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FEATURING

The Starmen of Llyrdis
a novel of galactic adventure
By **LEIGH BRACKETT**

Earthmen No More
a Captain Future novelet
By **EDMOND HAMILTON**

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PUBLICATION

STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 23, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

March, 1951



A Complete Novel

THE STARMEN OF LLYRDIS

BY LEIGH BRACKETT

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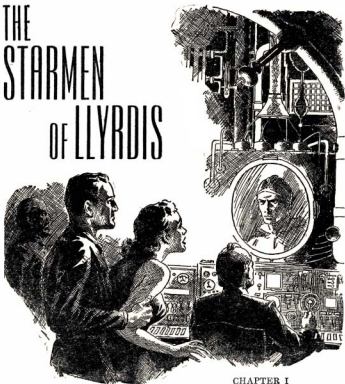
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STARTLING STORIES. Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 29 Washington St., Lowellfield 2, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 19 East 49th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter June 13, 1948, at the post office at Northfield, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1979. Copyright, 1951, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscriptions: 12 issues, \$2.00; single copies, 35¢; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In correspondence with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

THE STARMEN OF LLYRDIS



CHAPTER I

Shairn

A Novel
by LEIGH BRACKETT

MICHAEL TREHEARNE was to remember that evening as the end of the world, for him. The end of his familiar life in a familiar Earth, the first glimmering vision of the in-

Michael Trehearne sensed his difference from other men, but he little knew he was a changeling of the only race able to conquer the stars!

credible. It began with the man who spoke to him on the heights behind St. Malo by the light of the Midsummer Fires.

There was a great crowd of tourists there, come to watch the old Breton festival of the sacred bonfire. Trehearne was among them but not of them. He stood alone—he was always alone. He was thinking that the ritual being performed in the wide space of stony turf was just too quaint to be endured and wondering why he had bothered with it, when someone spoke to him with casual intimacy.

"In four days we shall be free of all this, going home. A good thought, isn't it? Two years is a long time."

Trehearne turned his head and looked into a face so like his own that he was startled.

The resemblance was that of a strong racial stamp rather than any blood kinship. If two Mohawks had met in the hills of Afghanistan they would have recognized each other and it was the same with Trehearne and the stranger.

There was the same arrogant bone-structure, the odd and striking beauty of form and color that seemed to have no root in any race of Earth, the long yellow eyes, slightly tilted, flecked with sparks of greenish fire. And there was the same pride. In Trehearne it was a lonely bitter thing. The stranger bore his like a banner.

During the moment in which Trehearne stared amazed the stranger remarked, "I don't remember seeing you on the last ship. How long have you been here?"

"Since yesterday," answered Trehearne and knew as he formed the words that they were not the ones expected of him. A wild throb of excite-



Trehearne said softly, "Shairn," and she came to him, radiant



ment ran through him. He said impulsively, "Look here, you've mistaken me for someone else but I'm glad you did!" In his eagerness he all but clutched the man's arm. "I must talk to you."

Something in the stranger's expression had altered. His eyes were now both wary and startled. "Upon what subject?"

"Your family—my family. Forgive me if I seem impertinent but it's important to me. I've come a long way, from America to Cornwall and now to Brittany, trying to trace down my own line." He paused, looking again into that remarkable face that watched him, darkly handsome, darkly mocking in the fire-light. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Kerrel," said the man slowly. "I beg your pardon, *Monsieur*. The resemblance is indeed striking. I mistook you for one of my kin."

Trehearne was frowning. "Kerrel?" he repeated and shook his head. "My people were called Cahusac before they went into Cornwall."

"There was doubtless a connection," said Kerrel easily. He pointed abruptly to the open space beyond. "Look—they begin the final ritual."

The great bonfire had burned low. The

A Monopoly of Speed

ONE of the major problems that currently face the writer of science fiction stories and may some day confront our scientists is the matter of exceeding the speed of light. Many theories have been suggested—perhaps all of them as absurd as that early nineteenth-century prognosticator who foresaw human inability to survive in a railway carriage moving faster than thirty miles per hour.

Miss Brackett, in her very fine novel, has a new suggestion as to how man may travel faster than 186,000 miles per second. Such a monopoly as she conceives is hardly an attractive idea—but in view of human history it is all too manlike. And certainly the thought of star travel, in the here and now, is one of the most exciting within the range of human imagination.—THE EDITOR.

peasants and the fisherfolk, some hundreds of them, were gathered in a circle around the windy glow of the flames. A white-bearded old man began to pray in the craggy Breton Gaelic.

TREHEARNE barely turned his head. His mind was full of the stranger and of all the things that had oppressed and worried and driven him since childhood, the nagging little mysteries about himself to which now, perhaps, he would find the key.

He glanced away only a second, following the gesture of Kerrel's arm. But when he looked back, Kerrel was gone.

Trehearne took half a dozen aimless steps, searching for the man, but he had melted away into the darkness and the crowd. Trehearne stopped, feeling cold and furious.

His temper, long the bane of a rather luckless existence, reared up and bared its claws. He had always been childishly sensitive to insults. If he could have got his hands on the contemptuous Kerrel he would have thrashed him. He turned again to the festival, controlling himself as he had learned painfully to do, realizing that he was being ridiculous. But his face, so like that of the vanished stranger, had the look of an angry Apollyon.

The Bretons had begun the procession around the waning fire. Short burly men in bright jackets and broad-brimmed hats, sturdy women in aprons and long skirts, their improbable starched coifs fluttering with ribbons and lace. Sabots clumped heavily on the stony ground.

They would march three times sunward, circling the embers, and then solemnly, each pick up a pebble and as solemnly cast it into the coals. Then they would scramble for the charred brands and bear them home to be charms against fever and lightning and the murrain until the next Midsummer Eve.

It struck Trehearne that most of them, except the very old, looked painfully self-conscious about it all. In a thoroughly bad humor, Trehearne was on the point of leaving. And then he

saw the girl.

She was standing some ten feet away from him in the forefront of the crowd, which had shaped itself into a semi-circle. She had wanted him to see her. She was swinging a white handbag like a lazy pendulum on a long strap and her gaze was fixed on him. She was smiling. Her smile was a challenge.

In the reflection of the great bed of glowing embers, Trehearne saw that she was another of Kerrel's breed—and his own, whatever it might be. But it was not that recognition that made his heart leap up. It was herself.

The red-gold light danced over her, and perhaps it was only that faëry glow that made her seem more than a handsome girl in a white dress. Only a trick of wind and starlight, perhaps, that made Trehearne see in her a changeling, bright, beautiful, wicked and wise—and no more human than Lilith.

She had attracted not only his attention but that of the Bretons also. The ritual circle was broken and they were staring at her and muttering. Then the old man who had prayed went toward her. In his seamed weathered face, in his eyes, was the spark of an ancient hatred, the shadow of an ancient fear.

The girl flung up her dark head and laughed but Trehearne did not feel like laughing.

The old man cursed her.

Trehearne knew not one word of Gaelic but he did not need a knowledge of the tongue. Nor did he need to have explained the gesture of angry dismissal. The Bretons, the old ones, had already picked up their stones for the fire. In another minute they would use them on the girl.

Trehearne strode across the front of the crowd and caught her roughly by the arm, pulling her away. She was still laughing, still mocking as she shouted something at the old man. The words she spoke might have been Gaelic but they had a different sound and they had no kindness in them.

The sightseers parted readily as Trehearne thrust through them with the girl. The voice of the old man followed

them down the slope of the hill and the curious tourists stared after them until they were out of sight.

Trebearne dropped her arm then and demanded, "What was the matter with them?"

"The peasant folk have long memories. They don't understand what it is they remember, only that evil things once happened to them because of us."

"What sort of evil things?"

"Have there been any new ones since the beginning?" Her voice held a dry humor.

They were far from the crowd now, near the beach. A late moon was rising but the walled island city bulked huge and dark, a medieval shadow. The girl was a white wraith, all astrif with the salt wind that tumbled her dark hair and set her skirts to rippling. He thought her eyes were sea-green but in the moonlight he could not be sure.

"Are you going to vanish like Kerrel?" he asked.

She laughed. "Kerrel is a rude man. I offered myself to make amends."

"What do they call you?"

"Shairn."

"That doesn't sound Breton."

"Doesn't it? My other name is unpronounceable and means of the *Silver Tower*."

HER eyes were very bright in the moonlight. He thought that in some secret way she was mocking him but he did not care. He said, "I'll stick to Shairn."

They went on down the path to the beach and sat on the soft warm sand. He told her his own name and she asked, "You are American?"

"Fourth generation."

"From Brittany to Cornwall to America," she murmured musingly. "Oh, yes, I heard all that you told Kerrel. The years, the generations, the mingling of other strains—and still the Vardda blood breeds true!"

He repeated the word *Vardda* wonderingly.

"An old tribal name. You've never heard it." She laughed with pure de-

light, "You're incredible, Michael. No wonder Kerrel made a mistake!"

After a moment of silence, she asked, "What sort of a man are you, Michael? What do you do? How do you live?"

He looked at her keenly. "Do you really want to know? All right, I'll tell you. I'm a man who has never been satisfied. I've never had a woman or a job I could stay with very long. I'm a flier by trade but even that seems a dull and rather childish business. And why? Because I'm too good for any of it."

He laughed, not without a certain cruel humor. "Don't ask me in what way I'm too good. I seem to be unusually healthy but that's important only to me. My brain-power has never set the world on fire. I have no tendency to genius. Yet somehow I've always felt there's something lacking either in me or the world."

Shairn nodded, absently smoothing a patch of sand with her palm. Again he was conscious of a queer wisdom in her that did not fit her youth. She smiled, a small thing full of secrets.

"And you thought that if you learned the origin of your blood you would understand yourself?"

"Perhaps. My father was a weedy little man with red hair. He swore I was none of his. I didn't look like my mother's side either. I've never looked like anybody until I met you and Kerrel. Oddness becomes very wearing, especially when you don't know why you should be odd."

He added, "The villagers in Cornwall called me changeling. I had the same thought when I saw you."

"So we are of one race, Michael, could you stay with me?"

"You're not a woman, you're a witch. I've never met a witch before."

She laughed outright at that. "Nonsense. Witch, changeling—these are words for fools and peasants."

"Who are the Vardda, Shairn?"

She shook her head. "I told you—it is a tribal name. One that I want you to forget."

She went on, "You said to Kerrel that you had come to Brittany to trace down

your family?"

"Yes. I learned in Cornwall that they came from a place called Keregnac."

He thought she started a little at that name but she said nothing and he asked, "Do you know the town?"

"It is not a town," she answered slowly. "Only a tiny village, lying on the edge of a great moor. Yes, I know Keregnac." She picked up a bit of driftwood and began to draw idle patterns in the sand. "I don't think you will learn much there. The village is very old and now almost dead."

He started to speak but she went on, almost hurriedly, "Don't go any farther in your search, Michael. It will bring you nothing but regret. I know the blood you spring from. I am telling you the truth."

She turned to him. "Go home. Go back to America. Be content that you are young and strong and, yes—very handsome, even if you do not resemble anyone else! I have done an ill thing. I should not have spoken to you tonight. Kerrel was wise and his act was kind. Now I ask you to forget me and all I have said. I am leaving St. Malo in the morning."

"No!" He caught her wrist and held it. "Oh, no! You've started this. You can't run away from it now."

"But," she said reasonably, "there's no way you can stop me."

"Then I'll follow." His grip softened, shifted to the place where her strong white neck curved so smoothly into a perfect shoulder. "Please, Shairn. Let me see you again. Let me come with you, to your home."

She would not meet his eyes. She smiled a little and said, "That would be a very long journey indeed."

"Brittany is not so large."

"Have I said that I live in Brittany?" She stood up suddenly. "I must go, Michael. Be angry with me if you will but believe in what I say—forget me, forget Brittany, forget your family. Go home and be content!" Her eyes were full of tears.

She left him then, going swiftly across the moonlit beach, and he would

not run after her. He stood where he was, upset and angered by her sudden going.

After a while he thought of the things she had said and the thing that Kerrel had said. "Have I said that I live in Brittany?"

Where was home to the Vardda?

Bent on the moonlit sand his moody gaze was drawn to the patterns Shairn had traced there. Amidst the aimless rambling lines a word stood out in clear, sharp letters—

KEREGNAC.

CHAPTER II

The Vardda

A HIRED car and driver took him for an exorbitant price to Keregnac. On the first day they had roads and made excellent time. On the second the tiny Fiat labored in agony along rutted cart tracks. The sea was far behind them and the driver complained incessantly of the mad desires of Americans. Why should anyone wish to go to Keregnac, a place that even the Bretons had forgotten?

Trehearne was in a savage mood. Shairn's cryptic warnings and her very clear advice had only served to whip his curiosity to fever pitch. The Devil himself could not have made him stop now and he knew that the girl was a large part of that determination.

She had done something to him. She had hit him where no one and nothing had ever touched him before. And she had done it deliberately. He was sure of that. She might be a lot of things, among them deceitful, heartless and dangerous, but she was not feckless nor lacking in intelligence.

Then he remembered her tears and began to wonder all over again.

The driver lost his way among the ruts and the stony hamlets. When he begged directions the peasants regarded Trehearne in dour silence and could not



smoke and age. A meager fire burned on the hearth and two home-made candles furnished all the light.

It was enough to show Trehearne's face.

Oddy enough the squat hard-handed peasant who was master of the house showed neither fear nor hatred. Nor was he surprised.

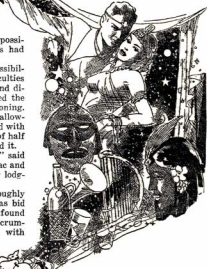
A certain slyness crept into his sullen

be compelled to answer. It was impossible even to learn whether others had gone this way before them.

Trehearne had forseen this possibility. He had had enough such difficulties in Cornwall. He had got a map and directions in St. Malo and he forced the unhappy driver on by dead reckoning. It was night before they came wallowing into a muddy square half paved with ancient stones and saw the lights of half a dozen dwellings clustered around it.

"Go there to the largest house," said Trehearne. "Ask if this is Keregnac and tell the master we'll pay well for lodging."

The driver, himself in a thoroughly foul humor by now, did as he was bid and in a few moments Trehearne found himself in a three-room house of crumbling stone, the walls blackened with



"Do you have to go voyaging, Michael?" asked Shairn



expression but that was all.

"You shall have the best bed, Monsieur," he said in vile French and pointed to a gigantic carved *lit-clos*. "I have also one good horse. The others have gone ahead into the *landes*. You will wish to overtake them."

Trehearne tried to conceal his sudden excitement. "Monsieur Kerrel and Mademoiselle Shairn?"

The peasant shrugged. "You know better than I what their names might be. I am not a curious man. I enjoy good health, and am content."

He called sharply in the Breton tongue and a woman came to prepare food. She had a heavy stupid face. She glanced once, sidelong, at Trehearne and after that was careful neither to look at nor speak to him. As soon as the simple meal was on the table she hid herself in the adjoining room.

The ancient crone who sat knitting by the fire was not so cowed. As though age placed her above necessity she kept her bright little eyes fixed upon Trehearne with a mixture of hostility and interest.

"What are you thinking, *ma vieille*?" he asked her, smiling.

She answered, in French that was almost unintelligible to him, "I am thinking, Monsieur, that Keregnac is greatly honored by the Devil!"

The man snarled at her in Gaelic, bidding her be silent, but Trehearne shook his head.

"Don't be afraid, *grandmère*. Why do you say that?"

"Every other year he sends his sons and daughters to us. They eat our food, borrow our horses and pay us well. Oh, very well!" Her white coif bobbed. Trehearne laughed.

"And do I appear like the devil's son?"

"You are the very breed."

ON impulse he went to her and said, "Once my family lived here. Their name was Cahusac."

"Cahusac. Eh, eh, Keregnac has forgotten them, the Cahusacs! That was long and long ago. They had an only child, a daughter, who gave herself to

one of these handsome sons of the Evil One and . . ." She looked at him wisely. "But forgive me, my old tongue has not yet learned caution."

Trehearne put silver in her lap and thanked her and went outside. He walked the few paces to the end of the muddy street and looked out upon a moor that stretched still and desolate under the stars.

Into the *landes*, the wastes, Shairn had gone with Kerrel. Why, for what purpose, he could not guess, any more than he could guess the answers to all the other riddles. He knew better than to ask his host. He lighted a cigarette and stood for a long time, staring out across the empty heath, his eyes narrowed and intense with thought.

He had traced his family back to Keregnac and he knew now the reason for their leaving. But the secret of his birthright lay still farther on.

How much farther he did not dream.

At dawn he paid off his driver and his host, mounted the horse that was ready for him and struck out into the moor. He had no idea what direction he should take. However, the moor could not be endless in extent and if he searched long enough he was almost bound to find what he was looking for. If Kerrel and Shairn and other "sons and daughters of the Devil" came into the *landes*, they must have shelter of some kind.

But all that day he rode across stony soil, through gorse and bramble and stunted trees, without seeing a cottage or a solitary sheep or even a distant smoke to mark a human habitation. Only here and there a lonely tor stood like a druid sentinel against a lowering sky.

It drew on to dusk. The wind blew and it began to rain, a fine soaking drizzle that showed promise of going on all night. And the heath stretched on all sides of him, featureless, without comfort or hope.

There was nothing to do but go on. He let the horse find its own way, sitting hunched in the saddle, wet and wolfishly hungry and at odds with the world.

His mood grew blacker as the light failed. The horse continued to plod on through pitch darkness. The land rolled a good bit and Trehearne knew from the cant of the saddle when his mount slid down into the hollow of a fold and then scrambled out again up the other side, slipping and stumbling in the mud and wet gorse.

From the crest of that low rise Trehearne caught a glimmer of light, ahead and to the left.

He said aloud, "There is a cotter's hut," and would not allow himself to hope for anything else. But he spurred his horse on recklessly and his heart was beating fast.

It seemed hours before he reached that light.

He was close onto the place before he could make out its size and shape in the thick night. Then he reined in, completely puzzled. This was no cotter's hut nor was it a manor nor any normal sort of dwelling. He saw a broken shaft of stone that had once been a squat crenelated tower and around its foot a ruin of walls and fallen outbuildings. It was obviously very old, probably the stronghold of some medieval robber, Trehearne guessed.

Yet part of it was inhabited. Yellow lamplight poured from the window embrasures of the keep and there were horses in the courtyard, sheltered under prosaic canvas.

He dismounted and let his weary animal join its fellows. Then, walking quietly over the sunken flags, he approached the tower.

He would have looked inside but the embrasures were set several feet above his head. Instead he stood for a time by the door, listening. He carried a small automatic in his pocket and it felt good under his hand. There was something wrong about all this—very wrong indeed.

The planks of the door were weathered but he thought that they were new in the last thirty years. He could hear the sound of voices beyond, a number of voices all raised in talk, talk punctuated by bursts of laughter.

As he listened there was a glassy crash as though someone had dropped a bottle, then further laughter, in the midst of which a man began to sing in a deep, strong voice. The singer sounded not particularly drunk but very happy. The song and the words to it were both strange to Trehearne. It was a rousing refrain and other voices joined in, one by one.

Instead of reassuring him the jovial uproar only made Trehearne's nerves creep more coldly down his back. He was sure that when he opened the door he would find Shairn and Kerrel among the company. What sort of folk were they, indeed, to hold high wassail in a ruined tower lost on this desolate moor?

The shrill old voice whispered in his memory—*Every other year the Devil sends his sons and daughters.*

He swore and laid his hand on the great iron latch, swinging the door wide open.

The talking, the laughter and the song all died into the silence of astonishment. Trehearne stood still in the doorway and those within remained as they were, as though the opening of the door had stiffened them into figures of wood.

MEN and women, a few less than a score, gathered in an archaic oblong room of musty stone. Their clothing and the chairs on which they sat did not belong in that room nor in any room Trehearne had ever seen—but they belonged quite naturally to the people. There was a long table laid with food and furnished with bottles of unfamiliar shapes.

Most of the faces were handsome. A few were plain and one was downright ugly. But all of them bore the same racial stamp—the indefinable difference from the rest of humanity that subtly marked Trehearne and Kerrel and the girl.

She was there. Shairn, wearing a loose, short tunic of some strange fabric the color of flame, belted over soft dark trousers. Her belt was jewelled, and her sandal shoes had golden bosses on the straps. She held a purple goblet full of

spicy wine and her eyes were fixed on his and even so he could not read them.

She said without moving or looking away, "If you hurt him, Kerrel, I'll kill you."

Trehearne saw then that Kerrel was taking from his belt a thing that looked like a narrow flashlight with a thick prism where the lens should be. He was dressed like Shairn—they all were, men and women both—except that his tunic was iridescent silver, open to the belt to show his muscular chest.

Kerrel said, "He has a gun."
"He won't use it."

"No," said Trehearne slowly. "I won't use it." His gaze had shifted from the girl to Kerrel. He did not take his hand away from his pocket. Neither did Kerrel put away the prism tube.

The ugly man stepped between them. He had a merry slightly drunken face. From the tone of his voice Trehearne knew that it was he who had begun the singing.

"Nobody's going to use anything," he said and thrust down Kerrel's arm. "We're all friends. We're all happy. We're going home. No quarrels between two Vardda now. Wait till you get to Llyrdis and kill each other there."

He glanced slyly at Shairn and added, "Still at it, eh? My, what fun we do have with our pretty games!"

"Oh, shut up, Edri!" she snapped. "Michael, how did you find us?"

"Yes, Michael," said Kerrel mildly. "Do tell us how." His eyes were not mild, nor the set of his mouth.

Trehearne answered, "I went to Kerregnac on business of my own." He would have gone on but the ugly man called Edri interrupted.

"What's all this about?" he demanded. "Why shouldn't a Vardda find his own?" He came and put his hand on Trehearne's shoulder. "I don't know you, my lad, but what the devil? I can't know everyone. Sit down. Have a drink. Did you miss your ship last time? We have our full quota now but there's always room."

He thrust a glass of the aromatic wine into Trehearne's hand. It went down

like mellow fire and took some of the chill out of his bones. Edri was still talking but he had slipped now, quite naturally, into that unknown tongue—the language of the song, the language Shairn had used when she mocked the Bretons at the festival.

There were others around Trehearne now. They were full of laughter and excitement, deluging him with questions he could not understand. Someone took his wet coat off him. His glass was refilled.

Shairn came up behind him and put her two hands on his shoulders. She spoke to Edri and the others. Their chatter slackened. They stared at Trehearne in amazement. Suddenly Edri flung back his head and roared.

"I don't believe it," he said in English, and peered closely at Trehearne. "You're having a joke together."

Kerrel smiled. "What Shairn says is quite true. Somewhere, far back, this man had a Vardda ancestor. That's his only claim. He's a remarkable atavism, no more."

"Well," said Edri. "Well!" Again he peered at Trehearne, his ugly face puckered comically. His eyes, however, were remarkably cool and shrewd. "He looks like a Vardda," he said.

Trehearne got up. There was a kind of anger in him now. He looked at these people who bore the name of Vardda. He looked at their garments and their furniture, and the taste of their alien wine was strong in his mouth. A shiver ran over him, almost of fear.

He caught Shairn by the arms roughly and said, "Who are you? Why are you here in this place? And where are you going?"

Kerrel answered. "Didn't she tell you? No—I see that she didn't quite dare do that. Well, there's no reason not to tell you now."

He paused. And Trehearne felt a cold foreboding at the hateful satisfaction in Kerrel's eyes. He knew that Kerrel was going to say something that would hit him hard. He suddenly didn't want to hear it.

Kerrel said, "We Vardda aren't of

your Earth at all. We're waiting here for a ship and we're going home to Aldebaran—to the stars!"

CHAPTER III

The Ship from Outside

THE words thundered in Trehearne's ears but they had no meaning—not at first. He let go of Shairn, who whispered, "Do you understand now why I told you to forget the Vardda?"

Edri thrust him into the chair again. "Sit down, old man. It's a large mouthful to swallow all at once. Here—wash it down with this."

Trehearne took the wine and drank it.

Home to Aldebaran. Home to the stars! Instinctively he appealed to Edri. "It isn't true," he said. "It can't be."

"Why not?"

Trehearne's throat was strangely tight. He stammered in his speech, finding it difficult to breathe. "Star-flight? An alien race coming and going on Earth—and all this in secret, no one knows of it?"

Edri laughed. "Oh, billions of people know about it, from Cygnus to Hercules. We Vardda trade openly between the star-worlds of the galaxy for we've an unbreakable monopoly on interstellar flight."

He poured Trehearne's glass full again. "Better let the idea trickle in slowly with the wine."

Trehearne drank mechanically, but the wine was tasteless now. He could not take his eyes from Edri's ugly sympathetic face.

"You mean you've conquered all those stars and worlds?"

Edri snorted. "That's your Earth war-obsession talking. War is not only backward, it's damned unprofitable. We Vardda aren't conquerors, we're merchant-adventurers."

He added patiently, "It's this way—there are hundreds of inhabited star-worlds. They're most of them civilized

and proudly independent. We Vardda rule our own world but no other.

"But we have something the other star-worlds don't have. We've got a monopoly on interstellar travel for certain reasons. We Vardda and we alone can travel and trade between the galaxy's worlds—the richest monopoly of all time!"

"But if you come and go like that, why not openly to Earth?"

Edri shrugged. "You can't trade profitably with worlds still in their war-ridden phase. Such worlds we prefer to visit secretly. Your Earth is one of them."

Shairn broke in. "It's true, Michael! We keep Vardda agents here secretly to gather from Earth whatever of value its civilization produces. We've done that for several centuries."

The blood hammered in Trehearne's temple. *We are waiting for a ship.* If they brought those ships down in these *landes* or in the Great American Desert or in a hundred other of the waste places of the globe, who would know or see them, especially if they landed by night?

And the Vardda themselves—the very truth would protect them. You might look at a man and speculate whether he came from some distant exotic land but you would never suspect him of having come from another star.

A woman began to giggle. "I'm sorry," she gasped. "But his face—it's so funny!"

"And so would yours be," flashed Shairn. Her voice whispered swiftly in Trehearne's ear. "I'm sorry you came, Michael. I truly am. But you've got to hang on now."

He recoiled from the touch of her fingers. His mind was rocking from the terrible agoraphobia of a man of Earth who had suddenly looked through an opened window into the crash and roar and glitter of all the galaxy's stars.

Woman not born of Earth, daughter of the unimaginable deeps beyond the world! Changeling, Lilith, star-witch . . .

Trehearne's head reeled and the familiar Earth seemed to vanish behind a

fery mist that dimmed his vision.

Home to Aldebaran!

He was aware of voices, remote and far away. They were talking, in that unknown language. Kerrel was speaking violently to Edri, Shairn crying out, the others joining in and arguing. Edri drank and did not answer, his brows drawn in a frown.

Shairn's clear voice overruled and silenced the others. She talked swiftly, her green eyes flashing with excitement. The others seemed to agree to her proposal. Kerrel protested angrily but was drowned out. And Edri reluctantly nodded to Shairn.

"Michael, listen!" Shairn's voice came urgently through the haze. "Listen to Edri!"

WITH a great effort Trehearne drew himself back to reality. He looked up dazedly into Edri's ugly compassionate face. Edri said, "You're going with us."

Trehearne stared at him without moving. He did not answer. He could not. For the moment he was beyond words. There was a sickness in him as though the solid ground had dropped suddenly from under him.

Edri went on. He looked uncomfortable, almost guilty, like a man who hates the thing he is forced to do.

"I wish you hadn't come," he said. "But you did and there's no help for it. I'm leader here and under orders. Earth must have no knowledge of the Vardda. You understand? I can't leave you behind."

Trehearne began to understand. He looked at the faces of the Vardda watching him, doubtful and troubled. Only Shairn's face he could not see. He knew they would use force if they had to.

He spoke and his voice sounded hoarse and strange in his ears.

"I'm going with you?" he repeated as though he needed to assure himself of the sense of those words. "Going to Aldebaran."

"I'm sorry," Edri said. "It seems preferable to killing you in cold blood as Kerrel wanted." Abruptly he swore in

his own tongue. "Damn it, I didn't ask you to come here. I said I was sorry. Here. Have a drink."

Trehearne sprang up. He struck aside the cup that Edri held out to him. His violence was born of fear—fear as deep as the abysses between the stars. He was no coward. But no man could have a thing like this flung suddenly in his face and not recoil from it in a kind of horror.

To Aldebaran . . . to the stars . . .

It had a different sound now.

Shairn was beside him, her fingers cutting into his wrist. "Michael, you have to go. I fought for you. I'm counting on you." Her eyes were hard and bright. They challenged him. She whispered, "Don't show them you're afraid!"

The man who stood by the door opened it suddenly and went out, leaving it wide. A curious silence fell on the room. It had an electric quality, a thrill that even Trehearne could feel through the daze of shock that numbed him. They waited and the time seemed endless. He was very cold.

The man thrust his head back in and shouted something, a high excited cry that was echoed from every throat.

"Michael, the ship is coming. Do you hear me?" Shairn's voice, edged, commanding, ruthless. He heard it.

"Walk with your head up, Michael! Don't make them take you by force!"

Trehearne's face tightened. Something dark and cruel came into it. He shook her hand off roughly. He turned and Edri was there, holding out another cup of wine. He smiled, an honest smile, friendly, apologetic. Trehearne took the cup.

It was strange. He saw the others, laughing, shouting, pouring toward the door. He heard and felt. And yet he was like a dead man. Everything was remote, without reality, the flimsy stuff of dreams.

He drank the wine. He knew that he had done so because he put down the cup again and it was empty. He saw Edri watching him and again surprised in that ugly face a look of pity. Then he was walking out with the others.

He stood beside them in the windy darkness of the moor. It had ceased to rain. There was a wide rift in the clouds. The Vardda were looking upward toward it. Trehearne looked also and saw the huge bulk of a great ship dropping silently down from the stars.

Softly, soundless as a drift of the night itself, the star-ship settled down over the heath. There were no noisy jets or clumsy bursts of flame to mark its landing. Trehearne caught the faint and subtle throbbing of motors different from any he had heard before and somehow that quiet song of power was more frightening than thunder.

He watched, alone in his strange dream, alone among all the men of Earth who dreamed, for they would wake and he knew that he would not.

The great sleek powerful stranger came to rest on the moor, bringing with it a dark breath of mystery from the outer Suns. Its hull was scarred by the atmosphere of unnamed worlds and its ports had looked upon infinities where the stars were swallowed up like clouds of fireflies.

Trehearne began to tremble, an inner shuddering of the soul.

The humming of the motors ceased.

CHAPTER IV

Ordeal in Space

THE Vardda began to run toward the ship. And Trehearne was aware that Shairn was pulling him toward it.

He saw that there were two men behind him, holding little prism tubes.

The ship was before him. He had to go into it. He was afraid but fear would do him no good. It was like bailing out. You had to do it and you did it.

He was angry too. But most of all he was numb. Things had happened too fast—too fast and too hugely.

He found himself shaking off Shairn's grip for the second time. He heard himself saying, "I can walk quite well by myself." He was surprised at the tone of his voice. It was sharp as a whiplash and perfectly under control.

A lock-door had opened high in the looming flank of the monster. White light blazed from it. A folding metal stair came down and then men and women descended to join the Vardda waiting eagerly below. There were greetings, talk, laughter. Those who had been exiles on Earth for two years had much to say to the newcomers who would replace them here.

A cargo hatch was open lower down. Vardda crewmen were setting up a conveyor belt with the swiftness of long practice.

Things were being brought to it from the tower. What things, Trehearne neither knew nor cared. Machinery clattered softly.

He had reached the foot of the ladder.

He looked up. The vast alien bulk of the ship was above him. It hung over him like the end of the world and he knew that it was just that. He thought of where that ship was going to take him, out into the darkness between the stars, out to unknown worlds, a stranger. [Turn page]

He heard Edri talking to the newcomers. They turned and stared at him, startled. Edri asked them earnestly, "What do you think? Is he Vardda or isn't he?"

A man shook his head. "You'll soon find out."

A woman, looking soberly at Trehearne, said, "It's cruel to find out that way. But there's nothing else you can do with him."

Shairn said quickly, "Come on, Michael. Come aboard."

He wondered what the woman had meant. He remembered the look of pity in Edri's eyes, the uncomfortable troubled look of the others.

The treads of the ladder rang hollow under his feet.

A bell inside the great ship began to shrill, sharp and urgent. The freight-belt was already going up. A leonine young man clad in scarlet and black, with the tabs of rank on his shoulders, came running down and bawled a demand that they hurry.

Trehearne said, "Shairn, what did she mean—*It's cruel to find out that way?*"

"Nothing. I'll explain later. Come on."

There was a great emptiness inside him. He was aware of the motions of his body, of the sounds and smells and colors, of the jostling of people behind him on the ladder. And yet none of it was really happening. It did not touch him, it was not part of him.

He trod upon a metal deck and passed from the round lock-chamber into a long transverse corridor faced in the same dull metal. He saw the scars of time and hard use upon it. Now and again through a bulkhead door he caught a glimpse of a cabin or orderly room. Men lived and worked in them. They had a disturbing look of reality.

There was a lounge and there were chairs bolted to the deck and he was sitting in one of the chairs.

The bells rang sharply.

Shairn stooped over Trehearne and whispered, "Kerrel is watching you. He wants to see you break."

They were all watching him, all the

Vardda in the rows of chairs. Their talk had faded away and they were looking at Trehearne uncomfortably, almost guiltily. It was as though something were going to happen to him, something that they didn't want to see happen. Edri's ugly face was bleak and sad.

Trehearne fixed his gaze on the one unfriendly face, on Kerrel's sullen eyes. They gave him a focus, a definite point of thought to cling to. He said over again to himself, *He wants to see me break.*

The bells rang again.

Swift, smooth and awesome as the hand of God, acceleration pressed down upon him. *And this is it*, he thought.

Muttering an all-but-silent thunder the ship rushed upward into the sky. For the first time in history Earthborn ears listened to the banshee scream of atmosphere past a cleaving hull.

The weight on Trehearne's chest seemed as heavy as all Earth but he supported it and breathed and did not black out. His gaze did not waver from Kerrel's.

The wailing shriek rose to a crescendo and died away.

Earth was gone. They had stepped away from it. Even its sky was behind them. He was horribly afraid.

He waited for the pressure to ease. It did not. There was a change now in the pitch of the motor-vibration. It seemed to climb higher and higher in a sort of demonic frenzy.

Shairn was bending forward, watching him. Her face was tense, without color. All the Vardda were peering at him now in a sort of climax of half-fearful expectation. What was it that they were afraid was going to happen to him?

The pressure grew and grew.

He labored to breathe. Something happened to his vision. The faces around him began to waver and grow vague, to recede slowly into a reddish twilight.

And still the pressure grew.

Fear became near-panic. Something was happening to him—something unearthly and strange. He was a fier, a test-pilot. He had known pressure be-

fore. He had taken all the gravas a power-diving plane could bear and he had never come close to blacking out. But this was different.

Speed, he thought. Light-years of speed—a long way between stars!

HE felt it in the fibers, the very atoms of his being. The incredible accelerations of interstellar speed were tearing at the separate cells of his flesh, riving them apart, rending the tissues of physical existence.

He knew that the Vardda still watched him half-fearfully. *This is what they were afraid of. They're used to it but I'm not. I'm going to die.*

He thought he heard a voice saying, "Fight, Michael! Fight!"

"Shairn," he muttered. The word never got beyond his throat. Because a girl in a white dress had beckoned to him he was going to die in an alien ship between the stars.

Kerrel settled back. He began to smile. With almost the last of his sight, Trehearne saw that smile. Kerrel knew that he was going to die. And he was glad.

Kerrel—Shairn—the Vardda—death. Kerrel had known it all along. They all had. That was why the others had looked at him with that half-guilty troubled pity. They had known that he would die.

Fierce resentment blazed up in him like a sudden fire.

Shairn with her lying tears. She must have known it would come to this when she had drawn him to the tower. Yet she had done it, coolly gambling with his life.

Rage shook him. Some buried part of his mind broke free and fury spurred it on. *Why must he die? Why should he not live? The Vardda lived and their blood ran in him.*

Anger—anger such as he had never known. He would not die under Kerrel's smiling eyes. He was filled suddenly with a raging determination to survive. He began to fight the pressure.

He had nothing to fight with but will-power. It seemed a frail thing to pit against the unthinkable powers of veloc-

ities such as the men of Earth had never dreamed possible. Reason told him that but he was beyond reason. He fought and it was a strange inner struggle without sound or motion—a blind battle to regain control of his own flesh.

He fought against the unseen force that sought to destroy the very cohesion of his body cells. Anger flogged him on and the instinctive will to live. He set his muscles and forced himself to breathe and his flagging heart stumbled, staided and began to beat more evenly.

He did not understand then what happened. He only knew that strength came to him from somewhere, a strength he had never known he possessed. It was physical strength—not the sort that can move great weights but a more subtle kind, a tensile force that strung his body taut against the terrible vibrations of speed and fought them back.

He did not understand, not then. But he caught at that unguessed core of strength within him and drew upon it and it was simple, so simple, just a matter of tensing the muscles in a certain way. Suddenly the ghastly sense of his atoms falling apart was gone and the battle he had thought impossible was won. It was easy and he was strong—strong as any Vardda!

It was then that he came near blacking out from sheer reaction. And he knew the victory had not been easy but very hard. The opening of that buried well of strength had left him paradoxically as weak as a newborn lamb.

Some deep ancestral wisdom told him that he had been newly born in a way that was still beyond his knowledge. He was a different man now. He would never be the same again.

He knew now that this was the important thing his body had been designed for—this proud ability to race between the stars.

Shairn's voice rang out. "He lives! He lives! I told you he was true Vardda!"

Kerrel's face had gone slack with amazement. Trehearne, drunk suddenly with a heady exultation, glanced at him with fiercely mocking eyes. The other

Vardda had relaxed as though from a sick taut apprehension. They grinned approvingly at Trehearne.

But Edri, mopping his damp brow, said behind his teeth, "By God, Shairn, if your tricks had made me an executioner, if he'd died . . ."

Kerrel interrupted furiously. "Perhaps he'll wish he had when we reach Llyrdis! You know Vardda law!"

Trehearne heard and recognized the menace in the angry threat but he paid no attention.

He said softly, "Shairn."

She came to him. She was radiant. She was like nothing he had ever seen before and he would never get her out of his heart if he lived forever. He got up and set his hands on her shoulders and he asked her, "Shairn, what is meant by *true Vardda*? How do they differ from other men?"

She laughed. "You have just proved your birthright, Michael. Don't you know?"

"That inner strength," he said slowly. "The ability to withstand interstellar speeds?" She nodded. She was still smiling. He went on. "I want to understand this, Shairn. Do the Vardda alone have this ability?"

Edri had arisen. He had the look of a man who wishes to avoid an ugly situation. He said uneasily, "There's a lot I want to show you, Trehearne. Come on and I'll explain about the Vardda on the way."

"No."

Shairn said, "It's quite simple, Michael. Controlled hereditary mutation, altering slightly the form and structure of the body cells so that they have enormous resistance to pressure and vibration. The other races of the galaxy are tied by their human weakness to their own solar systems—only the Vardda have the freedom of the stars!"

"Then," said Trehearne, "if the mutation had not bred true in me I would have died."

Edri spoke again but Trehearne did not hear him. He was smiling at Shairn, a peculiar smile. She began to draw

away from him but he held her and asked, "Are you glad I lived, Shairn?"

"Of course I am! From the first minute I saw you, Michael, I was sure you were one of us."

"That was very clever of you. And you were so sure you weren't afraid to gamble on it—with my life."

She said uncertainly, "Michael . . ."

His hands moved swiftly from her shoulders. Her throat was warm and strong. The veins beat hard against his palms. He could not see her clearly, only her great startled eyes.

Edri snapped, "Sit down, Kerrel!" He drew a small prism tube from his belt. To Trehearne he said, "I don't blame you one damn bit. But I'm afraid you'll have to stop it all the same."

A pale beam sprang out from the prism. It touched with exquisite care against Trehearne's temple. He sighed once and fell.

CHAPTER V

To Aldebaran

TREHEARNE looked up from the bunk where he lay and asked, "How long have I slept?"

"Nearly twenty-four hours by Earth reckoning," Edri answered. "You needed it. The ship's doctor gave you a shot to make sure."

"I seem to remember," Trehearne said, "that you gave me a shot of some kind yourself."

"No hard feelings?"

Trehearne smiled briefly. "Under the circumstances—no." He sat up. They were alone in a small neat cabin. Edri was sprawled in a chair.

He leaned over and offered Trehearne a prosaic pack of American cigarettes. "Smoke?"

Trehearne took one and lit it. He sat for some time in silence, remembering. He remembered most clearly Kerrel's angry threat. He asked, "What did Kerrel mean by Vardda law? What will they

do with me when we reach Llyrdis?"

Edri looked worried. "I wish to Heaven I knew."

"What can they do? I'm a Vardda. I've proved it."

"Ye-es," Edri agreed dubiously. "Actually, you're all Vardda, a complete atavism. But legally—"

He began again. "You see, the law Kerrel referred to is a prohibition against admitting non-Vardda strains of any kind. Cross-breeding is forbidden under penalty of death, is the one unbreakable law. Keeping the Vardda blood pure isn't just pride, it's an economic necessity."

"Then that was true about the mutation?"

Edri nodded. "It's the foundation upon which the Vardda monopoly is built. No one else can fly at interstellar speeds and live, so we are the only species of Galactic Man, holding the stars in our two hands."

"A star-flight monopoly of the galaxy, built on a simple mutation in body-cells!"

"Yes," said Edri. "Simple—but fundamental. Tissues having a certain cellular structure possess a tensile strength in their cell-walls that can withstand incredible acceleration-pressure without collapse. You're lucky that the mutation was a recessive that finally bred true in you."

He paused, then added somberly, "Some day I'll tell you the story of Orthis, who long ago found the secret of the mutation. A grand proud story it is—with a most shameful ending."

He seemed to brood upon some thought of his own, before continuing. "So, Trehearne, though actually Vardda, you're legally not one. It will be up to the Council. I have no influence there but Shairn has some."

Trehearne said bitterly, "Much help I'll get from that damned witch who was gambling with my life without telling me."

Edri grinned. "I don't say you haven't reason for resentment. Still, don't forget that if Shairn hadn't proposed that ordeal for you, Kerrel would have in-

sisted on killing you in cold blood."

He lifted the cover off a tray on a small table by the bunk. "I brought you some breakfast."

It occurred to Trehearne that he had not eaten for two days. He got up, looking for his clothes. They were gone but others were laid across the foot of the bunk—a tunic of dark green silk, dark trousers, jewelled belt and sandals. He examined them doubtfully.

"Put them on," said Edri. "You can't go about in those ridiculous tweeds."

Trehearne dressed and sat down. The food was unfamiliar but palatable. Synthetic, he guessed. He wolfed it down.

He tried not to think. He knew that if he thought of Michael Trehearne, bound out across the universe toward an unknown fate, his mind would crack. It could not accept that, not yet.

Edri said, "If you're finished, come with me. I'll show you something nobody of your world has ever seen before."

Trehearne got up. He caught a glimpse of himself in a reflecting surface and was startled to see how changed he was in the Vardda dress.

They went out into the long corridor. Edri led the way forward. Now that the ship was in free space and making its unthinkable speed Trehearne could feel the deep inner vibration of power in it—a sort of humming drone that seemed to challenge the whole universe to make it stop.

Trehearne shivered with the joy of a man who has handled power and is privileged to see the ultimate. He had flown the fastest jets and they were like children's toys compared to this mightiness.

He cried, "What is the motive power? And the principle? And how can you go faster than light? The limiting speed, contraction, mass . . ."

EDRI laughed. "One at a time! And such simple little questions too! It took thousands of years to evolve a technology capable of answering them and you want me to explain it all in a few words. Well, a few words is all I know

about it. I'm a drinker by profession, not a scientist.

"A really functional ship, whether it plies water, air or space, must get its motive power by reacting against the element it travels in. And so, right now, the big atomic-powered generators in the stern are producing fifth-order rays which react against the fabric of space itself—and space, not wishing to be torn apart, obligingly thrusts us forward.

"As to limiting speeds, long ago the Vardda physicists believed absolutely in them too—until they discovered fifth-order rays. They found then, as your scientists will find, that the theoretical absolutes you set up from limited knowledge will prove illusory when your knowledge expands. I could explain all that to you if I knew continuum-mechanics better than I do!"

They had reached the forward end of the corridor. There was a narrow circular stairway leading upward. Edri motioned Trehearne to precede him.

He did so and emerged into a round observation dome of immensely heavy quartzite. Through it there was nothing to be seen but utter darkness, streaked with creeping lines of light.

"Those are stars," said Edri. "Or rather the radiation patterns of stars. At our present velocity we are overtaking the lines of luminous energy they have left behind them. Star-tracks, we call them."

He closed a switch, and the thick quartzite became suffused with a pallid, milky glow. Edri consulted a masterdial, and made adjustments.

"Watch the dome," he said. "It's triple thickness, of a special molecular composition, each plane laid at a different oblique angle. I've switched high-frequency electronic current into hair-line grids between the three planes and all sorts of interesting and complicated things are happening in the molecular structure of the quartzite."

Trehearne watched. His heart was beating hard.

"Behold," said Edri, "the light-impulses of the star-tracks are caught,

stepped up, wrenched about and finally held on the inner lens."

Trehearne beheld and, beholding, forgot Edri and the ship and himself. He forgot almost to breathe.

Edri's voice came to him softly. "You may see this often, Trehearne—but never again for the first time."

Trehearne looked into the dark and splendid loneliness of space. The ship seemed to fall away beneath him, leaving him suspended in the plunging gulfs of infinity.

Through the magic of that quartzite dome he watched the great suns march in flame and thunder on their way, some solitary hunters, others joined together in companies of stars. He saw their cosmic pageant of life and death—the young suns, blazing with a blue-white strength, the golden suns, the old red suns, the dead suns, dark with funeral ash.

He glimpsed the far-off island universes, the coiling fires of the nebulae, the wondrous terrifying nations of the Milky Way streaming along the rim of creation. And as he looked all thought and feeling went from him, leaving him naked and dumb with awe.

Some of the stars he recognized—Algol, beating like a bloody heart of fire, the splintered glory of Sirius. To his left Orion strode gigantic across infinity, girded with suns. Dead ahead, tipping the far-flung Hyades, Aldebaran burned in sullen splendor.

How long Trehearne stood there wondering he had no idea. He was lost, a man gone astray in a titan's dream. Edri was forced at last to drag him bodily away and even then he hardly knew where he was going or why.

He found himself in the corridor outside the lounge. From within came the sound of Shairn's voice raised in laughter and the easy murmur of talk.

Edri stopped. He said quietly, "You'll be spending much of your time with the others and the sooner they get used to you, the better. I want no trouble over Shairn. Is that understood?"

Trehearne smiled. His head was ringing with stars, his vision dazzled by the

blaze of nebulae. Shairn had ceased to matter very much. He said so and Edri gave him a wry glance.

"The longer you feel that way, the longer you'll stay out of trouble." He paused and added, "Perhaps you ought to know why Shairn was among us observers on Earth. She went with Kerrel. He's mad over her and talked her into it—though she soon was bored with him and with Earth too."

"I think I understand why you're telling me, Edri," said Trehearne, nodding. "Thanks."

He went on into the lounge. Shairn was curled in a chair beside Kerrel, a wine-glass in her hand. She looked up as Trehearne came in, her eyes challenging and half amused. Kerrel's dark face tightened and suddenly everyone had stopped talking.

Trehearne followed Edri past them without turning his head. He was perfectly sincere in his indifference, too full of that outer immensity to care what a woman thought or did. He sat down, only vaguely aware of the curious glances with which the Vardda watched.

Shairn lifted her glass mockingly to Edri. "A good beginning for a happy voyage!"

Trehearne did not look up at her. He sat still, thinking his own far thoughts. Someone laughed and Shairn's green eyes flashed angrily.

But neither her anger nor her mockery could distract Trehearne from the wonder that had caught him, from the wild thrill of this plunge into infinity. And in the time that followed, its grip upon him strengthened.

AT first there were periods when he felt that he was dreaming, that the ship and all within it would disappear and he would waken. But as his mind readjusted itself, shaking free from the narrow horizons of Earth, ancestral pride and ancestral longing began to stir. All the ill-fitting craggy corners of his personality, that had jarred so harshly against the world he knew, fell into place perfectly now.

He was of one blood with these

Vardda. He knew it as he came to know them better. They had the same full-blooded joy in living hard, the same storming recklessness and delight in danger, that he knew was in himself. They were Galactic Man—the men who alone voyaged the interstellar gulfs, who alone strode between the stars.

The power, the magnificence of this voyaging between the suns! No wonder the little ships and little skies of Earth had seemed so futile. This was his heritage, the freedom of the stars, the long, long endless roads of outer space, the swift ships plying between the island continents of suns, the windless, timeless, boundless gulf that washed the shores of a galaxy.

Trehearne stood for hours in the observation dome. He haunted the bridge, watching the intricate controls, the staggering complexities of astrogation. In the generator rooms he learned by heart the pulse of the ship, listening to the silence of free flight after acceleration was complete. He learned much and yet it was nothing and he was mad for learning, mad to hold under his own hands one of these proud giants of the stars.

And the Vardda saw and understood his hunger and warmed to him. They accepted him, these gusty eager folk whose pride was as great as their cosmic horizons. He learned the Vardda tongue from Edri and his head spun to the tales he heard then from these mariners of the galaxy, of peril in far-off clusters of suns, of lonely dead stars booming forever dark through darkness with their frozen worlds, of tricky routes through nebulae, of all the thrill and danger that was life to them.

Within Trehearne there grew an iron determination not to be robbed of his newfound birthright. The threat of that hung over him like a black cloud. Having found them, to be barred now from the Vardda ships, the Vardda life, would be worse than dying.

With that determination in mind he began to question Edri about Vardda law.

"Final decision on your case will lie

with the Council," Edri told him. "And they'll be dead against admitting you to Vardda status."

"But damn it, I'm one of you!" Trehearne said. "They can't deny that after the ordeal I passed. And why should one more Vardda make a difference?"

Edri shook his head. "To recognize an Earthborn man as a Vardda? No—it might inspire vain hopes in all the peoples of the Galaxy who are bitterly envious of our monopoly."

That was something Trehearne hadn't thought of. He thought of it, now. "I suppose the non-Vardda do envy your power of interstellar flight."

"Would you like to be prisoned in your own solar system and have strangers carrying on all your commerce with other stars?" Edri countered.

HE added, "And there's more to it than the economic problem. You're mad over this star-voyaging, Trehearne. I've watched you. Well, do you think other men can't feel the same way? Do you think the young men of all those star-worlds like to see the Vardda starships come and go and know that they can never take that road?"

"I can see how they feel," Trehearne said. "A wonder they haven't found a way to force the Vardda to share the secret of the mutation."

"That secret was lost with Orthis. We haven't it to give if we wanted to," Edri said gloomily. Then he added, "But I'd better shut up, or I'll be accused of Orthist talk myself."

"Orthist?" said Trehearne, and Edri explained.

"Long ago, when Orthis discovered the mutation, he dreamed of giving it to every race. He couldn't see that that would only lead to interstellar rivalries and conflicts. A few Vardda still think the way he did and so are called Orthists."

"But if the mutation secret is lost how can they hope to change things now?"

Edri shrugged. "There are still fools who dream of finding the secret again. They claim that Orthis' lost laboratory

ship, which holds it, might still be found. It's only a useless dream but it makes trouble. And with all that in mind you can see your problem with the Council."

"Altogether," said Trehearne, "it looks like a grim prospect for me."

He got up.

"You might as well know," said Edri. "It won't be easy."

Trehearne went out. He climbed the stair to the observation dome, manipulated the controls and stood there, gazing at the red flare of Aldebaran, lost in brooding thought.

After a time a hand touched his and he turned his head, slowly, for his mind was far away, thinking it was Edri. He saw instead the face of Shairn.

She smiled. "Do you still hate me, Michael?"

The light of the outer suns caught in her eyes, filling them with radiance. Trehearne looked at her, standing slim and tall against infinity, a luminous creature crowned with stars, and he thought again that she was no woman as he knew women.

He said slowly, "I don't know." He thought of how she had tricked and led him, how she had gambled so lightly with his life. "Why did you do it, Shairn?"

"I think," she said, "because I love you or because I could love you."

"Or perhaps because you were only curious?"

"Perhaps." She took his hands and laid them on her white throat, holding them there, pressing them in against the beating veins. "You started this once, Michael. Will you finish it now?"

Her lips were curved and laughing. She was sure of herself, sure of him. Trehearne's eyes narrowed. They were suddenly hot and the starlight flickered in them.

"I ought to," he whispered. "I ought to . . ." He called her a short cruel name and caught her arm as it rose to strike him and then her mouth was under his.

Dead ahead, Aldebaran watched them from out of the darkness of space, the eye of a basilisk, baleful and bright.

CHAPTER VI

Judgment on Llyrdis

THE long arc of deceleration was completed. The great starship was cruising now at planetary speed. Aldebaran had grown from a remote point of fire to a giant sun, terrifyingly near at hand. The small companion was visible only as a faint disc above the upper limb, its bluish light drowned out in the flooding ruddy blaze of the larger star.

The Vardda had crowded up into the observation dome, eager for the first glimpse of home after two long years on Earth. A heavy shield now covered the dome to sunward and in its shadow the returning exiles pressed and chattered.

Trehearne stood among them, listening to their excitement and feeling at a loss in it. Their talk was suddenly the talk of strangers, full of names and references that were meaningless to him, strident with a joy he could not share.

They were coming home but he was homeless—and before him loomed the imagined faces of the Vardda Council, passing judgment.

Shairn tugged at his sleeve. "There!" she cried. "There it is, Michael. *Llyrdis!*"

He followed her pointing hand, squinting against the tawny glare of space, and saw a golden planet wheeling toward them, bright and beautiful, with a trio of circling moons.

He became as excited as the Vardda. He forgot to worry. He could only think that presently he was going to tread the soil of a strange world, warmed by an alien sun, tasting the winds that blew from unknown seas. Tensely now, quivering with eagerness, he watched with the others. And Llyrdis grew.

It seemed about the size of Earth. As the ship swept in upon it Trehearne could make out misty continents and the shadow-forms of oceans, wrapped in a cloud-shot atmosphere that burned red-

gold in Aldebaran's light.

The ship plunged into it as into a bath of fire. Down, rushing down with a long triumphant scream, and in the lower air the clouds rolled and whipped in golden fury where the dark hull clove them.

They swept low over an ocean the color of hammered brass and at length Trehearne saw ahead a low shore and beyond it a rolling verdant plain, girdled with tall mountains, and on that plain the gleaming vastness of a city.

Still dropping, but slowly now in a soundless glide, the ship bore southward of those lifting towers. Here for miles the great docks ran, cradling the giants of the stars. They were close enough for Trehearne to glimpse the ceaseless swarming magnificently-ordered chaos of men and machines in this central focus of a commercial empire that embraced a galaxy. The sheer size of it was stunning.

Edri's voice spoke quietly beside them. "I've just come from Communications. We've been ordered to land in the government dock and you and I are to present ourselves immediately to the Coordinator of the Port."

"Old Joris," said Shairn. "You're in for a bad quarter of an hour, Edri. I'll come with you, of course."

"We'll both come." That was Kerrel. He laid his hand with a light possessiveness on Shairn's arm and smiled over her head at Trehearne. Trehearne shrugged. It crossed his mind that some day, if he were lucky, he would kill Kerrel for nothing more than his way of smiling.

The warning bells rang. Trehearne went below with the others to await the landing. But his mouth was set and the keen edge of wonder was all gone.

Smoothly, softly, the great keel touched down, home again from the edges of the universe.

Trehearne rose. There was much hearty slapping of his shoulders, many assurances and offers of help. He knew they were sincere. He bade them all farewell with a jaunty carelessness that was not sincere in the least and stepped out onto the apron of adamantite con-

crete that edged the dock.

To his right, some distance away, was a huge white building. Edri nodded and Trehearne began to walk toward it. Shairn and Kerrel were behind him.

The roar and clang and thunder of the spaceport engulfed the building, dwarfed it, so that it resembled a lonely island in a monstrous sea. The air was heavy with the reek of oil and metal and strange odors out of a thousand gaping holds. Above, in a golden sky, the clouds were like little nebulae of flame.

There was a bitter taste in Trehearne's mouth, and the palms of his hands were sweating as the white building took them in.

The halls seethed with activity. Bronzed men in the black and scarlet of the Vardda ships, hurrying clerks and orderlies of a breed Trehearne had not before seen, a clamor of voices and the racing pulse of Port Administration. Trehearne caught only a glimpse of it. A lift took them swiftly upward to the highest level.

There was an office there, bare and spacious, with window walls that looked on all four sides across the spaceport. Trehearne thought fleetingly that it was almost like the bridge of a starship, pathetically shackled to the soil.

There were three men in the office.

ONE was hardly more than a boy. He was in charge of what appeared to be a recording device. The second was not much older, a brisk efficient young man who stared at Trehearne with frank curiosity.

The third man dominated the room—a grizzled heavy-shouldered giant who had never been made to occupy an office. The walls cramped him, even such walls as these, because they were bounded by horizons. His large scarred hands rested uneasily on the polished table and his eyes seemed better used to watching stars than men.

He glared at them all impartially, reserving one direct, hard glance for Trehearne. Then he addressed himself to Edri. "I believe you're responsible for bringing this man aboard the ship. Will

you please explain your action?"

Edri explained. His voice was clipped and firm. He finished, "I felt—we all did with the exception of Kerrel—that Trehearne should be given a chance." He laid a particular emphasis on his final words. "He had a right to that chance. He proved himself a Vardda."

"A mongrel, a freak," said Joris impatiently. "An Earthman! You did him no kindness to bring him here, where he doesn't belong. And you, Shairn!" He rounded on the girl. "I didn't ask you to come but since you're here I'll—"

"You won't tell me a thing, Joris," Shairn interrupted him with the ease born of many quarrels. "I'll tell you. Trehearne is as much a Vardda as you are and I'm going to see that—"

It was Joris' turn to interrupt. "I took orders from your father when I flew his ships but you're not the man he was! And I don't hold this job from you!" He favored both Shairn and Edri with his anger. "What the devil got into you? Don't you know the law? 'No non-Vardda personnel under any circumstances to board any craft designed for interstellar flight.'"

He went on to give them a dressing-down that was a masterpiece. Edri listened with a wooden countenance. Shairn seemed to find it genuinely interesting. When he was finished she said admiringly, "You haven't forgotten how to roar!"

Surprisingly Joris laughed. "No," he said, "no more than you've learned manners." He swung around to the brisk young man who sat at the end of the table, indicating Trehearne with a jerk of the head. "Tell him what's to be done with him."

The young man cleared his throat. In painfully stilted English he said to Trehearne, "You will remain in custody in a suitable place until the Cognod has had time to decide what disposition . . ."

Trehearne moved forward to the table. He leaned over and looked at the young man with a yellow gaze that stopped the words in his mouth.

"If you're thinking of going to Earth," Trehearne told him in good Vardda,

"you had better learn the language."

He straightened up. He was angry. He was very angry and no longer interested in keeping his temper under control. He faced Joris and said, "The devil with your custody! You have no authority to imprison me."

Joris stared at him. He shook his head irritably as though he thought his ears must be playing him tricks. His bronzed, seamed jowls took on a tinge of red.

Trehearne went on, rather loudly, "Unless he is guilty of a crime no Vardda may be detained by anyone against his will. Have I committed any crime?"

It took Joris some time to recover his voice. When he did it had a sound of thunder. "You're not a Vardda!"

"No? Think a minute. What is the one distinguishing quality of a Vardda that marks him as different from all other men?"

"All right, I'll answer that! By some freak or other you managed to survive the flight. But that doesn't change the fact that you're an Earthman, born and bred, and therefore no Vardda!"

Trehearne's eyes had acquired a hard glitter. "Then suppose," he said, "that you imprison me—an Earthman who has crossed the galaxy from Sol to Aldebaran and lived. That'll make quite an uproar, won't it? All the non-Vardda peoples will be mightily interested! So will the Orthist party. I don't doubt they'll spread the news all over the galaxy—the Vardda have admitted that they're not the only ones who can fly interstellar space!"

Joris' brows drew down into a straight gray bar. "What do you know about the Orthist party?"

"Enough to know they could make trouble for you. Either I'm Vardda or I'm not—and if I'm not I could be the start of a whole new movement. The first non-Vardda to fly the stars, the first crack in the monopoly!"

Joris controlled himself with visible effort. He said, "You can be put away so quickly and quietly that no one will ever hear of you."

"Good," said Trehearne. "Put me
[Turn page]

away. Put away all the officers of the ship. Put away all the passengers. Put away all the crew. That's a lot of people to keep quiet."

Shairn broke in on a triumphant note. "Yes, Joris! How do you plan to silence me?"

"And me?" said Edri. He had begun to hope.

Joris looked from one to the other and back again, angry as an old bull but for the moment, baffled.

KERREL said contemptuously, "Orthists! That should be enough to show you, Joris. The man is trying to blackmail you with the threat of treason."

"Yes," said Trehearne, "I am." His voice was suddenly quiet. There was an iron quality about it and about the set of his jaw. He ignored Kerrel. He was speaking straight to Joris, to the man.

"When I made that flight and lived I won my right to the freedom of the stars. Do you understand that? I won my right to fly deep space, between the suns and I'll use any weapons I can get my hands on against the man who tries to keep me from it!"

He was silent then, standing motionless, looking into the old man's eyes. And Joris was silent also. Kerrel laughed but no one heard him.

"By God," said Joris slowly, "I take it back. There can't be any mongrel blood in you. Only a Vardda could have that kind of insolence!"

He swung about and began to pace up and down behind the table. The young man gaped. The boy by the recorder gnawed his thumb and shivered in an ecstasy of excitement. Kerrel came forward, intent on saying something. Shairn gave him such a murderous look of warning that he hesitated and in that moment Joris made up his mind.

He went to the recorder, took out the spool and broke it. He gathered the slack of the boy's tunic into one hand. With the other he reached out and collared the young man. He brought them close together in front of him and glared down into their faces.

"If one word of what you've heard here goes beyond this office," he said distinctly, "you will regret it. Understand?"

They understood and said so. Joris nodded. "Now get out."

They left, the boy reluctantly, the young man with his faith in the eternal rightness of things shattered forever.

Joris said, "I'll talk to Trehearne now."

Kerrel could contain his rage no longer. "What kind of a fool are you, Joris?" he demanded. "'Freedom of the stars' be damned! Can't you see he's playing with you?"

"If he is," answered Joris grimly, "he'll pay for it. Meanwhile, I'll be the judge of my wisdom. Dismissed!"

"Come on," said Shairn and took Kerrel's arm. They went out together. Edri paused in the doorway and gave Trehearne a parting grin that meant "Good luck!" Then he too was gone.

The old spaceman and the younger man of Earth stood alone in the sweep of light from the windows. From the eastern quadrant of the port Trehearne saw a great ship rise and clear away, outbound for distant suns.

Joris tilted his head. "Come here."

Trehearne obeyed. Joris' eyes were harsh and keen as an old eagle's, weighing, studying, judging. Trehearne stood erect and waited. He said nothing. There was nothing more to say.

"Vardda blood," Joris muttered to himself. "Unmistakable. And he wants to fly the stars." He asked abruptly, "Were you a foundling?"

"No," said Trehearne. And then, slowly, "But I might just as well have been."

Joris turned away, scowling thoughtfully, his head and shoulders massive against the background of burning sky.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-three."

"I have an idea. Whether it will work or not I don't know. The Council sits again in five days, at which time I will make my report on you—and since I'm taking you on faith and my judgment you'll have to take me the same way. I'll do my best. Meanwhile, for the sake

of my neck as well as yours, you'll have to go where I tell you and stay there. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Good. And Trehearne . . ."

"Yes?"

"If I succeed with the Council—you will fly the stars!"

It was as much a threat as a promise. For the first time, Trehearne smiled.

Thirty minutes later, after a journey in an underground tubecar that left him in complete ignorance of his whereabouts, Trehearne was conducted into a square neat cubicle, comfortable in all respects but none the less a prison cell. The lock of the door clicked behind him and he was alone.

There were no windows. He did not even know whether he was above or below ground. There was neither day nor night nor time.

He paced the narrow floor and ate the food brought to him by a silent dark-faced jailor and tried to sleep. He smoked the last of his hoarded cigarettes and thought of Earth and the distances between the suns. He hoped and hope became gradually a grim despair.

No one came. Shairn had forgotten him, Edri's friendship had been a feeble thing. The trap that Joris had set for him became more obvious with each passing hour. He hated them all. He raged and waited and remembered the old man's words—*You can be put away so quickly and quietly that no one will ever hear of you.*

This was his landing on Llyrdis, the fruit of his journey across the star-shot universe. This was the end of his dream.

He ceased to rage. He only waited and wondered why the messenger of death was so long in coming.

There came a time when he awoke sharply from uneasy sleep to hear the low click of the lock and a soft slurred step on the padded floor, coming toward him.

He sprang up, reaching out to grapple with his killer, and saw that it was Shairn. She cried out, "*Michael!*" and he stopped, uncertain, and her words came to him with a sound of unreality

like the voices heard through fever.

"It's all over, Michael—and you're free!"

CHAPTER VII

In the Silver Tower

AN hour had gone by and he still could not quite believe it.

He had left the cell behind him and the five eternal days of waiting. He stood on a terrace high above the city. It was night and the burning moons were golden in the sky. The wind from the sea had the clean sting of wine. Around him were the tall fantastic towers bathed in light. Far below the shining web of streets was a pattern of sensual beauty, many-colored, sounding, alive.

Shairn said softly, "Look at it, Michael. It's all yours. You're a Vardda now by order and decree."

"Vardda," he whispered to himself. Vardda, lord of the starways! His hands were tight on the terrace rail and his gaze was far away.

"I had something to do with it, Michael. Aren't you going to thank me?"

He turned. She had put on a flowing thing of white, cunningly draped and spangled over with a diamond frost, so that her bosom and shoulders seemed to rise from sea-foam and there were strange jewels caught in the dark masses of her hair. He started to speak and then forgot the words. There were better ways of thanking her.

He had not nearly finished when sounds from inside the apartment—it was Edri's—announced the arrival of Joris, and Shairn pulled away from him, laughing.

"Come now and hear how the miracle was done. But you'll have to find a different way of thanking Joris!"

Joris greeted Trehearne with a demand to know what he had been thinking those five days in the cell. Trehearne grinned. "I won't tell you since none of

it was true."

Edri said, "We've told Trehearne nothing." He found glasses and poured wine. Joris settled heavily into a chair, full of an honest pride in his own cleverness, beaming with it.

"It took a lot of juggling," he said, "and more than a little downright forgery—but it worked. A full record of all voyages is kept at Port Administration. I went back between thirty and forty years and managed to supply you with a pretty good background."

He leaned forward: "Get this into your head, Trehearne, and keep it there. You were born on Earth thirty-three years ago of Vardda parents then stationed on that planet. Your mother died in childbirth and your father was forced to abandon you, since even a Vardda infant cannot endure interstellar flight."

He handed Trehearne a slip of paper. "Here are the names of your parents. Memorize them. Your father has since been killed in a wreck off Orion Nebula and you have no brothers or sisters. Incidentally you have no inheritance either, for your 'father's' estate was divided according to law upon his death."

He added, "From now on this is your only history. Don't forget it."

He paused to empty his glass and Shairn took up the story.

"Joris and I persuaded the Councilors not to have you appear for questioning, Michael. The records and your Vardda characteristics were sufficiently convincing. We pointed out to them that the less talk there was about it all the better. They passed their resolution in less than thirty minutes, then followed it by another to tighten the laws against Vardda children being born on any world but Llyrdis!"

She burst into laughter and Trehearne held out his hand to Joris. He said one word. "Thanks."

Joris' grip was hard and horny and his eyes were sharp. "Perhaps I was a fool to do this for you. We'll see. In the meantime you've got to make a living. We Vardda count our wealth in ships—and until you own one you'll have to

work for someone else. Do you still want to fly the stars?"

He saw the look on Trehearne's face and smiled. "I need a supercargo on my ship *Saarga*, outbound in two weeks, for trade in the Hercules Cluster. Officers and crew fly on shares and it's a rich voyage. Even a supercargo should do well."

Edri said, "I ought to warn you, Trehearne—the Hercules run is one of the toughest in the galaxy."

"That's why it pays so well," said Joris. "Well?"

Before Trehearne could answer Shairn laid her hand lazily on his shoulder and remarked, "Nonsense, Joris. He doesn't have to take on anything like that. I can find a better opening in my fleet and he won't starve until I do."

Trehearne's face had tightened. He said, "You never told me much about yourself, Shairn. I gather you're quite well off?"

"Oh, quite! As Joris says our wealth is in ships. He owns two, I own thirty. My father built one of the richest fleets on the trade lanes and I was fortunate enough to be his only heir." She laughed and shook her jewelled head.

"The devil with all talk of business anyway! This is a night for celebration." She pulled him to his feet. "Come on, Michael! We'll show you the city."

"In a minute," he told her curtly. Joris was looking at him with an odd expression.

Trehearne went over to him and said, "When shall I report to the *Saarga*?"

Edri leaned over Shairne's shoulder and whispered audibly, "I think you've got our Michael angry."

Joris looked at Shairn and roared. "Missed your guess, didn't you?" He got up. "All right, Trehearne! Let's see about that celebration!"

They went. But for the next hour or so Shairn was inclined to be sulky. The more so because Trehearne seemed to have forgotten her existence.

RESPLENDENT in black and silver supplied for him out of Edri's wardrobe, free, accepted and with a

future ahead, Trehearne walked the streets of the city, drunk with color and sound and movement.

The city surged magnificently, crowded, thriving, beautiful, devoid of poverty, drenched in the wealth and inventiveness of a thousand far-flung cultures, Mecca for all the peoples of Aldebaran's seven inhabited planets.

The little ships that tramped the narrow planetary roads set down beside the scornful giants of the star-trails and poured into the metropolis a never-ending tide of visitors, come to touch the fringes of a glory they could never touch themselves—to revel in alien pleasures and barter for the gems and spices and spider-woven silks of worlds that they would never see.

Most of them were human or nearly so, their skins of a variety of tints, their costumes outlandish or sober according to their native custom. Some were not human at all.

"See those black-skinned hawk-nosed chaps with the bronze wings?" Edri's hand guided Trehearne's wondering gaze. "They're from Suumis. And the three silvery ones over there with the bright crests and the crimson robes—they're the dominant race on Mirris and proud as Lucifer for all they've got scales instead of skin. That little blue fellow is a merchant-prince from Zaard, the outermost planet. See his diamond caste-mark?"

Trehearne saw. He saw them all and his head swam with it. The pulse and rush of the city, the kaleidoscopic multitudes, the companies of lordly Vardda like peacocks in their jewels and brilliant tunics, the babel of outworld tongues, the drifting sound of music.

From place to place the four of them wandered, drinking the dark wine of Antares, the pungent snow-white brew of Fomalhaut, endless wines of many colors from the worlds of many stars. Shairn forgot to sulk. To Trehearne she seemed to float in moonlight and laughter, bewitching, unattainable.

His head commenced to swim in earnest.

Faces, human, half-human, unhuman,

beautiful, grotesque, ludicrous. Carnival masks, reeling, dancing. Vardda women lovely as sin, dressed in a thousand fashions, smiling with red mouths. Music throbbing, passionate, soft, mingling with the smell of wine and perfume and the sharp sea wind.

Dancing-girls with emerald skins, outlandish beasts that capered with an eerie cleverness, a spinning whirl of pleasure-palaces infinitely strange. Terraces, gardens, parks and squares, nameless trees blowing under the triple moons, Joris flushed and jovial, a grey-pollled ox on holiday, Edri . . .

SOBRIETY was not habitual with Edri but Trehearne had never seen him drunk. He was drunk tonight. And as Joris and Trehearne grew gayer he grew steadily more solemn and withdrawn. He sat drinking silently now, his eyes gazing into inner distances, a brooding look on his ugly face.

They were in a place of trees and crystal columns, with bowers drowned in bloom and the open sky above, when Kerrel joined the party. He sat down between Shairn and Joris, erect, handsome. He did not touch the wine. "Well, Trehearne," he said. "Welcome to the Vardda race."

"Thanks." And then, deliberately, Shairn moved and laid her head against Trehearne's shoulder.

"Do you *hese* to go voyaging, Michael?" Her lap was full of the great pale moonflowers and her hands toyed with the musky blossoms. Something wicked and demure was in her eyes.

Joris poured ruby liquor into Edri's goblet. "Here, man. You look too sober."

Edri pushed the goblet away. "No. I'm going home. How about the rest of you?"

"But I've just come," said Kerrel easily. He turned to Shairn. "Did you hear about Arrsin?"

"What about him?"

"It seems he's one of the Orthist leaders. They caught him today. Odd thing, though—they couldn't find any of his papers." Very casually he added, to Edri, "A friend of yours, isn't he?"

"I know him."

"Oh, come now! You've known him for years."

Edri said nastily, "I've known you for a long time too. Don't cat-and-mouse with me, Kerrel. If you have something to say, say it."

Kerrel shrugged. "I was only thinking that a man can have too many unfortunate friendships." It was perfectly obvious that he included Trehearne among the undesirables.

"Your field is comparative technology," Edri said. "I understand you're quite good at it. Stick to it. I'm leaving."

He walked away, staggering a little. Trehearne watched the solitary figure moving down an avenue of trees, splashed with shadows and golden light. He hesitated, then got to his feet and followed.

Edri stopped when he felt Trehearne's hand touch him. He looked at him curiously as though he had never seen him before.

"What's wrong, Edri?"

"Nothing. A man is going to be punished but that's not wrong. It's right that he should be punished. He is an Orthist, a traitor."

Trehearne understood now. "Your friend Arrin?"

"Yes—my friend. But he deserves punishment for being an Orthist. And do you know how they punish such traitors? With exile—bitter lifelong exile on the lonely world of a lonely star. They are never allowed to fly space again. To a Vardda that's worse than death!"

TREHEARNE felt a trifle sick. He, who had just won the right to starfight, could realize the crushing enormity of such a sentence.

"I didn't know they did that to Orthists."

"Oh, yes. Not all of them, not the talkers in the salons who only play at it. But the men who work—oh, yes!"

Edri went on. He was very drunk and now that he had started it seemed that he could not stop. He was not talking to Trehearne but to himself, to the wind

and the casual moons and a world that had turned bitter around him.

"Arrin worked. He searched the records, the forbidden files, until they caught him. He never found what he was looking for but he might have—a little more time and he might have!"

He looked up into the sky, the empty sky that stretched to the rim of the galaxy.

"Somewhere out there Orthist sits in his ship and waits—waits to be found again. But where? That's it, the question that no one has answered in a thousand years. Where?"

He turned aside and was abruptly, violently sick. Trehearne waited.

After awhile Edri said, "Curious, the things a man will say when he's drunk."

"I don't know," Trehearne said. "I didn't hear anything."

Edri managed a grin. "I'm all right now. I'm going on home."

When Trehearne returned to the others Shairn complained sweetly, "You were gone so long, Michael. Was Edri sick?"

"Yes—very. But he's all right now. He went home."

"I think," said Shairn with a dainty yawn, "that I'll go home too. Come along, Michael."

Kerrel turned a dull red and there was sudden murder in his eyes. He said thickly, "Am I to understand—"

"You are to understand anything you wish," Shairn smiled.

Joris came out of his vinous fog and enquired hopefully, "Is there going to be a fight?"

Trehearne asked Kerrel, "Is there?"

They looked into each other's eyes, the direct intimate look of hate. Then Kerrel said softly, "No, not now. It's only a matter of time. But not now, not tonight."

He had mastered himself when he turned to Shairn. "I trust you'll find your new toy amusing."

"I shall—until he begins to act as though he owns me." Her smile became more beautiful, more sweet. "Tell me, Kerrel, now that it's over—did you love me or my thirty ships?"

The angry flush went out of Kerrel's face, leaving it deathly white. He stood for one long moment, then turned without a word and stalked away. His heels left small sharp scars in the turf.

Shairn lifted one exquisite shoulder. "He's tiresome. Oh, well! Come along, Michael."

She took his hand and he went with her. Joris' booming laughter followed them down the avenue of trees.

Trehearne realized only later just how wine-flushed he was. He had no clear memory of how they reached the car—an ultra-streamlined sublimation of a car, powered by humming generators—nor of the drive out from the city. He was suddenly aware of a broad road running along the coast, of the golden sea on one hand, dark mountains on the other. Shairn was at the controls. He hoped she was more sober than he. She was going very fast. The sea wind battered at them, wild and cold.

Shairn stopped the car. "This is my home, Michael. My family has lived here for hundreds of years—here in the Silver Tower."

She led him inside. He tried to see it all clearly but things tended to melt and run together—tapestries, carvings, colors, the loot of many worlds. Shairn went before him, floating, a white foam-wraith.

"Michael."

"Yes?"

They were in a long gallery above the sea. The moonlight lay in great angled blocks along the floor.

"You're a Vardda now—but you're in greater danger than ever. Kerrel will kill you if he can."

"Yes," said Trehearne, "if he can."

"Don't underestimate him, Michael. He can be very deadly."

He drew her to him, not tenderly. "You took good care to make him so. You wanted Kerrel and me to battle it to the death right there, didn't you?"

She laughed. "It would have been exciting."

"Listen to me, Shairn. The next time you try to make trouble, you'll get it—from me."

"Now you're being masterful. And no man is my master!"

He took her face between his two hands and looked down into it. His thumbs bit cruelly into her white cheeks.

"I think you're going to be sorry you ever met me, Shairn," he whispered.

Two weeks later, dressed in the black and scarlet of the Vardda spacemen, Trehearne left Shairn for the starship *Sarga*, outbound for Hercules.

CHAPTER VIII

Under the Cluster Stars

THE *Sarga* was not like the ship that had brought Trehearne from Earth. She was older and shabbier with enormous capacity for cargo and no space at all for passengers. Officers and crew were cramped in quarters functionally reduced to the absolute minimum and there were no such luxuries as lounges and observation domes.

But to Trehearne she was a thing of wondrous beauty. Every dent and scar on her unlovely bulkheads recorded a voyage to a nameless sun. The crammed and odorous vaults of her belly were storehouses of exotic riches, the fruits of unimagined worlds. And he was part of her. He was no longer merely a hungry observer. He belonged.

He worshipped her.

His shipmates discussed Trehearne's curious history—official version—with great interest, asked him questions about Earth, then forgot it. The officers treated him with the affable contempt of the veteran for the amateur, liked him and were patient with his feverish insistence on learning to be a starman. There was little else to do on the long haul out and they taught him much.

They showed him the purring metal giants that drove the ship, the mighty generators powered by almost automatic atomic turbines. They taught him how to read the radar-screen, that functioned not by slow electro-magnetic

waves but by rays, incomprehensible to him, which were far faster than light—another flat contradiction of the Earth theoreticians.

He listened in Communications to Vardda ships talking across the galaxy in thin ghostly converse by the same super-swift rays. He was allowed—and that was like realizing an impossible dream—to hold the controls of the *Saarga* in his hands as it raced through infinity.

Trehearne became especially friendly with Yann, the Second Officer, a cheerful young rakehell who had made nine voyages into the Cluster and had once been stranded for the equivalent of an Earth year on one of its wildest worlds, pinch-hitting for a Vardda factor who had died.

"Wait until we hit that system," he told Trehearne. "I'll show you things you never dreamed of. You want to see real barbarism? They have it there!"

Yann had made a brace of fortunes and gambled them away. He still clung firmly to the belief that some day he would have a ship of his own.

"This trip will do it," he would say and laugh and build vast empires that stretched across the star-clouds of the Milky Way.

He was good company. He was very helpful to Trehearne, instructing him in the diverse arts of starmanship. They got on well.

The great Cluster of Hercules grew from a patch of hazy brilliance, lost in the blaze and crash and thunder of the universe, to a monstrous star-swarm, blinding even through a darkened port—a swirling hive of suns, white, red, yellow, peacock blue and vivid green, booming across the eternal night of space with the rush and roar of a cosmic avalanche, hurtling onward toward some unknown destination, guided by the evil blinking eyes of the Cepheid variables.

The *Saarga* plunged in among the edges of the swarm and Trehearne began to discover why Edri had warned him about the Hercules run.

"All the globular clusters are bad,"

Yann told him. "Omega Centauri—there's another one to break a starman's heart. A strong ship, a strong captain and no imagination—that's what it takes for a voyage like this."

Trehearne was introduced to gravity tides and for the first time in his life he knew what real fear was.

The generators throbbed incessantly. The *Saarga* groaned and shrieked in all her metal bones, moving in erratic bursts of speed and sudden brakings, pitching and swerving as she felt her way in through shoals of suns, fighting the complex changing gravitational fields. Trehearne got the feeling that he was trapped inside an iron football being battered back and forth between the stars.

Yann grinned. "It gets worse as you go farther in."

It did.

Trehearne felt that it was impossible for any ship to live in those mighty cross-currents of gravitation as the suns thickened like swarming bees. But the *Saarga* went doggedly on her way and after a while Trehearne got used to her complaints and violent pitchings.

They stopped first at the single lonely world of a waning star on the fringe of the Cluster—a shadowy place, flooded with the distant glories of other suns but cold and barren and dying. The *Saarga* discharged food and ores, took in payment gems of royal purple, mined out of the grey rock by little men with sorrowful eyes.

The little men looked at the great ship and the men who flew in her, then at the flaming suns that were out of reach. They made their bargain silently and went away. Trehearne was glad when they left that world.

They visited the eerie planet of a variable star, where there was no life at all but a creeping fungus, valuable in the preparation of a medicinal drug. Trehearne, clad in insulating armor against the radiation of that evil sun, went with his shipmates to reap the ugly harvest, sank up to his knees in spongy dust.

They traded with scaly humanoids

under the glare of a blue-white sun. They stripped the worlds of a red giant, leaving gilded trinkets in exchange for rare radioactive minerals. They dealt with life-forms so degraded that there was no semblance of humanity, while the Vardda stood with shock-cannon ready to guard the ship while the bartering went on.

And they touched at systems that had a high degree of civilization, where for the first time Trehearne saw the Vardda factories—vast walled compounds held under treaty, crammed with warehouses in which were gathered the salable goods of a family of planets.

That, he learned, was the universal system wherever trade was openly and regularly carried on—the walled compound and separate landing-field presided over by a Vardda factor, an island fragment of Llyrdis preserved intact amid an alien culture.

Trehearne became accustomed to the open envy of the non-Vardda races. He no longer thought of it except to notice its variation according to cultures—the aboriginals who mixed with it a worshipful fear of the Vardda star-lords, the barbarians who would have killed them except that they were greedy for the luxuries of trade, the more civilized folk who treated them with cold respect and ate out their hearts with envious longing.

He got used to the eternal never-changing question, asked on every world by the old and the young and the large-eyed children—*What is it like to fly among the stars?*

BY the time they reached the system of the green star he was a thorough Vardda.

Yann was full of excitement. "This is the system I told you about, Trehearne—the one where I was factor so long. I got to know the natives like a brother." He laughed and clapped Trehearne on the shoulder. "We make a long stop here and I'll see to it that it isn't dull!"

The *Saarga* set down on a world of emerald heat. Besides the starship the landing-field contained half a dozen battered interplanetary craft, brought out piecemeal by the Vardda and operated by them between the wild planets of the system. The great stockaded factory was one of the largest Trehearne had seen and the strangest.

The "logs" that formed the stockade and made the walls of the warehouses were of crystal, cut from the crystalline forests that covered much of the land. Trehearne thought of them as trees and forests, simply because they had stems and branches, but they were inorganic, the glittering proliferation of sublimated alien chemicals.

They glowed and flashed under the fierce green sun, showing glints of weird color where a prism formation broke the light. And also, in their shining branches, they netted the many-colored rays of the brighter stars that burned even in the daylight sky.

There was a town beyond the factory. It too was built of the crystal logs over foundations of black rock sunk in the

[Turn page]

ooze. Thick vines clambered everywhere, bearing bulbous fruit. Undergrowth, green almost to blackness, stood rank between the trees. There was a smell of fragrant rottenness, cloying, sweet.

Trehearne moved and sweated through a bath of molten jade. It was a large world and heavy. The gravity dragged at him. The letters of the freight lists swam under his eyes. When he was finished at last with his job he was glad enough to follow Yann.

"Wine, cooled in deep wells," said Yann and smacked his lips. "Make a new man of you."

"A hell of a world," said Trehearne.

"You should see the others of this system. This is the pick of the lot."

They walked through the outer compound, a sort of caravanserai crowded with folk from the other planets, brought in for the trading. Cold-blooded creatures with crimson eyes, ophidian princes of the inner worlds, wrapped in golden mantles against the chill. Slim furred kings of the outer planets, capped and girdled with precious stones, still and panting in the heat. These and others watched the two tall Vardda, thinking their own thoughts.

They passed through the gate out of the factory, wading in soggy mud. The sun was setting in a welter of lurid green, tinged with peacock hues. Trehearne looked at the town ahead, the straggling lanes, the crystal huts that crouched in sordid beauty, the encircling forest of ungodly trees. Doubt assailed him.

"Perhaps we should stay in the factory. There'll be plenty of wine and more comfort."

Yann cursed him good-naturedly. "I told you I know these people better than I know my own children! Come on, Trehearne, there's nothing to do in the factory. Don't you want a good time? I've got friends in the town. You'll like them."

Trehearne glanced back at the factory. It was not inspiring. He shrugged. He was beginning to feel the long confinement of the voyage, the tensions and

the haste of trade. It would be good to cut loose for once, to see something of life outside the compounds, to get a change from the same faces. It was against orders but . . .

He made sure of the prised shock-tube in his belt and followed Yann.

Night came. The glorious sky of the Cluster crashed down on them, sown to bursting with stars as bright as moons. The crystal trees took on opaline fires. The hut walls glittered.

Around the two Vardda there gathered a crowd of sloe-eyed children, silent and solemn, with hides of dusky green. Women watched them from the doorways. Human enough and pretty enough too, the younger ones, sleek and olive colored, wearing bright silks from Llydis around their hips and baubles in their hair.

Trehearne asked Yann a question that had puzzled him. "How is it that there are humans or humanoids on so many worlds? Earth scientists had the idea that the human form was likely to be unique."

"Oh, the Vardda biologists have been busy with that for centuries. They've compared data from all over the galaxy, and worked out a theory that at some remote time great clouds of spores were deliberately released into space—you know, little life-seeds with a basic tendency to develop toward the human form or something like it. What long-dead civilization tried to perpetuate the human form by releasing the spores we'll never know."

He laughed. "Anyway, who cares? Here they are and mostly human and I take them as they come!"

HE chattered happily as they went along the winding lanes, telling of his multifarious sins and adventures and the clever ways in which he had cheated the factory. The hostile curious eyes of the women followed them and now and again a man spat expressively into the mud behind them.

They came at last to a hut on the outskirts of the town. Beside it were chained four pairs of beasts the size of

barriers, milk-white with dark muzzles and feet, their undulating bodies built light and long for speed. They made shrill barking sounds and leaped at the strangers, showing hungry fangs. Trehearne thought they looked like gigantic weasels—and quite as friendly.

"Hounds," said Yann. "Kurat is a hunter. I had a private arrangement with him for skins." He winked hugely and lifted up his voice, shouting in the native tongue an obvious demand for Kurat to come out and welcome his brother.

A lean hard-muscled man emerged. He wore a loin-cloth of brilliant blue silk, not very clean, and a necklet of hammered metal. He greeted Yann with glad cries. Trehearne smiled inwardly. They were two of a kind, the Vardda and the hunter, a brace of happy scoundrels.

Kurat welcomed him in the *lingua franca* of the factory towns. A brother of Yann, it seemed, was his brother also. He swept Trehearne before him into the hut.

There was a numerous family inside. A very old man and woman sat in a corner, doing nothing. Babes and children cluttered the floor. Kurat's hulking wife waded imperturbably among them. A handsome younger woman brought in a great sweating jug and poured from it into Trehearne's cup.

The wine was cold and bitter. Trehearne, draining it, began to forget the heat and his weariness. Then, as he looked up into the young woman's face, he was startled by the hatred in her watching eyes.

He said suddenly, "Why do you hate us so?"

She laughed metallically. "Is there any world where the Vardda are loved?"

"Because we are able to fly the stars and you aren't!"

"Because we too could have had the freedom of the stars and you Vardda kept us from it!"

Trehearne stared at her, disconcerted by her sudden passion. "But the secret was lost . . ."

"Oh, yes! And even on this far world

we know how it was lost! All the universe has heard of Orthis, of how the Vardda drove him into the depths of space and destroyed him when he would have shared his knowledge. And so you are free and I am chained and my children after me forever."

She turned abruptly away from him. He looked after her, disturbed and oppressed by the revelation of what bitter depths of hostility lay behind the faces of the non-Vardda.

But Yann shook his shoulder. "Kurat has made a kill today—a rare skin. Come outside and look at it. It's worth money."

LESS from interest than to escape his own oppression Trehearne rose. They went out a back way. There was a shed some distance away, where Kurat said the hide was drying. Yann and he chattered in the unfamiliar jargon. Trehearne was not much interested in the whole business.

It was dark inside the shed. Yann said, "Wait a minute while I make a light."

Trehearne waited but not long. The light exploded inside his own skull. He heard Kurat grunt behind him with the exertion of the blow, then laugh. Yann was laughing too.

Trehearne knew a moment of murderous fury and then the world of the green star slipped away from under him.

When it returned again into his ken, he was sprawled on his face in mud, stripped of his tunic, his jewelled belt, his sandals. The hut of Kurat had vanished, the town with it. He was in the forest, encircled by trees whose crystal branches glittered under the savage stars. His head hurt and he had no weapon.

He got unsteadily to his feet with only one thought in mind—the determination to get his hands on his good friend Yann. He took three steps in no particular direction—and then stopped, bathed in a sudden icy sweat.

In the distance and not too far away he heard the high-pitched cry of Kurat's strange hounds.

CHAPTER IX

The Hunting of Trehearne

IT dawned upon Trehearne then that this was not merely assault and robbery. This was murder. He had walked unsuspecting into a trap, had sat there while Yann and Kurat talked jovially over his head, arranging the details of its springing.

They would not want his body in the hut or in the town. They would not want it to look like murder. They would carry him into the forest, then set the hounds after him and leave the beasts to do the final work. Who could be blamed if a drunken Vardda wandered off where he had no business to be and was pulled down by a pack of hounds?

He wondered if Yann and Kurat were following the hunt.

And why did Yann want him dead? He began to run.

The rosy vines that crept and clambered among the crystal trees were like nooses set to catch his feet. He fell and rose and ran again and the spongy ground gave treacherously. It was very hot, and he was heavy, heavy with the drag of a heavy world.

Behind him, clear and shrill, came the yap-yap-yaaaahh! of Kurat's weasel hounds, racing over a fresh scent. The crystal branches gleamed and sparkled, tipped with star-fire—sharp-tipped like spears. Trehearne stopped and tried to break one and it was like trying to break a bar of steel with his bare hands. He gave it up and fled onward, not knowing where he was or where he was going, only wanting to stay away from the lithe white demons that pursued him.

There was a little river, black and warm. He waded upstream in it, splashing to his waist, swimming the deeper pools. The bitter wine had left him thirsty and he drank. The water tasted foully of pitch and slime and he spat it out again, gasping.

He heard the voice of the pack change

to a querulous whining as they checked by the bank. He sank down to rest and listened to them casting back and forth. He thought he heard a man's voice shouting but could not be sure.

He went on again, striking into the forest. The great stars were pounding against his head and his body was leaden with many extra pounds of weight by gravitation.

Trehearne prayed for a fallen branch but there was none. He prayed to find the town and that too was denied him. He ran heavily under the glittering trees and behind him the hounds burst suddenly into full cry, more distant now but as chilling to the blood.

It would not be long before they overtook him.

He measured the trees with an eye to climbing one for refuge. They were glassy and badly shaped and they were low. He remembered the long whipcord-bodies of the weasel-like beasts. He thought they could leap as high as they needed to pull him down.

He staggered on and every time he fell it was harder to get up again. The cry of the pack swept closer.

Abruptly, from somewhere ahead of him, came the challenging voices of other hounds.

Trehearne stopped, despairing. He was caught now between two fires. There was no use in going on. He choked on the acrid gorge of fear and cast about for a weapon, something, anything to hold in his hands, to kill with, at least a little before he was torn apart.

It came to him that the yelping of the beasts ahead was stationary and irritable. They were not hunting. They were chained.

Trehearne sobbed. He began to run again.

There was a clearing. He saw it ahead, dimly through the starshine and the trees. He strove to reach it and the pack cry clamored at his heels.

He tripped and pitched headlong and was almost happy because he had fallen over a tangle of branches left from the breaking of the crystal trees. He caught one up. It was not long but it was better

than nothing.

He plunged forward into the edge of the clearing. It was there that the hounds of Kurat bayed him.

Swift and undulant, white as frost in the starlight, they came leaping between the glistening trees. They voiced one final cry of triumph and then were still, still as arrows in mid-flight.

Trehearne set his back against a glassy trunk. Their fangs were like hot irons in his flesh and he was as maddened as they.

There was a hut across the clearing. Four of the hunting-beasts were leashed beside it. A man, a woman and a tall boy came out of the hut. The boy started to run toward Trehearne, shouting. The man caught him. He spoke to the boy and made him be still. They stood there, watching.

Trehearne swung his broken crystal branch.

ONE he killed and one he crippled. The remaining six boiled around him, a liquid tangle of bodies leaping, flowing, slashing with the white knives of their teeth. The blood ran on Trehearne's body. He swung and swung again and still the man and woman watched stolidly and did not move.

The boy cried out and the man cuffed him.

Trehearne yelled and dropped the branch. One of the brutes had fastened on his wrist. Its weight dragged him to his knees and he knew that this was the finish, the last of his voyaging amidst the stars. He tore the strong jaws out of his flesh and swung the brute as a flail in the faces of its mates and then he could hold it no longer and the pack closed in.

The boy had slunk back into the shadows by the hut wall. Now, suddenly, he reached and slipped the thongs from around the necks of the tethered hounds.

They tore across the clearing over the jagged stumps and flung themselves upon the pack of Kurat.

For a moment the beasts forgot Trehearne. He scrambled free of the snarling tangle and went toward the hut.

The man rushed by him, howling. He picked up a branch and began to beat the hounds, struggling to separate them. The woman wailed and ran to help him. The boy came to Trehearne.

He was not much above sixteen, tall and well made. He put his arm around Trehearne's waist and took him into the hut and sat him down. Trehearne was glad to sit. The room reeled and darkened around him. When his sight cleared the boy had brought cloths and a pungent salve and was binding his cuts.

"What is your name?" asked Trehearne in the *lingua franca*.

"Torin."

"You saved my life, Torin. I will not forget it."

"I would do anything for the Vardda." Instead of hate there was hero-worship in this non-Vardda face. It was obvious that in the boy's eyes Trehearne was a figure of glory. Trehearne was touched.

Torin stared at him, his task forgotten. And he asked the question, the old unchanging question that was always on the lips of boys. "What is it like—what is it really like, to fly between the stars?"

Trehearne put his hand on the lean young shoulder and lied. "It is long and hard and not nearly as adventurous as hunting. I'll wager that you're as good a hunter as your father."

"Not yet," said Torin. "Some day . . ." He bent to his work again. His fingers moved over Trehearne's flesh, touching the muscles, spreading the wounds, gentle with the thick salve. He scowled, brooding over some question of his own.

"It feels like mine," he said. "It bleeds like mine and here is an old scar and there will be new ones. It is not a different flesh, made of iron or some other thing."

He sprang up. "Look!" he cried. "I am strong, very strong. See, my flesh is hard like yours. Surely it is not true that only the Vardda can fly in the great ships! Surely I am strong enough to go out and see the stars!"

Trehearne could not meet his eager eyes. He said, "It takes a different kind of strength." He tried to explain and

gave it up. He could only say, "I'm sorry."

He got up. "Will you guide me to the compound, Torin? And think what you would like out of all the things that are there. I can't take my life from you without giving something back—a little gift between friends."

Torin whispered, "I want to see the ship."

Trehearne frowned and in the interval of silence he heard the noises from the clearing—the whining growl of the hounds and a sudden lifting of human voices.

"Torin," he said. "Look out and see who has come."

He flattened himself in the corner behind the door. The boy opened it and peered.

"Two have just come into the clearing," he whispered. "A hunter whose name is Kurat—and a Vardda." He drew back and looked at Trehearne. "They were hunting you?"

Trehearne nodded. His face had tightened and grown cruel. "Give me a knife."

Torin handed him a skinning blade of crystal chipped to a razor edge. Trehearne said, "Go and tell them I am dead from the hounds' tearing. Tell the Vardda to come and help you carry out my body. And see that he comes in first!"

Torin hesitated, then he went. Trehearne heard him calling across the clearing. The gabble of voices increased and Yann's familiar laughter sounded. The boy was talking, telling the details of Trehearne's dying.

Yann strode into the hut.

He came confidently. He had nothing to fear. And then Trehearne's arm was around his throat and the point of the knife was biting in under the angle of the jaw.

"Don't move," said Trehearne. And again, "Don't move!"

Yann stood still.

"Undo your belt and let it drop."

Yann did that very carefully lest Trehearne become nervous. Blood ran down the side of his neck. "You'll cut the

vein," he whispered. "No deeper, please, no deeper!"

The belt dropped. Trehearne set his foot on it. Then he flung Yann from him savagely, so that he fell sprawling on the floor. Torin stood wide-eyed in the doorway, watching.

Trehearne knelt and took the little prised shock-tube swiftly from its sheath on Yann's belt. "Now," he said. He did not take his eyes off Yann. "Keep watch, Torin, and tell me if anyone comes."

"They are busy with the hounds and with talking," the boy said.

YANN sat sullenly on the floor, holding his neck. He glowered at Trehearne but he made no move to rise.

"This wasn't my idea," he said. "I was only doing a job. You don't have to kill me."

"I don't have to but I'd enjoy it. Whose idea was it, Yann?"

"He was going to give me a ship," Yann muttered. "A ship of my own. Any man would do it for a price like that. You'd do it yourself, Trehearne. That's just common sense."

Trehearne said, "Who offered you a ship?"

"Kerrel. You go fight it out with him. I've got nothing against you, Trehearne, it was just a business deal. One life, one ship. You fight it out with Kerrel."

Trehearne kicked him. "You're not worth killing. Get up and get out. And Yann—"

"Yes?"

"Stay away from me!"

"All right, all right! But I don't see that you've so much to complain about." Yann hauled himself upright and started toward the door. "I'm the loser. You're alive, aren't you? And I've lost a ship!"

"That's too bad," said Trehearne. "You and Kurat can go away and mourn about it. And if I were you I would go fast."

Yann glanced back at him. He began to run. Within seconds he and Kurat had leashed what was left of the pack and vanished out of the clearing.

Trehearne watched them go. He was shaking with fury. Already he had forgotten Yann. He was thinking of Kerrel.

"He can be deadly," Shairn had said.

The man and woman returned slowly to the hut. In his hand, by its loose scruff, the man carried a limp dead hound. He flung it down at Torin's feet.

"There's your work," he said. "Two of the others will not hunt for days. We will go hungry because you are a fool."

He did not look at Trehearne. The woman did with stolid indifference. Torin said angrily, "I don't care. I couldn't just stand and watch him die!"

The man growled, "Learn to think of your own and not the Vardda. You will be happier."

Trehearne picked up Yann's fine jewelled belt and tossed it on the table. "That'll pay you for your hound." He went out across the clearing and in a minute Torin joined him, pointing out the path.

"I'm sorry," he said. "My parents are good and kind but they do not understand the Vardda."

"Perhaps they do," said Trehearne. "Better than you know."

It was morning when they reached the compound, a green morning oppressed with heat. Trehearne was ready to drop but Torin strode blithely ahead and all the way he talked of the great ship. He would accept no other gift but that, to see the ship, and he pleaded so that Trehearne had not the heart to refuse him.

After all it was little enough reward for what the boy had done.

It was the last great day of the trading and all the Vardda were inside the compound except one man who guarded the *Saarga*. The hatches were closed. Only the airlock port was open and the guard sat in front of it, yawning in the heat.

He brightened up when Trehearne came. "What happened to you?" he demanded, and laughed. "A big night, eh?"

"I spent it with a pack of hounds," Trehearne answered and spoke to him about Torin.

The guard looked doubtful. "It's

against the rules—the skipper'd have my head if he found out."

"How can he find out? Don't worry, I'll see the boy gets clear of the ship. You can look the other way."

The guard could not withstand Torin's hungry gaze. "Well—all right. Only be sure you get the kid out again fast!"

Trehearne saw to it. He showed Torin what he could, from the bridge to the generator-rooms, and the boy trod softly as though he were in a holy place, touching, sighing, wondering. Trehearne was sorry he had brought him. He felt a pity to see that longing that could never be fulfilled.

He pressed upon Torin what few trinkets from other star-worlds he had in his own cabin and led him out from the ship and stood with the guard, watching the boy go slowly away across the field, looking back, always back, until he was lost behind the compound wall.

"Star-crazy, like all the rest of them," said the guard. "Well, he'll get over it."

"I suppose so," said Trehearne and was glad he would not see Torin again.

He went into the factory, found the doctor and told the captain a brief story of how he had had too much wine in the town and been set upon by stray hounds. The captain remarked that it was no more than he deserved and bade him learn thereby the folly of breaking rules. Trehearne slept until he was routed out to check the lading.

Toward midnight the cargo was all aboard and the hatches locked. The *Saarga* lifted into the star-shot sky, and the acceleration built and built to the thrust of the throbbing generators.

Trehearne was almost asleep again when he heard the screaming.

CHAPTER X

Death Between Stars

THEY found Torin lying beside the well that led up from the hold. He had made it that far. His skin was al-

ready darkened with the subcutaneous hemorrhage, his body twisted and writhing, his face almost unrecognizable. And he screamed and would not stop.

Trehearne held him and watched him die.

It seemed to take a long, long time. It was not a clean death. It was dissolution. Trehearne remembered his own torment and there was nothing he could do.

The others watched also with sick white faces. In the end it was the guard who went to fetch a cloth to wrap the body in and there were tears on his cheeks.

Trehearne laid Torin on the sheet. His flesh was not hard any more. He was no longer straight and well made. He was not even a dead boy. He was a rag, a shapelessness, an obscenity. It crossed Trehearne's mind how nearly he had come to dying that same death.

He got up. He returned to his cabin, stripped and scrubbed himself in a kind of frenzy. He kicked his sodden garments into the corridor for someone else to deal with. He could not touch them again. And all the time he heard Torin's voice crying, "Surely I am strong enough to go out and see the stars!"

They came a little later and told Trehearne that they had found where Torin had hidden himself under the wrappings of a bale, to be carried aboard with the cargo.

"It wasn't your fault," they told him. "There was no way you could have seen the boy."

Trehearne was not comforted.

They buried Torin in deep space, to drift forever among the Suns of Hercules. And Trehearne thought of a hut, of a man and a woman who were waiting for their son to come home. He wished that Torin had listened to the wisdom of his father.

The *Saarga* tramped her way onward among the worlds of the Cluster. Time and events gave Trehearne other things to think about. He was a starman now, tested and hardened, a functioning part of his environment. His horizons were

boundless and the stars had not lost their lustre. But somehow, even so, the first fine flush of glory was gone.

He remembered the bitterness of the woman who had said, "You are free and I am chained and my children after me forever." He remembered the countless young men who hungered, the eyes of children wide with dreams. Each time he saw the new-healed scars on his body he remembered the boy who had dressed those wounds and found the Vardda flesh no different from his own—a treachery too subtle for his understanding.

Over and over, when he slept, he held Torin in his arms and watched him die.

He told himself that it was all wasted pity. Whatever had been done to Orth this long ago was not his doing. Things were as they were and there was no help for it. He was one of the lucky ones and he should be content with that.

Most of the time he was content. But now and again there would come the small sharp doubts, the creeping sense of guilt.

If only Torin had not come aboard the ship to die!

He needed to talk to Edri. He needed to ease his mind, to get things straight with himself, and he knew that Edri would understand.

He was glad when they started the long haul back to Llyrdis. He discovered that, much as he wanted to see Edri, he wanted even more to see Shairn. He wondered if she had forgotten him by now or if she would be waiting when the *Saarga* landed.

The voyage back seemed to take a million years. And Yann was always there, a constant reminder to Trehearne that there was someone else he had to see on Llyrdis.

The *Saarga* made her worldfall at last under the tawny-red glare of Aldebaran. Trehearne watched the golden planet rush and grow toward the ship. He cheered with the others at the first sight of home and did not think it odd that he should strain as eagerly as they to see the familiar towers of the city rising out of the mountain-girdled plain.

The freighter found her dock and wallowed into it.

Joris was on hand to watch his ship come in. He had been in contact with the *Scarpa* by the ultra-wave radio and now he boarded her before her ports were fairly open. The skipper had given him good news of the venture and he was in jovial spirits, clapping shoulders all around, peering at manifests, firing questions, demanding to know how Trehearne had acquitted himself.

"A good voyage, eh?" he cried. "Well, any voyage through the Cluster is a good one if someone doesn't get killed!" Trehearne said bitterly, "Someone did."

Joris stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Oh, not one of the crew. A native boy, crazy to fly the stars. He stowed away."

All the light went out of Joris' face, leaving it bleak. It was a long time before he spoke and then it was only to make a routine statement about the ship. He seemed to have lost all his joy in it. Trehearne was surprised at the impact that those few words about a nameless boy had had on the old man.

Joris left soon after. He told Trehearne, "I'll see you in a day or so. Meanwhile I think Shairn is waiting for you at the sector gate." He spoke as though his mind were not really on what he was saying.

He turned away, then hesitated and asked, "How old was that boy, Trehearne?"

"About sixteen."

JORIS nodded. He walked away across the apron as though he carried on his massive shoulders some heavy burden that weighed them down.

Trehearne signed over his manifests to the port official in charge of unloading and went in search of Shairn.

She stood outside the great barred gate, watching for him. She was just as beautiful as he remembered. He caught her in his arms and kissed her and her lips were just as he remembered them.

He said, "You haven't forgotten me then?"

"No. Did you expect me to?"

"I wouldn't have been surprised."

She laughed—the sweet familiar laughter spiced with mockery. "You're a wise man." She cocked her head back and studied him. "You've changed. You've got so brown and hard and—older. I think I like you even better now. But I'll have to learn to know you all over again."

She pulled him toward the long, sleek vehicle that waited. "It will be nice," she said, "this getting acquainted again!"

A broad road took them northward along the coast, away from the clamoring spaceport and the city. Cliffs began to rise from the golden sea, wild and rocky. Trehearne had been this way before and now he saw nothing but Shairn.

She asked suddenly, "Where did you get that?"

His sleeve had fallen back and she was looking at the scars on his wrist.

"Someone set the hounds on me," Trehearne answered indifferently. Then, "By the way, how is Kerrel?"

"I haven't seen him. He's not in the city." She glanced at the scars again. "How did he work it?"

"How did who work what?"

"Oh, stop trying to be subtle! I was pretty sure that Kerrel would arrange something for that voyage. He's not a man who takes his defeats lightly."

Trehearne told her briefly the story of Yann and the hounds. He finished, "I want to see Kerrel."

"You will!" Shairn's eyes sparkled. "And I want to be there when you do!"

The car swung around a curve, where a great crag jutted out from the sea, backed by a mountain wall. On it, seeming as proud and enduring as the rock, was built a tower faced all in silvery metal.

The wind and the spray beat upon it, the wild things of the ocean sky nested at its feet, yet its tall windows looked over the distant city and counted every ship that came and went from the sprawling port. Trehearne had been

here before too. It was Shairn's ancestral home, built by generations of Vardda men and women, reaching out with strong hands to grasp the stars—the Silver Tower which gave her her name.

Inside it was Trehearne who led the way to the long gallery looking to the west, a place of cool pastels that tempered the molten glory of the sea. For a time, with Shairn, he forgot about Kerrel and Torin and all the things that preyed upon his mind. He only knew that it was very good to be here again.

It was evening when he was again reminded of them. They were still sitting in the gallery, sipping the sharp, cold wines, and Shairn said, "Are you happy, Michael?"

He remembered another time when she had asked that question—the night that Edri had walked away alone down the avenue of trees. He remembered Edri crying out in the dark against injustice and instantly the old restlessness was back upon him.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm happy." He turned the wine-glass in his hands, brooding. "Shairn, could you get Edri out here? I'd like to see him."

He felt her stiffen and draw away and he thought that she was angry with him. He went on, "It doesn't have to be now. Tomorrow's time enough. But I—well, I want to talk to him."

"You're fond of Edri, aren't you?"

"He was a good friend to me."

"Yes—and to me." She turned around. "You might as well know now as later. Edri was arrested a month ago."

Trehearne sprang up. "Arrested?"

"Yes. They sentenced him yesterday. Exile to Thuvie—for the rest of his natural life."

CHAPTER XI

Fateful Decision

FOR a moment Trehearne stood still like a man stunned. *Thuvie—for the rest of his natural life!*

"No," he said. "Not Edri. There must be some mistake."

Shairn shook her head. "I wish there were but there isn't. Edri is an Orthist, caught, confessed and convicted. He was unable even to offer a defense."

She turned away from him. "I don't like it either. But Edri knew what he was doing. He brought this on himself."

Trehearne asked, "What happened?"

"You remember that night in the wine garden when Kerrel spoke of a man named Arrin who had been arrested?"

"Yes. He was a friend of Edri's."

"Well, they couldn't find Arrin's papers. They wanted them very badly. It seemed that Arrin had found some clue to the course of Orthis' ship, on that last voyage when it was lost, and had been making calculations."

She paused, then added grimly, "Kerrel got the idea that Edri had those papers."

Trehearne's yellow eyes took on a peculiarly evil glint. "Then Kerrel was at the bottom of this?"

"That's why he retired to his estate for a while. He's not very popular just now. Everybody liked Edri. They don't approve of his ideas but Kerrel went about it in such an underhanded way, setting spies on Edri and digging pits for him to fall into. He's told all over just how cleverly he did it. Now he's got himself appointed as an agent of the Council on the strength of it. Well, he did his duty. Edri had the papers, all right, and more of his own."

Trehearne groaned. "The idealistic fool! Why wasn't he satisfied to be a Vardda himself, without worrying about the rest of the galaxy?"

Shairn seemed relieved. Then, "That's what I said! But knowing your friendship for Edri I was afraid you'd lose your head when you heard."

She went on quickly. "I know you'll have a reckoning with Kerrel over this and your own score. But you'll have to be careful and clever since he's now a Council agent. I can help you—"

But Shairn's voice faded out of Trehearne's hearing, except for that one phrase.

"—knowing your friendship for Edri—"

Yes, Edri had been his friend. He was sorry for Edri. But should he let friendship be a chain to drag him back down from all that he had dreamed and desired and finally achieved?

No! He would not let himself be trapped by friendship and by pity! He had been merely indulging in emotionalism, to sympathize as he had with the non-Vardda peoples' hunger for star-freedom, to remember as he had the hopeless longing in their eyes, to brood as he had over the dying of Torin.

A sick fatal foreboding grew in Trehearne as he realized the decision shaping in his mind. He knew that it was shaped by emotion, not by reason, and he felt a savage contempt for his own weakness.

He spoke, interrupting Shairn. "I'm sorry, Shairn, I was thinking. And I think I've got to try to help Edri."

She stopped, looking at him with wide steady eyes. Then, rapidly, "Michael! Don't be a fool!"

He smiled mirthlessly. "That's what I've been telling myself. But it doesn't work. It seems that I'm determined to be a fool."

"You're taking it too tragically! After all, Edri's not going to be executed."

Remembering Edri's words about the fate of Arrin, Trehearne answered, "I think he'd almost prefer that. Exiled to a remote star, never to fly again, nothing to do but sit and wait for death—no!"

"But there's nothing you can do, Michael! He's convicted, sentenced. They're taking him off tonight. So there's an end to it."

Trehearne rose to his feet. "I'm going back to the city, Chairn."

"For what?"

"I'm going to try to get him away."

SHE understood then the full depth and danger of his thinking. She caught him fiercely by the arm.

"Are you going to throw away everything you've worked so hard to get for

[Turn page]

nothing? Remember, Edri's a traitor. No matter how good a friend he was to both of us he's a traitor and deserves his punishment."

"That's how you feel, is it?"

"Is there any other way I could feel? You know what the Orthists are as well as I do."

He said quietly, "I'm not sure I do. Perhaps you'd better tell me."

"They're destroyers. They want to ruin Llyrdis, the Vardda trade, everything as it is now." Her passionate voice took in the star-trails, the swift ships flying, the Vardda pride of race and achievement.

"Orthis had his laboratory in his ship. The secret of the Vardda mutation is there. They want to find that ship. They want to find the secret in it and spread it all across the Galaxy."

"Would it be so terrible," asked Trehearne, "if others should have the ability to fly between the stars?"

She looked at him as though he had spoken blasphemy. He added, "Except, of course, that it would wreck the Vardda monopoly."

"That sounds very strange, coming from you," she said bitterly. "You, the outsider, who fought so hard to be a part of the monopoly. It looked pretty good to you then after thirty-three years of crawling in the mud of Earth!"

"I've seen more of it now. I've seen a boy die because of it. I don't think I like it any longer."

"You don't like it?" Her voice was low and passionate. "You! And what do you know about it? We earned the right to what we have. We were the first—first of all the races of the Galaxy to go into interstellar space."

"And we did it without mutation, without anything! Four generations that first voyage took. Four generations of children born in deep space, in a little ship crawling between the stars! No one else ever did that. No one else ever dared!"

"And as for our wicked monopoly—it keeps the peace of the Galaxy. It keeps worlds alive that would have died. It brings wealth and comfort where they

never were before. But you don't like it and so it must be destroyed!"

She stopped for breath and then she whispered, "You make me ashamed that I have loved you!"

She turned from him and went swiftly along the gallery. There was a purpose about the way she did it that made Trehearne uneasy. He followed her and found her at the visiphone. The screen was already brightening.

She looked at him with blazing eyes. "I fought once to get you into Llyrdis. Now I'll undo that mistake!"

HE struck her away from the instrument and closed the switch. She was on him then like a cat, clawing him, calling him mongrel and freak and worse names, raging at his ingratitude. She was hard to hold but he held her and she could reach neither the visiphone nor the bell to call her servants.

He held her, and she laughed her mocking laugh at him. "All right. Go on, then. Go and make a fool of yourself, trying to free Edri. See how far you get. And remember that it's bad enough for a Vardda born to betray his people but for you—"

He held her a moment longer, swallowing his own rage, thinking. He could not let her go. The moment he left she would send out the alarm, denounce him to the Council, put an end both to his own freedom and to any remote hope he might have of saving Edri.

It took him only a few seconds to decide. In the mood he was in it was not difficult to strike the necessary carefully-calculated blow.

He carried her out to the car in his arms. If any of the servants were watching it would look very sweet, very romantic, her dark head on his shoulder, her arms around his neck. They would not be able to see that her wrists were tied.

He put her down gently in the padded seat. She did not stir. There was the shadow of a bruise already forming on her chin. He got in beside her and sent the car humming down the wide road that led to the city.

WHEN he was far enough away from the tower he stopped. He bound Shairn securely with strips torn from her own garments, taking especial care with the gag. He arranged her on the floor as comfortably as he could, out of sight. Then he drove on and did not stop again until he reached the spaceport.

The lights were still on in the office of Joris. Probably he would stay late tonight, to oversee the business of taking Edri away in the prison ship. Trehearne felt guilty about Joris, almost as though he were betraying his own father. The old man had been good to him.

Shairn seemed to be safely unconscious. Trehearne left the car where he thought it would be least likely to attract attention and went into the Administration Building. He had only the vague beginnings of a plan in his mind but whatever he did it would have to start here.

The roar and bustle of the spaceport were not diminished by darkness. Some of the Vardda officers he knew. They hailed him as he passed them in the corridors, congratulating him on his voyage, asking him when he was going out again. Trehearne almost faltered then, thinking what a fool he was to give up all this for an idle hope. And then he remembered Edri and went on. Edri had done his best for him when he needed it. It seemed that he could not do less for Edri.

The lift took him up to the high room that was like the bridge of a starship that would never fly. Joris was there. He was quite alone. He had been drinking for some time but he was not drunk. He looked up when Trehearne came in and his eyes were heavy and rimmed with red.

"What do you want?" he said.

"A favor."

"Another time, Trehearne. Get out. Get the hell out."

"Another time won't do." Trehearne leaned over the table. "They're taking Edri out for Thuvis tonight. I want to say goodbye to him, Joris. That's all,

just a word before he goes. Tell me what ship it is and where—or if you can't do that tell me what sector and I'll see him outside the gate."

"That's right," said Joris. "You're a friend of Edri's." He reached for the wine bottle. There was an empty one beside it and another on the floor. "How good a friend, Trehearne? That's what I'd like to know. How good a friend?"

His bloodshot gaze was sharp and very shrewd.

Trehearne said angrily, "You know I'm not mixed up with him. You know where I've been."

"Yes, I know. You've been watching a young boy die in space. What did you think when you saw that, Trehearne? How did you feel?"

"Let's not talk about that," said Trehearne harshly. "Tell me where I can see Edri and when. That isn't much to ask, Joris, just a minute to say goodbye."

"A boy sixteen," whispered Joris, "full of hope, full of longing, proud of his strength. . . . I ought to hate you, Trehearne. You're not even half Vardda in the ordinary way and yet you can fly the stars."

He filled his glass again and emptied it. His hands were steady. He was neither drunk nor maudlin. And yet there were tears in his eyes. Trehearne saw them and was somehow shocked. It did not seem possible that Joris could weep.

"Joris," he said gently, "forget about the boy. Let me see Edri."

Again the red-rimmed leaden gaze locked with his, weighing, measuring. "I like you, Trehearne. So I'll tell you again. Get out. Go away. Forget you ever came here."

Trehearne did not move. Abruptly Joris picked up the empty bottle and flung it, not at him but near him. "Get out, you fool! I'm giving you a chance to go!"

There was nothing to do but obey. Trehearne moved toward the door, thinking angrily that he would have to risk the sector map in Operations. He stretched out his hand to the latch and

the door opened under it fast and he was looking straight into the prism lens of a shock tube, held by a tall spaceport guard. Shairn was beside the guard.

The guard said, "Back up."

Trehearne backed. He looked at Shairn. "I should have clipped you again to make sure."

"You should. I got my feet loose quite easily. This silk is pretty flimsy stuff." She walked past him toward Joris. The guard came in and closed the door, setting his back against it.

Joris demanded, "What's all this about?"

"I found her out by the gate," the guard said. "She was gagged and her hands were tied."

"Trehearne," said Shairn to Joris. "He's an Orthist. He came here to help Edri escape."

"Did he!" said Joris. "Did he now!" He looked at Trehearne. "You stand where you are. Don't try anything." He reached into a drawer of the table and covered him with the lens of another tube.

"An Orthist, eh?" he said softly. He began to laugh.

CHAPTER XII

The Fight at the Spaceport

SHAIRN sat down on the edge of Joris' table. She smiled at Trehearne and in this moment he hated her. He looked from Joris to the guard and back again and did nothing. There was nothing then that he could do.

"Would you have believed it of him, Joris?" said Shairn. "Would you have thought that he could turn on us after all we did for him?"

Joris leaned back in his chair. "Shairn," he said, "I'm sorry it had to be this way."

"Yes," she answered, and then added bitterly. "Kerrel was right about him, after all."

Joris said, "That isn't what I mean."

Something in his tone made Shairn turn and look at him. He went on. "I'm sorry you got yourself into this. You're only doing what you believe to be right. But so is Trehearne. So am I."

He dropped his bombshell so quietly that for a moment neither Shairn nor Trehearne could quite believe that they had understood him.

Shairn got up off the edge of the table. She backed away, her eyes fixed on Joris in horrified incredulity. "You, Joris! You an Orthist!" Her tone made the words a denial.

But Joris nodded and said, "Yes."

Abruptly, Trehearne laughed. Shairn swung around. "You heard?" she said to the guard. "Arrest Joris!"

The guard shook his head and smiled. "Hardly. I'm Joris' man."

It was Shairn's turn now to stand like a trapped thing, searching for escape and not finding it.

Trehearne said, "May I move now?" His voice was a bit shaky with relief.

Joris grinned. "I didn't want you throwing yourself around. Somebody might have got hurt. Yes, you can move."

Shairn burst out, "I can't understand this, Joris! You, of all people—it's insane!"

"Perhaps. But I think Trehearne would understand." He scowled at his own hands, brooding, and then he said, "It doesn't matter who knows now. I did the forbidden thing. I married a woman of another world, a non-Vardda. I had a son. He wanted to fly the stars. He used to beg me to take him aboard my ship.

"After all, he was my son, half-Vardda. He thought he could do it. He hid himself away in my cabin and—the Vardda blood had not bred true in him." He glanced briefly at Trehearne. "He was not quite eighteen. I never flew another voyage after that."

He got up, kicking the empty bottle away. "I guess that was why I first gave Trehearne his chance. It seemed to make up in a way for—"

He broke off abruptly. "Well, that's over and done with. We have other

things to think about and not much time to do them in. Trehearne, you've upset my plans rather badly by fetching in Miss Spitfire here."

"It wasn't intentional." He went to Joris. "Is it true then? You're going to get Edri free?"

"I'm going to try. You see, this is a thing I could only do once. I've had to sit here for years, watching more than one good man go out to Thuvis, waiting—waiting for the time when I could make my action really count. Now it's here." He turned and glowered at Shairn. "The main question is—what are we going to do with you?"

She answered him angrily and without fear. "Whatever you do you'll live to regret it!"

"H'm," said Joris. "Tie her up again, Trehearne."

He did so with immense pleasure. This time he used stouter bonds and took extra pains with the knots.

Joris paced up and down, thinking hard. "I hate to say this but there's only one place I know of where there's no danger of her being found before we're gone. And that's aboard the ship."

The guard said, "There won't be any time to get her off again."

"I know it," said Joris grimly. "So it looks as though we'll have an extra passenger."

Trehearne had finished with the gag. He looked at Shairn. Her eyes burned and her face was white above the cloth.

Joris threw his cloak over her. "Take her down in my private lift," he told the guard. "The sector has already been cleared, so you won't have any trouble there. Get her aboard and make damned sure she's locked in."

THE guard nodded. He picked up the cloak-wrapped bundle and put it over his shoulder. The buzzer of the visiphone made a sudden jarring sound. Joris motioned the man to hurry, waited until he was gone before answering. Trehearne pressed himself back against the wall, out of range of the screen.

Kerrel's voice said, "Joris—we're bringing Edri down in exactly fifteen

minutes. Is everything ready?"

Joris nodded. "The sector is cleared, the guards are posted and the ship is ready for take-off."

"Good. There's a good bit of feeling about this business and we don't want any trouble."

"I've seen to it," Joris told him.

The screen went dark. "The swine!" said Joris. "He's only doing what he believes is right but he's so bloody smug about it. Agent of the Council! Bah!"

Unexpectedly he caught Trehearne's shoulders in a bearlike grip that nearly broke them.

"I'm glad you're with us. Are you armed?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then. This is the end of my waiting. I'm going back to space, Trehearne! I'm going to do the things I knew I'd have to do some day after I watched my son die. Come on then—move!"

They went down in the tiny private lift and out of the building to a guarded sector where the lights burned brightly over silent ships, where there were no swarming mobs of non-Vardda workmen, no clatter of machinery and whizzing of busy trams, only the deserted aprons of the great docks and the empty spaces between them.

As they went Joris told Trehearne what he had to do. "Only the guards at the gate, and the four who will pick up Kerrel's men when they come through belong to me. The others, we hope, will be too far away to interfere. But we'll have no time to linger."

"Where is the prison ship?"

"I spotted that at the far end of the sector. And they'll find its generators shot when they try to follow us. The Orthists are strong among the non-Vardda. The mechanics were glad to do that little job for me!"

Joris spoke briefly to the guards about Trehearne. They nodded a welcome. "In about ten minutes," Joris said. "Is the girl aboard?"

"All secure, sir."

"Good. Come along, Trehearne." He led the way past two of the towering

docks. By the time they reached the third they were out of sight and hearing of the gate. In this third dock was a long rakish starship, lightless and silent, all hatches closed except the port.

"The *Mirzim*, the ship we're taking," said Joris. "A long-distance light trader, built for speed. Well, we'll need that. It belongs, by the way, to a good friend of mine. He'll have to collect from the two good cargo-ships I'm leaving behind."

He added, "The crew's waiting inside now. Only a half-crew really—not many navigators and technicians are dependable Orthists."

He stationed Trehearne in the shadows under the corner of the apron. "We'll jump them right here. Try not to kill anyone. As soon as Edri is free make for the *Mirzim*."

"Right." Trehearne settled back into the patch of darkness, hidden from anyone walking past in the areaway. He held his shock tube ready in his hand. Joris was already gone, heading back to the gate.

Trehearne listened to the sounds of the spaceport. The sharp smell of the sea was in the wind, and in the distance he could see the shining towers of the city. He thought that this was probably the last time he would ever see Llyrdis.

He knew a stabbing pang of regret. And then, coming from the direction of the gate, he heard the rhythmic tramp of perhaps a dozen men, moving at a brisk pace toward him. He was glad that the wait was no longer.

He did not move but his body quivered, settling itself.

There was Joris, walking first with Kerrel. There were four men without uniforms. There was a fifth man and beside him Edri, with his right wrist linked to the man's left. There were four more men without uniforms, then four of Joris' guards.

The head of the little column passed the corner of the third dock. The four guards broke rank and pulled out their shock tubes, aiming the pallid beams at an angle to avoid hitting Edri.

Trehearne sprang out and joined them.

Three of Kerrel's men went down on that first assault. Two were unconscious but one could still use his shocker. Joris had caught Kerrel unawares and knocked him down with nothing more than his great hammer of a fist. He pulled out his own weapon then and waded in.

A vicious dogfight began, swirling around with Edri as its center. Edri grappled with his guard and they fell, both struggling, both hampered by the fetters.

BOTH sides quit using the shockers. The fighting was too close for that, a small blundering nasty mêlée of fists and feet, men stumbling over each other, hitting the wrong people in their haste, going down, getting up again, shouting for help, swearing, astonished, furious.

Trehearne, trying to get to Edri, smashed one man solidly in the face and sent another staggering. Then he was tripped and was kicked as he went down. He found himself sprawling on top of Edri, who grunted and struck at him, then said, "Oh, it's you. The key is in his belt."

Trehearne chopped down with his fist. The man's head rang on the concrete. He lay still and Trehearne found the key.

A heavy weight descended on him from behind, grinding his face into the cement. The hand that held the key was pinioned in an iron grip. He thrashed about, trying to unseat his attacker and in the meantime Edri had grabbed his hand as well, wrenching and clawing with a single-minded determination to have the key.

He got it. Trehearne managed to get his knees under him and roll. He saw Kerrel's face close to his. In a second the two men had each other by the throat.

They strained together, breast to breast, like two lovers, kicked and trampled by the feet of other men, oblivious. Edri got free and rose. He would have struck Kerrel but Trehearne gasped, "No! I'll handle him!"

Kerrel smiled, an anguished baring of the teeth. His thumbs bit hard into Trehearne's neck.

Trehearne let go of Kerrel's throat. He bunched his two fists together and struck upward. Kerrel's head snapped back. His hands loosened. Trehearne tore them away. He threw himself on top of Kerrel. He hit him hard in the face until Kerrel's head rolled like the head of a dead man.

Hands grasped him and tried to drag him away. He shook them off. Kerrel moaned and turned on his side. Trehearne kicked him with his sandalled feet. "That's for Yann," he grunted. "That's for the hounds and for Torin."

A voice roared at him. "Leave it, damn you! Leave it!" A very strong arm thrust him aside. He recognized Joris. There were distant sounds of shouting, coming closer. Kerrel's men were down or scattered. Their own men were running for the *Mirzim*, dragging with them several who were stunned or partly paralyzed. Edri, with a bleeding face, was capering joyously and yelling at him to hurry.

Trehearne shook his head to clear it. He ran beside Joris, stumbling up the metal stair to the apron. He was the last one through the port. Joris hauled down a lever, and the port closed and locked itself automatically with a squeal of compressed air.

Instantly the lights went on. The great generators jarred to life. Joris strode heavily down the long corridor to the bridge with Trehearne at his heels. There was another man sitting there but Joris took over the pilot chair.

Trehearne waited tensely but Joris did not touch the controls. He merely sat there, inspecting his bruised fists.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Trehearne cried. "We've only got a few moments at most!"

Joris looked at him stolidly. "We've only got one life too. We can throw it away by starting at the wrong moment and colliding with incoming ships. I know the dispatch-schedules. Wait."

Trehearne waited. He could not hear inside the ship but he knew that by now

alarms must be shrilling all over the spaceport.

It was mad to wait. It was craven surrender. Better to run any risk of suicidal collision than to wait. . . .

And still Joris waited, an eye cocked on the chronometers, until through the window Trehearne saw lights flashing up outside and men running. And then he overheard the loom of a great ship descending fast.

Joris grunted, suddenly punched the controls. "Hang on!"

The *Mirzim* went up in a screaming arc that crumpled Trehearne to the deck. He clung to a stanchion and prayed that Joris had not lost his skill.

He had not. Even the Vardda flesh had limits. So did metal and the bones of ships. Joris knew to the fraction exactly how much they could stand. The course had already been calculated. He cleared the system, found his coordinates, then hammered the signal relays to the generator rooms.

The whine of the generators rose and the needle on the acceleration master dial rose with it. Trehearne watched it with bulging eyes, gasping under the pressure, barely restrained an impulse to scream. The second officer was clutching his chair, his face white.

Joris watched the dial. At the precise instant he punched the relay bars again. The needle ceased to blur in its frantic ascent, climbing now with a decent deliberation.

Joris turned around. He looked at his companions and shook with laughter. He had, for the first time since Trehearne had known him, the face of a completely happy man.

Trehearne staggered up. He got out a handkerchief and wiped his face. There was blood on it as well as sweat. "Well," he said. "We're off. But if you don't mind telling me now, Joris—where the devil are we off to?"

"H'm," said Joris. "This may seem a little peculiar to you in view of all the circumstances—"

He roared again with hearty mirth. "I'll tell you Trehearne. *We're off to T'huvis!*"

CHAPTER XIII

Bitter Planet

TREHEARNE stared at Joris. A small trickle of blood ran from his nose down over his lip. He forgot to wipe it away.

"You're joking," he said.

"Not at all." It was Edri who answered. He had come into the bridge behind Trehearne. He cried good-naturedly, "Blast you, Joris, what are you trying to do—kill us all before we get started?"

"They'll be after us soon enough," said Joris. "We need all the edge we can get."

Trehearne demanded, "Why are we going to Thuvis?"

"Partly," said Edri soberly, "to rescue the men who are rotting away out there. But chiefly because we must have Arrin. You see, Trehearne, he was arrested before he could finish his calculations. When I tried to carry on I added a good bit of my own material—but the missing factor isn't there. Arrin has it. He must have or he couldn't have gone as far as he did. Now if we put our knowledge together—"

Edri sighed. "It's been a long, long fight. A thousand years of piecing together lie and legend and hearsay, of hunting down scraps of letters and secret reports, of dredging through tons of irrelevant nonsense in search of one little bit of truth.

"The Vardda authorities of that day suppressed or destroyed all evidence connected with that last voyage of Orthis. They did their work well. Until now no one has even known in what general sector of the Galaxy the pursuit took place.

"Yes, a long fight. And if we're wrong it means the end of hope in our generation. Others will have to begin the search all over again."

It seemed a cruel question to ask but Trehearne could not keep from it.

"Is there any proof that Orthis' ship still exists at all?"

"No. We only know that it was not destroyed at the time that Orthis outran his pursuers and disappeared. Long afterward one of the life-skiffs of his ship was picked up in space. He had known it could only be picked up by his enemies, so there was nothing inside it but a message painted large on the walls—*You have not destroyed me. The peoples of the Galaxy shall yet be given the freedom of the stars!*

Trehearne shook his head. "Orthis must have been quite a man."

"He was," said Joris. "A true man of the stars. He was born in deep space between Aldebaran and the little yellow sun that is our nearest neighbor. He was one of the last of the four generations of men and women who made the first round-trip voyage of all time into interstellar space."

Edri nodded, "He was only twenty when the ship returned to Llyrdis but spending his whole life in space had made him strange. He could not endure to be planet-bound. He built his laboratory ship and worked in it, almost alone, for another fifteen years and then announced his great discovery—the mutation, the birth of Galactic Man.

"He never gave out the whole secret of his process. He said it was too dangerous in untrained hands. He built the whole apparatus himself and handled it himself and sowed with his own hands the seed of the Vardda race that would flower in the next generation.

"He was revered almost as a demigod, at first. But there were the other planets of Aldebaran. There were the worlds of the neighboring yellow sun, inhabited by peoples of a high culture. Orthis assumed that they too were going to be included in the great new future of star-travel—they and all other star-worlds truly civilized enough to be worthy of it.

"Well, there were objections to that. Chiefest and soundest of them was the fear of terrible interstellar wars. Two parties sprang up and fiercely argued the question. Orthis' laboratory ship

was impounded and he himself was kept virtually a prisoner for many years. In the end his cause was defeated and his ship ordered destroyed.

"Orthis succeeded in escaping with his party's help. He got his ship away. It looked as though he would be victorious after all. But by this time the new Vardda race had begun to flourish and some of them were old enough to fly. So these young wolves, believing intensely in their right, haled out after the old man, who clung just as intensely to his own beliefs.

"He was undoubtedly able to endure ultra-speeds himself, for it was a long and bitter chase. They partially disabled his ship but even so he managed to elude them. There was no ultra-wave radar or radio in those early days and after all he had cut his teeth on the stars. They lost him. And that was the end of Orthis and his ship. Except for the life-skiff's message he was never heard of again."

Edri paused, then added, "Do you wonder that we venerate such a man?" "I think," said Trehearne slowly, "that you have his kind of courage."

"Maybe." Edri laughed. "I do know I have a most colossal thirst. You didn't forget the wine stores, Joris?"

"The gods forbid!"

"Let's go and drink." Edri took Trehearne's arm. "And you can tell me a story—where you came from and what in blazes you're doing here!"

"No," said Trehearne, without relish. "I think I'd better see about Shairn."

Edri's jaw dropped. "Shairn?"

"Yes, unfortunately—Shairn." He explained rapidly how the extra passenger came aboard.

EDRI said some low, hard words. "That isn't going to help matters one little bit. We can hardly leave her on Thuis and we can't stop anywhere else."

"It couldn't be helped," growled Joris.

"No. Well, I think I'll go with you, Trehearne. I don't believe you'd be safe alone!"

They found her, locked in an officer's cabin for which, on this short-handed

trip, there was no officer. She was still bound and gagged. From the look she gave them Trehearne thought she would have killed them both if she had the power.

He freed her. She sat up on the bunk, rubbing her wrists. Two red marks ran from the corners of her mouth across her white cheeks where the gag had rubbed. It gave her a comical expression, like the mask of a clown. There was nothing comical about her eyes.

She did not speak.

Trehearne said awkwardly, "Shairn, I'm sorry about all this. But you might as well make the best of it now you're here."

Still she did not speak. She only sat and looked at him.

Edri said, "Come on, Shairn. A glass of wine will do you good."

She ignored him. Silence and the green deadly eyes, fixed on Trehearne.

He went to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Be reasonable, Shairn. I know how you feel but none of it was done with intent. And we're all your friends, whether you agree with us or not."

He jerked back but not quite in time. Her claws raked his cheek. He stepped away. She sat motionless and said not one word.

Trehearne swung on his heel and went out. Edri came after him, and locked the door. "Perhaps Joris can talk to her," he said. His tone did not hold much hope.

"Oh, she'll come out of it," said Trehearne. "Nobody can stay that mad forever."

Edri shook his head. "I've known her longer than you have. I wouldn't count on it."

The intercom boomed over their heads—Joris calling from the bridge.

"Edri—will you and Trehearne step up here? The bad news is starting to come in."

Communications was just abaft the bridge. Joris had relinquished the controls to the Second and was standing in the cramped space behind the opera-

tor, listening intently to the thin metallic voice that came from the ultra-wave receiver.

"Channel One—Alert. All ships in Sector M29 . . . request radar confirmation on ship believed on course as follows . . ."

"Port radar base would have got our coordinates at take-off, of course," said Joris. "They're just making sure."

"Listen," said Edri.

The metallic voice finished repeating the coordinates. It went on. *"All ships will identify immediately when challenged. All ships will identify . . ."*

"Cruisers," said Edri.

Joris frowned. "They could man at least one in a hurry. I told you we'd need a head start."

He returned to the bridge to inspect the dials and order the generators stepped up.

"We'll have to reach acceleration peak in half the normal time or we might as well have stayed on Llyrdia. I'm going to see what radar has turned up."

Trehearne followed along, brooding on the subject of cruisers. The Vardda had no warships, being in the enviable position of having no use for them. But the Council maintained a small fleet of armed craft with maximum velocities considerably above those of the slower cargo ships, for the purpose of keeping down occasional outbursts of illegal trading among the Vardda themselves.

The three-dimensional radar screens showed the normal number of tiny red sparks—the faster-than-light energy impulses of ships' generators. Joris scanned them with a practiced eye.

"Nothing to bother us yet. Too early to tell—the sector immediately behind us is too crowded with shipping from the port." He turned to the technician. "Keep a damn sharp lookout astern. Call me the minute you see anything unusual. You're on a twelve-hour shift and I'll arrange for your relief."

Relief was a problem on that voyage. No one got much of it. They had slightly over half the number of men required for a full crew under normal circum-

stances and some of them were not trained technicians. Trehearne found himself doing one eight-hour trick on the bridge, calling out dial readings, and another in Communications. Since, obviously, there was no sending to be done he could handle the receiver well enough.

Channel One, which was the official, top-priority voice of the Vardda Council, continued to request—and get—confirmation of their course.

It was not long before Quorn, their Communications officer, reported that radar showed a red spark astern that seemed to be following their course.

CALCULATING distance by intensity it was possible to judge the rate of approach. Joris demanded more thrust from the generators, ignoring the shuddering agony of the hull and the equally painful reactions of his men.

"Until we pick up Arrin," he said, "it's got to be cut and run. Thuvis is the first place they'll block off and anything but a direct course on our part will give them time to do it."

They reached their acceleration peak—maximum stress for the fabric of the ship. Joris pushed it over. They prayed.

The observation port began to show a thinning star-field ahead. Wider and wider the areas of darkness spread and the colonies of suns were fewer and more scattered. The red sparks on the radar screens dwindled and faded until only two or three were left—lonely traders, outbound to these isolated systems. Those—and the single spark that brightened always astern.

The hours became a lagging monotony of constant watching, constant strain. Numb from lack of sleep, Trehearne went mechanically through his duties, forgot even to worry about what was going to happen. Yesterday was an eon ago, tomorrow was lost in nothingness. There was only today and he was tired.

It was the same with all of them. Joris seemed neither more nor less exhausted than the rest and Trehearne marveled at the old man's strength.

Shairne remained locked in her cabin. She would not speak to anyone, except the youngster who brought her food, then only to voice a curt thanks.

Ahead the darkness deepened. The main axis of the Milky Way plane was "below" them. Beyond the isolated systems they could glimpse the lightless gulf of utter emptiness. Its black blankness afflicted Trehearne with a creeping horror. It was like seeing the primal Chaos before creation.

At last a dim red sun was centered in the field. It began to grow. The radar screens were empty, save for the one grim following spark that had become almost a flame, ominously bright.

Joris made his calculations and again they prayed.

They completed deceleration in a little less than half the normal time. That was the period during which no one ate and only those who had to remained erect.

Thuvis hung in the sky before them, an idiot sun, devouring the last of its strength and peering with a dull red eye at the cosmic face of death. It was circled by a single world.

"We'll have to make it fast," said Joris harshly. "You be ready, Edri."

The *Mirzim* landed on an arid tableland swept by bitter winds. Quorn stayed to maintain his tense vigil at the radar screens but the rest of them went out, glad of solid ground if only for a few minutes.

The wind-driven dust tore at Trehearne, cutting into his flesh like tiny cold knives. The sky was dusky at midday but there were few stars. Even at night there would be few stars here.

The sullen glare of Thuvis washed the dusty desert world with red and where a deep ravine cleft the tableland the shadows clung like clotted blood. Trehearne could not think of a place that more resembled hell.

Edri had hastened to the lip of the ravine. Trehearne followed and looked down. Below the steep sides, below the ugly screens, was a tangle of pallid vegetation, stunted trees and leprous shrubbery, clustered around warm springs

that smoked like little fumaroles in the chill air. There was a settlement here, three or four small plastic structures surrounded by a wall, outside the wall a pathetic expanse of tilled land.

"They're coming!" cried Edri. "They saw the ship. . . ."

A narrow path led steeply up from the ravine. Men were already tolling along it. Trehearne counted them. Eight, ten, eleven—eleven men, the total population of this world of ultimate exile.

Edri was shouting. His voice echoed back and forth in the ravine with a hollow booming sound. Other shouts answered him. The men on the path began to run. They slipped and staggered in their haste, clawing their way upward. Trehearne could see their white faces strained toward him.

He watched them come—gaunt wind-bitten hopeless men with the greyness of living death upon them, striving up from that deep red-lit prison, answering the call of Edri's voice. He saw their eyes, the eyes of men called back suddenly from that terrible numbing of the mind that is worse than clean destruction.

Edri threw his arms around the man who came first over the rim. He had not been there as long as the others and the stamp was not so deep on him. He turned and shouted at his mates to hurry. His beard and his unkempt hair blew in the wind and his voice was wild.

Edri cried to him, "No time for talk now, Arrin! Is that all of you?"

It was. The line of bearded scarecrows hastened toward the *Mirzim*. Ready hands helped them in.

The voice of Quorn yelled over the intercom, "They're right on top of us! Hurry it up!"

Joris had thrust his way forward to the bridge. He was at his station and waiting before the port was closed.

"Ready for take-off! Watch yourselves!"

His hand reached out for the signal relays. And then Trehearne saw it hesitate and fall back.

From the opening door of the Communications room another voice spoke,

perfectly audible at that short distance—the metallic voice of the receiver.

"We have your range. Do not attempt to take off. We have your range. Do not attempt . . ."

Over Joris' suddenly shrunken shoulders, through the bridge port, Trehearne saw the long slim shape of a cruiser sweep in toward a landing close beside them.

CHAPTER XIV

Toward the Shores of Night

KERREL'S face appeared on the small screen. There was no need now for the ultra-wave and the ordinary visiphone unit had been cut in. Edri and Joris confronted him. Trehearne stood in the doorway, listening. Behind him were the rescued exiles and black despair was on them all.

Kerrel regarded Edri and Joris with weary hatred. He seemed to have learned that being an agent of the Council had its rough side. But there was no slightest hint of leniency in his tone.

"The gun crew has orders to open fire in exactly fifteen minutes," he said. "You have that long to clear your ship, bringing with you neither weapons nor personal gear of any sort." He repeated, "Fifteen minutes precisely."

Joris looked at him with red and sunken eyes. Twenty years of age had come upon him in the last few minutes. He could not seem to bring himself to speak. Edri's hands were clenched so tightly that the fingers were bone white. They moved back and forth, seeking something to strike and not finding it. He too had become old.

"Fourteen minutes," said Kerrel, without emotion. "You're wasting time."

Edri turned abruptly and thrust his way blindly past Trehearne, who caught and held him in the doorway.

"Let go," said Edri viciously and cursed him. "That ravine is deep. I can

step off into it now as well as later. I won't be taken back."

"Hold on," said Trehearne. A sudden wild hope had come to him. He lifted his voice. "Kerrel! Kerrel, can you hear me?" He was out of visual range of the screen.

"Yes, Trehearne, I hear you."

"Then listen! Tell your men to hold their fire. *We have Shairn aboard!*"

Joris' head came up sharply. Edri stopped fighting. And in the screen Kerrel's mirrored face went through the shadings of surprise, shock, then understanding and a wry mirth.

"You have a quick mind, Trehearne," he said. "But it won't do. Thirteen minutes."

"Go and get her, Edri," said Trehearne. His mouth was dry, his body drenched with cold sweat.

Edri plunged away into the corridor. Trehearne went and stood where Kerrel could see him. He smiled and wondered if Kerrel could hear the knocking of his heart against his ribs.

Joris stood motionless, waiting. Kerrel counted off the minutes, and at each count his voice became more strained, his eyes less certain.

There were six minutes left when Edri came back with Shairn and thrust her in front of the screen.

"You see?" said Trehearne. "I wasn't lying."

Kerrel forgot to count. He stared at the girl, the strong lines of his face crumbling into indecision. He said her name once. Suddenly he turned and was gone from the screen. They could hear him shouting somewhere beyond, "Hold your fire! Hold your fire! They have a prisoner aboard."

Trehearne knew then that he had not misjudged the depth of the other's passion. And strangely that knowledge was bitter to him.

Kerrel came into view again, and Shairn cried out, "Kerrel, they're after something more than these Orhist exiles! I think they're—"

Trehearne put his hand over her mouth. "It doesn't matter what she thinks. The only important thing is her

life. How much is it worth to you, Kerrel?"

Kerrel ran his hand nervously over his face and did not answer at once. Trehearne kept his palm firmly on Shairn's mouth.

Kerrel shook his head. "You wouldn't kill her, Trehearne."

"No, I wouldn't," Trehearne said. "But I'm only one and there are others aboard. Eleven men of Thuvis, who feel that one life is very little to pay for escape from this hell-hole. Come on, Kerrel, how much is Shairn worth to you? You can have her—free, clear and alive."

Kerrel asked, "What do you want?"

"A head start."

"It won't do you any good. You can't outrun a cruiser."

Joris said, "We'll take that chance!"

Again Kerrel hesitated. "What are your terms?"

Trehearne said, "You will allow us to take off and we'll guarantee to land Shairn safely on the other side of this planet. You will keep your ship here until you receive our message that that has been done. We will both be able to check each other's actions by radar and if your generators are started before our second take-off we'll know it."

Kerrel gnawed his lip and then asked sullenly, "What assurance have I that you will actually release her?"

"You can take my word for that," Trehearne told him. "Either that or blow her to bits with the rest of us."

There was another long tense moment of silence. And then Kerrel said, "All right." He spoke the words as though they had a taste of vitriol on his tongue.

Joris was out of Communications in one long stride. Kerrel looked at Shairn and cried, "Wait! You must radio your position when you set her down."

"We will."

Trehearne flipped the switch. The screen went blank. The throbbing generators took the ship and lifted it and whirled it away and no gun spoke from the cruiser. Trehearne released his grip on Shairn. Reaction and relief had turned his knees to water, so that it was

difficult to stand against the lurching of the ship.

Shairn turned and looked at him. "You're a fool, Michael," she said, "but I'll give you this. You're not a coward."

HE had her locked in her cabin again and went back to the bridge. Joris was scowling at the projection of the microfilm chart of the planet.

"There," he said and pointed to a huge emptiness. "She'll be safe there until they pick her up—there's no predatory life in these deserts." He glanced up at Trehearne. "Good man," he said. "Me, I was beaten."

Trehearne gave him a wry smile. "Me, I bluffed. From here on, Joris, it's all yours. Where's Edri?"

"Shut in his cabin with Arrin. They know the general sector, clear out at the galaxy's edge. Now they're trying to figure out the true course together." And Joris snorted. "Course! If I can keep one jump ahead of that cruiser I'll be satisfied."

The *Mirzium* skimmed over the darkling world of Thuvis into the starless night. Trehearne sat and brooded, thinking of Shairn, thinking of the two men who were bent over the final calculations of a dream that had balked men for a thousand years.

He thought of what a dream can do to a man, of how far it can lead him away from the good safe life of common sense to the ultimate voids of creation. He hoped that Edri and Arrin would find what they wanted. He hoped they would live to find it.

"Coming down," said Joris. "Better get Shairn a coverall. It's cold there."

Trehearne found a warm coverall in the equipment locker and took it to Shairn's cabin. She put it on and he saw how her face was shadowed by weariness and strain.

She said quietly, "Do you still love me, Michael?"

Her question took him by surprise, and the answer came of itself. "Yes," he said. "I do."

"Then we must stop behaving like two angry children and not throw away

the life we can have together."

He bent his head. "I'm sorry you got caught in this."

"It's as much my fault as yours. I was too quick to lose my temper. I should have stopped to think that the Vardda world was so new to you that you had little to judge it by."

She was not now the mocking Shairn of old. Her voice was full of a sombre passion, a pleading for him to understand.

"Michael, your motives were good—devotion to a friend, reaction against what seemed to you injustice. But surely now you must see how hopeless this all is. I know you're hunting Orthis' ship. You'll never reach it. Kerrel will run you down. It'll all have been for nothing."

It seemed to Trehearne that what she said was very likely true. But he only answered, "It's too late to think about that now."

"No, Michael! You can still save yourself!" She caught him by the shoulders, her hands urgent on his flesh. Her touch could still do things to him. "Leave the ship with me! Let Kerrel pick us both up!"

Trehearne smiled mirthlessly. "Kerrel would like that—taking me back to a prison."

"It doesn't have to be prison!" Shairn exclaimed. "You can say you pretended to join Joris and Edri only to save me! I'll back you up and not Kerrel nor anyone else can disprove it. You'll walk out free on Llyrdis!"

It crossed his mind that he could do that. It would all fit. It was an out.

"You won't be letting your friends down, either," Shairn insisted. "They'll go on without you. You've done all you can for them."

She clung to him. Her mouth begged him with a silent language of its own.

He took her arms slowly from around him and thrust her back and she caught her breath at the pain of his grip.

"No," he said. And again, "No, Shairn."

She stood back and looked at him steadily. "You could go back to the Sil-

ver Tower with me but you won't—and for what? So that peoples you've never met on worlds you'll never see can someday fly the stars?"

"There was a man named Trehearne on the world Earth who got his chance to fly the stars," he said. "I thought that others should have their chance too. I have to play it out now."

She was silent and then the dropping speed of the ship told them that it was almost over. Trehearne took her down to the airlock chamber. They stood there together, not finding anything more to say, and all that had been between them came silently and mocked them with the pain of vanished days.

The *Mirzím* scraped her keel softly on a yielding surface and was still. Trehearne opened the port, looking out on the dark windy desert.

Shairn spoke then. "A strange beginning for us, Michael, and now an even stranger ending. You told me once I would be sorry I ever met you. I am."

He held out his hand to help her down and the pressure of her fingers was like something tearing at his heart.

She looked up at him, a small lonely figure in the vast dark. He thought her lips moved but the wind came between them and took the words away and he had none of his own for answer.

The warning bell jarred harshly in his ears. He closed the port and she was gone.

Joris' voice roared from the bridge, through the intercom. "Flatten out, all! This is the only start we'll get on Kerrel and I've got to pile it on!"

The cruel hand of acceleration crushed Trehearne down. He lay on the scored plates of the deck and that last vision of Shairn's white face remained with him to remind him of all that he had had and lost.

He said her name over and over in the silence of the empty lock and his mouth was filled with the bitter taste of dust. The *Mirzím* leaped through space like a wild thing, driving toward the sector that was the goal of a thousand-year hope and quest, toward the galaxy edge and the shores of outer night.

CHAPTER XV

World of Death

THEY had stepped clear out to the edge of the galaxy, where the fringing stars were lost in the outer void and the dead suns swept forever through the entombing dark, where even the memory of creation was gone, blotted out by unimaginable time.

Trehearne tried to remember how long it had been since they had taken off from Thuviv. He gave it up. It didn't matter. He peered with aching blood-shot eyes into the lightless seas that lie between the island universes and tried to remember why he had come here. And that too was dim in his mind.

Edri was bent over a table that had been set up in the bridge. He no longer looked like Edri. He seemed to have been working for a million years. Arrin sat near him. He held his head between his bony hands, a bearded mummy embalmed upright, hardly retaining the semblance of life.

There were charts under Edri's hands, endless sheets of calculations, endless miles of figures. Joris studied them, bending beside Edri. His broad jowls hung down now over his wrinkled collar. His eyes had sunk deep under ridges of bone, peering out as from two shadowed caves.

Edri was talking in a voice that came from far away. The words reached Trehearne in droning snatches from beyond the fog of weariness.

"—so our only way to locate Orthiv's ship was to triangulate its position from two separate bearings on it. One bearing was the course of that life-skiff Orthiv sent in with his last message, allowing for aberrations caused by the gravitational field of stars. The other bearing was Orthiv's course in his last sight. We couldn't get that till I found the part of the Lankar manuscript that Arrin didn't have."

Trehearne heard someone ask, "Who

was Lankar?"

"One of Orthiv's last pursuers, who left a secret log of the pursuit to ease his guilty conscience. Enough of it survived—"

Joris said, "The hell with Lankar. Get on with it."

"We had to push the star-maps back in time—galactic motion, star streaming, a million complicated problems of relative motion and proper motion, back five hundred years and then another five hundred and then correlate them. That work's been going on a long, long time."

Edri drew a long breath that was coupled with a racking yawn.

"The charts indicate an unnamed dark star following an orbit here, outside the main stream of the galaxy." He traced a line with his finger. "These charts for the fringing stars are incomplete as you know. There's nothing to draw anyone out to these godforsaken regions and they've never been properly explored."

"But according to our calculations that star was in the right place a thousand years ago and Orthiv's life-skiff was launched from there. Now the wheel of the galaxy has turned so, taking the dark star with it . . ."

He laid his hand on the crossing of two marked lines on the chart. "That's our destination, Joris. If we're right the ship of Orthiv is there. If we're wrong—well, somebody else will have to try again in another thousand years."

He remained standing, silent, his hands braced on the table, too tired to move. Joris rubbed his bleary eyes and began to read the coordinates aloud from the chart. Mechanically the Second Officer set up the combination on the finder.

Joris moved heavily back to the pilot chair. He set the *Mirivim* on her new course. Then he spoke over the intercom to Radar. "What's the position of the cruiser?"

A croaking voice answered him. He listened. "Closer," he said. "Always closer."

Trehearne's mind turned back to its constant half-waking nightmare. The

cruiser, following, hanging on, dogged, persistent, relentless. He lived over painfully every maneuver, every trick by which Joris had managed to delay their pursuer, to grasp a little more time, a little more distance.

He remembered the last-minute plunge into a dark nebula when the cruiser was almost close enough to range them. He remembered the turning and twisting and doubling inside the blackness of the cloud, where the absorptive cosmic dust fogged the radar. They had lost the cruiser there. They had got clear away and for a time they had hoped. They had made it to this fringe sector—and then the red spark showed again on the screen, coming closer, always closer.

There were times when Trehearne forgot the physical fact of the cruiser, a ship of ordinary metal officered and manned by ordinary Varóda spacemen. At such times it seemed to him that the *Mírzim* was pursued by a demonic nemesis striding naked across the plunging gulfs—a nemesis wearing Kerrel's face with Kerrel's hands outstretched to grasp them.

Sometimes Shairn's face was there beside Kerrel's, white, unreadable, a misty cloud that blotted out the stars.

The hoarse voice of the radar man croaked at intervals. The ship fled on toward the dark star.

Joris turned around. The table had been taken out, the charts and the toilsome calculations rolled up and shoved away. Arrin lay on the deck against the after bulkhead, sleeping. He would not leave the bridge until he knew whether or not his life and work had gone for nothing. Edri sat beside him. He was not asleep.

Joris said flatly, "It isn't going to work."

Edri said nothing. He waited.

Joris went on, as though he hated what he was saying, but had to say it. "Look at it. As soon as I start deceleration the cruiser will begin to cut our lead to nothing. And they're stressed for less deceleration time than I can make without tearing the *Mírzim* to

pieces. What'll happen? They'll be on us before we can even begin our search."

Edri nodded. He leaned back against the bulkhead and closed his eyes. He said, "They know now what we're after. What do you suppose Kerrel would do if he found the ship of Orthis?"

NOBODY answered that. There was no need to answer. A heavy silence followed, during which Trehearne thought of the messages that had gone out across the galaxy from the cruiser's ultra-wave—guarded messages that betrayed by their very sparseness the desperate nature of this mission, urgent requests for other Council cruisers to close up with all speed.

The others were still too far away to matter. Whatever happened would have happened before they could come up. Kerrel was going to finish this alone.

Edri said, "What are we going to do?" Joris rubbed his big hand over his stubbled face and blinked, and said, "Our only chance, if Orthis' ship and secret are really there, is to get the ultra-wave equipment to it in time for what we planned."

He went on slowly. "I think the life-skiff could carry that equipment. If we drop the skiff it would travel on constant velocity for a while before it would have to decelerate. Meanwhile I could swing the *Mírzim* on another course, running back along the rim of the galaxy, away from the dark star. The cruiser would follow me. Chances are, with their radar concentrated on me to catch my lateral-impulse pattern, they wouldn't notice the skiff at all when she started deceleration."

He sighed. "They'd catch us, of course. But the *Mírzim* isn't going to keep on forever after the beating she's taken. The generators are in bad shape. But we could keep going long enough to give you time."

Edri thought it over. "I don't like it," he said. "But it looks as though it's that or nothing."

Joris was muttering under his breath about maximum loads and capacity. "The main ultra-wave equipment," he

said, "and three men. The skiff would take that. We'd keep the auxiliary ultra-wave set here, of course."

"Who can you spare? You'll need all your flight technicians."

"He can spare me," said Trehearne. "I'm the most nonessential. And I can still stand up if I have to."

Joris nodded. "Yes. Quorn has to go to handle the ultra-wave, of course—and he can handle the skiff all right."

"Who else?"

"You," said Joris.

Edri looked at the sleeping Arrin. "He ought to go instead. He's worked for it longer than I have." It was obvious that Arrin was unable to go anywhere and Edri sighed. He pulled himself erect. "All right, then. Come on, Trehearne. We'll start loading."

The skiff was contained in a cell of its own, sunk in the side of the *Mirzim*—a miniature starship with a flight range long enough to give the crew of a disabled ship a chance to reach safety.

Trehearne routed out every man that was off-station and could stand erect. Following Edri's orders he stripped the skiff of everything they wouldn't need. Quorn oversaw the removal of the heavy ultra-wave radio equipment from the *Mirzim* and its loading into the skiff. He seemed unnecessarily particular about it. Trehearne swore and sweated but got it done.

He went back up to the bridge with Edri and Quorn. Joris studied his instruments.

"Pretty soon," he said. He gave Quorn his flight instructions. "Trehearne is still a lubber," he remarked, "but he knows enough by now to give you a hand when you need it."

Edri said, "Surrender as soon as you're challenged, Joris."

Joris laughed, a pallid ghost of his old loud roar. "I will. Right now, I'm too tired to die." He glanced again at the instruments. "Time to go."

They looked at each other, these fatigue-drunken red-eyed men whom a dream had dragged to the edge of the universe, and could find nothing to say in this moment of their parting.

"Good luck," muttered Edri then and turned away.

"You're the ones who're going to need it," Joris called after them.

Trehearne went through after Quorn and Edri into the skiff. Quorn took its controls and waited, watching his chronometer. His hand grasped loosely about a red-switch marked RELEASE.

He closed the switch.

There was a squeal and grind of machinery, an instant of extreme pressure, then the skiff had left the *Mirzim*. Though they could not see, they knew that skiff and ship had already diverged far apart at their unthinkable speeds.

Quorn watched his instruments while Trehearne and Edri sat looking at nothing, afraid to sleep lest they should not be able to wake again.

Presently Quorn started his forward generator and began deceleration.

Trehearne lost track of things. Part of the following time he was unconscious or nearly so. The rest of it he observed as in a confused dream. He thought of how he had once been wild for starflight. But he managed to do the things that Quorn required of him.

The port cleared. It had no adapter and functioned as a port only at visual speeds. Now, ahead of them, Trehearne could see a huge bulk of darkness against the outer dark, illumined only faintly by the galactic light.

"There it is," said Edri. "The dark star." His voice shook a little.

They swept closer, still slowing down. "It has a planet," said Quorn. "There, catching the starshine—"

"Two," said Trehearne. "I see two."

TWO dimly gleaming bodies, dead worlds clinging to a long dead sun out here at Galaxy edge. The glow of the Milky Way touched them, the ghostly glow of candles at a wake.

Edri whispered, "We'll try the outer planet first. Give me a hand, Trehearne."

They crawled aft between the crowded banks of equipment to a detector that had come from the *Mirzim's* hold. Edri fumbled at it.

"In Orthis' day they used radioactive fuel, of course," Edri mumbled. We calculated its half-life. Even supposing his bunkers were nearly empty there should be enough left to register on this counter. A teacupful would do it."

Trehearne helped Edri adjust the shielding apparatus on the mechanism until the needle was still.

"What about radioactive deposits on the planets themselves?" he asked.

"We get a break there. Too old. The last radioactive element will have died millions of years ago."

He raised his voice. "Keep the skiff as low as you dare, Quorn. The counter has a wide sweep. Take it slow."

He crouched over the telltale. Trehearne moved forward again.

The planet was small, less than two thousand miles in diameter. Between the intense gloom and the motion of the skiff he could see nothing but a black featureless desolation, rifted here and there with white that he took to be the frozen remains of an atmosphere. He thought what it would be like to land there and shivered.

They swept the planet carefully. The telltale needle of the counter remained motionless. Edri said heavily, "We'll go on. Pray we find it on the other planet. Pray Orthis didn't come down on the dead star. It would take forever to find him there."

Quorn fed in power and cleared away. The port dimmed again and Edri moaned.

"He's about out," Quorn said. "Looks like whatever is done we'll have to do the most of it."

The second world was larger than the first by three times or more. It was not content to be featureless. It thrust up gnawed and shattered ranges, stripped bones of mountains sheathed in frozen gases. It showed forth dreary plains coated white with congealed air, glistening faintly in the light of the great galactic wheel.

It turned toward the watchers the naked beds of its vanished oceans, sucked dry to the deepest gulf. It displayed the scars of its long dying, the

brutal wounds of internal explosion, the riven gashes of a shrinking crust. A hideous world that seemed to remember beauty still and resent the cruelty of death.

Edri whispered, "Pray—pray that the damned thing moves." Instead of doing so he cursed the needle that it did not stir.

"Keep going," said Trehearne.

They kept going.

The needle quivered.

Edri let out a hoarse cry. "Easy! Easy!" Tears began to run down his cheeks. He sobbed. The needle jerked.

"Circle!" Trehearne shouted to Quorn. "Circle till we get it centered."

He ran his tongue over his lips and tasted salt and wondered how it got there.

Quorn swung the skiff around in a tightening spiral. "Now," said Edri. "Let her down."

He scrambled forward, thrusting his face against the port, trying to see. Quorn switched on a landing light. The blue-white blaze lit up a circular area below, the light intensely bright, the shadows intensely black. Its beam went sharply down.

They followed it. It was as though the skiff were poised on that pillar of light, sinking downward.

They were above a planetary surface racked and tortured by final diastrophism. Towering miles high, loomed a mighty cliff of riven rock. In front of it a chasm yawned and beyond the chasm a drear and tumbled landscape stretched dim under the great sword of the galaxy.

They started down along the face of the titanic cliff. Looking at the chasm at its base Trehearne began to get uneasy.

"There's no ship here," he said. "The counter must have picked up some last radiation from deep down in that chasm."

Quorn agreed with him. But Edri said, "No, keep going." Trehearne could feel him tremble.

They went on down the face of the giant, looming wall.

Trehearne pointed suddenly. "Isn't

that a ledge?"

The hard bright edge of the beam cut across a shelf of rock that jutted out halfway down the cliff. Quorn swung the skiff in closer. Something on the ledge glistened dully under the light.

Quorn let the skiff drop with a sickening rush. Detail sprang clear—shattered rock, ancient magma, puddles of frozen air in the hollows. And among them an ovoid shape, symmetrical, smooth, giving back a metallic glint.

Edri said the name of Orthis, as though it were a prayer.

CHAPTER XVI

The Star-Born

QUORN had set the skiff down on the ledge. They had scrambled into pressure suits. They had forgotten that they were already three-quarters dead.

Awkward in the clumsy armor, stumbling on the jagged rock, slipping on the patches of frozen air, they clawed their way toward the goal they had crossed a galaxy and gambled their lives to find. Above them the ghastly cliff leaned outward against nothingness, below them the abyss plunged down into the dead heart of a world. Beyond them was spreading desolation and in the black sky the awful rim of the Galaxy lay like a blazing sword of light.

Trehearne was aware of the silence. He had never been on an airless world before. He felt the impact as his metal boot struck against a shard of rock but it made no sound. All he could hear was the harsh breathing of Quorn and Edri, transmitted to him by the helmet audio.

The ship of Orthis loomed before them, lightless, lifeless, cradled in the ashes of destruction. It had a look of patience. It had lain here waiting for a thousand years, untouched by time or rust, entombed in silence and the endless night, eternal as the dead suns that rove forever in uncorrupting space. It seemed that it could wait until the end

of time, cherishing its trust.

Awe came upon Trehearne and with it a kind of fear.

They found the lock port. It stood wide open, the valves still clean and shining. The light of Trehearne's belt-lamp showed him, on the floor of the lock chamber, the scored marks of a man's boots. They might have been made only yesterday.

The three men paused outside that open port. They looked at each other through their glassite helmets and their faces were strange. Then Trehearne stepped aside, and Quorn also. Edri bent his head. He moved forward to the port.

Silently he clambered into the ship of Orthis.

The others were close behind him. Their belt lamps cut hard slashes of light across the dark. They passed through the lock chamber and came into a corridor running fore and aft. It was utterly still. The heavy drag of their boots on the metal deck made not the slightest sound. Trehearne could hear the beating of his own blood in his ears, the dull throbbing of his heart.

The whole after section of the ship was a laboratory. Much of the delicate equipment was shattered, either by speed-vibration or a hard landing. Trehearne could not make sense out of any of it but Quorn said, "He was studying interstellar radiation. Most of that stuff is beyond me, but I can see that much."

One section of the laboratory contained a complicated mass of coils and prisms and intricate banks of reflectors arranged around what must have been a great central tube. There was a small platform at the focal point of the mechanism, fitted with straps. Along one bulkhead was a stack of metal cages for experimental animals. Several of the little creatures were still there. They had died, the quick death of airlessness and cold, but their bodies were still perfect. They had, then, survived the voyage.

Edri's voice came over the helmet audio. "Nothing for us here," he said. "No good trying to figure out this apparatus—they couldn't do that in all the

years they had the ship impounded. Most of it Orthis designed and built himself."

Trehearne was still looking at the small furry bodies in the cages, lying as though in sleep. Somehow they made the betrayal of Orthis and his dream doubly cruel—that even beasts could be given the freedom of the stars, that so many generations of the races of many worlds had been denied.

He turned and went forward with the others. They glanced into the living quarters. They were small and spare. The coverings of the bunk were rumpled and the pillow still retained the hollow where a man's head had lain. Trehearne shivered. They passed on to the bridge.

Trehearne realized then what an act of heroism it had been to push this antique ship to the limits of the Galaxy and beyond. The instruments were so few and rudimentary, the system of controls so crude. There was a locking device, an Iron Mike that could keep the ship on its course without human attention. The science of starflight had come a long way since then.

He remembered that this craft had not been built for starflight but rather as a spatial laboratory. And he wondered that it had survived at all.

THERE was a door in the after bulkhead of the bridge. He went to it and looked through into the cabin beyond. The beam of his belt lamp speared brightly into the immemorial dark.

Trehearne uttered a hoarse cry. The others ran to him. He was clinging to the bulkhead then, the cold sweat pouring down his face, his eyes staring. They looked past him, over his shoulder.

The cabin was small. It was fitted as a library, crammed with metal cases of books, some of them microfilm volumes of an ancient type, others thick ragged notebooks. There was a great table, bolted down, and on the table was a metal box.

Behind the table was a man.

He sat in a metal chair. His right arm was outstretched, clenched fist resting squarely on the metal box as though de-

manding that it be noticed. His head was lifted, looking toward the glassite port that showed the black sky slashed across with the mighty fires of the Galaxy.

He was an old man. The years of his life had not been kind to him. They had shaped his face as though from dark iron, gouging the lines deep, hammering the ridges hard, driving out all traces of youth and hope to forge a mask of bitter anger and reproach and in the end despair.

It seemed to Trehearne that he could read a whole life history in that face, caught forever in the moment of death, when surely the man was crying out upon whatever gods he worshipped, demanding *Why?*

Edri made a strange harsh sound in his throat. "Orthis," he whispered. "*Orthis!* For a moment I thought . . ."

"So did I," Trehearne admitted. "He does look alive, all right."

Here in the airless utter cold, death held no decay, no change. But there was more to it than the lack of physical corruption. The fire in this man had burned so deep that even death could not erase its scars.

"I think," said Trehearne, "that he wanted whoever found him to look inside that box." He suddenly wanted to get away from this funeral ship.

They went in and he reached out and tried to move Orthis' hand from off the box. The arm was frozen rigid as a steel bar. Trehearne gave it up, and worked the box out from under it.

It was unlocked. He lifted up the lid. The lamplight showed a notebook bound in cloth. On top of it lay a loose sheet of paper with a few angular lines of writing. Edri read aloud:

"I have clung to life this much longer to write down for the first time all my formulae, complete and simplified so that they can be understood and used. In them lies the freedom of the stars. I, the first of the Star-Born, was rejected by the greed and fear of the planet-born before but it will not be always so. . . ."

"I shall not see what comes. My ship has already flown too far, I have little

fuel and I am old. Therefore I have set the airlock control and in a few minutes it will open, a swift death and better than a slow one.

"After that, I shall wait. What I dreamed will never be forgotten. Someday will come others who believe as I do that the stars are for all men!"

Edri fell silent and then he whispered, "He watched the Galaxy for a thousand years and waited."

Trehearne forced himself to break the spell. "We only have a little time!" he warned. He shut the box. "This is what you need. Let's go."

They went out of the silent ship. Trehearne looked up at the flaming river of stars in the sky and thought what a mighty dream the first of Star-Born men had carried with him into the long night.

He began to run toward the skiff, holding the box tight. A sudden panic of haste came over him. It seemed to him that Orthis had given them this trust with his own hands. If they failed now for lack of time . . .

He shouted at the others, thrust them on, harried them into the skiff. They took off from the ledge. They did not want to be near the ship of Orthis when they did what they were going to do. Quorn sent the light craft racing across the dead world, searching for a place to land.

"Keep your pressure suits on and your helmets ready," he said.

Edri bent over the notebook from the metal box, tremblingly reading.

"It's all here—the equations, the formulae, the instructions," he said hoarsely. "I don't understand them but others will!"

He looked at Trehearne with red-rimmed eyes. "Orthis has a foreword here. And he was the first of the Star-Born. The mutation began spontaneously on that first long voyage. The constant vibration of speed—not speed as we know it now but more than the human body was used to, speed approaching the velocity of light—and the impact of interstellar radiation on the living cell. That's what did it. Orthis was the end-product of four generations of

breeding under those conditions.

"He was nature's first attempt to create Galactic Man, to readjust the human body to meet new needs. And the thing he labored on so long was the reduction of that long natural process to a workable formula that could accomplish the change in one generation instead of four. He found it, of course. And it's all here."

Quorn broke in, "This place looks as good as any! At least it'll give us a little more cover."

He was taking the skiff down carefully toward the flat bed of an ancient watercourse. The channel was filled now with frozen air but in bygone ages it had gouged a deep canyon in the rock, leaving eroded holes and overhangs. Quorn worked the skiff into one of these, under the canyon wall.

Edri was going over his book again, making sure, dazed with the hypnosis of exhaustion and the need to be right. He did not dare to fumble or read a figure wrong. Trehearne realized the weight of responsibility.

Trehearne himself went aft with Quorn and began to struggle with the ultra-wave equipment. He was possessed by a demon of urgency, and he had not the slightest idea what he was doing. Quorn gave orders, and Trehearne obeyed. Hooking the power leads to the skiff's generators was the hardest task of all.

Somehow they finished it. They sat Edri down in front of the transmitter with his book. Quorn adjusted switches. The generators hummed, feeding power into the big transmitter. Edri blinked, moistening dry lips.

Quorn said, "I've got it on the emergency band, covering all channels. Every ultra-wave receiver within its range will pick it up—including non-Vardda communications centers. Also, the minute Kerrel picks it up he'll be able to center us and come in on our beam. So make it fast!"

Edri nodded, glancing nervously at Trehearne. Quorn made the last dial setting, and then spoke harshly into the transmitter.

"G-One! G-One! Emergency. Request

clearance all channels. Use your recorders! G-One, clear all channels. . . ."

Edri drew an unsteady breath and leaned forward, and spoke rapidly. "I may not have time to repeat. We have found the ship of Orthis. *We have found the ship of Orthis.* Here follow the formulae for the Vardda mutation."

IT was as short as that. He began to read from the notebook, going fast but taking pains to make each syllable clear beyond doubt.

Quorn hung tensely over his dials. Trehearne sat motionless. His muscles quivered. Sweat ran into his eyes. Edri's voice went on.

Suddenly, Quorn's hoarse voice cried, "*Hurry!* Kerrel's cruiser has already picked it up and they're trying to jam us! They'll be close enough in minutes to blank us out!"

Edri's face became that of a hunted thing. His voice rose shrill, racing desperately to the last page. He started then to repeat.

"Too late—we're blanked out!" Quorn yelled. "That means Kerrel is close enough to—"

The skiff was suddenly shaken as though by a giant hand. Then it shuddered again, harder. Quorn leaped up. "Shell-bursts! Kerrel's ranging us down the canyon!"

Trehearne tried to thrust Edri's helmet over his head. Edri fought him off, clinging to the transmitter. Quorn helped pull him around.

"You're jammed anyway!" he yelled. "You're not getting through! Come on!"

Between them they got Edri's helmet on. The skiff was racked again, and something broke with a crackle of exploding glass.

Trehearne locked his own helmet. Through the audio he could hear Quorn shouting something about the airlock and getting clear. Half dragging Edri, Trehearne began to run, staggering against the bulkheads.

They reached the airlock and got it open. Out on the canyon floor light blossomed and died. Great chunks of rock struck silently against the skiff. The

deck leaped up under their feet. Trehearne saw Quorn fall outward. Then he too was pitched out of the lock, carrying Edri with him.

He hit the ground hard. He thought his helmet was broken. And then there was nothing but darkness.

When he came to the cruiser had landed close by and men in spacesuits were coming toward the skiff, carrying weapons in their hands.

Trehearne got to his feet. The moving beams of the belt lamps showed him faces inside the glassite helmets. One of them belonged to Kerrel. It came toward him and looked at Edri, motionless on the ground, and at Quorn, crawling on hands and knees.

It said, "I ought to kill you all."

Trehearne became aware of a smaller figure in a spacesuit, a figure that carried no weapon and had the face of Shairn inside the glassite. He heard her voice crying through the audio, "Michael, are you all right?" And then, bitterly, "Oh, Michael, you fool!"

Kerrel turned. He said furiously, "I told you to stay in the cruiser."

She answered, "I'm not under your orders, Kerrel—not yet."

Men entered the skiff to search it. Other men picked up Quorn and Edri and carried them away. Kerrel looked at Trehearne and gestured with his long weapon that was like a gun.

"Walk ahead of me, Trehearne."

Trehearne began to walk ahead of Kerrel and Shairn. It was dark in the canyon, whose walls cut off the galactic light. He could hardly see the cruiser he was going toward. But the beam of Kerrel's belt-lamp was squarely upon him. The skin of his back crawled.

"You'll get this one cheap, Kerrel," said Trehearne. "You won't even have to promise the price of a ship."

"Do your talking when you get aboard," said Kerrel. "Go on."

"What about the *Mirzim*?"

"We overhauled her," Kerrel answered. "Your friends are all safely under hatches. Keep going, Trehearne. Don't try any tricks."

The surface was rough underfoot.

Trehearne was still groggy and the light beam swung, making a shifting pattern of whiteness and black shadow. He stumbled and went to his hands and knees.

"Ah," said Kerrel's voice, with infinite satisfaction. "A clear attempt to escape."

SHAIRN'S voice gasped out, "No, Kerrel!"

Trehearne swung around, clawing at the frozen surface. Shairn was clinging to Kerrel's arm. He struck her twice with his free arm. Then, raging, he raised his knee and drove it to knock her back.

Trehearne slammed solidly against Kerrel's turning body. He got both hands on the long weapon. Kerrel was cursing Shairn in a low hard undertone.

Trehearne wrenched the weapon away from Kerrel. He raised it like a club and brought it down on the gleaming crown of the helmet. He brought it down hard. A lot went into that blow, a lot of memories.

The glassite cracked.

Kerrel had time to scream, just once.

Trehearne dropped the weapon. Men came running toward him. Shairn had risen to her feet again. She came and stood against him so that the men would not fire. Trehearne looked down at the ghastly face inside the riven helmet. He shivered and turned away.

Shairn was saying over and over, "Kerrel tried to murder him. There was no escape attempt. I'll swear to it."

The men pulled her away and gathered around Trehearne. One of them said, "This isn't going to help you much, killing an agent of the Council." He turned on Shairn. He was a tired man. "All right!" he shouted. "We're not going to do anything! You can tell your story when you get to Llyrdis." He gave Trehearne a shove. "Get on, there."

Trehearne plodded on to the cruiser. He was put into a locked room with Edri and Quorn and Joris and two other men from the *Mírzin*. Edri was still dazed. Joris looked at them. He was an old man, centuries old, but hope lived in

him still.

"Did you do it?" he cried. "Did you find the ship?"

Trehearne said, "We found it." He turned to Quorn. He reached out and caught him by the wrists and asked, "Did we do it? Did we get the message through?"

Quorn's mouth trembled. "I think there's a chance we did. Kerrel's jamming came in on us so fast. But I think . . ."

He suddenly wrenched his hands away, his face agonized. "How do I know if we got through? Oh God, how do I know?"

CHAPTER XVII

Galactic Man

THE voyage was ending. They had known from the long period of deceleration that it was ending, and now the last pressures, and the small, grinding shocks as the cruiser settled into its dock, told them that they were again on Llyrdis.

The bells rang, and the throb of the generators gave way to an unfamiliar silence. They waited, then. And nothing happened. The hours went by and nothing happened.

Trehearne said finally, "They're not even going to remove us from the cruiser. They'll take us off to wherever we're bound for without even hearing us."

Edri shook his head. "No. Vardda law sentences no man without formal trial."

They could see nothing, hear nothing. Until, at last, the door of the room was unlocked. There were officers and guards—many guards, all of them armed. Their faces told nothing.

"You will come with us," said the young captain of guards soberly.

"Where?" demanded Joris. "To Llyrdis prison or—"

"All communication with the prisoners forbidden," clipped the young captain. "You will come with us."

It seemed strange to Trehearne to walk again on unmoving floors, corridors, decks—on a planet.

The tawny glare of Aldebaran was dazzling when they filed out of the cruiser. The air seemed unnaturally damp, heavy with the salt tang of the sea.

He and Joris and Edri, the first to emerge, looked around with a throb of eagerness, of half-hope. They could not see much. The cruiser had landed in a closed-off sector and there were other guards waiting out here beside a number of ultra-cars.

But Trehearne could hear. He could hear all the usual hum and din and clangor of the vast spaceport, the grind of cranes and rumble of trams, the scream of a fast planet-flyer coming in. And then the *whoosh* of a great bulk hurtling upward, a star-ship outbound for distant suns. And in the distance the shining towers of Llyrdis city still magnificently challenged the heavens.

Trehearne felt a sick sense of futility. All this vast ordered turmoil of routine and activity, all the galaxy-wide trade that centered here, the thousand-year solidity of Vardda commercial monopoly—how could he have dreamed that a pitifully faint and aborted radio call could ever shake it? The faces of his friends showed him how their last hope had begun to wane.

"The cars," said the young captain. "You four go in the first one."

Edri found his voice. "What about Arrin?"

"I am permitted to tell you that your comrade has been removed to the hospital and is in good condition."

Joris said nothing. Trehearne saw his sunken eyes looking across the spaceport and thought how it must be for him to come back so to this place where for years he had sat with his hands guiding the Vardda ships that came and went.

The car took them out of the spaceport fast. Trehearne saw that other cars, with guards alone in them, ran unobtrusively along ahead of and behind them.

And nothing was changed in Llyrdis. The peacock city preened itself beneath

the sun, iridescent, splendid, its streets thronged with the smiling Vardda and the other stranger races—echoing with music, brilliant with color.

They passed a Vardda man and girl who stood, laughing as they talked. It was then that Trehearne ceased altogether to hope.

"We're going to the Council Hall," Edri said presently.

Joris nodded somberly. "I could have told you that. As a Council member, I have to be formally impeached and removed before charges against me can be pressed."

He added grimly, "Old Ristin, the chairman, won't weep over that. We tangled pretty often, in the past."

The Council Hall sat amid a crowded nexus of governmental buildings. It dominated Llyrdis, not by size, but by age. It was a gray old pile, without beauty but with the massiveness and solidity of eternal things.

Its courts and corridors and staring officials Trehearne saw only vaguely. They slid over his vision, and nothing seemed entirely tangible until, in an anteroom, Shairn's face leaped real to his eyes.

She had been waiting to see him pass, he knew. Her face was white and strained, and she said nothing, but her eyes said, "*Michael! Michael!*"

He looked back at her as they went on and he wondered what she read in his own eyes. And then they had entered the deliberative chamber itself.

IT was not large and not crowded—a half-moon-shaped hall with something more than a hundred Vardda in its chairs. Of the blur of faces turned toward him, most were grave, some curious, some open in their hatred.

Ristin, the chairman, was a magnificent white-haired old Lucifer who disdained the petty vanity of pretending that this was a routine matter.

"This Council is not a judicial body," he said. "This criminal charge against you—piracy, resisting of authority, murder—will be handled by the regular courts. We are here investigating a mat-

ter urgent to the state."

"As for murder—" Trehearne began savagely but the chairman interrupted.

"I said the criminal charges will be examined later. The lady Shairn has already made her deposition, I understand. But what concerns us here is the much graver offense against the Vardda community."

Joris got up, thrusting his gray head forward like an old mastiff's. He growled, "Since this is an investigation, you can't legally carry it out without hearing us."

Ristin said grimly, "The Coordinator of the Port was always good at making himself heard. But you will have to wait this time, Joris." He looked up at the watching Vardda faces as he added, "The problem of your personal offense is not foremost. What concerns us most urgently is the general policy to be adopted by the Council."

Trehearne hardly heard. That glimpse of Shairn had done things to him and his mind was far away. He wondered vaguely why Edri, who had sat sagging heavily beside him, suddenly stiffened, why Edri convulsively grasped his wrist.

Ristin was continuing, "Therefore I emphasize again that we of the Council must not let any emotion of resentment sway our judgment. We are elected to serve the best interests of the Vardda as a whole and we must let no other considerations affect our decision."

Then Joris laughed. His head came up, and his bellowing laughter echoed and re-echoed from the vaulted roof. He swung around to Trehearne and Edri and Quorn, and his eyes were blazing now. "By God, you did it after all!"

Trehearne, still only half understanding, felt a white-hot thrill. Edri had begun to tremble violently.

Ristin's cool voice cut in. "Believe me, your exultation is premature. Nevertheless there is no purpose in concealing the fact that your actions have presented us with an unprecedentedly grave problem."

Quorn said hoarsely to Trehearne, "Don't you get it? Our message went through!"

Trehearne understood then. The gravity of the watching faces, the bitter hatred in some of them, the strong leadership the old chairman was wielding to conquer the crisis—all these belied the everyday appearance of Llyrdis that had been the death-knell of his hopes.

Through them, after a thousand years, the voice of Orthhis had spoken to the Galaxy. And it had been heard—somewhere it had been heard.

Ristin was saying, "So far only vague rumor and hearsay is abroad. Every operator who might have heard the broadcast has been warned not to repeat it but there are bound to be Orthists among them. The fact that non-Vardda worlds possess ultra-wave receivers for use in their commerce with us is an even more serious matter.

"It stands thus—that in spite of the news-services cooperation with us on the matter it is slowly becoming public knowledge that Orthhis' secret was found and broadcast. At least three recordings of it have been found and two written copies. We can assume that there are more."

Joris said grimly, "In other words—the secret is out and everyone will soon know that—and what are you going to do about it?"

"The Coordinator of the Port has summed it up," Ristin agreed, coolly. "What shall we do about it?"

A tall Vardda leaped up and cried, "I suggest that the first thing we do is to execute these traitors!"

There was a fierce chorus of agreement from a few dozen voices. Ristin rapped sharply for order.

"I have reminded you that our paramount consideration is the ultimate best interests of our people! Let us have no more such outbreaks."

An older Vardda man rose in the tiers and said quietly, "Before I advance my suggestion I should admit that I have always had secret Orthist sympathies. I don't think that I am the only one here. You must allow for that."

He went on, "I would have liked long ago to see this unnatural monopoly ended. Now our hand has been forced. I

suggest that our best and wisest course is to act at once—to declare publicly that we Vardda are going to give the secret to the whole galaxy.

"The secret is out anyway. But by acting quickly we can take credit for it. We can aver that the broadcast was made with our consent. Remember, in a few generations other worlds will be flying the stars—and we do not want them cherishing a legacy of hatred for us then!"

Trehearne, listening, smiled grimly. "Politics don't change much across the Galaxy."

"But it's all we hoped for!" Edri whispered. "It would work too."

DISCUSSION, angry debate, had sprung up. It went on and on, passionate voices accusing and denying, Ristin sternly maintaining order, bringing back the argument to the main issue time after time. Finally, in a lull of the disputing voices, Joris swung around and faced the Council.

"Now listen to me," the old man roared. "You'd think the way some of you talk that this meant the end of the Vardda, the end of Llyrdia, the end of everything. That's utter asininity."

"In the first place mutations don't take place overnight. It will be a generation or two before the other races start going out between the stars in any numbers."

Trehearne saw that sink home. The Vardda Council, being human, could not worry too deeply for long about a future they wouldn't see.

"And furthermore," Joris bellowed, "when every half-baked folk in the Galaxy does take to starflight, does that mean the great Vardda trade is ruined forever? Listen! We Vardda were the first to go out to the stars. *The first!* Do you think all the lubberly races of the galaxy can compete with us out there? Do you think so?"

He caught them with that, with the Vardda pride, the Vardda glory. Trehearne saw the strained faces changing. Not all of them but many.

Joris paused before he said his final

word. "Do you think there will ever be a time when we Vardda can't hold our own?"

There was not much talk after that. There were questions, protests, doubts, but little more argument. All the arguments had been spoken.

"We have to decide this now or never," Ristin told them. "If we delay longer there will not be a choice."

Trehearne heard the resolution read and the voting and the result. Not easily could the Vardda yield! Forty-three voted against the resolution. But seventy-nine for it.

Ristin said, "It will be announced by general broadcast tonight that, in view of the advance of civilization on many star-worlds, the Vardda deem the time ripe to share the secret of mutation with other selected races."

Quorn said, "It's done. Trehearne, it's done."

Trehearne still could not quite grasp that that simple statement marked a change forever in the Galaxy, that with it all human races began the great change toward Galactic Man.

"And these criminals who forced us to do the thing?" demanded a Vardda recalcitrant, glaring at Trehearne and his fellows.

"We have no choice there," Ristin said dryly. "To punish them for what they did would belie our own announcement. The ordinary charges against them can be dismissed. The murder charge has already been refuted by the lady Shairn."

"So that for their crime they go unpunished?"

Ristin sighed regretfully. "The interests of the state demand it. Yes."

Trehearne's comrades were breaking down, half stunned, half incredulous of the victory they had thought beyond them. But strangely Trehearne was not thinking of what they had won for the galaxy races. He was feeling a pride that Joris' phrase "We Vardda" had kindled in him.

"We Vardda—"

And he was one of them. He was one of the star-lords, the first, the oldest,

the greatest of the starmen.

Edri was thinking of something else. He had stepped forward amid the general clamor to speak to Ristin. "There is one more thing. Orthis—"

"A cruiser has been sent to guard his ship," said Ristin.

Edri nodded painfully. "But Orthis was not ever child of a planet. He was star-born, dwelling always between the stars. He has sat long on that far world. If his ship could take space again . . ."

Ristin said musingly, "A good thought. By putting that ship into an orbit around our system we'll create a monument that will remind all the Galaxy that it was a Vardda who gave them star-flight."

Edri turned to Trehearne and Joris. He said, "Orthis is coming home."

It was then that he began to cry.

THE message left for Trehearne had told him simply that Shairn would be at the Silver Tower. It was handed him when they finally emerged from the Council chamber. Joris got him a car and driver. Trehearne hesitated, suddenly hating to part from the old man. Edri, and Quorn and the others had their eager plans. But Joris took no joy in their victory.

"Had it been done a generation ago my son would be a star-captain now," he muttered, in answer to Trehearne's awkward words. "Well—"

The car took him out of Llyrdis, smooth and fast, and the great flare of Aldebaran sank toward the sea and dusk came on. He saw the Silver Tower glimmering in the twilight and the dark figure down on the shadowy beach and he went toward Shairn.

He put out his arms toward her but she held him off. She spoke to him steadily, her face a white blur in the

dusk. "Let us have no hidden things between us, Michael. I want you to know. I hate you for what you have done to the Vardda. I will always hate you for that."

He was astounded, all the firm hopes he had built up dissolving beneath him. Shairn went on. "But I love you, Michael—for everything else."

He had her in his arms then, all doubts gone. He said presently, "You'll get over that resentment, Shairn."

"No, Michael. It will always be there. I warn you of that now!"

Life with Shairn would be no haven of peace, but he was not afraid. He knew that he was not the man for too much peace.

They walked slowly back together toward the Silver Tower. The stars were burgeoning and Trehearne looked up at them. He looked at the far faint spark of little Sol and thought of Earth and of a changeling born there who had by miracle won his way home.

That green and distant Earth knew nothing yet of the battle fought and won beyond the edges of the Galaxy. But it had been Earth's battle too and she would know in time. Even to Earth, when a generation had passed, the starships would begin to go openly. And with their internecine conflicts past, her young men too would go out among the stars to join the great march of Galactic Man.

And who could say where that march might not lead them? To other galaxies, other island continents of suns . . .

Trehearne's thoughts became lost in the immensities of the future. He shook his head and smiled and brought Shairn closer to him in the circle of his arm. They climbed the last of the steep path in the gathering dark and the Silver Tower took them in