

THRILLING

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STORIES

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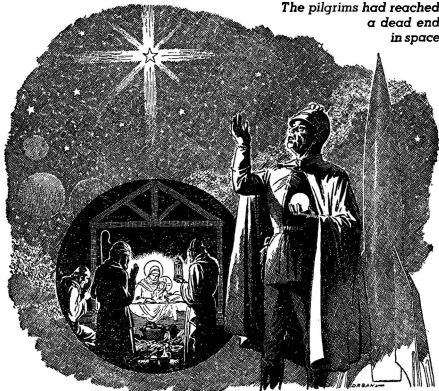
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*The pilgrims had reached
a dead end
in space*



Star of Wonder

by Julian May

FIRST COMMANDER HONDRA was accustomed to doing his thinking in his model shop. He sat there alone in the midst of a little cave of light, carved by the workbench lamp from the blue shadows of the ship's artificial night. There would be ten blue hours and ten bright hours—exactly as it had been on their home world of Eiollyra—in all the fifteen hundred and seventy-six ships which carried the population

of the little planet through space.

It was the sleeping time. The First Commander had prayed that the people would sleep. He knew that they would not, just as he would not.

He arranged his tools on the table. Completed models gleamed on the shelves of the room around him. There was a slim, silver miniature of his flagship, and an exquisite jet sphere dusted with microscopic diamonds which were

the constellations seen from home. There were miniature Eiollyran animals made from metal and mineral, worked cleverly to simulate scales and pelts. A platinum and crystal girl-child sat beneath a tree of which every leaf was distinct, although the whole thing was scarcely as tall as the First Commander's hand. There were engines and dancers and chronometers and music boxes, fashioned by his thin, hard fingers as he worked through the blue, sleepless hours.

Two unfinished models stood on a side shelf: one a spun-silica mock-up of a radio telescope, the other a little planetary globe which had been pushed back inconspicuously into the corner.

He took the globe down and set it on the table before him. It had been begun in the early days of the voyage, seven subjective years past in time and one hundred and ninety light years back in space, to compensate the first bitter pain of loss. It was made of green chromastite, with the refraction planes of the mineral subtly altered to simulate the varying depths of the sea. An overlay of rich, brown jade had been partially carved into a relief of continents and islands. It was to have been his masterpiece—a tiny model of Eiollyra.

He turned the globe slowly in his hands. The north continent was still blank and the poles wanted frosting. There was a lot of work to be done—delicate, painstaking carving with an energy needle—before it would be a perfect replica of the real world, the first world, the world whose warming sun, the astrophysicists said, would explode into a nova. *Oh Dawn, sun of justice, come and enlighten them sitting in darkness.*

The First Commander slowly set up the magnifier and arranged the three-dimensional patterns. He pulled a transparent shield over his eyes and began to carve a tiny mountain chain.

A chronometer gave a soft, heterodyned tone and said, "Twenty-hour" in a low, musical voice. The face of Re-

noldine, the Second Fleet Officer, appeared on the communicator screen.

"Renoldine submitting to the First Commander."

"Hondra retaining."

"We have the new star-plates from *Astronomy-1*. You asked me to notify you."

The First Commander sighed and put aside the energy needle. "Call the Executive Chairman. Alert Astrogation. I'll be down at once. Hondra releasing."

The screen darkened and the First Commander rose to go. He considered putting the globe away and dismantling the magnifier, then he shrugged and let it be. It was time he finished it, after all.

THEY stood in the gallery high above the main deck of the flagship. Below them, in orderly ranks filing away into the distance, were fifteen hundred and seventy-six unit controls, each of which broadcast and received astrogation data from a single ship of the fleet.

The First Commander addressed the small group of officers, "Gentlemen, I'd like you to consider this star system, which is one of three sent by *Astronomy-1* as prospects for our next exploration."

He pressed a stud and a blur of bright points sprang onto the viewer screen. He adjusted the limiter to block out all stars more than ten light years distant, and abruptly the confusing background cloud vanished, leaving a perfectly blank field with a solitary binary system in the middle of it.

"What do you think of this system?" he asked the Third Astrogation Officer.

The young man looked gravely at the screen and at the referent data. He knew the old man was baiting him, but he burst out confidently:

"Blue-whites the size of the primary have been found to possess only a few planets—extremely large, located far from the sun, and unsuitable for human habitation. The secondary is a white dwarf star. Any planet close enough to

be warmed to a livable temperature would be torn to pieces by—gravity tides. I'd say this system would be a very poor risk, sir."

The First Commander grunted non-committally and flashed the second plate. It showed a quadruple system consisting of a red, two whites and a green star. The referent placed it at a distance of nine light years.

The Executive Chairman, representing the population, observed glumly that multiple systems explored prior to this had usually proved to be barren of planets.

"How about this one, then?" The last plate came on the screen. In its center was a single yellow star.

"A type 13-H," said the Third Astrogator softly. "Like the home star—like Eiollyra's sun."

"I vote for this star," said the Executive Chairman promptly.

The rest of the officers concurred. Hondra said, "It is agreed then. Set the course."

Renoldine began to feed the co-ordinates into the master control, and a deep, almost subsonic hum swelled in the huge room as vectors and constants were translated by the receiver banks beneath the deck and sent into the unit controls for individual course correction. Hondra peered into the eyepiece of the confirmer and saw the star centered correctly in a complexity of deviation webs.

"It *does* look like Eiollyra," he marveled. And how many times he had sighted the home sun in the same way, pin-pointing her welcoming gold which stood out in the void of inhospitable stars. Suddenly an unreasoning anger rose in his heart. They had said it would become a nova. They had said that seven years ago, when the fleet abandoned their world forever. But the star was still there! It had not blown up!

But Eiollyra was not gone. Perhaps the astrophysicists had been wrong, and she would not be gone for another hundred thousand years.

"All banks clear, unit controls ready for-elision," said the Third Astrogator.

Hondra said out loud, "Through the confirmer, this sun bears an especially striking resemblance to Eiollyra. Wouldn't you say so?" He stepped aside from the instrument and motioned for the young man to look.

"I'd like to say so, sir—but I've never seen our sun through a course confirmer. I never aimed for her. Only away from her."

"Ah, of course," said the First Commander simply. "Then you wouldn't know, would you."

He turned away and repeated, "You wouldn't know at all." Then he threw the switch to take them into the blankness of hyperspace.

HONDRA'S wife had not slept either. She sat up in the twilight-blue shadows of the salon and watched the scope. She had tuned in the outside and watched the motionless stars, and saw pictures looking at her out of the light-splashed night until it faded to luminous grey nothingness. She had continued to stare even then.

Her husband had come back at last and found her, tears falling quietly from her unblinking eyes. He sat down beside her and took her hand. Her eyes did not leave the featureless screen.

"Dear, you mustn't cry. Is it because of the child again?"

Her gaze remained fixed, and when she finally spoke, the words came slowly and tiredly.

"Not only the child. It was good, I think, that he was not born alive. The poor little thing—there was nothing for him here."

"Nothing but hope," said Hondra gently.

"No," she said. "No more. It used to be here. But no more." The tears fell faster. "When we set out, it was an adventure. We left our world and our sun and the dear, familiar things behind, but they said there would be a new world soon. I've waited—I've tried

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to be patient."

He turned off the screen and wiped her streaming eyes. "It was the child. My dear. I'm sorry. But this weeping will make you ill again."

"If we would only stop somewhere," she pleaded. "Just for a year or two. We could go on again! We wouldn't have to stay. But just to feel the wind again, and the ground under our feet!"

"It's no use, my dear," he said, drawing her close to him. "None of the worlds we've visited could support human life."

She pushed him away from her and cried: "There was Gostand B! It was perfect! There were even trees and animals and—everything." Her sinking head curtained her breast with dark hair. "Why did we have to go away?" she sobbed. "They've been talking about it. Everybody. They say we should have stayed. Oh, Karei—why did we have to go away?"

"I've tried to tell you," he said patiently, taking both her hands. "The planet was a paradise—except for one thing. It was the sun, dear. Do you remember it? That strange, pearly-green sun that you liked so well. It made the little planet a death-trap. There was radiation from it which would have sterilized our whole race within two generations."

"But it was so beautiful! I saw the flowers on the scope. And there was a valley with a river where we could have—"

"It was a beautiful tomb for the race."

"I don't care about the race! All I care about is us! I'll die in space!" She threw herself against him and wept wildly. "Don't let them bury me in space, Karei. Not out here—" Her head, Hondra felt, was burning hot.

"Promise me this, Karei. I don't care if the atmosphere is chlorine and the rocks are lead. Bury me in the ground!"

"Stop it," Hondra commanded. "You're ill again. You must let me take you in to bed."

"I can't go on this way! And there are others who won't either. You'll see! We'll go back to Gostand and live our lives and die. And God help the race!"

"Come to bed," he persisted. "It will all pass away."

"Sooner than you think," she said, and ran sobbing out of the salon.

He sat down on the lounge before the darkened scope. *Oh Ruler of Aliens and desired of them, you cornerstone that makes all one, come and deliver man whom you did make out of the dust of the land.*

A wall communicator sounded. Hondra rose and punched the retaining button. "Well?"

It was Renoldine. His face was ashen. "I'm sorry, Commander, but a grave situation has arisen. We have lost contact with *Communications-2*. No signal seems to be getting through to her." He paused, and his eyes flickered nervously for an instant. "*Communications-2* has facilities for broadcasting simultaneously to every ship in the fleet. I'm afraid that the rebellion you anticipated has begun at last."

Hondra said sharply, "Put this phone on a hyperspace band and give me a fix on *Communications-2*. She can't alter her relative position while we're in elision. And neither," he added grimly, "can we."

"Bandswitch completed, Commander. You may proceed."

Hondra sent out a call, identifying himself. For a full minute there was no answer. Then suddenly the screen burst out in a characteristic kaleidoscope tangle of colors and a voice said distinctly:

"This is Shendy, Astrophysicist Blue-Three. We have seized this vessel in order that on the day next, at six-hour, we may freely broadcast a message which is vitally important to every one of the exiled people of Eiollyra. I have checked the previous calculations of the scientists who told us our sun would become a nova. The calculations, First Commander, were wrong."

SHORTLY before six-hour, the fleet of Eiollyra left hyperspace and came to rest outside a nine-planet system lit by a single yellow sun. No attempt at exploration was made. The people of Eiollyra were waiting for something else.

Hondra stood before the giant screen which took up an entire wall of the flagship's executive assembly room. Renoldine and Mocalis, chief in charge of astrophysics, were with him.

"I tell you, Commander, the notion is preposterous," Mocalis said. "Do you think we would have allowed the exodus to be organized if there was one shred of hope that Eiollyra might be saved? The shifts in the absorption bands alone were proof that. . ."

His voice trailed off as the six-hour tone echoed through the little room. The screen changed from neutral grey to deep black. And then there was a sound of voices swelling and falling rhythmically, voices chanting two syllables which were meaningless, taken by themselves.

"They're broadcasting a pickup from one of the cityship assemblies," cried Renoldine.

"What is that sound?" Mocalis wanted to know. The chant, pounding and insistent, grew louder. Two words with a rising inflection on the second syllable, shouted by forty thousand human throats.

The First Commander said, "They have found out somehow the subject of Shendy's address." He looked suddenly at Renoldine and the astrophysicist. "That chant, gentlemen, is the most fearful sound ever to be uttered in the history of our misfated race." He turned away and faced the screen. "And soon it will be taken up by every man in every ship—a sound which has not been heard for five hundred years. The symbolic cry of grievance—of a people betrayed."

There appeared on the screen a dazzling point of light which expanded rapidly into a great white circle. It centered on a platform, and on a figure

standing alone in the middle of it. The chant ceased.

The pickup lens swooped nearer to the figure, and the face of a man filled the screen. It was a gaunt and painful face, with dark eyes and a drawn, narrow mouth.

"We have traveled for seven subjective years," the speaker began without preamble. "We have searched for a new home among the stars because the scientists told us that our sun was doomed. Within a period of ten years, according to their calculations, our sun would explode into a nova, vaporizing the planets instantly. When we received these dreadful words, we accepted them with sorrow and courage. Since that day we have traversed nearly two hundred light years of space, trying to find a world to take the place of that lost to us.

"We have seen many strange suns, and the weird and inhuman planets circling them. Some of the planets have been inhabited, and some have been barren. But none of them were for us. We have seen methane worlds and sulfur worlds; worlds with atmospheres clouded by swirling plastics and worlds whose seas were acid; desert worlds, and worlds rank with sentient vegetation; dead worlds and worlds newly born.

"But never, in all the hundred of systems we have visited, has there been a world with familiar sky of blue-green; or emerald seas or purple hills or rich brown plains to compare with this world!"

ABRUPTLY the speaker's face vanished and another image took its place. Hondra and the other two men drew in their breaths sharply. The picture on the screen was a full-color stereo taken from space. Eiollyra hung there against the starry night, gorgeous and real once more.

"He must be mad!" Renoldine exclaimed.

"Clever," the First Commander corrected.

"This is the only world," said Shendy. "The world on which we were born, for which we were made and no other. We have left it behind—why?—because they told us that their calculations showed it likely that the sun would become a nova!

"I was one of those scientists, people of Eiollyra. I was one of those who turned you away from your world and made you wanderers in space. We turned you away, people of Eiollyra, for nothing!

"I have been checking the equations, observing our sun even from this great distance. I have found that our original calculations were in error! Our world is not doomed. Our sun will not become a nova. We can return to our homes. Eiollyra is our own once more!"

Leaning forward swiftly to the control panel Hondra tuned in the assembly hall of the nearest cityship. It was in an uproar. The image of the home planet remained on its screen. Most of the people raised their arms toward it and wept, while others streamed up and over the seats in exultant frenzy.

"Ready on the cut-in from *Communications-1*," said Renoldine.

Hondra arose and took his place before the lens, and the picture of Eiollyra disappeared from the cityship's screen. His own image was broadcast in its place to each of the fifteen hundred and seventy-six ships.

"I request order," he thundered. *Oh God at our side, the expected of the worlds, come to save us.* "Choose your spokesmen," he said in a voice which had suddenly become ineffably weary. "We will follow the will of the people."

Back in her cabin, Hondra's wife swayed dizzily. "We're free, we're free," she crooned, stroking the glass of the communicator with trembling fingers. Her face congested with fever, she bobbed unsteadily before the blank screen. "I'll be here for a while—only a little while—and then I'll be home. Shendy says I'll be home."

"I can't get her back to her room,"

whispered the nurse desperately to Hondra. "She's been there ever since Shendy's broadcast. We can't frighten her. Can't you do something?"

He stepped into the salon and went slowly toward the weaving figure.

She stopped still at the sound of his step and her lips bloomed in an exquisite smile. "Karei! Have they told you yet, my darling? We'll be going back to Eiollyra. Shendy says so. And Shendy's right." She looked confidently at the space where she thought his face would be. "He is right, isn't he, my darling? Oh tell me he is!"

He picked her up in his arms, cradling her burning head on his shoulder.

"Of course," said the First Commander soothingly. "Of course Shendy's right."

Elsewhere the feeling was charged with defiance. "Shendy is wrong," said Mocalis flatly. Spokesmen from the cityships murmured angrily. The Executive Chairman raised his hands warningly and the murmur subsided. The astrophysicist went on:

"I cannot tell you the words you want to hear. I only wish I could. We have worked without stopping for two days, utilizing every facility of our three great astrophysics units rechecking the calculations. Shendy has made a tragic mistake. The relentless weight of scientific facts confirms the previous deductions. Eiollyra is doomed to inevitable destruction."

A stubborn, negative babel arose from the assemblage. "Give us the First Commander!" they shouted.

Hondra stepped forward and the lens sent his face to sixty-three million waiting people.

"As your First Commander, I must order whether we are to turn back to Eiollyra or continue on as before. But the decision is not mine to make, after all. Your will is the one which must make this choice. Each one of you, individually, must choose. A vote will be taken and ships turned over to those who wish to return."

SHOUTS of approval greeted his words, but Hondra waited. "I will do this because as long as there is the smallest hope that our world will not be destroyed you have the right to pursue it."

"But I tell you this. Our fleet has been carefully compartmentalized—farm units, cityships, administrative and research units. It is a living, functioning organism, operating under optimum efficiency and a delicate balance. I am convinced that dividing the fleet may well result in the destruction of us all." He bowed and withdrew. There was no sound.

Another man, drawn and dark-eyed, wearing a white uniform, leaped up and faced the lens.

"People of Eiollyra!" Shendy cried. "The First Commander seeks to undermine your confidence by vague insinuations. He asks you to continue this weary voyaging from planet to planet on the force of his opinion! This very moment our fleet rests in a star system two hundred light years from home. A system, incidentally, whose only oxygen-atmosphere planet supports poisonous green vegetation. We have come to another dead-end in space. Commander Hondra offers us only the prospect of an ever-lengthening trail of these useless worlds, leading nowhere but to ultimate despair."

He turned slightly and extended his arms toward the great screen behind the speaker's platform. "I ask you all to return with me! There need be no partition of the fleet. I offer not vain hope but concrete reality. I offer you—this!"

The screen lit up. Mocalis exclaimed, "The same trick all over again!"

"No," Hondra said. "This is different. Look!"

The image this time was no stereo photograph. It was a telescopic view, taken through the gigantic instrument which occupied most of the ship *As-trometry-3*. The limiter had been care-fully adjusted, and Eiollyra's sun stood

out clearly against a sparsely starred background.

"We will go back!" the people shouted hysterically.

Hondra inclined his head slightly to Shendy, who stood triumphant in the center of the platform. *Oh, Key, who opens and no man closes, who closes and no man opens, come and bring forth from his prison the captive who sits in darkness and in the shadow of death.*

"People of Eiollyra," Shendy began—but never finished. . . .

The tiny disk of Eiollyra's sun seemed to shrink. Then from its upper limb a slow, vast prominence spurted. When it reached its ultimate, leisurely extension, the small sun exploded.

One of the audience fainted. The others, too stunned to voice their shock, stood mutely and despairingly.

HONDRA turned off the energy needle and directed a gentle blast of air to remove the last particles of loose jade from the mountain ranges of his globe. Only the frosting of the poles was left now, and working with deft assurance, he sprayed on the suspension of diamond dust and fixative.

Finally it was done. He cradled it in the palm of his hand, letting the workbench light be a sun for the miniature brown continents and rich, green seas. After a moment, he put the globe in his tunic pocket.

The workroom door opened, and the music he had managed to shut out—the digge for Eiollyra being broadcast from all the communicators—billowed in around him. He turned. The man who stood unmoving in the doorway wore a uniform which had once been white.

"The worst part of it," Shendy said, his words uneven in suppressed hysteria, "is that they won't kill me."

"Come in," said the First Commander. "And shut that door."

"Well, don't you blame me? Won't anybody blame me? It's my fault—the rioting and the suicides and the despair—all of it!" He dropped into a chair.

Hondra moved to a cabinet, took out a carved bottle, and decanted a glassful of heavy, silver-grey liquor. "Down," he directed, then turned his back and started to remove the protective shielding from the small, powerful telescope set in the outer hull.

"What's left now?" asked Shendy in a whisper. "No more hope of return. No more wish to go on. Nowhere in the universe a resting place for us. Do you know what they're saying? They want to go back to Gostand B!"

"Why not? If the fleet goes on, there may be years of traveling ahead before a planet is reached which can support human life such as ours. It could take a generation—or fifty. Or we might search the whole galaxy and find nothing."

"But Gostand means suicide for the race!"

"And continuing on? Perhaps a slower death by despair and rebellion." *Oh Wisdom coming from the mouth of the Most High, reaching to the ends of space and ordering all things mightily and sweetly, come and teach us the way of prudence!*

"It's only a leader they need—"

Hondra whirled and fixed him with a shriveling, contemptuous glance. "You would have led them back to Eiollyra. But then that was a direction they wanted to go, wasn't it! Do you have the courage to lead them where they don't want to go? Can you convince them that they should sacrifice themselves for the faint possibility that their children—or maybe their children's great-grandchildren—can live under an open sky again?"

Shendy said nothing.

"You can't do it?" asked the First Commander more gently. "Neither can I."

He bent over the eyepiece of the telescope and spent some time adjusting it.

Shendy rose and went toward the door. "Just a moment," said the First Commander. "I'd like you to look at something."

Reluctantly Shendy came to the telescope. In the field was a blue planet, strikingly beautiful. "The third planet of this system," Hondra explained.

"The vegetation is poison even though the air is good. A lovely, useless world."

"Nonetheless, I intend to visit her. Because useless though she may be, she is solid ground—and I must fulfill a promise I made."

"A promise?" said Shendy dully. "To whom?"

"To my wife," said the First Commander.

"I should like," said Shendy slowly; "to come with you."

"If you wish," said the First Commander.

THEY landed on the night side of the planet, in a hilly district near a great landlocked sea. Shendy stood apart from the First Commander when they had completed their task, muffled in a heavy cloak, shivering slightly in the cold. His hidden fingers tightened on the small vial he had brought with him from the flagship. Overhead, stars glittered brilliantly in the thin air, and brightest of all, hanging low over the hills and illuminating the landscape, was the nova of Eiollyra.

The two men moved together. "Such a chill, calm land," Hondra said, and his voice had a curious, almost frightening, lightness. You would think that the whole world was at peace."

"I would like to walk a bit, said Shendy. "Alone, if you don't mind."

His eyes met those of the First Commander, but Hondra said only, "I'll take the path into the valley."

"Good-bye," said Shendy, and disappeared into the darkness.

The First Commander turned and started down the faint trail, picking his way carefully through clumps of thorny shrubbery and stumbling occasionally against rocks hidden in the darkness. A faint clanking sound reach his ears, and now and then an animal far below gave a qu-

He went slowly toward a light which was flickering in a cleft down the hill to his right, and finally stood on a cliff overlooking an uneven valley. Beneath him, a group of men stood around a large fire while a herd of bulky, short-legged animals milled restlessly about.

One of the men was shouting and waving his staff excitedly while the others listened and occasionally gave an incredulous guffaw. A boy ran up with a great armload of brush and dumped it into the fire, making it hiss and roar up to the sky with a cloud of sparks. Suddenly he yelled and pointed at the cloaked figure of the First Commander standing on the upper trail. The excited man saw him too, and came running up to meet him, shouting breathlessly.

Hondra shook his head sadly and turned out his palms in a gesture of non-comprehension. The man cocked his head, tossed a few words over his shoulder to his joking compatriots, and took Hondra by the arm, drawing him down toward the fire.

The rest of the group grunted a bluff welcome and looked at him without curiosity. The excited man resumed his tale. He clapped his hands over his eyes dramatically, staggered and recovered himself, and repeated one phrase over and over again. Finally he pointed up at the sky and swept his arm in the direction of the valley, where a few lights twinkled.

The nova? wondered the First Commander.

The man said a few more urgent words, pointing down the trail. The others laughed at him and tapped their foreheads significantly. A stocky, older man with an air of authority stepped forward and addressed the speaker preemptorily.

The latter shrugged and spoke with an attitude which obviously conveyed that the others would be missing a great opportunity if they did not accompany him into the valley, but the rest only shook their heads and snickered. At the man called out to the boy who

had tended the fire, and they began to round up the animals and drive them down the trail.

Hondra stepped up to the herder and laid his hand on the man's shoulder. With the other he pointed toward the lights. The man smiled and motioned for the First Commander to follow.

Near the town, they encountered other groups, shouting jubilantly. Some were driving their flocks ahead of them, while others came with implements the First Commander assumed to be weapons. Without exception they were rudely dressed in tanned scraps of hide with the fur still on it, and coarse, woven-fibre cloth. They pressed on urgently until they reached the outskirts of the town, then turned aside to follow a roughly-paved road lined with trees.

ABOVE, the nova had sunk low in the northwest over a wooded hillock, and it was in this direction that the herders went, their chatter becoming more restrained. They paused in a grove of trees near a well-lit building. A youth ran out of the courtyard and spoke to them, motioning them to follow him, and suddenly the First Commander found himself alone in the orchard with the deserted animals moving nervously around him.

He pushed among the rank-smelling bodies, feeling their sharp hooves gashing the gloss of his boots. "I must be out of my mind," he muttered bitterly to himself. "What are they but ignorant natives going about their insignificant affairs? They don't know who I am or what I am. A man from another star? They only know their single little island in space. The stars are merely ornaments to them."

Extricating himself from the animals at last, he went into the courtyard. At the rear of the main structure, built back against the hill, was a low, wooden outbuilding. The nova glittered above it, through a tangle of wiry branches. "Eiollyra's sun is a curiosity," he said. "Something to gape at for a minute,

then forget." *As you have forgotten, Oh Unforgetting?*

A smoky, fitfully burning lamp hanging from a rafter illuminated the shed dimly. The First Commander hesitated, then went to the door and looked in.

The interior was crowded with men. Just inside the door stood two crop-headed stalwarts in metal-studded leather armor, holding brass helmets in their hands. They made room for him without a word.

The place seemed to be a shelter for animals. Wooden partitions divided the rear wall into compartments, and the floor was strewn with dried grass. But there were no animals in the stalls now, and the place was clean. The herders were clustered around the farther stall, some on their knees and the rest standing back talking quietly among themselves. A boy, whom the First Commander recognized as the one who had tended the fire in the hills, was perched high on the rim of one of the partitions so that he could see over the heads of the others.

The First Commander moved closer until he could see into the stall. "Only a peasant woman and her child," he said sorrowfully to himself. But then, what had he expected?

One by one the herders approached the young woman, laying articles at her feet. There were wooden bowls, a bone-handled knife, a small carved box, a skin and other homely offerings. The mother was gracious even to the crudest of the men, who advanced awkwardly with a reed flute clutched in one hand. As he stopped to lay it on the ground, the newborn infant in the woman's arms opened its eyes and the crowd exclaimed in admiration.

There were bustling, officious noises at the door, and a stout woman, with her head bound in a kerchief and her arms full of soft robes, pushed forward into the stall. She scolded the boy sitting on the partition, and began to arrange the coverings gently around the mother and child. When she had fin-

ished, she spoke anxiously to the mother, who reassured her with a few words, whereupon she smiled and withdrew.

There remained only a few of the herders and the two soldiers at the door who had not yet made their offerings. The First Commander watched them approach and withdraw. Outside in the darkness a single voice began to sing softly, and he thought of other music which had followed him from the fleet—ponderous and slow-pulsing, making even his heart beat slower and wish to stop if only to make the music stop.

The mother looked up and saw him standing in the shadows, and soundlessly the crowd parted and made way for him. He threw his cloak back over his shoulders, not caring whether they saw his strange dress, and stepped forward into the light. His eyes held those of the woman and burnt with an emotion nearer grief than defiance.

"You can't understand me," he said. "You, with your new child sleeping on your breast and the gifts of your friends at your feet. You won't understand what I say to you, but I say it nevertheless. because I am only a fool who led a race of fools chasing a dream across the depths of space. When they had hope, I was their leader. Now that they have lost it, I am the one who should give them courage to go on. But I have no courage even for myself."

HE LOOKED around at the motionless, kneeling figures and felt fury rising. What need did they have for hope? They had their world! His hand closed on the globe which still rested in his pocket. He and his people would keep their world as well! They would keep their images of Eiollyra before them always in their last home on Gostand:

Eiollyra, the thought of her! How could he ever give up that thought and its comfort? The dirge which flowed through his brain grew stronger and stronger until he felt his skull would break with the surge and flood

Oh Root of Tradition, before whom the powers are dumb and to whom the aliens shall make supplication, come to deliver us!

The child stirred, and the mother's face seemed to fill with pity.

"How can you know?" Hondra cried. "How can any of you know what it is to lose the thing which is your light and life, and seek it through the years until all hope is gone? All my people asked for was hope. But there was none anywhere in the universe."

The mother said to him: "Hope is here new-born to those who have waited, as He was to your world, as He will be again to those who wait for Him. And His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God, the Mighty. And his empire shall be multiplied to the ends of space and there will be peace."

The First Commander sank down in

astonishment and confusion, but after a time these ebbed slowly away, leaving his reason clean and alone. "I know you," he said.

OUT in space, the corridors of the city-ships were empty, and the music was growing slow and faint. And on the planet below, the nova had set in the western sky at last.

The First Commander lifted his head slowly, but the mother was no longer looking at him. The infant had awakened.

Hondra rose to leave. But at the door he paused and turned. From the pocket of his tunic he took the small globe of Eiollyra and placed it at the edge of the heap of offerings. Then he turned his back on the stable and returned to his ship and the fleet, where the music grew dim and finally stopped.