

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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## CONTENTS

### NOVELETTES

- THE CHILDLESS ONES** by *Daniel F. Galouye* ..... 18  
The natives of the new planet had no interest in sex
- SONG OF THE AXE** by *Don Berry* ..... 48  
Was the dancing girl a key to the mystery on Procyon?
- DEATH'S PLANET** by *Robert Silverberg* ..... 90  
Nature in the raw is a hideous thing

### SHORT STORIES

- A TIME FOR REVENGE** by *Calvin M. Knox* ..... 2  
The Vordillans were alien. They thought differently
- THE FEAR TRAP** by *Richard R. Smith* ..... 80  
How can fear be driven from the mind?
- THE BETTER LIFE** by *Charles V. De Vet* ..... 120  
Everything is subject to the force of will power

### FEATURES

- SCIENCE SHORTS** by *Edgar P. Straus* ..... 47
- LOOK TO THE STARS** by *Scott Nevets* ..... 79
- SOUND AT SEA** by *J. Foster Blake* ..... 89
- NUCLEAR NEWS** by *Steven Rory* ..... 127

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# SONG OF THE AXE

by DON BERRY

NOVELETTE

*illustrated by* ORBAN

There was a hidden mystery on Procyon IV. It could be vital to the whole Federation. Mason Kimberly thought the dancing girl might be a key that would unlock it

**T**HE dingy bar on Procyon IV offered only two things. Liquor and a dancer. The liquor was rotgut, but the dancer was good.

Kimberly sat at the bar, nursing a drink, his lean, square face impassive. Through narrowed eyes he watched the dancer whirl and spin beneath the blue light. She's good, he thought, too damned good for a cat's nest like this.

He reflected bitterly that he had once watched the premier dancers of the Galactic Ballet, back on Terra, in the huge Inworld Auditorium. They had danced for *him* then, for Mason Kimberly, Hero. Now he sat in a rundown tavern on Procy

on, trying to make a drink last so he wouldn't have to spend his few remaining credits for another. It made you wonder.

The dancer finished with a pirouette that stripped the last filmy cloth away from her slim body. She stood there under the spotlight for a moment nude, her ripe flesh glistening under the lights. Then it was black, and when the light came back on, she was gone.

Kimberly signalled the bartender. The burly Procy moved up the bar, taking his own time.

"Who's your dancer?" Kimberly asked.

"You want another drink?"

"I asked you who's your



dancer," Kimberly repeated.

"Name's Neela," said the bartender, unruffled. "Don't make trouble, Kimberly. You're in no position to make trouble." He made a small gesture with one pudgy hand.

Kimberly looked around him. Conversation had stopped in the bar. All heads were turned toward the two men, watching quietly. The space-linted faces wore expressions of contempt and hostility. There was little question whose side the men would take if it came to a fight. Some of them seemed to be relishing the prospect.

Kimberly said an ugly word, very quietly. The Procy bartender's face twisted, but he made no move.

Kimberly swung away from the bar and headed toward the door. As he reached it, he heard the conversation resume.

He stepped out into the cold Procyon night. There were no lights, not in what they called the Pariah Quarter, but Kimberly had no trouble seeing. The sky shed its own light, the massed accumulation of billions of stars. They lay like a great luminous blanket over the planet, heaped and massed

in a profusion unknown on Terra. The night sky on Procyon was like a gigantic jeweler's velvet, gleaming with the brilliance of ten thousand diamonds, a million queen's tiaras, ten million flashing jewels scattered at random across the sky.

HE stood there with his head thrown back, letting the liquid bright sky soak into his eyes, and thinking about space. Thinking of standing on the shining bridge of an EcoSurv ship. Thinking of the controls moving under his hands like a woman, thinking of the fierce joy of fighting landings on—

As though moved by some inner sense, Kimberly suddenly dropped to his knees. Something whined over his head and hit the wall behind him with a crash.

He whirled, still in a crouching position, and dimly saw a shadowy figure turn and begin to run down the narrow alleyway. A quick glance told him the figure had too much start to be caught. Once around the corner, he could lose himself easily in the endless series of alleys and cutbacks of the Pa-

riah Quarter. Even those who had lived there most of their lives didn't know them all, and Kimberly was relatively new.

He stood, and walked over to the wall. Deeply embedded in it was a Procy Fire-axe. It was a ceremonial weapon used in the Procy Fire Ritual, a huge, double-bitted axe with a heavily embellished blade. Except that on this one, both edges were honed to a razor keenness. If it had ever been used in the Fire Ceremony, that was its purpose no longer. It was meant to kill.

Kimberly's eye roved over the polished bit with the skill of an artist. A part of his mind he had not used in many months told him the Axe was a particularly good specimen. Narleen Dynasty, probably, exquisitely worked. The intertwining engraved designs were done with precision and sensitivity, the work of a master craftsman. Kimberly knew that Narleen Dynasty Axes were not easy to come by, particularly not a Singing Axe, which this one apparently was, from the fluted groovings on the bit. It didn't make any sense that someone would use a work of

ancient art for murder.

On the other hand, it didn't make any sense that anyone would try to murder him, really. Except possibly a relative of one of the Canopus VI colonists, and he thought he had checked their whereabouts carefully enough.

After the Canopus VI incident, he was not a popular man, certainly. But would anyone hate him enough to kill him? It didn't seem reasonable. The Solar Federation laws were not particularly lenient with murderers, and even on Procyon IV the law enforcement agencies were efficient when they had to be.

He shrugged and hefted the Fire-axe. So. He would add it to his collection of Procy art, when and if he ever saw Terra again.

As he started again down the alleyway, three men turned in at the other end, walking rapidly, close together. Kimberly stopped, shifted his grip on the Fire-axe.

The men came closer. Kimberly spun the Axe in his hand, making the finely worked blade scatter reflections of light from the starry sky. The three men

stopped, and one stepped forward.

"Kimberly?" he asked dubiously.

"Yeah."

"Come with us."

"What am I under arrest for?"

"Nothing, yet. Somebody wants to talk to you."

"Who?"

"Jacob Spack," said the Guard officer. "Where'd you get the axe?"

"It was a present," said Kimberly. "Sort of a going away present, you might call it."

"Where you going?"

"No place. But the people who—gave it to me didn't know that. What does Spack want with me?"

"How should we know?" said one of the other men irritably. "He said to pick you up, that's all. Why don't you put that Fire-axe down?"

"All right," Kimberly said. "You three walk along in front of me, then." Grumbling, the Guardsmen turned and walked toward the end of the alley, with Kimberly following several steps behind. Just around the corner a Guard cruiser was parked and the leader of the

three motioned for Kimberly to get in.

THE cruiser swung smoothly into the street. Soon they had left the Pariah Quarter and were moving along the brightly lit concourses of the City proper. They seemed to be heading on a direct route to the huge spire that marked the Ecological Survey Building, and Kimberly began to relax.

It began to look as though the Guardsmen were actually taking him to see Spack, Director of Ecological Surveys. Kimberly wondered bitterly what Spack could possibly have to say to him.

He didn't blame the Old Man for what he had done, he'd had no choice. Popular opinion would have forced him to get rid of Kimberly, if nothing else. When two hundred colonists die, people are going to look for a scapegoat, and Kimberly was it.

As Captain of an EcoSurv ship, it was Kimberly's job to examine the ecology of a colonizable planet. It had to be determined that the natural balance of a planet wouldn't be upset by the intrusion of human-

ity. If the arrival of colonists threw the planet's ecology off kilter, there was no telling what might happen. Nature has strange ways of maintaining her own balance, cruel and implacable ways. Usually they involved the removal of the disturbing element, in this case human colonists.

If a Captain's judgement was off, it could cost the lives of all the colonists, so EcoCaptains were not permitted to make mistakes.

Kimberly had.

It made no difference that the vicious *z'art* insects were in their larval stage when he had made his examination. By the time the colonists arrived on Canopus VI, they were hatched and looking for a place to lay their eggs. On the third day after planetfall a cloud of the *z'art* had spun over the horizon, so many as to blot out the sun. Like a monstrous scythe they swept through the colonists camp, cutting down everything before them. They moved like tiny flying needles, piercing everything in their flight path, injecting their paralytic poisons into anything warm, then depositing their eggs. The

living bodies of the human colonists had become incubators for the *z'art*. And since the *z'art* paralytic affected the muscle center but not the nerves, they had been conscious. Conscious and capable of feeling pain as the eggs grew in pulpy swarms beneath their flesh.

And Kimberly had become the most hated man in the Federation.

"We're here," the driver said shortly.

They got out of the Guard cruiser, walked through the lobby and entered the elevator. Kimberly noticed with wry amusement that his entrance caused a certain amount of consternation among the staff, but he said nothing.

The Old Man was seated at his huge desk, in the exact center of the room. He was idly shuffling papers, pretending to examine them, but Kimberly knew he was aware of his presence.

**S**PACK was a small man, but incredibly dynamic. Only a man with the energies of a giant could have held his job. His physical appearance was deceptive, small, balding, an almost

kindly face with bright blue eyes, but Kimberly knew how ruthless the man could be. He had seen it too often.

Spack looked up, regarding Kimberly without expression. His bright blue eyes flicked quickly down to Kimberly's hands, still holding the Procy Fire-axe.

"Where'd you get that?" Spack asked.

"It was thrown at me to-night."

"By whom?"

Kimberly shrugged. "I wish I knew. Thanks to you, lots of people like me."

Spack frowned. "Not enough to kill you," he said.

"I didn't think so either," Kimberly said. "But here's the Axe."

"That's bad," said Spack. "I hope it doesn't mean what I think it means." He reached forward on his desk, depressed a switch. "Find out who owns Procy Fire-axes, registered and un-registered, and where they are now."

"This shouldn't be hard to trace," Kimberly said. "It's Narleen Dynasty. There aren't many around."

Spack repeated the informa-

tion into the desk top, and turned back to face Kimberly.

"We'll see if we can trace it. Sit down."

Kimberly waited patiently while Spack shuffled the papers several more times. Abruptly, the small man said, "Kimberly, you want a job?"

"With EcoSurv? Hah! After the discharge you gave me I can't get a job sweeping streets in the Pariah Quarter."

"This is a big machine, Kimberly. People get caught in the gears occasionally. I thought you knew that."

"Nothing personal intended? Sure, I know that. It doesn't make it a hell of a lot easier to take."

"All right," said Spack. "I apologize. Do you think I *enjoyed* sacking the best man I had. I didn't have any choice, Kimberly. Keeping you would have destroyed people's faith in EcoSurv's infallibility. And," he added bitterly, "we've *got* to be infallible for them."

"Get to the point," said Kimberly. "What's the job?"

"I'll have to explain some things to you, first. What I'm going to tell you is known by only a handful of men. If you



don't want the job, you'll have to be hypnowashed. Still want to hear it?"

Kimberly nodded.

"All right," said Spack. "The brutal fact is that EcoSurv is going under. At the present rate of decline, it'll be dead in fifty years. When that happens, humanity stays on the planets it has. No more colonization, no more expansion."

"So?"

"Kimberly, I don't know what you've heard in the way of rumors, but this is *fact*. We are not alone, in the galaxy or any other. The Solar Federation is not the only Empire in the stars."

"I'd heard rumors," Kimberly admitted. "Wrote them off, mostly."

"They can't be written off any more. There is another Empire, and it is going to clash with the Solar Federation. Maybe not for two or three hundred years, but eventually it's inevitable. We know more about them than we think they know about us, though we may be mistaken. They are on a technological level comparable to ours, and, of course, they're humanoid."

"How do you know this much?"

"We captured one of their ships."

"Where?"

"Here. *In the Procyon system.*"

**K**IMBERLY was momentarily stunned. *The Outsiders were in the Procyon system!* What had been the vaguest of unsubstantiated rumors had suddenly become harsh fact. He was trying to sort out the implication of this unexpected data, when Spack's voice broke in again.

"The ironic fact," he said wryly, "is that the ship we took was Their equivalent of an Eco-Surv Team. They were checking out the Procy system against some old records of theirs."

"And they're humanoid."

"That's right. They can live on any planet we can. What this means, Kimberly is this: When the time of eventual contact comes, the two cultures will be in direct competition. The Solar Federation will have to be the stronger of the two, or it will be wiped out. In order to make it stronger, we

must expand. In order to expand, EcoSurv must continue, and even increase its effectiveness."

"And what's threatening EcoSurv?"

"Money," said Spack. "Simply money. Do you know how much it costs to send out a single Team? Yes, I suppose you do, you did it long enough. The simple fact is that the economy of the Federation will not even support exploration on the scale we need, much less colonization."

"Where do I come in? You asking for a donation?"

"Don't be funny, Kimberly. We have one chance, and only one. We can't compete on the basis we have. We've got to have a shortcut. We think we've found one, but we can't even be sure of that."

"What is it?"

"Naturally, the Outsider ship we captured carried a library. Part of it was stuff quietly picked up here, when they found the system was inhabited. Their Language Comps were in the process of translating it into their own language, so we have several books in both languages. With this as

a basis, we've translated the rest of their library and found out some things about the Procyon system we didn't even know.

"According to one of their histories, Procyon was once the center of an interstellar empire of its own. The original Procy race had colonized a volume of space that makes the Solar Federation look like a child's balloon. Then they disappeared. The Outsider history didn't say how, apparently the records had been lost. It was a long time ago, perhaps better than a million years. At any rate, it explains the advanced artifacts some of the EcoCaptains found on Survey runs.

"The point of this being that the Procy race had something comparable to EcoSurv. It's a necessary pattern. Before a planet can be colonized, *somebody* has to go in and check it out."

"All right," said Kimberly. "Admitted. So? I don't see how ancient history has any bearing on this situation."

"Just this," said Spack. "We have reason to believe that the original records of the Procy Teams are still in existence."

Two thousand years, thought Kimberly, five thousand years of EcoSurv work, already done for them. Perhaps enough to make the difference between victory and defeat in the eventual clash between Empires. If they could find the records.

"Wouldn't they be obsolete?" he asked.

"Some of them," Spack admitted. "Even those that were obsolete would be useful. If we could date them, the computers could predict the eventual development of any given planet, and make a pretty good estimate of what it would be like now. And just knowing where to *look* for an oxygen planet would save us billions of credits and hundreds of years."

"Where do you think the records are?" Kimberly asked.

"Right here. On Procyon Four."

"Why?"

"One of the jobs of the Outsider Team was to search for them here."

**A** buzzer on Spack's desk hummed angrily, and the small man cut in the wall speaker.

"Yes?"

"Here's the data on the ceremonial Fire-axes, sir."

"All right, I'm recording."

"There are sixteen Narleen Dynasty Axes in existence that we know of. Fifteen are in private collections and museums. Do you want the list?"

"No," said Spack. "What about the other one?"

"It was registered to the Thalan temple of the Fire Ceremony, about fifty years ago."

"Where's that?" interrupted Spack.

"Here on Four," said the voice. "In the Kandor Mountains. But it isn't there now, the Axe I mean. There was some kind of religious defection, one of the priests deserted the temple and took the Fire-axe with him. That was about twenty years ago and there's no record of it since. They never found the priest."

"All right," said Spack, and cut off the speaker. "Dead end," he said to Kimberly.

"Looks like I got a Fire-axe of my very own," Kimberly said.

"Do you want the job?" asked Spack abruptly.

"You want me to find the Procy records," said Kimberly.

"Yes. Frankly, the only reason I can think that anyone would try to kill you is that they heard you were coming here. That means there's a leak somewhere in my own organization. It may mean that the Outsiders even have an espionage system on Four, I don't know. The only thing I can say for certain is that it'll be dangerous, and you won't be able to depend on EcoSurv for help if you get into a tight spot. I understand the Procy are pretty touchy about people digging around in their past."

"D a m n e d if I do and damned if I don't," mused Kimberly. "Thanks to you I can't get a job anywhere else. I don't suppose I have any choice. You've got me over a barrel."

"That's the way I see it," said Spack.

"All right, you're on. What about pay?"

"Living expenses, unlimited expenses you run into on the job, and reinstatement of your old commission if you succeed."

"If I don't?"

"Tough," said Spack.

Kimberly laughed glumly. "You really stack the deck, don't you? All right, where do I start?"

"With the Outsider library," Spack said. "Oh, I suppose I should tell you one other thing, Kimberly."

"What?"

"We're missing a ship, too."

**T**HE library was not particularly enlightening. The Outsider histories were apparently pieced together from the fragmentary records that survived some great cataclysm of their own. As such, their information was spotty; very detailed examinations of some things, vague guesses about others.

The records of the Procyon survey teams were somewhere on the fourth planet. Procyon IV had been the base of operations for the original Procy race, just as it was for the Ter-ran crews. Which was natural enough; the present-day Pro-cys, direct descendants of the previous culture, were completely humanoid.

Beyond the planet, the Outsiders apparently knew nothing of the record's location.

The one part K i m b e r l y

found most interesting, if not helpful, was the lengthy description of the Procyon religious ceremonies.

Their religion had apparently been irrevocably connected with conquest, and symbolized the spreading of the Procy race through space. It was their divine destiny to conquer, and all the resources of the planet and its peoples had been directed to that sole end.

Kimberly found the descriptions of the ritual dances vaguely disturbing, but could not say why. Like all races bent on conquest, their existence depended on racial fertility, and there was a good proportion of their ritual that was frankly sexual in intent and meaning. Many of their dances were the direct enactments of their desire for, and realization of, fertility for the race.

It was a fairly common pattern, but Kimberly felt the tugging sense of familiarity more strongly than mere anthropological knowledge could explain.

**H**E left the EcoSurv Building, turning over in his mind the limited data the Out-

sider library had provided him with. There was not much to go on. Well, let that settle for a while; first things first.

That night he discovered the source of the ringing sense of familiarity the descriptions of the Procyon religious rites had caused.

It was the dancer he had watched in the bar, the night before. Tonight, sitting this time at a private table, Kimberly watched her with new knowledge adding meaning to her movements. He realized she was dancing a somewhat pale version of the Procy fertility rites, and caught himself wishing she were doing the whole thing. As it was, the excitement of her dance caught at his imagination, and apparently the imaginations of all the men in the bar, for the end of the number was signalled by tremendous applause and shouting. Operating on a hunch, Kimberly quickly scribbled a note. He signalled the bartender, who reluctantly came to the table.

"What did you say that girl's name was?"

"Neela," said the bartender.

"Take her this," Kimberly

said, handing him the note.

"Neela don't talk to the customers," said the heavy man, making no move to take the folded paper.

Kimberly dug into his pocket, added a five credit note to the paper. The bartender reached for it.

"Later," said Kimberly. "When I'm sure she has the note."

Grumbling, the bartender moved off into the dark recesses to the rear of the bar. In a few moments he reappeared. Beside him was the slight form of the girl, wrapped in a long enveloping cloak that made her look like a child in her mother's clothing.

Silently, Kimberly handed the bartender the five-credit note, and motioned for the girl to sit opposite him. She did, keeping her darkly luminous eyes directly on Kimberly.

"You dance well," he said.

"I know." Her voice was as gentle and liquid as her dance had been, with the same, sure confidence.

"Not particularly modest, are you?" Kimberly laughed.

"Why should I be?" the girl asked. "My dancing is a fact,

why should I pretend it is not?"

"No reason, I guess," Kimberly admitted.

"Your note said you were familiar with the dance. I don't see how that is possible. It is my own."

"Where did you learn it?" asked Kimberly.

"Much of it I made myself. Some is from—a dance of my people."

"A very old dance of your people."

"Yes."

"A religious dance."

"Perhaps we understand different things by religion," said the girl warily.

"A ritual dance," Kimberly insisted. "A dance performed only in the temples during ceremonies."

"You are obviously mistaken," the girl said with amusement. "Did I not just dance it—here?" Her graceful gesture expressed her contempt for the surroundings, and for Kimberly.

"Why do you dance here, anyway?" Kimberly asked, ignoring her comment. "With your body, and your talent, you could be dancing on Terra in

the Interworld Auditorium. I've seen worse, there."

"One must live," she shrugged.

"Not like this."

"Perhaps not. Recognition of ability does not always come swiftly. I'm sorry," she added, glancing at Kimberly's watch.

"I must go now.

"Where?"

"Home. I am finished for the evening."

"Let me take you."

"No," she said. "I'm sorry, it isn't permitted."

"Not permitted by whom?" asked Kimberly. "Him?" He gestured to the pudgy bartender, who stood behind the bar, glaring.

"No," she said. "By me." She stood quickly and moved gracefully across the room, entering the door from which she'd come, apparently back stage.

**K**IMBERLY counted slowly to fifty, then yawned ostentatiously and stood up. Crossing to the bar he wore a rueful expression of good-natured defeat. He handed the bartender another five-credit note and said, "She doesn't go

for the idea. Thanks anyway. She looks like a good one."

The bartender didn't smile as he took the extended money. "Better try someplace else. Neela's too high class to go to bed with the likes of you, Kimberly."

Suppressing an impulse to put his fist in the pudgy face, Kimberly left. He turned the corner and doubled back behind the building, where he waited in the dark until he saw the girl's slim figure move out of the back door. She stood quietly for a moment, apparently looking around her, but Kimberly was well hidden.

The shadow form moved away from the wall and down the alleyway. Behind her, Kimberly followed quietly, keeping to the shadows. The girl passed two streets, then turned into a doorway that was almost invisible in the darkness.

Kimberly speeded up and turned into the doorway. There was a sudden metallic pressure in his belly, and he looked down to see the starlight reflected from the muzzle of the weapon in the girl's hand.

"Oh," said Neela. "It's just you." Kimberly didn't know

whether he was being complimented or insulted.

"Who did you expect?" he asked lightly. "Just wanted to make sure you got home all right."

"Thank you very much," said Neela sarcastically. "I appreciate your concern."

"Aren't you going to invite your protector in for a nightcap?"

Ignoring that, the girl said, "Where did you get the idea that my dance was like a religious ceremony?"

"Trade you that information for a nightcap," Kimberly said.

The girl considered this for a moment, then put the gun back into her coat pocket. "Oh, all right," she said. "I suppose you aren't very dangerous."

"I don't know as I like being considered not dangerous," said Kimberly as they climbed the darkened stairs.

"You're not," the girl told him flatly.

There was not a single Terran object in the girl's room. Kimberly noted this especially, for most of the Procyon population had fully adopted Terran ways. Since it was furnished in Procyon style, there were no

chairs in the room. Against the walls were large mats, which doubled as sleeping pads. Now they were covered with the daytime covers of bright saffron.

Kimberly kneeled on one of the mats and bent his head to touch his knees. As he straightened, he noticed the girl's surprise that he knew the formal Procy gesture of respect for one's host. However, she did not comment on it, but went into the little serving alcove and got a bottle full of a murky red fluid.

When she returned, Kimberly was standing in front of a painting, his back to her. The painting was a landscape, depicting rugged mountain country with a Fire-temple set inconspicuously into one of the cliffs. It was beautifully executed, in the style of one of the greatest of Procyon artists. Kimberly mentioned it.

"You seem very familiar with our art and customs," said Neela. Kimberly heard the clink of the *mazh* bottle against the cups.

"I have a certain amount of my own," said Kimberly. "On Terra."



"You neither look nor act like a collector," the girl said. "At least not a collector of art."

She had removed her cloak in the serving room, and was now dressed in a style Kimberly had seen only in paintings. Her breasts were bare, and she wore a skirt-like garment which began at her hips. It was held almost waist high on her right hip, and cascaded gently across the soft contours of her belly to a much lower point on her left hip. The left side was slit from floor to top and joined with a golden pin.

"Does my dress bother you?" she asked naively. "I thought anyone so familiar with our customs would not be shocked.

"It bothers me, but in a pleasant way," Kimberly said.

Putting his cup down, he took her slim white shoulder in one hand. The girl leaned forward slightly, lips parting. Kneeling, the slit of her dress exposed the full length of her thigh, and Kimberly gently moved his hand along the smooth flesh, until he reached the golden pin which clasped the top together. Her full, firm breasts moved toward him,

swaying slightly from the rhythm of her breathing.

Their lips met, and clung, and Kimberly felt the warmth of her mouth on his, moving softly. She leaned back, pulling him with her to the mat. Kimberly felt the golden pin loosen beneath his fingers, and then there was only soft flesh beneath his hand.

When they finally sank into sleep, his body was pervaded with a warm fullness, and the touch of her body against his was electric.

WHEN he awoke, she was gone from his side, and he could hear low voices in the adjoining room. As he started to sit up, he discovered his hands were manacled together, as were his feet. Heavy links of chain clanked together as he moved, attracting the attention of the people in the other room.

There were three of them. Neela, her face cold and impassive, led the way. Behind her came a small man, white-haired, old, dressed in the traditional Procyon robe of respect. Last was a man as large as Kimberly himself, deeply tanned and muscular. His skull

was shaven and tanned an even brown from long exposure.

"Well, well," the old man said. "I see your—guest has awakened. "Did you sleep well?"

"Who are you? What's the idea?"

"Allow me to introduce ourselves," said the old man. "Neela, unfortunately, you already know. I am Dar Manson, the young man is my son Kai Manson."

"Why the manacles?" asked Kimberly.

"Why, obviously to prevent your going anywhere," said Dar Manson in a tone of surprise.

"Obviously," agreed Kimberly wryly. "Beyond that?"

"We have some plans of our own, Mr. Kimberly. Unfortunately you have become involved in them, and we must have you with us, whether you prefer it that way or not. We are going to take a trip up into the mountains. If you will come gently, we will take the manacles off. Otherwise, they stay on."

"Don't be a fool, father," said Neela. "You couldn't trust him anyway. The manacles stay on."

"I'm sorry," said Dar Manson. "I forget. One cannot trust the Terrans. I am not used to dealing with them." He turned again to Kimberly.

"As I said, we are going to the mountains, Mr. Kimberly. There, in fact." He pointed to the painting Kimberly had examined that evening, showing the Fire-temple in the rocks.

"Would those be the Kandor Mountains?" Kimberly asked.

"Very perceptive," nodded the old man. "These people are not so stupid, Neela. You've misrepresented them to me."

"And," Kimberly continued, "if those are the Kandor Mountains, that would be the Thalan Fire-temple."

"Yes."

"From which a Narleen Dynasty Fire-axe is missing."

"Yes. We are going to return it. That is one of the reasons for our trip."

"What makes you think I'll give it to you?" asked Kimberly.

"We've already seen to that," Dar Manson said. "Kai visited your flat earlier. We have the Axe here."

"You work efficiently."

"We must. We are few.

There is little allowance for error."

Looking again at Neela, Kimberly said, "You don't care much what weapons you use, either." He was grimly satisfied to see the rising blush cover the girl's features.

**S**UDDENLY a huge fist exploded in his face, throwing his head back to the floor. Kai Manson stood over him, apparently ready to throw his hammer-like fist again.

"Kai!" the old man shouted. "Enough!" The young man stepped back, and Dar spoke to Kimberly.

"You touched a rather sensitive point with Kai. You should be more careful."

"I think I will in the future," Kimberly said ruefully, tasting the salt blood that ran from his nose.

"Very wise," nodded the old man. "Kai, pick him up." The young giant moved behind Kimberly, easily lifted him to his feet.

"Does it talk?" asked Kimberly, tilting his head at Kai.

"Only when 'it' has something to say," the old man said

with amusement. "A policy we might all be well advised to follow. Especially yourself, if I may say so."

Kai went to the room from which the three had come, returned with the ritual Fire-axe in his hands, holding it with the ease of long familiarity. Seeing Kimberly staring at him, the huge man grinned. Kimberly was surprised to see that the grin was not a malicious one, rather it seemed an expression of genuine amusement. He almost caught himself grinning back.

They left the flat, Kimberly walking noisily and awkwardly because of the chains binding his ankles. Instead of going down the stairs he had come up that evening, they moved to the back of the building. What looked like a boarded-up door opened at Dar Manson's touch, revealing a sleek, modern elevator. It dropped smoothly, far past the street floor and stopped with a hushing susurration. When the door opened it revealed a tunnel-car, like those Kimberly had found on Nighthawk III. Only this one,

instead of being rusted through long disuse, was gleaming and polished.

"Get in," said Dar Manson.

The tunnel-car started rapidly, pushing Kimberly back in the seat with the force of acceleration.

"So these were native to Procyon," he said.

"Yes," said Dar Manson. "There are a few still in use."

"Why doesn't the Solar Federation know about them?"

Dar Manson laughed. "You Terrans believe what you are told," he said ambiguously. "When your curiosity is satisfied with likely stories, you never pry any further."

"Why are you taking the Fire-axe back to the temple?" Kimberly asked.

"It is needed," the old man said.

"Father," said Neela. "You are talking too much. He doesn't have to know anything."

"Perhaps not," said the old man. "On the other hand—Kimberly, how much do you know about our religion?"

"Not a great deal," said Kimberly cautiously.

"Just what you read in the Outsider's library, eh?" Dar Manson looked at him with amusement. "Yes, we know all about that. It's one of the reasons you're here." Neela started to interrupt, but the old man silenced her with a gesture. "Neela, please let me handle this."

"You know about the Outsider ship, then," said Kimberly.

"Oh yes," said Dar. "We've known about the Outsider for a good while now. We—had a brush with him a long time ago."

"You're speaking in riddles," said Kimberly.

"No mind. We're here now. You'll see soon enough."

"Father," Neela gasped. "You're not going to let him—"

"Yes, Neela, I'm afraid I am. It has occurred to me in the past that I may have been taking the wrong approach to this problem in ignoring the Terrans. I'm beginning to be convinced of it."

"Let me what?" asked Kimberly.

"Watch the Fire-Ritual," said Dar Manson.

THE Thalan Fire-temple was set into a cliff of the Kandor range. The straight purple cliff soared above it for a thousand vertical feet. Below, the ground tapered into a series of gently rolling hills, which ended on a plain nearly fifteen miles away. From its vantage point, the Thalan temple commanded a view of all the surrounding countryside. At its back was the impregnable bulk of the Kandor range.

Kimberly caught a brief glimpse of this as they left the tunnel car and crossed the narrow courtyard-pavilion in front of the temple. A low wall separated the pavilion from the beginning of the foothills. He was taken through a narrow tunnel to the central chamber, hewn from the living rock. The central chamber was circular, perhaps a hundred feet across. All around the perimeter the wall was pierced with tunnels similar to the one Kimberly had come through. They were apparently the only entrances, as though the chamber were the hub of a wheel and the tunnels, spokes.

Neela and Kai left them

then, and Dar Manson led Kimberly up to an overhanging shelf like a balcony above the central amphitheatre.

In the center of the amphitheatre was a slightly raised circular disc, perhaps six inches higher than the surrounding floor and five feet in diameter.

"I was once the priest of this temple," Dar Manson informed him. "Unfortunately, there was a difference of opinion between myself and the other Initiates. I left."

"Taking the Fire-axe."

"Taking the Fire-axe," agreed the old man. "I hated to do it, but it was the only way I could back up my feelings on the matter."

The amphitheatre began to darken. Coming from the tunnels, dark figures began to gather. They formed a ring about the outside edge of the chamber. Kimberly started to ask what the disagreement was that caused Dar Manson to leave, but the ex-priest hushed him.

"Watch," he said. From somewhere a drum began to throb, and was joined by the muted wailing of strings. The circular group below them be-

gan to sway gently in time with the slow rhythm set by the drum.

Dar Manson was now whispering low into Kimberly's ear, "We had an Empire once, from Procyon our race scattered to the stars. We ruled for ten thousand years, unchallenged. Then—we met the race you call the Outsider. They were young, vigorous, growing. Our Empire, though larger, was old. We had lost the vitality of youth, we had settled into more peaceful ways."

Below, the throbbing of the drums grew faster and louder, as counterpoint to the ex-priest's words.

"When the two cultures met, there was war, as there must always be. Our weapons were stronger, but we had forgotten how to wage a war on an inter-stellar scale. Their drive was greater. They wanted conquest with the hunger of a man for a woman, while Procyon wanted only to maintain what we had.

"The two advantages cancelled each other out. The combat left a thousand planets barren, deserted, lifeless. In the last stages, the Weapon was discovered, which can make a

sun go nova within seconds. That has been lost, and for that we can thank whatever gods there may be. But the war had destroyed both cultures, both were crippled beyond help. Both withdrew to their home systems, all dreams of Empire crushed.

"The Outsider forgot, we know that. Procyon almost forgot, except for a few men who determined that the lesson should not be wasted."

**T**HE lights in the amphitheatre were still low. The swaying circle was barely visible. Suddenly, a brilliant shaft of light darted from the ceiling, falling on the central disc. From the darkness a swift shape came, and Kimberly saw that it was Neela. She swept once around the central disc, just outside the ring of light, and then leaped full into the brilliant shaft. She stood rigid, her arms outstretched above her, her head thrown back. In one hand she carried a wand with what looked to Kimberly like a crystal tip. Neela thrust the wand up into the shaft of light, as if trying to reach its source. Gradually, the crystal

tip began to sparkle and gleam with a light of its own.

Soon it was brighter than the light which kindled it. The strings had stopped their wailing, and there was only the rapid beat of the drum in the amphitheatre.

The circle began to shift.

It split into segments, then into small groups, then into individual dancers. As they passed near the shaft of light, Kimberly saw that each dancer carried a wand of similar construction, though dark. They began to weave a complex pattern about the central disc, where Neela still stood rigid. Kimberly heard Dar Manson's voice again in his ear.

"These men embodied the facts of our history into ritual, to be passed on from generation to generation. A few Initiates of each generation, the high priests, were to know the symbolism, for they were to have access to the records. It is not difficult to understand, when you know what to look for: Neela represents Procyon in the dance. Watch."

Neela began to sway beneath the shaft of light. Gradually the swaying became more pro-

nounced, and soon she was making a slow circle, the glowing tip of the wand reaching almost the limit of the cylinder of light in which she stood.

Then she left the disc and darted between the other dancers, who continued to move around the disc in a pattern too complex for Kimberly to make out. Occasionally as she moved, Neela would touch one of the dark wands with her own, and it would spring into light. Soon the floor of the amphitheater was full of the bright sparks; and the central shaft of light was diminished and faded, leaving the chamber lit by the shining wands of the dancers.

Suddenly a new drum came into play, deep and heavy. It beat slowly, implacably, and a new figure came onto the floor. It was Kai Manson, his brown body gleaming with oil, the Fire-axe cradled in his arms.

"The Outsider," the old man said.

Behind the young giant came a horde of hooded figures, dark shadows against the light shed by the wands of Neela's dancers. They too carried wands, these glowing with a smoky red light. They began to weave in

and out of the complex pattern of white. When one would touch a white wand with his own red one, the white and red would both be extinguished, and both dancers would sink to the floor.

Neela was back on the central disc, and Kai Manson mounted it with her. They began a slow, circling dance about each other, Kai twisting the Fire-axe and sending splintered shards of reflected light into the shadows, Neela moving straight and graceful.

As more and more of the wand-lights were extinguished by contact with each other, the central shaft of light began to glow again, glinting down on the oiled bodies of the man and woman.

"Our people came back to Procyon IV," the old man was whispering. "The Fire-temples were set up, to be the heritage of Procyon in a better time. The records we could salvage were sealed in vaults in each temple. One key was made for each vault, and put into the hands of the priest of that temple. If they were threatened, they were to be destroyed."

Kai was now swinging the

Fire-axe in a great circle around his head.

"Listen!" said the old man. "The Axe sings!"

**K**IMBERLY listened. The keen blade moaned and whistled as it swung. The flute decorations caught the air and whined. Kai began to whirl the great blade faster, and the song grew higher. Several times he slashed in a great diagonal at Neela, without breaking the rhythm of his swing. Each time she stepped smoothly out of the way and the shining bit missed her slim body by inches.

"The Fire-axes are the keys to the vaults," said Dar, "and that is why I took this one with me. Now we have returned it."

With a shriek of victory that resounded through the chamber and echoed back from its walls, Kai swung the Axe into the center of the raised disc. He and Neela stepped swiftly into the shadows.

With a whining of tortured metal, the disc raised, a tubular column rising from the floor. The dancer had gone, and there was no one left in the amphitheater.



theatre except the two men on the balcony.

"The vault," said Dar Manson.

"Why are you showing this to me?" Kimberly said.

"Because the *O u t s i d e r* is back in our system," the ex-priest told him. "You have captured one ship, a small one, but there will be others, and very soon."

"What records are in the *Thalan vault*?"

"The ones you were sent to find," said the old man. "The ecological data on all the planets of the *Procyon Empire*. For twenty years I have held the key to the vault, for it was twenty years ago that the first *Outsider* made contact with this system again. The other *Initiates* wanted to destroy the records, but I was convinced the contact was accidental, that they were not bent on conquest again. Now they have come again.

"You were involved because you were close on the trail and you had the *Five-axe* which *Neela* unfortunately—gave you."

"Why?"

"*Neela* has never been in this

temple, though *Kai* grew up here. She was born after I left, and took a wife. She was trained in the ritual, but not its meaning. When she was instructed to assassinate you, she picked the first weapon at hand, without realizing its importance."

Suddenly there was a thunderous roar, shaking the balcony on which Kimberly and the old man sat. A thin streamer of dust floated down from the ceiling.

"What was that?"

"I don't know," said Dar Manson. "S u r e l y they couldn't—"

The lean, muscular figure of *Kai Manson* darted across the amphitheatre floor. He stopped below the balcony and cupped his hands to his mouth. His voice was drowned by another clap of thunder and the balcony shook again.

"Dar!" shouted the young man, "they're here! The *Outsider* is attacking!"

"Take these things off my wrists," Kimberly snapped.

Dazedly, *Dar Manson* complied. "I don't know what—"

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" More dust began to

trickle from the ceiling as the Outsider's blasting began to take effect. Kimberly grabbed the old man's arm and pulled him off the balcony.

"How do you lower the vault?" he shouted.

"From the main floor."

"Let's get down there!"

They stumbled through the increasing dust, finally finding the stairs which led to the main floor. In the main chamber they met Kai, who turned them around.

"It's no use," he said. "The vault won't go back down. The blasting has jammed it half-way!"

"Then destroy it!" said Dar.

"No!" Kimberly said. "We'll defend it!" To Kai he said, "Have you any hand weapons?"

"Some," said the young man. "Back in the living quarters."

"Get them out. Get as many men as you can who know how to use them."

**KAI** ran off into one of the tunnels to collect what weapons the temple could offer. Kimberly grasped the shoulder of another young man from the crowd that was begin-

ning to gather in the central chamber.

"Where's the Outsider?" he demanded.

"They landed in the foothills. They're blasting from their ship and sending troops out on foot."

"How'd they get a ship past the Federation?"

"It's a Federation ship. I don't know where it came from."

Kai Manson returned, laden with weapons, and began passing them out to the men in the chamber. Another blast shook the temple, and plumes of dust descended toward the floor.

"They'll have the range in seconds," Kimberly shouted.

"No," said Kai. "They won't destroy the temple, they want the records!"

"What's happening then?"

"They're firing at the cliff above," said Kai, "dropping stones on the roof."

"That means they'll probably try to take it with ground troops. They can't outnumber us too badly, with one ship. How many men do you have?"

"Only about twenty with weapons," Kai answered.

"Another fifty with knives."

"Knives aren't much good at this distance," Kimberly said. "All right, put your men with weapons out on the pavilion. Get everybody else in here!"

Kai charged toward the door, his armed men following him. Kimberly turned to the old priest.

"Is there a safe place for the women?"

"Yes," said Dar. "The living quarters are set back into the mountainside."

"All right, get them together and send them all back in. Then build a fire someplace. Set the building on fire."

"Set it on fire!"

"Or build a fire outside, I don't care. Anything to get some smoke going so it looks as if the temple were burning."

"I don't—"

"If the Outsiders see smoke, they may think they've hit the temple after all. If they want those records, they'll have to come after them before they're burned. Understand?"

"All right." The old man scurried off through the chamber, calling for the women to gather in the living quarters. As

Kimberly started for the tunnel leading to the pavilion, a little figure darted across the floor to him.

"Neela!" he said. "Get back in the living quarters!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Try to get 'em where the knives will do some good," he said. "Otherwise we're through. Now get back there!"

"Wait," she said, still holding his arm. "I want you to know—last night wasn't all—"

"Get the hell out of here!" Kimberly shouted. "I don't want that pretty body all scratched up!" He lifted her chin and kissed her harshly.

AT the front of the temple, Kai had placed his men with weapons in an even line behind the low wall that marked the edge of the pavilion. The Outsider foot troops were advancing slowly up the foothills, frequently dropping while the big batteries on the ship pounded the cliff. Rock was now falling in a steady stream from the cliff, bouncing off the temple roof and rolling down the hill.

Kimberly found Kai in the center of the line.

"Is there any chance that cliff will give way?"

"I don't know," said Kai. "It might. They're giving it an awful beating." He glanced fearfully up at the purple precipice, now occluded with clouds of dust scattered from the explosions that periodically racked it.

"Pull these men back into the temple gradually," Kimberly ordered. "Have them gather in the passage ways. Take them out of the line slowly enough that the Outsider will think they're being picked off by rock.

Kai was still watching the cliff, but now his eyes were following a streamer of black smoke that began to rise from the temple roof and flow up the side of the cliff.

"The temple's burning!" he shouted. The men lying on the line all turned their eyes back at the smoke.

"No," said Kimberly grimly. "That's the bait. Now we'll see if the fish bite."

Shortly the blasting from the Outsider-manned ship stopped. There was a momentary pause, a complete silence that roared

in their ears after the constant din.

"They've seen it," Kimberly said. "Now—"

They waited.

There was a sudden concerted movement all along the foothills, and the Outsider troops began their charge. The blasting from the ship's batteries did not resume, but the fire from handweapons increased as the ground troops covered their own approach.

"Pick off as many as you can without risking your own men," Kimberly directed. "When they get to that first rise, pull all your men inside."

Kai nodded his assent and began to bellycrawl along the line, passing the orders.

Kimberly raced back into the temple and made a quick survey of the physical set up. Each of the radial tunnels was perhaps wide enough for three men abreast, but only if they crowded. The Outsider would probably come through two at a time. From the looks of the line of troops spread out along the foothills, there were at least two hundred of them, perhaps more. The tunnels would give him an advantage of position

but whether enough to offset the numerical superiority of the Outsider, he didn't know.

Kai was back at the entrance, shouting. "They're over the first rise! Couple minutes at most!"

"All right! Get your men back in."

When they had all assembled in the central chamber, Kimberly saw with shock there had been more casualties than he had figured on. Apparently the enemy ground fire had taken its toll along with the falling rock. There were roughly forty men left capable of holding weapons.

Quickly he outlined his plan, and the Procy's took their places at the entrances of the tunnels.

Soon the first of the Outsider troops were heard in the tunnels that led outside. The leaders tried to approach the chamber cautiously but were being forced forward by the pressure of their comrades behind. As the first appeared in the entrance, they were quickly met with knives. But within a few scant minutes, the sheer numerical weight of the Outsider troops had pushed the Procyon

defenders back away from the entrances, and more poured in.

THE amphitheatre was soon filled with struggling clots of men, and full of the low sound of wounded and dying. Those still on their feet grunted and panted, but there was no other sound. The floor became slippery with the blood of Procy and Outsider alike.

Kimberly's foot slipped in a pool of blood and he fell heavily.

Looking up he saw the butt of a blaster plunging at his head. He rolled, kicking out with his feet, and felt them connect with the legs of the Outsider soldier as the blaster smashed into the floor where his head had been. He scrambled to his feet and kicked the Outsider in the face. He fell back, under the feet of the other combatants. Kimberly saw a hand appear as if by magic from the knot of men and deftly slide a dagger into the Outsider's throat, then disappearing back into the melee of arms and legs.

He was knocked off balance by another plunging body, and

thrown into the wall of the still upraised vault. It had gone nearly half way down before the mechanism jammed, and the circular disk was only about four feet off the floor. In the center the Fire-axe still hung, the key in the lock. Kimberly clambered to the top of the cylinder and wrenched loose the Axe.

An Outsider charged toward the vault, and Kimberly leaped from the top, whirling the Fire-axe. He caught the onrushing Outsider at the joint between neck and shoulder and split him cleanly, the head dropping away at a strange angle as bright blood spurted from the gash.

Kimberly swung the Axe above his head and started it whirling. It began to keen and wail as the blade flashed around and around, the tiny grooves of the decorations catching the air and turning it into a banshee's scream.

Kai shrieked from somewhere in the battle, the same high paean of victory that had chilled Kimberly's blood at the end of the Fire-Ritual. Kai's shaven brown head, now spattered with blood, appeared. His

head was thrown back and the shrill, piercing scream came from his throat in a rhythmic ululation.

Where the chamber had before held only the sound of struggling men, there were now the two eerie wails of the Fire-axe and Kai Manson. Some of the fighting men started, almost physically jolted by the sound.

With the terrifying war cry still issuing from his throat, Kai picked an Outsider up and threw him into the shining circle of death around Kimberly.

The Fire-axe neatly clipped off the man's head, and its wail was clotted with the gurgling of blood. A Procy knife man shoved another of the enemy soldiers backwards, and the Axe bit deeply. After each victim, Kimberly started the Axe whirling again, and soon the floor on the perimeter of the glittering circle it made was littered with the dead and dismembered bodies of the enemy.

Those left suddenly made a dash for the exit tunnels. Fear mirrored on their faces. They were met by the remnants of

Kai's men, and none left the central chamber.

Gathering the remaining Procys around him, Kai dashed to Kimberly. Together they made for the temple front and the pavilion. They reached open air just in time to see the Outsider ship lift.

It climbed vertically, under full acceleration until it was lost from their sight.

"I hope that's the last we see of them," Kai said.

"I doubt it," said Kimberly. "They'll be back."

**T**HEY turned to re-enter the temple, and were stopped by a shout from one of the Procy knifemen.

"Look! Look up there!" Their eyes followed his pointing finger. Far above, in the direction taken by the escaping Outsider ship, there was a new sun in the sky, its glare rivaling for a brief second that of Procyon itself.

"Nuclear blast," Kimberly said. "The Federation must have caught on to them."

Some minutes later the huge bulk of a Federation battle-cruiser appeared in the sky. It settled to earth gently, three

miles down the hill from the temple. A scout copter detached itself from the parent ship and sped quickly toward the temple cliff.

When it reached the courtyard, the entire remaining body of the Procy defenders had gathered on the pavilion, the women coming from the living quarters where they had spent the battle.

Neela came up beside Kimberly without a word, and linked her arm in his. He bent his head and looked into her luminous dark eyes.

"Well, we made it," he said.

He turned his eyes to the men climbing out of the Federation copter. One of them was Jacop Spack. His bright blue eyes widened as he saw Kimberly standing at the temple entrance with Kai at one side and Neela at the other.

"I suppose I might have known it," Spack said. "Kimberly, do you have to get mixed up with everything unsavory that goes on in this galaxy?"

"Just doing my job," Kimberly said. "Boss."

"What was that ship doing attacking this temple?" Spack asked. "We had it reported as

missing, then it turns up bombarding a Fire-temple. When we challenged them, they fired on us. So—" Spack shrugged, and inclined his head toward that patch of sky where the Outsider ship had glowed so brightly.

"That was an Outsider you just vaporized," said Kimberly.

"Well, we figured something of the sort, but how—"

"I'll explain it all to you later," Kimberly said. "Oh, by the way," he added casually. "Your ecological records are in the temple there. Thought you might want to know."

Spack's iron control broke, and he stared open-mouthed at Kimberly, who ignored him.

"Tell you what," said Kim-

berly to Neela. "Suppose we go talk over things of mutual interest and let our friend here catch bugs in his mouth."

"Now listen, Kimberly—" Spack began.

"*Captain* Kimberly, please. Remember? Neela, do you think you could ever love a man who had to work for a man like that?"

"I think I might manage it," said Neela solemnly. "It would depend a lot on the man."

"You know," said Kimberly, "I think you're going to make a pretty good wife for an EcoSurv Captain. A pretty good wife indeed. There's nothing like having a dancing girl around the house."

THE END

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