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Galaxy of the Lost by Gregory Kern

Chapter One

On Sartelle the seas are red and the sands black, the sky is emerald and the rain azure when it rains at all, which is seldom and never during the long, hot days of summer. A fine place on which to rest, with giant fish in the seas and the air scented with flowers. A soft place for a vacation, and Kennedy was enjoying every moment of it.

He lay sprawled on the ebon grains, the sun hot on the hard lines of his near-naked body, eyes closed against the glare as he listened to the soft murmurs from a group of young girls lying a few yards distant. They did not know or were careless of the way in which voices could travel over the sand and their comments about his person were getting too pointed for comfort. For a moment he wondered whether he should rise and face them and perhaps answer some of their speculations, then decided against it. Who he was and what he did were matters of no concern to any but himself. And, young and innocent as they appeared, the girls needn't be what they seemed. On Sartelle, as on everywhere else, information was a thing which had value, items which could be bought and sold to those who had an interest in such matters, and no one like himself could afford to risk anyone learning more than they needed to know.

He turned a little as feet scuffed at the sand close to where he lay. A voice, softly modulated, whispered in his ear.

"A message for you, Captain. Prime urgency and no delay acceptable. Shall I tell them that you are at sea?"

Service, he thought, opening his eyes. The thing for which the hotel

demanded a high price but always provided. Diplomatic lies and the bending of truth a little to give privacy. Here the wishes of the guests were paramount.

It was tempting to take advantage of it, but Kennedy was proof against temptation.

"Thank you, but no."

"Are you sure?" The voice softened even more. "You look so comfortable lying here in the sun and it would be only a slight distortion of the truth. A boat is about to leave. I could have missed you—a matter of a minute or two."

To offer was one thing, to suggest another. He moved his head and looked at her as she sat framed against the sun. She had crouched to show the double-curve of naked thighs, the flesh of her waist bunched a little above the circle of her kilt. Nudity was common on Sartelle, but the bareness of her body was more than compensated for by the painted mask which was her face. Spirals of red and purple interspersed with lines of silver and gold ran from forehead to shoulders. Crusted eyelids and lashes adorned with tiny globules. Hair which bore a dozen gems, wreathed and plaited with metallic strands. The normal garb of a hotel attendant.

But if the garb was normal her expression was not.

The paint disguised it, the mask turning her features into a robot-blankness, but there was a slight tension about the eyes, a firmness about the mouth which had no place if she were exactly what she seemed. A dilettante, perhaps, a female guest intrigued and hoping to establish a closer relationship? He decided against it; but if she were not a genuine employee or a bored holidaymaker looking for a companion, she could only be one other thing.

"The message," he snapped. "From whom?"

"Armat Chan."

The resident Terran operative on Sartelle and one, Kennedy thought grimly, who had obviously inflated ideas of his own importance. Or perhaps the girl had held plans of her own. To be able to report back that he had refused to accept a message of prime urgency would conceivably

have enhanced her importance. Or Chan could have been testing him—rumor had it the man was fond of such things. Not for the first time Kennedy cursed the departmental rivalries which made life more difficult

Rising, he dusted ebon grains from the smooth musculature of legs and torso. He caught the quick intake of breath from the group which had been studying him, a barely repressed squeal.

"I told you! See how tall he is? And that chest!"

"You appear to have made a conquest," said the woman at his side. She too had straightened and, tall though she was, her head rose barely above his shoulder. "Not hard when you consider the opposition." She stared at the rows of supine shapes, the men flabby for the most part, elderly, paunches and skin dull and soft with overindulgence.

Flatly he said, "Your name?"

"Sharon Dale." The globules on her eyelashes caught the light in tiny sparkles as she looked up at him. "You are interested?"

"In you, no." He was deliberately curt. "In Armat Chan, perhaps. Where can I find him?"

He was waiting in Kennedy's room at the hotel, a bland man with a neatly dressed figure, an executive-type case at the side of his chair. He rose as the pair entered, and glanced at the girl. Kennedy caught the slight, negative motion of her head as he headed toward the shower.

Armat Chan said, "The matter is of prime urgency, was not that made clear?"

"To whom?" snapped Kennedy. "To you or to me? If to you then why the nonsense at the beach? I don't take kindly to such stupidity."

"It was considered desirable," said Chan. "On the beach, one man among many, how could we be sure you were the one we wanted?"

Kennedy paused by the door leading to the shower. Glancing at the girl, he said, "Get out of here."

"What?" She looked at Chan. "Sir?"

"I told you to get out," snapped Kennedy harshly. "Now move!" As the door closed behind her he said to Chan, "Listen. If you are so inexperienced as not to be able to recognize a man you want to see, then I'd advise you to resign immediately. And, while we're on the subject, let me see your identification."

"Now wait a minute!" Chan bristled, his dignity offended. "May I remind you that I am—"

"I don't want reminding. I want to see your identity." Kennedy stepped forward and before the other could protest had seized his right hand. Lifting the sleeve, he pressed the flesh with cruel fingers and took his time studying the pattern which the pressure had caused to reveal itself on the inside of the wrist. "All right," he said, releasing the trapped hand. "Now sit down and wait while I shower and get dressed."

He washed, dressed, reappeared neat in pants and blouse of lustrous black edged with gold. Chan had placed his case on a table. He opened it as Kennedy took another chair.

"Now," he said stiffly. "If you are quite ready perhaps we can begin."

"Perhaps."

Chan sighed. "More delay?"

"A little. How important is all this?"

"Very important."

"And you are satisfied that I am the man you think?"

"I am." Chan was definite. "You are Captain Kennedy of FATE. You are a Free Acting Terran Envoy and I was advised to contact you by higher authority. I have not asked to see your identification because there is no need. I have already checked your body-emissions against the master pattern and your psychological Behavior is what I had expected. I also realize that I cannot coerce you or force you in any way. Incidentally, Sharon was acting under my orders when she contacted you on the beach. I had to be absolutely certain."

His manner, Kennedy noted, had altered a little. He was no longer the

blustering, overpowering agent infected with delusions of grandeur—an attitude guaranteed to arouse a predictable response in the man he had come to see. Or perhaps the byplay had been for the benefit of the girl. Female operatives were rarely to be wholly trusted; emotion played too large a part in their makeup.

Glancing at the case, Kennedy said, "Well, now that we are settled, what's this all about?"

"This." Chan lifted a small mechanism from the case. He rested it on the table between them. "Listen."

He touched a stud and the air became filled with sound.

It was thin, eerie, a blur of pips and shrills almost lost against a background of static. A coldness came with it, a sense of vast emptiness and hopeless despair which chilled the warmth of the room and somehow made the bright sunshine streaming through the windows duller than it had been before. It was eldritch, haunting, laden with skin-prickling terrors. Kennedy knew what it was.

Somewhere in space a ship had died.

He listened quietly until it came to an end, then gestured for Chan to replay it, this time noting the time on his watch.

"Thirty-four seconds," he said as again silence replaced the sound from the recorder. "Was the rest the same?"

"There was no more."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't make sense," said Kennedy. "The ship was damaged in some way and sent out an automatic emergency call. Even if everyone aboard was dead the apparatus should have continued to emit the beacon. The equipment is self-functioning and would have continued to operate for far longer than thirty-four seconds. Unless—"

Unless the engines had disintegrated into a blaze of uncontrolled energy

destroying everything for miles around in a gush of atomic flame. But engines could not explode by accident. They could fail, yes, but never turn into a bomb. Not unless they had been deliberately made to act that way. He said so and Chan nodded. "That is the conclusion higher authority has already reached."

"So you suspect sabotage?"

"That and more." Chan leaned a little forward across the table. "Both impossible to prove with the evidence at hand. Sabotage, obviously; the engines could not have disintegrated under normal circumstances and it is hard to see how the ship could have failed with normal functioning. But there is more. The signal was picked up by a Mobile Aid Laboratory and Construction Authority. Commander Breson, you may have heard of him? No? Well, it is unimportant, but MALAGA 7 immediately sent out investigating vessels to the coordinates given on the distress signal. They found no trace of the vessel."

"Time?"

"They were apparently only two days away from the area. The route of the *Wankle* was known. They extrapolated along the predicted path and still found no trace. If the ship had been wrecked it would have been discovered. If it had disintegrated there would have been discoverable residue. Even an atomic explosion would have left traces of discernible energy. They found nothing. No ship. No wreckage. No evidence of destruction of any kind. As far as we can determine the *Wankle* simply ceased to exist."

"Which could mean," said Kennedy shrewdly, "that it wasn't there in the first place."

"That is the other thing we cannot prove." Chan leaned back and made a helpless gesture. "Had it been a normal accident the beacon would have continued to function. That it did not forces us to the assumption that the engines must have exploded. As this normally is impossible we must think of sabotage. But if it was normal sabotage the wreckage or traces would have been found at the given coordinates. They were not and so—"

"A plant." Kennedy reached out and touched the stud, listening again to the recording. "This message was faked in order to throw you off the trail. But why? Why send it at all? To close the book," he said, answering his

own question. "To provide proof that the ship had really died. Even so, if you looked for it you should have found it. The route was known, you say?"

"A routine flight from Genghara to Kran. Yes, the route was known."

"So if the ship wasn't found then it couldn't have been following it." Kennedy paused, thinking. "It is barely possible," he mused, "that the captain or maybe his crew decided on some crazy plan of their own. To steal the ship, maybe, or to set up a new colony on some new world. Was it carrying anything of value?"

"Mining equipment, dipoles of krillium, mutated seeds, concentrates of perfume, some dehydrated fungi —the usual stuff. Makeweight mostly; the *Wankle* was primarily a passenger ship. Forget about the crew stealing the vessel for the value of the cargo."

"Ransom, then?"

"A batch of pilgrims, some tourists, a few business types, a troupe of dancers." Chan shrugged. "The usual assortment. I suppose the captain could have gone crazy, but if he did what about the rest of the crew? And if they had mutinied the message would have said so. Anyway, why should they have done that? They had a good, clean berth, a regular routine; and life can be easy on such a craft You're picking at straws, Kennedy."

"I'm examining all possibilities however remote," he corrected. "Logically the ship couldn't have vanished, but it did, so obviously we're overlooking something."

"As I see it there's only one thing left—the ship was taken by outside forces."

"Raided? Boarded, gutted, a fake message arranged and the ship taken to some remote world?" Chan nodded. "We thought of that. But how? And why?"

Questions to which he had no answer, but nothing in the universe happened without a reason and, even though at first an event might appear inexplicable, yet things became clear once sufficient knowledge had been obtained. He lacked data, Kennedy decided, yet there was more. His intuition told him that something was lacking. One ship, no matter how mysterious its disappearance, would not have caused Terra such

concern.

Flatly he said, "What haven't you told me?"

"About the *Wankle*! Nothing."

"You're lying, Chan. Is this another of your damned tests?"

"No, I—" Chan quailed before the fury in the other man's eyes, the cold, hard determination which turned the face into the resemblance of stone. "Not a test," he said quickly. "It was just that I wanted to see if you could throw fresh light on the incident. I—"

"Was the *Wankle* the first?"

"No."

"So other ships have vanished. How many?"

"Three."

"In the same circumstances?"

"Yes, but—"

"No 'buts,' you fool! You've wasted enough time. Tell me about them." Kennedy frowned as the story was repeated. "One could be accident," he said. "Two could be coincidence. Three must mean sabotage. Four—" He broke off, scowling. "All in the same area?"

"No," said Chan hastily. "That is, not exactly. Every ship left from a different world and had a different destination. That's why I didn't make a point of it at first; the losses seem to have no correlation. A mining hulk from Xand, a private yacht from Lisht, a pilgrim ship from Zangreb, and now the *Wankle*. The first two we didn't bother about; the time-element precluded all hope of rescue. At the third we had a coincidence. Another vessel following the same route was questioned after we had received the message. It hadn't seen anything."

"Did it pick up the beacon?"

"No more than we did. The captain checked, then decided it must be a freak transmission. I can't really blame him. Anyway, you know what these

Chenenians are like; if they can't see a thing, touch it, smell it, and taste it, to them it doesn't exist."

So the captain had been a Chenenian, which could mean little or much. On their world bribery was a way of life and maybe the man had been paid to act dumb. Kennedy frowned, not liking the way the interview was going. Armat Chan seemed to have a chip on his shoulder despite his one attempt to be friendly. Rivalry, perhaps, the irritation felt by a man of self-inflated importance when faced with a superior. A man used to giving orders and having them obeyed without question now faced with a man who took no orders and who had proved himself more adept in a hundred different ways.

Bluntly he said, "Why tell me all this? Just what is it you want?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Maybe, but I want to hear you say it."

"Four ships have vanished under mysterious circumstances. We need to know how and why they disappeared." Chan hesitated, then added, "We want you to find out. That is, my superiors want you to find out. Personally I am convinced that I could handle the matter without your help. This reliance on people like yourself tends to weaken the efficiency of the department and, let us be logical, what can one man do that a team cannot?"

"That depends on the man," said Kennedy dryly. "And it also depends on the team."

"Are you saying that I am inefficient?"

"Yes," said Kennedy flatly. "You've shown it from the first moment we met. What's wrong, Chan? Is this world making you soft?"

Anger was a useful tool and Kennedy used it as a surgeon would use a scalpel. His own was always under control, but Chan did not hold himself in such iron restraint. Kennedy watched as the man's face mottled; the slim, well-tended hands clenched on the edge of the table. Irritation, rage, and maybe frustration were building up to what could be an interesting explosion. A man in the grip of violent rage would be careless, say more than he intended, betray himself if there was anything to betray.

"I resent your implication! I demand an apology!"

"You're a servant," snapped Kennedy, adding fuel to the fire.

"Remember that. You were told to do something, so do it. And don't forget what you are. Despite all your tides and convictions of superiority you're, at this moment, nothing more than a highly-paid office boy. A messenger. And remember something else. Four ships have vanished and more could follow. Those ships hold people who value their lives. Think of them and not of your own imagined superiority. Stop thinking of me as a rival. If there's a job to do, let's get on with it. So get to the point and stop wasting time."

For a moment he thought the man would strike him and he watched the eyes, the hands. If Chan was trained he would make a feint to cover the real attack. The left hand lifting, perhaps, clenching as the right stabbed forward with stiffened fingers toward the eyes. If he tried it, he would wind up with a broken arm.

Then, incredibly, Chan smiled.

"You're a hard man, Kennedy. Damned hard. I'd heard about you and I'd wondered. Call it a test if you like, but—" He broke off, shrugging. "I suppose tests can be made both ways."

Clever, thought Kennedy. The man had regained control of himself, for there was no doubt his anger had been genuine. Clever or skilled or maybe he simply could not afford the luxury of rage. A thing which in itself gave rise to speculation.

He said, "So I am to find out why the ships have vanished. Right?"

"Yes."

"Information?"

"Everything you need to know is here." Chan touched his case, the recorder. "The messages, the special coordinates, details and listings of personnel, passengers, and cargo." His face creased into a smile, thin, acid, devoid of humor. "I'm sure that to a man like yourself it will be enough."

"Maybe."

"You will, of course, let me know what you intend to do. I shall need the information in case—" He paused for effect, taking a small revenge.

Kennedy finished for him. "In case I don't return. In the event I fail. Somehow I think you would like that."

Chan made no answer but his smile warmed a little. Only a little but it was enough. In one thing, at least, he was honest

Chapter Two

The bar held two hundred pounds. Kennedy stooped, gripped, lifted it with a smooth coordination of muscle, holding it high above his head as he ran toward a low fence. He jumped it, quickly regained his balance, then set down the weighted bar.

Penza Saratov snorted his contempt. "You call that a feat of strength? On my world a child could do as well. You're getting soft, Cap. You need three months under high-gravity. The next time we have a vacation come with me to Droom. I'll make a man out of you in no time at all."

"A man or a corpse?"

"A man, Cap. Someone like me." Stooping, Saratov picked up the bar with one hand, lifted it as if it were a twig, sprang high over the fence, then threw the bar to land a dozen yards away. Grinning, he stretched, his skin glistening in the light of the setting sun.

Watching him, Kennedy was reminded of a troglodyte from Earth's ancient mythology. A creature almost as wide as he was tall, the shaven ball of his head running into a thick neck mounted on massive shoulders. Arms, torso, thighs, and calves completed the picture of a living machine of flesh, bone, and muscle. A giant born, raised, and trained on a world with three times the normal gravity of Earth.

Dressed in his usual loose garments he appeared a normal man grown impossibly obese, and many who had taken him for that had learned to their surprise that he was far from being a soft mass of useless blubber. The vast frame carried not an ounce of useless fat, all was sinew and toughness, trained and controlled strength. His mind matched his body, shrewd, intelligent. Penza Saratov was the finest ship engineer Kennedy had ever come across, the great hands amazingly deft.

"What happened down on the coast, Cap? You get tired of lazing in the sun?"

"That and more," said Kennedy. "I'll tell you later. Had your fill of moving rocks and chopping trees?"

"Exercise is good for a man," said Saratov seriously. "That's the trouble with most civilizations. The people forget to use their muscles, they use machines instead and get lazy. They grow soft and begin to think like sick animals. I tell you, Cap, on Droom we don't know what insanity is. Hard work, fit bodies, and clean minds. You can't beat it."

"*Mens sana in corpore sano*," said Kennedy softly. "You and the ancients both."

"Cap?"

"A sound mind in a sound body. The people who first colonized your world must have held that as their creed." Kennedy looked at the cabin, the small clearing, the trees which rolled over the hills to where the emerald sun dipped toward the horizon. The coast with its ebon sand and overindulgent people seemed half a galaxy away. Saratov had tried it, losing patience after the first day, craving the exercise his body demanded.

To each his own, thought Kennedy. Some liked the solitude of lonely places, the close contact with nature denied to those who lived within the confines of ships traversing the stars. Some liked the push and thrust of close-packed populations, the variety of transient cultures and the medley of social conventions. Others, like Professor Jarl Luden, didn't give a damn where they were as long as they could work in peace.

He sat in a room in the cabin, a grave, almost sparse figure, his thin, stringy body neatly dressed in a high-collared blouse, flared pants, and a brilliant sash around his waist giving an unexpected touch of gaiety. Thick gray hair swept back from a high forehead. His eyes were blue, deep-set, and slight with intelligence.

IDs lips were thin, downcurved as if he had tasted the universe and found it not to his liking.

He turned in his chair as Kennedy entered the room, Saratov at his

heels.

"Cap, I'm glad you came. I was just about to call you."

"Have you finished, Jarl?"

"I have completed my study of the information you gave me and arrived at certain conclusions. Has Saratov been briefed?"

"Not yet."

"Then he had better be put in the picture. Chemile too if he can be found." The professor frowned. "I never seem to be able to find him when I want him. Perhaps you had better go and look for him, Saratov. There is no point in duplicating what *I* have to say."

Saratov hesitated. "Cap?"

"Better do it, Penza."

"Why?" The giant was impatient to learn what was going on. "He can pick it up later. If he had any sense of duty he would be here now. I don't relish the idea of having to wet-nurse that crazy idiot."

"That," said a sharp voice, "is very nice to hear."

A patch of the wall seemed to dissolve and take the shape of a man. Veem Chemile was tall, thin, with an upsweep of hair over a sloping brow, eyes that looked like tiny points in the smooth ovoid of his face. His ears were like shells pressed tight against his skull, convoluted, pointed like those of a cat. There was much about him reminiscent of a feline. The way in which he moved, his quietness, his ability to remain immobile for long stretches of time. A cat and a lizard, both, thought Kennedy, and neither having anything to do with humanity.

Not surprising when it was remembered that Chemile was not human. That he claimed to be a descendant of an ancient race, one which had ruled the galaxy long before the race of man had learned to make fire or wear skins; an old, old race which had flowered and died to leave only bare remnants hugging a harsh and predatory world.

Saratov said, growling, "You've been up to your old tricks again."

Spying, eavesdropping, listening to private conversation. If I had my way I'd cover you with paint so as to know exactly where you were at all times."

"I was practicing," said Chemile stiffly. "An ability like mine cannot be allowed to fall into disuse. And if you think it easy to stand and not make a move or a sound for hours at a time, then you just try it."

"I've better things to do."

"Like heaving rocks around and chopping down harmless trees?" Chemile sneered. "Muscle, that's all you've got. When it comes to skill, then I win the prize. Right, Cap?"

"Leave me out of this," said Kennedy. He was used to the interplay between Saratov and Chemile, the sparring and good-natured banter which, to outsiders, sounded like a deadly rivalry. "How long have you been in here?"

"Most of the day. I wanted to see if the professor could spot me. Then you came in and I just stayed."

In a strange, half-alive state his body slowed down; his skin, scaled with minute flecks of photosensitive tissue, adopted the coloration of the background against which he stood. A man-sized chameleon with an infinitely superior protective mechanism developed on the harsh world which had given him birth. A latent talent, perhaps, always possessed by his race but now developed to a high level of perfection. Consciously controlled and amazingly adaptable.

He said, "Don't bother to fill me in. I know what you told the professor, Cap. There's no need to go all over it again."

"You know," snapped Saratov. "I don't. Tell me before I slam you against that wall and paint you all over." He whistled as Chemile told of the missing vessels. "What do you think, Prof?"

Luden said, precisely, "I have arrived at the conclusion that here we have a problem of more than one variable. First, we can eliminate the possibility of accident. Second, that of simple sabotage. It exists, naturally, but it isn't a simple destruction of vessels for some personal or political reason. If nothing else the faking of the beacon messages precludes a simple and wanton act of multiple destruction. Touching the messages, I

am not satisfied as to the deductions drawn and presented in the information supplied. They could be genuine and I think they are." He lifted a thin hand to still any protestation. "The fact that no ship was found in the coordinates given or traces of destruction ascertained does not invalidate that conclusion. The messages could be genuine. Saratov, precisely just how does an emergency beacon operate?"

"In two ways," said the giant. "On manual control or automatic. If manually, the captain—or the highest in command if he is dead—tapes a message and sends it by condensed bleep. That is, the message is speeded up and emitted in a short burst backed by the fullest extent of available power. Code is used, naturally; words are liable to distortion over the distance it has to travel."

Luden touched a control and the eerie pips and shrills filled the room.

"Manual?"

Saratov shook his head. "No."

"How can you be so certain?"

"This is a translated message, right?" He continued as Luden nodded. "The signals are the standard automatic emission. A manually constructed tape would have differences, more detailed information, the impact of the personality of the sender. Whatever happened to those ships happened too fast for such a tape to be made. Imagine the situation," he demanded. "Something goes wrong with the ship. The captain does his best to remedy the fault but fails. He decides to send out an emergency call and distress signal. He cuts a tape giving all relevant data, hooks it to the transmitter, and waits until either the ship dies or rescue arrives."

"The point I am making is this: No two men will ever cut a tape exactly the same. And no man will ever cut a tape similar to the automatic relay."

Kennedy said, quietly, "Not even by intent?"

"Fake an automatic call?" Saratov shrugged. "It's possible, of course, but it wouldn't be easy. Each vessel has an individual code impressed on the auto-relay crystal which in turn is coupled to the drive and life-support apparatus governed by the ship computer. To fake an automatic call you'd have to determine precisely the ship-code impressed

on the crystal. To do that you'd have to dismantle the apparatus and, unless you were very skilled and careful, the act of dismantling would trigger the beacon. In any case, why bother? If you wanted to send out a fake call, why not cut a tape?"

"Questions are not answers," snapped Luden. "But you have proved my point. It would be too much trouble to fake a genuine, automatic beacon signal, and it would be unnecessary when a taped call would have done as well. Therefore, I contend the signals are genuine. The next point, of course, is why, if the signals were genuine, the ship or traces of it were not found? Commander Breson of MALAGA 7 is an experienced man. His ships investigated the area within two days of the signal being received. If he found nothing, then there was nothing to be found."

An interesting conclusion and one which Kennedy had considered. He hadn't liked the inferences then and he didn't like them now. A wrecked vessel was one thing. A ship, damaged, dying, which somehow vanished, was another.

Saratov said thoughtfully, "An automatic signal is sent when the ship computer decides that the vessel is at a point of nonfunctioning return. The drive useless, for example, or the life-support system broken. The damage, however, has to be both great and sudden, otherwise the crew would be given the opportunity to effect repairs."

Chemile suggested, "An explosion in the engine room, perhaps? The atomic engines running wild and threatening disruption?"

"Yes. That or something similar. Something both violent and sudden."

"We have a time-element," said Luden. "Thirty-four seconds. Something triggered the automatic beacon and then, just over a half-minute later, obliterated the mechanism. Would an engine explosion have taken so long? The answer, assuming that the engines could explode at all, is no. So we are faced with a situation in which a ship fell into difficulties, sent out the alarm, and then, thirty-four seconds later, was either so totally destroyed that no trace could be found, or was removed utterly from that particular section of space. The former, we have decided, is untenable. The latter, in the light of present knowledge, unthinkable. What is left?"

"The alarm triggered, stopped, and the ship sent at top speed on a

totally different course," said Chemile immediately. "Piracy. The alarm used to prevent a search."

"The signal was a bluff," said Saratov. "A pod containing a transmitter, a delayed-action trigger and a self-destruct device. It could have been dropped by any ship passing that way. Or it could have been set loose while the supposedly destroyed vessel took off for parts unknown. A small pod wouldn't leave much residue—certainly not enough to be picked up by those searching for a big ship."

Luden sighed. "You haven't been listening," he complained. "We are not dealing with one ship, but with at least two and maybe four. And none of the vessels contained anything of high value to tempt pirates or mutineers. Cap?"

Kennedy stepped forward from where he had been standing, listening to the interchange of ideas. Outside it was growing dark, emerald streaks laced with yellow and blue streaming above the horizon as the sun sank to rest. Lights glowed as he touched a switch, the brilliance winking from the rough walls, the desk, the smooth finish of the mechanisms Luden had assembled.

Things of steel and plastic, crystal and wire. Aids to the human mind, they could never be more than that, useful but unable to provide the solution to what seemed to be unanswerable. But, in the final essence, only one thing had value. The human mind, the skill, initiative, and imagination which created works of beauty coupled with engines of destruction, the power which had lifted them above the beast.

He said, "We are worrying too much about the mechanical details. To know how it was done is important, that I agree, but it is more important to know why it was done at all. Piracy seems out, ransom the same. Politics, then? Luden!"

The lights dimmed as the professor reached toward his instruments. Fresh light shone against the wall, red, green, swathes of blue. Brilliant points of white sprang into life and thin lines traced a spider web against the rest, a skein of somber black.

"The area in which the ships vanished," said the professor from the shadows. His thin face, touched with varying hues, seemed to shift, to alter—at one moment that of a dedicated friar, at another the visage of an

idiotic clown. "The bright points, circled, are the points of departure, the others the points of landing. The lines are the flight paths each ship would have followed." Twin spots of violet sprang into being. "The positions of the last two ships as given by their respective beacons. As you see, they are close."

"Conclusions?"

"A moment, Cap." More light sprang into life against the wall, swirls of orange, a Crosshatch of purple. "The orange is the sphere of Terran influence. There you see Commander Breson's forces, MALAGA 7. The purple is the Deltanian Domain. As you see, the flight paths of all ships cross that area which intrudes like a headland thrusting into an ocean. We have no quarrel with the Deltanians; in fact we work in close unison with them. Their ships cross into our sector, ours into theirs. However, should some other power be wanting to create discord, the destruction of ships taking that passage would be a good way to start. Given time and the inevitable spreading of rumor, all direct space travel will cease. Journeys will become longer as ships make circuitous detours, freight prices rise, dissension created. Pressure will be brought to bear for the intrusion to be eliminated. If our forces move in, the Deltanians, naturally, will object. In such a case, if neither side yields, the probability of war cannot be ignored." Luden paused, then added, "The probability is very high. Terra is weak in these regions and too many worlds are sparsely populated. If one should be occupied, it could start a chain of destruction which could reach to Earth itself."

Earth, with its teeming cities, its parks and playgrounds, recreational areas and vast museums. The hub and center of Terran culture and influence which fought to maintain peace among the stars. Kennedy imagined the fury of war reaching toward it, the menacing shapes of atomic missiles which could blast a continent to dust. A terrifying conclusion to draw from the loss of a few ships, and yet small things could cause momentous results. A virus was small, yet a virus could decimate a world, a system. Size, in all things, was relative.

He said quietly, "Could Armat Chan be an agent working to bring mat about?"

Luden was shrewd. "You suspect him?"

"From the first he tried to irritate me. I allowed him to think he had

succeeded and did my best to annoy him in turn. His actions could have been designed to turn me from the project or then, again, to needle me into accepting the assignment. But why act other than normal at all? He had merely to deliver a message. There was no need for a conflict of wills." He paused, thinking, then said, "It would appear that the ships in greatest danger are those passing the points at which the others apparently vanished. The obvious thing, then, is to be in a ship passing close to that area."

Saratov rumbled, "Now wait a minute, Cap. If you're intending to do what I suspect, then you must be crazy. What can you accomplish in a ship which vanishes?"

Kennedy smiled. "Possibly two things. IT! know what happened and I could learn where the ships were taken."

"And if they weren't taken anywhere? If they just went up in a cloud of radioactive dust?" The giant shook his head. "No. There has to be some other way. What you suggest is a short way to commit suicide."

Luden said, tersely, "I must advise against it, Cap. As Saratov points out, the danger is high, and while I admit it would be desirable to have an investigator on the spot, as it were, that investigator can do no good if he is destroyed."

"You have a better plan?"

"To send a ship close to the proximity of the disappearances. To watch, to record, to take careful observations."

"The scientific method," agreed Kennedy. "But slow, and we can't afford to waste time. As yet this thing has been kept secret, but if a few more ships vanish, then who can tell what will happen? And another thing." He pointed at the light display on the wall. "Those points at which the ships vanished are only apparently close because of the scale you are using. In fact, how far apart are they? A quarter light-year?"

"Point-two-three, to be exact."

"Close enough and too far apart no matter how you look at it. Just where will you station your vessel? Or will you follow every ship heading into that region?"

Luden shook his head. "That is impossible, Cap. We can't do that."

"No, but you can follow one. Right?" Kennedy glanced from one to the other, seeing the dawning light of comprehension. "You've got it. I'll take passage on the next vessel to head toward the suspect area. The rest of you will follow aboard the *Mordain*. If anything happens, you'll be there to see it. You might even be able to help. In any case, it's the best thing we can do."

Chemile coughed. "One point, Cap. If you take passage, then I'm coming with you. You'll need me." he insisted. "I can sneak around, listen to what's going on, learn what to expect."

"Not on your life!" roared Saratov. "This calls for an engineer. If anyone goes with Cap, it's going to be me." He lifted one huge, clenched fist. "And I want no arguments about it. You've got brains, Veem, I'll admit that if I have to, and you've got cunning, but this job needs strength." He added, shrewdly, "You'd be best here checking up on Armat Chan. Stand in his office and pretend to be a part of the building. You might learn something of value."

Chemile said, appealingly, "Cap?"

Kennedy had intended taking neither but the giant had a point. He could only be in one place at a time and it would help to have a trained man to watch the engines. And, in the event of physical violence, Saratov was the obvious choice.

"You're a navigator, Veem," he said. "The best I know. If anyone can follow a ship and plot a course, it's you. Stay with Luden on the *Mordain*. Saratov, you come with me." His voice hardened, became a thing of steel. "No more arguments! That's an order!"

Chapter Three

There was nothing special about the *Hedlanda*. A ship of a thousand tons' cargo capacity with accommodation for seventy-eight passengers and crew. A small ship which earned a living as a general transport, flitting between close-set worlds, doing the work which larger vessels found unprofitable. The steward was vociferous.

"You're lucky this trip, sir. Not many passengers, so you can have a

cabin to yourself." He hefted Kennedy's bag and tucked it into the locker. "Can I get you anything? A drink, a snack, something to amuse you?"

"Thank you, no."

"We've got a few sensitapes if you're interested." The steward winked. "Quite a range in fact. Full stimulation and complete sensory coverage. If you want to run a skimmer down a mountain, fight a lion, own your own seraglio—well, just let me know if you get bored."

"I'll do that." Kennedy slipped a bill into the ready hand. "When do we leave?"

"In an hour."

"Is there any chance of looking over the ship?" Kennedy produced another bill. "I'm an old pilot and would appreciate a look at the bridge. How's the captain? Would he be willing to accommodate me?"

The steward hesitated. Passengers were not allowed in the control room, but there was something about this man, a sense of hard competence which spoke of a brotherhood with those who rode space. And he was generous. On a trip like this with few passengers tips would be few and pickings small. Deftly he took the other bill.

"I can't promise anything, sir, but HI do my best Captain Thromb is pretty strict but, to a brother officer, well, I can do no more than ask."

It was good enough. As the man left the cabin, Kennedy examined the accommodation. It was what he had expected to find. The *Hedlanda* was no luxury craft and the cabin showed it. Bunk beds, two lockers, a chair, small table, adjustable lights. Food would be served in the salon; there would be entertainment of a kind, taped movies, music, and the inevitable gambling. Drinks, too, and the usual social contact with other passengers.

A normal ship struggling to earn its keep. The cargo was a mess of various items, none of high value. The passengers were a motley collection of transients. Nothing to attract pirates and certainly nothing to attract potential mutineers, but it was the first vessel to head across the Deltanian Domain and, as Luden had determined, it would pass close to where the *Wankle* had vanished.

Bait, thought Kennedy grimly. The only way to find out what was happening in the empty reaches between the stars. If this ship should follow the others, then he would go with it. If he lived, the mystery would be solved.

As promised, the ship took off in an hour. The engines shrilled as they built up the field, invisible energies warring against the gravity which held them close to the field, the sound rising as they lifted. A period in which velocity rose and then a subtle jerk, a peculiar sense of twisting, and they had reached and passed the velocity of light.

In the salon Penza Saratov was enjoying himself. He wore gaudy fabrics, a brilliant sash wrapped around his waist, gems bright on his fingers. He looked a fat, soft merchant with more money than sense and his voice rolled like a drum about the compartment.

"More wine there! The best vintage this tub contains! Hurry!"

He beamed as a steward ran to obey, lifting a brimming goblet and emptying it in a single gulp.

"To life!" he roared. "To health! To a fast passage and a gentle landing! Drink with me, my friends! Drink!"

A sour-faced matron sniffed as she stood close to Kennedy.

"Some people! I really do think the officers of a ship like this should be more discerning in their selection of passengers. The man is nothing but a boor!"

Her companion, a young girl, smiled and said, "Well, I don't know about that. I think he's rather fun."

Others shared her opinion. Within seconds the table at which Penza sat was ringed with those eager to enjoy his hospitality. He would give them wine, lead the conversation, make them relax and, all the time, he would be listening and watching. Waiting for the odd word, the warning glance, the little signs which would betray the fact that apparent strangers were not what they seemed or a passenger other than what he appeared.

Kennedy joined the throng, accepted a glass of wine, moved on with it in his hand. Behind a table a gambler toyed with a deck of cards, waiting

patiently for his time to come. As Kennedy approached, he smiled and gestured to a chair.

"Care for a few hands to pass the time?"

"Of what?"

"You name it. Starsmash, Hidalgo, Poker, Blind-eye." The gambler shrugged. "It's all the same to me."

"Poker. Seven card stud."

Kennedy produced cash and sat as the gambler dealt. He was good, not bothering to cheat this early on the trip, more interested in gaining a circle of players than skinning a potential mark. Kennedy lost, lost again, won three times running, then lost twice more.

Casually he said, "Notice anything different this trip?"

"How do you mean?"

"I was wondering. You ride this ship regular, correct? Well, I'd heard a couple of rumors back at the field. I was wondering if they could have affected you in any way."

The gambler dealt out two cards each facedown, a third faceup.

"Your king," he said. "You to bet." He watched as Kennedy placed money on the table. "Those rumors? Something about missing ships?"

"That's right." Kennedy watched as the man dealt more cards. Again it was his turn to bet. "You've heard them?"

"I picked up a whisper." The gambler continued the deal. He had a pair of fives. He bet, Kennedy raised, the gambler stayed, and turned more cards. "Nothing to it. Just gossip. You know how it is, a ship is late and the talk starts. That's all it is, just talk." He dealt the last card facedown. "Twenty."

"Make it fifty." Kennedy leaned over the table. "Any extra crew this trip? I mean, if ships are being hijacked, a few guards would be a comfort."

"Your fifty and raise you twenty more." The gambler frowned. "No extra crew and no need for any. Nothing is going to happen to this ship, mister. Take my word for that. Everything is just as it always is. Aside from him, of course." He nodded to where Penza was dispensing his wind. "You don't often see a character like that. You seeing me?"

Kennedy won, picked up his money, and turned as the cabin steward touched his shoulder. The man spoke in a low whisper.

"I think I've arranged that certain matter, sir. If you would be so good as to accompany me?"

Captain Thromb was a tough veteran of space, his hair grizzled, his face lined, the scar of an old radiation bum marring the line of neck and jaw. He held out his hand as Kennedy approached. His grip was hard.

"I understand that you are interested in the *Hedlanda*, mister. I don't usually accommodate passengers in this way but the steward tells me that you have a professional interest."

"That's right, Captain." Kennedy glanced about the control room, seeing the familiar layout of a ship of space. The main panel lay beneath wide screens fronted by the control chair, those of the under-officers to either side. Navigation instruments rested to one side, communication devices to the other. "I see that you're equipped with a Larvik-Shaw spacial disturbance detector. Do you find it of much use?"

Thromb blinked, relaxing a little at this proof of knowledge. "It's a recent installation. I've managed to handle a ship for years without one, but you know how it is. Progress all the time. Have you had experience with one?"

"A little." Kennedy crossed to the mechanism and adjusted a control. On the screen lines appeared, swirling, evening out to a steady ripple. "We had one on the *Charne*," he said casually. "I was second officer. We found it useful a couple of times. Once when some antimatter impacted a rogue asteroid and again when space flux created a magnetic vortex. If it hadn't been for the Larvik we'd have headed smack into the heart of the disturbance." He patted the smooth bulk of the cowling. "We could have ridden the turbulence, maybe, but it's always better to stay clear."

"You can say that again," said Thromb with feeling. "The *Charne*, you

say?"

"A ship of the Killmore Line. A second-class Eastarch. We operated in the Sheem Sector, freight, passengers, the usual thing. I struck it lucky on the Hondinian Combination and decided to travel." Kennedy patted the cowling again. "But, at times, the old urge comes back. I guess that once a man has ridden space he can never forget it. It's good of you to accommodate me, Captain. I appreciate it."

"You were too young to quit," said Thromb. His tone was warm, friendly now that he was sure Kennedy was a fellow spacer. He accepted the fictitious background without question. "Space needs dedicated men. It isn't easy crossing the vacuum especially when—" He broke off, aware that he was saying too much.

"Well, I guess that you'd like to see the rest of the ship?"

"Yes," said Kennedy. "If I may."

"No problem." Thromb pushed a button. To the steward who answered he said, "Allow this gentleman full run of the vessel." Then, to Kennedy, "If there's anything you'd like, just ask."

Outside the control room the steward released his breath with a smile.

"You certainly managed to make a friend there, sir. Of course, I did put in a good word for you."

"I won't forget it," said Kennedy. "Do you have anything else to do?"

The man hesitated. "Well—"

"Just pass the word that I've got free run of the vessel." Kennedy produced money and thrust it into the ready hand. "I'd just like to wander around in my own time and take it all in. Right?"

"Right, sir," beamed the steward. "Anything you say."

Alone, Kennedy wandered the vessel, passing the salon, the galley, the sealed holds, crew quarters, pausing at the repair shop, and spending a lot of time in the engine room. It was late when he returned to his cabin to lie supine on the top bunk, eyes thoughtful as he stared at the ceiling.

A knock brought him instantly alert. Penza Saratov slipped like a squat eel through the open panel.

"It's all right," he said quickly as Kennedy shut the door. "No one saw me. I've got the cabin across the passage and everyone thinks I'm hopelessly drunk." He passed a hand over his naked scalp, grinning. "Man! The way we got rid of that wine I'm not surprised."

"Did you learn anything?"

"As yet, no," Penza admitted. "There's a lot of strain and some talk about rumors, but everyone seems to be exactly as they make out. I was suspicious about a couple of salesmen but they were working out a method to boost their expenses. There's a woman who claims to be ten years younger than what she is and a man who I think is on the run from the law, but that's all. You?"

"Nothing." Kennedy opened the locker and took a small instrument from his bag. He set it on the table and threw a switch. Gently he operated a knob, listening, hearing nothing but a soft murmur. "No one in the cabins to either side. There is someone in cabin fourteen and two people in cabin eight."

"An old maid who went early to bed and a pair of newlyweds on their honeymoon," said Penza instantly. "I've already checked. We aren't carrying anyone who can't be accounted for."

"It's as well to be certain." Kennedy picked up the instrument, slipped a plate from the base, and set it against the hull. Suckers held it fast. As he made an adjustment a thin, penetrating hum came from the diaphragm. The engine noise caught and amplified from the vibrations carried by the metal.

Penza grunted as he heard it.

"Those engineers should go back to school. Anyone with half an ear can tell those coils aren't in perfect sync. Give me a couple of hours and some tools and I'd improve efficiency by at least ten percent."

"You are a drunken, fat fool," said Kennedy flatly. "Not an engineer. At least you aren't while in this ship, so forget about telling the engineers how to do their job." He concentrated on the sound. "Can you tell if any extra

load has been applied? I'm thinking of a preset time device which could cause a complete and sudden breakdown."

Penza frowned. "Impossible to tell, Cap. The load would be small and with the coils the way they are it wouldn't be noticed. Maybe if I could make a physical check?"

"You can't." Kennedy removed the instrument from the hull, replaced the base plate, tucked it back into his bag. "If it was placed at all it would have been done back at the field during routine maintenance. I've checked all I could and everything seems normal."

"So where does that leave us, Cap?"

"As the professor would say, negative information can be of value. We know the passengers are what they seem. The crew is normal and I'd stake my life that Captain Thromb has no intention of stealing or wrecking his ship. As far as we can determine the vessel is as sound as can be expected. Which means that whatever happened to the *Wankle* and the other ships must have come from outside." Kennedy paused, thoughtful. "The problem is, what can it be?"

"Raiders?" Penza shook his head. "No, we've discounted that. In any case, a raider would show itself on the screens unless it could make itself invisible. Hey, Cap, how about that? Chemile can blend in with the background, couldn't a ship?"

"It would still have mass," reminded Kennedy. "And it would still create a turbulence. No, it can't be a ship."

"Then what, Cap?"

"We don't know," said Kennedy grimly. "But in a few days, if it strikes again, we're going to find out."

Chapter Four

Time dragged, with Penza Saratov continuing his masquerade and Kennedy checking and rechecking every inch of the vessel, as the *Hedlanda* moved across space to the region of mysterious disappearances. Both men were conscious of a mounting tension, a subtle sense of strain as if space itself had adopted a new and terrifying guise. Rumors, discounted

while beneath the safety of a familiar sun, could no longer be ignored.

Kennedy said, "The captain knows. That Larvik-Shaw detector was newly-installed. And if he knows, then so do the officers. They're walking around like cats afraid of a dog."

"If the officers know, then so do the crew." Penza Saratov leaned back against the hull. He had come into Kennedy's cabin, shouting and waving a bottle of wine, a deception in case anyone should be watching. "And, like it or not, a thing like that can contaminate everyone. I can smell it among the passengers. The taint of fear. I'm finding it hard even to give away wine."

"And still nothing?"

Saratov shook his head. "You?"

"No." Kennedy stiffened at a knock on the door. Quickly he said, "The wine!"

The cork popped and liquid gurgled as the giant tipped the bottle over two glasses. He raised one as Kennedy opened the door, laughing, talking as if continuing a previous conversation.

"... and I told him to take his mangy furs and stuff them where they'd do the most good. A trader, he called himself! I've seen better traders on the swamps of Aidelle where they have nothing to sell and nothing to..."

His voice rumbled on, continuing the deception in case of need. The passengers could be genuine, the crew also, but it was second nature to take elementary precautions.

A steward stood in the passage. He glanced once at the giant and then, to Kennedy, said, "Your pardon, sir. Captain Thromb sends his compliments and asks if you would be so kind as to join him in the control room."

"Certainly." Kennedy looked to where Penza was busy gulping his wine. "Just as soon as I have—"

"The matter is urgent, sir," interrupted the steward. "And the captain is waiting."

"What's that?" Penza leaned forward, blinking like an owl. Wine slopped from the bottle to run over his blouse. "A party? You want my friend to go to a party? Why should he go to a party? We've got one right here. You want to join us? Then come on in and have some wine."

The steward hesitated. "Sir?"

"Go in to him," said Kennedy. "Get him back to his cabin if you can. I'll go and see the captain."

Thromb was disturbed. He stood before the communications panel, his jaw tight, little muscles jumping along the ridge of bone. As Kennedy entered the control room, he said to the radioman, "Try them again."

Kennedy said, "Something wrong?"

"I don't know." Thromb lifted a hand and rubbed at the scar. "That's why I sent for you. Sometimes two heads are better than one. There's something out there, a ship I think, but they do not answer our signals."

"A ship?" Kennedy glanced at the screens, but could see nothing except the usual vista of stars, bright dots set in the universal shimmer of hydride.

"Look at this." Thromb gestured toward the Larvik-Shaw spacial disturbance detector. The screen showed a converging pattern of rippling lines. "Whatever it is, it's keeping well away. If it hadn't been for the detector I wouldn't have spotted it, and normally it wouldn't bother me. But, with things as they are, well, I just don't like it."

The *Mordain*, of course, and Chemile getting in too close. And yet he wasn't wholly to blame. Without the new detector the captain would never have been able to spot the slight disturbance caused by the passage of the vessel.

Kennedy said quietly, "Why don't you like it, Captain? Is it because we are getting close to the point where ships have vanished?"

"You know about that?"

"That and more, Captain." Kennedy glanced around the control room. Aside from Thromb and himself it contained only the radioman and

navigator. He said, "Can we talk alone?"

For a moment Thromb held his eyes and then, as if coming to a decision, gave a curt nod.

"Fran, Elgar, leave us." As the door closed behind them he said, "Now, mister, let us put some cards on the table. I've been watching you. I can understand an old spacer being interested in a ship, but I've never known one yet to go over a vessel as you have done. Suppose you explain."

"There's nothing to explain," said Kennedy easily. "Just let's say that I'm an investigator. If this ship vanishes, I want to know why and how. Perhaps I should have briefed you earlier, but there didn't seem to be any need. I imagine the last thing you want is to lose your command. The trouble is that others might not have the same intention. That's why I wanted to talk with you alone."

"You distrust my officers?"

"It isn't a question of distrust," snapped Kennedy harshly. "We're talking about a matter of lives. Yours, mine, those of the crew and passengers. And, in case you are wondering, my investigation is official." He added, in a softer tone, "Don't feel badly about it, Captain. When ships start to vanish without apparent cause, then all of us are concerned. How close are we to the point where the rest disappeared?"

"I don't know." Thromb rubbed again at his scar. "I've only heard rumors, as I told you. Things get distorted. We could be close or still have a long way to go. We could even be past it, but I don't think so. You get a feel about these things when you've been in space as long as I have." His composure broke to reveal a part of the real man beneath the iron facade. "Damn it! That's the worst part. Not knowing. Not being sure."

A man concerned, worried sick over the welfare of his ship, his passengers, and crew. A little helpless and more than a little afraid.

Kennedy said, "That, at least, I can tell you. Your permission, Captain?"

A polite request to salve wounded pride, but it was more than just a formality. This was Thromb's ship and his command and Kennedy needed his cooperation now and, perhaps, later.

As the captain nodded, he stepped to the communications panel, threw switches, and said loudly, "Kennedy here. You are far too close. Back off and take no further risks. That is an order."

A moment's silence and then Chemile's voice: "Sorry, Cap. I guess we were getting a little anxious. The *Hedlanda* is almost at point zero."

"Back off immediately!"

Luden's voice, dry, precise: "Now that we have broken radio silence, Cap, have you anything to report on the state of the *Hedlanda*?"

"Nothing. Both ship and crew check out clean. The passengers are uninvolved. It could be that this will turn out to be a false run, but maintain full monitoring just in case. And keep your distance. Is that understood?"

"Understood, Cap."

"How long to zero point?"

"There is no zero point," snapped Luden irritably. "That was Chemile's invention. A convenient label, perhaps, but misleading. Actually, the area is poorly defined and of some extent. However, the center of maximum probability is one-point-seven minutes from —now!"

"Mark!" said Kennedy, glancing at his watch. "Out!"

He cut the circuit and turned to meet Thromb's eyes. Thoughtfully the captain rubbed at his scar.

"I should ask questions," he said. "But that can come later. For one thing, I'd like to know how an ordinary investigator can run a private vessel. If it is private." He shrugged as Kennedy made no reply to the unspoken question. "So we've got about a minute to go. Is that it?"

"A minute to maximum probability, but that doesn't mean a great deal. We've got to pass the entire area before we are really safe."

"Call it—what?" Thromb frowned. "A quarter light-year? A half? At our velocity that will take about—" He broke off, eyes starting. "What the hell is that?"

A flicker of light had appeared in the control room. It raced over the bulkhead and then, incredibly, stood in the center of the floor. It was tall, wavering, a thing of swirling luminescence, bifurcated in the grotesque resemblance of a man.

As it vanished, Thromb released his breath in a gusting sigh.

"Ghosts! By all the gods of space! Ghosts!"

Another appeared, a third, more, dancing and weaving in the parody of a dance. One hit the captain, passed through him, hit the bulkhead, and vanished beyond. On the control panel lamps flashed, and from the Larvik-Shaw detector came a thin, high shrill of warning.

"Look at it!" Thromb turned, baffled. "It's gone crazy! According to the screen all space is falling apart!"

Kennedy glanced at it, sprang to the radio, and snapped switches. There was no time to communicate with the *Mordain*, but a cry, a shout, a signal of some land could, perhaps, be carried to the monitoring vessel. Back at the control panel, he glanced at the dials. All were meaningless, needles and columns of light fluctuating in wild confusion. Around him the weird shapes of luminescence gathered, seemed to thicken with determined menace.

He had, he knew, only seconds in which to act.

Already the confusion into which the ship's computer had been thrown must have activated the automatic beacon. The signal from the *Wankle* had lasted only thirty-four seconds. Call it thirty to be safe. More than twenty had already passed. In less than ten the *Hedlanda* and all it contained would vanish as if it had never been.

"Kennedy!" Thromb flung himself at the controls. "My ship! Let me—"

Kennedy knocked him aside. He snapped, "Get to the radio, tell what's happening. Move!"

He dropped into the padded chair, snapped the safety straps, gripped the controls with both hands. Around him the ship lurched, seeming to twist, to stretch and shrink at the same time, to be enfolded back on itself while being extended to infinity. He felt a crushing pressure against his

chest, a growing blackness in his eyes, and then all space seemed to explode around him in a blazing display of whirling suns and naming comets.

In the *Mordain* Chemile said, blankly, "Jarl, it's gone. The *Hedlanda's* gone!"

"Be precise!" Worry tinged Luden's voice with more than its usual acerbity. "How do you mean, gone? Has it left its normal flight path? What?"

"Just gone." Chemile gestured toward the screen. "I was watching it and, suddenly, it seemed to just vanish. Jarl! What happened?"

"I don't know yet. Check the automatic receiver for any beacon signal. Run the record tapes for any information which may have been sent. Set the computer to evaluate all relevant data while I check on the instrumentation. We can do nothing until we have correlated all available information. And make certain that we maintain our relative position in space."

The last instruction presented no problem. The *Mordain* was fitted with automatic devices which overcame the necessity for a large crew. Chemile threw the computer into full control and then settled down to a series of checks and examinations. He found it hard to concentrate, his eyes drifting constantly toward the screens where the stars, unhaloed now that they were out of hydride, shone as if mocking the efforts of men to understand the immutable workings of the universe.

Finally it was done and he went to join Luden where he sat in his compact laboratory. The professor was intent, studying graphs, the fingers of his right hand tapping at the keys of a small computer, canceling the results to set up new equations.

Without looking up he said, "Did you check the communication tapes?"

"Yes."

"Well?" Luden snapped his impatience. "Did they contain any message? Anything at all?"

Silently Chemile slipped a spool into a player and hit the button.

Against a background of surging static came a thin voice, then another.

"Cap!" Luden frowned. "But whose was the first? Not Saratov's; his roar is unmistakable. The captain's perhaps?" He reached out to rewind the spool, played it again.

"My ship! Let me—" A second voice, familiar. "Get to the radio, tell what's happening. Move!"

"That's Cap!" said Chemile. He fell silent as a stronger voice came from the speaker.

"Ghosts! We've been attacked by ghosts. They are in the form of light and—"

The tape ran silently on. Luden raised his eyebrows.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Interesting, if hardly informative," commented Luden dryly. "A pity that Cap himself couldn't have got to the radio instead of, as I suspect, the captain of the *Hedlanda*. The man was obviously in a state of shock which made him almost incoherent. Ghosts, indeed!"

Figures of light. Why must superstition always intrude at moments of stress? The latter I can accept, certain electromagnetic forces do reveal themselves in the form of patterns of light. But ghosts? Never!"

"Let's not split hairs," snapped Chenille. "Cap's lost, Penza too, and you sit there complaining because some poor devil half out of his mind with shock finds familiar words to describe the indescribable. How do we know what he saw? Maybe he really did see ghosts. Or what he took to be ghosts. What do they look like, anyway?"

"Like anything the mind can imagine." Luden leaned back in his chair, eyes thoughtful. "But you have a point, Veem. A pattern of light in the shape of a manlike thing could look, to a man in shock, like a figment of childhood terror. But what would have caused such a manifestation? The impact of high energies on the retina, perhaps? The filtering effect of the metal of the vessel itself on a beam of intraspacial energy which, by

accident, resolved itself into the light-forms described? I must consider the matter."

"And while you're considering, what about Cap?"

"I haven't forgotten him," said Luden quietly. "You know better than to even think that I had. I've completed the first rough assessment of available data and the result is not good. As far as I can determine, the very fabric of space was altered at the point where the *Hedlanda* vanished. Imagine, if you can, a sheet of fabric over which a ball is rolling. The fabric is space, the ball a vessel. Now imagine the fabric to be ripped in some fashion. A small tear just below the ball. The ball would vanish and, if the rip was repaired, all would seem as before."

"Except that there would be no ball. No ship." Chemile frowned. "But it would have gone somewhere. To the other side of the fabric. Right?"

"The analogy is a crude one. Space is not two-dimensional, but, yes, you have the general idea. The problem is this: what caused space to rip? What lies on the other side? Can it be prevented from happening again?"

"You've forgotten something," said Chemile tightly. "There's another problem and one more important than all the rest. How do we get Cap and Penza back from where they must be?"

Quietly Luden said, "If they are alive."

"Is there any doubt?"

Luden reached toward the player. He slipped out the spool which Chemile had brought and inserted another. The familiar, eerie blips and shrills of an automatic beacon filled the confines of the laboratory.

"The signal from the *Hedlanda*. Automatic, of course. I've slowed it down and made very careful measurements of both harmonics and tone. I'm afraid the conclusion is inescapable. Both show a marked descent to a lower scale."

Chemile drew in his breath. "The Doppler effect."

"Exactly." Luden pursed his lips, a mask to hide emotion. "Signals originating from a stationary source would have shown no such effect. But

if the source had been traveling away from us at a very high velocity, then there would have been a descent in tone. The reverse, naturally, if coming toward us, but that is not the case. The time lag between the signals is minute but measurable. It increases toward the end of the message, which shows an acceleration of incredible proportions. From a relatively stationary position the *Hedlanda* was moved at a fantastic velocity into regions unknown."

He paused, then added somberly, "As far as I can determine from the Doppler effect of the message, the acceleration was high enough to have crushed to a pulp every living thing aboard the vessel."

Chapter Five

He wasn't dead and Penza Saratov couldn't understand why. He had been in his cabin when the lights had appeared and he had run into the passage, hearing the shouts and screams from terrified men and women, the harsh clangor of alarms. He had run toward the engine room, following a pre-laid plan, bumping into crewmen whom he had tossed aside as if they had been feathers. A door had been locked and he'd torn it from its hinges, running into the engine room as the ship tilted and began a crazy spin. He had seen a mass of metal, a rectifier, torn from its fastenings and hurtling toward him. And then the universe had exploded.

He groaned, feeling a cramping pressure against his chest, back, and shoulders and for a wild moment wondered if he had been taken for dead and actually buried. Then he moved his legs, feeling the impact of his boots against metal and knew that he could not be in a narrow box but must still be in the ship.

We crashed, he thought. That lump of metal must have knocked me out and now it's holding me down. But why is it so dark? The emergency lights should still be working and, unless everyone else is dead, there should be sounds of rescue.

Instinct prompted him to fight against the pressure holding him, to heave and twist in a blind effort to escape. Instead he lay still, waiting for his head to clear, some of the ache to die. He was lying facedown, his body trapped, only his legs and head able to move. His arms were at his sides held tight against his torso. He was, he guessed, lying against the point where a bulkhead joined the deck, the mass of metal holding him down forming the other side of a triangle. It could be resting against the

bulkhead forming a narrow prison which held him close.

Gently he drew up his knees, pressed them hard against the deck, and heaved. He felt the constricting weight ease a little, a rasp of metal, and then, as he moved forward a trifle, something hard press against the top of his head.

The hull", he guessed, where it met the bulkhead. He was trapped in a corner with only one way out. But without being able to use his arms he couldn't push himself backward and the weight on his body held him fast.

For a moment Saratov lay quietly, breathing deep, deliberately oxygenating his blood. The ache in his head had settled to a dull throbbing and from the feel of his body he could guess at extensive bruising. He waited, breathing, conscious of sweat dewing his face, the pressure holding him fast A weight which would have crushed an ordinary man, but his flesh and bones had been formed on a high-gravity world.

Slowly he drew up his knees, ramming them hard against the deck as, with a concentration of physical effort, he arched his back.

Again came the rasp of metal, a reluctant yielding of the pressure around him. He maintained the effort, face turned, one cheek hard against the deck, weight heavy against neck and upper shoulders. He gained a little room and moved both arms beneath him, hands fiat against the deck as great biceps took the strain. Above him metal protested, tore free, fell to one side as, with a surge of muscular energy, he rose to stand panting against the bulkhead.

Now he could see. A dun glow came from beyond an open door, the faint blue haze of a Kell emergency light, the bulb still intact despite the crash. Saratov moved toward it, slipped, and almost fell as his foot hit a patch of wetness. He caught himself and looked down at a barely recognizable shape. One of the engineers who had been caught by the spin, who had been flung against the bulk of the engine, now lay dead in a pool of his own blood.

One dead, thought Saratov grimly. And there would be others. Cap, perhaps? Concern sent him racing through the vessel toward the control room.

Kennedy was in the big chair, hanging suspended from the straps. The

supports had broken and tipped the chair forward and to one side. His eyes were closed, his breathing shallow, but apparently he was unhurt.

Saratov found water, dashed it into Kennedy's face, sent strong but gentle fingers to massage the nerves and muscles of the neck.

"Cap!" His breath exploded in a gust of relief as Kennedy opened his eyes. "For a minute there I thought you were dead. Can you move?" He watched anxiously as Kennedy tested his arms, his legs. The straps fell away and he rose. "What happened, Cap? What hit us?"

"Lights shaped like men. They threw the computer into chaos and then—" Kennedy paused, frowning. "I took control," he added slowly. "Everything seemed to go crazy and I must have blacked out for a while. Then I saw a spaceport, at least it was an area ringed with lights and machines of some kind; there was no time for more than a quick glimpse. We were falling totally out of control. I managed to right the ship and put it into a crash-glide. There were mountains, foothills, I couldn't avoid them."

Saratov frowned. "A spaceport, Cap? Are you sure?"

"No," admitted Kennedy. "It was only an impression. My first concern was for the ship. I tried to save it; obviously I failed. Have you checked the vessel?"

"Not yet, Cap."

"We'd better do it right away. There could be others wanting help. The captain for one. He was in here. Let's find him."

Incredibly, Thromb was alive and unhurt. The fragile panels of the communications system had folded around him providing a buffer against the impact. He stirred as Saratov ripped them away, sitting up, one hand lifting to touch his scar, his temple.

Wincing, he said, "My head! There's a blue medical cabinet somewhere. If you could find it..."

The box was battered, but the contents were undamaged. The captain gulped three violet capsules, took some water, rose unsteadily to his feet. Bleakly he looked at the control room.

"We're in a mess. Are there others still alive?"

"I don't know," said Kennedy. "We'd better find out."

The salon was a shambles, the engine room also, the cabins torn almost beyond recognition, but miracles had happened. The radioman had survived, a steward, the gambler, one of the two salesmen. They assembled in the control room, pale, shaken, still numbed by the fury of recent events.

"Seven left out of the entire complement." Thromb was bitter. "And it wasn't as if the crash killed them all. Some of those women were safe in their bunks. How did they die?"

"Concussion," said Saratov quickly. "I've seen it before. Outwardly there is no sign of injury, but shock has ruptured the internal organs. Right, Cap?"

"Yes," said Kennedy. "It was probably that."

The gambler's name was Jukan. He shrugged. "Luck," he said. "Some lived and others died. It could be they were the fortunate ones. Here we are, stranded God knows where, with a wrecked ship and no idea how to get back home. So what do we do now?"

"That's right." The salesman was thin, wearing cheap fabrics, his face creased in lines of perpetual indecision. He shivered and rubbed his hands. "I'm cold," he complained. "Can't we turn up the heat?"

"We've no power," said the radioman. "Only emergency Kell bulbs."

"They use current, don't they? Why can't we use some of it to get warm?"

"Kell bulbs don't use current. They are transparent containers coated on the inside with a fluorescent compound. A pinch of radioactive isotope makes it shine. Understand?" He spoke patiently, as if to a child.

"I don't get it." The salesman was petulant. "I always thought that light was heat Those bulbs should be able to keep us warm. I—"

The steward was hurt, cracked ribs making an agony of breathing. He

said, "Now listen, mister, why don't you just shut up and—"

"That's enough, Troy!" Thromb was sharp, conscious of the need for discipline. Conscious too that shock could affect people in different ways. The salesman was unused to spaceships and could not wholly be blamed for his ignorance. And it was getting cold. Already his breath was leaving plumes of vapor in the air.

Kennedy said, "We have to get organized. We can't stay in the ship, that's obvious. I suggest that we gather all the warm clothing we can find. Containers for water, food, other things we are going to need." He looked at the radioman. "Your name is Elgar, right? See what you can do with the communications equipment. Rig up a receiver of some kind, a transmitter also if you can manage it."

"Without power?"

"You don't need power for a crystal set. If anyone is broadcasting we might be able to pick up a signal. Jukan, take our friend here, Vendelle, isn't is?"

The salesman nodded.

"You go with Jukan and get some warm clothing. Wear all you can and remember that you are going to have to move, so don't pad out too much. Troy, get off those clothes. I want to look at your ribs."

As the others moved about their duties, spurred by the hard decision in Kennedy's voice, he rested his hands gently on Troy's bared torso. He heard the grate of bone, the sharp inhalation of pain, and eased the pressure.

"Bad," he said, "but it could be a lot worse. The lungs aren't punctured. Penza, tear me up something to use as a bandage."

As fabric ripped beneath the big hands of the giant Kennedy probed into the medical cabinet. He found a vial of capsules, another of an oily liquid. Quickly he loaded it into the barrel of a hypogun and blasted the quick-healing compound into the region of the damaged bones. The capsules were pain-killers. He gave the man four as Saratov wound the strips of fabric tightly around the naked chest.

"Not too tight," he snapped as the man gasped with pain. "We want to hold the bones, not crush them."

Saratov eased the bandages. "Better?"

Troy nodded. "I guess that will do it. I certainly feel a lot more comfortable. Thanks."

"Get some warm clothing," ordered Kennedy. "And find some food. All there is. We can sort it out later." As the man moved off he said to Thromb, "How about arms?"

"Guns?"

"You carry some, don't you?"

"Only the usual weapons for ship emergency." He meant mutiny, the chance of living cargo breaking from the holds, the potential need to shoot down a crewman or passenger who might run amok. "They're locked in the arsenal."

It was a small cabinet set in a corner of the bulkhead. The lock was jammed. Saratov smashed it open with heavy blows of a stanchion he had jerked from where it swung loose against the hull. Inside lay two hetdyne projectors and four Diones. The projectors were short-range devices which threw a beam of energy which would disorganize the central nervous system and bring immediate paralysis. The Dione pistols were heavy, with long, finned barrels and flared muzzles. The pressure of the trigger threw a tiny ball of unstable elements into the firing chamber where it vented its energy. Permanent magnets provided a field which took that energy, channeled it, sent it in a finger-thick shaft of focused, searing incandescence. An obvious weapon to use aboard a spaceship where heavy missiles would damage equipment and penetrate the hull. Asteroid miners used them as convenient tools to obtain spectroscopic analysis. Others, less peaceful, used them to burn and incinerate beasts and men.

Kennedy took one, checked the load, handed it to Saratov. He took one himself, handed the others to Thromb and Elgar. The hetdyne projectors would be used by the gambler and steward. Vendelle would have to remain unarmed, but he doubted if the salesman could handle a weapon.

To Saratov he said, "Let's go outside. It's time we Found out just where

we are."

"You want me to come with you?" Thromb took a step forward, halting as Kennedy shook his head.

"No. You stay here and get things organized. You know what has to be done." He added, grimly, "We don't know what could be waiting out there. There's no point in all of us offering a target at the same time. Stand by the lock. If we have to return we could be in a hurry. Ready, Penza?"

"When you are, Cap."

Together they stepped from the vessel.

The landscape was—alien.

It was like nothing he had ever seen before and Kennedy was reminded of ancient paintings he had seen in the old museums of Earth, works by Dali and Picasso, Bruni and the insane artist Emmanuel Smith, who had distorted his vision with electronic stimulus so that he saw nothing that was normal to other eyes.

Beside him he heard Saratov draw in his breath, release it with a sigh of sheer incredulity.

"Cap! What—"

They had both seen a multitude of worlds, a plethora of suns, terrain ravaged by monstrous turmoil and planets of varying nature. But neither had seen what lay before them now.

From their feet the ground fell away in a gentle slope to a rolling plain. The soil was ridged, edged and jagged as if torn by saws so that it looked like the surface of a gigantic file, points, dells, curves, and blades all softly winking as if flecked with minute gems so that shimmers merged with rainbows which blended into hazes and twinkles as far as the eye could see. Vegetation sprouted in fantastic variety, slender boles weighted with triangular leaves, ferns opening into geometric forms, rods, cones, pyramids, spirals, fluted columns. The sky was dark, blazing with points of light, three great disks like silver moons riding at the zenith, others, red, green, yellow, and blue set at equidistant points low above the horizon.

The moons, colored and silver, the points of light which had to be stars, the very ground itself lightened the scene with a ghostly luminescence cold and disturbing; and over everything was the sense of distortion, that other objects lurked just beyond the range of vision, that other shapes hung on the boles, the trunks, and columns of the strange vegetation.

And it was cold.

Kennedy felt the chill bite through his clothing and freeze the vapor of his breath. He heard Saratov mutter, the slap of his hands against his armpits, the crunch of boots as he stamped at the ground.

"We're not dressed for this, Cap. I'm freezing."

"You can stand it for a while."

"I don't have to like it." The giant looked at the sky, the ground. "Where the devil is this? It's like nothing I've ever seen before. What happened to the ship, Cap? Where are we?"

"I don't know." Kennedy was thoughtful. "But I suspect that we are no longer in the normal universe. Those stars are like nothing familiar. Not their configuration, but everything about them. And those moons are against all astronomical evidence. If they are moons," he added. "They could be something else. Satellites, power-sources, fortresses even. I wish the *Mordain* was here. There are tests I'd like to make that are impossible without specialized instruments."

"I wish it were here too," said Saratov with feeling. "At least, inside it we'd be warm." He added, "And safe. Those bodies in the ship, Cap. Did you notice?"

"Yes. As you did. Not everyone died in or before the crash. Thromb had suspicions but you were quick to provide an answer. I'm glad you did. We're in enough trouble without creating panic."

"Something killed them," said the giant. "But what? And how?"

"We don't know what and we can only guess how, but I think I know why." Kennedy turned and stared at the ship. It lay at the foot of a low range of hills, mountains soaring beyond their peaks bright with reflected illumination. The crash had dented the nose and sprung the plates of the

hull from the salon to the engine room. More damage lay at the rear, a wide pool of frozen liquid like a mirror beneath a gaping vent.

"The control room was intact," said Kennedy. "You were imprisoned in metal. The others were either in cabins which were sealed and whole or in a lattice of struts. The others, those who died without obvious cause, were in a sense exposed to the outside."

"We were protected," said Saratov thoughtfully. "They were not." His hand dropped to the butt of the Dione gun which he had thrust into his belt. "Something entered the ship while we were lying unconscious. It, they, searched around. Metal for some reason frightened them off, but those they could reach were easy prey. But they weren't eaten, Cap. They didn't show a sign of injury. No bites, no stings, nothing."

"They died," reminded Kennedy. "And something killed them." Saratov glared around, his shoulders hunched a little, his muscles bunched for action. "And that something could still be hanging around. Right, Cap?"

"Right," said Kennedy. He was looking upward, his eyes thoughtful, frozen vapor falling like a tiny storm from the plumes of his breath. "And that's not the only thing. Look!" His arm lifted, pointing. "There's something moving up there. A ship!"

Chapter Six

Like the landscape, it was like nothing they had ever seen before, a polyhedron dotted with truncated cones, the whole bathed in a shimmering lattice of green sparkles. It drifted over the mountains, dipping, rising, moving in little darts, seeming to vanish only to reappear in a different place. From it came a thin, high humming, a spiteful sound as if made by a hunting wasp.

"An alien ship," breathed Saratov. "What kind of engines can it have? What manner of drive?" Professional interest kept his face turned upward, eyes narrowed as he studied the strange vessel. "That green shimmer must be a gravity-negating screen. A force shield of some kind. They could be looking for us. Cap?"

"Get into the ship!" snapped Kennedy. "Fast!"

"You don't want them to see us?"

"Something dragged us through space from our own universe. They could be responsible. If so, they aren't likely to be friendly. Into the ship now. Move!"

He led the way through the port, snapping quick orders, primitive instincts screaming a warning of imminent danger. The strange vessel was drifting, moving as if searching for something, and he had a shrewd idea of what it was. If he was wrong, no harm would be done. If he was right, speed was their only salvation.

"Get the food outside. The water. Throw out every scrap of clothing, everything of value. Hurry, damn you! Hurry!"

"Trouble?" Thromb caught at his arm. "Did you see something out there?"

"I did. I think it's looking for us." Kennedy picked up a bundle of clothing and tossed it through the open *port*. He followed it with a parcel of food. "All of you. Listen. We're going outside now. Pick up as much as you can and run down the slope. There's a patch of vegetation which looks like blunted spires. Head for it There's a shallow spot to one side. Get in it and stay down. Penza, lead the way."

Elgar looked up from the equipment on which he was working.

"Just a minute! I've got to get this unit out and—"

"Forget it!"

"But—"

"Do as I say!" Kennedy gripped the man by the arm and threw him toward the open port. "Out! For your lives!"

They raced down the jagged slope, stumbling, dropping bundles, stopping to regain them as they followed the giant to the shallow dip beside the strange vegetation. Kennedy was the last to leave, snatching up the medical cabinet, some extra charges for the Diones. He dropped beside Saratov as the alien vessel dipped and swayed lower down the mountains. The thin hum grew louder, steadied as, like an emerald snowflake, the thing poised above the stricken *Hedlanda*.

From the tips of the truncated cones shot streamers of writhing green flame.

They hit the stone of the mountains and beneath their touch rose showers of broken debris, plumes of dust, stone broken and riven and tossed upward and outward from new-made craters. The flames reached toward the wrecked ship, touched it, blasted metal and stone in a merging shower which rose to fall and rise again in a rolling blast of unleashed destruction. For long minutes the alien craft dipped and weaved, sending the emerald flame dancing over the surrounding terrain, tearing the ground, the stone, the vessel itself into unrecognizable fragments.

And then it rose, whining, humming, to dip and lift and move steadily across the plain to where an emerald moon shone glowing in the sky.

Thromb lifted his head and made a sound deep in his throat.

"It's gone," he said. "The *Hedlanda's* gone. There's nothing left."

Nothing but what they had managed to carry with them. As they dressed in the extra clothing, teeth chattering, bodies cringing beneath the impact of the savage cold, Kennedy checked on what they had. Some food, some water, a little medicine, a few weapons, some rope, thin, strong cord which had somehow become included in one of the bundles, two bottles of brandy, a case of samples. He opened the lid and looked at racked bottles of perfume.

Vendelle said, "That's my stock in trade. If I lose that I've nothing to sell."

"What the hell do you expect to sell here?" Troy had fallen, hurting his broken ribs and his temper was short. "What's the good of this junk? We can't eat it We can't drink it and it won't keep us warm."

"It might," said Kennedy. "The solvent could serve as fuel."

Jukan, the gambler, said uneasily, "Shouldn't we be moving? That ship might return. After what they did I don't want to meet them."

"Move to where?" Elgar rubbed at his arm; Kennedy had not been gentle. "Look at this place. A frozen hell straight out of a nightmare. If you'd have given me time to collect some equipment I might have been

able to build a radio of sorts."

"There was no time," said Thromb. He looked again at the spot where his ship had lain, seeing nothing but a mound of rubble. "I guess it's useless to search for anything of value. I can't even see a scrap of metal, the whole ship must have been turned into slag." He sounded helpless, broken, at a loss without his command. "Don't ask me what we do now. I haven't an idea."

"We move," said Kennedy. "On the way down I was in control and I saw a spaceport of sorts. That ship must have come from it and it headed toward the green moon. My guess is that the spaceport lies in that direction. We'll find it—and maybe teach whatever ruined the *Hedlanda* a lesson. But first we'll eat. That ship did its job and it won't return. Food is easier to carry inside than out and we're going to need all the warmth and strength we can get. Troy, you're a steward, can you cook?"

"With a galley, a fire, and utensils, yes."

"We don't need anything fancy. Just something, hot, rich, and sustaining. See what you can find. Jukan, take Vendelle and get some of that vegetation. Elgar, go with the captain and see if you can find a flat rock and a heap of smaller stones. There should be plenty over where the ship was."

The vegetation was pulpy, soft masses lying over inner structures as hard as iron. Saratov snapped them beneath his boot, forming a pile over which Kennedy poured some of the perfume. Standing back, he raised his Dione and pressed the trigger. The shaft of incandescence blasted from the flared muzzle, splashed against the flat stone Thromb and Elgar had found, rose in a blaze as the perfume caught and fired the pulpy mass. Within minutes they crouched around a glowing fire.

Troy looked at the heap of smaller stones.

"What do I do with these?"

"Heat them in the fire. When they are good and hot drop them into a container. The water's frozen by now but it will thaw." Kennedy lifted two thick inner branches he had saved. "Use these to handle the containers and stones. How much longer for the food?"

They ate using fingers and fragments of stone, huddled close to the warmth of the fire, almost comic in their bundles of shapeless clothing. But there was nothing comic about their situation as Kennedy well knew. He stood back from the others, eyes searching the sky, the area beyond the fire.

Saratov loomed beside him, gigantic in his padding, silent despite his bulk.

He said, looking at the fire, "You took a chance there, Cap. Whatever killed those in the ship could be attracted by the flames."

"I know, that's why I'm on watch."

"You hope it'll attack, Cap?"

"I don't like mysteries. We've enough to face without having to worry about a lurking enemy. Anyway, it could be afraid of fire."

"It could be." Saratov paused and then said, "It's bad, isn't it? I guess we're in about as tough a situation as could be imagined. I wonder what odds Jukan would give on us getting out alive and in one piece."

Maybe I'll ask him, thought Kennedy. But not just yet. Not until the fire and the hot food had a chance to work their magic. A hungry, cold, and terrified man was a difficult creature to handle. Warmth, food, a plan of action would make all the difference. He wished they could sleep a while but that was out of the question. Sleep could come later, if they ever got the chance to sleep at all.

He walked to the edge of the fire, standing, waiting until he had their attention.

"All right, you've eaten and you're warm, and now it's time to move. As far as I can be sure about what happened to us we were somehow drawn from our own space into another dimension. Another universe. A region unknown to us—I can't put it better than that Something must have done it and I don't think it was an accident because we aren't the first. You all saw what happened to the ship; that alien vessel destroyed it. It headed toward the green moon. As I told you, I saw a spaceport on the way down. That means there could be ships and, if there are ships, there could be a chance that we can escape from this place. It's the only chance we have.

We're going to take it."

Positive commands, short sentences, the situation laid out in terms easy to understand. Kennedy was a master of psychology.

"We've weapons," he snapped. "We are warm, well-fed, and determined. If we stay here we freeze. You want to freeze? No. Then on your feet and let's get moving."

There were seven of them, Kennedy in the lead, Thromb and Troy behind flanking the unarmed salesman. Elgar and Jukan with Saratov brought up the rear. A tiny group of men, padded against the frigid cold, packs on their backs, marched over an alien plain beneath an alien sky.

The going was rough, the jagged soil hard, unyielding so that they stumbled and fell to rise cursing, breath frozen on faces and the edges of garments so that the lower parts of their faces became heavy with ice. Hours passed with no signs of progress aside from the mountains at their rear which seemed to shrivel, the patches of vegetation which grew close, grew level, and passed.

Vendelle fell, rose whimpering to fall again and lie with his face against the dirt.

Thromb knelt, turned him over, stared at the distorted face.

"He's beat," he announced. "Exhausted. If he doesn't rest he'll die."

"He won't be the only one." Troy winced as he knelt on the ground. "My ribs are killing me."

"Soft," rumbled Saratov into Kennedy's ear. "They can't take it. We'll have to rest, Cap."

"Not yet." Kennedy pointed. "There's a large stand of some kind of tree ahead. We'll camp there. It will give us some protection. We can light a small fire and mask it with brush. If you can carry Vendelle, I'll support Troy."

They were camping too soon, the distance covered too small, but it couldn't be helped. Later, perhaps, when bodies had hardened, they would do better. Kennedy set watches, stood his turn. After he was relieved by

Saratov he found a sheltered spot some distance from the fire. He woke to see Thromb's anxious face. "It's Elgar," whispered the captain. "He's dead." Kennedy rose at once. "How?"

"I don't know. I was a little restless. You know how it is, when you're used to standing watches you somehow know when your turn's due. Elgar should have woken me. I went to look for him. I couldn't see him and then I tripped over something." Thromb swallowed. "It was Elgar."

"Where is he?" Kennedy followed the pointing hand. "Wake Saratov and have him join me. Get Jukan on his feet and have him watch over the others."

Elgar was lying at the bole of a tree, face upturned toward the glimmering sky. He looked very peaceful. The Dione he had carried was lying a little to one side, inches from his outstretched hand.

"The same," whispered Saratov after he had made his examination. "Just like those others in the ship. Not a mark on him and yet he's dead."

"He couldn't have just died," said Kennedy flatly. "Something must have killed him."

"True, but what?" Saratov looked helplessly around. A physical enemy he would have attacked with his bare hands, but now he was at a loss.

"He could have fallen asleep," said Kennedy. "Sat down, then lay down, and drifted off. Vapor, perhaps?" He knelt, face close to the ground, cautiously sniffing. "Nothing that I can find. Is there anything in his mouth?" He frowned as Saratov shook his head. "He didn't chew at the vegetation, then. Alkaloids in the pulp could have done it, but not if he didn't touch the plants. And why is his gun lying to one side?"

"He could have released his hold on it when he dropped off," suggested Saratov. "It happens and—" He broke off, staring into the trees. "Cap! What the hell's that?"

It was a shimmer, a patch of light which seemed to swell, to change color, to adopt new shapes. A ball, a lozenge, a flattened disk. It pulsed and wavered, flaring to comparative brilliance and then dying to a mere flicker. It moved as if suspended in the air, swaying, darting in little jerks before coming again to rest.

And from it radiated a feral menace.

Kennedy's hand dropped, rose holding the Dione, his finger closing as the flared muzzle leveled on the mysterious glow. Thunder roared, the fury of released energy, the eerie light around them split with the shaft of flaring incandescence. It stabbed between the trees, hit the wavering shape, passed on to send fire leaping from the bole of a tree.

Saratov yelled, "Cap! Watch it!" The thing glowed. It sparkled with brilliance apparently unharmed by the searing blast. Before Kennedy could fire again it had darted close to the fire, dipped, hung for a moment like a curtain over the slumped figure of Vendelle. To fire again would be to kill the salesman. Kennedy shouted to the gambler. "The hetdyne projector. Use it, man! Use it!" Paralysis would hurt but would not be fatal. Jukan rumbled with the weapon, half-lifted it, then ran as the glowing thing rose and jerked toward him. Saratov caught him as he passed, snatched the weapon from his hand and fired. The shrill hum grated on nerves like a nail on slate, invisible energies reaching out from the stubby muzzle to where the thing hovered close to the fire. It darted away and to one side. Both Kennedy and Thromb fired together. Twin lances of flame hit dead center, passed, crossing like the fingers of a hand. Again Saratov joined in, the complex wave-pattern of the hetdyne projector seining to disorganize the glowing shape. It twisted, swelled, and then, as Kennedy continued firing, burst with a sudden gush of eye-searing brilliance.

And the air seemed to be filled with sighs, groans, whispers, a wave of complex emotions which left them all stunned with disbelief.

Thromb said huskily, "Did you get that? I feel—I don't know how I feel. But I don't like it."

"It was crying," whispered Jukan. "Pleading and at the same time it was laughing, gloating. What in God's name was it?"

"The thing which killed Elgar. Vendelle too." Kennedy rose from beside the body of the salesman. "The same thing which killed those within the ship. A life-eater. Fattening itself on psychic energy. We overloaded its metabolism, fed it too much raw energy and the hetdyne projector must have helped. It simply burst and, when it did, we caught the residue of what it had absorbed."

"But why didn't it move in and kill us all?" Saratov answered his own question. "The guns. We were all carrying metal aside from Vendelle. Elgar was attacked when he dropped his Dione;"

"It must have followed us," said Troy. His breathing was ragged, rasping in his chest. "Trailed us all the way from the ship. We wouldn't have noticed it against the glow. Or perhaps it was just one of a crowd. If so, I don't think we're going to get very far."

"We'll get as far as we have to." Kennedy looked around. The fire was almost dead, a glowing patch of embers in the midst of the camp. The men were awake. It was a good time to move.

Chapter Seven

The ground changed, the jagged points and file-like terrain smoothing to a gentle corrugation as if the soil had been neatly brushed and combed. The tall clumps of vegetation ended to be replaced by domed protuberances covered with spines which puffed and vanished into dust at the touch of a boot. They were useless for shelter or fuel and there was nothing else.

Kennedy found a narrow gully, followed it, rose at its end to stand and stare bleakly at the forbidding landscape. Above, the three silver moons had not altered position; the glowing disks set about the horizon seemed exactly as they had at the beginning of the journey. They had seen no sign of a ship, nothing to tell them they were heading in the right direction.

He turned and felt a faint nausea, as if eyes and brain were at war. The distortion, he thought. The subtle wrongness about everything he saw. The hint that the ground was not exactly what it seemed, the sparsely scattered domes something other than the natural product of an alien environment.

Only the cold was real, the strength-sapping numbness, the gelid frigidity which iced their mouths and made every second a nightmare.

He waited for the others to catch up. Thromb was in the lead, Jukan at the rear, between them Saratov looked grotesque, Troy riding like a child on his massive shoulders. The steward was ill, broken ribs and strain had taken its toll; now he rode in semi-delirium, his own fever a protection against the cold.

"Fifteen in the party," he babbled softly. "Make sure they get prime service. No fish for the matron and go easy on the red wine. Good tips if we play it right."

He chuckled, reliving a fragment of the past.

"A good cut off the trader and how the hell would he know Geladanian wine from local produce? Sweeten the brew and add a little spice. Five hundred percent profit and no comebacks. Five more trips like this and I'll be able to retire." He swayed and almost fell, only Saratov's quick hand restoring his balance. "Sorry," he muttered. "God, but I'm thirsty!"

"Set him down," ordered Kennedy.

Saratov grunted. "Don't worry about me, Cap. I could carry another five like him."

"Set him down."

From inside his garments where it had rested against his naked flesh Kennedy took a small container of water, the contents warmed by his body-heat. The pain-killing drugs were almost exhausted, but he slipped the last into the crusted mouth, adding a trickle of water.

"More!" gasped Troy. "More!"

"There is no more." Kennedy broke ice from the edge of the fabric around his mouth, fed the fragments into the container and tucked it back against his body. Thawed, the fragments would provide a little moisture. "How are you feeling now, Troy?"

"Bad." The drugs had taken effect; the delirium vanished. It would return, an anodyne to his misery, but for the moment his mind was clear. "My chest is on fire and I'm cold and hot at the same time. How much farther do we have to go?"

"Not far now."

"The quicker we get there the better. I could use a hot bath, a soft bed, and the biggest meal you ever saw. I served one once, at the banquet given by the Prince of Pealair. Man! You should have seen it! Two hundred different dishes, fountains of wine, entertainers from a dozen worlds."

Troy ran a dry tongue over his cracked lips. "Watch the ice!" he snapped. "And keep an eye on those pastries! Hurry with those fruits!" He tittered. "Later, honey, just let's get this thing over."

He was gone again, finding refuge in pleasant memories.

As Saratov heaved him back on his shoulders Jukan said, "He's going to die. I wouldn't give a snowball's chance in hell that he's going to make it."

Kennedy followed the giant, not answering.

"Listen to him," said the gambler. "Out of his head. Dreaming about food and women." He stumbled, swore as he regained his balance. "Why carry a man already dead?"

"He'll get his chance."

"To do what? To take us with him?" Jukan rubbed at his face, his bloodshot eyes. "Do you know what our chances are? Nil. Just nothing. Why don't we just give up and take what's coming?"

"Because we're men," said Kennedy harshly. "Because while there's a chance, no matter how small, we have to take it."

A philosophy the gambler could understand. He said quietly, "I guess you're right. It's just that all this is getting me." He gestured at the landscape. "It doesn't feel like it should. I get the impression that something's watching us, following us. And things seem to change. Look at the ground. For all we know we could be walking over skin, not dirt. Those moons could be eyes. Those domes pimples. And this damn cold. When can we stop and eat?"

"We can't." Kennedy was abrupt. "The food's gone, the fuel. We can't even make a fire."

"You told Troy that we didn't have far to go."

"That's right." Kennedy hadn't been lying. Either way the journey would soon have to be over. If they didn't find food and shelter of some kind in the next few hours they would die. Hypothermia would take care of that if nothing else. A metabolism, robbed of heat-giving food, would inevitably freeze.

"The final play," said Jukan. He sucked in his breath. "Well, it had to happen. Maybe if we moved faster, tried running?"

"No," Patiently, Kennedy explained. "If we run, well sweat. In these conditions that would be to commit suicide. The sweat would freeze and we'd get coated with ice. It would thaw, freeze, thaw again. Our body-heat would be lost and that would be the end. We're going as fast as we can."

But not fast enough. Kennedy forged ahead, his eyes searching for something to burn, something which would at least hold heat. The domes puffed and vanished, the ground was devoid of rocks. He moved down a shallow valley, up to a low ridge. Behind him he heard Thromb's startled shout, Saratov's booming roar.

"Cap! It's started to snow!"

It was the strangest storm he had ever seen. Thick, pale flakes appeared from the very air, turning as they fell, glossy pearls in the light from the sky. They thickened, coming from a point, he guessed, about ten feet above, a dimming blanket which piled on head and shoulders, softening the impact of their boots, seeming to congeal the very air so that it became hard to breathe, impossible to see.

"Cap!" Saratov had halted, shouting. "This way, Cap! This way!"

Kennedy followed the muffled sound, hit something which moved and cried out. It was Thromb, blinded and lost, afraid of unseen terrors.

"Follow me!" He caught the captain's arm, guided his hand to his belt. "Hold on."

"Where's Jukan?"

"With Saratov...Penza?"

Flame split the darkness, the roar of a Dione. It came again, a third time as the giant fired into the air, sound and light a guiding beacon. Together the little party huddled beneath the blanket of falling snow.

"Cap?" Mounded with snow, Saratov looked more gigantic than ever. "Do we squat down and wait for it to pass?"

"No." Once buried they would never find the energy to escape. "We've got to keep moving. Stay in line and each keep hold of the man in front. I spotted a cluster of domes over to the right They could provide a little shelter."

"Against the snow?" Thromb was doubtful.

"There could be wind. If so, we'll be helpless. Hold on now and follow me."

The snow thickened even more, falling in an almost solid cloud, piling beneath their feet so that they slipped and fell to rise and stagger on. Within minutes the wind Kennedy had feared began to blow, a than, high-pitched keening which sent snow lashing into their faces, stinging nose and eyes and mouths with vicious blows. To face it was to invite frozen eyeballs; all they could do was move before it, all sense of direction lost.

Kennedy slipped, rolled, came to rest against something smooth and hard. He rose, padded hands extended, feeling blindly at the obstruction. It rose above and to either side, curved, vaguely familiar. He snatched the gun from his belt and fired, the searing shaft of energy hitting the obstruction, splashing, reflecting back a wave of heat. Snow puffed to vapor revealing what lay beneath.

"Metal!" Thromb was incredulous. "That's metal!"

"A ship!" Saratov roared as his own Dione blasted away more snow. "Cap! We've found a ship!"

It was small, lying in a fold of ground, impossible to have found aside from accident Kennedy moved along the hull, searching. The port was ajar, the vestibule filled with snow. It vanished beneath the blast of their guns, a gust of acrid odor rising with the vapor. They piled inside, Saratov cradling Troy in his arms. He put the steward down and heaved at the other door. It slammed shut, cutting off the blast of wind, the swirling snow. Kennedy jerked open the inner door and led the way inside.

It was dim, dying Kell bulbs throwing a vague luminescence, the small compartment filled with misty shadows. The air was dank, stale with lack of recycling, but breathable. The floor was littered with debris, parts of electronic devices, empty food containers, scraps of clothing. The door to

the engine compartment was open, the ulterior dark. Before the control panel a skeleton stared with empty eyes.

It rested in the main chair, one bony hand on the panel, the other hanging at its side. Clothes draped it, a mess of uniforms, blue edged with crimson, the collar bearing the insignia of a second officer. As Kennedy touched it, it fell to one side, the skull rolling free to roll against the hull.

"An auxiliary craft." Saratov's voice sent booming echoes from the plating. "A planetary shuttle from a larger vessel. But what's it doing here?"

Thromb said, "That engineer could have been working on it when the larger ship was hit like the *Hedlanda*. He could have broken free and tried to escape. Is there a log?"

"That can come later." Kennedy looked at Jukan, the steward. Troy was back in delirium, the gambler stood crouched against the engine bulkhead, his teeth chattering, eyes rolled upwards. "We need heat. Is there any power?"

Saratov moved to the controls, tested them, shook his head.

"Everything's dead."

"The engines?"

"I don't know, Cap. It'll take time to check."

Time they didn't have. The storm had sapped the last of their strength; already Jukan was slipping into coma and Thromb looked little better. Kennedy looked around. The bulkhead, he decided; heat that and it would warm the entire vessel.

"Up to the controls," he ordered. "All of you."

As they obeyed, he lifted his gun. Five shots and a patch of the bulkhead glowed cherry red. Five more and water dripped from their clothing as ice melted in the radiated heat.

"Right," said Kennedy. "Let's see if there's anything to eat."

They found a little water, stale and tainted, but which could be boiled

beneath the blast of their guns. Some concentrate which could be added to make a soup. Kennedy added vitamins from the medical cabinet and they ate. Immediately Jukan fell asleep, his hand cradled on his arm. Thromb followed, nodding, finally yielding to age and exhaustion. Troy muttered and turned, his voice a low whisper as he vocalized his dreams.

"You should rest, Cap." Saratov was concerned. "You're beginning to look like him." He jerked his head at the skull. "We're safe here."

"For how long?" Kennedy had been reading the log. "Without food we'll starve and we can't heat the ship forever."

"True." Saratov pursed his lips. "Find anything of interest?"

"As you guessed, this is a shuttle craft and, as Thromb suggested, it was snatched into this space as we were. The only difference is that somehow, it managed to make a relatively soft landing. But the power's gone. It's dead. That poor devil did everything he knew to get it going but he failed. All he could do then was to sit and wait for a rescue which never came. In the end he grew tired of waiting."

"Poison?"

"Yes. He had no heat and only a scrap of food. He was alone. He tried to go out a few times, but the terrain frightened him. He kept seeing things and he was certain they were after him, So he shut the inner port and waited."

Alone, in the dying glow of fading Kells, freezing, a victim of real or imaginary terrors. A man ripped from his own space and time and flung into an environment impossible to understand. Death would have come as a friend.

Saratov said, "Is there anything else, Cap?"

"About the spaceport we're looking for? No."

"Those things he saw. Were they the same as the one we killed? The life-eater?"

"I don't think so. He wasn't too explicit, and he describes them in different ways. Giant shadows, things which moved like worms across the

ground, a scuttling creature he thought could be a huge spider." Kennedy shrugged. "Imagination, perhaps, but I don't think so. He could really have seen things, but was unable to see them as they really were and so fitted familiar descriptions on alien impressions. One thing, though. This vessel has been here a long time. It's possible that there could be seasons of some kind. That, at different times, various life-forms could be active. He could have landed at such a time."

"I'm glad we didn't," said the giant with feeling. "The cold's bad enough and that life-eater was something we could have done without. Add a few of the things he mentioned and we'd never have lasted a day." He shivered and reached for his Dione. "It's getting cold. I'd better warm us up a little."

"No."

Saratov glanced at the sleeping men. "Afraid of waking them, Cap? They might stir but that's about all. They're too far gone."

"No," said Kennedy again as the giant leveled the weapon. "Not because I'm afraid of waking them, but because we daren't get too comfortable. We've no food. Stay in the warm too long and we'll get soft and won't want to move. And, if we do, the cold outside will strike harder by contrast."

"We, Cap?"

"All of us. You're strong, Penza, but the others aren't. They can't take what we can—and I'm not so sure that I can take much more."

Kennedy leaned back, eyes closed, head swimming with the onset of sudden fatigue. For too long he and Saratov had shared the watches, giving the others the chance of maximum rest, cutting down on food in order to keep the others going. The giant with his incredible strength and massive reserves had a tremendous advantage, matched only by Kennedy's determination to survive. But he was only human and had only limited strength.

"Cap?" He felt the big, yet gentle hands on his shoulders. "You've got to get some rest."

"We all have. Check to see that Troy is comfortable."

Saratov lingered. "You worry me, Cap, talking like that. Damn it, we've been through bad times before. You can take it."

Kennedy forced himself to smile. It had been a fit of momentary depression caused by extreme fatigue; he recognized it, and also recognized the danger. Morale was a delicate thing.

"Sure I can," he said. "We can all take a lot more than we think we can. Now go and check Troy, you big ape, before I lose my temper."

The steward was comfortable, resting easy for the first time in days, his fever broken and his muttering stilled. Kennedy checked to see that the port was sealed, took a quick walk around the vessel, and then lay down on the deck.

Sleep came slowly and when it did it was tormented by dreams. Glowing life-forms, mysterious ships spouting green flame, endless deserts of howling winds and hidden dangers, something which mewed and whimpered and cried. A bell-like voice which tolled.

You've only one chance, Kennedy. You've used up all your luck. Find the spaceport or die. Find it or die. Find it... find it... find it...

He woke to meet the empty grin of the skull. It was cold, the last vestiges of heat dissipated, a thin rime of ice coating the deck, the frozen water which had dripped from their garments. Saratov was up, stamping, his big hands jerking the others to their feet Jukan complained, shivering.

"Can't we have some heat in here? I'm freezing."

"No heat Move like me." Saratov demonstrated. "Get your blood circulating and build up your body-heat. You'll soon be warm. You all right, Captain?"

"I'll manage." Thromb slapped his arms. Shrewdly he said, "Are we going out? Is that why you don't want more heat?"

"That's right," said Kennedy. "Is the storm over?"

"If it isn't, we stay here. If it is, we move. Ready, Penza?"

"When you are, Cap."

"Troy?"

"I'm all right," said the steward. "I can manage to walk now."

"You'll ride as before." Kennedy jerked open the inner door, stepped into the vestibule, flung his weight against the outer panel. It fell open and he looked outside.

The wind had died and the storm was over. Incredibly the snow had vanished, the ground looking as it had done before, smooth, neatly corrugated, firm beneath their feet. Another mystery to add to the rest; how had the snow vanished when there was no heat to thaw it, only frozen ground into which it could be absorbed?

Luck, thought Kennedy. They still had a little left despite the warning voice of his dreams.

He said, "This is our last chance. We're going to head toward the green moon. We aren't going to stop. We're going to keep moving no matter what because, unless we do, we'll die. Get that firm in your minds. We move or we die."

Jukan said, "How about sleep?"

"You've had it."

"And what happens if we find this spaceport you're looking for? How do we know there'll be food and shelter there?"

"We don't," said Kennedy harshly. "But we can be damn certain there isn't anywhere else that we know of."

Saratov took the rear. As he lifted Troy to his shoulders he turned for a last look at the wrecked vessel. He felt a little regret that he hadn't had the chance to check the engines, to discover what had turned them into inert masses of metal. And he felt a little homesick—the ship had reminded him of the *Mordain*.

Chapter Eight

Commander Breson leaned back in his chair and said, "I fully appreciate your concern, Professor, and I share it, but the matter isn't as

simple as it appears. Always we have to consider the political implications. The point of disappearance lies in the Deltanian Domain. They know and we know that the threat to interstellar flight is serious and genuine—however, the matter has not been widely publicized and if I move more forces into the area it could be construed either as an act of aggression against the Deltanians or as the result of a secret pact aimed, perhaps, at others who aren't as friendly with them as we are."

"That's ridiculous!" Chemile snorted his impatience. "No intelligent person would ever think of such a thing."

Breson inwardly agreed, but intelligence and politics didn't always go hand in hand. He was a military diplomat and commanded forces which could destroy worlds, but always he had to walk on eggs. A wrong move and sabers would rattle in a dozen systems. Accusations would be made, small groups, hating Terra, would grow strident. There would be suspicions, recriminations, a hardening of attitudes. Petty jealousies would flare and the status quo endangered.

He said, "I don't like it, Veem, any more than you do, but the facts have to be faced. The area in which the ships vanished is local and presents no real threat to Terran Control. There is no way I can justify moving MALACA 7 into the Deltanian Domain. No planet has asked for help against invasion. No government has requested technical advice or constructional equipment. If the area was within the Terran Sphere there would be no problem. As it is—" He broke off, shrugging. "Surely you can appreciate the situation, Professor?"

"I can," said Luden thinly. "But I think you are overemphasizing the obvious, Commander. I am fully aware of the delicate nature of the political atmosphere, but I am also aware that the area of disturbance may not remain as local as you assume. In fact I think there is a very real threat that it can either spread or even move into the Terran Sphere. However, that is a matter open to argument. What is incontestable is that several ships have vanished and that Cap and Saratov were on the last to disappear."

"I know, and if I could help—"

"You can."

Luden delved into a pocket and produced a sheaf of papers. Like

Chemile and the commander he sat in a compartment of the huge mother ship of MALAGA 7. Beyond the thick hull, clustered like bees around a hive, hung a mass of auxiliary craft, the *Mordain* among them. A great armada of ships, weapons, and men, ready to strike or to defend the scattered systems which constituted the far-flung reaches of the Terran Sphere. To give aid and the use of machines to lift economically poor worlds into a place in the sun.

"I've done the best I can with the instruments aboard the *Mordain*" said Luden. "I want the use of scientific officers and computer facilities to verify my deductions. I also want a score of monitoring beacons and a small vessel to use as a probe. I shall also need a small atomic missile; the X3718 would be ideal."

Breson frowned. "Why the X3718?"

"The charge is small and clean. Also the spectroscopic pattern is sharp and lends itself to minute analysis. I shall only need the warhead, of course. I shall also need complete monitoring equipment aboard the probe together with remote slave-control." He added dryly, "I assume that you have no objection to providing the items?"

Breson winced at the sarcasm. Any MALAGA was bound to provide an agent of FATE with all help and assistance on demand. Only when political considerations made it unwise to use a display of force could he use his veto.

He said, "You can have anything you want, Jarl, you know that. If it was a question of saving Cap's life I'd put a thousand men in disguise and to hell with the consequences, but you said that he was dead. Saratov too."

"Logically I fail to see how they could possibly have survived," said Luden precisely. "But, in science, there remains an unknown factor always. In any case the problem he faced has to be solved."

"And you can do it? With the probe and monitoring beacons?"

"The beacons are to determine the area of disturbance to precise limits," explained Luden. "They will also serve to warn other vessels away from the area. It is spherical, but not homogenous. Think of a whirlpool," he urged. "A wide area surrounding a vortex. Any craft entering that area will be drawn to the center. The place where the ship vanished is, in a

sense, a three-dimensional whirlpool. It is important that I find the exact center, the actual rip in space, as it were. Once the beacons are in position the matter will be relatively simple."

"And then?"

"Then well use the probe." Luden rose to his feet. "If you will supervise the installation of the equipment on the *Mordain*, Veem, I will confer with the scientific officers and make use of the computer. With your permission, Commander?"

Nothing had changed. In the control room of the *Mordain* Chemile stared at the screens, the empty space where the *Hedlanda* had vanished. To one side a score of monitors showed the whereabouts of the beacons, swirling lines making a regular pattern. To the other side hung the probe, and he checked the slave-controls, sending the tiny vessel up and to one side, back and down, finally bringing it again to rest. Screens showed the interior, the small bulk of the atomic charge, and he frowned at it, wondering what was in Luden's mind. As always the professor was taciturn, reluctant to discuss probabilities. Only when he was completely satisfied with his calculations would he talk of his findings.

"Are you ready, Veem?" The professor's voice came over the speakers.

"More than ready." Chemile went to the compact laboratory, filled now with extra equipment, repeater screens, analyzers, a mass of papers on the desk.

Luden, haggard for want of sleep, gestured to his findings.

"I want the finest navigation you're capable of, Veem. That probe must be sent directly to the center of the Vortex. There will probably be a tremendous centrifugal distortion, but I want you to compensate for it as much as you can. If you align the vessel with Beacon Nine along a line from Beacon Fifteen, you will be on an optimum flight path."

"I've got it, Jarl. Are you going to stay in here?"

"No. I'll join you in the control room. That charge must be detonated at precisely the right second." Luden made a couple of final adjustments. "There. That should do it."

"What do you hope to discover, Jarl?"

"I can hope for little more than a verification of my previous findings," said Luden. "But before we can hope to solve this problem we must have all the data we can get. Therefore I am going to record everything that happens both electronically and visually. We have twenty seconds, Veem. I suggest that we waste no more time."

"Am I keeping you?"

"Fifteen seconds, Veem."

Back in the control room Chemile sat at the slave-master and headed the probe from where it hung beside the *Mordain*. Beacon 9 was a speck on the screen, Beacon 15 another. He sent the probe along the line, increasing velocity as he watched the screens. Beneath his hands the controls kicked and jerked to the impact of invisible energies. Luden said quietly, "Steady, Veem."

"I'm doing my best. What—" Patterns of light shone from the monitor screens. Weaving, dancing, flowing through bulkheads, bifurcating in the semblance of a man.

"Ghosts! The things the captain mentioned. Jarl!" Luden was counting. As the probe neared the point at dead center he rested his finger on a button. As the dancing shapes of light thickened, seemed to swell, he pressed it down. In space a flower grew.

It blossomed with a gush of intense light, blue shot with crimson, a flaring patch which spread and dimmed the stars. The atomic warhead venting its megatons of energy in a fraction of a second. Chemile watched, dazzled despite the automatic darkening of the screens. For a moment the gush of brilliance hung against the star-shot background of space and then, abruptly, it vanished.

"That's all, Veem," said Luden quietly. "Now let's see what we have."

"Have we closed it? Sealed the rip in space?"

"That is not likely."

"But if we have? Damn you, Jarl. Cap and Penza are in there

somewhere. If you've sealed it, how the hell are they ever going to get out?"

Patiently Luden explained. "We haven't sealed it. I detonated the missile just on the edge of dead center. The flare and some residue must have been dragged through, but that was all. If the blast sealed the orifice I will be very surprised."

"You'll be surprised and they will be stranded. Can you imagine what it must be like for them? Lost, no way back, relying on us to help them?"

Chemile paced the deck, various tints patching his skin, turning him into a mottled parody of a surrealistic painting. Emotion had thrown his camouflaging mechanism out of gear so that he seemed to shimmer, to verge on the edge of visibility, to adopt a succession of backgrounds. The repeater screens, the bulkhead, the controls themselves.

Luden said sharply, "Get hold of yourself, Veem! I did what had to be done. And we have no reason to assume that Cap and Penza are still alive. Logic is against it."

"To hell with logic. I don't believe they are dead. Do you?"

"I don't want to think they are dead," admitted Luden. "But I cannot deny the scientific evidence. In any case the question is academic. If they are, somehow, still alive, nothing we have done could have possibly hurt them. If they are dead, then nothing we did or can do will possibly matter. Now let us check the findings."

An hour later they sat and looked at a series of pictures thrown against a wall. Photographs taken at twenty thousand frames a second had slowed time and motion.

"As I suspected, those manlike shapes of light are the result of diversified patterns of radiated energy," commented Luden. "Had they been the result of retina-stimulation we would not have seen them because we were not exposed to the cause. However, they exist and are obviously a by-product of the energies surrounding the vortex. A guide mechanism, perhaps? If we sent the beam of a searchlight into airless space we could see nothing until it impacted on a reflecting surface. Then there would be coruscations. We would know something was there. If the beam were not that of light but some form of energy which, once it had found a target, triggered an attractive force of some kind, the thing on which it impacted

would be drawn to the source. You follow, Veem?"

"I follow," said Chemile grimly. "What you are saying is that this rip in space is no natural accident. That somewhere is a machine causing it."

"Not necessarily. Coincidence cannot be ruled out.

However, the possibility that this is the result of some natural phenomena is, I admit, very remote. Let us check the atomic blast."

New pictures appeared on the screen. They saw the warhead, the sudden flowering of energy, a momentary darkness, and then light again as other cameras replaced those lost in the probe. Luden leaned forward, eyes intent, thin lips pursed as he studied the explosion. He ran the film again, a third time, a fourth.

Chemile said impatiently, "What's so special about that? We've seen atomic explosions before."

"Not like this one, Veem. Notice how the blast seems to be contained? And, at the very end, how it has closed in on itself?"

"A dampening field?"

"It could be, but I doubt it." Luden rose with sudden decision. "I must make a thorough analysis. The human eye is a very poor instrument for determining precise changes, but it seems to me that there was a pronounced shift to the red at the final stages. Maintain position, Veem. I don't want to move from this spot."

"And after that? Can I do anything to help?"

"Yes. I want enlargements of those photographs, both the light-shapes and the explosion." Thoughtfully Luden added, "That captain was right. They did look like ghosts. Coincidence, of course, but in his position very terrifying."

His and all those with him, the crew and passengers who wouldn't have known that anything was wrong. Chemile said, "Have you any clue that Cap and Penza might still be alive? That they needn't have been crushed by high acceleration?"

"As yet, no."

"When will you be certain?"

"When I have completed my analysis," snapped Luden. "Until then we can only speculate. How often must I remind you that emotion has no place in science? Facts are what they are no matter how unpalatable. I am not trying to find hope where no hope can logically exist And yet—"

"What?"

Luden shook his head. "Later, Veem. Now just do as I ask."

"How much later?"

"A few hours. When I have had time to check and cross-check. Now please do as I asked. Those enlargements are important."

It took five hours and, at the end of it, Luden pushed aside his graphs, the blowups, the mass of assembled data which he had reduced to a handful of equations.

Over coffee he said, "I can offer no hope, Veem, but we do know more than what we did. The analogy of the searchlight holds good. Some mechanism, somewhere, is radiating a beam of energy which has its focal point here in our universe. The penumbra creates the vortex surrounding the central node. I think that only the extended area is active at all times, that the core is triggered only when the beam impacts on a solid object. As you may have guessed the atomic explosion was both to determine the Doppler effect and to discover whether or not a dampening field exists. Also I had hoped to determine the direction in which the probe was drawn. The explosion would have left a trail of radiation from which we could have deduced the line of flight."

"Did we?"

Luden was not to be hurried.

"First, the Doppler effect verifies my original finding. The heart of the explosion was moved at incredible velocity away from its original point. Second, there was no dampening field. Third, the direction of movement was not away, but inward. It was as if the probe and all it contained was

suddenly reduced to an infinite smallness. The explosion, of course, had volatilized the metal, but the overall mass remained. And that mass was compressed in on itself. Theoretically, if the mass had become highly compacted, it would have had no apparent motion away from the original source. Yet the Doppler effect was incontestable. An apparent paradox which can only be explained by the use of Heimnan Interdimensional Mathematics."

Chemile said, "Let me get this straight. A ship enters the vortex and is immediately reduced in size. If everything was reduced at the same rate, then, to those inside, nothing would appear to have happened."

"Everything is relative," Luden agreed. "But in such a case there is a limiting factor. Electrons would have impacted and we would be left with a minute speck of neutronium. In such a case nothing living could survive. However, as I said, there seemed to be a paradox. In science a paradox cannot exist. The ships moved, but in a direction not of our universe. They were pulled into another region in which normal laws need not apply."

"The rip in space," said Chemile. "But we'd already guessed that."

"Guessing is not knowledge," said Luden flatly. "A speculation, a theory, is useless aside from a working tool until it is verified by incontestable fact. Now we have those facts. We know what happened, how it happened, and the exact point in which it happened. As yet we do not know why. Neither do we know the true nature of the mechanisms involved. It could be a machine operated by an alien intelligence or it could be the product of an interdimensional accident. And we do not know what happened to the lost ships. They could have been utterly destroyed or they could, even now, be drifting in some peculiar region which we cannot see and cannot reach."

"Cap and Penza! They could still be alive!"

"The possibility is remote, but yes, Veem, they could. Velocity does not kill, only acceleration does that, and in a different universe governed by different laws—" Luden broke off, pursing his thin lips. "I don't know. There is nothing to substantiate such a deduction."

"But there is still a hope?"

"Yes," said Luden, and his face darkened, betraying a little of what he

felt, had felt since the *Hedlanda* had vanished. "They could still be alive, Veem—but Cod alone knows where."

Chapter Nine

Troy saw it first. Riding on Saratov's shoulders he had the advantage of height, his horizon extended farther than those on the ground. He raised an arm, pointing, his voice muffled beneath the coverings protecting his face from the cold.

"There! A green shimmer. I can just see it." From the lead Kennedy said. "Where? Directly ahead?"

"No. A little to the right. That's it Straight ahead now."

"Food," said Jukan. "Warmth and shelter." He stumbled as he tried to increase his pace, bumping into Kennedy, who caught him before he could fall. "Steady. We can do without twisted ankles." Thromb sucked in his breath. "Food," he echoed. "Ship's stores. Supplies from the other vessels. Is that what you're looking for, Cap?"

"If they're there."

"They must be there." Thromb refused to think of the alternative. "The ships must have landed. Even if they are wrecked, they'll contain things we can use. The guns can give us heat like they did before. And there will be food, hot stews, soups." He added plaintively, "Why didn't we drink that snow? Melt it down and drink it good and hot?"

"You smelled it when we burned it from the airlock," reminded Kennedy. "It had the stink of acid. Anyway, in this temperature, we can do without water longer than we can do without food."

"Yes," said the captain. "I guess so. I'm just not thinking. It's getting so damned hard to think." He pulled a fragment of ice from around his mouth and slipped it between his lips. It was cold but would melt and give moisture. But how long could a man live on his own waste?

"Not long," said Kennedy when he asked the question. "But does it matter? We haven't far to go now."

No far, but a mile would be far enough, a yard. It had been thirteen

hours since they had left the wrecked vessel and not once had they halted. They had marched like automatons across the plain, concentrating on the grim necessity of putting one foot before the other, talking rarely, plodding, as alien in their way as the silver moons, the corrugated soil.

The shimmer grew, a delicate haze almost lost in the glow of the emerald moon, to become closer, Jo appear as a broad expanse ringed with tall pylons, their summits topped with parabolic bowls, the concave surfaces turned inward and upward, gleaming bright in the light from the sky. Buildings clustered about the pylons in neat array, long low structures which expanded as they rose, roofs and walls of flat planes set at divergent angles, edged crystalline. One, taller than the rest, was surmounted by a tower of elongated pyramids, a faceted ball on the summit bristling with antennas.

The glow came from the walls of the buildings, the pylons, the field itself. A soft green luminescence which pulsed a little as if to the beating of some primitive heart.

Kennedy halted, looking at the strange installation. It rested at the bottom of a vast, shallow depression; a saucer pressed into the corrugated soil, the edges as sharp as though cut with a knife. Lower down vegetation appeared, stunted shrubs, puffs, triangular leaves, things of twisted rods and spirals, sheets of membrane which could have been leaves, spines which feathered at the tips. It thickened as it approached the space-field, halting a hundred yards from the buildings, the edges sharp as the one on which he stood.

Saratov said, "Is this what you saw, Cap? On the way down?"

"Yes."

"It's the strangest field I've ever seen."

"It's alien," said Kennedy. "Like everything else in this region."

"It's deserted," said Thromb, wonderingly. "I can't see a sign of life." He narrowed his eyes, peering. "Are those ships on the field? I can't be sure. They don't look like ships and yet—"

"They're wrecked," said Kennedy. His eyes were sharper than those of the captain. "It's too far to make out what they are, but that much is

obvious." To Troy he said, "Can you walk now?"

"No need for that," rumbled Saratov. "I can manage."

"You've carried me far enough." The steward slipped from the broad shoulders, and stood, stretching. "Is it my imagination or is it warmer than it was?"

"It's warmer," said Kennedy. "It has to be, the vegetation tells us that. See how it gets thicker toward the buildings? My guess is that a lot of heat is coming from that field."

"Good." Jukan rubbed his hands. "Let's get down there. I've had enough cold to last me the rest of my life." He frowned as Kennedy hesitated. "Come on, why hang about? This is what we've been looking for, isn't it? Then let's get to it."

Saratov said quietly, "Something wrong, Cap?"

"I don't know." Kennedy turned, looking back the way they had come, the bleakness of the frigid landscape. Again facing the amphitheater he said, "A warm spot in this wilderness. Light and heat and more vegetation than we've seen before. If you were a local life-form, where would you head for?"

"Right where you're looking," said the giant immediately. "Maybe that's why we saw nothing on the way. You expect trouble, Cap?"

In a strange place trouble was always to be expected and guarded against, avoided if it were possible. But they had no choice. The vegetation surrounded the field and had to be crossed. All they could do was to take elementary precautions.

"We'll keep close," said Kennedy. "Have your guns ready. No talking and move quietly. Don't shoot unless you have to but, if you have to, don't miss. And don't wander. If we get separated we'll rendezvous at the building with the tower."

He led the way down the slope, treading cautiously, eyes searching every inch of the terrain ahead and to either side. The ground softened as the warmth increased, the bowl serving as a heat-trap to conserve the temperature. He reached the first of the vegetation, low-growing, sparse,

brittle beneath his feet. It rose as they progressed, knee-high, waist-high, soon rising above their heads. He followed what seemed to be a trail, leaving it as it swung to the left. A spined branch caught at his arm, ripping the clothing, but not reaching the flesh beneath. A patch of fronds abruptly spouted dust and he yelled a sharp warning.

"Hold your breath. Run!"

Behind he heard the others gasp, Jukan cough, doubling, retching as he fought to clear his lungs of the acrid motes. Saratov picked him up and ran to where Kennedy waited beneath a mass of ferns which rose in a pattern of delicate lace.

"Is he all right?"

"He was breathing in when you shouted, Cap." The giant slapped the gambler on the back. "I don't think he got a really bad dose."

Jukan coughed again, rose dabbing at his mouth. "It was like breathing in broken glass," he complained. "Like inhaling acid."

"I warned you to be careful," snapped Kennedy. "Keep a fold of cloth over your mouth. The rest of you do the same." He glared at Troy. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's the heat." The steward tugged at the clothing around his throat. He was sweating. "Can't we strip?"

"No." Kennedy held out his arm, showing the rip on his sleeve. "The padding gives some protection. You all right, Captain?"

"I can manage." Like Troy, the man was sweating, as much from weakness as from the warmth which felt stifling in contrast to the cold they had fought for so long. And the heat held another danger: already Kennedy could feel a growing lassitude.

He said, "We're all tired, but this is no place to rest. We can do that when we reach the field. Stay close now and keep alert."

The vegetation thickened still more, spines and hooks seeming to reach out and snag clothing, twisting vines catching at feet, dust-bearing fronds lashing at hands and faces. Underfoot the ground became invisible,

shielded from the light by growing things. Kennedy halted as he reached an open patch.

Jukan, head lowered, bumped into his back.

"What now?" said the gambler.

"Cap?" Saratov moved ahead from where he had guarded the rear. He sniffed, face crinkling at a dry, musty odor. "Something wrong?"

Kennedy made no answer, searching the clearing. It was perfectly round, the ground devoid of vegetation, sloping inward to a shallow center. A miniature amphitheater set in the large bowl which held the spacefield. An open space over which a man could easily march, an animal run. An area tempting in its invitation of easy progress. Too tempting.

"Back off," ordered Kennedy. "We'll take a wide swing."

"To hell with it." Jukan was tired and impatient. "Let's get to that field."

Before Kennedy could stop him he had headed across the open patch, walking casually, carelessly, his gun held low in lax ringers. He reached a quarter of the way across, a little more—and screamed as a giant claw closed about his middle.

It came from a thing which had sprung from the ground, a nightmare of claws and spines and rubbery tentacles. It had lurked below, waiting for a tread to signal the approach of prey, and it had struck with vicious, blinding speed.

Kennedy heard the scream, the crunch of bone, the ripping of cloth and flesh and fired before the released blood had reached the ground.

In the livid glare of the Dione he saw a claw reaching toward him, another suspended over the head of the giant. "Penza!"

Saratov blasted it, incinerating the joint so that it fell twitching to the ground. He fired again, his shot merging with Kennedy's so that the two sounded as one. Twin shafts of raw energy stabbed to meet in gouts of flame. The creature, charred, dripping a noisome moisture, reared from its hiding place to stand monstrous against the sky.

Its ferocity was incredible. Roasted, partly incinerated, dying, it lunged to the attack. A third gun joined the other two, a fourth, Thromb firing with cold deliberation, Troy shooting with a desperate frenzy. The blast of the weapons rose like thunder.

"God!" Troy, shaken, stared at the glowing, threshing heap. "What the hell was it?"

"Something which could have a mate." Kennedy backed from the still-jerking tendrils. An anteater, he thought. A trapdoor spider. A thing which had evolved on this strange world to be set, perhaps, as a guardian of the field. "The stink may attract others. Let's move before they get here."

"Jukan?"

"Dead. You saw him die. You heard him." Kennedy dropped his hand on the steward's shoulder, shook it. "It was his own fault. I warned him to be careful. If you don't want to join him, watch where you tread."

"To die like that!" Troy was numbed with the shock. "One second he was alive, impatient to get where we are going. The next—" He shuddered. "I heard him scream. I heard the way his back snapped and saw—" Bones splintering, internal organs ruptured, tissues rent to spill blood and fluids. But, at least, death had come quickly.

Kennedy swung his hand against the steward's cheek, again, the impact of his fingers leaving ugly welts.

Coldly he said, "Snap out of it, man. You knew this wasn't a picnic. Get hold of yourself and let's get moving before that thing draws company."

"They're already here." Thromb kicked at something which rustled and snapped. "The ground is alive with them."

Scavengers attracted by death and hungry for an easy meal. One squashed beneath Kennedy's boot as he led the way back into the vegetation away from the clearing. He didn't look down, concentrating instead on the tall vegetation through which they moved. Other forms of life could live among the soaring fronds, other living traps set to repel unwanted visitors to the field.

Saratov said, "Those guns made & lot of noise, Cap."

"I know."

"If there is anyone in those buildings he'll know we're coming."

"I know that too." Kennedy halted, listening. "Can you hear anything?"

The giant tensed, then shook his head. "No."

"I can." Troy lifted his gun, nervous. "It's coming from back there." He gestured with the weapon. "Back where Jukan died."

"Nerves," said Saratov. "You're imagining things."

"I'm not," snapped Kennedy. "Be quiet and listen."

They stood for a long moment, tense, hearing a soft rustling. Against the brightness of the silver moons a tall frond moved, snapping back with a cloud of dust.

It stood far to the left of the clearing where they had killed the beast. As they watched a group of twisted spirals jerked, making a dry tapping as they hit together.

"Something big," said the giant softly. "And heading this way. After a free meal, Cap?"

"I don't think so, scavengers are usually small. A thing that size would be a predator."

"There's more than one," whispered Thromb. He had been looking toward the ruby moon. "There, see?"

Kennedy followed his pointing finger. The round disk showed a small crescent bitten from the lower edge. As he watched, it vanished to be replaced by a sickle, a truncated cone.

"Lift Troy," he whispered. "Have him stand on your shoulders, Penza." To the steward he said, "Tell us what you see."

"Nothing," called down the man. "A patch of darkness and that's all. I can't make out details."

"And the other one?"

"The same." Troy jerked as something made a sucking noise. "It's big and close. Too big and a damned sight too close. Get me down." He wiped at his face as Saratov put him on his feet. "We've got to get out of here. If they are the same as the thing which killed Jukan, we don't stand a chance."

Kennedy fought the instinct to run. He stood, thinking, weighing probabilities. He said, "Well go between them and circle. They could be attracted by the noise we made or the death of that beast. If so, they won't bother us. If not, then we won't do the obvious. There could be another waiting ahead and we don't want to run into it. Follow me."

He gave them no time to brood. Like a shadow, he led the way between massed boles, slipping past dust-spouting fronds, tearing himself free from hooks and spines and incurved thorns. A wide path opened before them, broken vegetation oozing juice, the ground torn as if by claws. He paused a moment, then ran along it, darted across, forced a path between close-grown plants. The green shimmer of the field was toward his left and he headed toward it, running now, depending on sharp eyes and luck to carry them past danger. To hesitate was to invite unwanted attention. Safety lay beyond the plants in the clear area he had noticed around the buildings.

"Cap!"

Saratov had fallen. He rose, tearing thin strands from his arms, his legs. Above him something moved to dissolve in a gush of flame as Kennedy triggered his Dione. Thromb cried out, firing in turn, the roar of his shot drowning Troy's frenzied yell.

"The trees! The damn things are all around us!"

The size of a man's head, spined, slender-legged, dropping on thin strands, mandibles snapping like castanets. They burst into flame as the four men ran, firing livid shafts of energy brightening the gloom. Ahead lay the green shimmer, stronger, the pulse more pronounced now they were close.

"Together," shouted Kennedy. "Fire together. Burn a way through."

Strands vanished, bodies smoked and fell, shielding plants flared to become heaps of dust. Together they burst into the clearing to halt and stare grimly at what lay beyond.

"Hell," said Saratov. "The reception committee."

Chapter Ten

There were three of them, eight feet tall, truncated cones ringed with long, prehensile tentacles, the ends fashioned in a variety of shapes. Their bases glided an inch above the ground over which they slid in constant motion. They paid no attention to the four men, moving toward the edge of the vegetation, along it, plants falling to dust beneath weaving appendages.

More lay to one side. Yet farther on, a ring of golden cones, shining green in the shimmering light.

"Robots," said Kennedy. "Gardening machines designed to keep back the vegetation. But why aren't there any guards? If the things in that jungle had been placed to keep out unwanted visitors, then why not guards in the clearing?"

"They are guards." Saratov pointed to where one was busy with a hatefully familiar shape. A tentacle reached out, closed, dropped a crushed thing on the ground. As the base passed over it, it vanished in a pinch of dust. "Better than a fence. They make sure no plant can grow and no creature survive. The things out there must have learned to keep away."

Thromb said, "They've noticed us. They're coming this way."

"They aren't just gardening robots, Cap." Saratov, his engineer's interest aroused, watched as a pair of them glided toward where they stood. "See those appendages? They were designed as multipurpose instruments. They must have some form of anti-gravity drive inside which keeps them mobile. I'd like to take one apart to see what makes it tick."

"Not now, Penza." The questing robots were getting too close and Kennedy guessed they were standing on a forbidden area. "There should be more on the field and maybe they won't regard us as invaders to be disposed of."

He led the way toward the nearest buildings. They were like hangars, the pylons soared as high as sky-scrapers, the open expanse of the field like a park. Other details became apparent. Set at equal distances around the field tremendous helixes rose from massive supports, thick coils of golden metal surrounding an area large enough to take a vessel.

Saratov said, positively, "This is no ordinary spaceport, Cap. Those are power-coils if I ever saw any and those pylons must support a signaling mechanism of some kind. That building with the tower must be the control, but why all the antennas?"

Questions which had to wait to be answered. As they hit the edge of the field Thromb stared at the wrecked vessels;

"Look!" He raised a hand, pointing. "That must be a freighter of the Duay system. That could only have come from Trang. That's a Newman shuttle—and that?" He frowned. "I can't recognize the type."

It was a thing of vanes, swollen blisters, slender rods, and squat ovoids all of a gleaming black metal. An alien ship from, perhaps, yet another alien space. Robots clustered around it, little jets of fire spurting from their appendages, fragments of metal falling to be caught and carried away by other golden cones. A line of them led to a vast pit from which came a pulsing green glow.

"Stay away from it," warned Kennedy as Saratov, curious, began to walk toward it. "That pit's alive with raw energy. It must be a converter of some kind. A means of turning waste into usable energy." He looked over the field. Every ship had its attendant robots, some now bare struts, others still with hulls, the metal showing gaping holes. One, less damaged than the rest, stood close to one of the enigmatic coils.

"The *Wankle!*" said Thromb. "By, God, that's the *Wankle!* "

It looked like a melon which had been dropped from a great height, the base flattened, the hull splintered with cracks, ports sprung and a gaping hole in one side. As they neared it Kennedy examined the ground. The field was a pale green, adamantine, uncracked and unscarred by what must have been a tremendous impact. He looked at the helix, the ship, trying to judge what must have happened, remembering. The ship, out of control, plunging toward the field. What had made it land where it had instead of crashing into one of the buildings or pylons? Had some force

streamed from the helix to catch and guide the vessel? The same force, perhaps, which had snatched it from the normal universe?

Troy said, "Those robots! They're gutting the ship!"

A dozen of them moved with slow deliberation, moving into the vessel through the hole, reappearing with items clutched in their appendages, struts, bundles, a suitcase, the portion of a control panel, all to be thrown into the glowing pit.

"The food," said Thromb. "The supplies."

Already they could be too late. Kennedy reached the opening, passed through, squeezed aside as a robot passed with a section of bulkhead in its tentacles. Another came toward him, brightly golden in the glow of miraculously intact Kells, a box of concentrates held before it. As it emerged from the vessel Saratov grabbed the box and pulled.

The tentacles held it close.

The giant pulled again and then, gripping the box, lifted his feet and pressed the soles of his boots against the conical surface. Muscles bulged, the packing splintered, and he fell back in a shower of packets. Baffled, the robot turned, tentacles questing, packets turning into dust as the base passed over the scattered heap.

"The food!" Troy sprang forward to save what he could. A tentacle touched him, another, both wrapping tightly around his torso, lifting him from his feet. Turning, the robot glided toward the glowing pit.

"Penza!" Kennedy ran after the golden shape. "Thromb! We've got to stop it! Rescue Troy!"

The steward had faulted, the constriction on his chest blasting his consciousness with a wave of agony from his broken ribs. A kindness, thought Kennedy primly. At least the man would be spared the horrors of anticipation. Reaching the robot, he grabbed at a tentacle, pulled, felt his boots slide over the adamantine field, the jerk as the slender appendage snatched him toward the golden cone. He let go, ducking as other tentacles swung toward him. Without traction it was impossible to halt the machine. A rope could maybe hold it if the end could be firmly anchored, but they had no rope and nowhere to tie it if they had.

Saratov said, "If we could tip it over? Hold my waist, the pair of you."

He sprang forward, repeating his earlier maneuver, big hands clutching a tentacle, boots slammed against the cone a little above the base. He heaved, straightening his back, muscles bunched in arms and shoulders. The cone tilted, moved in a slant, dragging Kennedy and Thromb across the field as they hung onto the giant's waist. Still the traction wasn't enough, the leverage too weak to topple the golden shape.

"Drop, Penza!" Kennedy yelled the warning as other tentacles reached toward the giant. "Let go, damn you! Let go!"

Cloth ripped as claws sunk into the padding, metal ankers closing, missing the flesh. From one of the weaving tentacles came a spurt of flame, heat designed to cut metal swinging toward Saratov's head. He heaved, legs tensing, straightening, flame spurting from the padding of his arm as, releasing his grip, he fell, rolling, rising to tear away the burning fabric.

"I couldn't hold it," he gasped. "I couldn't tilt it It's too dam strong."

"Troy!" Thromb looked at the pit, now very close. Weakly he fumbled at his gun.

He intended to kill the man, to give him an easy death in case he should recover and face the glowing horror of the pit Kennedy snatched the weapon from his hand.

Tightly he said, "The last chance. I'll burn the tentacles. Catch Troy if he falls."

He raised the gun, resting it on his left forearm, eyes coldly calculating as he stared over the finned barrel. The Dione was no precision weapon, the shaft of flame would spread and radiate heat, but it was all they had. He aimed at the base of the tentacle close to the truncated cone. His finger closed, again as metal fused and dripped molten gold. As the steward fell Saratov darted in, caught him in his big arms, sprang backward as the robot turned, questing.

"The ship," snapped Kennedy. "Get him inside the *Wankle*. We'll barricade ourselves in."

"The robots?"

"We'll wait until they are all outside."

Some furnishings still remained. Kennedy rested the unconscious figure on a couch, stripping off the layers of clothing as Thromb searched for water and Saratov sealed the hull. He ripped doors from their hinges, heaved bunks, bales, a mass of various scraps over the opening. Methodically the robots attacked the barrier, slowly cutting it into fragments, mindless, operating on a set program which made the interior safe as long as there was no hole large enough for them to pass through.

"There's plenty of water," said Thromb, returning. "A whole tank which didn't spring. Food too, and some brandy." He lifted a metal flask. "Special stuff for some rich merchant Well, Troy needs it more than he does."

The steward coughed as Kennedy poured a trickle down his throat. He tried to sit upright, winced, relaxed beneath Kennedy's hand.

"What happened? That robot—"

"You got too close," said Kennedy. "You touched its body and interfered with its job. It probably took you for a piece of scrap."

Troy winced again. "I feel like it. My chest!"

"We can fix that. Can you find any medicines, Captain? Pain-killers, fast-healing compounds, bandages?"

"I'll look," said Thromb. "And I'll start a meal cooking. I won't promise what it'll taste like, but it will be hot."

"Good, but find the medicines first."

Saratov joined Kennedy as he worked over the steward.

"The hull's fixed," he announced. "Those robots won't get in for a while and we can get out through a small hole close to the rear. How's Troy?"

"He'll live."

"No burns?"

"No. He was lucky. His face was turned away and the extra clothing gave protection." Kennedy fastened the last of the bandages. "Nurse that chest a little, stay clear of robots, and you'll be as good as new before you know it," he promised. "Let's look at that arm, Penza."

"No need." The giant shrugged off his clothing and stood, sighing with relief. "I felt as if I were roasting. What I could use now would be a cold bath with lots of ice in it."

"No bath," said Kennedy. "But there's plenty of food if Thromb hasn't ruined it. Let's see if it's ready."

They ate in the salon, comfortable in light clothing, restoring some of the strength they had used on the journey. Thromb nodded, jerked himself awake, nodded again.

"You're tired," said Kennedy. "You'd better sleep."

"We're all tired." The captain rubbed at his eyes. "How's Troy?"

The steward was asleep, a plate, half-filled, lying on his lap. Saratov removed it, adjusted the man's arms and head to avoid cramps, settled a cover over his shoulders.

"Hell be all right."

"For how long?" Thromb was bitter. "Look at this ship. I knew the *Wankle*, a good, clean, reliable craft. Now it's a wreck. The *Hedlanda's* a pile of rubble. How many more ships are going to wind up the same way?" He paused, then added, "And where are the dead? I've searched every inch of the interior and there isn't a body to be found."

"I know," said Kennedy. "I looked."

"Well? Where are they?"

"In the pit, I guess. The robots must have collected them for disposal. Perishable goods," said Kennedy bitterly. "Untidy objects to be got rid of as soon as possible. The logic of a neat, mechanical mind."

"So how long can we last before it's our turn?" Thromb sat, glowering, one hand lifting to touch his scar. "Those robots will get in here eventually."

Even if we escape, where can we go? The food won't last forever and then we'll starve. Maybe we should have let Troy go. At least he wouldn't have known anything about it."

"He's alive," said Kennedy. "And while there is life there is hope."

"Hope," said Thromb. He sounded as if the word had a bad taste. "Will hope find us a new vessel? More food when we need it? A way to get out of this place and back to where we belong?"

He was old, tired, numbed with fatigue, and acutely aware of apparently insuperable difficulties. The wrecked ships had filled him with depression, adding to that induced by the rigors of the journey. He had seen men die and his command destroyed. He would not have been human had he not known despair.

But it was an emotion which would not last, could not last if they hoped to stay alive.

Kennedy said, "You're tired, Captain, or you wouldn't be thinking that way. We've a base now, a place where we can be safe for a while. There's water and food and shelter. We are warm and can rest and rebuild our strength. And we're in the middle of a spaceport. An alien, strange, mysterious one, it is true, but a spaceport just the same. Home, Captain. You're a spacer and belong here as much as any alien. And we haven't come so far and done so much to give up now. We've hands and brains and strength.

We've knowledge and instruments to work with. We might not make it back to our own universe, but, by God, we're going to try."

"Yes," said Thromb. He rubbed at his eyes. "I guess you're right. It's just that I feel so tired. I just want to lie down and sleep for a week." He closed his eyes, forcing them open as he almost toppled over. "Sleep," he muttered. "But I can't. Watches have to be kept. We must stay on guard. Stay on —"

Saratov caught him as he slumped.

"Out," he said. "Dead to the world." He yawned. "I don't feel all that frisky myself."

"There's anti-fatigue pills in the medical cabinet. We'll take some and stay on watch until the others wake. We can sleep then." Kennedy looked down at the captain. "You'd better put him next to Troy. Then well look at the control room."

The place was a nun. The impact had smashed in the nose, driving it toward the rear, leaving a tangled mess of components mixed with twisted struts, wires, shattered plastic. A hole had been cut through the mess, the deck at the end smeared with something brown.

"Dried blood," said Kennedy. "The robots found the body and removed it."

"That isn't logical," protested Saratov. "To a machine flesh and metal would be identical, rubbish to be cleared away. Why should they head straight for the dead?"

"I told you."

"Perishable goods to be cleared away." Saratov frowned. "That's what you told the captain, but would a machine work that way?"

"You know it could, Penza; you've built enough in your time." Kennedy was sharp, the anti-fatigue pills banishing the desire for sleep, but not restoring his patience. And yet the giant had a point. Thoughtfully he said, "There could be another explanation. The robots might be working on a program based on rescue and survival. If a ship crashed on a normal field, what would happen?"

"Crash wagons would go out," said Saratov immediately. "Men and machines to prevent fire, to dampen the engines and to save personnel. Cap! Is that what these robots are?"

Machines which filled in waiting time by cleaning and maintaining the field. Ready to cut their way into a wreck, to rescue anything living inside, to remove the dead, and then, tailing specific orders, to clear away the debris.

"No, Cap." Savatov had been thinking. "That robot was going to throw Troy into the pit. If you're right, it would have taken him to a hospital."

"Perhaps, but not if he didn't fit a programmed description. Would a

human salvage team rescue a bug from a wrecked vessel? They'd get rid of it, sure, but they wouldn't be gentle. And Troy was not in the ship. He may not have fitted the pattern instilled into the robot's brain. Or perhaps the machine had degenerated."

"A bug? Is that what we seem like to them?" Saratov scowled.

"We could, Penza. Size is relative. This installation is huge. The people who built it could be giants." Kennedy shrugged. "We may never know. Now let's see what we can salvage."

They worked for hours, tearing at the jumble with bare hands, accumulating a little heap of components over which Saratov shook his head.

"Useful," he admitted. "We can rig a few circuits if we could find power to run them. And there are a couple of detectors we could make which wouldn't need power at all, but that's about all."

"So far," pointed out Kennedy. "We've an entire ship at our disposal. Let's try the engine room."

There they had better luck. A Sheemar wave-guide, three unbroken Kells, some tools, a magnetic test probe at which Saratov sneered but carefully put to one side.

"It's old," he commented. "Probably as unreliable as hell, but better than nothing."

"The engines?"

"Dead, Cap. Burned out. The coils fused and useless." Saratov muttered as he checked the power plant. "Drained. Not a viable atom in the whole setup. The emergency accumulators too." He kicked at one of the compact fuel cells. "Rubbish, the lot of it."

"No chance to rebuild?"

"None. We'd have to start from scratch. If I had a machine shop and material I could make new coils. I could even tune them, given time and equipment. But without fuel to fire the power plant we'd never be able to establish the drive."

"There's power outside," reminded Kennedy. "In the pit. We could tap it in some way, store it even."

"Not with this stuff." Saratov kicked again at the dead engines, the ranked cells. "The whole lot is useless. The cells can't be charged; they would have to be completely rebuilt. I could use some of the components, but it would take a major operation, and we haven't the facilities. The best we could hope for is to make an anti-grav unit. It would lift us a little, but that's about all. And that depends on us being able to get power from that pit." He added, a little helplessly, "I'm sorry, Cap. But there it is. We're stranded!"

Chapter Eleven

Kennedy woke, rising instantly, hearing a host of noises as Thromb whispered, "The robots. They're in the ship."

"How? The barrier—"

"They made a new opening. In the nose. The barrier is still there but pretty thin now. I've got Troy packing up some food. Saratov is collecting equipment." He added bleakly, "I don't know where the hell we can take it."

"To the building with the tower," said Kennedy. "We decided that while you were asleep."

"I should have been working."

"You can work now." Kennedy stood upright. A bowl of water stood on the deck and he knelt before it, ducking his head. He could take more pills but they laid up a debt which had later to be paid. And it could come at a time when he would need all his faculties. "Pack up all the food you can, water too. Take them to the engine room. There's a hole down there we can get through. And stay clear of the robots. If one should get close remain upright and avoid the tentacles."

He met one outside the salon, pressing back against a bulkhead as it passed, dust and debris vanishing beneath the base. Saratov was squeezing through the hole in the engine room when he arrived. The giant looked strained, blood oozing from scraped places on his arms and shoulders.

"The hole's too small. Pass me something to use as a lever, Cap."

He took the metal stanchion Kennedy passed him, thrust one end into the opening, threw his weight on the bar, muscles bunching beneath his skin. The bar beat a little, the hull yielding, the hole widening to show a patch of green light.

"That should do it." He threw aside the bar. "How do you feel, Cap?"

"Fine. You should have woken me."

"You needed the rest." Saratov yelled at Troy as the steward appeared. "Don't make the bundles too big. We've got to get them through the opening."

Troy grunted as he lowered a package. "The water's going to be a problem. No small containers. And those robots are getting damned close."

"Use plastic bags," snapped Kennedy. "Fill them and knot the ends. Get everything you can down here but don't throw it outside until we tell you. Ready, Penza?"

He led the way outside to where a heap of small bundles rested close to the hull. Quickly he loaded the giant, using strips of fabric to sling packages together. More fabric tied the rest into a pack which lie slung to his shoulders. In a staggering run he headed toward the building with the tower.

The door was open, a blank vestibule shining clean beyond the parted leaves. Arched doors, twenty feet high, flanked the open space, the panels closed. Saratov tested a panel. It yielded a little, stuck, then flew open to the impact of his weight. Inside loomed a table, shelves, things which could have been chairs. A globe shone with a milky, pale luminescence, the surface mottled in varying shades. A celestial sphere or the depiction of a world. There was no time for close examination.

"The table." Kennedy heaved what he carried to the upper surface. "Can you close that door?"

It grated shut behind them as they raced back to the ship. Again they made the trip. On their return the others were waiting.

"This is the last we can get." Thromb gestured at the little heap of packages, the soggy, water-filled bags. His arm was bruised, the skin torn, blood showing beneath a ripped sleeve. "One of those damned robots almost caught me. I managed to get free, but it was like tearing my arm from a vise."

"They're all over the ship," said Troy. "They must concentrate on clearing the inside before they get to work on the hull."

Kennedy looked at the packages, mostly water, some food. Saratov had taken his tools and equipment on the first load. Even with what they had already taken it was little enough, but it couldn't be helped. What they had left would have to be done without.

"Let's get over to the building," he said. "At least we'll be safe from the robots there."

The need for desperate haste was gone; now there was time for closer examination. Kennedy halted, looking up at the soaring facade, the tower, the faceted ball with its bristle of antennas. There were no windows; like the other buildings the structure seemed almost to be made of one piece, only the great open door breaking the exterior.

"Why didn't they make it flat?" said Troy. "Why all those planes like facets?"

Alien ideas of beauty or the method used in construction. An insect-like being could have followed instinctive patterns, the honeycomb of a bee, the intricate exterior of a cocoon. Or, perhaps, it had a mechanical significance, the outward appearance of a complex machine.

Saratov said quietly, "Cap. Above the door."

Cut deep in the golden metal above the lintel was a familiar, convoluted pattern of interlinked circles.

"The seal of the Zheltyana!" Kennedy shook his head in baffled disbelief. "It doesn't make sense."

The Zheltyana, the mysterious, ancient race which had left artifacts scattered throughout the galaxy. Intelligent beings which had traveled space long before men had left the sea. Which had flowered and vanished

for no apparent reason. Whose enigmatic symbol presented a challenge which no planetary or interstellar archaeologist had yet been able to solve.

Had they penetrated to other dimensions? Had they originated in another universe? Had they evolved into a new and unguessable form of life? Questions which no one could answer.

Thromb said, blankly, "I've seen that sign before. On some old pottery in the museum at Aadopolis. And again on a stele found near the spaceport at Veem. The Ancient Sign. I knew a man who used to carry it on a medallion hung around his neck. He swore it brought him good luck. Maybe—" He broke off, shaking his head. "No, that's impossible. There couldn't be commerce between this place and our own universe. But if there was?"

"We could get passage," said Troy. "Buy ourselves transport." His tone was sarcastic, bitter. "Dreams. Well never get away from here. When the food is gone, the water, then we go too. Why kid ourselves otherwise?"

"We're not beaten yet," said Kennedy. He looked away from the symbol, wishing he had cameras, recording devices, some means to gauge the age of the structure. He glanced at the alien vessel, now only a collection of broken plates, an empty shell which could once have told so much. Had it belonged to this universe or had it, like themselves, been torn from another continuum? But speculation was irrelevant; first came the need to survive.

"We'll find a room in the building and make ourselves comfortable," he decided. "You take care of the catering, Troy. Stretch what we have as long as you can. Maybe we can get something more from the ship. Watch those robots, Captain. They may follow a pattern. Leave to get recharged, perhaps. If they should give us a chance, we have to take it."

He led the way into the building, pausing, hearing Saratov's explosive curse.

"those damned robots! There's one in here now!"

It glided smoothly over the floor, cleaning, following an age-old directive. As they moved toward the room in which the supplies were stored it followed, tentacles lifted, questing.

Troy said anxiously, "It's following us."

"Not us," said Kennedy. "It wants to get into that room. Maybe it can sense there is dirt inside and it wants to get rid of it."

"Our food and water," rumbled Saratov. "We can't work while it's around, Cap. How do we get rid of it?"

"Simple." Kennedy reached into a bundle and found a packet of concentrate. He crumbled it, scattering it before the robot in a path to the open doors. It followed the trail, the food vanishing beneath its base. Kennedy led it outside, threw a scatter of concentrate in a wide arc, returned as it glided away.

"Neat." Saratov beamed at the easy solution. "It's just like a dog. I wish we could take one back with us, Cap. The professor would like it. He could train it, maybe, and it would be useful on the *Mordain*. Chemile is damned untidy at times." He grew sober. "The *Mordain*," he said. "Where is it now, I wonder?"

"Waiting for us."

"You think so, Cap?"

"I'm sure of it. What would you have done, Penza, if the professor and Veem and vanished as we did? Would you have simply left? Written them off as dead? Of course you wouldn't. You'd have done everything in your power to rescue them." Kennedy looked through the open doors at the alien sky. "My guess is that they are up there, somewhere. In our own universe close to where we vanished. Let's hope they don't get too close."

"They can do without what we've been through," admitted Saratov. "I don't think the professor could stand it and I'm certain Veem couldn't."

"They could," said Kennedy. "If they had to. But if the *Mordain* comes through as we did, it'll be wrecked. That won't do anyone any good. If we could only warn them, tell them what we've discovered. The Zheltyana Seal alone would be information of value. The fact that it's on this building. Coincidence, perhaps, but it needn't be that." He shook his head, remembering more immediate needs. "Well, never mind. It would take a team of experts a decade to investigate this place as it should be. More than a decade, a lifetime. We haven't got that."

They had, perhaps, two weeks. Troy was definite.

"We can starve," he said, "but we can't go long in this heat without water. No matter how much you cut the ration, it won't last longer than a few days. Less if you want to remain active. Have you ever worked on a hot world?"

"Yes," said Kennedy. "And so has Penza."

"Then you know what I'm talking about. I know the captain does. In this heat we'll need a quart a day at least. There's four of us, a gallon a day. We've got eight. Cut the ration, add a few days of misery, and call it fourteen. And that's the top limit. If you're working hard a quart won't be enough. You'll manage but you'll end up dehydrated and dead. You'll all end up that way," he amended. "Two weeks total—then curtains."

"Maybe we could get some more." Thromb frowned, thinking. "That trick you pulled on the robot. We could do the same with those around the ship. Scatter some concentrate and, while they're busy, sneak in and fill a few more bags."

"We could try." Already Saratov felt a mounting thirst. Imagination, he told himself, but still his lips and mouth were dry. "Better yet, we could throw nit rubbish for them to pick up. They'd have to take it over to the dump. Throw out enough and we'd have a clear field."

A chance to get more equipment, tools, things overlooked in the rush. It was worth the risk.

Kennedy led the way outside. The ship lay beyond one of the giant helixes and, as he left the building, the great coil began to emit a thin, vibrant hum. It rose, tearing at the ears, mounting higher into realms of inaudibility. Light began to shimmer over the curving metal, an emerald glow which brightened to become an eye-searing blaze.

"Down!" yelled Kennedy. "All of you, down!"

As he hit the ground the helix gave a pulse, a sharp twang as if it had been struck by a solid object, and a vessel hung suspended over the circular area within.

It was one they had seen before, a polyhedron dotted with truncated

cones, wreathed in lines of sparkling green fire, dipping a little, jerking to rise and dart upward and away. The glow died from the helix. The brooding silence returned.

"That ship." Thromb stared at the point where it had vanished. "That's the one which destroyed the *Hedlanda*."

"That or one like it." Kennedy looked at the pylons, the parabolic bowls. "Did you see if they moved, Penza?"

"They didn't, Cap. I watched."

"But where did it come from?" Thromb still had his head turned toward the sky. Light from the glowing pit lit his face, accentuated the gauntness of his cheeks, the deep lines grave around mouth and eyes. "One second there was nothing, the next it was there."

"I don't like this." Troy was nervous, wiping at the sweat which dewed his face. "Whatever is in that ship doesn't like us. We know that. If they are running this place and should see us, we'd be dead."

"It didn't and we're not," snapped Kennedy. "What did you make of it, Penza?"

"A power helix," said Saratov thoughtfully. "I was right, Cap. That thing was loaded with more energy than I like to think about Not when I'm so close. And yet there was only a trickle of heat, which means there must have been screening shields of some kind. But, in that case, how would it have been directed? The pylons, of course. They must radiate an energy vortex of some kind, perhaps a resonance tuned to a distant source. Cap?"

"It's obvious that the entire installation must be not only a landing field but a transportation device of some kind. But I don't think it was built by whoever uses those green ships. The vessel we saw was too erratic for that. It dipped and swayed almost as if out of complete control. A different time-sense or visual pattern would account for that."

"Or delay caused by transitional shock," suggested Thromb. "Wherever it came from the journey was last. Almost instantaneous. There would have to be a fraction of delay before the pilot could orient itself."

Kennedy nodded and climbed to his feet. Thoughtfully he stared at the

faceted ball, the bristle of antennas.

"The vessel passed pretty close to that tower. It's just possible it, or another like it, could have hit one of those antennas. In that case—" He broke off, musing.

"What I don't understand is why it should have attacked the *Hedlanda*?" said Thromb. "We were lying helpless, wrecked; they must have seen that. Why destroy the ship?"

"Why does a man slap a bug?" Kennedy shrugged, his voice ironic. "It can't hurt the man, but he kills it just the same. We were out of place. A wrecked vessel on the field is one thing; the robots take care of it. Out there is another. They could have taken us for a source of potential danger. Something which didn't belong."

"On this world, sure," admitted the captain. "But do they? Is this their home planet?"

"It could be. That ship was going somewhere, perhaps to another field on the other side of this world, or to a city. They could exist, we've only seen a section of the place. Or maybe they just consider this field to be their private property and strangers aren't welcome." Kennedy frowned, irritable; too many questions remained unanswered. But one, at least, could be dealt with. "Check those antennas, Penza. See if you can spot one which has been damaged. You too, Troy, and you, Captain. See anything?"

Saratov squinted, narrowing his eyes. "I think there is, Cap. Count from the bottom. Seven. A long one. Got it?"

Kennedy moved to one side, stepping back for a better view. The light was bad, the antennas hard to see against the sky. He moved again, trying to align them with the green moon.

"You're right, Penza. Can you see it, Troy? Captain? Seven up from the bottom, three from the point of the ball above the door. It's bent a little." He lowered his eyes, studying the tower. "If we could only climb up there, get a better view. We need magnification of some kind. Let's see if there are any lenses in the ship."

"And water," reminded Troy. "Don't forget the water."

But they were too late. The water was gone, spilled from ripped containers. And the robots were everywhere.

Chapter Twelve

Saratov grunted, muscles bunched as he threw his strength against the great leaves of the door, teeth bared as they slammed shut. From the roof lights plowed, relieving the darkness with a pale whiteness, a relief from the eternal green.

"That should do it, Cap. We're shut in, but those robots are shut out. Were the devil did they all come from?"

"The other ships," said Kennedy. "The *Wankle* was a danger. It was too near the helix and had to be disposed of."

Saratov frowned. "They were ordered to move? Cap! That means that there is a control somewhere."

"Automatic. Computerized like the robots, the rest of this installation. There are no people here, Penza, and nothing resembling intelligent life. If there had been, it would have contacted us, either to kill us or ;o save us. Even to examine us. We know that didn't happen. Only machines could be so incurious."

Kennedy looked around the vestibule. In the room where they had placed the stores Troy and the captain were busy arranging the supplies. Other doors stood open, the panels swung back by the giant's strength. Most held bare furnishings, tables, shelves, some with glowing spheres which could have been maps, others with engraved charts and enigmatic lists of figures cut in metal plates fused to the wall. From one ran a broad spiral which curved upward, a gentle ramp marked with faint corrugations. Another held a model of the building in which they stood.

Kennedy examined it. It was made of some transparent material which revealed the inside, rooms and passages and spiraling ramps marked in different colors: red, green, blue, yellow, orange, somber black. In the upper levels machines stood in enigmatic array, thin conduits leading up the tower to the faceted ball. Miniature antennas looked like tufts of hair. Before it stood a phalanx of buttons each marked with a strange symbol. The roof of the compartment was rounded in a featureless hemisphere.

"The master control?" Saratov frowned as he looked at it. The model was set on a table five feet high. There were no chairs or benches. "No," he decided. "It's more like a display. Cap?"

Kennedy touched one of the buttons. One of the thin antennas lit with a ruby glow, a thin shaft of light streaming to impinge on the domed roof. A disk appeared, marked with more of the strange symbols. He tried another, a third, each time getting the same result.

"The markings aren't the same," said Saratov. He tried another of the buttons. "Look at that. And now this." He pressed another. "See?"

"Coordinates," said Kennedy.

"What?"

"Imagine you are a spaceship captain. You've landed, and while your ship is being serviced or cargo unloaded you come in here. Maybe to report, or to find out the state of various markets. There could be others. They would use the rooms to sit and talk and maybe arrange various deals. You want to refresh your memory or find out where a special place is. You don't know how to reach it, but you know its name. So you press the right button and the information is thrown on the wall."

"Now wait a minute," protested Saratov. "You talk as if they were human."

"They could have been," said Kennedy thoughtfully. "But that isn't important. No matter what they looked like they would have acted in a predictable manner. Spacefields aren't built for fun. Ships don't travel without reason. And worlds which have space travel invariably use it for commerce. I think that this entire installation is a staging point of some kind. Each of those antennas is directed toward another port, maybe similar to this one. Ships would travel between them, using those helixes as we saw. A form of matter transmission, perhaps, and wholly automatic."

Saratov frowned, thinking. His imagination was limited, and he lacked Kennedy's intuitive flair, but his engineer's brain could fill in details once the picture had been painted.

A wide slung web of communication points between which ships could

move. Depots to hold cargo, to trade, to provide facilities. Static places set on a variety of worlds. There would have to be local means of transport for distribution and passengers, if any, might have to make a dozen shunts before reaching their destination, but the system would work.

It would be different from the one he knew in which ships were free to move to any part of any world they chose, but it would work.

He said, awed, "But who built it, Cap? The system, I mean? The Zheltyana?"

Their symbol is above the door," reminded Kennedy. "They could have built it, but if they did it must have been a long, long time ago. Or perhaps this world is on the edge of the system. A place practically abandoned, used only by the ship we saw." He paused, dreaming, thinking of the vast civilization which must have existed here, could, perhaps, still exist on other worlds of this alien universe. Was this the home of the Ancient Race? Had they originated here, later to venture into his own universe? Or had the reverse been the case?

Saratov pressed more buttons. He said, "Maybe we can find the one that is damaged, Cap. Find where it leads. Now let me see; it was seven up and three long from the center above the door." Disks of light shone in rapid sequence over the walls, dozens of them, scores. They flickered as he pressed the buttons in rapid thrusts, watching the glowing points of the antennas. "There!" He thumbed the button again. "The antenna glows but there's no disk."

"Let me see." Kennedy pressed an oblong slab. Light glowed from the floor to vanish as he pressed it again. Another and the glowing disks winked into darkness. "Press that button again, Penza."

The wall remained dark.

"Those next to it, the antennas, I mean." Kennedy nodded at the sight of the familiar patches of light. Again he cleared the board. "Once more, Penza."

"Still nothing." The giant grunted. "Why not, Cap?"

"It isn't focused. The signal it emits isn't reaching its proper target. If the installation was functioning as it should engineers would have

repaired it by now. Another indication that this place has been abandoned by those who built it."

Kennedy stared at the model, intuitive deduction accelerating logical process, facts assembling to fit into a theoretical pattern. Mentally he visualized a signal streaming into space, a beam which no longer had its designed point of contact. The forces involved must be tremendous, operating on a plane impossible in his own universe where other laws of nature would apply. A beam reaching, tearing, perhaps, at the very fabric of this alien continuum.

He said, "We're looking at the reason those ships vanished, Penza. Why the *Hedlanda* was pulled into this universe. That damaged antenna is responsible. That's why we arrived above the spaceport."

"Dragged here by the same force which moves ships from one point of this system to another." Saratov frowned. "But what about that alien vessel on the field? The wrecked one. That never came from our own space."

"Maybe the beam passes through more than one universe," suggested Kennedy. "Or perhaps it's a local ship which managed to get itself snared. It could be a normal accident, anything. The main thing is we know what caused the rip and we can do something about it."

"Destroy the antenna," said Saratov slowly. "But how, Cap? We can't climb up the tower and, even if we could, it would be suicide to get too close. Those things must carry tremendous power. The radiation alone would kill us before we could reach it."

"There's another way." Kennedy pointed at the model. "The control must be in the upper regions. We'll have to trace the conduit and cut it out of circuit. If we can't do that, then we'll have to find some way to destroy it."

"Destroy it?"

Kennedy said flatly, "We've no choice, Penza. We've got to put an end to what happened to the *Hedlanda*."

"But, Cap, that beam is the only contact we have with our own space. If we destroy it, we'll lose any chance of ever getting back."

"We've got two weeks to find a way to do that. If we can't manage it, then we must close the rip." Kennedy turned as a shout came from outside the room. "What the devil's that?"

It was Thromb. The captain came staggering down the spiral ramp, white-faced, Troy limp in his arms.

"There's a door up there," he panted. "Sealed. Troy touched it and fell. I was close to him and felt the shock."

"Electronic?"

"Yes." Thromb laid the steward on the floor. "*I think he's hurt.*"

Kennedy knelt beside the limp figure. There was no pulse, no respiration; clinically the steward was dead. He rested the heels of his palms beneath the rib cage and thrust, withdrawing the pressure, thrusting again in a regular, sharp rhythm. Heart massage almost as old as the medical profession itself.

"Respiration, Penza," he ordered. "Be careful. Don't burst his lungs."

The giant knelt, inflating his chest, forcing the air between the parted lips into the flaccid lungs. It gushed out as Kennedy thrust at the torso. Again the giant put air into the still figure. Heart massage and artificial respiration, the only hope to restore Troy to life. After a few minutes he stirred, breath ragged in his chest, his heart faltering, strengthening, settling to a steady beat.

"He'll live." Kennedy rose to his feet. "Keep him warm, Captain. Penza, let's go and see what he found."

The door was a solid slab of gray metal, knurled rings in the center of the panel. A combination lock which would be insulated from the door itself, the charge which made it a death trap if touched by an unwary hand. Penza examined it, left to return with the magnetic test probe he had taken from the ship.

"This needn't work, Cap. If it doesn't, we'll have to find another way upstairs."

"There is no other way. I noticed that from the model. Be careful,

Penza."

An unnecessary warning. Used to dealing with "hot" materials, the engineer had an instinctive caution. Delicately he touched the probe to the lock, squinted at the dial, moved it a fraction, a little more.

"Counterbalanced fields," he muttered. "Set one against the other in the right sequence and the door will open." He moved the probe again, then rested the tips of his fingers lightly against the knob. "Here goes!"

The door swung open to reveal a vast chamber filled with humped machines. Lights glowed as they stepped inside, brightening as they moved toward the enigmatic bulks. There was no sound.

"No moving parts," murmured Kennedy. "There wouldn't be. Everything must be solid-state and use magnetic fields of varying density. Can you remember the circuitry, Penza?"

"I don't have to." Saratov gestured toward a line of engraved plates on the wall. "It's all there. I guess they put them up so that repairs could be made in case of need. That," he amended, "or for decoration. Though why machines should want that is beyond me."

"Logic," said Kennedy. "You build a machine. You put circuit diagrams beside it in case of failure. Machines can fail, Penza. Whoever built this installation knew that. Let's get to work."

Without the diagrams it would have been impossible in the time. Days only in which to learn the secrets of alien electronics. Even with their aid it was a matter of unremitting labor in which Kennedy used all his intuitive skill, his hard-won knowledge, Penza his trained engineering ability.

Thromb helped, tearing the covers from machines, tracing circuitry, testing fields with the crude instruments the others had made from the scraps salvaged from the *Wankle*. Primitive things, unreliable, uncalibrated and unrefined, adapted and readapted to meet changing need.

Troy served food and water. He was pale, still shaken by his recent shock.

"You saved my life," he said. "The captain told me. If you hadn't had

medical training I'd be cold now."

"You're not," said Kennedy. "So forget it In a way you did us a favor. I could have touched that door, any of us; you were the one who found it was dangerous." He looked at the ration of water. It was smaller than before. "How much longer can we go?"

"A few days. Call it four. I'm cutting the ration to stretch what we have." He licked dry lips. "I was thinking. Maybe there's water in one of those other buildings. If I went outside and scouted around I could find something."

"Later." The chances were too remote. "You can't go alone and we've got to finish this. Just do what you can."

Finally it was done. Kennedy looked at a block of transparent material in which were set nodules of ruby crystal. Strands of gold connected them, led to a rod of emerald, a cone of vivid blue.

"This is it," he said. "The connection to that damaged antenna. If we break it, we'll seal the rip."

"And lose our last chance of ever getting back." Thromb shrugged, "Well, I guess the chance is too remote to worry about. Break it now, Cap, before some other ship follows the *Hedlanda*."

Saratov said, "They won't do that The *Mordain's* out there and will give warning."

"The *Mordain*." Kennedy looked at the unit, then at the giant. "We've time yet," he said slowly. "Maybe, somehow, we could get out a message. If I know Luden, he's monitoring the area with every instrument he can devise. He must have located the exact point of the vortex. If we could modulate the signal-beam in some way, he might be able to pick it up. At least we could let him know what happened." He paused, then added, "And we could let him know that soon the rip will be sealed. That there isn't any point for him and Chemile to wait any longer."

That he and Penza would be lost, dead, a memory to be stored in the past.

"We'd have to use intergalactic code," said Saratov. "We've nothing to

build a mike for voice-modulation. And there would be too much distortion. Code then. If we fix up a key and attach it to here, Cap, and here, that should do it. Well have to operate it by hand. Work out the message while I make the key."

They took turns, Kennedy, Saratov, and Thromb. Troy, unused to code, couldn't help. Two days later he handed them the last of the water.

"That's all there is. We can last maybe another couple of days, but it won't be easy. We've been on short rations for too long."

"No juice in any of the supplies?"

"No. I used what there was. The brandy too. We've no more liquid."

Kennedy glanced to where Thromb sat at the key, sending out details of the installation, the Zheltyana Seal, the fate of the missing ships. They had done all they could. Unless there was water in one of the buildings they would all die. Before that happened the unit had to be destroyed.

But there was still time. Luden had to be given a chance to pick up the message if he could. Hard-won facts and data had to be relayed.

"Well try the buildings," decided Kennedy. "You stay here, Captain. If we don't come back, you know what to do. Right, Penza, let's see what we can find."

Without the giant's incredible strength the great doors couldn't be opened. He heaved against one of the leaves, dragged it ajar, stepped outside to where robots moved slowly across the field.

Before them the helix brightened and, from above, came the sound of thunder.

It split the air like a knife, a crashing roll of sound, compressed air striking them with almost crushing force. High above a shape appeared, falling, veering with a shimmer of fire, to turn, wheeling, to slow and come to a halt on the adamantine field.

"The *Mordain!*" Saratov's shout echoed across the field. "Cap! It's the *Mordain!*"

Chapter Thirteen

Chemile met them at the port. He was glowing, almost dancing with joy, eyes shining as he reached out his hands.

"Cap! Penza! Thank God you're still alive!"

Luden was less effusive.

"Really, Veem, must you state the obvious? The fact of their continued existence was inherent in the message we received. Even so, I am very glad to see that you appear to be well." He blinked as if from a smart in the eyes. "Very glad indeed."

"Not as glad as we are to see you." Kennedy squeezed the thin shoulder, pressed Chemile's outstretched hand. He knew Luden's iron, emotional control. Knew also that the man was not as insensitive as he appeared. "But I'd rather we hadn't. Why the devil did you let yourselves be caught in the vortex?"

Luden said stiffly, "I assure you, Cap, that it was quite deliberate. Are you alone?"

"There are two others in the building with the tower."

"Only two?" Luden pursed his lips. "You had better get them. Our time here is strictly limited. You have not yet broken the connection?"

"No."

"That is well. If you had, we also would be stranded here. That beam is our only means of return. It must be broken, of course, but only after we are on our way. Will you arrange it, Penza? There are explosives in the ship as you are well aware."

Saratov frowned. "Do we have to break it? I mean, if we can return we can beacon the affected area. Maybe we could even come back later. I'd like to take a closer look at that equipment. And we still haven't investigated those buildings."

"We have no alternative than to destroy the vortex," said Luden. "My investigations have shown that it is not stationary in relation to our own

universe. The galactic drift is moving a planetary system toward it and, unless it is destroyed, the beam could impinge on an inhabited world. I realize that you have little imagination, Penza, but even you can visualize what would happen if a city fell into its sphere."

"We'll arrange a time-bomb," said Kennedy quickly. "How long do we have?"

"Minutes only. Set the fuse for a ten-minute delay. That will give you time to return with the others and for us to have completed the journey." Luden added, regretfully, "I would like to come with you, but that would not be wise."

"Maybe not for you, Jarl, but it is for me." Chemile sprang to the port. "Come on, Penza, I'll race you to the building."

As they left, the giant bugging the explosives, Kennedy said, "How, Jarl?"

"How did we manage to ride the beam? It was simply a matter of investigation, deduction, and application. Your message gave me the final clue. The modulation was based on a normal sending rate as applied to our own space, but there was an interesting variation. I had already suspected the true nature of the vortex and had tentatively worked out a method of avoiding the abrupt accelerational pressure. Your mention of a complete power-drain gave me the final clue. I devised a heterodyning field which enabled us to maintain control of the *Mordain* at all times. I will admit that our arrival was a little precipitate. If it hadn't been for Veem we could easily have crashed. However, we didn't and we have managed to maintain our power."

"By means of the field?"

"Yes. One of the effects of the vortex is to drain all energy of an electronic nature. From what you said in your message I guess that is a part of the system of transportation as used by this installation. A ship is rendered negative in a power sense. It is dispatched and is recharged when it arrives over one of the helixes. This would give it limited energy, but enough for local movement and the maintenance of life-support apparatus. It would also mean, of course, that the vessels would have a far larger freight capacity than our own. In fact," mused Luden, "the system has much to commend it. The basic installations would be highly

expensive, but the operating costs would be low."

Kennedy said, patiently, "You mentioned a time-limit. I take it that the field you established is decaying."

"Unfortunately, yes. Given time I would have been able to devise some form of feedback which would have extended our capability to stay in this universe. You will understand why I did not wish to spend the time."

An understatement, thought Kennedy. He could guess at the desperate effort which must have ruled life in the *Mordain*. The race against time, not knowing if he or Penza were still alive, but refusing to accept the coldly logical surrender to observed data. And then the message and the gamble with untested equipment. The plunge into the unknown.

Comrades, friends, but he would have done exactly the same.

"Where is Penza?" snapped Luden peevishly. "I should have known better than to let Veem go with him. They are probably hunting souvenirs."

"They won't be long."

"At times they act like children." Luden shook his head as if in despair, baffled at illogical behavior. "I can understand curiosity, but not when it is misplaced. Enigmatic though Alpha-null is yet—"

"Alpha-null?"

"The name I have given to this region. There could be other universes and probably are, but this is the first we have discovered. Where are they?"

"Here they come." Kennedy watched as they emerged from the building, Troy, the captain, the others close behind. The giant carried plates of metal cradled in his arms, circuit diagrams ripped from the wall of the chamber of machines. He smiled as he saw them; Luden's suspicions had been well-founded.

He lost the smile as he looked over their heads at the vessel limned in green fire against the sky.

"Hurry!" he shouted. "Veem! Penza! All of you! Run!"

"That ship?" Luden stared at the polyhedron, the truncated cones. "An alien vessel?"

"Yes, and destructive. Get ready to close the port. Have Veem man the guns. No." Kennedy paused, frowning. The ship had been adapted, there could be controls which were new and strange and there would be no time to learn their operation. "I'll shut the port. You take the controls. Get us up as fast as you can."

Troy was the last to enter. He fell, gasping as Kennedy sealed the ship and slapped at the all-clear button to alert the control room. As the ship rose he ran to the turret. The *Mordain* was armed with both guns and missile launchers, the turret holding both a heavy-duty Dione and rapid-firing cannon. He dropped into the seat, hit the release, and centered the alien vessel on the screen.

It came jerking toward them, darting upward, gaining height, green fire streaming from the tips of the truncated cones. Kennedy felt a tremendous shock, heard the note of the engine fall, the *Mordain* jerk as if struck by an invisible hammer.

He fired, self-propelled missiles a thread of flame from the muzzle of the cannon, a thread which reached and touched the alien craft. Red blossomed among the green, the vented energy of the missiles exploding on impact, unable to penetrate the hull. The green shimmer had to be a shield of some kind, a protective screen.

"Veem!" He heard the professor call over the intercom. "Take over! I must see to the heterodyning field!"

A bad time to hand over control, but Luden must have his reasons. The *Mordain* jerked again, veered, sluggish as if drained of power. Again Kennedy fired, this time using the Dione.

A handgun could blast an animal the size of a horse. Turn a man into charred and glowing incandescence. The one on the *Mordain* could puddle a house with a single shot.

More red replaced the green. A growing, widening patch which ate at metal and sent it dripping in molten rain. Into it Kennedy sent a stream of

missiles, followed them with a second blast from the Dione.

In the screen the alien vessel expanded, puffed into a cloud of glowing vapor, became a smudge against the silver moons of the sky.

"Got it!" yelled Penza. He had been watching from the monitoring screen of the missile launcher, unable to use atomics at such close range. "One up for us, Cap! The *Hedlanda's* avenged!"

"Veem!" Luden's voice was strained, anxious. "Full power, man! Get back on the beam! Hurry!"

Time was running out. The battle had taken too long; the power-drain had been too great. Kennedy dropped from the turret and ran to where the professor stood before a complex panel. The installation was crude, the circuits roughly finished, clear evidence of desperate haste.

"Trouble, Jarl?"

"The field is collapsing and we aren't moving fast enough. If that bomb should detonate before we reach our own universe we could fall back to Alpha-null."

"Anything I can do?"

"No. All we can do is to wait." Luden stared at the swinging hand of a chronometer, the thin needles on various dials. "We had a safe margin. That alien vessel robbed us of it. The weapons it used not only drank power but created a disharmonic in the resonance field." Luden drew in his breath. "Now!"

The vessel went dark.

It was a sudden and total absence of light. Even the emergency Kells threw no glow, the hands of luminous dials, the telltales, nothing.

And, with the light, went all sound. Kennedy stood, blind, deaf, totally disassociated from the *Mordain* and all it contained. He felt nothing beneath his boots, beneath his reaching hands. If they were boots, if he did have hands. Suddenly he wasn't sure. He could feel nothing, not the impact of the clothes he wore, the pulse of blood, the waft of air into his lungs. His heart wasn't beating. He wasn't breathing. Only his brain

remained aware.

An intelligence divorced of all flesh and feeling drifting in an endless darkness.

It lasted for a second, an eternity, there was no way to tell.

And then light returned, a soft glow which rapidly brightened to become normal. As did small sounds, the beat of his heart, the gust of his breathing. He felt the touch of his clothing, the pressure of the deck beneath his feet. Beside him Luden had not moved. "Limbo," he breathed. "Jarl, we were in Limbo."

"The region between universes," agreed the professor. He swallowed, his thin face haggard, his eyes strained as if he had looked on unsuspected terrors. "A place where nothing can logically exist. We could have drifted there for eternity, locked in stasis, unfeeling, unaware."

Kennedy heard voices, Penza, Troy, the captain, Veem's yell of relief.

"Stars! Our own universe! We're through, Cap. We're home!"

"Thank God," said Luden. He shook his head, regaining his iron self-control. "It could so easily have gone the other way. A little less momentum and Alpha-null would have claimed us for its own. But we belong to this universe and were drawn to it And, as Veem said, we're home." Home among familiar stars and with a galaxy to rove in. The peace to maintain and Terra to defend. And questions to be answered and problems to be solved.

And, one day, they would be.