

PLANET STORIES



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★

STAR SHIP

By
POUL
ANDERSON

★

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I

WITH SUNSET, THERE WAS rain. When Dougald Anson brought his boat in to Krakenau harbor, there was only a vast wet darkness around him.

He swore in a sulfurous mixture of Krakenau, Volgazani, and half a dozen other languages, including some space-man's Terrestrial, and let down the sail. The canvas was heavy and awkward in the drenching rain; it was all he could do to lash it around the boom. Then he picked up the long wooden sweep and began sculling his boat in toward the dock.

Lightning flared bluely through the rain, and he saw the great bay in one livid flash, filled with galleys at anchor and the little schooners of the fishing fleet. Beyond the wharfs, the land climbed steeply toward the sky, and he saw the dark mass of the town reaching up to the citadel on the hilltop. Dark—dark! Hardly a light showed in the gloom.

What in the name of Shantuzik was up? The waterfront, at least, should have been alive with torches and music and bawdy merriment. And the newly installed street lights should have been twinkling along the main avenues leading up to the castle. Instead Krakenau lay crouched in night, and—

He scowled, and drove the light vessel shoreward with rhythmic sweeps of the long oar. Uneasiness prickled along his spine. It wasn't right. He'd only been gone a few days. What had happened in the

meantime?

When he reached the pier, he made fast with a quietness unusual to him. Maybe he was being overcautious. Maybe it was only that the king had died or some other reason for restrained conduct had arisen. But a man didn't spend years warring among the pirates of the outer islands and the neighboring kingdoms around Krakenau without learning to be careful.

He ducked under the awning in the bows which was the boat's only shelter, and got a towel from the sea chest and rubbed his rain-wet body dry. He'd only been wearing a tattered pair of breeches, and the water ran along his ribs and down his flanks. Then he shrugged on a tunic, and a coat of ring-mail over that. A flat-bladed sword at his side and a helmet over his long yellow hair completed his outfit. He felt secure now, and jumped up to the pier.

For a moment he stood in thought. The steady rain washed down over his leather cape, blurring vision a few meters away, and only the intermittent flicker of lightning broke the darkness. Where to go? His father's house was the logical place, perhaps. But the Masefield dwelling was a little closer to here, and Ellen—

He grinned and set out at a long stride. Masefield's be it.



His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him . . .

The street onto which he turned opened before him like a tunnel of night. The high steep-roofed houses lay dark on either side, walling it in, and the fluoroglobes were unlit. When the lightning blinked, the wet cobblestones gleamed; otherwise there was only darkness and rain.

He passed one of the twisting alleys, and glanced at it with automatic caution. The next instant he had thrown himself to the ground, and the javelin whipped through the place where his belly had been.

He rolled over and bounded to his feet, crouched low, the sword whining out of its scabbard into his hand. Four Khazaki sprang from the alley and darted at him.

Dougald Anson grunted, backed up against a wall. The natives were armed and mailed, they were warriors, and they had all the unhuman swiftness of their species. Four of them——!

The leading attacker met his sword in a clang of steel. Dougald let him come lunging in, took the cut on his mailed ribs, and swept his own weapon murderously out. Faster than a man could think, the Khazaki had his own blade up to parry the sweeping blow. But he wasn't quite fast enough; he met it at an awkward angle and the Terrestrial's sheer power sent the sword spinning from his hand. The hand went too, a fractional second later, and he screamed and fell back and away.

The others were upon Anson. For moments it was parry and slash, three against one, with no time to feel afraid or notice the cuts in his arms and legs. A remote part of his brain told him bleakly: *This is all. You're finished. No lone Earthling ever stood up long to more than two Khazaki.* But he hardly noticed.

Suddenly there were only two in front of him. He darted forth from the wall, his sword crashing down with all the power of his huge body behind it. The warrior tried to skip aside—too late. The tremendous blow smashed his own parry down and sang in his skullbones.

And the last of the attackers died. He tumbled over beside the second, and each of them had a feathered shaft between his ribs.

The bowman came loping through the rain. He paused, in typical Khazak fashion, to slit the throat of the wounded being, and then came up to where Dougald

Anson stood panting.

The human strained through the rainy dark. Lightning glimmered in the sky, and he recognized the newcomer. "Janazik!"

"And Anson," nodded the Khazaki. His sharp white teeth gleamed in his shadowed face. "You seem to have met a warm welcome."

"Too warm. But—thanks!" Anson bent over the nearest of the corpses, and only now did the realization penetrate his brain. They all wore black mail of a certain pattern, spiked helmets, red cloaks—Gods of Gorzak! They were all royal guardsmen!

HE LOOKED UP to the dark form of Janazik, and his lean face was suddenly tight. "What is this?" he asked slowly. "I thought maybe bandits or some enemy state had managed to enter the city——"

"That would be hard to do, now that we have the guns," said Janazik. "No, these are within our own walls. If you'll look closely, you'll see they wear a gold-colored brassard."

"Prince Volakech—but he——"

"There's more to this than Volakech, and more than a question of the throne," said Janazik. Then suddenly, urgently: "But we can't stay here to talk. They're patrolling the streets, it's dangerous to be abroad. Let's get to shelter."

"What's happened?" Anson got up, towering over the native by a good quarter meter, his voice suddenly rough. "What happened? How is everyone?"

"Not well. Come on, now."

"Ellen? Masefield Ellen?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. Now come on!"

They slipped into the alley. Anson was blind in the gloom, and Janazik's slim six-fingered hand took his to guide him. The Khazaki were smaller than Terrestrials and lacked the sheer strength and endurance which Earth's higher gravity gave; but they could move like the wind, they had an utter grace and balance beside which humans were clumsy cattle, and they saw in the dark.

Dougald Anson's mind whirred in desperate speculation. If Volakech had gotten enough guardsmen and soldiers on his side to swing a palace revolution, it was bad. But matters looked worse than that. Why

should Volakech's men have assaulted a human? Why should Janazik have to sneak him into a hiding place? How had the revolutionists gotten control in the first place, against King Aligan's new weapons? What powers did they have now?

What had become of the human community in Krakenau? What of his father, his brother and sisters, his friends? What of Masefield Ellen? What of Ellen?

He grew aware that Janazik had halted. They were in an evil-smelling, refuse-littered courtyard, surrounded by tumble-down structures, dark and silent as the rest of the city. Anson realized that all Krakenau was blacked out. In such times of danger, the old Khazaki clandom reasserted itself. Families barricaded themselves in their dwellings, prepared to fight all comers till the danger was past. The city was awake, yes—it was crouched in breathless tension all around him—but not a light showed, not a hand stirred, not a voice spoke. They were all waiting.

Janazik crouched at the base of one of the old buildings and lifted a trapdoor. Light gleamed dimly up from a cellar. He dropped lightly down and Anson followed, closing the door behind him.

There was only one smoky lamp in the dank gloom. Shadows were thick and huge around the guttering wick. The red flame picked out faces, shimmered off cold steel, and lost itself in darkness.

Anson's eyes scanned the faces. Half a dozen humans: Chiang Chung-Chen, Du-Frere Marie, Gonzales Alonzo and his wife Nora who was Anson's sister, Dougald Joan, Masefield Philip—No sign of Ellen.

"Anse! Anse!" The voices almost sobbed out of the dim-lit hollowness. Joan and Nora sprang forward as if to touch their brother, make sure he was alive and no vision of the night, but Janazik waved them back with his sword.

"No noise," hissed the Khazaki's fierce whisper. "No noise, by all the thirteen hells! Volakech's *burats* are all over the city. If a patrol finds us——"

"Ellen!" Anson's blue eyes searched for Masefield Philip, crouched near the lamp. "Where's your sister, Phil?"

"I don't know," whispered the boy. "We're all who seem to've escaped. They may have caught her—I don't know——"

"Father." Joan's voice caught with a dry sob. "Anse, Father and Jamie are dead. The rebels killed them."

For a moment, Anson couldn't grasp the reality of that. It just wasn't possible that his big laughing father and young Jamie-the-brat should be killed—*no!*

But——

He looked up, and then looked away. When he turned back to face them, his visage had gone hard and expressionless, and only the white-knuckled grip on his sword showed he was not a stranger.

"All right," he said slowly, very slowly and steadily. "All right. Give me the story. What is it? What's happened in Krakenau?"

II

JANAZIK PADDED AROUND TO stand before him. He was not the only Khazaki in the cellar; there were a good dozen others. Mostly they were young males, and Anse recognized them. Bolazan, Pragakech, Slavatozik—he'd played with them as a child, he'd fared out with them as a youth and a man to the wars, to storm the high citadel of Zarganau and smite the warriors of Volgazan and pirate the commerce of the outer islands. They were good comrades, yes. But Father and Jamie were dead. Ellen, Ellen was vanished. Only a fragment of the human community remained; his world had suddenly come down in ruin about him.

Well—his old bleak resolution came back to him, and he met the yellow slit-pupilled gaze of Janazik with a challenging stare.

They were a strange contrast, these two, for all that they had fought shoulder to shoulder halfway round the planet, had sung and played and roistered from Krakenau to Gorgazan. Comrades in arms, blood brothers maybe, but neither was human from the viewpoint of the other.

Dougald Anson was big even for a Terrestrial; his tawny head rode at full two meters and his wide shoulders strained the chain mail he wore. He was young, but his face had had the youth burned out of it by strange suns and wild winds around the world, was lean and brown and marked with an old scar across the forehead. His eyes were almost intolerably bright and

direct in their blue stare, the eyes of a bird of prey.

The Khazaki was humanoid, to be sure—shorter than the Terrestrial average, but slim and lithe. Soft golden fur covered his sinewy body, and a slender tail switched restlessly against his legs. His head was the least human part of him, with its sloping forehead, narrow chin, and blunt-muzzled face. The long whiskers around his mouth and above the amber cat-eyes twitched continuously, sensitive to minute shifts in air currents and temperature. Along the top of his skull, the fur grew up in a cockatoo plume that swept back down his neck, a secondary sexual characteristic that females lacked.

Janazik was something of a dandy, and even now he wore the baggy silk-like trousers, long red sash, and elaborately embroidered blouse and vest of a Krakenau noble. It was woefully muddy, but he managed to retain an air of fastidious elegance. The bow and quiver across his back, the sword and dirk at his side, somehow looked purely ornamental when he wore them.

He was almost dwarfed by Anse's huge-thewed height. But old Chiang Chung-Chen noticed, not for the first time, that the human wore clothing and carried weapons of Khazaki pattern, and that the harsh syllables of Krakenau came more easily to his lips than the Terrestrial of his fathers. And the old man nodded, gravely and a little wearily.

Janazik spoke rapidly: "Volakech must have been plotting his return from exile a long time. He managed to raise a small army of pirates, mercenaries, and outlawed Krakenau, and he made bargains with groups within the city. Two days ago, certain of the guards seized the new guns and let Volakech and his men in. Others revolted within the town. I think King Aligan was killed; at least I've seen or heard nothing of him since. There's been some fighting between rebels and loyalists but the rebels got all the Earth-weapons when they captured the royal arsenal and since then they've just about crushed resistance. Loyalists who could, fled the city. The rest are in hiding. Volakech is king."

"But—why us? The Terrestrials—what have we to do with—"

Janazik's yellow eyes blazed at him.

"You aren't stupid, blood-brother. Think!"

After a moment Anse nodded bleakly. "The Star Ship—"

"Of course! Volakech has seized the rocket boat. No Terrestrial in his right mind would show him how to use it, so he had to capture someone who understood its operation and force them to take him out to the Star Ship. Old Masefield Henry was killed resisting arrest—you know how bloody guardsmen are, in spite of orders to take someone alive. Volakech ordered the arrest of all Terrestrials then. A few surrendered to him, a few were killed resisting, most were captured by force. As far as we know, this group is all which escaped."

"Then Ellen—?"

"That's the weird thing. I don't believe she has been caught. Volakech's men are still scouring the city for 'an Earthling woman' as the orders read. And who could it be but Ellen? No other woman represents any danger or any desirable capture to Volakech."

"Ellen understands astrogation," said Anse slowly. "She learned it from her grandfather."

"Yes. And now that he is dead, she is the only human—the only being on this planet—who can get that rocket up to the Star Ship. And Masefield Carson knows it."

"Carson? Ellen's older brother? What—"

Janazik's voice was cold as Winter: "Masefield Carson was with Volakech. He led the rebels inside the city. Now he's the new king's lieutenant."

"Carson! No!"

"Carson—yes!" Janazik's smile was without mirth or pity. His eyes sought out Philip, huddled miserably beside the lamp. "Isn't that the truth?"

THE BOY NODDED, too choked with his own unhappiness to cry. "Carse always was a friend of Volakech, before King Aligan outlawed him," he mumbled. "And he always said how it was a shame, and how Volakech would know better what to do with the Star Ship than anyone now. Then—that night—" His voice trailed off, he sat dumbly staring into the flame.

"Carson led the rebel guardsmen in their seizure of the city guns," said Janazik.

"He also rode to the Masefield house at the head of a troop of them and called on his people to surrender on promise of good treatment. Joe and the mother did, and I suppose they're held somewhere in the citadel now. Phil and Ellen happened to be out at the time. When Phil heard of the uprising, he was afraid to give himself up, in spite of the heralds that went about promising safety to those who did. He heard how the rebels had been killing his friends. He went to Slavatozik here, whom he could trust, and later they got in touch with me. I'd used this hiding place before, and gathered all the fugitives I could find here." Janazik shrugged, a sinuous un-human gesture. "Since then I've seen Carse, at a distance, riding around like a prince of the blood, with a troop of his own personal guardsmen. I suspect he really runs things now. Volakech wants power, but only Carse can show him how to get it."

"And Ellen——?"

"No sign of her. But as I said, I think she's in hiding somewhere, or the guards wouldn't be out looking for a woman. She wouldn't give herself up."

"Not Ellen." A grim pride lifted Anse's head.

"Remains the problem of finding her before they do," said Gonzales Alonzo. "If they catch her and make her plot an orbit for the rocket, they'll have the Star Ship—which means power over the whole planet."

"Not that I care who's king," growled Pragakech. "But you know that Masefield Carson never did want to use the ship to get out to the stars. And I want to see those other worlds before I die."

"To the thirteenth hell with the other worlds," snarled Bolazan. "Aligan was my king, and it's for me to avenge him and put his rightful heir on the throne."

"We all have our motives for wanting the blood of Volakech and Carson," said Janazik. "Never mind that now; the important thing is how to get at their livers. We're few, Anse. Here are all the free humans we know of, except Masefield Ellen. There can't be more than two or three at large, and perhaps ten dead. That means the enemy holds almost a hundred humans captive. Discounting children and others who are ignorant of Terrestrial science, it still means they'll be able to operate the

guns, the steel mill, the atomic-power plant—all the new machines except the rocket boat, and they only need Ellen for that."

Anse nodded, slowly. "What is our strength?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not much. I know where about a hundred Khazaki warriors are hiding, ready to follow us whenever we call on them, and there will be many more sitting at home now who'll rise if someone else takes the lead. But the enemy has all the guns. It would be suicide."

"What about the Khazaki who fled?" Usually, in one of the planet's violent changes of governments, the refugees were powerful nobles who would be slain as a safety measure if they stayed at home but who could, in exile, raise strong forces for a comeback. Such a one had Volakech himself been, barely escaping with his life after his disastrous attempt to seize the throne a few years back.

"Don't be more stupid than you can help," snorted Janazik. "By the time they can have rallied enough to do any good, Volakech and Carson will have the Star Ship, one way or another, and then the whole world is at their mercy."

"That means we have to strike back somehow—quickly!" Anse stood for a moment in thought.

The habits of his warring, wandering years were coming back to him. He had faced death and despair before, and with strength and cunning and bluff and sheer luck had come through alive. This was another problem, more desperate and more urgent, but still another problem.

No—there was more to it than that.

HIS FACE GREW BLEAK, and it was as if a coldness touched his heart. Carson was Ellen's older brother, and even if they had quarreled from time to time he knew she had always felt deeply bound to him. *Carse is everything I never was. He stayed in Krakenau and studied and became an educated man and a skilled engineer while I went halloing over the world. He's brave and a good fighter—so am I—but he's so much more than that. I imagine it was his example that made Ellen learn the astrogation only her grandfather knew.*

And now I'm back from roaming and roving with Janazik, and I'm trying hard

to settle down and learn something so that I won't be just a barbarian, a wild Khazaki in human skin, when we go out to the civilization of the stars. So that I won't be too utterly ashamed to ask Ellen to marry me. And it was all going pretty well until now.

But now—I'm fighting her brother—

Well—he pushed the thought out of his brain. After all, apparently she was in opposition to Carse's plans too.

"I wonder why they tried to kill me?" he asked aloud, more to fill in the time while he thought than out of curiosity.

"You'd be of no use to Carson, having no technical education," said Janazik, "while your knowledge of fighting and your connections with warlike groups make you dangerous to him. Also, I don't think he ever liked your paying attention to Ellen."

"No—he always said I was a waster. Called me a—*an absorbed Khazaki*. I'd've split his skull if he hadn't been Ellen's brother—No matter now. We've more important things to talk over."

Have we, now? he thought sickly. *Carson must know Ellen well, better than I do. If he thinks he can have me killed without making her hate him, then—maybe I never had any chance with her then—*

"How'd you happen by?" he asked tonelessly.

"I've been out from time to time, looking for Ellen and killing guardsmen whenever I could catch them alone." Janazik's white fangs gleamed in a carnivore's smile. "And, of course, I expected you back from your fishing trip about this time, and watched for you lest you blunder into their hands."

Anse began to pace the floor, back and forth, his head bent to avoid the basement rafters. If Carson was in control, and out to kill him . . . There was more to it than that, of course. The whole future of the planet Khazak, perhaps of the fabulous Galactic civilization itself, was balanced on the edge of a sword. If Volakech or a descendant of his took the warlike race out among the stars, with a high level of industry to back a scheme of conquest—

But it didn't matter. All the universe didn't matter. There was only Ellen, and his own dead kin, and himself.

A man's heart can only hold so much. Janazik stood quietly back, watching his

friend's restless prowling. He had seen that pacing before, and he knew that some scheme would come out of it, crazy and reckless and desperate, with his own cool unhuman intelligence to temper it and make it workable. He and Anse made a good team. They made the best damned fighting team Khazak had ever seen.

Presently the human lifted his head. There was silence in the hiding place, thick and taut, so that they could hear their own breathing and the steady drum of rain on the trapdoor.

"I have an idea," said Anse.

III

THE LONG NIGHT WORE ON.

Janazik had sent most of his Khazaki out to alert the other loyalists in their hiding places, but only they had a chance of slipping unobserved past the enemy patrols. Humans, obviously alien, slow-footed and clumsy beside the flitting shadows of Khazak, would never get far. They had to wait.

Anse was glad of the opportunity for conference with Janazik, planning the assault on the citadel. Neither of them was very familiar with the layout, but Alonzo, as an engineer on the rocket building project, and old Chiang had been there often enough to know it intimately.

It was impossible that a few hundred warriors armed with the primitive weapons of Khazak could take the stronghold. Its walls were manned by more fighters than that, and there were the terrible Earth-type guns as well. Alonzo had a blaster with a couple of charges, but otherwise there was nothing modern in the loyalist force.

But still that futile assault was necessary—

"It's taking a desperate chance," said Dougald Joan. She was young yet, hardly out of girlhood, but her voice had an indomitable ring. The true warriors among the five Earthling families were all Dougalds thought Janazik. "Suppose Ellen doesn't come out of hiding? Suppose she's dead or—or captured already, in spite of what we think."

"We'll just have to try and destroy the rocket then," said Alonzo. "Certainly we can't let Volakech get to the Star Ship."

He sighed, heavily. "And the labor of another generation will be gone."

"It wouldn't take us long to build another boat," said his wife. "We know how, now, and we have the industry to do it."

"There are only a few who really know how to handle and build the Terrestrial machines, and most of them are in the enemy's hands," reminded old Chiang. "I'm sure I couldn't tell you much about atomic engines, even though I was on the Star Ship herself once. If those few are killed, we may never be able to duplicate our efforts. What Terrestrials survive will sink back into barbarism, become simply another part of Khazaki culture."

"I don't know——" said Nora.

"I know, because I've seen it happen," insisted Chiang. "In the fifty years since we were marooned here, two generations have been born on Khazak. They've grown up among Khazaki, played with native children, worked and fought with Khazaki natives, adopted the dress and speech and whole outlook of Krakenau. Only a few in this third generation have consciously tried to remain—Terrestrial. I must admit that Masefield Carson is one such. Ellen is another. But few others."

"Would you have us wall ourselves out from the world?" asked Anse with a bridling anger.

"No. I don't see how the situation could be helped. We are a minority in an alien culture with which we've had to cooperate. It's only natural that we'd be more assimilated than assimilating. Even at that, we've wrought immense changes."

JANAZIK NODDED. The stranded Terrestrials had found themselves in an early Iron Age civilization of city-states, among a race naturally violent and predatory. For their own survival, they had had to league forces with the state in which they found themselves—Krakenau, as it happened. Before they could build the industry they needed, they had to have some security—which meant that they must teach the Krakenau military principles and means of making new weapons which would make them superior to their neighbors. After that—well, it took an immense technology to build even a small spaceship. The superalloys which could stand the combustion of rocket fuel

required unheard-of elements such as manganese and chromium, which required means of mining and refining them, which required a considerable chemical plant, which required—How far down do you have to start? And there were a hundred or a thousand other requirements of equal importance and difficulty.

Besides, the Terrestrials had had to learn much from scratch themselves. None of them had ever built a rocketship, had ever seen one in action even. It was centuries obsolete in Galactic civilization. But gravity drives were out of the question. So—they'd had to design the ship from the ground up. Which meant years of painstaking research . . . and only a few interested humans and Khazaki to do it. The rest were too busy with their own affairs in the brawling barbaric culture.

Ten years ago, the first spaceboat had blasted off toward the Star Ship—and exploded in mid-acceleration. More designing, more testing, more slow building—and now the second one lay ready. Perhaps it could reach the Star Ship.

The Star Ship—faster than light, weightless when it chose to be for all its enormous mass, armed with atomic guns that could blast a city to superheated vapor. Whoever controlled that ship could get to Galactic stars in a matter of weeks. Or could rule all Khazaki if he chose.

No wonder Carson and Volakech had struck now, before the rocket boat was launched. When *they* had the ship—

But only Ellen knew the figures of its orbit and the complicated calculations by which the boat would plot a course to get there. A bold warrior might make a try at reaching the ship by seat-of-the-pants piloting, but he wouldn't have much chance of making it. So Ellen, and the rocket boat, were the fulcrum of the future.

"Strange," mused Chiang. "Strange that we should have had that accident . . ."

They had heard the story a hundred times before, but they gathered around to listen; there was nothing else to do while the slow hours dragged on.

"We were ten, all told, five men and their wives. Exploratory expeditions are often out for years at a time, so the Service makes it a policy to man the ships with married couples. It's hard for a Khazaki to appreciate the absolute equality

between the sexes which human civilization has achieved. It's due to the advanced technology, of course, and we're losing it as we go back to barbarism—"

Anse felt a small hand laid on his arm. He looked down into the dark eyes of Du-Frere Marie. She was a pretty girl, a little younger than he, and until he'd really noticed Ellen he'd been paying her some attention.

"I don't care about equality," she whispered. "A woman shouldn't try to be a man. I'd want only to cook and keep house for my man, and bear his children."

It was, Anse realized, a typical Khazaki attitude. But—he remembered with a sudden pity that Carson had been courting Marie. "This is pretty tough on you," he muttered. "I'll try to see that Carse is saved . . . If we win," he added wryly.

"Him? I don't care about that Masefield. Let them hang him. But Anse—be careful—"

HE LOOKED AWAY, his face hot in the gloom, realizing suddenly why Masefield Carson hated him. Briefly, he wished he hadn't had such consistent luck with women. But the accident that there was a preponderance of females in the second and third generations of Khazaki humans had made it more or less inevitable, and he—well, he was only human. There'd been Earthling girls; and not a few Khazaki women had been intrigued by the big Terrestrial. *Yes, I was lucky*, he thought bitterly. *Lucky in all except the one that mattered.*

"—we'd been a few weeks out of Avandar—it was an obscure outpost then, though I imagine it's grown since—when we detected this Sol-type sun. Seeing that there was an Earth-like planet, we decided to investigate. And since we were all tired of being cooped in the ship, and telescopes showed that any natives which might exist would be too primitive to endanger us, we all went down in the lifeboat.

"And the one-in-a-billion chance happened . . . the atomic converters went out of control and we barely escaped from the boat before it was utterly consumed. We were stranded on an alien planet, with nothing but our clothes and a few hand weapons—and with our ship that would go faster than light circling in its orbit not ten

thousand kilometers above us!

"No chance of rescue. There are just too many suns for the Galactic Coordinators to hope to find a ship that doesn't come back. Expansion into this region of space wasn't scheduled for another two centuries. So there we were, and until we could build a boat which would take us back to our ship—there we stayed!

"And it's taken us fifty years so far . . ."

Pragakech came in with the rain glistening on his fur and running in small puddles about his padding feet. "We're ready," he said. "Every warrior whose hiding place we knew has been contacted."

"Then we might as well go." Janazik got up and stretched luxuriously. His eyes were like molten gold in the murky light.

"So soon?" Marie held Anse back with anxious hands. "This same night?"

"The sooner the better," Anse said grimly. "Every day that goes by, more of our friends will be found out and killed, more places will be searched for Ellen, Volakech's grip on the city will grow stronger." He put the spiked helmet back on his head, and buckled the sword about his mailed waist. "Come on, Janazik. The rest stay here and wait for word. If we're utterly defeated, such of us as survive will manage to get back and lead you out of Krakenau—somehow."

Marie started to say something, then shook her head as if the words hurt her throat and drew Anse's face down to hers. "Goodbye, then," she whispered. "Goodbye, and the gods be with you."

He kissed her more awkwardly than was his wont, feeling himself a thorough scoundrel. Then he followed Pragakech and Janazik out the trapdoor.

IV

THE COURTYARD was filled with Khazaki warriors, standing silently in the slow heavy rain. It was the darkness of early morning, and only an occasional wan lightning flash, gleaming on spears and axes, broke the chill gloom. Anse was aware of softly-moving supple bodies pressing around him, of night-seeing eyes watching him with an impassive stare. It was he and Janazik who had the plan, and who had the most experience in warfare, and the rest looked to them for lead-

ership. It was not easy to stand under that cool, judging scrutiny, and Anse strode forth into the street with a feeling of relief at the prospect of action.

As they moved toward the castle, along the narrow cobbled lanes winding up the hills, their army grew. Warriors came loping from alleys, came slipping out of the dark barricaded houses, seemed to rise out of the rainy night around them. All Krakenau was abroad, it seemed, but quietly, quietly.

And throughout the town other such forces were on the move, gathering under the lead of anyone who could be trusted, converging on the citadel and the rocket-ship it guarded.

Tonight—victory, or destruction of the boat and a drawn battle . . . or repulsion and ultimate shattering defeat. The gods are abroad tonight.

Somewhere, faint and far through the dull washing of rain, a trumpet blew a harsh challenge, once and again. After it came a distance-muted shouting of voices and a clattering of swords.

"One of our bands has come across a patrol," said Janazik unnecessarily. "Now all hell will be loose in Krakenau. Come on!"

They broke into a trot up the hill. Rounding a sharp turn in the street, they saw a close-ranked mass of warriors with spears aloft.

Guardsmen!

The two forces let out a simultaneous yell and charged at each other in the disorderly Khazaki fashion. It was beginning to lighten just a little; Anse could make out enough for purposes of battle. Hai-ah—here we go!

He smashed into a leading guard, who stabbed at him with his long pike. The edge grazed off Anse's heavy chain mail as the Earthling chopped out with his sword. He knocked the shaft aside and thrust in, hewing at the Khazaki's neck. The guard intercepted the blow with his shield, and suddenly rammed it forward. The murderous spike on its boss thudded against the Terrestrial's broad chest and the linked rings gave under that blow—just a little, just enough to draw blood. Anse roared and chopped down across the other's right arm. The Khazaki howled his pain and stumbled back.

Another was on the Earthling like a spitting cat. Swords hummed and clashed together. Leaping and dodging, the Khazaki lashed out with a blade like a flickering flame, and none of Anse's blows could land on him.

The Khazaki leaped in suddenly, his edge reaching for the human's unprotected throat. Anse parried with his sword, while his left fist shot out like an iron cannonball. It hit the native full in the face, with a crunch of splintering bones. The guard's head snapped back and he fell to the blood-running street.

Janazik was fighting two at once, his sword never resting. He leaped and danced like the shadow of a flame in the wind, and he was laughing—laughing! Anse hewed out, and one of the foemen's heads sprang from its neck. Janazik darted in, there was a blur of steel, and the other guardsman toppled.

Axe and sword! Spear and dagger and flying arrows! The fight rolled back and forth between the darkening walls of houses. It grew with time; Volakech's patrols were drawn by the noise, loyalists crouched in hiding heard of the attack and sped to join it. Anse and Janazik fought side by side, human brawn and Khazaki swiftness, and the corpses were heaped where they went.

A pike raked Anse's hand. He dropped his sword and the enemy leaped in with drawn knife. Anse did not reach for his own dirk—no human had a chance in a knife fight with a Khazaki—but his arms snaked out, his hands closed on the native's waist, and he lifted the enemy up and hurled him against another. They both went down in a crash of denting armor and snapping bones. Anse roared his war-cry and picked up his sword again.

JANAZIK LEAPED and darted and fenced, grinning as he fought, demon-lights in his yellow eyes. A spear was hurled at him. He picked it out of the air, one-handed, and threw it back, even as he fought another guardsman. The rebel took advantage of it to get in under Janazik's guard. Swifter than thought, the warrior's dagger was in his left hand—and into the rebel's throat.

Back and forth the battle swayed, roaring, trampling, and the rain mingled with blood between the cobblestones. Thunder of

weapons, shrieking of wounded, shouting of challenges—lightning dancing overhead!

Suddenly it was over.

Anse looked up from his last victim and saw that the confusion no longer snarled around him. The street was heaped with dead and wounded, and a few individual battles were still going on. But the surviving guardsmen were in full flight, and the victorious warriors were shouting their triumph.

"That was a fight!" panted Janazik. He quivered with feral eagerness. "Now on to the castle!"

"I think," said Slavatozik thoughtfully, "that this was the decisive struggle as far as the city is concerned. Look at how many were involved. Almost all the patrols must have come here—and now they're beaten. We hold the city!"

"Not much good to us while Volakech is in the castle," said Anse. "He need only sally forth with the Earth-weapons—" He leaned on his sword, gasping great lungfuls of the cool wet air into him. "But where's Ellen?"

"We've had heralds out shouting for her, as you suggested," said Slavatozik. "Now that the city is in our control, she should come out. If not——"

"—then I know how to blow up the boat," said Gonzales Alonzo bleakly. "If we can get inside the citadel to it."

The loyalists were reassembling their forces. Warriors moved over the scene of battle, plundering dead guardsmen, cutting the throats of wounded enemies and badly mutilated friends. It was a small army that was crowding around Anse's tall form.

His worried eyes probed into the dull gray light of the rainy dawn. Of a sudden, he stiffened and peered more closely. Someone was coming down the street, thrusting through the assembled warriors. Someone—someone—he knew that bright bronze hair . . .

Ellen.

He stood waiting, letting her come up to him, and his eyes were hungry. She was tall and full-bodied and supple, graceful almost as a Khazaki, and her wide-set eyes were calm and gray under a broad clear forehead and there was a dusting of freckles over her straight nose and her mouth was wide and strong and generous and—

"Ellen," he said wonderingly. "Ellen."

"What are you doing?" she asked. "What have you planned?"

No question of how he was, no look at the blood trickling along his sides and splashed over his face and arms—well—"Where were you?" he asked, and cursed himself for not being able to think of a better greeting.

"I hid with the family of Azakhagar," she said. "I lay in their loft when the patrolmen came searching for me. Then I heard your heralds going through the streets, calling on me to come out in your name. So I came."

"How did you know it wasn't a trick of Volakech's?" asked someone.

"I told the heralds to use my name and add after it—well—something that only she and I knew," said Anse uncomfortably.

JANAZIK remained impassive, but he recalled that the phrase had been "Dougald Anson, who once told you something on a sunny day down by Zamanau River." He could guess what the something had been. Well, it seemed to happen to all Earthmen sooner or later, and it meant the end of the old unregenerate days. He sighed, a little wistfully.

"But what did you want me for?" asked Ellen. She stood before Anse in her short, close-fitting tunic, the raindrops glittering in her heavy coppery hair, and he thought wryly that the question was in one sense superfluous. But in another sense, and with time so desperately short—

"You're the only one of us who can plot a course for the rocket," he said. "Alonzo here, or almost anyone, should be able to pilot it, but you're the only one who can take it to the Star Ship. So that, of course, is why Carson and Volakech were after you, and why we had to have you too. If we can get into the citadel, capture the rocket and get up to the Star Ship, it'll be easy to overthrow Volakech. But if he gets there first, all Khazak couldn't win against him."

She nodded, slowly and wearily. Her gray eyes were haunted. "I wonder if it matters who gets there," she said. "I wonder why we're fighting and killing each other. Over who shall sit on the throne of

an obscure city-state on an insignificant planet? Over the exact disposition to be made of one little spaceship? It isn't worth it." She looked around at the sprawled corpses, lying on the bloody cobblestones with rain falling in their gaping mouths, and shuddered. "It isn't worth that."

"There's more to it than that," said Janazik bleakly. "Masefield Carson and his friend—his puppet, I think—Volakech would use the ship to bring all the world under their rule. Then they would mold it into a pattern suited for conquering a small empire among the neighboring stars."

"Volakech always talked that way, before his first revolution," said Ellen. "And Carse used to say—but that can't be right! He can't have meant it. And even if he did—what of it? Is it worth enough for brothers to slay each other over?"

"Yes." Janazik's voice was pitiless. "Shall the freemen of Khazak become the regimented hordes of a tyrant? Let all this world be blown asunder first!"

"Shall the innocent folk of the other stars become his victims?" urged Alonzo. "Shall Khazak become a menace to the Galaxy, one which must be destroyed—or must itself destroy? Shall there be war with—Earth herself?"

"To Shantuzik with that," growled Anse. "These are our enemies, to be fought and beaten. Out there is the great civilization of the Galaxy, and they would keep us from it for generations yet, and make it in the end our foe. And Volakech is a murderer with no right to the throne of Krakenau. I say let's get at his liver!"

"Well—" Ellen looked away. When she turned back, there was torment in her eyes, but her voice was low and steady: "I'm with you in whatever you plan. But on one condition. Carse is not to be harmed."

"Not harmed!" exploded Janazik. "Why, that dirty traitor deserves——"

"He is still my brother," said Ellen. "When Volakech is beaten, he will not be able to do any more harm, and he will see that he was wrong." Her eyes flashed coldly. "Whoever hurts Carse will have me for blood-enemy!"

"As you will," shrugged Anse, trying to hide the pain in his heart. "But now . . . Our plan is to storm the citadel. We can't hope to take it, but we'll keep the gar-

rison busy. Meanwhile a few of us break in, get the rocket, and take it back out here, where you will have an orbit plotted—"

"I can't make one that quickly. And who can pilot it well enough to land it here without cracking it up?"

THEY LOOKED at each other, and then eyes turned to Gonzales Alonzo. He smiled mirthlessly. "I can try," he said. "But I'm only an engineer; I never imagined I'd have to fly the thing. Chiang Ching-Wei was supposed to be the pilot, but he's a prisoner now."

"If we smash the rocket—well, then we smash it," said Anse heavily. "It'll mean a long and hard war against Volakech from outside, and he'll have all the advantages of the new weapons. We may never overthrow him before he gets another boat built. Still—we'll just have to try."

Ellen said quietly: "I can pilot it."

"You!"

"Of course. I've been working on the second boat from the beginning. I know it as well as anyone, every seam and rivet and wiring diagram. I was aboard when Chiang took her on a practice run only a few days ago. I'll fly it for you!"

"You can't—we have to fight our way into the castle itself, the very heart of Volakech's power—you'd be killed!"

"It's the best chance. If you think we can get in at all, I stand as good a chance of living through it as anyone else."

"She's right," said Janazik. "And while we waste time here arguing, the citadel is getting ready. Come on!"

Automatically, Anse broke into movement, trotting along beside Janazik, and the army formed its ranks and followed them.

He had time for a few hurried words with Ellen, whispered as they went up the hill: "Stay close by me. There'll be a small group of us getting in, picked fighters, and we'll make a ring about you."

"Of course," she nodded. Her gray eyes shone, and she was breathing quickly. "I begin to see why you were a rover all those years, Anse. It's mad and desperate and terrible—but before Cosmos, we're alive!"

"Most recruits are frightened green before their first battle," he said. "You have

a warrior's heart, Ellen—" He broke off, hearing the banality of his own words.

"Listen, my dearest," he said then, quickly. "We may not come alive through all this. But remember what I did say, down by the river that day. I love you."

She was silent. He went on, fumbling for words: "You wouldn't answer me then——"

"I thought it was just your usual talk to women."

"It may have been—then," he admitted. "But it hasn't been since, and it isn't now." His sword-calloused hand found hers. "Don't forget, Ellen. I love you. I will always love you."

"Anse——" She turned toward him, and he saw her eyes alight. "Anse——"

A bugle shrilled through the rain, high and harsh ahead of them. Dimly, they made out the monstrous bulk of the castle, looming through the misty gray light, its towers lost in the vague sky. Janazik's sword flashed from its sheath.

"The battle begins," said a voice out of the blurring rain.

Anse drew Ellen over against a wall and kissed her. Her lips were cool and firm under his, wet with rain; he would never forget that kiss while life was in him.

They looked at each other for a moment of wonder, and then broke apart and followed Janazik.

V

THE LOYALISTS CHARGED IN a living wave that roared as it surfed against the castle walls and spattered a foam of blood and steel. From three sides they came, weaving in and out of the hailing arrows, lifting shields above them, leaving their dead behind them.

The blaster cannon mounted on the walls spouted flame and thunder. Warriors were mowed down before that whirling white fury, armor melted when the lightning-like discharges played over it, but still the assault went on with all the grim bitter courage of the Khazaki race.

Old siege engines were appearing, dragged out of storehouses and hiding places where they had been kept against such a day of need. Now the great catapults and ballistae were mounted; stones and fireballs and iron-headed bolts were

raking the walls. A testudo moved awkwardly forth up the steep hill toward the gates. It was blasted to flaming molten ruin, but another got underneath the walls and the crash of a battering ram came from under its roof.

Shadowlike in the blinding rain, the warriors flitted up toward the walls. No spot of cover was too small for one of those ghostly shapes; they seemed to carry their own invisibility with them. Under the walls—scaling ladders appearing as if out of nowhere—up the walls and into the castle!

The ladders were hurled down. The warriors who gained the walls were blasted by cannon, cut down by superior numbers, lost in a swirl of battle and death. Boiling water rained down over the walls on those below, spears and arrows and the roaring blaster bolts. But still they came. Still the howling, screeching demons of Krakenau came, and died, and came again.

Anse cursed, softly, luridly, pain croaking in his voice: "We can't be with them. They're being slaughtered and we can't be with them."

"We're needed worse here," said Janazik curtly. "If only Pragakech can maintain the assault for an hour——"

He and Anse loped in the forefront. Behind them came Gonzales, Ellen, and a dozen picked young Khazaki. They wove through a maze of alleys and streets and deserted market squares, working around behind the castle. The roar of battle came to them out of the gray mist of rain; otherwise there was only the padding and splashing of their own feet, the breath rasping harsh in their lungs, the faint clank and jingle of their harness. All Krakenau not at the storming of the citadel had withdrawn into the mysterious shells of the houses, lay watching and waiting and whetting knives in the dark.

The paths dipped steeply downward, until, when they came around behind the citadel and stood peering out of a tunnel-like alley, there was a sheer cliff-face before them. On this side the castle was impregnable. The only approach was a knife-edged trail winding up the cliff, barely wide enough for one man at a time. At its top, flush with the precipice edge, the wall was built. Against this wall, commanding the trail, there had in the old days

been an archer post, but lately a cannon had been mounted there.

Yet that very security, thought Anse, might be a weakness. Except for that gun, the approach wouldn't be watched, especially with the fight going on elsewhere. So—

"Give me your weapon, Alonzo," said Janazik.

"Here." Gonzales handed him the blaster pistol. "But it only has two charges left in it."

"That may be enough." Janazik slipped it under his cloak. Then he wound a gold brassard about his arm and started up the trail. A couple of his Khazaki came behind them, then Anse, Ellen, and Alonzo, and finally the rest of the warriors.

THE TRAIL WAS STEEP and slippery, water swirling down it, loose rocks moving uneasily beneath the feet—and it was a dizzying drop off the sheer edge to the ground below. They wound upward slowly, panting, cursing, wondering how much of a chance their desperate scheme really had.

Ellen slipped a little. Anse reached back and caught her hand. He smiled lop-sidedly. "Now I don't want to let go," he said.

"I wonder—" Ellen looked away, then back to him, and her eyes were wide and puzzled. "I wonder if I want you to, Anse."

His heart seemed to jump up into his throat, but he let her go and said wryly: "I'm afraid I have to right now. But wait till later."

Up and up—*Later! Will there ever be a later?*

And if there is, what then? I'm still more than half a Khazaki. Can we live together in the great civilization I hardly comprehend?

It was simpler when Janazik and I were warring over the planet . . . Janazik! I wonder if two beings of the same race could ever know as close a friendship as that between us two aliens. We've fought and laughed and sung together, we've saved each other's lives, sweated and suffered and been afraid, together. We know each other as we will never know any other being.

Well, it passes. We'll always remain close friends, I suppose. But the old comradeship—I'll have to give that up.

But Ellen—

Up and up—

Janazik whistled, long and loud, and called: "Hail Volakech! Friends!"

He could dimly see the looming bulk of the blaster cannon, crouched behind its iron shield. Above it the walls of the castle were high and dark and—empty.

The voice came from ahead of him, taut with nervousness: "Who goes there?"

"A friend. I have a message for His Highness." Janazik moved forward almost casually. His eyes gleamed with mirth. It tickled his heart, this dicing with death. Someday he'd overreach himself and that would be the end, but until then he was having fun.

"Advance . . . No, no one else. Just you alone."

Janazik sauntered forward until he stood only a meter from the blunt ugly muzzle. He had his left arm out of his cloak, so that the golden brassard shone in plain view. Underneath, his right hand thumbed the catch of Alonzo's pistol.

"Who are you?" challenged the voice from behind the shield.

"A messenger for His Highness from his allies in Volgazan," said Janazik. "Seeing that there was still fighting going on, I and my men decided to come in the back way."

"Well—I suppose I can let you in, under guard. But your men will have to stay out here."

"Very well." Janazik strolled over behind the shield.

There were three warriors crouched there, in front of a small door in the wall. One of them was about to blow his trumpet for a guard detail. The other two poised their spears near Janazik's throat. None of them thought that anyone outside the citadel might possess an Earth-weapon.

JANAZIK SHOT right through his cloak. In that narrow space, the ravenous discharge blinded and blistered him, stung his face with flying particles of molten iron. The hammer-blow of concussion sent him reeling back against the wall. His cloak caught afire; he ripped it off and flung it down on the three blackened corpses before him.

Vision returned to his dazzled eyes.

These Earth-weapons were hideous things, he thought; they made nothing of courage or strength or even cunning. He wondered what changes Galactic civilization would bring to old Khazak, and didn't think he'd like most of them. Maybe Volakech was right.

But Anse was his comrade and Aligan had been his king. He whistled, and the others came running up.

"Quick," rasped Janazik. "The noise may draw somebody—quick, inside!"

"Can't we swing this lightning thrower around and blast them?" wondered a Khazaki.

"No, it's fixed in place." Anse threw his brawny shoulders against the solid mass of the door. It swung ponderously back and they dashed through the tunnel in the thick wall—out into the open courtyard of the castle!

The noises of the fight rose high from here, but there were only a few warriors in sight, scurrying back and forth on their errands without noticing the newcomers—a fact which did not surprise Anse or Janazik, who knew what vast confusion a battle was. The human remembered the layout now—the rocket would be over by the machine shops, near the donjon keep—"This way!"

They trotted across the court, around the gray stone bulk of the citadel's buildings and towers, toward the long wooden shed which housed the new machine shop. The rain was beginning to slacken now, and the sun was up behind its gray veil, so that there was light shining through slanting silver. Against the dark walls, the lean torpedo shape of the rocket boat gleamed like a polished spearhead.

"Now—ahead!" Janazik broke into a run toward the boat, and they followed him in a close ring about Ellen.

A band of fighters came around the corner of the machine shop, in front of the rocket. The wet light shone off their brassards. Janazik swore bitterly, and his hand dropped to his sword.

One of the enemy warriors let out a yell. "Earthlings—two—three of them! Not ours——"

The blaster crashed in Janazik's hand, and five dropped their charred bodies on the ground. With a spine-shivering yell, Janazik bounded forward, and after him

came Anse, Alonzo, and a round dozen of the fiercest fighters in Krakenau. The blaster was exhausted now—but they had their swords!

The leader of the enemy band was a huge Khazaki, dark-furred and green-eyed. His men were scattering in panic, but he roared a bull-voiced command and they rallied about him and stood before the rocket.

Volakech. By all the thirteen hells, *Volakech!*

He must have been leading reinforcements to a threatened point on the wall, thought Anse in a fleeting moment, and his sharp mind had instantly deduced that the invaders were after the rocket—and that they could have no more blaster charges, or they would be using them. And Volakech's band was still larger than theirs, and he had all the forces of the citadel behind him if he could summon them!

THE TWO BANDS CRASHED together and steel began to fly. Anse stood before Ellen and lashed out at a spitting Khazaki who reached for his belly with a sword. The enemy dodged past his guard, drilled in close. Ellen shouted and kicked at the native's ankles. He stumbled, dropping his defense, and Anse clove his skull.

Volakech roared. He swung a huge battle axe, and its shock and thunder rose high over the swaying tide of battle. Two of Janazik's men leaped at him. He swept the axe in a terrible arc and the spike cracked one pate and the edge split the other's face open. Alonzo sprang at him with furious courage, wielding a sword. Volakech knocked it spinning from his hand, but, before he could kill the engineer, Anse was on him.

They traded blows in a clamor of steel. Axe and sword clashed together, sheared along chain mail and rang on helmets. It was a blur of rake and slash and parry, with Volakech grinning at him behind a network of whirling steel.

Anse gathered his strength and pressed forward with reckless fury. His sword hummed and whistled and roared against Volakech's hard-held guard. He laid open arms, legs, cheek; he probed and lunged for the rebel king's trunk. Volakech

snarled, but step by step he was driven back.

Warriors fell, but it was on the bodies of foemen and even dying they stabbed upward at the enemy. Bitter, bloody, utterly ruthless, the struggle swayed about the rocketship. It was old Khazak that fought, the planet of warriors, and, even as he hewed and danced and slew, Janazik thought bleakly that he was trying to end the gory magnificence of that age; he was bringing civilization and with it the doom of his own kind. Khazak of the future would not be the same world.

If they won—if they won!

"To me!" he yelled. "To me, men of Aligan! Hai, Aligan! Krakenau! Dougald!"

They heard and rallied round him, the last gasping survivors of his band. But there were few of Volakech's men left, few.

"Volakech! Aid the king! To me, men of Volakech!" The rebel shouted at the top of his lungs. And Anse lunged in at him, beating against the swift armor of the axe.

"Anse!" Janazik's urgent shout cut through the clangor of battle. "Anse, here! We're blasting free!"

The human hardly heard him. He forced his way closer in against Volakech, his sword whistling about the usurper's helmeted head.

"Anse!" shouted Janazik. "Anse—Ellen needs you—"

With a tiger snarl, Anse broke free from his opponent and whirled about. A rebel stood before him. There was an instant of violence too swift to be followed, and Anse leaped over the ripped body and up to Janazik.

The Khazaki stood by the airlock. There was a ring of corpses before him; his sword ran blood.

"Ellen?" gasped Anse. "Ellen?"

"Inside," rasped Janazik. "She's inside. We have to get out of here—only way to get your attention—*Come on!*"

Anse saw the armed band swarming at them from one of the outer towers, defenders who had finally noticed the battle at the rocket and were coming to aid their king. Not a chance against them—except the boat!

Man and Khazaki stepped back into the airlock. A storm of arrows and javelins broke loose. Anse saw two of his men fall—then Janazik had slammed the heavy outer valve and dogged it shut.

"Ellen!" he gasped. "Ellen—take the boat up before they dynamite it!"

The girl nodded. She was strapping herself into the pilot's seat before the gleaming control panel. Only Alonzo was there with her, bleeding but still on his feet. Four of them survived—only four—but they had the boat!

Through the viewport, Anse saw the attackers surging around the hull. They'd use ballistae to crush it, dynamite to blow it up, blaster cannon to fry them alive inside the metal shell—unless they got it into the sky first.

"Take the engines, Alonzo," said Ellen.

Gonzales Alonzo nodded. "You help me, Janazik," he said. "I'm not sure I—can stay conscious—"

THE PILOT ROOM was in the bows. Behind it, bulkheaded off, lay the air plant and the other mechanisms for maintaining life aboard—not very extensive, for the boat wouldn't be in space long. Amidships were the control gyros, and behind still another bulkhead the engine controls. Rather than install an elaborate automatic feed system, the builders had relied on manual controls acting on light signals flashed by the pilot. It was less efficient, but it had shortened the labor of constructing the vessel and was good enough for the mere hop it had to make.

"I don't know anything about it," said Janazik doubtfully.

"I'll tell you what to do—Help me——" Leaning on the Khazaki's arm, Alonzo stumbled toward the stern.

Anse strapped his big body into the chair beside Ellen's. "I can't help much, I'm afraid," he said.

"No—except by being here," she smiled.

Looking out, he saw that the assault on the castle was almost over—beaten off. It had provided the diversion they needed—but at what cost, at what cost?

"We might as well take off for the Star Ship right away," he said.

"Of course. And that will end the war. Volakech can either surrender or sit in the castle till he rots."

"Or we can use the ship to blast the citadel."

"No—oh, Cosmos, no!" Her eyes were filled with sudden horror.

"Why not?" he argued angrily. "Only way we can rescue our people if he won't give them up of his own will."

"We might kill Carse," she whispered.

It was on his tongue to snap good riddance, but he choked down the impulse. "Why do you care for him that much?"

"He's my brother," she said simply, and he realized that in spite of her civilized protestations Ellen was sufficiently Khazaki to feel the primitive unreasoning clan loyalty of the planet. She added slowly: "And when Father died, years ago, Carse took his place, he's been both father and big brother to me. He may have some wrong ideas, but he's always been so—good—"

A child's worship of the talented, handsome, genial elder brother, and she had never really outgrown it. Well—it didn't matter. Once they had the Star Ship, Carse didn't matter. "He'll be as safe as anyone can be in these days," said Anse. "I—I'll protect him myself if need be."

Her hand slid into his, and she kissed him, there in the little boat while it rocked and roared under the furious assaults from without. "Anyone who hurts Carse is my blood foe," she breathed. "But anyone who helps him helps me, and—and—"

Anse smiled, dreamily. The engines began to stutter, warming up, and Volakech's men scattered in dismay. They had seen the fire that spurted from the rocket tubes.

And in the engine room, Masefield Carson held his blaster leveled on Alonzo and Janazik. "Go ahead," he smiled. "Go ahead—take the ship up."

VI

THE KHAZAKI SWORE LIVIDLY. His sword seemed almost to leap halfway out of the scabbard. Carse swung the blaster warningly, and he clashed the weapon back. Useless, useless, when white flame could destroy him before he got moving.

"How did you get here?" he snarled.

The tall, bronze-haired man smiled again. "I wasn't in the fight," he said. "Volakech wanted to save my knowledge

and told me to stay out of the battle. I wasn't really needed. But it occurred to me that your assault was obviously a futile gesture unless you hoped in some way to capture the boat. So I hid in here to guard it—just in case. And now—we'll take her up. We may just as well do so. Once I have the Star Ship—" He gestured at Alonzo. "Start the engines. And no tricks. I understand them as well as you do."

Gonzales strapped himself in place and stood swaying with weakness while he manipulated the controls. "I can't—reach that wheel—" he gasped.

"Turn it, Janazik," said Carse. "About a quarter turn—that's enough."

The impassive faces of meters wavered and blurred before Alonzo's swimming eyes. He had been pretty badly hurt. But the engines were warming up.

"Strap yourself in, Janazik," said Carse.

The Khazaki obeyed, sickly. He didn't really need the anti-acceleration webbing—Carse himself was content to hang on to a stanchion with one hand—but it would hamper his movements, he would have no way of making a sudden leap. Between them, he and Alonzo could handle the engines readily enough, Carse giving them their orders. Then once they were at the Star Ship he could blast them down, go out to capture Anse and Ellen—and the old books said one man could handle the ship if necessary—

How to warn the two in the pilot room? How to get help? The warrior's brain began to turn over, cool and steady now, swift as chilled lightning.

The boat spouted flame, stood on its tail and climbed for the sky. Acceleration dragged at Carse, but it wasn't too great for a strong man to resist. Carse tightened his grip on the stanchion. His blaster was steady on them.

Ellen's signal lights blinked and blinked on the control panels. More on the No. 3 jet, ease to port, full ahead, cut No. 2 . . . Alonzo handled most of it, occasionally gasping a command to Janazik. The bellow of the rockets filled the engine room.

And in the bows, Dougald Anson saw the world reel and fall behind, saw the rainy sky open up in a sudden magnificence of sun, saw it slowly darken and the stars come awesomely out. Gods, gods,

was this space? Open space? No wonder the old people had longed to get away!

* * *

How to get help, how to warn Anse— Janazik's mind spun like an unloaded engine, spewing forth plan after unusable plan. Quickly, now, by Shantuzik's hells!

No way out—and the minutes were fleeing, the rocket was reaching for the sky, he knew they were nearing the Star Ship and still he lay in his harness like a sheep and obeyed Carse's gun-point orders!

The disgrace of it! He snarled his anger, and at Alonzo's gasped command swung the wheel with unnecessary savagery. The ship lurched as a rocket tube overfired. Carse nearly lost his hold, and for an instant Janazik's hands were at the acceleration webbing, ready to fling it off and leap at him.

The man recovered, and his blaster came to the ready again. He had to shout to be heard above the thundering jets: "Don't try that—either of you! I can shoot you down and handle it myself if I must!"

He laughed then, a tall and splendid figure standing strained against the brutal, clawing acceleration. Ellen's brother—aye! And one could see why she wanted him spared. Janazik's lip curled back from his teeth in a snarl of hate.

THE ROCKET must be very near escape velocity now. Presently Ellen would signal for the jets to be turned off and they would rush weightless through space while she took her readings and plotted the orbit that would get them to the Star Ship. And if then Carse emerged with his blaster—

Anse had only a sword.

But—Anse is Anse, thought Janazik. If there is any faintest glimmer of a chance Anse will find it. And if not, we're really no worse off than now. I'll have to warn Anse and leave the rest up to him.

The Khazaki nodded bleakly to himself. It would probably mean his own death before Carse's blaster flame—and damn it, damn it, he liked living. Even if the old Khazak he knew were doomed, there had been many new worlds of the Galactic frontier. He and Anse had often dreamed of roving over them—

However—

A red light blinked on the panel. Ellen's signal to cut the rockets. They were at escape velocity.

Wearily, his hand shaking, Alonzo threw the master switch. The sudden silence was like a thunderclap.

And Janazik' screeched the old Krakenai danger call from his fullest lungs.

Carse turned around with a curse, awkward in the sickening zero-gravity of free fall. "It won't do you any good," he yelled thickly. "I'll kill him too—"

Alonzo threw the master switch up! With a coughing roar, the rockets burst back into life. No longer holding the stanchion, Carse was hurled to the floor.

Janazik clawed at his webbing to get free. Carse leveled his blaster on Alonzo. The engineer threw another switch at random, and the direction of acceleration shifted with sudden violence, slamming Carse against the farther wall.

His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him.

And in the control room, Anse heard Janazik's high ululating yell. The reflexes of the wandering years came back to galvanize him. His sword seemed to leap into his hand, he flung himself out of his chair webbing with a shout . . .

"Anse!" Ellen's voice came dimly to his ears, hardly noticed. "Anse—what is it—"

He drifted weightless in midair, cursing, trying to swim. And then the rockets woke up again and threw him against the floor. He twisted with Khazaki agility, landed crouched, and bounded for the stern.

Ellen looked after him, gasping, for an instant yet unaware of the catastrophe, thinking how little she knew that yellow-maned savage after all, and how she would like to learn, and—

The rocket veered, crazily. Anse caught himself as he fell, adjusted to the new direction of gravity, and continued his plunging run. The crash of a blaster came from ahead of him.

He burst into the control room and saw it in one blinding instant. Alonzo's charred body sagging in its harness, Janazik half out of his, Carse staggering to his feet—the blaster turned on Janazik, Janazik, the finger tightening—

TIGER-LIKE, ANSE SPRANG. Carse glimpsed him, turned, the blaster half swung about . . . and the murderous fighting machine which was 'Dougald Anson had reached him. Carse saw the sword shrieking against his face; it was the last thing he ever saw . . .

Anse lurched back against the control panel "Turn it off!" yelled Janazik. "Throw that big switch there!"

Mechanically, the human obeyed, and there was silence again, a deep ringing silence in which they floated free. It felt like an endless falling.

Falling, falling—Anse looked numbly down at his bloody sword. Falling, falling, falling—but that couldn't be right, he thought dully. He had already fallen. He had killed Ellen's brother.

"And I love her," he whispered.

Janazik drifted over, slowly in the silent room. His eyes were a deep gold, searching now. *If Ellen won't have him, he and I will go out together, out to the stars and the great new frontier. But if she will, I'll have to go alone, I'll always be alone—*

Unless she would come too. She's a good kid . . . I'd like to have her along. Maybe take a mate of my own too . . . But that can never be, now. She won't come near her brother's slayer.

"You might not have had to kill him," said Janazik "Maybe you could have disarmed him."

"Not before he got one of us—probably you," said Anse tonelessly. "Anyway, he needed killing. He shot Alonzo."

He added, after a moment: "A man has to stand by his comrades."

Janazik nodded, very slowly. "Give me your sword," he said.

"Eh?" Anse looked at him. The blue eyes were unseeing, blind with pain, but he handed over the red weapon. Janazik slipped his own glaive into the human's fingers.

Then he laid a hand on Anse's shoulder and smiled at him, and then looked away.

We Khazaki don't know love. There is comradeship, deeper than any Earthling knows. When it happens between male and

female, they are mates. When it is between male and male, they are blood-brothers. And a man must stand by his comrades.

Ellen came in, pulling her way along the walls by the handholds, and Anse looked at her without saying a word, just looking.

"What happened?" she said. "What is the—*Oh!*"

Carse's body floated in midair, turning over and over in air currents like a drowned man in the sea.

"Carse—Carse—"

Ellen pushed from the wall, over to the dead man. She looked at his still face, and stroked his blood-matted hair, and smiled through a mist of tears.

"You were always good to me, Carse," she whispered. "You were . . . goodnight, brother. Goodnight."

Then turning to Anse and Janazik, with something cold and terrible in her voice: "Who killed him?"

Anse looked at her, dumbly.

"I did," said Janazik.

He held forth the dripping sword. "He stowed away—was going to take over the ship. Alonzo threw him off balance by turning the rockets back on. He killed Alonzo. Then I killed him. He needed it. He was a traitor and a murderer, Ellen."

"He was my brother," she whispered. And suddenly she was sobbing in Anse's arms, great racking sobs that seemed to tear her slender body apart.

But she'd get over it.

Anse looked at Janazik over her shoulder, and while he ruffled her shining hair his eyes locked with the Khazaki's. *This is the end. Once we land, we can never see each other, not ever again. And we were comrades in the old days . . .*

Farewell, my brother.

WHEN THE STAR SHIP landed outside Krakenau's surrendered citadel, it was still raining a little. Janazik looked out at the wet gray world and shivered. Then, wordlessly, he stepped from the airlock and walked slowly down the hill toward the sea. He did not look back, and Anse did not look after him.