can be done. I know my own body, and perhaps, just perhaps, we'll be able to do some-thing. Though I doubt it."

"Where do we start?"

"First by pouring me another drink. A full one, this time. Then get down to the engine room and get the small laser. The one we used for cutting the frequency trim plates. It's depth adjustable, and it'll cut into me a lot neater than a knife. In the galley you'll find some concentrated hydrogen peroxide. One of the O-humans we shipped once needed it in his diet. Make an eight-percent solution, and we'll use that as an antiseptic. It and alcohol work best on my race. And right now I'd rather take the alcohol in-ternally."

"What then?"

"Give me that marker there," Zu'matra said, pointing to a stylus on the table next to the memory cube he had used to record the *Kassala's* transfer of ownership. He opened the top of his suit liner, showing a series of small holes in his stomach almost covered with crusted blood. He made a small mark near the holes, a straight line about four centimeters long. "Cut here, then sterilize each cut with the hydrogen peroxide. You'll have to use the laser to cauterize any bleeders you cut, and there will be plenty of them. So this is going to take a while. Once you have all the bleeders stopped widen the wound—you'll probably have to get the woman to hold it open for you—stick your finger in, and pull out the punctured section of intestine. It's a lot like your own, but slightly smaller in diameter. Wash the inside of the cut as well as you can with the peroxide. The best way to do it will probably be to just pour it into me, rock me back and forth a bit, then roll me over onto my side to drain it out." As he said that Tiala's face turned dead white and her hand went up to cover her mouth. For a moment it seemed as though she was going to be sick, but then, with an obvious effort, she regained control of her stomach.

"After that," Zu'matra continued, "it depends on how much damage has been done to the intestine. There are sutures in the emergency box—the ones marked *Lakos*—they'll work with my body chemistry. If the holes in the intestine are clean, try to sew them up. If not, you'll have to take a section of the intestine and try to sew it back together-tight. Then sew up the muscle layer and the skin, put a sterile dressing over the wound, and we'll hope for the best."

Within an hour the crude operation was done. Then Byrne stripped off his now bloody spacesuit liner, took a shower, then washed Zu'matra's perspiring body with cooling alcohol. He covered the O-human with a light blanket, then settled down in the room's one chair after sending Tiala off to his cabin to get a little sleep. In one of Zu'matra's reference books he found that the O-human's normal body temperature was 40.2 degrees Celsius, and when he checked it with a surface pyrometer from the engine room he found Zu'matra registering a fever of 42.6 degrees. But by midnight it had dropped to 42, and Zu'matra was drunk and sound asleep. Byrne, looking down at him, found he felt a vast admiration for the O-human. Whatever his other faults, a lack of courage was not one of them.

Byrne stood watch over Zu'matra all night, while Tiala slept. In the morning she came into the room, looking angry. "Go below," she ordered. "I can watch him as well as you can. Why didn't you call me at midnight? I've slept the whole night, and you need some rest."

Byrne didn't argue with Tiala, but went immediately to his cabin, where he fell asleep without even taking off his spacesuit liner. Tiala stood watch over Zu'matra until 1300, when Byrne came back to see how he was doing. Then she went below, to reappear half an hour later with two plates of hot food from the auto-chef and some new clothes to replace the rather dirty and blood-stained dress she had worn up from the surface. She had made herself a pair of shorts by cutting the legs off a pair of dungarees, and had found a soft shirt and a belt in Hunza's room. Her golden hair hung in two long braids across her breasts, and she wore one of Hunza's old uniform caps. Byrne noticed the play of well-developed muscles in her bare arms and legs, and felt a stirring of desire. He firmly pushed that stirring into the back of his mind, smiling at her instead of sweeping her up into his arms, as he wanted to do.

Zu'matra, awake again and in pain, looked up at Tiala, then at Byrne, standing next to her. He nodded as if to say, "She'll do," then, with his eyes, he summoned Byrne to his side.

"I'm afraid our technique wasn't quite good enough, Byrne," he whispered. "You washed the wound clean enough, but inside—down below—I'm afraid there's peritonitis. Foreign matter from the intestine down in the abdominal cavity. I feel like I'm burning up."

Byrne quickly checked Zu'matra's temperature with the pyrometer, and found that it had gone up to 44.6. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

"No reason to be. You tried your best." Zu'matra's hand reached out and touched his. "I wouldn't—couldn't—have killed you. Or her. Be good to her. She's not a common woman, Byrne. And for her sake you must go back to your old life, and take her with you. You must make a life there for both of you."

"I will," Byrne assured him, squeezing his hand. "And you made it possible, friend."

"I will die hard," Zu'matra said. "I'm no weakling. I'll have delirium—and I'll say things I should not say. It would not be good that she should hear me. You are a kind man, Byrne. You forgive your enemies,

and you do not forget your friends. I would that you forgive me, and not forget we were friends. When the woman goes below—find some excuse to send her—I'll ask you a favor to which I am entitled."

Byrne called to Tiala, who was relaxing in Zu'matra's chair reading from one of his books. "Tiala, please go below for a while."

"Certainly, William," she said, putting the book aside, then leaving the room.

"She obeyed without question," Zu'matra said, shaking his head. "A marvelous woman. Any other woman would have wanted to know why you were sending her out of the room, but not her. She trusts you to have a good reason, and such trust is not common. Your life with her will be one of peace. Now please help me up, Byrne. I must go. To the shuttle bay."

Byrne helped Zu'matra out of his room and up through the lift shaft to the shuttle bay. As they stepped through the door, Zu'matra staggered, sagging away from Byrne, then he steadied himself against the wall and looked around the big room for a moment. "She's a good ship, despite her age and the uses to which she's been put. But I'll never command her," he said softly. "And that was all I ever really want-ed." He shook his head, then looked at Byrne. "I'm a nuisance here now, and I shall be a greater nuisance in a few hours. I knew you couldn't save me, but it was a good try, and I thank you for it. Now if you'll help me with one more thing."

Zu'matra walked over to the small lock next to the big shuttle doors on his own, stepped into it, then turned and reached out his hand. Byrne shook it, tears in his eyes, then he stepped back and hit the switch. The door slid closed, and in seconds the red light came on, showing vacuum on the other side. He stood for a moment, his eyes on the light but his vision blurred with tears, then he turned back into the *Kassala*.

Tiala was waiting for Byrne in the control room when he returned. She stood looking at him for a long moment, then came into his arms. "It's better this way," she said, her head pressed against his shoulder. "Zu'matra was a warrior, and this was the way he wanted it."

Byrne, looking down at the top of Tiala's head, realizing that her castaway life on Tapar had given her a great advantage over her more civilized cousins. It had, to a large extent, made a simple native out of her, and to the native of a planet like Tapar death is nothing at all. Byrne felt a sudden revulsion at his own civilized up-bringing, because it had taught him that all death is terrible. He had known what it meant to be afraid to die. He had been caught up in the meshes of a belief that forces man to make life one long preparation for death. Well, in the future, he would live his own life, making each day a preparation for another joyous day of life. That was how Zu'matra had lived—and died. To Byrne, in that moment came a keen realization of the sweetness of life when life is lived bravely, cleanly and honorably, without conscience, qualms, or regrets. He felt as if he had suddenly been cleansed.

Chapter Eight

Byrne pulled the Master ship in tight against the hull of the *Kassala*, then locked it in place using the grapples for the shuttle. Once he was sure it was solidly attached he used the computer to figure the shape of the zero-space drive field bubble that would be needed to enclose it along with the *Kassala*, made the necessary adjustments, and prepared to take the *Kassala* out of orbit.

"Where are we going?" Tiala asked as Byrne punched out a new course tape for the nav computer.

"Back to Kadesh, I suppose." Byrne hit the rewind switch, then fed the new tape into the computer.

"But what about the fleet Levis said was on the way from the Empire? He said they had orders to arrest you."

"Yeah, I know. All I can think of is to try to get back to Kadesh without being intercepted, sell the *Kassala*, then buy ourselves some new identities. I can't make any realistic decisions right now, simply because we don't have enough information."

"What if *we* are intercepted?" Tiala asked.

"Then I'm probably going to end up in prison. Or hanged. I don't think they'll bother you, though. But we still have one ace in the hole that might get us away if they do catch up with us."

"What?"

"Your ship. If I can figure out how to cross connect the computer here to the computer in it, we might be able to get control of the zero-space drive in it. Having a second ship, one I hope they won't realize we can control, might be our only hope of getting away from them."

Three hours after leaving orbit around Tapar, while Byrne was still setting up for their zero-space insertion, the red incoming signal light on the communicator began to flash. Byrne looked at it for a minute, knowing who was calling and wondering if there might be any advantage to be gained by not answering the signal. He finally decided there wasn't and punched the *accept* button, while putting a hold on the vision circuit, which allowed the computer to match comm signal frequencies with whoever was calling.

"Calling the trading ship *Kassala*. Calling the trade ship *Kassala*. Calling the trading ..."

"This is the *Kassala*," Byrne said, breaking in on the transmission while still holding the vision circuit of the comm signal system.

"Stand by one minute, please. The captain would like to speak to you." Byrne waited not one minute, but several, before the screen lit up. To Byrne's astonishment the face of Admiral Helena MacMillan—the admiral who had sat in on the hearing that had demanded his resignation from the Imperial Forces—appeared on the screen.

"This is the captain of the *Novi Sad*, of the Imperial Terran Fleet. Do I have Captain Hunza of the *Kassala*?"

"Sorry," Byrne said. "Hunza is no longer in command of the *Kassala*. This is Captain William Byrne, the new owner and captain."

"Byrne? Well, this makes things a bit simpler. Cut your drive and stand by to be boarded, Byrne. By order of the Emperor, you are under arrest."

"I wasn't aware that the Emperor's authority extended into space outside the borders of the Empire," Byrne said.

"The Emperor's authority extends to wherever the Imperial Fleet is," MacMillan said sharply. "Now cut your engines."

"Sorry, I can't do that just yet, Admiral. We've got a few things to discuss first."

"We have nothing to discuss, Byrne. My orders are to place you under arrest and confiscate any spacecraft you may, at the time, have control of. I repeat—cut your engines."

"And if I don't?" Byrne asked mildly.

"Then we'll be forced to fire on you."

"Oh no you won't, Admiral. And you know it as well as I do. I've got something you want too badly to take a chance on destroying it with your weapons."

MacMillan glared at Byrne, even though she couldn't see him with the vision circuit cut off, and he could almost hear her gritting her teeth. "Very well, Byrne. I am instructed to inform you of the following facts. Your father and brother, the former Citizen of Myriad and his heir, are currently awaiting the Emperor's justice. Deliver the so-called Master ship to us, and they will be set free. Refuse—force us to take the ship from you by whatever means necessary—and they will be executed without trial. The choice is yours, but you really have no choice. We hold all the high cards, Byrne, and don't count on any miracles such as the Myriad fleet rushing in to save you at the last moment. They are well engaged elsewhere, and you have no hope of escaping us."

"Thank you, Admiral," Byrne said.

"For what?" MacMillan asked, flustered by his unexpected response to her threat.

"For telling me the defeat of Myriad isn't quite as complete as you would have me believe. That the fleet is still out there somewhere, resisting the Empire. I suppose I shall have to go and find them."

"Don't be a fool, Byrne. You don't stand a chance of getting away from us. And if you try the lives of your family are forfeit."

"The lives of my family were forfeit the day they were captured," Byrne said savagely. "You don't think I'd believe any promise of amnesty given by the Emperor, do you? You're the fool, Admiral." And with that Byrne cut the comm signal and quickly turned to the controls. "Strap in," he told Tiala. "We're getting out of here."

"Ah, sir? I'd appreciate it if you'd drop me off, first. I'd rather take my chances with the Imperials than on wherever you're going."

"Nul-Broor! Sorry, I forgot about you. Okay, get into a suit, fast. We'll dump you with a beacon, and one of the Empire ships will pick you up in no time."

Minutes later, with Nul-Broor safely away from the ship, Byrne hit the emergency override switch on the zero-space drive controls, and with a groan that twisted slightly every plate in the *Kassala's* hull they penetrated into zero-space, at once outrunning, the light from Tapar's sun. Just before penetration the nav board showed a ship arrowing in on a collision course with them, then, with the transition, it was gone.

"Are they gone?" Tiala asked. "Did we get away from them as easily as that?"

"No, they're still there, behind us," Byrne said. "While I was talking to the admiral they had plenty of time to get a reading on our neutrino emission pattern. It only takes a few seconds for the computers aboard a ship like the *Novi Sad*. And as long as they have that pattern, they can follow us anywhere. We can't outrun them, and the minute we drop back into rational space they'll match and board."

"So what do we do now?" Tiala asked. "Try to find that fleet you were talking about?"

"Again, no. We'd have to break out some-where to ask question, listen to rumors. And they'd be right behind us."

"Then we might as well surrender. Is that what you're saying?"

"Not as long as there's any chance we might be able to get away from them. And there is just one chance. A slim one, but possible. Their neutrino detectors are tuned to the emissions from the *Kassala's* engines. There's enough neutrino flux in space, especially in a tight cluster like this, that without the pattern there's no way they can pick a ship out of the background noise. And the engines of the Master ship aren't on, aren't emitting. So if we can get them going, we can get away from the *Kassala* until the last of her fuel is gone, and have no idea of where we split away from her."

"But you don't know how to run the Master ship's engines. And even if you did, without a computer we'd be lost, with no hope of getting anywhere."

"I know," Byrne said grimly. "The com-puter is the key to the whole thing. So let's see what we can do with it."

Working feverishly Byrne attempted to cross connect between the Master ship and the *Kassala's* computer, guessing more often than not at which input terminals controlled what on the Master ship, setting up a makeshift vision screen in front of optical pickup of the Master com-puter, hoping that it was programmed to accept visual inputs. It took him almost four days to complete the connections, and another day to cut a program for the *Kassala* which he hoped would "teach" the Master computer to under-stand his programs.

"Well, that's it," he said after making the last connection. "If I did everything right, and if the Master computer's smart enough to accept the new symbology, it shouldn't take more than three or four minutes to feed all the necessary data into the banks. Then, with a little luck, we'll be able to control it."

"And get away," Tiala said.

"And get away if—and it's a big if—that ship even has a zero-space drive. Remember, it may just be a shuttle, left behind in orbit for some reason."

"If it is," Tiala said with supreme confi-dence, "I'm sure you'll think of something else."

"Come on, let's get over into the other ship, where we can monitor the input. I've left a program here to cut the computer if anything should go wrong."

Over in the Master ship Byrne settled himself into the uncomfortable chair in front of the com-puter

control panel, hit the power switch, then, after a smile and a thumbs-up signal to Tiala, which she returned by showing him her crossed fingers, used his remote control unit to start the program running back in the computer aboard the *Kassala*.

Immediately every red warning light on the remote unit lit up brightly, indicating massive overloads into and out of the computer, and, cursing, Byrne hit the switch to cut the power to the Master computer. But this time the switch had no effect. In desperation Byrne tried to cancel the feed program with his remote control, but that had no more effect than trying to cut the power on this computer.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Tiala asked in a strained, high-pitched voice.

"I don't know," Byrne said, equal strain in his tone. "It's overloading, and I can't shut it off." Byrne threw the remote control unit at the wall, then jumped out of his seat and ran back into the *Kassala*. On the control deck one entire panel of warning lights was flashing red, and it was obvious that in minutes—if it wasn't already too late—the computer aboard the *Kassala* would be burned out, or at least wiped clean of all its stored data. In either case, it would be a disaster for Byrne and Tiala.

Byrne manually keyed in the cancel program he had left in the computer as an emergency override, but again with no effect. He started to reach for the master switches, to cut all power to the control deck, but before his hand reached them the warning lights, one by one, blinked out, and the high-pitched whine that had been coming from the computer faded downwards and finally stopped altogether.

"What happened?" Tiala asked.

"I don't know," Byrne said, staring at the computer control panel, half afraid to touch anything. "It overloaded, and it wouldn't answer any commands. Then it shut itself off." He reached forward and punched the keys to run a test program through the computer. "It seems to be okay now," he said. "Let's get back over to the Master ship and see what happened there."

Everything seemed normal in the Master ship, and the power for the computer was now evidently off. Hesitantly, first checking to make sure that the leads to the *Kassala's* computer were cut, Byrne reached out and pressed the lavender power switch. The power came on, the switches lit up, and a green glow filled the screens in front of the panel.

"Well," Byrne said, "let's see if anything happened." He quickly typed out a standard navigation problem on the board, treating the keys as though they were the keyboard on the *Kassala's* computer, which required him to ignore one and a half rows of buttons. A series of numbers, English numbers, flashed on the screen, quickly replaced with four equations, then another series of numbers. "Well I'll be damned!" Byrne said. "It worked."

"You have control of the computer?"

"It looks like it. The computation banks, at least. Let's see what happens when I check out the logic circuits." Byrne looked at the panel, trying to compare it to the *Kassala's* computer, figured out what keys would handle the logic functions if the Master computer was allowing internally for the different keyboards, then began to type. The words he typed appeared on the screen directly in front of the panel—again in English.

DOES THIS SHIP CONTAIN A ZERO-SPACE DRIVE (QUERY).

Byrne looked up at the screen for a minute, waiting for something to happen. Then he looked down at

the board again. "It seems there must be a *commit to banks* function lever for this board," he said. "Any idea of which one it would be?"

"No, but I have an idea of how you might find it."

"How?"

"Close your eyes, then punch a button."

"Gee, thanks too much." Byrne paused, staring at the board, then looked up at Tiala. "But I'll be damned if I can think of anything else to do. What the hell. Let's give it a try."

Byrne reached forward and punched one of the function levers, and nothing happened. He waited a minute, then pressed another one, and this time the screen went blank. "That must have cut in another function," he said, "canceling the logic bank input." He tried the next lever in the row, and the question reappeared, this time with a flashing bar of orange light under it. After ten seconds the light went off, then the question disappeared. Byrne started to press another switch, but before he had a chance the screen lit up again.

YES.

"You've got it!" Tiala shouted with glee.

"Looks like it," Byrne said. "Let's try another question."

CAN YOU ACCEPT THE PROGRAMMING USED BY THE OTHER COMPUTER (QUERY).

Byrne pressed the function lever, and again the orange light came on for ten seconds.

YES.

DO YOU NEED THE COURSE TAPES AND CHART CUBES FROM THE OTHER COMPUTER (QUERY).

NO. ALL NECESSARY COURSE AND LOCATION INFORMATION IS STORED IN MY PRIMARY DATA BANKS.

WHERE ARE YOUR DATA BANKS LOCATED (QUERY).

PRIMARY DATA BANKS ARE (*****) (NO REFERENCE). SECONDARY DATA BANKS ARE IN COMPARTMENT NESH-FLU.

THE LOCATION OF WHICH YOU HAVE NO REFERENCE. IS IT LOCATED IN THE FORWARD PART OF THE SHIP (QUERY).

"We may have to do this by playing twenty questions with it," Byrne said.

THE PRIMARY DATA BANKS ARE NOT ON THIS SHIP.

"What? That doesn't make sense."

WHERE ARE THE PRIMARY DATA BANKS (QUERY).

PRIMARY DATA BANKS ARE ON (*****) (NO REFERENCE.)

CAN YOU GIVE ME A LOCATION OF THE NO-REFERENCE POSITION (QUERY).

The screen wiped clean for a moment, then a series of equations flowed across it, freezing when the screen was almost full. "That's a spatial location reference," Byrne said.

"Where?"

"I don't know. Look, go back to the *Kassala* and get the chart cubes marked L-19 and M-19. And the small viewer in the rack under the cubes. Bring them over here, will you?"

Tiala was back in seconds with the cubes and viewer, and Byrne plugged one of the cubes into the machine. He quickly scanned it, then substituted the other cube. Halfway through the reference scan he stopped the machine, then began frantically punching numbers into the scanner's small computer.

"If I read this right," Byrne said finally, "the location of this computer's main data banks is nearly twenty thousand light years from here, straight in toward the galactic core."

ARE YOU IN COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR PRIMARY DATA BANKS AT THIS TIME (QUERY).

YOUR QUESTIONS ARE BEING ROUTED DIRECTLY TO THE PRIMARY DATA BANKS. THE SECONDARY BANKS ARE NOT FUNCTIONAL AT THIS TIME.

"But how can it be communicating with something over twenty thousand light years away?" Tiala asked.

"I don't know. And I don't even know how to ask, so let's let it go for now."

IS THIS SHIP FUELED FOR PROTRACTED CRUISING IN ZERO-SPACE (QUERY).

SUFFICIENT FUEL IS ABOARD FOR OPERATIONS NOT TO EXCEED ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS.

"Now that's impossible! Nothing carries that much fuel!"

RECONFIRM CRUISING RANGE (QUERY).

CRUISING RANGE OF THE FFK AVOL SCOUT SHIP IS ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS. THIS UNIT IS CURRENTLY FUELED FOR ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS WITH STANDARD RESERVE.

Byrne started to type in another question, but the board stopped him by clearing for a moment, then flashing another two-word sentence.

SUGGESTION/QUERY.

PROCEED.

PRIMARY BANK EVALUA-TION SHOWS THE FOLLOWING SITUATION.
(CLAV)PERSONS ABOARD THIS UNIT ARE NOT JUDUDU, BUT ARE AUTHORIZED
UNDER DISCRETIONARY PROGRAM NAGI-CLAV. (ZRTT) THIS UNIT IS CURRENTLY
AT-TACHED TO ANOTHER UNIT OF ALIEN DESIGN. (PAVOX) BOTH UNITS ARE BEING
PUR-SUED BY OTHER UNITS, WITH A PROBABILITY RATING OF ZLIT-PANG THAT THE
PURSU-ING UNITS ARE HOSTILE. IS THIS A TRUE SITUATION EVALUATION (QUERY).

IT IS, Byrne typed.

SUBPROGRAMS ALLOW DE-STRUCTION OF THE PURSUING UNITS. EITHER
SUBPROGRAM WILL REQUIRE DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE GRAPPLED UNIT.
DISCRETION AS TO SUBPRO-GRAM INITIATION IS LEFT TO YOU.

DELAY SUBPROGRAM IM-PLEMENTATION FOR ONE STANDARD HOUR.

"Come on," Byrne said, getting up and taking hold of Tiala's arm. "Let's get back over to the *Kassala* and get packed. We're leaving."

An hour later they had everything they figured they'd need, including the autochef and their total supply of concentrates to feed it, transferred to the Master ship, and Byrne re-leased the grapples holding it to the side of the *Kassala*. Within seconds they were approaching the edge of the field enclosing the *Kassala*, and Byrne felt something go in the Master ship, then the *Kassala* simply wasn't there anymore.

ZERO-ALPHA-NEGATIVE DRIVE UNITS NOW IN OPERA-TION, appeared on the screen.

"Where is it taking us?" Tiala asked Byrne as he sat down in the seat in front of the computer control panel.

WHAT IS OUR COURSE (QUERY).

THIS UNIT IS CURRENTLY FOLLOWING A NULL-GEODESIC TO (*****) (NO REFERENCE).

Then the answer was wiped from the screen and again the series of equations filled it.

"Well, it looks like, since it had no other instructions, it's taking us home," Byrne said. "Its home."

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FOLLOWING HOSTILE UNITS (QUERY).

THE FOLLOWING UNITS DID NOT DETECT OUR DE-PARTURE AND ARE CONTINU-ING TO FOLLOW THE ABAN-DONED UNIT. DO YOU WISH TO REEVALUATE COURSE SELECTION (QUERY).

"Well, do we?" Byrne asked.

"I don't know," Tiala asked. "What do you think we'll find there?"

"Whatever it is, it can't be any worse than what we'll find waiting for us if we head back to the Empire. So why not have a look?"

"Will we be able to get back to the Empire at all if the ship takes us to its home, though?"

"It's giving us a choice of courses now, so I don't see why it won't do the same thing after we arrive at wherever its home planet might be. Let's see what it has to say."

HOW LONG WILL YOUR DISCRETIONARY PROGRAMS ALLOW US COURSE CHOICE ON THIS UNIT (QUERY).

UNTIL APPLICABLE DISCRETIONARY PROGRAMS ARE CANCELLED BY AN AUTHORIZED JUDUDU.

ARE THE JUDUDU YOUR BUILDERS (QUERY).

YES.

CAN YOU COMMUNICATE WITH A JUDUDU AT THIS TIME (QUERY).

NO.

WHEN WAS YOUR LAST DIRECT COMMUNICATION FROM A JUDUDU (QUERY).

LAST DIRECT COMMUNICATION LOGGED WAS SEVEN HUNDRED AND ELEVEN OF YOUR STANDARD YEARS AGO.

"Well, that seems to take care of the Master race," Byrne said. "And it seems to leave us pretty much in complete control of this ship, if our control can only be cancelled by one of them."

"Then we're going to their homeworld?" Tiala asked.

"Why not? This ship seems to be capable of taking us just about anywhere we want to go, so why not go there first? If for no other reason than I need time to figure out this ship. Which reminds me—we need a name for it."

"And I know the perfect one," Tiala said.

"What?"

"The *Enigma*. What better word describes it?"

"Right. The *Enigma* it is."

There voyage, which carried them eighteen thousand two hundred light years in toward the center of the galaxy, took three long months. Three months Byrne spent working with the computer learning how to operate the *Enigma*, learning the capabilities of the equipment now under his command. And, among other things, he found that their ship had armament on it that would allow it to take on, with at least some chance of coming out whole, a battleship the size of the *Novi Sad*. The most potent weapon was something the computer called a tachyon drive torpedo, which packed a wallop which could blow a combat boat out of space with one hit, or even a close near-miss. There were also laser weapons,

radiation weapons, and weapons for which Byrne had no names. But it was in the defensive armament that Byrne found the greatest surprise.

The *Enigma* was equipped, the computer told him, with an energy screen which was capable of stopping any kind of known missile or energy weapon. At first it appeared that this made the *Enigma* invulnerable, but then Byrne discovered its limitations. The ship could not change course or speed so long as the screen was on, and there was a definite overload point beyond which the screen could not hold. Bom-bard it with enough missiles, laser beams, brain-scramblers, and what-have-you, and the screen would eventually break down.

One on one, the *Enigma* would probably be able to handle anything in the Imperial fleet, including a battleship. But let two or more ships start pouring fire into the screen, and in a matter of minutes the *Enigma* would be just a cloud of thin, hot, rapidly expanding gas.

Byrne was sitting in the main control seat, pondering what tactics would be best to use with the weapons now at his disposal, when a duck-like honking started. He looked up, startled, never having heard the sound before aboard the *Enigma*, and minutes later the screens in front of the pilot's position, which had been blank since their leave from the *Kassala*, blazed to life as they dropped from zero-space into rational space.

Immediately ahead of them was a planet, less than a quarter million miles away. Byrne looked at its glowing crescent for a moment, then began punching buttons on the console in front of him, switching scanners to be a more complete visual look around the ship. And what he saw puzzled him.

As far as Byrne could tell, there wasn't a sun within normal range of the planet. The closest stellar object, which was radiating so brightly his eyes were momentarily dazzled before the automatic controls by the image in-tensity, was a white dwarf, nearly a quarter light year away.

"Is that this planet's sun?" Tiala asked. "I don't see how it could be. I've never heard of a white dwarf having planets that could support life. Let's ask the computer."

IS THE STAR ON SCREEN CEE-FOUR THE HOME STAR OF THE JUDUDU (QUERY).

IT IS.

THE JUDUDU EVOLVED ON A PLANET OF A WHITE DWARF (QUERY).

NO. EXCESSIVE NEUTRINO EMISSION COLLAPSED THIS STAR SEVEN HUNDRED AND TWENTY THOUSAND STANDARD YEARS AGO.

"That may explain what happened to the Masters," Byrne said. "Photon emission was so outdistanced by neutrino emission that the star collapsed, and it either ruined their civilization or they went elsewhere."

"I don't understand," Tiala said. "I thought that the formative stage of a white dwarf was always a nova."

"I did, too. And perhaps it is. Maybe that's why this planet, way out here, survived. Their home planet may have been in closer to the sun."

IS THIS THE HOME PLAN-ET OF THE JUDUDU (QUERY).

NO. BUT THIS IS THE ONLY INTACT PLANET LEFT IN THE SYSTEM. IT WAS THEIR

MAIN SHIPBUILDING AND LAUNCHING CENTER.

"That explains it then," Byrne said. "Their sun must have been a rather old one, possibly even aged to the point where there were helium-carbon, or even oxygen-neon, reactions going on in the core. Which usually ends up with the star blowing itself apart. But there's another possibility. If the core temperature goes high enough the neutrino production steps up enormously. And neutrinos, once formed, can't be stopped by collisions with the mass of the star like photon radiation. They escape into space, and the energy that went into their formation is lost. And that energy loss cooled the star's interior to the point where light pressure could no longer hold up the outer layers, and they collapsed under gravitational pressure, releasing energy in the process to reheat the core, ending up a white dwarf. Some of the outer layers were probably blasted free, and they fried the inner planets. And now this is all that's left of the home system of the Masters."

"They couldn't all have been killed," Tiala said. "I wonder what happened to the rest of them?"

"Who knows? Maybe there wasn't enough left for them to maintain an industrial civilization out here, and they simply died out. Or maybe they went somewhere else. When did the computer say the star collapsed?"

"Seven hundred and twenty thousand years ago."

"And if I remember right it said the last communication it had from a Master was over seven hundred and twenty thousand years ago. So at least some of them must have survived the catastrophe."

"Why don't you ask the computer?" Tiala suggested.

"Okay."

DO YOU KNOW IF THERE ARE ANY JUDUDU SURVIVORS, AND IF SO, THEIR PRESENT LOCATION (QUERY).

APPROXIMATELY FOURTEEN MILLION JUDUDU SURVIVED THE STELLAR COLLAPSE. THEIR PRESENT LOCATION IS NOT IN MY MEMORY BANKS, BUT IT IS ASSUMED THEY RE-SETTLED FURTHER IN TOWARD THE GALACTIC CENTER. THAT WAS THE DIRECTION OF THEIR MIGRATION AFTER ABANDONING THIS SYSTEM.

"So we may meet them yet, someday," Byrne said. "Right now, though, I'd like to get a closer look at that planet." He leaned forward and began to punch buttons, magnifying the image coming in over the screens.

"Look *at that!*" Tiala exclaimed. *That* was a planet that appeared to be one large city. Nowhere in the hemisphere in view was there any sign of open ground.

"We won't be able to breathe the atmosphere," Byrne said, checking his instruments. "It looks to be about a fifty-fifty mix of nitrogen and carbon dioxide, with a little water vapor, ammonia, and methane mixed in."

DO YOU HAVE A LANDING FIELD LOCATION (QUERY).

Byrne typed into the computer.

YES. COORDINATES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

and again a line of figures appeared on the screen. Figures that meant nothing at all to Byrne, since they didn't have anything like a map of the planet below to match the figures to.

GRID THE PLANET IMAGE AND SHOW THE LOCATION OF THE SPACE FIELD.

An overlay appeared on the screen, matching the shape of the planet, then a small white dot began to blink near the northern pole.

CAN YOU LAND US (QUERY).

YES.

DO SO.

The computer killed the *Enigma's* orbital velocity, then sent them in a long, fast slant into the atmosphere, toward the pole. As they came down Byrne avidly examined the continuous, planet-wide building beneath them, noticing occasional broken area, and once what appeared to be a meteor impact crater. Then they were on the ground, and he had something else to occupy his eyes and mind.

"Look at the ships!" he said in a whisper.

"There must be hundreds of them. And that big one over there—I think it's a ship. Either that or one hell of a big building, and I can't see why anyone would build a tube-shaped building and put it in the middle of a landing field."

"But why, if they were migrating to another world, would they leave their ships behind?"

"I don't know. Unless they used even bigger ships for the migration. And right now nothing would surprise me about these people."

The giant tube-shaped ship on the field, a mile away from them, was covered with bumps and bulges, derricks and giant hatches, yawning open. It appeared to be nearly three-quarters of a mile long, and easily five hundred feet in diameter. "It looks," Byrne said, "like either a warship or a long-range exploration ship. Whichever it is, I'd hate to have it mad at me." He turned to the computer keyboard and began to type.

THE GIANT SHIP TO OUR RIGHT. IS IT A SHIP, AND IF SO, WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE (QUERY).

IT IS A SHIP, THE PRATH-ABOM, BUILT FOR EXPLORATION OF THE GREATER MEG-ALLANIC CLOUD. SPACEFARING RACES THERE ARE GRADE PAVOX HOSTILE.

"So it's both a warship and an exploration ship," Byrne mused. "Which is something we could use."

"How?"

"I don't know how we'd be able to use it, but I sure as hell know what we'd use it for. To make contact with the Myriad fleet, then have a bit of confrontation with the Imperial fleet. I kind of think that ship would take care of them."

WHAT CREW IS REQUIRED FOR THE PRATHABOM (QUERY).

NORMAL COMPLEMENT IS FOURTEEN HUNDRED AND THREE. MINIMUM OPERATIONAL COMPLEMENT IS EIGHTY SIX.

"Well, that takes care of that. It sure would have been nice to take it back with us, though."

SUGGESTION/QUERY.

PROCEED.

DO YOU WANT THE PRATHABOM (QUERY).

YES.

"Maybe there's a way," Byrne said hopefully.

COMPUTER CONTROL OF A LIMITED NUMBER OF UNITS CAN BE INITIATED FROM HERE. CONTROL WILL BE ACTIVE AND NAVIGATIONAL ONLY. LIFE SUPPORT, HOUSE-KEEPING AND WEAPONS SYSTEM CANNOT BE UTILIZED.

"Jackpot! If that means what I think it does," Byrne said, "we can take that big ship with us when we go back."

CAN THE PRATHABOM BE COMPUTER CONTROLLED FROM THIS UNIT (QUERY).

YES.

"Let's go for the whole thing."

HOW MANY UNITS CAN YOU CONTROL (QUERY).

A TOTAL OF FIFTY TWO, NOT INCLUDING THIS UNIT.

"That's it!" Byrne shouted. "We can take a whole damn fleet back with us!"

IS THE PRATHABOM FUELED AND READY TO GO (QUERY).

YES

HOW MANY OTHER UNITS CAN BE UTILIZED IN THIS MANNER (QUERY).

SEVEN HUNDRED AND FORTY TWO ARE AVAILABLE. HOWEVER I CANNOT CONTROL MORE THAN FIFTY TWO, INCLUDING THE PRATHABOM.

USE THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA: PICK FIFTY ONE UNITS ON THE BASIS OF, FIRST, ARMAMENT, SECOND, SPEED, THIRD, SIZE. INITIATE COMPUTER CONTROL OF THOSE FIFTY ONE, PLUS THE PRATHABOM.

PROGRAM COMPLETED.

"Okay, honey, we've got ourselves a fleet."

"But what are we going to do with it?" Tiala asked. "The computer said it could only control them as far as taking them along. It can't use them to fight with."

"I know. Which means we'll need a crew for them. And we can get a crew from the Myriad fleet."

"But you don't know where it is."

"No, but I know where the *Kassala* is."

"What good will that do?" Tiala asked.

"Right behind the *Kassala*, I hope, there's still that Imperial squadron. If we can intercept them and knock off a ship or two, we've got a chance of locating the Myriad fleet."

"How?"

"By picking up just one prisoner. That's all we'll need to get the information, unless the fleet's changed an awful lot since I left it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple," Byrne said. "The fleet has one of the best damn grapevines I've ever seen or heard of. There's no such thing as a secret in the fleet. If the Myriad fleet is still fighting someplace, and there's any chance of a ship being assigned there, you can bet that every man in that ship knows about it, and has a pretty good idea of just where that fighting is going on."

"That sounds like a pretty long shot to me," Tiala said. "I don't want to dash your hopes, William, but this will only work if the Imperial squadron is still following the *Kassala*, if we can intercept it, if we can win a fight with it, if we can capture a prisoner, and if he knows where the Myriad fleet is at. And that's an awful lot of ifs to be basing our future on."

"I know," Byrne said slowly. "But I can't think of anything else we can do."

Chapter Nine

Three hours later they were back in space again, only this time the *Enigma* was followed by fifty-one other ships, plus the giant *Pratha-bom*, all under slave control from their computer. Byrne used the computation section of the computer to get a present location of the *Kassala*, which he hoped would also mark the location of the Imperial squadron that had been chasing it, then projected that course line into the future, to the point where they would intercept it. Once they had the point plotted he fed the figures into the computer, and without any build-up, such as was necessary with human ships, the entire fleet dropped into zero-space, and they were on their way.

"I hate to ask this," Tiala said after the course had been set, "but how are you going to start a fight with that Imperial squadron?"

"What do you mean?" Byrne asked.

"Well, you're assuming they're still following the *Kassala*, right?"

"Yeah. I hope like hell they are."

"Well, if they are, they're going to be in zero-space when we intercept them."

"You're right. And we can't engage them unless we can get them back into rational space. Hell, unless the computer got a neutrino emission pattern on them, we won't even be able to tell if they're still there."

"How long will it be before the *Kassala* runs out of fuel?" Tiala asked.

"Too long, I'm afraid. She should have nearly a year's worth of fuel left in her tanks at standard cruising speed. And we can't chase them for that long."

"Why not?"

"Because our own food supplies won't last us that long. Within six months we'll have to stop someplace to pick up supplies for the auto-chef."

"Is there any reason why we can't?" Tiala asked. "I mean, we know the course of the *Kassala*, so can't we pick her up again any time we want to?"

"Yes, I suppose we could," Byrne admitted. "I was just hoping to get this over with a little more quickly. A year is a long time to spend just sitting here, waiting."

"I can think of a few things we can do to help pass the time," Tiala said with a smile.

"Yes," Byrne said, returning her smile, "so can I. And enjoyable that time would be, too. But there's one problem with just sitting and waiting for the *Kassala* to run out of fuel and break out of zero-space on her own."

"What's that?"

"We don't know if the Myriad fleet can hold out for that long. They have no way of knowing we're coming with help, and as good as they are, they're no match for an Imperial battle fleet. If they get cornered, or decide to make a fight of it to decide the issue once and for all, chances are there won't be any fleet left for us to bring these ships to."

"Oh. Isn't there something in the Master weapons that will work in zero-space?"

"No, nothing can get through a zero-space field."

"Well, what about something to force them out of zero-space?"

"No. Or at least I don't think so. We don't have anything like that, and I never thought to ask if the Masters might."

CAN A SHIP BE FORCED FROM ZERO-SPACE INTO RATIONAL SPACE BY ANOTHER SHIP (QUERY), Byrne typed into the computer keyboard.

YES.

"Honey, I love you!. Maybe we can force them into a fight after all."

HOW (QUERY).

BY APPLICATION OF A PRATH-NULL AXIS TRACTOR BEAM TO THE ZERO-SPACE FIELD BUBBLE.

IS THIS SHIP EQUIPPED WITH SUCH A BEAM (QUERY).

YES.

CAN YOU LOCATE THE FLEET THAT WAS CHASING OUR OLD SHIP AND SINGLE OUT ONE SHIP FOR WITH-DRAWAL INTO RATIONAL SPACE (QUERY).

YES.

"Okay," Byrne said, sitting back, "that an-swers the first couple ofifs. Now all we have to do is win the fight, then find a prisoner and hope he has the knowledge of where the Myriad fleet is fighting."

The *Enigma* hung in space, alone, the other ships left behind under a computer control lock, her screens showing only the featureless black of the inside of the zero-space field bubble. But her computers said the rearmost of the Imperial squadron was less than half a million miles away.

Byrne checked to make sure the belts holding Tiala tight in the alien, but usable, acceleration couch were tight, then he strapped into his own couch and hit the switch initiating the capture program.

With a lurch the *Enigma* dropped into ra-tional space, and there in front of them, showing on the screens a single bright dot surrounded by a green target circle, was a ship. Byrne punched up the magnification factor on the screens, then whistled through his teeth when he saw what they had captured. It was the *Novi Sad* herself.

Normal tactics in battles between two ships called for a lot of distance between the ships, high speeds relative to each other, and all the self-guided torpedoes each ship could put in space. After that the battle was between the computer and the other ships' torpedoes, trying to knock them out or avoid them while waiting for one of your own torpedoes to get through to the other ship. With a battleship there was one additional factor—the combat boats such as Byrne had commanded—but they were, to the computer, nothing more than slightly larger torpedoes, capable of launching torpedoes and laser beams of their own. They changed the numbers involved in the battle, but not the tactics of the battle.

Byrne had figured out some new tactics, though, to go with the new weapons he now had at his disposal. Tactics he was sure were going to give Admiral Helena MacMillan fits, and possibly keep her from using the heavier armament of the *Novi Sad*, including the combat boats, against him.

Under computer control the *Enigma* drove in toward the *Novi Sad*, and despite the battleship's evasive maneuvers the *Enigma* was soon lying less than fifty miles off the flank of the giant ship, matching it move for move. Soon MacMillan must have realized she couldn't get away from Byrne's ship, and the

maneuvers stopped as the *Novi Sad's* turrets and launching bays opened. And as soon as they did, Byrne activated the defense screen.

Half a dozen laser turrets fired simultaneously at the *Enigma*, and the screen absorbed the beams, going from invisibility to a pale orange as it soaked up energy. More lasers fired, then a flight of torpedoes flashed out from a launching bay, and the dull orange of the screen climbed through the octaves of light to a bright yellowish white, with an occasional patch of cold blue showing where a torp had detonated. More and more energy poured into the screen, until Byrne figured the gunnery officers aboard the *Novi Sad* must be mumbling to themselves. Then he unleashed some of his own weapons.

A flight of eleven of the tachyon torps erupted from a hatch in the nose of the *Enigma*. Three of them were caught by the computer-controlled lasers of the *Novi Sad*, but the remaining nine found their target, blasting gaping holes in the side of the battleship. Byrne fed new instructions into the computer, and a radiation beam lanced into one of the gaping holes, and the metal skin and compartment walls of the *Novi Sad* melted and ran where the beam touched, globules of molten metal breaking away, slowly cooling as they headed out on their own to become part of the mass of wandering interstellar debris that spotted the space between suns.

Half a dozen blisters opened on the side of the battleship, and combat boats erupted from them, as, at the same time, the *Novi Sad* tried to sheer off from the *Enigma*. Byrne held his position for less than a minute, while using an extremely tight, hot laser to swat the boats, then he dropped his screens and went after the battle-ship. From less than a thousand miles range he launched another flight of eleven torpedoes, five of which found the openings of the battle-ship's drive nodes. And it was there that the battle, to all intents and purposes, ended.

Byrne matched courses with the *Novi Sad* again, and the *Enigma* rocked as a laser beam touched it briefly. Red warning lights came on, but immediately faded to orange as the damage control circuits in the computer took over. Byrne hit the screen controls, then punched at the hull of the battleship twice more with a laser. Then, sighting carefully with the weapons control board, he sent twin radiation beams into the hull of the Empire ship, one into the nose and one into the tail. Air puffed into space, instantly frozen into a white mist which dissipated in seconds, and Byrne had a brief impression of tiny forms, forms that had been men, spilling from the gaping holes the beam had cut. Then, as he reached for another weapon control, the computer signaled an incoming comm beam.

"Calling the unknown warship. *Novi Sad* calling the unknown warship."

"This is the *Enigma*, Royal Myriadian Navy," Byrne answered. "Let me talk to Admiral MacMillan."

The screen was blank for a minute, then the features of Helena MacMillan formed on it. "Byrne!" she exclaimed.

"That's right, Admiral. Did you think I was still on the *Kassala*?"

"I take it that is the Master ship that you found?" she asked.

"It is. And as you have seen, nothing you have is any match for it. If I choose, I can cut you to pieces."

"If you choose?"

"That's right. And right now I don't choose to do so, but that doesn't mean that I won't do it if you don't answer some questions, and very quickly."

"What questions?"

"When we last talked you mentioned, quite inadvertently I'm sure, that the Myriadian fleet was still fighting. I want to know where."

"And you expect me to tell you?"

"You will if you want to save your ship."

"Not likely, Byrne," MacMillan said.

"Admiral, I really don't want to cut you up. There are friends of mine aboard your ship, men I served with, and I don't want to kill them. But I will if you force me to."

"What good would it do if I did tell you where your fleet is? True, your ship has defeated the *Novi Sad*, but do you think it could match an entire Imperial fleet? You were in the service. You know how many ships the Emperor has at his disposal. Why, even if your weapons proved invulnerable, we could expend a hundred ships to crush you between them. You might knock them out first, but the wreckage would still get you. What can you gain by trying to find the fleet?"

"Nothing, perhaps," Byrne said, "but then again, perhaps I might regain my freedom."

"Byrne, let me offer you a deal," the admiral said. "You surrender your ship, and you have my word, my personal bond, that you will not be harmed or imprisoned. It may cost me my commission, perhaps even my life, but surrender now, and I'll supply you with a ship and sufficient fuel to go wherever you want, and I'll guarantee that no Empire ship will follow you."

"Thanks, Admiral," Byrne said, "but no thanks. I believe you mean what you're saying, that you'd actually free us, but I'd rather take my chances with my own people. I'm going to give you a chance to talk this over with your staff. You have ten minutes to give me the information I want, then I start shooting again. *Enig-ma* out."

Byrne cut the comm circuit then sat back in the acceleration couch to wait out the ten minutes.

"Do you think they'll tell you?" Tiala asked.

"I don't know. Probably. There are bound to be some Court representatives aboard, who theoretically don't rank the admiral, but who carry enough influence that they might be able to argue her into giving me the information we want."

"How do you know they'll tell the truth?"

"I don't. As a matter of fact, I'd be very surprised if they didn't dream up some phony position to give us, then have a fleet waiting for us there. But I have a way around that."

"How?"

"I'm going to demand they send one of the court functionaries over, supposedly a hostage. Then I think I can convince him we've got a brainscrambler aboard, and that I'll use it on him to get the truth. If he gives me a different answer from the one she gives me, I'll have to assume his answer is the right one."

"And if he refuses to answer, or gives you the same answer you get from her?"

"Oh, he'll answer, all right. You don't know those court flunkies like I do. He'll tell us anything to save his skin. But if he gives us the same answer she does, then we're in a quandary. We can accept whatever they tell us and go look-ing for the fleet, or we can try something else. What, I don't know."

"You'll think of something," Tiala said. "You always do, even if I do have to help you at times."

The minutes crawled by, and after eight of them had passed, the computer informed Byrne that the *Novi Sad* was calling again. Byrne pressed the *accept* button, and the figure of Admiral MacMillan built up on the screen.

"Okay, you win, Byrne. I'll beam the figures over to you at once."

"Thank you, Admiral. That's a wise deci-sion. But there's one other little thing I'll be wanting."

"What's that?" the admiral asked, sudden wariness in her voice.

"I want one of your court-appointed officers sent over here in a suit. And I want him to leave your ship in no less than four minutes. Any delay, and I start shooting."

"What?Why?"

"As a hostage, of course. To guarantee that the figures you give me are accurate. And remem-ber, four minutes. I don't think even your psych squad can get a man ready for suicide in that short a time. Now send the figures across, and get that officer moving. Your time is down to three and a half minutes."

They almost made it over at the *Novi Sad*, but not quite. Actually, it was almost five minutes before a spacesuited figure left one of the personnel locks and jettied toward the *Enigma*. Byrne watched him as he approached and cut the defense screen for bare seconds to let him through, then reimposed it between the *Enigma* and the *Novi Sad*.

"Go down to the lock and let him in," Byrne said. "And keep a gun on him. Don't get too close to him until he's out of his suit and you can see that he's unarmed, and if he so much as looks crosseyed at you, shoot him."

"Shall I bring him up here?"

"No, not right away. Make sure he's un-armed, then take him to the cabin. Have him strip, check him again for weapons, then give him one of my spacesuit liners to wear. Then bring him up here."

Ten minutes later a young Imperial officer entered the control room of the *Enigma* wearing one of Byrne's spacesuit liners and a bright red flush. Tiala was right behind him, a traser point-ed steadily at the middle of his back and a bright smile on her face. Again Byrne wondered about how much of the savage had rubbed off on her during the years she had spent living on Tapar among the slightly less than civilized natives.

"Captain Preen at your service, sir."

"Relax, Captain," Byrne said, motioning Tiala over to one side of the room, where she could keep their

captive covered without endangering Byrne should she have to shoot. "I suppose you know why you're here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm afraid I told Admiral MacMillan a little lie. You see, we don't really need you as a hostage."

"I see. May I ask what the purpose of bringing me over here was, then?"

"To insure that the figures she fed me on the location of the Myriad fleet are accurate."

"And if I assure you that they are?"

"Then we aren't any further along than we were before you came over, are we? No, I have to have some way to check the figures."

"May I ask how you intend to accomplish that?"

"Much as I regret it, Captain, I'm afraid I'm going to have to use you up. But that should-n't bother you too much. I mean, you did swear to defend the Empire with your very life if need be."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the captain said, a film of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"I think you do, Captain. We don't have the drugs we need to get the information out of you, and you've probably been protected against them anyhow. But we do have a brainscrambler. Unfortunately, it's one of the large military models, not a clinical unit. But you'll live long enough under it to confirm the figures the admiral gave us. And that's all that's really necessary, isn't it?"

"You can't be serious!"

"Oh, but I am, Captain. I mean, what other choice have I in this matter? I must know the truth, and that seems to be the only way I have of getting it."

"The figures she gave you are not accurate, sir."

"Oh? And what are the correct figures?"

"I don't know."

"Come now, Captain. I spent five years in the fleet, and there was never an action going on anywhere that the entire fleet didn't know about. *Where is the Myriadian fleet?*"

"I swear to you I don't know, sir." Byrne noticed that the young man's hands were shaking and sweat was pouring off his face in streams. "All I know is that the fighting has been going on somewhere out around Tau Canis Majoris. At least, that's the scuttlebutt."

"Byrne looked at the captain for a long moment, then he signaled to Tiala. "Okay, Captain. That's good enough. Back into your suit. You have three minutes to clear our field."

The fleet wasn't hard to find. Byrne simply dropped out of zero-space two light hours from Tau Canis Majoris and set the neutrino detectors at maximum. And an hour and a half later they picked up what could only be the emissions coming from a major fleet. Two fleets, as it turned out, one of Imperial ships, circling the star at about two hundred million miles. There were approximately four hundred ships in that fleet, spread out over half a million miles of space. And sunward from them, in a tight, compact sphere that on the neutrino detector screen looked almost like a planet, were the two hundred or so ships that were all that was left of the Myriad spacefleet.

Byrne had no real problem joining that fleet. Half a dozen times he was fired on by Myriadian ships, but each time he got the *Enigma's* screens up in time. Then he was within comm range of them, and he immediately sig-naled the flagship.

Half an hour later the *Enigma* was snuggled up against the side of the slightly battered battle-ship that was Admiral Kreno's flagship, with the rest of the Master ships lying off some five hundred miles away, already being boarded by members of the Myriadian navy.

"Glad to see you, Citizen Byrne," Kreno said, shaking Byrne's hand as he stepped into the control room. "We thought you were dead."

"I almost was—several times," Byrne said. "I just heard about what happened on Myriad a short time ago. I've been somewhat out of touch, and then the Empire gave me a bit of trouble in getting here."

"Those ships you brought with you, sir. Are they really Master race ships? There actually is such a thing as the Master race?"

"There was. They've been dead quite a long time. But I think you'll find their ships quite useful now. Once your crews have learned to handle them, there isn't a thing in the Empire that can stand in their way."

"And then we'll have Myriad back," the admiral said, satisfaction in his voice. "And a Byrne back in the Citizen's palace, instead of that damned cousin of the Emperor who sits there now."

"First we have to get my father back from Earth," Byrne said. "And that's not going to be an easy job, even with this fleet."

"Your father?" the admiral asked, puzzle-ment in his voice. "I'm afraid I don't understand, sir."

"My father," Byrne said impatiently. "Fred-erick Byrne, the Citizen of Myriad."

"But you're the Citizen now, sir. Ever since your father and brother were killed during the invasion."

"Killed?"

"Yes, sir. In the first days after the attack by the Empire fleet."

"Did you see them killed?" Byrne demand-ed, grabbing hold of the admiral's jacket.

"Why, no I didn't, sir. But I saw their bodies. They lay in state at the palace all through the battle, and were only converted when it be-came obvious that we weren't going to be able to hold the planet."

"I'm sorry, Admiral," Byrne said, letting go of the older man's jacket and stepping back, away from him.

"I had been told that they had been captured, and were being held on Earth. They tried to use threats against me to get me to surrender."

"I'm sorry, sir. Truly I am. But now the fleet awaits your orders, sir. Your orders as the Citizen of Myriad."

"Very well, Admiral. The first thing we have to do is get the men trained to operate the ships I brought back. And transfer the command staff to the large ship. We'll call it the *Myriad*, and the Empire won't soon forget the name."

"Yes, sir. Are we going to retake Myriad from the Empire with her, or go after the Imperial fleet first?"

"Myriad will have to wait a while longer," Byrne said. "We have another job to do first. We're going to take the Imperial fleet, then the next fleet they send, and the next and the next and the next. Until there are no ships left to send against us. And then we're going to take Earth and destroy the Empire, once and for all."

"No!" Tiala said. "You can't do that!"

"I'm sorry, Tiala, but the only way to stop the evil is to destroy it. The Empire is decadent, and long overdue for destruction."

"The Empire is decadent—yes. And it must change. But you must not destroy it."

"Why? It destroyed my family and tried to destroy me. And you."

"Because bad as it is, the Empire is still necessary if there is to be peace. Too many races depend on the Empire to protect them from other races. Too many people—good people—look to the Empire to preserve the peace that has made the Empire rich. Without it millions, perhaps billions, of those people will die. Will you have that on your conscience, William Byrne, just to satisfy your thirst for vengeance?"

"Then what would you have me do, Tiala?" Byrne asked. "Pretend none of this happened? Pretend my home wasn't raped? Pretend my father and brother weren't killed?"

"You must do the only thing it is possible for you to do."

"What?"

"Give up Myriad. Give up your dreams of freedom."

"For what?"

"To become the Emperor of the Terran Empire."