

THE TWO THOUSAND CENTURIES: ERA OF INTERSTELLAR EXPLORATION 2300-2621

**THE GODMEN**

Classic Space Opera from the Golden Age of the Pulps

By

**EDMOND HAMILTON**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977) has been hailed as one of the three pioneers of the space opera. Indeed, of the three writers credited with creating this beloved science fiction subgenre, Hamilton, Edward E. Smith, Ph.D., and Jack Williamson, Hamilton's first space opera, "The Comet Doom," beat both his colleagues into print, by almost a year, in the case of Smith's unprecedented universe-spanning epic, *The Skylark of Space*, and by almost three years in the case of Williamson's "The Cosmic Express." Since Smith had begun his book around 1919, clearly neither he nor Hamilton influenced the other, while Williamson has tipped his hat to the inspiration of both. So, in the final analysis, sole credit must be given to Edmond Hamilton and E. E. Smith as the progenitors of the space opera as so many know and love it today.

In the 1930s Hamilton was approached by a pulp editor who wanted him to create a science fictional equivalent of the then bestselling Doc Savage novels which appeared in the magazine that bore his name. Hamilton's character was Curt Newton, Man of Tomorrow, known to the world as Captain Future (also the magazine's title). Captain Future opposed interplanetary crime as well as menaces from beyond the solar system, accompanied everywhere by his closest friends, the giant metallic robot, Grag and the pasty-faced android Otho, who bickered comically throughout the books over which was the most valuable to the Captain. Titles of some of the novels Hamilton wrote about Curt Newton included *Calling Captain Future*, *The Magician of Mars*, *Outlaw World*, *The Comet Kings* (ghosted by his wife, Leigh Brackett, and hands-down best of the CF novels), *Planets in Peril*, and *Red Sun of Danger*. In the 1970s the French produced a Captain Future television cartoon series so loosely based on Hamilton's novels that most fans of the original felt it did an actual disservice to Curt Newton and his comic side-kicks.

But Edmond Hamilton's contributions to science fiction and to popular culture don't end with the creation of space opera. They begin there. As science fiction matured, Hamilton's colorful adventure sagas matured, and he produced a series of poignant, poetic space operas that helped extend the form and widen its possibilities. Among them were *Battle for the Stars*, *The City at World's End*, *The Star of Life*, and *The Haunted Stars*.

At the same time, one of Hamilton's magazine editors, Mort Weisinger, had been picked to helm the DC comic book line, including its new hits, *Superman* and *Batman*. Soon Weisinger had tapped several top SF pulp writers, including Hamilton, to become full-time scripters for the company's comic books. As a

result he became a trailblazing pioneer in a new medium, creating characters like Adam Strange, whose science fictional adventures appeared in the comic *Mystery in Space*, and superhero teams like the Legion of Superheroes, whose euphonious comic book has been hailed for its strong, feminist slant (not surprising considering he was married to tomboy and tough-guy novelist Leigh Brackett). And it was Hamilton who was responsible for scripting the first-ever Superman-Batman team-up.

Most of this is a matter of public record. What few people seem to know, for as far as can be determined the fact appears in no history of SF so far written, is that Hamilton was a genre pioneer in another way. Most SF histories credit Robert A. Heinlein with the creation of the first future history (a consistent idea of how things might turn out over several hundred or even thousand years against which a number of stories are set). Heinlein first disclosed the existence of his future history in the March 1941 issue of *Astounding*, creating a sensation among both his readers and his fellow SF authors. Isaac Asimov, for instance, would be at work on his future history, the famous Foundation saga, within a year.

Yet Hamilton's revelation, a year earlier that he had set the majority of his stories against a common future background covering some two thousand centuries went almost unnoticed (perhaps because it appeared in the less distinguished pulp magazine, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*). But the credit for being first definitely belongs to Hamilton. The first story set in his future history, *The Comet Doom*, was published in the issue of *Amazing Stories* that appeared on the newsstands in December 1926, while the initial story in Heinlein's history did not appear until twelve years later in 1939. (Although every story in this future history has not yet been identified, it is clear that most of his novels, and more than fifty short stories and novelettes, belong to it including the novels mentioned above, his famed Captain Future series, and the two novellas showcased here.)

A fuller description of this future history, and a selection of key stories showing its development across centuries will appear in a forthcoming PageTurner Editions ebook. Hamilton himself did not title this history, but we have chosen to call it "The Two Thousand Centuries." However, in brief, Hamilton tells us that: "By the end of the 20th Century, atomic-powered rockets guided by radar had reached the Moon, Mars and Venus."

There followed:

*The Era of Interplanetary Exploration and Colonization—1971-2011.*

*The Era of Interplanetary Frontiers—2011-2247.*

The Era of Interplanetary Secession—2247-2621.

The Era of Interstellar Exploration—2300-2621.

The Era of Interstellar Colonization—2621-62,339.

The Era of the Federation—62,339-129,999.

The Era of the Star Kings—130,000-202,115.

*The Godmen* and *The Stars, My Brothers* take place during the Era of Interstellar Exploration, of which Hamilton writes: "Interplanetary exploration and exploitation had increased rapidly. But the vast distances to other stars remained unconquerable until late in the 22nd Century, when three great inventions made interstellar travel possible. Using these inventions to build starships, mankind took at once to interstellar space. Alpha Centauri, Sirius and Altair were quickly visited."

*The Godmen* occurs during the earlier days of this era, and tells of the problems that arise when

humankind first encounters a nonhuman intelligence. *The Stars, My Brothers* takes place several centuries later, and shows how the question of humanity's relationship to alien races was finally answered—by a man from our own time! Together they point the way toward the concord among alien races that produced the Era of the Federation and the United Worlds.

Jean Marie Stine

July 12, 2006

BOOK ONE  
THE GODMEN

CHAPTER I

*Break free, little Earthmen, break free of Sol and Earth!*

He had broken free. Forgotten and petty now were the first feeble attempts, the Sputniks, the moon and Mars rockets that had followed them, all those stumbling baby steps. Now, with the star-drive, man had broken free and for the first time the stars were conquered—

And suddenly it seemed to Mark Harlow that all the universe was laughing at him, at the vanity of man, a cosmic laughter ringing across the galaxies.

*But you are not the first, little Earthmen! The Vorn did it long ago!*

And the gargantuan laughter of that jest rocked and shook the constellations, and Harlow cried out in disappointment and shame.

He cried out, and awoke.

He was not in space. He was in his bunk in the *Thetis*, and he was sweating, and Kwolek, his second officer, was looking down at him in wonder.

"I came to wake you, sir—and you gave a yell."

The fading echoes of that cosmic laughter still rang mockingly in Harlow's ears. He got out of the bunk and stood on the plastic deck and he was thinking.

"If it's true, it *is* a joke on all of us. And the joke may have cost Dundonald his life."

The *Thetis* rested quietly upon the soil of an alien planet, and alien pink sunlight came through the ports of his little cabin. The small starship was a thing of Earth, and the nineteen men aboard it were men of Earth. They had come far, and worked hard, and the feeling that it had never been done before had sparked them all the way, and now if they found out they had been anticipated, how would they feel?

Harlow told himself to forget that; there was no use dwelling upon it. Dundonald had brooded too much on that cosmic mystery, had gone forth to solve it, and where was Dundonald now? Where, indeed? It was up to him to find out, and that was why he was here at ML-441, and he was getting exactly nowhere in his search.

He stretched wearily, a stocky, broad-shouldered man in jacket slacks, looking more rumpled than a Star Survey captain should look. He asked, "What is it, Kwolek?"

Kwolek's round red face was worried. "Nothing's happened. But that's what makes me uneasy. Not one of those people have come near us all day—but they keep watching us from the edge of their town."

Harlow came alert. "N'Kann hasn't sent any word?"

"No." And Kwolek added, "You ask me, those saffron so-and-sos have just been stalling you."

Harlow grunted. "You may be right. But I'll wait till sunset. If he doesn't send a message, I'll go and have it out with him."

"It's your neck," said Kwolek, a characteristic fine, free lack respect. "But they look kind of ugly to me."

Harlow went through the narrow metal corridors and out of the lock, stepping onto withered, orange-colored grass. The heat and glare, reflected by the shining metal flank of the *Thetis*, hit him like a blow.

A dull-red sun glared from low in the rosy sky. It was not a very big or important star. It had no name, only a number in the Star Survey catalogues. But it had two planets, of which this was the innermost, and it was a big enough sun to make this world hot and humid and slightly unbearable.

The orange-colored grassy plain on which the *Thetis* had landed ten days before rolled gently away to hills crowned by yellow forests. But only a mile away upon the plain rose the strange crimson stone town of the people who called themselves the Ktashas in their own language. The red light of the setting sun painted their weird monolithic city an even deeper crimson.

Harlow could see the gay-colored short robes of the golden-skinned people who stood in irregular rows at the edge of the town, and stared toward the *Thetis*.

"What gets me," said Kwolek, "is that they're so blasted much like us."

He had followed Harlow out of the ship, and so had Garcia, the Third Officer, a young Mexican whose trimness was a constant reproach to Harlow and Kwolek. The Star Survey was strictly UN, and the *Thetis* had a dozen different nations represented in its crew.

"I should have thought you would have got over your surprise at that, by now," said Garcia.

Kwolek shrugged. "I don't believe I'll ever get over it. It was too big a shock."

*Yes, thought Harlow, that had been the first surprise men had got when, after the first trips to the disappointingly lifeless nearer planets, they had got to other stars.* The discovery that an Earth-type world would usually have human and animal life reasonably close to the Terran had been unexpected. But then the quick-following discovery that the old Arrhenius theory had been correct, that there were spores of life in deep space, had explained it. Wherever those spores had come from, whatever faraway fountainhead of life, they were identical and when they fell upon a world like Earth they had quite naturally developed the same general types of life.

A big surprise, yes, but not a dismaying one. Earthmen were still ahead, sometimes far ahead, of these other human and humanoid races in achievement. After all, they had said, we were the first race of all to conquer space, to invent the ion-drive and then the spacewarp, and travel between the stars. We men of Earth—the pioneers.

*And that, thought Harlow, was where the second surprise had come.* As ships of the Star Survey landed on far-separated star-worlds, as their linguists learned alien languages and spoke with these peoples, they gradually got the surprise. Almost all these peoples of the stars had a common belief, a

legend.

"You Earthmen are not the first. Others have traveled the stars for a long time and still do. The Vorn."

\* \* \* \*

The name was different on different worlds, but the legend was always the same. Earthmen were not first. The Vorn had been first. They had been, and still were, star-travelers. And—

"The Vorn use no ships like yours. They come and go, but not in ships."

Small wonder that scientists of the Star Survey, like Edwin Dundonald, had felt a feverish curiosity to get at the bottom of this legend of the Vorn. There had to be something behind it. Peoples forever separated by light-years could not make it up in their own heads simultaneously.

And Dundonald's party had set out in their *Starquest*, and that had been the start of it, for Harlow. For no communic-message could come back from Dundonald at these vast distances. And when Dundonald himself had not come back, after months, the Survey became worried. Which was why the Survey had sent Harlow to find Dundonald, who was his friend and also a valuable scientist. Since his plans had included this star-system, they had come to ML-441 to find his trail.

"We've been here all this time," Kwolek was saying pessimistically, as they stared at the silent, distant figures and the town. "We've learned their language, and that's all we *have* learned. It's a washout. And now I think they want us off their world."

"We're not leaving," Harlow said, "until we talk to that man Brai."

*Brave words*, he thought. What had he been doing here all this time but trying to find Brai, and failing. Failing in the very first step of his search for Dundonald.

As they stood there, the sun touched the horizon and washed lurid light over everything. Harlow turned.

"I'm going in to see N'Kann. I'm going to have this out with him."

"I'll go with you," said Kwolek, but Harlow shook his head.

"And I don't want you coming after me, either. Wait."

As Harlow walked forward, he was conscious of the sullen hostility in the gay-robed, immobile, silent group at the edge of the monolithic town. The very first Star Survey ship to touch here had accurately estimated the half-civilized state of the Ktashan culture, and it was the Survey's policy to deal with all such peoples with a careful absence of patronage or domination.

That, Harlow thought, was what had made it difficult for him all along. He didn't think it would be any easier now, when his persistent questions about Dundonald and the Vorn had roused superstitions.

The sun went out like a lamp and the moonless dark clapped down. Torches flared as he walked across the plain, and he headed toward them. And there in the torchlight amid other tall, impassive, golden-skinned men stood N'Kann. His powerful face was hostile, and his voice rolled harshly in the slurred language that Harlow had learned.

"There is nothing for you here. Take your ship and go!"

Harlow walked up to him, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. He kept his voice carefully calm and casual.

"We will go. But it is as I have said before. We seek the Earthman, Dundonald, who was here. We must know where he went from here."

"I have told you that we do not know," retorted the Chief Councilor.

Harlow nodded. "But there is someone here who does know. A man of your people named Brai, Dundonald talked to him."

He remembered very well the garrulous old man of the Ktashas who had told him—cackling the meanwhile at Harlow's mispronunciations—that the last Earthman here had talked of the Vorn with young Brai. He had not found Brai. He had not even found the old man again.

Harlow said, "Where is Brai?"

"Who knows that name?" retorted N'Kann. The faces of all the Councilors were blank. "No one."

"Yet Dundonald spoke with him," persisted Harlow. "He spoke with him of the Vorn."

The ruddy torches flared steady and unshaken but it was as though a cold wind swept through the group of golden men when they heard that name.

And N'Kann threw up an arm free of his barbaric bright robe, and gestured with it toward the black sky, spangled by stars across which the dark blot of the mighty Horsehead Cloud sprawled like a brooding cosmic octopus.

"My people do not talk of the Wanderers—no!"

So the Vorn were also called the Wanderers here? Harlow filed that fact mentally, and pressed another question.

"Why? Are you afraid of them?"

The flash in N'Kann's eyes was dangerous. "We do not fear any men. Certainly not Earthmen."

"Then the Vorn are not men?"

"I will not talk of them." N'Kann's voice rose, heavy with rage. "They come and they go from star to star as they wish, and it is their right, and it is not for us to speak of them. Nor for you, Earthman—nor for you!"

The little group muttered agreement, and from all along the torchlit row of men there was a movement toward Harlow. Hands were under their short robes now, and he knew they had weapons in their grasp.

He had no weapon, nor if he had could he have used one. The law of the Star Survey was iron on that point. If you went to another people's world and flashed Earth weapons, court-martial awaited you.

"I say again that we wish no more talk of the Vorn!" cried N'Kann. "And that by tomorrow's sunrise, your ship must be gone."

Harlow knew that he had failed. He had not found even the first clue to Dundonald's trail, and if he left ML-441 now, he would never find one. Yet they were not going to let him into the town again to look for Brai, that was clear.

He turned and walked back into the darkness of the plain. He heard low, fierce voices behind him, and the timbre of them made him think that he had been lucky to get away from them unscathed.

But had he got away yet? The torches were soon well behind him, and the lights of the *Thetis* a half mile ahead, when Harlow's ears picked up a stealthy sound from behind. A sound of quiet running.

He turned quickly. He could see nothing. Whoever came was being careful not to show himself against the distant torches.

So they had decided not to wait out their own ultimatum, and had sent someone after him? Harlow felt anger rise in him. He had no weapon. But they were not going to hunt down an Earthman in the dark like this.

Too far, to call to the *Thetis*. His only chance was in counter-surprise. He went down on one knee and poised waiting, listening.

He heard the soft, fast footsteps come closer, and just glimpsed a flitting darker shadow against the dark.

Harlow lunged and crashed into the runner, hard.

## CHAPTER II

They rolled over and over together in the dark. Then Harlow, grabbing fiercely for his antagonist, got a surprise. It was a girl.

He held onto her by her smooth bare shoulders, but now she managed to speak in a quick, panting whisper.

"I am not your enemy. Please!"

It took him a moment to speak; he had to think of the Ktashan words he had learned, and for that moment he stood gripping her. Back at the edge of the town the torches were moving, and they struck a fitful gleam that showed Harlow the short-robed figure and clear, golden young face of the girl.

"Who are you and why did you follow me?" he demanded.

"You look for Brai?" she said breathlessly.

Harlow was instantly alert. "I want to talk to him, that's all. Do you know him?"

"I am Yrra," said the girl. "I am Brai's sister."

Harlow took his hands off her. He glanced back toward the moving torches, but they were moving into the town, not toward him. Yet he was sure there were still watchers there, and he kept his voice down when he spoke.

"I was beginning to doubt whether there was a Brai. Where is he?"

Yrra talked in a rush that he could hardly understand. "They are holding him a prisoner. N'Kann and the Council. He was already under disapproval, and when your ship came they seized him and hid him away."

"For God's sake, why?"

"So that he could not talk to you of the Vorn as he had talked to the other Earthman," she answered.

"To Dundonald?" Harlow felt a kindling excitement. "Listen, Yrra—what did your brother tell

Dundonald? About the Vorn, I mean."

She was silent a moment. "There are only legends. That is all Brai knew, all any of us know."

"But the legends? Do they speak of where the Vorn come from, where their native star is?"

"Yes. They do," she said. "It is said that long ago some of the Vorn who came to our world spoke in their own way—with some of our people, and told them things."

"Then you know as much as your brother on that point!" Harlow said. "Good. You can tell me what he told Dundonald, about the origin-world of the Vorn."

"I will not tell you," said Yrra flatly.

"Why not? You mean you're superstitious too about the Vorn?"

Her reply was edged with pride. "We are not all as backward here as N'Kann. My brother is a student and a thinker. He would like to see our world become more civilized. That is why he talked so eagerly to the other Earthman—Dundonald."

"All right, so you're not superstitious," Harlow said impatiently. "Then why won't you tell me?"

She caught his arm. "Listen, Earthman—"

"The name is Harlow," he interrupted. "Go ahead."

"It is this, Harlow. I am afraid for my brother. They said N'Kann and the others—that he was only locked up to keep him from talking with you, that he would be released when you left. But I fear that in their superstitious anger, they may kill him."

"Go on," said Harlow.

"Help me set Brai free," said Yrra coolly. "Then he and I will tell you all that is known about the Vorn."

Harlow felt his momentary hopes wither. "It's no good," he said. "It can't be done; we're not allowed to interfere with local law and justice. Anyway, where would your brother go? They'd just grab him again when we left."

"There are other towns and people on this world beside Ktasha," said the girl. "Brai and I will go to one of them. Our parents are dead, there's only the two of us."

Harlow shook his head. "I don't blame you for trying to break him out but it's no deal. We can't use force, it's against our orders and anyway, we're about to be run out as it is."

"There would be no need of fighting!" Yrra said earnestly. "I know where he is, all I need is help to slip him out of there." She added, "Unless you do so you will learn nothing."

Harlow felt trapped. The rules of the Star Survey were rigid. Its men were allowed to defend themselves but not to barge into other peoples' worlds and throw their weight around. From the very start, it had been a basic tenet that Earth's sudden leap into space was not to be used for crude imperialism.

And yet if he left ML-441 without a single clue to Dundonald's trail, without an inkling of where Dundonald had gone in his search for the Vorn, he would have to go home and report failure. It was a long way back to Sol, for that.



"I just don't see how—" Harlow began, and then was stricken dumb by a startling interruption.

From the moonless sky of stars came a faraway shriek that in a heartbeat of time became a thunderous roar. Yrra cried out and upward at a black bulk with rows of lights that was down upon them like a falling meteor. But Harlow had ready recognized that sound, and it was the last sound he had expected to hear.

"Another ship!" he exclaimed. "Now why—" Then his hopes bounded. "By Heaven, maybe it's Dundonald come back here!"

"They have seen, in the town," Yrra said swiftly. "Look!"

Back in the Ktashan town the torches were tossing wildly as men ran back out onto the dark plain. Over the dull, steady roar of riven atmosphere from the descending ship, Harlow could hear faraway cries of anger and alarm. He could well imagine the state of mind of N'Kann and the others when, right after ordering his own ship away, they saw another one arrive.

"They are coming," Yrra said. "And if they find me talking secretly with you here, I will be imprisoned like Brai."

He took her arm. "Come with me. It's all you can do, until they calm down."

He ran with her toward the lights of the *Thetis* glancing up warily to make sure he did not get under the descending ship. But the newcomer was dropping down on the plain a little beyond the *Thetis*.

Men were running out of the *Thetis*, as he and Yrra ran up. He darted a glance backward and saw the torches streaming out over the plain. Now the newly-arrived ship was landing on the ground, its keel tubes spurning ghostly clouds of ions, and he made out its outlines as those of a twenty-man star-cruiser like his own ship.

Kwolek came running up to him, as he and Yrra reached the *Thetis*.

"It's another Star Survey cruiser! Do you suppose it's—" Then he broke off, looked at Yrra, and whistled. "Where'd you pick her up?"

"Get the men back into the ship," snapped Harlow. "There's liable to be trouble. And take her with you. Garcia, you'll come with me."

To Yrra he spoke as rapidly as he could in the Ktashan tongue. "Go with him. Your people are coming and they must not see you with us."

She flashed a look of understanding at him, and went with Kwolek without a word.

The torches were coming across the plain in ragged order, still some distance away. Harlow glanced at them worriedly and then with Garcia beside him he hot-footed it around the stern of the *Thetis*.

His first close look at the newly-landed ship shattered his hopes.

Dundonald's cruiser had been the *Starquest*, but the name on the bows of this one, beneath the Survey, emblem, was *Sunfire*.

"Not Dundonald," said Garcia. "But I didn't know another Survey ship was anywhere near here."

The lock of the *Sunfire* opened as a square of glowing light in the dark flank. A tall figure shouldered out, glanced around, and then came toward Harlow and Garcia.

By the light streaming from the lock, from which other men in the standard uniform were now emerging, Harlow saw a big young man with close-cropped red hair—and keen, light blue eyes in a rawboned face.

"Taggart, commanding the *Sunfire*," he said, extending his hand. "You'll be Harlow? I'm from Sector Three Division, I don't think we ever met. What the devil's going on here?"

"The people here are not happy about your coming," Harlow said dryly. "If I may make a suggestion, I'd confine your men aboard ship for the present."

Taggart looked at the oncoming torches and swore, then turned and rapped out an order to the men in the lock. Then he turned back to Harlow.

"Service courtesy demands that I visit your ship first, but shall we get a move on?" he said.

Harlow thought they had better. The torches were uncomfortably close, and he could hear the angry voices of the men who carried them.

With Garcia following them, he and Taggart went back around the *Thetis* on the double. As they reached its lock, he saw that the Ktashans had stopped a pistol-shot away, but a shout that he knew was from N'Kann rolled loudly.

"I warn you again, be gone by sunrise! All of you!"

Inside the *Thetis*, Taggart turned to Harlow with a perplexed look on his face.

"What's got into these people? They were listed as quite friendly."

"They were—until Dundonald got to talking with one of them about the Vorn," said Harlow.

Taggart's face lengthened. "So that's it. I wish no one had ever heard this cursed myth about the Vorn. It's kicked up trouble from here to Earth and it's still kicking. It's why I'm here."

Harlow didn't like the sound of that, but kept from asking questions as they went toward his cabin. He passed Yrra standing uncertainly in a companionway with Kwolek. Taggart looked at the girl admiringly as Harlow said, "Wait here for a little, Yrra. They mustn't see you come out of our ship."

She nodded, looking very young and more than a little unhappy, and he went on.

When Taggart was sprawled in a chair in his little cabin, with a drink, Harlow said, "Let's have it."

Taggart set the drink down. "We were pulled out of Sector Three survey work to come here on special service. Our orders—to report to you, and assist under your command to find Dundonald and the *Starquest*."

Harlow stared. "Meaning no discourtesy to you, but why in the world would they send another ship? If one can't find Dundonald, two can't."

"There's more to it than that," said Taggart. He looked keenly at Harlow. "Ever hear of the Cartel?"

Harlow was about to say he hadn't, but then checked himself. He remembered something. He said slowly, "That was years ago, back in the time when the star-drive was first invented, wasn't it? A bunch of tycoons on Earth who decided the star-drive was too profitable a thing to let the UN have, and tried to grab it. They got slapped down hard."

Taggart nodded. "That was the bunch. Now it's happening again, according to what the Survey just heard. There's a new Cartel operating—a group of tough magnates on Earth who are after something as big as the star-drive."

"After what?" demanded Harlow.

Taggart picked up his glass and drained it. "After the Vorn."

"The Vorn?" repeated Harlow. "I'll be—Why, nobody even knows who or what or where the Vorn are!"

"Right," said Taggart. "But one thing people do know. They know that ever since the Survey started exploring the star-worlds, at world after world we've heard the stories about the mysterious Vorn, and how they can travel between the stars—without using ships like ours. It's why your friend Dundonald is hunting for them. It's why some very rich men on Earth are also extremely interested in finding them."

He hunched forward, speaking earnestly. "Lots of people think these Vorn may have some method of instantaneous transmission of matter across interstellar distances. If they do, it would make starships obsolete. All right. A new Cartel, so the Survey just learned, is out to find that secret."

Harlow stared at him troubledly. It made sense. There was a type who felt that nothing must be discovered, invented or made that did not make them richer than they already were.

Taggart leaned back, stretching tiredly. "When Survey Center heard that the Cartel has ships out hunting for Dundonald too, they thought you'd better have reinforcement. I was available, so they shoved me here. I've brought some weapons, by order, in case of trouble."

He added, almost cheerfully, "Well, that's it and I'm reporting for orders. When do we start looking for Dundonald, and where?"

"I wish I knew," Harlow said gloomily. "There's one man here who knows where Dundonald went, but I can't even get to him."

He told Taggart about Brai, and what Yrra had said. The red-haired captain listened attentively. Then he exclaimed, "Why, there's no big problem in that. We'll help the girl get her brother out and this Brai can tell us what we want to know."

"But Survey regulations forbid intrusions into local law and justice—" Harlow began.

Taggart snorted, and got to his feet. "Listen, Harlow. I'm fresh from Survey Center and I can tell you this: Survey is in such a sweat over the possibility of this Cartel getting to the Vorn and their secret that they'll overlook any minor infraction of rules. But they won't overlook failure on your part."

That, too, made sense, Harlow knew. He had realized from the first that he couldn't leave ML-441 without finding out anything.

"What we ought to do is take this wench and spank the information out of her," he growled.

Taggart grinned. "I'd sure enjoy it. But she may not really know much, so we have to get her brother. I'll take on the job of doing it."

Harlow said, "We will. We can't send men into danger on a mission that's against the rules, but we can go ourselves."

He touched the intercom and spoke into it and presently Yrra came into the cabin. Taggart whistled softly in appreciation, much as Kwolek had done. But she looked anxiously at Harlow, and her fine brown eyes lit up when he told her.

"It has to be tonight, your people will be at our throats by tomorrow," he finished. "The question is, can you lead two of us to where your brother's locked up without our being seen?"

"I'm almost sure I can!" Yrra said.

"Confidence is a wonderful thing," grunted Harlow. "All right, Taggart, we'll start our jail-breaking mission in an hour. We'll have to circle out in a big curve to come at the town from the other side."

Two hours later, he and Taggart and Yrra had made most of their big detour and were approaching the Ktashan city from the far side. They walked quietly in the darkness on the grass, and the wind brought them a heavy fragrance from flowering trees outside the town, mingled with a smell of acrid smoke from the crude vegetable oil lamps these people used. Beyond the trees the monolithic town was a blacker bulk dotted with softly lighted windows, looking for all the world like a single rambling stone castle that went on and on.

Yrra's warm fingers closed on Harlow's wrist. "From here I must lead."

Harlow nodded, and he heard Taggart murmur, "All seems quiet enough."

"Too quiet," Harlow muttered. "Most of the people are out watching our ships and waiting for sunrise. Then it'll blow off."

He and Taggart went forward in the dark, and Yrra led the way as silently as a shadow. From the sky the unfamiliar stars looked down incuriously, a spangled canopy made even more strange to Earthly eyes by the vast, brooding black blot of the Horsehead. Harlow looked up at that alien sky and wished that nobody had ever heard of the Vorn. We wished that the first sputniks and rockets had never happened and that man had had sense enough to stay on his own world.

He did not know just how desperately he would wish that before morning.

### CHAPTER III

They walked in a dark, narrow street that was no more than a corridor cut out of the rock. On either side rose walls of the same stone, with here and there a door or shuttered windows. The doors and shutters were of metal, and no light came from them. Nor was there any sound except the clump of their boots, which seemed to Harlow's strained ears loud enough to wake the dead. He thought that this stone city would make a fine trap.

The makers of this place had been a patient folk. They had found a great solid outcrop of red sandstone and they had set to work to carve it into a city. How many centuries they had chiseled away at the soft stone, he could not guess. But rooms and walls and streets and narrow ways like this one had taken shape under the chisels, and as the people had grown they had worked ever farther and deeper into the outcrop until this staggering monolith town was the result.

"These are the ways between the grain warehouses," whispered Yrra. "Now we must cross a street, and we must not be seen."

Harlow was grateful that there was no street lighting, when they came to the wider crossways. The only illumination was lamplight from windows along it, but that was enough to show a number of the Ktashan

men and women. They were hurrying along the street, calling to each other in excited tones.

"They're talking about the arrival of your ship," muttered Harlow to Taggart.

"Yes, I got it," said Taggart unexpectedly, and then explained. "I studied copies of some of the language-tapes the first Survey party here made—the one before Dundonald. Nothing else to do on the way here."

Harlow waited until there were no passersby within a block, then whispered the word. They skipped across the shadowy street into another narrow stone way.

As Yrra led deeper into the dark, monolithic maze, Harlow felt the whole weight of the place on his spirits.

How long until sunrise?

Why did Dundonald have to go Vorn-hunting anyway?

Why—

"Just ahead," came Yrra's whisper. "There is a guard. You see him?"

They were in a stone alley so narrow that Harlow would have called it a hallway if it were not open to the stars. The vague light showed a Ktashan man, tall in his skimpy robe, standing in front of a metal door with a thing in his hand that looked like a metal bar ending in a blade.

Harlow said, "If we rush him, he'll let out a yell. Yrra, can you circle around and approach him from the other side—get him to turn his back on us?"

For answer, she slipped away the way they had come. Harlow heard Taggart move uneasily, and then glimpsed a gun in his hand.

"Oh, no," he whispered. "No shooting. We could never explain that away to Survey Center, and anyway it would rouse the whole place."

"All right, but it's going to make it tougher," said Taggart. "That bar-sword looks like a mean weapon."

Yrra's voice now came out of the dark from ahead. She was speaking to the guard, and Harlow gathered that she was asking to see her brother.

The Ktashan man turned toward her as she approached, and grunted, a gruff refusal.

"Now," said Harlow.

He led the way, walking on tiptoes like a child playing a game. Then he jumped on the guard's back.

He got one hand over the man's mouth to prevent an outcry. But he hadn't bargained that this Ktashan would be as strong as a bull, and he was. The man tore at Harlow's wrist, and reached around with his other hand to get hold of Harlow anywhere he could.

It was humiliating to realize that while you were reasonably young and strong, you were up against someone a lot stronger. Harlow realized it, and clung frantically, and then there was a thumping sound and the man collapsed. He fell so suddenly that Harlow fell with him, and then he saw that the Ktashan was out cold. He scrambled up.

Taggart chuckled. "More ways to use a gun than firing it," he said. He had rapped the guard over the head with the barrel.

Yrra was already at the metal door, tugging vainly at the catch. She turned and said swiftly, "It's locked."

"I expected that," said Harlow. "Stand back a little."

He put on the heavy gloves he had in one pocket, and drew out from another pocket the compact little cutting-torch he had brought. He touched the stud and drew the thin, crackling tongue of flame around the lock.

A piece of the door that included the lock fell out. Harlow grabbed it just in time to keep it from clanging on the stone.

Taggart reached out and pulled the door open by the cut-out notch, and then let go of it and cursed feelingly and blew upon his burned fingers.

Yrra darted through into the dark beyond the door. They heard her call softly.

"Brai!"

Harlow went in after her. Taggart had a pocket-light and flashed it on.

\* \* \* \*

In a bare little stone room without windows and with no furniture but a wooden cot, a young Ktashan man was babbling excitedly. He turned an eager, good-looking golden face toward Harlow and Taggart.

"I have told him," Yrra said rapidly. "He will tell you everything he told Dundonald, if we get away."

"Dundonald was my friend," Brai said proudly, in imperfect English. "I learned many things from him. I learned your language—"

"That's fine," said Harlow hastily, "but the main thing is to get out of this rat-trap quick. We can talk when we get back to the *Thetis*."

They went out, and Taggart examined the stunned guard and then hauled him into the cell he had guarded.

"He'll come to in an hour or less," said Taggart. "But if we're not back to the ships by then, we'll never be."

Within fifteen minutes they had slipped back through the dark streets and were hurrying out onto the starlit plain.

Harlow could not believe it. He had felt a dismal certainty that they would be found and trapped in that labyrinthine monolith, and it still seemed impossible to him that they had gone in and got Brai and got out again without even a challenge. The fact that most of the Ktashans were out on the plain watching the Earth ships was all that had made it possible.

They went back in their wide circle to avoid the Ktashans on the plain, moving fast and not talking. In less than the hour Taggart had mentioned, they had circled clear around and were approaching the two starships from the side farthest away from the town.

The lights of Taggart's ship, the *Sunfire*, which was nearest to them, now shone brightly in the night. As they came toward it, Taggart uttered a low whistle. Next moment a half-dozen men appeared between

them and the *Sunfire*, coming toward them.

"There was no need to Post men out here," said Harlow, irritated.

"Ob, yes, there was," Taggart said.

There was a mocking quality in his voice that Harlow had not heard before, and he turned quickly. The light from the *Sunfire* fell on Taggart's rawboned face, and he was smiling, and the gun in his hand was pointing at Harlow.

"I don't want to kill you but I don't particularly mind if I have to," said Taggart. "Stand still."

Harlow stared, too shocked for the moment to get it. "What the hell kind of a Survey captain are you—" he began, and then he got it. "You're no Star Survey man, and I was stupid enough to fall for it!"

"That's right," said Taggart lightly. "But I told you the truth about one thing. The Cartel *does* have ships out hunting for Dundonald and the Vorn. And the *Sunfire*, for all that we pasted a Survey emblem on it, is one of those ships."

The catastrophic implications of it hit Harlow. The Cartel who were after the Vorn and their secret had an efficient agent in Taggart. The man had followed him to ML441 in his hoaxed-up ship, had boldly gone in with him after Brai when he learned that Brai was the key to Dundonald and the Vorn, and now he would—

"Brai—Yrra—run!" yelled Harlow, and plunged straight at Taggart.

He was so mad right down to his roots that the gun facing him didn't matter. All that mattered was his raging resolution that Taggart's clever trick was not going to succeed.

Taggart hadn't quite expected that crazy lunge. He fired, but a moment too late, and the gun roared close beside Harlow's ear as he hit Taggart.

They went over onto the grass and rolled struggling, and in one of the moments he could see, Harlow glimpsed Yrra running like a deer with men after her, while other men had hold of Brai and were beating him into submission.

There were distant yells of alarm and Harlow knew the gun must have been heard by some of his own men at the *Thetis*. He struggled furiously in the grass with Taggart, to keep a second gunshot from tearing through his middle.

Then the world caved in on him.

The blow didn't feel like a blow, it felt like the sky falling. No, it was he who was falling, down through infinities of darkness and pain. One of Taggart's men had run up and hit him with something and his nerveless hands could no longer hold onto anything.

He heard a voice saying hoarsely, "The Survey men are coming!"

He heard Taggart's voice saying, "We've got to jump fast."

Then he heard nothing and felt nothing for a time that seemed very long though later he knew he had only blacked out for a few moments. He struggled fiercely back to consciousness. He was lying in the grass and voices somewhere were yelling louder and the *Sunfire* loomed dark and big and still only a few hundred feet from him.

As Harlow tried to get up, the slim projecting ion-drive tubes along the keel and stern of the *Sunfire* shot forth their ghostly spume of light. Under the impetus of the drive, the ship rushed upward and a shock-wave of air hit Harlow and rocked him back off his feet.

The *Sunfire* was gone.

It had happened so fast, from the moment when Taggart's men had come out of the darkness, that Harlow still could not quite take it in.

Then his own men were around him, Kwolek and Garcia and the others, yelling to know what had happened. But Yrra clung to his arm and made herself heard above them.

"Brai! Where is Brai?"

Harlow looked around, his head aching and everything still in a fog. He spoke thickly, in her language.

"Brai's gone? Then they took him with them. They would, of course. He knows where Dundonald went and that's what Taggart is after."

"What the devil is the Survey coming to anyway?" cried Kwolek, in tones of pure outrage. "One captain knocking out another and shooting and—"

"Taggart's not Survey, he was a fake and his ship was a fake," Harlow said. He added bitterly, "And I fell for it, he fooled me one hundred percent."

He pushed aside Kwolek's steadying hand. "I'm all right. We've got to take off fast. We're going to run down Taggart, and we mustn't let him get out of radar range. Move!"

They moved, running back to the *Thetis*, Kwolek bawling orders. But Yrra still clung fiercely to Harlow.

"I am going with you," she said. "After Brai."

He was about to tell her that she couldn't and then he thought better of it. She had helped Brai break out of his cell, and when her people found that out he didn't know what they would do to her.

"All right, but we've got to take off fast," he said. "Come on." He ran, stumbling a little, toward the *Thetis*. Kwolek came running to meet them, and there was rage on his round red face.

"No take-off—not for a while," Kwolek said. "They were clever, blast them. Take a look at this."

"This" was one of the *Thetis'* projecting stern ion-tubes. Someone with a cutting-torch had cut halfway through it where it came out of the hull.

"That tube has to be replaced," said Kwolek, "or it'll blow high and handsome the minute we turn on the drive."

Harlow thought that Taggart hadn't overlooked a thing.

As they stood, stricken into silence, they heard a distant roar of voices. It came from out on the dark plain. Torches, very many of them now, were moving out there, and they were moving fast toward the *Thetis*. The shouting of the men who carried them swelled louder.

"My people have found out that Brai escaped," said Yrra. "They'll think we have Brai here, and—"

She did not need to finish. The intentions of the infuriated Ktashans were very clear.



## CHAPTER IV

It was very noisy inside the *Thetis*. Part of the noise was being made by Kwolek and his crew down in the bowels of the drive-room, but only a small part. Most of it came from outside.

Harlow felt as though he were standing in the interior of a great iron-sided drum. Yrra, beside him, had her hands over her ears. He could feel her flinch at the loudest and he knew she was frightened—not of the noises, but what they could mean to her.

The screen in front of them showed the ground around the ship. It swarmed with Ktashans. The sun was high now, and between its heat and their own activities most of the men had thrown off their short robes, leaving only loose drawers that did not hamper their movements. Their golden bodies gleamed, glowing with energy and sweat. They had hammered tirelessly on the *Thetis'* hull for more than three hours now and they showed no signs of flagging. So far the durametal hull had resisted everything they had from stones to crude drills and wrecking bars. But the stubborn methodical battering was getting on Harlow's nerves.

He leaned over to the intercom. "How's it going?"

Kwolek's voice answered him in a rasping snarl. "It won't go at all if you don't quit pestering me. Some fool question every five minutes!

"Okay," said Harlow. "Okay."

He didn't blame Kwolek. The boys were doing the best they could. They could have replaced the damaged tube in half the time from outside, but the Ktashans out there made that impractical. So it was being done under emergency-in-space procedure, from inside, only one difference, which would help some. They didn't have to wear vac-suits.

"It won't be long now," he said to Yrra, having to shout to make himself heard but trying to make it a comforting shout. He knew what she was thinking. He was thinking the same thing himself. If the Ktashans ever managed to break their way inside, their chances for living long were poor. They didn't have Brai now, but they had committed their sin against custom and tabu when they got Brai out of his prison. And what had happened afterward would probably only make N'Kann more determined than ever to punish them for having set loose no one knew what menaces connected with the Vorn.

He took Yrra by the shoulders and turned her away from the screen. He said, "I want to know about the Vorn—everything that your brother told Dundonald."

She was scared, but after a moment she answered him.

"He told Dundonald all that he knew, all that my people know. It is all legend, for it was two generations ago." She thought a moment, then went on. "The Vorn came to this world—"

Harlow interrupted. "How did they come? What did they look like?"

Yrra stared. "It was not known how they came. They had no ship like this one—no ship at all. They suddenly were just here."

And that, Harlow thought, was the same story that the Survey had heard on several worlds about the Vorn. They did not use ships, they just appeared. Some method of instantaneous transmission of matter seemed the only answer to that riddle. It was small wonder that the Cartel back on Earth was grabbing for such a secret.

"As to how they looked," Yrra was continuing, "the stories are strange. It is said that they were human, but not human like us—that they were of force and flame, not of flesh. Is such a thing possible?"

That, too, was the cryptic description that other worlds had given the Survey. It could mean anything, or nothing.

"I don't know," said Harlow. "Go on."

"It is said," Yrra told him, "that the Vorn spoke to our people in some way. Our people were very afraid. But the Vorn said they had not come to harm them, that they were star-rovers who visited many worlds and were merely visiting this one. They said they would go back to their own world, but might come here again some day."

"Where did the Vorn say their home-world was?" asked Harlow.

It was the crucial question and he waited tensely for the answer.

"In the Great Blackness," said Yrra, using the name given by the Ktashans to the Horsehead that was such a big feature of their night sky. "The Vorn said that beyond two blue stars that burn at the edge of the Blackness there is a bay that runs deep into it, and that a green star far in that bay was their native star."

Harlow's hopes leaped up. He had noted the twin blue stars on the fringe of the Horsehead—and this sounded like a clear clue.

"Is that what Brai told Dundonald?" he asked, and Yrra nodded.

"Yes. And that is why my people condemned Brai. For when Dundonald left here he said he would search for the world of the Vorn, and so great is my people's reverence for the Vorn that they thought that sacrilege."

The banging upon the hull of the *Thetis* suddenly stopped. In the abrupt silence, Harlow thought hard. He said, "Whether or not the Vorn are really there, that's where Dundonald went so we have to go there. And that's where Taggart will have headed, as soon as he got this information out of Brai."

"Brai would never tell a treacherous enemy like that anything—not even under torture," Yrra declared proudly.

Harlow looked at her a little a little pityingly. "You don't know Earthmen. They're too clever to use torture any more. They use a process led narco-synthesis, and other things. Brai will tell all he knows."

Yrra did not answer. She had turned to look at the screen and now her eyes were wide and bright with a new terror.

Harlow followed her gaze, and his own nerves tightened with a shock. He saw now why the Ktashans had stopped hammering on the *Thetis'* hull.

The golden men were all running out onto the plain to meet something that was coming slowly from the city. It trundled ponderously on wooden wheels, pushed by a gang of sweating men. It was a massive ram made of a colossal tree-trunk tipped with stone.

Harlow jumped to the intercom. "Kwolek, we've got maybe ten minutes! They're coming with a nutcracker that'll spring our plates for sure."

"Ten minutes? We need an hour more!" answered Kwolek's voice. "We've unshipped the damaged tube but it'll take that long to install a new one."

Harlow thought a moment, then made his decision. There was only one thing to be done.

"Suspend work," he said. "Seal the tube-mounting and come up here. We'll take off as is."

"Are you crazy?" Kwolek howled, but Harlow snapped off the intercom.

Kwolek and Garcia came into the bridge a minute later. Kwolek's red face was smeared with dirt and he was badly upset.

"You ought to know that a takeoff on unbalanced tubes will sunfish the *Thetis* all over," he said. Then he saw the screen and the sweating, triumphant Ktashan men on the plain, all pushing their massive ram faster and faster toward the ship. He said, "Oh." He bent over the intercom and spoke into it loud urgent words, ending up with a profane order to get it done fast. Harlow took Yrra by the arm and pulled her away from the screen, where she was still watching with fascinated horror the ponderous approach of the ram.

"This is going to be rough," he told her. "You'll probably be scared to death, but it won't last long."

*Either way, he thought, it won't last long. If we make it, or if we don't.*

He strapped her into his own bunk, making her as secure and comfortable as possible, and when he got through she looked so small and patient and scared and too proud to show it that he kissed her. Then he ran back to the control room.

Kwolek and Garcia were already strapped in, Kwolek with his ear glued to the intercom and both of them watching the screen. The ram was much closer now. Its massive head of red stone looked and was heavy enough to batter down the stone walls of a city.

Kwolek said, "Another couple of minutes. We don't want to take any chances of the seal blowing out when we hit vacuum."

He was sweating visibly. So was Garcia, but more neatly, refraining somehow from staining his tunic collar. Harlow said, "Give me the outside speaker. Fast."

He strapped himself into his own recoil chair while Garcia flipped switches and made connections on the communic board. He too watched the screen. He could see the scars of combat on the barrel of the ram, the histories of old battles written in the chips and cracks in the stone warhead. He could see the faces of the Ktashans, quite clearly. They were the faces of fanatics, uniform across the galaxy no matter where you found them. The men who knew they were right, the men without mercy.

Garcia handed him the mike. "Here." He looked at the great red head of the ram and folded himself as small as he could in the confines of his chair, as though he wanted to compact his atomic structure as solid as possible against the coming shock.

Harlow roared into the mike. Amplifiers picked up his voice and magnified it a thousand-fold and hurled it forth from the ship's exterior speaker system.

"N'Kann!" he cried. "Get your men out of there. We're taking off." In the screen he could see the startled faces upturned toward the gigantic sound of his voice, the bodies arrested in motion. "We're taking off! Run, or you die. N'Kann, you hear me? Leave the ram and run!"

Kwolek turned from the intercom and said, "All ready."

Harlow stared at the screen. Some of the Ktashans had turned to run. Others still stood undecided. Still others, the hard core of violence, shouted and waved their arms toward the ship, urging on the ram.

Harlow groaned. "The fools," he said. "I don't want to kill them. I can't—"

The ram inched ponderously forward.

"Get away!" he yelled at them with a note of desperation, and touched a stud on the central control board.

The *Thetis* quivered and began to hum to herself, a deep bass note of anticipation.

The ram stopped. The men stood by it, staring up. Behind them the larger crowd was melting away, slowly at first and then with increasing speed.

Harlow touched the stud again, advancing it a notch. The hum became a growling, a wordless song. The *Thetis* gathered herself for the upward leap, "Get away!" screamed Harlow into the mike, but his voice was almost drowned in the iron voice of the ship, and then suddenly the men turned from the ram and fled away across the plain.

Harlow set his teeth and slammed the firing key all the way down.

\* \* \* \*

The *Thetis* went up in a great wobbling surge, like a bird with an injured wing. But she was an awfully big bird, and terribly strong, and the violence of her thrashings about nearly snapped the eye-teeth out of Harlow's head. He fought through a deepening haze to keep her from flopping over out of the control of her gyros and crashing back to the ground, feeling the contents of his skull wash back and forth like water in a swinging kettle, feeling the straps cut into him when he went forward and the bolts of the chair prod him through all the padding when he was flung back, hearing strange rasping grunting whistling noises that he knew was himself trying to breathe. The control panel dimmed and at last disappeared beyond the red mist that filled the cabin, or his own head. His pawings at the keys became blind and unsure. Panic swept over him. *I'm blacking out*, he thought, *I can't hold her, she's going down*. He tried to scream, in anger and protest against this sudden end, in fear and regret. The contraction of his diaphragm forced blood into his head and held it there for a moment, and the mists cleared a little and the wild gyrations of his insides steadied down just enough for him to get hold of reality, if only by its thinnest edge.

He hung on, forcing himself to breathe deeply, slowly. One. Two. Three. The indicator lights winked peacefully on the board. The furious thrashings of the unbalanced drive had settled to a sort of regular lurch-and-spin no worse than that of a ship in a beam sea. The *Thetis* was in space. She was not going to crash.

He looked around at Kwolek and Garcia. Both of them were bleeding at the nose—he found that he was too—and their eyes were reddened and bulging, but they managed to grin back at him.

"That's a devil of a way to treat a good ship," croaked Kwolek. "If I ever get hold of that Taggart—"

"You and me both," said Harlow. "Let's get that tube fixed."

Kwolek was already unstrapping. He went staggering out of the control room. Harlow gave the controls to Garcia and staggered after him, heading toward his own quarters.

He found Yrra almost unconscious in the bunk, her flesh already showing some cruel bruises from the straps. He unbuckled them and wetted a towel in cold water, and wiped her face, smoothing the thick tumbled hair back from her forehead. Presently she opened her eyes and looked up at him, and he smiled.

"It's all right now," he said. "Everything's all right."

She whispered, "Brai?"

"We're going after him. We'll get him back."

"From the world of the Vorn." She was silent a moment, her gaze moving about the unfamiliar cabin. The tiny viewport was open. She looked through it at her first view of deep space, the stars burning all naked and glorious in their immensities of gloom, and Harlow saw the thrill of awe and terror go through her. Her fingers tightened on his wrist, and they were cold.

"On my own world I was not afraid of the Vorn," she whispered. "I laughed at N'Kann and the old men. But now—" She stared out the viewport. "Now I am in the country of the Vorn, and I am afraid." She turned suddenly and buried her face against him like a child. "I am afraid!"

Harlow looked over the top of her head to the viewport. The country of the Vorn. The black and tideless sea through which they voyaged at will between the island stars. Harlow had never been afraid of the Vorn, either. He had hardly believed in their existence. But now, when he looked at space and thought of the brooding Horsehead and the two blue suns that burned in its shadow, he felt a cold prickling chill run down his spine.

Dundonald had gone that way and he had not come back.

\* \* \* \*

That prickling of fear did not leave Harlow in the long days that followed—arbitrary "days" marked out of the timeless night through which the *Thetis* fled. With the damaged tube replaced, she built up velocities rapidly on a course that took her straight toward the Horsehead. There was no sign of Taggart's *Sunfire* on the radar. He was too far ahead for that. In fact, he was so far ahead that there was no hope of overtaking him or forestalling any action he might take on the world of the Vorn, which he would reach long before Harlow. Any sensible man would have said the pursuit was hopeless, but the men of the *Thetis* were not sensible. If they had been they would never have signed up with Survey. Also, they were angry. They had been made fools of, and they had almost died of their foolishness, and now they were determined to catch up with Taggart if it took them the rest of their lives.

Which might not be very long, Harlow thought. He looked gloomily at the screen that showed the panorama of space ahead of the *Thetis*. It was one of the most magnificent sights in the galaxy. You sat stunned and wordless before it, and no matter how often or how long you stared at it the wonder and the glory did not depart. There was the whole vast canvas of the universe for a backdrop, and all across it, arrogant, coal-black, and light-years vast, the Horsehead reared against a bursting blaze of suns. Magnificent, yes. Splendid and beautiful, yes. But there was another word that came to Harlow's mind, an old word not much used any more. The, word was sinister.

Yrra spent as much time as she could with him in the control room, watching the screen, straining her eyes for some glimpse of the ship that carried her brother. Harlow noticed that the Horsehead had the same effect on her. There was a sign she made toward it, furtive and quick as though she were ashamed of it, and he knew that it was a Ktashan sign to ward off evil.

For a long time the relative positions of the tiny ship and the great black nebula seemed not to change.

Then gradually the blazing fringe of stars passed off the screen and the blackness grew and swallowed the whole viewfield, lost its shape, and then finally produced a defined edge outlined against the light of distant suns, and eventually that black coast-like showed the marker-lights of two blue sullen stars.

The *Thetis* decelerated and felt her way between the beacon suns.

Beyond them was a bay, a bight in that incredible coastline. And now fear really caught the men of the *Thetis*—a fear much greater than any they might have felt for the deeds of men or the legendary Vorn. This was something absolutely elemental, and it had to do with the terror of darkness and alienage and unhuman might that go back to the beginnings of the race.

None of them had ever been near a black nebula before. They were deathtraps, blind areas where radar was useless, where a ship was helpless to protect herself against drifting stellar debris, where you might ram yourself full on into a drowned dark star before you ever knew it was there. Now they were creeping antlike into the very flanks of the Horsehead. The bay was relatively narrow, and it wound and twisted around great shoulders of blackness, past upflung cliffs of dust that lifted a million miles to crests that blazed with the fires of hidden stars, over crevasses that plunged a million miles to break in a ragged cleft through which stars showed as faint and distant as those of Earth on a cloudy night. Everywhere you looked, up, down, ahead or on both sides, those incredibly vast clouds enclosed you in their eternal blackness, like the shrouding draperies of a funeral couch made ready for some god.

Kwolek shook his head. "For God's sake," he said. "If the Vorn lived in here, no wonder they found a way to conquer space. They had to!"

The *Thetis* crept on and on in that nighted cleft, and presently there was light ahead, the blaze of a green sun that touched the looming clouds around it with a lurid glow.

They crept closer and saw a planet.

"That must be it," said Garcia. "The world of the Vorn."

"If there's anything in the Ktashan legends," said Harlow. "Anyway, it's the world where Dundonald went, and where Taggart is. We're going to have to be damned careful going in—"

Yrra, who was sitting at the back of the control room, suddenly made a small sound of exhaled breath.

It was a very curious sound, suggesting a fear too great for mere screaming. Harlow's skin turned cold as though from a sluice of ice water. He turned his head. He saw Kwolek and Garcia, both frozen, staring at something still behind him. He saw Yrra. A sickness grew in him, a fatal feeling that something totally beyond human experience as he knew it was already confronting him. He continued to turn, slowly, until he could see.

He was not wrong. From out of the blackness of the Horsehead and the fire of an alien star, silently, with no need for clumsy armor or the sealing of locks, something had come to join them in the ship.

Yrra whispered a word. She whispered it so faintly that under ordinary conditions he might not have heard it, but now it rang in his ears with a sound like the last trump. She said:

"*The Vorn!*"

## CHAPTER V

There was nothing monstrous or terrible about the Vorn as far as looks went—no crude grotesqueries to

shock the eye. It hung in the still air of the cabin, a patch of radiance like a star-cloud seen from far off so that the individual points of light are no more than infinitesimal sparks. The Vorn's component motes seemed at first to be motionless and constant, but as Harlow stared he became aware of a rippling, a fluctuation of intensity that was as regular and natural as breathing, and this was the crowning touch that turned his blood to ice. The thing was alive. Creature and force and flame, as the legends said, not human but living, thinking, sensing, watching.

Watching him. This unhuman voyager between the stars, watching him and pondering his fate.

Kwolek had picked up something and was holding it with his arm drawn back for a throw, but he was just holding it. Garcia just sat. His lips were moving, as though he prayed hastily under his breath. Yrra slid very slowly and quietly onto the floor in an attitude of abasement.

Harlow spoke. Some automatic reflex set his tongue in motion, and words came off it, sounding so stiff and ridiculous that he was ashamed, but he could not think of any others. These words came easy, straight out of the Manual. He had said them many times before.

"We belong to the Star Survey. We are on a peaceful mission. We have come to your world—"

*Knock it off, Mark!*

Harlow knocked it off in midbreath. He stared at Garcia and Kwolek. Neither one of them had opened his mouth.

Yet somebody had spoken. Kwolek started violently. "Who said that?"

"Nobody said anything," Garcia whispered.

"They did, too. They said, 'Kwolek, put down that silly lump of iron before you get a cramp in your shoulder.'"

"You're crazy," said Garcia quietly, and seemed to go back to his praying.

"Mark," said the voice again to Harlow, "I seem very strange and frightening to you but that is only because you don't yet understand the scientific principles that make this changed form of mine possible. My atoms are in different order from that in which you last saw them, but I'm otherwise quite the same. Well, no. Not quite. But near enough so that I can truthfully say that I'm still Dundonald."

"*Dundonald*," said Harlow, staring at the patch of fluctuating radiance that hovered in the air before him. He added softly, "For God's sake!"

Kwolek and Garcia turned their heads and looked at him. They spoke almost together.

"Dundonald?"

"You heard him," Harlow muttered.

"They didn't hear me at all," the voice said to him. "Shake the cobwebs out of your head, man. You can't afford to be stupid now, you haven't the time. This is telepathy, Mark. I'm communicating with you direct because it's the only way I have now. Unfortunately I haven't the energy to communicate with all of you at once. Now listen. I've been waiting for you—"

"What are you talking about?" Garcia said to Harlow. "What do you mean, Dundonald?"

"You better take the time to tell them," Harlow said to the patch of light. "I doubt if they'll believe me."

He put his hands over his face and trembled quietly for a moment, trying to understand that his quest for Dundonald was ended, that this amorphous cloud of energy-motes was his friend, his drinking companion, the flesh-and-blood Dundonald with the strong hands and ruffled brownish hair and the bright blue eyes that were always looking past the familiar to the distant veiled shadows of the undiscovered.

He could not believe it.

"That doesn't matter," said Dundonald's thought-voice in his mind. "Just accept it for the time being. What does matter is that Taggart is all ready for you. That ship of his carried heavy armaments. He has them set up, and the moment he catches your ship on his radar the missiles will fly. Then you'll be dead and I'll never get back, so please mind what I say."

"You'll never get back?" repeated Harlow. "Back where?"

"To the old me. Solidity. Taggart has the Converter. It's guarded night and day and I'd be killed on sight if I stepped through. So would any of the Vorn, I suppose, though none of them have for centuries. So—"

"Wait," said Harlow. "Just wait a minute. I'm trying to understand, but you've lost me. Converter?"

"Of course, a converter. What did you think made us—me—like this?"

"I don't know," said Harlow numbly. "Just what is 'like this'?"

"Exactly as you see," said Dundonald. The patch of radiance bunched up, swirled, then shifted so quickly that Harlow thought it was gone. "Matter into energy, only the ancient Vorn solved the problem of achieving the conversion without losing either intelligence or personality. The individual remains unchanged. Only his body is free of the limiting shackles of the flesh."

The patch of radiance moved toward the iron bulkhead. It glided right through the solid iron, and then came dancing back again.

"No more barriers. No more death. No wonder the Vorn lost interest in the old planet-bound life. I tell you, Mark, even in my brief term as one of them, I've seen done things—Have you any conception of what it is like to fly free as a bird between the stars, covering light-years at the flick of a thought, with no fear of anything? And not only the stars, Mark, but other galaxies. Time and distance are only words without meaning. The greatest secret ever discovered. Nothing so crude and clumsy as the transmission of matter, which would merely send you like a package from transmitter to receiver, leaving you as planetbound as ever. No, the Vorn developed a mechanism that gave them the real freedom of the universe."

The radiance danced and floated, and Kwolek and Garcia and Yrra stared at it with naked fear, and the thoughts from it kept pouring into Harlow's mind and he did not think he could take any more. It was easy enough to talk of leaving off the shackles of flesh and wearing a body of pure energy, but it was too big for his brain to grasp as yet. He said, "Dundonald."

"Yes?"

"I'm Mark Harlow, remember? I'm just a guy from Earth. You spring this on me all at once, you expect me to—" He broke off, and then he clenched his hands and made himself go on again. He said, "Listen. I'm talking to a patch of light. And I get a thought in my mind that this light-patch says it's Dundonald, a man I knew. It's hard to take. You know?"



Dundonald's thought came with a pitying quality in it. "Yes, Mark. I suppose it is."

"All right." Harlow felt sweat damp on his forehead, but he stared straight at the misty radiance and said, "Give it to me slow, then, will you?"

"All right, Mark, I'll give it to you slow. But not *too* slow, please, for time is running out."

Harlow asked, "You found the world of the Vorn from the legend Brai told you about?"

"Yes."

"You found the Vorn on it?"

"No. No, Mark—the Vorn have been gone from that world for a long, long time. Ever since they found out how to change and become—like me. I found their dead cities, and I found the Converter. Not them."

"The Converter that made you this way. What made you do it, Dundonald?"

The answering thought was strong. "I had to. I had to *try* the thing, after I learned its secret. I went through. I was still like this—like the Vorn—when Taggart's ship came."

"Ah," said Harlow. "And then-?"

"My men, my ship, were waiting," Dundonald answered. "Taggart took them by surprise, easily. In the fight, three of my men were killed. He has the others locked up."

Harlow, in the anger he felt, almost forgot he was not talking to Dundonald in the flesh. He said, between his teeth, "He's very good at trick surprises, is Taggart."

"He learned," said Dundonald, "that I was—on the other side. He has armed men watching the Converter. If I try to come back through, he'll have me."

"But what's he doing—just sitting there?" demanded Harlow.

"He's waiting, Harlow. He sent out communic messages, to someone named Frayne. Frayne, I gathered, commands another of the secret ships that the Cartel sent to find me and the Vorn. Taggart messaged him to come to the world of the Vorn, to help him take the Converter away."

The appalling picture began to come clear to Harlow. If the Cartel ships got this Converter away, the ultimate freedom of the universe would be in the hands of a group of greedy men who could exploit the greatest of all discoveries for their own power and profit.

"Oh, no," said Harlow. "We've got to stop that. Can we reach that world before this other ship—Frayne's ship—does?"

"I don't know," said Dundonald. "Frayne can't be too far away or he'd be out of range of communic. That's why you've got to hurry, to get there first. Yet you can't land right where Taggart is, his ship radar will spot you coming and his missiles will get you before you're even close. The only way you can get to him is through *that*."

And the patch of radiance became a round ball and moved to the visiscreen, touching the black outward bulge of a looming cloudcliff.

"I can guide you through it, Harlow. But you'll have to come down beyond the curve of the planet and

walk the rest of the way to Lurluun—that's that old Vorn city where the Converter is. After that—"

"After that," Harlow said, "we'll hit Taggart with everything we've got."

"Which isn't much," Dundonald said, "if all you have are the popguns prescribed by Regulation Six. Well, they'll have to do. Change your course now, and make it fast."

Harlow, as he moved, glimpsed the strained face of Yrra gazing in awe at the floating core of radiance. He said, "Something else, Dundonald. "The girl's brother, Brai. She came after him. Is he still living?"

"He's with Taggart's prisoners—my men," came the answering thought. "How long any of them will live if Taggart pulls this off, you can guess."

Harlow told Yrra briefly, in her own language, and saw the tears start in her eyes.

"For God's sake, will you hurry!" prodded Dundonald's thought.

\* \* \* \*

Feeling very strange indeed, like a man dreaming or drunk or in partial shock, Harlow spun the *Thetis* around on her tail and sent her plunging toward the black cliff of dust.

He filled in Kwolek and Garcia as much as he could in a few words, and had Garcia get on the intercom to the crew. He tried not to look at the dust-cliff ahead. It was a million miles each way and it looked as solid as basalt. The green glare of the distant sun touched its edges with a poisonous light.

"Relax," said Dundonald. "It only looks that way. I've been through it a dozen times."

"Fine," said Harlow, "but we're still bound to our old fleshly selves, not at all impervious to floating hunks of rock."

"I'll take you through, Harlow. Don't worry."

Harlow worried.

The cliff was black and imminent before them. Instinctively Harlow raised his arm before his face, flinching as they hit. There was no impact. Only suddenly it was dark, as dark as Erebus, and the telltales on the board flopped crazily. The *Thetis* was blind and deaf, racing headlong through the stellar dust.

Kwolek muttered, "This is crazy. We just imagined we saw and heard—"

"Shut up," whispered Harlow. "I can't hear—" He looked around. Panic hit him. The patch of radiance was gone. Dundonald was gone. Dundonald? How did he know it was Dundonald and not a deceitful stranger, one of the old Vorn sent to lead him to destruction? He could wander forever in this cosmic night until the ship was hulled and they died, and still they would wander forever—

"Pull your nose up," came Dundonald's thought sharply. "Three degrees at least. What the hell, Mark! Pull it up. Now. Starboard ten degrees—forget the degrees. Keep turning until I tell you to stop. Good. Now keep her steady—there's some stuff ahead but we'll go under it. Steady—"

Harlow did as he was told, and presently he saw what he had not seen before—the misty brightness that was Dundonald's strange new being drawn thin as a filament and extending out of sight through the fabric of the ship. Harlow found time to be ashamed.

The utter dark went on, not quite forever. There was no thinning, no diffusion. Or perhaps they went through the fringe area so swiftly that none was apparent. One moment the screens were dead black and

in the next moment the green sunblaze burst painfully upon their eyes and they were out of the cloud, back in the vast, dark walled bay of the Vorn. But their detour through the dark had now brought them out on the other side of the green star and its planet.

Dundonald's thought reached him, urgent. "Taggart expects you to come after him, straight in through the bay the way he came. He's got his ship cruising out in front of the planet to radar your approach."

"And we've got the planet between us and his ship, masking us," Harlow said. "If we keep it between, we can land secretly."

"That's it, Harlow. But you've got to hurry! I'll guide you in."

*Strange pilot for the strangest landing a man ever made, thought Harlow. Don't think about it, don't think about what Dundonald has become, play it as it comes, take her in.*

He took her in. The *Thetis* hit the atmosphere and it was like plunging into a green well.

"I'm trying to land you as near Lurluun as I can," said Dundonald. "But this planet rotates, and Lurluun is rolling toward the picketship out there, and you have to keep the curve of the planet hiding you."

The ship plunged downward, and now weird-colored forests rolled beneath them, vast deserts of greenish sand, mountains of black rock stained with verdigris like old copper, a strange, unearthly landscape under the light of the emerald sun that was setting as this side of the planet turned away from it.

A low black range rose ahead of them and Dundonald urged him toward it, and the *Thetis* went down on a long slant with the screeching roar of riven atmosphere about them. And Harlow, his hands tense on the controls, thought that he saw scattered cities fly past beneath them.

"All dead," came Dundonald's thought. "More and more of the Vorn took to star-roving and fewer and fewer came back, until gradually the race here died out. And now hardly any of the Vorn are left in even this part of the galaxy. They've moved on and out."

An instant later he warned, "*Drop* her! This side of the ridge!"

They landed in a desert where a river had cut a deep fantastic gorge down through the sand and the layers of many-colored rock. The tawny waters ran toward the rocky ridge, and through a canyon Dundonald said, "Don't waste time on atmosphere-check, the air's breathable. I lived here for months, and the Vorn lived here for ages, and they were as human as us."

Harlow went to the intercom and gave an order. "Crack the lock. All hands out."

When they went outside, it was into air that was dry and warm and faintly metallic in smell. The green desert stretched around them, and the light of the viridescent sun struck brilliantly across it and painted the looming black rock of the ridge with poisonous colors. There was a silence, except for the murmur of the river in its gorge.

The men looked dumbly at each other and then at Harlow. And then, as a little dancing star of radiance flicked past them and bobbed close to Harlow, the tough Earth faces changed. Harlow had tried to explain but it was no use, all they knew was that the dancing star was supposed to have been human once and they did not like it, they were afraid and they showed it. All of them, and that included Kwolek and Garcia and Yrra too, kept looking at the floating radiance that had been Dundonald.

"Don't speak aloud to me, they're getting panicky," came Dundonald's thought. "Think it strongly, and I'll get it."

"Which way to Lurluun?" thought Harlow.

"The way the river flows. But you can't follow the river, Harlow, the gorge is too deep. You'll have to go over the ridge."

"How many men has Taggart got there?"

"Fourteen," Dundonald answered. "All heavily armed. Plus eight more out in his ship."

Harlow spoke aloud to Kwolek. "Serve out the sidearms."

The little stunners were duly handed out—purely defensive weapons to be used only to save the lives of personnel. They did not have an effective range of more than a few feet, and they did not carry a lethal charge—Star Survey was very tender of native feelings. The light feel of the thing in his hand did not give Harlow much confidence.

He said aloud to the men, "You know what Taggart did to us back at ML-441. Here's our chance to get back at him. He's over that ridge. We're going over and hit him."

"All of us, sir?" said Garcia. "Don't you want a guard left on the *Thetis*?"

Harlow shook his head. "Unless we overpower that bunch, we won't be coming back to the *Thetis*. We're twenty to their fourteen, but they've got weapons that make ours look like water-pistols."

Yrra's face flamed with eagerness in the fading green light. "Then I go with you too."

Harlow looked at her dubiously. "I suppose you have to. Stay close to me, and obey orders."

He turned toward the patch of radiance hovering in the air beside him, shining brighter now that the green sun was setting and the light lessening. He thought, "Dundonald, can you go ahead and find out where Taggart has his sentries posted in that city? I must know exactly before we go in."

"Yes. I can do that."

And then men of the *Thetis* flinched back as the radiance whirled and spun and then flashed away through the gathering twilight. A shining feather, a shooting star, an incredible will-of-the-wisp, darting toward-the looming black ridge and disappearing.

Harlow raised his voice. "We're moving out right now. Pick them up and keep them going."

And in a compact column they started across the sand, keeping a little away from the river-gorge. As the last rays of the green star lit the rock rampart ahead, Harley surveyed it dubiously. He thought he saw a way over it but was not yet sure.

Then he found that they were following an ancient roadway, one so drifted over by sand that he would have strayed from it had there not been stone markers along it. Back from the road rose dark, low, rambling structures that looked like scattered villas. The wind had piled the sand in drifts around them. And in the deepening twilight, there was no sound but the wind and the river. Nobody had lived in those villas for thousands of years.

Yrra, marching beside him, shivered. "It is evil," she said. "Men were meant to live like men. Suppose everyone were to become like the Vorn? All the worlds of the galaxy would be like this."

It was a frightening thought. Harlow's mind leaped ahead, in imagination, to a time in the future when the human race might vanish utterly and only creatures like Dundonald would be left, immortal, sterile,

building nothing, creating nothing, existing only for the thrill of pure knowledge, lovely bits of force and flame wandering forever through the reaches of space, universes without end.

Was that the ultimate goal of a race who went to space, their final evolution? Had the first rockets been only the first steps of an evolution that would take man and make something more than human and less than human of him?

He forced that eerie thought from his mind. They were nearing the ridge and he saw now that the ancient roadway climbed along its face in an easy grade.

"This way," he called.

The darkness was becoming absolute. There were no stars in the sky, nothing but the blackness of the mighty Horsehead in which this world was embayed. The tiny flash of his pocket-light was drowned.

But as they climbed higher, Harlow thought that he saw a steady pulsing of light from the other side of the ridge. It grew stronger in the sky. They reached the crest of the ridge.

They stood and stared, all their faces bewildered and strange in the light that now struck upon them.

"What is it?" whispered Yrra. A few miles from them, on the other side of the ridge, a great column of opalescent light rose skyward. It was most intense at its base, fading as it ascended. It seethed and coruscated uncannily, yet it maintained itself and sent a strange glow out to touch everything around it.

By that glow, Harlow saw that the opalescent pillar rose from the center of a city. Dark roofs, walls, towers, quivered in the unearthly glow, and shadows clotted the ways between them. There was no other light at all in the silent place, and no visible movement.

"That's the city of the Vorn," he said. "Lurluun. It's dead, all right."

"But the light?"

"I don't know—" Then Harlow broke off in relief as he saw a flying, shining star that came rushing up toward them. "Dundonald can tell us."

Dundonald had something to tell them, but it was not that. From that hovering star of radiance, his thoughts beat at Harlow frantically.

"It may be too late, Harlow. They've had a message from Frayne. Frayne's ship has entered the Horsehead and is coming on to this world right now!"

## CHAPTER VI

The sudden imminence of complete defeat had a curiously numbing effect upon Harlow. He had come a long way, they all had, and they were tired, and it seemed that they were too late and it had all been for nothing. And what was he doing so far from Earth, standing in the night of an alien world and looking across a dead, dark city at a pillar of glory while a floating radiance that had once been human whispered in his mind?

Then Harlow's momentary despair was swept away by good, strong rage. His anger had nothing to do with his mission, important as that was. It was ordinary human anger at being beaten, out-thought, bested, by someone cleverer than himself. He would not let Taggart get away with this!

"Then we've got to hit Taggart before Frayne's ship arrives," he said.

He spoke aloud, so that Kwolek and the others could understand as well as Dundonald. He asked Dundonald, "Where are Taggart and his sentries?"

"You see that pillar of light, Harlow?"

"I see it. What is it?"

"It's the operative beam of the Converter. It's perpetual, undying. It springs from the mechanism of the Converter itself. Enter the base of the beam and its forces take the atoms of your body, the very electrons, and rearrange them so that you become like me—like the Vorn. But if, as a Vorn, you enter the upper part of the beam, it triggers the reverse process and the beam draws you down and re-arranges your electrons into solidity, into ordinary humanity, again."

"You can tell me how it works later—right now I've got to know about those sentries," pressed Harlow.

"I'm trying to tell you," thought Dundonald. "Up on the rim of the Converter itself are two guards with auto-rifles—in case I try to emerge. They also can cover every foot of the big plaza in which the Converter stands. Taggart and his men have their base in a large building on the south side of the plaza. They've got a communic there and their prisoners—my men and Brai—are locked up in a windowless room of the building."

"Taggart's awake?"

"Yes. He was talking by communic with his ship out there. Telling them to hit your ship with missiles the moment you show up, but not to mistake Frayne's ship for yours."

Harlow tried to think fast. This was a soldier's job and he was not a soldier, Star Survey didn't teach strategy. Nor was there time to evolve elaborate plans. He said, "We'll have to knock out the two outside sentries before we can hit Taggart, then. We'll see what the set-up is. Let's move."

They went forward on the double, down the descending roadway toward the dark city that brooded under the loom of the ridge. For light they had the opalescent rays of the great column of brilliance ahead.

Their hurrying feet shuffled the dust and sand of thousands of years' drifting, and made echoes that whispered in the starless night. The echoes became louder when they came down into one of the wide streets that led straight away between low black buildings toward the vertical beam.

Fast and far had Earthmen come from their little world, thought Harlow. The swift snowballing of technical progress had made one breakthrough after another and now a score of Earthmen were hurrying through the night of an alien star-world toward something that could be the biggest breakthrough of all.

A deep shiver shook Harlow as he looked at the shining will-of-the-wisp gliding beside him, and then at the dark and silent buildings. Men had once lived here as men. Now they were all gone, dispersed as the radiant Vorn far across the galaxies, and had that breakthrough been good? He thought of a secret like that in the hands of ambitious men, and looked again at the gliding, dancing star beside him, and he quickened his pace.

They came to where the street debauched into the plaza. They kept close against the side of a building, and Harlow motioned his men to stay there in the shadow. He and Kwolek and Garcia with the flitting gleam of Dundonald, moved forward until they could peer out into the open space.

*Plaza, park, shrine—what would you call it?* Harlow wondered.

Whatever it had been called, this smoothly-paved space was vast. So vast that far away around its curving rim, a parked star-cruiser as large as his own looked small.

"My *Starquest*," murmured Dundonald's thought.

Harlow spared it only a glance. His eyes flew to the thing that dominated the plaza, the city, the whole planet.

The Converter. The ultimate triumph of an alien science, the machine that had made men into the Vorn.

It did not look like a machine. At the center of the great paved area there rose a massive, flat-topped cement pedestal. Whatever apparatus there was, whatever perpetual power-source of nuclear or other nature, was hidden inside that. A flight of steps on each side of it led up to the summit of the eminence.

From the center of this flat summit, the opalescent beam sprang upward into the night. At its base, the beam was a curdled, seething luminescence that was dazzling to the eyes, flinging quaking aurora-rays in a twitching brilliance all around the plaza. Higher up, the beam imperceptibly lessened in intensity until far up in the night it was only a vague shining. The Converter. The ultimate step in space travel, the gateway to the freedom of the cosmos.

"The guards—see!" rang Dundonald's thought, urgently.

With an effort, Harlow wrenched his mind from the hypnotic fascination of the beam. Now he saw the two men.

They stood on the unrailed ledge or balcony that surrounded the beam, and the beam itself was between them. Their backs were to the beam as they could not stand its brilliance for too long, but they looked alertly upward and around them every few moments. Each of them carried a heavy, old-fashioned auto-rifle, cradled for instant use.

"They watch in case I try to come back out through the beam," thought Dundonald. "Always, two watch. And they can see the whole plaza."

"Where are Taggart and the others?" whispered Harlow.

"See there—away to your left, not far from the *Starquest*. That square building with the domed roof."

Harlow saw it. It was not hard to identify, for light shone out through the windows of that building and all the others were dark.

He dropped back a little to where Kwolek was looking ahead with wide, wondering eyes.

"You'll take all the men except Garcia and me," he told Kwolek. "Circle around and approach that building from behind. Wait near its front door until Garcia and I have got the two sentries up there on the Converter. Then, when Taggart and the rest come out, jump them fast."

"Okay," said Kwolek, but Yrra had pressed forward and now was asking Harlow anxiously, "What of Brai?"

"If we overpower Taggart and his bunch we can release the prisoners easily," Harlow told her. "But that has to come first." He added, "You're to stay right here where you are, Yrra. No arguments! All right, Kwolek, get them going."

Kwolek did. They made a considerable-looking little body of dark figures as they slipped away across the street and disappeared among the buildings. But Harlow thought of their little short-range stunners, and of Taggart's old-fashioned lethal rifles, and he did not feel too happy.

He and Garcia were left, with Dundonald hovering beside them and Yrra a little behind them. Her face was both scared and mutinous.

"Listen, Harlow," came Dundonald's rapid thought. "You and Garcia will be seen and shot if you just barge out onto the plaza. Let me distract those two sentries first."

"You? How?"

"You'll see. Wait till they turn their backs toward you."

With that thought, Dundonald suddenly flashed away from them. Like a little shooting-star he sped out and upward across the plaza, toward the upper reaches of the towering beam.

Harlow, watching tensely with Garcia, saw the two sentries up on the rim of the Converter suddenly point upward and call to each other. They were looking up at the eery, shining star that was Dundonald, as it flitted high up around the beam. They had their rifles ready for instant use now, and they were facing the beam.

"They think Dundonald's going to come through the beam—they're getting set to shoot if he does!" muttered Harlow. "That gives us a chance—you take the farther guard, I'll take the nearest."

"Luck," whispered Garcia, and went out across the plaza in a swift run, looking miraculously neat after all they had been through, his little stunner glistening in his hand.

Harlow was right after him, taking a slightly different course. The two guards up there still had their backs to him, facing toward the beam and looking tensely up at Dundonald's firefly circlings.

Harlow reached the base of the steps on his side of the Converter. They were wide steps, their cement worn by the wind and weather of thousands of years.

He went quietly up them, his stunner in his hand. He had to get close, the little shocker-gadget had almost no range. He hoped he would get close enough.

*And how many other men have gone up these steps toward the beam of the Converter, never to return? How many men and women have left their humanity behind them here to break through into the wider cosmos?*

\* \* \* \*

He reached the top of the steps, and crouched a moment. The guard on this side of the Converter ledge was fifteen feet away, his back to Harlow.

Harlow waited, his eyes searching for the other guard part way around the beam. He and Garcia must make their play at the same time. But he could see the man only vaguely, through that brilliance. The beam sprang up from what seemed a transparent plate, twenty feet in diameter, and at this close distance it was utterly dazzling.

He was scared, and he was sweating, he wanted to jump forward and act but he mustn't compromise Garcia's chances, he had to wait...

He waited too long, and everything happened at once.



The other guard, partway around the beam, suddenly crumpled down onto the cement ledge. Garcia had come up close behind and had used his stunner.

Instantly, Harlow jumped forward toward his own man. But this guard had seen his comrade fall and he was whirling around, opening his mouth to shout.

He saw Harlow coming and threw up his rifle to fire. Harlow triggered the stunner. But he was running and he was not too used to weapons, and the invisible conical electric field of the stunner only brushed against the guard. The man staggered, but he did not fall.

Desperately, Harlow ran in. The stunner's charge was exhausted until it re-cycled, and he had to get in past that rifle. He hit the guard in the mouth as he started to yell an alarm, and then grabbed him.

"Harlow!" rang a wild thought in his mind. "No time now, Frayne's coming in—"

Harlow staggered, wrestling clumsily with the guard on the wide stone ledge, with the shining star that was Dundonald dancing in a frantic way close to him. The blood was roaring in his ears, and—No. The roaring was in the sky, it was getting louder and louder, a great dark bulk was sinking on plumes of flame toward the plaza.

Garcia reached him just as Harlow swung again and hit the guard's chin. The man collapsed and fell, his rifle clanging on the cement.

"Harlow! Run!"

The radiance that was Dundonald was whirling with wild urgency beside him yet, and Harlow heard his frantic thought. Had it been a voice he could not have heard, for the roar of the descending cruiser drowned everything.

Harlow cried, "Come through, Dundonald—through the beam!"

"Too late!" was the answering, agonized thought. "Look!"

The star-cruiser landed on the plaza, and instantly its lock opened. At the same moment over in front of the domed square building, shots rang out as Kwolek and the *Thetis* crew rushed Taggart's men, just emerging from the building.

Out of the newly-landed cruiser men came running. They had auto-rifles too, and Kwolek and the *Thetis* men were caught in a crossfire.

Harlow was starting to run for the steps when Garcia crumpled.

He caught him. The Mexican's neat tunic was drilled right through over the heart, and his face was lax and lifeless.

Bullets screamed off the cement beside Harlow and he turned and saw men from the cruiser—two—now three—of them, shooting at him.

Dundonald was a star beside him and the star was screaming in his mind.

"You can't run now! The beam, Harlow—it's that or death!"

The little battle was over and they had lost it, and Kwolek and the *Thetis* survivors were helplessly surrendering, and the rifles out there were leveled to rip through Harlow as he stood silhouetted against the blazing beam.

He had a choice, of dying right there or not dying.

He chose. He threw himself into the beam.

## CHAPTER VII

The impact was incredible. It was birth and death and resurrection all happening instantaneously and all together, with the violence of a whirlwind. Harlow knew fear for a brief instant, and then the very concept of fear as he knew it was overwhelmed and lost in an emotion so new and vast that he had no word for it.

He never really knew whether or not he lost consciousness. Perhaps that was because his whole concept of “consciousness” changed too, out of all recognition. There was a brilliant flare of light all through him when he entered the misty glowing pillar of force. The light was inside him as well as out, exploding in every cell of his flesh and bone, brain and marrow. It was as though for an instant his whole corporeal being had achieved a strange state of glory. But after that instant he was not sure of light or dark, time or place, being or not-being. Something unbelievably weird was happening to his body. He tried to see what it was but all he could achieve was a blurring of color like a kaleidoscope run mad. He could only feel and that did not tell him much because he had never felt anything like this before and so had no frame of reference whatever.

Only he knew that all at once he felt free.

It was a feeling so joyous, so poignant, that it was almost unbearable.

Free.

Free of weight and weariness, the dragging limitations of the flesh. Free of want and need, free of duty, free of responsibility, free forever of the haunting fear of death. Never in his life before, even in its most supreme moments, had he felt truly free, truly at one with the universe. It was revelation. It was life.

He leapt forward, impelled by the joy that was in him, and then he sensed that Dundonald was there waiting for him. It did not seem at all strange now that Dundonald should be a hovering cloud of sparks, a hazy patch of sheer energy. It seemed natural and right, the only sort of form for a sensible man to have. His thought—contact with him was clear and instantaneous, infinitely better than speech.

*Well, now you've done it, Dundonald thought. How do you feel?*

*Free!* cried Harlow. *Free! Free!*

*Yes,* said Dundonald. *But look there.*

Harlow looked, not with eyes any more but with a far clearer sense that had replaced them.

The men with rifles—Taggart's men and Frayne's men—stood looking baffledly toward the Converter, the gateway through which he, Harlow, had plunged. The change, then, had been very swift, almost instantaneous. Kwolek and the other surviving men of the *Thetis* were being disarmed, surrounded by more of Taggart's men.

One of them held Yrra. She was staring at the glowing misty beam of the Converter with anguished eyes and she was crying out a word. The word was Harlow. It was his name. He could read her thoughts, very dimly compared to Dundonald's, but clear enough. He was astounded by what he read in them.

"I could have told you how she thought of you," Dundonald thought. "But I didn't think I should."

Some vestiges of Harlow's recent humanity still remained. He dropped down close to Yrra and she saw him, her face mirroring shock and pain but no fear now. There was another emotion in her far stronger than fear. The man who was holding her saw Harlow too and flinched away, raising his gun.

Harlow ignored him. He spoke to Yrra's mind. *I'm safe*, he said. *Don't worry, I'll come back. I love you.*

Stupid words. Human words. Everything had failed and he could not come back any more than Dundonald.

The watch over the Converter would be doubled now, to guard against any possibility of his and Dundonald's return during the time it would take the technicians from the Cartel ships to find a way of dismantling and removing the Converter. And once that was done, the way would be closed to them forever.

Yrra's voice—or was it her thoughts?—hurt him with sorrow and longing. He was not so free as he had thought. And then he saw Taggart talking to a neat efficient pleasant-looking chap with eyes like two brown marbles, and he knew that it must be Frayne. He felt their thoughts, cold, quick, clear, perfectly ruthless. For the first time he understood what it was that set men like that apart from the bulk of the human race. Their minds were like cold wells into which no light or warmth ever penetrated. They might counterfeit friendship or even love, but the capacity for them was not really there. All the emotions were turned inward, bound tightly around the core of Self.

And these were the men who had beaten him, the men who were robbing the galaxy of its mightiest possession.

Harlow became aware that he could still feel hate.

He sprang at the men. He reached out to strike them, and the substance of his being passed through them like bright smoke. They were startled, but that was all. And Taggart smiled.

"Is that you, Harlow? I thought so. There are disadvantages in not having a body, aren't there?" He gestured toward the Converter. "You can have yours back any time. Just come through."

*And get killed? No use to lie, Taggart. I can read your mind.*

"Well, then, you'll have to wait and hope that some day I'll get curious about your kind of life and come through where we can meet on equal ground. Though I wonder just what you could do to me even so."

Dundonald was close beside Harlow now. "Come on, you can't do any good here. As he says, there are disadvantages."

The fingers Harlow no longer itched for a weapon. "I'm not going back through."

"They'll kill you the instant you return. You know that."

"But if the two of us came together—if we came fast and went for both the guards—"

"Then there'd be two of us dead instead of one,"

"But if there were more of us, Dundonald. If there were ten, twenty, a hundred, all at once, pouring out through the Converter—" The idea grew in Harlow's mind. The cloud of energy that was his being pulsed

and brightened, contracting into a ball of radiance. "The Vorn, Dundonald! That's our answer. The Vorn. This is their fight as much as it is ours. They built the Converter. It belongs to them, and if the Cartel takes it they'll be cut off too."

He sensed a doubt in Dundonald's mind.

"It's true, isn't it?" he cried, wild with impatience. "You know it's true. What's the matter?"

"They're so far away," Dundonald said. "I've hardly met any of them—only one, really, and there was one other I sensed a long way off. Most of them, I think, have left this galaxy."

The rest of Dundonald's thought was clear in his mind for Harlow to read. The thought was, *I doubt very much if the Vorn will care.*

"Then we'll have to make them," Harlow said. "There isn't anything else to try!"

Dundonald sighed mentally. "I suppose we might as well be doing that as hanging around here watching, as helpless as two shadows." He shot away. "Come on then. I'll take you to where I spoke with one of them. He may still be in that sector—he was studying Cepheid variables, and there were two clusters there that were unusually well supplied."

Harlow cried. "Wait! How can I do it, how can I move-?"

"How did you move before, when you didn't think of it?" said Dundonald. "Exert your will. By will the polarity of your new electronic body is changed, so that it can grip and ride the great magnetic tides. Will it!"

Harlow did so. And a great wind between the stars seemed instantly to grip him and to carry him away with Dundonald, faster and faster.

\* \* \* \*

He was first appalled, then exhilarated by it. He kept Dundonald in close contact, and the world of the Vorn, the green star, the black-walled bay, all simply vanished. There was a flick of darkness like the wink of an eyelid and they were through the Horsehead, skimming above it like swallows with their wings borne on the forces of a million suns that shone around the edges of the great dark.

This could not be happening to him. He was Mark Harlow and he was a man of Earth, not a pattern of electrons rushing faster than thought upon the magnetic millrace currents of infinity. But it was happening, and he went on and on.

At a speed compared to which light crawled, they two flashed past many-colored sparks that he knew were stars, and then before them rose up a globular cluster shaped like a swarm of hiving bees, only all the bees were suns. The swarm revolved with splendid glitterings in the blackness of space, moving onward and ever onward in a kind of grand and stately dance, while within this larger motion the component suns worked out their own complicated designs. The Cepheids waxed and waned, living their own intense inner lives, beyond understanding.

"He's not here," said Dundonald, and sped on.

"How do you know?"

"Open your mind. Spread it wide. Feel with it."

They plunged through the cluster. The magneto-gravitational tides must have been enough to wrench a

ship apart, but to Harlow they were only something stimulating. The blaze of the sun-swarm was like thunder, overpowering, stunning, magnificent. He could strangely sense the colors that shifted and changed. White, gold, blue, scarlet, green, the flashing of a cosmic prism where every facet was a sun. It passed and they were in the outer darkness again, the cluster dwindling like a lamp behind them.

And ahead was a curtain of golden fire hung half across the universe.

"The other cluster is beyond the nebula," Dundonald thought. "Come on—"

Going into the Horsehead had been like diving against a solid basalt cliff. This was like plunging into a furnace, into living flame. And they were both illusion. The fires of this bright nebula were as cold as the dust-laden blackness of the dark one. But they were infinitely more beautiful. The more diffuse gaseous clouds blazed with the light of their captive suns instead of blotting them out. Harlow sped with Dundonald along golden rivers, over cataracts of fire a million miles high, through coils and plumes and great still lakes of light with the stars glowing in them like phosphorescent fish.

Then there was darkness again, and another cluster growing in it, another hive of stars patched with the sick radiance of the Cepheids. And Dundonald was sending out a silent cry, and suddenly there was an answering thought, a third mind in that vastness of space and stars.

*Who calls?*

They followed that thought-voice, arrowing in toward a pallid star that throbbed like the heart of a dying man. And in the sullen glare of its corona they met a tiny flicker of radiance like themselves, a minute living star—one of the old Vorn.

"Who comes?" he said. "Who disturbs me at my work?"

Harlow sensed the strong annoyance in this strange mind, too lofty and remote for anger. He kept silent while Dundonald explained, and the mind of the Vorn kept that remoteness, that lofty detachment, and Harlow began to understand that humanity and the ant-like affairs of men had been left too far behind for this one to care now what happened to anything that wore perishable, planet-bound flesh.

He was not surprised when the Vorn answered Dundonald. "This is no concern of mine."

Harlow's thought burst out. "But the Converter! You'll never be able to come back—"

The Vorn regarded him for an instant with a sort of curiosity. "You are very new. Both of you. Go range the stars for a thousand years and then tell me that these things matter. Now go—leave me to my studies."

Dundonald said wearily to Harlow, "I told you they wouldn't care."

"But they have to," Harlow said. "Listen," he shouted mentally at the Vorn, who was already drifting away above the curdled furnace-light of the Cepheid. "Listen, you think of this, the whole wide universe, as your country. Well, it won't be your country any longer if these men gain control of the Converter. You reprove us for disturbing you. We're only two. Millions will come through the Converter, in time. The Vorn will no longer be alone, or in any way unique. Where will your solitude be then, and your peace?"

The Vorn hesitated. "Millions?" he repeated.

"You better than I should know how many inhabited worlds there are in this galaxy. And you should remember how men fear death and try in every way to cheat it. The promise of a physical immortality will

draw whole populations through the Converter. You know that this is so."

"Yes," said the Vorn. "I remember. I know."

"Then you'll help us? You'll lead us to others of your kind?"

The Vorn hovered for what seemed to Harlow an anxious eternity, the pallid fires coiling around him, his mind closed in so that neither Harlow nor Dundonald could read it.

Then the Vorn said, "Come."

He rose and darted away from the cluster, and Harlow followed with Dundonald, and the starstream of the Milky Way whipped by like smoke and was gone, and there was blackness like the night before creation and emptiness beyond the power of the mind to know.

Gradually, as his new and untried senses adjusted, Harlow began to be aware of little flecks of brightness floating in the black nothing, and he understood that these were galaxies. So small, he thought, so terribly far apart, these wandering companies of stars banded together like pilgrims for their tremendous journey. Here and there it seemed that several galaxies had joined in a cluster, traveling all together from dark beginning to darker ending, but even these seemed lost and lonely, their hosts of bright companions dwarfed to single sparks in that incredible vastness, like sequins scattered thinly on a black robe.

The thought-voice of the Vorn reached him, a throb with hunger and excitement.

"In all this time, we have never reached the end—"

The hands of the ape, thought Harlow, and the eyes of man. They had never been filled and they never would be, and this was good. He looked at the distant galaxies with the same hunger and excitement he had felt in the Vorn. What was man for, what was intelligence for, if not to learn? To see, to know, to explore, to range over creations to its uttermost boundaries, always learning, until you and the universe ran down together and found the ultimate answer to the greatest mystery of all.

No wonder the Vorn had no interest in going back. With something of a shock, Harlow realized that he himself was rapidly losing it.

Dundonald laughed, the silent laughter of the mind, edged with sadness. "Cling hard to your purpose, Harlow. Otherwise we too will be Vorn."

\* \* \* \*

The pace quickened. Or perhaps that was only an illusion. They fled at unthinkable speeds, crosscutting time, their bodiless beings making nothing of space and the limitations of matter. They plunged toward a fleck of brightness and it grew, spreading misty spiral arms, and the mists separated into stars, and a galaxy was there all blazing bright and turning like a great wheel. They swept through its billions of suns as a breeze through grains of sand, and the Vorn called, and others answered. There was swift talk back and forth, and Harlow knew that some of the minds broke contact and withdrew again into their privacy, but others did not and now their little company was larger.

They burst free of the spiral nebula. The Vorn scattered away and were gone, to speed the hunt and spread it wider. Harlow, Dundonald and their guide raced on.

There was no time. There was no distance. Like a drunken angel, Harlow plunged and reeled among the island universes, dizzy with the wheeling of stars beyond counting, dazed with the dark immensities between, exalted, humbled, afraid and yet in a very real sense, for the first time, not afraid at all. Several times he strayed, forgetting everything, and Dundonald called him back. And then there was a long last

swooping plunge, and a galaxy, and a flickering darkness that was somehow familiar, and Harlow was in a bay on the coast of a great black nebula, and there was a green star burning like a baleful lamp—

Home-star of the Vorn. And from across the universe the Vorn were Gathering.

They danced against the black cloud-cliffs like fireflies on a summer night, and there were very many of them. They coalesced in a bright cloud and went streaming down toward the planet of the green star in a comet-like rush, carrying Harlow with them, and at the last moment he cried out in sudden terror and regret, "No—no—"

But there was a pillar of fire in the night and they streamed toward it, filling the air with their eerie brightness. They brushed the upturned faces of Taggart's men as they passed, and Harlow saw the faces go white and staring with panic.

Then they all vanished in a blur as Harlow spun high, high into the air and flung himself into the shaking glorious pillar. Moth into flame. And his wings were shorn and crumpled and the glory died, and the lightness, and the freedom, as he fell inside that pillar of force. For as he fell, the subtle pattern of its forces was transforming, rearranging, his electrons and atoms back into solidity. He stumbled out of the pillar, and he was a man, he was Mark Harlow again, moving heavily on cement and not knowing why.

He was not alone. Dundonald was beside him—the old fleshly solid Dundonald—and all around them there were others. Tall men whose lean, spare flesh seemed even now to have a certain glow, almost a transparency, as though the long ages in another form had wrought some permanent, subtle change. Their eyes were strange, too—as remote and brilliant as the stars they had followed across the endless void. There was one taller, sterner, more commanding than the rest, and he seemed to be the leader, as perhaps he had been.

"Heavy, slow, mortal," muttered Dundonald beside him. "Why did we have to come back?"

Dim memory, struggling to return, warned Harlow of danger. He cringed in the expectation of bullets tearing into his now-vulnerable solid body. But there were no shots, and the whole plaza held a confusion of outcries that expressed only fear.

Suddenly he realized that he could not see the plaza. It was obscured in a bright fog, a mad whirling coruscation through which the tall Vorn men moved with calm certainty. Harlow and Dundonald faltered, confused, and then they realized that not all the Vorn had come through the Converter.

By hundreds, by thousands, they had settled upon the plaza in a glowing cloud that blinded and terrified the men who were there on guard, and the others who had run out at the first cry of alarm. They carried weapons, but they could not see to shoot them. Bright mists clotted around them, and the tall quiet men from the Converter moved among them quickly, with a frightening air of efficiency. They had come back a long way to do a certain thing, and they wanted it done and over without delay. The terrified Earthmen were disarmed, swept up, herded together, and held with their own weapons in the hands of the human Vorn.

Dundonald caught Harlow's arm and pointed suddenly. "Taggart!"

He appeared through a thinning of the bright mist, with a heavy rifle in his hands and a cobra look of fury on his face. He leveled the rifle at the dim shadows of the human Vorn in the mist, where they herded the Earthmen. He was bound to hit some of his own men if he fired, but Harlow sensed that he did not care. Harlow shouted a warning and ran forward.

Taggart heard him and wheeled. He smiled. "This was your idea, wasn't it, Harlow? Well—" He brought

the rifle to bear.

Harlow launched himself in a low dive for Taggart's knees.

He heard the rifle go off. He felt the impact as he hit Taggart, and a second jarring crash as Taggart fell backward and they both landed on the pavement. But there was no fight. Hands lifted him up, while other hands hoisted Taggart less gently to his feet.

The voice of a Vorn spoke inside his mind. "That was rash and needless. We were ready for him."

Harlow turned and saw the tall leader beside him. He knew the man was speaking to him as he would have spoken before he returned through the Converter, and it dawned on Harlow that none of the re-created Vorn had spoken a word aloud, which was one reason for the weird silence in which all this had been done.

The Vorn leader smiled. "But it was brave, and we thank you. We are glad that we deflected the weapon in time."

Harlow whispered, "So am I!" He wiped his forehead.

The tall men led Taggart away. And the bright mist began to lift as the Vorn withdrew a little.

The strange, silent battle was over. Taggart, Frayne and their crews were captive. Dundonald's and Harlow's crews had been released, and now the tall Vern men relinquished their weapons and their captives to the men of the Star Survey.

Yrra was running out across the plaza, calling his name.

Harlow ran to meet her, catching her in his arms. He kissed her, and overhead the glowing, dancing stars that were the Vorn hung in the deepening twilight of their ancient world, as though they were waiting.

He said to Dundonald, "Your ship can take word to the Survey. We'll need more ships here, more men to guard the Converter permanently—"

The voice of the Vorn leader spoke again in his mind.

"There will be no need. Before we leave, we will make very sure that the Converter is not used again."

\* \* \* \*

Night had fallen and the Vorn were leaving. Eagerly the tall, strange men crowded up the steps of the Converter. Joyously, they stepped into the blazing beam, and light, free, and joyful they sped out of the upper beam as radiant stars to join the hosts of other firefly stars that waited.

Harlow stood with Yrra and Dundonald and watched them. There were tears in Dundonald's eyes, and he took a half-step toward the stairs.

"No," said Harlow. "No, you can't, you mustn't."

Dundonald looked at him. "You weren't free as long as I was, you don't know. And yet you're right. I can't."

A door in the cement side of the Converter—a hidden door they had not known before existed—opened and out of it came that tall Vorn man who had been their guide. His thought came to them.

"You will be wise to remove yourselves from the Converter, before the last of us depart."



Harlow understood, and a great sadness took him. "The greatest secret of the galaxy—to be destroyed. Yet it's better."

"It will exist again," came the Vorn's thought.

Startled, Harlow looked at him. "Again? How?"

"You too, you men of Earth, will someday build a Converter. When you first stepped off your planet, you set yourself upon a road that has no turning-back. You will go farther and farther, as we did, until you hunger for the farthest shores of the universe, and those you can only reach as we did."

Harlow wondered. Would it be so? Or would Earthmen take a different road altogether.

Yrra tugged fearfully at his arm and spoke to him, and he looked up to find they were alone. The last of the Vorn was climbing the steps toward the beam.

He awoke to their danger, and turned and took Dundonald's arm. Dundonald seemed amazed with his own thoughts, his face pale and drawn by a wild regret, and Harlow had to drag him back with them across the plaza.

They turned by the ships, and looked back. No human figure now was visible by the Converter. But out of the upper beam sped a last radiant Vorn to join the hosts of others that swirled in the darkness.

A dull red spark appeared in the side of the massive cement pedestal that held the Converter. It was not flame, but a force unleashed by whatever fusing device the Vorn had left. It spread, and devoured, and the supernal beam that had been a gateway to the infinite for thousands of years flickered and dimmed and went out. The hungry redness ate all the Converter, and it too went out, and all was dark. Except—

"Look!" cried Yrra, in awe.

Overhead the Vorn were circling, a radiant will-of-the-wisp host, a maelstrom of misty shooting-stars as though they bade farewell forever to the world of their birth.

And then they shot skyward, joyously, a great plume of rushing little stars outward bound for the farthest shores of creation, for the freedom and wonder of all the universe, time without end.

It was not for Earthmen, Harlow thought. They had their own road, and must follow it. And yet, as he looked up, he felt that his own eyes held tears.