

PLANET STORIES



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TWO GRIPPING NOVELS OF OTHER PLANETS

- MINIONS OF THE CRYSTAL SPHERE** Albert DePina 2
 Revolt was brewing in the jewel-world of Plastica, for the blazing hate of millions of slaves was a funeral pyre for the brutal masters that could not be checked. And fanning that flame to raging life was a slender girl and Vyril Guerlan—the Ruler who had become a slave.
- WARRIOR OF TWO WORLDS** Manly Wade Wellman 74
 He was a man of two planets, drawn from the blackness of space to save a nation from ruthless invaders. He was Yandro, the Stranger of the Prophecy, a warrior with a memory for places and men he had never seen before—and a destiny that decreed he was to fight both friend and foe.

PLANET STORIES' OFF-TRAIL NOVELET

TERROR OUT OF SPACE Leigh Brackett 33
 An eerie tale of a silver land beneath ebony Venusian seas, of Lundy whose duty was to capture the menace which had come from nowhere—and of "It" whose shadowed eyes held the secret for which men fought and died.

THREE THRILLING STORIES OF THE STARWAYS

- MORGUE SHIP** Ray Bradbury 51
 Three more dead men would fill the ship—and Burnett could return to Earth.
- MR. MEEK — MUSKETEER** Clifford D. Simak 58
 Adventure sang her Lorelei song—and Mr. Meek couldn't resist the siren-lure.
- ONE AGAINST THE STARS** Vaseleos Garson 104
 Joe was death to the men manning that mercy-ship, death—and their salvation.

P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

- P.S.'s FEATURE FLASH** 57
 Meet a red-hot fan whose words chill an editor's ego.
- THE RINGER FAMILY** Guy Gifford 103
- THE VIZIGRAPH** 118
 Puns and praise, grieves and gripes—step in, customers, and earn your money's worth.

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MORGUE SHIP

By RAY BRADBURY

This was Burnett's last trip. Three more shelves to fill with space-slain warriors—and he would be among the living again.

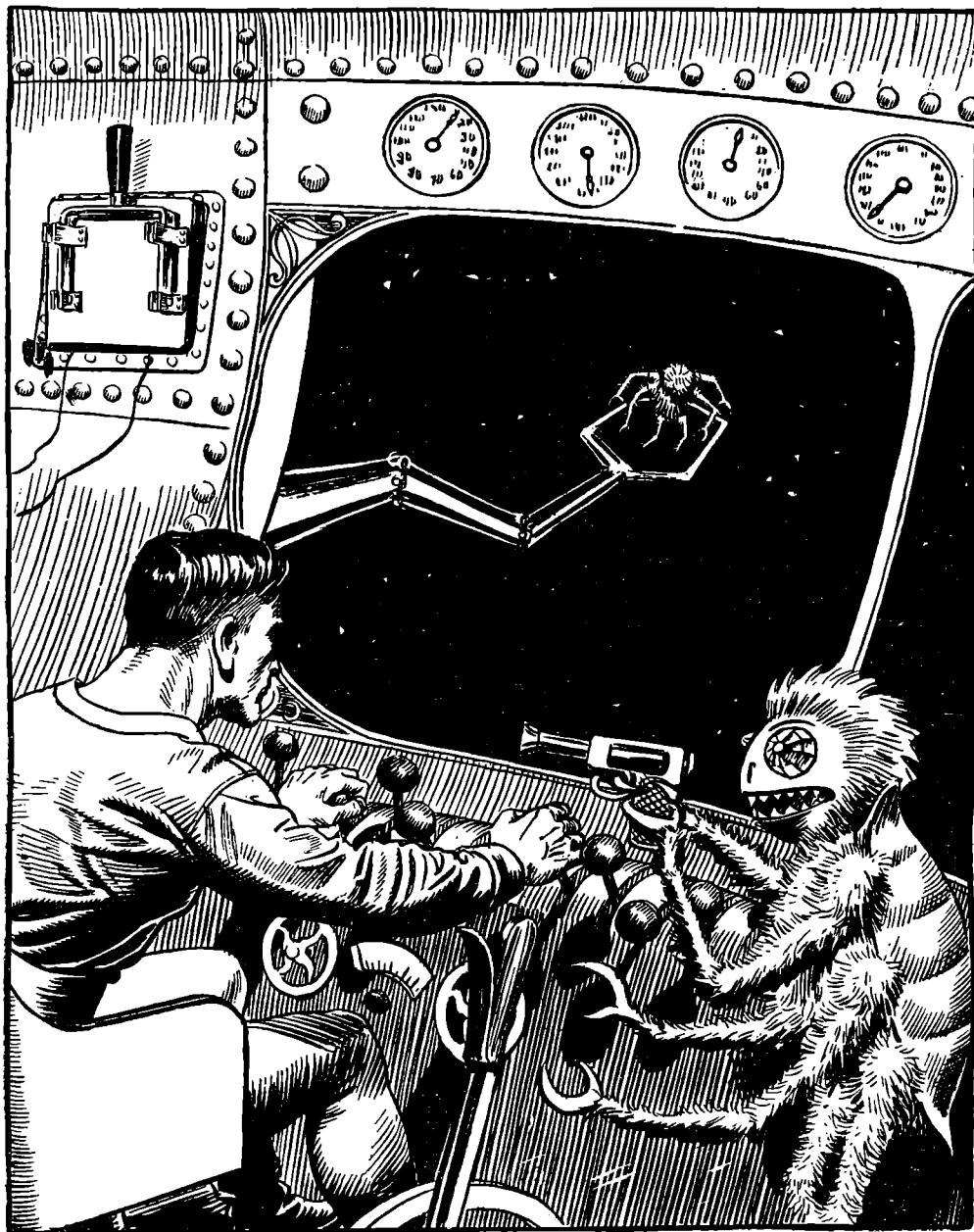


Illustration by Doolin

HE HEARD the star-port grind open, and the movement of the metal claws groping into space, and then the star-port closed.

There was another dead man aboard the *Constellation*.

Sam Burnett shook his long head, trying to think clearly. Pallid and quiet,

three bodies lay on the cold transparent tables around him; machines stirred, revolved, hummed. He didn't see them. He didn't see anything but a red haze over his mind. It blotted out the far wall of the laboratory where the shelves went up and down, numbered in scarlet, keeping the bodies of soldiers from all further harm.

Burnett didn't move. He stood there in his rumpled white surgical gown, staring at his fingers gloved in bone-white rubber; feeling all tight and wild inside himself. It went on for days. Moving the ship. Opening the star-port. Extending the retriever claw. Plucking some poor warrior's body out of the void.

He didn't like it any more. Ten years is too long to go back and forth from Earth to nowhere. You came out empty and you went back full-cargoed with a lot of warriors who didn't laugh or talk or smoke, who just lay on their shelves, all one hundred of them, waiting for a decent burial.

"Number ninety-eight." Coming matter of fact and slow, Rice's voice from the ceiling radio hit Burnett.

"Number ninety-eight," Burnett repeated. "Working on ninety-five, ninety-six and ninety-seven now. Blood-pumps, preservative, slight surgery." Off a million miles away his voice was talking. It sounded deep. It didn't belong to him anymore.

Rice said:

"Boyohbody! Two more pick-ups and back to New York. Me for a ten-day drunk!"

Burnett peeled the gloves off his huge, red, soft hands, slapped them into a floor incinerator mouth. Back to Earth. Then spin around and shoot right out again in the trail of the war-rockets that blasted one another in galactic fury, to sidle up behind gutted wrecks of ships, salvaging any bodies still intact after the conflict.

Two men. Rice and himself. Sharing a cozy morgue ship with a hundred other men who had forgotten, quite suddenly, however, to talk again.

Ten years of it. Every hour of those ten years eating like maggots inside, working out to the surface of Burnett's face, working under the husk of his starved eyes and starved limbs. Starved for life. Starved for action.

This would be his last trip, or he'd know the reason why!

"Sam!"

Burnett jerked. Rice's voice clipped through the drainage-preservative lab, bounded against glassite retorts, echoed from the refrigerator shelves. Burnett stared at the tabled bodies as if they would leap to life, even while preservative was being pumped into their veins.

"Sam! On the double! Up the rungs!"

Burnett closed his eyes and said a couple of words, firmly. Nothing was worth running for any more. Another body. There had been one hundred thousand bodies preceding it. Nothing unusual about a body with blood cooling in it.

SHAKING his head, he walked unsteadily toward the rungs that gleamed up into the air-lock, control-room sector of the rocket. He climbed without making any noise on the rungs.

He kept thinking the one thing he couldn't forget.

You never catch up with the war.

All the color is ahead of you. The drive of orange rocket traces across stars, the whamming of steel-nosed bombs into elusive targets, the titanic explosions and breathless pursuits, the flags and the excited glory are always a million miles ahead.

He bit his teeth together.

You never catch up with the war.

You come along when space has settled back, when the vacuum has stopped trembling from unleashed forces between worlds. You come along in the dark quiet of death to find the wreckage plunging with all the fury of its original acceleration in no particular direction. You can only see it; you don't hear anything in space but your own heart kicking your ribs.

You see bodies, each in its own terrific orbit, given impetus by grinding collisions, tossed from mother ships and dancing head over feet forever and forever with no goal. Bits of flesh in ruptured space suits, mouths open for air that had never been there in a hundred billion centuries. And they kept dancing without music until you extended the retriever-claw and culled them into the air-lock.

That was all the war-glory he got. Nothing but the stunned, shivering silence, the memory of rockets long gone, and the

shelves filling up all too quickly with men who had once loved laughing.

You wondered who all the men were; and who the next ones would be. After ten years you made yourself blind to them. You went around doing your job with mechanical hands.

But even a machine breaks down. . . .

“SAM!” Rice turned swiftly as Burnett dragged himself up the ladder. Red and warm, Rice’s face hovered over the body of a sprawled enemy official. “Take a look at this!”

Burnett caught his breath. His eyes narrowed. There was something wrong with the body; his experienced glance knew that. He didn’t know what it was.

Maybe it was because the body looked a little *too* dead.

Burnett didn’t say anything, but he climbed the rest of the way, stood quietly in the grey-metal air-lock. The enemy official was as delicately made as a fine white spider. Eyelids, closed, were faintly blue. The hair was thin silken strands of pale gold, waved and pressed close to a veined skull. Where the thin-lipped mouth fell open a cluster of needle-tipped teeth glittered. The fragile body was enclosed completely in milk-pale synthasilk, a holstered gun at the middle.

Burnett rubbed his jaw. “Well?”

Rice exploded. His eyes were hot in his young, sharp-cut face, hot and black. “Good Lord, Sam, do you know who this is?”

Burnett scowled uneasily and said no.

“It’s Lethla!” Rice retorted.

Burnett said, “Lethla?” And then: “Oh, yes! Kriere’s majordomo. That right?”

“Don’t say it calm, Sam. Say it big. Say it big! If Lethla is here in space, then Kriere’s not far away from him!”

Burnett shrugged. More bodies, more people, more war. What the hell. What the hell. He was tired. Talk about bodies and rulers to someone else.

Rice grabbed him by the shoulders. “Snap out of it, Sam. Think! Kriere—The All-Mighty—in our territory. His right hand man dead. That means Kriere was in an accident, too!”

Sam opened his thin lips and the words fell out all by themselves. “Look, Rice, you’re new at this game. “I’ve been at it

ever since the Venus-Earth mess started. It’s been see-sawing back and forth since the day you played hookey in the tenth grade, and I’ve been in the thick of it. When there’s nothing left but seared memories, I’ll be prowling through the void picking up warriors and taking them back to the good green Earth. Grisly, yes, but it’s routine.

“As for Kriere—if he’s anywhere around, he’s smart. Every precaution is taken to protect that one.”

“But Lethla! His body must mean something!”

“And if it does? Have we got guns aboard this morgue-ship? Are we a battle-cruiser to go against him?”

“We’ll radio for help?”

“Yeah? If there’s a warship within our radio range, seven hundred thousand miles, we’ll get it. Unfortunately, the tide of battle has swept out past Earth in a new war concerning Io. That’s out, Rice.”

Rice stood about three inches below Sam Burnett’s six-foot-one. Jaw hard and determined, he stared at Sam, a funny light in his eyes. His fingers twitched all by themselves at his sides. His mouth twisted, “You’re one hell of a patriot, Sam Burnett!”

Burnett reached out with one long finger, tapped it quietly on Rice’s barrel-chest. “Haul a cargo of corpses for three thousand nights and days and see how patriotic you feel. All those fine muscled lads bloated and crushed by space pressures and heat-blasts. Fine lads who start out smiling and get the smile burned off down to the bone—”

Burnett swallowed and didn’t say anything more, but he closed his eyes. He stood there, smelling the death-odor in the hot air of the ship, hearing the chug-chug-chug of the blood pumps down below, and his own heart waiting warm and heavy at the base of his throat.

“This is my last cargo, Rice. I can’t take it any longer. And I don’t care much how I go back to earth. This Venusian here—what’s his name? Lethla. He’s number ninety-eight. Shove me into shelf ninety-nine beside him and get the hell home. That’s how I feel!”

Rice was going to say something, but he didn’t have time.

Lethla was alive.

He rose from the floor with slow, easy

movements, almost like a dream. He didn't say anything. The heat-blast in his white fingers did all the necessary talking. It didn't say anything either, but Burnett knew what language it would use if it had to.

Burnett swallowed hard. The body had looked funny. Too dead. Now he knew why. Involuntarily, Burnett moved forward. Lethla moved like a pale spider, flicking his fragile arm to cover Burnett, the gun in it like a dead cold star.

Rice sucked in his breath. Burnett forced himself to take it easy. From the corners of his eyes he saw Rice's expression go deep and tight, biting lines into his sharp face.

Rice got it out, finally. "How'd you do it?" he demanded, bitterly. "How'd you live in the void? It's impossible!"

A crazy thought came ramming down and exploded in Burnett's head. *You never catch up with the war!*

But what if the war catches up with you?

What in hell would Lethla be wanting aboard a morgue ship?

LETHLA half-crouched in the midst of the smell of death and the chugging of blood-pumps below. In the silence he reached up with quick fingers, tapped a tiny crystal stud upon the back of his head, and the halves of a microscopically thin chrysalis parted transparently off of his face. He shucked it off, trailing air-tendrils that had been inserted, hidden in the uniform, ending in thin globules of oxygen.

He spoke. Triumph warmed his crystal-thin voice. "That's how I did it, Earthman."

"Glassite!" said Rice. "A face-moulded mask of glassite!"

Lethla nodded. His milk-blue eyes dilated. "Very marvelously pared to an unbreakable thickness of one-thirtieth of an inch; worn only on the head. You have to look quickly to notice it, and, unfortunately, viewed as you saw it, outside the ship, floating in the void, not discernible at all."

Prickles of sweat appeared on Rice's face. He swore at the Venusian and the Venusian laughed like some sort of stringed instrument, high and quick.

Burnett laughed, too. Ironically. "First time in years a man ever came aboard the Constellation alive. It's a welcome change."

Lethla showed his needle-like teeth. "I thought it might be. Where's your radio?"

"Go find it!" snapped Rice, hotly.

"I will." One hand, blue-veined, on the ladder-rungs, Lethla paused. "I know you're weaponless; Purple Cross regulations. And this air-lock is safe. Don't move." Whispering, his naked feet padded white up the ladder. Two long breaths later something crashed; metal and glass and coils. The radio.

Burnett put his shoulder blades against the wall-metal, looking at his feet. When he glanced up, Rice's fresh, animated face was spoiled by the new bitterness in it.

Lethla came down. Like a breath of air on the rungs.

He smiled. "That's better. Now. We can talk—"

Rice said it, slow:

"Interplanetary law declares it straight, Lethla! Get out! Only dead men belong here."

Lethla's gun grip tightened. "More talk of that nature, and only dead men there will be." He blinked. "But first—we must rescue Kriere. . . ."

"Kriere!" Rice acted as if he had been hit in the jaw.

Burnett moved his tongue back and forth on his lips silently, his eyes lidded, listening to the two of them as if they were a radio drama. Lethla's voice came next:

"Rather unfortunately, yes. He's still alive, heading toward Venus at an orbital velocity of two thousand m.p.h., wearing one of these air-chrysalis. Enough air for two more hours. Our flag ship was attacked unexpectedly yesterday near Mars. We were forced to take to the life-boats, scattering, Kriere and I in one, the others sacrificing their lives to cover our escape. We were lucky. We got through the Earth cordon unseen. But luck can't last forever.

"We saw your morgue ship an hour ago. It's a long, long way to Venus. We were running out of fuel, food, water. Radio was broken. Capture was certain. You were coming our way; we took the chance. We set a small time-bomb to destroy the life-rocket, and cast off, wear-

ing our chrysalis-helmets. It was the first time we had ever tried using them to trick anyone. We knew you wouldn't know we were alive until it was too late and we controlled your ship. We knew you picked up all bodies for brief exams, returning alien corpses to space later."

Rice's voice was sullen. "A set-up for you, huh? Traveling under the protection of the Purple Cross you can get your damned All-Mighty safe to Venus."

Lethla bowed slightly. "Who would suspect a Morgue Rocket of providing safe hiding for precious Venusian cargo?"

"Precious is the word for you, brother!" said Rice.

"Enough!" Lethla moved his gun several inches.

"Accelerate toward Venus, mote-detectors wide open. Kriere must be picked up—*now!*"

RICE didn't move. Burnett moved first, feeling alive for the first time in years. "Sure," said Sam, smiling. "We'll pick him up."

"No tricks," said Lethla.

Burnett scowled and smiled together. "No tricks. You'll have Kriere on board the *Constellation* in half an hour or I'm no coroner."

"Follow me up the ladder."

Lethla danced up, turned, waved his gun. "Come on."

Burnett went up, quick. Almost as if he enjoyed doing Lethla a favor. Rice grumbled and cursed after him.

On the way up, Burnett thought about it. About Lethla poised like a white feather at the top, holding death in his hand. You never knew whose body would come in through the star-port next. Number ninety-eight was Lethla. Number ninety-nine would be Kriere.

There were two shelves numbered and empty. They should be filled. And what more proper than that Kriere and Lethla should fill them? But, he chewed his lip, that would need a bit of doing. And even then the cargo wouldn't be full. Still one more body to get; one hundred. And you never knew who it would be.

He came out of the quick thoughts when he looped his long leg over the hole-rim, stepped up, faced Lethla in a cramped control room that was one glittering swirl of

silver levers, audio-plates and visuals. Chronometers, clicking, told of the steady dropping toward the sun at a slow pace.

Burnett set his teeth together, bone against bone. Help Kriere escape? See him safely to Venus, and then be freed? Sounded easy, wouldn't be hard. Venusians weren't blind with malice. Rice and he could come out alive; if they cooperated.

But there were a lot of warriors sleeping on a lot of numbered shelves in the dim corridors of the long years. And their dead lips were stirring to life in Burnett's ears. Not so easily could they be ignored.

You may never catch up with the war again.

The last trip!

Yes, this could be it. Capture Kriere and end the war. But what ridiculous fantasy was it made him believe he could actually do it?

Two muscles moved on Burnett, one in each long cheek. The sag in his body vanished as he tautened his spine, flexed his lean-sinewed arms, wet thin lips.

"Now, where do you want this crate?" he asked Lethla easily.

Lethla exhaled softly. "Cooperation. I like it. You're wise, Earthman."

"Very," said Burnett.

He was thinking about three thousand eternal nights of young bodies being ripped, slaughtered, flung to the vacuum tides. Ten years of hating a job and hoping that some day there would be a last trip and it would all be over.

Burnett laughed through his nose. Controls moved under his fingers like fluid; loved, caressed, tended by his familiar touching. Looking ahead, he squinted.

"There's your Ruler now, Lethla. Doing somersaults. Looks dead. A good trick."

"Cut power! We don't want to burn him!"

BURNETT CUT. Kriere's milky face floated dreamily into a visual-screen, eyes sealed, lips gaping, hands sagging, clutching empty to the stars.

"We're about fifty miles from him, catching up." Burnett turned to Lethla with an intent scowl. Funny. This was the first and the last time anybody would ever

board the *Constellation* alive. His stomach went flat, tautened with sudden weakening fear.

If Kriere could be captured, that meant the end of the war, the end of shelves stacked with sleeping warriors, the end of this blind searching. Kriere, then, had to be taken aboard. After that—

Kriere, the All-Mighty. At whose behest all space had quivered like a smitten gong for part of a century. Kriere, revolving in his neat, water-blue uniform, emblems shining gold, heat-gun tucked in glossy jet holster. With Kriere aboard, chances of overcoming him would be eliminated. Now: Rice and Burnett against Lethla. Lethla favored because of his gun.

Kriere would make odds impossible.

Something had to be done before Kriere came in.

Lethla had to be yanked off guard. Shocked, bewildered, fooled—somehow. But—how?

Burnett's jaw froze tight. He could feel a spot on his shoulder-blade where Lethla would send a bullet crashing into rib, sinew, artery—heart.

There was a way. And there was a weapon. And the war would be over and this would be the last trip.

Sweat covered his palms in a nervous smear.

"Steady, Rice," he said, matter of factly. With the rockets cut, there was too much silence, and his voice sounded guilty standing up alone in the center of that silence. "Take controls, Rice. I'll manipulate the star-port."

Burnett slipped from the control console. Rice replaced him grimly. Burnett strode to the next console of levers. That spot on his back kept aching like it was sear-branded X. For the place where the bullet sings and rips. And if you turn quick, catching it in the arm first, why—

Kriere loomed bigger, a white spider delicately dancing on a web of stars. His eyes flicked open behind the glassite sheath, and saw the *Constellation*. Kriere smiled. His hands came up. He knew he was about to be rescued.

Burnett smiled right back at him. What Kriere didn't know was that he was about to end a ten-years' war.

There was only *one* way of drawing

Lethla off guard, and it had to be fast.

Burnett jabbed a purple-topped stud. The starport clashed open as it had done a thousand times before; but for the first time it was a good sound. And out of the starport, at Sam Burnett's easily fingered directons, slid the long claw-like mechanism that picked up bodies from space.

Lethla watched, intent and cold and quiet. The gun was cold and quiet, too.

The claw glided toward Kriere without a sound, now, dream-like in its slowness. It reached Kriere.

Burnett inhaled a deep breath.

The metal claw cuddled Kriere in its shiny palm.

Lethla watched.

He watched while Burnett exhaled, touched another lever and said: "You know, Lethla, there's an old saying that only dead men come aboard the *Constellation*. I believe it."

AND THE claw closed as Burnett spoke, closed slowly and certainly, all around Kriere, crushing him into a ridiculous posture of silence. There was blood running on the claw, and the only recognizable part was the head, which was carefully preserved for identification.

That was the only way to draw Lethla off guard.

Burnett spun about and leaped.

The horror on Lethla's face didn't go away as he fired his gun.

Rice came in fighting, too, but not before something like a red-hot ramrod stabbed Sam Burnett, catching him in the ribs, spinning him back like a drunken idiot to fall in a corner.

Fists made blunt flesh noises. Lethla went down, weaponless and screaming. Rice kicked. After awhile Lethla quit screaming, and the room swam around in Burnett's eyes, and he closed them tight and started laughing.

He didn't finish laughing for maybe ten minutes. He heard the retriever claws come inside, and the star-port grind shut.

Out of the red darkness, Rice's voice came and then he could see Rice's young face over him. Burnett groaned.

Rice said, "Sam, you shouldn't have done it. You shouldn't have, Sam."

"To hell with it." Burnett winced, and

fought to keep his eyes open. Something wet and sticky covered his chest. "I said this was my last trip and I meant it. One way or the other, I'd have quit!"

"This is the hard way—"

"Maybe. I dunno. Kind of nice to think of all those kids who'll never have to come aboard the *Constellation*, though, Rice." His voice trailed off. "You watch the shelves fill up and you never know who'll be next. Who'd have thought, four days ago—"

Something happened to his tongue so it felt like hard ice blocking his mouth. He had a lot more words to say, but only time to get a few of them out:

"Rice?"

"Yeah, Sam?"

"We haven't got a full cargo, boy."

"Full enough for me, sir."

"But still not full. If we went back to Center Base without filling the shelves, it wouldn't be right. Look there—number ninety-eight is Lethla—number ninety-nine is Kriere. Three thousand days of rolling this rocket, and not once come back without a bunch of the kids who want to sleep easy on the good green earth. Not right to be going back any way—but—the way—we used to—"

His voice got all full of fog. As thick as the fists of a dozen warriors. Rice was going away from him. Rice was standing still, and Burnett was lying down, not moving, but somehow Rice was going away a million miles.

"Ain't I one hell of a patriot, Rice?"

Then everything got dark except Rice's face. And that was starting to dissolve.

Ninety-eight: Lethla. Ninety-nine: Kriere.

He could still see Rice standing over him for a long time, breathing out and in. Down under the tables the blood-pumps pulsed and pulsed, thick and slow. Rice looked down at Burnett and then at the empty shelf at the far end of the room, and then back at Burnett again.

And then he said softly:

"One hundred."