

PLANET STORIES



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► *Novel of Galactic Wars*

EVIL OUT OF ONZAR Mark Ganes 4

A vast, grand prize lay within a parsec of the ambitious orphan system of Onzar—the major warp-lines of space crossing the Galaxy between the Allied Worlds and Darzent Empire. . . . Skyward, hungry legions!

► *Three Star-Flung Novelets*

ZERO DATA Charles Saphro 30

All the fabulous electronic witchery of the 21st century couldn't pin guilt on irreproachable Lonnie Raichi. But Jason, the cop, was sweating it out, searching for that fourth, final and all-knowing rule that would knock Lonnie's sublime "triple ethic" for a gala loop.

THE STAR PLUNDERER Poul Anderson 54

"One ship, and you're planning an empire in the Galaxy? That was exactly the plan of a handful of desperate men.

THE SLAVES OF VENUS Edwin James 90

The planet-wrecker rocketed his peculiar brand of freedom to the green swampmen of Venus—and prayed for one unholy miracle.

► *Short Stories from Beyond the Moon*

THE GUN Philip K. Dick 46

Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent. The planet was dead. Only the gun showed signs of life.

THOMPSON'S CAT Robt. M. Williams 70

Forgotten in the panic was Thompson's wise cat as the spaceship hurtled toward the sun . . . and certain death.

BIG PILL Raymond Z. Gallun 78

Child, it was, of the now ancient H-bomb. New. Untested. Whither goest man at the terrible hour of the detonation?

► *Planet's Star Feature*

THE VIZIGRAPH 2 & 108

Heaven and Hell, side by side.

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Thane knew this crazy duel was just another of Candor's roadblocks. He had to win.



EVIL OUT OF ONZAR

By MARK GANES

The orphan system of Onzar was fuming under its leader's driving, paranoid megalomania. For there was a prize. A vast, grand prize within a parsec of this ambitious domain—the major warp-lines of space crossing the Galaxy between the Allied Worlds and the Darzent Empire. Skyward, hungry legions!

ROGER THANE had, of course, heard of these meetings. The stories of his acquaintances in Liaison had been graphic enough but they didn't begin to do the scene justice. It was, well, jarring.

Through the one-way glass panel built into one side of the vast meeting hall of the

space station, Thane looked directly across at the delegation from Onzar, though "delegation" was hardly the word. All top gold from the Onzar group was there, and it was easy to tell their rank—fleet marshals, the technical advisors, the interpreters—by the amount of gold that encrusted their helmets,



coruscated from their shoulder boards, and crept and crawled in heavy filigree around their uniforms. In that assembly it was easy to pick out Candar. Shorter than the average Onzarian, with shaven head, his uniform was quite plain except for small, double-headed platinum shagells on the collar.

And Candar was doing all the talking. When he had started one hour and fifteen minutes ago his voice had been harsh and low. Now it had increased in pitch and volume and he was striding back and forth, showing his scorn for the Allied Systems in every gesture. Thane glanced at the "absolute" dial of his watch and wondered how long it would keep up.

"... we have come to deal with you in good faith and again you seek to exploit us. You would, if you could, take all we produce and give nothing in return. This you shall not do. Onzar is young, but already its power encompasses five suns. Each day we grow stronger. We do not need your shoddy goods in exchange for our treasure."

As Candar's voice became louder and more shrill Thane noticed that a technician to his left kept adjusting the recorder dials. In an hour or so the speech would be broadcast through Onzar, three and a half light years from this meeting place in space. Candar was choosing words to inflame the already fanatical nationalism of his expanding system. "You would take our discoveries, the fruits of our genius and industry. You would even take our young men into slavery. But this Candar will prevent. We are a warrior race, and what we need, we take. Our day approaches."

The last three words were his trademark, his invariable sign-off. So that was that. Candar strode from the room followed by the marshals, the advisors, the interpreters. Thane looked over to Garth who had slumped a bit in his conference chair on the Allied Systems side of the room, and was lighting a cigar. Thane had never particularly liked Garth, but, now, he felt a touch of sympathy with him. Garth took two long puffs on his cigar and then slowly shrugged his shoulders as if to put a final period to the scene.

Back in the Allied Systems naval cruiser, Garth was getting out of his reserve marshal's uniform. He glanced across at Thane, strapping his couch belts at the other side

of the compartment. "I wanted you to see Candar in operation. Figured you might as well as long as this show was scheduled anyway. Could be that it will be of use to you in your new assignment."

The navigator's voice came over the intercom, "Prepare for finite acceleration, twenty seconds absolute."

GARTH zipped up his civilian coveralls and dropped to the couch, slipping the stub of his cigar into the converter tube. "This conference was about like the rest. It makes the sixth, now, that I've sat through with Candar. You remember he was full of cooperation right at the start while we were renewing the gold-trade agreement. After that was settled there was nothing more in it for him except the chance to make another speech."

Thane looked over at Garth. "I noticed that. But why? There was certainly plenty of gold splashed over everyone in the Onzar delegation, but what is it that makes the stuff so important to them?"

Garth looked over in surprise. "You don't know? Well, of course you wouldn't. You've been working on specialized stuff on the other side of the Galaxy. I'll give you some of the background on the way back to Liaison. The sleep-trainer will fill in there."

Garth stopped. Everything stopped as the acceleration began. Both of them were overbraced for the acceleration was light and even. It was only 5000 KM to the nearest warp-line.

As acceleration slacked off for the five-minute coast into the warp, Garth lit another cigar and began. "Onzar was one of those relatively distant systems which were colonized back in the days when all they had was the finite drive. Of course, it took them a generation or so to get out there, at just under the speed of light. And when they got there, the best guess is that their ship was too damaged for further flight. Otherwise, considering the planet, they wouldn't have stayed."

Thane flipped through a systems manual to the geographical data for Onzar IV. He readily agreed that they wouldn't have stayed if it had been possible for them to get away. Onzar IV was cold, bitterly cold. Hurricane winds were common. The mountains went up to forty and fifty kilometers,

and the land between them was largely barren desert.

"They couldn't get back into space," Garth continued, "so they stayed in splendid isolation for about 1500 years. Not another ship touched the system till the warp-lines were discovered."

Thane looked up. "I suppose they went through the usual reversion of the orphan systems?"

Garth grunted. "A lot worse than usual. Of course, our version of their history is largely guesswork because the Onzarians have never allowed any research. But it's clear that the immigration crew, or their first-generation descendants, put on a very effective little war between themselves. By the time they were finished Onzar IV was back in the age of ox-carts, without the ox."

The intercom sounded again. "Five seconds to warp-line." There was a pause, then the familiar shummer and they were on the warp-line drive. As usual, the shummer had put out Garth's cigar. He re-lit it and went on. "When we began using warp-line travel we hit Onzar in the first fifty years of exploration. Practically had to. It's only a parsec from the confluence of nine lines running between our part of the Galaxy and the Darzent Empire. Right on the main road, right in the middle of the next war." He stared in silence at Thane for a moment. "That's one reason I've called you in on this."

For most of the rest of the trip to Liaison, Garth continued to explain the strange orphan system of Onzar. In the religion, as Garth described it, the whole priesthood was female, and gold had magical value. All the men wore gold, the amount strictly in line with their rank. They despised the women but were in superstitious dread of them because only the church could sanctify and give power to their gold symbols of rank. At first, the men had lived in warring tribes, the women in religious groups. They came together each spring and fall for the ceremonies of gold consecration.

Still, they did make considerable technical progress, partially because of their interest in mining. By the time the first warp-line ship reached them, the Onzarians had the internal combustion engine, nation-states, mass production, planet-wide wars.

"Of course," Garth went on, "in the early

days of warp-line exploration we weren't as careful as we are now. The Onzarians picked up enough to put on a real atomic war within fifty years. After that they expanded through their own system, and even took over nearby suns. They certainly had the motive for conquest, too. Gold was running out on their own planet, and they'd go to any lengths to get it."

Thane glanced at his watch and got back onto his couch. "About time for deceleration," he said. Garth also began fastening his straps. Thane glanced over, with curiosity. "Sounds like the usual story, with some interesting variations. Where do I come in?"

"The thing that makes Onzar uniquely important," Garth said, "is its position. Space fleets from Darzent or from the A.S. will have to pass within a parsec of Onzar, because of the confluence of warp-lines in that part of the system. Whoever controls Onzar can win the war for the Galaxy when it comes."

Garth paused as they went through the shummer and the beginnings of deceleration, and then went on. "We were doing fairly well till Candar's revolt and seizure of power. He is leaning toward Darzent. Apparently he thinks he can keep his own independence even if Darzent wins the decision. He's going along with us just enough to assure his supply of gold. But you noticed his own lack of gold ornamentation. His eventual aim is undoubtedly to dominate and destroy the religion because it's about the only independent force left on Onzar, and Candar is not going to tolerate any independent forces."

Garth looked steadily at Thane. "The rest of the details, the language, and your own mission will be made clear to you in the sleep trainer. And it is no exaggeration to say that you will be responsible for the future of the Galaxy."

LIAISON Headquarters had started out several centuries before as a small organization within the Department of the Oustide, directly under the control of the newly-formed Allied Systems Council. It had begun in a room, and had later moved to its own building. Now it occupied a planet.

The four planets in the system all ap-

peared to be barren, lifeless rocks. Appearances were correct for I, III, and IV. II, however, was not what it seemed. Like the others, the surface was rocky, barren, utterly lifeless, without atmosphere. But a few kilometers down, a red-haired boy had just won a game of bok at school recess. A research worker had just finished a report on an improved interrogatory drug. An administrative assistant had just planned a palace revolution on a system 200 light years away. And Roger Thane, Liaison Agent, was just entering Medico-Synthesis, some eighteen kilometers under the surface.

The young medic looked up as Thane stepped off the mobiltrack and entered the room. "You're Thane," he said, with curiosity in his voice. "The instructions and the sleep-record just came through the Pneum. I've heard about you people from Proxima. Just how does it work, anyway?"

Thane walked over to the sleep-table and grinned a little wearily. "How are you able to see?" he asked. "I don't know that I could tell a blind man satisfactorily. How do the people of the Noxus system telepath? I don't know, and they've tried to tell me. All I know is that mutations occurred sometime while Proxima Centauri was an orphan system, which enable many of us to make small changes in our appearance. Hair color, skin pigmentation, fingerprints. Usually takes about two days. Liaison Research learned how to speed it up with equipment but they never have learned just what they're working with." He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid that doesn't help you a bit but there's nothing much more I can say that will give you a clearer picture. I've tried before."

Thane was then in his own normal: black hair and eyes, somewhat over two meters in height, with the heavily tanned Proxima skin. Before sliding on the table he took a sheet from the medic and glanced over his new specifications: yellow eyes, golden hair, golden skin. Slight slant to eyes. Three centimeters height reduction. All routine changes, and a matter of a few minutes, with the aid of the Liaison equipment.

The medic was busy making connections, giving injections and setting dials. Thane looked up at the brightly lighted ceiling. With no perceptible lapse he was still staring at it when the medic began taking off

the connections. But in the zero subjective time, the twelve minutes of elapsed time, Thane had changed his appearance completely. And what he had learned puzzled him at first and then angered him.

"Roger Thane," the sleep-record began, "your assignment is the protection of Dr. Manning Reine . . ."

Reine, he learned, was one of the scientists who had been working in obscure laboratories on the Forsberg Project. Forsberg's mathematics had shown the theoretical possibility of a discreet jump, with no time lapse, from one of the curving lines of warp to the next, instead of the present method of travel at "friction speed" along the erratically curving lines.

Garth's voice cut in on the speech record. "Now that we have the drive, what are we going to do with it? Politically, the Allied Systems cannot initiate the attack. Yet if we merely wait, Darzent will eventually learn the details of the drive. As it is, they outnumber us, two to one. They have the advantage in almost every respect. Their only deterrent has been the fear that we do have the second-stage drive.

"There have already been leaks—enough so that if Manning Reine falls into Darzent hands, they would have the drive in operation within a few days. Then immediate attack, and defeat. Your job is to protect Reine, or to kill him if there is danger of his loss to Darzent."

Manning Reine, a native of Onzar, had been educated at the Systems University at Beirut, Earth. He'd returned to Onzar but had fled at the time of the Candar revolution. On Earth, he'd married and gone on with his research work. Now, after twenty-five years, he was the key figure in the development of the drive. Undoubtedly his knowledge was enough to allow Darzent to develop the drive if he should fall into their hands. And he was not susceptible to the protective, anti-interrogatory drugs. Reine himself had developed the vitally important gold catalyst principle.

REINE'S address was just a pair of top-secret geographical coordinates, a thousand kilometers from the nearest feeder jet-line. Thane looked down at the endless Norwegian forest, a thousand meters below his rented anti-grav scout. He felt depressed.

That was always a reaction to be expected, of course, after an accelerated identity change. But then too, there'd been the scene with Garth after he'd left Medico-Synthesis.

Thane had strode past Garth's secretary and into the inner office without a word. Garth was behind his desk, his back to the door, studying a galactic wall map. He turned slowly.

"A bodyguard!" Thane exclaimed. "Is that your idea of the most responsible job in the Galaxy? You pulled me off the Elron business just when I was set to engineer the beginnings of a representative government there. The whole project will be set back by years. And it was touch-and-go as it was. And for what?"

Garth looked at him calmly for a moment, as he bit off the end of a fresh cigar. "Thane," he finally said, with deliberation, "the executive council of the Department of the Outside just doesn't like your methods. You've put through some really brilliant maneuvers but you've done it alone, taking chances. I've tried to go along with you but the last report from Elron caused a real blow-up at the council. One of the council members suggested your assignment to this bodyguard job, as you call it, and they all agreed. I had to go along."

"Just why, then, is all this Onzar background necessary? Did you think it would fool me?"

"I said I *had* to go along," Garth answered impatiently, "but that's not all. I also *wanted* to go along with the idea. This is much more important than it appears on the surface. We have reason to believe that Reine is still connected with Onzar. We don't have much to go on, but one of your jobs will be to get the details."

The coordinates on the lat-don dial had almost lined up, though the forest was still completely unbroken below. A few hundred meters to the right and he had it. Thane let the anti-grav hover for a moment, and then dropped silently downward. Branches of spruce brushed against the plastic cabin as the anti-grav settled into the forest. It gently settled on a thin layer of powder snow. There was nothing but the silence of the forest, broken only by the thin sound of the wind in the branches above.

He stepped out, breathing in the cold,

crisp air. He started off through the forest using the unfamiliar Terran compass. One hundred twenty meters, azimuth 273 (difficult to maintain through the trees) and he would come, according to his directions, to a tree a little different from the rest. He continued, with the brittle snow tinkling faintly under his feet.

Then a new sound. Once . . . again . . . then a repeated volley. Stoltz guns. From the tone, hand size, tuned down below lethal potential, but enough to stun and mutilate.

He was absolutely still for a moment. Then he began running towards the sound, trying to minimize the noise of crunching snow under his feet.

He swerved to pass a clump of trees and brush. As he did three things happened. A small thrush started into the air off a branch, fluttered a moment, then fell to the snow. A white-clad figure appeared ahead, just at the next bend. And . . . Thane wondered just what he was doing here . . . why wasn't he on Proxima? He remembered school there . . . what fun in elementary atomics. . . .

Then his training took over, forcing his temporarily twisted brain to perform rationally. As he dropped to the brittle snow and aimed his own Stoltz, he automatically catalogued his confusion as the result of an off-shot, a near miss. He hit the snow. The white figure was just off his sights, but close enough. He pressed the impeller. That one didn't miss, and it had been set on "lethal." He crept forward across the ground. He was sure that his immediate opponent was through, but there were others. The slithering Stoltz noises ahead increased in volume.

He reached the white-cloaked figure. Onzarian. The eyes and mouth had the idiot expression peculiar to a Stoltz corpse. Thane considered. He was at a disadvantage against the snow in his blue civilian coveralls. He quickly stripped the white cloak off the corpse and put it on as he continued at a run.

He slowed as he approached a clearing. Not much of a clearing, not large enough to be spotted from the air. Two figures in the Patrol uniform were stretched out, motionless, a few meters from the tree at the center. Two men in white cloaks were carrying a third figure between them, just enter-

ing the pine forest at the further edge. Thane instantly recognized the unconscious figure as Reine. At once he started towards them, shifting the Stoltz to the lightest stun position. That cut the range way down, even for this close-in weapon, but it would be dangerous for Reine if he used more. Reine apparently had had one dose already. On the run, Thane aimed at one figure he had not seen before. Apparently it was good, for Thane was able to keep going. Fifteen meters distant from the three figures, Thane stopped. They were just visible through the trees. He raised his Stoltz and . . . thought of Proxima. . . .

. . . he was fifteen and the dance was wonderful. She was dressed in the new shell-white toga that was fashionable just then. It certainly set off her jet-black hair, shining on the terrace, in the light of Proxima's two moons. . . .

But it wasn't black, it was blonde. And she wasn't leaning against his arm on the terrace, she was standing in front of him, and he was lying on the brittle snow. There was a Stoltz in her bare right hand.

She stared at him, steadily and coldly. "It is turned all the way up now. I hope you are ready to die, Onzarian!"

THANE, as he recovered fully from the Stoltz shock, recognized the tall blonde girl standing before him. Astrid Reine, Manning's daughter and assistant. He raised himself painfully to his elbows. As he did, he saw Astrid's knuckles tighten around the impeller.

"No, Astrid," he said. "I'm here to help you. We may still be able to save your father."

Her hand didn't waver. The expression on her golden face was scornful. "Do not lie so childishly! You came with the Onzarians, the agents of Candar. You are one of them. You came to take my father."

Thane desperately gestured back the way he had come. "My footprints are in the snow. There's an Onzarian I killed. And my anti-grav. I was sent to protect your father."

"Who are you?"

A roaring noise came from the east and a moment later a jet cleared the tree tops, headed south. Thane saw the ship at the edge of his vision, but kept his eyes on

Astrid. She turned her head slightly at the sound. Slightly, but enough. Thane's tensed muscles contracted as he sprang to his feet. She pressed the impeller—just as his left foot kicked in a high arc and caught the side of the barrel.

The gun spun off to the edge of the clearing. "Now," he said angrily, "don't you think we've wasted enough time? They have him now, and with that jet they'll have enough start on us to leave the system before we can catch them." As he spoke, the jet reappeared and slipped down low over the trees to the west. "Hurry," he said, "they'll be on us in seconds."

She looked at him, hesitated. Then, "All right. Inside."

She stepped over to the trunk of the tree and spoke softly. A panel opened in the ground at the foot of the tree, over a grav-well. They dropped gently, and the panel closed behind them. As they floated slowly downward they heard a sharp explosion overhead. He smiled wryly at Astrid, dropping beside him.

"Your change of heart," he said, "didn't come any too soon."

Reine's laboratory, like a great deal else in the Allied Systems, had gone underground as galactic war approached. Far beneath the surface, the grav-well ended in a corridor, stretching out a hundred meters. Rooms filled with equipment opened out at either side. As they walked down the corridor, Thane explained his mission and his Onzarian appearance. "Now," he went on, "there's a lot for me to catch up on."

"It's been terrible," Astrid said. "First, there was the attack yesterday. We fought them off, then. Liaison radioed that they were sending more protection. But the jet that landed today flashed the Liaison code to our auto-interrogator. We lowered the screen and they began to attack. We didn't stand a chance, once they were inside."

It was all clear enough, and it was certainly also clear that he was late. There was the faint possibility that Reine could still be rescued before the Onzarians could leave the system.

He turned to Astrid. "If they plan to leave by the regular Onzarian transport, we should be able to catch them at the Aberdeen spaceport. Where's the radio?"

They had reached an open door. Astrid's

gesture was hopeless. Thane looked inside. The Onzarians had been there before they left. Twisted, melted circuits were all they had left.

THE anti-grav scout got them to the Aberdeen spaceport an hour late. The Onzarian gold transport had left for Kadell IV. A few questions were enough to justify Thane's growing pessimism. Several Onzarians had taken passage. One was heavily drugged, under the care of a physician.

The hours dragged till they were able to get passage on the next Kadell-bound transport the following day. Once spaceborne, Thane felt a lot of his depression lift. There was a good chance they would reach the Kadenar spaceport on Kadell IV before the other ship had left. In the meantime there was Astrid. . . .

By the time they had reached the second warp-line intersection Thane had learned that Astrid had also attended the Systems University at Beirut, three classes behind him. They'd had some of the same professors and a couple of mutual friends. Thane told her of life on Proxima, and she told him how she had lived and worked with her father. Her talk was in the off-hand sort of vocal shorthand that their generation shared. But through the facade, Thane could see that she was immensely brilliant in research, fascinated with her work, and at the same time, immensely lonely. She was animated when she spoke of the work that she and her father had done but there was a different sparkle in her yellow eyes when she talked of the university. Talks with fellow students, a brief love affair, weekend trips to Tel Aviv or New Rome—it was plain that she had badly missed it all in her years in Norway, in the glittering, isolated laboratory far under the snow.

And always there was recurrent alarm for her father. She broke off her talk of the University and gripped his arm. "Roger, we must stop them. If they take my father to Onzar, he'll be killed. And the movement. What will happen to that?"

"The movement?" Roger Thane asked, puzzled.

"Why of course," she said, surprised. "Don't you know about it?"

Thane was about to answer, but just then there was the shummer as they re-entered

space at the second warp-line intersection. At the same moment the red warning light in their compartment blinked. The navigator's voice, with an undercurrent of alarm, came over the intercom. "Emergency. Emergency! Crew to battle stations. Passengers to lifeboats."

Roger and Astrid dashed out into the port corridor. The corridor widened as they ran forward, and they were suddenly in the port fire control center. An Onzarian officer, the Third from his insignia, was at the fire control panel. Thane looked at the screen over the Third's head. The ship was black and unmarked but if it was a pirate it was by far the biggest Thane had ever seen. The whole black hulk was turning in space, a hundred KM away, lining up its armament. It would only be seconds. Thane looked at the Third. He seemed to be confused, and was fumbling almost blindly with the instruments. He twisted dials almost at random, on the edge of panic. Thane hesitated—then realized what it must be—Stoltz artillery. The unmarked ship had managed to get through with it, during the microseconds of the shummer when the screens were down.

He could feel some of the effect himself. He went through a moment of indecision, but that was all. Then he stepped forward and shoved the Third Officer aside. The officer looked blank, then his face reddened in anger. As Thane tried to bring the armament to bear, the Third was clawing at his back. Thane bent and twisted. The Third went crashing into a bulkhead. Thane didn't even glance at him. There was no time. He turned back to the fire control. As he did, the first disruptor explosion came, not two kilometers ahead. The next one would get them.

Thane twisted the manual computer for there was no time to wait for the automatic to warm up. Two small adjustments and he touched the impeller. Instantly his disruptor burst appeared on the screen off the starboard bow of the black enemy. Not close enough to do real damage but enough to throw off the pirate's next shot. The shot came. Needles danced wildly on the board before Thane. The whole ship vibrated wildly. The power drain was tremendous, but the inner screens held. As Thane lined up the pirate again, the intercom said, "Five

seconds to warp-line!" They'd be safe, then, after the micro second when the screens were down. And the pirate was in position to take full advantage of that moment. Thane's fingers moved with scherzo speed as he fed twelve adjustments to the fire control. He let go with everything they had on the port side, and switched off the guns, in preparation for the shummer. It came almost simultaneously, and the pirate disappeared as they went into the hyper-space of the warp-line. There was no time to see if any damage had been done. His last shots must have had effect, though, or they would never have made it back into the warp.

Thane turned away wearily from the fire-control panel. The whole encounter had lasted less than twenty seconds, but the strain of fighting against the Stoltz effect and of manually computing twelve variables had been wearing. He saw that the Third Officer was now standing close to Astrid. He started to say he was sorry that he had to act as he did. But the Third walked over to him, with military precision, his face set. He stood before Thane, young, military, and serious.

"You have impugned my honor and that of Onzar. For that your life is forfeit. We fight on Kadenar."

"I also saved your life and my own," Thane said drily, "but if you want me to take yours back, I'll be glad to oblige. See you at Kadenar." Thane turned on his heel and walked away.

DUELLING was forbidden by the Systems Code but on such outposts as Kadenar it was not only allowed but even encouraged.

Therefore, no time was lost in customs. Thane's forged Onzarian passport was stamped "duellist priority" and that was that. Astrid came through as readily as his second. And the Third, with another junior officer, was just behind them.

The four of them sat side by side without a word as their automatic anti-grav taxi took them the ten kilos from the port to Kadenar City, and then beyond. The taxi continued over the City and its three "towns"—the spacetown, the bureaucrat's town, and the miner's town—and finally settled gently down in the foothills beyond.

There was a clearing beneath them, with a fenced-in surface. A medic looked up as they got out.

"Differences to settle, gentlemen and my lady? Interne Pyuf at your service. The duelling tax is three sals. Always glad to accept any Systems currency. Then too, there's the cremation deposit required from both parties, the medication fee, and if you gentlemen are interested in insurance, I'm able to supply some very special policies."

After the principals and seconds had signed the register and all fees had been paid, Pyuf leaned back in his chair, lit one of the fashionable 30 centimeter cigarettes, and explained the rules. "In general, no criminal nor civil disability attaches to actions of the principals within this enclosure. Certain fines, however, are imposed if the rules are not followed. To wit: knives only can be used, not to exceed twelve inches. Each contestant may wear a personnel anti-grav, limited to fifteen feet ascentability. Anti-gravs must be adjusted to compensate for native gravities." He smiled, in self-deprecation. "That's Pyuf the lawyer at work. Now perhaps you prefer Pyuf the bartender." He reached under his counter and pulled out a bottle, labelled in the local language, and poured out five glasses. "To your continued good health, gentlemen, and I sincerely hope I can return your cremation deposits—though of course, many previous contestants, grateful to be alive, have contributed the amounts to the Interne's Benefit Association."

Thane and the others picked up their glasses. The stuff was yellow, sticky, sweet, and without the slightest doubt, alcoholic. When Thane could manage to speak, he said, "By all means, Pyuf. I'm sure that both my opponent and I will contribute to the internes, dead or alive. Shall we proceed with the main event?"

Before answering, Pyuf poured a small chaser from the same bottle and stood up, a little unsteadily. "By all means. But before we start I might mention that I have been ordained in fourteen systems' religions and will be glad to perform last rites. . . ."

"Enough, enough," said the Third, who was beginning to show signs of nervousness. "Let us get on with it."

Pyuf stepped over to the weapons racks and removed a set of knives and a pair of

anti-grav jackets. He laid them on his table and gestured to the Third. "Take a knife and jacket." The Third chose the knife and jacket to the left without more than a cursory glance.

Pyuf reached in his jacket pocket and brought out one of the twelve-faced dies of Kadenar. "Pyuf, the gambler," he said. "You two gentlemen will now roll the die. He who is high has his choice of either group of weapons."

The Third Officer rolled first, and the Kadenar equivalent of nine came up. Thane rolled a five.

"Now," said Pyuf, "it's Pyuf, the courier. Step forward, gentlemen, to be fitted."

Pyuf fitted the anti-grav jackets to Thane and the Third, and gave each a brief, efficient test. He stepped back and leaned against his counter. "And now, Pyuf, the referee." He pointed to a green line bisecting the enclosure. You gentlemen will remain on the other side of the line during the contest. You remain within the fences. You do not ascend higher than fifteen feet. The contest lasts till blood has been drawn three times or until a prior fatality—or do I need add that? At any rate, that's all the rules. The State wishes you well, while it frowns on your activity. To your circles, gentlemen, and await my signal."

Thane judged the area marked off for the "contest" to be about ten meters square. It was smoothly surfaced with one of the hard local metals, and Thane noticed a few bloodstains near the edges. Most of them were the dark brown of dried human blood, but there were other alien colors mixed in here and there.

As he walked across the court Thane looked carefully at his opponent, appraising him. They were both about the same height but the Third had several centimeters more reach. Probably around the equivalent of 23 years, absolute time. Certainly at the peak of physical condition. Thane decided on his course. He would try first for his opponent's anti-grav. Probably the other would try to cover his throat and belly, and Thane might be able to get to the anti-grav by surprise. Then, draw the blood that was in the rules, and get the thing over. Not much of a plan, but at least a plan.

There was an inset ring of some cupra-

alloy at each end of the duelling court, about a meter in diameter. Thane reached his end, watched his opponent, and waited for Pyuf's signal. Pyuf slowly poured another drink. As he raised it with his right hand, his left arm went up over his head. He swallowed the drink, and the left arm came down.

The Third Officer came on in all-out attack. His anti-grav assisted leap was long and shallow, aimed at Thane's throat. At the same moment Thane bent his knees slightly and dropped. Just before he hit the surface he pushed up and outward with all his strength and twisted his body sharply. With the assistance of the anti-grav he was floating now directly above and behind his opponent. He cut off the anti-grav completely and dropped, with all the planet's gravity. As he did, the Third twisted and raised his knife. He lacked a fraction of a second to complete the turn and get into lethal position. Thane hit him on the shoulder and instantly turned his anti-grav to the "full" position, grabbed his opponent's shoulders, and pushed against the court surface with both heels.

They both went up and over, almost to the fifteen meter limit. As they did, Thane worked his knife into the anti-grav pak on his opponent's back. Three connections, at the top, left, and bottom. His knife cut in and out rapidly, three times. Then he suddenly pushed away, slipped his own anti-grav to zero, and dropped to the surface.

The Third, suddenly without the assistance of his anti-grav, crashed into the fence and dropped leadenly to the metallised surface. Thane crouched a moment watching him. Thane had a cut above one eye, and the blood was beginning to run. He stepped forward. . . .

. . . the knife in his hand . . . what was it there for? He should be on his way to the rotor meet with the rest of the boys . . . he was going to win this year . . . he was going to win. . . .

III

THE first feeling Thane had when he came out of the Stoltz shock was lightness. He raised his right arm as he came back to consciousness, and he noticed that the effort required was less than he had ex-

pected. He opened his eyes, and they gradually came back into focus. He was lying on a cot in a dimly lit room. The light, he saw, came from a small window across the room. With an unfamiliarly light tread, Thane stepped over to the window. The pane was double, transparent metal. It took only one glance at the bleak, wintry landscape outside to explain the feeling of lightness. It could only be the landscape of Onzar II, whose gravity was about 80% that of Kadell IV.

Someone obviously had reason to cart him, unconscious, across a few light years. Apparently, the duel had not been what it seemed. But how? And why? Quite possibly the Third Officer was an agent of Onzarian counter-espionage. If so, what had happened to Astrid? How had Pyuf and the others been taken care of? On the other hand, it was quite possible that Astrid was behind it. He remembered how she seemed to have been talking to the Third just before the challenge. But for what motive? Thane smiled to himself. The speculation was interesting, but a little barren till more data turned up.

It was not long in coming. Thane had begun to explore the room carefully when a door opened. It was Pyuf, armed. "You'll come with me, please." No longer the half drunk duelling attendant, Pyuf was now quite sober and quite serious.

Thane went. There were questions to be answered.

He had somehow expected a long corridor with many doors. Instead, he walked directly into a brightly lighted room, filled with a great deal of equipment. He recognized the latest model lie-detector, a rather outdated narco-synthesizer, a Class B Psychocomputer. Much of the rest was unfamiliar.

There were two Onzarians in the room. Both, in contrast to Pyuf, who was dark and shorter than the average, had typical Onzar features—yellow eyes with a slight slant, and golden skin. Pyuf gestured towards Thane. "Give him the whole routine. We want to know everything you can get. Then let us know."

Thane, of course, had been prepared for this sort of thing. He'd spent time in Medico-Synthesis after every major job to immunize him against interrogation. He'd had

three separate, integrated pasts built up, all quite fictional, which could be used during interrogation. He was protected, at a certain level, against physical torture, and he did have a certain protection against most of the drugs.

But the older medic simply asked him to sit down. He did, and his assistant twisted a few dials. Indicators gave readings, quite a few hundred readings. A metal recorder plate dropped out. The assistant dropped this into the computer which began busily to eject tape. The older man read the tape as it ticked out. The computer stopped and he crumpled up the tape and tossed it into a corner. "Injection A17," he said.

Vaguely he heard his name. He sat up, blinked his eyes open and looked around. He was, in quite a different room. There were curtains at the windows, a desk, a rug, even a fire. There was a figure in front of him speaking to him. "Roger Thane, we know you now. There is much that we do not know, that has been hidden from even our methods. But we know enough."

Thane was now fully alert. The voice had been soothing, but the shock on seeing the face, when his eyes had come back into focus, was enough to change all his ideas. It was Manning Reine.

Reine was sitting close to him, one elbow casually thrown across the desk. He smiled, and asked if Thane would like coffee or a drink.

"I've had both," Thane said, "and they're not what I need now. Right now all I want is what goes on. My job, which I didn't particularly want, was to nursemaid you. Frankly, it's turned out to be quite a job. After three or four very thorough stoltzings, one space battle, a challenge, and a duel, you have me kidnapped. All right. I've got a reasonably open mind. I'll listen. Now just what in the hell is going on?"

Manning Reine said calmly, "Undoubtedly you have reason for anger, Thane. It is true that we have used you. We have had to. But you should know that there was nothing faked about my abduction. Those who took me were Onzarians, agents of Candar, and they were deadly serious. It was only with the greatest of good fortune that I was able to escape. Only the presence of Pyuf at Aberdeen Spaceport made it possible.

"And another point for your consideration. We did not know your position. Your appearance is Onzarian. We could not be sure that you were what you claimed, an agent of Liaison. And even if we could have been sure, there were considerations that required us to proceed with the greatest caution. Now, I hope you will accept my apologies and listen. There is much that you can do, important for us and for the whole Galaxy."

Thane controlled his anger and nodded assent. At the moment it was his job to listen if he was going to be useful from here on in.

"You already have some knowledge of the second-stage drive," Reine began. "You already know that it frees man for flight through the Galaxy at an average speed ten times greater than that now possible with the present warp-line drive. You are aware of the warp-line type of movement. We cannot leave the warps without reverting to finite drive. As you know, the warps are electro-gravitic lines of force in space, along which interstellar travel has proved possible with certain devices. . . ."

"As you say," Thane broke in, "I know all that. I know too that the second-stage drive allows practically instantaneous travel across the warps. But just what does that have to do with your disappearance, and the attacks that have been made on me?"

"Just this. I am, you know, one of the researchers responsible for the development of the second-stage drive. I am more than that. I am also the present leader of the Onzarian underground."

MANNING REINE relaxed in his chair and sipped his coffee. "At the same time I want you to understand that I am completely, wholeheartedly loyal to the Allied Systems. As you know, I was educated at Earth University at a time when that was possible for an Onzarian. I left Onzar for good at the beginning of the Candar revolution, expecting to devote the rest of my life to research within the A.S. But now I am convinced that Candar must be overthrown if our own systems are to survive."

"It's a proposition that will take some explaining," Thane said coldly.

"The basic ideas are simple enough," Reine said, "once you see how they fit to-

gether. There is, of course, nothing new about the basic theory of the second-stage drive. Even at the beginning of the ancient atomic era, scientists were groping for the Unified Field. The basic unified field equations were the first step. Then came the charting of the electro-gravitic lines of stress in space, which we know familiarly as warp-lines. That was the foundation for faster-than-light travel, and all that went with it. But of course it was awkward. We could not leave the warp-lines unless we returned to finite speed. We could change direction only at the intersection of warps. Many star-systems were far off the warp-lines, and could be reached only after days or weeks of travel at finite speeds."

"All very true," said Thane, "but it still doesn't explain a thing to me. About your place in this or Candar's."

Reine hardly noticed the interruption. He went on, professorially. "The solution has always seemed clear. In order to travel at will through space, at faster-than-light speeds all we needed to do was to create our own Field with its own warp-line. If a ship could generate its own electro-gravitic warp it would be able to travel in almost unlimited directions with no time lapse except for pauses at each warp-line crossed. The power factors were such that an entirely new principle of operation was needed. We have found it in the so-called gold catalyst principle, and we now have a practical, economical second-stage drive."

Thane frowned. "But that would seem to make Onzar less important. Why do we need to worry about them now?"

Reine was about to answer but the door opened and Pyuf was there. "How goes it, duellist?"

"It was a great fight," Thane said, "until you decided to tear up the rules. You forgot to tell me that you included 'kidnapper' in your list of trades."

Reine smiled. "That's just one of many that Pyuf forgot to mention. Forger, propagandist, and political theorist might also have been added." He turned to Pyuf. "I've about covered the technology. Why don't you give our friend the politics?"

"Sure." Pyuf sat on the desk swinging his short legs. "First, though, I'm sorry about the duel, Thane. We had to do it."

"Reine's already assured me of that once

or twice," Thane said drily. "I would like to know, though, just how you did it."

"That's simple enough. For months now we've been using the duelling court on Kad-enar as an exchange point in the underground. It's been very helpful because of the ease that duellists have in getting through customs. In your case we were lucky. Or I should say that Astrid was quick and intelligent enough to take advantage of a fortunate situation. A few words from her were enough to instigate the Onzarian officer to challenge you. Remember that Onzarians have a tradition of duelling, and you had insulted him. Furthermore, he was still confused from the stoltz artillery."

"Clear enough. But may I ask why you bothered to let the duel go on at all? Why not just take me when we got to the court?"

"We wanted to explain your disappearance. At the same time that you were unconscious, your opponent and the other junior officer were also out. With a touch of post-hypnotic suggestion, they were both quite convinced that the Third Officer had won the duel and that you were dead. We had no trouble getting your 'corpse' back through customs and to Onzar."

"Probably," Thane said, "you had a purpose for all this. Before we go any further, let's have it."

"If you were an agent of Candar we would have eliminated you," Pyuf said. "You had already learned too much, and you had shown that you were a dangerous man. If you were a Liaison agent, it was still necessary for you to 'die.' At the moment, it's imperative that no word of our activity gets to the Allied Systems. And, if we can convince you, we badly need your help."

"It'll take some convincing from what's happened up to now. But go ahead."

"Ever wonder," Pyuf went on, "why the Darzent Empire hasn't attacked? What are they waiting for? They're aggressive. They have the edge in power, with two inhabited systems to one in the A.S. Their technology matches ours and their heavily centralized dictatorship allows them to move faster, at least at the beginning of a war."

"Well?"

"Two reasons. One, they never could be sure that we didn't have the second-stage drive. Two, they couldn't be sure of the al-

legiance of Onzar."

"Onzar—the whole five systems—is probably more of an armed camp than any other political entity in the Galaxy. But that isn't the real reason for their overwhelming importance." Pyuf jumped down off the desk and flipped a switch on the far wall. The galactic map appeared, with the warp-lines superimposed in red.

Pyuf pointed with his cigarette. "Take a look at those warps. All nine of the principal ones, crossing the Galaxy between the Allied Systems and the Darzent Empire, pass within a parsec of Onzar. A faster-than-light fleet going either way *has* to surface at the Onzar Confluence. And Candar, no matter how he sounds to you or me, is no fool. He, you can bet, has taken some long quiet looks at a map like this and he knows his position. So does Darzent. So do the people who are presumably running things in the Allied Systems."

Thane stood up. He had been off at the perimeter of the struggle, working in obscure but possibly important systems for the past three years. He hadn't been in a position to see all the factors in the struggle that was shaping up. But now at a glance he saw that Pyuf was probably right. "It makes sense," he admitted, "but what about the second-stage drive? Isn't that supposed to cut across warp-lines? Wouldn't that reduce to zero the strategic importance of our friend, Candar?"

At this, Manning Reine broke in excitedly, "But that's just the point, Thane! Remember I mentioned there were certain limits to the second-stage drive. We can, to a large extent, manufacture our own lines. But they are never wholly independent of the existing natural lines through space. Our dependence on the galactic lines varies from almost zero to almost unitary, depending on our position in space. The Onzarian Confluence has much the same effect as a whirlpool. Theoretically, we could force our way out of the whirlpool and go through the center of the Galaxy by a different route. But the energy required approaches infinity."

Thane stepped over to the map. He pointed to the Onzarian Confluence. "O.K. There's our bottleneck. But where's the cork? Just how do you figure on stopping a fleet if it does surface at the Onzarian Con-

fluence for two or three microseconds?"

Pyuf slapped the butt of his cigarette across the tray on Reine's desk. "There, Agent Thane, we reach the point of the whole show. But let's get the story straight from the source." His eyes went to Reine.

Reine, pouring his second cup of coffee, looked up. "If you mean me, that's not very accurate. It's true that it was developed in my laboratory but Astrid was the one who saw the hint, originally, and did all the development. I'm not even familiar with all the details." He smiled apologetically to Thane. "We're talking about the Tracer. As a by-product of our main job we discovered a new way of plotting warp-lines. Instead of doing by mathematics we found a way of plotting warps directly by instrument. Well, I was on the main line of research, and I had three times as much as I could do already. I just regarded this as a curiosity. But Astrid took it and built the Tracer."

Pyuf interrupted. He was not the man, Thane saw, who could abide technical explanations when they had a clear political implication. "The Tracer," he said, "is the cork for your bottleneck. With the tracer, we know when any ship is operating on second stage drive. With two tracers, separated on a baseline of a few million kilometers, we can plot position closely. Three tracers will pin-point them, and for a trip across the center of the Galaxy, we will know when and where they'll have to surface."

"That fits all right," Thane said, "but why tie in Onzar? Why not let the Allied Systems have the tracer?"

Pyuf shrugged impatiently. "Gentlemen, from here on, we need a drink. The explanation is simple, limpid, computable logic. As far as we can see, it's the only course." He stared pointedly at Thane. "But it also could be construed as treason. So we'd better have a drink." He stepped to the door. "Astrid, will you bring glasses and the bottle? We've got a bit of dialectics to dispense with."

AFTER Astrid had handed the drinks around, Pyuf downed his. Then he went on. "First of all, Thane, don't get me wrong. Maybe I couldn't pass a security check with some of the boys in the Department of the Outside. Maybe I could, I don't

know. I've never tried. But I like the Allied Systems as well as anything the Galaxy has to offer and I want to live there. But let's take a hard look at them." He stopped to pour another glass. "Within the A.S. you have the main federation, and you have a lot of loosely confederated systems. Space only knows what the confederations will do. We can only hope. But look at the rest of them. Every couple of years, absolute, they rear back and elect an assembly of 13,000 members, a really efficient size for a deliberative body. So that sterling group elects a senate of 300 or so, and then goes home. But it reserves a lot of rights, like declaring war. And the senate, of course, goes ahead and elects the council. Which does its best to keep things going."

"I know the system," Thane broke in. "Just what do you want to do about it?"

"I don't want to do anything about it," Pyuf looked up earnestly. "I want to prevent it from being wiped out. And right now the only way that can be done is to work outside it, rather than through it. Or do you want to hold a systems election when the Darzent fleet surfaces at Onzar confluence?"

Manning Reine was on his feet now. "And they will, Thane, they will. We know there have been security leaks in the development of the drive. It's just a question of time."

Thane calmly reached over and took the bottle from Pyuf. He filled his glass and looked at the bottle, then at Pyuf, Astrid, and Reine. "All right. We have our bottleneck. And we have our cork—the Onzarian fleet. Just how do you propose we shove the cork into the bottle?"

Astrid was the first to answer. "We'll take the fleet! The Onzarians are ready for freedom!" After that they were all talking. The underground had convinced the people of the truth. They were ready to rise up and throw off the yoke of Candar. There was conflict between the government and the religion. The people would not stand any further reduction in their living standards. Two-thirds of the gross product went for armaments now, and the amount was steadily increasing.

At last Thane banged the desk until they had all stopped talking. He looked at them a moment in silence. "All right. You've got your gadgets. You've got your political

theory. You've even got your strategy. But there hasn't been an atom's worth of tactics in anything you've said, any of you. I think you're badly in need of some engineering for your revolution."

Astrid walked over and looked up into his eyes. "That's about the way it is, Roger. And that's why we need you so badly."

That was when they began going into details. Strength of the underground, possible allies, weaknesses of Candar . . . Thane was beginning to see the picture, and the tremendous obstacles to be overcome, when a buzzer sounded and a red light over the door blinked DANGER . . . DANGER . . . DANGER . . .

IV

PYUF ran over to a cabinet on the wall by the fire. Thane saw there were several dials and a visiscreen. As Pyuf twisted the dials he spoke rapidly over his shoulder to Thane. "We're quite isolated here. The house belongs to the old boy you met in the lab. He's been checked for security by Candar so we figured we were safe here. There's a detection screen about a kilometer hour from the house, and we have a force screen we can use as a last resort. Of course, we'd have to abandon this place once we did use it. Candar's detectors would pick it up right away."

The visiscreen came into focus and Pyuf turned the perimeter dial till it lined up with the degree mark on the disturbance indicator. Nine figures appeared, advancing toward the house. Three were short and squat—not over a meter and a half in height. They walked with the peculiar slouch of the Darzent entity in its humanoid phase. The other six were the Darzent robot infantry. Two and a half meters high, impervious to any hand weapon, with built-in blasters and the Darzent version of the Stoltz gun. Their ship was in the background. It had the outlines of an ordinary atmosphere jet of medium size, but there were alterations which made Thane suspect that it had been refitted for deep space, with at least the finite drive, and probably FTL.

Thane spun around to the others. "We either put up the force screen or get out now," he said. "Unless, that is, there's some heavy artillery around the house. Nothing

else will stop a Darzent Robot. And even the screen probably won't last long. That ship looks as though it has enough high powered stuff to breach any screen we can put up."

Astrid looked up at him. "We do have the jet, Roger. It's armed, but it will take time to get it ready for take-off."

"Let's get the force screen up now, then."

Pyuf snapped switches. The whine of power at emergency levels began. The Darzent force had screen detectors, because they stopped at once and turned back to their ship. Short, sharp rocket blasts shot out from the bow tubes of the ship, as it turned on its axis to attack the force screen.

"Let's get going," Thane said.

"We all can't go," Pyuf pointed out. "Our jet is only two-place, and anyway, someone will have to cut off the screen to let the jet out."

"You and I can do it," Astrid said to Thane. "I can handle the engines and the defensive screens while you fly it and man the gun."

Thane considered quickly. If they succeeded in knocking out the Darzent forces they'd be able to get the others out without difficulty. If not, it would be wise to separate Astrid and her father. With one of them, the plan that was shaping up might succeed, but if both were lost there'd be no chance.

"All right," Thane said. "Let's go."

Just then the first attack on the screen came. There was vibration through the room and the needles of the indicators all jumped up over the red lines. The whine of power momentarily became a shriek and then died down.

"That was close," Thane said. "The sooner we stop them the better." He turned to Pyuf. "Drop the screen for two seconds when I signal, to let us out."

The bitterly cold wind cut into Astrid and Thane as they hurried outside. Astrid was ahead, leaning against the wind, running towards the outbuilding which housed the jet. They were in full view of the Darzent attackers who renewed their thrust at the screen when they saw the running figures.

"We won't take time to ease it out," Thane shouted above the wind. "Full power at the start. It'll knock over this shack but that's a small loss at the moment."

Thane climbed into the nose position of the little jet while Astrid slid in behind him. They ran a fast check while the engines warmed. Thane waited for the next attack on the force screen. It came and he gave a short sharp blast to signal their readiness. They had two seconds leeway before the screen went up again. The ship was not fully warmed. Thane flicked on all the rockets and gave the jet full throttle.

There was the barest hesitation, and then they were forced back in their seats, with 5G acceleration. The outbuilding flamed and collapsed behind them. As Thane went into semi-consciousness he pulled back on the control wheel to clear the hill ahead. The corners of his mouth pulled down, his eyeballs felt as if they were being forced down into his cheekbones. His vision became a red blur, then grey . . .

He came out and looked down. The house and the Darzent ship were tiny blurs in the storm, three kilometers below. He looked back at Astrid. "Make it all right?" he asked anxiously.

Her face was white and strained but she managed a smile. "Still with you, skipper. Let's get back down."

"**H**ERE we go. Hang on and hope. Keep the screens up till I nod. Then drop them fast." Thane put the jet into a steep dive, lining up the Darzent ship in the sights of the Baring gun. He was ready to fire when there was a tremendous jolt and a flash of light. The little jet was thrown over on its back and Thane fought the controls to steady it.

He went into a climbing turn and saw, above and behind him, the long black shape of an Onzarian atmosphere cruiser. "The protector screens are dead," Astrid cried in alarm. "Whatever that was that hit us burned them out!"

"That was a disrupter." He pointed at the Onzarian cruiser. "Our visitor is playing for keeps." His knuckles went white as he pulled back on the wheel into another long climb with emergency power. Another disrupter burst behind them barely missed.

"They've got everything on us," he said. "Speed, firepower and range. Except maneuverability." He turned to Astrid. "Just how far out is the force screen from the house?"

"Four hundred meters."

"Let's see if we can judge it," he said grimly. "It's going to be close." He put the jet into a tight turn and slipped off into a steep, screaming dive. There was another disrupter burst and a sudden flutter of the controls. He fought them to maintain the dive, straight for the house and its invisible bubble of force. The flutter became worse as their speed increased, and vibration racked the whole ship. He judged the distance by the rangefinder on the Baring. At the last moment he pulled out and up. The ship skidded down sickeningly, and then caught. Thane fought bitterly to keep conscious.

They heard the explosion above the sound of the wind shrieking past them. Thane looked down and back. It had worked! The Onzar ship had followed them down, but it had not allowed for the invisible force screen. It had hit the screen, caromed off into a wild, twisting skid, and hit the ground, completely wrecked.

But Thane had time only for a glance. The vibration was getting worse. One more strain and the little jet would be torn to pieces.

He eased out of the climb and tried to put the jet into a long flat glide. It kept slipping off to the right, and the glide increased in steepness. The ground came up and he managed to pull back into a partial stall. At the last instant the jet dipped to the right and hit. It spun crazily on the ground, straightened, skidded and then buried itself in a drift of snow.

He was still numb with shock when he heard Astrid's voice. "What happened, Roger? Why did they attack us?"

"They must have been sent as soon as our force screen was detected. Let's get back."

They climbed out into the biting wind and started towards the house in the distance. The red sun of Onzar was setting and the cold deepened and chilled bitterly as they hurried on.

IT WAS almost dark when they reached the house. In the lengthening shadows there was no sign of the Darzent ship. They hurried on in growing fear. The front of the house showed the signs of the blast that had knocked out the force screen. Inside the

house was dark. All power had been burned out when the screen went. They went in through the smashed, tilted doorway. In the gloom they saw the old medic first. He was slumped in a chair against one wall. His neck was twisted and his head slanted back. His chest was a gaping hole, with the blood already frozen. His assistant lay beside the dead fire, headless. What had been Pyuf was at the instrument cabinet, one hand still on the fused panel. Manning Reine was not there.

There was a tremble of panic in Astrid's voice. "Roger, they killed them . . . and . . . where is Dad?"

"They killed them deliberately with hand weapons after they knocked down the screen. And they have your father now. That was their purpose."

"What will they do to him? Where have they taken him? Roger, we've got to find him!"

Roger Thane turned to her in the shambles of the wrecked room. The quaver in her voice indicated that she couldn't take much more. He took her arm and led her down the corridor to the laboratory. "We're going to fight back, Astrid, and we're going to win. Right now there's not much we can do for your father. But don't worry about him. He's safe. He's much too valuable to be mistreated by the Darzent Empire. But they will get everything they need from him with their interrogatory drugs."

In the laboratory nothing had been touched. Once the Darzent force had Reine they must have left at once. Astrid's shoulders were shaking as Thane led her to a chair. "We've got a lot to plan and a lot to do. It won't be easy and we'll be fighting all the way. But we'll win if we're steady."

Thane could see the effort Astrid was making. "I'm . . . I'm ready, Roger. Where do we start?"

"We'll start with what we have, the underground. And Astrid, the really important jobs may be up to you because I'm going to be out of circulation for a while." Astrid looked up with a question on her lips but he went on before she could voice it. "Pyuf mentioned that we have some support among the Onzarian priestesshood. Just what do we have?"

"There's been general dissatisfaction with Candar all through the religion," she said.

Her voice was low, carefully controlled, with an undercurrent of stress. "The whole priestesshood feels that Candar is their enemy. They feel that Candar's eventual aim is to destroy every organization not under his direct control. Of course, the church also has a long tradition of remaining aloof from the temporal government. And outwardly, Candar has so far usually respected the church."

She looked up at Thane. "That's the general picture. Actual proved sympathizers with the underground are scarce, but we do have some important ones. Probably the most important is the Priestess of Keltar, Selan. As she's the head of the church in Keltar, the capitol city, she's at least nominally the head of the whole organization, though it does have a good deal of autonomy. But her word carries enormous weight."

"What's she like?"

"She's old. Very old and very determined. She's always been on the liberal wing of the church. Willing to recognize the changes that have taken place, and to modify the church so that it will maintain its place in the system. She recognizes Candar for what he is but is willing to try to get along with him till someone can show her an alternative with a chance of success. At least, that's how she seemed to me when I met her."

"Do you think," Thane asked, "that she would be ready to help now if it meant the overthrow of Candar?"

Astrid was silent for a long time. Finally she nodded. "I think so. I don't know but I think she would."

Thane glanced at his watch. It might do. And they just might have time for what had to be done. "It's the best chance we have, and it may work. But now we've got things to do. We can use some of the equipment here, and the batteries will give us enough power."

THANE rapidly explained that he was going back into his own identity, and that some of the equipment present would help accelerate the change-over. He tried to give Astrid the general picture as they made the circuit changes on the equipment.

"Astrid, you are going to turn me in. You are going to surrender me to the Onzarians when they get here."

Astrid stopped. She had been re-fusing a circuit, and the fuse hung limply in her hand, forgotten.

Thane went on. "I'll explain while we finish the circuit. We haven't much time. You remember how we talked of driving the cork into the bottle? Well, that's what we're going to do. The Onzarians will be here before long when they've discovered their cruiser is missing. You will pass as an Onzarian. As an acolyte of the religion, you'll turn me over to them as a spy."

They had finished the identity accelerator circuit. Thane wasn't sure the rough equipment would do, but it might be close enough. He'd try it. He climbed on to the laboratory table and showed Astrid how to make the connections.

"I'm using all the power we have," he said. "I'll be out about 13 minutes, absolute. If they get here before then do everything you can to keep them out till the time's up."

Astrid looked down at him lying on the table. She was very serious, very quiet. She brushed her lips lightly against his forehead and said softly, "We'll manage."

She was gone and Thane heard the hum of power.

It went on and on, in the easy world of change. And then the power was gone. Thane struggled to open his eyes, minutes, years before he should. He looked up into the cold, unfriendly eyes of an Onzarian lieutenant.

Astrid appeared beside the lieutenant. She talked rapidly in Onzarian. Her manner was imperious. "He's the one. He did it all. He attacked us here, and after he had killed the others he admitted to me that he was a spy for the A. S. He would have killed me, too, if you hadn't come, lieutenant."

The lieutenant said harshly, "He won't trouble anyone now. Candar, himself will deal with him."

Thane was pulled to his feet by two crew members. Each grasped one of his arms, and they took him out of the house to the waiting Onzar cruiser. Inside the ship one of them opened a reinforced door and shoved him into a tiny cell.

Thane had been in jails before on other systems. Their politics varied but their jails were about the same. He didn't like it, but he did know what to expect. There was the take-off, and the trip to the sector patrol

station. The lieutenant told his story and they questioned him, in a cursory, routine way. He was an important political prisoner and there were experts to take care of the questioning later on. Then there was another ship, and they flew through the long, bitterly cold night to the capitol city, Keltar. More guards, more questions on arrival. The receiving station. And finally the trip through the ancient streets of Keltar to the palace prison.

The cell there was just as small, just as dark, just as dirty as the others. But at least he was in a cell by himself. He was alone, and would have time to think through his plan.

Time went by. Thane, without light, without sound, did not know how long. But long enough. Long enough for the Darzent Empire to learn about the second-stage drive, from a drugged Manning Reine. Long enough to begin to equip their fleet with the drive. Could one man stop their attack? Thane wondered, and planned, and waited impatiently.

No prison sounds. No noise of any kind. Until suddenly the duralite door opened. "Let's go," the gruff Onzarian voice said.

Outside the cell door Thane's eyes gradually focused in the light. The guard was one he hadn't seen when they'd brought him in. Apparently he'd been in the cell through at least one watch, possibly longer. They walked down the long row of doors to the registry room.

V

THE room was bare except for a bench along one wall, a chair and a small table. A non-com sat behind the table. He began to ask the usual questions. Thane answered in a flat, dull voice, and the non-com filled out a form, scribbling on a line or checking a box as each question was answered. Finally he shoved the form aside and looked up at Thane for the first time. "Oh, an Alien, eh? That should be interesting for you." He jerked a thumb at the bench. "Sit there till you're called." Thane went over to the bench. He saw that the non-com had lit a cigarette and was staring into endless boredom.

For long, empty minutes nothing happened. Then there was noise at the outer

doors. The doors opened and two burly guards entered. Astrid Reine was between them.

They dragged her up to the desk. "They told us to bring her here."

The non-com looked up. "What's the purpose?" That, Thane was sure, was the correct translation of the Onzarian. Not 'charge,' 'not offense,' but 'purpose.' It was a one-word explanation of Candar's whole system of justice.

"... and she claimed to be an acolyte of the church," the bigger guard was saying. "Gave the name of a registered acolyte and everything. And funny thing, the Priestess of Keltar vouched for her. Had to let her go. But then we found out that the acolyte she was supposed to be was across the continent, in Akra. We picked her up just as she was leaving the cathedral." At the end of his long speech, the guard sucked in his breath and blew it out, hoarsely.

The non-com merely sighed, picked up his pad of forms, and began his questions. Astrid answered most of the questions in a monotone. She gave no sign that she had seen or recognized Thane. He noticed that on a few of her questions, her voice went up. He saw why.

The non-com had finished the body of his form and was filling in the "remarks." His stylus poised, he asked, "Why did you go to the priestess?"

Astrid's voice went up as she answered, "She's all right." Then her voice went back to a dull monotone. "I—I was confused. After I'd told them I was in the church I thought she would help me. But she couldn't."

"What were you trying to do?"

"I've done everything," she said in that slightly altered tone. "I don't know what I was going to do. I've been so confused." She bent her head and began to sob.

"Take her away," the non-com said. The two guards led her into the cell block. As they left, the intercom buzzed beside the non-com. He answered and gestured to Thane. "Time for you, Mister. Stand up and wait."

Two officers of the guard entered. The gold on the uniform of one indicated that he was at least a commander. They took him between them, without a word, and went out.

The wind tore at them as they walked across the palace court. Each sentry snapped to attention as they passed. Inside, they were inspected formally by a guard and more efficiently by a battery of detectors. They hurried on. After halls, corridors, steps, grav-wells, and more guards, they reached the door. One final check and they were through.

Glistered—that was the word—the whole room glistered. Gold inset in the wall panels. Golden arms on the chairs. Gold plating on the ceiling. A gold shagell, wings outstretched, at one corner of Candar's enormous desk. And Candar, in a perfectly plain uniform, staring up at him from behind the desk. His own expensive way, Thane considered, for showing his contempt for the gold fetish of the church.

Candar looked up at him steadily for a moment without speaking. Then: "I always greet the emissaries from the Allied Systems personally. They always have so much of interest to tell us in one way or another sooner or later."

Thane stared back and said, "You are right. I have information that will save Onzar if I give it to you. Perhaps, using your methods, you could get it eventually. Perhaps not. But eventually is too late, Candar."

Candar picked up a small gold knife. "Go on," he said, "but do not bluff. I do not like bluffs."

"There is no question of bluffing," Thane said impatiently. "But there are other matters that must be settled before I will go on."

"Just what would you have us settle, spy?" Candar asked sardonically.

"First, the matter of my own immunity. I'm being hunted throughout the Galaxy. The Allied Systems are searching for me. Darzent agents have attacked me twice. I have disregarded orders and I'm about to commit treason if I'm assured of safety."

Candar put down the knife and leaned forward. His voice showed his reluctant interest as well as his habitual suspicion. "Tell me why, spy. Why should I assure your safety?"

Thane said scornfully, "I didn't say that you should assure it. I said I wanted it assured. And it will be. If it isn't, you'll be wiped out, and what's left of the Onzar

system will be in slavery."

"You may think, Systems Spy, that you know the kind of death you will die if this is a trick," Candar said slowly and coldly. "But you do not. There are specialists here, experts whose life work is the gradual dispatching of men who try to trick Candar." He paused for a moment. "If you can prove what you say, I, Candar, will personally guarantee your safety and immunity."

Thane snorted. "You'll get your proof, but not on your personal guarantee. You'll transfer me to the custody of the church on the condition that I'll be turned back to you if I can't prove everything I say."

Candar pushed himself to his feet. Thane could see the veins throbbing in his forehead. "That's enough!" The harsh voice mounted to a roar. "You have insulted Onzar and its ruler." He turned to his officers. "Take him out. We'll see what he knows, and how much he can stand before his death."

THE room they entered was a spotlessly clean room, an antiseptic room. Thane wondered how often the blood was scrubbed from the floor as he recognized the instruments.

They pushed him into a chair and strapped him down. "Now let's see what he'll take," Candar said. The commander himself applied the fittings and turned on the switches. Then the pain came. In long shivering waves. No body pain. Just pure pain, applied directly to the synapses of his brain. It was unbearable—and then it got worse. It went up and up. Through a dim red haze, Thane saw Candar shove the dial up still another notch. Then he blanked out.

As he came back he looked up at them. Stinging drops of sweat blurred his vision but he managed to smile. "Now try your psychograph. Just try it. Here's what you'll read: *conditioned against physical torture. Brain waves lack stable pattern. History inconsistent. Standard drug susceptibility predicted negative.* Then decide, friends, if I'm bluffing."

Candar growled, "Do as he says."

The test was run. They looked at the results. All three of them walked over to the corner of the room behind him. With his head strapped he could not see them. He heard their conversation in undertones.

He broke in. "There's your choice, Candar. Kill me or turn me over to the church. And if you're afraid to know what's coming, if you're afraid to know how you're going to die, you'd better kill me now."

There was a long silence. Then Candar: "Unstrap him." Candar walked up and stood before him as the straps were taken off. "You'll curse yourself for postponing the end, if this is a trick. The transfer papers will be prepared now." He gestured to the commander. "Bring him back to my chambers, and call the emissary of the church." The door slammed jarringly behind him as he strode out.

When the conditions were made out, signed and countersigned and sealed, and a copy transmitted to the Cathedral of Keltar, and when the young emissary in cloth-of-gold had signed the receipt for him, Thane began. "At this moment," he started, "the Darzent Empire is preparing an attack. They have a space-drive, stolen from the Allied Systems, which allows almost instantaneous travel through the Galaxy. You will learn of this drive, and you will learn something that Darzent does not know. You will learn how to locate any ship using this drive at any time the drive is in operation."

That was enough to stimulate Candar's driving, paranoid megalomania to the full. Thane had already threatened him with destruction. Now he held out to him the opportunity to be master of the Galaxy. Thane felt it would be simple now to obtain the transfer of Astrid to the custody of the church. He thought so, but there was another hour of argument before he had overcome Candar's suspicions and convinced him of the absolute necessity of having Astrid to supervise the building of the Tracer and the Drive.

At last it was settled. Then Thane committed his treason. He told all he knew, about the second-stage drive and the tracer, and when Astrid came in, she finished the job. Between them they gave away the most important secrets of the Galaxy to an enemy, a man of endless, pathologic ambition.

CANDAR, of course, wanted confirmation. It was fast in coming. With all the technical resources of Onzar at her disposal, Astrid had a prototype of the tracer in operation the following day. An hour

later the existence of a ship using the catalyst drive was reported by the tracer. Its position could not be determined until a base line had been established. The following day, three more tracers were set up at widely separated points across the planet. More movement of ships was reported—and they were definitely placed within the Darzent Empire. One more day passed, and more tracers had been set up on Onzar III, across the sun from the capitol planet.

At the same time, Candar pushed work on the second-stage drive with all possible speed. As Thane had guessed, the use of gold in the catalyst principle gave Candar pause, but only momentarily. It was true that such a use of gold violated one of the oldest and strongest taboos in the religion but Candar's hunger for power was stronger than his fear of revolt. As Thane had supposed, Candar went ahead with the development of the drive, thinking that when he had it his power would enable him to ignore the church. The church was powerful on just this system. With the drive, Candar would rule the Galaxy.

Candar had taken certain precautions. Almost complete radio silence had been clamped down, partially to prevent any information getting out, and partially to provide enough power for the tracer. No ships of any registry could enter or leave the system. Only his personal adherents of unquestioned loyalty were allowed to work on the assembly of the drive. But there were leaks. And there was Thane . . .

With one legal pretext after another, Candar had succeeded in keeping Thane in isolation within the palace for three days. Finally, he gave in to the demand of the church that Thane be turned over to the Cathedral. He did not want Thane loose but still he could not afford a break with the church just a few days before his great victory.

So Thane at last managed to see Selan in her personal chambers in the Keltar Cathedral. It was a small, comfortable room that did not seem to share the bleakness of most of Onzar. Perhaps, as much as anything, that was due to the personality of the Priestess Selan. She was very old. She had remained slim, and her lined face retained much of its original golden color. Her yellow eyes were alert. The only term Thane

could think of for their expression was cynical compassion. She sat by a small writing table in one of the traditional, intricately carved chairs of Onzar.

"The developments of the past few days, Priestess Selan, are of extreme importance to Onzar and the church. The tracer device has already confirmed our belief that Darzent is preparing to attack. Already their trial maneuvers with the second stage drive have ceased, and they have begun the marshalling of their fleet. When they come, they must come through the Onzar confluence, not more than a parsec from this system. This attack must be stopped, and we hope that time enough is left."

"I am aware of these developments, Roger Thane," she said with a slight smile. "We still have our sources of information."

"Perhaps," Thane said, "you are also aware of the industrial use of gold in the second-stage drive?"

"We have heard rumors," she said wearily, "but perhaps my position on such matters is not clear to you. I have never been a religious doctrinaire. I have lived through tremendous changes on this planet, and I know that the church must conform to survive. You certainly must know that from the history of religions in your own system. The church is conservative, yes. It can never move with the skeptical flexibility of the politician or the scientist. But it must change with them, sometimes leading, sometimes following. Otherwise it becomes a thing of quaintness, a building without an institution, a place for tourists."

Thane regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. Even this brilliant, experienced woman would be ensnared by her own long-range theories into a disastrous inaction in the short-run crisis. And there would be no long-range for her or her church unless there were victory in the present crisis. He said, "I agree with you completely. Like any organism, social or biological, the church must adapt to continue. It must survive. And the present situation is not merely one in which an ancient taboo is violated. It is a crisis of survival for you."

"I know," she said thoughtfully, "that Candar has never been friendly to the church. But I do not believe that he has the power to destroy it."

"Up to now," Thane answered, "Candar

has been limited. Now, with the drive, he feels that unlimited power is his. His dream is to crush the power of Darzent in this attack, and then to turn upon the Allied Systems. I do not know if his dream of complete domination of the Galaxy can be realized. I do not think so. But it is something he will not put away. And when he makes the attempt, it will mean the destruction of millions, the killing of whole planets, the ending of all life of whole systems.

"There is no need to keep the useless old taboos that no longer fit into the present world. But they should be ended by the church itself, in its own time and its own way, not abrogated by a contemptuous politician."

She looked half-convinced, and he pressed his point at once. "The power of the whole planetary communications system is now being used by Astrid Reine for the tracer system now being built. With a word from you the whole radio system will be at your disposal for as long as we can keep it open. You can at last tell the people of Onzar the truth, which they have not heard for so long."

Selan stared at the floor for a long time. Finally she looked up. "I don't know. I just don't know." She paused again, and it was a long, agonizing pause for Thane. "The decision is too large for me now. It is a seizure of authority that goes against my whole nature." She looked directly at Thane. "But, be assured, you will have my word in time. You and I will witness this battle of the confluence, and then you will know my decision."

Thane's mind was full of reasons why the old priestess should not travel out into space, with all the stresses of that travel, to a position of great danger. But he met her determined eyes and saw at once that all arguments would be futile.

He got up to leave, and with the sincerest of respect, lied to her. "Your decision will be mine, Priestess Selan."

VI

THE ship used by Selan in her trips through the system was little larger than the usual scout class but it had been completely refitted for her purposes. She'd had

a special acceleration couch built in to allow her to survive the stress of space travel. And Thane noted that the large visiscreen would be ideal for watching the battle. And the communications system was larger than usual. It might do for his purpose.

They stayed well back from the restricted area where the whole Onzarian fleet was orbited. On the screen images appeared—twenty-three Class I cruisers, each with its own fleet of cruiser escorts, scouts, disruptor carriers, tenders and screen amplifiers. Swarms of independent tactical squadrons. Controlling all of them, ready to put them into instant action, was the battle-control cruiser, with its tracers, its receivers, its computers, its nearly automatic message center—and Candar and his staff.

Thane turned to the tracer that had been installed. Selan was by his side. He switched on its galactic screen. The Darzent marshalling was now almost complete. A few flashes of light still crossed the screen, crossing countless light years at each jump, pausing, and then a vault through more light years. As Thane and Selan watched, the flashes changed direction. The marshalling was complete, and the assembled might of Darzent was on its way. Thane found it hard to believe that even the fleet waiting before him could cope with all the force of Darzent.

The Darzent fleets had started from points spanning the whole Galaxy. With each flash of lights they converged, arrowing toward the Onzarian Confluence. Thane could imagine the watchers at similar screens in each ship of the battle fleet. Eyes becoming grimmer, nervous smiles appearing and disappearing on faces, hands clenching on instruments. And the waiting.

The flashing lights approached closer. The lead group of lights appeared, ten light years from the tiny orange circle marking the confluence. There was a pause—somewhat less than a second—and the lights appeared on the circle. Thane spun around to the visiscreen. The lead battle squadron of the Darzent Fleet had appeared there simultaneously, surfaced in space. Seven of the battle cruisers fired as one, and were joined by all the firepower of their escort ships.

The disruptor blasts, joining together, created a blinding sun in empty space. It was there. It was gone. And then just dead,

empty space again, but without the slightest hint that the lead squadron of the mighty Darzent Fleet had ever been there. Thane quickly looked over at the galactic map to see if they could have managed to get back into warp-line drive. No, there were no lights below the circle of the confluence. But another light was approaching from above, still ten light years away. Thane turned back to the visiscreen just as the second division of Onzar's fleet opened fire on the surfacing Darzent forces. Again utter annihilation.

The battle continued, with more surfacing squadrons, more eruption, disappearing suns. Thane turned away, losing interest in the well-planned slaughter. Here, a parsec away from the Onzar system, they were well outside the intersystems communication jam. Selan's horrified attention was still completely on the battle. Thane stepped back into the communications section of the scout and flicked the powerful space set into life. Static from the now almost constant disruptor blasts ripped and crackled across the hum of the set. There was just a chance, he considered, that he could get the relay station at Kadenar.

He worked rapidly, setting the frequency, the directional beam, the gain control. It was only a question of time before the detector would pick up the clear beam on the Onzar fleet, even in the midst of battle. At last it came through.

Across space, the automatic code responder finally could be heard. Thane gave his own code and said, "A direct to Garth. Top urgent."

"That code has been changed," the mechanical voice replied at once. Give current code."

"But I've been out of touch," Thane said, "and this must go through."

"That code has been changed," came the same, unvarying reply. "Give current code."

It was no use. With the mechanical monitor working he'd never get through. And of course they would have changed his code, after his disappearance and reported death. He began to talk rapidly giving his instructions. He couldn't get through to Garth, but there was the chance that someone would see the recording in time to act. Damn the mechanical efficiency of Liaison!

Now Selan was all he had to depend on.

He started back to the forward compartment hoping that Selan had at last made her decision. The battle was still going on and lights were still flashing down the galactic screen to sudden, unwitting death. The bulk of the Darzent fleet had been destroyed and Thane saw that Candar had changed his tactics. Now, instead of disruptors, he was using concentrated, high-power Stoltz artillery.

After destroying the mass of their power, Candar was going to bring in the staff ships, with the fleet admirals as captives. It would immobilize whatever power Darzent had in reserve while Candar turned on the Allied Systems. Already, confused and blinded Darzent ships were drifting in space, with Onzar wrecker tugs swarming in on them.

Thane turned to the old priestess Selan. "Don't you see the crisis that is shaping? Don't you see what Candar intends? When this is done and he has re-powered, he'll turn on the Allied Systems. They'll fight back of course, but the war will make a shambles of the whole Galaxy. Don't you see?"

She turned slowly and looked at him. Her eyes seemed older, much more tired than they had before. "I have seen it, Roger Thane, and this cannot be repeated. It will not happen again. It is against all my training and belief and the tenets of the faith, but I, as Priestess of Keltar, will take it on myself to attack the temporal power."

THANE felt the sweat on his hands, and his smile was stiff though it was certainly heartfelt. So much depended on this woman's decision and on her performance from now on. Without the aid of Liaison to depend on it was up to this woman to prevent galactic war.

They started back for Onzar II and Keltar at once. They would have a good start on Candar while he was engaged in mopping up the Darzent fleet. Thane felt sure that Candar would stay to confront the high-ranking captives and to gloat over them. On the other hand Candar would not delay too long. He would be back to announce his victory and to prepare for the attack on the Allied Systems.

At the landing port outside Keltar, Selan's automatic anti-grav was waiting. It took them up over the outskirts of the bleak

wintery city and towards its center. As they reached the solidly built-up area Thane could see the dim outlines of the old city wall beneath them. Not so many years ago, as time went in the Galaxy, that wall had been a vital protection against the spears of the hill men. And now Onzarians were in space, blasting away the power of a third of the Galaxy. But still, the descendents of the hill men, the descendents of the plains dweller, the city builders, were living here, underneath him.

In the midst of their technological revolution they were still living in their ancient superstitions. Still the old awe of the Word of the matriarchal, matrilineal church. Still the compulsion to have their little gold symbols of rank sanctified and made real. Still the . . . Thane paused in his thoughts as he saw flames leaping into the night sky from a blast furnace, producing some of the finest alloys in the Galaxy. It was still the same, he hoped.

In another moment they were over the towering white shaft of the communications center. Then they slowly let down. Thane thought that Candar's constant suspicion, his unending compulsion for infinite control, direct control, was playing into their hands here. The communications center was exactly that. It controlled all electronic communications with the capitol system, and could easily tie in with subject systems. But how much time did they have? Thane didn't know. With luck, they'd have a few vital moments for the voice of the Holy Church to go out over the planets.

The anti-grav settled gently on the upper terrace. Thane helped Selan out into the stinging cold of the Onzar night. Just inside the gloomy passage to the grav-well a harsh voice sounded. "Halt!"

They stopped. Thane made out a uniformed man, his hand on his holster.

"We have come at the call of Astrid Reine," Thane said. "She wishes our assistance."

"All who come for the thirteenth level must have the code word. Give it and you will pass."

Thane's right arm went up and the side of his stiff hand flashed down, hitting the sentry between his neck and shoulder. The man's pistol was almost aimed at Thane when Thane hit. The guard relaxed and

gently fell into an inert heap on the deck. Thane bent and took the blaster from the guard's inert fingers. He looked a moment and found a Stoltz. He took that, too. He straightened up and turned to Selan. "Sorry," he said. "We can't risk an examination now, and there's no time to lose. He'll be all right." Thane picked up a hand-control from the ledge in the sentry's cubicle and led Selan to the well.

They dropped gently, interminably. At last they reached "13." From the distance they had dropped, Thane judged they were far underground if this grav-well was timed as most were. He held Selan's arm and stopped their descent with his hand control.

They stepped out into a darkened corridor. A sentry was waiting. There was no 'halt!' this time. Without a signal from the roof they were automatically enemies. The blast echoed along the corridor. In the dim light the sentry's aim had not been good but Thane felt the first sting in his right arm. He aimed and fired the blaster with his left hand, and thus solved the problem of the sentry. They went down the corridor.

Thane pushed open the first lighted door with his foot, his right arm hanging useless. The blaster was ready in his left. Astrid looked up, sitting at a table. She ran to him.

"Roger, you did make it. You can't know how hard this waiting has been. I was sure you would make it but I've gone through days without hearing a thing."

He held her clumsily with his left arm, the hand still gripping the blaster, and winced when she pressed against his right shoulder. "We've made it so far, Astrid," he said, "but the biggest job is still ahead. How long can we keep the channels open for a newscast?"

Astrid stepped back, puzzled. "As far as the power goes, indefinitely, I believe. Of course there haven't been any newscasts since I've been here. All the power has been used for the Tracer. But it's easy enough to switch over. And all the other planet stations and systems stations are primarily just amplifiers and transmitters for this one."

"If the broadcasts haven't been on the air, what about the receivers? Will anyone be listening if we put a speech on?"

Astrid smiled. "We can take care of that. Candar installed a system for use on his own speeches. Each receiver automatically goes

on when he is speaking."

"That's it, then," Thane said. "Switch all the power from the Tracer to the newscast beam. Put the Priestess on the circuit and I'll try to keep it open." He turned to Selan. "How long will you need?"

"Ten minutes will be enough," she said with determination.

"Let's make it fifteen to be sure," Thane said. "I'll be on the roof doing what I can to hold off whoever shows up. Meet me there in fifteen minutes if everything is all right, or come at once if anything at all goes wrong."

Astrid noticed that he had been hurt. "Your arm, Roger! What happened? Can I do anything for it?" The deeply concerned look in her eyes made him feel that he was a little more to her than just a part of an underground conspiracy.

"The arm's all right," he said. "A sentry grazed it. I'll see you." He turned away and started back for the roof.

VII

THERE was a throbbing ache in his arm as he went back up the grav-well. He held the control in his teeth and twisted it with his left hand as he reached the roof level. He stepped out. The cold had deepened and the wind was bitter. He stepped over the unconscious sentry and placed his guns on the ledge before him. He twisted the dial of the Stoltz to 'lethal' and to 'max area.' With that sort of adjustment the Stoltz was dependable only for very short ranges, but he had to have something ready against a mass attack. The blaster was a precision, aimed weapon, and would do for one at a time.

The cold soaked in. His arm numbed and then ached, and numbed again. Thane waited. He had no way of knowing what Selan was saying or what effect it had in the minds of the Onzarians. Or did he? The normal street noises below seemed to be changing. Through the noise of the wind, a dull, confused murmur came up from below. That might be mass anger.

Thane picked up the blaster and walked over to the parapet. Far below he could see that crowds were beginning to gather in the street. Some were clumped around street loudspeakers.

There was a hum overhead. Thane spun around and looked up. A police patrol was just overhead. As it settled Thane threw himself flat on the icy tile. There was an immediate shrieking pain from his injured right arm. He gritted his teeth and aimed as the door of the anti-grav opened. The flash of his blaster was a bright orange in the night air. The man on his side crumpled. Thane was on his feet at once and dashed to the door of the patrol. One more flash of the blaster and the other occupant tumbled out the other side.

Thane hurried back to the sentry booth for his Stoltz. There would be more. As he reached it something hit him hard. He fell back towards the patrol anti-grav. He was fighting desperately. A hand went around his throat and tightened. A knee came down on his right arm. He wavered on the brink of unconsciousness. He fought his way back.

He jabbed savagely with the stiff fingers of his left hand and caught his opponent under the jaw. Thane pushed upward and back as hard as he could. Thane felt the hand loosen on his throat. Thane came up as the man went back. As they both reached their feet Thane saw it was the sentry. They struggled for a moment on the edge of the parapet. Then the sentry made a last grasp at Thane and went over.

Thane felt the sweat condense and freeze under his clothes as he searched for his lost blaster. He found it and started back for the entryway. Three more police ships were coming towards the roof. At that moment the grav-well door slid open and Astrid and Selan stood before him.

The first police ship fired before it landed. The blast came before Thane had reached Astrid and Selan. He saw Selan crumple. She was dead when he touched her. He had the impulse to do something, to say something, for one who had forced herself to do so much. But there was no time. He thrust the blaster at Astrid, who was still staring at the dead Selan. "I'll try to get them with the Stoltz. You hit anything that's dangerous with this!" He grasped the Stoltz from the ledge and stepped forward. Running figures were coming towards them now. He waited with a weary sort of calm for them to come close enough. An explosion burst the tile just off his right heel. He waited. Finally he pressed

the impeller of the Stoltz. The wide-angle shot dissipated the power, but it did include all of them. They kept coming forward. One of them raised an arm and there was a blinding flash. Thane firmly pressed the impeller again as he fell forward.

THERE was a voice, and Thane tried to get ready for what was coming but it was too much effort. Anyway, the voice went away. And then someone else was there, and someone else was saying something important, if he could only catch it . . . and then movement, up, and around, and down.

When Thane finally opened his eyes Garth was standing over him biting his cigar. "They tell me you've committed treason," Garth said.

Thane looked up at him steadily. "I guess that's right," he said.

"I suppose you know what we're going to do."

"I suppose so . . ." and Thane stopped. Full memory was coming back, and all its implications. "Wait . . . it's all wrong. What are you doing here? And where is here? And . . . if you're here—if we're together, then it must have worked! It must have worked!"

Garth lit his cigar. His face changed slightly. It might have been a smile. "Yes. It worked. The old girl really hit the Onzarians. They hadn't heard any news at all in all the days of radio silence. Then their sets came on and there she was telling them that all their gold gimmicks were no good any more. That death was approaching for all of Onzar. That Candar had . . . well, you can hear the recording of it. She meant every word and they acted as if they believed every word. Of course, they'd been conditioned to that with the propaganda newscasts. But after the long silence she really hit them."

Some one moved at Thane's other side. He turned his head. It was Astrid. She was scowling at Garth. "You're a mean, bitter old bureaucrat," she said mockingly, "talking to Roger like that."

Garth's face twisted into the approximation of a grin. "Well, there actually were treason charges against him for a time. But I will say that things have changed."

Thane looked from one to another and

then overhead. What he could see of the room looked vaguely familiar, but . . . "Where are we?"

"At the space station," Astrid said. "Dad and Garth are working over a treaty between Onzar and the Allied Systems."

"Dad? Then Dr. Reine was rescued? But how?"

They both started talking. A moment later Manning Reine joined them, looking paler and more haggard than before. All three of them talked, constantly interrupting each other. Gradually Thane got the essential details.

After the first impulsive, unorganized revolt, the church took over. It, at least, had an organization. A large part of the armed forces had joined in. Some, though, had stayed on Candar's side, and there had been sharp, bitter fighting. But by the time Candar landed it was about over. This was his greatest victory. He had destroyed the power of Darzent, and was bringing back, as captives, most of the leadership of the fleet and of Darzent. In addition, there was Dr. Reine, who had been discovered in captivity, on the leading staff ship. But when Candar stepped out into the spaceport, instead of meeting his adulating subjects, a very determined group of his own soldiers stopped him.

Thane finally turned to Astrid. "But how did we get away? The last I remember . . ."

"You got them all, Roger. One of them hit your leg with a blaster as he went down. All I had to do was to get you to the anti-grav, and out of there."

Thane moved the leg, experimentally, and winced. "How is it?"

"Surface burn and shock," Astrid said. "In a week you can ski on it."

"Skiing—haven't done that since I was at Earth University." He thought for a moment. "How did you get into it, Garth? Did my message get through to Liaison?"

"Oh, yes. We picked up the recording an hour or so after it was recorded. I listened to it myself, and it convinced me. It sounded like you, and I could sort of see what you might have done. I shoved every available Liaison in the adjacent sectors right into Onzar, on my own responsibility. It worked out as it turned out. All they had to do was to clean up the tag-end of things."