

FANTASTIC

APRIL

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

SOME FABULOUS YONDER

by Philip José Farmer

35¢

CASKET DEMON

by Fritz Leiber



BRUNO



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*No man had yet survived a landing on
the black planet, till Raspold dared
to venture his body and his mind in
the cavern of Voittamaton, where the
draco-centaurs gazed at . . .*

Some Fabulous Yonder

By PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

Illustrator BRUNO



RASPOLD was in a tavern in Breakneck, capital city of the Federation planet, Wildenwooly. He was drinking, but only in the line of duty. The bartender had some very interesting information for him, and Raspold was elated. He was finally getting some place; the trail, once so cold, was now warmer.

Then, a messenger (from Saxwell Space Links) walked into the tavern and handed him a sealed envelope. He tore it open and read. The message was in code and was to the point.

JOHN CARMODY TURNED HIMSELF IN AND IS NOW AT JOHN HOPKINS REHABILITATION CENTER. REPORT AT ONCE TO ME.

R.A.

Four hours later, Raspold was talking to his chief, Richard Ali'i. He had had to wait at the spaceport of Breakneck for two hours for a scheduled ship. The trip between Wildenwooly and Earth—20,000 lightyears—took, in wrist-watch time, ten minutes. He spent an hour going through Customs and Sanitation. Another hour was consumed in taking various taxis and tubes to the headquarters of the Chief of Federation Extra-Terrestrial Criminal Apprehension Bureau (FECAB). This was deep within the bowels of Under Copenhagen.

Richard Ali'i was a big, handsome man of middle age, dark-skinned, black-haired but with

blue eyes (Samoan and Norwegian immediate ancestry).

"Whatever made Carmody surrender?" asked Raspold. "You sure he hasn't got some nasty scheme up his sleeve?"

"Thought of that. But his turning himself in seems to be genuine. Apparently, he was on Dante's Joy. Strange things happen there. Remind me to tell you about it sometime. Now, we've got something that can't wait."

He paused, lit up a Siberian cigar, and said, "It's about No. 2. Rather, I should say, No. 1, now that Carmody's, uh, abdicated."

"Heinrich Nge?"

"Yes. I've had ten agents on his trail for the past four years, as you know. Five of them have disappeared recently. Two were murdered. One is off somewhere. I can't get hold of him, maybe he's been done away with, too. The tenth . . . well . . . he was bought."

Raspold was genuinely shocked. "A Fecab?"

"Thoroughly screened. But tests are given by human beings, and human beings are . . . fallible. The evidence is undeniable. McGrew took a bribe, sold out to Nge. We'd never have known if he hadn't been badly hurt in a drunken brawl in Diveboard. Under drugs, he babbled like a maniac. Not for long. Something in his body exploded, blew him to bits, killed a doctor and a Metro

inspector. The explosive must have been surgically implanted. And set off by remote control. McGrew was in no condition to do it himself, even if he'd wanted to."

DIVEBOARD?" said Raspold. "Then Nge, or one of his men, must be on that planet. The bomb must have been set off by radio."

"We think so. However, I'm not through yet. McGrew in his babbling told us something we would never have known otherwise. You remember the disappearance of the Federation destroyer *George A. Custer* two years ago?"

"Between Earth and Aldebaran?"

"Yes. Maiden voyage. Thirty men aboard. Translated from Earth, was supposed to appear above Einstein ten minutes later, ship's time. But she never did, and no one knew what happened. Now, we know Nge highjacked her."

"Highjacked?" Raspold's brows arched in surprise. "If I didn't know you so well, sir, I'd think you were kidding."

"I wish I was. No, Nge did the impossible. Or improbable. With one man. A member of his organization who had contrived, somehow, to become a crew member. He released a deadly gas through the ventilation system of the destroyer, thus killing all the

crew except himself. Then, he piloted the bird to a rendezvous at some planet McGrew didn't name, and turned the *Custer* over to Nge. Must have been a damned good pilot. He did the translation all by himself."

"So, what's he going to do with the *Custer*?" said Raspold.

"I don't know. Or didn't. We fed this new data into ATHENA. And ATHENA, after checking this against what it knew about Nge, came up with a reasonable, if astonishing, probability. Maybe not so astonishing, considering Nge."

Raspold wanted to urge Ali'i to continue, kill the suspense. Instead, he waited restlessly.

Ali'i said, "Voittamaton."

"Voittamaton?" Raspold repeated aloud. "Wait a minute! I got it! Fifty years ago. . . . Miika Versinen . . . sure . . . I saw a dramatic re-creation of his life. Ran as a three-part series. And, of course, I read about him when I was a kid."

He looked at Ali'i as if he still thought Ali'i was joking. "You mean Nge's going to use the *Custer* to storm Voittamaton? Even after Versinen failed so miserably and so bloodily?"

Ali'i nodded grimly.

Raspold raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "We won't have to worry about him any longer. Or any of the men with him. Why not let him go?"

"Because, in the first place, we don't know for a certainty that that is what Nge plans to do. It's only a high probability. Second, Voittamaton is tabu, off limits. Third, we have to stop Nge now before he hurts innocent people while preparing for the expedition against Voittamaton. Fourth, I want our department to get him—now. There are about ten Federation agencies of Earth alone trying to catch him, and the Great Light alone knows how many from other Fed or non-Fed planets."

Raspold nodded thoughtfully, "I'd like to see the blackguard get his comeuppance, which he will, if he tackles Voittamaton."

"That," said Ali'i, "is what we're aiming for and I think you're best qualified to do it."

TWENTY minutes later, Raspold had sketched his plan, received his authorization and a draft for 5,000 C, and was on his way. It took an hour for him to get back to the port. In the meantime, one of Ali'i's secretaries had arranged for a seat on a non-sked jumper. Because Raspold was going to Diveboard, a non-Federation "open" planet, he had to have a passport. Ali'i's secretary had given him a forged one bearing the name of Dick Ricoletti. Ricoletti was, presumably a subcitizen of the Middle North American Department, Lifelong

Limited Privileges Resident of Lesser Laramie. Raspold had spent some time in that city and could speak the dialect quite well. Not that he expected to run across anyone acquired with it but he liked to present a perfect character.

His passport carried his portrait, his fingerprints, retina-prints, earlobeprints, blood type, EKG-patterns, and voiceprint. When Customs and Sanitation took these and matched them against the passport's, they would discover nothing wrong. And, when they wired the prints to ATHENA for double checking, they would receive from ATHENA assurance that the prints belonged to Dick Ricoletti. What Customs and Sanitation did not know was that, when the inquiry about Ricoletti was plugged into ATHENA, it went to a data block that had been inserted by the FECAB.

Raspold leaned against a wall and smoked a cigarette while waiting for this procedure to be completed. He was a tall man, about 12 centimeters above average height (1.7 meter), but looked taller because of his thinness. His broad and thickly muscled arms and shoulders and chest contrasted strangely with the girlish thin waist, narrow hips, and slender legs. He was wearing an auburn wig with a high-piled curly coiffure of the

latest fashion. His eyes, normally a deep brown, were now a dark purple. The wig and contact lenses had had to come off during customs inspection, but no one had commented. Almost every passenger wore them.

His features were as Nature had given them; no surgeon's knife or plastiflesh for him. His forehead was high; his eyebrows, black and thick and meeting over the nose; his nose, big and thick, like a bloodhound's. The lips were medium sized and had only a smudge of lipstick and that red, not the fashionable green flecked with gold. On his left ear, he wore a huge golden ring with a large goldengreen pendant.

PRESENTLY, he walked out with the other passengers to the *Willowisp*, a twenty-seater craft belonging to a small line. The pilot, however, was a retired Federation Navy navigator. After the passengers were seated, the pilot gave his usual description of the trip they would make; the translation of 180,000 light-years in exactly nothing flat (objective and subjective time), the shorter translations, and the time it would take to fly to Diveboard's spaceport after the final "jump."

Raspold paid no attention; he had heard similar lectures over a hundred times. The passengers demanded his concentration. Aft-

er examining each in minutest detail, he decided that they were what they seemed to be. A couple of import agents going to Diveboard to set up business, and the rest, emigrants. These mostly came from the subclasses, men and women who could no longer endure the crowded apartments and jammed streets of the great enclosed cities, the low standard of living, the tribute paid from their meager wages to local politicians and their thugs, their ratings as lower class citizens (which their children might escape but not them). They had scraped enough money together to buy the expensive tickets to the faroff sparsely settled planet on the rim of the Galaxy (enticed by TV-shows of life on that planet), agricultural equipment, tools, guns, clothes, and whatever else they thought they might need. Now, they were facing a new life, ill-equipped, most of them, for the strange life on the frontier planet. But they all had dreams of some fabulous yonder, some place where there would be no formal classification of social and economic scale, more than enough fresh air to breathe, silence, trees, grass. And where they would be their own men and women.

Raspold felt sorry for them. They would find that what they had regarded as chains on Earth were, in many ways, walls to pro-

tect and guide them. Now, chain-naked, helpless, or inadequate, unsure of how to act. And their life would be hard, hard beyond their powers of conception.

He thought of Versinen. Miika Versinen. Transplanted into English from the Neo-Finnish of the colonial planet Toivo, Micah The Bloody. Versinen was the first and the greatest of the space pirates. A yellow-haired bearded giant who looked like an ancient Viking. He carried a broad axe at his belt, a weapon useless in warfare but quite adequate for splitting his prisoners' skulls in half. He was a madman but a successful one. Until he heard of that dark planet beyond the rim of the Galaxy. The sunless body traveling outwards toward Andromeda. An Earth-sized planet bereft of atmosphere, seemingly devoid of life from its beginnings. Yet, there were mysterious structures on its surface. Over a million of them, pillars with globes on their ends. They glowed; they looked like an army of phantoms.

THE first Federation expedition to attempt to explore—a Naval force of a destroyer, a tender and a laboratory-carrier had failed. Ten kilometers above the surface, the power in all three vessels had been cut off, and the ships crashed. The crews were killed except for a navigator. Finding that the power was now

restored, he had escaped in a one-man hopper and succeeded in translating back to Diveboard, the nearest planet.

A second Federation force tried to land. The power of all six vessels was cut off while they were still in orbit. Then, restored. The fleet had left, and the planet was marked off-limits.

But Versinen listened to rumors, to wild tales. The inhabitants of the dark runaway possessed great powers and great riches. The man who conquered them would be the most powerful and the richest being in the Galaxy. Versinen decided he would be that man. Recklessly he brought his fleet of ten vessels out of translation only a kilometer above the surface and dived to the surface before his power could be extinguished. Three of his vessels miscalculated, for the translation drive was not as accurate at that time as it was now. Two crashed. One translated below the surface, and there was an explosion that left a giant crater and thousands of the globed pillars flattened to the ground.

What happened after that is for speculation. Two of the pirate fleet still lie where they landed, several kilometers from the cavern's mouth. The third, the *Kirves*, was located in orbit around Diveboard; its only occupant, Versinen. He was mumbling and nonresistant. For a

long while, all he could distinctly say was, "*Voittamaton! Voittamaton!*"

"Unconquerable! Unconquerable!"

Later, at John Hopkins, he quit talking and became catatonic. All efforts to arouse him failed. For ten years, he was a blob. Then, one day, he opened his eyes, and he gave a thin scream.

"I don't want to die!" he cried. "I can't! I must not!"

He muttered, "They're both horrible. But life is better."

A few minutes later, he was dead.

The pilot's voice brought Rasbold out of his reverie. They had made the final translation 50 myriameters from Diveboard's surface. From now on, they would proceed by gravitic drive.

AN hour later, Rasbold was through the lax Customs of Diveboard and walking its streets. It was high noon over Copenhagen and almost dusk here.

He walked slowly to give the impression of a man out on a sightseeing tour. He wondered if he should contact the agent Ali'i had told him about. How did he know he could trust Jack Yee? He knew of the man, but he did not know him personally. And, while Ali'i, was not likely to make a mistake about a man, he

could. Yee might have been all right until Nge got to him and offered him a large attractive bribe. Rasbold decided to see what he could do on his own.

He found that, aside from the uneasiness of his situation—and he was not one to be thrown into a sweat easily—he was enjoying his stroll. The city of Diveboard was much like Breakneck, the capital of Wildenwooly. It was built of a medley of log structures, of quickdrying foam shells supported by sprayed beams, a few buildings of native stone: granite, limestone, or prestressed concrete, roughly dressed planks, even of paper impregnated with hardoo. The streets were the only evidence of planning. These were wide and ran straight and crossed each other at right angles. Some, those nearest the spaceport, were paved with the cheap and quickly laid hardoo. The rest were dirt.

The men who thronged the streets were a varied lot. Many were recent immigrants from Earth, but there were also human beings from the colonial and independent planets: Toivo, Tserokia, Novaya, Big Sudan, Po Chui, Heinlein, Maya, Last Chance, Goibniu, and two dozen or more others. A minority among the human beings, but not rare, were oxygen-breathing nonhumans. Sinister (to human eyes) Felicentaurs from Capella, the huge

Ursucentaurs of Ross 128 III, feathery bipedal Gkuun from Taurus IV, pygmy Flickertails from Van Houden, a big-turbaned Pachydermoid from Puppis. And a near-human type with slanted purple eyes and bulging cheekbones of which Raspold had never heard.

The men who jostled each other on the paved and the dusty streets came from many social classes and professions. Richly dressed merchants and obvious tourists; commercial spacemen in their blue, white, or gold uniforms; poorly dressed farmers or ranchers; buckskin-clad hunters or prospectors; and the nondescript. There were a few gravity-fed units coasting through the streets or high in the air, some electrical fuelcell-powered modes of transportation, and even a nuclear-powered truck. By far the most popular modes of transportation, which gave an archaic air to the scene, were the buggies and wagons drawn by the furry equinoids of Diveboard. Whatever the immigrant could afford to import from Earth, he drove. And, if he didn't have the money for a Terrestrial means of travel, he used the native resources.

RASPOLD saw a chair sitting on a sidewalk. Beside it was a sign in big black letters in Lingo: LEG-PAINTING. $\frac{1}{4}$ S. A LEG.

Below was a name in English: JIM QUINN, PROPRIETOR. Standing beside the chair, his tool of trade on a small table beside the chair, was a medium-sized, chunkily built youth with bright orange hair—his own, judging from the shagginess—and a toothy smile. Raspold said to the youth, "I have long legs. Going to charge extra for them?"

Quinn grinned and said, "No, sir. Anything I lose on you, I'll make up when a fellow with short legs comes along."

Raspold sat down and placed his right foot on the short stool provided. Quinn took a bottle of clear liquid from his table and squeezed a shot of the liquid into a cloth in his other hand. Then, he began rubbing Raspold's right leg with the damp cloth. The red, white, and blue barberpole stripes painted on Raspold's limb ran together. After Quinn had wet a large area, he took a dry cloth and began to rub the area. The pale flesh beneath began to show.

"Earth?" said Raspold.

"Middle Dublin, 3rd Sector, sir," said Quinn. "My parents were second-class C, although my old man got First before he did. Played the bassoon in the Greater Dublin Symphony for twenty years. Me, I have no musical talent. Back to second C for me until I was a majority. Then, to third. But my mother taught me

to read and write. And you know there's lotsa second-C that can't do that. Finally, got tired of no money, being shoved around. And cubehappy. Couldn't stand being crowded all the time, couldn't breathe any more. Then, luck, pure blind dumb luck! Stepped into a public bath and found a dead man. Some old guy that musta been slumming; he had some M's in his purse, so he couldn't have come from the Middle Sector. Musta had heart failure. No one else in the place. I took the M's and runned. Used some of the credits to find out where I could get hold of an outlaw jumper. Paid most of my M's to the agent and the pilot and took the jump to here with ten others. Landed with just enough money to buy me this chair, stool, table, and leg-painting tools. But I'm doing O.K. now. Someday, I'll be a big man on Diveboard. And I can breathe, I can breathe."

"You don't miss the big city and all its refinements?"

"Sometimes. You know, the gang, the girls. But I wouldn't ever have amounted to anything; I'da always been a drunken C. Here, things get tough, rough, you gotta fight like hell sometimes. But what the hell, you had to back on Earth."

RASPOLD examined his legs and said, "You're doing a

good job. Paint them black. Solid. No stars or crescents."

Quinn looked up, winked, and said, "You dint really need a paint job, sir. What's on your mind?"

"You must get around, hear a lot," said Raspol. "There's two S for this job if you can give me a little information."

"I come happy for two S," said Quinn, grinning bucktoothedly. "Yeah, I hear, see. But it might cost you."

"There are people in this city who have money. Where do their women—wives or what have you?—go to buy their clothes, get their wigs cleaned and curled, get a sono?"

"Rene Gautier's," said Quinn. "Best place in town. Only place, in fact."

"You just earned 3 S," said Raspol. "Now, you've probably set up your business near Gautier's. . . ."

"Yeah," said Quinn, grinning. "He's my only competitor. But not really a competitor, because only the fullpurses can afford him. But I place my chair near him a lot, because I like to see the dangoes that waltz in and out. Some pretty goodlookers."

"That's what I want to know," said Raspol. "Has one of Gautier's customers ever been a beautiful woman who uses Erector Set Perfume?"

"What's that?"

"A natural perfume from Umchawa. Used to be, anyway. It's been synthesized but is still by far the most expensive. The man who smells it has an immediate erotic reaction, if he's at all capable of one."

Quinn hawhawed. "Yeah, I smelled it twice, both times when I was working in front of Gautier's. The first time, I didn't think anything of it, the woman was such a dish. Second time, I was painting a customer's legs when she went by, and he told me what it was. I couldn't figure out why a woman would be wanting to have it on her when she was walking on the streets. You'd think she'd cause a riot . . . get. . . . Say! Maybe she *was* walking the streets! Naw, she dint have to, she was too beautiful, too well dressed."

"How tall was she?"

"Oh, about an inch or two higher than I am."

"Lots of jewelry?"

"Loaded."

"She comes to Gautier's regularly?"

"Not that I know. I saw her last Thirdsday and a Secondday two weeks before. Say, that's enough. I've given you more'n 3 S' worth."

"Five S now. Tell me a little more, and it's six. Was she alone?"

"Once. Other time, she had another woman with her. A blast-

off, too, but she wasn't wearing that Erector Set stuff."

RASPOLD took six S out of his purse and handed it to Quinn. He said, "You're an intelligent man, and, therefore, curious. You must have asked around about this woman."

"What for? What chance would I stand with a woman like that? Maybe someday, after I make my pile . . . Yeah, I asked around. Nobody knows her name, and Gautier sure isn't going to give out any information. The tight-lipped little fairy. But I can tell you one thing that'll be at least worth a half-S. Haw, haw! She don't live in town."

"Half it is," said Raspold. "What does she ride in?"

"Believe it or not, a horse and buggy," said Quinn. "A Diveboard horse, not one of the Earth kind. She drives like a maniac. But it ain't hers. She rents it from Tak Alvarez; he's got a livery stable out at the edge of town. I painted his legs a couple days ago. He says she walks in from the forest, from nowhere, and rents the outfit. Then, coming back from Gautier's, she leaves the horse and buggy with Tad, and walks off into the forest. So . . ."

Somebody could be waiting for her in a grav, thought Raspold. He said, "Many people live in the country around here?"

"More every day. Diveboard's population has doubled in the last ten months. Mostly poor would-be farmers or hunters or prospectors."

"Any rich ones?"

"A few. There're two nobody knows much about. Word is that they're big-shot criminals who've piled it and want to take it easy. Which they can do. Earth can't touch them; this's a Free Planet."

"I know. Now, what're the names of these so-called criminals?"

"Nobody knows the name of one of them. The other calls himself Gottfried von Fulka."

Quinn knew no more than that about von Fulka. Except that his house—mansion, rather—was on an island in a lake about 80 kilometers north of the capital. The house was built about two years ago; von Fulka had not moved in until a year later.

"Alvarez' livery? It's on the north side of town?"

"South."

Raspold rose and examined the paint on his legs. "Very good," he said. "You'll go far in your profession—whatever it may be in the future."

"Another S-worth of advice," said Quinn, squinting shrewdly at him. "If you're thinking of hanging around Gautier's until this chick shows up, forget it. Gautier goes to her now."

Raspold's brows, thick and black, rose and he said, "You earned it. How do you know this?"

"Oh, I get around."

"Details, please," said Raspold, holding out, not an S but an Un with a large M on it.

QUINN'S eyes widened, and he said, "Gautier drives a long red Wang. He's easy to spot, even late at night, especially here where lotsa people stay up all night for one reason or another. He's driven out on the North Road twice about two in the morning and didn't show up until the next night. Where'd he go? That road ain't passable for a sport car once you get ten km. outta town. And he ain't shacking up with no farmer's daughter. If he was, everybody in town'd know it. No, he parks his car someplace, and somebody picks him up. The Erector Set chick hasn't shown after she made those two trips, so. . . ."

"The mountain goes to Mohammed. Or vice versa."

"More advice. Gautier may be one of the boys, but he's a hard nut to crack; he came here because he got into some trouble on Earth."

Raspold handed him the M and said, "Part of that is for silence. And loyalty in the future. I want you to work for me. More where that came from."

"How do you know you can trust me?" said Quinn. "I want to get ahead, and I know I need money for that. Suppose . . ."

Raspold shrugged. "I'm taking a chance. But those who betray me. . . ."

"I'll hitch my wagon to your star, mister. . . .?"

"Call me Dick Ricoletti for the present," said Raspold. "It wouldn't be good for either of us if you knew my real name. And I warn you, even talking to me as you have been doing may be very dangerous."

"If I scared easily, I wouldn't be here," said Quinn.

Raspold asked where the best restaurant in town was and then walked off. He strolled through the bustling colorful noisy streets, following Quinn's directions, until he came to The Soulful Cow. This establishment, a two-story building of rough-hewn logs of a reddish wood, was a combination tavern and eating-place. A blast of chatter and laughter blew from out the open doorway, with a mixed odor of tobacco, beer, and frying steaks. Raspold stepped into a huge room filled with people and smoke. The great dark-red beams overhead were festooned with heads of native animals and signs in various alphabets, ideograms, and syllabaries. A bar, cement-topped, ran the length of the northern side of the building.

Men stood two or three deep along it, and over a dozen bartenders sweated to keep their customers from dying of thirst. At the rear was the kitchen, open to view, and here were the cooks, their helpers, and waiters, preparing the only course The Soulful Cow served; steaks, potatoes, butter, beans, and a dark bread.

RASPOLD's mouth watered. He had had steak on Wildenwooly, but it had been his first in an Earth month. On Earth, he could rarely afford true meat, but here, where cattle was one of the chief industries, and transportation from the plains to the city was not so expensive, he could have all the steak he wanted.

Raspold found an empty seat at one of the long plank tables. The waitress came over and he ordered a stein of native dark beer with his meal.

While waiting Raspold took special note of a man who sat directly across from him. This fellow was easily the biggest human being in the place. Also the broadest. His forearms looked as thick as Raspold's thighs. His chest looked like two drums of muscle. His hair was black and straight, and the handsome face was brown. His eyes were a light green. He sat brooding, his huge right hand almost completely enfolding the stein of beer.

From time to time, he took a swallow from the stein. As he did so, he green eyes looked at—and through—Raspold. Yet Raspold was sure that the big man had taken in every detail of Raspold's face and dress.

Presently, a youth came in and bent down by the big man and whispered into his ear.

Raspold was startled, for the youth was the red-haired leg-painter, Quinn.

Quinn, straightening up, gave Raspold a wink and a grin, and he walked away. Raspold wondered if Quinn meant these for a friendly greeting or a signal that this man had something to do with his quest.

RASPOLD rose and strode after Quinn. He caught him just outside the tavern, out of sight of anyone sitting within it.

"You working for that dark giant?" he said.

"Sorry," said Quinn. "I don't tell one of my clients another's business. It ain't ethical. It also ain't healthy."

"How much?" said Raspold.

Quinn's face, lit by a lamp above and to one side of him, darkened.

"You haven't got enough," he said.

Raspold laughed and said, "That tells me a lot about you. Maybe I can trust you, after all. O.K. I'll find out for myself. But

you can do something for me. There's a Q in it for you. You know a man of Terran Chinese descent named Jack Yee? I don't know where he lives just now; he moves around a lot."

Quinn nodded, and Raspold took a notebook and a pen from his purse, tore out a leaf, and began writing. Finished, he handed the leaf to Quinn.

"I could get into contact with him right now, but I don't want to use the waves. And I've got some business to take care of first. When you see him, don't say a word. Just hand him this paper. Got it?"

"His place might be bugged?"

"Right. And don't bother trying to read this. It's in code."

"You must be on Heinrich Nge's trail," said Quinn.

Raspold had trained himself to keep a poker face, but he could not help betraying some surprise. "How do you figure that?"

"I hear a lot, see some. Word's around that he's here somewhere on Diveboard. A coupla his men seen in town last few months. And the word also is that Raspold's in town, hot on Nge's trail."

Raspold smiled slightly and said, "communications engineers ought to investigate the possibility of the grapevine. For swift-ness, it beats the speed of light. Well, now you know you're in hot water up to your neck, and you're

likely to get drowned. Want to back out?"

"It's exciting," said Quinn. "And I got a chance to make a big profit."

"I don't think you mean a profit from Nge," said Raspold. "As soon as you've delivered the message to Yee, come back here and wait for me."

Quinn walked off, and Raspold returned to his seat at the table. By then, his dinner was before him, and he ate it with great pleasure. His enjoyment was not a bit tempered by the hard stares the big man across the table was giving him. When Raspold had paid his bill and rose to leave, the big man also stood up. Raspold walked out of the tavern, aware that he was being followed.

DIVEBOARD'S moon, almost as large as Earth's, shone fitfully through a half-clouded sky.

"Mister," said a rumbling voice behind him. "A word."

Raspold turned around, noting that the man was keeping his distance. If he intended to attack, he meant to do it with a weapon. Raspold idly fingered the pendant on his ear-ring.

The fellow spoke in Lingo but used strange phonetic values that showed he had not learned it as an infant along with his native tongue but in later life.

"My name is Big Chuck Wood-

wolf," he said, not offering his hand. "I'm a Tserokian."

Raspold said, "I've been to Tserokia."

Woodwolf flashed a smile and said, "You speak my language?"

"Regretfully, no. My name is Ricoletti. What do you want?"

"O.K. We'll use that name, though I think I know who you really are. Listen, you heard of the big raid that Heinrich Nge made on Sequoyah a year ago?"

Raspold nodded. Sequoyah was the capital city of Tserokia, a T-type planet colonized seventy years before (when interstellar travel had first started) by several thousand Cherokees. Since then, the population had expanded to thirty million, largely through the immigration of other racial groups and nationalities. The immigrants had become naturalized or, as the Tserokians phrased it, "adopted," and had learned to speak Cherokee. But that tongue was now dying out, replaced by the standard Federation speech, Lingo. The racial continuity of the original colonists (already half-white) had been broken. Big Chuck himself was probably descended from at least three races and two dozen nationalities. But he thought of himself as Cherokee.

Two years ago, six months after the destroyer *Custer* had been hijacked, a fleet of ten vessels had appeared over Se-

quoyah. The *Custer* was one of them. Before anyone knew what was happening, the fleet had landed, looted the planetary treasury, the government art museum, and had also kidnapped a number of Tserokian women. There was no doubt about the identity of the leader of the pirates. Heinrich Nge. He had left a letter saying that he had enjoyed his visit there, thanked them for their gracious hospitality, and promised to return when their treasury was refilled. Also, complimented them on the beauty of their women. The letter bore the image of the scorpion (Nge was Swahili for *scorpion*).

"My sister, Tuli, was one of the girls taken by the pirates," said Woodwolf. "She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen; she was to marry the richest man on Tserokia. He's dead now; killed by the pirates during the raid. I loved my sister."

"Why tell me this?"

"Because I figure you're looking for Nge, too. You know some things I don't. I know some things you don't. If we work together. . . ."

Raspold considered. Woodwolf might be an agent of Nge. He could be approaching him with this story with the intent of capturing him. If so, he might give Raspold a chance to find Nge.

"Would you be willing to submit to questioning under *chala-*

rocheil?" said Raspold. "I'm not one to take unnecessary chances."

"Yes."

"In that case, it may not be necessary. Let's go some place else and talk."

RASPOLD merely walked across the street and stopped before the dark front of a farm equipment store. They were outside the illumination area cast by the nearest lamp, and he could watch the door to The Soulful Cow. Big Chuck Woodwolf began talking at once.

"I went to Wildenwooly, Diveboard, Peregrino, Liang, Krona, all the 'free' planets. I figured that Nge might be found in a place where the Feds could not legally touch him. Then I went to Earth several times and also visited a dozen non-human planets. No luck at all.

"Then, instead of just running around, sniffing here and there like a dumb hound trying to find a lost trace, I sat down and did some thinking. If I were Nge, where would I go? And why? Nge wants to be the biggest man in the Galaxy. He wants power and wealth. How can he best do this? By looting the biggest treasury in the Galaxy, that's how. And what is that? Voittamaton, if you believe all you hear.

"But Voittamaton is well-nigh invulnerable. So, if Nge needs

men, ships, weapons to take Voittamaton, he will steal the ships and rob some place to give him the money to buy men and weapons. So, he highjacks the *Custer*, and he loots Sequoyah. He now has money and firepower. But he also needs a base of operations. What inhabited 'free' planet is closest to Voittamaton? Diveboard, on the rim of the Galaxy, and only ten lightyears from Voittamaton."

Raspold smiled. This man, using the little mass of gray matter within his skull, had come to the same conclusion as the skyscraper-tall computer, ATHENA.

"I came back here. I hang around taverns, the marketplaces, find out who knows the most, tap into the grapevine. I even became partner in some small robberies here to get the confidence of the underworld. I'll repay the men I robbed after this is over. I got a conscience.

"One night, while I was hanging around the Twelfth Street Tavern, a man I recognized entered. I didn't know his name, but I couldn't forget that face; we'd blazed away at each other during the raid on Sequoyah from opposite ends of a hall. He wounded me with his rifle, almost killed me. Now, I could reach out and get his neck between my hands and squeeze once. Instead I buddied up to him. Pretended I was a planetpicker who'd tried to

keep a planet to himself and been cashiered out of Federation Service. Down on my luck. He was cagey at first, but he got drunk, and he said he might possibly have something for me to do—if I was made of strong stuff. Wouldn't say any more, and I figured that he wasn't likely to. I knew that the little device in his body might be transmitting our conversation to some monitor who only had to press a button and blow both of us to kingdom come. He knew it, too.

SO, I told him that The Soulful Cow was a better place for steaks, drinks, and women, and we staggered out into the street. When we came opposite the entrance to an alley, I chopped him alongside the neck and dragged him back into the dark end. When he came to, he was bound tight and had a gag over his mouth. I used my little flash to show him what I'd written on a piece of paper. It told him what I wanted to know. What was his name? Where was my sister? Where was Nge?

"He had one hand free so he could write an answer. He wasn't about to try to speak. If his speech was being monitored, he wouldn't live more than a minute. Neither, probably, would I, but I had to take the chance. I had also written that, in return for the information, I'd let him

loose. I knew he wouldn't say anything to Nge, because Nge would kill him. He wrote his answer. 'Go to hell.'

"Brave talk. But I took his sandal off and ignited my cigarette lighter and held the hot wire between his toes. He didn't dare scream. I took the wire away and gestured to him to write. He must have made up his mind then, for he began to scribble. He let the paper fall, I picked it up and read.

"My sister was still alive; Nge had taken her for one of his mistresses. She was pregnant. She was at Fulka's place. He didn't know where Nge was, for Nge often took off for visits elsewhere.

"I asked him some more, by paper, of course. Where Fulka's place was? Who was Fulka? Did Nge intend to attack Voittamaton? He wrote that Nge was Fulka."

Woodwolf stopped talking. He was breathing heavily.

"So what happened?" said Raspolo coolly.

"I'd promised to let him go free," said Woodwolf. "And I did. I untied him, after relieving him of a knife and a gun and knocking him out again. Then, I phoned the police but didn't give my name, of course. Told them that I'd seen Howard Guy and another man at the end of that alley. Guy was tied up; the other

man was writing something on a piece of paper and showing it to Guy, and Guy was doing the same for him. I even told them about the hot wire between Guy's toes."

"You said that you'd let him go free," said Raspolo. "Was that . . . ?"

"I'm not through talking yet. The police didn't get hold of Guy; I knew they wouldn't. I kept my word. It wasn't three minutes after the call that a big explosion took place right in the middle of Twelfth Street. Fortunately, nobody but Guy was involved.

"You see, I know, like everybody else, that Nge has his contacts in the local police force. Maybe the one I called up. The contact must have radioed Nge, and Nge wasn't taking any chances on Guy spilling anything."

THEY started to walk down the street. But, hearing the frenzied barks of a dog and the equally frenzied cries of a man, they turned. Two blocks behind them, a youth ran as fast as he could, shouting for help. Several yards behind him bounded the dog, a large black mongrel that looked as if he had a heavy dash of German shepherd in him.

"Looks like Quinn," said Raspolo.

"Yeah," said Woodwolf. "And that dog . . ."

He broke the magnetic clasps

of his shirt with his left hand and with his right reached under the shirt. Raspold, having previously noted the bulge under his left armpit, was not surprised to see the hand emerge clutching a pistol.

"Damn, damn!" groaned Woodwolf. "Quinn's in the way."

"What's the matter?" said Raspold.

"Has to be one of Nge's dogs," said Woodwolf. "Nge must have stolen some piece of clothing from Quinn and set the dog to track down the owner."

Raspold saw the picture. He drew his gun, a .32 Weckel, and ran diagonally across the street. He shouted, "Quinn, out of the way!"

Quinn saw them and must have understood. He sprinted for the sidewalk nearest him, which was Woodwolf's side of the street. Raspold, aiming carefully, pressed the trigger.

The gun bucked twice, and the dog went whirling sidewise in the dust. Quinn kept on running. Meanwhile, Big Chuck Woodwolf had run into the middle of the street, and he fired immediately after Raspold. The dog, crumpled in a heap, moved a few inches under the impact of the .45. Quinn dived into an alley between two buildings. Woodwolf, only a few meters from the dog, threw himself flat on the dirt. Raspold, suddenly realizing his

vulnerable position, did the same.

He was deafened, and the ground trembled under him. Dust swirled into the street; the plastic sheet of the store window near the dog blew inwards in a solid sheet, and the crash of objects falling off the store shelves was in the ears of the three as they rose and sped down the street.

After running for several blocks, they stopped beside the side of a building. "Don't your citizens get nervous with all these explosions?" said Raspold, gasping for breath.

"They love excitement," said Quinn. Then, "That was close! But I'm O.K. Listen, Mister Ricolletti, I couldn't deliver your note! Your friend Jack Yee was dead! I went to his room, on the second story of Krishna's Hotel, and I knocked. There wasn't any answer. The door was unlocked. I hollered again, cause I dint want my head blown off. Still no answer. I pushed the door, it swung in, and there was Yee on the floor. He was dead but from what I don't know. Poison, maybe, or gas. So, I got to hell out of there with your note still in my hand."

"Nge must have discovered his identity," said Raspold. Now, as far as he knew, he was the only FECAB agent on Diveboard.

I WAS walking back," said Quinn, "when a car drove by. It stopped, and a door opened,

and the dog jumped out. He stood there a moment, whining and sniffing. Then, like a hound out of hell, he ran for me, barking. I ran, and the dog came after me. Something told me I better not stop and try to talk to him. You showed up, and . . ."

He paused, then wailed, "Nge's after me, too!"

"He won't get you unless he gets us, too," said Rasbold. He was considering every aspect swiftly. He could take a jumper back to Earth, talk to Ali'i, get a crew of FECAB, and return. But he couldn't take a legal ship, for Nge's men would be watching the spaceport. Moreover, the police, if working with Nge, could arrest him and turn him over to Nge. If he hired an illegal jumper, he might fall into Nge's hands just as easily as if he tried the legal route. Nge might have the word around among the underworld that he wanted Rasbold. Even if he got to Earth, Nge would be gone by the time he returned. He might already have left Diveboard on the expedition against Voittamaton.

"Any place in town that rents cars or gravs?" he said to Quinn.

"Yeah. Jock Barry. But he's as crooked as a pretzel. He could be a stoolie for Nge."

"We won't rent one from him. We'll steal it," said Rasbold.

They walked to Barry's place, a single-story foam structure on

the edge of town. It was three in the morning; the building was dark. Rasbold shot the lock off the front door. He and Quinn entered and picked out a Bluebolt four-seater gravity-drive. Unfortunately, there were no keys available. He stuck the muzzle of the pistol against Barry's ribs as Barry came charging out of his rooms in the rear. Barry did not argue; he handed over the gun in his hand and the keys. Rasbold, wanting to make sure that Barry would not contact Nge—if he had intended to do so—took him along in the Bluebolt.

Big Chuck took over the controls and lifted the runabout just above treetop level. He steered it northwards, toward Fulka's house on the island 80 kilometers, landed the Bluebolt in an open space. Rasbold, after making sure that Barry had no wrister or other means of wireless communication on his person, told Barry to start walking back home.

TEN minutes later, the big Tserokian slowed the Bluebolt. The lake was in sight. It sparkled in the light of Diveboard's full moon. The house on the island in the middle of the lake gleamed whitely. No lights came from its windows.

Big Chuck, following Rasbold's orders, slid the Bluebolt down the bank, into the lake, and under the surface. The car spurted for-

ward in the darkness of the waters until it struck the shallow mud of the island. The Tserokian lifted it slowly above the surface. They were on the beach, just outside the thick forest surrounding the house. There were no roads to the house. Rasbold debated with himself whether they should proceed on foot, then decided against it. Big Chuck lifted the Bluebolt to a position level with the tops of the trees. The car, bending the treetops before it, moved toward the house. When they came to the clearing around the house, they stopped.

"I don't see how they could be expecting us," said Rasbold. "But, with Nge, you never know. If it's a trap, we go into it."

A thick stone-and-cement wall about ten meters high surrounded the house, which was about sixty meters from the wall. The house was a two-story structure also built of native rocks and cement. It looked as if it had from ten to twelve rooms. Against the northern wall stood a stone garage.

Rasbold had Big Chuck guide the Bluebolt completely around the house. He was well aware that anyone looking out of the dark windows could see the glint of moonlight on the silvery Bluebolt. At any moment, he thought, guns will start firing. And we'll know where we stand.

"There are windows but no

doors," he said. "They must get to the rooftop via grav and go down through a trapdoor. So will we."

"Nge isn't the man to sleep without guards of some kind," said Big Chuck. "That is, if he is in there. We don't even know that. Something's in there."

"Wait a minute," said Rasbold. "You have to think about one thing. Nge's the greatest booby-trapper in the world. If he's left that house for keeps, he'll likely trigger it. If he knew I was coming to it, he wouldn't, for he's sworn to take me alive. But maybe he doesn't know I've tracked him this far."

HE told big Chuck to take the Bluebolt back across the forest-top to the beach. Here the car descended, and they slid a few feet above the beach around the island until Rasbold saw what he was looking for. A log washed up by the waves, a log about one decimeter in diameter and two meters long. The three got out of the car, picked up the log, and laid it at right angles to the front and back seats. Quinn and Rasbold held the log steady while Woodwolf piloted the car to a height of 20 meters.

The car moved until it was over the house, still silent and white in the moonlight. Woodwolf locked the controls and rose from the pilot's seat to help them.

With his strength added to theirs, one end of the log rose easily and was held vertically by the side of the car.

Raspold said, "Let her loose," and the log dropped. They sat down quickly, strapped themselves with the safety belts, and Big Chuck rolled the car fifty degrees along its longitudinal axis so that they could get a good view over the side.

The log, black in the silver moonlight, was almost on its target by the time they were ready to look. When it struck, it was horizontal, and the roof received the impact of the full length.

A bright flash appeared. Big Chuck slammed the Bluebolt into sudden flight, and the occupants were pressed back against the seat. For a moment, they were deafened.

Raspold looked back and saw planks and stones and other objects flying up higher than the car. If they had stayed, they would have been hit.

"I think," said Raspold, when he felt the others could hear him, "the mere opening of the rooftop door would have set off that mine. Anyway, we know one thing. Nge, if he was there, has left. Probably for Voittamaton. If he really dares."

THEY shot back to the city. Raspold went to the Terrestrial Consul and identified him-

self. After telling part of his story to the Consul, he had no trouble getting passports for himself and Woodwolf. Quinn decided to stay on Diveboard and continue in business. The passports gave the two immunity from police seizure (such a right has been granted in the contract with Earth ten years previously). He and the big Tserokian took a nonsked to Earth. An hour after getting through Customs, Raspold stood in the office of Ali'i.

"If your surmises are correct," said Ali'i, puffing away on a big cigar, "and if what I've read of Voittamaton is true, we can forget about Nge. He's as good as dead."

"We can't know for sure," said Raspold. "I want permission for myself, Woodwolf, and a pilot to go to Voittamaton. A small ship might be undetected by Nge. But if a big force showed up, we'd just scare him. He'd go into translation, and we'd have to start the chase all over again."

"Woodwolf?"

"Swear him in as a temporary agent with limited powers and under my supervision," said Raspold. "If you don't, the damn fool will go to Voittamaton by himself. And he might get in the way, cause God-knows-what kind of mess. He's a good man, and he knows Nge's history, his behavior patterns."

"You'll have to take full responsibility for him and his actions," said Ali'i. He pressed a button and spoke into the box on his desk.

"Miss Petersen, show Mr. Woodwolf in."

Raspold and Big Chuck spent two hours with Ali'i, and then they went off to sleep for two hours while Ali'i made arrangements. Waking up completely refreshed, they removed the Morpheus electrodes from their temples and went to eat breakfast. Afterwards, Ali'i introduced them to their pilot.

Raspold recognized him at once.

"Glad to see you're on the team," he said. "We couldn't have a better man."

He introduced Big Chuck to Aga-Oglu, a tall broad-shouldered man with a narrow face, a big curved nose, and deeply sunken eyes. Later, when Raspold was alone with the Tserokian, he said, "He's a native of Kagan. Was a member of the Baudelairean Gang. I was the one who arrested him. About three years ago. He was rehabilitated and discharged from John Hopkins a year ago. Now, like a lot of rehabs, his experience with the criminal world is being used to good advantage by FECAB."

"You aren't a rehab?" said Big Chuck.

"If I'd been a criminal," said

Raspold, "I'd never have been caught." He smiled to soften the egotism of the statement, but Big Chuck was not sure that Raspold was at all facetious.

Aga-Oglu called them, and they boarded the ship. Their take-off time was 13:47.22; to be delayed a second meant that new data would have to be fed into the ship's computer and a new translation period arranged for.

AN hour later, subjective time, they were in a wide orbit about thirty thousand myriameters from Voittamaton. The nearest star was the sun of Diveboard, some ten lightyears away. The rim of the Galaxy was so far away that it looked like a rough luminous humpbacked disc seen edge on. And there was so little light that the planet, relatively close, was invisible.

"There it is," said Aga-Oglu, indicating the ghostly white circle on the screen before him. The image faded out and strengthened in 45-degree sectors, and on each side of the circle were little bursts of whiteness.

"Those little flashes are too big to be vessels," said Aga-Oglu. "Orbital debris; asteroidlets, maybe."

He flicked off the active scanner and turned on the passive.

"Now what?"

"We land," said Raspold.

Aga-Oglu shrugged and said,

"I'll set the computer to land us in thirty minutes. We ought to be in our suits, have everything else ready by then O.K.?"

Raspold nodded, and the three began to prepare for the landing. Twenty minutes later they were in their space suits and strapped to their seats. Aga-Oglu had turned the scanner on for another two minutes, long enough for the computer to receive all necessary data. Then, three minutes before the translator was to go into action, he turned the scanner on again. The computer rechecked their position and verified the setting of the translator "gauge".

"We make it in one big jump," said the pilot. "A series of small translations might allow Nge or whatever is on that planet to detect us between jumps. I've set the translator for minimum tolerance. We won't materialize any closer than one kilometer. We could try within that distance, but we'd run the risk of materializing under the surface."

Raspold's hands were tightly clenched around the arms of his seat, and they remained tight when Aga-Oglu went into action. He switched the controls to manual and rammed two control sticks forward. The vessel accelerated, and the occupants felt themselves pressed back against their seats. The window in front of them suddenly cleared; they were automatically on visual

now. They clamped their jaws to keep from crying out. The surface was rushing toward them; they were going to crash!

But Aga-Oglu knew what he was doing. He had shot the craft downward as swiftly as he dared after coming out of translation so that he could get on the surface before their power was mysteriously cut off. Twenty seconds later they had landed.

THE entire upper half of their ship was transparent, and they could see the surface of the planet. Rather, could see what the darkness permitted.

It was more than they had expected. Something gleamed outside. Somethings. Tall and white, apparently casting a self-generated and feeble glow. Everywhere around them. So close they pressed against the vessel. Aga-Oglu had, with magnificent skill, landed them—wedged them—in an aisle of the phantom objects.

Raspold examined the closest one. It was a slender round pillar which rose to a height of five meters. At its top was a globe approximately two meters in diameter. This was only partially white; it bore irregular blackish blotches. The globe on the stele next to it also had the patches, but these were of a different pattern. And, on each stele, running from top to bottom, were characters. Alphabetical letters?

Raspold turned away from them. "How close are we to The Mouth?" he said, describing the opening in the mountain.

Aga-Oglu, looking at a card in his hand, said, "We were supposed to make a final translation within at least ten kilometers of The Mouth. The scanner took a fix while we were landing. We're just nine kilometers away. Straight North. How's that, huh?"

"Did it pick up any of Nge's ships?"

"No. How could it? If his fleet landed in this forest . . ."

Aga-Oglu read two other cards, and he said, "No more atmosphere than the Moon. Funny, too, when you're on a planet only a little smaller than Earth. Should at least be a frozen atmosphere, gas-snow."

Raspold considered. They could lift the ship above the globed steles and make a dash for The Mouth in it. Or two could get into each of the one-man "hoppers" stored in the rear of the bigger ship and advance between the aisles of the steles and beneath the cover of the globes. That meant that the Kagan would have to remain in the ship.

Aga-Oglu protested.

"If we have to come running," said Raspold, "I want everything triggered to go the moment we drive into the hopper-port. And if we don't return within two hours,

you are to leave without us, at once, and report to Ali'i. That's an order."

He made sure his watch synchronized with Woodwolf's and Aga-Oglu's, shook hands with the Kagan, and walked to the hoppers. These were small rugged craft much used by spacers in asteroid mining. The two in the port had been especially beefed up for service on a large planet; they were capable of speeds up to six hundred kilometers an hour and could cruise at one hundred kilometers an hour for six hours before needing refueling. Each was armed with two .45 machine guns located in the forward end of the thick runners (like a sled's) placed at the underpart of the craft.

RASPOLD rotated the hopper so that it faced the north and lifted it over the *Pulex* and down into the aisle in front of it. Woodwolf's craft followed him.

Raspold began to increase his speed swiftly. But, after several seconds, while the tall white pillars and their globes shot by him, he lifted his hand in signal to Woodwolf. And he slowed the craft, looking in the rearview mirror to make sure that the big Tserokian wasn't going to hit him. When he had come to a halt, he lifted the hopper level with the globes. He examined the nearest ones. Shaking his head, he pro-

ceeded slowly enough to allow himself a good look at those passing on his right. He crawled past them for a minute. Then, as if making up his mind, he lifted his hand again, and shot the hopper forward, reaching one hundred km p/h in five seconds. Again, the white and silent aisle sped by in a blur; the huge hole at the base of the mountain—outlined on the scanner—expanded before him. He stopped the hopper two kilometers from it, and Woodwolf landed directly behind him. Rasbold flipped the switch that would put them in tight-beam communication. "I slowed down because there was something familiar about the patterns of the dark patches on the globes. Did they not look to you as if they represented continents? As if the globes were supposed to be planets, and the white portions are seas?"

"I didn't think so," said Big Chuck. "But, now that you point it out . . ."

"You don't suppose they do represent planets?" said Rasbold. "Markers? Markers for what? Possessions?"

"This place gives me the spooks," said the Tserokian. "It looks like one big graveyard. The biggest in the world."

The hairs on the back of Rasbold's neck rose. He said, "Maybe it is."

"What do you mean?"

Rasbold shrugged and said, "I really don't know. But the whole thing is curious. A thousand square miles of nothing but globes on steles. For what purpose?"

"Maybe somebody in there has the answer?"

"If he—it—does," said Rasbold, "I hope he feels like talking."

He reached for the controls, then stopped. Above and ahead of him, above the mountain, a luminous round object had appeared. It was, at first, a pale globe, dinnerplate sized. Which meant that, at this distance from him, it must be at least fifty meters in diameter. It could have been hanging, undetected, all this time; now, it had started to pour out light. And, in a few seconds, the light had strengthened, had become as bright as the Earthly sun.

"What the hell's going on?" said Woodwolf.

"Something just came out of the cave mouth," said Rasbold. "It flew up the mountainside, went over the top."

HE sat for several seconds, rigid in his seat, before speaking. "Maybe it's a decoy. But let's go after it, anyway."

He shut off the beam and shot the hopper at an angle which would take it just above the sharp point of the mountain. Woodwolf

followed him. Raspol'd, clearing the peak, saw that the mountain was part of a range of similar jagged cones. And he risked a quick look behind him and saw that the monuments were white as bleached bones under a desert sun. And that nowhere in the illuminated area was a sign of Nge's fleet. Perhaps, he thought, Nge had taken his ships into the cavern mouth. Or, he had never reached the surface.

His mother ship, the *Pulex*, was still sitting wedged in the aisle. He could imagine Aga-Oglu's frantic reaction to the light, and he hoped the man would stay where he was, as ordered.

The hopper almost struck the top peak, then it was by. And Raspol'd saw the thing that had flown from the cave. It was not more than thirty meters from him and was hanging in space, facing him, as if waiting for him.

It was the strangest creature that Raspol'd had ever seen, and he had seen many. It had a long reddish-brown body roughly centaur-shaped. The lower torso gave a bilobed impression; there was a deep groove running its length where a spine would be in any other creature and where one might be in this. Six spindly and grotesquely long limbs hung downward from the lower torso and ended in something like a human foot. The up-

per torso had narrow shoulders and a neck and a head and two arms as spindly and overly long as the "legs". These ended in enormous hands with fingers that made Raspol'd think of spider legs.

The face was that of a demon's. Humanoid, it had a chin, acromegally developed. A nose that looked like a parrot's beak. Great forward-leaning ears. Two long independently moving fleshy strips sprouting from each cheek. The forehead was very low; the skull was hairless. The eyes were set in fleshy slants.

It was the tail that startled Raspol'd the most. A thick pillar, almost as long as the body, it ended in a thick oval four-lobed pad.

The creature was a nightmare, something out of an opium smoker's dreams. It had no right to exist, to be unprotected by a spacesuit, to have limbs where limbs were not needed to move, to have a nose where no air was, to have ears where sound had no medium through which to travel, to have a mouth where it could not talk.

It moved, seemingly by a biologically generated control of gravity. It lived without artificial devices where nothing could live naturally.

Raspol'd decided to break the silence between the hoppers; he activated the radio. With all the

maneuvering they might have to do, they could not afford to jockey around until lined up for tight-beam transmission.

"Watch that tail!" he said to Woodwolf. "It looks dangerous"

"Here come four more," said Woodwolf's voice.

Raspold spun the hopper around so he could see past the Tserokian's craft. Four similar creatures were just coming over the peak.

A SHADOW appeared above him; he looked upward and at the same time placed the hopper into a reverse motion so savage that the upper part of his body strained against the belts holding him. The thing—which he mentally termed the "space scorpion," darted after him, its long arms held out toward him.

He stopped the hopper and threw it forward, intending to ram the creature. But the scorpion shot off at an angle.

Woodwolf's hopper darted towards Raspold's. It tilted upward, and flame appeared at the open end of one of the runners beneath the hopper.

The scorpion, struck by a series of .45 slugs, turned end over end, its legs and arms flailing. Then, as if it had suddenly lost its power over gravity, it began to fall straight down.

Raspold steered his hopper at the four scorpions. These scattered, increasing the gap between

them, some going up and some down. He had lost his chance to get all of them with one sweep of the machine-guns. But he did center one and gave it a burst. It was hurled backward, cartwheeling, and then began to fall swiftly.

There was a thud, and he looked upward to see a face upside down, pressed against the port on his left. The scorpion was clinging to the top of the hopper and was peering down at him.

For several seconds, he looked into the eyes above the falcon's beak. They were black, innocent of white of pupil or any other color. A ball of jet.

Then, he turned his hopper over and over in a violent maneuver to throw the creatures away, but the thing clung tightly, and the four-lobed pad on the end of its tail came down against the right port and pressed against it.

Immediately, the irradiated plastic began to melt.

Raspold snatched the .45 automatic from its holster by the edge of his seat. He fired twice into the window, the muzzle centered on the pad. Normally, the bullets would have come flying back from the plastic. But, weakened by the melting, the plastic was no obstacle. The bullets plunged into the fleshy looking pad, and the pad jerked away.

Woodwolf's hopper suddenly appeared, the ends of its runners on a level with the top of Ras-



pold's craft. Flame shot out from the open end; the scorpion's face disappeared. And reappeared on the other side of Raspold's hopper as it fell away.

That left two. No, one. For another had attacked Woodwolf, and to do so it had to pass by Raspold. He fired, knocked it spinning away, followed, dived after it, gave it four more bursts, and saw it fall toward the peak.

NOW, the two men maneuvered their hoppers to herd the scorpion and catch it in a cross-fire. But the creature turned and fled. Its speed must have been at least three hundred kilometers an hour; it went over the peak and disappeared, presumably toward the cavern mouth.

Raspold checked the hole in the plastic port. It was about the size of his hand, but he didn't worry about it. The cabin had no air in it; the access ports had been closed for protection against micrometeorites.

"If we go into the cavern," said Raspold, "we may encounter thousands of these. You know how little chance we'd have then."

"Yeah," said Big Chuck. "Maybe most of them were too busy with Nge to bother us. And what about Aga-Oglu? We'd better check on him before we do anything else."

Raspold looked out of the cor-

ner of his eyes at the bright-as-the-sun globe above him. He was sure that the scorpions were not responsible for that. Whoever had released them against the two Terrans had placed that globe there.

"We'll check on Aga-Oglu," he said. "Keep silence unless it's necessary to break it."

They dipped at an angle to the peak and stopped just above it. The rows on rows of globes and pillars were as before, ghostly, chill, white. The *Pulex* lay where it had been. The Kagan, Raspold knew, would see them when they came down along the face of the mountain. He'd know they were all right.

They dropped down the almost vertical face of the peak. But, before they reached the great opening below them, they were in darkness again. The globe had been extinguished.

Raspold felt cold. They were being watched. How? By whom? He did not know. But he assumed that he would soon find out. Probably not to his pleasure.

Just below the top of the cavern, he stopped. Why go on? Why not be sane, be discreet? Return to Earth, tell them what had happened. It was more than likely that Nge had met defeat at the hands of whatever lived in the bowels of Voittamaton. If the Federation wanted to, it could send a fleet back, a fleet which

could land as they had and could shoot missiles with thermonuclear warheads into the cave. Get rid of the menace once and for all. Or, if Voittamatton were truly invincible, then Nge could be marked off the books and the planet would be left alone forever.

He sighed. The old proverb was true. Curiosity killed the cat, and Raspold had a cat's curiosity. He could not endure not knowing what had happened to Nge, what was the power within this dark planet.

He broke the silence and said to Woodwolf, "I'm going on in, but you don't have to be stupid too. Go back to the *Pulex*."

"I hope you're not ordering me to return," said the Tserokian. "I don't want to be guilty of insubordination. But if I have to, I will. I swore I'd find my sister or find out what happened to her. And I swore I'd get Nge."

"It's your neck," said Raspold.

HE directed the craft into the cave, just beneath the arch of rock. And he stopped almost at once. He had expected to be surprised but not so soon.

Below him, at least five hundred meters below, was the floor of the cave. He could see it easily because it glowed with a light. A strange light that illuminated only the area of the floor and cast no glow above a definite demarca-

tion. The ships of Nge's fleet were clearly illuminated by the light. They rested on the floor in ranks of six, the stolen destroyer *George A. Custer* and the largest ships in the front rank and the others, graded according to size, behind them. All had various ports open, the ports out of which the pirates must have proceeded on foot or in hoppers. The front ranks were by the wall at the far end of the cave, the wall that had stopped further progress on their part. And the personnel of the vessels must have gone through an opening of the wall, an opening large enough for ten men abreast but too small for the ships.

Raspold wondered where the light came from. Then, as he dropped down two hundred meters for a closer look, he saw that the surface of the lighted area had a shiny appearance. It was almost as if the entire floor of the cave had been covered with a thick plastic which trapped light issuing from some unseen source.

He gasped and dropped down again and then paled.

The floor *was* solid with some clear material. The ships were caught in it, embedded like insects in amber!

Raspold almost turned back at this point. If the power within Voittamatton could spring a trap like this, could release some gluey or flowing plastic sub-

stance and imprison big ships like this, then light it up for display purposes, what chance did two men have? Who knew but what the light was for his benefit?

The ports were open. Therefore, the men who had left the fleet must have gone on through that archway in the far wall. But the men that must have been left behind in the ships were trapped. Doomed to die of starvation.

He thought, why didn't they just translate? The plastic could not hold them if they used the drive.

The answer was obvious. They did not have the power. It must have been cut off by an outside agency, just as the power in that Federation expedition had been cut off. So, the men would not die of starvation. They would die choking as soon as they used up the air in the ships and then that in their spacesuits.

He had a thought, one which did not please him. If the plastic material also filled up the entrance to the next chamber or cave, he would be forced to turn back.

He guided the hopper over the embedded ships and to the archway. And found that the luminous material stopped several meters short of it. There was more than enough room for the hoppers to pass through.

THE entranceway did not lead immediately to another cave, as he had expected. It was the opening for a tunnel, cut out of solid rock, that curved not quite imperceptibly to the left and led gently downward. Raspold had turned on the searchbeam so that he could see where he was going; the light splashed off an oily blackness of hard-seeming stone. Then, a bright glow was ahead, the tunnel ceased, and they were in another cavern.

This was so huge that it looked like the interior of a pocket world. It was well-lighted from an invisible source—nothing new in Raspold's technology—and the floor, polished granitoid stone, held thousands of objects. These were arranged in rows; the aisles between were broad enough for five hoppers abreast. The objects were in groups and stood on black metal platforms about two meters high. It became evident, as they advanced down the aisle, that they were in a museum. The objects consisted of paintings, stone and wooden sculptures, wood and stone and metal weapons, furniture, models of dwellings: tents, houses, temples, castles, and boats, wagons, chariots. And, standing stiffly and silently beside the artifacts, the makers of the artifacts.

These looked at first like wax dummies. Raspold lifted his hopper and went closer. And he was

sure that the statues were stuffed specimens, superb examples of taxidermy. They were members of some centauroid species with which he was unfamiliar.

After a while, they came to an aisle that crossed the one they were on at right angles, and Ras-pold decided to turn onto that. He drove for several kilometers until he met another aisle which continued in the same direction as the aisle he had originally been on. Turning down this, he at once saw that another type of sentient was represented on the platforms. These were bipedal, humanoid, their legs from the knees downward incased in tubes of clear plasticlike material. As he passed the platforms, he saw that the groups were arranged to show the stages of physical and cultural evolution of the various subspecies among the bipeds. Near the end of the aisle, they were passing platforms with highly developed artifacts, artistically and technologically.

They crossed an aisle at right angles to this one, and started down it. And found that this represented the same progress in evolution for a centauroid race of quite a different type than the first they had seen.

Raspold lifted the hopper until he could see far across the gigantic chamber. There, barely within the limits of his vision, was what he had expected. He

gestured to Big Chuck and shot over the heads of the thousands of silent figures until he was at the desired aisle.

He did not need to break silence to tell Woodwolf what these represented. The subhuman figures were familiar enough to both of them, from their school-books. After a minute, they were going by inescapably recognizable sentients. Homo Sapiens.

RASPOLD sped down the aisle while the prehistory and history of man flashed by. Ten kilometers, and he was at the end. Beyond, a sea of empty platforms.

He did not turn then and go down the aisle that ran at ninety degrees to this. He knew that if he did he would see the present development of all the extra-Terrestrial sentients he knew and many many more he did not know. How far that aisle extended was a matter of conjecture. It went so far it passed the horizon, out of sight. But he was willing to bet with any taker that every sentient group that presently inhabited this Galaxy was represented. Presently? Probably many that had existed but did no longer. When he had risen high to take a look, he had seen quite a few rows that had ended long before the others, that had empty platforms at the end of their lines.

Did the vast prairie of empties before him wait for further steps in evolution of the human race? Or did the curator of this museum consider that Homo Sapiens was through, and the empties were to be filled with new sentients?

Raspold shivered, and lifted the hopper high. He rose to the top of the chamber, over two kilometers high, and looked for doorways. He found one, an entrance that looked small from where he was. But, when he came close to it, it was huge. An archway a hundred meters high and two hundred broad. And it was a thousand meters thick.

On emerging from the entrance, they found themselves in another cavern as Brobdingnagian as the last. And their eyes widened and their lips parted with gasps of wonder as they gazed upon mountain after mountain of piled-up jewels. Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, topazes, every precious stone that they knew of and many more they did not. The twinkling glittering masses, heaped higher than three-story buildings, were composed of cut jewels of every size, from thumbnail dimensions to diamonds taller than a man.

Raspold wondered why Nge had not stopped here, taken all he could carry, and returned to his fleet. Perhaps, he had, and found his fleet trapped forever and had

come back to find the possessor of these treasures and either kill him in revenge or force him to unspring the trap.

More likely, though, he had not retraced his steps. Nge might be tempted to grab and run but he would resist it. More than a share of this, he would want the knowledge and the power of the owners of this world. If he had those, he could easily be the most powerful man—being—in the Galaxy. And he could take whatever he wanted.

Or so Nge would reason, thought Raspold. I think like a criminal, and that is how I would think.

If even a portion of these were dumped on the market, they would be very cheap. Maybe not. There were a thousand worlds in the Galaxy that he knew of and a probable ninety-nine thousand more to be found. These could be spread out very thin.

HE repressed the impulse to take several of the larger jewels with him and sped as swiftly as discretion allowed toward the opposite wall of the cavern. Here he found another archway just like the last one, but he paused before it. Big Chuck maneuvered directly behind him, and they established tight-beam transmission.

"It's still not too late," said Raspold. "We'd not be criticized

at all if we return to Earth. We've invaluable information. The discovery of a form of life that can live in airless space, biologically control gravity and generate a plastic-melting heat is enough to justify us. Especially, if we pick up several of the bodies of the scorpions we shot down and give them to the scientists for dissection. And we can take some of the jewels. They're not stolen from Federation people, not as far as we know. We'd be entitled to keep them. You could buy the biggest ranch on Tserokia; I could resign from the FECAB, set up my own agency.

"But there are stronger factors. I believe that we're as helpless before the inhabitants of Voittamaton as new-born kittens before a hungry wolf. From what I've seen, we don't have a chance."

"I'm going on ahead," said the Tserokian.

Raspold sighed and drove the hopper down the archway. This was even longer than the previous ones. And, as they neared its opposite end, they saw that it was obscured, flickering, like a flawed sheet of plastic on which light was playing.

But Raspold's hopper went through it as if it did not exist. They were inside another cavern. The hopper lost the two decimeters of height above the floor.

Raspold was startled, but he saw at once that every light on his instrument panel had gone out and all dials indicated zero. His power was cut off.

Shadows fell on his hopper, and resolved into dozens of the scorpions. They grabbed his hopper and rose with it to a height of fifty meters before he could decide what action to take. By then, he knew that he could do nothing except go along for the ride. If he shot the scorpions, he'd be dropped and killed.

Besides, he knew that the inhabitants of Voittamaton had finally taken action against him, that they had been waiting for him, and had sprung the trap. At least the tension of waiting for attack was gone. Behind him, Woodwolf's hopper was also being carried.

RASPOLD looked through the spaces between the cloud of brown bodies around his craft. This chamber was even more fantastic. Its walls were plated with gold, and the gold was set with patterns of jewels. There were niches in which were set statues and paintings. The artwork, however, differed from that he had seen in the first chamber. This, it was evident, was all of a piece. The work of one group of sentiments. The paintings were bizarre, many almost incomprehensible. And the statuary repre-

sented beings he had never seen before. Creatures that could only be termed dracocentaurs. Except that they had six lower limbs. The upper torso was scaled, and the arms were long but humanoid. The face looked like an intelligent dragon's.

Abruptly, the hopper fell as those carrying it let themselves drop. For a few seconds, he wondered if he were to be killed as an eagle kills a tortoise, by dropping it and breaking its shell. But the scorpions applied deceleration, and he was gently lowered onto the floor. Immediately, the plastic ports shattered, fell outward, and huge hands with spidery fingers reached in and took his automatic from him. He was dragged out of the craft and set on his feet.

The visor to his helmet was opened, and it was then he knew that the chamber had atmosphere. When he was whirled around, he saw that Nge and his men had also been caught. They were standing in orderly rows, unarmed and as naked as the day they were born. Two hundred or so men and women in twenty rows of ten each.

Behind him, Woodolf cried out, "Tuli! Tuli!" and he spoke a long string of phrases in his native tongue.

So, Woodwolf's sister was one of the women. That part of his quest was ended, anyway.

And he recognized Heinrich Nge. The man was standing in the first row, half a pace ahead of the others. The giant's massively muscled body was beautiful, shining copper in the golden light. The face—high-browed, aquiline-nosed, thick-lipped, was set in scowling lines; he looked like a statue of an ancient Pharaoh carved from a polished close-grained dark-red stone. His hands, like those of everybody in the ranks, were free. But his feet could not move, and, as Raspold was carried closer, he saw why. Every human being had his legs embedded inside a block of some transparent material.

Shocked, he thought of the stuffed beings in the museum. Their legs, also, were set inside similar cubes.

Carried horizontally, looking upward, Raspold saw that the ceiling of the gigantic chamber was covered with scorpions hanging upside down or else drifting slowly near the top. He turned his head to both sides and saw that, behind the human beings and on both sides, the floor was packed with the creatures.

Perhaps the most terrible aspect of the scene was that they uttered not a sound.

HE and Woodwolf were carried before the front row of the prisoners, also silent, and there the suits were swiftly re-

moved from them. Their underclothes were stripped off, and scorpions carried in two metallic boxes. Inside the boxes was a clear liquid. The feet of each man were thrust into a box despite their struggles, and a scorpion dropped a tiny red pellet into the liquid in each box. Within a few seconds, the liquid had become a jelly. In half a minute, the jelly had become a solid. The men and the boxes were lifted into the air, and the boxes were slid from the material. And the men were set back on their feet. Rasbold found that he could stay upright without any difficulty; his feet were far enough apart.

Before, he had been too occupied with what was happening to him to take a good look at the thing—things—about ten meters in front of the human beings. Now, he saw that a ball of some glassy stuff hung in the air at a level with his head. The ball had a diameter of about thirty meters and colors played inside the sphere as if a hundred living rainbows were chasing each other. On top of the ball, sitting or lying in a depression, was a dracocentaur.

It was about twenty meters long, exclusive of the long scaled, and barbed tail which hung down on the other side of the ball but now and then rose into the air and waved about like a cat's tail. The upper torso

reared into the air, propped up by the elbows of the long arms. The face was huge and frightening; the eyes were enormous. From each cheek hung a long tendril of pale flesh. The mouth, when opened, revealed quite human teeth, teeth that looked grotesque in that mouth, in that half-human, half-dragon face.

The eyes were completely black. They looked ancient beyond the ken of his mind. Their blackness was that of interstellar space itself. No, that of extra-Galactic space, frightening in the emptiness and foreverness.

Rasbold stood humble and quaking and silent, like some suppliant before the greatest of all kings. Behind him, the others were silent, too.

FINALLY, the dracocentaur opened its mouth, and the black and flexible lips spoke. They spoke in Lingo, but with phonetic values strange to Rasbold's ears, so that he thought at first that it was an entirely foreign language.

"You came through the Place of Dead Worlds before you entered my home!" it said in a loud roaring voice. "Did not that make you think? Think that you could do nothing against one who has seen those globes form out of the primeval gas and become balls of flaming gas and then cool off and give birth to brain-

less life and then to creatures that can talk and then give death as the parent sun cooled or became a nova? Nothing against one who may see this Galaxy die? And see another rise from the ashes?"

Raspold felt as if his bones had crystallized into ice. So that was what the globes on the steles represented? He had passed through the greatest graveyard in the world, the graveyard of planets long dead. But what sort of creature was this that could mark the passing of a world by setting up a monument? And wait eons for another to die and set up another marker? How long, how immeasurably long, since the first stele and globe?

The dracocentaur stopped talking and looked at them for several minutes. Then, it said, "No. You would not stop to think. You would not dare to stop. Your greed blinded you. As it has every creature that has tried to storm this world. Long before your ancestors were even one-celled sea creatures."

Raspold did not think he had the courage. Yet, he spoke. And, afterward, he thought it was the bravest act of his life.

"You are wrong! I did not come here to steal. Neither did my companion. And some among the others did not come of their own free will. They were brought along as prisoners. And my

friend and I came only because we hoped to catch these criminals."

The being on the sphere opened its mouth. Its eyes focussed on Raspold. It said, "I know."

There was another silence while the brain that had outlived mountains of granite considered them.

Then, "I cannot worry about your petty problems—how petty you cannot guess—of good and evil. You are all one to me. Would you distinguish between the moral characters of a swarm of gnats?"

"I would," said Raspold boldly. After all, what did he have to lose? Moreover, would a being as powerful, as ancient as this, be irritated by a being like himself?

Perhaps. A lion will swat at a fly.

"One insect considers another," said the dracocentaur.

"I talked to your predecessor, Versinen," said the being. "He went mad. Rather, more mad. Because I showed him what awaited him when he died."

IT paused and seemed to stare through them, the walls of stone, the mountain, and out to the stars. Or beyond the stars.

"What waits for us all," it said. "What terrifies even me."

Now, for the first time since Raspold had entered, Nge spoke.

He bellowed, "You are lying! After death, there is nothing. Nothing! You are trying to frighten us! You do not know! You do not know!"

The dracocentaur waited until the echoes of Nge's frenzied cries had ceased. Then, it said, "I know."

Again, it fell silent, and the brain within considered thoughts beyond the scope of man. It said, "The one who came before Versinen was a creature whose kind you do not know. They perished some hundreds of thousands of years ago—your Earth years, that is. He came seeking knowledge, not treasure to loot. I showed him what waited for him, for us all. He left crazy. Not as insane as Versinen, because he had greater stability. But he returned to his planet and told what he knew. I think that his revelation had something to do with their swift decline and death."

"What do you intend to do to us?" asked Woodwolf. "I only came here to get my sister and to make Nge pay for what he has done."

"During which, you injured some of my children," said the being. (Raspold thought of him now as Voittamaton; man must name everything).

"Your children? These? said Woodwolf, gesturing at the scorpions.

"Yes. For much longer than you can ever conceive, I was alone here. You see, my people have been practically immortal for a—to you—immeasurably long time. We were scattered over this Galaxy and others. Then, one by one, we died. Some by accident, for we are not truly immortal. Most by suicide. They had lived too long. Only I am left. I would have killed myself, too, but I lived long enough to find out what waits for us after death. And then I dared not.

"But one of the things that made life intolerable was that we quit having children. We quit because we saw that life was, in the end, only futility. Moreover, after eons, we lost the desire to mate, to reproduce. You people have found out how to prolong your lives. And you are just beginning to encounter the numerous problems immortality brings. Wait until you are semi-immortal, like us. Then. . . .

"However, recently—a thousand or so of your years ago—I thought, why not have children? They will be some companionship. Not much. Some. So, I removed several millions of egg-cells from suspended animation, and changed their structure somewhat so that they can live and operate in space as well as in atmosphere of any type. They are also the only truly omnivorous sentients in the Galaxy.

They can eat anything: rocks, trees, plants, animals. They can survive on radiant energy, too, though this is only enough to keep the spark of life from going out. Naturally, they derive the most benefit from eating flesh.

THESE you see now are pre-adolescents. They have been developing for several hundreds of your years. Soon, they will be adolescent and will be reproducing. Then, when this planet becomes too crowded, they will be venturing into the stellar systems in your Galaxy. Look out then!

"But these do not represent the greatest danger to you. There is a storm gathering on the Galaxy nearest to this, beings who are far more dangerous than my young. But you need not worry about them for a hundred years or more.

"However, you may be able to fight these youngsters. They are intelligent but ignorant. Savages. I will teach them nothing. It will be interesting, I hope, to see how they develop, but I doubt it. Interest dies as immortality grows."

"What about us?" shouted Nge. "We are not immortal! We want to live as long as we can! We cannot hurt you, and it will cost you nothing to let us loose!"

"You plead for your lives? Beg?"

"I beg for nothing!" said Nge. "I will not go down on my knees to you and whine for my life! I do not want to die! But, if I have to kiss your scaly tail, I will die first! I do say that we can be no danger to you. So, why not let us go? Especially, if what you say is true about the afterlife? Why condemn us to something you cannot face yourself?"

A horrible rictus opened Voittamatton's mouth. He said, "So! You do not believe what I told you about death. You are only using what I said to argue with me. I will not argue."

He was silent again for a while. Then, "I admire courage and the will to live. Even if I know they mean nothing. Perhaps, that is why I brought my young to life."

He gave a quite human shrug of his shoulders, and . . .

Raspold did not at first grasp what had happened. Seemingly, between the blink of his eyes, he had been transported from the chamber of Voittamatton to the interior of a spaceship. He was in the lounge (he had seen enough of these to know), and stars hung outside the transparent viewport of the lounge. Whether the transition had been instantaneous or he had been made unconscious and transported here, he did not know and would never know.

The important thing was that Nge and his crew and Tuli and

Chuck Woodwolf and himself were here. They were standing on a great heap of jewels, a layer of diamonds and other precious stones at least a foot thick.

Beyond the lounge was the open doorway to a corridor. And, far down the corridor, another open door. The entrance to the bridge. The pilot's chair was empty; nobody was at the controls.

NGE and his crew still had their feet encased in the transparent blocks. But the blocks were gone from the legs of himself, Woodwolf, and a woman who must be Woodwolf's sister.

Raspold, the shock clearing, saw the situation as arranged by Voittamaton. The ship was accelerating or the gravitic field was on. Otherwise, they'd have been floating in free fall. The way to control of the ship lay open. Raspold shouted, "To the bridge, Woodwolf!" Then he was in the pilot's seat and there, dead ahead, looming so hugely it looked as if it would crush them, was the bulk of a planet. It filled the screen except for one corner cut by an arc.

Raspold was too old a spacehand to be alarmed by its seeming proximity. Instead, he located and found the transceiver controls. And, within a minute, he was in contact. The planet was Diveboard.

THE END