

## THE BIG NIGHT

### Chapter i. Last of the Hyper Ships

She came lumbering up out of the ecliptic plane of the planets like a wallowing space beast, her jet tubes scarred and stained, a molten streak across her middle where Venus's turgid atmosphere had scarred her, and every ancient spot weld in her fat body threatened to rip apart the moment she hit stress again.

The skipper was drunk in his cabin, his maudlin voice echoing through the compartments as he bewailed the unsympathetic harshness of the Interplanetary Trade Commission.

There was a mongrel crew from a dozen worlds, half of them shanghaied. Logger Hilton, the mate, was trying to make sense out of the tattered charts, and La Cucaracha, her engines quaking at the suicidal thought, was plunging ahead through space into the Big Night.

In the control room a signal light flared. Hilton grabbed a mike.

"Repair crew!" he yelled. "Get out on the skin and check jet A-six. Move!"

He turned back to his charts, chewing his lip and glancing at the pilot, a tiny, inhuman Selenite, with his arachnoid multiple limbs and fragile-seeming body. Ts'ss-that was his name, or approximated it-was wearing the awkward audio-converter mask that could make his subsonic voice audible to human ears, but, unlike Hilton, he wasn't wearing space armor. No Lunarian ever needed protection against deep space. In their million years on the Moon, they had got used to airless-ness. Nor did the ship's atmosphere bother Ts'ss. He simply didn't trouble to breathe it.

"Blast you, take it easy!" Hilton said. "Want to tear off our hide?"

Through the mask the Selenite's faceted eyes glittered at the mate.

"No, sir. I'm going as slowly as I can on jet fuel. As soon as I know the warp formulae, things'll ease up a bit."

"Ride it! Ride it-without jets!"

"We need the acceleration to switch over to warp, sir."

"Never mind," Hilton said. "I've got it now. Somebody must have been breeding fruit-flies all over these charts. Here's the dope." He dictated a few equations that Ts'ss' photographic memory assimilated at once.

A distant howling came from far off.

"That's the skipper, I suppose," Hilton said. "I'll be back in a minute. Get into hyper as soon as you can, or we're apt to fold up like an accordion."

"Yes, sir. Ah-Mr. Hilton?"

"Well?"

"You might look at the fire extinguisher in the Cap'n's room."

"What for?" Hilton asked.

Several of the Selenite's multiple limbs pantomimed the action of drinking. Hilton grimaced, rose and fought the acceleration down the companionway. He shot a glance at the visio-screens and saw they were past Jupiter already, which was a relief. Going through the giant planet's gravity-pull wouldn't have helped La Cucaracha's aching bones. But they were safely past now. Safely! He grinned wryly as he opened the captain's door and went in.

Captain Sam Danvers was standing on his bunk, making a speech to an imaginary Interplanetary Trade Commission. He was a big man, or rather he had been once, but now the flesh had shrunk and he was beginning to stoop a little. The skin of his wrinkled face was nearly black with space-tan. A stubble of gray hair stood up angrily.

Somehow, though, he looked like Logger Hilton. Both were deepspace men. Hilton was thirty years younger, but he, too, had the same dark tan and the same look in his blue eyes. There's an old saying that when you go out into the Big Night, beyond Pluto's orbit, that enormous emptiness gets into you and looks out through your eyes. Hilton had that. So did Captain Danvers.

Otherwise-Hilton was huge and heavy where Danvers was a little frail now, and the mate's broad chest bulged his white tunic. He hadn't had time yet to change from dress uniform, though he knew that even this cellulose fabric couldn't take the dirt of a space-run without showing it. Not on La Cucaracha, anyway.

But this would be his last trip on the old tub.

Captain Danvers interrupted his speech to ask Hilton what the devil he wanted. The mate saluted.

"Routine inspection, sir," he observed, and took down a fire extinguisher from the wall. Danvers sprang from the bunk, but Hilton moved too fast. Before the captain reached him, Hilton had emptied the tank down the nearest disposal vent.

"Old juice," he explained. "I'll refill her."

"Listen, Mr. Hilton," Danvers said, swaying slightly and stabbing a long forefinger at the mate's nose. "If you think I had whiskey in there, you're crazy."

"Sure," Hilton said. "I'm crazy as a loon, skipper. How about some caffeine?"

Danvers weaved to the disposal port and peered down it vaguely.

"Caffeine. Huh? Look, if you haven't got sense enough to take La Cucaracha into hyper, you ought to resign."

"Sure, sure. But in hyper it won't take long to get to Fria. You'll have to handle the agent there."

"Christie? I\_I guess so." Danvers sank down on the bunk and held his head.

"I guess I just got mad, Logger. ITC-what do they know about it? Why, we opened that trading post on Sirius Thirty."

"Look, skipper, when you come aboard you were so high you forgot to tell me about it," Hilton said. "You just said we'd changed our course and to head for Fria. How come?"

"Interplanetary Trade Commission," Danvers growled. "They had their crew checking over La Cucaracha."

"I know. Routine inspection."

'Well, those fat slobs have the brassbound nerve to tell me my ship's unsafe! That the gravity-drag from Sirius is too strong-and that we couldn't go to Sirius Thirty!"

"Could be they're right," Hilton said thoughtfully. 'We had trouble landing on Venus."

"She's old." Danvers' voice was defensive. "But what of it? I've taken La Cucaracha around Betelgeuse and plenty closer to Sirius than Sirius Thirty. The old lady's got what it takes. They built atomic engines in those days."

'They're not building them now," Hilton said, and the skipper turned purple.

"Transmission of matter!" he snarled. "What kind of a crazy set-up is that? You get in a little machine on Earth, pull a switch and there you are on Venus or Bar Canopus or-or Purgatory, if you like! I shipped on a hyper ship when I was thirteen, Logger. I grew up on hyper ships. They're solid. They're dependable. They'll take you where you want to go. Hang it, it isn't safe to space travel without an atmosphere around you, even if it's only in a suit."

"That reminds me," Hilton said. 'Where's yours?"

"Ah, I was too hot. The refrigerating unit's haywire."

The mate found the lightweight armor in a closet and deftly began to repair the broken switch.

"You don't need to keep the helmet closed, but you'd better wear the suit," he said absently. "I've issued orders to the crew. All but Ts'ss, and he doesn't need any protection."

Danvers looked up. "How's she running?" he asked quickly.

'Well, she could use an overhaul," Hilton said. "I want to get into hyperspace fast. This straight running is a strain. I'm afraid of landing, too."

"Uh. Okay, there'll be an overhaul when we get back-if we make a profit. You know how much we made this last trip. Tell you what- you supervise the job and take a bigger cut for it."

Hilton's fingers slowed on the switch. He didn't look around.

"I'll be looking for a new berth," he said. "Sorry, skipper. But I won't be aboard after this voyage."

There was silence behind him. Hilton grimaced and began to work again on the spacesuit. He heard Danvers say:

"You won't find many hyper ships needing mates these days."

"I know. But I've got engineering training. Maybe they would use me on the matter transmitters. Or as an outposter-a trader."

"Oh, for the love of Pete! Logger, what are you talking about? A- trader? A filthy outposter? You're a hyper ship man!"

"In twenty years there won't be a hyper ship running," Hilton said.

"You're a liar. There'll be one."

"She'll fall apart in a couple of months!" Hilton said angrily. "I'm not going to argue. What are we after on Fria, the fungus?"

After a pause Danvers answered.

'What else is there on Fria? Sure, the fungus. It's pushing the season a little. We're not due there for three weeks Earth-time, but Christie always keeps a supply on hand. And that big hotel chain will pay us the regular cut. Blamed if I know why people eat that garbage, but they pay twenty bucks a plate for it."

"It could mean a profit, then," Hilton said. "Provided we land on Fria without falling apart." He tossed the repaired suit on the bunk beside Danvers. "There you are, skipper. I'd better get back to controls. We'll be hitting hyper pretty soon."

Danvers leaned over and touched a button that opened the deadlight. He stared at the star screen.

"You won't get this on a matter transmitter," he said slowly. "Look at it, Logger."

Hilton leaned forward and looked across the Captain's shoulder. The void blazed. To one side a great arc of Jupiter's titan bulk blared coldly bright. Several of the moons were riding in the screen's field, and an asteroid or two caught Jupiter's light in their tenuous atmospheres and hung like shining veiled miniature worlds against that blazing backdrop. And through and beyond the shining stars and moons and planets

showed the Big Night, the black emptiness that beats like an ocean on the rim of the Solar System.

"So it's pretty," Hilton said. "But it's cold, too."

"Maybe. Maybe it is. But I like it. Well, get a job as a trader, you jackass. I'll stick to La Cucaracha. I know I can trust the old lady."

For answer the old lady jumped violently and gave a wallowing lurch.

## Chapter a. Bad News

Hilton instantly exploded out of the cabin. The ship was bucking hard. Behind him the mate heard Danvers shouting something about incompetent pilots, but he knew it probably wasn't the Selenite's fault. He was in the control cabin while La Cuearacha was still shuddering on the downswing of the last jump. Ts'ss was a tornado of motion, his multiple legs scrabbling frantically at a dozen instruments.

"I'll call the shot!" Hilton snapped, and Ts'ss instantly concentrated on the incredibly complicated controls that were guiding the ship into hyper.

The mate was at the auxiliary board. He jerked down levers.

"Hyper stations!" he shouted. "Close helmets! Grab the braces, you sun-jumpers! Here we go!"

A needle swung wildly across a gauge, hovering at the mark. Hilton dropped into a seat, sliding his arms under the curved braces and hooking his elbows around them. His ankles found similar supports beneath him. The visor screens blurred and shimmered with crawling colors, flicking back and forth, on and off, as La Cuearacha fought the seesaw between hyper and normal space.

Hilton tried another mike. "Captain Danvers. Hyper stations. All right?"

"Yeah, I'm in my suit," Danvers' voice said. "Can you take it? Need me? What's wrong with Ts'ss?"

"The vocor at my board blew out, Cap'n," Ts'ss said. "I couldn't reach the auxiliary."

"We must need an overhaul bad," Danvers said, and cut off.

Hilton grinned. "We need a rebuilding job," he muttered, and let his fingers hang over the control buttons, ready in case Ts'ss slipped.

But the Selenite was like a precision machine; he never slipped. The old Cuearacha shook in every brace. The atomic engines channeled fantastic amounts of energy into the dimensional gap. Then, suddenly, the see-saw balanced for an instant, and in that split second the ship slid

across its powerbrldge and was no longer matter. It no longer existed, in the three-dimensional plane. To an observer, it would have vanished. But to an observer in hyperspace, it would have sprung into existence from white nothingness.

Except that there were no hyperspatial observers. In fact, there wasn't anything in hyper-it was, as some scientist had once observed, just stuff, and nobody knew what the stuff was. It was possible to find out some of hyper's properties, but you couldn't go much further than that. It was white, and it must have been energy, of a sort, for it flowed like an inconceivably powerful tide, carrying ships with it at speeds that would have destroyed the crew in normal space. Now, in the grip of the hyper current, La Cucaracha was racing toward the Big Night at a velocity that would take it past Pluto's orbit in a matter of seconds.

But you couldn't see Pluto. You had to work blind here, with instruments. And if you got on the wrong level, it was just too bad-for you!

Hastily Hilton checked the readings. This was Hyper C-758-R. That was right. On different dimensional levels of hyper, the flow ran in various directions. Coming back, they'd alter their atomic structure to ride Hyper M-75-L, which rushed from Fria toward Earth and beyond

it.

"That's that," Hilton said, relaxing and reaching for a cigarette. "No meteors, no stress-strain problems-just drift till we get close to Fria. Then we drop out of hyper, and probably fall apart."

An annunciator clicked. Somebody said:

"Mr. Hilton, there's some trouble."

"There is. Okay, Wiggins. What now?"

"One of the new men. He was out skinside making repairs."

"You had plenty of time to get back inside," snapped Hilton, who didn't feel quite as sure of that as he sounded. "I called hyper stations."

"Yes, sir. But this fella's new. Looks like he never rode a hyper ship before. Anyhow, his leg's broken. He's in sick bay."

Hilton thought for a moment. La Cucaracha was understaffed anyway. Few good men would willingly ship on such an antique.

"I'll come down," he said, and nodded at Ts'ss. Then he went along the companionway, glancing in at the skipper, who had gone to sleep. He used the handholds to pull himself along, for there was no accelerative gravity in hyper. In sick bay he found the surgeon, who doubled in brass as cook, finishing a traction splint on a pale, sweating youngster who was alternately swearing feebly and groaning.

"What's the matter with him?" Hilton asked.

Bruno, the sawbones, gave a casual soft salute. "Simple fracture. I'm giving him a walker splint, so he'll be able to get around. And he shot his cookies, so he can't be used to hyper."

"Looks like it," Hilton said, studying the patient. The boy opened his eyes, glared at Hilton.

"I was shanghaied!" he yelled. "I'll sue you for all you're worth!"

The first officer was unperturbed.

"I'm not the skipper, I'm mate," Hilton said. "And I can tell you right now that we're not worth much. Ever hear about discipline?"

"I was shanghaied!"

"I know it. That's the only way we can get a full crew to sign articles on La Cucaracha. I mentioned discipline. We don't bother much with it here. Just the same, you'd better call me Mister when people are around. Now shut up and relax. Give him a sedative, Bruno."

"No! I want to send a spacegram!"

"We're in hyper. You can't. What's your name?"

"Saxon. Luther Saxon. I'm one of the consulting engineers on Transmat."

"The matter-transmission gang? What were you doing around the space docks?"

Saxon gulped. "Well-uh-I go out with the technical crews to supervise new installations. We'd just finished a Venusian transmission station. I went out for a few drinks-that was all! A few drinks, and-"

"You went to the wrong place," Hilton said, amused. "Some crimp gave you a Mickey. Your name's on the articles, anyhow, so you're stuck, unless you jump ship. You can send a message from Fria, but it'd take a thousand years to reach Venus or Earth. Better stick around, and you can ride back with us."

"On this crate? It isn't safe. She's so old I've got the jitters every time I take a deep breath."

"Well, stop breathing," Hilton said curtly. La Cucciracha was an old tramp, of course, but he had shipped on her for a good many years. It was all right for this Transmat man to talk; the Transmat crews never ran any risks.

"Ever been on a hyper ship before?" he asked.

"Naturally," Saxon said. "As a passenger! We have to get to a planet before we can install a transmission station, don't we?"

"Uh-huh." Hilton studied the scowling face on the pillow. "You're not a passenger now, though."

"My leg's broken."

"You got an engineering degree?"

Saxon hesitated and finally nodded.

"All right, you'll be assistant pilot. You won't have to walk much to do that. The pilot'll tell you what to do. You can earn your mess that way."

Saxon spluttered protests.

"One thing," Hilton said. "Better not tell the skipper you're a Transmat man. He'd hang you over one of the jets. Send him for'rd when he's fixed up, Bruno."

"Yessir," Bruno said, grinning faintly. An old deep-space man, he didn't like Transmat either.

Hilton pulled himself back to the control room. He sat down and watched the white visoscreens. Most of Ts'ss' many arms were idle. This was routine now.

"You're getting an assistant," Hilton said after a while. "Train him fast. That'll give us all a break. If that fat-headed Callistan pilot hadn't jumped on Venus, we'd be set."

"This is a short voyage," Ts'ss said. "It's a fast hyper flow on this level."

"Yeah. This new guy. Don't tell the skipper, but he's a Transmat man."

Ts'ss laughed a little.

"That will pass, too," he said. "We're an old race, Mr. Hilton. Earthmen are babies compared to the Selenites. Hyper ships are fading out, and eventually Transmat will fade out too, when something else comes."

"We won't fade," Hilton said, rather surprised to find himself defending the skipper's philosophy. "Your people haven't-you Selenites."

"Some of us are left, that's true," Ts'ss said softly. "Not many. The great days of the Selenite Empire passed very long ago. But there are still a few Selenites left, like me."

"You keep going, don't you? You can't kill off a-a race."

"Not easily. Not at once. But you can, eventually. And you can kill a tradition, too, though it may take a long time. But you know what the end will be."

"Oh, shut up," Hilton said. "You talk too much."

Ts'ss bent again above the controls. La Cucaracha fled on through the white hyper flow, riding as smoothly as the day she had been launched.

But when they reached Fria, it would be rough space and high gravity. Hilton grimaced.

He thought: So what? This is just another voyage. The fate of the universe doesn't depend on it. Nothing depends on it, except, maybe,

whether we make enough profit to have the old lady overhauled. And that won't matter to me for it's my last voyage into the Big Night.

He watched the screens. He could not see it, but he knew that it hung beyond the universal whiteness, in a plane invisible to his eyes. The little sparks of worlds and suns glowed in its immensity, but never brightened it. It was too vast, too implacable. And even the giant suns would be quenched in its ocean, in the end. As everything else would be quenched, as everything moved on the tides of time into that huge darkness.

That was progress. A wave was born and gathered itself and grew- and broke. A newer wave was behind it. And the old one slipped back and was lost forever. A few foam-flecks and bubbles remained, like Ts'ss, remnant of the giant wave of the ancient Selenite Empire.

The Empire was gone. It had fought and ruled a hundred worlds, in its day. But, in the end, the Big Night had conquered and swallowed

It.

As it would swallow the last hyper ship eventually .

They hit Fria six days later, Earth time. And hit was the word. One of Ts'ss' chitin-covered arms was snapped off by the impact, but he didn't seem to mind. He couldn't feel pain, and he could grow another limb in a few weeks. The crew, strapped to their landing braces, survived with minor bruises.

Luther Saxon, the Transmat man, was in the auxiliary pilot's seat- he had enough specialized engineering training so that he learned the ropes fast-and he acquired a blue bump on his forehead, but that was all. La Cucaracha had come out of hyper with a jolt that strained her fat old carcass to the limit, and the atmosphere and gravity of Fria was the penultimate straw. Seams ripped, a jet went out, and new molten streaks appeared on the white-hot hull.

The crew had been expecting liberty. There was no time for that. Hilton told off working gangs to relieve each other at six-hour intervals, and he said, rather casually, that Twilight was out of bounds. He knew the crew would ignore that order. There was no way to keep the men aboard, while Twilight sold liquor and even more effective escape mechanisms. Still, there were few women on Fria, and Hilton hoped that enough working stiffs would keep on the job to get La Cucaracha repaired and spaceworthy before the fungus cargo was loaded.

He knew that Wiggins, the second mate, would do his best. For himself he went with the skipper in search of Christie, the Fria trader. The way led through Twilight, the roofed settlement that was shielded from the hot, diamond-bright glare of the primary. It wasn't big. But then Fria was an outpost, with a floating population of a few hundred. They

came in and out with the ships and the harvest seasons. If necessary, Hilton thought, some of the bums could be shanghaied. Still, it wasn't too likely that any of the crew would desert. None of them would be paid off till they went back in the Solar System.

They found Christie in his plasticoid cabin, a fat, bald, sweating man puffing at a huge meerschaum pipe. He looked up, startled, and then resignedly leaned back in his chair and waved them to seats.

"Hello, Chris," Danvers said. "What's new?"

"Hello, Skipper. Hi, Logger. Have a good trip?"

"The landing wasn't so good," Hilton said.

"Yeah, I heard about it. Drinks?"

"Afterward," Danvers said, though his eyes gleamed. "Let's clean up the business first. Got a good shipment ready?"

Christie smoothed one of his fat, glistening cheeks. 'Well-you're a couple of

weeks early."

"You keep a stockpile."

The trader grunted. "Fact is-look, didn't you get my message? No, I guess there wasn't time. I sent a spacemail on the Blue Sky last week for you, Skipper."

Hilton exchanged glances with Danvers.

"You sound like bad news, Chris," he said. "What is it?" Christie said uncomfortably, "I can't help it. You can't meet competition like Transmat. You can't afford to pay their prices. You got running expenses on La Cw~aracha. Jet fuel costs dough, and-well, Transmat sets up a transmitting station, pays for it, and the job's done, except for the power outlay. With atomic, what does that amount to?"

Danvers was growing red.

"Is Transmat setting up a station here?" Hilton said hastily.

"Yeah. I can't stop 'em. It'll be ready in a couple of months."

"But why? The fungus isn't worth it. There isn't enough market. You're pulling a bluff, Chris. What do you want? A bigger cut?"

Christie regarded his meerschaum. "Nope. Remember the ore tests twelve years ago? There's valuable ores on Fria, Logger. Only it's got to be refined plenty. Otherwise it's too bulky for shipment. And the equipment would cost too much to freight by spaceship. It's big stuff- I mean big."

Hilton glanced at Danvers. The skipper was purple now, but his mouth was clamped tightly.

"But-hold on, Chris. How can Transmat get around that? By sending the crude ores to Earth in their gadgets?"

"The way I heard it," Christie said, "is that they're going to send the refining machines here and set 'em up right on Fria. All they need for that is one of their transmitters. The field can be expanded to take almost anything, you know. Shucks you could move a planet that way if you had the power! They'll do the refining here and transmit the refined ores back Earthside."

"So they want ores," Danvers said softly. "They don't want the fungus, do they?"

Christie nodded. "It looks like they do. I had an offer. A big one. I can't afford to turn it down, and you can't afford to meet it, Skipper. You know that as well as I do. Thirteen bucks a pound."

Danvers snorted. Hilton whistled.

"No, we can't meet that," he said. "But how can they afford to pay it?"

"Quantity. They channel everything through their transmitters. They set one

up on a world, and there's a door right to Earth-or any planet they name. One job won't net them much of a profit, but a million jobs-and they take everything! So what can I do, Logger?"

Hilton shrugged. The captain stood up abruptly.

Christie stared at his pipe.

"Look, Skipper. Why not try the Orion Secondaries? I heard there was a bumper crop of bluewood gum there."

"I heard that a month ago," Danvers said. "So did everybody else. It's cleaned out by now. Besides, the old lady won't stai~çl a trip like that. I've got to get an overhaul fast, and a good one, back in the System."

There was a silence. Christie was sweating harder than ever. "'What about that drink?" he suggested. 'We can maybe figure a way."

"I can still pay for my own drinks," Danvers lashed out. He swung around and was gone.

"Jehoshaphat, Logger!" Christie said. "What could I do?"

"It's not your fault, Chris," Hilton said. "I'll see you later, unless- anyhow, I'd better get after the skipper. Looks like he's heading for Twilight."

He followed Danvers, but already he had lost hope.

Chapter ~. Danvers Lays the Course

Two days later the skipper was still drunk.

In the half-dusk of Twilight, Hilton went into a huge, cool barn where immense fans kept the hot air in circulation, and found Danvers,

as usual, at a back table, a glass in his hand. He was talking to a tiny-beaded Canopian, one of that retrovolved race that is only a few degrees above the moron level. The Canopian looked as though he was covered with black plush, and his red eyes glowed startlingly through the fur. He, too, had a glass.

Hilton walked over to the two. "Skipper," he said.

"Blow," Danvers said. "I'm talking to this guy."

Hilton looked hard at the Canopian and jerked his thumb. The red-eyed shadow picked up his glass and moved away quickly. Hilton sat down.

'We're ready to jet off," he said.

Danvers blinked at him blearily. "You interrupted me, mister. I'm busy."

"Buy a case and finish your binge aboard," Hilton said. "If we don't jet soon, the crew will jump."

"Let 'em."

"Okay. Then who'll work La Cucaracha back to Earth?"

"If we go back to Earth, the old lady will land on the junkpile," Danvers said furiously. "The ITC won't authorize another voyage without a rebuilding job."

"You can borrow dough."

"Ha!"

Hilton let out his breath with a sharp, angry sound. "Are you sober enough to understand me? Then listen. I've talked Saxon around."

'Who's Saxon?'

"He was shanghaied on Venus. Well-he's a Transmat engineer." Hilton went on quickly before the skipper could speak. "That was a mistake. The crimp's mistake and ours. Transmat stands behind its men. Saxon looked up the Transmat crew on Fria, and their superintendent paid me a visit. We're in for trouble. A damage suit. But there's one way out. No hyper ship's due to hit Fria for months and the matter transmitter won't be finished within two months. And it seems Transmat has a shortage of engineers. If we can get Saxon back to Venus or Earth fast, he'll cover. There'll be no suit."

"Maybe he'll cover. But what about Transmat?"

"If Saxon won't sign a complaint, what can they do?" Hilton shrugged. "It's our only out now."

Danvers' brown-splotched fingers played with his glass.

"A Transmat man," he muttered. "Ah-h. So we go back Earthside. What then? We're stuck." He looked under his drooping lids at Hilton. "I mean I'm stuck. I forgot you're jumping after this voyage."

"Pm not jumping. I sign for one voyage at a time. What do you want me to do, anyhow?"

"Do what you like. Run out on the old lady. You're no deep-space man." Danvers spat.

"I know when I'm licked," Hilton said; "The smart thing then is to fight in your own weight, when you're outclassed on points, not wait for the knockout. You've had engineering training. You could get on with Transmat, too."

For a second Hilton thought the skipper was going to throw the glass at him. Then Danvers dropped back in his chair, trying to force a smile.

"I shouldn't blow my top over that," he said, with effort. "It's the truth."

"Yeah. Well-are you coming?"

"The old lady's ready to jet off?" Danvers said. "I'll come, then. Have a drink with me first."

'We haven't time.'

With drunken dignity Danvers stood up. "Don't get too big for your boots, mister. The voyage isn't over yet. I said have a drink! That's an order."

"Okay, okay!" Hilton said. "One drink. Then we go?"

"Sure."

Hilton gulped the liquor without tasting it. Rather too late, he felt the stinging ache on his tongue. But before he could spring to his feet, the great dim room folded down upon him like a collapsing umbrella, and he lost consciousness with the bitter realization that he had been Mickeyed like the rawest greenhorn. But the skipper had poured that drink.

The dreams were confusing. He was fighting something, but he didn't know what. Sometimes it changed its shape, and sometimes it wasn't there at all, but it was always enormous and terribly powerful.

He wasn't always the same, either. Sometimes he was the wide-eyed kid who had shipped on Starhopper, twenty-five years ago, to take his first jump into the Big Night. Then he was a little older, in a bos'n's berth, his eye on a master's ticket, studying, through the white, unchangeable days and nights of hyperspace, the intricate logarithms a skilled pilot must know.

He seemed to walk on a treadmill toward a goal that slid away, never quite within reach. But he didn't know what that goal was. It shone like success. Maybe it was success. But the treadmill had started moving before he'd really got started. In the Big Night a disembodied voice was crying thinly:

"You're in the wrong game, Logger. Thirty years ago you'd have a future in hyper ships. Not any more. There's a new wave coming up. Get out, or drown."

A red-eyed shadow leaned over him. Hilton fought out of his dream. Awkwardly he jerked up his arm and knocked away the glass at his lips. The Canopian let out a shrill, harsh cry. The liquid that had been in the glass was coalescing in midair into a shining sphere.

The glass floated-and the Canopian floated too. They were in hyper. A few lightweight straps held Hilton to his bunk, but this was his own cabin, he saw. Dizzy, drugged weakness swept into his brain.

The Canopian struck a wall, pushed strongly, and the recoil shot him toward Hilton. The mate ripped free from the restraining straps. He reached out and gathered in a handful of furry black plush. The Canopian clawed at his eyes.

"Captain!" he screamed. "Captain Danvers!"

Pain gouged Hilton's cheek as his opponent's talons drew blood. Hilton roared with fury. He shot a blow at the Canopian's jaw, but now they were floating free, and the punch did no harm. In midair they grappled, the Canopian incessantly screaming in that thin, insane shrilling.

The door handle clicked twice. There was a voice outside-Wiggins, the second. A deep thudding came. Hilton, still weak, tried to keep the

Canopian away with jolting blows. Then the door crashed open, and Wiggins pulled himself in.

"Dzann!" he said. "Stop it!" He drew a jet-pistol and leveled it at the Canopian.

On the threshold was a little group. Hilton saw Saxon, the Transmat man, gaping there, and other crew members, hesitating, unsure. Then, suddenly, Captain Danvers' face appeared behind the others, twisted, strained with tension.

The Canopian had retreated to a corner and was making mewing, frightened noises.

"What happened, Mr. Hilton?" Wiggins said. "Did this tomcat jump you?"

Hilton was so used to wearing deep-space armor that till now he had scarcely realized its presence. His helmet was hooded back, like that of Wiggins and the rest. He pulled a weight from his belt and threw it aside; the reaction pushed him toward a wall where he gripped a brace.

"Does he go in the brig?" Wiggins asked.

"All right, men," Danvers said quietly. "Let me through." He propelled himself into Hilton's cabin. Glances of discomfort and vague distrust were leveled at him. The skipper ignored them.

"Dzann!" he said. "Why aren't you wearing your armor? Put it on. The rest of you-get to your stations. You too, Mr. Wiggins. I'll handle this."

Still Wiggins hesitated. He started to say something.

"What are you waiting for?" Hilton said. "Tell Bruno to bring some coffee. Now beat it." He maneuvered himself into a sitting position on his bunk. From the tail of his eye he saw Wiggins and the others go out. Dzann, the Canopian, had picked up a suit from the corner and was awkwardly getting into it.

Danvers carefully closed the door, testing the broken lock.

"Got to have that fixed," he murmured. "It isn't shipshape this way." He found a brace and stood opposite the mate, his eyes cool and watchful, the strain still showing on his tired face. Hilton reached for a ~cigarette.

"Next time your tomcat jumps me, I'll burn a hole through him," he promised.

"I stationed him here to guard you, in case there was trouble," Danvers said. "To take care of you if we cracked up or ran into danger. I showed him how to close your helmet and start the oxygen."

"Expect a haif-witted Canopian to remember that?" Hilton said. "You also told him to keep drugging me." He reached toward the shining liquid sphere floating near by and pushed a forefinger into it. He tasted the stuff. "Sure. Vakheesh. That's what you slipped in ~y drink on Fria. Suppose you start talking, skipper. What's this Canopian doing aboard?"

"I signed him," Danvers said.

"For what? Supercargo?"

Danvers answered that emotionlessly, watching Hilton.

"Cabin boy."

"Yeah. What did you tell Wiggins? About me, I mean?"

"I said you'd got doped up," Danvers said, grinning. "You were doped, too."

"I'm not now." Hilton's tone rang hard. "Suppose you tell me where we are? I can find out. I can get the equations from Ts'ss and run chart-lines. Are we on M-75-L?"

"No, we're not. We're riding another level."

"Where to?"

The Canopian shrilled, "I don't know name. Has no name. Double sun it has."

"You crazy!" Hilton glared at the skipper. "Are you heading us for a double primary?"

Danvers still grinned. "Yeah. Not only that, but we're going to land on a planet thirty thousand miles from the suns-roughly."

Hilton flicked on his deadlight and looked at white emptiness. "Closer than Mercury is to Sol. You can't do it. How big are the primaries?"

Danvers told him.

"All right. It's suicide. You know that. La Cucaracha won't take it."

"The old lady will take anything the Big Night can hand out."

"Not this. Don't kid yourself. She might have made it back to Earth -with a Lunar landing-but you're riding into a meat grinder."

"I haven't forgotten my astrogation," Danvers said. "We're coming out of hyper with the planet between us and the primaries. The pull will land us."

"In small pieces," Hilton agreed. "Too bad you didn't keep me doped. If you keep your mouth shut, we'll replot our course to Earth and nobody'll get hurt. If you want to start something, it'll be mutiny, and I'll take my chances at Admiralty."

The captain made a noise that sounded like laughter.

"All right," he said. "Suit yourself. Go look at the equations. I'll be in my cabin when you want me. Come on, Dzann."

He pulled himself into the companionway, the Canopian gliding behind him as silently as a shadow.

Hilton met Bruno with coffee as he followed Danvers. The mate grunted, seized the covered cup, and sucked in the liquid with the deftness of long practice under antigravity conditions. Bruno watched him.

"All right, sir?" the cook-surgeon said.

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Well-the men are wondering."

"What about?"

"I dunno, sir. You've never-you've always commanded the launchin~s, sir. And that Canopian-the men don't like him. They think something's wrong."

"Oh, they do, do they?" Hilton said grimly. "I'll come and hold their hands when they turn in for night watch. They talk too much."

He scowled at Bruno and went on toward the control room. Though he had mentioned mutiny to the skipper, he was too old a hand to condone it, except in extremity. And discipline had to be maintained, even though Danvers had apparently gone crazy.

Ts'ss and Saxon were at the panels. The Selenite slanted a glittering stare at him, but the impassive mask under the audio filter showed no expression. Saxon, however, swung around and began talking excitedly.

'What's happened, Mr. Hilton? Something's haywire. We should be ready for an Earth landing by now. But we're not. I don't know enough about these equations to chart back, and Ts'ss won't tell me a blamed thing."

"There's nothing to tell," Ts'ss said. Hilton reached past the Selenite and picked up a folder of ciphered figures. He said absently to Saxon:

"Pipe down. I want to concentrate on this."

He studied the equations.

He read death in them.

Chapter ~. Gamble With Death

Logger Hilton went into the skipper's cabin, put his back against the wall, and started cursing fluently and softly. When he had finished, Danvers grinned at him.

"Through?" he asked.

Hilton switched his stare to the Canopian, who was crouched in a corner, furtively loosening the locks of his spacesuit.

"That applies to you, too, tomcat," he said.

"Dzann won't mind that," Danvers said. "He isn't bright enough to resent cussing. And I don't care, as long as I get what we want. Still going to

mutiny and head for Earth?"

"No, I'm not," Hilton said. With angry patience he ticked off his points on his fingers. "You can't switch from one hyperplane to another without dropping into ordinary space first, for the springboard. If we went back into normal space, the impact might tear La Cucaracha into tiny pieces. We'd be in suits, floating free, a hundred million miles from the nearest planet. Right now we're in a fast hyper flow heading for the edge of the universe, apparently."

"There's one planet within reach," Danvers said.

"Sure. The one that's thirty thousand miles from a double primary. And nothing else."

"Well? Suppose we do crack up? We can make repairs once we land on a planet. We can get the materials we need. You can't do that in deep space. I know landing on this world will be a job. But it's that or nothing-now."

"What are you after?"

Danvers began to explain:

"This Canopian-Dzann-he made a voyage once, six years ago. A tramp hyper ship. The controls froze, and the tub was heading for outside. They made an emergency landing just in time-picked out a planet

that had been detected and charted, but never visited. They repaired there, and came back into the trade routes. But there was a guy aboard, an Earthman who was chummy with Dzann. This guy was smart, and he'd been in the drug racket, I think. Not many people know what raw, growing paraine looks like, but this fellow knew. He didn't tell anybody. He took samples, intending to raise money, charter a ship and pick up a cargo later. But he was knifed in some dive on Callisto. He didn't die right away, though, and he liked Dzann. So he gave Dzann the information."

"That halfwit?" Hilton said. "How could he remember a course?"

"That's one thing the Canopians can remember. They may be morons, but they're fine mathematicians. It's their one talent."

"It was a good way for him to bum a drink and get a free berth," Hilton said.

"No. He showed me the samples. I can talk his lingo, a little, and that's why he was willing to let me in on his secret, back on Fria. Okay. Now. We land on this planet-it hasn't been named-and load a cargo of paraine. We repair the old lady, if she needs it-"

"She will!"

"And then head back."

"To Earth?"

"I think Silenus. It's an easier landing."

"Now you're worrying about landings," Hilton said bitterly. "Well, there's nothing I can do about it, I suppose. I'm stepping out after this voyage. What's the current market quotation on paraine?"

"Fifty a pound. At Medical Center, if that's what you mean."

"Big money," the mate said. "You can buy a new ship with the profits and still have a pile left for happy days."

"You'll get your cut."

"I'm still quitting."

"Not till this voyage is over," Danvers said. "You're mate on La Cwcaracha." He chuckled. "A deep-space man has plenty of tricks up his sleeve-and I've been at it longer than you."

"Sure," Hilton said. "You're smart. But you forgot Saxon. He'll throw that damage suit against you now, with Transmat behind him."

Danvers merely shrugged. "I'll think of something. It's your watch. We have about two hundred hours before we come out of hyper. Take it, mister."

He was laughing as Hilton went out. .

In two hundred hours a good deal can happen. It was Hilton's job to see that it didn't. Luckily, his reappearance had reassured the crew, for when masters fight, the crew will hunt for trouble. But with Hilton

moving about La Cucaracha, apparently as casual and assured as ever, even the second mate, Wiggins, felt better. Still, it was evident that they weren't heading for Earth. It was taking too long.

The only real trouble came from Saxon, and Hilton was able to handle that. Not easily, however. It had almost come to a showdown, but Hilton was used to commanding men, and finally managed to bluff the Transmat engineer. Dissatisfied but somewhat cowed, Saxon grumblingly subsided.

Hilton called him back.

"I'll do my best for you, Saxon. But we're in the Big Night now. You're not in civilized space. Don't forget that the skipper knows you're a Transmat man, and he hates your insides. On a hyper ship, the Old Man's word is law. So-for your own sake-watch your step!"

Saxon caught the implication. He paled slightly, and after that managed to avoid the captain.

Hilton kept busy checking and rechecking La Cucaracha. No outside repairs could be done in hyper, for there was no gravity, and ordinary physical laws were inoperative-magnetic shoes, for example, wouldn't work. Only in the ship itself was there safety. And that safety was illusory for the racking jars of the spatial see-saw might disintegrate La Cucaracha in seconds.

Hilton called on Saxon. Not only did he want technical aid, but he wanted to keep the man busy. So the pair worked frantically over jury-rigged

systems that would provide the strongest possible auxiliary bracing for the ship. Torsion, stress and strain were studied, the design of the craft analyzed, and structural alloys X-ray tested.

Some flaws were found-La Cucaracha was a very old lady-but fewer than Hilton expected. In the end, it became chiefly a matter of ripping out partitions and bulkheads and using the material for extra bracing.

But Hilton knew, and Saxon agreed with him, that it would not be enough to cushion the ship's inevitable crash.

There was one possible answer. They sacrificed the after section of the craft. It could be done, though they were racing against time. The working crews mercilessly cut away beams from aft and carried them forward and welded them into position, so that, eventually, the forward half of the ship was tremendously strong and cut off, by tough air-tight partitions, from a skeleton after half. And that half Hilton flooded with manufactured water, to aid in the cushioning effect.

Danvers, of course, didn't like it. But he had to give in. After all, Hilton was keeping the ship on the skipper's course, insanely reckless as

that was. If La Cucaracha survived, it would be because of Hilton. But Captain Danvers shut himself in his cabin and was sullenly silent.

Toward the end, Hilton and Ts'ss were alone in the control room, while Saxon, who had got interested in the work for its own sake, superintended the last-minute jobs of spot bracing. Hilton, trying to find the right hyper space level that would take them back to Earth after they had loaded the paraine cargo, misplaced a decimal point and began to curse in a low, furious undertone.

He heard Ts'ss laugh softly and whirled on the Selenite.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"It's not really funny, sir," Ts'ss said. "There have to be people like Captain Danvers, in any big thing."

"What are you babbling about now?" he asked curiously.

Ts'ss shrugged. "The reason I keep shipping on La Cucaracha is because I can be busy and efficient aboard, and planets aren't for Selenites any more. We've lost our own world. It died long ago. But I still remember the old traditions of our Empire. If a tradition ever becomes great, it's because of the men who dedicate themselves to it. That's why anything ever became great. And it's why hyper ships came to mean something, Mr. Hilton. There were men who lived and breathed hyper ships. Men who worshipped hyper ships, as a man worships a god. Gods fall, but a few men will still worship at the old altars. They can't change. If they were capable of changing, they wouldn't have been the type of men to make their gods great."

"Been burning paraine?" Hilton demanded unpleasantly. His head ached, and he didn't want to find excuses for the skipper.

"It's no drug dream," Ts'ss said. "What about the chivalric traditions? We

had our Chyra Emperor, who fought for-

"I've read about Chyra," Hilton said. "He was a Selenite King Arthur."

Slowly Ts'ss nodded his head, keeping his great eyes on Hilton.

"Exactly. A tool who was useful in his time, because he served his cause with a single devotion. But when that cause died, there was nothing for Chyra-or Arthur-to do except die too. But until he did die, he continued to serve his broken god, not believing that it had fallen. Captain Danvers will never believe the hyper ships are passing. He will be a hyper-ship man until he dies. Such men make causes great-but when they outlive their cause, they are tragic figures."

"Well, I'm not that crazy," Hilton growled. "I'm going into some other game. Transmat or something. You're a technician. Why don't you come with me after this voyage?"

"I like the Big Night," Ts'ss said. "And I have no world of my own- no living world. There is nothing to make me want success, Mr. Hilton. On La Cucaracha I can do as I want. But away from the ship, I find that people don't like Selenites. We are too few to command respect or friendship any more. And I'm quite old, you know."

Startled, Hilton stared at the Selenite. There was no way to detect signs of age on the arachnoid beings. But they always knew, infallibly, how long they had to live, and could predict the exact moment of their death.

Well, he wasn't old. And he wasn't a deep-space man as Danvers was. He followed no lost causes. There was nothing to keep him with the hyper ships, after this voyage, if he survived.

A signal rang. Hilton's stomach jumped up and turned into ice, though he had been anticipating this for hours. He reached for a mike.

"Hyper stations! Close helmets! Saxon, report!"

"All work completed, Mr. Hilton," said Saxon's voice, strained but steady.

"Come up here. May need you. General call: stand by! Grab the braces. We're coming in."

Then they hit the see-saw!

Chapter ~. Hilton's Choice

No doubt about it, she was tough-that old lady. She'd knocked around a thousand worlds and ridden hyper for more miles than a man could count. Something had got into her from the Big Night, something stronger than metal bracing and hard alloys. Call it soul, though there never was a machine that had a soul. But since the first log-craft was launched on steaming seas, men have known that a ship gets a soul- from somewhere.

She hopped like a flea. She bucked like a mad horse. Struts and columns snapped and buckled, and the echoing companionways were filled with an erratic crackling and groaning as metal, strained beyond its strength, gave

way. Far too much energy rushed through the engines. But the battered old lady took it and staggered on, lurching, grunting, holding together somehow.

The see-saw bridged the gap between two types of space, and La Cucaracha yawed wildly down it, an indignity for an old lady who, at her age, should ride sedately through free void-but she was a hyper ship first and a lady second. She leaped into normal space. The skipper

had got his figures right. The double sun wasn't visible, for it was eclipsed by the single planet, but the pull of that monstrous twin star clamped down like a giant's titanic fist closing on La Cucaracha and yanking her forward irresistibly.

There was no time to do anything except stab a few buttons. The powerful rocket-jets blazed from La Cucaracha's hull. The impact stunned every man aboard. No watcher saw, but the automatic recording charts mapped what happened then.

La Cucaracha struck what was, in effect, a stone wall. Not even that could stop her. But it slowed her enough for the minimum of safety, and she flipped her stern down and crashed on the unnamed planet with all her after jets firing gallantly, the flooded compartments cushioning the shock, and a part of her never made of plastic or metal holding her together against even that hammer blow struck at her by a world.

Air hissed out into a thinner atmosphere and dissipated. The hull was half molten. Jet tubes were fused at a dozen spots. The stem was hash.

But she was still-a ship.

The loading of cargo was routine. The men had seen too many alien planets to pay much attention to this one. There was no breathable air, so the crew worked in their suits-except for three who had been injured in the crash, and were in sick-bay, in a replenished atmosphere within the sealed compartments of the ship. But only a few compartments were so sealed. La Cucaracha was a sick old lady, and only first aid could be administered here.

Danvers himself superintended that. La Cucaracha was his own, and he kept half the crew busy opening the heat-sealed jets, doing jury-rig repairs, and making the vessel comparatively spaceworthy. He let Saxon act as straw-boss, using the engineer's technical knowledge, though his eyes chilled whenever he noticed the Transmat man.

As for Hilton, he went out with the other half of the crew to gather the paraine crop. They used strong-vacuum harvesters, running long, flexible carrier tubes back to La Cucaracha's hold, and it took two weeks of hard, driving effort to load a full cargo. But by then the ship was bulging with paraine, the repairs were completed, and Danvers had charted the course to Silenus.

Hilton sat in the control room with Ts'ss and Saxon. He opened a wall compartment, glanced in, and closed it again. Then he nodded at Saxon.

"The skipper won't change his mind," he said. "Silenus is our next port. I've never been there."

"I have," Ts'ss said. "I'll tell you about it later."

Saxon drew an irritated breath. "You know what the gravity pull is, then, Ts'ss. I've never been there either, but I've looked it up in the books. Giant planets, mostly, and you can't come from hyper into normal space after you've reached the radius. There's no plane of the ecliptic in that system. It's crazy. You have to chart an erratic course toward Silenus, fighting varying gravities from a dozen planets all the way, and then you've still got the primary's pull to consider. You know La Cucaracha won't do it, Mr. Hilton."

"I know she won't," Hilton said. "We pushed our luck this far, but any more would be suicide. She simply won't hold together for another run. We're stranded here. But the skipper won't believe that."

"He's insane," Saxon said. "I know the endurance limits of a machine-that can be found mathematically-and this ship's only a machine. Or do you agree with Captain Danvers? Maybe you think she's alive!"

Saxon was forgetting discipline, but Hilton knew what strain they were all under.

"No, she's a machine all right," he merely said. "And we both know she's been pushed too far. If we go to Silenus, it's-" He made a gesture of finality.

"Captain Danvers says-Silenus," Ts'ss murmured. "We can't mutiny, Mr. Hilton."

"Here's the best we can do," Hilton said. "Get into hyper somehow, ride the flow, and get out again somehow. But then we're stuck. Any planet or sun with a gravity pull would smash us. The trouble is, the only worlds with facilities to overhaul La Cucaracha are the big ones. And if we don't get an overhaul fast we're through. Saxon, there's one answer, though. Land on an asteroid."

"But why?"

"We could manage that. No gravity to fight, worth mentioning. We certainly can't radio for help, as the signals would take years to reach anybody. Only hyper will take us fast enough. Now-has Transmat set up any stations on asteroids?"

Saxon opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Yes. There's one that would do, in the Rigel system. Far out from the primary. But I don't get it. Captain Danvers wouldn't stand for that."

Hilton opened the wall compartment. Gray smoke seeped out.

"This is paraine," he said. "The fumes are being blown into the skipper's cabin through his ventilator. Captain Danvers will be para-happy till

we land on that Rigel asteroid, Saxon."

There was a little silence. Hilton suddenly slammed the panel shut.

"Let's do some charting," he said. "The sooner we reach the Rigel port, the sooner we can get back to Earth-via Transmat."

Curiously, it was Saxon who hesitated.

"Mr. Hilton. Wait a minute. Transmat-I know I work for the outfit, but they-they're sharp. Business men. You have to pay plenty to use their matter transmitters."

"They can transmit a hyper ship, can't they? Or is it too big a job?"

"No, they can expand the field enormously. I don't mean that. I mean they'll want payment, and they'll put on the squeeze. You'll have to give up at least half of the cargo."

"There'll still be enough left to pay for an overhaul job."

"Except they'll want to know where the paraine came from. You'll be over a barrel. You'll have to tell them, eventually. And that'll mean a Transmat station will be set up right here, on this world."

"I suppose so," Hilton said quietly. "But the old lady will be space-worthy again. When the skipper sees her after the overhaul, he'll know it was the only thing to do. So let's get busy."

"Remind me to tell you about Silenus," Ts'ss said.

The Lunar Refitting Station is enormous. A crater has been roofed with a transparent dome, and under it the hyper ships rest in their cradles. They come in battered and broken, and leave clean and sleek and strong, ready for the Big Night again. La Cucaracha was down there, no longer the groaning wreck that had settled on the Rigel asteroid, but a lovely lady, shining and beautiful.

Far above, Danvers and Hilton leaned on the railing and watched.

"She's ready to jet," Hilton said idly. "And she looks good."

"No thanks to you, mister."

"Tush for that!" Hilton said. "If I hadn't doped you, we'd be dead and La Cucaracha floating around in space in pieces. Now look at her."

"Yeah. Well, she does look good. But she won't carry another paraine cargo. That strike was mine. If you hadn't told Transmat the location, we'd be set." Danvers grimaced. "Now they're setting up a Transmat station there; a hyper ship can't compete with a matter transmitter."

"There's more than one world in the Galaxy."

"Sure. Sure." But Danvers' eyes brightened as he looked down.

"Where are you heading, Skipper?" Hilton said.

'What's it to you? You're taking that Transmat job, aren't you?'

"You bet. I'm meeting Saxon in five minutes. In fact, we're going down to sign the contracts. I'm through with deep space. But-where are you heading?"

"I don't know," Danvers said. "I thought I might run up around Arcturus and see what's stirring."

Hilton did not move for a long time. Then he spoke without looking at the captain.

"You wouldn't be thinking of a stopover at Canis after that, would you?"

"You're a liar."

"Go keep your appointment," Danvers said.

Hilton eyed the great hyper ship below. "The old lady's always been a nice, clean craft. She's never got out of line. She's always charted a straight course. It'd be too bad if she had to carry slaves from Arcturus to the Canis market. It's illegal, of course, but that isn't the point. It's a rotten, crooked racket."

"I didn't ask your advice, mister!" Danvers flared. "Nobody's talking about slave-running!"

"I suppose you weren't figuring on unloading the paraine at Silenus? You can get a good price for paraine from Medical Center, but you can get six times the price from the drug ring on Silenus. Yeah, Ts'ss told me. He's been on Silenus."

"Oh, shut up," Danvers said.

Hilton tilted back his head to stare through the dome at the vast darkness above. "Even if you're losing a fight, it's better to fight clean," he said. "Know where it'd end?"

Danvers looked up, too, and apparently saw something in the void that he didn't like.

"How can you buck Transmat?" he demanded. "You've got to make a profit somehow."

"There's an easy, dirty way, and there's a clean, hard way. The old lady had a fine record."

"You're not a deep-space man. You never were. Beat it! I've got to get a crew together!"

"Listen-" Hilton said. He paused. "Ah, the devil with you. I'm through."

He turned and walked away through the long steel corridor.

Ts'ss and Saxon were drinking highballs at the Quarter Moon. Through the windows they could see the covered way that led to the Refitting Station, and beyond it the crags of a crater-edge, with the starshot darkness hanging like a backdrop. Saxon looked at his watch.

"He isn't coming," Ts'ss said.

The Transmat man moved his shoulders impatiently. "No. You're wrong. Of course, I can understand your wanting to stay with La Cucaracha."

"Yes, I'm old. That's one reason."

"But Hilton's young, and he's smart. He's got a big future ahead of him. That guff about sticking to an ideal-well, maybe Captain Danvers is that sort of man, but Hilton isn't. He isn't in love with hyper ships."

Ts'ss turned his goblet slowly in his curious fingers. "You are wrong about one thing, Saxon. I'm not shipping on La Cucaracha."

Saxon stared. "But I thought-why not?"

"I will die within a thousand Earth hours," Ts'ss said softly. "When that time comes, I shall go down into the Selenite caverns. Not many know they exist, and only a few of us know the secret caves, the holy places of our race. But I know. I shall go there to die, Saxon. Every man has one thing that is strongest-and so it is with me. I must die on my own world. As for Captain Danvers, he follows his cause, as our Chyra Emperor did, and as your King Arthur did. Men like Danvers made hyper ships great. Now the cause is dead, but the type of men who made it great once can't change their allegiance. If they could, they would never have spanned the Galaxy with their ships. So Danvers will stay with La Cucaracha. And Hilton-

"He's not a fanatic! He won't stay. Why should he?"

"In our legends Chyra Emperor was ruined, and his Empire broken," Ts'ss said. "But he fought on. There was one who fought on with him, though he did not believe in Chyra's cause. A Selenite named Jailyra. Wasn't there-in your legends-a Sir Lancelot? He didn't believe in Arthur's cause either, but he was Arthur's friend. So he stayed. Yes, Saxon, there are the fanatics who fight for what they believe-but there are also the others, who do not believe, and who fight in the name of a lesser cause. Something called friendship."

Saxon laughed and pointed out the window. "You're wrong, Ts'ss," he said triumphantly. "Hilton's no fool. For here he comes."

Hilton's tall form was visible moving quickly along the way. He passed the window and vanished. Saxon turned to the door.

There was a pause.

"Or, perhaps, it isn't a lesser cause," Ts'ss said. "For the Selenite Empire passed, and Arthur's court passed, and the hyper ships are passing. Always the Big Night takes them, in the end. But this has gone on since the beginning-

"SATHat?"

This time Ts'ss pointed.

Saxon leaned forward to look. Through the angle of the window he could see Hilton, standing motionless on the ramp. Passersby streamed about him unnoticed. He was jostled, and he did not know it, Hilton was thinking.

They saw the look of deep uncertainty on his face. They saw his face suddenly clear. Hilton grinned wryly to himself. He had made up his mind. He turned and went rapidly back the way he had come.

Saxon stared after the broad, retreating back, going the way it had come, toward the Refitting Station where Danvers and La Cucaracha waited. Hilton-going back where he had come from, back to what he had never really left.

"The crazy fool!" Saxon said. "He can't be doing this! Nobody turns down jobs with Transmat!"

Ts'ss gave him a wise, impassive glance. "You believe that," he said.

"Transmat means much to you. Transmat needs men like you, to make it great-to keep it growing. You're a lucky man, Saxon. You're riding with the tide. A hundred years from now-two hundred-and you might be standing in Hilton's shoes. Then you'd understand."

Saxon blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Transmat is growing now," Ts'ss said gently. "It will be very great- thanks to men like you. But for Transmat too, there will come an end."

He shrugged, looking out beyond the crater's rim with his inhuman, faceted eyes, at the glittering points of light which, for a little while, seemed to keep the Big Night at bay.