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Stardeath  
by E.C. Tubb  
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Science Fiction

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\*CHAPTER 1\*

AFTER an eternity when he could see again Varl looked at his hands and stared wonderingly at the unmarked skin, the uncrushed bones, and the intact nails. He had known his hands as things of horror -- burned, seared, the tips bleeding stumps, the knuckles crushed, splintered, shards of bone needling the skin.

"Here." The figure at his side held out a cup containing a pale blue liquid. "This will help."

The masked man was shapeless beneath an enveloping robe. A creature of studied anonymity, even his voice betrayed a calculated distortion. The cup he held in gloved hands was made of fragile plastic which would shatter into a powder if broken. Varl ignored it as he did the man, concentrating on his own hands, remembering the things which had been done to them.

"Subjective punishment," the robed figure explained. "An illusion created by the use of electronic stimulus on appropriate areas of the cortex. If the level had been too high your protoplasm would have responded in psychosomatic mirroring. As it was, you only suffered mental anguish."

Only? The agonies of hell itself delivered by means of fire and clamps and tearing steel. A time in which he had known the touch and taste, the sight and sound, the stench of calculated torment. Dimly he remembered a frenzied screaming and sensed the soreness of his throat. Had he begged? Pleaded? Groveled? Prayed?

"I suggest you drink this." The robed man held out the cup again. "There has been some dehydration

and loss of essential bodily chemicals together with certain physical reactions associated with your recent experience. We do not wish for you to fall below optimum physical condition."

"Why not?" Varl looked at the man. "Is there to be more?"

"Punishment? The courts -- "

"You bastard! You sadistic bastard! You -- "

"Steady!" The gloved hand thrust the cup forward. "Drink this! Drink it!"

The cup shattered, a blue shower rising to fall and darken the fabric of the glove and the robe of the man who wore it. He called out in sudden alarm as Varl rose, snarling, hands reaching to kill.

"Guards!"

Varl touched the robe and the flesh beneath, fingers stiffening as they began to dig into the flaccid throat. His grip locked as the paralysis seized him and he toppled to one side, his temple striking the edge of the table. Blood welled from the wound to mask his cheek and jaw.

Then the guards were around him, freeing his hands and staunching the wound, adding more stings to the one which had fed the numbing drug into his veins. Needles brought a sudden darkness.

When he woke, he was back in his cell. It was a box containing a bunk, a bowl, toilet facilities, and nothing else. A glowing plate in the ceiling provided illumination. The door was a solid panel. The cell was a place buried deep, isolated from life, insulated from sound -- a tomb for the living dead.

Varl sat upright on the bunk, his back against the wall. His head ached a little and his nerves were jumping from the aftermath of drugs and punishment. The wound on his temple, sealed beneath a transparent dressing, itched a little but he made no effort to scratch it. Instead he relaxed and closed his eyes and sent his senses to explore his environment.

Long ago, when young and eager to taste the adventure which was space, he rode the ships to new and exotic worlds where he had learned boredom and disappointment and, too often, the animal which lives within the skin of a man. But he learned how to kill time in space by picking up the vibrations created by every movement, every word. In a sealed environment nothing can be lost, and in space sound is caught and retained by the hull to be transmitted and circulated in fading murmurs which hang like ghosts in the whispering air.

In his cell he heard the thin vibration of a crying voice, a plaintive wailing which keened on and on as if a wandering soul mourned for the lost innocence of childhood. He heard a laugh which held the hate of a nation and a sigh which whispered like a wind between the stars, a scrape of a shoe and the padding of naked feet, a soft rill of running water, clicks more imagined than heard, and the rustle of what could have been the passage of electrons through a wire or the soft susurrations of a brush through a mane of silken hair.

He heard the dying shrieks of his recent ordeal.

He remembered the slow and agonizing crushing of his bones, the ripping torment as his nails were torn from their beds, the sizzling burn of heated iron. Things once done in the name of religion by robed familiars working in dungeons illuminated by guttering flambeaux were now done in the name of justice by cold, detached men working with meters, dials, and minute pulses of electronic energy. A different age, different means, but the motives were the same. And the cruelty remained.

To kill once had not been enough to satisfy the ire of kings. They had demanded multiple deaths as far as the limitations of the human physique had allowed: hanging, drawing, quartering, throttling to unconsciousness, reviving, dissecting, burning pieces of flesh before the living eyes of their victims, forcing molten lead down a throat, filling a rectum with acid; or slow immersion in boiling oil, or impalement. The records were filled with the diabolical ingenuity of torments devised by man to use on his fellows.

Finally, the ultimate had been achieved. The torments of hell could be visited on a victim again and again and again. Punishment could fit the crime in a manner never dreamed of by those who had proposed the value of poetic justice.

Varl stirred a little, easing a cramp in his right thigh, a growing ache in his left buttock. Small shifts of position were undiscernible to any who might be watching, and there would be a watcher, he knew. Someone manned the scanner which monitored his cell, checked his reactions, took notes, and gathered data on which to base an opinion -- the unseen opponent in a game he could not hope to win.

Against his shoulders he felt a new vibration, an alteration in background level which grew stronger as if someone traversed the passages leading toward him. Varl tensed imperceptibly, readying himself for potential action. Behind the blank mask of his face his mind spun. The sound could mean nothing or have another cell as its target -- a routine visit from a medic or minor official to some unfortunate who had tried to kill himself and who had, as most of them did, failed.

Varl sharpened his senses as the vibrations grew stronger, hope flowering with the growing conviction that his cell was their objective. Not one man, that was hoping for too much. Not even two; he forced himself to relax as he counted three sets of footsteps. One in the cell, one just outside, the third placed some distance down the passage to act as general cover. He could kill one, perhaps even two, but the third would bring him down before he could get within reach. Unless the man could be lured close, tricked into dropping his guard in some way -- if the chance came he would take it!

He stretched and slipped from the bunk as the footsteps halted beyond the door. He swayed as he hit the floor and turned toward the bowl. As the door opened he spun, one hand lifted to the dressing on his temple, to slump and lie sprawled on the floor.

"Careful!" The oldest of the two at the door snapped a warning. "He's a killer, remember. Don't take any chances."

"Cover me." His companion stepped into the cell and stooped over the limp figure. "He's out. Delayed shock, I guess, and that crack on the head couldn't have helped any."

"He could be bluffing." The elder guard looked up at the light inset in the ceiling. "Check wanted on recent actions -- report!"

"Prisoner remained quiet after regaining consciousness," the unseen watcher said over the speaker in the ceiling. "He seemed dazed a little and sat as if meditating. Slept some, I guess; at least I didn't see him move."

"Not at all?"

"Not while I was watching. I've fifty others on my panel to keep an eye on."

"Then what?" The eldest guard frowned at the delay in the other's response. "What happened when we arrived?"

"He got down from the bunk and headed toward the bowl. I guess he was thirsty. He stopped when you opened up and turned toward the door. Then he went down. Hell, you saw that. Could have been sudden nausea. He's had it rough lately."

"The bastard asked for it." The guard glowered at his companion busy over the slumped figure. "Any change?"

"None. Skin flaccid and chill. Some perspiration. Breathing shallow. No response to pain stimuli." He displayed the pin he had used to dig beneath a nail. "Maybe if we got him on the bunk it would help."

"It would look better."

"Well? I can't manage him alone."

"And my back won't allow me to lift a weight like that." The older guard yelled down the passage. "Hans! Give a hand here! Hurry!"

"Sick?" The third guard looked at the prisoner when he arrived. "Or did you deck him?"

"He hasn't been touched. Give Frank a hand to lift him on the bunk." He stepped back. "All right, you two, get on with it."

He watched as they stooped, heaving, to lift the man from the floor and rest him on the bunk. A moment later they relaxed, easing their backs and stretching, forgetting the danger inherent in a desperate man, realizing it too late.

Hans dropped, retching as a stiffened hand rose to stab at his throat, his breath a harsh and labored rasping as he fought to draw air through a ruptured larynx. Frank joined him, unconscious, the nerves in his neck impacted by the side of a hand like a blunted ax. The older guard backed as Varl rose and lunged toward him; his mouth opened to yell a warning, one hand fumbling at his belt. The hand froze and the warning remained unuttered as he felt a hand grip his throat and the ball of a thumb come to rest just below his right eye.

"Make a sound and I'll blind you," Varl said. He moved the thumb a little, lifting his index finger to

threaten the other eye. "On your knees. Move!"

"Crazy," the guard said. "There's no need for this. We -- "

"Shut up!" Varl dropped his hand from the other's throat and snatched the needle gun from its holster. "Up and out!"

"I told you -- "

"Out!" The darts in the gun would not kill, but the weapon itself could crush a skull if swung by a powerful arm. "Down the passage and head upward. Do it, damn you!"

It was madness, a gamble he could not win. But even so the game was worth playing for the one slim possibility that, despite all logic, he would be able to get clear and make his way to the open, the sun, the freedom which was the prize. He had to take the chance no matter what the cost.

They let him climb three levels before gassing him down.

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\*CHAPTER 2\*

SHE was tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, with a good figure and a mouth twisted as if she had tasted something bad. Her voice and eyes matched her uniform: crisp and cold.

"Kurt Varl, you disappointed me. I'd hoped to find an intelligent man."

Captain Varl."

"Your license was rescinded when you were sentenced to corrective punishment -- for multiple murder and wanton destruction of private property. Or are you going to protest your innocence?"

"Execution is not murder."

"And you killed in your capacity as captain in order to prevent a mutiny." She shrugged indifferently. "As I said, Varl, you are a fool."

"And you, Major? What are you?"

"You recognize my uniform?"

"I can read your braid."

"And admit I outrank you?"

"Not where it counts." Abruptly, he was tired of the game. "In the Venegian Sector we had a name for women like you. They were all well built and good-looking and all had tailored uniforms and high rank. The only field of battle they ever saw was between the sheets." He caught the hand she swung at his face, his own fingers digging hard into her wrist. "Whose battleground are you, Major?"

For a moment their eyes met and then, with surprising strength, she jerked her wrist from his grasp. "An animal," she said bitterly. "I should have expected it. A beast walking on two legs. What else could have killed nine people and destroyed a valuable cargo? You belong to the Dark Ages."

He made no comment, looking instead at the room, and at the tall window which gave a view of rolling hills in the far distance, of clouds, and of the ground a long, long way below. The sun was low in the sky, dying with flaring streamers of crimson and gold, scarlet and amber, pink and orange. The colors touched his face and highlighted the cheekbones as they accentuated the hollows, dusting the eyes and giving the whole a resemblance to a pagan mask. Studying it, she thought of primitive idols wreathed in the smoke of sacrificial fires, their nostrils flared to catch the scent of newly spilled blood.

Then he turned and the moment was gone. He was just a man again, one caught in a vicious trap, the victim of justice formulated to embrace different circumstances on a different world.

He said flatly, "If you've come to gloat, forget it. Men are dead and I killed them and would again if the need arose. They were scum and you know it. The courts knew it -- but the cargo belonged to the Pui-Chi Consortium and reparation had to be made. So I got sentenced and the government paid and everyone's happy."

"You infer expediency?"

"That and stupidity -- mine. I should have taken what was going and run. Instead, I acted the captain, brought in my ship, delivered my passengers, and faced the music." He looked at his clenched fists. "The last time, Major. I promise you that."

"You'll be old before they let you out," she said bluntly. "Old and broken and maybe insane. Nine men, Varl. That's a heavy debt to pay, and you're damned lucky it isn't more. Those guards could have

died. If the monitor hadn't summoned medics without delay, they would have died and you'd be facing fresh charges at this very moment. Think about it. Just think."

He drew in his breath and shook his head, then turned and paced the floor. The gas had left him a little weak and foggy but not enough for him to be unaware of the guards beyond the door. The woman had come for a reason; the guards had been sent to collect him; he had acted too quickly for his own good.

"I've thought," he said. "So?"

"Just how badly do you want to get away from here?"

"So badly that if you're having a game with me I'll break your neck."

"I believe you." She met his eyes; her own were cold, calculating. "Do you think you could do it?"

"It would be fun to try."

"Your kind of fun." Contempt edged her voice. "To hurt. To kill. To force others to jump when you give the word. A child. A vicious, unthinking child."

"An animal," he said. "That's what you called me. But even an animal has feelings. What do you want from me?"

"You."

"Just that?"

"Can there be more?" She turned and poured wine from a decanter into a glass and lifted it to study the tints swirling behind the crystal. "A deal, Varl. Your sentence commuted in return for your full cooperation. I warn you now -- you could be getting the worst of the deal." She poured a second glass of wine and extended it toward him. "Do we drink to it?"

He shook his head.

"You'd rather go back to your cell? To sit and wait for what's coming? What will it be the next time? Flaying? Being slowly immersed in boiling oil? Choking on molten lead? Does it give you a kick? Are you a masochist?"

Her voice was too high, its tone too harsh, and the set of her mouth and eyes betrayed her strain. She was a woman sent to do a job and already she had tasted the possibility of failure.

He said, "The continued application of pain can build a resistance to its stimulus, as witnessed by those addicted to the use of the whip. It can even cause an emotional transference. Who knows, given time I may run joyfully to the sessions, eager to taste the new thrill of broken bones and burned flesh. After all, it's only in the mind."

"You bastard!"

"Yes."

She looked at her wine and said, abruptly, "We need you."

"Who?"

"Earth Confederation. The Comptroller. The fleet. Every damned ship in space. Posterity. You want more?"

"Start with your name."

"Major Erica Borken, Central Computer Division, Probability and Analog Section, Spatial Department, Special Assignment."

"Why me?"

"The specifications." The wine vanished as she lifted the glass and drank; a single droplet clung like a pearl to the full bloom of her lower lip. "We need a certain kind of man, and they aren't all that plentiful. A primitive -- but with a brain. A man with guts and the killer instinct -- but who knows how to evaluate situations. Someone who has experience in space, who can handle people, who can give orders and make them stick. A fighter. A man who can survive. Someone who knows how to hate."

"An animal?"

"That and more. You fit and we need you -- need you enough to spring you out of this trap. But I'm not begging. There are others, maybe not as well suited, but available and a damned sight easier to find."

"Then get one," he said. "But when you hand him over, be prepared to add that nice, neat uniform, your rank, your office, your career. The bastards who put me in here aren't gentle. Fail them and you'll

find out just how hard they can be."

"I know."

The admission gave him victory, but he did not make the mistake of pressing it too hard. She could see him marched back to hell and think her career cheap at the price.

"Get me out of here," he said. "Get me some decent clothes and take me somewhere I can feel human again. And tell me what all this is about."

\* \* \* \*

The first took time, the second money, the third cooperation she was reluctant to give.

"My job was to get you," she said. "The details will come later."

"But you know them?"

"Some of them. Enough to know how important this is. Enough to be scared."

They sat on the terrace of a hotel which emulated a mountain in its soaring flight toward the stars. Facets of crystal caught and magnified the lights of distant beacons and the transient gleams of passing aircraft. Erica's hair shone with burnished perfection in the brilliance; her face was angelic.

The illusion was created by too many lonely hours, Varl knew; he busied himself with the meal. The woman had ordered and the table was loaded with a profusion of dishes, each holding a succulent delight. Varl probed with the pointed sticks provided, lifting, tasting, recognizing flavors and discovering tastes he had never known existed.

"Luxury," he said. "Who is footing the bill?"

"I'm allowed expenses."

"That isn't answering my question."

"What does it matter? Call it reparation. A bribe. Compensation."

"And you?"

"I don't come with the meal." For a moment her face froze to match her eyes. "Don't get the wrong idea, Varl. You can push too hard."

"I was curious as to who was backing you." He speared a morsel of meat and chewed, not speaking again until he had swallowed. "The Pui-Chi Consortium valued that cargo at about three times its loaded worth. They might have had the idea that I cached it. A meal, a pretty woman, some money spent in bribes -- some would think it a good investment."

"Did you? Cache the cargo, I mean?"

His shrug matched the enigma of his smile.

"Not that you'd tell me if you had," she said. "But it doesn't matter. I'm working for Earth Confederation, and all expenses are taken care of. Incidentally, we leave tomorrow morning. Early, I'm afraid, but I didn't think you'd object."

"I don't."

"No." She looked at the ground lying dark below the terrace, at the strings of lights, the condominiums, the shopping malls, the industrial complex. "Civilization," she mused. "It looks so safe, yet how thin is the veneer. Sometimes, when I realize just how thin, it scares me." Then, abruptly, she said, "Did you find it hard to kill?"

"I learned how in the Venegian Sector."

"Things," she said. "Insects -- it isn't the same."

He made no comment, lifting his glass to sip at his wine; the light from the crystals adorning the building illuminated his face and gave it a harsh bleakness.

"You must have been young then," she said. "During the war, I mean. Little more than a boy. And yet you learned to kill -- or so you say. What did they look like? Wasps? Spiders? Ants?"

"Men," he said. "You've been reading the propaganda. They weren't men, but they looked like old-time knights in armor. Their exoskeletons were smooth and black and gleamed like polished metal, and when they bled they oozed red. Real blood just like ours. Only their shapes were different."

"And their breeding habits."

"And the way they looked after each other," he admitted. "They put us to shame. The damned war should never have started, and it should have ended much sooner than it did. Too many men died out

there. Men and Venegians, kids, babies, grubs, women, but people, all of them." He emptied his glass and paused with his hand over the bottle. "I've had enough."

"Go ahead if you want. I'll take care of you."

"Orders?"

"That, if you want."

"I'd rather talk."

"And I know what about. But leave it. The Comptroller will tell you what all this is about, and he won't thank me for having interfered. Or for telling you about Polar North. In the meantime, I suggest you do your best to relax. You're far too tense. Can you swim?"

They sported in water the temperature of blood, then plunged through misty curtains into a freezing chill to dive into tubes of electronic forces which spun them about and spat them into pools alive with golden fish and fronds of delicate weed. And later they walked on the upper promenade to look at the stars through panes of magnifying crystal, then went to sit in a garden heavy with the scent of nocturnal blooms.

"The cargo was contaminated," he said abruptly. "Do you know what a tenge is?"

"A parasite, isn't it?"

"One yielding a rare and expensive compound. Not just a perfume but a scent keyed to the natural exudations so as to accentuate the pheromones. Wearing it, a woman -- any woman -- is irresistible to any partner she desires. And no woman can deny a man using it anything he wants. The Pui-Chi were smuggling a consignment of eggs in the cargo, but something went wrong. The things hatched ahead of time."

"Parasites," she said. "I begin to understand."

"They use living creatures for hosts. When gravid, they vent their eggs into the bloodstream. Once distributed about the body, death is inevitable."

"But newly hatched eggs?"

"They'd used a dog to harbor them. It had remained alive while being eaten away inside. I had passengers to think about, women and children. The scum I killed had been set to guard the consignment. Dead, they couldn't argue." In the shadows he saw the gleam of her eyes. "What would you have done?"

"I don't know. The same, I guess -- no, I lack your courage. Does that make me a coward?"

"No. You'd have done the same if you were faced with it."

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you are." Her hand found his own, fingers closing, giving comfort with their warmth. "So you destroyed the cargo -- but why not tell what happened?"

"I did, but I'd done too good a job. No evidence," he explained. "My word against that of the Pui-Chi and the lie-detector evidence was ruled inadmissible because of my space-service conditioning. Bribery, but it worked, and I'd carried a couple of bleeding hearts who swore I was a martinet. They didn't like the way I'd ordered them around when they broke regulations."

"It's over now," she said.

He was bitter. "Is it?"

"How do you mean?"

"I'm out of jail but still have to pay the price. How long do I need to pay?"

"Maybe all your life," she said. "But there are compensations."

Later, in the snug comfort of her bed, she reached out to touch the hard contours of his body and found him sleeping like a child. But before dawn he woke her with his frenzied screams.

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\*CHAPTER 3\*

NASIR Kalif was a hundred and thirty-two years old but artifice had lifted a barrier against the years. A mechanical heart beat within his chest, chemicals laved his blood, and fresh organs had replaced the old. Only his brain remained untouched -- the unique organ which housed the mind and the conceptions it entertained, the power which had made him the Comptroller of Earth Confederation.

"Later you will be given a complete mental and physical examination," he said to Varl. "For now, tell me how you feel."

"Relieved."

"At having left Voltan? I can appreciate your sentiments. A soft and congenial world but one cursed with peculiar customs."

"Imported from Earth."

"True." Kalif made a small gesture with a hand as thin and as curved as the claw of a bird. "The Confederation embraces a variety of worlds, and on each we have stamped our imprint. Subjective punishment holds certain desirable attributes, but, like most things, it can be abused." He paused. "I understand you don't sleep well at nights."

"I have dreams. Nightmares."

"Of course. They will be taken care of."

"By Major Borken?" Varl met the dull brown eyes of the old man. "I must congratulate you on your choice of messenger."

"She is efficient."

"And was hand-picked for the job." Varl made it a statement, not a question. "You knew of my preference for blondes, for tall, shapely women, for a personality stronger than mush but not as hard as steel. Why go to so much trouble?"

"You don't know?"

"She refused to tell me. Said that you would explain it all at the right time." Varl looked at the room, the instruments it contained, the furnishings. "Here?"

"Later, but now let me show you my garden."

It was a fantasy in ice. Mutated plants clung to blue-white surfaces, spreading flame leaves over chill hummocks, and sprouting in lacelike fountains from masses of frozen water. An elaborate maze of paths wound through Polar North.

"A place in which to think," Kalif mused. "One in which to dream. You are comfortable?"

Varl nodded; beamed and focused heat provided localized warmth.

"Problems," the Comptroller continued. "At one time they threatened the very basis of society. Civilization had become too complex and skills too specialized. Local difficulties were lost in the general pattern, and one area could starve while another enjoyed a glut. Communication and cooperation provided the structure of salvation, but it required more. A means to assimilate a variety of cultures, to absorb the impact of newly opened worlds, was needed. The discovery of the hyperdrive was a double-edged sword."

Varl made no comment as the old man fell silent. Beneath their feet tiny crystals of ice made harsh crunching sounds, and Varl's hands flexed in automatic response. Ahead, masked by billowing curtains of vapor, something reared at the heart of the maze.

"A mixed blessing," Kalif continued. "New worlds for the taking, but with each came fresh problems. The trouble in the Venegian Sector was but one of many. Before that, we had a dozen conflicts, each of which could have led to destruction. Luck saved us, but we needed something more. The computers provided it."

"Records," Van said. "Completed details of everything everywhere. Each individual docketed, assessed, filed, registered. The lawless could be isolated and weeded out, the misfits noted and action taken, the desired pattern imposed on entire populations."

"Communication and cooperation."

Varl shrugged. "There is another word for it."

"Emasculation?" Kalif smiled. "No, I do not read minds, but I've learned to recognize the obvious. Yet, what was the alternative? War, conflict, or the risk of exotic disease creating a biological holocaust. Conformity is the pattern of every civilization. The lesson is to be found throughout history."

"And the danger. How many civilizations have fallen to the uninhibited barbarian? How -- "

Varl broke off, his eyes narrowing, one hand lifting to grip a down-pointing spear of ice which snapped as he closed his fingers. "Brittle," he murmured. "Once you establish a pattern, you build in destruction. Unless a thing can bend, it must break."

"So?"



"Ask your machines. They know everything. But if they know so much, why do we need you?"

"Because a machine can never be more than you make it. If it ever grows beyond its predicted design you no longer have a machine, you have life." Kalif paused. "But that is not our problem. And to answer your question, I am needed because someone has to be able to scan the total pattern. Let me illustrate. On Hadjao a plant mutated to produce a substance which affected the inner membrane of the nose. It was harmless but it altered the sense of smell. As a result the sale of coffee in that area fell to a minute portion of the anticipated amount. There was no correlation, you understand, no hard evidence, just financial ruin facing the growers and shippers in that region. Mechanical investigation might have found the association, given time. I discovered it within hours of its having been brought to my attention. The difference between detection and intuition. Machines have one, but we have the other. And I have more than most. Which is why I am the Comptroller of Earth Confederation."

"And I am -- what?"

"For the moment a pupil. Shall we press on?" The path widened, the flowers changing to a denser profusion of exotic blooms -- stars, cones, and suspended globules touched with a variety of blazing color. They were mutations and imports from a host of worlds. Banks of moss softened the chill of the ice with fronds and tendrils; lichens made mosaics and geometrical shapes of staggering complexity.

As they approached the curtains of vapor, Varl leaned back to study the height of whatever it was the coiling mist kept hidden. The air had grown warmer, and he guessed that permanent heat sources monitored the area. He wondered at their purpose and wondered, too, why the Comptroller had led him to the enigma.

He followed Kalif into the mist and through it, to stand in a clear space looking up at a statue.

"Ludwig Kreutzal," Kalif said.

"I know."

"A genius -- did you know that too?"

"He invented the hyperdrive -- the hydee as we call it now -- three hundred years ago, give or take a decade. I've seen his photographs in books."

"But not a statue?"

"No."

"Can you guess why?" Kalif did not wait for an answer. "More history, I'm afraid. After the Debacle at the turn of the century, it was thought that all personality cults were too dangerous to be tolerated. So no statues were permitted, no monuments, nothing which could be turned into a shrine. In a sense it was a reversion to old, long-held principles of a religious nature. But Kreutzal was too great a man to be ignored, and, well, the Comptroller has certain privileges. Privacy, for one. What do you think of it?"

The statue was -- awesome. Not in size, though it was too large to take in at a glance, but in stature, expression, and assembly of its parts. But most awesome of all was the face itself.

Eyes open, face upturned a little, the statue stared into the infinite as if seeing the open doors of paradise. The face was of a man transformed, touched with the warmth of Promethean fire, gifted, granted a fragment of the divine, of a man who had found a key for the locks which held man prisoner on a tiny world.

Varl lowered his head and stared unseeing at the ground. He saw only the face -- the radiant visage glowing as if illuminated from within. The cheeks were sunken, the temples pronounced, the mouth thin, the nose beaked, the eyebrows a hard ridge above the eyes. The face was intense, almost ugly, yet the sculptor had used his artistry to capture in stone the essential essence of the man, to freeze his genius as long as the material would last.

"Who?"

"A madman," Kalif said. "A student tormented by visions and unable to accept the restrictions of society. So he had to be called mad. But I think, at the end, he found happiness."

As Ludwig Kreutzal must have found happiness. Varl studied the features again, his admiration for the sculptor growing as he noticed delicate touches he had missed at first. Mad, the Comptroller had said, but there had been bitterness in his voice. A relative? A son? Who else could have gained such close cooperation?

Varl said, "Is he dead? The sculptor, I mean."

"Yes."

"A pity." Varl touched the stone. "It's an even greater pity that his work must remain hidden. It isn't fair to Kreutzal. No photograph can do him the same justice. We should respect our benefactors."

"You think him that?"

"He gave us space, a universe to play in, worlds without number to make our own. If any man was a hero it is Kreutzal. He should be honored above all others -- and you hide him behind a curtain of mist.

An old man -- " Varl broke off. "Never mind."

"An old man shaking in fear? Is that what you were going to say?"

"Leave it."

"Why? Haven't you the courage to speak your mind?" Kalif glanced up at the statue, his eyes lingering on the face. "Three hundred years," he whispered. "A man born to stand among those precious few who altered the world with the sacrifice of their lives, lifting their fellows from the mud and slime of savage ignorance. And yet, at times I wonder if we would be happier if he had never lived. Do we really need the stars? To travel so far and so fast? Build so high? Live so long? Change so much? And what of those others on distant worlds? The Venegians? The Chard? The amphibians of Hermapolis? The avians of the Munchian Cluster? Would they have been happier without the advent of man? Have they reason to bless Kreutzal's name?"

"Natural progression," Varl said. "The strong survive."

"Jungle law."

"It works."

"\_ "Those shall take who have the power,"\_ the Comptroller quoted. \_ "And those shall keep who can."\_ The harsh creed of a barbarian -- and Kreutzal was one at heart. What else is a conqueror? He sent the sword of his invention in a bright challenge to every sentient creature in the universe. We are man! What we want we take! And if some race, somewhere, should pick up our gage, what then?"

"We fight."

"And maybe perish." Kalif shook his head. "Why should we be the exception? Before us, the great reptiles dominated the earth, and who knows what reigned before them? How many other races have flowered to vanish and leave nothing but unreadable smears on adamantine stone?"

Varl did not answer. Instead he said, "I was brought here for a purpose, and I think it's time I was told what it is."

"Impatient?"

"Curious."

"As Kreutzal was curious." Again the old man looked at the statue. "Look at him, Varl. Study that face. Remember it. The visage of a saint, some would say, but there can be no doubt it belonged to a genius. I want you to find him."

The air was warm despite the surrounding ice, but Varl felt the touch of a sudden chill. An old man, lost in dreams, his abilities dulled by accumulated years, the most powerful man in Earth Confederation -- insane?

"The machines selected you," Kalif said. "From all the millions of suitable types, you were chosen as the one most likely to succeed. That is why I had you released from Voltan. Paroled, rather; there is a slight distinction. Need I explain what it is?"

"You tricked me! You -- "

"Lied?" Kalif's smile was the twitching of his mask. "No, I have not lied. And I offer you a choice: work with me or go back to your cell."

He could resume his subjective punishment, feel again the agony of tormented flesh, crushed bone, fire and acid and tearing steel, watch as his feet were pulped in cramping boots, and feel the rising flames as he burned at the stake.

Or he could find a man dead three hundred years.

POLAR North was more than a garden. Buried deep in the ice sprawled the insulated conglomeration of the heart of Earth Confederation, a town-sized complex which swallowed Varl as an amoeba would engulf a morsel of food.

"Hold the stance!" Selim was a machine of bone, muscle, and iron-like sinew. He was a master of unarmed combat with the trained ability to spatter a drop of sweat beneath his fist while leaving the skin untouched. "Now!"

His left hand lashed out, followed by his right, then the upward jerk of his knee, the sudden batter of his head -- blows Varl warded, dodged, and turned from their targets in unthinking response.

"Good," the instructor commented. "At least as far as it goes. Now I'm going to hurt you."

His face did not change and neither did his eyes. It was merely a job to him, and a matter of extending his reach a little, of not checking his blows so soon. He blinked as he struck nothing but air, then blinked again as Varl came in, hitting, leaving welts on the thick-set, heavily muscled torso.

"Better. This time we'll make it for real."

"No."

"Scared?"

"You could call it that." Varl backed, hands lifted. "I don't like the odds."

Selim nodded, thinking he understood, not guessing that Varl was talking about the relative reward against the invited risk. To fight the instructor, to cripple him, even to kill him -- what would he gain?

"You're smart," the instructor said. "I like that. Don't fight unless you have to but, when you do, go in for the kill. Remember the body is a lot tougher than most people think, but there are vulnerable places. Aim to hit the eyes, the throat, the groin. Get the kidneys, the ears, the temples. And use everything you've got."

"Will I have to?"

"You might. Those -- " Selim broke off, shrugging. "You'll be told. Now come for me again and don't stop until I say so."

There followed a flurry of moves and countermoves, bare feet slapping the mat, bodies glistening, muscles rippling beneath the skin, the air echoing to meaty impacts. Varl suffered the ritual for the sake of the physical exercise, but, at any time, he could have sent the instructor down. Selim fought by ingrained reflex, weakened, though he did not know it, by the instilled disciplines of the traditional arts. He was a man grown predictable by his use of tested parries, of trusted attacks.

Showered and dressed, Varl moved on to eat in the canteen, then to take his place before a console where he scanned endless images culled from the mass of data stored in the giant computers.

Ludwig Kreutzal. His life, his times -- the frame holding the man. A hero, the Comptroller had said, the answer to the misery plaguing his time. A genius. A man dead three hundred years.

A man he had to find.

Varl watched the shift and blur of transcribed data. Nasir Kalif was no fool -- and he had not asked for Kreutzal to be found alive. And yet ... and yet...

Words flashed on the screen before him: LUDWIG KREUTZAL. BORN 2197. ASSUMED DEAD 2252.

Assumed!

The computers took nothing for granted -- and no body had ever been found.

Varl leaned back and blanked the screen. The history was something every schoolboy knew, and he would have sworn he possessed every detail. A man went missing and stayed that way for centuries, and so, to a human mind, he had to be dead. What good was a dead genius to anyone? Did Nasir Kalif have reason to suppose the man was still alive?

The screen flashed into life again with words, pictures, and graphs depicting the era which had given birth to the man who had found the key to the stars. The Debacle, when madness had reigned and old forms had been overthrown, was the result of stress induced by crowding, frustration, and the blindness of those in power. Those they had manipulated, rose in anger, the sheep finally turning, the meek rising in fury to inherit the earth.

The screen blurred to mask scenes of burning, hanging, dismemberment -- brutal executions and

bloody massacres that punctuated a time in which civilization itself hung in the balance. Stability was regained when man again looked at the skies and the promise they held: new worlds on which old mistakes could be avoided, new beginnings.

Kreutzal supplied the means.

As a boy, he was studious, with a large head and eyes to match, a weak chin, prominent temples, and the slight build of a traditional aesthete; a lad hopeless at games, friendless, finding comfort only in books. A misfit as all geniuses had to be, he was Prometheus, unrecognized, returned to give mankind the stars.

The screen showed a blur as the machine compressed time, then steadied again to show a man with a large, domed, balding head, and eyes which looked like bruises in the drawn pallor of his face. His chin was masked with a ruff of beard and his body was still nothing but a vehicle for his mind. He was still friendless, still a misfit, still unrecognized.

The year was 2229, the place the Scientific Institute at Stuttgart. At thirty-two, Kreutzal delivered a paper containing the basic formulization of the hyperdrive.

Three years later the hydee was a fact.

Varl killed the screen, rose, and went to draw coffee from a machine. He sipped it while pacing the open area beyond the room in which he had studied. Around him he sensed the throb and bustle of life, the smoothly directed tide of effort which was Polar North. A snug, warm, friendly-seeming place, but he was not deluded. He ate well, wore good clothing, wandered where he pleased, and did not have to sleep alone, but the installation was as much a prison as the one he had left on Voltan.

"Kurt!" Jarl Asner smiled as he halted, one hand lifted in greeting. Tall, big, with skin the color of golden leaves, he had met Varl in the pool; he was an easy companion. "Hard at it?"

Van nodded.

"You look drawn, man. Take time out to relax. How about sitting in on a game tonight? Some of the boys are getting together for poker. The stakes high enough to hurt."

"Maybe."

"Bell me, uh?"

"If I'm coming."

"Good. You do that. We'll have a few bottles and make it a session. Hope you can make it." The arm rose again, this time in farewell. "Well, back to the grind."

The man moved away, smiling, intent on his own business. A casual friend, Varl wondered, or a watchful guard?

The cup yielded in his hand, and he eased the pressure before coffee could spill and soil the floor. These were the rules of the game, and he had no right to complain. His role was to wait, to take what was going, to gather his strength while he danced to the tune the Comptroller had chosen. Later, when the chance came, he would dance to his own.

Back in his seat, he activated the screen and leaned back to study the face. Kreutzal, not as he appeared gilded by the sculptor's art, but as he had looked when alive: a man bowed, old before his time, his eyes pouched, his cheeks haggard. A man who had yet to taste the heady wine of success. A man about to engage in the biggest gamble any man could take -- using his life for the stake.

Words overlaid the face:

27 SEPTEMBER 2232.

11.16 STANDARD WORLD TIME.

KREUTZAL MAKES FIRST TEST OF HYDEE.

The ship rested behind him, small and frail -- a skin holding air, instruments, and the power to feed the drive. The jewel at its heart, fabricated in metal and crystal, represented the fruit of genius, a concrete summation of a mathematical concept which rested on a paradox which rested in turn on logic unique to Kreutzal. He had built a key to unlock the cage Einstein had illuminated when he demonstrated the limitation of velocity: Nothing could travel faster than light. In the orthodox universe, which said, 'So fast and no faster,' Kreutzal's invention was a rude noise.

The man turned and entered the ship. Varl could sense his strain, though the event had happened

centuries earlier and Varl knew what the result would be. Even so, he leaned forward as the ship rose to hang poised, to shimmer, to vanish.

27 SEPTEMBER 2232.

13.23 STANDARD WORLD TIME.

KREUTZAL'S SUCCESSFUL RETURN  
FROM FIRST TEST OF HYDEE.

One hundred and twenty-seven minutes reduced into as many seconds. Varl sucked in air as he stared at the figure that came stumbling from the ship. Kreutzal dropped to his knees, and vomited blood as he toppled forward, near death. He clutched in his hand the object later to be known as the Martian Rose.

Varl cleared the screen and rubbed thoughtfully at his temples. Why had Kreutzal been such a fool as to try and breath atmosphere so thin it was almost a vacuum? The answer he had given later was that, quite simply, he had forgotten certain basic astronomical data in the impact of events. He had activated the hydee and had seen a planet beneath him which he recognized as Mars. He had landed, seen the object he had brought back with him, had gone to collect it, and had made it back just in time -- to return with the incontrovertible proof that his invention worked.

Twenty years later he disappeared.

Varl had learned nothing new of the old story. Had Kreutzal carried an unsuspected streak of idiocy in his makeup? Later adulation had glossed over the incident, making it the calculated act of a hero determined to obtain proof of his success. Certainly it had given him all he could ask for in the way of equipment, supplies, and facilities to expand his discovery. Even as mankind gathered itself for the rush to the new frontiers, Kreutzal was perfecting his drive.

The original shimmer had been due to power leakage; eliminated, there was a gain in performance. Directional control had been refined -- his luck on the first test had been phenomenal. Jumps had been calibrated and vectors established. As the years passed. Kreutzal had occupied himself with more and more abstruse research.

Varl had reached a dead end. The early days could tell him nothing he did not already know aside from small facets of Kreutzal's character. Kreutzal had been a warped and lonely man who had revealed an area of blindness, a man with more guts than sense who had risked his life on the basis of a conviction -- a hero, a martyr. After three hundred years, how to be sure?

Varl frowned at the screen, wondering why Kalif had insisted he do the research. Why not just give him the data? And why put him through the physical training?

He reached for buttons and looked at the face in the screen. A female operator, smooth and bland, smiled as she waited for his request.

"Give me an update on the Kreutzal data," Varl said. "I want the summation of all investigations during the past five years."

"One moment." The smile grew brittle as the girl checked. "There is a restrict order on that data."

"I see." Kalif intended he should do things the hard way, and Varl resisted the temptation to give Major Borken as his authority to override the restrict. "Then give me a complete rundown on all journeys made by Kreutzal during the last ten years of his life. I want a total assessment including type of vessel used, crew members, any adaptations or alterations in structure, load-mass index, any special equipment carried -- stuff like that. You understand?"

"Yes, but it will take time."

"Cut corners. I also want a compilation of destinations, times, jump periods -- " He saw her frown. "Something wrong?"

"It would help if I knew what you were after."

"Honey," Varl said, "I can't tell you that -- but I'll know it when I see it."

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\*CHAPTER 5\*

ASNER had an apartment on an upper level, a suite which he shared with another, now absent. The living room was decorated with murals depicting alien worlds -- strange scenes of exotic mountains, seas,

rolling plains illuminated by multiple suns. The carpeting was soft, the furniture luxurious; the room itself was dominated by the round table in its center.

"Cards?" The dealer was Mark Stanislac, a man with a mottled face and a harassed expression -- an environmental engineer who had drunk too much and lost too heavily. Asner hesitated, studying his hand, and Stanislac scowled. "You going to take all night?"

"One." Asner threw out his discard. "A big one."

"Give me two." Calton, from communications, sat relaxed as a cat. "Both the same."

"You?" Stanislac stared at Varl. "You in or out?"

"Out." Varl threw in his hand and rose to pour himself a drink. The whiskey was too warm, and he added ice and a shot of seltzer from a bottle crusted in twinkling crystals. He felt tense; his mind was still filled with the blur of figures from the computer, a seemingly endless stream of data which had to hold a pattern but one which as yet eluded him.

"Here!" Piers Machen had left the table and was standing beside him, proffering a small, opened box. "Try one of these."

"Ka'sence?"

"From Rigel Four." Machen selected one of the pods and held it between thumb and forefinger. "Here's health!"

Following the other's example, Varl crushed a pod beneath his nose and a sweetly pungent yet acrid aroma filled his nostrils, clearing his head like a gust of freezing wind. He breathed deeply, savoring the refreshing sting of the vapor, but shook his head as Machen offered another.

"Not for me, thanks. When you due out?"

Machen was a courier carrying taped and recorded data and messages from assembly points to Earth Confederation, a member of the far-flung service which enabled a letter to reach a world in hours when radio would take years. Sniffing another pod, he said, "In ten hours. To the Capellan Sector. Then back here, maybe, or to some other place just as boring. A hell of a life when you think of it. Collect the cargo, deliver it, collect more, and do the same. And to think that when I was a kid I used to dream of the romance of space."

Ritter spoke from the table. "Quit complaining and get back into the game. You want romance, then switch to the passenger trade. Right, Kurt?"

"He could do worse." Varl dropped into his chair. "That or find a few partners and become a free trader."

"And grow a crop of ulcers worrying about expenses and maintenance and penalty clauses." Machen shook his head. "I've seen the poor bastards and that life's not for me."

"Coward."

"Sure." Machen smiled at Stanislac. "Now come outside and say that again."

"Calm down!" Asner had the deck, and he riffled the cards with a harsh, crackling sound. "We're here to have fun. Me, I side with Piers. A good job, regular pay, certain comfort -- and you can have your dream of vast profits and exotic adventure. You in, Mark?"

"Am I sitting here to hold down the chair? Of course I'm in!"

"Then feed the kitty." Cards spun from his fingers as Asner dealt. "You too, Piers."

"Uh?" Machen blinked. "Sorry." He tossed coins into the pot. "I was thinking of free traders and the trouble they have at times. Like one who landed just before I left Artaskese. That's in the Sirian Region. Well, this ship came in and the captain was cursing fit to bust. Seems he's headed for Danilovich -- that's a world fifteen light-years from Artaskese. A short jump and yet he finished up well away from his point of aim."

"Lousy navigation." Ritter scowled at his cards. "No mystery. It happens all the time."

"Fifteen lights?"

"Fifty sometimes. I collate the reports and it's fairly common. Navigational error." He fingered his cards. "I'll open for ten."

"Some navigators." Machen sucked in his cheeks. "I'll see your ten and raise you the same."

"Twenty to stay." Asner looked at Varl. "You staying, Kurt? Good. Mark?"

"I fold." Stanislac threw in his hand. "What kind of captain tolerates such bad navigation?"

"Damned few of them." Ritter stared at the small man sitting next to Stanislac. "You staying, John?"

"I'm raising." Calton smiled as he threw coins into the pot. "This is my day. Thirty to stay, Jarl."

Asner grunted and threw in his hand. "Discards?"

Varl watched as the cards fell. The game was five-card double-draw, an innovation which yielded strong hands and big pots and made for interesting conflicts, but he felt jaded and had little interest. Even so he stayed. He drew three cards and looked at a hand which needed one card to make a running flush -- a basically weak hand. Without a five of hearts to fit between the four and six, the hand was worthless.

As Ritter studied his hand, Varl said, "Those reports you collate on the misaligned ships -- has any conclusion been reached?"

"What?" Ritter looked up, scowling. "A hell of a thing to ask at a time like this. Hell, give me two!" He flung down the discards. "What was that again?" He shook his head as Varl repeated the question. "I told you -- navigational error. What else could it be?"

"Kurt's a captain and knows something about navigation," Asner said dryly. "How bad does a navigator have to be to miss his target by fifty lights?"

"Bad!" Machen flung down his cards. "As bad as this lousy hand."

"What are you going to do?" Stanislac glared at Varl. "Raise, stay, or fold?"

"What's the hurry?" Varl met the angry eyes. "If you're in a sweat, go and grab yourself a shower."

"Or a drink," Asner said quickly. "He's tense," he explained as, scowling, Stanislac rose to follow the suggestion. "He's waiting for his wife, and she's taking her time showing up. Should have arrived two days ago, but as yet she's still missing."

"She's on vacation," Stanislac snapped from where he stood by the bottles. "So she's been delayed -- that's nothing to worry about."

"No? Not on Apollo, where all the men are built like Greek gods?" Ritter shook his head. "Any man who lets his wife take a vacation there is begging for trouble. That or he wants to change partners. Which was it, Mark? That little kitten in accounting putting on the pressure?"

"You -- " Red-faced, Stanislac took a step forward, turned and stalked from the room.

Asner shook his head as the door slammed. "He's worried. Really worried. You shouldn't have needed him."

"He'll get over it." Ritter's shrug expressed his indifference. "Are we playing cards or holding a wake?"

"It's up to you, Kurt." Calton stared at Varl, his eyes shrewd. "What's it to be?"

One card alone could turn rubbish into a potential winner, but the odds against his getting it were too high for the possible gain. A percentage player would have quit without hesitation, but Varl ignored the logic and threw down a single discard.

"One."

"Aiming to fill a straight?" Calton dropped a single discard of his own. "Let's see who makes it."

"I'm out." Asner looked at Ritter. "You?" He grunted as the man threw in his hand. "Kurt?"

"The limit." Varl doubled the pot.

Calton blinked, looking at his hand, the money he would need to check if Varl was running a bluff. Desperately he searched his opponent's face for a sign of weakness, found none, scowled at his cards again.

"We're all waiting, John," Asner said.

"What's the hurry?"

"You want a drink while you're making up your mind?" Ritter was sarcastic. "Or a pod of ka'sence? Give him one, Piers. Better make it two -- he looks a little confused."

"Call him," Asner said. "Let's see if he's bluffing."

For a moment longer Calton hesitated, then, scowling, threw in his cards. Varl looked at his own hand, at the useless card he had drawn, then laid it face down on the pile.

"That's enough for me," he said, scooping in the pot. "I'm too bushed to see straight."

"Me too." Machen yawned. "Nice game, Jarl. We'll do it again sometime."

"Make a date for when I next drop in." Ritter joined the other man as he headed toward the door.  
"Coming, John?"

"To where?"

"The pool. A quick swim, another few drinks, and maybe we can find some company. You interested, Jarl? Kurt?"

"Not me," Varl said. "I'm ready for bed."

Alone, he mounted to an upper level to walk along a promenade in an effort to ease his body and slow the spinning of his mind. The accumulated toxins in his blood -- products of hypertension and fatigue -- distorted his metabolism and filled his mind with a blurring fountain of isolated facts.

Snippets whirled by the computer data, the game, the way he had tried to draw the one card which would have slipped between the others, Stanislac's anxiety, Ritter's --

Between?

Between?

Varl halted to stare at a relay window which showed the external world. To him biologically, it was past dawn, but the arctic night still had two months to run and the window was bright with the eerie beauty of the aurora borealis -- shimmering curtains of delicate luminescence hanging suspended against the stars.

"Hi, there!" The girl was young, with vacuous eyes and a mouth wearing smeared lipstick. She smelled of whiskey and stale perfume. "You look lonely -- wanna come to a party?"

"No."

"Then be polite. I just thought you looked kinda ill. Strained, maybe. Thought I'd stop and be friendly to a fellow human being." She giggled. "Human," she said. "That's funny."

"Why?"

"You tell me. No? Don't wanna play games? Then how about you going to get some shut-eye? Want me to lead you to bed?"

"No."

"There you go again. Not even been polite. What's it cost to be polite, huh?" Her tone was maudlin. "A girl gets time off to enjoy a party and you can't even treat her decent. You know what, mister? You can go to hell."

He looked at the empty face, the smeared mouth, the hair which was a mess. Behind her the glory of the universe haloed her head in an aureole of beauty. Dirt against the stars; he tasted something bad.

"Mister? You -- "

"Shut up!" His voice was a knife. "Just get on about your business!"

He left her standing before the window as he walked on, heading for the stairs. He ran down until he reached the lower levels and his own room. He stepped beneath the shower, and the hammering deluge stung the fatigue from his system as it lashed him with whips of ice and steam, of chill and burn and blasting force.

Erica Borken watched as he stepped naked from the stall, rubbing himself with a towel.

"Did you enjoy your game?" she said acidly.

"It made a change."

"Which means you're getting tired of me, is that it?" Then, as he made no comment, she added, "Haven't you the guts to tell me to my face?"

"All right," he snapped. "I'm getting tired of you. Of you and the stupid game you're playing. Satisfied?"

"You think it a game?"

"A game. A test. Call it what the hell you like. But I've had enough of it. You can tell your boss I want to see him. Now!"

"Not now," she said. "He'll be asleep."

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\*CHAPTER 6\*

SLEEP came reluctantly, but once it had established its sway it was slow to relinquish its domain.



Dreams lingered and memories wove their fabric into new fantasies in which those long dead rose to live again. Like a fish swimming up through endless layers of lightening darkness, Nasir Kalif woke to face the tribulations of a new day.

A day of decision, he knew, for if nothing else age brought experience, and enough age brought maturity. Again he wondered at the cruel jest destiny had played on the human race: a genetic trait which ensured that prolonged adolescence should accompany humanity to the grave. That trait was the root cause of all conflicts, of all intolerance, hatreds, and petty spites, of destructive wars, of waste, misdirected effort, and harsh judgments, of all the ghastly terrors of the mind.

He alone was truly mature; the rest were children playing with lethal toys, infants thinking they were adult.

And Kreutzal had given them a wonderful new toy.

A toy that could kill them.

Thinking about it caused a renewal of the tensions which tightened invisible cords around his temples and fed lead shot into his stomach. He was stupid to fear; already he lived on borrowed time, and why should he care what the future could bring? Death would enclose him and provide the eternal safety of oblivion. As a true adult, he could accept his end with the calm equanimity of intelligent appraisal. Yet he was human and a prisoner of the driving trait of his kind: to survive at all costs!

Washed, dressed, armored with chemical strength, the Comptroller of Earth Confederation commenced his day. His comsec flared to life at a touch, and the screen listed his appointments, tasks, and duties, and the routine activities of the day. The representative from Cyginus Five could not be ignored; the delegation from Orion must be entertained; the request from Polaris needed to be attended to. And Major Borcken must be given her audience.

He decided to see her at tea, a ceremony he had always enjoyed, and he ordered special cakes to be prepared together with jams, paper-thin bread, butter, and oven-browned scones. The china, so thin it was translucent, was decorated with writhing dragons touched with scarlet on their gilt; the saucers were scalloped with subtle indentations.

When she saw it, Enca smiled. "This is wonderful! A fragment of the past. Did you really use this so long ago?"

"No." Regretfully he shook his head. "The service is relatively new, fifty years old, I think, an import from a nearby world. The ceremony itself was a custom which died during the Debacle but which was dying before that. When I was a child it was reintroduced as a social grace. I find it a pleasant ceremony. Will you be Mother?" He smiled as she hesitated. "I mean, will you be so kind as to pour the tea?"

"That makes me Mother?"

"The privilege belonged to the female head of the house. Thank you, my dear." He glanced at Varl. "Won't you sit?"

"I didn't ask to see you in order to drink tea."

"I know that."

"Then -- "

"You are impatient. It is, I know, a condition of youth but one which you must try to master." Kalif gestured toward a chair. "Sit. Drink tea and eat a cake. Try some jam and bread and butter and relax. Nothing is so urgent that it cannot wait."

"Do as he asks, Kurt." Erica extended a filled cup. "Help yourself to milk and sugar if you want them." She turned to the Comptroller. "Did people really use to sit around drinking and eating like this?"

"Of course. Hospitality is one of the most important customs devised by mankind. To offer your guest food and drink assured him or her of welcome. The custom is still prevalent on many worlds." Kalif ate a cake and dusted crumbs from his fingers. He looked at Varl. "Have you found the answer?"

"Of how to find Kreutzal? Perhaps."

"A doubt? Then why demand to see me?"

"You know most things," Varl said. "You must know that."

"Impatient?"

Varl shrugged, and slowly ate a cake.

"I see." Kalif looked into his empty cup, then set it carefully on its saucer. "If you were to name one thing that created civilization as we know it, what would it be?"

Erica said, "The hydee."

"Transport to other worlds. Fast, cheap, reliable -- true?"

"Maybe not so reliable," Varl said. "What of the misaligned ships? How many don't hit their targets?"

"Too many."

"And those which simply vanish?"

"Too many."

Varl frowned at the admission. "Why the secrecy?" A stupid question, and he supplied the answer. "Once let the cat out of the bag and you'd create a panic. Worlds depend on the cheap exchange of products, and that means ships are needed and the men to operate them. A small risk is acceptable -- it's always someone else who gets lost or killed. But when the risk gets too large, then who will transport the cargoes? What will happen to the ships?" He remembered Stanislac and his wife. "Just how bad is it?"

"How many journeys have you made?" Kalif asked. "Personally supervised, I mean. Several dozen? A hundred?"

"About that," Varl admitted. "Why?"

"How often did you miss target?"

"Not once. I double-checked each setting before -- " He broke off. "So why did I do that? Rumors, mostly. Talk in the taverns about ships which had lost their way, others with stupid navigators or careless skippers. In space a decimal point can make a hell of a difference. What's the point?"

Erica glanced at the Comptroller then, as he nodded, said, "Statistics, Kurt. How often must you cross a road before getting knocked down by a car? Or fall down stairs before breaking your neck? There's no answer to either question. All we can say is that if enough people do a thing often enough, then a certain event will take place a certain number of times. One ship could travel space a hundred years and be safe. A hundred ships could lose two of their number in a year. You see the difference?"

Varl nodded, looking at the cups resting on the table, the cakes, the plates with their assorted comestibles. The strange scene, which once had been commonplace, was still within the framework of acceptable recognition, but something alien had been added: the cold touch of the unknown.

"When did it start?" Varl asked.

"The misalignings? The vanishings?" Kalif shrugged. "Perhaps from the beginning. New worlds waited on our doorstep -- ships streamed from the factories and left as fast as hydees could be installed. No one counted who came back. No one cared. A ship went out and was lucky or just vanished. If anyone wondered about it there were a dozen explanations: The skipper was careless, the navigator stupid; the calibration was bad and the jump ended in a sun or too near a world or in the path of a rogue planetoid. Two ships could even collide. Then there was the danger in landing -- sometimes wreckage was reported spread over a mountainside or lying half buried in a field. Predators could kill the crew, or disease -- Achenar provided a prime example. A crew could mutiny or decide to keep a strike secret. And there were other dangers."

Men greedy for land. Consortiums seeking to own entire systems. New empires rising and companies interested in exploitation and easy profits. A wild time in which life was cheap. Like a cloud, mankind had exploded from the surface of his world to contaminate all he could reach. Who had time to worry about a lost vessel? Who cared?

But someone, in the end, had to care, for when peoples became established and civilization became so complex, to do otherwise was to invite mutual destruction. And so Earth Confederation was established, and the power given to the Comptroller to keep things running.

And even so, Varl thought, institutions like the Pui-Chi could risk bringing horror to a world for the sake of profit, and could condemn a man to a hell of punishment for having stopped them.

"Steady!" Erica had guessed his thoughts. She handed him a cup of tea. "Drink this."

He refused it, wanting something stronger, suddenly impatient.

"So ships are being lost -- so what? Let each take care of his own."

"Meaning?"

"Good navigators. Good captains. If a company decides to operate on the cheap, then to hell with them."

"And their passengers?" Kalif did not wait for an answer. "Companies don't cut corners on efficiency. Not when a ship is such a big investment. They want the best crew they can get and are willing to pay for it. How long did it take you to get your master's ticket? Five years? Seven? How many examinations? Tests? Simulated emergencies?"

Too many -- they had stolen his youth. "So I spoke without thinking. But what you're saying is that big ships have vanished. How big?"

"The Deltanian Queen has been reported missing," Erica said quietly. "Five hundred passengers and crew together with fifteen hundred tons of cargo. That was a week ago. Before that was the Lunar Star -- three hundred passengers and crew -- the Cappellan Rose -- three-fifty -- the Orion Express -- two hundred and seventy. Want me to go on?"

"Accidents," Kalif said. "All accidents due to human error -- officially, at any rate. But how many accidents can you claim and get away with? And those are the vessels we couldn't cover up. God knows how many have really vanished."

"So you've got a problem," Varl said. "But what's it got to do with me? My job is to find Kreutzal, or what's left of him. That or return to jail, right?"

Kalif nodded.

"So I've enough on my plate. What would I want with more?"

Erica said, "Kurt, we want -- "

"Miracles from the sound of it." Anger made his voice brittle. "You want me to find a man dead three hundred years, one lost in hyperspace, vanished like those other ships, maybe. And what the hell for? To give him a grade-A funeral? A medal? A solid-gold coffin? What the hell do you hope to find?"

"Notes."

"What?"

"Notes," Kalif repeated. "Data. Jottings. An idea. A hope. Kreutzal was a genius, and he never stopped working on the hydee. Every trip he made was for a purpose. Always he was working to perfect his invention, to iron out the snags, to find out just what it was he had discovered. He didn't know -- are you aware of that? No one knows. We build something and we do something and something then happens. We can guess why it happens but we don't know. We don't know!"

"Does it matter?"

"It could."

"Why?" Varl looked from one to the other. "Did the discovery of gravity change what happens to a man when he falls off a cliff? We use hydee and ships vanish. According to you, they've always vanished but we didn't know about it. Now we do -- so what?"

The question hung in the air. The Comptroller rose, and the hem of his robe struck a cup which tapped a jug and produced a thin, high, singing note that filled the chamber with a sound of absolute purity. As the sound died, he said, "You wanted to see me. Why?"

"I'm tired of the hoops you're putting me through." Varl rose to face the old man. "If you want to train an animal, pick a different beast."

"I picked you."

"Your machines did that." Varl glanced at Erica. "And while you're at it, call off your watchdog. She's a fringe benefit I can do without."

"You bastard! You -- "

"Close your mouth!" He did not look at her. "You talk too much and you snore at night." To the Comptroller he said, "You gave me a job to do, but I can't do it with restrictions on the computer data banks. I want free access to all information. I want a special team skilled in Kreutzal's subspace tensors. I want to know where he went and why and when. Given time I could figure it out, but I'd rather not grow old in Polar North."

"Or in jail on Voltan?"

"Threaten me with that once more and you won't have to send me back. That whip no longer

works."

"I believe you." Kalif glanced at the woman. "As predicted, Major."

"A week earlier than anticipated."

"True, but there was a margin for error." He turned back to Varl. "Congratulations. I was afraid we'd have to use harsher measures to help you overcome the fear conditioning you received on Voltan, but your natural attributes have made that unnecessary. You could be ready now."

"For what?"

"To see what was found three months ago drifting half a parsec from Fomalhaut." Kalif added bleakly, "To look at hell."

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\*CHAPTER 7\*

KALIF had not overstated -- that was the real hell of it. Standing at the summit of the tower overlooking the Kalahari, Varl could taste the vomit which had risen in his throat, feel the crawl of his skin, the hand gripping his bowels. The Comptroller had been wrong -- his recovery had not been complete. Watching the holograms in Polar North, he had smelled again the char of his burning flesh, cringed at the remembered agony of his ravaged hands, became a beast flinching at the threat of pain, one who had died to become a man.

He straightened, checking the activity below, in a clearing rested a ship readying for space, a tough freighter, small but strongly built to withstand the tug of high gravities, the savage thrust of rockets. Men crawled like ants over the hull, the flare of their torches like small suns in their hands.

Around the hull lay stacked the mounds of supplies -- the machines, the snouted cannon, the lasers, and other equipment -- yet to be installed. Even as he watched, a ship snapped from hydee high above to drop in a landing pattern.

"Captain!" The voice spoke from the speaker behind his ear. "New arrivals on their way in. You want to check?"

"Later."

"Coop them in a hut?"

"Just keep them happy."

Varl turned, narrowing his eyes as he studied the rolling expanse of vegetation that filled the area as far as he could see. An echo rose from the past as had his memory of vomit; the things he had seen could never be washed from his mind. The vegetation that grew in what had once been a desert drew its sustenance from soil created by the bones and flesh and blood of twenty million dead. The Debacle had created a garden, if nothing else.

He turned to the stairs to meet Erica as she came toward him. She looked crisply cool even though dark patches of sweat marred the armpits of her blouse. She carried a clipboard in one hand; the papers it bore were heavy with names.

"A fresh contingent," she said. "Volunteers."

"I know. I saw them come in."

"And had them put on ice. Harvey told me. Aren't you interested?"

"I need workers. The hull is still incomplete and the armament has yet to be installed. Where is Brice? What the hell does he think he's doing?"

"Checking supplies."

"I don't need a trained ship engineer for that. Werne?"

"There was some trouble with a generator." She caught his arm as he turned toward the ship. "There are only so many hours in a day, Kurt."

"So?"

"Only so much can be done. Keep up the pressure and you'll have a mutiny."

She regretted the warning when she saw his face. The workers might rebel, but if they did there would be blood on the soil and the echo of screams in the air. Varl would see to it. Varl and the men he had on watch -- armed, ruthless men handpicked from the workers sent to rush the adaptation of the vessel. Sometimes, when they looked at her, she saw the animal in their eyes.

Within the ship, where most of the alterations were complete, the confusion was less. Erica followed Varl as he moved from point to point, checking, questioning, and finally halting to look down at a man busy with a generator.

"How bad?"

"This?" Werne looked up and shrugged. "It could be worse. I can fix it, given the time. Just a matter of adjustment. Don't worry about it, Captain; leave it to me."

"Get it out of here."

"What?"

"Dismantle it. Throw it out. I don't want it -- and that goes for you too."

"Now just you wait a minute!" Werne rose to his full height. "I'm under contract to Earth Confederation. You can't fire me."

"Who is your assistant? Siddharti?" Varl looked at a man with soft brown skin and luminous dark eyes, with the hands of a woman and the body of a boy. "Take over. Dismantle and dump this junk and replace it with new equipment. Have it done by dark and you take Werne's place."

"Right away, Captain!"

"No!" Werne moved as if to stop him, but halted as Varl stepped close. "You can't do this! I'm a trained man, an electronics engineer. That generator -- "

"Is junk. Men are going to risk their lives on its continuing to function. You won't be one of them, so I guess you don't care. But I do. Now, are you going to get out of here under your own power or do I help you?" Varl waited as Werne gnawed at his lip. "If I see you anywhere when I leave this ship I'm going to break both your arms. Is that clear?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"No, Kurt!" Erica stepped between them as Varl drew in his breath. "Leave this to me!" As Varl moved away she spoke to Werne. "Don't be a fool. He will do exactly as he promised. Leave now. There's a shuttle which will take you south within the hour. Here!" She scribbled a note on a scrap of paper. "This is an official release from your duties on the grounds of sickness. Now leave!"

"My things?"

"I'll have them sent after you. Now please hurry!"

Varl was in the hold, an oasis of relative calm in the general bustle and noise. As he examined stanchions with the aid of a flashlight Erica stepped close to him, waiting to speak until he lowered the beam.

"There are ways to handle men, Kurt."

"I know."

"The way you dealt with Werne was a mistake. He has his pride, and -- "

"To hell with his pride!" He turned to face her, his face blazing with anger. "Will his pride keep men alive because he didn't do his job? How many others like him are on the project? Well?" Her silence added fuel to his rage. "I asked for men I could trust, hard workers who knew their job, all the supplies and equipment I needed. Kalif agreed. You were there and heard him. So why am I lumbered with idiots like Werne?"

"The machines -- "

"Picked him, I know."

"You make it sound like an excuse," she accused. "How else to find the best?"

"The best by whose definition? Damn it, girl, I want men, not ciphers! Not cunning bastards who've learned how to pass examinations and fill out forms and answer the given questions in the right way. This isn't a cost-effective project but a special assignment. Werne should have known that. They all should know it. This is one time when we can't afford other than the best."

"All right, Kurt! All right!" She lifted her arms in abject surrender. "I believe you!"

"Then -- " He broke off as he saw her smile and the mocking lift of her eyebrows; his expression changed to match her own. "Sorry."

"Shall I tell Werne that?"

"No. He asked for it. Anyway, he'll serve as an example to the others. I suppose you sweetened his

departure?"

"Just a note to salve his pride."

"Do it again and you'll have a real use for salve for personal application." He was not joking. "Let's hope he doesn't shoot off his mouth."

Varl moved on to the engine room. New additions dwarfed the original installation and turned the ship into a virtual power plant. Among the apparatus, a man was busy calibrating dials, making checks, annotations, and adjustments.

"Kurt!" He looked up, smiling. "Good to see you, Erica. Come to check on progress?"

"And to see you, Ben."

"You flatter me." Ben Lydon was at least twice her age. A man with a thin, intent face and hollowed temples, he had devoted his life to the pursuit of arcane knowledge. The apparatus at which he worked held the fruits of his discoveries. "We're ready when you are, Captain. If my theories are correct this contraption will do the job. If it doesn't then I've wasted my life."

"Not wasted," Erica said quickly. "Even negative findings can be of value."

"If everything is ready," Varl said, "then there is no need for you to be down here. I'd like you to circulate and pick up general impressions together with specific attitudes. We'll have to select the crew soon, and the more I know the better."

"I will be among them?"

"Can anyone else operate your machine? No? Then why ask foolish questions?" Varl slapped the man on the shoulder. "You're in, but don't let anyone know. Now where's Emerson? I want to see what's holding up those guns."

At dusk Erica made her way to her quarters in the communal hut. Other women, equally tired, forced her to wait for a shower, and she was irritated. But pressure alone was not the reason she had had to vacate her own rooms and private bath: Only by living close to the others could she evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

"Erica!" A tall, dark-haired girl wearing an almost transparent dress and a profusion of makeup lifted an arm in greeting as she entered the lounge. "Where have you been hiding all day? I've been looking for you."

"What for?"

"To see if you're interested in a party. Good food, plenty to drink, and some of the latest shows on videotape, all donated by a couple of young men who just hate to spend an evening alone. They came in with the latest contingent and seem to be loaded. Nice clothes, good manners, and intelligent enough to guess what a girl needs most in a place like this." She smiled as she displayed a flask of perfume. "There's one for you if you want it."

"If she doesn't, I do." Magda, another brunette, stepped in. "Anyway, why can't we all go to the party?"

"No room. Two only. I'm one and -- Erica?"

"Sorry." She shook her head as if disappointed. "I couldn't make it anyway. I'm working tonight. But try and get me that perfume."

"No luck." Magda was firm. "I go, I get it. No argument, Erica. You had your chance."

Later, in his office, Pat Harvey said thoughtfully, "Two men, uh? Both young and heavy spenders, and on the latest contingent." He reached for a file. "Did you get their names?"

"Brad and Hank. I couldn't dig too deep."

"A pair in cabin 32B. We spread them out after taking them off ice. They certainly wasted no time. Perfume, eh? That's out of character for a start. Do you smell what I smell?"

"Bribery," she said. "Someone's curious."

"And we can guess why." Harvey reached for his transmitter. "Captain?" He paused, waiting. "Harvey here. Just to give you warning. Better get your answers ready." He paused. "That's right. The cover's blown. They're moving in."

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\*CHAPTER 8\*

MORE came in the following afternoon, flying up from the Cape -- the noses, ears, and eyes of an inquisitive society. An earlier age could have controlled these pests, but the Debacle had put an end to government secrecy and the rule of bureaucrats as the hydee had liberated captive, taxpaying populations. Like vultures, the news hounds dove in for the kill.

"What are you doing here, Captain Varl?" Jane Gosser -- aged, sharp, and acid -- fired the question. "I mean really doing."

"An investigation -- "

"Spare us the crap." Stefan Wilson, as old as the woman but even more cynical, signaled to his cameraman to get close-ups. "There are no mineral deposits here, and even if there were, you've the wrong equipment to go after them. Give yourself a break, Captain. Tell us the truth."

An agent of Earth Confederation warning that the original story no longer held water and to repeat it would be a mistake.

"There's word out that you're conducting illegal experiments in the field of atomics." Clair Omney, young and eager, edged closer with a flash of white teeth in the scarlet cavern of her mouth. "What are you hiding in the ship, Varl? Animals? Isotopes? How about letting us have a look?"

"Yeah, why not?" A young man backed the suggestion. Sweat pearly on the dusty velvet of his skin and clung to the crisp wool of his hair. "Let's get in there!"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Would you let me into your house to root around?" Varl met the man's eyes. "That ship is private property. Respect it -- or get the hell away from here!"

"Now, Captain, take it easy." An older man was quick to pour oil on the trouble waters. Another agent? It was possible; Earth Confederation did not lack manpower. "You can understand why we're curious. A ship stuck out here in the Kalahari. Equipment. Men. Some of them are employed by Earth Confederation, right? How come, if the project is private?"

Werne -- the bastard had opened his mouth. Varl lifted both hands and smiled as he gestured toward a hut.

"Let's all calm down. There's ice in there and drinks and air conditioning." And girls carefully chosen by Erica to look nice, talk at length, but say nothing while they served refreshments.

Erica handed Varl a tall glass filled with fruit juice and ice. "I heard. What happens if they insist on looking inside the ship?"

"We let them."

"The armament?"

"I'll tell them." She smiled as if he were telling her a joke. "Relax. Lydon will take care of the ship, and I'll manage the rest. Just keep the drinks flowing. My men in position?"

Enca nodded. Varl's men were disguised as workers, clerks, or casual wanderers who would isolate the visitors from others; people who could be chosen at apparent random and who knew just what to say.

As the noise subsided Jane Gosser got to the point. "There have been rumors, Captain Varl, about you and what you're doing here. The public has a right to know, and we have a duty to keep them informed. I'm sure you are willing to cooperate."

"Of course."

"Then why the mystery?"

"No mystery." Varl took a sip of his juice, then smiled. "I'm adapting an ordinary ship for a special purpose."

"Is that all?" She frowned as he nodded. "But why here? Why not in a shipyard?"

"I didn't want to advertise."

"So we're back to the mystery. If -- "

"No," Varl said sharply. "There is no mystery. Secrecy, yes, but the need for that is surely obvious. My backers have no desire to invite competition and -- "

The young man interrupted. "Sam Mboto, \_Cape Star.\_ Do your backers include Earth

Confederation?"

"Directly, no."

"But some of your workers are under contract to them. Do you deny that?"

"Three specialists were hired via the government agency: Rees, Fletcher, and Werne. The last proved unable to stand the pace and is no longer with the project. Fletcher finished his contract and left the day before yesterday." The truth now followed by a semi-lie. "Rees will cooperate with you and answer any questions you may put to him. That can come later. For now I suggest you let the girls recharge your glasses."

A man standing at the rear of the assembly said dryly, "Trying to get us drunk, Varl?"

"Your name?"

"Connors. \_Tri-world News.\_"

"The day I could get you drunk, Connors, will be one to remember. But if you're afraid of decent gin the girl will get you some milk."

The cheap joke did not merit the weak laughter it received, but Varl had shown himself amiable, and the news hounds were willing to throw him a little comfort.

"Why not just give us the story in your own way, Captain?" Stefan Wilson suggested. "Let's start with why you want the project kept secret."

"Sure -- you want my life with it?"

"The runaround," Mbotto said disgustedly. "He's giving us the treatment."

Varl looked at him. "How long you been on the job, Mbotto? Not long, I guess. Certainly not long enough to learn basic manners. Talk to me like that again and I'll have you thrown off the site."

"Try it! Man, I'm the press! Ruffle me and --"

"Cork it, Sam!" Wilson shook his head. "You came for a story, right? So why start a war?"

"Didn't like being called a liar," Wilson said. "I can't blame him. I wouldn't like it either. Nor would I stand to be threatened by a visitor I hadn't invited. Now have a drink and calm down. Captain?"

"There's a place beyond the Coal Sack," Varl said without preamble. "A cluster of worlds which are the kind of thing prospectors dream about. It's a real bonanza. A once-in-a-lifetime chance to make it rich. If you want to know more, forget it. I've already told you too much."

"The pot of gold, uh?" Jane Gosser looked dubious. "You could have told us that before."

"Did you give me a chance?"

"Maybe not, but what's so secret about that? A rich strike out among the stars -- how often I've heard it all before!"

"We all have." The older man who had interceded before smiled and shook his head. "It's an old story, Captain, but I wish you luck. You're going to need it."

"Now that's out of the way, how about explaining a few things?" Clair Omney was not satisfied. "The guns, for example. Afraid of pirates?"

"Pirates and lifeforms which could damn near swallow the ship and others which could bury it. Life can be rough beyond the frontiers."

"And the supplies?"

"Where I'm going there are no stores, factories, canteens."

"And Ben Lydon?" Jane Gosser had waited for her moment. "What about him, Varl?"

"He's an expert."

"Of course." She pressed her attack. "But why should any prospecting vessel need an expert in psychic phenomena? A ghost hunter? A medium? Are you intending to contact the dead?"

"Should I give them a message from you if I do?"

"Don't dodge the question," Mbotto said. "Why the expert?"

"Because he's just that -- an expert. Out there beyond the Coal Sack things aren't like they are here. The suns are close and the worlds are wrapped in skeins of force which create odd patterns of influence. I'm carrying guns to take care of material danger. Lydon may give us a different kind of protection. Call it insurance. Now, is there anything else you'd like to know?"

The barrage continued, and he answered with honest directness. The hull was being equipped with



extra scanners -- it was dark in the Coal Sack. The added stanchions were to protect the vessel from spatial stresses likely to be encountered where they were going. The guns they knew about. The supplies the same. The unusual equipment? Well, the improved generators were a precaution, as was the hydee unit enhancer. Yes, Lydon had installed a device of his own, the PEAP. Psychic Emission Amplifying Projector. To ward off ghosts, naturally -- what else would a psychic expert invent?

The drinks circulated as the sun lowered toward the horizon, but the news hounds seemed as immune to alcohol as they were to flattery. But Clair's voice was a little slurred as she leaned against Varl.

"The ship, Captain. What's its name?"

"The \_Odile.\_ And it isn't an 'it.' She's a 'her.'"

"\_Odile?\_"

"It means 'Wealth.'" Varl lifted his glass and pressed his own body against her curves. "Let's hope I get enough of it to make me attractive in your eyes."

"You're that already." Her stare was bold. "Do we meet again? Later? When we can talk alone?"

"Tomorrow?"

"What's wrong with tonight?"

Everything -- but he did not say it. Hoping to repel her, he had accomplished the opposite, even though her interest was not so much in him as in the facts she hoped to gain by the use of her body. As a news hound, Clair had all the right qualifications and the priorities to go with them.

"Captain!" Erica came to his rescue. "You asked me to warn you about the time. It's late and you have the final checks to do on the life-support system in sector nine."

"Final?" Drifting close, Jane Gosser pricked her ears at the word. "So you're almost ready to leave?"

"In a couple of weeks."

"How about a man coming to wrap up the story?"

"Why not? Have him here in, say, twelve days."

After they had gone, Erica, standing in the swift-fallen tropic night, said thoughtfully, "Twelve days, Kurt. That means they'll have him here in eight."

"Which means we must be ready to leave in five."

"Which means you've got to make the final selection of personnel," she said. "I've the short list with me." She stared at it in the starlight. "How about Stanislac? You've met him and he likes you. Also he has good reason to volunteer."

"His wife. I know."

"She just vanished, Kurt. Along with the other two hundred in the \_Pelican.\_ He's hot to go after who or what was responsible."

"Too hot. No."

"He has motive and -- "

"No!" Varl looked at her. "How often do I have to tell you? He's too raw with regard to his emotions. Forget him."

"And Calton?"

Varl remembered the way the man had yielded to his bluff when they had played poker. "No."

"Machen?" She sighed when he nodded. "Ritter?"

A cog traveling a set path; courier training did little to encourage initiative. "No."

"Asner?" She folded the scrap of paper. "He's good, Kurt. One of the best hydee engineers alive."

"He didn't tell me that."

"He wasn't supposed to. Well?"

Varl remembered the deft way Asner had handled the cards -- understandable now he knew Jarl's true occupation. The engineer was a big man, calm, able to handle an argument and to keep the peace.

"I'll take him. Add Cole and Owen."

"And Stacey?"

"If he checks out."

"He does. No emotional hang-ups, no phobias, no aberrations. With the rest, that should do it. I've

already chosen the women -- I'll let you have their dossiers in the morning." She turned to stand silhouetted against the night, face toward the glare and bustle around the \_Odile.\_ "Five days," she murmured. "And then -- "

She broke off to turn and look at the sky, at the stars blazing like a scatter of diamonds against the black velvet of space, and she shivered -- in fear.

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### \*CHAPTER 9\*

THE hull was completed on the first day. On the second, the generators were tried and their internal adaptations finished. The third saw the armament installed together with the tracking and firing controls: guns that could be fired directly or by remote direction, lasers able to shear through armor plate, and others which vented an assortment of missiles. This was Owen's domain, and he fussed over the instruments of destruction as if they were precious gems.

Cole was in charge of communications. He arrived with Asner on the fourth day, and both men set immediately to work. Stacey was the doctor.

"Orders from Earth Confederation," Stacey had said. "From the Comptroller himself. All officers are to be given hypnотuitiоn. Now that the crew has finally been chosen, we may as well get on with it."

"Why wasn't I told?"

"You were." Stacey was patient. "If you check your communications, Captain, you'll find one dated a week ago. I guess you've been too busy to read your mail."

This was true and Varl knew it, but hearing it did not excuse his lapse.

"It won't take long," Stacey said. "The tape is pretty short -- mostly the latest update on all relevant material applicable to Kreutzal's equations. The rest covers the use of the hydee modifications on the \_Odile.\_ Shall we start?"

"With that?" Varl looked at the band the doctor carried: a strap fitted with electrodes -- something he had seen before.

"Subjective teaching," Stacey said. "The impulse impinges directly on the cortex and -- but I guess you know about that."

He would know; Varl's dossier would have yielded the information on his past experience, essential if the doctor was to work at optimum efficiency. Now, as Stacey fitted the band, he said, "Nothing to worry about. You'll just feel a tingle and it'll be over. All set? Here we go!"

The tingle lasted too long. Van felt his nerves tense and muscles contract as, softly, a whine grew in his ears. The unimportant side effect was the result of cerebral adjustment to the new stimuli registering as sound. To others it could be flashes of light, a prickle in the tongue, or a jerk of the knee.

Time slowed, though he was not aware of it. His perceptions changed a little as if he had been thrown into a light trance, and for a moment he felt as if something were thrusting itself into his brain, a sensation gone as soon as registered.

"Done!" Stacey reached forward and removed the band. "You'll have a headache for about thirty minutes, then it will vanish and you'll begin to realize you know a lot more than you thought you did about the subjects mentioned. Who should I take next?"

"Asner." The hydee engineer would need to know before the others. "Then take them as they come. All of them, the women too."

"I was going to ask you about that." Stacey tucked the band into its holder on the case he held. "As I understand it, this is a chancy operation -- need we take women at all?"

"You object? Why? Do you think women are weak? Inferior?"

"Neither. As a doctor I know that every woman sees more blood and experiences more pain than a dozen average men. They live with it. And they aren't inferior in any way. No. I'm thinking about the complications. Put men and women together and you create associations. Then, if something happens to one, the other is affected. Made less effective."

"You could be right," Varl said. "But the women stay."

"Then that's the end of it -- you're the captain. I'll get on with it now."

"Do that. And do something else. Tell everyone you treat -- every crew member, that is -- to be at hut 62S at dusk this evening. Everyone. No exceptions. And, Doctor, you'd better bring restoratives with you."

Alone, Varl resumed his checking. The figures blurred, and the promised headache was like a hammer pounding at his temples. Either the treatment was too strong or his own subconscious resistance was too high -- whatever the reason, the pain was enough to ruin his concentration. Outside he noted the relative quiet; where before the area around the ship had been a bedlam, now birdsong could be heard from the surrounding vegetation. Tomorrow there would be nothing but scarred dirt where the ship now rested. The *\_Odile\_* would have gone, leaving Earth Confederation to clean up the mess. Kalif should be good at it -- he had had time to practice.

On a whim Varl walked due north away from the work area and into the thick mass of growth. The air was dry and the fronds dusty; small blooms showed yellow among the dull brownish green. The stridulation of insects stilled as he neared, resumed when he passed. The sun was hot on his head and shoulders; the heat intensified his headache. When the hammers turned into pile drivers, he turned and retraced his steps and almost fell over a man lying in the brush.

Sam Mbotto rose, defiant, camera in hand.

"Spying?" Varl glanced at the instrument, the recorder slung around the strong neck. "What do you hope to find?"

"The truth."

"You've had it."

"The real truth. That mush you gave out wasn't it and you know it. I don't know what you're hiding, man, but I figure on finding out."

"By sticking your nose into private business?"

"Private?" Mbotto shrugged, brushing scraps of dusty leaves from his clothing, batting an insect from his cheek. "What's an officer of Earth Confederation doing working on a private project? And why should a major take orders from a captain -- The blonde, Major Erica Borke. I saw her a year ago when doing a stint at Polar North. And you made a mistake in firing Werne."

"A fool."

"Maybe, but he hates your guts. I fed him booze and pumped him dry. And I did some checking. And I decided to come out here and find out what I could." He swatted another insect. "You could make it easy."

"If you're right I could have you buried."

"That too -- if you're that kind of a man. But there are those who know what I'm doing."

A possible lie, but even if it was true, Mbotto must know how weak such a defense would be. With the ship gone, and the weight of Earth Confederation backing the cover-up, how long would the disappearance of one stubborn news hound be remembered?

Yet he had guts: courage enough to return at night, to crouch in the brush, waiting, watching; the stamina to be patient.

Varl glanced at the canteen and the pack of food lying close to the spot where Mbotto had lain.

"What makes you feel so deeply about this? Pride in your job?"

"That and more. I majored in history and specialized in the pre-D era -- the French Revolution and onward. That's when the rot really set in; the manipulation of information, the cynicism of politicians, the corruption of governments. God, the things that happened! Well -- never again!"

"That's what those early revolutionaries must have said. But what happened? The serfs got rid of one tyranny and were saddled with another. France, Russia, China -- " Varl shrugged. "You know the pattern."

"One which blew up in their faces," Mbotto said. "But things are different now. We have computer voting, referenda, obligatory consultation with the public. The old days when things were arranged behind closed doors are over. Free information and an aware public are the guarantee of liberty. That's why the smell of secrecy is a stink in the nostrils."

"Sometimes it's for the best."

"Yeah, that's what they said in the old days." Mboto dug his shoe into the ground. "You know how this came about? There's another such place in the western Sahara, and India, and the Kazakhstan Plain. Gas. Flame and germs and napalm. Starvation. And why? Because they'd had a gutful of having to kowtow to the leeches riding their backs. Those bastards!" His shoe gouged a miniature grave. "They sowed the wind and, by God, they reaped the whirlwind and the innocent paid. But not again. Governments exist to serve the people and not the other way around. Some politicians would like to forget that. Are they starting up again?"

"No."

"Convince me."

"I'll do that," Varl said. "Tonight."

\* \* \* \*

The area had been cleared and hut 62S stood in an oasis of isolation. The interior had been stripped except for the humped bulk of a hologram projector. As Varl entered with Mboto at his side there was a momentary break in the murmur of conversation.

"The entire crew of the Odile," Varl explained to his guest. "If there seems a lot, it is because at all times we shall operate with a full duty crew. Six-hour watches, turn and turn about."

"No automatics?"

"We have those, too." Varl lifted his voice. "Your attention, please. Thank you. You have been assembled for indoctrination on the purpose of our operation. Some of you may guess at what it is, others may be better informed, but to all of you I say this -- once I start the recording there can be no change of heart. If you want to quit, now's the time to do it."

A man said, "What about the stranger?"

"Sam Mboto? I hope he will become our historian. If not he will keep silent." This was a promise; one way or another he would do that, but Varl did not elaborate. The technician standing beside the projector glanced at him and threw a switch.

As the lights dimmed, Varl began to speak. "This recording was made of a vessel found drifting half a parsec from Fomalhaut. She is the Lewanna, a ship of the Harbor-Nezib line bound from Alshain to Sadalsuud. She carried three hundred and twenty-seven passengers and crew. The ship that discovered her was the Shiemach." As the last light died Varl added, "This is what they found."

And, again, he was in hell. There was no other word for it. There could be no other word for the things depicted in three dimensions and glowing color: the blood, the bone, the matted hair, the ripped clothing, the smashed furnishings, the dented plates, dangling lights, the obscene parody of the human shape. And there was more.

"God!" A woman cried, and Van heard the sudden retching. "Dear God!"

A man mouthed something before he too was silenced by rising bile. A girl screamed and screamed until someone swung a hand in a pistol report against her cheek, turning hysteria into a ragged sobbing.

The Lewanna had carried three hundred and twenty-seven living, human beings -- the hell lay in the fact that not all were dead.

"No!" A woman shrieked as a hopping travesty of life came toward her. "No! No! No!"

A man -- alive despite the eyes which hung on his cheeks, the organs which dangled like ghastly fruit on the parody of his body -- twitched and stumbled on feet which looked like hands and extended in mute and helpless appeal hands which looked like feet.

Another thing crawled.

Something was plastered against a wall as if it had been an anatomical schematic; nerves, fat, bone, inner organs -- smears of blue and white and yellow and blue -- eyes which moved as they dribbled blood.

The great salon of the Lewanna was now a charnel house in which the living envied the dead.

Varl stared at the depiction filling the interior of the hut. The assembled crew moved like ghosts through the visually solid images, blending with the scene, adding to its horror with shocked faces and wild eyes, with mouths open to scream or pray, with their vomit, their sweat, their stink of fear.

Shock, he knew, had caused the reaction -- the sudden and unexpected confrontation with sickening

reality, the sight and concept of injury and pain. The same shock had fired his own conditioned responses when he had first seen it, to sear his hands with remembered agony and his mind with the knowledge of the desperate hell the living had known. Mercifully, the depiction was of the past and the travesties which crawled and twitched in broken posturings had long been at rest.

The tape ended, and Varl stared at his crew in the glow of blossoming lights. Three women and a man had fainted. Others sat with their heads between their knees. Two were in a fetal position.

"Up!" He stormed among them, gripping, raising, the sting of his hand wetting their cheeks. "Up, damn you! On your feet!" He saw the glint of Erica's hair, Asner's golden brownness. "Help me! Get them up and aware. Move!"

As they worked, he snapped to the technician standing at the projector, "Again."

"Captain?"

"Show it again!"

And again. And again. Until the screaming died and the fainting and the nausea ceased. Until repetition had numbed them and built a wall of detachment, creating the familiarity which enabled a surgeon to cut and slash and expose pulsating organs to his clinical eye.

Afterward, when they had left the hut, Mboto said, "Is that the story?"

"Yes." Varl looked at the man. Sweat beaded in the crisp wool of his hair and the dark skin was tinged with a gray. "Going to spill it?"

Mboto shook his head, turning to look up at the stars as Erica had done, shivering as she had shivered.

"What's out there?" he whispered. "What in God's name could have done a thing like that?"

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#### \*CHAPTER 10\*

THE Comptroller had lied; Kreutzal could not still be drifting in the great unknown. The problem would not be solved; the enemy would always be waiting, lurking out there among the stars. And even if Kreutzal's ship could be discovered, what would they find? Jelly smeared on the hull? Something crawling as it whimpered with a mouth shifted to its stomach? Crying with eyes set in its hands?

A skeleton wearing a cheerful grin tapped a bony hand on the metal of the ship. It wore Kalif's face, his eyes, his smile grown old with time -- a cunning smile, as the man was a master of deception. He tapped and tapped -- and vanished as Varl sat upright on his bunk, rubbing at his eyes.

He had lain down to ease the renewed throbbing of his temples and must have drifted to sleep. The tapping persisted, and he snapped an order at the closed door. Erica entered the cabin.

"You've caught me," he said. "Sleeping on the job."

"And liable to be whipped near to death." Her smile was a grimace. "But not this time -- you're off watch."

He glanced at the clock set in the bulkhead; he had dozed little more than an hour.

"That's no excuse. All snug?"

"Set and in the groove. You were rough last night."

"They'll get over it."

"Sure -- but I'll bet no one will want to eat meat for a while." She handed him an envelope. "This came a couple of hours ago. Congratulations!"

The envelope was open. It contained his master's certificate and an official document proclaiming his promotion to the rank of commander. Kalif's work, and, he guessed, a sop to gain and maintain his cooperation. Seeing his expression, Erica frowned.

"Aren't you pleased?"

"I don't need a certificate to make me a captain."

"It'll come in useful. As will the promotion. You'll need both if you want help from Earth Con worlds."

Fuel and supplies, ammunition for the guns and parts for the machines, replacements for the crew, perhaps -- the old bastard had thought of everything. Varl leaned back, feeling a growing satisfaction. He had a ship, arms, a crew, supplies -- and a universe to rove in. What chains had Kalif forged which as

yet remained invisible?

Varl rubbed his face again and rose. The headache was a nagging irritation, and he jerked open a cabinet and swallowed three pills dry. They stuck in his throat; nodding his thanks, he took the cup of water Erica handed him.

"If that pain's from Stacey's treatment, you'd better get him to check you out," she said. "Mine lasted about fifteen minutes, and even Mboto was normal after thirty-five. You wanted him treated, I assume?"

"I said all crew. He became one of us."

Mboto, now installed in a cabin with his equipment, was after the biggest story a news hound could hope to break -- a story Varl was sure would never be published.

"He must be crazy," Erica said.

"As you are? And the rest?"

"You too, Kurt."

"I had little choice," he reminded her. And now neither did the rest. Locked in the \_Odile,\_ they would stay with it all the way. How many would remain human? He said, "Is basic routine established with your women?"

"They know the drill." She added, "I've posted the fact of your promotion. It'll stop any arguments about rank. Not that there would have been any."

He did not share her confidence. "Did anything else come from Polar North?"

"Only the update on the computer data I'd asked for. I'll process it once we're on our way. When will that be, Commander?"

"In a hurry to leave?"

"There's no point in hanging around." She turned to the door, pausing to take a deep breath.

Varl looked at her silhouette as she touched the doorknob. "Stacey didn't want you with us. I'm beginning to think he had a point."

"Me?"

"All of you -- the women."

"He's old-fashioned," she said. "A thousand years out of date. Hasn't he heard of equality?"

"It doesn't exist and never has. Having legal equality doesn't make us the same. If it did I could have babies, too. Do you know what I'm getting at?"

Erica glanced down at her contours. "I think so."

"All we men know you are different; you don't have to keep reminding us. I want the women dressed in clothing which doesn't emphasize their femininity. No makeup. No perfume. What they do off-watch in the privacy of their cabins is their business, but I don't want them taking the minds of the men off their jobs. That goes for you too."

For a moment she tensed as if about to argue, then shrugged. "I'll see to it. Shapeless coveralls -- I guess you won't object to belts?"

"Don't let them be worn too tight."

"For God's sake! Do you think I've picked a load of strumpets? We have better things to do than seduce you men. Maybe you should warn your side not to yield to temptation -- Or can't you resist an opportunity to rape?"

Varl stared at her face, at the anger glistening in her eyes, then said quietly, "I've a reason for ordering this, and you should know what it is. Or have you forgotten what happened in here after we came aboard?"

"No." Her eyes moved from his face to glance at the bunk, and a tinge of red brushed her cheeks. "No, I haven't forgotten."

"The other side of the coin," he said. "Nature's way of keeping a balance. The sight of pain and blood and death triggers the desire to create. Wars bring an increase in population. It's something basic in our makeup, a thing we can't really control. Conditions in the \_Odile\_ are going to be tense. Add titillation and you beg for trouble. Not just the distraction, but the envies and jealousies and the primitive need to survive. The genetic urge to breed -- need I say more?"

"No, Professor, you've said enough."

"I'm serious, Major!"

"I know you are, Commander." For a moment she glared at him, then she shook her head. "Is there anything you haven't thought of, Kurt? Anything at all?"

"I hope not," he said. "We leave in ten minutes."

In the control room he took his place in the pilot's chair, sweeping the controls with experienced eyes, starting the checks with a curt nod at Cole on communications. The reports were too slow, and he slammed his hand on the console.

"Cancel! Recommence checks, and this time remember we aren't playing a game. Start!"

He listened to the responses, watching the telltales, then snarled his anger again, slamming his hand on the panel.

"Cancel! I want full response. It isn't enough to press a button -- a bulb could have blown, a wire snapped, anything. I want both vocal and electronic systems check. Again!"

In the engine room, a man looked at Asner and raised his eyebrows. At the life-support monitor board a woman pursed her lips and whispered to her duty mate.

"Now I know what I've heard is true -- we've got ourselves a real martinet."

"A real bastard, you mean."

"I was being polite." She winced as Varl's voice snarled from the speakers, canceling the check again. "So much for schedules! At this rate we'll never leave the ground."

When they did, the ship lifted with a jerk.

Kreutzal's first ship had risen like a bubble to hang poised before vanishing; it had been a frail skin lightened by hydrogen, and the *\_Odile\_* was a structure of massive proportions in comparison. But the hydee was as advanced as the ship and more than equal to the strain.

"Power!" Varl snapped as he watched the meters. "Engage first level!"

He could have done it himself from the chair, but he had his own reasons for involving the others. As a telltale flared into ruby life a thin, keening whine began to fill the vessel, a note which climbed and stung the ears before it passed above audible range. In the engine room a paradox came into being.

Kreutzal's invention was a machine with no moving parts. Instead, a complex mesh of energy fields was created within the framework of symmetrical coils immersed in liquid hydrogen and framed by massive armatures. Supercooled conductors, shaped to harmonize with others of similar nature, created a field of mutual induction. When enough power was supplied, an irresistible force met an immovable object.

Power, seeking to escape, created the very conditions that made it impossible for it to do so. Plasma-like field pressures developed to form a complex node which could not logically exist within the framework of the known universe. The energy could not dissipate, nor could it change. Instead it went somewhere else -- into hyperspace. With it went the engine that created it, the ship in which it was held, and everything contained within the hull, living or dead. A section of normal space moved into a region which was still a mystery.

"Watch the sync!" Varl scowled as the ship jerked and lights flared on the panel. "Engineer! Check your levels!"

"Steady now, sir!" Asner made his report. "Level evened!"

"Rate?"

"Twelve."

"Increase to fifteen."

Kreutzal had drifted high up before gambling with the direction. There was no longer any gamble involved; a slow lift was achieved with a stream of millipulses on the initial field level which gave the crew the opportunity for slow but close maneuvering. Even so, the *\_Odile\_* streaked for the upper atmosphere faster than any pre-D rocket, to soar high above the Van Allen belts and, safe from the turbulence of the magnetic field, to swing into a synchronous orbit.

"Check all systems." Varl was taking no more chances than he had to on an untried vessel.

"Navigator! Stand by for TD tests." He waited until all reports were in and in the green. "TD testing. One second. On five. Mark!" He counted. "...Two! One! On!"

The screens blurred, cleared after a second to show the vista of normal space. Machen checked the apparent diameter of Earth, compared it to what it had been, and computed the distance the Odile had traveled in the time the hydee had been engaged. He would run another dozen on the time and duration tests before he would dare to plot a course, and while he did so he was in command of the ship.

Finally he looked up. "Initial calc completed. Where to, Commander?"

Varl wanted a short flight for further testing of the ship and the navigator's skill. "The belt. Take us to the asteroids."

He sat patiently as Machen made his calculations. The asteroid belt was rife with dangers: masses of rock in complex orbits and smaller scraps of planetary debris swinging like tiny moons. Too close and the ship could drop from hydee to be smashed into ruin by the impact of jagged boulders, riddled with the shot of gravel, or penetrated by bullet-like pebbles. Possibilities Varl did not mention; the navigator should know his job.

Machen did. "How close, Commander?"

"Close."

"To the north of the elliptic then. Ceres is in close proximity to the belt just now, and I'll use it for a marker. On five. Mark!"

The screens blurred again with the eerie grayness of hyperspace. Kreutzal had reached Mars in a matter of minutes; the major time spent on his journey had been in landing and finding his way back to Earth. He had been armored in ignorance, with more luck than any human had ever deserved -- luck which need never be repeated.

Varl tensed in his chair, hands on the controls, eyes on the screens. Should the Odile emerge too close to a rock, he must fire the rockets to blast them from danger. A ship took that gamble every time it jumped, but so close to a region like the belt it could be near suicide.

The screens filled with normal space again, the alarms remained silent, the ship held still.

"Made it." Machen blew out his breath. "But too high and too far. The levels must be wrong. We'll have to recalibrate before heading out. Have we time?"

"Take all you want," Varl said. "The rest of us will be busy."

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\*CHAPTER 11\*

STACEY woke to the blare of the alarm and rolled from his bunk, cursing, his minor irritation deepening to anger as he banged his elbow. Damn Varl and his endless drills! He had not had a clear off-watch since they had reached the asteroids, and neither had anyone else. Fatigue was beginning to show in heightened tension, mounting irritation, and general discourtesy among the crew. Maintained, such fatigue could lead to verbal abuse and physical violence; already it had led to quarrels and a loss of comradeship. A hell of a way to maintain morale!

As he reached the passage the clangor died to be replaced by a harsh voice from the speakers.

"Lower hold penetrated. Power loss in forward section! Attack in upper right quadrant! Battle alert! Move!"

Varl playing god, he thought. It had to be another drill, of course, but how could he be sure? A stray meteor could have penetrated the lower hold and power could be lacking from the forward section and an attack could be lancing in from the upper right quadrant. The ship echoed to the sound of running feet as the crew raced to take up their stations. In the sick bay Singh Garewell, the medical orderly, looked up as Stacey entered.

"All right, Doctor?"

He had laid out the emergency equipment: hypodermics, swabs, dressings, and instruments were all neatly tucked beneath their clips. Garewell was a good man who had learned fast, but how he would perform under actual surgical conditions was another matter. The drills provided pretended casualties but not real blood, real pain, or real death.

"Fine." Stacey rubbed his eyes and glanced at the oxygen bottle. A few deep breaths would clear his head but would also set a poor example to the aide -- if the crunch came neither should have to rely on stimulants. "I'm busy on a patient when a casualty is brought in with a broken arm and stomach



lacerations, and coughing blood. What do you do?"

"Ignore the arm," Garewell said without hesitation. "Check the stomach for arterial bleeding, and if none is obvious, concentrate on the chest."

"And?"

"Immobilize with anesthetics and use suction to clear accumulated fluids." He added, "I'd also check the trachea for injury."

"Extensive bleeding from severed arteries?"

"Pressure on relative checkpoints and apply one or more tourniquets."

"Splinters of glass in an eye?"

"Anesthetize and bandage for your later attention."

"And if I'm dead?"

Garewell hesitated. "Take a chance."

"You wait for relative quiet," Stacey corrected. "You check up on the medical books and do what you can to the full extent of your knowledge and skill. With a patient you never take chances." He smiled wryly. "At least you never admit it. Now, as the medical officer of the *Odile*, I prescribe two ounces of medicinal brandy to us both. You'll find --" He broke off as the alarm blared again. "Now what's wrong?"

The attack had broken through the defenses and the gun turrets in the upper right quadrant and midsection had been put out of action. Another compartment had been penetrated and sealed. All hands were ordered to emergency stations.

Garewell ran off to man a gun. Had there been patients, Stacey would have had to complete emergency treatment before running to the lower left quadrant to man a laser. The area was sealed, and he ran to another sector, to throw himself into an empty turret, to reach for the controls and to curse as a red lamp flared to signal both his and the gun's destruction.

"Drill completed," Varl announced. "All hands restore ship to normal running." After a pause he said acidly: "Had the attack been genuine you would all have been dead by now."

Back in the sick bay, Stacey sat on the operating table and waited for the usual stream of minor casualties. The first to arrive was a woman with a badly grazed forearm. "Another souvenir of our commander's hope of perfection," she said as he examined her wound. "Does he expect to build a naval fighting crew in a few days?"

"It's been two weeks."

"And basic training in any military establishment is what? Six weeks? Eight?"

"I guess Varl is in a hurry." He nodded at Garewell, who had returned to resume his duties. "Singh will take care of it. Next?"

The man had a pair of badly bruised eyes. "I slipped," he explained. "Trod on something which was supposed to be blood. Damn near busted my neck. And I had something special going on my next off-watch."

"She won't see you in the dark." Stacey applied a salve. "Next?"

Mboto winced as Stacey examined his shoulder. "I think it's dislocated, Doc."

"It is. How did it happen?" Mboto, like the other man, had slipped in a pool of simulated blood, tried to save himself, and had wrenched his arm from its socket as he fell. "Here!" Stacey thrust a rolled-up bundle beneath the injured arm. "I'm going to apply leverage -- this will act as a fulcrum. Here we go!" He was fast, and before Mboto knew what was happening, his arm had been moved, the limb extended, aligned, and released for the normal pull of ligaments and muscles to restore it to its proper seating.

"Hell!"

"Hurt a little, uh?" Stacey nodded. "It'll be tender for a while, so carry it in a sling. Use it, but don't apply strain. These will help." He shook three tablets from a bottle. "Drink?"

"When there's something to celebrate."

"As my first dislocation on this trip, you have. Three glasses, Singh -- this time let's hope there are no more phony attacks."

The brandy was good, and Stacey savored it as he did the relative calm. Mboto had gone to his

cabin to sleep off the effects of the drugs and drink. Singh was busy with a medical book; he was a man who could be a doctor given time and opportunity, and Stacey decided he would get both.

A bell chimed. "My watch, Singh," Stacey said. "Get off now -- and get what sleep you can."

Garewell nodded and, taking the book with him, left the sick bay. Alone, Stacey poured himself another drink and looked at the golden fluid and the face that stared back at him from its depths.

No longer young yet not old enough to be as cynical as it was, the face was a combination of planes and curves that betrayed the man -- or a mask behind which he lived. It was a face which held disappointment and the touch of disillusion which had known how to smile but was reluctant to invite hurt. The face vanished as he lifted the glass and drank, and felt the remembered glow of liquid fires.

In the control room, Varl studied the reports of the recent drill: The computer-simulated attack had resulted in the total loss of the *\_Odile\_*.

"You can't blame the crew," Owen said. "They were hit on all sides. Once the hold was penetrated and power lost -- "

"Those things don't happen in combat?"

"At times, yes, but -- "

"And the enemy never take advantage of them?"

"Be fair, Commander," Cole said. "No matter how strong the ship or well trained the crew, you can always devise a system which will reduce them both to total loss. The point is -- "

"I'm not making points," Varl snapped. "I'm trying to save lives -- yours, mine, that of every man and woman in the *\_Odile\_*. Have you forgotten what could happen to us? If an attack comes I want to be ready for it. I want the crew to know what they're doing and why. To be able to use their initiative and not run around in panic. Look at the reports! Seconds lost between manning the turrets and opening fire. Minutes between the initial alarm and full battle alert. Suggestions?"

"They know it's a drill," Owen said. "That tends to slow them down."

"But they've had practice on the guns. Why the delay?" Varl frowned. "Response time," he decided. "They reach for the controls and then take time to settle instead of triggering the guns. They want to know what they're firing at instead of just blasting at what's out there regardless of what it is. Well, that can be cured." He leaned back in his chair, not too displeased, knowing he had asked more from the crew than they could give. He knew, too, that pressure constantly maintained could defeat its own objective. "We'll alter the schedule. Switch to suit drill and target practice. How long before you can arrange a computer simulation based on external defense?"

Cole shrugged. "As soon as I get access to the machines. Erica has hogged the system ever since Piers completed the calibration."

"That's right," Machen said. "She's a glutton for work."

Varl made no comment. "Dan?"

"No trouble with the guns." Owen looked again at the reports. "I'll pick out the slowest and give them individual tuition. Maybe arrange a team competition -- that always brings out the best."

Varl nodded, conscious of his fatigue. The drills had broken every watch, and he had been on the bridge during each drill. He knew he was trying to do too much too soon, but he also knew that at a certain point all would fall in line and the crew and the ship would become a composite unit. Then the confusion of the moment would be lost in the smooth efficiency learned in training. But until then he could not bring himself to relax.

"The drill's over," he said. "Off-duty officers leave the control room. The rest get about your business."

Alone aside from Machen, Varl looked at the vista on the screens. A mass of pitted rock turned in a slow rotation, dark seams and fissures showing in the adamantine stone. Other asteroids were close, many bearing the marks of gunfire; freshly made craters or patches fused by lasers.

Varl lifted his eyes to the distant sheen of nebulae, the cold glitter of countless stars. Jupiter was close, a mottled ball of vapor blotched with the turbulence of the Red Spot. Ganymede and Io moved with the other satellites in a celestial saraband around the giant. They were small worlds still guarding their secrets as did the planets of Uranus and Neptune -- worlds too close, too cold, too hostile. The environs

of Earth were as void of human activity as they had been since the pre-D probes had made their voyages, as empty as they had been before rockets had burst free of Earth's gravity.

The stars shone like a nacreous cloud, billions of suns and multibillions of worlds. Why waste time on Mars and Venus and balls of freezing gas when fertile worlds were waiting to be found for the looking?

And it was so easy: Locate a G-type star and, almost invariably, it would be attended by planets. Pick one not too far out and not too far in, one with a moon and exposed seas, and simply take over. The chances were high that it would hold only beasts or the traces of a long-vanished civilization. There would be minerals and arable soil and fecund vegetation. Harvests would be big, and if there were any troublesome life forms, gas and guns and flame would take care of them. If they were too tough, then move on. If the place got too crowded, then move on.

Mankind was always on the move.

Varl blinked as the stars began to blur and closed his eyes to rest with the heels of his hands pressed against them. The pressure caused flares of color and bright swirls which persisted even when he lowered his hands, as ghost images dancing against the stars.

"Kurt? You all right?"

"Yes."

"Sure? You look --" Machen broke off, shaking his head.

"Like what?" Varl pressed for an answer. "Like what, Piers?"

"Hell," Machen said. "You look like hell."

Like a man who had not slept for too long; like a man who had not eaten. Varl looked at his reflection in the crystal cover of a dial and ran his hand over his chin. Starlight shone in his eyes with dulled reflection.

"You need a steak, a bottle, and a bed," the navigator said. "Why don't you give yourself a treat, Commander?"

Instead, he went to see a man who believed in ghosts.

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\*CHAPTER 12\*

BEN Lydon had a bleeding nose. He looked at Varl from over the edge of a handkerchief, the once-spotless fabric now dappled with crimson. "An accident, Commander. I was trying to help when I was hit."

"What with? A fist?"

"The back of a hand. The man didn't know I was behind him."

"Where?"

"The passage leading to the lower hold. I'm detailed to check for leaks and seal any I find. I was careless and didn't look where I was going."

The smack in the nose could have been the accident Lydon claimed, but Varl sensed another explanation: a burst of irritation from someone more efficient or a spiteful man taking a sneaky revenge. He decided to find the one responsible. A slap could turn into a punch, which could lead to something more violent. If a potential sadist was aboard, Varl wanted to know it. "Come to the sick bay," he said. "You're messing up the ship."

Stacey was apparently asleep when they entered the compartment, sitting slumped against the bulkhead, eyes closed, breathing ragged. Varl crossed toward him, stooped, smelled his breath. The doctor opened his eyes as the commander lifted his hand.

"No need for that," he said. "I was just resting my eyes."

"With the help of brandy?"

"One drink -- medically prescribed." Stacey looked at Lydon. "Trouble?"

"Just a nosebleed. It isn't important."

"Maybe not, but let's have a look at it just the same." The doctor pursed his lips as he kneaded the cartilage. "It's broken. I'll set, freeze, and staunch it. You won't need more than a scrap of tape to hold it, but don't emulate trumpets when you blow it. In fact, try not to blow it at all." He worked with brisk

efficiency. "That should do it. Try not to run into any more doors."

"What?"

"A joke." Stacey shook his head at Lydon's expression. "You haven't had to treat women with heavy-handed boyfriends. Broken noses, blacked eyes -- all the result of walking into doors." He turned to Varl. "Am I on a charge?"

"Not this time." Varl wondered if Erica had known when she had cleared the doctor of his weakness for alcohol.

"And not a casualty either." Stacey rubbed his cheek where Varl's hand would have landed.

Back in the engine room, Varl watched Lydon check out his machine. The dials with their esoteric markings meant nothing to him, and neither did the antenna and projections, the spinning discs, the peculiarly shaped grids and rhomboids. Lydon claimed this machine generated psychic power, emulating the emanations of the human psyche, amplifying and projecting them far beyond the confines of the vessel.

"Is it in operation?"

"No." Lydon's bandaged nose gave a clownish touch to the austere lineaments of his face. "I've balanced the various components but have not been able to make the final tests as yet. The engineer ordered me not to," he explained. "Not until he was satisfied there could be no interference with the hydee. And not until calibration was completed."

"And now?"

"It's ready for testing."

And, Van thought, Lydon's reputation with it. Lydon was an expert in a field in which there were no grades, no honors, no neatly printed diplomas. How could the value of a ghost hunter be assessed? By his bag?

Varl studied the machine. The principle of the PEAP was simple, its operation something else.

Lydon explained. "A person, any person, is a biological machine. Every cell carries an electrical charge and can be affected by a magnetic field. This has been proved again and again in the field of radiation-assisted therapeutic medicine. Bones knit faster when exposed to an electrical induction field. Tissue reacts more strongly. And there can be no doubt as to the electrical nature of the brain -- electroencephalograms proved that centuries ago. So we have a radiating mesh of energy generated by cellular current. One which can be measured and duplicated."

"Copied?"

"Not exactly." Lydon sounded regretful. "If that could be done a new era would be open to us. If we could make an exact facsimile of a person's energy field then that person could be frozen in time and later duplicated in an artificial body of an organic nature. No, what I have done is to devise a means of radiating the aura of a crowd. Of, if you like, creating ghosts."

Energy fields were created, shaped, transmitted -- if such fields were released from their cellular prisons at death, what else were ghosts? Energy imprints on the fabric of time.

"Are you ready to test?" Varl asked.

"Yes, but -- "

"We are at rest relative to the asteroids. The hydee isn't working, and if ghosts can harm the Odile it's time we found out. Run your test."

Lydon hesitated, dabbing at his nose, then seemed to come to a decision. "Turn away from me. Close your eyes. Concentrate on your surroundings."

"A trick?"

"No, how can there be? But you, yourself, are a detector of the energies I am about to release. I don't want you to be affected by anything I may do or your eyes should witness. Please, Commander, bear with me."

Varl turned and looked at the expanse of the engine room, the sheen of machines, the lights that provided that reflected illumination. The compartment had been cleared by his order and, aside from Lydon and himself, was deserted.

"Ready, Commander?"

Varl obediently closed his eyes. "Ready."

Nothing.

Nothing but the sound of his own breathing and the soft rustle of clothing as his companion moved toward the machine. But what had he said? To concentrate on the surroundings. To think of the bleakness of metal and reflected light. Of the vast emptiness of space, the vacuum beyond the hull, the infinite void. Of his own youth and early manhood. Of the bleakness of command. The loneliness of a cell.

Then, suddenly, he was in a crowd.

"What -- " He jerked to his feet, eyes opened, head moving as he stared from side to side. He saw nothing but the empty compartment and yet he knew, he knew, he was not alone, that around him, filling the engine room, was a host of people.

Ghosts.

The emanations created by the machine aped the attributes of real people. Closing his eyes, Varl could imagine them laughing, smiling, moving about -- a busy, bustling throng. He knew they were there as a blind man would know of the presence of others, as a primitive savage crouching in a cave would know of the presence of enemies.

The crowd vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Well, Commander?" Lydon smiled with a quiet triumph. "Is that what you wanted?"

Varl drew in his breath. "Were you operating at maximum?"

"No. Low register only. I can increase the amplification to a far higher level and, of course, the projection. Do you want a further demonstration?"

"No."

"Then what about more tests? I'd like to -- "

"Later." The crew were under enough tension without having to suffer more -- ghostly presences were something they could do without. "Could such a device work in reverse?" Varl asked with genuine interest.

"Catch and amplify the fading energies of a person who has died?" Lydon glanced at his invention. "That's what so interested the media when I was foolish enough to admit the possibility to a news hound. He didn't listen to anything but one item of speculation, and the story cost me my position with Ohio University."

"I'm not interested in headlines. Will it?"

"Resurrect the dead? No."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"No," Lydon admitted. "It wasn't. Well, to answer your question, the possibility exists but is extremely remote. Theoretically it should be possible to capture the energy web, boost it, condense it, and achieve the original pattern. In which case we should have a scientific contradiction -- a disembodied person."

"A ghost?"

"Something which would be aware but unable to make contact on the physical plane. Which would be unaffected by material barriers. Which would be invisible to all but those few with supranormal abilities or those able, if only for a brief moment, to sense other planes and dimensions. Yes, Commander, as you said -- a ghost."

The dissolving fragment of a life and all that would be left of the struggle and achievement, the hope, the love and tenderness, the sadistic indulgence, the blend of angel and devil which made up a normal human being.

And after?

"Nothing ever really dies," Lydon said when Varl asked. "The law of the conservation of energy proves that. Burn a stick and you get ash and smoke and heat. Things change but never vanish, and the electrical field which once constituted the ego of a man, his individual awareness, that also must continue to exist."

Those who feared extinction might draw comfort from such thoughts, but Varl was not one of them.

From the engine room, he made his way through the ship, checking, lingering to examine installations, moving like a restless shadow to the operations room, where Erica sat at a table littered with papers, graphs, and printouts.

If he looked like hell she looked like heaven.

Varl stood looking at her, at the golden hair and the contours beneath her blouse, the long curve of her thighs and the delicate arch of her brows. A Valkyrie, a warrior-queen, or the high priestess of an esoteric god. Then she sighed and rubbed her brows and was just an ordinary woman gifted with a beautiful face and figure. She looked up as he moved closer to the table.

"Kurt! You look -- "

"Awful," he said. "I know. It'll pass." He pulled out a chair and sat. "Any results?"

"As yet all negative." Her voice was dull, betraying her own fatigue. "The figures should give us some kind of an answer, but if it's there I can't see it. Neither can the computer. No pattern, damn it! There's just no pattern!"

"Or one you can't recognize?"

"That could be true," she admitted. "But I'm beginning to think it's a matter of random selection. If so -- " She broke off and shook her head. "There has to be something."

"You'll find it. Maybe tomorrow after you've had a rest."

"Maybe." She took a small box from her pocket, opened it, selected a pod, and crushed it between finger and thumb. She inhaled, her chest swelling as she drew the tingling aroma of ka'sence into her lungs. "When are we starting out?"

"When we're ready."

"A week? Two? A month?"

"As long as it takes. Why? Are you in a hurry?"

"Kalif's getting anxious. Two more ships have been reported as missing." She rummaged among the papers and found the message slip. "Here. I've decoded it."

"Both ships were big ones, right?" Van asked.

"Both had total complements of over four hundred. How did you know?"

Varl took the slip without answering and read the details. The message which followed held the usual platitudes and exhortations, promises, and fulsome praise, and he wondered why the Comptroller thought they would do any good. Habit, he guessed, and the detachment of age. He crumpled the slip in his hand.

"Heroes," Varl said. "Who the hell is he talking about?"

"Us," Erica said. "We're meeting the challenge, facing the danger, protecting mankind. We're crusaders venturing into the dark to face the great unknown. To fight it and beat it and return victorious. Heroes, Kurt, you see?"

Varl had a better word -- bait!

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\*CHAPTER 13\*

SHIP'S council was held in the operations room, not the largest compartment but the most convenient, and from his seat at the head of the table Varl glanced at each officer in turn. Cole had a plaster on one temple, the result of a careless step while on suit drill -- he had been lucky the impact with asteroidal mass had not cracked his faceplate. Asner had a seared hand, burned while adjusting a machine; like Cole, he had been careless because of fatigue. Others had suffered similar injuries.

Varl spoke. "We're about ready to start out, and this meeting is to put you all in the picture. You all know what we're looking for. Any ideas on how to find it?"

"Trace the paths of the lost ships," Owen suggested. "Keep it up long enough and what hit them will hit us."

"And, when it does, we'll be ready for them, eh, Dan?" Stacey said.

"That's right." Owen missed the sarcasm. "We'll blast it with everything we have."

"Do we know the path the lost ships took, Commander?" Mbotto asked.

"No." Varl anticipated the next question. "There is no discernible pattern to the missing vessels, and I don't think one can be found. Erica?"

"I've checked and rechecked, and the answer is zero. It's a random happening. Ships have been reported lost from all regions of the known galaxy." She leaned back, eyes shadowed by dark circles.

"So we've nothing to go on?" Mbotto wanted to make the point clear for his record. "Then -- "

"No one said we have nothing to go on," Varl snapped. "Only that we have discovered no regular flight pattern the victims followed. But we do have similarities and points the ships had in common." He reached for a list and began to read details. "The \_Virilian\_ -- a total complement of around four hundred and fifty. The \_Entarra\_ -- five hundred. The \_Beagle\_ -- three-fifty. The \_Mary Rose\_ -- almost six hundred. The \_Snark\_ -- five-fifty. You notice anything?"

"Big," Machen said. "They were all big."

"And carrying a lot of people." Mbotto frowned. "Cargo ships are big too -- have they been vanishing?"

"Ships have always vanished for one reason or another and we can guess why -- navigational error, natural hazards, all the rest of it. But the reported incidence of loss is way below that of passenger-carrying vessels." Varl glanced at Stacey. "Doctor?"

"Just a thought: Has the fact the ships were carrying people anything to do with what happened to them?" If the doctor had been drinking, it did not show.

"Yes, I think it does," Van said. "I noticed the correlation almost from the first, possibly because it was the one fact most repeated to me. Big ships, large complements -- always the emphasis was on the number of people lost. I began to wonder if there wasn't a critical factor at work somewhere."

"Is there?"

"Maybe, but I don't know what it is. The reported losses range from ships carrying as low as fifty passengers and crew to as high as almost seven hundred." Varl paused. "I know there are larger ships carrying over a thousand, but they are mostly used on relatively short and regular runs."

"So we have another factor." Irene sat upright in her chair. "Large ships containing high numbers of people together with long journeys. So?"

"We're safe." Owen sounded regretful. "If fifty is the lower limit, we're way under that. We don't carry more than thirty."

"But -- " Mbotto broke off as he saw Varl looking at him and recognized that his timing was wrong. "But what shall we do?" he ended, lamely.

"Find a large ship and run along close to it," Cole said. "If it's attacked we'll be on hand."

"To do what?" Stacey asked acidly. "And how the hell will we know if it's being attacked? Run a wire from hull to hull? That won't work in hydee -- even I know that."

"I was thinking of short hops and regular rendezvous," Cole said stiffly. "We can keep relatively close. The \_Lewanna\_ could only have recently been hit -- some were still alive, remember? A companion ship might have been in time to join the action."

Even Cole knew such a desperate plan would not work; only stubbornness had made him improvise on his first, thoughtless suggestion.

"From the look of it, we're on a wild goose chase. Before we can even hope to hit what it is that is attacking the ships we have to find it," Asner said.

"Or attract it to us," Mbotto said. "What we need is to make it seem that we are carrying far more people than we are. If a large complement is a factor, then we have to emulate it."

"How?" Machen snapped impatiently. "You can't turn thirty into three hundred. Not unless you use magic or -- " He blinked, finally understanding. "Of course! The PEAP!"

Varl stepped in. "It will work -- tests have already been completed. Once the PEAP is in operation, the \_Odile\_ will have the radiation index of a ship carrying hundreds. Any questions?"

Some questions were inevitable, but he was pleased how few there were.

Mbotto summed it up again -- for the sake of the record, Van suspected. "So we head out under hydee with Lydon's machine working. And if we're attacked?"

"We'll be ready." Varl rose from his seat at the head of the table. "We leave in an hour. Starting then we'll alter watches -- one third of personnel to be suited and armed at all times."

Varl took his place in the control room, checking the instruments, aware of but not wholly

concentrating on the blur of preflight checks. On the screens, the asteroid they had used as a training ground spun deceptively slowly. The training finally showed in the crispness of the action taking place, in the time lopped off the period needed to man and fire the guns, in the smooth efficiency now attending every function of the \_Odile.\_

A woman reported from her station before a console. "Power at optimum level. Hyde ready to engage."

Her throaty contralto was echoed by Machen's deeper, precise voice. "Course fixed. Ready to leave."

Varl was slow to give the word that would send them on their way. This was the last any of them might see of the normal universe -- death could come at any time and smear them into extinction before they knew it. No commander with sense failed to make a last-minute assessment of the most delicate instrument he carried: his own basic instinct for danger.

"Check course. Asner?"

"Optimum, Commander. PEAP on minimal operation. No interference."

Varl wondered how the engineer felt surrounded by an invisible crowd. Again he checked the screens and the \_Odile's\_ target star: Rigel, in the constellation Orion. Burning five hundred light-years distant, Rigel was a blazing point even among the glittering panoply of stars.

Suddenly he was impatient to be on his way.

"Stand by," he snapped. "Leave on five. Mark!" Five seconds and ... "Go!"

Now, more than ever since the first few times when he had still been awed by the wonder of it, he was aware of transition. The tension mounted to burst in a peculiar sensation of being twisted, warped, stretched into bizarre dimensions. The feeling passed, and he stared at the screens: Devoid of stars, they were filled with nothing but gray, a vague, amorphous, mistlike something which coiled and writhed and seemed to be ever on the edge of forming familiar patterns but never did.

The color of nonspace, the realm in which ships traveled by virtue of the hydee -- Kreutzal's world.

Varl stared at it. According to psychologists, the color was gray because it was a noncolor, and the swirling was due to the mind trying to take shapelessness and turn it into a recognizable whole by associating it with familiar forms. Such explanations answered nothing, but held a certain logic and provided comfort for those who needed to be convinced they were safe.

Did the mist hold monsters? Slavering things ready to pounce and rip open the hull and scoop out the tender delicacies within as a man would eat fresh peas from the pod or a bear delve in a hive for honey?

Was the \_Odile\_ heading down a gargantuan mouth into an unimaginable intestine to be dissolved by acids, ingested by an unseen, unsuspected creature of horror? Or heading directly into the heart of a sun to be converted to atoms and spread among the stars? Or doomed to drift for eternity in the coffin of the ship not dead, not alive, but frozen in an eternal moment?

"Commander!" Varl turned toward the navigator. "On flight," Machen reported. "All systems green."

Varl realized that his introspection had lasted no longer than a few seconds. He automatically checked his console, then leaned back and looked again at the screens. The hypnotic fascination of the gray mist contained a subtle danger: Pilots had been found helpless in their chairs, lost in a private universe, catatonic or mad.

A face appeared in the swirling grayness, one he had seen before:

\_"Kreutzal!"\_

The face was gone and only the amorphous mist remained to answer his shout. Had he shouted? No one had turned toward him, and Varl knew the shout, like the face, had been in his own mind. Had the mist swallowed its discoverer?

Lydon had said that nothing really died -- what happened to those who vanished in hydee? Lydon! Varl remembered the machine.

"Control to engine. Have PEAP activated at full intensity."

"Check," Asner replied. "Machine at full."

The ship came alive, a place crammed with humanity, jostling, surging, crowding close. The mist,



too, seemed to live; as a woman screamed, Varl slammed his hand against the switch, killing the screens and the images they held. He was sweating, his skin crawling with remembered terrors, seeing again the cell, the robed figure, the instruments which had turned him into a whimpering beast.

He realized the images must be born of mental stimulation. Ghosts were of those who had once lived, not the reflections of pain and fear. And ghosts were not real.

He relaxed and felt the Odile vibrant with life. A ship prepared to kill. A ship loaded with fictional humanity as bait -- waiting for the killers to strike.

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\*CHAPTER 14\*

AGAIN Stacey looked at the hell found in the Lewanna. He was not bothered by the blood smeared over the bulkheads and the floors -- red paint would have made a similar pattern. But the huddled masses were something else, and he felt the old sickness as he studied the pulped tissue, the bone, the ravaged organs.

He sipped, feeling the stinging warmth of the brandy running down his throat. Man's oldest anesthetic and still one of the most efficient, the alcohol dulled, made tragedy seem like comedy, a crisis a slight and ephemeral affair. And if it could not cure, at least it made dying easy. He sipped again and studied what he saw.

The holograms had been taken by an expert and left nothing to the imagination. The crawling thing was obviously trying to use legs that were no longer in their usual position. The horror that swayed and dripped like an exotic tree bathed in carmine held an unmistakable resemblance to the human anatomy; that was the heart and there were the kidneys and that -- a hand. Something that twitched and moved and seemed to beckon...

Once again brandy won the day.

Stacey breathed again and looked at the images through the empty glass. The tape was on a loop and repeated itself with sickening regularity; three-dimensional images filled the sick bay, ghosts to accompany the others riding with the Odile, the invisible presences that stared at him but were never there when he looked.

He reared as something touched his arm.

"Steady!" It was Erica, her golden hair glinting in the light. "It's only me."

"I thought --" Stacey gulped and reached for the bottle to refill his glass. "God, you gave me a scare. I thought I was alone."

"Lock your door the next time." She looked at the glass, the bottle standing on the floor by his side. "If Kurt catches you drunk he'll kill you."

"He can try."

"Don't you think he could do it?"

"Do you think I care?" Stacey gestured with the glass toward the images. "Could anything he might do be as bad as that? Look at that thing. It's still living, you know. Still conscious and aware. How do you think it must feel?"

"It?"

"You want me to give it the dignity of sex?" Stacey looked at her, at the glass, at the distorted thing. "It's a woman. Those yellow-white patches you see are the mammary glands. That other thing, lower down, is the womb. I don't know how young she was, but she couldn't have been too old. That --"

"Don't!"

"You asked."

"Not for details." Erica snatched the glass from his hand and drank and handed it back empty. "What in God's name happened to her?"

"At a guess," Stacey said flatly, "I'd say she's been turned inside out."

"But --"

"It can't happen, I agree. You can't treat a person as you would a surgical glove. You know how we remove soiled gloves? We take the top and pull it downward and end with a nice, neat glove, but the outside is on the inside and the inside is on the outside -- like that girl. Like the one you wanted me to

talk about. To dignify with sex. What the hell's dignified about death?"

He sat and reached for the bottle and poured himself a large drink. She watched as he downed it, and said nothing until she was sure she had his attention.

"I lied for you, Hans. I said you'd been cleared. No emotional hang-ups, no phobias, no aberrations. Now I find you a drunk."

"Because of this?" Stacey lifted the glass. "When did you inhale ka'sence last?"

"That's different."

"Naturally; our own weaknesses always are. But I'm not a drunk. My trouble is simply that I've too much imagination." He set down the glass and stood and lifted a hand. "Listen, can't you hear them? The things all around us which we can't see. We know they're there but we can't see them. But if we turn quickly enough, then, perhaps, we shall catch a glimpse. That's why you startled me. I thought a ghost had touched me. One day they will."

And one day she too might feel their touch. The ship was full of them, and some were getting stronger; a young man she had known when a girl who had died in a crash -- he had smiled at her the day before. He was no more than a hint in a shadow, but she had seen him. He could appear the next day in the flashing pages of a riffled report, the reflection on a polished surface, the combination of light and darkness.

"I treat people," Stacey said. "I clean their cuts and wash their scratches and prescribe pills for upset stomachs and headaches and insomnia. Those I can handle. There are others, those with guts showing through a ripped belly, bone sticking from lacerated flesh, punctured lungs. They too can be healed -- it just takes a while longer. Then there are those I can't heal at all. I feel for them. I suffer with them, all of them. I know what it has to be like. As I know what those poor damned bastards must have suffered after they were hit. God help me, I \_know!\_"

Perhaps he was a rudimentary telepath. After dying and suffering a thousand times in an unsuspected rapport, how could he ever fear death? But what had been done to the people on the Lewanna was worse than death.

Erica looked at the images thronging the sick bay. "Why?"

"The quest for knowledge never ends." Stacey did not misunderstand her meaning. Stooping, he picked up the bottle and glass and put them away. "At least, thank God, you didn't tell me to heal myself."

"Could you?"

"I'm working at it." He straightened, breathing deeply, recovering his courage, his pride. "And I'm curious. I put on the recording to study it. Look at the hull -- unbroken, right? So how did whatever performed that obscenity get in? And how, after they did, was it possible for them to do what we see? That girl -- no, take that man. Be clinical. Remember your anatomy and tell me how any human form could be so distorted and still remain alive."

The thing was impossible. Erica looked away. "The recording was limited to the salon. The hull could have been penetrated elsewhere."

"They would still have had to get into the salon. It was fitted with emergency air doors. No matter what happened to the hull outside it would have remained intact." Stacey killed the projection; he looked older, more bleak in the normal lighting. "A sealed area," he murmured. "Things done which are anatomically impossible. A puzzle. One we may never solve until the same thing happens to us."

"If it happens."

"That's what we're here for, isn't it? Unless it does, this is a wasted journey."

She could have done without that reminder; in the passage outside the sick bay she leaned against a bulkhead, fighting to control a rising nausea. The horror had been dulled by repetition, but the basic fear remained: She was frightened by the possibility that she too could be converted into something like that girl. The breasts, the womb -- why had Stacey been so explicit?

And why had he stated the obvious? What had happened to the Lewanna would happen to them -- Varl would see to that. He would go on and on tempting the things to attack and relying on the Odile's weapons to defeat whatever it was that turned people inside out. How long would the crew of

the \_Odile\_ be prepared to act as bait?

"Major!" Shelia Laudert approached, hand lifted in salute. She was just coming on duty; her face bore the traces of cosmetics carelessly removed. "You look pale. Are you sick?"

"No." Erica forced a smile. "Just tired, I guess."

"You need to relax. Take a break. Get rid of this thing and dress like a woman." Shelia touched her coverall. "I'll be glad when we can all act normally again."

The rules were already being ignored. Erica watched the woman walk away; the traces of cosmetics would grow, the coverall take on a more feminine drape with tucks and pleats and subtle shapings. Even in prisons women still used artifice, and the \_Odile\_ held more temptations than a jail.

Kurt must have known that, and he had probably anticipated the weakening of his directive. He was cunning -- while the women resisted their unflattering uniforms they would not have thoughts to spare for other worries.

Erica paused as she entered the engine room. Asner was on duty and waved to her. Lydon seemed to be asleep, crouched against his machine, but as she approached he stirred and looked up with reddened eyes.

"Hello, Major."

Erica smiled. "How are you, Ben?"

"Fine. On a tour of inspection?"

"Just stretching my legs." She liked the old man with his studious expression and general air of detachment, a man with little time for mundane affairs. "Everything as before?"

"As yet, yes."

She caught the inflection and frowned. "As yet? You mean there's going to be a change?"

"The commander ordered it. A small addition." He glanced at the engineer as if appealing for help. "A slight difference in the projection."

"What will it do?"

Asner answered, joining them by the whirling, glinting, humming machine. "Maybe nothing, but it makes good sense. As yet we've had no response from whatever could be out there, and we've come a damned long way. Too far for safety -- we'll have to emerge soon to check position and calibration. Pushing a hydee too hard and too far is begging for trouble."

"You've a spare?"

"Of course, but that isn't the point. We're heading God alone knows where." Asner looked at Lydon's machine. "So we're trying something. Big ships carry large complements of mixed sexes, men, women, children, right?"

"So?"

"We've got the crowd or the impression of one, but something could be lacking. A normal pursuit. The one thing which might attract whatever it is we're looking for."

"And that is?" Erica looked at him, and at Lydon, and suddenly felt a fool for having asked the question. "You can't mean it!"

"It \_fits,"\_ Asner said. "As yet we've worked on the assumption that numbers alone are effective, but there could be a correlation we've overlooked. Emotion," he explained. "Put men and women together and you provide the elements of intense emotional involvement."

"Love," Erica snapped. "Sex. Say what you mean!"

"Peaks of high intensity," Lydon said. "The reproductive urge is the strongest emotion known to the race. I can't understand why we didn't think of it before."

But Varl had thought of it -- why else the mixed crew?

"And how are you going to simulate this emotion? I suppose -- " She broke off as the explanation came to her. "Recordings. You've set up relays in the cabins. Listened in. Watched like a lot of filthy voyeurs!"

"No," Lydon said quickly. "Not listened and not watched. All I wanted was the electronic pattern accompanying the creative act."

Recorded, amplified, and blended with the other emissions from the machine, those patterns were

sauce to add spice to the bait. Suddenly Erica saw the humor of it: space filled with fornicating ghosts.

"What about side effects?" she asked.

"There won't be any." Asner was positive. "Switch on, Ben."

There was no change in the machine, no change in the engine room, the lights, or the composition of the air. But something had been added.

Erica turned, feeling naked, hands lifting in an age-old gesture of protection against lascivious eyes. She saw nothing but felt herself blush and wondered at her unsuspected prudery. She wondered, too, at the sudden look in Asner's eyes, the jerk of Lydon's head, the abrupt nausea gripping her stomach.

"God! What was that?"

The Odile had moved.

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#### \*CHAPTER 15\*

A ship did not lurch or twist or seem to skid in hyperspace. The movement should not have happened. Locked by the hydee in a cocoon of invisible forces, a ship could travel only in one direction, like a bullet in the barrel of a gun.

Yet the Odile had moved!

The lurch happened again while she fought her sickness; she staggered, bruising her thigh against a stanchion. Asner crashed to the deck as he dived toward his panel.

"Turn it off!" Erica screamed to Lydon. "The machine -- turn it off!"

In a moment the whirling glitter of oddly shaped protrusions began to slow, and, as they lost their power, the ghosts died with them.

"There can be no association," Lydon said. "We tested --"

"Forget it!" Erica had no time for patience. "Keep it off. Help Asner. Get him to his station."

She ran from the engine room, wondering why there had been no alarm. Time contraction; the alarm blasted from the speakers even as she thought about it, alerting the ship as she reached Varl's cabin.

"Kurt! I -- "

"Later!" He had rested fully dressed; he pulled on his shoes without looking at her. "Check your stations."

The alarm died as he burst into the control room, checking those present, taking the main chair as it was vacated by Cole.

"Report?"

"Movement," Cole said. "A veering from the direct line. Minor yet obvious and followed by a second."

"Direction?"

"Opposed, as far as I can gather." Cole gestured at the board. "The instruments registered nothing but odd flickers."

Varl checked the telltales and listened to the stream of reports submitted from all over the vessel. All appeared to be in order.

"Fresh watches," he ordered. "Double suited personnel. Emergency alert standby."

The ship readied for action. The tension could not be held for too long -- it was a delicate balance for the crew, and if Varl guessed wrong their lives could pay the penalty.

He spoke to the engine room. "Asner, any indication as to cause of movement?"

"No, sir. No registered fluctuations of power. Hydee functioning as anticipated."

More negative data -- but the fact remained that the Odile had moved. Or had been moved.

Varl leaned back and opened the screens to stare at the gray nothingness of hyperspace, the empty void that rested in nonspace beyond the known universe.

He remembered the thought which had struck him back in Polar North: not beyond -- between! A space between actual dimensions in which vessels could travel, or be lost and drift for eons as Kreutzal might now be drifting. A region which could hold its own kind of life.

"Commander?" Enca was coldly formal, her face a mask as she stared from the screen. "Permission to speak?"

"Go ahead."

"I've information which could be relevant to the present situation. Ship's council?"

The Odile was on emergency alert and officers could not be spared for discussion, yet only a fool would refuse to listen to something which could affect the safety of his command.

"We'll use a restricted channel," Varl said. "Five minutes."

The five minutes were used to check the instruments and the condition of the vessel. Nothing was found, not even a small leak that would be expected from an impact with an external object. The reason for the sudden jerks remained a mystery.

Erica spoke from her segment of the divided screen. "I believe the new emissions of Lydon's machine had a contributory effect to what happened. The proximity is too close for it to have been wholly coincidental."

"Why not?" Stacey shook his head. "I was taking a blood sample at the time -- that could have had just a great effect."

"No!"

"Following your line of reasoning, Erica -- yes." Varl cut short the argument. "Asner assures me there was no effect on the hydee from the emissions." He looked at Mbot's face on the screen, at the hand lifted for attention. "Sam?"

"I think Major Borken could be right. No one has said the PEAP affects the hydee, but the main reason for its being aboard is to lure whatever it was that destroyed the Lewanna."

"Attacked, not destroyed, but I get your point." Varl paused. "So?"

"The new emissions could have tipped the balance." Mbot's paused. "I think that whatever we came out here to find moved the Odile."

Whatever it was had moved the ship as a man would casually swat at a fly, throwing it off-flight with the wind created by the passage of his hand.

Varl checked the instruments and the gray mist of hyperspace, and saw nothing he had not noted before. If the enemy was out there it was invisible. If it decided to strike, they would have no warning. "Suggestions?"

"As I see it we have a choice," Owen said. "If that thing is out there, we can go in and fight or wait to get smeared. I vote for the first option."

"Go in? How?" Machen pursed his lips. "Fire blind, you mean?"

"We could be lucky at that," Stacey said. "Like blasting a gnat out of the air with a rifle."

Owen took him seriously. "Not a rifle. We'll use the multifire cannon and flash lasers to cover the entire area around the ship."

"A shotgun then, better?" Stacey continued the irony. "One loaded with dust."

"Knock it off, Hans." Asner had little sympathy with the doctor. "Owen's right as far as he goes. I don't know about the rest, but I've had enough of acting as a sitting target. Keep it up and I'll want to go home."

"That sounds like a good idea," Stacey said. "If it comes to a vote I'm for it."

"There'll be no voting." Varl looked at the faces on the screen. "And we aren't here to talk about quitting, either. Who agrees with Erica that the PEAP's new emissions drew the thing to the Odile?"

"We haven't moved since it was switched off." Mbot's lifted a hand. "I agree."

So did the others. Stacey, more reluctant, added the final agreement. "So the bait works. What now?"

"We use it." Varl held their attention. "Man all guns, Owen. Check loading and use reserve crews. All suited. Battle order."

"Right, Commander!"

"All crew on alert. Battle stations. Erica, you seem sensitive to the new emissions. Stand by the PEAP and activate on order." Varl glanced at his instruments, and the winking telltales. "Ten minutes from now. Mark!"

They had ten minutes to climb into the metal and fabric of protective suits, to check air and radios, seals and equipment; if the hull was penetrated, they would have a second line of defense. The gunners

had ten minutes to take up their stations and check their weapons, and to slip into the routine instilled by harsh training. In those ten minutes, the maintenance crews assembled, the life-support systems were segregated, the essentials were spread out and safeguarded.

The *\_Odile\_* was a world, and without it her crew would die.

In the engine room, Erica stared at the PEAP.

The machine stood quiescent now, the protrusions stilled, the magic sleeping beneath the dust covers. Like a modern wizard, Lydon stood at the side of his creation. "Now?"

"Not yet." Erica glanced at her watch. "Kurt will give the signal."

"And then?" He bit his lip as she shrugged. "And if nothing?"

"We try again. Stand by now. Ready?"

The signal came; he threw the switches and the PEAP hummed again into life.

And then came the waiting.

Held fast in the confines of her turret, Lille Finch felt the touch of invisible eyes and her skin crawled to the caress of ghostly fingers. She felt unclean. In the gray mist of hyperspace filling her sighting screen, she could see the writhing movements of abandonment as hinted bodies performed an ancient ritual. There were other pictures: men who leered, women who invited, postures, gestures, poses of unmistakable meaning.

An incident in her childhood, which even the psychiatrists had not been able to wholly eradicate, had left her with a revulsion against sex induced by pain and fear. Later she had been soothed with the comforts of an esoteric order but their good intentions had done nothing but aggravate the initial trauma. They had found the men and treated them but the scars remained; the victim was to be punished over and over for having been a victim.

The old trauma sprang again to full and repulsive life in the realm of her innermost mind. "No!" The plea was sub-vocalized, unheard by ears other than her own. "No, please don't! Don't! Don't! *\_Mama mia, \_* don't! Holy Mother, don't!"

Seated at her gun, staring into the gray mist filled with memories, she felt her hands tighten on the controls, on the trigger which could release death.

Joe Manfield sang as he nursed his laser. A good weapon, sharp, accurate, devastating, it was a sword of fire with which to banish all evil from the world. Retribution would come to the alien monstrosities, and after, bathed in the smoking blood of his victim, he would relish the spoils victory would bring.

He thought of the blonde with the long, lovely legs and the -- but no, she was for the captain. He remembered the small brunette who had given him the eye on more than one occasion -- their watches had clashed and they had never had the chance to be wholly alone, but that would change, he promised himself. Life was nothing without love and nothing was more pleasurable than the act of creation.

Later. Later he would have it all.

Busily he checked his gimbals and sights and switches, the laser a warm and palpitating woman beneath his hands.

At his station in a passage, Arnold Valdemar looked at a wall and in it imagined cracks and ragged fissures and sawtoothed openings. The damage could become real, and when it did he would be busy with paste and plates and rapid-hardening foam, sealing the wall so it would hold in the air. There would be blood on the edges and beyond could lie a trapped and wounded comrade, but his duty was clear -- the sacrifice would have to be made, and he would not shirk from the necessity. Blood and pain and the fury of death, all were part of the vibrant nature of life, and he would be one with it in this work of bringing humanity to the stars. In the wall a woman smiled at him and winked, and then vanished as all ghosts vanish to leave only painful memories of what might have been.

At the controls, Varl checked his instruments. Waiting was always the hard part, but there was nothing to do but wait, to sit and watch and check and recheck and listen to the hum of reports. He could feel the mass and bulk of the ship as if it were an extension of his own body -- he could feel the danger, as he waited for the touch of hot iron, the burn, the sear, the agonizing pain.

How long must he wait?

The PEAP had been operating for almost an hour. When the new emissions had first been projected, the \_Odile\_ had moved almost at once. Varl had a mental picture of a hand swatting at a fly; darting beyond easy reach, the fly again would attract with its buzz the punishing blow.

How big did that hand have to be to swat a ship the size of his command?

The ship lurched. "Commander!" Machen's voice was high with tension. "The ship! It -- "

"I know. All stations prepare for attack!"

The enemy had arrived.

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\*CHAPTER 16\*

THE attack came with a twisting that tore at the stomach, a sickening vertigo, a scream drowned in the sudden pulse of guns.

"All turrets open fire!" Varl snapped the order as he checked the instruments, hands darting to the controls. "Torps -- loose!"

Missiles tipped with atomic warheads blasted from their housings to destroy -- what?

The gray of hyperspace showed nothing, yet again the \_Odile\_ lurched, plates creaking, lights flickering as the scream of the hydee rose even louder. The sound was impossible; electromagnetic forces did not scream no matter how abused, yet the machine shrieked like an injured horse as the ship shuddered at the sudden impact of blasting radiation.

"Port foreturret out of action." Owen's voice was calm as he made the report. "Port midturret damaged. Radiation burning of port side. Hull penetrated at lower section."

"Air loss from lower port hull compartment seventeen." A new voice, equally calm. "Power lost from sections three and seven."

"Life support lost in compartments twelve through nineteen." The voice held a touch of panic. "Casualties in compartment fifteen -- my God, I can hear them screaming!"

"Erica! Relieve that woman! Owen, cease firing torps. All turrets concentrate on flash-laser fire. Maintenance! Get those damned leaks sealed!" Varl fed more power to the hydee, overriding Asner's control. The shriek, rising higher, turned into a cutting edge that slashed at his ears. The sound muted as he snapped shut his helmet. "All crew total seal. Repeat. Total seal."

The battle web replaced the previous communications channel. Small, ghostlike voices whispered from the radio in his helmet, reporting.

"Fire!" Owen said. "All guns keep firing. Fry the bastard before it breaks in!"

A hand swatting a fly -- could it be stung?

Varl concentrated on the controls. In hyperspace a ship was helpless to maneuver, but it seemed as if a new set of rules had been introduced which caused the hydee to scream, the ship to lurch and veer, and the blast of atomic torpedoes to be reflected back to their source.

"Asner! How's the drive?"

"In trouble. Can't you hear it?"

"Engage the enhancer. I want to try something." Varl bared his teeth as the engineer made no answer. "Can you hear me? Damn you, do as I say!"

"Enhancer engaged. Commander, if it goes then we could go with it!"

Varl was aware of the danger -- but there was little choice. His gloved hands tensed; he felt the yielding of the controls, and suddenly his mouth filled with bile. Before him the gray of hyperspace seemed to take on a deeper hue, touched with crimson and blue. The colors took on shape and form. A mountain with cratered volcanoes. Suckers, fringes, mouths, eyes. Beaks, feathers, slimed jelly all dotted with points of furious luminescence. The sky at night compressed into a closed fist. An atom expanded into a universe.

Varl closed his eyes, feeling his mind twist inside his skull as if it were a terrified animal struggling to escape. Sights and scenes beyond his comprehension turned into figments of horror by mental association -- that was the lure of hyperspace, and its danger.

Yet over his radio he could hear the sound of delighted laughter as someone saw beauty in the mist.

"Keep firing!" Owen roared in anger. "Turret eleven! Keep firing!"

"To hurt that?" The man's voice echoed its disbelief. "You must be crazy!"

Manfield? Lomas? Vorst?

Varl was angry that he had to search for the name. "Obey orders, Manfield! Maintain fire!" he snapped.

"Go to hell!"

Later that defiance would be punished, but for now the need to survive was paramount. As the hydee screamed, the Odile slued, and shuddered as again Varl operated the controls.

"Asner! More power!" If only they could increase the field, twist space, tear free from whatever held them close and forget what had happened to the Lewanna. "Asner!"

The speakers remained dead, and Varl jerked his chin to hit the switches set beneath the faceplate. The new frequency produced no better result, and he guessed that either the engineer was dead or something had blocked radio communication.

"Cole!" He spun in his chair to face the officer. "Cole!"

He rose when there was no response, and almost fell when the Odile jerked. Reaching Cole, he dropped a hand on the suited shoulder, and Cole reared, turning, arms lifting, face ghastly behind the transparent faceplate of his helmet.

Impatiently Varl ripped open his own helmet and smelled the odors wafting about the control room; the stench of burned insulation, seared metal, charred flesh, and the tang of blood.

"Cole!" He gestured at his open helmet and waited until the other had followed his example. "No radio," Varl snapped. "No contact. What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Cole licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Every band is dead. Interference, I guess. The battle web is out."

"Switch to emergency." Flare lamps, flashing in turrets and on bulkheads to spell out coded signals, were crude, but they were better than nothing. "Move!"

Cole hesitated. "Can't we duck out?"

"Move, damn you! Move!"

Cole flinched as if he had been struck and turned to his panel. As he reached to touch it he reared, back arched, arms lifted, head thrown back at an impossible angle. As Varl watched, Cole's feet left the deck and he rose to spin on his long axis, his face a mask of horror in the frame of his open helmet. He spun like a top which grew a crimson slime, then shrank to form a beach ball, a football, a tennis ball, a golf ball, a marble -- and suddenly, it was gone.

"Cole!"

The man had vanished. Varl smelled the acrid stench of blood before he slammed shut his helmet. Back at the controls he fought to lift and turn the ship, feeling the shrieking protest of the hydee, cutting power as he tried a different tactic. They would escape, but not by running. They would escape by leaving the universe that held the threatening monster, by running back into the quiet safety of normal space.

Before him instruments flared red as the accumulated power housed in the hydee began to break free.

A torrent of energy held by invisible forces, trapped by freezing chill, streamed from the coils and crystals of the drive. So much power should not be released so quickly, and Varl fought to check the flow. Escape would be useless without an operational vessel.

Beneath his hands, transmitted by the fabric of the vessel, he felt the pulsing roar of guns as the turrets maintained their fire. The roar was ragged and he sensed gaps in the pattern, but some, at least, were still fighting back.

More red flared from the panel. And more.

"Asner!" Varl slammed his chin against switches. "Answer man! For God's sake answer!"

The radio remained silent. But, blended with the rolling pulse of the guns, Varl felt other sounds; human screams.

He remembered the Lewanna.

He remembered the grotesque travesties of the human shape that had been left alive to crawl and



bleed and slip on the carmine of their fellows.

Glass smashed as he drove a fist through the panel of an emergency fitment.

The \_Odile\_ at his insistence, had been fitted with a full set of remote controls. Men could die or go mad or be injured, but finally, for a while at least, one man could run the ship.

The lever Varl gripped would short-circuit the drain channel of the hydee and vent the accumulated energy into the hull. That course was dangerous and destructive, but he had no choice. They had to escape or die -- and Cole had demonstrated the manner of their passing.

With a jerk he threw the lever.

The \_Odile\_ reared as if alive; a horse pricked with a savage spur, a man goaded in his tender parts. Metal winked and scintillated with transient shimmers and the gray mist of hyperspace roiled as if stirred with a monstrous spoon.

When the roiling cleared the screens showed -- madness!

Where there should have been the black emptiness of normal space, the cold shine of distant stars, there was instead a riot of color. Varl blinked and narrowed his eyes as he stared at brilliant greens and blues, yellows and flaring reds, orange and puce and lavender and scarlet. The hard white of burning magnesium mingled with the warm glow of ripe peaches, and the cool blue of summer skies mingled with the soft browns of newly turned soil and the delicate tints of autumn leaves. The screens were filled with a plethora of flamboyant hues, as if a million rainbows had joined with the spilled contents of an artist's palette.

And among the colors objects moved: a spire formed of shining crystal, something which could have been a hive, a slowly wheeling snowflake, a pyramid, a ball banded in silver and gold, polyhedrons of endless variation, cones, cubes, an amorphous mass like a sponge.

Had the \_Odile\_ been thrown into another dimension?

Speculation could wait. Into his radio Varl snapped, "Attention all personnel! Hear me! Attention all personnel! Respond if you can!"

The radio still was not working. He jerked open his helmet and snapped the switches on the intercom.

"Asner? Owen? Mbot? Answer if you can. Answer!"

From her station at the life-support panel a woman said, "Why don't you let Frank do that, Commander?"

She was pale, unkempt hair framing her face in the open helmet; Margot Noventes had been friendly with Cole. Incredibly she had not seen him vanish.

Neither had Machen.

"Where is he?" Machen's voice was high as he opened his helmet. "Commander?"

"He's dead," Varl said bluntly.

"Dead?" Margot drew in her breath, eyes wide with disbelief. "Killed? But how? He -- "

"Something hit him. He vanished. I saw him go." Varl terminated the explanation and turned to Machen. "Take sights, make checks, find out where we are. Margot, get back to your board. Check all life-support systems. Move!"

Varl hoped work would provide an anodyne to soften the pain of her loss. He returned to the intercom. "Asner?"

"No." The voice was weak. "Lydon here. I'm afraid the engineer has been hurt."

"Badly? Is he dying?"

"Bleeding and unconscious."

"Do what you can to stanch the blood. Owen? How are the guns?"

"Some operational, but all need checking. That was rough, Commander."

"Do what you can. Erica?" Varl released his breath in a sigh as she answered. "Get help to Asner. Top priority. How are things in your section?"

"We're holding our own. You?"

"I was lucky. Give Stacey all the help he needs. If anyone asks, tell them we're out of danger."

"And the screens?"

"Affected by wild radiation." Impatience sharpened his tone. "Let's not complicate matters. Panic is something we can do without. Later we'll have a conference to discuss the matter and clarify the situation. Now we have to clean up the mess."

"Safeguard the ship, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And bury the dead?"

"Yes," he said again. "But they can wait."

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\*CHAPTER 17\*

SAM Mbotto kept the record.

Lille Finch, who had been afraid of men and who had ended a broken heap of flesh and bone. A girl who had barely tasted life and who had suffered too much, she could finally rest in peace.

Joe Manfield, who had loved women and had enjoyed life, had ended a charred ruin, his once handsome features a mask of blackened skin, his eyes pits of dark emptiness. He too could rest in peace.

Arnold Valdemar, who had worked like a maniac to maintain the seal on a bulkhead, had been hurt when a plate had torn free to slice his suit and rip his stomach. His pleas for help had not been answered, for the air loss was too great and the compartment he was in had been sealed, leaving him to die alone. At least he had made his sacrifice.

As had Lucy Bland.

As had Tony Cachou and Elsa Hoetmar and Brad Quimper and Amrik Taylor.

And Frank Cole, of course -- but he had simply vanished, as had three others.

Mbotto wondered if they had known what had hit them.

Lydon was chosen to speak the service, because of his affinity with the realms beyond and because no one else could be spared to do the job. He did it well, with due reverence, odd in a man who did not believe that death existed. Watching him, Erica could appreciate the way he catered to others, to Shelia Laudert, who had been close to Brad, and to Margot Noventes, who had loved Cole. She wondered if she would have been comforted had Varl been enclosed in one of the sacs now waiting to be evicted. She quickly dismissed the thought.

She was glad when the service ended. Kurt should have been present for the disposal -- a captain should pay his last respects to those of his crew who had died -- but he was outside checking the hull, and Machen had taken his place. At the navigator's signal, the sacs were lifted, and shoved through the lock one after the other, dumped into space like so many bags of rubbish.

Locked within the confines of his suit, Varl watched the sacs go. He was fastened by a line to the \_Odile\_, along with Owen and Carter, an engineer. Caught in the gust of evicted air, he hung at the end of the taut line as the sacs drifted past to vanish into the unknown.

"That's it." Owen sounded bitter. "Good men and women soon to be forgotten."

"As are we all." Carter was a philosopher. "Their turn today, ours tomorrow. It's all the same in the end."

"Let's get back to work," Varl said.

They communicated over direct connections that provided telephonic contact; the radios still were not functioning and would not until the ruined transistors had been replaced. Now, pulling on his line, Varl drew himself closer to the hull, to the wreckage which had once been turrets, the holes which had once been solid plate.

"Fused," Carter judged. "Intense heat locally applied. And something hard and sharp smashed in the hull over there -- the metal's spiked and indented in a ring formation. It'll be easier to weld a plate over the hole from out here rather than try internal repairs. Let's see what else we've got."

They found a scored place as if a giant comb had created ridges over the smooth plating, a patch of burn pebbled with globules of fused alloy, a turret which had been ripped and elongated as if the stubborn metal had been softened wax.

"Bad," Carter announced. "It will have to be replaced -- there's not enough there to rebuild. Even the gun is useless."

"We've lost half our armament," Owen said. "Almost the entire port side is stripped of weapons, and most of the launching tubes can't be used. What the hell was it that hit us?"

Whatever it was had been too big and too dangerous, but it had not been responsible for all the damage; the cascade of energy released by Varl had created the burn, the patch of roughness, and the oddly peaked effect near the stern. The pattern had been made by vaporized metal coming into contact with a ridged surface, then cooling, to freeze in alien contours.

Yet the control room was intact. Nowhere could Varl see any signs of penetration -- so how had Cole died?

He shelved that question in the face of greater urgency. "The first priority is to seal the hull. Work from out here. That'll allow others to take care of what has to be done inside."

"I'll need help," Carter said.

"Pick the men you need. Owen, how do you suggest we defend the port side?"

"Without turrets?"

"We can't use what we haven't got."

"How about shifting a couple from the starboard quarter? They could cover the blind spots." He added, regretfully, "I guess it would be a long job."

"Too long." Varl lifted an arm, pointing. "We can adjust those launchers to cover this sector, but they're for long range only. For the rest we'll have to cut away the wreckage and fit external guns."

"No sights," Owen said. "No protection. Just a man riding the hull. One strapped to a seat and aiming with open sights. Right?"

"We've no choice," Varl said. "We have to use what we've got. And at close quarters it should be good enough."

"Against what hit us?" Owen paused. "It would be suicide. Normally a suit is a second line of defense, but the man wouldn't have a first. One cut, a rip or tear, and he'd be out of action. That or dead."

"Do you have any better suggestion?" Varl turned to look at the blazing colors of the alien space. The enigmatic shapes seemed to be closer now, larger. One, a spiral daubed with green and pink like a giant stick of candy had turned to point at the *\_Odile\_*. "We'll fit a pod in each ruined turret," he said. "An airtight cover. A lock beneath it so a man can take up his position. If we're threatened, he can blow the pod and cut loose. At short range he can't miss and he'll have the element of surprise."

"And after?" Owen glanced into space after the sacs. "More fruit for the sowing?"

"If necessary." Varl began to pull himself closer to the ship. "But they'll be in good company."

Erica met him as he entered the ship. She looked drawn, her tangled golden hair smeared with dirt and dust. Her eyes were red-rimmed, dusted with circles of fatigue.

"Asner's bad, Kurt. Stacey thinks he could die."

The engineer lay on a cot in the engine room, his face pale, eyes closed, chest barely moving. Garewell, checking the pulse, shook his head as Varl questioned him with his eyes.

"He's low, Commander. Blood loss, shock, burns, neural distortion -- when the hydee cascaded he caught a hell of a blast."

"Where's Stacey?"

"There's nothing more he can do. He's -- "

"Where the hell is he?"

The doctor was in the sick bay sitting at his desk, head in hands, shirt stained with blood. More blood lay on the operating table, touched equipment with red, lay in crusted smears on the floor -- evidence of furious activity as the man himself radiated fatigue. He looked up as Varl came close.

"Commander? Something wrong?"

"Asner. I want him on his feet."

"The difficult we do at once -- the impossible takes a little longer," Stacey said dryly. "I can't work miracles, and your wanting one doesn't make it so. Sorry."

"I thought you and Jarl were friends."

"That still doesn't give me a magic wand."

"Find one or you'll be in a coffin. We'll all be in coffins." Varl gripped the other's shoulder and dragged him upright. "You want a better incentive? How about this?" His hand slapped against a flaccid cheek. "Or this?" Again -- his palm left red welts to mar the skin. "Wake up, damn you! Come alive!"

"You bastard!" Stacey wrenched himself free from Varl's grasp. "You lousy bastard!"

"Feeling better?"

"Go to hell!"

"And find good company? Clean company?" Varl looked at the dried blood, the mess. "This place stinks. Instead of sitting feeling sorry for yourself, why don't you clean it up? Or are you too big a man to soil your hands?"

"Don't get sick," the doctor warned. "Don't get hurt. If you do, by God, you'll pay for this!"

"We'll all pay if Asner doesn't get to work."

"How can he? He's a sick man. He could die."

"Then what have we to lose?" Varl stared at the other. "Stop nursing him and stop being soft. Blood can be replaced. Burns can be covered and pain blocked. Shock and neural distortion can be treated by directed stimulus to the cortex. Am I wrong?"

"No, but he could lose his mind."

"Then it happens. As I said, what have we to lose?"

Much later, Asner sat upright and winced, then managed to stand.

Erica confronted Varl. "Why, Kurt? You aren't a sadist, and you know Stacey's been working so hard he had no time to clean up. Why slap him around like that?"

"He told you?"

"He didn't have to; those welts on his face tell the story. Do you want him to hate you?"

"I want him to find his guts." Varl turned to look at her. "You lied about him, and I'm wondering why. He's weak and you know it, and we've no place for weaklings aboard my ship. No place for liars either."

"Is that what you think I am?"

"What else would you call someone who can't deliver what she promised?" Varl turned as the engineer approached. "Jarl? You all right?"

"I'm fine." Asner managed to smile. "A new skin, a set of new nerves, a blood change or two -- how bad is it, Commander?"

"I had to trip the emergency release and drain the hydee. You got caught in the blast. Sorry about that, but there was no way I could warn you. The point is we're stuck, aside from rocket power, until it's repaired or replaced. And we need it fast. Can you manage?"

"If I said I couldn't?"

"Don't," Varl said. "Just do your best. And ask for anything you need."

Hours later, Varl went to his cabin to stand in the semi-gloom, feeling the screaming tension of his nerves, the demands of his body for rest, demands he could no longer withstand. He swayed a little, jerking awake as he was about to fall, and throwing out a hand to support himself against a bulkhead.

He thought of the gray expanse now bright with pictures; small sacs vanishing into rainbows; a pale face marred with his blows; a man near death rising from his cot to bring them all life; alien shapes edging close; guns set on flimsy supports; the screams he had heard and the blood he had seen.

"Kurt?" Erica had opened the door so quietly he had not heard. "Are you asleep? I -- " She caught her breath as he turned to face her. "Kurt! I didn't see you! You should have warned me!"

"What do you want?"

"To talk. To share a drink. We both need it."

He looked at the bottle she had brought with her, the glasses. As he watched, she poured them both half full and handed him one.

"Take it," she urged. "Give thanks we're alive, if nothing else."

"A libation to the gods?"

"Why not? Some of the old superstitions had value. Can we afford to ignore them?"

"Not in our present situation." He lifted the glass. "To life!"

"To life!"

The brandy warmed him, washing away his fatigue so that he felt a momentary exuberance. He felt himself respond to the warm proximity of her body.

"Kurt!" She stepped closer, her glass falling to hit the bunk and bounce from the covers. "Remember what you said about the effect of danger and strain? How it stimulates desire and the need to create?" She embraced him. "We've been through hell, Kurt. And, darling, I need."

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\*CHAPTER 18\*

CARTER killed the torch. Inches from his darkened faceplate, the spot of incandescence began to fade. He knew the weld was good, but he could not be sure how it would stand up to strain. The metal had changed in subtle ways -- heat retention was different than it had been, the flux was hard to manipulate -- but the new bonds should hold the gun.

"Stan?" Max Ovidio called from where he crouched at the far side of the turret. "Like to check this?"

He had finished the mount that would hold the thin cover. Carter doubted the covers would be used -- the effort was not worth the reward and the guns would ride naked on their mounts. He was casual in his inspection.

"It'll do. How about the lock?"

"Finished. The outer panel just needed replacing, and we fixed the inner before coming out." Ovidio glanced at the gun, the gunner's seat, and the straps that would hold the gunner fast. "How about the power connections?"

Carter seated himself at the laser. The gimbals were imperfect but they would serve; the gun itself was relatively light. A shot projector would have been too heavy for rapid aligning, a factor which had dictated the choice.

"Attack at three o'clock high!" Ovidio snapped the warning. "Fire!"

Automatically Carter obeyed, swinging the gun with thrusts of his feet, gloved hands clamped on the release, withholding the final pressure until he spotted the target. He saw none and cursed with belated understanding.

"Max, you fool! Call that a joke?"

"I just wanted to see if you were ready." Ovidio knew he had gone too far. "Sorry, Stan, I shouldn't have done it."

"Damned right you shouldn't!"

"It won't happen again. But you sure moved fast. The gun's OK, uh?"

"As good as we're going to get it." Carter swung the barrel, spun the weapon, lifted it, spun again to leave it at rest in its original position. "No power as yet, but that won't take long. Just as well you didn't see an attack for real."

He had moved fast, but had he moved fast enough? Could he have aligned the gun and fired and destroyed whatever it could have been before it reached him? And, if not, what then? The answer took no imagination.

Carter rose from the seat, feeling the chill of imagined death, his skin crawling in the trapped heat of his suit. Body warmth had accumulated to bead his face with sweat and to soak the layer of absorbent fabric worn next to his skin. A man exposed as the gunner would be had no chance at all -- if he was slow, if he missed, he would be dead.

"Volunteers," Ovidio said. "Owen spoke of using volunteers. Think he'll get any?"

"Not unless they're crazy."

"They'd be heroes," Ovidio mused. "The girls would line up to please them. And they'd have a damned fine view."

The view was unique to the *\_Odile\_*, and Carter looked out at it. The bright colors and enigmatic shapes spread in all directions, drifting in a lambent sea of vivid hues, a sea which, while colored, was oddly transparent so that his vision went on and on as if reaching into the endless immensity of space.

The region was alien and he felt oddly disturbed, torn from his familiar environment of empty darkness and distant stars.

"Like a dream," Ovidio said. "A fantasy. I had a fever once and lay in delirium for three days before they could reach me with antibiotics. I was on a surveying trip in the Atlas mountains, checking out chopper sites. A rockfall crushed the medical kit, and when I got a fever there wasn't anything anyone could do aside from sponging me down."

Carter grunted, not interested, but knowing the other wanted to talk, to maintain contact with another human even if it was over the newly repaired radios in their suits.

"So?"

"So I was delirious and saw all manner of crazy things. Stuff like that." He gestured at the shapes around them. "Objects that moved and grew mouths and came after me and other assorted horrors. They told me afterward that I screamed and jerked around like a madman. Maybe I was -- mad, I mean -- what I saw was crazy enough." His voice changed. "Stan, do you think we're going to get out of this?"

"Sure."

"What makes you so certain?"

"We've got a good captain," Carter said. "He'll see to it."

"Like he saw to Asner?" Ovidio sounded dubious. "You hear about that? Slapped the doc around to get him at work and said he didn't give a damn if Asner died as long as he did his job."

"He got him at it, didn't he?"

"Sure, but -- "

"You ever own a horse? Sometimes you give it the spur and sometimes a handful of sugar. Too much of either alone is no good." Carter looked again at the alien space in which the *\_Odile\_* drifted, then at the gun in its naked mount. "Sometimes people need driving, and Varl's the man to do just that. That's why this gun will be manned when the time comes and he won't waste time begging for volunteers. The one chosen will do the job or get shot."

"The bastard!"

"Maybe he is," Carter admitted. "But if any man can get us back home then it's Varl."

\* \* \* \*

Machen, in the control room, did not share Carter's confidence. "I don't know where we are," he said to Varl. "This space is alien, there are no points of reference, no signposts. If we emerged into normal space now we could come out in the heart of a sun. We could come out between galaxies and -- " He broke off, staring at Varl's expression. "Something wrong?"

"Between," Varl said. "You said 'between.'"

"So?"

"Think of hyperspace as a skin, something like the rubber of a balloon. One side could be air, the other water. The layer of rubber is hyperspace."

"So?"

"We move from air into rubber with the hydee. Now something pushed us too far and we came out in water. From one side of hyperspace to the other. All we need to do is reverse the process."

"Easy," Machen said. "With a half-wrecked ship and a half-dead crew. And even then we won't know just where we'll emerge."

"But we'll be somewhere." Varl looked at the screens, the enigmatic shapes. "Keep checking. If any of those things move I want to know about it. Their speed, direction, change of size if any. You know what needs to be done." He slapped Machen on the shoulder. "It's up to you, Piers. You're the only one who can guide us home."

"Maybe -- but I can't provide the legs to get us there."

Only Asner could do that. The engineer sat in a chair, blood staining his lips, Garewell hovering in attendance. Fighting the weakness of his body, Asner directed the work of others. The hydee lay in a tangle of cables, tools, discarded wrappings. The ruined coils lay to one side, and others, shining in pristine perfection, had already been set in place.

"How is it going, Jarl?" Varl asked.

"Better than I'd hoped." Asner drew in his breath, and Garewall stepped forward, the vial in his hand emitting an acrid odor. "No!" Asner waved aside the aide. "No!"

"Let him help." Varl nodded to Garewell. "Give it to him, Singh. Breath deep now, Jarl. Deep."

Suck in the vapors and clear the head and lend strength to the heart and nerves and sinews. Rob the body a little more of its dwindling reserves, but remain alert and active. I need you, man! We all need you!

"We've fixed the rest of the ship as best we can," Varl said. "It's all up to you now. How much longer will it take?"

"Not long. The hard part will be in tuning the coils. Ben will help with that." The engineer glanced to where Lydon stood by his machine. The old man looked ghastly with his sunken cheeks and smudged eyes; like the rest, he was showing the effects of relentless work and little sleep. "Once that's done and the rest assembled we'll be ready to go."

"Fine."

"Of course, where will be another matter," Asner added.

"Earth. Home. Where else?"

"Yes," the engineer said, and coughed and almost choked before managing to swallow the blood which brightened the stains on his lips. "Home," he continued, in a vague tone. "Home is the hunter away from ... from where, Commander? Do we know?"

"Piers is working on it."

"He should talk to Ben. He knows where we are. In Limbo. We're in Limbo. Right, Ben?"

"I think so, yes." Lydon closed his eyes and pinched the top of his nose before opening them again. "Limbo is a region which supposedly held the souls of the departed. A place between heaven and hell. A region of forgotten things. Of -- "

"Ghosts," Varl snapped. "Forget it. You may be in a hurry to become one, but I'm not. You there!" he shouted at the men working around the hydee. "Clear the area of that junk. Set out those cables and lay out those tools. Sloppy conditions make for sloppy work. Move!" To Garewell he said in a softer tone, nodding at the engineer, "Take good care of him. I want him to come out of this alive and well. Understand?"

"Of course, Commander." The aide's voice held a touch of acid. "But the first priority is the hydee. That above all. Am I correct?"

"Without it none of us will be around to make judgments," Varl said coldly. "Remember that."

Outside the engine room, heading down a passage, he paused to draw in his breath, fighting a sudden giddiness which sent him to lean against a bulkhead. Accumulated fatigue was taking its toll, but they were winning -- in a matter of hours, the Odile would again be a fighting, functional machine.

If Asner did not die.

If nothing came from this alien space to halt the work on the outside.

Varl turned, feeling the hard coolness of metal against his cheek, maintaining the contact as he waited for the giddiness to pass. Tiny voices like the distant hum of bees echoed in his ear.

"...said we'd never get back home. The odds are against it. I must have been crazy to have volunteered in the first place."

"You wanted to be close to Van, and I can't blame you. That is a special kind of man."

"That's what I thought. Now I'm not so sure. He wants too much and..."

The voices died as Varl lifted his head. Gloria Arle's arm was bandaged to her shoulder; Fleur Brandt had three broken ribs and a burn the size of a saucer on her back. Like others, they were walking wounded.

Varl entered a newly sealed compartment. He had thought the room was empty, but Ivan Yegorovich lay there on his back, his head resting in Rachel Sheim's lap. She caressed his hair with long, loving strokes; the torn skin of her hand glistened with transparent dressings.

"Commander?" She did not move, her hand continuing its caress.

"Nothing. Just checking. I thought this place was empty." He looked at Ivan, at the bandaged face, the slits giving vision. Once that face had been handsome. "Next time use a cabin."

He moved on, pausing to check the registers set against the bulkheads, the lights, the emergency sealing compounds. Something flashed in the air as he entered the passage holding Erica's cabin -- a brief

glitter gone as soon as seen.

The glitter reappeared -- as it vanished, he heard the scream.

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\*CHAPTER 19\*

ERICA reared from her bunk as Varl burst into her cabin. She was nude; the sheet fell, exposing the smooth expanse of shoulders and arms, the swell of breasts, the roseate circles embracing her nipples.

"Kurt!" Shock made her voice shrill. "What in hell is that?"

It came again, a raw sound of absolute terror, harsh, grating, a sound torn from a human throat. The alarm blared. Varl swore, reached for the intercom, slammed his hand on the button.

"Cut the alarm! Cut it, damn you!"

The alarm died and the screaming died with it to leave a relative silence broken only by the sound of startled voices. Then, like the grate of a nail on slate, came a thin, keening moan.

"God!" Erica was standing, oblivious to her nakedness. "Kurt -- "

"I thought it was you." Relief made him abrupt. "Listen!" He held up a hand for silence. "Down the passage. Get Stacey!"

He turned back to the intercom as she snatched up a sheet and ran from the cabin. "Why the alarm? Report!" he snapped.

"Trouble on the outside," Machen replied from the control room. "A worker called for help, then the transmission was broken. I checked the area but couldn't find him. No visual trace."

"Could he have drifted from the hull?"

"If he had, why no call for help? He had a radio. And I couldn't see him."

If he was gone he could be found; suited, he was in no immediate danger. "Anything else?" Varl drew in a breath at the negative report. "Keep alert. Find that man if you can, but don't sound the alarm unless we're attacked." As he raced down the passage the keening grew louder. The sound seemed to come from the compartment where he had left the lovers. Sam Mboto turned from the door as Varl approached. "It's stuck," he said. "Maybe if we hit it together?"

"Stand back." Varl lifted his foot and slammed his boot against the door. At the third kick the door yielded. He stepped inside, then turned, fighting his desire to retch.

"Back!" He saw Mboto's dark face, the wide eyes of Gloria Arle, others. "All of you -- back!"

The order was too late. Carter had joined the crowd and vomited, staining his chin and the front of his blouse. Gloria lay in a slumped heap where she had fallen in a faint.

"Back," Varl said again. "Disperse. Spread out, you fools! Do you all want to end like this?"

"Commander! What -- "

"I gave you an order!" Varl's anger was genuine. "This isn't a show. Get back to your station, you damned ghouls. Move!"

Only when they were gone did he turn to look at what lay on the floor.

Ivan Yegorovich was dead. Nothing could live with its body ripped open, intestines exposed, the heart, lungs, liver, spleen, all laid out in a ghastly symmetry. He had to be dead.

But why did the heart still beat? The lungs still move? And what, in God's name, whimpered from beneath the bandage covering the face?

Varl moved without conscious thought, covering the distance between himself and the thing on the floor, stooping to kneel, his hand lifted, stiffened into a blunted ax which he slammed against the throat, the nerves, the vulnerable areas beneath the ears. He gave it a dozen savage impacts, each of which would have killed.

As he rose, hand numb, the whimpering no longer stirred the bandage.

But the keening remained.

"Rachel! Rachel, it's over now. It's all over. What happened?"

She sat on her haunches apparently unharmed, but made no effort to answer. Instead she rocked from side to side, keening without pause as if she had been turned into a mechanical doll.

"God!" Stacey had arrived, Erica at his side. He glanced at the mess on the floor, at the blood dappling Varl's hand, then at the girl. "Leave this to me."



He delved into his bag, then moved softly toward her, crooning, one hand extended, the bright metal of a hypodermic catching and reflecting the light. As she saw it the keening faltered and she drew herself back over the floor.

"I've got to know what happened," Varl said.

"She's in shock."

"I've still got to know. It's important."

Stacey hesitated, then changed the hypodermic for a spray. Again he advanced toward the girl, crooning, his hands weaving, making little circles.

"Look at me, Rachel. Look at my hands. Aren't they pretty? Much better than that bad dream. That's all it was, Rachel. Just a dream. Why don't you tell me about it?"

The spray hissed a puff of vapor toward the pale face, the empty, vacuous eyes.

"Just a dream, Rachel. You frightened Ivan, but he's safe. He's here with me now. See?" More vapor wreathed her lips and nostrils. "Tell him about the dream. Tell him. Tell him. Tell him about the dream."

The spray filled the air before her face with its medicinal vapor. As she breathed, the keening stopped. Abruptly she giggled.

"Bright," she said. "So bright. It came and went and came again. We watched it. It grew and changed and -- " She broke off, quivering. "It touched Ivan. Touched him and -- oh, God! God!"

Stacey used the hypodermic to kill her screams. The girl slumped, unconscious. "That's all you're going to get. I hope you think it was worth it."

"It was."

"Yes." Stacey looked at Varl's hand. "I guess it was. And I guess you did what had to be done. Let me take a look at that."

"It'll keep."

"Maybe. Or you could have cracked a bone. Broken one, even. Let me look." He pursed his lips as Varl extended his hand. "Nothing serious. I'll give you some pills to ease the pain."

"It doesn't hurt."

"I wasn't talking about the hand." Stacey looked at the shambles on the floor. "But I guess you're right. What the hell happened to him?"

"I'd hoped the girl could tell us."

"She did. As much as she ever will. Try to force her to remember and she'll do her best to escape. She'll go back in time to when she was a child and find more problems waiting for her. In the end she'll be catatonic and lie curled up like a fetus."

"But you can help her, Hans," Erica said. "You can do that."

"I'll do my best, but I'm not God. Miracles don't come easy." He looked at Varl. "Anything else before I take her to her cabin?"

"I want a report on the body."

"An autopsy? What good will that do? He's dead and -- " Stacey broke off. "No, we don't know how he died. I can guess what killed him but not how he got into the condition he's in. I'll have to work in here, though. Once he's moved the evidence will be lost."

Varl left, going to the shower, stripping, and standing in the cubicle as hard-driven sprays drove icy whips against his skin. The water stimulated the flow of blood and, together with drugs, banished most of his fatigue. He needed to be alert -- to be otherwise in space was tantamount to suicide.

As Max Ovidio had found.

Ovidio had been the man outside, as Carter explained.

"I left him to clean up. Just a few minor details on the new installations. He said he could manage on his own, and I knew he was a good worker so I left him to it."

"Alone in space?"

"That's right, Commander." Carter was blunt. "It's against normal practice, but we aren't exactly operating according to the book. My air was running low, there was work one man could finish, so I left Max to it while I came inside."

"To desuit?"

"I'd been cooped up for ten hours straight." A statement, not an excuse. "I'd just finished dressing after the shower when I heard the scream. The rest you know."

"The scream -- was Ovidio still outside then?"

"I guess he must have been." Outside but missing.

"Nothing new to report," Machen told Varl. "I've scanned the surrounding area without success. He must have drifted away from the ship, but if so he gained fantastic velocity to get out of range so fast. Enough to kill him, I'd say."

"Tell me about his last call. Did he say what was wrong?"

"No. Not in specific terms. He just mentioned something about things not being right." Machen fell silent for a moment then, "I think I have it. It went: 'Hey, something weird's happening out here. It's crazy. I'm getting out of here. Help, come and get me!'"

"Is that all?"

"As far as I can remember. He started to say something else, but then the transmission ended and I sounded the alarm. Just when Rachel screamed, I guess. A hell of a coincidence."

Varl turned to Carter. "I'm going outside to look for Ovidio. Suit up and come with me. I want to know where you left him."

They dressed in the vestibule; Varl taking time to check the suits, each rechecking the other. Carter shook his head as Varl pulled communication wire from its reel.

"We won't need that, Commander. The radios are working."

"You used them with Ovidio?"

"Sure, and at times I wished they were still busted. Max liked to sing, but he had a lousy voice. Do you think we'll find him?"

"Maybe." Varl snapped on his line, then checked the laser in the holster at his side. Carried on the other hip was the snout-barreled reaction pistol. Ovidio had carried one -- why had he not used it to move back to the ship if his line had broken and he had drifted? "All set?"

Carter nodded and led the way into the lock. Air dropped as the pumps evacuated the chamber; the outer door opened as a green light flashed. He stepped out, snapped the end of his line to a ringbolt set in the hull, and made room for Varl to follow.

"There!" Carter pointed to where a gun rested in bleak nakedness on the hull. "I left him over there."

Varl walked to the emplacement, magnetic boots rasping over the plates.

"Reitsch was with me at first," Carter explained. "He went back inside when Max came out to relieve him. We completed the installation at the stern and moved up to this one. I checked what had to be done and left him to it. He could have gone back inside the gunner's lock had the inner port been operational."

Stooping, Varl lifted the door of the port beside the gun and saw nothing inside the vestibule beneath. Rising, he looked around again, seeing nothing but the scarred hull painted with the reflected hues of alien space.

On all sides, the enigmatic shapes seemed larger, closer than before.

"I'm going up," Varl said. "Check my line."

He dropped, flexing his knees, straightening them with a jerk which tore free the grip of his boots. The ship fell away from him as he rose, the line snaking to where Carter had it running through his hands. In a minute Carter joined him.

"Check the bow," Varl ordered, and fired his reaction pistol to send him wheeling on the end of his line toward the stern. Below him, he could see the gaping vents of the rockets; he fired again to bring them close. Each vent was large enough to hold the body of a man, but all were empty.

Rising again to the full extent of his line, he heard Carter's voice.

"Commander!" Carter was shocked, incredulous. "For God's sake -- look!"

They had found Ovidio. Drifting high, Varl looked down.

The hull was marked with the grotesque parody of a giant cartoon. The suited figure of a man lay, flattened and expanded, from bow to stern in a paper-thin layer like a coat of paint.

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\*CHAPTER 20\*

VARL's thoughts were like bubbles rising in a sparkling wine, streaming up to burst and form small craters ringed with tiny fountains; each burst was a question.

How had Ovidio died? What could take a man and smear him out in a thin, even layer on the curved surface of a ship? What could spread a man like warm butter beneath a knife -- and all in an instant of time?

Varl turned, restless, in the darkened privacy of his cabin. He had finally yielded to sleep too long denied, but his slumber was broken by a stream of mental images.

What had killed Ovidio? Yegorovich? Cole and the others who had vanished? What had driven Rachel insane?

He turned again and saw monsters sitting, watching, waiting to reach out and take the Odile and crush it and squeeze it into a battered container filled with bloody pulp.

And after the Odile?

How many other ships would go on a similar crusade?

A bubble burst to show the secretive face of Nasir Kalif, probably wandering in his garden at Polar North.

Another burst bubble framed the face of Ludwig Kreutzal.

Then the face dissolved to reveal a ghastly montage of skin and bone and pulsating organs and, above, the face of a woman crowned with a golden helmet of hair.

"No!" Varl jerked upright, feeling the hammer of his heart against his ribs. Sweat dewed his face, neck, and torso, and rested in clammy liquidness in his groin. "No," he said more quietly as if speaking to an alien but attentive god. "No."

Light bloomed as he rose, a soft effulgence which banished ghosts but left the questions intact. There were too many questions. He padded to the shower to stand beneath the lash of stinging spray. The water woke him but did little else, so he stepped out to fumble in a cabinet until he remembered and gave up the search. He had no ka'sence; that he had used before had been donated by Erica from her store.

Sitting, letting his body dry, he thought again of Ovidio, of Yegorovich, of the thing which had cursed the ship he had been given to command.

Why? How? When?

The times, at least, were known. Cole had vanished during the initial attack, and the others had gone with him. Rachel's scream had marked when Yegorovich had been opened to lie on the floor of the compartment, and Ovidio's death had been close. Close? How close?

Varl rose to pace the floor, conscious of something nagging at his mind, something noted and filed but overlooked in the pressure of events. Ovidio had been outside and had been hit at about the same time as Yegorovich. No -- at the same time, he was sure of it. Were there other associations?

He halted, looking at the bulkhead, seeing in his mind's eye a plan of the Odile; the gun emplacement on the hull where Ovidio had been working was almost above the compartment in which Yegorovich had died. And what was it Rachel had said? Something bright. Flashing. Moving. Changing.

Had he seen it before it struck?

Varl closed his eyes, forcing himself to remember the passage, Erica's cabin, and the spot of brightness he had seen. He had dismissed the flash as a visual aberration created by the toxins of fatigue, and he had almost forgotten it in the erasure of the scream.

The scream, the alarm, the ghastly aftermath.

Blood and bone and pulsating organs.

A man smeared like paint.

Monsters waiting, reaching, hungry for revenge.

Varl jerked as he almost fell, realizing that he had drifted into sleep, his thoughts veering into the realm of dreams, where speculation was easy and logic dismissed.

Filling a bowl, Varl plunged his head into the water, rose, immersed face and temples again, to rise gusting moisture from his nostrils. The procedure gave him only small relief, and he dressed, remembering

Erica and the ka'sence she would have.

In the passage he changed his mind and went to the sick bay for oxygen. As he took his third deep inhalation, the door opened and Stacey entered the room. He looked once at Van, then, without speaking, opened a cabinet, took out a bottle, and filled a glass with brandy.

Varl watched him drink. "I guess you needed that."

"I did."

"Mind telling me the reason?"

"You know the reason. I've just finished the autopsy you ordered."

Varl nodded and went to the cabinet. He found another glass, poured it half full, and took a sip.

"What took you so long?"

"Yegorovich was dead and could wait. Others couldn't." Stacey looked at his glass. "I could have wished there had been more of them."

"Bad?"

"You could say that." The doctor shuddered and finished his drink, then helped himself to another. "I've seen it," he said. "A dozen times when I've watched the recording from the Lewanna. But, you know, I'd begun to believe it wasn't real. That it was all a sick joke or something rigged for a purpose. There were too many things I couldn't swallow -- the unbroken hull, the anatomical impossibilities. I thought it was something designed to use as a spur to drive us to action. Something was out there, yes, but no one knew what. Ships had vanished, true, but no one knew why. So find some people and give them a reason for heading into the unknown. Bolster their pride and offer them the reward of regained dignity. Hell, let them think they were heroes. You, me, all of us." He drank. "Fools!"

"And now?"

"I know better." Stacey drew in his breath. "He wasn't dead, you know, not when you found him. He was alive and aware of what had happened and only God can know the state of his mind. His pain. He couldn't scream," he added, with strange detachment. "But he must have wanted to."

"He whimpered."

"The best he could manage." The doctor looked at his glass, at the hand wrapped around it. He watched as the crystal shattered to lacerate his palm. "You were merciful -- I wouldn't have had the guts."

Varl sipped at his brandy as Stacey washed his hand, applied a dressing, then filled a new glass. "So what happened?"

"To Yegorovich? The same thing that happened to those found in the Lewanna. He'd been damned near turned inside out. But the skin hadn't been broken. You understand what I'm saying? He was still all in one piece and anatomically unharmed. Of course, he couldn't move or eat or drink or do any of the things we think of as human, but he was alive and would have stayed that way for longer than I like to think about."

"Not broken? Then -- "

"How did we see him the way we did?" Stacey shook his head. "I don't know. Physically it's impossible, but it happened. There was no rupture. No wounding. The blood around him was due to seepage from capillaries broken through lack of normal support. Minor damage -- you'd have worse with a nosebleed." The doctor downed his brandy. "Hell, I don't want to think about it. When I do, I'm in his place, scared, hurting, praying someone will do something to help me. He was lucky. He had you."

And now he was dead. And Rachel, who had loved him, had joined him in a mental grave.

She lay on her bunk, knees drawn to her chin, back bowed, arms wrapped around her legs, eyes closed, and head bowed in the classic fetal position.

"Catatonia," Gloria Arle said. She leaned back in the chair beside the bed and eased her bandaged arm. "Hans told me all about it." Her voice became petulant. "He shouldn't have left her. A doctor's place is with his patient."

"He was busy." Varl looked at the woman and saw that her eyes were dilated as if from drugs. Sedatives, he guessed. "When you were outside that compartments the one where we found Rachel, did you see anything?"

"I don't think so." She frowned, trying to remember. "No. I just heard the screams and came running. Then you arrived and kicked open the door. Then -- " She broke off, swallowing. "I just fainted, I guess."

Varl nodded, thinking of the door and the way it had stuck. Something had jammed it -- what? The flashing thing he had seen when it passed through?

"Nothing else?"

"No." She paused. "Commander, we're in a bad way, aren't we? I mean, what with the hydee out and the rest of it. And now this thing attacking us. I don't want to end up like Ivan. Not even like her." She glanced at Rachel. "God! What a way to end!"

"She's alive," Varl said. "And can recover. And we'll get out of this."

"How?"

"We'll get out. It's only a matter of time. Before you know it you'll be back on Earth and acting the heroine. Now how about making some coffee and taking it around?"

"I don't know. Hans said I should just sit here and take -- "

"I give the orders!" Varl hardened his voice, holding her eyes, watching for the spark of anger which would signal her return from the happy clouds of sedation. "You can't do anything for Rachel sitting here. And the rest of us can't afford to nurse you. On your feet, woman! Get that coffee made!"

The anger came and, after a moment, the obedience. Varl was not proud of the small victory, but gentleness was something he could not afford.

In the engine room, he glanced at the slumped figure of Asner, then at Garewell.

"Any improvement?"

"He's getting worse, Commander." The aide stepped from his charge and lowered his voice. "I can't understand how he's still managing to remain active. He should be comatose by now. Dead, even."

"Your diagnosis?"

"All right," Garewell admitted. "I'm not a doctor, but I do know how many injections he's had. How many transfusions. How many pills. He needs deep sleep and life support and -- "

"Has he finished the repairs?"

"The hydee." Garewell looked at it. "The machine or the man -- a hell of a choice."

"No choice," Varl said. "You know that. It's no choice at all. Is he awake?"

Asner stirred as the aide held a vial beneath his nostrils. He looked ghastly, his eyes laced with a mesh of red lines, dried blood edging the corners of his lips, the rim of his nostrils. Seepage, Stacey had explained, capillaries bursting to release tiny hemorrhages. Minor damage of no real concern but symptomatic of greater injury caused by the accident.

"Commander." He tried to smile. "I've done the best I can. The engine -- I've done my best. But..." His voice trailed into silence.

"Jarl?" Varl reached him, touched the flaccid skin of the throat. "Jarl, damn you! Don't let me down now!"

"...depends on the new application of Kreutzal's sub-space tensors." The engineer continued as if there had been no break, no silence. "One chance to make it. If we don't, we'll be either a cloud of atoms or stuck. Wrecked and drifting, you understand? Lost in this..." Again his voice trailed into silence and again, slowly returned. "...don't stop. That's of prime importance. Keep going at all costs. To break out and through we must have ... application of Kreutzal's equations and ... a cascade. Obvious when..."

This time when the voice trailed into silence it did not return.

Asner was dead.

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\*CHAPTER 21\*

SOMEONE was singing something about bottles falling from a wall; Mbotto thought it was Stacey, but the doctor did not sound drunk, and was singing with a bitterness which verged on pain:

\_ "Nine green bottles standing on the wall\_

Nine green bottles standing on the wall

And if one green bottle should accidentally fall

There'll be eight green bottles standing on the wall."

The voice died as Mboto moved from the spot on the bulkhead. Had the doctor begun his song by numbering the full original complement of the *\_Odile\_*? Already he had passed the number now crewing the vessel and was going down; nine to eight to seven -- would he go the whole way? And, when there were no bottles standing on the wall, what then?

The small pad at the end of Mboto's wire found a new site and held as the muted sounds of the ship reached his ear. The usual susurrant of noise, then two voices loud and clear: Carter and Shelia Laudert.

"Stan! Stan -- don't!"

"I'm soft for you, Shelia. You know that."

"And I like you too, but -- "

"Is it Brad? Quimper was a good man and I liked him, but he's gone now. You going to mourn all your life?"

"No. That would be stupid. But, well, now isn't the time."

"Am I asking for anything? I just want to feel we belong. And, Shelia, maybe we haven't much time. Know what I mean? I'd hate to go without having what you could give me."

There was a rustle. "You mean it, Stan? You really like me?"

"I love you." Carter spoke with an unusual intensity. "Shelia, I love you!"

Mboto pulled free the wire, not wanting to hear more, and moved on to another place. He did not move away until the door of the cabin opened and Varl stood looking down at where he crouched.

"I'd wondered," he said. "I thought it might be you."

"Why?"

"A news hound. One too eager to get a story and too quick to drop it. It was a nice act you pulled, but it didn't quite make sense."

"And you suspected Nasir Kalif would have planted an agent in the *\_Odile\_*." Mboto rose to his feet, wrapped the wire into a small loop, and tucked the eavesdropper into a pocket. "But what choice did you give me? Had I backed out after the initial showing of the recording, what would you have done?"

"Made sure you didn't talk."

"And I can guess how." Mboto ran one finger across his throat. "Not that it matters now. I was supposed to make certain you didn't take off and run. Then, when we got hit, that didn't apply anymore. So I just remained quiet and acted the historian and kept my eyes and ears open. Incidentally, if you suspected Major Borken, you followed the path Kalif wanted you to take. He's a shrewd man."

"All that's in the past," Varl said. "But if you're not a true news hound, what are you?"

"A psychologist. I find out what makes people tick. Another reason I'm aboard -- you are a complex character, Commander, and out of Kalif's normal experience. He needed you but didn't wholly trust you. So -- "

"We can forget that too. What about the present state of the ship?"

"You mean the crew, and you mean condition, not state. People aren't metal and plastic and wire; machines to be kicked into action. You want a rundown by individual, or a general summation?"

"General."

"You're sitting on a powder keg. Sooner or later it's going to hit them that they are on a one-way ride to hell. When they do, you are going to get the blame. It may not be fair and it certainly isn't logical, but that's the way it's going to be. I've already picked up hints of mutiny from a couple of sources. Just vague thinking, as yet, but it can stiffen." He paused. "Asner's dying didn't help."

"Reitsch is taking his place."

"Otto's a good man, but -- "

"The hydee has been repaired. We're ready to go as soon as a few things are settled."

"Things?"

"Have you forgotten the *\_Lewanna\_*? How we were hit? Whatever attacked us is still out there. I don't want to risk meeting it again until we're ready."

"And in the meantime we sit and wait to be killed like Yegorovich and Ovidio." Mboto shook his

head. "How long do you think the crew will risk that now the hydee has been repaired? You picked a good crew, Commander, one with guts and intelligence. They'll fight for you, what's left of them, but they won't stand still to be executed."

"They will if they have to."

"Maybe." Mbot was dubious. "Do you know what's causing it?"

"Yes," Varl said. "I know."

"The deaths?"

"All of it -- I think."

Varl expounded his theory in the control room, facing the screens that showed the alien space outside, the host of enigmatic shapes.

Stacey shook his head, frowning. "Odd," he said. "They remind me of something, but I can't remember just what."

"A kaleidoscope?" Erica suggested. "Colored pieces which move to fashion a new pattern?"

Machen spoke. "Never mind what it looks like out there -- how the hell do we get out of it?"

"The same way we got in." Varl sat at the chart table, clean sheets of paper spread before him. Picking up a marking crayon, he made a dot in the center of one of the sheets. "A man," he explained. "Us. The ship if you like." Around it he drew a spiral which reached halfway to the edge of the paper. "Call that distance -- the thing we have to cover if we are to get from here, say, to here." He made two marks on different loops of the spiral. "Are you with me?"

"Flatland," Erica said. "You're demonstrating a two-dimensional world."

"No," Owen corrected. "A three-dimensional world in two-dimensional terms."

"The dot -- the man -- has only one way of covering distance," Varl said. "He has to move along the spiral." He illustrated the point with the crayon. "He can't go over it because he is limited to his dimensional reality. In this case, two. In our case, three. Then along came Kreutzal, who provided an alternative." The crayon rose up in a straight line, across and down again to connect the dot to the outer loop of the spiral. "A shortcut through an added dimension. To the dot it would be the third. To us, the fourth."

"And that's the hydee?" Machen frowned. "Did Kreutzal ever claim that?"

"Not in as many words." Varl looked at his drawing. "But he didn't have our evidence. Maybe he found it too late. How many ships had to vanish before the Lewanna was discovered?"

"The unbroken hull," Stacey said. "And the rest. All the damned rest!"

Varl drew a circle on a clear sheet. "The hull of a ship," he said. "A sphere. If a flatlander was inside he couldn't get out without breaking through the line. If it was a sphere neither could we. But as we are to the flatlander so something else is to us. Something which can reach in and do all the things we've seen done."

"Smear us over the hull," Stacey said. "Reach in and grip our guts and pull and turn us inside out. Or maybe they don't even have to pull. For God's sake, man! Do you know what you're saying?"

Varl watched their faces as they reacted to the knowledge that they drifted in an alien region inhabited by creatures -- or things -- which could, at any moment, turn them into objects of horror.

There could be no defense against such monsters. Suits, walls, the hull -- all were useless, as were the guns. How could they fire at something they could not see?

"They can be seen," Varl said when Mbot mentioned the point. "I saw one, or, rather, a part of one. It showed as a flash, a gleam. Rachel saw it too. It passed me in the corridor just before Yegorovich was hit. Had I been alert I could have shot it."

"Maybe it's as well you didn't." Stacey looked at the curve of metal above his head, at the screens depicting the shapes outside. "Weird," he said. "It's all so damned weird."

"It's a place." Varl was harshly practical. "Just a place."

"One we want out of." Machen was blunt. "The hydee's repaired, so let's go!"

"And forget what we came here for?"

"For God's sake, Kurt!" Erica said. "You can't still want us to go on!"

But she saw by his face, his eyes, that he did. She listened with the others to his reasons: They had

crossed, they were as safe now as they could ever be, the hydee had been repaired, and whenever things got too bad, they could run from danger. A nice, neat, reasonable summation -- why did she think he was lying?

"No!" Machen was positive. "No, dammit! No! We've had enough! Lost enough! We -- "

"Two men!"

"Are you crazy?" Machen glared at Varl. "Can't you count? We had thirty when we started, and -- "

"We've lost two men since we came into this alien space!" Varl slammed his hand on the table in a demand for attention. The rest don't count. Not as regards the present situation. Two men -- for God's sake, are you children? You knew there'd be risks!"

"Three." Machen was stubborn. "You're forgetting Asner. That makes twenty percent casualties."

"Asner died as a result of an accident."

"Rachel then."

"She's still alive. The alien didn't touch her. And why talk of figures? We came to do a job. It seemed a good idea to you when we left. Now you want to quit. What are they going to call you back home? A hero?"

"You bastard! I'm no coward!"

"Then prove it! And watch your mouth when you talk to me!" Varl had not moved, but Machen stepped back as if sensing the need to defend himself. "I'm not ordering you to commit suicide, and I've no intention of committing it myself," Varl said. "Now use your brains. We were attacked in hyperspace. Why?"

"A long journey," Erica said. "And we used the PEAP to simulate a crowd. One busy making love."

"Broadcasting it," Stacey said. "Broadcasting?"

"Radio," Varl said. "Or something so near it as to make no difference. We wanted to be noticed, so we advertised our presence."

"So?"

"What makes a man swat a fly? He hears it buzz, right? So he reaches out and swats it." Varl rapped the table. "End of fly. Too bad. But what really killed it?"

"The buzz," Erica said, understanding. "You're saying we were attacked because of the noise we made. The broadcast. But what about Yegorovich and Ovidio? We had no radio -- the transistors were destroyed during the attack."

"They were replaced. Carter and Ovidio were using suit radios while working outside. Carter left Ovidio alone, and he was fond of singing to himself."

"And Yegorovich?"

"They both died as a result of the same incident. That was the flash I saw. One attack, not three. One event triggered by use of the radio. I guess our own mental emanations are too weak to be noticed or have too short a natural range. But if we don't use radio or anything similar we should be safe."

"It makes sense," Owen said. "By God, it makes sense. He looked at Machen. "Still want to go home, Piers?"

"I don't know what he wants, but I do." Stacey looked uneasily at the alien space depicted in the screens. "I just want to get away from here. I don't like what's out there and I don't like what it can do. When -- " He broke off, startled. "What the hell is that?"

A sudden crowd of ghosts, rushing, thrusting, busy with love. Filling every nook and cranny of the ship and streaming from the hull to fill space with their noisy presence.

"Kurt!" Erica's voice was almost a scream. "Kurt! Kurt, look!"

In the screens something moved.

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\*CHAPTER 22\*

THE sponge-like, jelly-like, squamous mass was something from a nightmare; it reached with fretted tentacles ringing a puckered orifice that could have been a mouth. Varl lunged for the controls, slamming his hand on the intercom, barking orders.

"Lydon! Turn off that machine! Kill the PEAP! Now!"



He turned as Lydon made no answer to snap at the doctor. "Go and see that it's done. Find out what the fool thinks he's doing. Owen, man the guns! Reitsch!" he snapped into the intercom.

"Commander?"

"Stand by for use of rocket power. If there's trouble, see to it immediately. First priority." Varl slammed his hand on a button. "Red alert! Battle stations!"

The blare of the alarm echoed through the ship as he checked the screen. The thing was closer, and seemed to be incredibly vast, a creature which belonged in a diseased mind, it rested where a pyramid had drifted in roseate hues.

"Piers?"

Machen reported with no trace of his former anger. "Nothing else in close proximity. Observed drift as before. The only threat is that one thing which seems to have appeared from nowhere."

"There was something there. A pyramid."

"Which is no longer in evidence." The navigator shook his head. "I don't understand it. If it changed then why the sudden move, and why toward us?"

The questions could wait. Varl grunted as the ghosts vanished, the sense of their presence disappearing as quickly as it had come.

"It heard," Machen said. "Whatever's out there must have heard. Lydon must have gone crazy to do a thing like that."

Lydon had not known, but that was no excuse -- he had acted on his own volition, and later, if they lived, if the ship remained intact, Varl would know why.

"Reitsch?"

"Ready for firing, Commander."

Varl checked the rest of the vessel and found it as ready as it would ever be. Still the decision remained: to move and risk what such a move would bring, or to remain still and hope the blast of ghost noise had passed unnoticed.

"The hydee," Machen said. "We should be building the field."

"Attention! Hear this!" Varl kept his eyes on the thing outside as he spoke to the ship. "All hands secure for thrust. Fifteen seconds. Mark!" He waited, counting. "Two! One! Go!"

At the rear of the ship, as Varl operated the controls, a giant sprang to life, yawning to spit flame from the venturis of its mouth. Fire streamed with savage brilliance into the void; tiny particles of matter superheated by the fury of atomic energy were thrown from the Odile at tremendous velocity.

As the ship lunged forward, a reaching tentacle touched the stern, slung the vessel to one side, then passed on to be bathed in the flame of the exhaust and incinerated into fuming vapor.

"Fire!" Varl yelled as other tentacles came close. "All guns open fire!"

The target was obvious; the creature shuddered to the impact of laser fire and shells. The searing heat sent more of the tremendous bulk into vapor, and the detonations tore holes large enough to contain the Odile in the scaled substance.

The attacks were mere pin-pricks to the monster, but they stung. The thing seemed to flinch, then, with mindless courage, moved in again for the kill.

Varl opened the rocket drive to its full power. Thunder pulsed from the venturis and invisible weight piled on his chest and pressed him hard against the back of his chair. Blackness edged his vision, and he fought to retain consciousness as the blood drained from his brain. Then he cut the drive and he could see again.

"We did it!" Machen almost shouted in relief. "We outran it! Left it behind!"

In the far distance the shapeless blob changed, dwindling as they watched to become just another object among the rest. They saw a sudden bright glitter.

"Owen! Bring in the external gunners. All sections stand easy. I'm shutting down all electrical activity."

"Commander!" Owen protested. "The locks -- "

"I'll give you time. Move!"

The lights died as Varl tripped switches, their bright glow replaced by an eerie blue luminescence

from the emergency plates. The soughing of air, noticed only when absent, fell silent as the fans ceased to spin. The life-support panel winked from green to yellows then red, to stand finally dark.

As the last external gunner passed through the airlock into the hull, the *\_Odile\_* died.

Seated at the useless controls, staring at the blank screens, Varl felt the weight of metal and machines. Nothing was left to advertise their presence but the activity of their own brains; he hoped the thickness of the hull would negate their small broadcasts.

There was nothing to do but wait.

In the engine room, Otto Reitsch checked the inert venturis, touching the injectors, the feeds, the coils that harnessed the streaming power. The machines had functioned perfectly, but he had sensed a minor vibration at a junction which could mean a slight misalignment of one of the permanent magnets. He would see to it later; meanwhile, just to move and touch the gleaming fabrications brought a measure of comfort.

Gloria Arle could not stop thinking of Rachel. She was back in her chair beside the bunk, watching the curled figure, almost envying the woman her escape from the problems that nagged at her mind. How had Ivan felt when it happened? What would it be like to be killed? She knew that the brain remained active and aware for at least three minutes after the heart had stopped beating -- an eternity of pain. Pain and horror and -- dear God, what if it should happen to her?

In a cabin, Carter felt the comforting warmth of the woman at his side and tried not to think of losing the happiness he had found. He had waited too long, hoped too desperately for a woman like Shelia to come his way. The initial attack had made her his -- would another take her away? The thought of her spread out like Ovidio sent his hand questing to find her own, to hold it, to squeeze it.

"Shelia, darling, I love you."

She returned the pressure. "And I love you, Stan. For ever and ever."

For an hour, a day, a minute even, but still forever. For as long as they had -- could anyone ask for more?

Stacey wanted to get drunk, to forget the screaming of his nerves in the warm comfort of alcohol. But the golden fluid seemed to have lost its magic, and he could do nothing but sit and think of the people who had died and how they must have felt when dying.

Lydon thought of ghosts. Owen thought of guns. Others thought of their own private hopes and fears.

"How long?" Machen coughed to clear his throat, conscious of the betraying timbre of his voice. "How long do we act dead?"

Any answer would be a guess, but Varl considered the problem with what data he had. The initial attack had followed soon after the PEAP had been activated with the new emissions. Ovidio had died shortly after using a suit radio. How long? Allow time for them to have worked, more for Carter to have returned to the ship and desuited. An hour? Two?

Had the last attack been nothing but a coincidence?

"It could have been," Machen admitted when Varl mentioned the possibility. "Maybe the thing was ready to jump us anyway. But, if your theory is correct, why?"

Varl scowled at the blank screens. To drift dead was bad enough, but to drift dead and blind was worse. Into what might they drift?

He leaned back, forcing himself to relax as he built mental images. A river winding its way to a sea. A flow of air carrying motes of dust to a common point. The fall of sand in an hourglass. Rain. Snow. The drift of leaves. Where were they heading? What waited when they arrived?

Kreutzal?

If the drift was universal to this alien space and Kreutzal had broken through as they had, then it was possible -- highly improbable but possible.

Varl reached for the intercom, then remembered and, rising, went to the door of the operations room only to find it empty. But minutes after he had returned to his chair, Erica came with a tray bearing cups of coffee. She handed one to him, gave another to Machen.

"From the emergency survival kit," she explained. They contain chemical elements to heat food and

water. I've laced it with brandy"

"Stacey's?"

"He didn't object. Incidentally, Lydon had an accident. A small one. He'd been working on his machine and had it all ready for operation when he slipped and knocked on the switch when he fell. He banged his head and was too dazed to answer when you called." Erica sipped at her coffee. "How long do we run dead?"

"We're in no hurry." The coffee was good, the brandy warming. "Are the others having this?"

"Some of the girls are taking care of it." Erica set down her cup and lifted some papers she had brought in on the tray. "I've been doing some checking. Remember I said there was no pattern to the vanished ships? Nothing to go on? Then you found a correlation and proved it to be correct. So I turned back to the data on Kreutzal and his journeys. At first they too seemed wholly random, but that didn't make sense. He was too logical a man to go shooting off in all directions without a reason. Remember his advice to those students he spoke to at Heidelberg three years before he vanished?"

"Think before you act," Varl quoted. "Misdirected effort is wasted energy."

"They've got it carved in stone," Machen said. "I've seen it."

"So what he did must have had a plan. I think I've found it." Erica shuffled her papers. "He was looking for something. He was very secretive about it, but it's there." She paused. "I think he knew what would happen when the big ships got into space. I think he was looking for an answer."

A wild guess? Kreutzal had been a genius, and such men often seemed to be touched with the gift of clairvoyance. Had he, in some inexplicable fashion, managed to peer into the future to recognize the nature of the thing which now ravaged normal shipping? Had he dreamed of violated bodies? Of hulls smeared with blood?

"You're wrong," Machen said. "Kreutzal was working to improve the hydee. Everyone knows that."

"No. That work was being done by others. Kreutzal was more interested in investigating the true nature of hyperspace." Erica slapped a hand against her papers. "It's all in the figures if you know how to look. That and certain recommendations he made. They were ignored because they were considered to be cost-ineffective."

"Short jumps," Varl said. "Small ships. But that was centuries ago. We've improved since then."

"And run into trouble." Erica shrugged. "Maybe it doesn't mean anything now, but I thought you should know. If Kreutzal left anything we've got to find it:"

Kalif had thought the chance worth following, and had sent a ship and crew after the genius. For the Comptroller, the gamble was safe -- he had not come along. Varl reached for the controls. If anything was out there waiting for them it had waited long enough.

Erica sighed her relief as the screens showed nothing but the colors, the drifting, enigmatic shapes.

"Nothing, Kurt. We're safe."

"Safe?" Stacey came into the control room. He halted, looking at the screens. "Now I know what that reminds me of," he said. "Blood!"

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### \*CHAPTER 23\*

FLEUR Brandt grunted as Garewell removed the dressing. Even though he had tried to be careful, the wound had stung, and she tried to examine it, holding a mirror to reflect the saucer-large burn on her back. The movement caused pain to dart from her broken ribs.

"Careful!" The aide had heard bad language before but had never learned to like it. "Just stay easy until I fix this."

"It's turning bad on me, right?" Brandt was a big woman with a hard face and a manner to match. Her nature did not match her name; there was nothing of the softness of flowers about it. "I should be treated by a proper doctor. Where's Stacey?"

"With Rachel." Garewell lifted a spray and covered the burned patch with an antiseptic film; a second spray firmed into a transparent dressing. "That should do it."

"What about the ribs? They still hurt."

"Give them time. The breaks are knitting and will heal as good as new. Just take things easy and if

that burn gives you trouble come back."

"If I do, I want to see the doctor. How is she, anyway?"

"Rachel? No change."

"We should be getting her to a proper hospital. Me too, and Gloria -- that arm of hers needs more than you can give it. Mention it to the commander when you see him, huh?"

"Why not you?"

"I'm busy. Just tell him you think we've traveled long enough and it's time we started for home." The woman grunted as Garewell adjusted her blouse. "Do that and I'll have a word with a friend of mine. She runs a big hospital in Bremen. Just the place for you to graduate as a doctor. You do want to become a doctor, don't you?" She smiled as the aide nodded. "Then just do as I ask and I'll arrange it. A scholarship -- it won't cost you a thing."

Mboto reported the bribe when he and Varl were alone in the control room.

"It's beginning again, Commander. They're getting keyed up, restless, worried as before. The attack broke the pattern; mutual need and danger always does, but the basic situation hasn't altered. And it's aggravated by this drifting." He gestured toward the screens. "It's getting on their nerves. Heading through mystery into the unknown."

"How bad is it?" Varl asked.

"Just restlessness as yet, but another death like Ovidio's or Yegorovich's could trigger an outright demand for you to abort the mission."

"Mutiny?"

"They wouldn't think of it as that, but, yes, a mutiny."

Varl reflected that death could come from other than alien sources.

"You handled it well the last time," Mboto said. "Edging Machen into a rage and using his temper against him. And you had luck. This time? Well, luck can only last so long."

As could patience and supplies and the raw courage needed to live beneath the constant fear of alien death. Supplies could be stretched and the courage found if there was no choice; patience was another matter. Varl's own patience was wearing thin.

Varl looked at the screens and remembered what Stacey had said -- blood. The alien space had reminded the doctor of blood.

And Mboto?

"I don't know," he said when Varl asked. "It could just as well be soup."

"I'm serious!"

"So am I. Start thinking of it as blood and the next thing you'll be imagining we're stuck in the gut of some monster. It's a coincidence. Blood is a fluid filled with bits, the corpuscles, the platelets, antibodies, all manner of cellular debris. A river is like blood. Sap is a form of blood. Ichor. Some say the oil in an engine. With enough imagination you can see anything."

In a universe of infinite possibilities, anything could be. Varl pondered that thought as he sat alone and looked at the screens. The pyramid had turned into something else -- was that a defensive mechanism to take care of invaders? Had they drifted a little too close and triggered a reaction?

How long could Kreutzal have survived? If he had crossed into this alien space, he would have been helpless; in a frail ship lacking armament he would have been easy prey. Could his vessel have drifted for three hundred years?

"Machen!" Varl slammed his hand on the intercom. "Get up here! You too, Erica!"

He was busy when they arrived, taking sights, checking position.

"Plot a course," he said to the navigator. "One which will take us along the line of drift. Stay well clear of all obstructions. I don't want to get anywhere near to those shapes."

"A power source?"

"Yes."

"Hydee? If so -- "

"Rocket." Varl turned to the woman as the other set to work. "Check those figures of yours for any clue as to what Kreutzal thought he might run into. Did he make any repeat journeys to a special point?"

Did he favor any particular length of jump? Take any unusual precautions? Any special equipment?"

"You have something in mind?"

"I'm wondering if he found this place before he vanished. If so, he might have left something to help us."

"I'll look." Erica was not too optimistic. "But if he'd found anything of value, we'd know it. My guess is that if it exists it'll be in his ship."

Varl intended to find that ship. As Machen worked on his calculations, Varl rechecked his plan. To blast along the general direction of drift might not be the simple thing it seemed. Would speed alone cause the drifting shapes to react? Would their speed be enough to save them? And would their increased velocity alone be enough to send them from the path Kreutzal might have taken?

He was balancing probabilities, setting risk against potential gain -- should they run now while they had the chance or make one last effort to accomplish their mission?

His hand reached for the intercom.

"Your attention, please! Hear this! We are going to blast down the drift. Man all stations. External gunners to stand by for action. Ten minutes. Mark!"

"No," Varl said in answer to a query from Lydon. "We won't need the PEAP to be activated."

"Maybe he hopes to call Kreutzal back from the dead." Machen handed Varl the course he had plotted. "I'm working in the dark as regards the effectiveness of the rockets in these conditions. But follow these targets and we should stay constant relative to the drift. If the drift is constant. If the targets don't move. If -- " He broke off, shrugging. "What I'm really saying is that you'll have to guide the ship by guess and by God."

"Rather I didn't?"

"Hell, no! If we're going, let's go in glory!"

Such euphoria could vanish to leave a black depression, but for the moment it ruled. Varl checked his instruments, watched the final seconds die on the chronometer, and dropped his hands to the controls.

The Odile became fully alive.

A ship designed for space, mobile, adorned with fire, it thrummed with pulsing vibrations as it moved. Varl watched the shapes as they spun close and passed while others took their places. Gradually he increased the thrust, aiming at the points Machen had designated, frowning as subtle distortions increased.

"The left!" Machen warned. "Watch the left!"

A spiral spun and turned into a frothing mass of jutting spears -- the threat fell behind as another loomed ahead. A bizarre combination of cones and rods and rounded protrusions expanded to form a shimmering web.

Varl hit the warning button and increased the thrust. The web grew larger, closer, to hit and almost hold, then the Odile was through, leaving curling ends and shattered symmetry.

"God!" Machen gusted his relief. "That was close!"

Too close. Had the thing moved to intercept the ship? If so, how? There had been clear space and then, without warning, the shape had appeared.

Varl adjusted the controls as another loomed ahead; a rounded ball thick with enigmatic lumps which had not been there a moment before. The Odile shuddered to the thrust of guiding rockets and the ball fell behind as they passed to one side. The mass was as large as a planetoid, blotched with a riot of color, touched with transient glitters that were repeated from something far ahead.

"Lydon!" Varl snapped into the intercom. "Can you change the polarity of your machine?"

"Change -- I don't understand."

"Reverse its effect. Send out an emission which emulates death, not life." Why couldn't the fool understand? "A negative effect instead of a positive one. Can you do it?"

"I don't know."

"Try! Get at it and try!" Varl broke the connection.

"Do you think it will work?" Machen said.

"It might. It's a chance."

"Reverse the polarity," the navigator mused. "If one attracts, the opposite should repel. Let's hope it does. You're thinking of what threw us into this space?"

Varl nodded.

"Is that why you've drifted for so long?"

"We came to find Kreutzal."

"Sure, but that thing could be waiting, and you want to increase the odds on our chances of survival. So drift, find a reason for doing it, but give that thing time to forget us. You're shrewd. Damned shrewd -- I hope you're as lucky."

Varl shared that hope. In this world dimension he needed all the luck he could find.

Ahead the small glitters had grown brighter and the shapes on all sides seemed closer. They thronged in all directions, resembling oddly shaped asteroids; peanuts, doughnuts, warped crystals, puffed grains of rice, puckered sponges, all on a gigantic scale yet seeming to be smaller than before.

Had speed increased the size of the \_Odile\_? That illusion would account for the apparent diminution.

Varl fed power into the port jets and saw the shimmering twists of convoluted crystal which had appeared before him swing to one side. Its movement was an illusion; the ship had moved, not the shape. Another appeared, flowering as he watched into a spined and writhing monstrosity, avoided as again the steering rockets cut space with streamers of flame.

"Fast!" Machen was tense in his seat. "We're going too damned fast!"

When Varl had won the Lacerta Trophy years before, he had gone too fast. But the \_Odile\_ was not a sleek racer and the hazards were not drifting balloons. He had slashed to victory in the race with the hydee jumping in microseconds, fantastic velocity which had carried him clear. In the alien space he had only the relatively sluggish rockets to set against the menace of the shapes.

And, as Machen had said, he was going too fast.

"Stand by for reverse!" He yelled the warning. "On three! Mark!"

The \_Odile\_ spun, the venturis spouting flame in their direction of motion, cutting down their velocity with the impact of pulsing hammers. There was a time of jarring punishment, then Varl cut the drive and spun the ship again to stare at the screens and what lay ahead.

"What the hell is that?" Machen cried.

Before them shone a cluster of brilliant particles. Shot with glimmers and restless movement, the objects darted to hang, then to dart again, like a swarm of gnats all blazing in brilliant colors. And among them --

Varl blinked and saw burning afterimages on his retinas.

"Ships!" Machen's voice rose with incredulity. "They're ships!"

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\*CHAPTER 24\*

THE vessels were old, scarred, stained with time. As the \_Odile\_ approached, the ships grew larger, jumping into clearer detail as Varl stepped up the magnification of the screens. The \_Bismarck\_. The \_Aphrodite\_. The \_Warnemunde\_. He noted the names as he took in other details, the coded markings, the designs.

"Old," Machen said. "That type of hull went out before I was born. What the hell are they doing here?"

Paying the price of ignorance or attack, Varl thought. The ships had been thrown into this alien dimension to be caught in the drift, moving on to some final resting place as ships of old lost in a vast ocean had ended in the Sargasso Sea. If the \_Odile\_ and her crew could forge ahead, catch up with the first vessels to be trapped, they might find Kreutzal's among them.

As he reached for the controls, color blazed from the screens.

The darting objects had come close, no longer gnats but swollen ovoids, as large as the \_Odile\_, vanned, pointed, curved with bizarre configurations.

One flickered and vanished to appear directly ahead. Ahead and close!

The \_Odile\_ slewed as Varl hit the controls, tongues of fire streaming from the guidance jets to

touch the alien shape with incandescent fingers. A vane sagged, a curved protuberance turned into a gust of vapor, then the thing backed to hover wreathed in a shimmer of green.

From it a bolt of lavender lanced at the \_Odile\_.

Varl felt the impact, read the damage from his instruments. He heard, too, the scream torn from a human throat. He slammed his hand on the alarm.

"Battle stations! All guns open fire! Torps! Loose at -- " He broke off, staring, not daring to move.

Beside him, hovering like a glowing silver ball, something had appeared. It moved as he watched, drifting back to elongate into a cylinder, constricting to a thin disc, expanding to a sphere, narrowing to a glittering spindle. It was the thing he had caught a glimpse of in the passage; the thing Rachel had seen before it had touched Ivan Yegorovich to leave him living but dissected on the floor; the thing that had spread Ovidio over the hull as if he had been made of butter.

"Don't move!" Varl rapped the order as Machen, seeing the intruder, started to rise. "Don't attract it!"

"My, God, Commander! If -- "

"Don't move!"

Play possum, play dead, hope it goes away. Freeze and maybe it won't see you and you'll live to laugh another day; live to laugh and love and walk free instead of sitting, damp with fear, guts churning in knowledge of what the thing could do, dying a thousand deaths in the anticipation of one.

As the pulse of guns shook the \_Odile\_, Varl looked at the screens, at the glittering ovoids darting like a mass of fireflies or a swarm of wasps. Together? Were they and the shining thing a part of some monstrous whole? Or were they a form of predator like lice feeding on the afflicted?

"No!" Machen felt sweat break out on his body as the glittering spindle changed and edged toward him. "Dear God, no!"

He rose to throw himself away and to one side, then screamed. Flesh fell from his arm, his side, the length of his thigh, breaking open to expose the cage of his ribs, the lungs, the white sheen of bone, the yellow of fat. His whole body followed the break, opening as if unfolding.

A man was turned into a shrieking, carmine flower.

Varl snarled, one hand leaping at the controls as the other snatched at the laser clipped beneath the wide arm of his chair. As the venturis spouted to life he lifted the weapon, firing, sending flashes of searing, merciful heat into the distorted flesh of the navigator.

"Lydon! The machine! Turn on your machine!"

He continued to fire as he yelled, aiming at the shining spindle, seeing the hull beyond sprout blackened patches, jamming back the trigger and venting the last of the charge in a beam of continued energy to cut and slash and cut again at the spindle, and at the place where the spindle had been.

"Lydon!"

"I'm working on it! Reverse polarity?"

"Yes. Reitsch? Start the field! We're going into hyperspace!" The magic of the hydee would be used to escape the terror of the alien death which had struck at them.

The menace of the burning ovoids massed closer, too close -- Varl fed power into the jets as he veered the ship, using the incandescent blast as a weapon to drive the enemy back, to clear an area. He ignored the blood that gushed from his nose as savage accelerations slammed him hard against his chair.

On the instrument panel telltales flickered, then steadied as the scream of the hydee rose above the general din. The scream told of misaligned coils and inefficient working.

"Reitsch!"

"I'm adjusting -- doing what I can. Maybe if -- "

"Maintain the power!" Varl remembered Asner's warning. "Keep it going! Cascade the field -- if you lose it we're dead!"

More bodies would be added to the others; Machen and whoever it was had screamed. Erica? Dear God, let it not be her!

"Fire! Keep firing! Loose the torps!"

They were aiming blind, but the shooting kept them busy and held the thing at bay. The hydee

screamed and the \_Odile\_ shuddered and the roar of venturis became a threnody. The fight gained them time -- time for power to build the field, for energy to flow from the accumulators, the pile, concentrating power on power to cascade, their one hope of safety. The ship jerked and the guns fired and the air grew thick with the stench of fire and blood.

And all at once there was calm.

Varl stared at the screens, seeing the familiar gray nothingness of hyperspace. He killed the rockets; the guns fell silent. He was conscious of a terrible negation as if all life had been drained from his body -- and he was convinced that he was the one man left alive in the entire universe.

"Kurt!" Erica entered the control room and ran toward him, not looking at the mess on the floor. "I feel -- "

"Dead. I know. Dead and lost and alone. It's Lydon's machine. He got it going in time. Reverse polarity." His arms closed around her as she came to him, but, oddly, he still felt alone. "A heterodyning effect. He's damped out all mental emanations."

Lydon had turned the \_Odile\_ into an apparent coffin, finding the answer to the terror as he had saved them all.

They were still in hyperspace, but the thing that had attacked them was gone. They had repelled it or made themselves so inconspicuous that it no longer reacted to their presence.

"It can be copied," Varl said. "Refined and fitted to all ships. We didn't find Kreutzal, but we did what we set out to do. They'll be no more \_Lewannas\_."

"Kalif will be glad," Erica said. Then she cried out in alarm. "Kurt!"

The note of the hydee had faltered, becoming a grating whine which rose to fall, then suddenly broke. In the screens the grayness vanished to be replaced with the cold glory of distant stars.

"Reitsch?"

"It's gone, Commander. The entire unit's a mass of slag."

They had broken out into normal space, but without the hydee they could be stranded light-years from any habitable world. With rocket power alone they would starve.

A moment of fear dissolved as Varl checked the screens and the eye-searing brilliance of a nearby sun.

"We can make it." Varl felt the euphoria of release from strain. "We'll use the rockets to signal. They'll be seen and a ship will come out to rescue us. Erica, we've made it!" He swept her up in his arms. "We're safe, girl! Safe!"

She responded to his embrace, her lips warm against his own, then he felt her stiffen in his arms, and saw what had quenched her joy.

In the screens something loomed huge and menacing, a great ovoid blazing with a riot of color, vaned, pointed, curved in bizarre configurations -- something they had seen before in an alien dimension.

"A ship!" Varl knew it had to be that. "It must have followed us!" The alarm blared as he hit the button. "Battle stations! Prepare for attack!"

The attack came as the echoes died, and in his turret Stan Carter screamed as the flesh roasted on his bones in a blaze of lavender fire. The scream was repeated by another. Then a third.

"Fire!" Varl fed power to the jets, and the \_Odile\_ shuddered, sluing beneath opposed thrusts to form scythes of incandescent fury. "All guns keep firing!"

Green iridescence flared from the vessel as beams and shells struck home, then the bright shimmer died, leaving a lambent hue. A protective screen, Varl guessed, lowered to project the lavender fire. "The torps! Owen -- the torps!"

A torpedo lanced from its housing to meet lavender and dissolve in brilliance. Another missed; the \_Odile\_ felt the impact of violent forces and echoed to dying screams.

"Owen?"

"Dead." The voice was unrecognizable. "He's dead."

"Stacey! Reitsch? Mbot!" Varl did not wait for answers. "All guns cease fire! Cease firing!" He turned to Erica. "Take over control," he snapped. "Kill the ship and let it spin under momentum. Get ready to loose the torpedoes when I give the word."



"Kurt! What -- "

Before she could ask her question, he was gone, racing to the lock, suiting up, triggering the cycle as the inner door closed. A moment later he looked at naked space, the stars, the alien ship that threatened his command.

It hung in a web of green as if watching its helpless prey, then it fell below the curve of the hull as the \_Odile\_ slowly turned on its long axis. As the alien ship dropped out of sight, Varl threw himself from the lock, magnetic boots scraping on the plating, one hand snapping fast the end of his line. Straightening, he made his way forward to the humped bulk of a seared, blackened external gun. The gunner was dead -- behind the faceplate grinned a naked skull. Releasing the body, Varl took its place. The damaged weapon still functioned when he checked it.

The alien ship again came into view. It had not moved, its apparent motion due to the \_Odile's\_ own, and Varl watched, gauging just when the alien would be in line with the bow.

"Erica?" he said over the com line.

"All ready, Kurt."

"Good. I'm in position. Aim directly ahead and loose the torps when I give the word. Understood?"

There was no answer, as he had expected. The stars wheeled above and around him and he waited, tension mounting, praying the alien would not move. Then, as the alien ship passed overhead toward the bow, he swung up the muzzle and waited.

As the edge of the blazing ovoid touched the curve of the bow he jammed back the release.

He held the gun steady as laser fire hit and blossomed into green sparkles. The attack was over before the alien could move. Then the protective field died to return his fire with lavender fury. "Now, girl! Now!" he snapped.

The first torpedo missed. The second hit to expand in a gush of blue-white fire. The third completed the destruction.

A sun blossomed where the alien vessel had been.

Varl felt the impact of blasting radiation; he was torn from the gun and thrown to the full extent of his line, body jerking with involuntary spasms. Below him the \_Odile\_ crawled with green and lavender fire, with a shimmering golden brightness which died with the rest to leave only a sere and darkened hull.

The ordeal was over; the threat against mankind met and a solution found. Varl began to pull himself along the line, to the ship, his woman, and the rewards to come.

THE END

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