

FRONTIER OF THE DARK

An experiment: this is a science-fiction fantasy — yet whether such things might be valid for humans or not — they'd make peculiarly dangerous alien enemies!

Falsen had never liked cats, and cats had never liked him. That was one of the reasons why Captain Canning, master of the interstellar ship Etruria, had ordered that his second pilot be marooned on Antares VI, an inhospitable planet barely capable of supporting human life and deemed by the Federation not worthy of the time, trouble and expense of any colonization project. At that, Falsen was lucky that the mutual hostility between himself and the feline species brought only marooning as its consequence. Others like himself had been tossed out of air locks without spacesuits, had been carefully shot with "specially" manufactured bullets, had, in fact, been purged from the body politic by many and diverse methods more interesting than pleasant. But Falsen had once saved Canning's life at considerable risk to his own—on occasion when the bloody-minded Lemans overran and all but annihilated the trading post on their planet—and, as Canning remarked to his senior officers, there are limits, you know . . . And, Canning had added, he couldn't be certain—

So, at the appointed time, the whine of the Mannschen Drive generators had sagged from the supersonic to the subsonic and Etruria, navigating once more in normal space-time, had made a gingerly approach to the sixth planet of the ruddy sun, had thrown herself into an orbit around this planet. Number Three boat had been readied, and to the boat Falsen, under heavy escort, was taken. He could have broken free even then, he could have slipped out of the manacles around his wrists with ease. But there were too many of the crew to see him off, and Wilbraham, the commander, was carrying a heavy, old-fashioned automatic pistol, an outmoded blunderbuss of a thing that fired, as Falsen well knew, slugs of metal rather than bolts of energy. So he went into the boat, which was to be piloted by Kent, his own junior, and Wilbraham, still carrying his weapon, came too, and Minnie, the ship's cat, spat one last malediction at him before the air lock doors closed.

They set him down on a, spongy plain that was more than half swamp, with the last of the daylight almost gone and a thin, persistent rain drifting down from the overcast sky. Falsen shivered as they pushed him towards the air lock door. "You might," he protested, "have let me bring some stores, some heavy weather gear—"

"You won't need 'em," Wilbraham told him. "You're lucky," he gestured with his pistol, "that I didn't use this. If I thought that you had the ghost of a chance, I would."

"You could, you know, sir," volunteered Kent. "Shot while attempting to escape—"

"Escape?" asked Wilbraham. "To what? He's welcome to all that he finds here. Although I still think that the Old Man was too soft-hearted. Out, Falsen. And"—this last in tones of great irony—"good hunting!"

So it was that Falsen stood ankle deep in mud and, with upraised fists, cursed Etruria, cursed the boat that had brought him here to this dismal world. The fast fading flare of the lifeboat's jets was reflected from his eyes, made them glow like those of some wild animal. And then there was only the darkness and the falling rain, and the solitary figure clad in low shoes, in shirt and shorts, dressed not for pioneering but for the control room of the interstellar liner from which he was forever barred.

Cursing, Falsen soon realized, would get him nowhere. With one hand he brushed his wet, pale blond hair away from his eyes, then his stocky figure stiffened as he surveyed surroundings. The rain was not heavy, enough to impair visibility, although heavy enough to soak and chill. Enough light still remained, once the castaway's eyes had become accustomed to the darkness following the flare of the lifeboat's departure, for him to make out the horizon—a dim, deeper blackness against the blackness of the overcast sky. Featureless was this line of demarcation, level, unbroken by tree, hill or building, so straight that for one panic-stricken moment Falsen thought that he had been set down upon some tiny islet in the midst of a great, calm sea. Fighting down his fears he tried to remember all that he had ever read, in *Pilot's Books* and *Astrogating Directions*, about Antares and its worlds. He remembered vaguely that this planet's equatorial zone was encircled by broad belt of almost level plain and swampland; that it was only in the equatorial zone that temperatures were endurable by Terran standards

Once again he turned in a slow circle, eyes, ears and nose alert for any indication of life—of life, and warmth, and food. He heard nothing but the steady susurrus of the rain, smelt nothing but dampness and vegetable decay and— And— Surely, he decided, that was smoke, wood smoke, an elusive fragrance that did no more than hint at the presence of some kind of intelligent life. He shook himself then, and purposively started to trudge in the direction from which he judged the faint odor had come. The mud slopped over the tops of his shoes, making his feet even colder, his saturated clothing clung clammy to his body yet, as the exercise warmed him, with a certain moist heat of its own. One hand, as he walked, explored, not for the first time, the pitifully inadequate contents of his pockets—a combination tool that combined pocketknife with screw driver, tiny adjustable spanner, corkscrew and bottle opener, a pocket lighter, a sodden pack of cigarettes. Whatever he might find at the end of his walk he was armed, after a fashion. He had a cutting tool or weapon, and he had fire. He had, too, his own physical strength and the ability to look after himself in unarmed combat.

Stronger grew the smoke odor, and stronger, and with it another smell, not unpleasant—a smell that in other circumstances would have promised more than the warmth and dryness to which he looked forward now with increasing certainty—yet, paradoxically, a smell that destroyed his hopes of food. He could see something ahead now—a hill that humped its not inconsiderable bulk well above the featureless horizon, halfway up whose denser blackness flickered a ruddy circle of dim light, the entrance, he decided, of a cave—a cave in which dwelt somebody who, in all probability, was a castaway like himself, somebody with the same needs and desires—or, he amended, similar needs and desires. For he was, by this

time, reasonably certain that his co-ruler of this barren world was a woman.

He walked cautiously now, treading carefully to avoid snapping the twigs and branches of the low shrubs that covered the relatively dry slopes of the hill. The other, whoever she was, might be armed. And, armed or not, too sudden an awakening from her sleep might make her—vicious. Cautiously he climbed the hill, carefully—yet with a mounting excitement in his veins. It was only now, at this moment, that he fully realized how lonely he had been. Appreciatively he savored the fragrance of the fire, of those other scents that most men would never have noticed, especially at this distance. At last he was at the cave mouth, was peering inside.

The fire burned low, casting a dull, crimson radiance over the clean sand floor, over the pile of twigs and small branches a little to one side of it, over the neatly folded clothing and the huddle of blankets. Walking slowly and softly, scarcely breathing, Falsen entered the cave and, skirting the fire, made his silent way to the little heap of clothes.

Curiously, he picked up the garments one by one. They were a woman's, as he had known, and they bore, as he was now discovering, insignia similar to those on his own uniform. This person had been, as he had been, in the employ of Interstellar Mail Lines. He looked at the epaulettes of the shirt—two silver braid bands on scarlet—and thought: Nurse.

Meanwhile, he was cold. He turned to walk to the fire, stepped inadvertently on a dry twig. He turned again, this time with no thought for caution, to see the blankets tossed violently aside and the white figure of a girl leap from them. He caught her in mid-leap, forced her down to the sandy floor. He felt the flesh of her naked shoulders shudder and crawl beneath his hands, flinched from the animal hate that glared from the pale, almost colorless, blue eyes. He bared his teeth in a mirthless grin, said, "Steady, my dear. Dog doesn't eat dog, you know."

Suddenly she ceased to struggle. Falsen got to his feet, gave her his hand to help her up. In the light of the dying fire she looked unreal, somehow, her flesh gleaming with a shimmering insubstantiality. Yet her actions were prosaic enough. She dusted the sand from her body, then walked to her clothing and started to dress. Falsen watched her—the slim, graceful lines of her, the high cheekbones, the pale blond hair and, when she spoke, the strong, white teeth.

She said, her voice low and husky ` "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

"Falsen. Nicholas Falsen, late second pilot of Etruria. They decided that they didn't like my company. And so—"

"Why didn't they kill you?"

"Some of them wanted to. But I saved the captain's life once."... He said sneeringly, "I suppose you were equally obliging."

"Perhaps," she said tonelessly. "I wouldn't be—now. I was dumped here, with enough stores to last me about six months. I've been here for three."

"Then you must be from Calabria. She was about three months ahead of us."

"Yes. I'm from Calabria." Dressed now, she turned to look at him as he stood in the firelight, stared at his soaked clothing and muddy shoes. She said, "I heard no rockets. You must have come a long way. Wouldn't it have been better to have left your clothes?"

"I didn't know who or what I might find," he told her. "Then there's convention, and training, and all the rest of it. I notice that you've dressed."

"So I have," she admitted. "But as ex-officers of Interstellar Mail"—she laughed bitterly—"we must dress the part."

"You haven't told me your name."

"Veerhausen. Linda Veerhausen. But you're cold, and I'm no hostess. Get out of your wet things and between those blankets, and I'll bring you something hot—"

"But I wouldn't take your stores."

"Rubbish. I've hardly touched them. There's a sort of crayfish in these pools that's not too bad eating—not the same as red meat, but it serves. But this calls for a can of stew."

She went into a smaller cave opening off the main one, and by the time that Falsen was between the blankets she was back, carrying the can of stew, hot, the smoke still spiraling from the tube of chemicals that had heated it. Falsen took his share gratefully and then, exhausted by the emotional and physical strains of the last few days, slept soundly. The girl built up the fire and sat beside it, alert, unsleeping.

Outside the cave the steady whisper of the rain died, and finally ceased.

Falsen was awake with the dawn, snapping from sound sleep into instant awareness. He threw the blankets to one side, walked on bare, silent feet to the cave entrance. The girl, standing on the little ledge overlooking the downward slope of the hill, sensed his coming, turned to greet him. A smile flickered briefly over her sullen face. "This is it," she said. "Your first morning on Antares VI. At that, it's better than my first morning."

Low to the east a sullen, red glow stained the gray clouds. Slowly it spread, spread and lifted, suffusing all the overcast with dull crimson. And then there was a sun in the sky, Antares, with upper and lower limbs vaguely defined, and all the pools and channels of the swamp glimmering like blood among the grayness of vegetation.

"What now?" asked Falsen.

"Breakfast," said the girl. "But we have to catch it first. I've been keeping the stores they left me as an emergency ration. Look!" she pointed, "that pool there, shaped like a horseshoe. That's where I get my crayfish. I'll show you."

"Do we go . . . as we are?"

"You can dress, if you like. But as we are is better for things like crayfish. If it were sheep, now—" She licked her lips with a red tongue.

"Don't!" said Falsen sharply.

The girl ignored him. "On my last leave," she said. "I knew then. One morning, but finer than this, in the Scottish Highlands—" She smiled reminiscently. "I often wonder who, or what, that shepherd blamed."

"And yet, knowing the risk, you kept in the Service?"

"Why not? As a nurse I had access to the drugs—and saw to it that there was a sudden and complete mortality among the cats. If it hadn't been for that passenger, and her pampered Persian— And now "—she spat viciously—" crayfish!"

"Let's go and get 'em," said Falsen. "I'm hungry."

Together they made their way down the hillside, down to the pool. The spongy vegetation was soggy underfoot, still saturated with the night's rain. The rising of the sun had brought a steamy, uncomfortable warmth to the air and Falsen was thankful that he had not bothered to dress, thankful in a way that there was only his smooth, hairless skin to get muddy, that the discomfort was no worse. At the pool that Linda had pointed out to him they stopped, and there the girl made a careful search of the vegetation along the bank. She selected, finally, a long tendril having at its end an elongated, yellowish berry. This, with her left hand, she lowered into the water. Watching, Falsen saw that there were tiny fish in the pool, and that somebody, or something, with very weak eyesight might just possibly mistake the berry for one of the fish.

"The thing to do," explained Linda, "is to keep it moving, just so. And you need hands for this. Now we start in earnest."

Carefully, so as not to disturb the water, she assumed a prone position, still angling with her left hand, her right hand poised ready. Falsen watched the pale colored berry, watched the tiny fish—if they were fish—dart up to it, investigate, then sheer off with a rather elaborate show of disinterest. Then, suddenly the little water creatures were gone flashing away to the farthest recess of the pool, and something big and gray scuttled over the bottom. Wit scarcely a splash Linda's arm flashed down into the water—and then she had rolled over on to her back, holding with both hands a thing that could have been an oversized, infuriated Earthly spider. Uncertain what to do, Falsen stood by, more than a little sickened by the appearance of the thing that the girl had fished from the pool.

"Shall I—" he began doubtfully.

"No. All right. There!"

Something cracked loudly and sharply, and then the crustacean was rolling on the spongy vegetation gray, hairy football in size and appearance, dead.

"We cook him," said the girl. "I've tried them raw, but—"

The thing, Falsen admitted, wasn't bad eating. It would have been improved by salt, and vinegar, and bread and butter, but it was much better than nothing. And then, after the meal, there was a cigarette from the pack that Linda had carefully dried when she dried his clothes, a shared cigarette for, as the girl pointed out, she had not yet found any kind of vegetable that would serve as a tobacco substitute. "But you will lose the desire," she said. "After all—it's not natural. I'm just having this one with you to be sociable."

"Then let me finish it."

"No. Funny—with the smell of it the desire came back. After all, we are civilized and there's no reason why we shouldn't make the best of two worlds."

"The main problem right now," said Falsen, "is to make the best of one."

He got to his feet, walked to the cave entrance to survey the one world that was left to them after all their years and light-years of interstellar travel. He stiffened suddenly. "Linda!" he called. "Come here!"

"What is it, Nick?"

"Look! Do you see it?"

Away over the swamp, all of seven miles distant, something was moving, something that reflected the crimson rays of the sun. Something brightly metallic it was, moving fast, flying low. As they watched it stopped and hovered, poised over one of the larger pools of water.

"A helicopter," muttered Falsen. "Looks like a survey job."

"But I thought that the Federation didn't want this world."

"There are races outside the Federation." He grinned suddenly. "There are races that don't know anything about the family scandals that the Federation is keeping so quiet about! Quick! Get some damp wood on that fire!"

"But suppose they are human?"

"Even then, they won't know why we're here. We can cook up some yarn about shipwreck!"

As he talked he was tearing up armfuls of the brush growing outside the cave, throwing it on to the fire. The white smoke rose, a trickle at first, then great, rolling billows, pouring out of the cave mouth, flowing down the hillside like a heavy liquid. Over the swamp the helicopter rose slowly from the surface of the pool that it was investigating, made directly for the hill and the cave.

"Not one of ours," said Falsen, watching intently. "That's a serrated disk they have rather than rotors. Doralan—? Could be. But we'd better get dressed."

"Why? This is better if we're going to—"

"We're not going to—yet. They're taking us to their ship. Hurry!"

Falsen, coughing and spluttering, came out of the cave again when the humming of the aircraft's approach filled all the humid air. He looked up at the thing, saw the characters on the cylindrical fuselage, decided that his guess had been correct. She was Doralan. But what were the Doralans doing here? Linda came out and stood beside him, watched the helicopter drop to a neat landing a little way down the slope of the hill, watched the door in the fuselage open and three red-cloaked, red-hooded figures clamber out. Falsen, his arm over the girl's shoulders, felt her muscles tense and shift, whispered: "Not now! You'll spoil everything."

"But they look," she murmured, "so tempting—"

"And they've got some kind of lethal ironmongery trained on us from inside their ship."

"That shouldn't worry us. Unless—"

In single file, the Doralans marched up the rough path. Their scarlet loaks were brave splashes of color against the gray of sky and plain, their scarlet hoods shaded faces that like the grave, piquant faces of girls. Their bodies, too—what e could be seen of them—were human enough in outline.

"But," Linda whispered, " they human—"

"No," said Falsen softly. "Just similar conditions, parallel development. Take 'em apart and they're—different. Yet near enough to human for—us."

The leader of the Doralans, she, who wore the gold star on the collar of her cloak, addressed them. Her voice was thin and high, clear, and every word was perfectly enunciated.

She said, " You are from Earth."

"Yes," agreed Falsen.

"Why do you make smoke?"

"Because we are cast away upon this world, and we need help."

"That is obvious. But why do you make smoke?"

"That is obvious, too. To attract your attention."

"But in the course of our survey we were bound to have visited this, the only hill within miles. Your call for help that was not urgently required has disturbed our work."

Falsen said, "I'm sorry about that."

"Lady," said the officer to Linda, "I would have no further talk with this so obviously inferior being. It is clear that you are in charge here. Tell the male to follow us to our helicopter. You shall be taken to our Lady Mother."

"Better play ball, Linda," Falsen told her. "They've a sort of matriarchal setup, and the Lady Mother is the captain of their ship."

He followed the three women to the helicopter, was somewhat surprised when the officer gestured to him to get in first. But, he found, he was not to make the ride in comfort. The three who had been left to guard the aircraft grabbed him unceremoniously, pushed him into a compartment at the stern that was already more than half full of specimens—geological as well as others of a softer but even less pleasant nature. From his uncomfortable seat he could see the backs of Linda and the three Doralans—the Earth girl towering head and shoulders above her diminutive companions. He could see a contraption of metal tubing that might, or might not, have been a weapon. He hoped that the proximity, the all too close proximity, of these warm-blooded beings would not lead the girl into doing something foolish. In the confined space the odor of them was almost overpowering.

Silently, smoothly, the helicopter took off. It flew with equal smoothness—but that, Falsen decided, might be due as much to local aerological conditions as any excellence of design. At last a slight forward tilt of the deck told him that they were coming in to a landing; a slight jolt told him that they had made it. Linda turned to look at him before she left the aircraft—her face was white and strained, but she essayed a grin. Falsen grinned back—and much of his grin was relief at being able to lift the fleshy part of his thigh from the rocks upon which he had, perforce, been sitting. He stumbled forward to the door, half fell out on to the spongy, gray vegetation.

He looked around him with interest. Except that the plain here was not level, but gently undulant, the site of the Doralan camp differed very little from the place from which they had been brought. The only high things in sight were a range of hills to the eastward, and the ship. A secondhand job, Falsen decided—Earth-built. One of the old City class that Interstellar Mail got rid of all of ten years ago. But they were good, solid old wagons, he thought, and built to last.

"You," said the officer, breaking into his thoughts, "come with us."

"What are your orders, Lady?" Falsen asked Linda, more than a little sardonically.

"Don't ask me," she said. Then, to the Doralan, "Look, Little Red Riding Hood, in our world we do things differently. Horrid though it may seem, where we come from this male is my superior officer."

"Then come, both of you," said the Doralan. "Here you will both take my orders."

They entered the ship by the stern air lock, crowded into an elevator cage and were rapidly lifted through deck after deck, coming to rest, at last, just under—or so Falsen estimated—the control room right forward. They left the cage, walked along a short length of alleyway terminating in a door. On this the officer rapped sharply. Somebody on the other side called out something, and then the door slid open. The furniture in the room beyond the door had been changed, of course, had been modified to suit the dimensions of its present occupant—but otherwise it was still the captain's day room of a City-class liner. Sitting behind the big desk was one of the

little women who now owned and operated the ship, dressed, as were her crew, in scarlet—but scarlet well ornamented with gold devices. Her hood was thrown back to show short, iron-gray hair. Her features were lined by experience and authority—yet the mouth was kindly. Sitting on the desk, a little to her right side, was a huge, ginger cat, a Persian if the length of its coat were any guide. This beast, as the Earth people entered, got to its feet and, with arched back, spat viciously.

"Pondor!" said the Lady Mother reproachfully.

The animal replied in a mewling voice—and Falsen could almost have sworn that the reply was in words. Imagination, he thought.

The ship's officer made her report to her captain. The Lady Mother heard her story, then spoke a few words of dismissal. To the two castaways she said, "Be seated."

"So you speak our language, Lady Mother?" asked Falsen. He seated himself on the built-in settee, that being the article of furniture best adaptable to his greater weight and bulk. The girl sat by his side.

"Yes," said the captain, "I speak your language. And first I must apologize to you for the conduct of my officer. She is unused to the idea of a world in which the two sexes are equal or, indeed, to one in which your sex is superior."

"That was nothing," said Falsen then jumped to his feet with a yell, bent and rubbed the calf of his leg.

"Pondor," said the captain sternly. "That is no way to treat guests!"

"They don't like me," the words were slurred, barely distinguishable, "so I don't like them."

"Then leave the room. At once!"

"Why should I? My people were worshiped as gods once."

"We never worshiped you, Pondor. Go!"

"Oh, all right." Then as the beast, tail in air, sauntered out, they heard the one word, muttered in tones of great contempt, "Females!"

"What a . . . what a charming animal," said Linda. "Do you have any more like him?"

"Yes. I think you'll agree that we've done wonders with your cats—just fifty generations of controlled mutation and we even have a few bilingual specimens like Pondor here. But I am sure that you will like some refreshment."

One of the little women came in with a tray on which were small, spouted cups and plates of tiny cakes, another, an officer, followed her, carrying a pad and a styluslike pen. This latter seated herself and prepared to write.

"Tell me your story," said the captain.

"We are Nicholas Falsen and Linda Veerhausen," said Falsen, "second pilot and nurse respectively of the liner"—he hesitated slightly—"Etruria. We were bound from Chylor to Port Gregory, on Mars, in our System, with general and refrigerated cargo and two hundred passengers. It was my watch," he said. "Miss Veerhausen shouldn't have been in the control room with me, but she was. She was there—and it saved her life."

"Why, what happened?"

Falsen sipped from the little, spouted cup that had been handed him, decided that it was like weak tea flavored with aniseed. He sipped again—not because he liked the overly sweet brew, but to gain time. He heard the girl, her voice strained, say, "It was horrible, horrible."

"Yes," he agreed. "It was horrible. The field of the instruments in Control saved us, I guess, but the rest of the ship— Have you ever seen, what happens when a Drive Unit runs wild?"

"No," said the Lady Mother. "But I've read about it."

So have I, thought Falsen. He went on, "They were all dead, of course. All of them. Some of them—changed. I'd cut the Drive as soon as the buzzer went, but it was too late. And then, as we were investigating, we heard the thing starting up again. You know, it does sometimes, even with the power cut off. All part of this temporal precession business. So we threw what bits and pieces we could into one of the boats and got out—but fast."

"Where is your boat?"

"I could show you the spot," lied Falsen. "But unless you've got special mud-dredging gear, you'll never find her. We shifted our stores to this cave of ours, and slept there the night—and in the morning she was gone. I should never," he said, trying to make his voice sound bitter, "have left both air lock doors open."

"There will be an inquiry," said the Lady Mother, "when we return you to your own people. Meanwhile, you are our guests. Arrangements are being made for your accommodation." She sipped from her cup, then set it down on the deck for Pondor, who had just returned. The animal, using his fore paws to tilt the vessel, drank noisily and appreciatively. "You will be wondering," she went on, "what we are doing here. It is not a secret. In return for certain trading privileges your Federation has ceded us this planet, and this is the first prospecting and surveying expedition. We expect to remain here for two hundred days. I trust that you will not mind being separated for so long from your own kind."

"I mind," mewed Pondor unexpectedly. "Find their boat for them, mistress, tell them to go. They are not our people. They—smell. They smell wrong."

"Rubbish, cat. If you'd spent all your life aboard an Earth ship, you'd say that I smelled all wrong."

"No, mistress. You wouldn't. Make them go."

"Lend us a boat," said Falsen, "and we shall go. When an animal tells me I

. . . stink it's time that I went."

"Don't pay any attention to Pondor," said the Lady Mother,

"He's jealous. He's used to being the center of attention and now he's having to . . . how do you put it? . . . take a back seat. Just ignore him, and he'll stalk out, all outraged dignity, and cuff his two wives to restore his self-esteem."

"A charming animal," said Linda.

"If I thought that you meant that," Pondor told her, "I might like you."

"How intelligent are these . . . things?" asked Falsen. "Or are they no more than sort of glorified parrots?"

"I don't know. Of course they couldn't solve an equation or build a ship—"

"Our people were gods once," said Pondor, "and gods don't build ships."

"Could you make a world, then?" asked Falsen.

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"Prenta, here, will show you to your cabins," said the Lady Mother. "You will mess with my officers. I shall see you again."

"I hope that I shan't," muttered the cat.

The cabins to which they were shown were comfortable enough by Terran standards, although the furniture was on far too small a scale for comfort. Each cabin, however, boasted a little shower cubicle—and this, thought Falsen, would be useful. Having explored his tiny, temporary, home he sat on the edge of his bunk, waited until the murmur of female voices, heard indistinctly through the thin bulkhead, should cease. At last it stopped, and shortly after came a soft rap on his door. It was only the captain's cabin that was fitted with a voice-controlled door opening device, so Falsen had to get to his feet and open his himself. Linda Veerhausen came in.

"That purser, or whatever she is," she began, "was in a talkative mood. I think that she was trying to convert me to these people's way of thinking. She kept harping on this big ship of theirs, with a crew of a hundred, and not a single male among them. Not counting, of course, Pondor, or whatever the beast's name is—"

"A hundred—" said Falsen thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said. "A hundred. And we are only two. But there's the value of surprise—"

"We have to do it," muttered Falsen. "How we do it—that has to be worked out." He paced up and down in the narrow confines of the little cabin, like some caged wild beast. "They won't have changed the controls of this ship much, if at all. I'm a good pilot, and I can navigate. There are worlds out towards the Rim, out past the Rim, that'll not be colonized for generations, if at all."

"What sort of worlds?" she asked. "Like- this? Or arid deserts? Or with atmospheres of chlorine or something equally toxic?"

"Some of them. But there are good Worlds, too. Planets with rivers and forests, and timid, fleet-footed animals not unlike the Earthly deer."

"You're not lying?"

"Why should I lie? And get this straight—if we stay here the balloon is bound to go up sooner or later. We have to get somewhere where there's no explaining to do. And that fast."

The girl was not listening. She stood tense, alert. Suddenly she strode silently to the door, opened it, pounced with the same speed that she had shown in her capture of the crayfish. Swiftly and silently she backed into the room, the thing between her hands struggling viciously, trying to cry out, succeeding, in spite of the pressure on its throat, in giving a strangled squeal.

"What—?" began Falsen. Then he saw what it was. It was a cat—not Pondor, but, presumably, one of his two mates. Like him, it was of Persian descent, but it was black. And the Lady Mother had said that all the cats could talk.

"This thing," said Linda, "was spying."

"Can it understand English?"

"I don't know. But it may have learned it from that other brute. You may have spied," she went on, addressing the animal, "but you won't talk!"

Claws drew angry furrows down her face as she lifted the cat to her mouth. There was one, semiarticulate cry—then a silence broken only by a steady, rather horrid dripping sound. Suddenly the woman choked: "This fur gets between your teeth."

"The fur will have to go the same way as the rest of it," said Falsen in a matter-of-fact voice. "We can't leave the body around."

"Help me, then."

"All right."

A little while later Falsen carefully inspected the cabin. "It's a good thing," he remarked, "that this soap of theirs is so strong smelling. I doubt if even Pondor could tell that his girl friend has been here."

"It must be almost dinner time," said Linda, "but now I haven't much of an appetite."

"Neither have I," admitted Falsen, "but we shall have to go through the motions. Anyhow, if that horrid aniseed tea we had was a fair sample of their food, a small appetite will be understandable."

A little later the survey ship's chief officer, at whose table they had been placed, remarked, Earth people never seem to appreciate our food. Is yours,

then, so very different?"

Very," said Falsen.

Falsen awoke, that next morning, fully refreshed. He did not need to be for him the first light, even when in a metal box with no outward looking ports or windows, was alarm enough. He threw the light blankets off his bunk, and jumped out. Silently the door opened, and Linda came in.

Falsen turned to face her. He saw that she had made concessions to the ship's conventions, was wearing a gaudy wrapper loaned her by one of the officers. She was fully dressed by the standards of the burlesque stage, but by no others, even though the kindly owner of the wrapper had explained that the garment was too big for her.

"Careful, there's somebody coming," whispered Falsen.

He was dressing when the door flew open without ceremony. One of the officers looked in and, ignoring Falsen somewhat pointedly, addressed Linda Veerhausen.

"Lady! The Lady Mother desires the presence of both of you, at once."

"What's wrong?" asked Falsen. "Something dreadful. Last night, when the ship slept, huge, savage beasts attacked the night watch. Clenni is dead, and four of her people. Not only dead, but—parts of them eaten. Hurry!"

In a minute or so—Falsen having finished his dressing with more regard for haste than for appearances, Linda still in her wrapper—they were in the captain's day room. The Lady Mother. faced them across her big desk, and her face was grave. On the desk sat Pondor, who did not forget to spit a curse at them as they entered. The captain cuffed him absent-mindedly, then spoke.

"Sit down," she said. "You will have heard something of what has happened. Perhaps you can help."

"In what way?"

"You, Mr. Falsen, were an executive officer on your last ship. You must have read astrogating directions. You might, just possibly, have read those astrogating directions applying to this planet. Can you remember any mention of any large, dangerous animals among the fauna?"

"I can't remember," said Falsen.

"Well, then—you were living here for some time before we came. Did you see anything, hear anything?" "Yes, Lady," said Linda, while Falsen was still considering his answer. "Some nights we heard something howling. And early one morning we saw something big and gray slinking away from our cave. After that we kept our fire going."

"You should have told me."

"But we thought you knew."

"I have explored all around the ship," said Pondor suddenly, " and I have neither seen, heard nor smelt anything—until this morning. The smell hangs strong, even in here."

"I examined the—bodies," said the Lady Mother. "What was left of them."

"Then you might be able to reconstruct—"

"Only this far. Whatever it was—it used teeth as its main weapon. Perhaps its only weapon. Whatever it was, was immune to the fire of my crew's blasters—and some of them must have been fired at close range. Was this thing you saw—armored?"

"It seemed to have a scaly hide," said the girl.

"I ask your advice," said the Lady Mother. "On your world, or so I have read, there are still large tracts of wild forest, of savage jungle, where men and women still go to hunt, and kill, large dangerous beasts. We have nothing of that kind, we never had, even in our barbarous past. We have no experience. You have. You must help us."

"What steps have you taken so far, Gracious Lady?" asked Falsen.

"I have sent both my helicopters out, and they are searching all the area of which the ship is the center. Should they see anything they will signal in at once."

"Useless," said Falsen, an idea germinating in his mind: "The only way to track any kind of game is on foot. You'll never do it with aircraft."

"How big a party will you require?"

Falsen hesitated. Then—" Six," he said, "not counting ourselves. Somebody in charge who can speak English. And, of course, weapons."

"You had better break your fast before you go."

"No. This is too urgent. Give us a few moments to get dressed and we shall be ready."

"As you please. The party will be waiting for you in the after air lock."

Falsen, dressed himself, went into Linda's room while she was hastily donning her uniform.

He said: "We'll try that range of hills. There're bound to be caves there. And where there are caves you might find—anything."

"Yes," she agreed. "But shall we?"

"Why not?" He went to the door, opened it, looked up and down the alleyway. It was deserted. He returned to the cabin, shut the door. While the girl finished dressing he talked rapidly, pausing at intervals to give her time to object or to elaborate. Then, together, the two of them made their way to the after air lock where they found the ship's people waiting for them.

The Lady Mother was there, and she handed weapons to the man and the girl. Falsen examined his curiously. It was a pistol, its grip a little small for his relatively large hand. It had a bell-mouthed muzzle, and a firing stud instead of a trigger. It could be set either to paralyze or to kill, and its maximum effective range—here the captain paused while she did a conversion sum in her head—was fifty yards.

Prenta, the officer who had brought them in from the cave, was in charge of the party—and she showed little enthusiasm when she learned that, to all intents and purposes, she was to be under Falsen's orders. She snapped a command, however, and her five women shouldered their packs. She herself carried nothing but her weapons, and neither did Falsen nor Linda Veerhausen.

She said, hesitating over, the title, "What first, Mr. Falsen?"

"We shall examine the scene of the—killings," said Falsen.

One by one they clambered down the ladder to the spongy vegetation. The Lady Mother halted them at the foot of the gangway. "They came," she said, "as far as this. They must have wanted to get into the ship, but could not negotiate the ladder."

"Why do you say 'they'?" asked Falsen.

"There were at least two. Some of the bodies bear teeth marks—and one of the things had smaller jaws than its mate—or mates. But look, there's blood around here—smearred blood, not freshly shed blood. They must have prowled, and jumped, and rolled on this mossy growth."

"Could be."

"And here," said the captain, leading them farther from the ship, "is where we found the bodies. They have been taken into the ship, of course, but, as you see—there was a struggle."

"Hm-m-m. They must have attacked," said Falsen, "from that clump of shrubs. Have you looked there?"

"But of course."

A mewling voice broke into the conversation. Falsen looked down, saw that it was Pondor, who was addressing the Lady Mother in her own language. She replied to the animal briefly, then said to the man: "He wants to know if anybody has seen Kristit—that's one of his two mates."

She smiled briefly. "I'm afraid that I was rather short with him."

"I'm rather sorry for him," said Linda. "After all—he will feel a loss as deeply as any of us."

"I suppose so. But he might make himself useful—he should be able to follow a trail. Why not take him with you?"

"Why not?" said Falsen.

"Are you walking?" asked the cat. "No. I do not wish to go. I shall stay here and look for Kristit."

He stalked off, tail in air.

Linda, who had been carefully examining the low shrubs, suddenly straightened and pointed, crying, "They went that way!" Falsen, following the direction of her outstretched arm, saw that it led towards the low range of distant hills. The Lady Mother hurried to where the girl was standing, asked, "How do you know?"

"See," said Linda, "how the tendrils of this mossy stuff have been disturbed—"

Falsen looked, expecting to see nothing—and was not disappointed. The Lady Mother looked, and said that she thought she saw the trail found by the girl. Prenta looked—and remarked superciliously that, of course, Earth people were much closer to the animal than the Doralans. Falsen, lying, said that the trail was as easy to read as a tri-di chart.

They followed this doubtful trail, then. The Lady Mother standing by her ship watched them go, and, thought Falsen, she still would be standing there when they returned, anxious to learn that vengeance had overtaken the thing or things that had murdered her people.

Overhead one of the two helicopters dipped and hovered, its buzzing distracting. At last: "Tell them to go away," said Falsen to Prenta. "If the things are lurking anywhere around, it'll scare 'em off."

At the word of command one of the Doralans pulled out a fishing rod aerial from her pack, put on a headset and spoke into it. The flying machine bumbled off in the direction of the gleaming tower of metal that was the ship. Meanwhile Linda, on hands and knees, was examining the vegetation. "They traveled in a straight line," she announced. "And fast."

"I don't know how you can tell all that," said Prenta. "But I suppose that it is as you say."

The sun, a vague, ruddy ball of light in the overcast sky, rose higher, drawing a steamy moisture, a stench of decay, from the numerous stagnant pools. A diversion was caused by something that splashed loudly over to the left of the party. Three of the Doralans ran to investigate, and loosed their fire on it. But it was only one of the crustaceans—a huge beast, its body at least two feet in diameter. The energy bolts from the Doralan pistols had cooked it—and so Falsen called a halt for lunch; he and Linda satisfying their appetites with the stringy, but far from flavorless, flesh. Prenta and her women, although offered a share, preferred their little, oversweet cakes.

After they had eaten, and after Falsen and Linda had shared one of the precious cigarettes—which neither of them enjoyed—the party pressed on. The ground rose gradually, became drier, and the air, although still hot, was drier, too. Here and there bare rock showed through the gray, spongy, mosslike growth. And once something small and lizardlike, too fast for Prenta's skill as a markswoman, scurried from one stunted bush to

another.

They pressed on—and had now and again to climb from ledge to ledge. Then—"There!" cried Linda. "They went in there!"

"There" was a narrow opening between two boulders, an opening that, by its very darkness, gave promise of depths beyond and below. Promising, thought Falsen. Promising — He said: "You brought lights, I suppose."

"Of course," replied Prenta. "We may not have the skill of your so marvelous people as trackers of wild beasts, but we are not devoid of intelligence." She started snapping orders to her women. Three of them produced large, powerful hand torches from their packs. The one with the walkie-talkie started a conversation with somebody—presumably with the ship. She repeated whatever it was she had been told to Prenta, who turned to Falsen and said, "The Lady Mother says that we are still under your orders."

"And why not? That was the understanding. And we have yet to find the beasts for you."

"Give me one of those lights," said Linda. "I shall go in first."

"No," said Falsen. "I shall. There might be something in there."

"I thought that that was why we had come here," remarked Prenta in acid tones.

"He is prone to understatement," replied Linda.

Falsen took the light, switched it on, then squeezed his body between the two boulders. There was a little more room inside the cave—but, even so, his body blocked the tunnel from the view of those behind him. He called: "You were right, Linda. They came this way."

"Let me see," cried Prenta. Then—"These clumsy males! Your big feet are obliterating the tracks."

"Do you want to go first, then?" asked Linda.

"Yes."

You would, thought Falsen, but said, "I'm sorry, Prenta, but your Lady Mother put me in charge. I must go first."

The cave, to Falsen's nostrils, smelt dry and sterile—not the sterility of death, but a sterility that had never known life. He said nothing, however. After all—Linda had led the party here, and her senses were at least as good as his own, perhaps better. And some extra sense that he possessed told him of the girl's mounting excitement, of the eager anticipation of the hunter with the kill almost within sight. An extra sense? On reflection he was not quite sure. Perhaps it was only that his other senses were keen enough to appreciate her quickened breathing, the subtle change of the very smell of her, just as the same senses brought him evidence of the fear—a fear that was kept well down, well under control, but still fear—of the Doralans.

The beam of his torch suddenly touched something smooth and gleaming, something that shone like a huge, black mirror. Falsen hurried forward, ran to the water's edge, his feet stirring up fast falling clouds of the powdery sand. He saw that they had come into a huge cavern, a vast, subterranean hall that was almost filled by the glassy waters of the lake. Only here, where they had come from the tunnel, and directly opposite, was there any beach. And behind the farther beach, black in the grayish rock wall, was the mouth of another tunnel.

"They must have crossed the water," said Falsen.

"If you say so," replied Prenta. "You've destroyed what tracks there were."

"We shall have to cross," said Linda. "It looks deep."

"There's another tunnel mouth," said the Doralan officer. "And another. Which one?"

"The one over there, with the beach, I think— Yes. I can see tracks," murmured Linda.

"I can't," said Prenta rudely. "I'm beginning to wonder just what special senses you people have got."

"You'd be surprised," said Linda. "Nick—I'm going across. Tell her ladyship that I want four of her people with me. You, with Prenta and the other one, had better stay here to guard our rear."

"Are you sure that you'll be all right?"

"Of course. Prenta, will you tell these women of yours to get ready for a swim? I suppose that these weapons and torches of yours are waterproof?"

"They are." The Doralan officer snapped orders in a bad-tempered voice.

Four women unbuckled and dropped their packs, swiftly divesting themselves of their scarlet uniforms. Their almost human bodies glimmered pallidly in the reflected glow of the torches, the beams of which were trained on the entrance to the nearest tunnel. Each of the women, Falsen noticed, buckled her belt, with it holster and pistol, back about her waist after she had stripped. Linda did not. Falsen supposed that she knew best, said nothing.

The girl picked up one of the torches and, holding it high, waded into the lake. She said, "It's cold—" But she kept on and dropped suddenly, with barely a splash, into a swimming posture, struck out for the farther beach. The beam of her torch, which she had not extinguished, made fantastic, shifting patterns on walls and cave roof. Prenta snapped something in her own language, and the four Doralans followed the Earth girl. One of them also carried a torch.

Falsen and the two women watched the swimmers reach the other side of the lake, watched them clamber up to the tunnel mouth. Linda dropped to her hands and knees, seemed to be examining the sandy floor. She straightened then and, hands cupped to her mouth, shouted across the water: "They went this way!"

"Be careful!" replied Falsen. "Don't worry! I shall be all right!" came the reply.

Prenta called something incomprehensible to her people, then got on the sand, her back to the rock wall. Her pistol, though, was in her hand, ready for instant use. The other Doralan sat beside her officer, pulled the radio antenna from her pack, put on the headset and started to talk. Falsen, pacing up and down, watched the mouth of the tunnel into which the others had vanished. He watched the glow of the torches fade and, as those using them turned a corner, die. And the faint whisper of bare feet over dry sand died with it.

He said, to make conversation, "I wonder what they'll find."

"Nothing!" snapped Prenta. She turned on him a face in which worry and responsibility struggled, with indignation. "What are the words in your crude language? A wild goose chase? That is what you have led us on."

"That is what you say," countered Falsen, resuming his moody pacing.

"For Korsola's sake stop that!" almost screamed the Doralan. "It's bad enough being stuck on this world, in this cave, without having to watch a half-witted male walking miles to get nowhere!"

Falsen grinned. "I give the orders here. Your own Lady Mother said that it was to be that way."

Prenta started to make a vicious reply, then stiffened. Across the lake, in the dark tunnel, somebody was screaming. And with the screaming came a crackling sound—the same crackling sound that Falsen had heard when the Doralans had used their energy guns on the crustacean. Abruptly the crackling of released energy ceased, and the screaming—Something howled, a dismal ululation that was not human, that echoed from the rocky walls, that seemed to be amplified rather than diminished with each reverberation.

The silence fell like a blow.

Falsen stripped hastily, flinging his garments from him. He entered the water in a shallow dive, gasped as the icy chill of it shocked his skin. Something passed him, going like a torpedo. It was Prenta. Behind them the walkie-talkie operator gabbled a few hasty words into her microphone, flung aside her garments and followed them. Although the two women had belted on their pistols nobody had thought to bring the torch, the beam of which still shone across the lake on to the mouth of the tunnel.

Prenta had entered the dark opening when Falsen, the other Doralan close behind him, scrambled up the shelving sand. He heard Prenta scream, heard the crackle of her pistol and saw the blue flare of it, heard, too, a loud and frenzied snarling. Prenta screamed again and staggered backwards out of the tunnel to the beach, knocking over both Falsen and the other woman. All three fell into the water—and with them, there fell something huge and gray and furry, something whose eyes gleamed green and evil in the light from across the lake. Its eyes gleamed, and its teeth gleamed, and those teeth were at the throat of the radio operator—and the white body sank

into the bloodstained water.

Linda and Prenta fought the thing hands against teeth and claws, human intelligence against a more than animal cunning. The full fury of the attack seemed directed against the woman, however, and the man was fighting for her life rather than for his own. He got his fingers into the eyes, and legs around the beast's body, pulled it somehow from the Doralan officer. It broke away then, and it was gone—and Falsen was alone, paddling with an exhausted stroke, barely keeping himself afloat. Something glimmered pallidly below the surface, and the man dived. It was Prenta. He got his hands into her hair, towed her to the beach, dragged her up the shelving sand.

She was alive still, although unconscious. There were deep scratches on her shoulders and neck. He shook her brutally until her eyes opened, said, "I'm going to find Linda." She made a sound that could have been assent, that could have been merely a moan. He left her there.

It was dark in the tunnel, but Falsen found his way sure-footedly, only occasionally putting out a hand to steady himself against the rock wall. The odor of freshly spilled blood was heavy in the air, and his nostrils tingled as he smelled the ozone that told of the recent discharge of electrical weapons. His foot caught upon something metallic. He picked it up. It was one of the torches that had been carried by Linda's party.

All of them were there, sprawled ungracefully on the blood-soaked sand. The three Doralans were dead. No close examination was necessary. They were too close to humankind, Falsen knew, to live with their throats torn out. Linda was there. There was blood on her face and on her white body. She blinked in the beam of Falsen's torch. She said, in a matter of fact voice: "It's you."

"Yes," said Falsen. "I left Prenta by the water. She'll live."

"Hadn't you better—?"

"It would be as well," agreed Falsen.

"In case she comes, put the light out."

There was a little cry of pain from the girl. Then: "Couldn't you have been gentler?"

"I could," said Falsen, his voice curiously muffled, distorted, "but this has to carry conviction."

The light flashed on again.

"She's coming now," said Linda.

Together they listened to the whisper of unsteady feet on the sandy floor, together they watched the Doralan stagger round the bend of the tunnel. In her right hand she carried a pistol. She stared at the bodies of her women, whispered something, her bloodless lips scarcely moving, in her own language. Then, turning her pallid face to the two Earth people, she said, "Dead. All dead."

"Yes," said Falsen.

"But," said Prenta to Linda, "you are wounded."

"It is only a scratch," said the girl.

"Which way did it go? I could have sworn that I hit it, with my first shot. Which way did it go?"

"I think," said Falsen, "that it swam across to one of the other tunnels. I can't be sure which one. I was too . . . busy to notice."

"Yes," Prenta said slowly, "you saved my life. I had forgotten. I must thank you."

"Skip it," Falsen told her. "Have you got any first-aid kit in those packs we left? You're in a mess, and Linda, here, is badly torn around the shoulders."

"Yes. Of course."

Together they made their way back to the lake, Prenta first of all collecting the weapons of her dead shipmates. Slowly, with Falsen and Linda taking it in turns to assist the Doralan, they swam across the dark expanse of icy water. Then, while Falsen broke out antiseptic and dressings, Prenta got in touch with the Lady Mother on the portable radio set, announced that a helicopter was being sent at once.

As soon as the plastic skin that Falsen had sprayed on to the wounds of the women had set they dressed, then made their way to the tunnel entrance. The sun was not far from setting and a damp chill was in the air. In the distance they could see the glaring lights of the ship and, soaring and dipping, fast approaching, the dark, low flying shadow that was the helicopter. Prenta led the party from the aircraft into the cave, supervised the removal of the mangled bodies. A second helicopter came, bringing the Lady Mother herself. At her orders a large, metal cylinder was carried into the tunnel. At her orders the two helicopters took off hurriedly, put as much distance as possible in as short a time as was practicable between themselves and the range of hills.

Sitting with the Lady Mother Falsen and Linda watched, as she watched—but all her attention was not on the landscape astern of them, some of it was on the timepiece at her wrist. At last she sighed and said—"Now." With the word the hills lifted—a huge mushroom of smoke and dust and rubble that climbed slowly towards, and through, the overcast. From the riven earth rose a dull, baleful glow, and a dreadful, sullen thunder caught and drove their flimsy flying machine like leaves before a gale.

And as her pilot tried to hold a steady course for the ship—"I should have liked specimens," said the Lady Mother. "But I refuse to risk the lives of my crew or"—and she smiled briefly—"my guests."

That night six more of the Doralans were killed and partly eaten.

Falsen and Linda Veerhausen were asked to the conference held by the

Lady Mother in her cabin. Out of courtesy to the two castaways English was spoken, the words of any officers not conversant with the language being at once translated. Prenta's story was told and retold, discussed from all angles. Even Pondor—after all, he was animal and therefore presumably conversant with the habits of idler animals—was called in, but he multi do nothing but whine about his lost mate, Kristit, a cat who, it would seem, served as a repository for all the feline virtues. The Lady Mother, her nerves frayed with strain and worry, cuffed his head and sent him squalling away.

More and more did Falsen and Linda sense the hostility of the ship's people. After all, they were from Earth, and Earth had ceded this planet to the Doralans. And it was a well-known fact that Earth was not in the habit of making free gifts. There must, said one of the officers, evidently proud of her grasp of idiom, be a catch in it somewhere. There must be a nigger in the woodpile, a fly in the ointment. Furthermore, she said, the presence of the two Earthlings had never been explained to her satisfaction. How long was it they said that they had been away from their ship? And yet, when found by the survey party, the man was clean shaven, had only begun to produce a facial growth after he had become a guest of the Doralans, whose hospitality he was no doubt abusing.

"Carlin," said the Lady Mother. "You are being insulting. Mr. Falsen and Miss Veerhausen have risked their lives in our service. I, myself, have seen Miss Veerhausen's wounds. All the same—It seems odd. But I am sure that Mr. Falsen has an explanation."

"I have, Lady Mother. I do not use a razor, I use a depilatory cream. And my last tube was finished the day before you found us."

"Thank you. I am sure that my pharmacist will be able to make something up for you. Have you any more ... theories, Carlin?"

"No, Gracious Lady. But —"

"But what?"

"I would suggest, Gracious Lady, that the disappearance of Kristit be investigated more closely."

"Rubbish, Carlin. It is obvious that whatever it was that killed our people, that attacked Mr. Falsen and Miss Veerhausen in the cave, could have swallowed a cat in one gulp. Anything else? "

All were silent. The Lady Mother absent-mindedly scratched Pondor's ears, looking from face to face. At last she spoke, directly to her chief officer.

"Mardee," she said, "there are one or two questions I have to ask you." She looked at a slip of paper in her hand. "Last night Canda and Weltin were killed. According to the watch list you gave me they should have been on duty inside the ship."

"That is correct, Gracious Lady."

"Then why were their bodies found outside?"

"The only thing I can suggest, Gracious Lady, is that they heard, as they

should have heard, the noise outside and rushed down to help their comrades."

"Without sounding the alarm?"

The officer's manner was defensive. "As you know, Gracious Lady, all the watchkeepers had written instructions, signed by yourself, to the effect that all hands must be roused at once at the first signs of anything suspicious. Canda and Weltin must have disregarded those instructions. Unfortunately we cannot deal with them as they deserve."

"They have been punished," said the Lady Mother slowly, "with even greater severity than their offense deserved." There was silence again, broken only by the purring of the big cat. Then — "As and from tonight, there will be no watches kept outside. The air lock door will be kept shut. You, Letta, will see to it that searchlights are rigged to cover all the surrounding terrain, so that an efficient lookout can be kept from Control. You, Mardee, will arrange watches, and see to it that a reliable junior officer is in charge of each. And you and I will split the night between us. And you, Pondor —" the cat stretched and yawned — "will prowl through the ship all night, in company with your mate, Tilsin. It is possible that your keen, animal senses might detect something outside the range of ours."

"Can I get some sleep now?" mewed the cat. "And will Mardee see that some saucers are left out for us?"

"All right. Don't forget to tell Tilsin, will you?"

"Can we help?" asked Falsen.

"Why not? You are guests here—but this ... thing menaces you as much as it does us." She said thoughtfully. "I'm still not happy about Ia and Weltin. I'm still not —"

"People do silly things," said Falsen.

"Yes. I suppose so. And it's the last silly thing that they'll do. Thank you, ladies, and you, Mr. Falsen and Miss Veerhausen. Stay with me, Mardec, and we will draw up our watch lists."

As they filed out of the room the woman Carlin fell in beside them. She said, rudely, "What do you know about the Mannschen Drive?"

"Not much," said Falsen shortly. "I didn't invent the thing."

"But you were a navigator."

"No. Second pilot. Another five years' service, and study, and school, and be qualified to sit for master astronaut. And not everybody who sits passes. Come to that—even our best navigators know only how to use and to service the Drive. The actual workings of it are a mystery."

"Come to my room," said Carlin. She led the way to her cabin, waited until her two guests were seated on the settee, then curled up in a large, overstuffed chair. She looked, thought Falsen, like a huge, sleek, slightly overfed cat. He disliked her, and knew that she disliked him. He was rather

surprised when Carlin got up, went to a locker and produced a bottle and three of the little, spouted drinking vessels. The wine was heavy, and too sweet, and had strong, spicy flavor that at once repelled and attracted. The second cup was much better than the first. "When you had the accident to your Drive," said Carlin, "you said that people were—changed. In what way?"

"What way would you expect?" countered Falsen. "All sorts of odd things had happened to space-time, and there was a certain . . . reversal? No, that's not the right word. Turning inside out is near enough."

"So the Temporal Precession had no effect?"

How much does she, know? thought Falsen. Is she the navigator of this packet? He said, hoping that his memory of what he had read of disasters on the interstellar tracks was accurate, "The only thing I noticed was that some of the clocks seemed to be running backwards. And the perspective of things was—wrong. And the colors. Why do you ask?"

"I have my—curiosity. After all, such a thing might happen to this ship at some time. Especially with our Earthbuilt Mark XVII unit."

"If you're so clever," said Falsen, "why don't you build your own ships instead of buying our worn-out tonnage?"

Carlin smiled cattily. "We regard our survey ships as being expendable. So when we can get cheap old crocks for the job—we do so."

"She's a better ship than any of the spacefaring boudoirs that are turned out by your yards!" flared Falsen.

"At least," said Carlin, "they don't —stink."

Falsen bit back the reply that he could have made so easily. He had been conscious for some time of the odor of the little cabin—a smell that made him want to bare his teeth and snarl, that roused the urge to—kill. He glanced sidewise at Linda. She was conscious of it, too—he could tell by the tenseness of the line of her jaw, by the taut skin over her cheekbones, by the subtle shifting of skin and muscle that he could feel when he laid his hand lightly on her shoulder.

He said: "Let's go, Linda. We appreciated your hospitality, Lady Carlin—until you started to become insulting."

Carlin got to her feet. She said—and Falsen could not doubt her sincerity—"I'm sorry. But there's a certain—incompatibility. After all, in spite of our outward resemblance, we are members of different races—"

You don't know how different—thought Falsen.

He said, "Thank you, anyhow. Come, Linda."

Outside, in the alleyway, the door shut behind them, Linda said, "Phew! I couldn't have stood it any longer in there. That horrid wine—and that horrid woman! Better tell that chief officer of theirs to invest in about twenty tons of deodorant!"

"She's not the only one," said Falsen. "There're one, or two of the officers and about six of the crew—But what was she driving at?"

"As she said," suggested Linda, "just curious. After all—the disasters befalling others are almost as interesting as those befalling oneself—and far less dangerous."

"She'd have found the truth even more interesting."

"If she'd believed it. These people haven't any frontiers of the dark in their Cosmos."

"I suppose not. I wonder why we should be the only ones?"

"Some accident of radiation and mutation. Perhaps even an experiment by some race before history—or a race whose history went up in flames in some catastrophe that blasted them back to first beginnings."

"I suppose you know where we are?"

"Frankly, no. I thought that you knew which way we were going. And if we didn't want any Doralans they'd be treading all over our toes—and now we do want one they've all vanished."

"If we keep going down ladders, we're bound to hit the right deck. Ah! Here's a hatch!"

"Storerooms," said the girl, halfway down the ladder. "And,"—wrinkling her nose—"cats!"

"Or cat," amended Falsen. "One tom has a nuisance value out of all proportion to his size. Pondor!" he called. "Pondor!"

"He'll never come to you."

"He's wise. If he did—I'd wring his neck."

"That was strong wine she gave us," said Linda thoughtfully. "Watch your step, my dear, and I'll watch mine. If we aren't careful we'll be doing something silly."

"Something moved!" snapped Falsen suddenly. "Look!"

"The storekeeper," suggested Linda, but Falsen did not hear her words. He was attacking a pile of bales and cases like a terrier at a rat hole. As the girl watched he put all his strength into pushing a huge bale to one side, then squirmed into the aperture thus made. There was a brief scuffle, a cry of pain—and then Falsen backed out from the opening, dragging with him a limp figure. It was dressed as were the other Doralans and to outward appearances was one of them.

"Have you killed her?" asked Linda.

"Her?" demanded Falsen. "Use your senses, woman. This isn't a female."

"No . . . you're right. A stowaway?"

"Stowed away," said Falsen. "But —by whom?" He laughed. "These people with their marvelous, matriarchal society! And yet one of them —perhaps even the Lady Mother herself—has brought along some company for her idle moments!"

"Are you reporting it?"

"Why, should I? I might make enemies—open enemies. No, let 'em enjoy themselves while they can. It's no skin off our nose."

The little Doralan moaned and stirred, opened his eyes. He stared at the two Earthlings, muttered something in his own language. He seemed to be making an appeal. Falsen said nothing in reply, made a gesture of dismissal. The stowaway scrambled to his feet, ran silently to a corner of the storeroom. He seemed to melt into a stack of crates.

"Somebody should be grateful to us." said Linda. "But come on! We've still to find our way back to our own quarters."

It was light in the big ship's control room—light with the reflected glare from the big searchlights. All shutters around the greenhouse were down, and through them Falsen could see the featureless plain surrounding the ship, looking, in the harsh brilliance of the lamps, as though it were covered with fresh snow. Another glow, not of reflection, hung in the sky over where the Lady Mother's bomb had destroyed the cave system. Falsen wondered what would have happened to himself and Linda if they had been there when the bomb exploded. It was an interesting problem.

"It is very quiet," said the Lady Mother.

Falsen agreed with her. His keen ears could hear the subdued whine of the generators that supplied the current for the searchlights, could hear—but faintly—the soft breathing of the sleepers throughout the ship. He made a mental calculation—one hundred minus sixteen makes eighty-four; plus one stowaway—eighty-five. Six on deck watch, two in the engine room, and the captain, leaves seventy-six sleepers. And Linda. I hope, he thought, she's sleeping. Something padded almost silently along the alleyway outside the control room, Instinct made Falsen stiffen, reason told him to relax. Pondor crept in through the half open door, spat at Falsen in passing, rubbed against the Lady Mother's legs.

"Well, cat," she asked, "is all well?"

"I have a name," said the animal. "I wish you'd use it." He condescended to allow the Lady Mother to tickle his ears. Then—"All is quiet," he said. "I left Tilsin making her rounds of the lower decks."

Falsen, the very presence of the cat making him nervous, started to pace up and down. Prenta came in, flashed him a smile and made a report to the captain in her own language. She fell in beside Falsen, tried to match her stride to his, tried to make conversation. Falsen answered in monosyllables. He thought: Was it your boy friend we found, my dear? Is that why you're being nice to me? But I forgot, I saved your life.

"It's too quiet—" said the Lady Mother suddenly.

Falsen stopped his nervous pacing, stood still with every sense alert. He did not join the Doralans at the windows, in their scanning of every inch of the terrain with their high-powered binoculars. But—There is something wrong, he thought. Linda . . . I should have had her on watch with me. It would not have looked suspicious. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a little light flash on among the dark instruments, dismissed it from his mind as something of no importance. But, in spite of the dismissal, its very presence was an irritation, a warning. Falsen tried to remember the layout of the controls of the City-class liners, in one of which he had once served—then suddenly realized what the little light was. He thought, The silly little fool! She shouldn't.

The sudden clangor of the alarms was like a blow. The Doralans fell back from their windows, dropping their glasses with a clatter. The Lady Mother gripped Falsen's arm, cried: "Look ! The air lock door is open!" The man tore his attention away from the little, betraying light, followed the Doralans as they ran from the control room.

Already the ship was in an uproar. Lights flashed on in every alleyway, through open doors poured the crew—in night attire, half dressed, but every woman among them armed. Somebody, somewhere, was already firing at something—the vicious, sharp crackle of the energy guns was distinctly audible above the tumult of near panic.

I must be first, thought the man. I must be first on the scene. Perhaps, even now, I shall not be too late. Knocking clown the little Doralans as he ran he buffeted his way through alleyways, down companionways. The air was thick with the smell of fear, of anger and, as he approached the deck where his own living quarters were situated, of blood.

Carlin was beside him, running, her cat-face almost smiling, her cat's eyes alight with excitement. Oddly, illogically, at this moment Falsen felt a feeling of kinship with the Doralan, thought:

She's better than the others. She's not frightened. Then he cursed her as, accidentally or by intent, she tripped him. When he scrambled to his feet the chase had surged past and over him and the alleyway was deserted. He drew his pistol then and, walking cautiously, made his way to the head of the companionway leading to the next deck—the deck on which he and Linda were living. As he walked he heard the babble of excited voices stilled by the clear, authoritative commands of the Lady Mother. He walked slowly, alert, ready to fight or fly, descended the companionway step by wary step.

It was Prenta who met him when he was halfway down. She said, "Come quickly. But she will live, I think. She is asking for you."

"I was knocked down," said Falsen. He quickened his pace, but feigned a limp.

The crowd of Doralans parted to let Falsen through. There were bodies on the deck, which was slippery with blood. Each one had been torn and gashed and—disemboweled. Falsen shuddered. He forced himself to ignore them, walked slowly to where the girl was sprawled against the door to her

own cabin with the Lady Mother and the ship's surgeon bending over her. He tripped over something, half stumbled, looked down and saw that it was Tilsin, Pondor's mate—or what was left of Tilsin. Something had torn the animal's head from its body.

"Nick," said Linda.

Her face was pale beneath the blood, and there was blood on her shoulders and down the front of her body. Falsen looked at the deep gashes and wondered how they could have been inflicted. He said, his voice unemotional, "'Well?"

"She did it!" screamed Pondor. "She killed Tilsin!"

Squalling, he launched himself upon the wounded girl, his claws reaching for her eyes. The Lady Mother caught him in mid-leap, held him at arm's length while his scrabbling hind feet tried to rend her wrists. Violently, she threw him from her. There was a dull thud as he hit the bulkhead, and then his voice was upraised again in mewling protest. "She did it. I know she did it. Kill her."

"Take him," said the Lady Mother, "and lock him up until he comes to his senses." Her voice became gentle. "How is she, Magadja?"

"She has lost some blood," said the surgeon. "But her injuries are little more than superficial." Deftly she cleaned the wounds, sprayed them over with the quick-drying plastic skin. "Can you get her moved to her cabin?" she asked.

Falsen followed the surgeon and the Lady Mother into Linda's room. He walked to her bedside, caught her limp hand in his. He felt her fear, a blind fear that almost induced a like panic in himself. He said, "Don't worry."

"Miss Veerhausen," said the Lady Mother, "I am sorry to have to question you. But this has been—dreadful. Fifteen of my people murdered in their cabins, including my chief officer, another five in the alleyways. Can you tell me what happened?"

"A . . . little," said the girl. Falsen felt her hand tense in his. "I did not sleep well. And I woke up, feeling that something was wrong. There was a strange odor in the air. I got up and went out—and something attacked me."

"What was it like?"

"I don't know. It had teeth, and it was like an Earthly tiger but not the same. It seemed to run on it's hind legs only—"

"Was there more than one?"

"Yes. I'm almost sure that I saw others while I was fighting it off."

"Miss Veerhausen?" The words cracked like a whip lash. "Did you open the air lock doors?"

The girl's eyes opened wide in an amazement that, thought Falsen, must

convince almost anybody. "Of course not," she said.

Prenta slipped silently into the room. "Lady Mother," she said, "there's blood on the moss under the air lock door. I followed the trail as far as I could, then it faded out. What shall we do?"

"Order out the helicopters. Go in one yourself. Fly in the direction indicated by the trail." She turned to Falsen, who felt an acute stab of pity at the sight of the pale, careworn face. "What else can we do?"

"You were a fool," said Falsen. "You tried to do too much by yourself. You could have ruined everything."

"I, Nick, I didn't. Oh, I did kill Tilson after the sound of her padding up and down outside was driving me crazy. Then, while I was dealing with her, this other . . . thing jumped me. I was . . . prepared, so I could fight it off."

"A cross between a kangaroo and a tiger!" scoffed the man. "That's even better than your big, gray beast with the armor-plated hide! Save these tales for the Doralans."

"No," she said. "Why should I lie to—you? This planet has got dangerous beasts, after all." She started to laugh. "Funny isn't it?"

"It's not so funny. But—it suits us. Anything, everything will be blamed now on these ... these . . . Antareans? As good a name as any. But we shall have to be careful still."

"There's somebody at the door," the girl said suddenly. "Come in!"

It was the Lady Mother. She said abruptly, "I have called the roll. I have taken account of all those killed. But, even so, there are three of my women missing."

"Could they," suggested Falsen, "have been eaten entirely?"

"I thought that myself at first. But Carlin tells me that she saw them being dragged away from the ship by the beasts that attacked. Carlin thinks that they were still living."

"But why should they take prisoners?"

"That puzzled me, too. But I have a fairly clear idea now as to what the things are really like. Funnily enough, they're remarkably similar to one of our own animals—a beast that is now extinct save for a few specimens in zoos. The simbor, we call it, and in its wild state it was carnivorous. And in its wild state it used to carry living victims back to its lair for its young. It would cripple them so that they could not escape, and sometimes it would be days before they were eaten."

"There couldn't possibly be any ... what was the name? . . . simbors here," said Falsen.

"Oh, I know, I know. But there is parallel evolution. You and I are examples of that. And, you must admit, similar habits often go with a similar external appearance."

"Could be."

"Prenta's helicopter has returned. She reports that she has seen the beasts, two of them, in a crater to the southwestward. She opened fire on them, but they bolted for cover in time. She thinks that she saw, too, one of our people—but the creatures dragged her down into a narrow opening between the rocks." She paused. "I want my three subjects back alive. And I want these bloodthirsty beasts exterminated. I'm stripping the ship, Mr. Falsen, of all hands but the merest skeleton of a watch. Both helicopters will go, and the bulk of the party will proceed on foot. You have shown your skill in the past. I should like you to lead the ground forces."

"I want to go, too," said Linda.

"But you are wounded," said the Lady Mother.

"I was," said the girl. "But you don't know just how tough we are."

"The Lady Mother bent to examine Linda's wounds, the scars of which were visible under the transparent, plastic skin. She said, "That is remarkable. If you feel fit enough—"

"But I do. And I want my revenge."

"As you wish, then. Please report to my cabin with Mr. Falsen for instructions."

The instructions were brief and to the point. The helicopters were to guide the ground party and also to act as air cover. The ground forces were to press into every tunnel, opening immediate fire on anything and everything that moved. The ship's armorers had been working on the Doralan energy guns, had tuned them so that they were just short of being as great a danger to the marksman as to the target, so that, in fact, one sustained action would inevitably burn them out. Meanwhile, one of the helicopters would carry a bomb similar to that employed before. After the three Doralans had been rescued—or after proof positive of their deaths had been found—the bomb would be used.

The sun was already up when the two helicopters took the air, when the ground party clambered down the ladder from the after air lock to the spongy soil of the hostile planet. Carlin was in charge of the bomb-carrying aircraft, another officer, who had flown with Prenta when she discovered the lair of the Antareans, commanded the other. Prenta herself marched with Falsen and Linda Veerhausen.

"Tell me, Prenta," said Falsen, "how did you find the things? This crater of theirs must be out of range of our lights."

"It is. But one of the prisoners has a pocket torch, and, as luck would have it, we saw the feeble glimmer of it. And Merru, who flew with me, had suggested that the crater—we found it on our first survey flight—might be where the things were living."

For a while they marched in silence, then Prenta said, "I saw them only by the light of our flares. But I could have sworn that they were simbors."

"Impossible," said Falsen. "Unless you brought them with you."

"Impossible!" snapped Prenta. "Then she started to laugh. "You were joking."

"Of course. You people couldn't bring half such queer things with you as ours do."

Conversation flagged then, a fragile plant wilting in the steamy heat. The party marched on and on, possessed by a sense of urgency. Ahead of them the helicopters soared and dipped, the steady humming of their rotors hypnotic so, at the finish, the ground party marched as in a dream. Falsen hardly interested when, at last, the horizon ahead was broken by a low, serrated ridge. He had literally to force himself into a state of alertness, discovered that the mere act of drawing his pistol taxed all his reserves of will power. By his side trudged Prenta and Linda, both of them, to outward appearance at least, more than half asleep. He had to shout at them to arouse them—and they, in turn, had to bully those following into complete wakefulness.

"Tell the helicopters," Falsen ordered Prenta, "that we're having a breather before we attack. Tell them to let us know if they see any signs a life."

Prenta called her radio operator to her side, passed the orders on to her in her own language. Ahead of them the two helicopters dipped and hovered. The operator said a few words and then listened. Again, briefly, she spoke, then turned to Prenta and passed on to her what had been said by those in the aircraft.

"No signs of life or movement," reported Prenta.

"I rather think," said Falsen, "that they sleep by day."

"Never mind when they sleep," said Prenta. "Haven't we rested long enough?"

"All right, we have. Pass the word for the crater to be encircled. Tell the helicopters what we're doing."

Falsen stood and watched the little, red-cloaked women, obedient to his command, straggling out into a line that would surround the crater and all that it might contain. I'm getting fond of the little beasts, he thought, and that won't do at all. He looked down from his superior height at Prenta, watched her face as she snapped orders, noticed the capable way in which she held the weapon that she had already drawn. He felt a sudden, strange pride, and a regret, and his active mind was already considering schemes in which marooning was an alternative to death.

"This is fun," said Linda, a bright spot of color on either cheek relieving the pallor of her face. "But I wish we could hunt them our way."

"What is your way?" asked Prenta. "We are under your orders, you know."

"On elephants," said Falsen quickly. "But I don't suppose that anybody has brought them along."

Prenta's radio operator was in touch with her similarly equipped sisters. She made a report to Prenta, who said, "The encirclement is complete."

"All right. Give the word that all weapons are to be ready. Give the word to advance."

Slowly they climbed the gentle slope, pausing to examine every boulder. There was a sudden, sharp crackle of fire to the right; and a large rock shattered and a small lizard-thing killed. A considerable area of the mosslike growth was set on fire. Falsen ordered greater caution—wondering, as he did so, if he were making a wise command. This was war, he told himself, and the old principle of firing first and asking questions afterwards still held good. He thought, I'm a fool. I should be in one of those helicopters, running the show from up top. But it wouldn't be the same.

Falsen's sector of the line topped the crater rim—paused for a minute until the others had done so. Falsen surveyed the shallow depression, the saucer shaped hollow, his eye noting the boulders that would serve as cover, the rocks that might mask the entrances of caves. He saw a splash of scarlet on the gray ground, decided that it must be the cloak of one of those taken by the beasts. Opposite him, from the other side of the crater, somebody fired. The beam of the weapon was barely visible—but the flare of the disintegrating boulder was blinding. The sharp crackle of the bolt was followed by sudden thunder—and by an almost human scream. From where the boulder had been something ran, something that progressed in almost kangaroolike hops, Yet, Falsen decided as he saw it over the sights of his gun, it had a leonine head and body.

"You missed," said Linda. "We all missed."

Falsen blinked his smarting eyes. "Which way did it go?"

"Between those rocks."

"Must be a cave. Anything from the helicopters, Prerita?"

"Yes. They reported the thing after we'd all shot at it."

"What now?" asked Linda.

"We continue to advance. Tell them, Prenta, to post a strong guard over every cave mouth, every possible hole. After we've got them all located we call for volunteers."

The going was hard—harder still when one hand was needed to grip a weapon, when undivided attention could not be given to the secure placing of feet. At the finish about two thirds of Falsen's force met in the center of the crater—the rest having been left at various points to watch the mouths of caves and tunnels. And here, almost equidistant from all points of the crater rim, was the most promising cave of all, a tunnel sloping down into the blackness at not too steep an angle, an almost horizontal shaft floored with a damp pumice dust, on the surface of which were the almost human footprints of the Doralans and other marks, larger, like those of an Earthly lion.

Already Prenta held a torch in her left hand, her pistol ready in her right. Already the Doralans were quarreling among themselves as to whom should descend to the rescue of their shipmates. But Falsen was not happy about it—neither, he saw and sensed, was Linda. It was all too easy, somehow. There was a trap—he was sure of that. A trap baited with footprints, with a rag of scarlet cloak. And there were marks just inside the tunnel entrance that, to his acute senses, begged for investigation.

He said to Prenta: "Get that boulder shifted. I think it will roll. I know it will."

Four of the Doralans laid hands on the rock, contrived to get their fingers into inequalities of its surface. It was stubborn at first, and then it came easily. Behind it was a smaller cave—a mere niche, rather—and in it were three huddled bodies, the three missing Doralans. Two of them were fully clad, the third was naked. They were alive.

Willing hands lifted them, carried them out to the open air. They seemed too dazed to speak. Prenta stilled the excited babble of the rescue party with one sharp order, then turned to Falsen. She said, "We've done what we set out to do. The bomb?"

"Those were the Lady Mother's orders."

The bomb-carrying helicopter was already dropping, the roar of its rotors making further conversation impossible. Looking up, Falsen saw the woman Carlin peering from the cabin of the thing, decided, when, he saw the expression of triumph on her face, that the three rescued Doralans must be especial friends of hers. With a creaking of landing gear the helicopter grounded. The cabin door opened. Moving swiftly and efficiently the aircraft's crew passed the three ex-captives into their ship. The rotors started to spin again, the ship to lift.

"What about the bomb, Carlin?" shouted Falsen.

"You shall have it!" she screamed in reply.

From the open cabin door toppled the shining metal cylinder, striking the rocky ground with a dull clang, rolling a few feet before it fetched up against a boulder.

As the helicopter drifted overhead Falsen turned to Linda and bellowed, "Jump!" At the very peak of his own leap his outstretched fingers caught the horizontal struts of the undercarriage, caught and held. For long seconds he hung there, his body buffeted by the slipstream; dimly he realized that Linda was beside him. Working slowly, carefully, he succeeded in transferring the grip of one of his hands to a vertical member of the undercarriage; first one hand, and then the other, and then he was able to pull himself up until he was sitting, insecurely, on the cross strut. Using his right hand only he got a firm hold of Linda, pulled her up until she was seated beside him.

They looked down. Below them, in the crater, the scarlet-clad Doralans were getting out, and fast. Only one of them had not joined the general panic, and that one was Prenta. Grimly, intently, she was working at the

gleaming cylinder left by Carlin, worrying at it like some small, conscientious terrier at a rat hole. Whether to defuse, whether to procure a premature blast and thus involve the helicopter and its crew in the explosion, Falsen never found out.

There was the other helicopter still to be reckoned with. It came dropping down on Carlin's ship like a noisy falcon, all its guns spitting bolts of energy. There was the smell of ozone, the acrid stink of hot metal. But Carlin did not falter in her flight, held the nose of her craft steady on that point of the horizon beyond which lay the ship. And then, suddenly, one of her guns began to speak—not a mere projector of electrical forces, all but ineffective against metal hull, but an old-fashioned weapon firing solid slugs of metal. Abruptly the other aircraft fell within Falsen's field of view, and he saw that the shining aluminum of its hull was perforated, and as he watched a great piece broke off its whirling vanes and gyrated Earthward. And with the shattering of its rotor the helicopter faltered, faltered and fell, following its own wreckage in unsteady, wavering descent, accelerating wildly and suddenly towards the end so that where it fell there was a sudden geyser of water and mud—followed, after a moment, by a second high climbing geyser of flame and steam.

Linda Veerhausen clutched Falsen's arm, her nails digging painfully into his flesh. She screamed, trying to make herself heard above the slipstream, the roaring rotors, "What . . . what are they doing?"

"I . . . I don't . . . know. Mutiny—"

He looked astern, to where the low crater 'had already dipped beneath the horizon. He saw the flash, the beginnings of the flash, and shut his eyes. When he opened them there was the climbing column of flame-shot smoke, reaching up to and through the overcast. Then the wind came—the hot, searing wind that lifted the helicopter like a toy, that drove the aircraft before it like a dead leaf before an autumnal gale. He clung to his strut with one hand, kept his other arm tightly around the girl's waist. With the wind came the thunder, peal after dreadful peal, beating at them like blows from a giant's hammer, threatening to tear their desperate grasp from the frail construction of light metal that still, miraculously, kept its course and even keel.

Prenta must be dead, thought Falsen numbly. Prenta, and all her people. He was sorry, in his way—although, he told himself, this woman Carlin had, by her mutiny, made things so much easier for himself and Linda. He did not fear the energy guns of the Doralans, although their possession and use of old-fashioned machine guns caused him a certain degree of apprehension. But, he told himself, they would never have the right ammunition for them. The need for ammunition of that kind could never exist, possibly, in more than one world of the galaxy.

Astern the column of smoke still stood high and dreadful in the sky but, save for a certain hot, gusty turbulence the air was almost calm again, and the sullen thunders of the bomb were now no more than a distant, forbidding rumbling. And ahead the ship lifted above the horizon line—a tower of dull-gleaming metal, the wandering home of a new race, the great, sky-faring argosy that would bear them to the last frontier of the dark. A

fortress it was, too—a fortress of the snug, secure interstellar civilization, a fortress that had fallen, or was soon to fall, by the treachery of its own people.

The helicopter was flying lower now, losing altitude steadily, barely skimming, it seemed, the mossy surface of the Antarean planet, the scum covered surface of the stagnant pools. Falsen noticed this, shouted to Linda, "We shall have to drop!"

"Why?"

"Carlin's bound to find us when she lands! We'll approach the ship on foot!"

Swiftly they approached one of the pools—almost a lake it was, hundreds of feet across. Falsen waited until the helicopter was almost above its nearer shore, then wriggled down from his sitting posture until he was hanging, once more, by his hands. He waited until the girl had followed his example, then shouted, "Now!"

Together they let go, together they fell, hitting the water with barely a splash, sliding deep, deep down below its surface. Falsen felt his feet touch soft mud, kicked out and, long seconds later, broke through to the light and air. He was afraid that Carlin or one of her women would have seen him, would have brought the aircraft back to deal with the two survivors of the massacre in the crater but, he was relieved to see, the helicopter still flew onward heedlessly and straight for the ship.

There was a splash beside him, a splash and a splutter as Linda broke surface. She shook her head to throw the wet hair away from her eyes, gasped; "What now?"

Falsen tread water. He said, speaking jerkily, "We'll swim for the shore—this way. If they do come back for us, we can dive."

Side by side they struck out, swimming in a silence broken only by the splashing of their passage and their sharp breathing. Side by side they reached the lake edge, the shore that was no more than the gradual, unpleasant merging of land and water. Side by side they scrambled out and stood, muddy and dripping, regarding each other.

"There will only be a few of them," said Linda at last.

"Yes. We must be ready to fight—any way."

In silence they stripped. Linda Veerhausen made as though to resume her holstered belt, then thought better of it. She took the pistol from the holster instead, held it ready in her right hand. Falsen did likewise. Naked and muddy, weapons ready, they trudged slowly and warily over the spongy, mossy terrain, through the gathering night to the bright lamps that marked the ship.

Carlin had no guards out, although there was one member of the survey ship's complement who sat, miserable and terrified in the mud, staring towards the bright lights that marked what had been, what never again

would be, his home. Linda pounced upon him before he was aware of their coming, held him high, squeezing him with deliberate cruelty.

Pondor spat and scratched, cursed the girl in the Doralan tongue, then lapsed into English. He said, his mewling voice little more than a whimper, "They are killing, killing—they have killed the Lady Mother."

Falsen felt rage surge up within him. He had known that he himself must, at the end, slay the foreign woman, the kindly, tolerant captain of the Doralan ship—but he hated Carlin for having done what he himself could not have escaped doing: Besides, he told himself, I'm different, Carlin is not. He said, his voice cold "We shall kill them."

"Be careful!" squealed Pondor, "they are—"

His voice died in a choking gurgle as Linda's teeth found his throat. The girl threw the little, lifeless body to one side.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Falsen sharply. "He was trying to warn us of something."

"I hated the beast, anyhow. As well kill him now as later."

It was dark now, but the glaring lights from the ship threw every prominent object into sharp relief. Falsen realized that he was a prominent object, that both he and the girl were prominent objects, that their pale, naked skins must stand out against the surrounding grayness as though luminous. He said, "We're too conspicuous. We shall have to change."

"What about our pistols?"

"Carry them in our mouths."

He watched her, watched the white flesh creep and shift, darken and change. He felt the pain that was not a pain, the sense of freedom that was, at the same time, a sense of bondage. He dropped his pistol when he could hold it no longer, then picked it up between his teeth. Crouching low, moving swiftly and silently, a gray shadow among the gray shadows, he led the way to the square of yellow light that was the air lock door. The smell of warm machinery, of lifeless, inanimate metal, was strong and repugnant in his nostrils, and the smell of warm flesh and blood was strong—but not repugnant. The last few yards of the journey he made on his belly and then, only a foot or so from the ladder into the ship, he crouched motionless, listening and—feeling.

Carlin, he thought, must be lax. There was nobody on guard in the air lock. She must be certain that he and Linda had perished in the explosion. But what of the cat-things, the carnivorous beasts indigenous to this planet whose bloody ravages had given Carlin the opportunity for her treachery? Perhaps, he thought, with hope and disappointment, they've all killed each other.

Once again the sense of loss and gain, the queer, painful ecstasy—and Falsen stood erect, picked up the pistol that had fallen from his mouth. He looked around, saw that the girl had followed his example. Swiftly, silently,

he climbed the ladder to the air lock door, clambered into the ship. The air lock itself was, as he had known it would be, deserted—and so was the alleyway beyond it—and the companionway leading from it to the next deck above. And yet the ship was not—dead. It pulsed with unseen life, with unseen, inimical life, spoke vaguely yet threateningly of the menace that lay just beyond that bend of the alleyway, that lurked just at the top of this companionway. Linda was beginning to whimper softly, but Falsen said, "We must go on. We must go on. After all—they can't hurt us."

And so they climbed, deck after deck, alleyway after alleyway, smelling, now and again, the death that had come to those loyal to the Lady Mother—yet finding nowhere any other evidence of death, no bloodstains, no charred and contorted bodies, nothing but the dead, yet alive, ominous emptiness.

And so they climbed, deck after deck, until at last they stood in the alleyway outside what had been the captain's quarters. From behind the closed door they heard voices—low, indistinct, speaking in the Doralan language. Pistols ready, the two Earthlings approached the door, their bare feet silent on the soft, plastic deck covering, hoping that the automatic control of the door was still working, that Carlin, hearing them knock, would absent-mindedly utter the words that would cause it to open.

Falsen knocked—and a voice inside, Carlin's, said the words. The door opened.

"I could kill you now," said Falsen, his pistol covering the group behind and around the big desk. "I could kill you now—and I shall kill you later. But I want you to know who is killing you, and why. It should help to make your last moments uneasier."

He looked at the group behind and around the big desk—at Carlin lolling at ease, smoothly insolent even now, at the other five women, at the six men, one of whom was the stowaway found by himself and Linda. And he hated them, the fat, satisfied sleekness of them, and the treachery that had brought them to where they now sat and stood, masters and mistresses of a huge, sky-cleaving ship in which they could escape, in which they would have escaped had it not been for the intervention of the man and woman from Earth, the justice of their kind.

"You," said Carlin, "are as bad as we."

"No." snarled Falsen. "We should never have killed the Lady Mother. We should never have murdered our shipmates with a bomb."

"You might not have done so. But could you answer for your . . . companion? "

"So you know?"

"So we know — what? All right then. We aren't all fools, Mr. Falsen. We aren't all like our late, sorely lamented Lady Mother. We know your language, we read your books. We learn of your rather intriguing legends. And we know, as you know, that the Drive does queer things to Time as well as to Space, and that if there is tendency towards atavism—It was

Pondor who put me on the right track. He told the Lady Mother of his suspicions at first—but she, poor fool, would not believe him. So he came squealing to me. I didn't believe him either—officially."

"Believe what?" demanded Falsen his grip tightening on his pistol. He felt that things were going wrong that this little group of Doralans, regarding him steadily with their big, almost luminous eyes, was playing with him. His gaze flickered to Linda, standing close beside him. He noticed the white tautness of the knuckles of her pistol hand, sensed the unease in her. Shoot! screamed a voice in his brain. Shoot, and get it over with.

"You were marooned, of course, went on Carlin, "from your ship, or ships. It doesn't matter. They should have killed you. But perhaps they couldn't. I'm rather intrigued to see that you survived the bomb. But we didn't expect you here so soon."

"We came back with you," Falsen told her. "Riding the undercarriage of your helicopter."

"Indeed? I had assumed that you had lost your clothing in the blast."

"We took off our clothing," snarled Falsen, "so that we could—fight! Just as we did the first time, in the caves."

"Oh? So it was you. An almost masterly piece of planning that—especially making sure that there was one survivor of our people to tell the tale. You know, Falsen, we could almost respect you."

Shoot! screamed the voice in his brain. Shoot!

The hand holding the pistol had dropped slightly. He raised it, pointing the muzzle squarely at Carlin. He was about to fire when, "Don't," said Linda. "I want her, the other way."

Carlin smiled. "Yours is the dominant sex," she said. "Why don't you smack her down? You know," she went on, "we've found the pair of you most useful. Your activities served to lay a most confusing smoke screen. And now the ship is ours."

"Was yours," corrected Falsen. "Anyhow, just what did you intend doing with her?"

"There are worlds," said Carlin, "out towards the Rim. Wild worlds that will not be colonized for generations yet. Worlds where we"—and her voice caressed all those standing around her—"can lead the kind of life that we were meant to lead."

"And that," said Falsen, "is the very reason why we are taking your ship."

He stared at the hateful face before him—the grave, unsmiling cat's face, the big, unwinking eyes. His thumb pressed the firing stud of the pistol. The crackling bolt leaped out, played briefly over Carlin, then passed on to the Doralan at her left hand, paused and passed on, paused and passed on. At his side Linda was firing—first at Carlin, then at the people on her right. With a thud the big desk burst into flames, flared briefly, smoldered redly and smokily. The air stank of ozone, of charred wood and fabric, scorched

paint

Through the acrid fumes he stared at the hateful face before him—the grave, unsmiling cat's face, the big, unwinking eyes.

"You never bothered to learn our language, did you?" asked Carlin. "And if you had, you'd never have bothered to read our books, to study our history and mythology." She smiled briefly, showing very white teeth. "I must admit that, luckily for us, our people haven't been quite so quick on the uptake as yours. A certain effect of the Interstellar Drive, of its temporal precession, has, so far, escaped their notice. They do not know, as your authorities know, as we know, how short a way we have come from the frontier of the dark—"

Falsen kept a tight grip on his useless weapon. "I don't understand," he said, understanding only too well, the last pieces of the jigsaw puzzle falling into place, with inexorable logic, in his mind. "I don't understand."

"But you do," said Carlin. "You must." Her little, pointed red tongue flickered out between her red lips, flickered briefly over her lips. She said, "I am glad you came. We are—enjoying this."

She gave a brief order to her people, two of whom, a man and a woman, cast aside the scorched and still smoldering remnants of their clothing. With fascinated, horrified eyes Falsen and Linda Veerhausen watched them, watched the firm, golden flesh creep and shift and change, watched the terrifying metamorphosis of humanoid into simbor. Standing erect, the tigerlike animals snarled at them wordlessly, extended the long, razor-sharp claws of their fore paws. Snarling, Falsen hurled his pistol at one of them. The beast evaded the missile easily, then fell into a crouch preparatory for the killing spring.

Falsen snarled back at the simbor, and by his side the girl snarled, too. He fell to all fours as he changed, as he sloughed off the remaining shred of his humanity. At least, he thought, it will be a good fight. And we might even—who knows?—win after all. They're only—cats. He was aware of Linda beside him, changed too, the fur of her body erect and bristling, the lips drawn back from the sharp teeth as she growled deeply and ominously in her throat.

Carlin chuckled. "Yes," she said, "it would have been a good fight, and I should have liked to have watched it, even to have taken part in it. But I have so few, Falsen, with whom to start my colony."

Her hand came up from beneath the smoking ruins of the desk holding a pistol—not one of the energy guns, but a huge, old-fashioned weapon that could well have come from some museum. She said, "Luckily the cartridges didn't explode—" Then, as she fired, "Silver bullets, of course."

The larger of the two werewolves died scrabbling vainly at the door. The other, his mate, was struck down in mid-leap.