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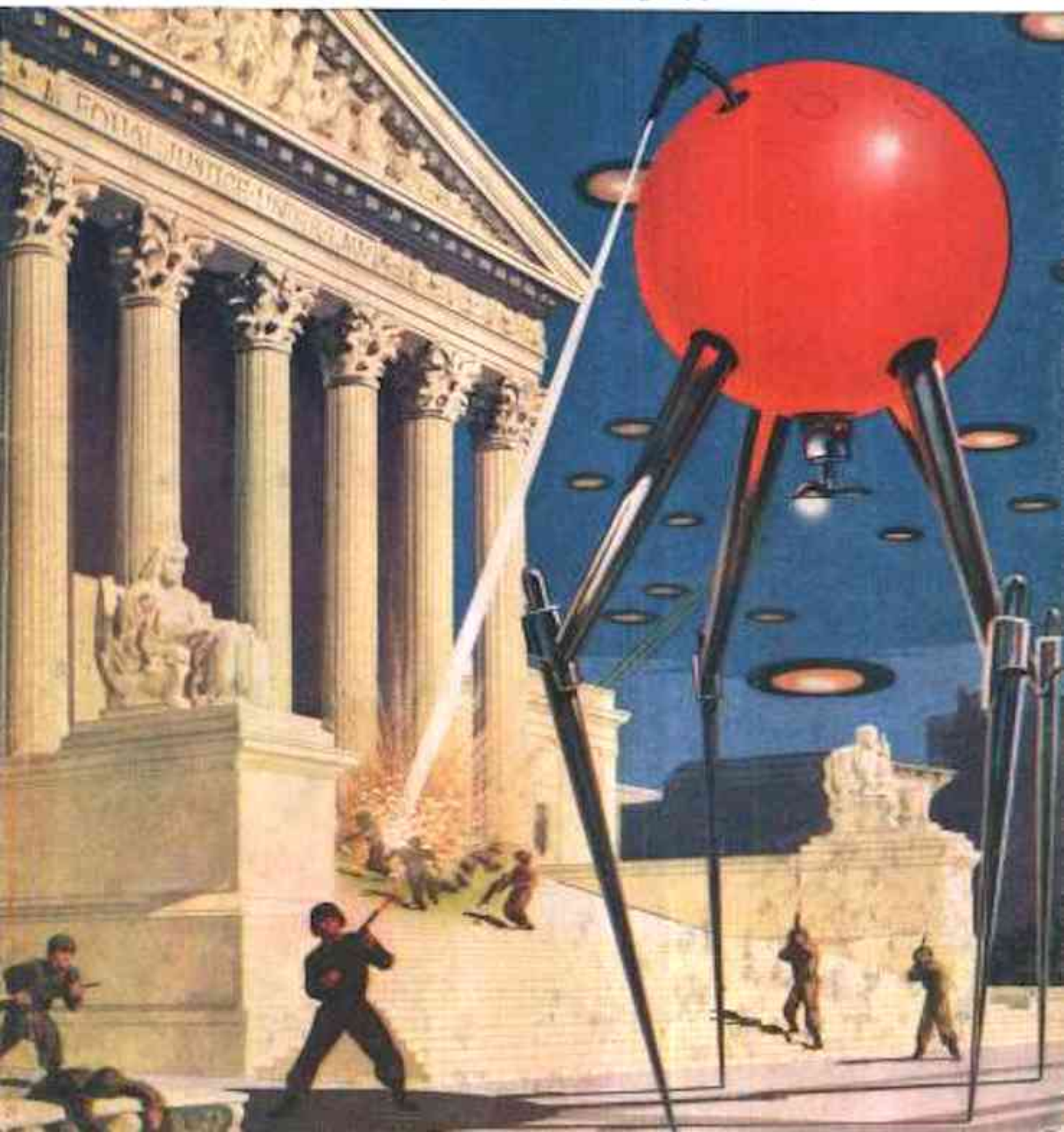
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THE COSMIC
LOOTERS

by Alexander Blade



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COSMIC LOOTERS ***

THE COSMIC LOOTERS

By Alexander Blade

Wyatt knew his situation was desperate: he couldn't stop the alien invasion, and even if he warned Earth—nobody would believe him!

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Duncan Wyatt sprang up, grabbed his gun and started toward the door before he had his eyes properly open. His ears were ringing with the explosive roar that had awakened him and the pre-fab shack still quivered in the shock wave.

He thought the Third World War had started.

He crouched in the doorway and peered out onto the mesa. The unorthodox shape of the experimental ultra-tight-beam transmitter loomed over him, black against the star-blazing New Mexican sky, bearing a red star of its own to warn low-flying planes. He was all alone here. His partner, Bannister, had flown out to the Coast to oversee the making of new components for a projected improvement in design. Wyatt had never felt lonely before, even in the total solitude of the mesa top with nothing around it but the vast impersonals of sky and desert, sun and wind. Now he did feel lonely, and scared. He wondered where the bomb had dropped.

He couldn't see anything, so he went out and around the corner of the shack, keeping low and sticking tight to the wall.

Now he could see a larger area of the mesa, softly but almost adequately lighted by the billion stars above the crystal-clear air.

He saw what it was that had fallen out of the sky.

It wasn't a bomb. It was a—plane? Call it a plane. Call it a rotary-thrust flying wing. Call it anything you want to, it was there, round and glimmering faintly against the drab rock. The boom and shock that had shaken him out of his bunk must have been the result of the thing pulling out of a steep dive at super-sonic speed.

He should have been relieved that this was so. Somehow Wyatt was not. He had a feeling. It was such a crazy feeling that he could not believe it, but he couldn't get rid of it either.

He stood still in the shadow by the corner of the shack and waited to see what would happen next.

A light came on with blinding suddenness, shining from the center of the queer plane. It showed up every pebble and stunted bush, every grain of the rock, the sun-bitten pre-fab wall, himself in his sock feet and rumpled khakis, standing stiffly with the gun in his hand.

A portion of the black outer rim of the round plane dropped down, unfolding into a stair.

Wyatt shouted, "What is it? Who are you?" His voice was thin and small in that vastness of windy air. "I have a gun," he shouted. "Come out slowly, with your hands up!"

The words sounded ridiculous even while he was saying them. But he had to put up some kind of a front, simply because he was scared. If he didn't he would have had to turn and run away.

It was the damned round queer-looking plane. He was in a cold shaking sweat waiting to see what came out of it.

When he did see he didn't believe it.

She stood in the aperture at the top of the narrow metal stair. Her hands were raised just a little, so that he might be sure there was no weapon in them. He thought she was smiling slightly. She had black hair, black as the blackest shadow you could imagine, shorn close around her head. She was dressed in black—soft boots, close-fitting pants, wide belt with holster, severely plain shirt with a splotch of gold on the front of each shoulder. Somehow he sensed that the gold splotches were insignia, not decorations. He also sensed—from something about the way she stood, the way she looked at him, the hard, disciplined strength that underlay the splendid lines of her body—that this woman was not like any of the women he had ever known, and that probably the Third World War might have been easier to cope with.

She said, "There is no need to be afraid."

Her English sounded as though she had learned it by mathematical formula, and in a hurry.

Wyatt said untruthfully, "I'm not afraid. Just cautious." He walked out closer to the disc-shaped plane. The mesa rock was icy under his

socks, the wind was icy down his back, and there was a chill inside him that was purely personal.

"Where do you come from?" he asked. "What do you want?"

She dropped her hands and came quickly down the stairs, apparently satisfied that he was not going to shoot her.

"I haven't much time," she said. Her eyes were the color of pure turquoise, startlingly bright, curiously tilted. She gave a swift glance at the sky and then spoke urgently to Wyatt.

"Try to understand, to believe. Your world is going to be attacked. Not tonight, but within a short time. I want you to take a warning to your government, so that we may be prepared when the attack comes."

"I see," said Wyatt. He had a wild desire to laugh. He saw himself going to Washington and telling various personages at the White House and the Pentagon that a beautiful girl landed in a funny round ship and told him the Earth was going to be attacked and so they should call out the armed forces to be ready.

"They'd shoot me first," he muttered, "and then throw me in a padded cell." He stepped closer to the girl. Her face was handsome, perfectly human and perfectly alien at one and the same time. It was not a soft face. It was used to decision and command. The red mouth, he thought, would never pout or be petulant, but it could easily be cruel. "Who's going to attack Earth? Who are you?"

She said impatiently, "It does not matter who I am, except that I'm in a position to know what I'm saying. Listen. There is a huge interstellar task force out there, working its way through this sector of the galaxy, plundering as it goes. These fringe areas are too far away from our center of power at Uryx—a star-system you never heard of here—to make permanent conquest practical, so all we are interested in is loot. Our advance scouts go far ahead of the main body. We scouts have been here before. *I've* been here before. Now

I'm warning you. The main force will be at Alpha Centauri when I return to it. When it is finished there, Earth is next."

"I don't believe you," Wyatt said. But in spite of himself, he did.

He was close to the foot of the stair now, close enough almost to touch the tall, slim girl with the black hair blowing around her forehead and the brilliant, wary eyes. The strange ship loomed above them both. Wyatt looked at it and shivered and gnawed his lip.

"Why are you warning me?" he said suddenly. "You're part of the force. Why do you want to betray it?"

"I have my reasons," she said, "and they are good ones. But you wouldn't understand them. In any case, the warning is true. Don't question it."

She started to withdraw from him, up the metal steps.

"Wait," said Wyatt. "Nobody on earth would listen to me if I told them that story. They'd only think I was crazy. Listen, if you really want to have your warning taken seriously you'll have to go to Washington yourself."

"That's impossible," she said curtly.

Again she started up the steps and again he stopped her.

"No," he said, and now he knew that he must not let her get away. As wildly improbable, not to say insane, as this whole business was, she was real and her ship was real, and wiser men than he should be handed the responsibility of dealing with that reality.

"You and I together couldn't convince anybody by just talking," he said. "The only thing that could is your ship. *That* was never made on Earth and they would know that. They could test it, examine it, prove it isn't a fake, a hoax of any kind, and that's going to be hard—you haven't any idea how hard."

He stepped onto the lowest step of the stair. "You've got to fly this thing to Washington."

"I told you that's impossible," she said. "I've given you the warning; you'll have to do what you can with it. Stand clear!"

She turned her back on him and sprang lightly through the aperture into the ship.

Wyatt did not stop to think. He rushed up the stair after her and it began to draw itself up as he did so, folding him under, so that he thought he was going to have to jump clear or be crushed. There was a whine of power from inside. Damn her, thought Wyatt, she doesn't care if she kills me. He scrambled frantically up the tilting, flattening rungs and caught the edge of the aperture and kicked himself forward through it.

The panel that was sliding in to seal the opening caught him halfway and held him in an agonizing grip. He cried out with pain and the fear of being cut in two. He could see into the round cockpit now, with the black-uniformed woman stopped in the act of sitting down at the controls, her startled face turned toward him.

Then her expression became one of intense annoyance. Her hand moved toward the weapon holstered at her waist. In the same instant a warning bell rang and the sliding panel re-opened automatically. Wyatt lurched the rest of the way through, sick and dizzy but knowing that this was no time to indulge his symptoms. He was afraid to fire the gun he still held clutched in his hand, even as a gesture of intimidation. The cockpit was small and faced in metal. A ricocheting bullet could kill either or both of them, or damage the control panel so that the craft could not fly. So he threw the gun instead. It whizzed past her head close enough to touch her hair, and in the second she was busy ducking it he had crossed the tiny metal floor and grappled with her.

She did not scream or claw his face or tear at his hair or do any of the things women customarily did. She fought, and she was strong as spring steel. He held her wrist so that she could not get at the weapon in her belt, and her free fist came up under his chin and

made him see stars. Then her knee got him in the pit of the belly. All Wyatt's ideas of chivalry deserted him. He let go of her wrist and gambled that he could knock her out before she could get the weapon, whatever it was, out of its holster.

He won, but by a shamefully tiny margin. She sagged down and he snatched the weapon himself and then retrieved his gun and stood panting, feeling very shaky at the knees.

She shook her head, grunted, looked up at him with blazing eyes, and started up all ready to come back and kill him.

He pointed her own weapon and his gun at her, using both hands.

"Mine will kill," he said. "I don't know what yours will do, but you know." He motioned to the pilot's seat. "Get in there. We're flying to Washington."

She gave him a wicked little smile with the sharp edge of her teeth and did as he told her.

CHAPTER II

There were places for four beside the pilot, spaced around the circular cockpit. Wyatt strapped himself into the seat nearest the girl. He imagined the take-off would be something special, and he was braced for it, but even the almost instantaneous transition from a state of sitting still on the ground to one of shooting straight up into the sky at a hell of a rate was hard to take. He jammed the gun into her back between the shoulders and said,

"Not too high. We're not going to Alpha Centauri."

"There are commercial air lanes," she said irritably, "and military air bases and radar installations, and ground-to-air missiles. Even in this ship I couldn't guarantee to elude every one of them."

Wyatt considered that, uneasily aware that his gun was now largely a bluff. He was not likely to use it on her, unless he wanted to come down a lot faster than he went up, and she would know that. He said, "All right, get up over the obstacles, but don't try anything too clever. I'm a pretty good pilot and I could gamble on flying this thing myself."

That was a flat lie, but he thought it might be worth telling.

The girl did not seem to be interested one way or another. The craft continued to go straight up, whistling shrilly as it went, and then it swerved around with surprising gentleness and headed east. Wyatt looked out the small double-sealed window beside him.

The stars blinded him. They had ceased to twinkle, and they had grown huge, and they had multiplied. The sky was no longer flat but deep and endless, so that even as countless many stars as there were did not crowd it. Far below there was a dark wrinkled rind like the edge of a round cheese, and Wyatt knew that it was the Earth.

It was the most magnificent sight he had ever seen, and he wished intensely that he was not seeing it. It was the final touch of insane

reality that made the whole wild nightmare consistent.

"I was just lying there minding my own business," Wyatt said bitterly, turning away from the window. "Why did you have to pick on me?"

"You were obviously a technician, and it would require a technician to grasp what I had to tell you. The others seem not to believe even when they see."

"Others?" asked Wyatt startled by a new thought.

"Of course. How do you suppose we plan our attacks? How do you suppose we learn the things we must know, including enough of the language to be able to communicate with the people after the invasion? In the normal course of events I would have considered you an especially valuable find. The accessible ones have all been herders of animals or fishermen or primitive tribesmen or poor wanderers, who could not tell us much beyond their own language and their own calling."

"You mean," said Wyatt, "that if you hadn't decided to give me the warning instead, you'd have kidnapped me? Taken me—" he nodded at the window, "—out there? Or tried to?"

"Of course."

"Well," said Wyatt. "I'll be damned."

He was enraged, and more alarmed than ever. "Don't forget for a second that I've got this gun in your back."

"I'm not likely to," she said in a curiously calm voice. "How are you called?"

He told her.

"I am Brinna Halphard—Brinna the Dark, I think you would say."

It seemed a little ridiculous to say, How do you do? Wyatt grunted uneasily and asked, "Why the sudden friendliness?"

"I'm a soldier, and I know it is impossible to win every skirmish. I've learned to make the best of things."

"That's fine," said Wyatt, not trusting her for a minute. But he was curious. "Are all women soldiers where you come from?"

"As many as wish to be. There is no difference made between the sexes, only between individuals according to their abilities. There are many women in the task force—pilots, technicians, officers, gunners, ordinary troops."

"Nobody thinks a thing of it?"

"Why should they?"

Wyatt could not really think of any good reason, except that on Earth they did.

Brinna reached for a panel at her right side and started to open it.

Instantly Wyatt was alert. "What are you doing there?"

"You want to go to Washington. Unless you can tell me the exact coordinates yourself, I must have the computer work out a course."

"Okay," said Wyatt. "Open the panel, but slowly."

Behind it there was only a remarkable compact receptor-effector unit. "You see?" she said. "Now if you will allow me—"

He allowed her. He asked, "Do you have a chart designation for Washington already in that thing?"

"For everywhere in your world," said Brinna. "*Naturally.*"

A chill went crawling down Wyatt's back. Some of the larger implications of the situation were beginning to catch up with him.

Enemies had entered the skies of Earth, spying, charting. Enemies from another star, so far away that Earth had never heard of it. Earthmen had been kidnapped, the names of cities had been written down, plans had been made. And somewhere out there, in the immense black and fire-blazing gulf that surrounded Earth—not any

longer as a protective barrier but as a pathway for invasion—an alien fleet proceeded on its way.

Wyatt stared in horror out the window and wondered how, even if all Earth's defenses were mustered, she could fight off an attack by an enemy so superior in technology that interstellar flight was a commonplace.

"Brinna," he said, "what—" He started to turn his head toward her and out of the tail of his eye he saw her hand move on the controls but it was already too late to do anything. The plane went out from under him sideways and the window tried to push itself through his head. Then he was thrown the other way with a violence that nearly snapped his neck. The seat belt cut into him and his arms flew out wildly. The gun was pulled from his hand as by a powerful magnet. He yelled involuntarily and then for the second time direction was reversed and his head slammed into the window again and all the stars went out.

When he came to he had no weapon at all and his hands were securely fastened to the back of the seat with his own belt. His head ached abominably. "That was a dirty trick," he said. "Now I see why you made that first turn so gentle—so I wouldn't know how fast this thing could maneuver at right angles."

Brinna said, "Would you have expected me to give you a performance sheet?"

"All right," he said sourly, hating her, hating the feeling of helplessness and disadvantage, raging at the combination of circumstances that had chosen him to grapple with a situation that no one man could possibly have handled. "Where are we going now?"

"Back to where I found you. You'll have to get to Washington with the warning some other way."

Wyatt groaned. "What do I have to do to make you understand? Nobody will believe a word I say."

"It's your world," she said. "I can do no more than tell you what will happen."

"You mean you *won't* do any more," he said furiously. "What's your game, anyway? If you really cared whether Earth is attacked or not you'd make sure—"

A pair of little blue lights began to flash alternately at the left of the control panel, accompanied by a shrill buzzing.

Brinna started. She said something in her own language that sounded like a curse.

"What's the matter?" Wyatt asked.

"Trouble. Oh, not with the ship, that's only the communicator." She put out her hand and at the same time she gave him a hard glare. "Just keep quiet. Don't say anything at all, or you may only make things worse for yourself."

She flipped a switch. The flashing and buzzing stopped and a man's face appeared in a tiny screen. Wyatt could not see it too clearly from his angle, but it seemed a not unlikeable face of which the chief characteristics were strength and a sort of inner weariness. The man spoke to Brinna and she answered him, and Wyatt could not understand a word of what they said.

Some part of the conversation seemed to concern Wyatt himself. He became more and more frantically uneasy. When the contact was broken and the screen was blank again, he leaned forward against his bonds and demanded, "What's all that about?"

Brinna nodded briefly toward the window. "Look out there." Her brows were drawn down into a black angry bar and she seemed to be thinking hard. Wyatt looked out the small window.

A second disc-shaped craft had joined them. It was about four hundred feet away, keeping pace. Even while he looked at it the craft tilted, showing a glowing pink center surrounded by the black outer ring, and appeared to shoot away into the starry void.

Brinna followed it.

Wyatt said, "Hey. You said you were going to put me off on the mesa —"

She shook her head. "Not now. That's Makvern out there, the good gray Makvern who would be suspicious of his own father. He knows you're aboard. There is only one place I can take you." She pointed expressively. "Out. If I tried to drop back down to Earth now I'd be in front of a court-martial before breakfast."

She turned to face him. It seemed that she had done her thinking, compensating for the sudden change in direction that Makvern's appearance had necessitated.

"Listen," she said. "I'm the only hope you have of getting back to Earth before the attack. If you tell anyone that I tried to pass on a warning, that one hope will be gone. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," Wyatt said. He had been doing some thinking too. "I am also your only hope of getting a warning to Earth before the invasion, which you badly want to do not because you give a tinker's damn what happens to Earth, but because of the effect you think it will have on some deal of your own. So I guess in a sense we're partners, then?"

"You could say that." Her eyes were as bright and hard as two chips of blue stone. She was as handsome a girl as Wyatt had ever seen, and she scared the devil out of him. "Partners. Yes. But whatever my motives may be they do not concern you, or Earth. And if I do not succeed with my plan this time—" She shrugged. "There will be other worlds."

Wyatt said shrewdly, "They might not be as well able to fight back as Earth, though. We don't quite have space flight yet, but we do have nuclear weapons. Enough to give even your force a real jar. And that's what you want, isn't it?"

Her face changed slightly. He thought she almost smiled, in a wry unhumorous way.

"You're far too clever," she said. "Don't let your cleverness betray you."

"I'll watch it," he said, not feeling clever at all, feeling sick and agonized as the last thin rim of Earth dropped away out of sight and all of a sudden he knew that he was in space.

For one wild moment he thought, This whole thing is a dream, it happened too fast and it's all too crazy to be real, and pretty soon I'll wake up. But he knew it was not a dream. He was here, awake and substantial, and he was a captive, going with bound hands into an unknown void.

And going fast.

CHAPTER III

It had been night, and suddenly it was day.

There was no twilight zone, no period of transition. The craft shot out of the Earth's shadow into the full blaze of the sun, and it was like somebody turning on all the lights in the world in the middle of a dark room.

Wyatt flinched and turned his head away. When he dared to look again there was a filter lens over the port. Actually it must have slid into place at once, or the raw glare would have blinded him. And now space seemed to be brimming over with light, all the blackness hidden beyond that golden blaze.

He could see Makvern's craft, still in position ahead and to one side, its polished rim flashing and glittering. It seemed to skim through the ocean of light like a fleeting shadow, and Wyatt found himself mesmerized by the illusion that he, too, was being buoyed up and whirled along, a chip on the floods of heaven.

Brinna hunched brooding over her controls and never gave it all a second look. Wyatt realized that of course this was an old story to her. She must have seen suns all over the galaxy and consider them no more interesting than street lamps.

It was not an old story to Wyatt. He was still frightened to death of being where he was, but even the fear was getting lost in the overwhelming wonder and magnificence of it. He craned his neck around to peer at the actual sun itself, but that was behind them and the ports on that side of the cockpit were blacked out completely. All he could see were shaking veils of fire that sprang out suddenly to cover half his field of vision and then fell back, streaming in golden streams. He thought these must be solar prominences, or part of the corona. The golden flood of light spread out and out and he could not see any end to it, though he knew there must be one. Rushing

obliquely ahead of the craft was a thin black knife-edged blade cutting sharp across the radiance, and he knew that that was their own shadow.

There was the light, and Makvern's craft, and the shadow, and nothing else. Then a white curved thing like a gnawed bone slid into view, and he knew it was the edge of the Moon.

They headed toward it. For the first time Wyatt had something by which to estimate their speed. Whatever it was in miles per hour, it was too damned fast. The Moon fairly sprang at them. He could see craters opening and weird jagged mountains shooting up, exactly like pictures of growing plants taken with a strobe camera. The flinty peaks glinted like rows of teeth. Wyatt's heart came up in his throat. He understood that Makvern and Brinna must know what they were doing, and he was determined not to yell, but he found himself trying to push his feet through the floor in an involuntary gesture of putting on brakes.

The two craft tilted and swung across the face of the Moon—it was only the airlessness of space and the brilliance of the reflecting sunlight, Wyatt knew, that made the surface seem close enough to reach out and pick up the perfectly defined chunks of broken pumice as they passed. Plains, craters, pinnacles and ranges, blinding white or etched with inky shadow, flashed beneath them and then they were on top of the terminus and over it and it was night again, black, black, black and hung with stars.

Wyatt shook himself, feeling dazed. It was like a plunge into deep water, stunning. The filter shield slid automatically away from the window. He looked out at the hind side of the Moon, glimmering mysteriously in the eternal starshine, and was not very surprised to see that it looked very much like the familiar face.

Once more the two craft tilted and swung, and Wyatt saw the ship.

It hung motionless between the Moon and the stars, an enormous cylindrical shape catching dull glints on its flanks and its blunt nose. He could only guess its size by the area of stars it blotted out, and even that was only a guess. It was big. Big enough.

It was not showing any lights at first, but then one came on, laying a hard white path across the empty blackness. Makvern's craft found the path and raced along it, slowing as it went, and presently vanished.

"What is it?" asked Wyatt, and Brinna said,

"Scout tender. You didn't think we were going all the way to Alpha Centauri in these skimmers, did you?"

Wyatt said, "I hadn't really thought about it, one way or the other."

Alpha Centauri, he thought. My God.

Brinna put the skimmer, as she called it, into the lighted guidepath.

"You're likely to have a fairly rough time of it," she said. "They will question you. They're not brutes, but they're thorough. I won't be able to do anything about that. But hang on, and I'll arrange your escape as soon as I can."

"Thank *you*," said Wyatt bitterly.

"If," said Brinna with equal bitterness, "you hadn't been in such a blazing hurry to make me go to Washington, you wouldn't be here. So don't blame me for all your troubles."

The skimmer slowed, climbing up the beam of light.

A resurgence of panic took hold of Wyatt. "Why Alpha Centauri? Why do I have to go there?"

"Two reasons. We work well ahead, always planning the next campaign before we finish the last one. I told you they'll question you. In the normal course of events you would be shown the Centauri campaign so that you could get a clear idea of just how we work, and then you would be used to persuade your people not to resist."

"But you'll arrange my escape before that."

"I'll do what I can," she snapped, "as long as you keep your mouth shut. Now we're going in, and from here on you're just another captive."

Wyatt looked at her. He didn't trust her promise, not at all. He thought he had better never trust this dark girl too far.

The skimmer rose up into a great hatch. Wyatt heard a thunderous click transmitted through the air in the cockpit and felt a strong jar as what he thought must be a magnetic grapple took hold. Beyond the window now he saw a brightly lighted space that looked as big as Grand Central, equipped with great incomprehensible pieces of machinery. None of them looked like any propulsion or communication machines he knew. How did a faster-than-light ship communicate, anyway? An idea came to him.

Small figures moved out there. He recognized them as men wearing spacesuits. The suits were astonishingly like those being tested by the Air Force for high-altitude flying. He thought the A.F. boys would be glad to know their designs were good.

The skimmer was dormant, being lifted and handled by forces outside. Brinna said, "We have to wait for pressure to build up."

The huge hatch doors beneath had closed. Presently Wyatt heard sounds faintly from outside the skimmer, chiefly a throbbing noise like the beating of a gigantic heart which he thought must be the air-pumps.

He nursed the idea that had come to him. He didn't think it was a very good idea but it was the only one he had, and he had to do something, try somehow, to get a warning to Earth. He could not just wait for Brinna to help him escape, it might never be possible—even if she wasn't double-crossing him as she was obviously double-crossing someone else. He'd try his own way.

Soon a light showed on the control board and Brinna pushed a lever under it.

She got up. "All right," she said. "You go ahead of me."

Wyatt rose, his hands still tied. He passed through the aperture and onto the narrow stair which had unfolded from the rim. There was a platform under the bottom rung and he stepped onto it. Brinna came behind him. The skimmer hung suspended from a grapple on an overhead track. Makvern's craft was just beyond it on a similar grapple. At the end of the track was a mobile rack with three skimmers already in it and two empty slots. Three other racks held fifteen more, stacked up like pies in a bakery.

The men in spacesuits—some of them were women—were taking off their helmets. They were looking at Wyatt, interested but not unduly so. Makvern was walking toward them. He also was looking at Wyatt. His eyes were dark and his skin was leathery with exposure to many suns. His hair was rough and wiry, iron gray. His shoulders were wide and his body was hard and narrow and his legs were long. Wyatt thought if he had not met Makvern in another time and place he might have liked him. As it was, he hated him.

Makvern nodded to Brinna. He wore the same black uniform, but the insigne on his shirt was different and contained a ruby stud. He watched Wyatt as another man untied his hands.

"A technician, eh?" he said, speaking English no better than Brinna did, but perfectly intelligibly. "Good work, Captain. We have needed one badly."

"Thank you," said Brinna. "I hope he'll be useful."

Makvern said to Wyatt, "What is your field?"

"Communications," said Wyatt. "And I can tell you right now that I don't know anything more about weapons and defense than anybody who can read the daily papers, and that I won't be useful at all."

Makvern said, "I see Brinna explained to you why you were being brought here."

"She did. Fully."

"Well," said Makvern. "Come along."

He walked away and Brinna motioned for Wyatt to follow and he did, padding in his sock feet over the deck. It was a hell of a thing, he thought, to be on his way to Alpha Centauri without any shoes.

But his hands were free now. They were so sure he couldn't escape, inside their ship. Well, he couldn't. But maybe he could do something else. He looked at Makvern as they walked along the huge room.

"Star-ships," Wyatt said. "Faster than light. How the devil can you communicate at speeds and distances like that?"

Makvern smiled slightly. "That's right, you said you're a communications man. Well, there are ways. There are beams you never heard of."

"I'd like to see an outfit that can send a signal faster than light," Wyatt grunted.

Makvern looked at him thoughtfully. "Why not? We'll be going right past the communic room."

Brinna looked as though she wanted to say something, but she didn't, and they went on out of the hold and through a neat functional labyrinth of corridors.

"Here we are," said Makvern and opened a bulkhead door.

Wyatt sprang forward, low and fast, like a football player making a desperate tackle. His shoulder struck Makvern in the small of the back, his arms clasped him tight around the waist, and his weight bore him forward and down, through the door into the communications room. They hit the deck together, Wyatt on top, Makvern grunting heavily from the impact. Two men inside the room sprang up from their places in alarm. Wyatt turned his head and saw Brinna in the doorway and kicked the door shut in her face. There was no way to lock it. He scrambled to his feet, wild with the need for haste, and he realized then that Makvern was not moving. He must have hit his head on the deck when he fell. Wyatt dragged him against the door to block it, and by that time one of the two men had

turned back to his instruments and was shouting into what Wyatt assumed to be the ship's intercom.

The other man was almost on top of him.

Wyatt could not possibly avoid that rush. The man was big and he was young and strong and he pinned Wyatt against the wall and pounded at him. Wyatt did not worry about prize-ring rules. He lowered his head and butted, hard. The man staggered back, and Wyatt gave him a clip on the jaw to help him down and then made a rush of his own, at the man who was busily arousing the whole ship.

This man was not a pugnacious type. He looked at Wyatt with large horrified eyes and flung up his hands in a vague gesture of striking but Wyatt's fist took him solidly in the face and he whimpered and turned around and folded over his own knees.

The communic room was now quiet, except for a series of noises outside the door. Wyatt stood panting, looking at the maze of equipment.

Right here within reach was the means of warning Earth. The radio system on this ship must be strong enough to blanket every receiver on the planet. All he had to do was figure out how to use it.

He swore in an agony of frustration. Nothing was marked right, nothing was as he knew it. It was all there, and it was totally useless.

He reached down and took hold of the man who was crouched on the deck near him. He dragged him upright. He shook him.

"Listen," he said. "Listen, you're going to get this thing working. Understand?"

The man shook his head dazedly from side to side and said something in his own language.

Wyatt's grip became cruel. "You're going to send a message to Earth," he said, and then Makvern spoke quietly behind him.

"He can't understand you, Wyatt. Let him go."

Wyatt spun around, still holding the man. Makvern had got up. He was standing beside the door with a weapon in his hand. The door was now open and Brinna was standing in it, her thumbs hooked in her belt, watching. Men were arriving behind her in the corridor.

Wyatt said, "If you shoot me you'll get your own man too." He shifted his grip, dragging the man closer to the control panel. Feeling even while he was speaking the absolute hopelessness of this last ditch play, he said,

"Tell him what I want or I'll smash your communication system so thoroughly—"

"It was a good try, Wyatt," said Makvern, not without a certain admiration, and pressed a stud on his weapon.

Wyatt never knew what hit him.

When he awoke he was lying in a bunk in a small metal cabin. Close beside his head there swung a curious helmet-like device linked by cables to a squat cabinet.

Makvern was standing looking down at him. He looked alert and wary and his hand rested casually on his holstered side-arm.

"How are you feeling now?" said Makvern.

Wyatt started a sour reply, and then he froze in an incredulous astonishment.

Makvern had not spoken in English. He had spoken in a totally strange language—and yet he, Wyatt, had understood him!

"What—how—" Wyatt began.

Makvern smiled. "How do you know the language of Uryx, our language, all of a sudden? Simple. Learning-tapes."

He gestured toward the helmet and the cabinet. Wyatt gaped like a yokel. It was too uncanny. Hearing words he'd never consciously heard before, and yet understanding them—

He articulated with difficulty. "Learning-tapes?"

Makvern sat down. "You've been under a seda-ray for some days, Wyatt. In fact, we're nearly to our rendezvous with the fleet, off Alpha Centauri."

So time had passed? That wasn't surprising. But this other thing—

Makvern went on. "Don't you yet have it on your Earth, the technique of teaching arbitrary knowledge to a subject in his sleep?"

Wyatt began to get it now. "You mean, a recorded voice repeating facts over and over in a sleeping man's ear? Yes. We have that—but it's not good enough to teach a man a whole new language in sleep."

"With us," said Makvern, "it is good enough. We always use it, once we pick up the vocabulary and grammar from our first captives. Makes it easier to question them. Instead of all our intelligence officers, technicians and so on having to learn the captive's language, we give him *our* language."

It was still too much for Wyatt to take in. He lay looking at Makvern, and after a moment he said,

"You seem like a decent guy, not a butcher or a greedy conqueror type. Maybe you can tell me what gives your people the idea they've a right to go around acting like a bunch of goddamned bandits."

Makvern smiled faintly. "Probably," he said, "because that's exactly what we are. Uryx is still a young empire. I imagine you have learned on Earth how empires grow—starting from a small weak poverty-ridden state fighting for its existence and becoming, by the process of eating its neighbors, a tremendous power able to conquer everything in sight. When it does this it wants to gorge itself on all the things it never had before."

He made a sweeping gesture. "Wealth, beauty, techniques, cultures, knowledge, everything under a thousand suns that can enrich or entertain us. We are still in this stage of acquisitiveness."

Wyatt grunted. "That all sounds very philosophic, but it still doesn't make you anything but bandits."

"When we join the main fleet," said Makvern, refusing to be angered, "you can take that up with Varsek."

"Varsek?"

"Commander in Chief of the Task Force. The—ah—Boss, I think you would say."

"I'll be glad to take it up with him," Wyatt said. "And if he thinks he's going to get any help from me, he's wrong."

He looked up at Makvern and he said suddenly, "You deliberately gave me a chance at that communic room, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

"Yes. You didn't have to show it to me, you must have known what was in my mind. But you had no intention of letting me get a message off to Earth. You shammed unconsciousness till it looked like I might make it, and then you came to and stopped me."

"Why would I do a thing like that?" Makvern asked calmly.

"Why, indeed? That's what I'm asking."

Makvern said, "Perhaps I was testing you to find out something, Wyatt. Let me ask you a question in return. Why did you let Brinna capture you so easily?"

"What do you mean, easily?"

"You had a weapon. Yet you didn't use it on Brinna. Why?"

Wyatt became instantly wary and on guard. Makvern, then, suspected the arrangement between Brinna and himself, suspected Brinna of a double-cross? He'd better be careful.

He said, "What's this about Brinna? To me, she's just a female wildcat that dropped out of the sky."

"She is what you would call very high brass," Makvern said. "A high officer of the Task Force, completely trusted by Commander Varsek."

Had Makvern faintly emphasized the word "trusted"? Wyatt wasn't sure. He was only sure now that some devil's broth of intrigue went on in the immense Task Force that followed its looting voyage through the galactic suns, and that he, Wyatt, was less than the smallest pawn in the hidden game.

"I wouldn't," said Makvern, "think too much of Brinna. She's beautiful, I know. But she's in love."

Oddly, Wyatt felt a pang to hear that. "In love? With whom?"

"With power," Makvern said grimly, and then the next moment the light in the cabin went blue and there was a vertiginous shock that made Wyatt feel as though he was falling, falling, everything gone from around him, plunging through abysses of darkness—

A whining sound went up to a shriek and passed beyond hearing, and then the lights burned white again and the dizziness in his head passed.

"What the devil—" he began huskily.

Makvern stood up. "We just went out of overdrive. We've reached the Task Force. Come on Wyatt—for you, this is it."

CHAPTER IV

Here in the windowed bridge, the background was all stars.

Clouds of stars, rivers of them, chains and globes of them, and drawn across them here and there like curtains of the most glorious fire ever imagined were the shining nebulae. They were all colors. Red, blue, smoky yellow, green, diamond white. Some of them, Wyatt realized, were not stars at all but galaxies, scattered out in careless millions through the apparently infinite universe. To an earthbound, skybound man like himself, this was almost too much to take. Look at ten billion stars and a million galaxies and all the empty space between for them to roam around in, and realize that this is the universe, you are in the middle of it, not standing on the edge looking up the way you do on Earth but right in the middle of it, the nothingness and allness of it without end, amen. If you have no religion you get one in a hurry, because obviously only God could have made this.

Wyatt was dimly aware that someone—Makvern—was talking to him. Alpha Centauri. A hand pointed, guiding him back from the infinite to the particular.

Ahead, still very far away but close enough to stand out from among the more distant stars like a beacon lamp, was a yellow sun.

"There's a companion," Makvern said, "but it's insignificant and did not prevent the formation of a stable planetary system around the primary. Alpha Centauri has eight planets—it's very much like your own Sol. The two inner planets are too hot, and the outer ones are too cold, but the third and fourth support life. The third is closer to the sun than Earth and is still in a comparatively primitive stage of evolution. We can pick up minerals there but nothing else. The fourth world is our target."

Wyatt shut his eyes against the blaze of suns and nebulae and wheeling galaxies and tried to concentrate on Alpha Centauri, its fourth planet, and himself.

"Where's your fleet?" he asked, and opened his eyes again, looking closer at hand instead of trying to see the end of creation.

Once more Makvern pointed.

Once more Wyatt was stunned, this time in a much more personal way. Suns and galaxies were beyond him, the incredible handiwork of God, but men had built these ships. And the one was almost as overwhelming a thing as the other.

It was the hell and all of a fleet.

It too was a long way off, though not anything like as far as Alpha Centauri. Makvern explained that they did not attempt any very close maneuvering in hyper-drive, where you counted your fractional seconds of error in multiples of parsecs. The main task force would approach the system of Alpha Centauri at planetary speeds and deploy according to the master attack plan already decided upon while the fleet had been busy plundering the hapless worlds of the star-system before this one. The scout ship was now on an intersecting course.

Wyatt watched this convergence with a mounting awe and an increasing conviction that no matter how many warnings he might bring to Earth it would not do them one bit of good.

He had thought the scout tender was huge when he first saw it hanging beyond the dark side of the Moon. The closer he got to the fleet the smaller the tender seemed to him and the smaller he felt himself, until he thought that this must be pretty much like a minnow's-eye view of a school of whales passing in all their majesty, accompanied on the flanks by the swift sinister forms of great sharks. The analogy was obvious but not a bad one, Wyatt thought. The phalanx of huge dark shapes swam in space as in black water, touched with vagrant gleams of light that might have been phosphorescence instead of starshine. The hugest of them—the heavy support craft, the troop transports, the supply ships, and the

swag-bellied monstrosities that Brinna said were used to store and carry loot—travelled together in a wedge-shaped formation, with the flagship at the apex. Ahead and on both wings were the smaller, faster destroyer-type craft, heavily armed but maneuverable. These were the spearhead of any attack, and the defenders of the fleet from any hostile action in space. Behind came a shoal of smaller craft like the tender, the inglorious but indispensable work-horses of the fleet.

Clear across the galaxy these ships had come, built and manned by humans, conceived in their brains and controlled by their hands. It seemed a pity their purpose could not have been more noble.

The Task Force swept closer and closer, rolled over the tender like a mighty wave, engulfed it, and carried it along in its resistless rush toward Alpha Centauri.

A communicator at the back of the bridge, which had been rattling away in the course of routine technicalities, suddenly changed its tone. "Clear channels," said a brisk important voice. "Clear channels for Number One." The operator at Fleet Control whose image had appeared on the screen promptly pulled the switch on himself. Involuntarily everyone in the bridge room snapped to attention, even Makvern and Brinna.

Swiftly, under her breath, Brinna said, "What does he want that couldn't wait for our regular report?"

She looked worried. Guilty conscience, Wyatt thought. But Makvern's conscience was clear, at least where Wyatt was concerned, and he looked worried too. Almost, you might say, apprehensive.

When he turned to face the screen there was no sign of this in his face, nothing but the properly alert expression of a staff officer about to speak to his chief.

A smartly turned out operator, owner of the officious voice, appeared in the screen. "ST-6," he said. "ST-6, this is Number One calling.

Number One, calling for Staff Captain Makvern."

Makvern stepped forward into the pick-up area. "Captain Makvern here."

"Stand by, sir. Commander Varsek is ready to speak to you."

Makvern stood by. He seemed perfectly at ease. Brinna's mouth was drawn tight and her eyes were narrowed. Wyatt started to say something and she shook her head at him fiercely. He shut up. The bridge waited silently as though the Supreme Being was about to step into it.

The operator had vanished from the screen. It remained blank for a moment or two. Then it brightened again and Commander Varsek was mirrored in it.

He nodded to Makvern, who saluted. He was sitting behind a big desk covered with charts, papers, microfilm spools, a couple of viewers, and various communic media. In contrast to the immaculate turn-out of his operator—and everybody else that Wyatt had so far seen—Varsek's uniform shirt was open down the front, his sleeves were rolled up, and the shirt itself looked as though he had been digging ditches in it. He gave the impression of a man enormously embroiled in work, the two-hours-of-sleep-a-night, coffee-and-benzedrine-and-I-thrive-on-it type that automatically makes everybody else feel like a lazy slob. All this part of him Wyatt found only mildly irritating. It was Varsek's face and what he sensed behind it that made Wyatt feel he could really hate this man.

Varsek was a big lean man, and his face was big and lean, with a lot of bone in it and no softness anywhere, and no warmth, and no friendliness. He smiled, and the smile was a lie. Wyatt thought all the rest of it was a lie too, or at least a deliberate pose. Only his eyes were true. They looked at Makvern, and then at Brinna, and then for quite a long moment at Wyatt, and they were rapacious and hungry, cold and cruel, highly intelligent, and disconcertingly demonstrative of a mind capable of handling nearly anything.

"This is your captive, is it?" he said. "Good. He looks more intelligent than any I've seen yet." He turned his attention back to Makvern.

"I've sent a skimmer for you. You too, Brinna."

Makvern said, in an almost too carefully expressionless voice, "We were about to report to the flagship."

"This is important, Makvern. Can't wait. I've got Loran aboard, very sick, about dying I'd say. I want you and Brinna here." His gaze flicked again to Wyatt. "Bring him along. It may help him to understand us better."

"Yes, sir," said Makvern.

Varsek nodded and the screen went dead.

Somebody said, "Skimmer's coming into the airlock now, sir."

Makvern turned around and looked at Brinna. His face was absolutely white. So was hers. White, frightened, and bitterly angry.

"Who is Loran?" asked Wyatt.

"One of our under officers," Makvern said, too quietly. "Come on, we mustn't keep them waiting."

They left the bridge and went, not below to the main launching hold, but aft to a small lock. On the way Wyatt asked,

"Can you tell me what's going on?"

"For your own sake," said Makvern, "no."

They got into the skimmer and the pilot took it away and they sat stiff and silent like three people going to a wake. And Wyatt had an idea he was about to get a little closer to the truth of whatever forces were operating behind the scenes here. He needed to know, needed it desperately. He was prepared to sell or double-cross anybody including himself in order to get a warning to Earth in time, but before he could do that he had to know who was buying, and what, and for how much.

The skimmer passed swiftly through the fleet, past the great dull-gleaming hulls tarnished by a thousand atmospheres, pitted and scarred by the cosmic dust and drift of half a galaxy.

The black enormous form of the flagship loomed ahead, blotting out the stars. The skimmer was gathered into it. A minute later, as they stood close together at the ladder head, Makvern whispered in English,

"This is going to be ugly. Keep out of it, you understand? No matter what!"

CHAPTER V

The man was obviously sick, probably dying, painfully, spasmodically, and not from natural causes.

He was a fairly young man, younger than Makvern, older than Brinna. He was strapped onto a kind of flat cradle made of a plastic mesh, and this was suspended in a circular pit, not very deep. Above the man, almost but not quite in contact with his body, was a double row of crystal rods, their bottom ends close together, their top ends spread to form a V. They were served by power leads that went away somewhere to the sides of the pit. Every so often, in answer to a signal, power was fed into the double-rods, a rapid flicker of bluish light ran up and down through them, and the man below them writhed and sobbed in a grotesque and hideous agony.

Varsek gave the signals. He was sitting on a seat above the shallow pit, where he could look down comfortably into Loran's face while he talked to him. There was a ring of seats around the pit. Wyatt sat in one. So did Makvern, and Brinna, and several other officers Wyatt did not know. The pit was situated in the center of a quite small room with soundproof walls and a single door, very thick and having a lock on the inside. The room was deep in the most secret bowels of the flagship.

The crystal tubes were dead now. Loran rolled his head from side to side and moaned. He had bitten his lips and tongue, and he was bleeding slightly from the nose. Varsek watched him. There was not a sound in the room other than Loran's moaning. Nobody moved. Nobody met anyone else's eye. Nobody spoke. There might have been a concourse of waxen dummies above the pit.

Except for Varsek. He spoke. He called Loran by name, several times, with a dispassionate persistence, until he answered. Then Varsek said,

"Who is the leader of the Second Party?"

He had asked that question fifty, a hundred times before, in exactly that tone of voice.

And Loran answered, as he had fifty or a hundred times before, "There is no Second Party." Only his voice was weaker every time he said it.

And Wyatt was sicker. He clenched his hands and shut his jaw tight. There was nothing he could do. He kept telling himself that. There was nothing he could do.

Varsek said, "It's no use to lie to me, Loran. There is a Second Party. Every ship in the fleet including this one has some officers and some men who are not loyal to me—who are in fact dedicated to the task of taking the fleet away from me. This I know Loran, I have absolute proof. I'm only asking you who the leader is."

"There is no Second Party."

"Is he one of my staff officers, Loran?"

"There is no—"

"Which one?" And he named them through one at a time, including Makvern and Brinna, every one that was there, and they sat in the bright light with blank faces and fear in their eyes.

Loran said, "There is no Second Party."

"Let's be realistic about this," Varsek said. "Your friends, the men you're so nobly protecting, can't help you now. I'm the only one who can. I can have you up out of there in a minute, with the best medical attention and everything you need to fix you up. All you have to do is answer my questions. That's your duty, isn't it, Loran? Didn't you swear an oath of loyalty to Uryx and the government of Uryx, and to me as the duly appointed servant of that government?"

No answer.

"You're a young man, Loran. I don't imagine you love the idea of death. Why leap at it? Tell me the names of the disloyal officers you know, and you can live."

Loran said distinctly, "Go to hell."

Varsek gave the signal again.

The banked rods pulsed and flickered, and whatever nerve-searing, flesh-torturing force was in them went to work on Loran.

Wyatt got up. He called Varsek the dirtiest name he could think of, in a kind of choked and half-articulate voice, and then he started for him. It was obviously a silly thing to do but he wasn't really thinking about it. He just had a simple desire to stop Varsek from doing what he was doing.

Several of the officers—Makvern was one of them—caught him before he had taken two steps. Varsek glanced around. He smiled briefly. "I thought you looked like a brave man," he said. "Brave men are usually stubborn. That's why you're here, to see what happens to brave stubborn men."

"There are a lot of them on Earth," said Wyatt fiercely. "They haven't broken for other dirty little tyrants and they won't break for you. Remember that."

Makvern snarled in his ear, "Shut up for God's sake. And sit down." His face was rigidly controlled but in his eyes, deep down, there was a wildness of hate and fury that startled Wyatt into obedience. He allowed himself to be forced back toward his seat. And then Brinna stepped forward and said to Varsek,

"It might be safer, sir, if I put him with the other prisoners now."

Varsek considered that, totally undisturbed by the deathly sounds from the pit. He studied Brinna, who was looking rigidly past his head at the opposite wall. He studied Makvern, who was now as blank as a stone, so that Wyatt wondered if he had really seen what he thought he had seen in Makvern's eyes. He studied the others, who showed varying degrees of unhappiness, and then he said to Brinna, "You look ill, Captain. How would you expect to command a battle fleet if you can't stand to see one man die?"

Brinna's body was absolutely rigid. She said, "Are you accusing me of plotting with the Second Party to take command? If so, I request a formal—"

Varsek shook his head. "No accusation, Brinna. Merely a statement. I know how it eats on your soul that you probably never will command a fleet just on account of your sex." He grinned at her. "Sex isn't the whole story, Brinna. I'm merely pointing that out to you."

Ability and toughness have something to do with it too. Isn't that so, Makvern?"

"I suppose so, sir."

The man in the pit howled like a tortured animal. Varsek pushed a button impatiently and the rods stopped flickering and the howling ceased.

"Very well," said Varsek, turning away, "take your delicate stomach away from here. And maybe you can put your sex to some use with the prisoner. Try it, anyway. The rest of you stay here."

Brinna saluted, turned smartly on her heel, snapped, "Follow me," at Wyatt, and marched toward the door. Wyatt glanced at Makvern, who refused to look at him, and went after Brinna.

He was thankful to get out of the room. Sick and raging himself, he did not feel like talking and Brinna's face discouraged him anyway. The way her bootheels rang on the iron floor he thought that she was wishing Varsek's head under every one. Finally, when they had left even the level of the pit-room behind and were walking together along an upper corridor with nobody else in sight, he did speak.

"Are you plotting with the Second Party, Brinna?" he asked.

"No," she said savagely. "I am not. I hate everything they stand for."

"But you are plotting against Varsek?"

She stopped and looked at him with eyes as lambent as those of an angry cat.

"If you have thoughts of helping your own cause by going to Varsek about me, forget them. In the first place, Varsek helps nobody. In the second place, I can have you silenced before you could ever get to him."

"No," said Wyatt slowly, "I wasn't thinking of going to Varsek. But what he said about you is true. You do want the command. You figured that Earth, armed and prepared, would give Varsek such a setback that you might be able to oust him and take over."

"Do you blame me?" whispered Brinna. "He's a swine. A cruel, treacherous, sadistic swine. You saw him. No wonder there's a Second Party."

"How big is it, Brinna?"

"Big enough to worry Varsek. Loran is the third poor devil he's tortured to death trying to find out who's in it. He hasn't managed it yet, but he will. And then—" She made an expressive gesture of slashing.

"You said you hated everything the Second Party stands for. What does it stand for?"

"Peace," said Brinna, as though it was a shameful word. "They want to take the Task Force home and force the government to stop this galaxy-wide swing of conquest."

"And you don't want peace?"

"I'm a soldier. What use would I be at peace?" Her face was hard, shining, exalted with ambition. "Not while I'm still young and unsatisfied, anyway. Listen, Wyatt. I told you women are not segregated and discriminated against in our society and that's true—except for top positions of power in politics and the military. Even there it's never stated openly. But somehow or other the women candidates never quite make it. I'm going to be the first one to break that custom. I am going to command this Task Force."

She put her hand on his arm, speaking rapidly, with urgent force. "I'm not alone, Wyatt. I have a powerful group behind me. Varsek isn't popular with the officers. The men love him because he wins battles and looks the other way when they abuse the native women, but they don't have to deal with him. All we need is an excuse—a demonstration that Varsek has blundered badly—and we can step in. I can step in. Earth could give us that excuse, if your people put up enough of a surprise fight. So you see our interests do run together."

"That far, they do," said Wyatt. "But afterward?"

"What do you mean, afterward?"

"After you take over. What happens to Earth then?" He shook her hand away. "Don't treat me like a fool, Brinna. You don't take over from Varsek on the grounds that he's failed and then admit that you too are licked by the same situation."

Her eyes had narrowed and the anger-light was in them again. "So?"

"So you will then proceed to smash my world. You have to, to prove you're more capable than Varsek. Otherwise, somebody will oust *you*."

"I warned you before not to let your cleverness betray you," she said. "Let's be realistic about this. Earth is our next target, she's going to be hit warning or no warning, and she's going to be beaten. Now. Do you imagine Earth can get better and more merciful treatment from Varsek, or from me?"

"When you put it that way," Wyatt said thoughtfully, "I can see a preference. All right, Brinna. When do you think you can arrange the escape?"

"The only chance will be some time during the attack on Alpha Centauri. I'll get word to you as soon as the arrangements are made, but don't get impatient. You heard Varsek. I'll have to move very cautiously."

"And what happens to me in the meantime?"

"You'll be questioned. Oh, not like that. Varsek reserves the pit for special cases. By our Intelligence group, by subterfuge—the captives' quarters are thoroughly monitored and don't forget it—and by Varsek himself, probably. Don't antagonize him, Wyatt, or you could find yourself in the pit at that."

They had come to a transverse corridor, and now Brinna gave him a warning glance and said in a sharp impersonal tone, "That way." Her hand was on the butt of her stunner.

Wyatt turned obediently, into the transverse corridor. A guard who had been lounging midway of it snapped to attention. He was stationed beside a door. Brinna marched Wyatt up to him and said, "Another one for the tank," and the guard said, "Yes, sir." He did a complicated series of things with his hands, apparently activating power sources that released various locks, and the door opened.

"Inside," the guard said to Wyatt, and jerked his thumb.

With no further word to Brinna, Wyatt stepped through the door.

It closed behind him with the sound of a bank vault shutting for the night.

The room he stood in was fairly large and it had bunks all around the walls. About sixteen bunks, Wyatt thought, and there were about a dozen men sitting on the edges of them, or sitting around a table bolted to the floor in the center of the room. They were all looking at him. They were the damnedest collection of humanity, or whatever you wanted to call it, that Wyatt had ever come across. He remembered Brinna's complaint that the accessible people, the ones easily picked up without giving any wide-spread alarm, usually lived in isolated regions and were without much in the way of technical knowledge.

He could see the problem, all right. Of the five Earthmen there, one was an Arab in a dirty burnoose, one looked like a young Apache Indian in old farm clothes, and one, at a guess, came from Chinese Turkestan and smelled of camels. The other two were closer to home. One was medium-tall and stocky, with a thick chest and thin strong legs. He wore faded Levis and high-heeled boots and his face was burned brick-red to the middle of his forehead. Above that his skin was as white as a baby's. A Stetson hat hung on a peg over his bunk. The fifth man, who sat beside him, was cut out of the same cloth, but somehow with a difference. Wyatt was puzzled for a minute, and then he remembered once seeing an Australian movie with a long lean leathery actor named Chips Rafferty in it playing a stockman, and he thought he had the answer.

The other six men in the room were not from Earth.

The other six men in the room were not human.

Not as Wyatt was used to thinking of human, homo sapiens, tracing a well-fossilized descent back through the various *anthropus* forms and ultimately to the primal ancestor. These six walked erect and had facile hands and humanoid bodies and quite handsome faces, but whatever their primal ancestor had been it had not been like man's. It had left them a legacy of body hair that could not be called anything else but fur, and their skulls were curiously elongated rather than domed, and their finger-tips still had their ancient claws, retracting catlike into the flesh. Catlike, Wyatt thought, was a good word for them—and yet not quite Earthly-catlike. The ears were too round, the eyes too large and dark and capable of warmth. They wore garments of fine cloth in bright shades to set off their individual color, and in size and facial conformation they were as different from each other as the Earthmen were.

They looked at Wyatt, sitting in two double rows on the edges of their bunks. The Earthmen looked at Wyatt. And in no eye, human or humanoid, was there a spark of friendliness.

Wyatt said, "Hello."

There was no answer. The stocky man and the long lean one got up, and each one hitched up his pants and left the thumbs of his hands sticking negligently in the waistband.

"Look," said Wyatt, annoyed, "I didn't come here because I wanted to, but I haven't got smallpox or whooping cough, and I haven't wronged anyone's sister."

The two men began to walk slowly forward. The young Apache rose and came after them, a dark gleam flickering deep in his eyes. The Arab rose, and then the Turcoman, and then the six lithe furry men came dropping one by one from the edges of their bunks and all of them moved toward Wyatt, not speaking.

A cold qualm of fear contracted his heart. He set his back against the door and braced himself.

"What is this?" he said. "What are you doing? I'm an Earthman, a captive like you. Why—"

"You're no Earthman," said the stocky southwesterner, in a very cold, mild voice. "You're another goddamn lousy spy."

They came at him all together in a swift purposeful rush.

CHAPTER VI

Instead of cowering against the door or trying to get out, as they expected him to do, Wyatt sprang straight for the man in the Levis. He was easy to get at because he was leading the others by a pace or so. Wyatt hit him.

"Spy, am I?" he snarled. He was mad. The rush closed around him but he hung onto the man, who snorted and grappled with him, and they toppled over thrashing and kicking among the legs of the others. "I'll show you who's a spy," he said. The tall man he took to be an Australian bent over and started to pull at him, and he kicked him furiously on the shins. "One at a time, boy. Keep your paws off." He rolled with his enemy, pounding on a cast-iron body and getting knocked dizzy himself in return. He began to swear. He had never been much for swearing, but the injustice of this attack inspired him beyond his talents. He went on pounding and cursing until after a while he realized that his target was no longer in range and that he was alone in a small circle, surrounded by the others who were looking down at him. He crouched there, blinking, and saw the man in the Levis wiping blood off his mouth with the back of his hand and studying him speculatively.

"So I'm a so-and-so saddle tramp, am I?" he said.

"Yes, and a damn dumb one," said Wyatt bitterly. He got up, bunching his fists.

"Real fast now," said the stockman, "who was it died at the Alamo?"

"Davy Crockett," said Wyatt. "King of the wild frontier. Also William Barret Travis and Jim Bowie and a lot of other good men who never had songs written about them. Come on, let's finish this."

"No," said the other man, stepping back. "I don't reckon anybody but an Earthman could swear like that without stuttering, nor want to fight like that. What would you say, Bill?"

The Australian said he agreed.

"My name's A. C. Burdick," said the stockman, holding out his hand, "and I'm a long way from home. Sorry about jumping you like that, but we've had three guys in a row claiming to be captives like us, only they weren't, and we're getting sick of it."

Still glowering, Wyatt shook hands with him, and then with the Australian. The Arab and the Turcoman muttered and returned sulkily to their places, apparently disappointed that there had been no bloodshed. The Apache youth stood and regarded Wyatt with an unwinking stare from under his greasy hatbrim.

"This here is No-Name," said Burdick, grinning. "He was sleeping out in the hills when he was picked up—you know, some of them still find out their warrior-name by getting it in a dream the old way. He figures this is all part of the dream and is waiting till he wakes up."

Wyatt nodded to No-Name, who inclined his head briefly and went back to his bunk where he sat cross-legged, patiently brooding.

Burdick shifted from his native tongue to the language of Uryx and said, "These gentlemen are from Alpha Centauri Four."

The furred slender men clasped their hands and raised them to their breasts. One of them, who was jet black and dressed in a scarlet tunic, said in the same tongue,

"I am Thurne of Obran, a king's messenger. I was taken as I crossed a plain, carrying a message between kings. Now there will be war for all."

The others nodded sadly. Wyatt, all his anger forgotten now, said, "Yes, and for my world too."

"Well," said Burdick, "come in and make yourself at home."

The time that followed then was something of a nightmare to Wyatt, not too protracted but intense. It was a strain watching his tongue

when he talked with the others, knowing that every word he said was being listened to outside. The Arab, the Turcoman, and No-Name awaited whatever thing might happen with their several brands of fatalism but Burdick and the Australian had a clearer understanding of the situation and were frantic to do something about it. He would have liked to offer them a word of hope, but he did not dare to. For the Alpha Centaurians, Wyatt knew, there was no hope, and they knew it too. With each passing hour, as the fleet roared on its way, Wyatt wished more earnestly for something evil and permanent to happen to Varsek.

It didn't. The only thing that happened was that Wyatt was hauled out away from the others at frequent intervals and questioned, questioned, questioned until he was too dazed and tired to form words any more. He tried not to tell them anything at all, but they were experts, and he suspected that they learned almost as much, if not more, from what he refused to tell them as from what he did. His only comfort was that he had no knowledge of armaments or defense beyond what any ordinary citizen might read in the papers, and which Fleet Intelligence had doubtless also read.

He sweated through it the best way he could and waited for word from Brinna.

It did not come.

Makvern came instead. He said, "Varsek wants to see you."

Wyatt went with him and they walked briskly through the corridors.

"What does he want with me?" Wyatt asked.

"You'll have to ask him," Makvern said.

"Did Loran die?"

"Yes. He died."

"Did he talk?"

"No."

"Then the Second Party's still safe."

"For the time being," said Makvern. "Only for the time being." He would not turn to look at Wyatt. His profile was as expressionless as a king's head on a coin.

Wyatt hesitated while he took three steps, knowing that if he guessed wrong he would almost certainly wind up in the pit, and that Earth quite certainly would be worse off than ever. Then, considering what he had to gain if he guessed right, he plunged.

"The Second Party," he said, "could take over if Varsek had a serious setback at Earth. Then they could take the Task Force and go home. They could start exporting some things from Uryx, like peace and stable government, instead of importing nothing but loot."

Makvern continued to walk briskly, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

"How would you propose that Earth could give Varsek a setback?" he asked.

"Get some of us back to Earth before the fleet, to give warning."

"That kind of talk," said Makvern evenly, "could get you and possibly a number of other people killed. I suggest that you stop it."

His tone was hard, perfectly cold and inflexible. Wyatt's heart sank. He had guessed wrong and Makvern was not one of the underground. And yet he had been so sure, the way Makvern had looked when Loran was suffering in the pit—

An orderly passed them into a huge room that was obviously used as an outer office, full of communic equipment, recorders, electronic files, and busy men. A second orderly opened the inner door for them, and Wyatt found himself looking at Varsek as he had first seen him on the communic screen, sitting behind the big crowded desk with his shirt open and his sleeves rolled up, the picture of demon energy.

He nodded and Makvern stepped back a little, leaving Wyatt alone, as it were, before Varsek. Varsek picked up a report and shook it at him.

"This is from Intelligence," he said. "It's not satisfactory. You're not cooperating, Wyatt."

"Would you expect me to?" said Wyatt.

"I expect you not to be a fool," said Varsek. "Look, I'm going to loot your planet. You know that, don't you? All right. Now if I know where things are I won't have to smash a lot of other things trying to find them, will I? And if there's no attempt at resistance, then nobody will get hurt, will they?" He threw the report. "You're not helping Earth, you're making it harder."

"I told everybody in the beginning," said Wyatt sullenly, "that I don't know anything more than they can find out themselves from reading a popular magazine."

"You're a native. You know more about it than we could ever find out in the time we have, and you have a scientific background. You must know approximately where the largest uranium deposits are, for instance, and the main sources of radioactive isotopes. Yet you refuse to verify our information, or correct it if it's wrong."

"That's right," said Wyatt. "I do refuse."

"Brave and stubborn," Varsek said. "Well. I know how stubborn you are. I could find out very quickly about the bravery."

"In the pit?"

Varsek nodded. "What would you say, Makvern?"

"It's up to you, sir," Makvern said, shrugging.

"No opinion at all?"

"None."

"That's not like you, Makvern."

"It's impossible to have any opinion of value concerning the advisability of—ah—questioning a man I don't know at all. I have no

idea of his limits. If they're easily reached, fine. If not, he's likely to die before you know it."

"True," said Varsek. "True. And he's the best bet to transmit a convincing message to Earth when the time comes, assuring them of the futility of resistance." He leaned back in his chair and scratched his chest reflectively, studying Wyatt with his bright cold eyes, and Wyatt had an uneasy feeling that Varsek was thinking rapidly of a great number of things only remotely connected with him except that they might have an indirect bearing on his life or death.

"Well," said Varsek finally, "there's always time for the pit later on. We'll follow the customary procedure. Arrange for Wyatt and the other Earthmen to have a good clear view of what happens when we hit Alpha Centauri Four, which will be—" He frowned at a desk chrono. "—in approximately five hours. I want you to watch carefully, Wyatt. This world isn't as mechanized as parts of yours and it doesn't have nuclear power, but it's civilized. Remember that. And remember that your nuclear weapons wouldn't be much more effective against us than their explosive devises."

He jerked his thumb at Makvern. "Get him out of here now. I've got half the planning still to do for this campaign, without worrying about the next one."

He became furiously busy. Makvern ushered Wyatt out and down the corridors again. This time Wyatt did not speak at all, and neither did Makvern. They parted at the door of the prisoners' quarters.

The five hours seemed more like five centuries. The only chance for an escape, Brinna had said, would be during the confusion of the attack. He didn't know whether she had been able to arrange it at all, and if she had, whether he might have made Makvern suspicious and ruined the whole thing by his attempt to make a better deal for Earth through the Second Party. He chewed his knuckles and sweated and thought wild thoughts about escaping somehow on his

own hook, but he couldn't plan anything with Burdick and the Australian because it would be overheard, or seen.

The other Earthmen were all restless and upset, as though they sensed a coming crisis. The Alpha Centaurians waited quietly, by contrast. Only their eyes shone with a terrible light. By God, thought Wyatt furiously, I'll kill Varsek with my own hands if I have to, I swear it. It was a childish thing to say even to himself, and he knew it. But he had never meant anything so much.

The Task Force hurtled on, a school of killer whales racing toward an unsuspecting victim.

The door opened and Brinna stood there. There were guards behind her.

"Come," she said. "All of you."

She stood aside while the captives filed out. As Wyatt passed her she gave him one quick fleeting glance. Hope sprang up in him. She had arranged something, and whatever it was he and the other prisoners would see that it worked.

They were marched through the corridors under guard and into a contact lock, where a small craft clung like a remora under the chin of the flagship. Here they were separated into two groups. The Alpha Centaurians were sent down first. Wyatt heard a clashing of metal, and then the Earthmen were ordered down and placed in a semicircular room which was half of an observation turret. The Alpha Centaurians were in the other half, fully visible but securely barred off by a partition of metal rods.

Similar rods slid down behind the Earthmen into slots in the deck. Wyatt stayed beside the doorway. He heard Brinna dismiss the guards. Their feet clanged on the ladder, going up. Brinna came along the corridor and stopped on the other side of the bars. She was blazing with excitement, triumph, hate, a lot of things that had been bottled up in her and which she was daring now to show.

"It's all arranged," she said, speaking rapidly but in a low voice. "All but two of the crew are my men. When we're clear of the ship, pass the word quietly to be ready when I—"

She broke off, whirling around, her face suddenly alarmed. Someone was coming down the ladder from the flagship.

It was Makvern, coming fast, and he held a stunner in his hand.

Brinna controlled herself admirably. She said, "Is there some trouble, Makvern? The prisoners are all secure—"

"I'm sure they are," said Makvern. He reached the foot of the ladder and an officer appeared as though he had been waiting for him. Makvern nodded sharply and almost at once the warning bells were ringing and the hatch was sliding shut. A moment later Wyatt felt the jar as contact was broken and the small craft fell free on its own power.

Makvern stood looking at Brinna and Wyatt. "I imagine," he said to Wyatt, "that she was telling you most of the men aboard belong to her. She was just a little bit mistaken. All of them belong to me."

CHAPTER VII

Brinna's face was now absolutely white, with her red mouth showing on it like a smear of blood. She dropped her hand to the grip of her own stunner.

She almost made it but not quite. Makvern hit her full on with a crackling charge and she fell and lay still and senseless.

Makvern sighed. "Poor Brinna. This is like snatching food from someone that's starving—I almost regret it—"

"I'll bet you do," said Wyatt. If he could have got his hands between the rods and around Makvern's throat he would have killed him. Burdick and Bill Whitfield, the Australian, had joined him now, and Whitfield asked, "What's up?"

"Nothing," said Wyatt with intense bitterness. "Not a damn thing, thanks to me. I had to get smart."

He felt sick with the knowledge of his own folly. He had taken the chance on Makvern in the hope of sparing Earth any attack at all, and this was what had come of it. He and Brinna would now go together to the pit, and what would happen to Earth would happen.

He pushed Burdick aside and went across the narrow room to the curving glassite-panelled wall on the other side and stood there. The others left him alone.

He heard movement and voices in the corridor, but he paid no attention to them. Nothing was important now. He looked out into space, lighted with the baleful light of the twin suns, and saw the whole great Task Force spread between him and the stars overhead, the destroyers coursing ahead of the main body, all their hulls glittering bright, beautiful, swift, deadly, a brazen spear for the slaying of planets.

The small craft in which he and the others were imprisoned was dropping below the fleet. It was extremely difficult to judge speeds here where there was nothing to go by but the stars, but Wyatt thought the Task Force must have been decelerating for some time as it approached its target, and that the small craft was moving considerably faster than the main body. He watched, simply because the ships were before his eyes, and he began to realize that this little ship was leading all the others down to battle.

"Like a damn Judas goat," he muttered, and Burdick spoke from beside him.

"They took that lady officer away," he said. "I reckon she's in trouble?"

Wyatt said, "The worst. She was going to help us escape."

Burdick said shrewdly, "Bill and me figured it was something like that. Too bad it went wrong."

Wyatt explained why it had gone wrong. "I should have been content with what I had. But I thought if—oh, what the devil's the use of hashing it over!" He looked at the steel rods that separated them from the Alpha Centaurians. "If we could just get those bars out of the way, get all together, the twelve of us—we might still do something. This is a small ship. It can't carry much of a crew, probably not more than five or six beside Makvern. If we could rush them and take the ship, we might be able to force them to fly it to Earth—"

Moonshine. Fool's talk, the babble of desperation. On the other hand, what did they have to lose?

Their lives, of course. But that would have to be up to the individual. As far as Wyatt was concerned, the pit was no beautiful prospect.

And if they succeeded—if—

"Well," said Whitfield, "let's get cracking." He crooked his finger at the Arab, the Turcoman, and No-Name.

In the spaceship, with the incredible panorama of space and the racing war fleet beyond the observation panels, the six Earthmen

held a conference, speaking to each other not in their own diverse tongues but in the language of Uryx, a place they had never seen and had not even known existed until suddenly it had become the most important thing in their lives.

The conference was brief. When it was over Wyatt and Burdick went to the wall of rods and talked to the Alpha Centaurians.

Thurne of Obran spoke for them all. "We will fight," he said. "We will fight gladly." He turned and pointed, his eyes blazing with a feral light that made him look more like a black panther than a human man. Wyatt followed his gesture and saw a misty blue planet rushing toward them in the golden glare of the primary.

Burdick said matter-of-factly, "Before we do any fighting we got to get out of here, so we better start looking for holes."

They looked. They had no way of knowing whether they were being watched as they had been on the flagship, but they had to risk that. They tested every rod and searched in vain for a weak spot. They tried by main force and by cleverness and there was no way. And the blue misty planet rushed closer and spread into a vast globe, and the blue color faded into greens and browns and ochres, splotched with the harsher blue of water. A high-pitched shrieking began and grew in intensity. The blaze of the sun was softened and the stars were blotted out. Clouds whipped and rolled and were gone, and the wild downward rush stopped. The ship hung in a greenish sky, and there was a yellow desert of sand and tumbled rock below. Cutting through the desert was a gorge with a river in the bottom of it, and where the river left the gorge at the edge of the desert was a green and most beautiful land full of little streamlets and flashing lakes, with queer-colored orchards and many-colored fields. And in the middle of the land there was a city.

"Obran," Thurne said.

Wyatt took the rods in his hands and strained until the veins swelled to bursting on his forehead and his face was crimson.

He could not budge them, but the other rods that barred the corridor suddenly slid up out of the way and Makvern stood there with another officer behind him.

Makvern said, "Wyatt—"

But Wyatt had already spun around and launched himself like a charging bull at Makvern.

He hit him and knocked him back into the other officer. There was a moment of wild confusion, while Burdick and Whitfield and the others piled through the door and into the fray. Wyatt was only clearly aware of one thing and that was that he had Makvern down and that he was going to kill him and it was all very pleasant. Then Whitfield was hauling at him and saying something about needing this one later on and Wyatt allowed himself to be hauled away, and the fight was over. This much of it, at least.

Burdick pulled Makvern to his feet and held him with one arm doubled behind his back. The Turcoman was methodically strangling the other officer and Wyatt went over and made him stop, explaining that the man might be necessary for flying the ship. Then he turned back to Makvern, who was shaking his head hard to clear it.

"Take their stunners and keep watch," Wyatt said to Burdick and Whitfield. "No-Name, you hold him. Good. Don't be afraid to hurt him a little—remember Cochise." He spoke then to Makvern. "How do I raise that partition?"

The Alpha Centaurians were all squeezed against it, trying to see what was going on.

Makvern said, "I'll raise it myself in a minute. God, Wyatt, don't you ever think before you jump?"

"I've thought," Wyatt said. "Plenty. Where's that control? And where's Brinna?"

He nodded to No-Name, who exerted pressure. Makvern began to look really angry. He snapped,

"Will you stop bawling at me and listen? I'm on your side. I'm the man Loran died for. I *am* the leader of the Second Party!"

The other officer, who had finally recovered his voice a little after the Turcoman's mauling, croaked out, "You won't be the leader of anything for long if we don't get that broadcast going. The flagship has already checked us once. If Varsek' doesn't find you anywhere else in the fleet and we don't behave just the way we ought to—"

Makvern glared at Wyatt. "Well? Do you still want to go to Earth, or would you prefer to accompany Brinna and me to the pit?"

Wyatt said to No-Name, "Let him go."

"Thanks," said Makvern sourly. "This shows signs of becoming a habit. I would have liked to tell you earlier that plans were already laid, but I didn't think it was wise. Varsek is unpredictable. He might have sent you to the pit—"

"Yes," said Wyatt. "You were a big help there. No opinion. You might at least have said no."

"If I had, you'd have been there in five minutes. Anyway, I've been teetering on the brink of that pit for weeks. All I wanted to do was hold out until now."

"So you let Brinna go ahead with this on her own hook, to kind of cover for you?"

"Yes. It kept her busy, and kept Varsek puzzled about me. It worked out well. Most of Brinna's men are really Second Party men, though it's going to be a shock to her to find that out. We were taking no chance of exchanging Varsek for another ambition-hungry chief, even if this one is female and handsome."

He had moved into the observation cell and was talking as much to the Alpha Centaurians as to Wyatt and the Earthmen.

"Your idea of warning Earth and using a setback there to put us in power—the same thing Brinna had in mind—wasn't a bad one, except that we can't wait that long. Varsek is alarmed. He's willing to torture the whole fleet if he has to root us out. We would have liked to put this off until we were just a little stronger. The fleet has been away from home a long time now and discontent is growing among the men—we could have capitalized on that. But we have no choice. If we don't move now we'll be destroyed, inevitably. So we're making our break at Alpha Centauri."

"How?" asked Wyatt.

"A full-scale revolt is out. Things will go well here, not much effective resistance and a lot of loot. Men don't oust a leader under those circumstances. We can't hope to take over the whole fleet. After the ships have landed and the ground phase of the attack is under way, we'll separate ourselves from the main force and take over as many of the destroyers as we can man. Anybody that wants to can come with us—in the heat of a successful battle, I'm afraid that won't be many. After that—" Makvern shrugged. "There are too many variables. I don't know."

"Can you help my world?" asked Thurne. "My city?"

Makvern said sadly, "I won't lie to you. No. Except in that Varsek will have fewer men and ships, we can't help. We're not strong enough."

"And you would not fight against your own comrades, anyway," said Thurne.

"Not under these circumstances, no. That would be too much of a stab in the back and we'd lose all chance of ever winning them over. About all I can offer you, Thurne, is the hope of vengeance and the promise that if we do win we'll make what restitution we can."

"And what about us?" asked Wyatt. "What about Earth?"

"We'll send you there. If Varsek is sufficiently shaken up there may not be any need for a warning. If not—well, his force will be that much the weaker."

Wyatt looked at the others and said, "That's fair enough."

Makvern turned to the Alpha Centaurians, who had been talking among themselves.

"Varsek is already hunting for me through the fleet. He's been told that I'm not here but if anything about the required routine of this ship is wrong he'll send a force at once to search it and that will be about the end of me and the revolt both. What do you say, Thurne? Can I raise the bars as between comrades, or must I treat you still as captives?"

Thurne said, "Raise them. We will do what we can against Varsek."

"Good," said Makvern. "Good!" He called to the other officer and the steel rods slid up out of sight. "Now we must hurry. Thurne, you were given some instructions quite a while ago. Follow them. I know they're distasteful to a brave man, but you'll be doing your people no disservice. To urge them to fight against us would be suicidal."

"Nevertheless," said Thurne, "they will fight."

Makvern sighed. "That's usually the case. Make the speech anyway. That's what we're here for. We're leading the whole fleet, remember, out in front where everybody can see us."

He showed the reluctant Alpha Centaurian where to stand, on a lens-like circle of crystal in the deck, with a similar one over his head. Almost at once both lenses brightened, so that Thurne stood encased in a pillar of light.

"But," said Wyatt, "there are no radios down there, no receivers. His culture hasn't built them yet. How are you going to broadcast?"

Makvern motioned him and the other Earthmen to the observation panels on their side of the cell. "Watch," he said. "That's what you're supposed to do anyway. The value of example. The prospective victim is softened up by seeing what happens to his predecessor."

He started away. "I've watched enough of these things, world after world. They make me sick. I have things to do now. Listen for the

intercom and be ready to jump when I tell you."

He went out. Thurne stood stiffly in his pillar of light. The ship dropped lower over the city of Obran. And now the ships of the Task Force had begun to come into view in the higher air.

A metallic voice said, "Begin the talk, Thurne."

Burdick said suddenly, "I'll be damned. Look there."

In the clear air above the city, ahead of and below the ship, stood a gigantic three-dimensional image of Thurne, perhaps thirty feet high, moving slowly as the ship moved, his insubstantial feet brushing the tops of the queer ornate towers. And now Thurne was talking. Faintly through the hull came an echoing vibration from outside, and Wyatt knew that Thurne's voice, as greatly amplified as the prismatic projection of his personal image, was booming out over Obran. Down in the streets, in the sunlight, between the tall buildings and in the parks and along the rows of little mudbrick houses, people were running out to stare up in fear and amazement.

Thurne was speaking to his people in his own tongue so that Wyatt could not understand the words, but from his tone and the snarling glint of bared teeth he was not preaching submission as wholeheartedly as he might have done. Probably the Task Force was used to that. They could not control their captives absolutely on these propaganda broadcasts. They gave them the chance, and probably it paid off in enough surrenders to make it worthwhile. With more primitive people than Thurne's, the appearance of a giant in the sky over their heads would be enough in itself to make them collapse in utter panic.

Down below in the sunlit streets the people began to run here and there, and a haze of dust arose and shimmered. From the towers and the high walls a million carven faces looked out unmoved, the faces of a million dancing stone gods and goddesses.

The fleet came down in a whistling rush among the orchards and fields, burning and crushing wherever they landed in a great circle around the city. The people ran. They had no nuclear weapons, no

ground-to-air missiles, no planes. They ran and there was no place to run to. They were already trapped.

Poor devils, thought Wyatt, and imagined what New York or Washington would be like under similar conditions, with a gigantic image of himself striding the sky and bellowing at them to surrender. The success of Makvern's revolt and the creation of a wide split in the fleet itself were now his only hope that that might not happen.

"I thought," said Burdick, "that Thurne was so sure they'd fight."

"They will," said Wyatt. "Look. The panic's already quieting." The women and children had disappeared from the streets now. Groups of men still ran but their running was purposeful. Suddenly from various places around the outskirts of the city puffs of smoke burst out and Whitfield said,

"Little cannon, by God!"

The pillar of light flicked off. The image of Thurne disappeared from the sky. Makvern's voice came over the intercom. There was an iron note in it.

"We've been ordered to land at once beside the flagship. Obviously we can't. And if you look up you'll see trouble on the way."

They looked. Two small fast craft, light-armed but plenty heavy enough for the propaganda ship, were headed in their direction.

"They will attempt to force that landing on us, and I can't fight them in this tub. I propose to land at once. It may be rough, so take what precautions you can. Wyatt, there's a supply of stunners here. Come and get them."

Wyatt found his way to the bridge. A case of side-arms, apparently fresh out of stores, had been smuggled there and hidden alike from Varsek's men and Brinna. Makvern's face was wire-drawn with tension and excitement. He showed Wyatt the case and then handed him a three-pronged key.

"She's in the skipper's cabin—it's the only one that's locked. Don't give her arms or a chance to make trouble. Apart from that I leave her up to you."

Wyatt said, "Thanks."

Makvern went out, hurrying.

They smashed open the case and served the stunners out, but Wyatt didn't wait for that. He grabbed one for himself and then went hunting for the skipper's cabin. He could hear a mounting tumult from the bridgeroom. The ship was low, skimming the housetops, lurching this way and that so roughly that it was hard to stand up. The two pursuing ships were closing fast.

He heard Brinna before he found her. She was shouting through the door, demanding to be freed. Wyatt struggled with the unfamiliar lock. The ship rocked wildly. There was a roar and a crack like the grandfather of all lightning bolts. Blue fire sheeted from the metal inner surfaces. Half stunned, he saw the door come open under his hand and then Brinna seemed to leap through the air at him, her eyes wide and her arms outstretched. She hit him, but he was already flying backward himself as the ship went out from under him and they fell together against a wall that had suddenly become a deck. There was a very great noise and a sound of things moving and somehow the branches of a tree had appeared, stuck through the broken port of the skipper's cabin which was now directly overhead.

CHAPTER VIII

It took Wyatt quite a long minute to realize that he was still alive and not even badly hurt. He didn't know about Brinna, but when he pushed her off him he was relieved to see her move. He scrambled to his feet and helped her up. Makvern came from the direction of the bridge. He shouted and made urgent motions. He was bleeding from a cut on the cheek and his shirt was torn. Wyatt pushed Brinna toward him and clambered over the buckled walls to the observation chamber.

Burdick and Whitfield and the Apache were already crawling toward him. The Turcoman came after them, but the Arab was dead, lying in a corner with his head twisted under him. The Alpha Centaurians had taken less damage on their side. Three of them were hurt but they were all able to move. Wyatt shouted at them to come out and made his way back to where Makvern and the officers from the bridge had got the hatch open. In a minute he had dropped out of it perhaps eight feet to the ground, in a tangle of broken trees, and the others were coming one by one after him. The two ships, one of which had brought them down, had shot over them and away, presumably to turn and make another pass.

Or maybe there was no need for another pass.

They had crashed at the edge of the city, just missing a row of mudbrick houses shaped like ovens with round brick roofs. Beyond, the ships of the Task Force stood like ominous towers in the green fields, discharging their ground attack vehicles.

Wyatt had heard about these but he had never seen any. Every destroyer carried a number of them to clear the way for troops, in the manner of tank units, only these were not in any way like tanks. They consisted of a monstrous red globe mounted on four jointed legs which were about four times a man's height so that the globes stood high off the ground. There was a small propeller mount underneath

so that the globes could become amphibious at need. They were horrible-looking things to come stalking at you over the flat fields, and they were stalking pretty fast. Some twenty yards away to the right a battery of three small shiny cannon popped and banged, served by furry men whose courage was only exceeded by the futility of what they did.

Makvern was talking. He was fierce and alert, a man caught in a tight spot and determined to get out of it.

"Our men are to gather in the northwest sector of the perimeter. We'll try to fight our way to them. This sector here is designated as northeast and we're pretty close to the middle of it, so it could be worse. Stick together and let's go fast."

Brinna said quite coolly, "Watch it, they're coming within range."

They began to run, away from the wrecked ship and toward the row of houses, bunched together and looking warily over their shoulders. One of the globes in particular seemed to have decided to follow them—probably it had been ordered to after the ship crashed. Now Wyatt could see a circle of round shuttered ports around its top, and one of them had opened. A large sort of gun or projector was rising from the hole on a flexible mount, bobbing about in an inquisitive fashion like the head of a bird on a long neck. Suddenly it made a point directly at them and a brilliant white beam shot toward them. They leaped for cover between the houses, but the beam was short. Where it hit the ground it erupted into a shower of green sparks.

"Heavy-duty stunner," Makvern said. "When one of those hits you you stay down till the battle's over."

They ran again, ducking and dodging between the queer round-roofed houses.

"Don't they kill?" Wyatt asked.

"Not often. The very old, little children, invalids. It's humane, as weapons go."

Another white beam sizzled down close behind Whitfield, bursting green where it hit. The red globe towered over them against the sky,

grotesquely like a huge round-bodied quadruped with a ludicrously small head on that bobbing little neck.

"I don't reckon," said Burdick, "that we're going to outrun that for long."

Thurne turned a slitted panther look on the globe and said, "I can lead you by safer ways, if you can run very swiftly ahead of it for a little time."

"We can run," said Makvern.

They ran. Wyatt, Burdick and Whitfield all had ideas about giving Brinna a hand, only to find that she was going fleet as a deer with long clean strides. They ran their hearts into their throats and the breath clear out of them and they made it into a long colonnade that covered the walk beside a great building covered with the rows of sculptured dancing gods that seemed to delight Thurne's people. In the broad street men were dragging more of the queer little cannon into place. Their body-fur was dark and mottled with sweat. Several of them left the cannon and came leaping toward Makvern's party, their teeth and claws bared, but Thurne shouted at them in his own tongue and they stopped reluctantly. The five who had been captive with Thurne now ran to join the men with the cannon, which were already hurling shot at the stalking globe and not hurting it at all. Thurne pointed to a wide low door and said, "In here."

They crowded through. Over his shoulder, in the brilliant sunlight outside, Wyatt saw green fire in the street. The cannoneers fell down and the little guns were silent.

Inside it was quite dark by contrast, a great vaulted place so crowded with carvings and shadows that for a minute or two he couldn't tell if anything alive was in there or not. Then he got the sounds, the breathing and stirring, the whimpering of small creatures, the whisperings. His eyes adjusted to the dim light and he saw that the place was full of women and children huddled along the

walls on either side and in the alcoves which he supposed were shrines because they had big ornate statues in them and little lamps. The children, especially the very young ones, looked like oversized kittens.

Makvern said, "See those statues, and the gilding of the vault? All gold, and the stones are real too, every one of them. A poor place to seek sanctuary from looters."

The hot feral eyes of the women made Wyatt shiver. All along the way they would rise and come out with a white gleaming of claws and teeth. If it had not been for Thurne they would have been torn to pieces in seconds. Wyatt was glad when they reached the other end of the building and emerged again into sunlight and the sharp sounds of battle.

The red globes were stalking everywhere now, their monstrous forms visible over the roofs of houses or between the towers of the larger buildings. The defenders were being struck down or driven back into the heart of the city, and troops of Uryx were already in the outlying streets, beginning the systematic business of sacking Obran.

A globe had just passed by in the street, leaving in its wake a litter of stunned forms that looked sufficiently like corpses, but the troops had not yet come in sight. There was another huge carved building across the way. They raced toward it, and the men who were operating the departing globe did not see them in time to fire.

This building was better lighted inside, although it had just as much carving, gilding and statuary as the last one. This was obviously a hospital. Some of the patients began to scream at the sight of the strangers and attendants ran to bar the way. Once more Thurne's authority got them through—almost. This time, as they reached the doorway at the far end, a party of Varsek's troops came in.

There were eight or nine of them with stunners in their hands. They were expecting trouble but nothing more than they could easily handle, and the first thing they saw about the group inside was the uniforms of Makvern and his officers. The leader actually saluted,

and while he was doing it he saw the Earthmen all armed, and the Alpha Centaurian armed, and he said in sudden alarm to his party,

"Look out, these are the people—"

He didn't get any farther. Makvern's stunner knocked him down and then Wyatt began firing and so did the others. There was a brief but violent crackling of beams, and when it was all over seven of the fleet party were down and two had made it out the door. Whitfield and No-Name and two of the officers had gone down.

So had Thurne.

From here on they were on their own.

"Well," said Makvern grimly, "let's get them up and out of here."

Wyatt heaved No-Name onto his shoulders and Burdick carried Whitfield, his long legs dragging. They left Thurne where he was, with his own people. Burdened and staggering, they started out the door. And now Brinna said,

"You'd better give me a weapon."

Makvern shook his head.

"I don't see what you're afraid of," she said. "I know you won't kill me and I know Varsek would. He wouldn't believe any story I could tell him now."

Makvern hesitated and then said, "All right. Take one of theirs."

She picked up a stunner and they all went out together, cautiously, into the bright sun.

Here they were near one corner of a broad square. A globe was marching toward them on its jointed stilt-legs, coming up the street to their right, with men on foot following behind it. There were overturned cannon and fallen men near the corner, where the beams had hit, and other men were running away across the square, their faces wild with fury and fear and helplessness.

Makvern pointed to the mouth of a street diagonally across from them. "Make for that. Our ships should not be far beyond here now, if —"

Wyatt thought he was going to say *if the Second Party has been successful*. But he didn't. It was hardly worth bringing that up, not now.

They ran out across the square, heavy and slow with their burdens.

Once again they were lucky. They made the transit past the corner before the men in the globe could fire at them, and then the buildings protected them. A haze of dust and smoke hung in the air. The queer high-piled towers and the crowded masses of carving seemed to waver like things seen through water. The gods and goddesses almost seemed to move, dancing and smiling with fierce, grotesque dignity.

Some of the Alpha Centaurians who had been running away saw them and turned back.

They had weapons like very primitive pistols, and they had long sharp knives. The ones with pistols paused to load them. The others charged. And from the street behind came the measured clanging tread of the globe.

Wyatt fired. Nobody stopped running, they didn't dare to, because the globe was a worse enemy than these furry men. They fired as they went and some of the Alpha Centaurians fell under the stun rays and the rest turned back, waiting for the others who were loading their pistols. Wyatt panted and labored on under the weight of the Apache. The mouth of the street was not far away now. Brinna and those of the men who were not burdened had lagged behind to cover the others. Their stunners crackled. Another one or two of the furry men went down, and then there was a series of sharper crackling sounds and one of the officers stopped and looked down in astonishment at the hole in his middle, from which blood had begun to flow. A ball hit close to Wyatt's feet and skipped away over the stones. Others rattled off the walls.

Makvern yelled to them to hurry, sweeping the Alpha Centaurians with a continuous flare from his stunner. Brinna was helping the wounded man, half carrying him and firing steadily with her free arm. Wyatt softened toward her immensely in that moment.

The street mouth swallowed them. In almost the same instant the walking globe rounded the corner. Its heavy beams took care of the Alpha Centaurians, which was a favor to Makvern's party that was more or less forced upon it. It would be after them too, probably, but in the meantime the street ahead of them was clear and there was a bend in it that would give them protection.

They staggered on, in the dust and the hot sun. They rounded the bend and Wyatt saw a short row of little houses and over them the tall distant forms of ships.

He thought for a minute that they were safe, that they had made it. And then he saw the uniformed troops running up the street toward them, utterly cutting them off.

CHAPTER IX

Makvern said sharply, "Hold your fire. They're ours."

It was a minute before Wyatt took that in, and by that time someone had lifted the ten-ton weight of No-Name off his back and he was being hurried along the street and out across the fields toward the ships. There was some fighting still going on—the Second Party men had attacked the skeleton crews left behind after the troops disembarked, and a few of them were still holding out.

"We'll have them mopped up soon," a young officer panted, running beside Makvern. He looked as though he had had a rough time. "God, I'm glad you got through, sir! We were trying to find you—"

"How well did we do?" asked Makvern.

"We've got about one third of the fleet. I was hoping—"

"Yes," said Makvern. "So was I. Well, a third is better than a quarter, or a tenth."

"It's hardly a victory, though," said the young officer flatly. He pointed off across the fields in the distance. "Look there, sir. Varsek's starting to pull some of the men back to their ships. He can catch us dead on the ground."

"Send an order to prepare for take-off at once," said Makvern. "Is this the command ship? Good. Get everybody here aboard, see that the wounded are cared for. I'll want—" he reeled off a string of names—"on the bridge immediately—"

Things were already moving fast. Now they raced, under the whiplash of Makvern's orders. Nobody stopped Wyatt, so he followed Makvern to the bridge. Even he could see the danger. If Varsek's heavy-armed units were manned in time to get above them they would be stopped before they started.

Makvern got his ships off the ground.

They roared screaming into the sky, and before they were clear of the atmosphere Varsek's face was mirrored in the communic screen.

It was a face flinty and implacable with anger, not the wild kind that soon burns out but a deeper colder thing that would last until the men he considered to be his enemies were no longer any threat to him or anyone else.

"Did you think you could go home to Uryx now?" he asked, looking at Makvern with his cold eyes. "You may be free of the fleet but you're not free of me. If you go home I'll have you all tried for desertion. I'm still your chief, Makvern, and I have powerful friends."

"Who profit from the loot," said Makvern. "Yes, I know that. It was my thought that we could force a few changes at Uryx too, before it stinks too high of corruption."

Varsek laughed. "With the whole fleet, you might do that. With your handful—no." He leaned closer into the pick-up field so that he seemed to be coming right through the screen. "Listen, Makvern. You've made your move and failed. You can't fight me and you can't go home and you can't even run for long. You haven't enough supply ships. You haven't enough fuel or food. You'll have to start looting yourself or try stealing from me, and sooner or later I'll catch up with you and annihilate you."

"Annihilate," said Makvern slowly. "That's a big, cruel word. I wonder how your men will feel about it. We've been comrades for a long time and our quarrel is with you, not with them. Perhaps a lot of them are as sick of this life as we are and would like to get home to the families they haven't seen in years. We didn't harm any of them when we took these ships, and we'll welcome any of them who want to join us, now or later. We'll be around for a while."

Wyatt knew that Makvern was not talking to Varsek alone, but to all the men who would be listening to the communics all over the fleet.

He was a good talker, but it didn't look to Wyatt as though talking was going to do him much good.

"If that is intended as a challenge," Varsek said, "I'll accept it. My plans will not be changed. As soon as we finish here we go on to Earth, and after that to whatever system offers the best pickings. I'm in no hurry, Makvern. I can go on indefinitely. Hang on my flank and hope for deserters as long as you want to. Sooner or later—" He brought his hand down in a slashing gesture. "—I'll destroy you."

His gaze slid past Makvern to Wyatt.

"I warned you twice," he said, "about the fate of brave stubborn men. Whether you stay with Makvern or go back to Earth I'll find you. And I'll give Earth some special attention because of you—we do have weapons that will kill at need." Once more he smiled, and now his gaze included both Wyatt and Makvern. "I know that Earth will be warned. I accept that, too."

"You might lose a lot of men," Wyatt said. "We're not quite as primitive as the Alpha Centaurians."

"You have nuclear weapons," said Varsek, "but no way to get them up to us in space. And people usually hesitate to drop bombs on their own cities, to destroy an invader who is only temporarily there. So your warning does not frighten me."

"We have tactical weapons, too," said Wyatt. "Or didn't you tell your men about those?"

"My men are soldiers," said Varsek, "not babies. Go home, Wyatt. Spread the alarm. And take Brinna with you. That was her plan, wasn't it—warn Earth and thus unseat me." His voice rose and it was as though he was shouting a warning to the whole fleet. "No one can unseat me! This is my Task Force, I command it, and I *will* command it, until such time as my superiors call me home."

"That will be never," said Makvern wearily, "as long as you keep the loot ships pouring into Uryx to make them rich."

He broke the contact—probably the first time anyone had cut Varsek off first. He turned to Wyatt and his officers.

"Much of what he says is true. We are short of food and fuel. Both of those we can get at Earth, but it will have to be peaceably. I propose that we offer ourselves to help in her defense—that we force a showdown with Varsek by placing our ships between him and Earth. If we're to be destroyed, it might as well be now as later, when we'll be even weaker and less able to fight."

He looked with a terrible grim look at Wyatt and said, "We can carry nuclear weapons into space."

Brief minutes later, Makvern's little fleet, all fast destroyers and a few light supply ships that could outdistance the slower-moving Task Force, went into hyper-drive, headed for Earth.

And now the customary business of landing on a target world was played in reverse. They did not have a propaganda ship, but as soon as they reached the outer limits of Earth's atmosphere Wyatt began to broadcast, blanketing the Western Hemisphere with the ship's powerful transmitter. He sent the same message over and over again, beginning with, *We come in peace* and going on with a summary of the situation, begging the powers that were not to attack them when they landed. He had Burdick and the Australian speak, and No-Name, and even the Turcoman. He had Makvern speak.

But when an answer did come it was from the government radio in Washington forbidding them to land until the United Nations had been consulted and preliminary talks had been had with Makvern via shortwave, with proper assurances of their intentions. Then Bannister got a message through from the big transmitter on the mesa, starting with "What the hell happened to you, you can't be telling the truth!" Wyatt assured him he was, and Bannister said, "Then for God's sake don't land. Everybody's in a panic. They're evacuating Washington and setting up gun-emplacements on every corner, and the crackpots are having a field day. Wait until they all calm down!"

"We've been trying to make them understand," said Wyatt, "that we can't wait. There's a fleet coming right on our heels and if arrangements aren't made right now it'll be too late for all of us."

"Well," said Bannister, sadly and without hope, "good luck."

They went about their landing.

Makvern's command ship came down in one of Washington's parks. They had decided that Makvern and Wyatt, with one man to operate the thing, would leave the cruiser in one of the stalking-globes. There was not room enough in it for Burdick and the other Earthmen.

Brinna had maintained a brooding silence all the way, but she broke it now by saying bitterly to Wyatt,

"You know your people out there are panicky about this sudden eruption from space—they'll destroy you before you can talk to them."

"I'll have to take the chance," Wyatt said.

"Just as you had to force me to take you to Washington—how long ago?" said Brinna. She added with sudden fierceness, "God defend us from having to do with fools!"

Wyatt grinned. "Are you angry because your schemes are ruined, or because I'm in danger?" Before she could make wrathful reply, he kissed her and pushed her out of his way, and went after Makvern.

They got into the red globe, and stalked out of the cruiser. They needed the globe, not for attack but for their own defense. Above them in the sky a squadron of skimmers wheeled, easily eluding the slower and clumsier jets of Earth, and keeping at such a low altitude that the planes hesitated to fire on them for fear of hitting their own men on the ground.

The red globe stalked ponderously into Washington.

Bannister had told the truth. The city was deserted except for soldiers. Watching the 360 degree screen inside the globe, Wyatt saw men in olive drab fire at them and he heard the vicious battle of bullets against their armor plate. Makvern had assured him it was

proof against practically anything short of atomic projectiles, but when the anti-tank guns and the flame-throwers appeared Wyatt began to get nervous and was glad when Makvern decided not to take any chances. He ordered one of the heavy stunners unlimbered and asked for support from the skimmers. Then he turned the radio over to Wyatt.

The screens now showed bursts of green fire all around where the stun rays were striking. The gun crews were being struck down, the soldiers with rifles stunned or driven back. An area of quiet was laid down around the globe, travelling with it as it moved, constantly being pushed ahead by the white beams of the stunners.

Wyatt talked tensely on the radio. "You force us to defend ourselves but you will find that these men are not dead or harmed in any way, only stunned. We beg the President and Congress to give us a hearing—"

No answer. Wyatt mopped sweat from his forehead, and talked on.

"You are faced with an enemy more terrible than any you ever dreamed of, approaching you through interstellar space at many times the speed of light. You see what we can do, but this is only a fraction of *their* power. Your only hope is to accept our offer of help, plan with us how to stop the Task Force before it ever lands. Or you'll have hundreds of these red globes stalking the countryside, and hundreds of ships against which your planes will be useless as they are right now against the skimmers."

No answer.

Makvern said to Wyatt, "We have to stop somewhere. This is your country—what do you suggest?"

Wyatt looked at the screen. They were in front of the Supreme Court building. Soldiers were firing at them from the approaches, the steps, the portico. Some of them had already been stunned and were lying on the pavement. While he watched a white beam shot out from the globe's projector and burst in green fire among a group on the steps. Wyatt's patience, worn thin by long anxiety, suddenly snapped.

"This place is as good as any," he told Makvern, and then he shouted into the radio, "All right, damn it, I'm an American citizen and I came here in good faith. I haven't committed any crime, and I don't see why I should have to hide and cower in the streets of my own capital, which were paid for out of my taxes. So I'm getting out of this globe, unarmed, and if any damned fool shoots me down he can take it up with his conscience later on."

He got up and snapped at Makvern. "Open the hatch. And pull that stunner in."

"Brinna was right, they're panicky," Makvern said. "They'll kill you. Wait a bit."

Wyatt swore. "We *can't* wait, it's now or nothing! They'll stay panicky until they actually see that I am an Earthman and not a bug-eyed monster lying to them over the radio. Then we may get somewhere with them."

Makvern hesitated a moment and then pressed a button. The hatch opened and a thin ladder extended itself.

Wyatt went down it.

He went down slowly, and it was a warm day in Washington but he was as cold as mid-December. The sweat of fear was clammy on him and his legs shook. The soldiers in the immediate vicinity were all unconscious or had taken cover, but more would undoubtedly come. He hoped their field command posts would relay his radio message to the men with the guns.

He reached the foot of the ladder and stood there.

There was a great silence. Then a soldier with a rifle edged cautiously around one of the pillars of the portico.

Wyatt watched him, thinking *He will raise that gun and fire and that will be the end of it.*

The man's voice reached him, thin with distance and surprise. "Hey, it's a man. It's human. It ain't no monster after all—"

From inside the open hatch of the globe Wyatt heard a radio-transmitted voice speaking.

"If you will withdraw your—er—aircraft as a sign of good faith, our representatives will come to—"

Wyatt didn't hear the rest of it too clearly. He was struggling with the reaction of relief. Not only for Earth, but for himself.

After that it was not so difficult. Once the high brass was convinced of the danger, and of Makvern's sincerity, things got done in spite of red tape and provincial stubbornness. The testimony of Burdick and Whitfield, the Apache and the Turcoman, helped immensely.

Makvern's ships were allowed to refuel and take on supplies. They took to space again, but without any nuclear weapons aboard. "Those are my own people," Makvern said. "I can't use that against them."

The air forces of the world were deployed as a second line of defense, coordinated with ground-to-air missile batteries and with squadrons carrying air-to-air missiles. On the ground, the armies readied themselves.

Varsek's fleet came, a great dark arrow of ships into the light of the Sun.

Once more Wyatt was aboard Makvern's command ship, on the bridge. He was acting with others of the regular armed forces of several nations, as liaison officer. He watched the dramatic wedge of ships approach, catching fire on their sun sides as they drew closer until their brazen glitter was painful to the eye. And his heart sank. What Varsek had said was true. Nothing could stand against that fleet.

As though to emphasize that point, Varsek's face appeared in the communic screen.

"So you decided to face me here," he said. "Good. Oh, very good!"

"Perhaps," said Makvern. "Perhaps not. Earth has been warned, Varsek, and now I'm warning you and every man in the fleet. She has powerful armaments, including hydrogen devices, and she is prepared to use them. She can kill a great many of you before she's beaten."

"And who warned Earth?" said Varsek. Both men, Wyatt knew, were speaking to the fleet as much as to each other. "You, Makvern. A traitor's act. Every life we lose here will be your responsibility!"

"Not at all," said Makvern quietly. "You know what the situation is. All you have to do now to avoid any casualties is to withdraw the fleet from Earth without attacking."

"Turn tail and run?" said Varsek. "You should know me better."

Suddenly Makvern's voice blazed fierce, white-hot with old rage. "I know you, Varsek! You'll sacrifice every man in the fleet before you'll admit you've been bested. Remember that, you men, when he's ordering you into battle! Try to figure out what real reason you have

for attacking and then see whether you think it's worth dying for! If you don't—"

Varsek's great voice drowned him out. "This is a general order to the Task Force. Battle stations, all personnel. Executive officers of destroyer squadrons Three, Four and Five will proceed with landing operations according to plan."

"You heard your commander," Makvern flared. "Go down and die for him, for his ambition and the fat pockets of his friends, if you want to. If you don't, take your ships out of formation and join us. Then we can all go home. Then—"

"Destroyer Squadrons One and Two," Varsek's voice rolled inexorably on, "will attack the enemy ships at once, proceeding at individual discretion. You will use Type Two armaments—*these traitors must be destroyed!*"

This time it was Varsek who broke the contact with Makvern, and it was as though by that gesture he declared them all dead.

"Well?" said Wyatt tensely.

"God knows," said Makvern. He began to rap out orders, preparing to fight his ships as well as he could.

Wyatt withdrew into a corner out of the way and found Brinna there. She was regarding the preparations inboard and the movements of the fleet with an expert, eager, frustrated gaze. The realization of the defeat of her ambitious plans changed her, Wyatt thought, very little.

"If I had the command here—" she said, between her teeth.

"I don't think you could swing the men in the fleet, if you had," he said. "Maybe even Makvern hasn't swung them—"

It didn't look as though he had. The Task Force was breaking up in orderly segments, the heavy attack craft wheeling into position behind their destroyer screens, ready for the screaming plunge downward into the sky. And now from their stations at either side of the forward point of the fleet the two destroyer squadrons leaped toward Makvern's ships.

"Type Two armaments," said Wyatt, "are the lethal ones, I take it. No polite stunning of the victim, just good honest annihilation."

Brinna nodded, her hand closing unconsciously on his.

Makvern was hunched like a bulldog in the forepart of the bridge, rapping orders.

"Hang on," said Brinna. "We move."

They did move, roaring straight up in an effort to get above the oncoming destroyers. Wyatt could see other ships going up with them, while still others dropped and circled. They were trying some kind of a boxing-in maneuver, but the destroyer squadrons were old hands at this game too. They counter-moved with lightning speed. Wyatt did not see any projectile pass through space, but suddenly there was a silent blossoming of fire like the birth of a small sun and one of Makvern's ships ceased to exist in the time it took Wyatt to blink.

"I believe," said Brinna in a steady voice, "that's the first time I have ever seen Type Two projectiles in use except on a test range."

There was a kind of a stunned silence on the bridge. Then once more the ship was in tangential motion, and somebody began to shout, "Look at their formations! Some of Varsek's ships are pulling out—"

"Fire!" said Makvern, and the ship shuddered twice. White stunning beams lanced out and struck a dark iron flank with green fire and sent it staggering away—Wyatt assumed that these beams were powerful enough to knock out not only men but delicate electrical equipment as well.

"They are pulling out," said Brinna. "Breaking up. Look!"

He could see that the orderly formations of Varsek's fleet had become suddenly ragged, some of the ships frankly deserting the ranks and others lagging as though they were hesitant.

"It was the projectile," Brinna said. "Seeing one of their own ships full of men they knew destroyed that way—I think it must have shocked them all as it did me."

The face of a man appeared on the screen, white and strained. "Makvern," he said. "You know me—Shannar, commanding the First Squadron. I'm pulling out—this is murder—"

Varsek's face appeared, super-imposed over Shannar's in a ghastly double image.

"Follow your orders! Destroy—"

"The hell with you," said Shannar. "I'm a soldier, not an executioner."

He faded, and a second face appeared through the image of Varsek. "Me, too. After what you've led us into, the Second Squadron is quitting."

Now Varsek's face stood clear in the screen, and outside in space the dark ships wheeled away and joined the number that were gathering behind Makvern's force.

Varsek, his face distorted with a violent fury, cried out, "I *order* the commander of every ship to proceed with his assigned duties! If he refuses, I authorize every officer in the chain of command to take over until one loyal man is found. I order this! Prepare to land. I'll destroy Makvern myself if none of you have the guts to do it."

And the great bulk of the flagship moved from where it had hung in space and gathered speed, and bore down upon Makvern's command ship like the ultimate hammer of doom.

"He must have packed the flagship with his most trusted officers," Brinna said.

Ignoring every other craft in space, the enormous ship rushed at them.

Makvern spoke into the communic.

"I don't think you quite understand, Varsek. The situation has changed. You are now fairly well isolated. There's been enough killing. Surrender and we'll see that you get a fair trial at Uryx."

"You won't live to go anywhere," Varsek snarled. He began to talk to others who apparently were in the room with him, out of range of the pick-up. "Why the hell doesn't the fleet move? I ordered them. Order them again, and prepare a projectile, Type Two—What are you waiting for?"

"Sir," said a voice, "have you noticed the disposition of the destroyer squadrons?"

"What of them?"

"They're between us and the target. All of them. The commanders request that you surrender. They say there will be no more Type Twos used on men of Uryx."

Varsek spoke into the communic. "Clear the way," he said. "I'll ride over you and smash you. I command this fleet." He pulled his side-arm from its holster and turned around. "As for you—I thought you were loyal to me. I handpicked you, and this is how you repay me! I order you to prepare a projectile—"

A hard matter-of-fact voice said, "You pushed it too far this time, Varsek. You're one man against a fleet. We have been loyal, but you're not the commander any more."

A stunner beam caught Varsek from the back before he could turn around. He fell below the focus of the screen, and the face of another man replaced his.

The man said, "Varsek has surrendered."

There was a long silence in the command ship. Then the men began to cheer and other voices came over the communics, cheering, and only Makvern turned away so that no one could see his face.

Later, after Makvern had made his speech to the fleet, taking over as commander, he said to Wyatt,

"This is where we part. We go home, to put a stop to this looting and pillaging—it's time Uryx grew up and became an empire to be proud of rather than a nest of outlaws. And you can go home too, knowing that Earth will sleep safe tonight."

Brinna stepped forward. "And what about me?"

"I have that planned," said Makvern sternly. "You'll learn about it in good time."

Wyatt smiled, but did not say anything.

He had no chance to say anything later on, when the ship had landed on the desert near the mesa and Makvern and Brinna had shaken hands with him for the last time, standing on the cool sand in the moonlight at the foot of the ship's ladder. Makvern had moved so quickly while Brinna was occupied with her farewells that she did not realize he was already in the lock and the ladder drawn up until it was too late to follow him. He looked down at her and grinned, and said,

"This seemed to be the best solution to your problem, Brinna. It'll be a long time before Earthmen get into space, and by then you'll be too old to make trouble and I'll be too old to care."

"You mean you're leaving me here?" she shrieked.

"In the care of Wyatt, a brave and stubborn man. Goodbye. And clear away now, we're taking off."

Wyatt hauled the temporarily speechless Brinna to a safe distance. She watched the ship take off into the starry sky and Wyatt did not dare say anything then.

He wasn't at all sure he had made a good bargain. But he was determined to make the best of it.

He started out by kissing her.

After a long enough time, she stopped fighting.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COSMIC LOOTERS ***

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