

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET stories

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From a world beyond the fringe Valduma lured men to  
a voluptuous half-life. . . .

## **SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS**

a Dark Nebula novel by POUL ANDERSON

## **CALLING WORLD-4 OF KITHGOL!**

novelet of Lost Races by H. B. FYFE





# PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 4 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • JANUARY, 1952

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T. T. SCOTT, President



MALCOLM REISS, General Manager

PLANET STORIES Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1951, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 25¢ per copy. Subscription Rate, \$1.50 per year. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.







*A trumpet blew its high note into the dusking heavens, and Valduma appeared above the battlers to give heart to the men of Dragobyeh.*

# Sargasso of Lost Starships

By POUL ANDERSON

*Far out in limitless space, Valduma, queen of the voluptuous half-life, plied her deadly trade . . . a Lorelei of the black void, beckoning adventurous spacemen to death and destruction with her beautiful siren lure.*

**B**ASIL DONOVAN was drunk again. He sat near the open door of the Golden Planet, boots on the table, chair tilted back, one arm resting on the

broad shoulder of Wocha, who sprawled on the floor beside him, the other hand clutching a tankard of ale. The tunic was open above his stained gray shirt, the bat-

tered cap was askew on his close-cropped blond hair, and his insignia—the stars of a captain and the silver leaves of an earl on Ansa—were tarnished. There was a deepening flush over his pale gaunt cheeks, and his eyes smoldered with an old rage.

Looking out across the cobbled street, he could see one of the tall, half-timbered houses of Lanstead. It had somehow survived the space bombardment, though its neighbors were rubble, but the tile roof was clumsily patched and there was oiled paper across the broken plastic of the windows. An anachronism, looming over the great bulldozer which was clearing the wreckage next door. The workmen there were mostly Ansans, big men in ragged clothes, but a well-dressed Terran was bossing the job. Donovan cursed wearily and lifted his tankard again.

The long, smoky-raftered taproom was full—stolid burgers and peasants of Lanstead, discharged spacemen still in their worn uniforms, a couple of tailed greenies from the neighbor planet Shalmu. Talk was low and spiritless, and the smoke which drifted from pipes and cigarettes was bitter, cheap tobacco and dried bark. The smell of defeat was thick in the tavern.

"May I sit here, sir? The other places are full."

Donovan glanced up. It was a young fellow, peasant written over his sunburned face in spite of the gray uniform and the empty sleeve. Olman—yes, Sam Olman, whose family had been under Donovan fief these two hundred years. "Sure, make yourself at home."

"Thank you, sir. I came in to get some supplies, thought I'd have a beer too. But you can't get anything these days. Not to be had."

Sam's face looked vaguely hopeful as he eyed the noble. "We do need a gas engine bad, sir, for the tractor. Now that the central powercaster is gone, we got to have our own engines. I don't want to presume, sir, but—"

Donovan lifted one corner of his mouth in a tired smile. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I could get one machine for the whole community I'd be satisfied. Can't be done. We're trying to start a small factory of our own up at the manor, but it's slow work."

"I'm sure if anyone can do anything it's you, sir."

Donovan looked quizzically at the open countenance across the table. "Sam," he asked, "why do you people keep turning to the Family? We led you, and it was to defeat. Why do you want anything more to do with nobles? We're not even that, any longer. We've been stripped of our titles. We're just plain citizens of the Empire now like you, and the new rulers are Terran. Why do you still think of us as your leaders?"

"But you are, sir! You've always been. It wasn't the king's fault, or his men's, that Terra had so much more'n we did. We gave 'em a fight they won't forget in a hurry!"

"You were in my squadron, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir. CPO on the *Ansa Lancer*. I was with you at the Battle of Luga." The deep-set eyes glowed. "We hit 'em there, didn't we, sir?"

"So we did." Donovan couldn't suppress the sudden fierce memory. Outnumbered, outgunned, half its ships shot to pieces and half the crews down with Sirius fever, the Royal Lansteaders had still made naval history and sent the Imperial Fleet kiyooodling back to Sol. Naval historians would be scratching their heads over that battle for the next five centuries. Before God, they'd fought!

HE BEGAN to sing the old war-song, softly at first, louder as Sam joined him—

*Comrades, hear the battle tiding,  
hear the ships that rise and yell  
faring outward, starward riding—  
Kick the Terrans back to hell!*

The others were listening, men raised weary heads, an old light burned in their eyes and tankards clashed together. They stood up to roar out the chorus till the walls shook.

*Lift your glasses high,  
kiss the girls good-bye,  
(Live well, my friend, live well, live  
you well)*

*for we're riding,  
for we're riding,  
for we're riding out to Terran sky! Terran  
sky! Terran sky!  
We have shaken loose our thunder  
where the planets have their way,  
and the starry deeps of wonder  
saw the Impies in dismay.  
Lift your glasses high,  
kiss the girls good-bye—*

The workmen in the street heard it and stopped where they were. Some began to sing. The Imperial superintendent yelled, and an Ansan turned to flash him a wolfish grin. A squad of blue-uniformed Solarian marines coming toward the inn went on the double.

*Oh, the Empr'or sent his battle  
ships against us in a mass,  
but we shook them like a rattle  
and we crammed them—*

"Hi, there! Stop that!"

The song died, slowly and stubbornly, the men stood where they were and hands clenched into hard-knuckled fists. Someone shouted an obscenity.

The Terran sergeant was very young, and he felt unsure before those steady, hating eyes. He lifted his voice all the louder: "That will be enough of that. Any more and I'll run you all in for *lèse majesté*. Haven't you drunken bums anything better to do than sit around swilling beer?"

A big Ansan smith laughed with calculated raucousness.

The sergeant looked around, trying to ignore him. "I'm here for Captain Donovan—Earl Basil, if you prefer. They said he'd be here. I've got an Imperial summons for him."

The noble stretched out a hand. "This is he. Let's have that paper."

"It's just the formal order," said the sergeant. "You're to come at once."

"Commoners," said Donovan mildly, "address me as 'sir.'"

"You're a commoner with the rest of 'em now." The sergeant's voice wavered just a little.

"I really must demand a little respect,"

said Donovan with drunken precision. There was an unholy gleam in his eyes. "It's a mere formality, I know, but after all my family can trace itself farther back than the Empire, whereas you couldn't name your father."

Sam Olman snickered.

"Well, sir—" The sergeant tried elaborate sarcasm. "If you, sir, will please be so good as to pick your high-bred tail off that chair, sir, I'm sure the Imperium would be mostly deeply grateful to you, sir."

"I'll have to do without its gratitude, I'm afraid." Donovan folded the summons without looking at it and put it in his tunic pocket. "But thanks for the paper. I'll keep it in my bathroom."

"You're under arrest!"

Donovan stood slowly up, unfolding his sheer two meters of slender, wiry height. "All right, Wocha," he said. "Let's show them that Ansa hasn't surrendered yet."

He threw the tankard into the sergeant's face, followed it with the table against the two marines beside him, and vaulted over the sudden ruckus to drive a fist into the jaw of the man beyond.

Wocha rose and his booming cry trembled in the walls. He'd been a slave of Donovan's since he was a cub and the man a child, and if someone had liberated him he wouldn't have known what to do. As batman and irregular groundtrooper he'd followed his master to the wars, and the prospect of new skull-breaking lit his eyes with glee.

For an instant there was tableau, Terrans and Ansans rigid, staring at the monster which suddenly stood behind the earl. The natives of Donarr have the not uncommon centauroid form, but their bodies are more like that of a rhinoceros than of a horse, hairless and slaty blue and enormously massive. The gorilla-armed torso ended in a round, muzzled, ape-like face, long-eared, heavy-jawed, with canine tusks hanging over the great gash of a mouth. A chair splintered under his feet, and he grinned.

"Paraguns—" cried the sergeant.

All hell let out for noon. Some of the customers huddled back into the corners, but the rest smashed the ends off bottles and threw themselves against the Terrans. Sam Olman's remaining arm yanked a ma-

rine to him and bashed his face against the wall. Donovan's fist traveled a jolting arc to the nearest belly and he snatched a rifle loose and crunched it against the man's jaw. A marine seized him from behind, he twisted in the grip and kicked savagely, whirled around and drove the rifle butt into the larynx.

"Kill the bluebellies! Kill the Impies! Hail, Ansa!"

Wocha charged into the squad, grabbed a hapless Terran in his four-fingered hands, and swung the man like a club. Someone drew his bayonet to stab the slave, it glanced off the thick skin and Wocha roared and sent him reeling. The riot blazed around the room, trampling men underfoot, shouting and cursing and swinging.

"Donovan, Donovan!" shouted Sam Olman. He charged the nearest Impy and got a bayonet in the stomach. He fell down, holding his hand to his wound, screaming.

The door was suddenly full of Terrans, marines arriving to help their comrades. Paraguns began to sizzle, men fell stunned before the supersonic beams and the fight broke up. Wocha charged the rescuers and a barrage sent his giant form crashing to the floor.

They herded the Ansans toward the city jail. Donovan, stirring on the ground as consciousness returned, felt handcuffs snap on his wrists.

**I**MPERIAL summons being what they were, he was bundled into a groundcar and taken under heavy guard toward the ordered place. He leaned wearily back, watching the streets blur past. Once a group of children threw stones at the vehicle.

"How about a cigarette?" he said.

"Shut up."

To his mild surprise, they did not halt at the military government headquarters—the old Hall of Justice where the Donovans had presided before the war—but went on toward the suburbs. The spaceport being still radioactive. They must be going to the emergency field outside the city. Hm. He tried to relax. His head ached from the stun-beam.

A light cruiser had come in a couple of days before, H. M. *Ganymede*. It loomed enormous over the green rolling fields and

the distance-blued hills and forests, a lance of bright metal and energy pointed into the clear sky of Ansa, blinding in the sun. A couple of spacemen on sentry at the gangway halted as the car stopped before them.

"This man is going to Commander Jansky."

"Aye, aye. Proceed."

Through the massive airlock, down the mirror-polished companionway, into an elevator and up toward the bridge—Donovan looked about him with a professional eye. The Impies kept a clean, tight ship, he had to admit.

He wondered if he would be shot or merely imprisoned. He doubted if he'd committed an enslaving offense. Well, it had been fun, and there hadn't been a hell of a lot to live for anyway. Maybe his friends could spring him, if and when they got some kind of underground organized.

He was ushered into the captain's cabin. The ensign with him saluted. "Donovan as per orders, ma'm."

"Very good. But why is he in irons?"

"Resisted orders, ma'm. Started a riot. Bloody business."

"I—see." She nodded her dark head. "Losses?"

"I don't know, ma'm, but we had several wounded at least. A couple of Ansans were killed, I think."

"Well, leave him here. You may go."

"But—ma'm, he's dangerous!"

"I have a gun, and there's a man just outside the door. You may go, ensign."

Donovan swayed a little on his feet, trying to pull himself erect, wishing he weren't so dirty and bloody and generally messed up. You look like a tramp, man, he thought. Keep up appearances. Don't let them outdo us, even in spit and polish.

"Sit down, Captain Donovan," said the woman.

He lowered himself to a chair, raking her with deliberately insolent eyes. She was young to be wearing a commander's twin planets—young and trim and nice looking. Tall body, sturdy but graceful, well filled out in the blue uniform and red cloak; raven-black hair falling to her shoulders; strong blunt-fingered hands, one of them resting close to her sidearm. Her face was interesting, broad and cleanly molded, high



cheekbones, wide full mouth, stubborn chin, snub nose, storm-gray eyes set far apart under heavy dark brows. A superior peasant type, he decided, and felt more at ease in the armor of his inbred haughtiness. He leaned back and crossed his legs.

"I am Helena Jansky, in command of this vessel," she said. Her voice was low and resonant, the note of strength in it. "I need you for a certain purpose. Why did you resist the Imperial summons?"

Donovan shrugged. "Let's say that I'm used to giving orders, not receiving them."

"Ah—yes." She ruffled the papers on her desk. "You were the Earl of Lanstead, weren't you?"

"After my father and older brother were killed in the war, yes." He lifted his head. "I am still the Earl."

She studied him with a dispassionate gaze that he found strangely uncomfortable. "I must say that you are a curious sort of leader," she murmured. "One who spends his time in a tavern getting drunk, and who on a whim provokes a disorder in which many of his innocent followers are hurt or killed, in which property difficult to replace is smashed—yes, I think it was about time that Ansa had a change of leadership."

Donovan's face was hot. Hell take it, what right had she to tell him what to do? What right had the whole damned Empire to come barging in where it wasn't wanted? "The Families, under the king, have governed Ansa since it was colonized," he said stiffly. "If it had been such a misrule as you seem to think, would the commons have fought for us as they did?"

## II

AGAIN that thoughtful stare. She saw a tall young man, badly disarrayed, blood and dirt streaking his long, thin-carved, curve-nosed features, an old scar jagging across his high narrow forehead. The hair was yellow, the eyes were blue, the whole look that of an old and settled aristocracy. His bitter voice lashed at her: "We ruled Ansa well because we were part of it, we grew up with the planet and we understood our folk and men were free under us. That's something which no upstart Solar Empire can have, not for centuries, not ever

to judge by the stock they use for nobility. When peasants command spaceships—"

Her face grew a little pale, but she smiled and replied evenly, "I am the Lady Jansky of Torgandale on Valor—Sirius A IV—and you are now a commoner. Please remember that."

"All the papers in the Galaxy won't change the fact that your grandfather was a dirt farmer on Valor."

"He was an atomjack, and I'm proud of it. I suggest further that an aristocrat who has nothing to trade on but his pedigree is very ragged indeed. Now, enough of that." Her crisp tones snapped forth. "You've committed a serious offense, especially since this is still occupied territory. If you wish to cooperate with me, I can arrange for a pardon—also for your brawling friends. If not, the whole bunch of you can go to the mines."

Donovan shook his head, trying to clear it of alcohol and weariness and the ringing left by the parabeam. "Go on," he said, a little thickly. "I'll listen, anyway."

"What do you know of the Black Nebula?"

She must have seen his muscles jerk. For an instant he sat fighting himself, grasping at rigidity with all the strength that was in him, and the memory was a blaze and a shout and a stab of pure fear.

*Valduma, Valduma!*

The sudden thudding of his heart was loud in his ears, and he could feel the fine beads of sweat starting forth on his skin. He made a wrenching effort and pulled his mouth into a lopsided grin, but his voice wavered: "Which black nebula? There are a lot of them."

"Don't try to bait me." Her eyes were narrowed on him, and the fingers of one hand drummed the desktop. "You know I mean *the* Black Nebula. Nobody in this Galactic sector speaks of any other."

"Why—well—" Donovan lowered his face to hide it till he could stiffen the mask, rubbing his temples with manacled hands. "It's just a nebula. A roughly spherical dustcloud, maybe a light-year in diameter, about ten parsecs from Ansa toward Sagittari. A few colonized stars on its fringes, nothing inside it as far as anyone knows. It has a bad name for some reason. The

superstitious say it's haunted, and you hear stories of ships disappearing—Well, it gets a pretty wide berth. Not much out there anyway."

His mind was racing, he thought he could almost hear it click and whirr as it spewed forth idea after idea, memory after memory. *Valduma and the blackness and they who laughed. The Nebula is pure poison, and now the Empire is getting interested. By God, it might poison them! Only would it stop there? This time they might decide to go on, to come out of the blackness.*

Jansky's voice seemed to come from very far away: "You know more than that, Donovan. Intelligence has been sifting Ansan records. You were the farthest-ranging space raider your planet had, and you had a base on Heim, at the very edge of the Nebula. Among your reports, there is an account of your men's unease, of the disappearance of small ships which cut through the Nebula on their missions, of ghostly things seen aboard other vessels and men who went mad. Your last report on the subject says that you investigated personally, that most of your crew went more or less crazy while in the Nebula, and that you barely got free. You recommend the abandonment of Heim and the suspension of operations in that territory. This was done, the region being of no great strategic importance anyway."

"Very well." The voice held a whipcrack undertone. "What do you know about the Black Nebula?"

Donovan had fought his way back to impassivity. "You have about the whole story already," he said. "There were all sorts of illusions as we penetrated, whisperings and glimpses of impossible things and so on. It didn't affect me much, but it drove many toward insanity and some died. There was also very real and unexplainable trouble—engines, lights, and so on. My guess is that there's some sort of radiation in the Nebula which makes atoms and electrons misbehave; that'd affect the human nervous system too, of course. If you're thinking of entering it yourself, my only advice is—don't."

"Hm." She cupped her chin in one hand and looked down at the papers. "Frankly,

we know very little about this Galactic sector. Very few Terrans were ever here before the war, and previous intercourse on your part with Sol was even slighter. However, Intelligence has learned that the natives of almost every inhabited planet on the fringes of the Nebula worship it or at least regard it as the home of the gods."

"Well, it is a conspicuous object in their skies," said Donovan. He added truthfully enough: "I only know about Heim, where the native religion in the area of our base was a sort of devil-worship centered around the Nebula. They made big sacrifices—food-stuffs, furs, tools, every conceivable item of use or luxury—which they claimed the devil-gods came and took. Some of the colonists thought there was something behind the legends, but I have my doubts." He shrugged. "Will that do?"

"For the time being," Jansky smiled with a certain bleak humor. "You can write a detailed report later on, and I strongly advise you not to mislead me. Because you're going there with us."

Donovan accepted the news coldly, but he thought the knocking of his heart must shake his whole body. His hands felt chilly and wet. "As you wish. Though what I can do—"

"You've been there before and know what to expect. Furthermore, you know the astrologation of that region; our charts are worse than sketchy, and even the Ansan tables have too many blank spots."

"Well—" Donovan got the words out slowly. "If I don't have to enlist. I will not take an oath to your Emperor."

"You needn't. Your status will be that of a civilian under Imperial command, directly responsible to me. You will have a cabin of your own, but no compensation except the abandonment of criminal proceedings against you." Jansky relaxed and her voice grew gentler. "However, if you serve well I'll see what I can do about pay. I daresay you could use some extra money."

"Thank you," said Donovan formally. He entered the first phase of the inchoate plan which was taking cloudy shape in his hammering brain: "May I have my personal slave with me? He's nonhuman, but he can eat Terran food."

Jansky smiled. There was sudden warmth

in that smile, it made her human and beautiful. "As you wish if he doesn't have fleas. I'll write you an order for his embarkation."

She'd hit the ceiling when she found what kind of passenger she'd agreed to, thought Donovan. But by then it would be too late. *And, with Wocha to help me, and the ship blundering blind into the Nebula—Valduma, Valduma, I'm coming back! And this time will you kiss me or kill me?*

THE *Ganymede* lifted grays and put the Ansa sun behind her. Much farther behind was Sol, an insignificant mote fifty light-years away, lost in the thronging glory of stars. Ahead lay Sagittari, Galactic center and the Black Nebula.

Space burned and blazed with a million bitter-bright suns, keen cold unwinking flames strewn across the utter dark of space, flashing and flashing over the hollow gulf of the leagues and the years. The Milky Way foamed in curdled silver around that enormous night, a shining girdle jeweled with the constellations. Far and far away wheeled the mysterious green and blue-white of the other galaxies, sparks of a guttering fire with a reeling immensity between. Looking toward the bows, one saw the great star-clusters of Sagittari, the thronging host of suns burning and thundering at the heart of the Galaxy. *And what have we done? thought Basil Donovan. What is man and all his proud achievements? Our home star is a dwarf on the lonely fringe of the Galaxy, out where the stars thin away toward the great emptiness. We've ranged maybe two hundred light-years from it in all directions and it's thirty thousand to the Center! Night and mystery and nameless immensities around us, our day of glory the briefest flicker on the edge of nowhere, then oblivion forever—and we won't be forgotten, because we'll never have been noticed. The Black Nebula is only the least and outermost of the great clouds which thicken toward the Center and hide its ultimate heart from us, it is nothing even as we, and yet it holds a power older than the human race and a terror that may overwhelm it.*

He felt again the old quailing funk, fear crawled along his spine and will drained out of his soul. He wanted to run, escape, huddle under the sky of Ansa to hide from

the naked blaze of the universe, live out his day and forget that he had seen the scornful face of God. But there was no turning back, not now, the ship was already outpacing light on her secondary drive and he was half a prisoner aboard. He squared his shoulders and walked away from the viewplate, back toward his cabin.

Wocha was sprawled on a heap of blankets, covering the floor with his bulk. He was turning the brightly colored pages of a child's picture book. "Boss," he asked, "when do we kill 'em?"

"The Impies? Not yet, Wocha. Maybe not at all." Donovan stepped over the monster and lay down on his bunk, hands behind his head. He could feel the thrum of the driving engines, quivering in the ship and his bones. "The Nebula may do that for us."

"We go back there?" Wocha stirred uneasily. "I don't like, boss. It's toombar. Bad."

"Yeah, so it is."

"Better we stay home. Manor needs repair. Peasants need our help. I need beer."

"So do I. I'll see if we can't promote some from the quartermaster. Old John can look after the estate while we're away, and the peasants will just have to look after themselves. Maybe it's time they learned how." At a knock on the door: "Come in."

Tetsuo Takahashi, the ship's exec, brought his small sturdy form around Wocha and sat down on the edge of the bunk. "Your slave has the Old Lady hopping mad," he grinned. "He'll eat six times a man's ration."

"And drink it." Donovan smiled back; he couldn't help liking the cocky little Teran. Then, with a sudden renewed bitterness: "And he's worth it. I couldn't be without him. He may not be so terribly bright, but he's my only proof that loyalty and decency aren't extinct."

Takahashi gave him a puzzled look. "Why do you hate us so much?" he asked.

"You came in where you weren't asked. Ansa was free, and now it's just another province of your damned Empire."

"Maybe so. But you were a backwater, an underpopulated agricultural planet which nobody had ever heard of, exposed to barbarian raids and perhaps to nonhuman



conquest. You're safe now, and you're part of a great social-economic system which can do more than all those squabbling little kingdoms and republics and theocracies and God knows what else put together could ever dream of."

"Who said we wanted to be safe? Our ancestors came to Ansa to be free. We fought Shalmu when the greenies wanted to take what we'd built, and then we made friends with them. We had elbow room and a way of life that was our own. Now you'll bring in your surplus population to fill our green lands with yelling cities and squalling people. You'll tear down the culture we evolved so painfully and make us just another bunch of kowtowing Imperial citizens."

"Frankly, Donovan, I don't think it was much of a culture. It sat in its comfortable rut and admired the achievements of its ancestors. What did your precious Families do but hunt and loaf and throw big parties? Maybe they did fulfill a magisterial function—so what? Any elected yut could do the same in that simple a society." Takahashi fixed his eyes on Donovan's. "But rights and wrongs aside, the Empire had to annex Ansa, and when you wouldn't come in peaceably you had to be dragged in."

"Yeah. A dumping ground for people who were too stupid not to control their own breeding."

"Your Ansan peasants, my friend, have about twice the Terran birth rate. It's merely that there are more Terrans to start with—and Sirians and Centaurians and all the old settled planets. No, it was more than that. It was a question of military necessity."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

"Read your history sometime. When the Commonwealth broke up in civil wars two hundred years ago it was hell between the stars. Half savage peoples who never should have left their planets had learned how to build spaceships and were going out to raid and conquer. A dozen would-be overlords scorched whole worlds with their battles. You can't have anarchy on an interstellar scale. Too many people suffer. Old Manuel I had the guts to proclaim himself Emperor of Sol—no pretty euphemisms for him, an

empire was needed and an empire was what he built. He kicked the barbarians out of the Solar System and went on to conquer their home territories and civilize them. That meant he had to subjugate stars closer to home, to protect his lines of communication. This led to further trouble elsewhere. Oh, yes, a lot of it was greed, but the planets which were conquered for their wealth would have been sucked in anyway by sheer economics. The second Argolid carried on, and now his son, Manuel II, is finishing the job. We've very nearly attained what we must have—an empire large enough to be socio-economically self-sufficient and defend itself against all comers, of which there are many, without being too large for control. You should visit the inner Empire sometime, Donovan, and see how many social evils it's been possible to wipe out because of security and central power. But we need this sector to protect our Sagittarian flank, so we're taking it. Fifty years from now you'll be glad we did."

DONOVAN looked sourly up at him. "Why are you feeding me that?" he asked. "I've heard it before."

"We're going to survey a dangerous region, and you're our guide. The captain and I think there's more than a new radiation in the Black Nebula. I'd like to think we could trust you."

"Think so if you wish."

"We could use a hypnoprobe on you, you know. We'd squeeze your skull dry of everything it contained. But we'd rather spare you that indignity."

"And you might need me when you get there, and I'd still be only half conscious. Quit playing the great altruist, Takahashi."

The exec shook his head. "There's something wrong inside you, Donovan," he murmured. "You aren't the man who licked us at Luga."

"Luga!" Donovan's eyes flashed. "Were you there?"

"Sure. Destroyer *North Africa*, just come back from the Zarune front—Cigarette?"

They fell to yarning and passed a pleasant hour. Donovan could not suppress a vague regret when Takahashi left. *They aren't such bad fellows, those Impies. They were brave and honorable enemies, and*

*they've been lenient conquerors as such things go. But when we hit the Black Nebula—*

He shuddered. "Wocha, get that whiskey out of my trunk."

"You not going to get drunk again, boss?" The Donarrian's voice rumbled disappointment.

"I am. And I'm going to try to stay drunk the whole damn voyage. You just don't know what we're heading for, Wocha."

*Stranger, go back.*

*Spaceman, go home. Turn back, adventurer.*

*It is death. Return, human.*

The darkness whispered. Voices ran down the length of the ship, blending with the unending murmur of the drive, urging, commanding, whispering so low that it seemed to be within men's skulls.

Basil Donovan lay in darkness. His mouth tasted foul, and there was a throb in his temples and a wretchedness in his throat. He lay and listened to the voice which had awakened him.

*Go home, wanderer. You will die, your ship will plunge through the hollow dark till the stars grow cold. Turn home, human.*

"Boss. I hear them, boss. I'm scared."

"How long have we been under weigh? When did we leave Ansa?"

"A week ago, boss, maybe more. You been drunk. Wake up, boss, turn on the light. They're whispering in the dark, and I'm scared."

"We must be getting close."

*Return. Go home. First comes madness and then comes death and then comes the spinning outward forever. Turn back, spaceman.*

Bodiless whisper out of the thick thrumming dark, sourceless all-pervading susurration, and it mocked, there was the cruel cynical scorn of the outer vastness running up and down the laughing voice. It murmured, it jeered, it ran along nerves with little icy feet and flowed through the brain, it called and giped and hungered. It warned them to go back, and it knew they wouldn't and railed its mockery at them for it. Demon whisper, there in the huge cold lone-

liness, sneering and grinning and waiting.

Donovan sat up and groped for the light switch. "We're close enough," he said tonelessly. "We're in their range now."

Footsteps racketed in the corridor outside. A sharp rap on his door. "Come in. Come in and enjoy yourself."

### III

DONOVAN hadn't found the switch before the door was open and light spilled in from the hallway fluorotubes. Cold white light, a shaft of it picking out Wocha's monstrous form and throwing grotesque shadows on the walls. Commander Jansky was there, in full uniform, and Ensign Jeanne Scoresby, her aide. The younger girl's face was white, her eyes enormous, but Jansky wore grimness like an armor.

"All right, Donovan," she said. "You've had your binge, and now the trouble is starting. You didn't say they were voices."

"They could be anything," he answered, climbing out of the bunk and steadying himself with one hand. His head swam a little. The corners of the room were thick with shadow.

*Back, spaceman. Turn home, human.*

"Delusions?" The man laughed unpleasantly. His face was pale and gaunt, unshaven in the bleak radiance. "When you start going crazy, I imagine you always hear voices."

There was contempt in the gray eyes that raked him. "Donovan, I put a technician to work on it when the noises began a few hours ago. He recorded them. They're very faint, and they seem to originate just outside the ear of anyone who hears them, but they're real enough. Radiations don't speak in human Anglic with an accent such as I never heard before. Not unless they're carrier waves for a message. Donovan, who or what is inside the Black Nebula?"

The Ansan's laugh jarred out again. "Who or what is inside this ship?" he challenged. "Our great human science has no way of making the air vibrate by itself. Maybe there are ghosts, standing invisible just beside us and whispering in our ears."

"We could detect nothing, no radiations, no energy-fields, nothing but the sounds

themselves. I refuse to believe that matter can be set in motion without some kind of physical force being applied." Jansky clapped a hand to her sidearm. "You know what is waiting for us. You know how they do it."

"Go ahead. Hypnoprobe me. Lay me out helpless for a week. Or shoot me if you like. You'll be just as dead whatever you do."

Her tones were cold and sharp. "Get on your clothes and come up to the bridge."

He shrugged, picked up his uniform, and began to shuck his pajamas. The women looked away.

*Human, go back. You will go mad and die.*

*Valduma*, he thought, with a wrenching deep inside him. *Valduma, I've returned.*

He stepped over to the mirror. The Ansan uniform was a gesture of defiance, and it occurred to him that he should shave if he wore it in front of these Terrans. He ran the electric razor over cheeks and chin, pulled his tunic straight, and turned back. "All right."

They went out into the hallway. A spaceman went by on some errand. His eyes were strained wide, staring at blankness, and his lips moved. The voices were speaking to him.

"It's demoralizing the crew," said Jansky. "It has to stop."

"Go ahead and stop it," jeered Donovan. "Aren't you the representative of the almighty Empire of Sol? Command them in the name of His Majesty to stop."

"The crew, I mean," she said impatiently. "They've got no business being frightened by a local phenomenon."

"Any human would be," answered Donovan. "You are, though you won't admit it. I am. We can't help ourselves. It's instinct."

"Instinct?" Her clear eyes were a little surprised.

"Sure." Donovan halted before a view-screen. Space blazed and roiled against the reaching darkness. "Just look out there. It's the primeval night, it's the blind unknown where unimaginable inhuman Powers are abroad. We're still the old half-ape, crouched over his fire and trembling while the night roars around us. Our lighted,

heated, metal-armored ship is still the lonely cave-fire, the hearth with steel and stone laid at the door to keep out the gods. When the Wild Hunt breaks through and shouts at us, we must be frightened, it's the primitive fear of the dark. It's part of us."

She swept on, her cloak a scarlet wing flapping behind her. They took the elevator to the bridge.

Donovan had not watched the Black Nebula grow over the days, swell to a monstrous thing that blotted out half the sky, lightlessness fringed with the cold glory of the stars. Now that the ship was entering its tenuous outer fringes, the heavens on either side were blurring and dimming, and the blackness yawned before. Even the densest nebula is a hard vacuum; but tons upon incredible tons of cosmic dust and gas, reaching planetary and interstellar distances on every hand, will blot out the sky. It was like rushing into an endless, bottomless hole, the ship was falling and falling into the pit of Hell.

"I noticed you never looked bow-wards on the trip," said Jansky. There was steel in her voice. "Why did you lock yourself in your cabin and drink like a sponge?"

"I was bored," he replied sullenly.

"You were afraid!" she snapped contemptuously. "You didn't dare watch the Nebula growing. Something happened the last time you were here which sucked the guts out of you."

"Didn't your Intelligence talk to the men who were with me?"

"Yes, of course. None of them would say more than you've said. They all wanted us to come here, but blind and unprepared. Well, Mister Donovan, we're going in!"

The floorplates shook under Wocha's tread. "You not talk to boss that way," he rumbled.

"Let be, Wocha," said Donovan. "It doesn't matter how she talks."

He looked ahead, and the old yearning came alive in him, the fear and the memory, but he had not thought that it would shiver with such a strange gladness.

And—who knew? A bargain—

*Valduma, come back to me!*

Jansky's gaze on him narrowed, but her voice was suddenly low and puzzled. "You're smiling," she whispered.



He turned from the viewscreen and his laugh was ragged. "Maybe I'm looking forward to this visit, Helena."

"My name," she said stiffly, "is Commander Jansky."

"Out there, maybe. But in here there is no rank, no Empire, no mission. We're all humans, frightened little humans huddling together against the dark." Donovan's smile softened. "You know, Helena, you have very beautiful eyes."

The slow flush crept up her high smooth cheeks. "I want a full report of what happened to you last time," she said. "Now. Or you go under the probe."

*Wanderer, it is a long way home. Spaceman, spaceman, your sun is very far away.*

"Why, certainly." Donovan leaned against the wall and grinned at her. "Glad to. Only you won't believe me."

She made no reply, but folded her arms and waited. The ship trembled with its forward thrust. Sweat beaded the forehead of the watch officer and he glared around him.

"We're entering the home of all lawlessness," said Donovan. "The realm of magic, the outlaw world of werebeasts and nightgangers. Can't you hear the wings outside? These ghosts are only the first sign. We'll have a plague of witches soon."

"Get out!" she said.

He shrugged. "All right, Helena. I told you you wouldn't believe me." He turned and walked slowly from the bridge.

**O**UTSIDE was starless, lightless, infinite black. The ship crept forward, straining her detectors, groping into the blind dark while her crew went mad.

*Spaceman, it is too late. You will never find your way home again. You are dead men on a ghost ship, and you will fall forever into the Night.*

"I saw him, Wong, I saw him down in Section Three, tall and thin and black. He laughed at me, and then there wasn't anything there."

Sound of great wings beating somewhere outside the hull.

*Mother, can I have him? Can I have his skull to play with?*

*Not yet, child. Soon. Soon.*

Wicked rain of laughter and the sound

of clawed feet running.

No one went alone. Spacemen First Class Gottfried and Martinez went down a starboard companionway and saw the hooded black form waiting for them. Gottfried pulled out his blaster and fired. The ravening beam sprang backward and consumed him. Martinez lay mumbling in psychobay.

The lights went out. After an hour they flickered back on again, but men had rioted and killed each other in the dark.

Commander Jansky recalled all personal weapons on the grounds that the crew could no longer be trusted with them. The men drew up a petition to get them back. When it was refused, there was muttering of revolt.

*Spacemen, you have wandered too far. You have wandered beyond the edge of creation, and now there is only death.*

The hours dragged into days. When the ship's timepieces started disagreeing, time ceased to have meaning.

Basil Donovan sat in his cabin. There was a bottle in his hand, but he tried to go slow. He was waiting.

When the knock came, he leaped from his seat and every nerve tightened up and screamed. He swore at himself. They wouldn't knock when they came for him. "Go on, enter—" His voice wavered.

Helena Jansky stepped inside, closing the door after her. She had thinned, and there was darkness in her eyes, but she still bore herself erect. Donovan had to salute the stubborn courage that was in her. The unimaginative peasant blood—no, it was more than that, she was as intelligent as he, but there was a deep strength in that tall form, a quiet vitality which had perhaps been bred out of the Families of Ansa. "Sit down," he invited.

She sighed and ran a hand through her dark hair. "Thanks."

"Drink?"

"No. Not on duty."

"And the captain is always on duty. Well, let it go." Donovan lowered himself to the bunk beside her, resting his feet on Wocha's columnar leg. The Donarrian muttered and whimpered in his sleep. "What can I do for you?"

Her gaze was steady and grave. "You can tell me the truth."

"About the Nebula? Why should I? Give me one good reason why an Ansan should care what happens to a Solarian ship."

"Perhaps only that we're all human beings here, that those boys have earth and rain and sunlight and wives waiting for them."

*And Valdama—no, she isn't human. Fire and ice and storming madness, but not human. Too beautiful to be flesh.*

"This trip was your idea," he said defensively.

"Donovan, you wouldn't have played such a foul trick and made such a weak, self-righteous excuse in the old days."

He looked away, feeling his cheeks hot. "Well," he mumbled, "why not turn around, get out of the Nebula if you can, and maybe come back later with a task force?"

"And lead them all into this trap? Our subtronics are out, you know. We can't send information back, so we'll just go on and learn a little more and then try to fight our way home."

His smile was crooked. "I may have been baiting you, Helena. But if I told you everything I know, it wouldn't help. There isn't enough."

Her hand fell strong and urgent on his. "Tell me, then! Tell me anyway."

"But there is so little. There's a planet somewhere in the Nebula, and it has inhabitants with powers I don't begin to understand. But among other things, they can project themselves hyperwise, just like a spaceship, without needing engines to do it. And they have a certain control over matter and energy."

"The fringe stars—these beings in the Nebula really have been their 'gods'?"

"Yes. They've projected themselves, terrorized the natives for centuries, and carry home the sacrificial materials for their own use. They're doubtless responsible for all the ships around here that never came home. They don't like visitors." Donovan saw her smile, and his own lips twitched. "But they did, I suppose, take some prisoners, to learn our language and anything else they could about us."

She nodded. "I'd conjectured as much. If you don't accept theories involving the supernatural, and I don't, it follows almost

necessarily. If a few of them projected themselves aboard and hid somewhere, they could manipulate air molecules from a distance so as to produce the whisperings—" She smiled afresh, but the hollowness was still in her. "When you call it a new sort of ventriloquism, it doesn't sound nearly so bad, does it?"

Fiercely, the woman turned on him. "And what have you had to do with them? How are you so sure?"

"I—talked with one of them," he replied slowly. "You might say we struck up a friendship of sorts. But I learned nothing, and the only benefit I got was escaping. I've no useful information." His voice sharpened. "And that's all I have to say."

"Well, we're going on!" Her head lifted proudly.

Donovan's smile was a crooked grimace. He took her hand, and it lay unresisting between his fingers. "Helena," he said, "you've been trying to psychoanalyze me this whole trip. Maybe it's my turn now. You're not so hard as you tell yourself."

"I am an officer of the Imperial Navy." Her haughtiness didn't quite come off.

"Sure, sure. A hard-shelled career girl. Only you're also a healthy human being. Down underneath, you want a home and kids and quiet green hills. Don't lie to yourself, that wouldn't be fitting to the Lady Jansky of Torgandale, would it? You went into service because it was the thing to do. And you're just a scared kid, my dear." Donovan shook his head. "But a very nice-looking kid."

Tears glimmered on her lashes. "Stop it," she whispered desperately. "Don't say it."

He kissed her, a long slow kiss with her mouth trembling under his and her body shivering ever so faintly. The second time she responded, shy as a child, hardly aware of the sudden hunger.

SHE pulled free then, sat with eyes wide and wild, one hand lifted to her mouth. "No," she said, so quietly he could scarce hear. "No, not now—"

Suddenly she got up and almost fled. Donovan sighed.

*Why did I do that? To stop her inquir-*

*ing too closely? Or just because she's honest and human, and Valduma isn't? Or—*

Darkness swirled before his eyes. Wocha came awake and shrank against the farther wall, terror rattling in his throat. "Boss—boss, she's here again—"

Donovan sat unstirring, elbows on knees, hands hanging empty, and looked at the two who had come. "Hello, Valduma," he said.

"Basil—" Her voice sang against him, rippling, lilting, the unending sharp laughter beneath its surprise. "Basil, you have come back."

"Uh-huh." He nodded at the other. "You're Morzach, aren't you? Sit down. Have a drink. Old home week."

The creature from Arzun remained erect. He looked human on the outside, tall and gaunt in a black cape which glistened with tiny points of starlight, the hood thrown back so that his red hair fell free to his shoulders. The face was long and thin, chiseled to an ultimate refinement of classical beauty, white and cold. Cold as space-tempered steel, in spite of the smile on the pale lips, in spite of the dark mirth in the slant green eyes. One hand rested on the jeweled hilt of a sword.

Valduma stood beside Morzach for an instant, and Donovan watched her with the old sick wildness rising and clamoring in him.

*You are the fairest thing which ever was between the stars, you are ice and flame and living fury, stronger and weaker than man, cruel and sweet as a child a thousand years old, and I love you. But you are not human, Valduma.*

She was tall, and her grace was a lithe rippling flow, wind and fire and music made flesh, a burning glory of hair rushing past her black-caped shoulders, hands slim and beautiful, the strange clean-molded face white as polished ivory, the mouth red and laughing, the eyes long and oblique and gold-flecked green. When she spoke, it was like singing in Heaven and laughter in Hell. Donovan looked at her, not moving.

"Basil, you came back to me?"

"He came because he had to." Morzach of Arzun folded his arms, eyes smoldering in anger. "Best we kill him now."

"Later, perhaps later, but not now." Valduma laughed aloud.

Suddenly she was in Donovan's arms. Her kisses were a rain of fire. There was thunder and darkness and dancing stars. He was aware of nothing else, not for a long, long time.

She leaned back in his grasp, smiling up at him, stroking his hair with one slender hand.

His cheek was bloody where she had scratched him. He looked back into her eyes—they were cat's eyes, split-pupiled, all gold and emerald without the human white. She laughed very softly. "Shall I kill you now?" she whispered. "Or drive you mad first? Or let you go again? What would be most amusing, Basil?"

"This is no time for your pranks," said Morzach sharply. "We have to deal with this ship. It's getting dangerously close to Arzun, and we've been unable yet to break the morale and discipline of the crew. I think the only way is to wreck the ship."

"Wreck it on Arzun, yes!" Valduma's laughter pulsed and throbbed. "Bring them to their goal. Help them along, even. Oh, yes, Morzach, it is a good thought!"

"We'll need your help," said the creature-man to Donovan. "I take it that you're guiding them. You must encourage them to offer no resistance when we take over the controls. Our powers won't stand too long against atomic energy."

"Why should I help you?" Donovan's tones were hoarse. "What can you give me?"

"If you live," said Valduma, "and can make your way to Drogobych, I might give you much." She laughed again, maniac laughter which did not lose its music. "That would be diverting!"

"I don't know," he groaned. "I don't know—I thought a bargain could be made, but now I wonder."

"I leave him to you," said Morzach sardonically, and vanished.

"Basil," whispered Valduma. "Basil, I have—sometimes—missed you."

"Get out, Wocha," said Donovan.

"Boss—she's toombar—"

"Get out!"

Wocha lumbered slowly from the cabin. There were tears in his eyes.



## IV

THE *Ganymede's* engines rose to full power and the pilot controls spun over without a hand on them.

"Engine room! Engine room! Stop that nonsense down there!"

"We can't—they're frozen—the converter has gone into full without us—"

"Sir, I can't budge this stick. It's locked somehow."

The lights went out. Men screamed.

"Get me a flashlight!" snapped Takahashi in the dark. "I'll take this damned panel apart myself."

The beam etched his features against night. "Who goes?" he cried.

"It's I." Jansky appeared in the dim reflected glow. "Never mind, Takahashi. Let the ship have her way."

"But ma'm, we could crash—"

"I've finally gotten Donovan to talk. He says we're in the grip of some kind of powerbeam. They'll pull us to one of their space stations and then maybe we can negotiate—or fight. Come on, we've got to quiet the men."

The flashlight went out. Takahashi's laugh was shrill. "Better quiet me first, Captain."

Her hand was on his arm, steadying, strengthening. "Don't fail me, Tetsuo. You're the last one I've got. I just had to paralyze Scoresby."

"Thanks—thanks, chief. I'm all right now. Let's go."

They fumbled through blindness. The engines roared, full speed ahead with a ghost on the bridge. Men were stumbling and cursing and screaming in the dark. Someone switched on the battle-stations siren, and its howl was the last voice of insanity.

Struggle in the dark, wrestling, paralyzing the berserk, calling on all the iron will which had lifted humankind to the stars—slow restoration of order, men creeping to general quarters, breathing heavily in the guttering light of paper torches.

The engines cut off and the ship snapped into normal matter state. Helena Jansky saw blood-red sunlight through the viewport. There was no time to sound the alarm before the ship crashed.

"A hundred men. No more than a hundred men alive."

She wrapped her cloak tight about her against the wind and stood looking across the camp. The streaming firelight touched her face with red, limning it against the utter dark of the night heavens, sheening faintly in the hair that blew wildly around her strong bitter countenance. Beyond, other fires danced and flickered in the gloom, men huddled around them while the cold seeped slowly to their bones. Here and there an injured human moaned.

Across the ragged spine of bare black hills they could still see the molten glow of the wreck. When it hit, the atomic converters had run wild and begun devouring the hull. There had barely been time for the survivors to drag themselves and some of the cripples free, and to put the rocky barrier between them and the mounting radioactivity. During the slow red sunset, they had gathered wood, hewing with knives at the distorted scrub trees reaching above the shale and snow of the valley. Now they sat waiting out the night.

Takahashi shuddered. "God, it's cold!"

"It'll get colder," said Donovan tonelessly. "This is an old planet of an old red dwarf sun. Its rotation has slowed. The nights are long."

"How do you know?" Lieutenant Elijah Cohen glared at him out of a crudely bandaged face. The firelight made his eyes gleam red. "How do you know unless you're in with them? Unless you arranged this yourself?"

Wocha reached forth a massive fist. "You shut up," he rumbled.

"Never mind," said Donovan. "I just thought some things would be obvious. You saw the star, so you should know it's the type of a burned-out dwarf. Since planets are formed at an early stage of a star's evolution, this world must be old too. Look at these rocks—citrified, back when the stellar energy output got really high just before the final collapse; and nevertheless eroded down to bare snags. That takes millions of years."

He reflected that his reasoning, while sound enough, was based on foreknown conclusions. *Cohen's right. I have betrayed them. It was Valduma, watching over me,*

*who brought Wocha and myself unhurt through the crash. I saw, Valduma, I saw you with your hair flying in the chaos, riding witch-like through sundering ruin, and you were laughing. Laughing!* He felt ill.

"Nevertheless, the planet has a thin but breathable atmosphere, frozen water, and vegetable life," said Takahashi. "Such things don't survive the final hot stage of a sun without artificial help. This planet has natives. Since we were deliberately crashed here, I daresay the natives are our earlier friends." He turned dark accusing eyes on the Ansan. "How about it, Donovan?"

"I suppose you're right," he answered. "I knew there was a planet in the Nebula, the natives had told me that in my previous trip. This star lies near the center, in a 'hollow' region where there isn't enough dust to force the planet into its primary, and shares a common velocity with the Nebula. It stays here, in other words."

"You told me—" Helena Jansky bit her lip, then slowly forced the words out: "You told me, and I believed you, that there was nothing immediately to fear when the Nebulites took over our controls. So we didn't fight them; we didn't try to overcome their forces with our own engines. And it cost us the ship and over half her crew."

"I told you what happened to me last time," he lied steadfastly. "I can't help it if things were different this trip."

She turned her back. The wind blew a thin hissing veil of dry snow across her ankles. A wounded man suddenly screamed out there in the dark.

*How does it feel, Donovan? You made her trust you and then betrayed her for a thing that isn't even human. How does it feel to be a Judas?*

"NEVER mind recriminations," said Takahashi. "This isn't the time to hold trials. We've got to decide what to do."

"They have a city on this planet," said Donovan. "Drogobych, they call it, and the planet's name is Arzun. It lies somewhere near the equator, they told me once. If they meant us to make our own way to it—and it would be like them—then it may well lie due south. We can march that way, assuming that the sun set in the west."

"Nothing to lose," shrugged the Terran. "But we haven't many weapons, a few assorted sidearms is all, and they aren't much use against these creatures anyway."

Something howled out in the darkness. The ground quivered, ever so faintly, to the pounding of heavy feet.

"Wild animals yet!" Cohen grinned humorlessly. "Better sound battle stations, Captain."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so." She blew her whistle, a thin shrilling in the windy dark. As she turned around, Donovan saw a gleam running along her cheek. Tears?

The noise came closer. They heard the rattle of claws on stone. The Terrans moved together, guns in front, clubs and rocks and bare hands behind. They have guts, thought Donovan. God, but they have guts!

"Food would be scarce on a barren planet like this," said Ensign Chundra Dass. "We seem to be elected."

The hollow roar sounded, echoing between the hills and caught up by the thin harrying wind. "Hold fire," said Helena. Her voice was clear and steady. "Don't waste charges. Wait—"

The thing leaped out of darkness, a ten-meter length of gaunt scaled body and steel-hard claws and whipping tail, soaring through the snow-streaked air and caught in the vague uneasy firelight. Helena's blaster crashed, a lightning bolt sizzled against the armored head.

The monster screamed. Its body tumbled shatteringly among the humans, it seized a man in its jaws and shook him and trampled another underfoot. Takahashi stepped forward and shot again at its dripping wound. The blaster bolt zigzagged wildly off the muzzle of his gun.

*Even the animals can do it—!*

"I'll get him, boss!" Wocha reared on his hind legs, came down again with a thud, and charged. Stones flew from beneath his feet. The monster's tail swept out, a man tumbled before it with his ribs caved in, and Wocha staggered as he caught the blow. Still he rushed in, clutching the barbed end of the tail to his breast. The monster writhed, bellowing. Another blaster bolt hit it from the rear. It turned, and a shot at its eyes veered away.

Wocha hit it with all the furious momentum he had. He rammed its spearlike tail down the open jaws and blood spurted. "Ho, Donovan!" he shouted. As the thing screamed and snapped at him, he caught its jaws in his hands.

"Wocha!" yelled Donovan. "Wocha!" He ran wildly toward the fight.

The Donarrian's great back arched with strain. It was as if they could hear his muscles crack. Slowly, slowly, he forced the jaws wider. The monster lashed its body, pulling him to his knees, dragging him over the ground, and still he fought.

"Damn you," he roared in the whirling dust and snow, "hold still!"

The jaws broke. And the monster screamed once more, and then it wasn't there. Wocha tumbled over.

Donovan fell across him, sobbing, laughing, cursing. Wocha picked him up. "You all right, boss?" he asked. "You well?"

"Yes—yes—oh, you blind bloody fool! You stupid, blundering ass!" Donovan hugged him.

"Gone," said Helena. "It vanished."

They picked up their dead and wounded and returned to the fires. The cold bit deep. Something else hooted out in the night.

It was a long time before Takahashi spoke. "You might expect it," he said. "These parapsychical powers don't come from nowhere. The intelligent race, our enemies of Drogobych, simply have them highly developed; the animals do to a lesser extent. I think it's a matter of life being linked to the primary atomic probabilities, the psi functions which give the continuous-field distribution of matter-energy in space-time. In a word, control of external matter and energy by conscious will acting through the unified field which is space-time. Telekinesis."

"Uh-huh," said Dass wearily. "Even some humans have a slight para power. Control dice or electron beams or what have you. But why aren't the—what did you call them?—Arzunians overrunning the Galaxy?"

"They can only operate over a certain range, which happens to be about the distance to the fringe stars," said Donovan. "Beyond that distance, dispersion limits them, plus the fact that differences of po-

tential energy must be made up from their own metabolism. The animals, of course, have very limited range, a few kilometers perhaps. The Arzunians use telekinesis to control matter and energy, and the same subspatial principles as our ships to go faster than light. Only since they aren't lugging around a lot of hull and passengers and assorted machinery—just themselves and a little air and maybe an armful of sacrificial goods from a fringe planet. They don't need atomic engines.

"They aren't interested in conquering the Galaxy. Why should they be? They can get all their needs and luxuries from the peoples to whom they are gods. An old race, very old, decadent if you will. But they don't like interference."

Takahashi looked at him sharply. "I glimpsed one of them on the ship," he said. "He carried a spear."

"Yeah. Another reason why they aren't conquerors. They have no sense for mechanics at all. Never had any reason to evolve one when they could manipulate matter directly without more than the simplest tools. They're probably more intelligent than humans in an all-around way, but they don't have the type of brain and the concentration needed to learn physics and chemistry. Aren't interested, either."

"So, swords against guns— We may have a chance!"

"They can turn your missiles, remember. Guns are little use, you have to distract them so they don't notice your shot till too late. But they can't control you. They aren't telepaths and their type of matter-control is heterodyned by living nerve currents. You could kill one of them with a sword where a gun would most likely kill you."

"I—see—" Helena looked strangely at him. "You're becoming very vocal all of a sudden."

Donovan rubbed his eyes and shivered in the cold. "What of it? You wanted the truth. You're getting it."

*Why am I telling them? Why am I not just leading them to the slaughter as Valduma wanted? Is it that I can't stand the thought of Helena being bunted like a beast?*

*Whose side am I on?* he thought wildly. Takahashi gestured and his voice came

eager. "That's it. That's it! The ship scattered assorted metal and plastic over twenty hectares as she fell. Safe for us to gather up tomorrow. We can use our blaster flames to shape weapons. Swords, axes, spears. By the Galaxy, we'll arm ourselves and then we'll march on Drogobych!"

## V

**IT WAS** a strange little army, thought Donovan, as strange as any the Galaxy had ever seen.

He looked back. The old ruined highway went down a narrow valley between sheer cliffs of eroded black stone reaching up toward the deep purplish heaven. The sun was wheeling westerly, a dull red ember throwing light like clotted blood on the dreariness of rock and ice and gaunt gray trees; a few snowflakes, borne on a thin chill wind, drifted across the path of march. A lonely bird, cruel-beaked and watchful, hovered on great black wings far overhead, waiting for them to die.

The men of the Imperial Solar Navy walked close together. They were haggard and dirty and bearded, clad in such ragged articles as they had been able to salvage, armed with the crudely forged weapons of a vanished age, carrying their sick and wounded on rude litters. Ghost world, ghost army, marching through an echoing windy solitude to its unknown weird—but men's faces were still brave, and one of them was singing. The sunburst banner of the Empire flapped above them, the one splash of color in the great murky landscape.

Luck had been with them, of a sort. Game animals had appeared in more abundance than one would have thought the region could support, deer-like things which they shot for meat to supplement their iron rations. They had stumbled on the old highway and followed its arrow-straight course southward. Many days and many tumbled hollow ruins of great cities lay behind them, and still they trudged on.

Luck? wondered Donovan. *I think it was intentional. I think the Arzunians want us to reach Drogobych.*

He heard the scrape of boots on the slanting hillside behind him, and turned around

to face Helena. He stopped and smiled. There had been a slow unspoken intimacy growing between them as they worked and struggled together. Not many words, but the eyes of each would often stray to the other, and a hand would brush over a hand as if by accident. Tired and hungry and road-stained, cap set askew on tangled hair, skin reddened by wind and blued with cold, she was still good to look on.

"Why are you walking so far from the road?" she asked.

"Oh serving as outrider, maybe," he said, resuming his stride. She fell into step beside him. "Up here you get a wider view."

"Do you think we have much further to go, Basil?"

He shrugged.

"We'd never have come this far without you," she said, looking down at her scuffed boots. "You and Wocha and Takahashi."

"Maybe the Empire will send a rescue mission when we don't come back," he suggested.

"No doubt they will. But they can't find one little star in this immensity. Even thermocouples won't help, the Nebula diffuses radiation too much. And they'd be blundering into the same trap as we." Helena looked up. "No, Basil, we've got to fight our way clear alone."

There was a long stretch of thicket growing on the hillside. Donovan went along the right of it, cutting off view of the army. "You know," he said, "you and those boys down there make me feel a lot kinder toward the Empire."

"Thank you. Thank you. We—" She took his arm. "It's a question of unifying the human race, ultimately this whole region of stars, and— Oh!"

The beasts were suddenly there in front of them, lean black things which snarled with mouths of hunger. One of them circled toward the humans' flank, the other crouched. Donovan yanked his sword clear.

"Get behind me," he snapped, turning to face the approaching hunter.

"No—back to back—" Helena's own blade rasped from its sheath. She lifted a shout for help.

The nearest animal sprang for her throat. She hacked wildly, the blade twisted in her hand and scraped the muzzled face.

Jaws clamped on the edged steel and let go with a bloody howl. Donovan swung at the other beast, the blow shuddered home and it screamed and writhed and snapped at his ankles.

Whirling, he turned on the thing which had launched itself at Helena. He hewed, and the animal wasn't there, his blade rang on naked stone. A weight crashed against his back, he went down and the teeth clamped on his shoulder.

Helena swung. The carnivore raised its head to snarl at her, and she gripped the sword in both hands and stabbed. It threshed wildly, dying, spewing blood over the hillside. The other, wounded creature disappeared.

Helena bent over Donovan, held him close, her eyes wild. "Are you hurt? Basil. Oh Basil, are you hurt?"

"No," he muttered. "The teeth didn't have time to work through this heavy jacket." He pulled her head down against his.

"Basil, Basil!"

He rose, still holding her to him. Her arms locked about his neck, and there were tears and laughter in her voice. "Oh, Basil, my darling."

"Helena," he murmured. "I love you, Helena."

"When we get home—I'm due for furlough, I'll retire instead—your house on Ansa—Oh, Basil, I never thought I could be so glad!"

The massive thunder of feet brought them apart. Wocha burst around the thicket, swinging his giant ax in both hands. "Are you all right, boss?" he roared.

"Yes, yes, we're all right. A couple of those damned wolf-like things which've been plaguing us the whole march. Go on back, Wocha, we'll join you soon."

The Donarrian's ape-face split in a vast grin. "So you take a female, boss?" he cried. "Good, good, we need lots of little Donovans at home!"

"Get on back, you old busybody, and keep that gossiping mouth shut!"

Hours later, Helena returned to the army where it was making camp. Donovan stayed where he was, looking down at the men where they moved about gathering wood and digging fire-pits. The blazes were a note

of cheer in the thickening murk.

*Helena, he thought. Helena. She's a fine girl, wonderful girl, she's what the thinning Family blood and I, myself, need. But why did I do it? Why did I talk that way to her? Just then, in the strain and fear and loneliness, it seemed as if I cared. But I don't. She just another woman. She's not Valduma.*

THE TWILIGHT murmured, and he saw the dim sheen of metal beside him. The men of Drogobych were gathering.

They stood tall and godlike in helmet and ring-mail and night-black cloaks, leaning on swords and spears, death-white faces cold with an ancient scorn as they looked down on the human camp. Their eyes were phosphorescent green in the dark.

Donovan nodded, without fear or surprise or anything but a sudden great weariness. He remembered some of them from the days when he had been alone in the bows of the ship with the invaders while his men cowered and rioted and went crazy in the stern sectors. "Hello, Morzach, Uboda, Zegoian, Korstuzan, Davleka," he said. "Welcome back again."

Valduma walked out of the blood-hued twilight, and he took her in his arms and held her for a long fierce time. Her kiss was as cruel as a swooping hawk. She bit his lips and he tasted blood warm and salt where she had been. Afterward she turned in the circle of his arm and they faced the silent men of Drogobych.

"You are getting near the city," said Morzach. His tones were deep, with the chill ringing of struck steel in them. "It is time for the next stage."

"I thought you saved some of us deliberately," said Donovan.

"Us?" Valduma's lips caressed his cheek. "Them, Basil, them. You don't belong there, you are with Arzun and me."

"You must have projected that game where we could spot it," went on Donovan, shakily. "You've kept us—them—alive and enabled us to march on your city—on the last inhabited city left to your race. You could have hunted them down as you did all the others, made sport of them with wild animals and falling rocks and missiles shooting out of nowhere, but instead you



want them for something else. What is it?"

"You should have guessed," said Morzach. "We want to leave Arzun."

"Leave it? You can do so any time, by yourselves. You've done it for millennia."

"We can only go to the barbarian fringe stars. Beyond them it is a greater distance to the next suns than we can cross unaided. Yet though we have captured many spaceships and have them intact at Drogobych, we cannot operate them. The principles learned from the humans don't make sense! When we have tired to pilot them, it has only brought disaster."

"But why do you want to leave?"

"It is a recent decision, precipitated by your arrival, but it has been considered for a long while. This sun is old, this planet exhausted, and the lives of we few remnants of a great race flicker in a hideous circumscribed drabness. Sooner or later, the humans will fight their way here in strength too great for us. Before then we must be gone."

"So—" Donovan spoke softly, and the wind whimpered under his voice. "So your plan is to capture this group of spacemen and make them your slaves, to carry you—where?"

"Out. Away." Valduma's clear lovely laughter rang in the night. "To seize another planet and build our strength afresh." She gripped his waist and he saw the white gleam of her teeth out of shadow. "To build a great army of obedient spacegoing warriors—and then out to hunt between the stars!"

"Hunt—"

"Look here." Morzach edged closer, his eyes a green glow, the vague sheen of naked steel in his hand. "I've been polite long enough. You have your chance, to rise above the human scum that spawned you and be one of us. Help us now and you can be with us till you die. Otherwise, we'll take that crew anyway, and you'll be hounded across the face of this planet."

"Aye—aye—welcome back, Basil Donovan, welcome back to the old king-race . . . Come with us, come with us, lead the humans into our ambush and be the lord of stars . . ."

They circled about him, tall and mailed and beautiful in the shadow-light, luring

whispering voices, ripple of dark laughter, the hunters playing with their quarry and taming it. Donovan remembered them, remembered the days when he had talked and smiled and drunk and sung with them, the Lucifer-like intoxication of their dancing darting minds, a wildness of magic and mystery and reckless wizard sport, a glory which had taken something from his soul and left an emptiness within him. Morzach, Marovech, Uboda, Zegoian, for a time he had been the consort of the gods.

"Basil." Valduma laid sharp-nailed fingers in his hair and pulled his lips to hers. "Basil, I want you back."

He held her close, feeling the lithe savage strength of her, recalling the flame-like beauty and the nights of love such as no human could ever give. His whisper was thick: "You got bored last time and sent me back. How long will I last now?"

"As long as you wish, Basil. Forever and forever." He knew she lied, and he didn't care.

"This is what you must do, Donovan," said Morzach.

He listened with half his mind. It was a question of guiding the army into a narrow cul-de-sac where the Arzunians could perform the delicate short-range work of causing chains to bind around them. For the rest, he was thinking.

*They hunt. They intrigue, and they whittle down their last few remnants with fighting among themselves, and they prey on the fringe stars, and they capture living humans to hunt down for sport. They haven't done anything new for ten thousand years, creativeness has withered from them, and all they will do if they escape the Nebula is carry ruin between the stars. They're mad.*

*Yes—a whole society of psychopaths, gone crazy with the long racial dying. That's the real reason they can't handle machines, that's why they don't think of friendship but only of war, that's why they carry doom within them.*

*But I love you, I love you, I love you, O Valduma the fair.*

He drew her to him, kissed her with a terrible intensity, and she laughed in the dark. Looking up, he faced the blaze that was Morzach.

"All right," he said. "I understand. Tomorrow."

"Aye—good, good, well done!"

"Oh, Basil, Basil!" whispered Valduma.

"Come, come away with me, now."

"No. They'd suspect. I have to go down to them or they'll come looking for me."

"Good night, Basil, my darling, my vorza. Until tomorrow!"

He went slowly down the hillside, drawing his shoulders together against the cold, not looking back. Helena rose when he approached her campfire, and the flimmering light made her seem pale and unreal.

"Where have you been, Basil? You look so tired."

"Just walking around. I'm all right." He spread his couch of stiff and stinking animal hides. "We'd better turn in, eh?"

But he slept little.

## VI

THE HIGHWAY curved between great looming walls of cragged old rock, a shadow tunnel with the wind yowling far overhead and the sun a disc of blood. Men's footfalls echoed from the cracked paving blocks to boom hollowly off time-gnawed cliffs and ring faintly in the ice. It was cold, their breath smoked from them and they shivered and cursed and stamped their feet.

Donovan walked beside Helena, who was riding Wocha. His eyes narrowed against the searching wind, looking ahead and around, looking for the side track where the ambush waited. Drogobych was very near.

Something moved up on the ridge, a flapping black thing which was instantly lost to sight. The Arzunians were watching.

There—up ahead—the solitary tree they had spoken of, growing out between age-crumbled fragments of the road. The highway swung west around a pinnacle of rock, but here there was a branch road running straight south into a narrow ravine. *All I have to do is suggest we take it. They won't know till too late that it leads up a blind canyon.*

Helena leaned over toward him, so that the long wind-whipped hair blew against his cheek. "Which way should we go?" she asked. One hand rested on his shoulder.

He didn't slacken his stride, but his voice was low under the whine of bitter air: "To the right, Helena, and on the double. The Arzunians are waiting up the other road, but Drogobych is just beyond that crag."

"Basil! How do you know—"

Wocha's long hairy ears cocked attentively, and the little eyes under the heavy bone ridges were suddenly sharp on his master.

"They wanted me to mislead you. I didn't say anything before for fear they'd be listening, somehow."

*Because I hadn't decided,* he thought grayly. *Because Valduma is mad, and I love her.*

Helena turned and lifted her arm, voice ringing out to rattle in jeering echoes: "Column right! Forward—charge!"

Wocha broke into a trot, the ground booming and shivering under his huge feet. Donovan paced beside, drawing his sword and swinging it naked in one hand, his eyes turned to the canyon and the rocks above it. The humans fell into a jogging run.

They swept past the ambush road, and suddenly Valduma was on the ridge above them, tall and slim and beautiful, the hair like a blowing flame under her helmet. "Basil!" she screamed. "Basil, you triple traitor—"

The others were there with her, men of Drogobych standing on the heights and howling their fury. They had chains in their hands, and suddenly the air was thick with flying links.

One of them smashed against Donovan and curled itself snake-like around his waist. He dropped his sword and tugged at the cold iron, feeling the breath strained out of him, cursing with the pain of it. Wocha reached down a hand and peeled the chain off, snapping it in two and hurling it back at the Arzunians. It whipped in the air, lashing itself across his face, and he bellowed.

The men of Sol were weltering in a fight with the flying chains, beating them off, stamping the writhing lengths underfoot, yelling as the things cracked against their heads. "Forward!" cried Helena. "Charge—get out of here—forward, Empire!"

A chain whistled viciously for her face. She struck at it with her sword, tangling it on the blade, metal clashing on metal. Takahashi had his blaster out, its few remaining charges thundering to fuse the missiles. Other flames roared at the Arzunians, driving them back, forcing them to drop control of the chains to defend their lives.

"Run! Forward!"

The column shouted and plunged down the highway. Valduma was suddenly before them, her face distorted in fury, stabbing a spear at Donovan's breast. The man parried the thrust and hewed at her—she was gone, and the Terrans rushed ahead.

The rocks groaned. Donovan saw them shuddering above him, saw the first hail of gravel and heard the huge grinding of strata. "They're trying to bury us!" he yelled. "We've got to get clear!"

Wocha stooped, snatched him up under one arm, and galloped. A boulder whizzed by his head, smashing against the farther wall and spraying him with hot chips of stone. Now the boom of the landslide filled their world, rolling and roaring between the high cliffs. Cracks zigzagged across the worn black heights, the crags shivered and toppled, dust boiled across the road.

"Basil!"

Donovan saw Valduma again, dancing and leaping between the boulders, raising a scream of wrath and laughter. Morzach was there, standing on a jut of rock, watching the hillside fall.

Wocha burst around the sentinel peak. A line of Arzunians stood barring the way to Drogobych, the sunlight flaming off their metal. Wocha dropped Donovan, hefted his ax in both hands, and charged them.

Donovan picked himself up and scrambled in the wake of his slave. Behind him, the Terrans were streaming from the collapsing dale, out over open ground to strike the enemy. The rocks bounded and howled, a man screamed as he was pinned, there were a dozen buried under the landslide.

Wocha hit the Arzunian line. His ax blazed, shearing off an arm, whirling up again to crumple a helmet and cleave the skull beneath. Rearing, he knocked down two of them and trampled them underfoot.

A warrior smote at his flank. Helena, gripping one mighty shoulder, engaged him with her free hand, her blade whistling around his ears. They fell away from that pair, and the Terrans attacked them.

DONOVAN crossed swords with one he knew—Marovech, the laughing half-devil whose words he had so much enjoyed in earlier days. The Arzunian grinned at him across a web of flying steel. His blade stabbed in, past the Ansan's awkward guard, reaching for his guts. Donovan retreated, abandoning the science he didn't know for a wild whirling and hacking, his iron battering at the bright weapon before him. Clash and clang of edged metal, leaping and dancing, Marovech's red hair wild in the rising wind and his eyes alight with laughter.

Donovan felt his backward step halted, he was against the high stone pillar and could not run. He braced his feet and hewed out, a scream of cloven air and outraged steel. Marovech's sword went spinning from his hand.

It hit the ground and bounced up toward the Arzunian's clutch. Donovan smote again, and the shock of iron in flesh jarred him where he stood. Marovech fell in a rush of blood.

For an instant Donovan stood swaying over the Arzunian, looking stupidly at the blood on his own hands, hearing the clamor of his heartbeat and sucking a dry gasp into his lungs. Then he picked up the fallen being's glaive. It was a better weapon.

Turning, he saw that the fight had become a riot, knots of men and un-men snarling and hacking in a craziness of death. No room or time here for wizard stunts, it was blood and bone and nerve against its kind. The Terrans fought without much skill in the use of their archaic equipment but they had the cold courage blended of training and desperation. And they knew better how to cooperate. They battled a way to each other and stood back to back against all comers.

Wocha raged and trampled, smashing with ax and fist and feet and hurled stones, his war-cry bellowing and shuddering in the hills. An Arzunian vanished from in front of him and appeared behind with spear

poised. The Donarrian suddenly backed up, catching the assailant and smashing him under his hind feet while he dueled another from the front. Helena's arm never rested, she swung to right and left, guarding his flanks yelling as her blade drove home.

Donovan shook himself and trotted warily over to where a tide of Arzunians raged about a closely-drawn ring of Impies. The humans were standing firm, driving each charge back in a rush of blood, heaping the dead before them. But now spears were beginning to fall out of the sky, driven by no hand but stabbing for the throats and eyes and bellies of men. Donovan loped for the sharp edge of the hills, where they toppled to the open country in which the fight went on.

He scrambled up a rubbled slope and gripped a thin pinnacle to swing himself higher. She was there.

She stood on a ledge, the heap of spears at her feet, looking down over the battle and chanting as she sent forth the flying death. He noticed even then how her hair was a red glory about the fine white loveliness of her head.

"Valduma," he whispered, as he struck at her.

She was not there, she sat on a higher ledge and jeered at him. "Come and get me, Basil, darling. Come up here and talk to me!"

He looked at her as Lucifer must have looked back to Heaven. "Let us go," he said. "Give us a ship and send us home."

"And have you bring our overlords back in?" She laughed aloud.

"They aren't so bad, Valduma. The Empire means peace and justice for all races."

"Who speaks?" Her scorn flamed at him. "You don't believe that."

He stood there for a moment. "No," he whispered. "No, I don't."

Stooping, he picked up the sheaf of spears and began to crawl back down the rocks. Valduma cursed him from the heights.

There was a break in the combat around the hard-pressed Terran ring as the Arzunians drew back to pant and glare. Donovan ran through and flung his load clashing at the feet of Takahashi.

"Good work," said the officer. "We

need these things. Here, get into the formation. Here we go again!"

The Arzunians charged in a wedge to gather momentum. Donovan braced himself and lifted his sword. The Terrans in the inner ring slanted their spears between the men of the outer defense. For a very long half minute, they stood waiting.

The enemy hit! Donovan hewed at the nearest, drove the probing sword back and hammered against the guard. Then the whirl of battle swept his antagonist away, someone else was there, he traded blows and the howl of men and metal lifted skyward.

The Terrans had staggered a little from the massive assault, but it spitted itself on the inner pikes and then swords and axes went to work. Ha, clang, through the skull and give it to 'em! Hai, Empire! Ansa, Ansa! Clatter and yell and deep-throated roar, the Arzunians boiling around the Solar line, leaping and howling and whipping out of sight—a habit which saved their lives but blunted their attack, thought Donovan in a moment's pause.

Wocha smashed the last few who had been standing before him, looked around to the major struggle, and pawed the ground. "Ready, lady?" he rumbled.

"Aye, ready, Wocha. Let's go!"

The Donarrian backed up to get a long running space. "Hang on tight," he warned. "Never mind fighting, lady. All right!"

He broke into a trot, a canter, and then a full gallop. The earth trembled under his mass. "Hoooo!" he screamed. "Here we come!"

Helena threw both arms around his corded neck. When they hit it was like a nuclear bomb going off.

In a few seconds of murder, Wocha had strewn the ground with smashed corpses, whirled, and begun cutting his way into the disordered main group of the Arzunians. They didn't stand before him. Suddenly they were gone, all of them, except for the dead.

Donovan looked over the field. The dead were thick, thick. He estimated that half the little Terran force was slain or out of action. But they must have taken three or four times their number of Arzunians to

the Black Planet with them. The stony ground was pooled and steaming with blood. Carrion birds stooped low, screaming.

Helena fell from Wocha's back into Donovan's arms. He comforted her wild sobbing, holding her to him and murmuring in her ear and kissing the wet cheeks and lips. "It's over, dear, it's over for now. We drove them away."

She recovered herself in a while and stood up, straightening her torn disarray, the mask of command clamping back over her face. To Takahashi: "How are our casualties?"

He reported. It was much as Donovan had guessed. "But we gave 'em hell for it, didn't we?"

"How is that?" wondered Cohen. He leaned against Wocha, not showing the pain that jagged through him as they banded his wounded foot except by an occasional sharp breath. "They're more at home with this cutlery than we, and they have those damned parapsych talents too."

"They're not quite sane," replied Donovan tonelessly. "Whether you call it a cultural trait or a madness which has spread to the whole population, they're a wild bloodthirsty crew, two-legged weasels, and with a superiority complex which wouldn't have let them be very careful in dealing with us. No discipline, no real plan of action." He looked south over the rolling moorland. "Those things count. They may know better next time."

"Next time? Fifty or sixty men can't defeat a planet, Donovan," said Takahashi.

"No. Though this is an old dying race, their whole population in the city ahead, and most of it will flee in panic and take no part in any fighting. They aren't used to victims that fight back. If we can slug our way through to the spaceships they have there—"

"*Spaceships!*" The eyes stared at him, wild with a sudden blaze of hope, men crowding close and leaning on their red-den weapons and raising a babble of voices. "*Spaceships, spaceships—home!*"

"Yeah." Donovan ran a hand through his yellow hair. The fingers trembled just a bit. "Some ships, the first ones, they merely destroyed by causing the engines to

run loose; but others they brought here, I suppose, by inducing the crew to land and parley. Only they killed the crews and can't handle the machines themselves."

"If they captured ships," said Helena slowly, "then they captured weapons too, and even they can squeeze a trigger."

"Sure. But you didn't see them shooting at us just now, did you? They used all the charges to hunt or duel. So if we can break through and escape—"

"They could still follow us and wreck our engines," said Takahashi.

"Not if we take a small ship, as we'd have to anyway, and mount guard over the vital spots. An Arzunian would have to be close at hand and using all his energies to misdirect atomic flows. He could be killed before any mischief was done. I doubt if they'd even try."

"Besides," went on Donovan, his voice dry and toneless as a lecturing professor's, "they can only do so much at a time. I don't know where they get the power for some of their feats, such as leaving this planet's gravitational well. It can't be from their own metabolisms, it must be some unknown cosmic energy source. They don't know how it works themselves, it's an instinctive ability. But it takes a lot of nervous energy to direct that flow, and I found last time I was here that they have to rest quite a while after some strenuous deed. So if we can get them tired enough—and the fight is likely to wear both sides down—they won't be able to chase us till we're out of their range."

Takahashi looked oddly at him. "You know a lot," he murmured.

"Yeah, maybe I do."

"Well, if the city is close as you say, we'd better march right away before our wounds stiffen, and before the natives get a chance to organize."

"Rig up carrying devices for those too badly hurt to move," said Helena. "The walking wounded can tote them, and the rest of us form a protective square."

"Won't that slow us and handicap us?" asked Donovan.

Her head lifted, the dark hair blowing about her proud features in the thin whimpering wind. "As long as it's humanly possible we're going to look after our men,



What's the Imperium for if it can't protect its own?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose so."

Donovan slouched off to join the salvaging party that was stripping the fallen Arzunians of arms and armor for Terran use. He rolled over a corpse to unbuckle the helmet and looked at the blood-masked face of Korstuzan who had been his friend once, very long ago. He closed the staring eyes, and his own were blind with tears.

Wocha came to join him. The Donarrian didn't seem to notice the gashes in his hide, but he was equipped with a shield now and had a couple of extra swords slung from his shoulders. "You got a good lady, boss," he said. "She fights hard. She will bear you strong sons."

"Uh-huh."

*Valduma could never bear my children. Different species can't breed. And she is the outlaw darkness, the last despairing return to primeval chaos, she is the enemy of all which is honest and good. But she is very fair.*

Slowly, the humans reformed their army, a tight ring about their wounded, and set off down the road. The dim sun wheeled horizonward.

## VII

**D**ROGOBYCH lay before them.

The city stood on the open gray moor, and it had once been large. But its outer structures were long crumbled to ruin, heaps and shards of stone riven by ages of frost, fallen and covered by the creeping dust. Here and there a squared monolith remained like the last snag in a rotted jaw, dark against the windy sky. It was quiet. Nothing stirred in all the sweeping immensity of hill and moor and ruin and loneliness.

Helena pointed from her seat on Wocha, and a lilt of hope was eager in the tired voice: "See—a ship—ahead there!"

They stared, and someone raised a ragged cheer. Over the black square-built houses of the inner city they could make out the metal nose of a freighter. Takahashi squinted. "It's Denebian, I think," he said. "Looks as if man isn't the only race which has suffered from these scum."

"All right, boys," said Helena. "Let's go in and get it."

They went down a long empty avenue which ran spear-straight for the center. The porticoed houses gaped with wells of blackness at their passage, looming in cracked and crazily leaning massiveness on either side, throwing back the hollow slam of their boots. Donovan heard the uneasy mutter of voices to his rear: "*Don't like this place . . . Haunted . . . They could be waiting anywhere for us . . .*"

The wind blew a whirl of snow across their path.

*Basil. Basil, my dear.*

Donovan's head jerked around, and he felt his throat tighten. Nothing. No movement, no sound, emptiness.

*Basil, I am calling you. No one else can hear.*

*Why are you with these creatures, Basil? Why are you marching with the oppressors of your planet? We could free Ansa, Basil, given time to raise our armies. We could sweep the Terrans before us and hound them down the ways of night. And yet you march against us.*

"Valduma," he whispered.

*Basil, you were very dear to me. You were something new and strong and of the future, come to our weary old world, and I think I loved you.*

*I could still love you, Basil. I could hold you forever, if you would let me.*

"Valduma—have done!"

A mocking ripple of laughter, sweet as rain in springtime, the gallantry of a race which was old and sick and doomed and could still know mirth. Donovan shook his head and stared rigidly before him. It was as if he had laid hands on that piece of his soul which had been lost, and she was trying to wrench it from him again. Only he wanted her to win.

*Go home, Basil. Go home with this female of yours. Breed your cubs, fill the house with brats, and try to think your little round of days means something. Strut about under the blue skies, growing fat and gray, bragging of what a great fellow you used to be and disapproving of the younger generation. As you like, Basil. But don't go out to space again. Don't look at the naked stars. You won't dare.*

"No," he whispered.

She laughed, a harsh bell of mockery ringing in his brain. *You could have been a god—or a devil. But you would rather be a pot-bellied Imperial magistrate. Go home, Basil Donovan, take your female home, and when you are awakened at night by her—shall we say her breathing?—do not remember me.*

The Terrans slogged on down the street, filthy with dust and grease and blood, uncouth shamblers, apes in the somber ruin of the gods. Donovan thought he had a glimpse of Valduma standing on a rooftop, the clean lithe fire of her, silken flame of her hair and the green unhuman eyes which had lighted in the dark at his side. She had been a living blaze, an unending trumpet and challenge, and when she broke with him it had been quick and clean, no soddenness of age and custom and—and, damn it, all the little things which made humanness.

*All right, Valduma. We're monkeys. We're noisy and self-important, compromisers and trimmers and petty cheats, we huddle away from the greatness we could have, our edifices are laid brick by brick with endless futile squabbling over each one—and yet, Valduma, there is something in man which you don't have. There's something by which these men have fought their way through everything you could loose on them, helping each other, going forward under a ridiculous rag of colored cloth and singing as they went.*

*Fine words, added his mind. Too bad you don't really believe them.*

He grew aware of Helena's anxious eyes on him. "What's the matter, darling?" she asked gently. "You look ill."

"Tired," he said. "But we can't have so very far to go now—"

"Look out!"

Whirling, he saw the pillars of the house to the right buckle, saw the huge stone slabs of the roof come thundering over the top and streetward. For a blinding instant he saw Valduma, riding the slab down, yelling and laughing, and then she was gone and the stone struck.

They were already running, dropping their burden of the hurt and fleeing for safety. Another house groaned and rum-

bled. The ground shook, flying shards stung Donovan's back, echoes rolled down the ways of Drogobych. Someone was screaming, far and faint under the grinding racket.

"Forward. Forward!" Helena's voice whipped back to him, she led the rush while the city thundered about her. Then a veil of rising dust blotted her out, he groped ahead, stumbling over fallen pillars and cornices, hearing the boom around him, running and running.

Valduma laughed, a red flame through the whirling dust. Her spear gleamed for his breast, he grabbed it with one hand and hacked at her with his sword. She was gone, and he raced ahead, not stopping to think, not daring.

They came out on a great open plaza. Once there had been a park here, and carved fountains, but nothing remained save a few leafless trees and broken pieces. And the spaceships.

THE spaceships, a loom of metal against the dark stone beyond, half a dozen standing there and waiting—spaceships, spaceships, the most beautiful sight in the cosmos! Helena and Wocha were halted near a small fast Comet-class scoutboat. The surviving Terrans ran toward them. Few, thought Donovan sickly, few—perhaps a score left, bleeding from the cuts of flying stone, gray with dust and fear. The city had been a trap.

"Come on!" yelled the woman. "Over here and off this planet!"

The men of Drogobych were suddenly there, a ring about the ship and another about the whole plaza, crouched with their weapons and their cat's eyes aflame. A score of hurt starvelings and half a thousand unmen.

A trumpet blew its high note into the dusking heavens. The Arzunians rested arms, expressionless. Donovan and the other humans continued their pace, forming a battle square.

Morzach stood forth in front of the scoutship. "You have no further chance to escape," he called. "But we want your services, not your lives, and the service will be well rewarded. Lay down your weapons."

Wocha's arm straightened. His ax flew like a thunderbolt, and Morzach's head burst

open. The Donarrian roared and went against the enemy line.

They edged away, fearfully, and the Terrans followed him in a trotting wedge. Donovan moved up on Wocha's right side, sword hammering at the thrusts for his ribs.

An Arzunian yelled an order which must have meant "Stop them!" Donovan saw the outer line break into a run, converging on the knot of struggle. No flying spears this time, he reflected in a moment's bleak satisfaction—tearing down those walls must have exhausted most of their directing energies.

A native rushed at him, sword whistling from behind a black shield. Donovan caught the blow on his own plundered scute, feeling it ring in the bones of his arm, and hewed back. His blade screamed close to the white teeth-bared face, and he called a panting salutation: "Try again, Davleka!"

"I will!"

The blows rained on his shield, sang viciously low to cut at his legs, clattering and clanging, whistle of air and howl of iron under the westering sun. He backed up against Wocha's side, where the Donarrian and the woman smote against the airlock's defenders, and braced himself and struck out.

Davleka snarled and hacked at Donovan's spread leg. The Ansan's glaive snaked forth against his unshielded neck. Davleka's sword clashed to earth and he sprawled against the human. Raising his bloody face, he drew a knife, lifted it, and tried to thrust upward. Donovan, already crossing blades with Uboda, stamped on his hand. Davleka grinned, a rueful crooked grin through the streaming blood, and died.

Uboda pressed close, working up against Donovan's shield. He had none himself, but there was a dirk in his left hand. His sword locked with Donovan's, strained it aside, and his knife clattered swiftly for an opening.

Helena turned about and struck from her seat. Uboda's head rolled against Donovan's shield and left a red splash down it. The man retched.

Wocha, swinging one of his swords, pushed ahead into the Arzunians, crowding them aside by his sheer mass, beating down

a guard and the helmet or armor beyond it. "Clear!" he bellowed. "I got the way clear, lady!"

Helena sprang to the ground and into the lock. "Takahashi, Cohen, Basil, Wang-ki, come in and help me start the engines. The rest of you hold them off. Don't give them time to exert what collective para power they have left and ruin something. Make them think!"

"Think about their lives, huh?" Wocha squared off in front of the airlock and raised his sword. "All right, boys, here they come. Let 'em have what they want."

Donovan halted in the airlock. Valduma was there, her fiery head whirling in the rush of black-clad warriors. He leaned over and grabbed a spaceman's arm. "Ben Ali, go in and help start this crate. I have to stay here."

"But—"

Donovan shoved him in, stood beside Takahashi, and braced himself to meet the Arzunian charge.

They rushed in, knowing that they had to kill the humans before there was an escape, swinging their weapons and howling. The shock of the assault threw men back, pressed them to the ship and jammed weapons close to breasts. The Terrans cursed and began to use fists and feet, clearing a space to fight in.

Donovan's sword clashed against a shield, drove off another blade, stabbed for a face, and then it was all lost in the crazed maelstrom, hack and thrust and take the blows they give, hew, sword, hew!

They raged against Wocha, careless now of their lives, thundering blows against his shield, slashing and stabbing and using their last wizard strength to fill the air with blades. He roared and stood his ground, the sword leaped in his hand, metal clove in thunder. The shield was crumpled, falling apart—he tossed it with rib-cracking force against the nearest Arzunian. His nicked and blunted sword burst against a helmet, and he drew the other.

The ship trembled, thutter of engines warming up, the eager promise of sky and stars and green Terra again. "Get in!" bawled Donovan. "Get in! We'll hold them!"

He stood by Wocha as the last crewmen

entered, stood barring the airlock with a wall of blood and iron. Through a blurring vision, he saw Valduma approach.

She smiled at him, one slim hand running through the copper hair, the other held out in sign of peace. Tall and gracious and lovely beyond his knowing, she moved up toward Donovan, and her clear voice rang in his darkening mind.

*Basil—you, at least, could stay. You could guide us out to the stars.*

"You go away," groaned Wocha.

The devil's rage flamed in her face. She yelled, and a lance whistled from the sky and buried itself in the great breast.

"Wocha!" yelled Donovan.

The Donarrrian snarled and snapped off the shaft that stood between his ribs. He whirled it over his head, and Valduma's green eyes widened in fear.

"Donovan!" roared Wocha, and let it fly.

It smashed home, and the Ansan dropped his sword and swayed on his feet. He couldn't look on the broken thing which had been Valduma.

"Boss, you go home now."

Wocha laid him in the airlock and slammed the outer valve shut. Turning, he faced the Arzunians. He couldn't see very well—one eye was gone, and there was a ragged darkness before the other. The sword felt heavy in his hand. But—

"Hooo!" he roared and charged them.

He spitted one and trampled another and tossed a third into the air. Whistling, he clove a head and smashed a rib-case with his fist and chopped another across. His sword broke, and he grabbed two Arzunians and cracked their skulls together.

They ran, then, turned and fled from him. And he stood watching them go and laughed. His laughter filled the city, rolling from its walls, drowning the whistle of the

ship's takeoff and bringing blood to his lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand, spat, and lay down.

"We're clear, Basil." Helena clung to him, shivering in his arms, and he didn't know if it was a laugh or a sob in her throat. "We're away, safe, we'll carry word back to Sol and they'll clear the Black Nebula for good."

"Yeah." He rubbed his eyes. "Though I doubt the Navy will find anything. If those Arzunians have any sense, they'll project to various fringe planets, scatter, and try to pass as harmless humanoids. But it doesn't matter, I suppose. Their power is broken."

"And we'll go back to your home, Basil, and bring Ansa and Terra together and have a dozen children and—"

He nodded. "Sure. Sure."

But he wouldn't forget. In the winter nights, when the stars were sharp and cold in a sky of ringing crystal black, he would—go out and watch them? Or pull his roof over him and wait for dawn? He didn't know yet.

Still—even if this was a long ways from being the best of all possible universes, it had enough in it to make a man glad of his day.

He whistled softly, feeling the words run through his head:

*Lift your glasses high,  
kiss the girls good-bye,  
(Live well, my friend, live well, live  
you well)  
for we're riding,  
for we're riding,  
for we're riding out to Terran sky! Terran  
sky! Terran sky!*

The thought came all at once that it could be a song of comradeship, too.

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