

The Other Sky

1

It was late. The third level walkaway was deserted except for a lone Niss standing under the glare of a polyarc fifty feet ahead. Vallant hurried along, only half-listening to the voice of the newser from the tiny tri-D set he carried:

". . . perturbation in the motion of Pluto. The report from the Survey Party confirms that the ninth planet has left its orbit and is falling toward the Sun. Dr. Vetenskap, expedition head, said that no explanation can be offered for the phenomena. Calculations indicate that although Pluto will cross the orbit of the Earth in approximately forty-five years, an actual collision is unlikely; however, serious consequences could follow a close passage of the body . . ."

Vallant turned the audio up. Ahead, the immobile Niss was staring at him with small red eyes.

". . . inexplicable disappearance from Pluto of a Survey scouting vessel," the newser was saying. "The boat's crew, operating in the northern hemisphere of the uninhabited planet, had left it in order to take solar observations; the stranded men, rescued after a three-day ordeal, stated that they observed the scout to rise, apparently under full control, and ascend to extreme altitude before being lost from view. The boat was fully fueled, and capable of an extended voyage. The Patrol is on the lookout for the stolen vessel, but so far—"

As Vallant came abreast of the waiting Niss, it moved suddenly into his path, reached out a four-fingered parody of a human hand, twitched the set from his grip and with a convulsive motion, crushed it flat.

"Here, what the devil—" Vallant started. But the Niss had already tossed the ruin aside, turned away to resume its immobile stance under the glare of the light.

Vallant stared at the creature, the dusty grey-green hide, furrowed like an alligator's, the flaccid crest that drooped over one pin-point eye, the dun-colored tunic and drab leather straps that hung loosely on the lean, five-foot body.

He took a step; the Niss turned its narrow head to face him. The tiny eyes glittered like rubies.

"Why did you smash my Trideo?" Vallant said angrily.

The Niss stared for a moment longer; then it opened its mouth—a flash of snow-white in the gloom—and flicked a tongue like a scarlet worm past snake teeth in an unmistakable gesture.

Vallant doubled a fist. Instantly, the Niss flipped back the corner of its hip-length cape, exposing the butt of a pistol-like apparatus with a flared muzzle.

Vallant locked eyes with the alien; the words of the ten-times-daily public

service announcement came back to him:

"Remember—it is our privilege to welcome the Niss among us as honored guests, who share their vast knowledge with us freely, to the betterment of all mankind."

The Niss stood, waiting. Vallant, fists still clenched, turned and walked away.

At the door to his apartment block Vallant took out his electro-key, pressed it in the slot. From behind him there was a tiny sound, a whistling cough. Vallant turned; a wizened face on a turkey neck peered at him.

"Ame," a voice as thin as smoke said. "Lord, boy, you look wonderful . . ." The old man came closer, stood round-shouldered, one veined hand clutching the lapels of an oddly cut coat. A few strands of wispy, colorless hair crossed the age-freckled skull. White stubble covered the sagging cheeks; the pale lines of old scars showed against the crepey skin.

"Guess you don't know me, Ame. . ."

"I can't say that I do," Vallant said. "What—"

"That's all right, Ame; no way you could, I guess . . ." The old man held out a hand that trembled like a leaf in a gentle breeze. "We served in the Navy together; we've been through a lot. But you don't know. It's been a long time . . ." The wrinkled face twisted into an unreadable expression. "Longer than you'd think."

Vallant shook his head. "You must have me confused with someone else, old-timer. I've never been in the Navy."

The old man nodded as though Vallant had agreed with him. "There's a lot you need to know about, Ame. That's why I came. I had to, you see? Because if I didn't, why, who knows what might happen?"

"I don't—"

"Look, Ame," the old man cut in urgently, "could we go inside?" He glanced both ways along the walkaway. "Before one of those green devils shows his ugly face . . ."

Vallant looked at the old man. "You mean the Niss?"

The old eyes were bright. "That's who I mean, Ame; but don't you worry, boy; we'll take care of them—"

"That's careless talk, granddad. The Syndarch frowns on unfriendly remarks about our honored guests." Vallant opened the door. "You'd better come inside."

In Vallant's flat, the old man fumbled in his coat. "We got no time now to waste, Ame. There's things we've got to do, fast, and I need help . . ."

"If you're a former Navy man, the Society will take care of you," Vallant said.

"Not money, Ame. I've got all that I need." He took out a much-folded paper, opened it with shaking hands, handed it across to Vallant. It was a map, creased and patched, grimy and oil-splattered. The legend in the corner read:

TERRESTRIAL SPACE ARM—

POLAR PROJECTION. Sol IX

March 2212.

The old man leaned, pointing. "See this spot right here? A river cuts through the mountains—a river of liquid nitrogen. The gorge is a thousand feet deep—and the falls come thundering down out of the sky like the end of the world. That's the place, Ame. They'd kill to get it, make no mistake—and that'd be only the beginning."

"Who'd kill?"

"The sneaking, filthy Niss, boy—who else?" the old man's voice snapped with an echo of youthful authority. "They trailed me in, of course. You heard about the stolen Survey boat?"

Vallant frowned. "You mean the one that disappeared on Pluto?"

The ancient head nodded quickly. "That's right, Ame. That was me. Lucky, them coming down like they did. Otherwise, I'd have had another thirty-odd years to wait. Might not of made it. I figured to lose them but I'm getting old; not as sharp as I used to be. I killed one an hour ago. Don't know how long I've got—"

"You killed a Niss?"

"Not the first one, either." The old man's toothless grin was cheerful. "Now, what I have to tell you, Ame—"

"Look . . ." Vallant's voice was low. "I won't turn you in—but you can't stay here. God knows I have no use for the Niss, but killing one. . ."

The old man looked into Vallant's face, searchingly. "You are Amory Vallant . . .?"

"That's right. I don't know how you know my name, but—"

"Look here, Ame. I know it's hard to understand. And I guess I wander; getting old . . ." He fumbled over his pockets, brought out a warped packet, paper-wrapped, passed it over to Vallant.

"Go ahead—take a look."

Vallant unfolded the wrappings, took out a once-glossy tri-D photo. It showed a line of men in regulation ship suits standing against a curving wall of metal. The next was a shot of a group of boyish-faced men in identical Aerospace blue blouses, sitting at a long table, forks raised toward mouths. In another, two men stood on a stormy hillside scattered with the smoking fragments of a wrecked ship.

Vallant looked up, puzzled. "What—?"

"Look closer, Ame. Look at the faces." The old man's bony finger reached, indicated a man in a worn uniform, looking down at torn metal. He had a lean face, short-cropped sandy hair, deep-set eyes—

"Hey!" Vallant said. "That looks like me!"

"Uh-huh. In the other ones, too . . ." The old man crouched forward, watching Vallant's face as he shuffled through the pictures. There he was—standing on the bridge of a capital ship, clipboard in hand; leaning on a bar, holding a glass, an arm over the shoulders of a square-faced red-headed man; posing stiffly before a bazaar stall manned by a sullen Niss with his race's unfortunate expression of permanent guilt stamped on the grey-green features.

Vallant stared at the old man. "I've never been in the Navy—I never saw the inside of a ship of the line—I was never on the Niss world . . . !" He flipped through the remaining pictures. "Here's one where I've got gray hair and a commodore's star! How the devil did you fake these up, old-timer?"

"They're not fakes, Ame. Look there—that red-headed young fellow—do you know him?"

Vallant studied the picture. "I have a friend named Able; Jason Able—at Unitech; we're both students there. This looks like him—only older."

The old man was nodding, grinning. "That's right, Ame. Jase Able." The grin faded abruptly. "But I didn't come here to talk about old times—"

"Is he a relative of yours?"

"Not exactly. Listen, Ame. My boat; they got it. Didn't have time to camouflage it like I planned. It's at the Granyauck Navy Yard now: I saw it yesterday. We've got to have that boat, Ame; it's the fastest model there is—you know how to handle her?"

"I guess so—I'm an Astronautics major. But hold on a minute. How do you know me? And where did you get these pictures? What's the map all about? Why did you kill a Niss—and what's this about a boat? You know the Syndarch outlawed private space travel thirty years ago . . . !"

"Hold on, Ame . . ." The old man wiped a trembling hand across his forehead. "I guess I'm going too fast—but I have to hurry. There's not time, Ame—"

"Start with the boat. Are you saying you stole it and came here from Pluto?"

"That's right, Ame. I—"

"That's impossible. Nobody could stay alive on Pluto. And anyway the Patrol or the Niss would stop any ship—"

"It's the same thing, Ame; the Syndarch is just the traitors that made peace with the Niss after the War—"

"War?"

"You don't even know about the War, do you?" The old man looked confused. "So much to tell, Ame—and no time. We've got to hurry. The War—not much of a fight to it; it was maybe thirty years ago; our ships were just starting their probes out beyond Big Jupe. The Niss hit us; rolled us up like a rug. What the Hell, we didn't have a chance; our ships were nothing but labs, experimental models, unarmed. The Niss offered a deal. Ramo took 'em up on it. The public never even knew. Now the Niss have occupied Earth for twenty-five years—"

"Occupied! But . . . they're supposed to be our honored guests—"

"That's the Syndarch line. As for why I came back, I had to, Ame. I had to tell you about Galliale and the Portal—"

"Galliale . . . ?"

"I could have stayed . . ." The old man's eyes were distant, the present forgotten. "But I couldn't chance it, Ame . . ." He seemed to pull himself together with an effort. "And anyway, I kind of missed the old life; there's no place for ship boots in fairyland."

There was a buzz from the front entry. The old man struggled to his feet, stared around the room, his lips working. "They're here already. I thought I'd thrown 'em off; I thought I was clear . . ."

"Hold on, old-timer; it's probably just a friend; sit down—"

"Any back way out of here, Ame?" The old man's eyes were desperate. From the door, the buzz sounded insistently.

"You think it's the police?"

"It's them or the Niss. I know, boy."

Vallant hesitated a moment, then went quickly to the bedroom, into the closet, felt over the wall. A panel dropped, fell outward; a framed opening showed dark beyond it.

"I discovered this when they were doing some work on the other side; it's one advantage of cracker box construction. I phoned in a complaint, but they never fixed it. It opens into a utility room in the Municipal Admin block."

The old man hurried forward. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Ame. I won't come here again—you come to my place—the Stellar Castle on 900th—room 1196b. I been away two days now—I've got to get back. Don't tell 'em anything—and be sure you're not followed. I'll be waiting." He ducked through the opening.

From the next room, there was the sound of heavy pounding—then of splintering plastic. Vallant hastily clipped the panel back in place, turned as a thick, dark man with an egg-bald head slammed through the doorway. He wore tight cuffed black trousers and there was a bright metal servitude bracelet with a Syndarch escutcheon on his left wrist. His small, coal black

eyes darted around the room.

"Where's the old man?" he rapped out in a voice like bullets hitting a plank.

"Who are you? What's the idea of smashing my door?"

"You know the penalty for aiding a traitor to the Syndarch?" The intruder went past Vallant, stared around the room.

"There's nobody here," Vallant said. "And even the Syndarch has no right to search without a warrant."

The bald man eyed Vallant.

"You telling me what rights the Syndarch's got?" He barked a short laugh, cut it off suddenly to glare coldly at Vallant.

"Watch your step. We'll be watching you now." Beyond the door, Vallant caught a glimpse of a dull Niss face.

"That reminds me," he said. "The Niss owe me a Tri-D set; one of them smashed mine today."

The beady eyes bored into him. "Yeah," the Syndarch man said. "We'll be watching you." He stepped past the smashed door.

As soon as he was gone, Vallant went to the closet and removed the panel.

2

Vallant stepped through the opening, fitted the panel back in place, felt his way past brooms and cans of cleaning compound, eased the door open, emerged into a dim-lit corridor. Lights showed behind a few doors along its shadowy length. He went toward a red exit light; a lone maintenance man shot him a sour look but said nothing. He pushed out through a rotating door onto the littered walkaway, went to a nearby lift, rode up to the fifth level, took the crosstown walkaway to the shabby section near the Gendye Tower. Here, near the center of the city, there were a few pedestrians out; a steady humming filled the air from the wheelways above. Between them, Vallant caught a glimpse of a bleary moon gleaming unnoticed in the remote sky.

It took Vallant half an hour to find the dark sideway where a dowdy plastic front adorned with a tarnished sunburst huddled between later, taller structures whose lower levels were darkened by the blight that washed about the bases of the city's towers like an overflowing sewer. Vallant stepped through a wide glass door that opened creakily before him, crossed to the dust-grimed directory, keyed the index; out-of-focus print flickered on the screen. Jason Able was registered in room 1196b.

Vallant stepped into the ancient mechanical lift; its door closed tiredly. Everything about the Stellar Castle seemed ready to sigh and give up.

On the hundred and tenth floor he stepped out, followed arrows to a warped plastic door against which dull florescent numerals gleamed faintly. He tapped; the door swung inward. He stepped inside.

It was a mean, narrow room with one crowded, dirt-glazed window, opening on an air shaft through which the bleak light of a polyarc filtered. There was a bunk bed, unmade, a wall locker with its doors ajar, its shelves empty, and beyond, a tiny toilet cubicle. A hinge-sprung suitcase lay near the bed; next to it, the single chair lay overturned. Vallant rounded the bed. The old man lay on his back on the floor. The waxy face—thin-nosed, sunken-cheeked—stared up at him with eyes as remote as a statue of Pharaoh.

Vallant touched the bony wrist; it was cool and inert as modeling clay. The packet of pictures lay scattered on the floor. Vallant felt inside the coat; the map was gone. He went to the locker; there was a covered bird-cage on its floor among curls of dust, a small leather case beside it. He checked the suitcase; it contained worn garments of strange cut, a leather folder with six miniature medals, a few more edge-crimped photos, a toy crossbow, beautifully made, and a Browning 2mm needler.

A tiny sound brought Vallant upright; he reached for the needler, searching the gloom. From somewhere above him, a soft scraping sounded. Among the shadows under the ceiling, two tiny amber lights glinted; something small and dark moved. Vallant flipped the pistol's safety off—

A shape no bigger than a cat dropped to the bed with an almost noiseless thump.

"You are Jason's friend," a piping voice said. "Did you come to help me?"

3

It was almost man-shaped, with large eyes which threw back crimson highlights, oversized foxlike ears, a sharp nose; it wore form-fitting clothing of a dark olive color which accentuated its thin limbs and knobby joints. Dark hair grew to a widow's peak on its forehead.

"What are you?" Vallant's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I'm Jimper." The tiny voice was like the peeping of a chick. "The Not-men came. Jason is dead; now who will help Jimper?" The little creature moved toward Vallant. There was a jaunty cap on the doll-sized head; a broken feather trailed from it.

"Who killed the old man?"

"Are you his friend?"

"Yes . . . he seemed to think so."

"There was a large man—great in the belly, and with splendid clothes, though he smelled of burning drug-weed. Two of the Not-men were with him. They struck Jason a mighty blow, and afterward they took things from his clothes. I was afraid; I hid among the rafters."

"What are you—a pet?"

The little creature stood straighter.

"I am the Ambassador of the King. I came with Jason to see the King of the Giants."

Vallant pocketed the gun. "I've been to a lot of places; I never saw anything like you before. Where did you come from?"

"My land of Galliale lies beyond the Place of Blue Ice—the world you know as Pluto."

"Pluto? Out there the atmosphere falls as snow every winter. Nothing could live there."

"Green and fair lies Galliale beyond the ice." The little figure crept closer to the foot of the bed. "Jason is dead. Now Jimper is alone. Let me stay with you, Jason's friend."

"But—I don't need a pet . . ."

"I am the Ambassador of the King!" the manikin piped. "Do not leave me alone," he added, his tiny voice no more than a cricket's chirp.

"Do you know why they killed the old man?"

"He knew of the Portal—and my land of Galliale. Long have the Not-men sought it—"

The tiny head came up suddenly; the long nose twitched. "The Not-men," the bird voice shrilled. "They come . . . !"

Vallant stepped to the door, listened. "I don't hear anything . . ."

"They come—from below. Three of them, and evil are their thoughts."

"You're a mind reader, too?"

"I feel the shapes of their intentions . . ." The tiny voice was frantic. "Flee, Jason's friend; they wish you harm . . ."

"What about you?"

"Jason made a carrying box for me—there—in the locker."

Vallant grabbed up the cage, put it on the bed; the Ambassador of the King crept inside.

"My crossbow," he called, "it lies in Jason's box; and my knapsack."

Vallant retrieved the miniature weapon and the box, handed them in to their owner.

"All right, Jimper. I'm not sure I'm not dreaming you—but I'd hate to wake up and find out I wasn't."

"Close are they now," the small voice shrilled. "They come from there . . ." He pointed along the gloomy hallway. Vallant went in the opposite direction. He glanced back from the first cross-corridor; three Niss stepped from the elevator; he watched as they went to the room he had just left,

pushed inside.

"It looks as though you know what you're talking about, Jimper," Vallant said. "Let's get away from here before the excitement begins."

* * *

4

There were a scattering of late-shift workers hurrying through the corridor when Vallant reached the secret entry to his flat. He waited until they had hustled out of sight, then opened the utility room door, stepped inside. In the cage, Jimper moaned softly.

"The Feared Men," he peeped.

Vallant stood stock-still. He put his ear against the removable panel. A heavy voice sounded from beyond it.

"How did I know he'd die so easy? I had to make him talk, didn't I?"

"Fool!" hissed a voice like gas escaping under pressure. "Little will he talk now."

"Look, your boss isn't going to blame me, is he?"

"You will die, and I with you."

"Huh? You mean—"

There was a sudden hiss, then a sound of rattling paper. "Perhaps this will save our lives," the Niss voice said. "The map . . . !"

In the cage, Jimper whined. "I fear the Not-men," he piped. "I fear the smell of hate."

Vallant raised the cage to eye level. The little creature inside blinked large, anxious eyes at him. "They found the old man's map," he said. "I left it lying in plain sight. Was it important?"

"The map?" Jimper stood, gripping the bars of the cage. "Vallant—with the map they can seek out my Land of Galliale, and fall upon us, unsuspecting! They must not have it!"

"They've already got it—and if I'd walked in the front door, they'd have had me too. I'm in trouble, Jimper. I've got to get away, hide out somewhere . . ."

"First, the map, Vallant!"

"What do you mean?"

"We must take it from them. You are a giant, like them; can you not burst in and take it from them?"

"I'm afraid heroics are out of my line, Jimper. It's too bad, but—"

"Jason died for the map, Vallant. He came to warn you, and they killed him. Will you let them take it now?"

Vallant rubbed his jaw. "I've gotten mixed up in something I don't understand. I don't know the old man; he never got around to saying why he came to see me—"

"To save a world, Vallant—perhaps a Galaxy. And now only you can help!"

"The map is that important, is it?"

"More than you could know! You must make a plan, Vallant!"

Vallant nodded. "I guess my number's up anyway; I'd never get clear of the city, with the Syndarch and the Niss after me. I might as well go down fighting." He chewed his lip. "Listen, Jimper. I want you to sneak around front, with my key. You can reach the keyhole if you climb up on the railing. When you plug it in, the buzzer will go. Then I'll move in and hit them on the flank. Maybe I can put it over. Can you do it?"

Jimper looked out through the brass bars of the birdcage. "It is a fearsome thing to walk abroad among the giants . . ." He gripped his five-inch crossbow. "But if you ask it, Vallant, I will try."

"Good-by." Vallant put the cage on the floor, opened it. Jimper stepped out, stood looking up at the man. Briefly, Vallant described the location of his apartment entry; he handed over the electro-key.

"Be careful; there may be somebody watching the place from outside. If you make it, give it one good blast and run like hell; I'll meet you back here. If I don't show up in ten minutes, you're on your own."

Jimper stood straight; he settled his cap on his head.

"I am the Ambassador of the King," he said. "I shall do my best, Vallant."

Vallant waited, his ear to the thin panel. The two who lay in wait inside conversed excitedly, in low tones.

"Look," the man said. "The guy's wise we're after him. He won't come back here; we've got to get the map to the Syndarch—"

"To the Uttermagnate!"

"The Syndarch's my boss—"

"He is a dirt beneath the talons of the Uttermagnate!"

Faintly, the door buzzer sounded. The voices ceased abruptly. Then:

"OK, you cover him as he comes in; I clip him back of the ear . . ."

Vallant waited a quarter of a minute; then he pushed on the panel, caught it as it leaned into the room, stepped in after it, the gun in his hand. He crossed quickly to the connecting doorway to the outer room. The man and the Niss stood across the room on either side of the entry, heads cocked alertly; the alien held a gun, the man a heavy sap.

"Don't move!" Vallant snapped.

The two whirled on him like clockwork soldiers. Vallant jumped aside, fired as the Niss burned the door frame by his ear. The Browning snarled; the alien slammed back, fell, a cluster of needles bright against the leathery hide over his heart. The man dropped the length of weighted hose, raised his hands.

"Don't shoot . . . !" he choked. Vallant went to him, lifted the map from his pocket.

"Talk fast!" Vallant snapped. "Who's the old man?"

"All I know is," the man stuttered, "the Niss boss said bring the old guy in."

"You tailed him here, but he lost you. How'd you get to him?"

"There was four teams working him. Mullo picked him up when he'd taken a hack on One Level."

"Why'd you kill him?"

"It was an accident—"

"Why'd you come back for me?"

"Once the old guy was dead, you was the only lead . . ."

"Lead to what?"

Sweat popped out on the man's veined temples. He had a narrow, horsey face, a long torso with too-short legs.

"I . . . dunno. It was something they wanted."

"You take orders from . . . those?" Vallant glanced at the dead Niss.

"I do like I'm told," the man said sullenly.

"You know any prayers?"

The man's face broke like smoke in a gust of wind. He fell to his knees, clasped his hands in a grotesque parody of adoration. He babbled. Vallant stood over him.

"I ought to kill you—for my own protection," he said. "But that's where you skunks have the advantage . . ." He hit the man hard behind the ear with the gun butt; he fell on his face. Vallant trussed him with a maroon bathrobe cord, knotted a handkerchief over his mouth, then rose, looked around at the laden book shelves, the music storage unit, the well-stocked pantry beyond.

"It was nice while it lasted," he muttered. He went to the closet, stepped through into the dark room beyond.

"Jimper!" he called. There was no answer. The cage was empty, the tiny knapsack beside it. He picked it up, stepped out into the corridor, went to

the exit, out into the walkaway, turned back toward the entrance to the apartment block.

As he passed the dark mouth of a narrow service-way, a sudden thump! sounded, followed by a squeal like a rusty hinge. Vallant whirled; a giant rat lay kicking long-toed hind feet, a three-inch length of wooden dowel projecting from its chest. Beyond it lay a second, its yellow chisel-teeth closed on a shaft which had entered its mouth and emerged under its left shoulder. Vallant took a step into the alley; a foot-long rodent darted at him. He pivoted, swung a foot, sent it thudding against the wall. He saw Jimper loose a bolt from his bow, then toss the weapon aside and draw a two-inch dagger. A red-eyed rodent rushed him; he danced aside, struck—

Vallant snatched him up, aimed a kick at the predator, quickly retreated to the dim-lit walkaway.

"I'm sorry, Jimper; I forgot about the rats . . ."

"My . . .bow . . ." Jimper keened. His head drooped sideways. Vallant was suddenly aware of the lightness of the small body; there seemed to be only bones under the silken-soft garments.

"How long since you've had a meal?"

"Jason gave Jimper food. . .before he went away . . ."

"You mean you waited there two days, in the dark, without food and water?"

Jimper stirred, tried to raise his head. "Jimper is tired . . ."

The elfin face was grayish, the eyes hollow.

"You've had a rough time, partner."

Vallant walked back up the alley, recovered the crossbow. The rats were gone—even the two dead ones, dragged away by their fellows.

"I'll get you some food," Vallant said, "then maybe you can tell me what this is all about."

"Then . . . you will help Jimper?"

"I don't know, Jimper. I just killed a Niss, and gave a Syndarch man a severe headache. I'm afraid I've permanently spoiled my popularity in this area. I have a couple of hours maybe before they find them. That means I'll have to make some very hurried travel arrangements. Afterwards, we can discuss future plans—if we still have any."

5

Vallant stood in the angle of the security wall surrounding the Navy Yard, sheltered from the glare of the polyarcs. "Do you know which one it is?" he whispered.

"Well I know her, Vallant; a fleet vessel; none can match her."

"Point her out to me." He lifted the cage to a shed roof, scrambled up beside it. Over the wall-top, the lights threw back dull highlights from the tarnished hulls of three Syndarch hundred-tonners squatting in an irregular row. Beyond, half a dozen of the Syndarch's private racing stable were parked, their peeling decorative paint giving them a raffish air. Far to the right, Jimper pointed to a smaller vessel, agleam with chromalloy and enamel, glistening under the polyarcs. Men worked around it; nearby stood four armed men in the pale green of the Syndarch contract police.

"I'll have to take some chances now," Vallant said softly. "You'd better stay here; I won't be able to look out for you."

"I will look out for myself, Vallant!"

"All right, partner; but this will be risky."

"What will you do, Vallant?" Jimper's voice was a mouse's squeak, but he stood with a bold stance, looking up at Vallant.

"I'm going to waltz into Operations as though I owned a controlling interest, and see what happens. Keep your fingers crossed."

"Jimper will be near, Vallant. Good luck."

Vallant stooped, put out a hand. "Thanks, partner—and if I don't make it, good luck to you—and your land of Galliale." Jimper laid his tiny hand solemnly against Vallant's palm.

"Stout heart," he piped, "and fair hunting."

Vallant strode through the gate, walking briskly like a man intent on serious business. A Niss eyed him from a sentry box by the gate as he rounded the end of a building, went up steps, pushed through wide doors, went along a carpeted corridor and under an archway into a bright room with chart-lined walls. A fat man with a high, pink forehead loomed up from behind a counter, glanced at Vallant, let his bored gaze wander past. Vallant rapped smartly on the counter.

"A little service here, please, my man. I need a clearance order; I'm taking a boat out."

The fat man's eyes flicked back to Vallant. He plucked a plastic toothpick from a breast pocket, plied it on large, square teeth. "So who're you?" he inquired in an uncoiled tenor.

"I'm the Syndarch's new pilot," Vallant said coldly. He wiped a finger across the dusty counter, examined its tip distastefully. "I trust that meets with your approval?"

There was an extended silence, broken only by the lick of the fat man's toothpick.

"Nobody never tells me nothing," he stated abruptly. He turned, plucked a paper from a desk behind him, scribbled on it, tossed it at Vallant.

"Where's old man Ramo going this time?"

Vallant looked at him sharply. "Mind your tone, my man."

The toothpick fell with a tiny clatter. The fat man's face was suddenly strained. "Hey, I din't mean nothing. I'm loyal, you bet." He indicated himself with an ink-stained thumb. "I just got kind of a haha informal way of talking."

"What was that lift-off time again?" Vallant was still looking sternly at the man.

"Plenty time yet, sir." The squeaky voice was half an octave higher. "I wasn't expecting the pilot in fer half an hour yet. I got my paper work all set early, just in case, like. All you got to do, you got to sign the flight plan." The man pointed with the blue thumb.

Vallant scribbled Mort Furd in the indicated space, folded his copy and tucked it away.

"About that crack," the fat man started.

"I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt," Vallant said.

Outside, Vallant walked quickly across to the low shed under the glare sign reading EQUIPMENT—STATION PERSONNEL ONLY. Inside, a small man with lined brown skin and artificial-looking black hair looked at him over a well-thumbed picto-news.

"I want to draw my gear," Vallant said briskly. "I'm taking the new boat out in a few minutes."

The little man got to his feet, held out a hand expectantly.

"Let's see that Issue Order."

"I'm running late," Vallant said. "I haven't got one."

The little man sat down and snatched up his paper. "Come back when you got one," he snapped.

"You wouldn't want to be the cause of delaying Leader Ramo's departure, would you?" Vallant looked at him pointedly.

"I do my job; no tickee no washee." The little man turned a page, appeared absorbed in his reading.

"Hey," Vallant said. The man glanced up, jaw lowered for a snappy retort. He saw the gun in Vallant's hand, froze, mouth open. Vallant plucked a length of wire from the table, tossed it to him. "Use this to tie your ankles together," he ordered. The magazine fell to the floor as the man complied. Vallant went behind him, cinched his hands with another length of stranded copper. He went along the bins, picked out a vacuum suit, pulled it on over his street clothes. He added an emergency power pack, a field communicator, emergency rations, a recycler unit.

Vallant stepped from the door—and was face to face with a heavy built Niss holding a gun like the one Vallant had first seen at the hip of the alien who

had smashed his Tri-D set. The gun came up, pointed at his chest.

"Would you mind pointing that thing in some other direction?" Vallant started to edge past the alien. It hissed, jabbed the strange gun at him.

Vallant took a deep breath, wondering how fast Niss reflexes were.

"Perhaps I'd better explain," he started—

There was a sharp clatter behind the alien; the narrow head jerked around; Vallant took a step, hit the creature on the side of the head; it bounced backwards, went down hard on its back; the gun skidded away. Vallant jumped to the Niss, caught it by the harness, dragged it into the shadows of the shed. Jimper stepped into view.

"Well smote, Vallant!" he chirped.

"Your timing was perfect, partner!" Vallant looked toward the lighted ship. The ground crew was still at work, the guards lounging nearby.

"Here we go; make a wide swing. Wait until they're all admiring me, and then run for it." Vallant started across the open ramp with a long stride. A man with a clipboard strolled forward to meet him. Vallant flapped the Clearance Order at him.

"All set to lift?" he barked.

"Eh? Why, no; I haven't even run idling checks—" the man backed, keeping pace.

"Skip 'em; I'm in a hurry." Vallant brushed past, reached the access ladder, thumbed the lock control; it cycled open. A small figure bounded from shadow, leaped up, disappeared inside.

"Hey—"

"Clear the area; I'm lifting!" Vallant went up, swung through the open port, clanged it behind him, climbed up into the dim-lit control compartment, slid into the deep-padded acceleration couch, threw the shock frame in place.

"Get on the bunk, Jimper," he called. "Lie flat and hang on." He slammed switches. Pumps sprang into action; a whining built, merged with the rumble of the preheat burners. The communicator's light blinked garish red on the panel.

"You in the yacht," a harsh voice blared. "Furd, or whatever your name is—"

A Niagara of sound cut off the voice. The pressure of full emergency power crushed Vallant back in the seat. On the screen, the pattern of lights that was the port dwindled, became a smudge, then glided from view as the ship angled east, driving for Deep Space.

"We're clear, Jimper," Vallant called. "Now all we have to do is figure out where we're going . . ."

Mars was a huge, glaring disk of mottled pink, crumbling at the edge into blackness. It lit Jimper's face eerily as he perched on the edge of the chart table, watching the planet swing ponderously past on the screen.

"Not this world, Vallant!" Jimper piped again. "Jason came with me from the world of the Blue Ice—"

"You said your country was warm and green, Jimper; with a big orange sun. Let's be realistic: Pluto is only a few degrees above absolute zero. Your home couldn't be there!"

"You must believe Jimper, Vallant." The little creature looked appealingly across at the man. "We must go to Pluto!"

"Jimper, we need supplies, information. We'll land at Aresport, rest up, take in some of the scenery I've heard about, then see what we can find out about the old man's itinerary—"

"The Not-men will capture us!"

"Jimper, we couldn't be that important. Mars is an autonomous planet. I know commerce has been shut off for years, but the Syndarch couldn't have any influence out here—"

"Vallant—the Not-men own all the worlds! There are no Giants but those who serve them—but for those on Earth—and why they let them live, I cannot say—"

"You've got a lot of wild ideas, Jimper—"

"Look!" Jimper's finger pointed at the screen. A black point was visible, drifting across the center of the planetary disc. Vallant adjusted a control, locked a tracking beam on the vessel.

"If he holds that course, we're going to scrape paint . . . !" He keyed the communicator. "Ariane to Mars Tower West; I'm in my final approach pattern; request you clear the Sunday drivers out of the way."

"Pintail Red to Pintail One," a faint voice came from the speaker. "I think I've picked up our bogie; homing in on 23—268—6, sixteen kiloknots . . ."

"Pintail Red, get off the clear channel, you damned fool—" The angry voice dissolved into a blur of scrambled transmission.

"Panam Patrol—out here?" Vallant twiddled controls, frowning at the instruments. "What was that course? 23—268—6 . . ." He flipped a switch, read off the numerals which glowed on the ground glass.

"Hey, Jimper—that's us they're talking about . . . !"

A speck separated itself from the vessel on the screen, raced toward Ariane.

"Hang on to your hat, Jimper," Vallant called. "He means business . . ." He slammed the drive control lever full over; the ship leaped forward.

"I guess the Ares Pavilion's out, Jimper," he said between clenched teeth, "but maybe we can find a cozy little family-type hotel on Ganymede."

7

Vallant sagged over the control panel, his unshaven face hollow from the last week on short rations.

"Ariane to Ganymede Control," he croaked for the hundredth time. "Ganymede Control, come in . . ."

"None will answer, Vallant," Jimper piped.

"Looks like nobody home, Buddy," Vallant slumped back in the couch. "I don't understand it . . ."

"Will we go to Pluto now, Vallant?"

"You don't give up easily, do you, partner?"

Jimper sprang across, stood before Vallant, his feet planted on dial faces. "Vallant, my land of Galliale lies beyond the snows, deep among the Blue Ice mountains. You must believe Jimper!"

"We're low on rations and my fuel banks were never intended for this kind of high-G running, weeks on end. We'll have to turn back."

"Turn back to what, Vallant? The Not-men will surely slay you—and what will happen to Jimper?"

"There's nothing out there, Jimper!" Vallant waved a hand at the screen that reflected the blackness of space, the cold glitter of the distant stars. "Nothing but some big balls of ice called Uranus and Neptune, where the sun is just a bright star—"

"There is Pluto."

"So there is . . ." Vallant raised his head, looked into the small, anxious face. "Where could this nice warm place of yours be, Jimper? Underground?"

"The sky of Galliale is wide and blue, Vallant, and graced with a golden sun."

"If I headed out that way—and failed to find Galliale—that would be the end. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, Vallant. I will not lead you wrong."

"The old man said something about mountains of ice; maybe—" Vallant straightened. "Well, there's nothing to go back to. I've always had a yen to see what's out there. Let's go take a look, Jimper. Maybe there are still a few undreamed of things in Heaven and Earth—or beyond them."

8

The planet hung like a dull steel ball against the black; a brilliant highlight threw back the glinting reflection of the tiny disc that was the distant sun.

"All right, Jimper, guide me in," Vallant said hoarsely. "It all looks the same to me."

"When we are close, then I will know." Jimper's pointed nose seemed to quiver with eagerness as he stared into the screen. "Soon you will see, Vallant. Fair is my land of Galliale."

"I must be crazy to use my last few ounces of reaction mass to land on that," Vallant croaked. "But it's too late now to change my mind."

For the next hours, Vallant nursed the ship along, dropping closer to the icy world. Now plains of shattered ice-slabs stretched endlessly below, rising at intervals into jagged peaks gleaming metallically in light as eerie as an eclipse.

"There!" Jimper piped, pointing. "The Mountains of Blue Ice . . . !" Vallant saw the peaks then, rising deep blue in a saw-tooth silhouette against the unending snow.

The proximity alarm clattered. Vallant pushed himself upright, read dials, adjusted the rear screen magnification. The squarish lines of a strange vessel appeared, dancing in the center of the field. Beyond, a second ship was a tiny point of reflected light.

"We're out of luck, partner," Vallant said flatly. "They must want us pretty badly."

"Make for the mountains, Vallant!" Jimper shrilled. "We can yet escape the Not-men!"

Vallant pulled himself together, hunched over the controls. "OK, Jimper, I won't give up if you won't; but that's an almighty big rabbit you're going to have to pull out of that miniature hat!"

9

It was not a good landing. Vallant unstrapped himself, got to his feet, holding onto the couch for support. Jimper crept out from under the folded blankets that had fallen on him, straightened his cap.

"We're a couple of miles short of the mark, Jimper," Vallant said. "I'm sorry; it was the best I could do."

"Now must we hasten, Vallant; deep among the blue peaks lies Galliale; long must we climb." Jimper opened his knapsack, took out a tiny miniature of a standard vacuum suit, began pulling it on. Vallant managed a laugh.

"You came prepared, fella. I guess your friend Jason made that for you."

"Even in this suit, Jimper will be cold." The long nose seemed redder than ever. He fitted the grapefruit-sized bowl in place over his head. Vallant checked the panel. The screens were dead; the proximity indicator dial was smashed. He donned his suit hurriedly.

"They saw us crash; they'll pick a flatter spot a few miles back; that gives us a small head start." He cycled the port open; loose objects fluttered as

the air whooshed from the ship; frost formed instantly on horizontal surfaces.

Standing in the open lock, Vallant looked out at a wilderness of tilted ice slabs, fantastic architectural shapes of frost, airy bridges, tunnels, chasms of blue ice.

"Jimper—are you sure—out there . . . ?"

"High among the ice peaks," Jimper's tiny voice squeaked in Vallant's helmet. "Jimper will lead you."

"Lead on, then." Vallant jumped down into the feathery drift-snow. "I'll try to follow."

The slopes were near-vertical now, polished surfaces that slanted upward, glinting darkly. The tiny arc-white sun glared between two heights that loomed overhead like cliffs. In the narrow valley between them, Vallant toiled upward, Jimper scampering ahead.

Far above a mighty river poured over a high cliff, thundering down into mist: its roar was a steady rumble underfoot.

Abruptly, Jimper's voice sounded in a shrill shout. "Vallant! Success! The Gateway lies ahead!"

Vallant struggled on another step, another, too exhausted to answer. There was a sudden heavy tremor underfoot. Jimper sprang aside. Vallant looked up; far above, a vast fragment detached from the wall, seeming to float downward with dreamlike grace, surrounded by a convoy of lesser rubble. Great chunks smashed against the cliff-sides, cascaded downward; the main mass of the avalanche shattered, dissolved into a cloud of ice crystals. At the last moment, Jimper's warning shrilling in his ears, Vallant jumped for the shelter of a crevice. A torrent of snow poured down through the sluicelike narrow, quickly rising above the level of Vallant's hiding place. His helmet rang like a bell bombarded with gravel, then damped out as the snow packed around him. Profound silence closed in.

"Vallant!" Jimper's voice came. "Are you safe?"

"I don't know . . ." Vallant struggled, moved his arms an inch. "I'm buried; no telling how deep." He scraped at the packed snow, managed to twist himself over on his face. He worked carefully then, breaking pieces away from above, thrusting them behind. He was growing rapidly weaker; his arms seemed leaden. He rested, dug, rested . . .

The harsh white star that was the sun still hung between the ice cliffs when Vallant's groping fingers broke through and he pulled himself out to lie gasping on the surface.

"Vallant—move not or you are surely lost!" Jimper piped in his ears.

He lay, sprawled, too tired even to lift his head.

"The Not-men," Jimper went on. "Oh, they are close, Vallant."

"How close?" Vallant groaned.

"Close . . . close."

"Have they seen me?"

"Not yet, I think—but if you stir—"

"I can't stay here . . ." With an effort, Vallant got to his hands and knees, then rose, tottered on, slipping and falling. Above, Jimper danced on a ledge, frantic with apprehension.

"It lies just ahead!" he shrilled. "The gateway to my land of Galliale; only a little more, Vallant! A few scant paces . . ."

Ice chips flew from before Vallant's face. For a moment he stared, not understanding—

"They have seen you, Vallant!" Jimper screamed. "They shoot; oh, for a quiver of bolts . . . !"

Vallant turned. A hundred yards below, a party of four suited figures—men or Niss—tramped upward. One raised the gun as a warning.

"Vallant—it is not far! Hasten!"

"It's no use," Vallant gasped. "You go ahead, Jimper. And I hope you find home again, up there in the ice."

"Jimper will not desert you, Vallant! Come, rise and try again!"

Vallant made a choking sound that was half sob, half groan. He got to his feet, lurched forward; ice smashed a foot away. The next shot knocked him floundering into a drift of soft snow. He found his feet, struggled upward. They were shooting to intimidate, not to kill, he told himself; they needed information—and there was no escape . . .

There was a ridge ahead; Vallant paused, gathering strength. He lunged, gained the top as a near-miss kicked a great furrow in the ice; then he was sliding down the reverse slope. A dark opening showed ahead—a patch of rock, ice-free, the mouth of a cave. He rose, ran toward it, fell, then crawled . . .

It was dark suddenly; Vallant's helmet had frosted over. He groped his way on, hearing the sharp ping! of expanding metal.

"This way!" Jimper's voice rang in his helmet. "We will yet win free, Vallant!"

"Can't go . . . farther . . ." Vallant gasped. He was down now, lying on his face. There was a minute tugging at his arm. Through the frost melting from his face plate, he saw Jimper's tiny finger, pulling frantically at his sleeve. He got to his knees, stood, tottered on. A powerful wind seemed to buffet at him. Wind—in this airless place . . .

Without warning, a gigantic bubble soundlessly burst; that was the

sensation that Vallant felt. For a moment he stood, his senses reeling; then he shook his head, looked around at the cave walls. Through the water trickling down over his helmet, he saw packed earth walls shored up by spindly logs. Far ahead, light gleamed faintly—Jimper scampered out of sight. . .

A terrific blow knocked him flat. He rolled, found himself on his back, staring toward four dark figures, silhouetted against the luminous entrance through which he had come a minute before.

"I will bring rescuers!" Jimper's voice shrilled in Vallant's helmet.

"Run!" Vallant choked. "Don't let . . . them get you, too . . ."

Faintness overtook him . . .

"Do not despair, Vallant," Jimper's voice seemed faint, far away. "Jimper will return . . ."

They stood over him, three Niss, grotesque and narrow-faced in their helmets, and one human, a whiskery, small-eyed man. Their mouths worked in a conversation inaudible to Vallant. Then one Niss made a downward motion with his hand; the man stepped forward, reached—

Suddenly, a wooden peg stood against the grey-green fabric of his ship suit, upright in the center of his chest. A second magically appeared beside it—and a third. The man toppled, clutching . . . Behind him a Niss crouched, a flick of scarlet tongue visible against the gape of the white mouth—

A shaft stood abruptly in its throat. It fell backwards. Vallant raised his head; a troop of tiny red and green clad figures stood, setting bolts and loosing them. A Niss leaped, struck down two—then stumbled, fell, his thin chest bristling. The last Niss turned, ran from sight.

"Vallant!" Jimper's voice piped. "We are saved!"

Vallant opened his mouth to answer and darkness closed in.

10

Vallant lay on his back, feeling the gentle breeze that moved against his skin, scenting the perfumed aroma of green, growing things. Somewhere, a bird trilled a melody. He opened his eyes, looked up at a deep blue sky in which small white clouds sailed, row on row, like fairy yachts bound for some unimaginable regatta. All around were small sounds like the peeping of new-hatched chicks. He turned his head, saw a gay pavilion of red and white striped silk supported by slim poles of polished black wood topped with silver lance heads. Under it, around it, all across the vivid green of the lawnlike meadow, thronged tiny manlike figures, gaudily dressed, the males with caps and crossbows, or armed with foot-long swords, their mates in gossamer and the sparkle of tiny gems.

At the center of the gathering, in a chair like a doll's, a corpulent elf lolled in the shadow of the pavilion. He jumped as he saw Vallant's eyes upon him. He pointed, peeping excitedly in a strange, rapid tongue. A splendidly dressed warrior walked boldly toward Vallant, planted himself by his

outflung hand, recited a speech.

"Sorry, Robin Goodfellow," Vallant said weakly. "I don't understand. Where's Jimper?"

The little creature before him looked about, shouted. A bedraggled fellow in muddy brown came up between two armed warriors.

"Alas, Vallant," he piped. "All is not well in my land of Galliale."

"Jimper—you look a bit on the unhappy side, considering you brought off your miracle right on schedule . . ."

"Something's awry, Vallant. There sits my King, Tweeples the Eater of One Hundred Tarts—and he knows not his Ambassador, Jimper!"

"Doesn't know you . . . ?" Vallant repeated.

"Jason warned me it would be so," Jimper wailed. "Yet I scarce believed him. None here knows faithful Jimper . . ."

"Are you sure you found the right town? Maybe since you left—"

"Does Jimper not know the place where he was born, where he lived while forty Great Suns came and went?" The manikin took out a three-inch square of yellow cloth, mopped his forehead. "No, Vallant; this is my land—but it lies in the grip of strange enchantments. True, at my call the King sent warriors who guard the cave to kill the Not-men—the Evil Giants—but they would have killed you, too, Vallant, had I not pleaded your helpless state, and swore you came as a friend. We Spril-Folk have ever feared the memory of the Evil Giants."

"Kill me?" Vallant started to laugh, then remembered the shafts bristling in the bodies of the Niss. "I've come too far to get myself killed now."

"Near you were to a longer journey still, Vallant. I know not how long the king will stay his hand."

"Where are we, Jimper? How did we get here?"

"The king's men dragged you here on a mat of reeds."

"But—how did we get out of the cave . . . ?"

"Through the Portal, Vallant—as I said, yet you would not believe!"

"I'm converted," Vallant said. "I'm here—wherever here is. But I seem to remember a job of world-saving I was supposed to do."

Jimper looked stricken. "Alas, Vallant! King Tweeples knows naught of these great matters! It was he whom Jason told of the Great Affairs beyond the Portal, and the part the Folk must play."

"So I'm out of a job?" Vallant lay for a moment, feeling the throb in his head, the ache that spread all through his shoulders and back.

"Maybe I'm dreaming," he said aloud. He made a move to sit up—

"No, Vallant! Move not, on your life!" Jimper shouted. "The King's archers stand with drawn bows if you should rise to threaten them!"

Vallant turned his head; a phalanx of tiny bowmen stood, arrows aimed, a bristling wall of foot-tall killers. Far away, beyond the green meadow, the clustered walls and towers of a miniature city clung to a hillside.

"Didn't you tell the King that I came to help him?"

"I pledged my life on it, Vallant—but he names me stranger. At last he agreed that so long as you lay sorely hurt, no harm could come to you—but take care! The King need but say the word, and you are lost, Vallant!"

"I can't lie here forever, Jimper. What if it rains?"

"They prepare a pavilion for you, Vallant—but first must we prove your friendship."

Jimper mopped his face again. Vallant stared up at the sky.

"How badly am I hurt?" Vallant moved slightly, testing his muscles. "I don't even remember being hit."

"A near-miss, meant to warn you, Vallant—but great stone chips are buried in your flesh. The King's surgeons could remove them—if he would so instruct them. Patience now, Vallant; I will treat with him again."

Vallant nodded, watched as Jimper, flanked by his guards, marched back to stand before the pudgy ruler. More piping talk ensued. Then Jimper returned, this time with two companions in crumpled conical hats.

"These are the Royal Surgeons, Vallant," he called. "They will remove the flints from your back. You have the royal leave to turn over—but take care; do not alarm them with sudden movements."

Vallant complied, groaning; he felt a touch, twisted his head to see a two-foot ladder lean against his side. A small face came into view at the top, apprehensive under a pointed hat. Vallant made what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

"Good morning, doctor," he said. "I guess you feel like a sailor getting ready to skin a whale . . ." Then he fainted.

Vallant sat on a rough log bench, staring across the four-foot stockade behind which he had been fenced for three weeks now—as closely as he could estimate time, in a land where the sun stood overhead while he slept, wakened, and slept again. Now it was behind the tops of the towering poplar-like trees, and long shadows lay across the lawns under a sky of green and violet and flame. A mile away, lights glittered from a thousand tiny windows in the toy city of Galliale.

"If I could but convince the King," Jimper piped dolefully, a woebegone expression on his pinched features. "But fearful is the heart of Tweeple; not like the warrior kings of old, who slew the Evil Giants and freed the Fair Land of Galliale."

"These Evil Giants—were they the Niss?"

"Well might it be, Vallant. The legends tell that they were ugly as trolls and evil beyond the imagining of man or Spril. Ah, but those were brave days, when the Great Giants had fallen and only the Folk fought on."

"Jimper, do you suppose there's any truth in these legends of yours?"

The tiny Manikin stared. "Truth? True they be as carved stone, Vallant! True as the bolt sped from my bow! Look there!" He pointed to a gaunt stone structure rising from a twilight hill beyond the forest to the east.

"Is that a dream? But look at the stones of it! Plain it is that giants raised it once, long and long ago."

"What is it?"

"The Tower of the Forgotten; the legend tells that in it lies a treasure so precious that for it a king would give his crown; but the Thing of Fear, the Scaled One, the Dread Haik set to guard it by the Evil Giants, wards it well, pent in the walls."

"Oh, a dragon, too. I must say you have a completely equipped mythology, Jimper. What about these Great Giants—I take it they were friendly with the Spril?"

"Great were the Illimpi, Vallant, and proud were the Spril to serve them. But now they are dead, vanished all away; and yet, some say they live on, in their distant place, closed away from their faithful Folk by spells of magic, and the Scaled Haik of the Niss."

"Jimper—you don't believe in magic?"

"Do I not? Have I not seen the Cave of No Return with my own eyes—and worse, passed through it?"

"That's the tunnel we came in by, Jimper. You went through it with your friend Jason on the way out—and now you've returned."

"Ah, have I indeed, Vallant? True it is I passed through the Cave—and only my sworn fealty to my King forced me to it—but have I returned in truth? Who is there who welcomes my return?"

"I admit that's a puzzler . . ."

"Tales have I heard of others, long ago, who came from the Cave, strangers to the Tribe of Spril—and yet of our blood and customs. Always they talked of events unknown, and swore they had but ventured out into the Blue Ice—and now I am of their number; the stranger in his own land, whom no one knows."

Vallant rose, looking across toward the city. A long procession of torch bearers was filing from the city gates, winding across the dark plain toward Vallant's stockade. "It looks as though we have visitors coming, Jimper."

"Woe, Vallant! This means the King has decided your fate! Well has he

wined this night—and drink was never known to temper the mercy of the King!"

"Jimper, if they're coming here to fill me full of arrows, I'm leaving!"

"Wait, Vallant. The captain of the guard is a decent fellow; I'll go to meet them. If they mean you ill, I'll . . . I'll snatch a torch and wave it thus . . ." He made circular motions above his head.

Vallant nodded. "OK, partner—but don't get yourself in trouble."

Half an hour later, the cavalcade halted before Vallant, Jimper striding beside the breast-plated captain. He ran forward.

"Mixed news, Vallant. This is the judgment of the King:—that you shall stand before him in his Hall, and show proof that you are friend to the Spril-Folk; and if you fail . . ."

"If I fail?" Vallant prompted.

"Then shall you enter the Cave of No Return, whence no man or Spril has ever come back."

The main avenue of the city of Galliale was ten feet wide, cobbled with cut stones no bigger than dice, winding steeply up between close-crowded houses, some half-timbered, others of gaily patterned masonry, with tiny shops below, gay with lights and merchandise, and open casement windows above, from which small, sharp-nosed faces thrust, staring at the looming giant who strode along, surrounded by the helmeted warriors of the King, toward the dazzling tower of light that was the Royal Palace of Tweeples the Eater of One Hundred Tarts.

"I don't understand why His Highness isn't content to let me sit out there under my canopy and smell the flowers," Vallant said to Jimper, who rode on his shoulder. "I've even volunteered to be his royal bodyguard—"

"He sees you grow well and strong, Vallant. He fears you may yet turn on the Folk as did the Evil Giants in the olden time."

"Can't you convince him I'm the good variety? I'd be handy to have around if that Niss who escaped came back, with a couple of his friends."

"Never will be return, Vallant! All who enter the Cave—"

"I know—but if he sends me out there in the cold, I'm likely to turn around and sneak right back in—tradition or no."

"Ah, if Jason were but here to vouch for you," Jimper piped. "Well he knew the tongue of the Spril, and wondrous the tales he told; charmed was King Tweeples, and many were the honors of Jason the Giant. But now, alas, the King knows naught of all these things."

"How did Jason happen to find Galliale?"

"He told of a great battle fought between the worlds, where Niss died like moths in the flame under the mighty weapons of the men of Earth—"

"The old man talked to me about a war; he said we lost."

"Jason's ship was hurt," Jimper went on. "He fell far, far, but at last brought the ship to ground among the Blue Ice crags. He saw the Portal among the snows—the same in which we fought the Not-men, Vallant—and so he came to fair Galliale."

"And then he left again—"

"But not until he had tarried long and long among us, Vallant. At his wish, sentinels were posted, day and night, to watch through the Cave of No Return, which gives a fair view of the icy slopes and the plain beyond, for sight of men. Often, when he had drunk a hogshead or two of the King's best ale, he would groan, and cry aloud to know how it went with the battle of the Giants; but he knew the magic of the Cave, and so he waited. And then one day, when he had grown old and bent, the sentries gave him tidings that a strange vessel lay in view beyond the cave. Grieved was the King, and he swore that he would set his bowmen to guard the entrance to that enchanted path, that Jason the Teller of Tales might not walk down it to be seen no more; but Jason only smiled and said that go he would, asking only that an ambassador be sent with him, to treat with the Giants; and it was I, Jimper, warrior and scholar, whom the King chose."

"That was quite an honor; too bad he doesn't remember it; and I'm sorry I don't know any stories I could charm the old boy with. I haven't made much headway with the language yet."

"Long before Jason there was another Giant who came to Galliale," Jimper chirped. "No talker was he, but a mighty Giant of valor. The tale tells how he went in against the Scaled One, to prove his love to the King of those times. I heard the tale from my grandfather's father, when I was but a fingerling, when we sat in a ring under the moons and talked of olden times. And the King of those times—would have slain him—but in sign of friendship, he entered the Tower of the Forgotten, there to battle the Fanged One who guards the treasures. Then did the King know that he was friend indeed, and of the race of goodly Giants—"

"And what happened to him in the end?"

"Alas, never did he return from the Tower, Vallant—but honored was his memory!"

"That's a cheery anecdote. Well, we'll find out in a minute what Tweeples has in mind."

The procession had halted in the twenty-foot Grand Plaza before the palace gates. The warriors formed up in two ranks, flanking Vallant, bows ready. Beyond a foot-high spike-topped wall, past a courtyard of polished stones as big as dominoes, the great two-foot high entrance to the palace blazed with light. Beyond it, Vallant caught a glimpse of intricately carved paneling, tiny-patterns tapestries, and a group of Spril courtiers in splendid costumes, bowing and curtsying as the plump elf-king waddled forth to stand, hands on hips, staring up at Vallant.

He spoke in a shrill voice, waving ringed hands, pausing now and again to

quaff a thimble-sized goblet offered by a tiny Spril no taller than a chipmunk.

He finished, and a servant handed him a scarlet towel to dry his pink face. Jimper, who had climbed down and taken up a position in the row of Spril beside the King, came across to Vallant.

"The king says . . ." He paused, swallowed. "That his royal will is . . ."

"Go ahead," Vallant urged, eyeing the ranks of ready bowmen. "Tell me the worst."

"To prove your friendship, Vallant—you must enter the Tower of the Forgotten, and there slay the Fanged One, the Scaled One, the Eater of Fire!"

Vallant let out a long sigh. "You had me worried there for a minute, Jimper," he said, almost gaily. "I thought I was going to provide a target for the royal artillery—"

"Jest not, Vallant!" Jimper stamped angrily. "Worse by far is the fate decreed by the King! Minded am I to tell him so—"

"Don't get yourself in hot water, Jimper; it's OK. I'm satisfied with the assignment."

"But, Vallant! No one—not even a Great Giant—can stand against the Fearsome One whom the Evil Giants set to guard the tower!"

"Will he be satisfied if I go into the Tower and come out again alive—even if I don't find the dragon?"

"Delude yourself no more, Vallant! The Scaled One waits there—"

"Still—"

"Yes, to enter the Tower is enough. But—"

"Fair enough. I may not come out dragging the body by the tail, but the legend won't survive the experience. When do I go?"

"As soon as may be . . ." Jimper shuddered, then drew himself erect. "But have no fear, Vallant; Jimper will be at your side."

Vallant smiled down at the tiny warrior. "That's a mighty brave thing to do, Jimper; I wish I could put your mind to rest about the dragon."

Jimper looked up at him, hands on hips. "And I, Vallant, wish that I could stir in you some healthful fear." He turned, strode back across the courtyard to the King, saluted, spoke briefly. A murmur ran out from the group of courtiers; then a treble cheer went up, while tiny caps whirled high. The King signaled, and white-clad servitors surged forward, setting up tables, laying out heaped platters, rolling great one-quart barrels into position.

"The King decrees a night of feasting, Vallant!" Jimper chirped, running to him. "And you too shall dine!"

Vallant watched while a platform normally used for speeches was set up and vivid rugs as fine as silk laid out on it; then he seated himself and accepted a barrel of ale, raised it in a toast to the King.

"Eat, drink, and be merry . . ." he called.

"If you can," Jimper said, mournful again, "knowing what tomorrow will bring."

11

In the fresh light of morning, Vallant strode across the emerald velveteen of the Plain of Galliale, feeling the cool air in his face, ignoring the throb in his head occasioned by last night's fifteen barrels of royal ale, watching the silhouette of the tower ahead growing larger against the dawn sky. A long sword—a man-sized duplicate of the tiny one at Jimper's belt—brought from the King's Treasury of Ancient Things for his use, swung at his side; in his hand he carried a nine-foot spear with a head of polished brass. Behind him trotted a full battalion of the Royal Guards, lances at the ready.

"I'll have to admit that King Tweeples went all-out in support of the expedition, Jimper," Vallant said. "Even if he did claim he'd never heard of your friendly Giant."

"Strange are the days when valued tales of old are unknown to the King. But no matter—pleased is he to find a champion."

"Well, I hope he's just as pleased when I come out and report that the Scaled One wasn't there after all."

Jimper looked up from where he scampered at Vallant's side. He was splendid now in a new scarlet cloak and a pink cap with a black plume. "Vallant, the Scaled One dwells in the Tower, as sure as blossoms bloom and kings die!"

Another quarter hour's walk brought Vallant and his escort through the forest of great conifers and out onto a wild-grown slope where long mounds overgrown with vines and brambles surrounded the monolithic tower at its crest. Near at hand a slab of white stone gleamed through underbrush. Vallant went close, pulled the growth away to reveal a weathered bench top.

"Hey, it looks as though someone used to live here—and a giant at that." He glanced at the tumuli, some large, some small, forming an intersecting geometric pattern that reached up to the tower's base.

"Those are the ruins of buildings and walls; this whole hilltop was built up at one time—a long time ago."

"Once those Giants whom the Spril served dwelt here," Jimper piped. "Then the Evil Giants came and slew our masters with weapons of fire; there was a great king among the Spril in those days, Vallant: Josro the Sealer of Gates. He it was who led the Folk in the war against the Ugly Ones." He looked up at the Tower. "But, alas, the Scaled One lives on to wall away the treasure of the Illimpi."

"Well, let's see if we can go finish the job, Jimper." Vallant went up past the mounded ruins. At the top he paused, looking back down the silent slope. "It must have been beautiful once, Jimper," he said. "A palace of white marble, and the view all across the valley . . ."

"Fair it was, and enchanted in its memory," Jimper said. "Long have we feared this place, but now we come to face its dreads. Lead on, Vallant; Jimper is at your side!"

A shrill trumpet note pierced the air. The troop of King's Lancers had halted. Their captain called an order; the two-foot lances swung down in a salute.

"They wait here," Jimper said. "The King will not risk them closer—and they guard our retreat, if the Scaled One should break out, which Fate forefend!"

Vallant returned the salute with a wave of his hand. "I guess if you believe in dragons, to come this far is pretty daring." He glanced down at Jimper. "That makes you a regular hero, partner."

"And what of you, Vallant! In your vast shadow Jimper walks boldly, but you go with only your lance and blade to meet the Terrible One!"

"That doesn't count; I don't really expect to meet him."

Now four warriors came forward, stumbling under the weight of a foot-long box slung from their shoulders by leather straps. They lowered it gingerly before Vallant, scampered back to the ranks.

"What's this, a medal—already?" Vallant pressed a stud on the side of the flat box; its lid popped up. Nestled in a fitted case lay a heavy electro-key of unfamiliar design. Vallant picked it up, whistled in surprise.

"Where did this come from, Jimper?"

"When long ago the Spril-Folk slew the Evil Ones, this did they find among the spoils. Long have we guarded it, until our Goodly Giants should come again."

Vallant examined the heavy key. "This is a beautiful job of microtronic engineering, Jimper. I'm beginning to wonder who these giants of yours were." He went up the last few yards of the vine-grown slope to the vast door of some smooth, dark material which loomed up in the side of the tower; the structure itself, Vallant saw, was not of stone, but of a weathered synthetic, porous and discolored with age.

"I'd give a lot to know who built this, Jimper," he said. "It must have been a highly technical people; that stuff looks like it's been there for a lot of years."

"Great were our Giants, and great was their fall. Long have we waited their return. Now it may be that you, Vallant, and Jason, are the first of those ancient ones to come back to your Galliale."

"'Fraid not, Jimper. But we can still be friends." Vallant studied the edge of the door.

"Looks like we'll have to dig, Jimper. The dirt's packed in here, no telling how deep." Jimper unsheathed his sword, handed it to Vallant. "Use this; a nobler task could not be found for it."

Vallant set to work. Behind him, the ranks of the bowmen stood firm, watching. The unyielding surface of the door extended down six inches, a foot, two feet, before he came to its lower edge.

"We've got a job ahead, partner," he said. "I hope this snoozing dragon of yours is worth all the effort."

"For my part," Jimper said, "I hope the sound of our digging awakens him not too soon."

Two hours later, with the door cleared of the packed soil and an arc excavated to accommodate its swing, Vallant returned Jimper's sword, then took the key from the box.

"Let's hope it still works; I'd hate to try to batter my way past that . . ." He lifted the key to the slot in the door; there was a deep-seated click!, a rumble of old gears.

"It looks as though we're in business."

Vallant hammered back the heavy locking bar that secured the massive door; then, levering with his swordblade, he swung the thick panel back, looked into a wide corridor inches deep in dust. The Captain of the Guard and four archers came up, waiting nervously to close the door as soon as Vallant was safely inside. Jimper sneezed. Vallant stooped, lifted him to his shoulder. He waved to the escort, who raised a nervous cheer, then stepped into the dust of the corridor, watched as the door slowly clanked shut behind him.

"We're in, Jimper," he said. "Now—which way to the dragon?"

Jimper fingered his crossbow, staring ahead along the dim hall. "H-he could be anywhere . . ."

"Let's take a look around." Vallant explored the length of the corridor which circled the tower against the outer wall, floundering through dust drifted deep under the loopholes high in the walls. At one point a great heap almost blocked the passage. He kicked at it, yelped; rusted metal plates showed where the covering of dust was disturbed.

"It looks like a dump for old armor," he complained, clambering over the six-foot obstruction. "Maybe this was an early junk yard . . ." Jimper muttered fretfully. "Walk softly, Vallant . . ."

They completed the circuit, then took a stairway, mounted to a similar passage at a higher level. Everywhere the mantle of dust lay undisturbed. They found rooms, empty except for small metal objects of unfamiliar shape, half buried in dust. Once Vallant stooped, picked up a statuette of bright yellow metal.

"Look at this, Jimper," he said. "It's a human figure . . .!"

"True," Jimper agreed, squinting at the three-inch image. "No Spril form is that."

"This place must have been built by men, Jimper! Or by something so like them that the differences don't show. And yet, we've only had space travel for a couple of centuries—"

"Long have the Giants roamed the worlds, Vallant."

"Maybe—but humans have been Earth-bound until just lately. It's comforting to know that there are other creatures somewhere that look something like us—I guess."

They followed corridors, mounted stairs, prowled through chambers large and small. Faint light from tiny apertures in the walls was the only illumination. High in the tower, they came to a final narrow flight of steps. Vallant looked up.

"Well, if he's not up here, I think we can consider the mission accomplished."

"Certain it is that somewhere lurks the Dread One," Jimper chirped. "Now I-let him b-beware!"

"That's the spirit." Vallant went up the stairs—gripping his sword now in spite of his skepticism; if there were anything alive in the tower, it would have to be here . . .

He emerged in a wide, circular room, high-vaulted, thick with dust. A lustrous cube, white, frosty-surfaced, twelve feet on a side, was mounted two feet clear of the floor at the exact center of the chamber. It seemed almost to glow in the dim room. Cautiously, Vallant circled it. The four sides were identical, unadorned, shimmering white.

Vallant let his breath out, sheathed the sword. "That's that," he said. "No dragon."

Perched on his shoulder, Jimper clutched his neck and whimpered.

"I fear this place, Vallant," he piped. "We have blundered—I know not how . . ."

"We're all right, old-timer," Vallant soothed. "Let's take a look around. Maybe we can pick up a souvenir to take back to old Tweeples—"

"Vallant, speak not with disrespect of my King!" Jimper commanded.

"Sorry." Vallant's boots went in to the ankle as he crossed the drifted floor to the glistening polyhedron; he touched its surface; it was cool, slippery as graphite.

"Funny stuff," he said. "I wonder what it's for?"

"Vallant, let us not linger here."

Vallant turned, looked around the gloomy room. Vague shapes bulked under

the dust blanket. He went to the table-like structure, blew at it, raising a cloud that made Jimper sneeze. He brushed at the array of dials and bright-colored knobs and buttons that emerged from the silt.

"It's some kind of control console, Jimper! What do you suppose it controls?"

"L-let us depart, Vallant!" Jimper squeaked. "I like not these ancient rooms!"

"I'll bet it has something to do with that . . ." Vallant nodded toward the cube. "Maybe if I push a couple of buttons—" He jabbed a finger at a large scarlet lever in the center of the panel. It clicked down decisively.

"Vallant—meddle not with these mysteries!" Jimper screeched. He crouched on Vallant's shoulder, eyes fixed on the lever.

"Nothing happened," Vallant said. "I guess it was too much to expect . . ." He paused. A draft stirred in the room; dust shifted, moving on the table top.

"Hey—" Vallant started.

Jimper huddled against his neck, moaning. Dust was flowing across the floor, drifting toward the glossy surface of the cube, whipping against it—and beyond. Vallant felt the draft increase, fluttering the fabric of his ship suit. The dust was rising up in a blinding cloud now; Vallant ducked his head, started toward the door. The wind rose to whirlwind proportions, hurling him against the wall; air was whining in through the loopholes; dust whipped and streamed, flowing to the face of the cube, which glared through the obscuring veil now with a cold white light. Vallant lunged again for the door, met a blast like a sand storm that sent him reeling, Jimper still clinging to his perch. He struggled to a sheltered angle between floor and wall, watched as the wind whirled the dust away, scouring the floor clean, exposing a litter of metallic objects. Nearby lay a finger-ring, an ornate badge, an odd shaped object that might have been a hand gun. Beyond were a scatter of polished metal bits, the size and shape of shark teeth.

Now, suddenly, the wind was lessening. The white-glaring rectangle was like an open window with a view of a noonday fog. The shrilling of the gale died. The room was still again.

"Now must we flee . . ." Jimper whistled; he flapped his cloak, settled his pink cap, edging toward the door. Vallant got to his feet, spitting dust. "Not yet, Jimper. Let's take a look at this . . ." He went close to the glowing square, stared at it, reached out a hand—

And encountered nothing.

He jerked his hand back quickly.

"Whew! That's cold!" He massaged the numbed hand. "Half a second, and it was stiff!"

Somewhere, far away, a faint, metallic clanking sounded.

"Vallant! He comes!" Jimper screeched.

"Calm down, Jimper! We're all right. It was a little thick there for a minute, but I suppose that was just some sort of equalization process. Or maybe this thing is a central cleaning device; sort of a building-sized vacuum cleaner—"

Abruptly, the panel before Vallant dimmed. Shapes whipped across it. The shadowy outlines of a room appeared, sharpened into vivid focus. Sounds came through; an electronic hum, the insistent pinging of a bell, then a clump of hurried feet.

A man appeared, stood staring across at Vallant, as through an opened doorway.

Or almost a man.

He was tall—near seven feet, and broad through the shoulders. His hair curled close to his head, glossy black as Persian lamb, and through it, the points of two short, blunt horns protruded, not quite symmetrically on either side of the nobly-rounded skull.

He spoke—staccato words in a language strange to Vallant. His voice was deep, resonant.

"Sorry, sir," Vallant got out, staring. "I'm afraid I don't understand . . ."

The horned man leaned closer. His large dark-blue eyes were fixed on Vallant's.

"Lla," he said.

Vallant shook his head. He tried to smile; the majestic figure before him was not one which inspired the lighter emotions. "I guess—" he started, then paused to clear his throat. "I guess we've stumbled onto something a little bigger than I expected . . ."

The horned man made an impatient gesture as Vallant paused. He repeated the word he had spoken. Vallant felt a tug at the knee of his suit.

"Vallant!" Jimper peeped. Vallant looked down. "Not now, Jimper—"

"I think—I think Jimper understand what the Great Giant means. In the ceremony of the crowning of the king, there is the phrase, 'qa ic lla'. . . It is spoken in the old tongue, the speech of long ago; and the wise elders say those words mean 'when he speaks!' He would have you talk . . ."

The horned giant leaned toward Vallant, as though to see below the edge of the invisible plane between them. Vallant stooped, raised Jimper up chest-high. The Manikin straightened himself; then, standing on Vallant's hand, he doffed his feathered cap, bent nearly double in a deep bow.

"Ta p'ic ih sya, Illimpi," he chirped.

A remarkable change came over the horned man's face. His eyes widened; his mouth opened—then a vast smile lit his face like a floodlight.

"I' Ipliti!" he roared. He turned, did something out of sight of Vallant beyond the edge of the cube, whirled back. He spoke rapidly to Jimper. The little creature spread his hands, looking contrite.

"N'iqi," he said. "N'iqi, Illimpi."

The giant nodded quickly, looked keenly at Vallant.

"Lla, Vallant," he commanded.

"He knows my name . . ." Vallant gulped. "What am I supposed to talk about?"

"He is a Great Giant," Jimper peeped excitedly. "Well he knows Jimper's kind, from of old. Tell him all, Vallant—all that has befallen the race of Giants since last the Portal closed."

* * *

12

Vallant talked for five minutes, while the giant beyond the invisible barrier adjusted controls out of sight below the Portal's edge.

". . . when I came to, I was here—"

The giant nodded suddenly. "Well enough," he said clearly. Vallant stared in surprise. The horned man's lips, he noticed, did not move in synchronization with his words.

"Now," the giant said, "what world are you?"

"What . . . how . . . ?" Vallant started.

"A translating device; I am Cessus the Communicator. What world are you?"

"Well, I would have said I was on Pluto, except that . . . I couldn't be. And on the other hand, I must be . . ."

"Your language . . . A strange tongue it is; none that I have known in my days in the Nex. Best I find you on the Locator . . ." He flipped unseen levers; his eyes widened.

"Can it be?" He stared at Vallant. "A light glows on my panel that has not been lit these ten Grand Eons . . . that of Lost Galliale . . ."

Vallant nodded eagerly. "That's right—Galliale is what Jimper calls the place. But—"

"And your people; are all—as you?"

"More or less."

"None have these?" he pointed.

"Horns? No. And this isn't my home world, of course. I come from Terra—third from the sun."

"But—what of the Illimpi of Galliale?" The giant's face was taut with strain.

"Nobody lives here but Jimper's people. Right, Jimper?"

"True," Jimper spoke up. "Once the Evil Giants—foes of the Great Giants—came; but from thicket and burrow we crept, after the last Great Giant fell. We loosed our bolts to find their marks in vile green hide, then slipped away to fight again. So we dealt with them all, we bowmen, for against our secret bolts, of what avail their clumsy lightnings? The last of them fled away down the Cave of No Return, and free at last was my land of Galliale from their loathsome kind. Now long have we waited for our Giants to come back, and in their absence have we tilled and spun and kept fair the land."

"Well done, small warrior," Cessus said. He studied Vallant's face. "You are akin to us—that much is plain to see; and you dwell on the double world that lies third from the sun—so some few survivors made good their secret flight there—"

"Survivors of what?"

"Of the onslaught of those you call the Niss."

"Then—what the old man said was true? They're invaders—"

"That, and more, Vallant! They are the bringers of darkness, the all-evil, the wasters of worlds!"

"But—they haven't wasted the Earth; you hardly notice them; they're just a sort of police force—"

"They are a poison that stains the Galaxy. Long ago, they came destroying—but listen; this was the way of it:

"Ages past, we Illimpi built the Portal—this block of emptiness before which you stand—linking the star-clouds. We sent colonists into the fair new world of Galliale—adventurers, man and woman, the brave ones who never could return; and with them went the Spril-Folk, the faithful Little People.

"They thrived, and in time they built a Gate—a useful link to a sunny world they called Olantea, circling in the fifth orbit of a yellow sun twenty light-years distant. There they built cities, planted gardens that were a delight to the senses.

"Then, without warning, the Niss came to Galliale, pouring through the Gateway, armed with weapons of fire. Swift and terrible was their assault, and deadly the gasses they spread abroad, and the crawling vermin to spread their plagues. The peaceful Illimpi of Galliale battled well, and volunteers rushed through the Great Portal to their aid. But deadly were the weapons of the Niss; they carried the Tower of the Portal and some few, mad with blood lust, rushed through it, never to return. Then the Portal failed and lost was our link with our colony. The long centuries have passed, and never did we know till now how it fared with Lost Galliale."

"So the Spril finished off the Niss, after the Niss had killed the Illimpi? Nice work, Jimper. But how did you manage it?"

"Proof were we against their sickness," Jimper piped. "But no defense had they against our bows."

"If the Niss are such killers, why haven't they used their weapons on us? The story that Syndarch tells is that they're our great friends, sharing their wisdom—"

"Proof have we seen of that lie," Jimper chirped. "Deep are the plots of the Niss."

"It is the Portal they seek," Cessus said. "All who came to Galliale were lost to them—"

"Just a minute," Vallant cut in. "I'm lost. The Niss came through the Gateway from this world Olantea—but that was held by the Illimpi. The Niss must have hit them, and captured the Gateway—which I take it is some sort of matter transmitter. But why wasn't Galliale warned? And why is it none of the Galliales escaped through the Portal here, back to the home world? And how did the Gateway get shifted from Olantea to Pluto—"

Cessus was frowning in puzzlement. "Do you not know, Vallant—"

"Vallant!" Jimper cocked his head. "The Scaled One—I hear him stir!"

"It's your imagination, Jimper. We've explored the whole building, and didn't find him, remember?" He turned back to the Portal. "I—"

The horned man was looking at Jimper. "What manner of creature is this Scaled One?"

"It's just a superstition of Jimper's—" Vallant started.

"A Haik, Great Giant," Jimper shrilled. "A guardian set by the Niss when they had closed the Portal against the Illimpi, before they fared forth against the Spril, from which adventure no Niss returned—"

Cessus whirled on Vallant. "How have you restrained the beast?"

Vallant's mouth opened. "I hope you don't mean—" he began.

There was a sudden clangor as of armor clashing against stone.

"The Fanged One comes!" Jimper shrilled.

"What weapon have you," Cessus rapped out.

"Just this ham-slicer . . ." Vallant gripped the sword hilt. "But I have a feeling it's not quite what the program requires . . ."

The clatter was louder now; Jimper screeched; the horned Giant whirled to reach beyond the screen's edge—

There was a screech of tortured steel from the doorway; a hiss like an ancient steam whistle split the air. Vallant spun, stared at a vast thing—like a jumble of rusted fragments of armor plate, wedged in the doorway, scrabbling with legs like gleaming black cables three inches thick, armed with mirror-bright talons which raked grooves in the hard floor as

though it were clay. From a head like a fang-spiked mace, white eyes with pinpoint pupils glared in insane ferocity. The Haik surged, sending chips of the door frame flying as it forced its bulk through the narrow way.

"Ye Gods!" Vallant yelled. "Jimper, why didn't you tell me this thing really existed!"

"Tell you I did, Vallant; now slay it with your sword!"

"What good is a hat pin against a man-eating rhino like that!" Vallant backed, watching as the material of the wall chipped and crumbled under the force of the Haik's thrust. His eye fell on the gunlike object on the floor. He jumped for it, caught it up, raised it and pressed the button on its side. A lance of blue flame licked out, touched the Haik's snout. The monster clashed its jaws, gained another foot. The flame played on its cheek, dimmed abruptly, fell back to a weak yellowish glow, died with a harsh buzz. Vallant threw the weapon from him.

"Vallant!" Jimper shrieked. "The door frame! It crumbles . . . !"

"Sorry, Jimper! I guess we'll just have to round up a posse and come back after him . . . !" Vallant grabbed up the little creature, stepped to the screen—

"No, Vallant!" the horned man shouted—

"Here I come, ready or not—" Vallant closed his eyes, and stepped through the Portal.

13

There was an instant of bitter cold; then silence, a touch of cool air, an odor of almonds . . .

Vallant opened his eyes. A great, dim, vaulted hall arched high above him; far away, mighty columns loomed into shadows. Beyond one iodine-colored wall towered misty with distance, decorated in patterns of black lines set off with glittering flecks of gold and copper.

"Where is he?" Vallant blurted, staring around. "What happened to Cessus the Communicator?"

Jimper huddled against Vallant, peering up into the mists far overhead.

"Lost are we now, Vallant. Nevermore will we see the spires of Galliale—nor the drab cities of your world . . ."

"He was right here—and the room behind him . . ."

"Dread are the mysteries of the Great Giants . . ." Jimper keened.

"Well," Vallant laughed shakily. "At least we left the Haik behind." He sheathed the unused sword. "I wonder who lives here." Faint echoes rolled back from the distant wall. "We're in a building of some kind; look at this floor, Jimper. Slabs the size of tennis courts. Talk about Giants . . ."

"Vallant, can we not go back? I dread the Haik less than I fear this place of

echoes."

"Well . . ." Vallant studied the empty air around them. "I don't see anything that looks like a Portal. Maybe if we just feel our way . . ." He took a cautious step; Jimper wriggled down, darted ahead. He paused, puzzled, turned back—and froze, staring. Vallant whirled. At the spot where he had stood, a glossy black cable, dagger tipped, writhed in the air, three feet above the stone floor.

"The Haik!" Jimper squealed. With a deafening screech, the many-spiked head of the monster appeared, followed an instant later by its two-ton bulk, crashing thunderously through the Portal. For a moment it crouched as though confused; then at a sound from Jimper, it wheeled with murderous speed on its intended victims.

Vallant whipped out the sword. "Run, Jimper! Maybe I can slow him down for a second or two—"

Jimper snatched the crossbow from his back, fitted a six-inch quarrel in place, drew and let fly; the dart whistled past Vallant's head, glanced off the Haik's armor. The creature gaped tooth-ringed jaws, dug in its talons for the spring—

There was a sudden rush of air, a shriek of wind. From nowhere, a vast grid slammed down, struck with an impact that jarred the floor, knocked Vallant from his feet. He scrambled up, saw the grid receding as rapidly as it had come. The broken thing that had been the Haik flicked cable-legs in a last convulsion, then lay, a shattered, rusted hulk, leaking thin fluid against the stone.

"Whatever that was," Vallant said shakily, "it just missed us . . ." He looked up. Far up in the dimness, a great pale shape hung, a misty oblong, with smaller dark patches, whose outline wavered and flowed, bulging and elongating—

Then it withdrew and was gone.

"Jimper . . . !" Vallant croaked. "Did you see that. . .?"

"I saw naught, Vallant," Jimper shrilled. "The Haik charged and then—I know not."

"It was . . ." Vallant paused to gulp. "A face. . .a huge, rubbery face, a mile long and five miles up . . . and I'd swear it was looking right at me . . . !"

"Another invasion of mind-fleas in the Hall," said a voice as clear as engraved print.

"Ill-struck, Brometa," a second voice answered. "I hear their twittering still."

"Vallant!" Jimper gasped. "Those there are who speak close by—and in the tongue of the Spril-folk—yet I see them not . . ."

"N-nonsense," Vallant gulped. "They're speaking English . . . But, where are they?"

"We should have plugged the hole they burrowed last time," the silent voice said. "There, give me the whisk; I'll attend to these fleas—"

"No!" Vallant yelled at the top of his lungs, staring upward into the formless shadows. "We're not fleas . . . !"

"Yapud! Did you hear words amid the twitterings just now?"

There was a pause; distant rumblings sounded. "You must have imagined it, Brometa—"

"I heard it just as you raised the whisk—"

"Don't do it!" Vallant bellowed.

"There! Surely you heard that! It rang in my mind like a light-storm."

"Yes, I do believe you're right!"

Staring upward, Vallant saw the vast cloud-face appear again, its shape changing.

"I see nothing, Yapud."

"We're friendly!" Vallant shouted. "Don't swat us!"

"These fleas have the same irritating way of projecting thought-forms out of all proportion to their size—"

"More of those hate-scorched vermin who infested the Hall last Great Cycle? Swat them at once!"

"No, this is another breed. Those others—Niss, they called themselves—what a vicious mind stink they raised before we fumigated! Hmmm. This one seems quite different, Yapud."

"Vermin are vermin! Give me the whisk—"

"Hold! Little enough I have to divert me here; let me converse awhile with these noisy fleas."

"What transpires, Vallant?" Jimper peeped. He gazed worriedly up at Vallant. "Who speaks in Jimper's head?"

"I don't know, Jimper—but it's something that thinks I'm a flea, and doesn't even know about you."

"Here, you fleas; I'll put a paper on the floor; step upon it, that I may lift you up where I can lay eyes on you."

There was a great rushing of air. A vast, white shape rushed down, blotting out the mists above. Vallant and Jimper dropped flat, clung to crevices in the floor against the rush of air that whistled past. An immense, foot-thick platform thudded to the floor fifty feet away, stretching off into the distance. The wind howled and died.

"We're supposed to climb up on that, Jimper," Vallant said. "So they can

get a look at us."

"Must we?"

"I guess we'd better—if we don't want to get whisked, like the Haik."

Vallant and Jimper got to their feet, walked across to the ragged-edged, spongy mat, clambered up on it. At close range, the fibers that comprised it were clearly visible; it was like a coarse felt of pale straw.

"OK," Vallant hailed. "Lift away . . ."

They lost their balance as the platform surged up beneath them; a white light appeared, grew. Their direction of motion changed; the paper tilted sickeningly; then, with an abrupt lurch, came to rest. The glare above, like a giant sun, cast blue shadows across the white plain behind them. A mile away, two unmistakable faces loomed, block-long eyes scanning the area, their changing shapes even more alarming at closer range.

"There it is!" A shape like a vast blimp floated into view, pointing.

"Yes—and isn't that another one beside it—a hatchling, perhaps?"

"Ah, poor things; a mother and young. Always have I had a soft spot for maternity."

"Here—" Jimper started.

"Quiet," Vallant hissed. "I'd rather be a live mother than whisked."

"Size is not all," Jimper peeped indignantly.

"Now, small ones. Perhaps you'll tell us of your tiny lives—your miniscule affairs, your petty sorrows and triumphs; and who knows? Mayhap there'll be a lesson therein for wise T'tun to ponder."

"How can it be that they know the speech of the Spril?" Jimper chirped.

"They don't—it's some kind of telepathy; it comes through as English, for me."

"Here—natter not among yourselves; explain your presence—"

"Not so harshly, Yapud; you'll frighten the tiny things."

"Not so quick to fear are we!" Jimper piped. "Know that we have passed through many strange adventurings, and no enemy yet has seen our heels!"

"Ah, this could prove diverting! Start at the beginning, bold mite; tell us all."

"Very well," Jimper chirped. "But at the end of my recital, hopeful I am you'll hold out aid to two poor travelers, lost far from home."

"These fleas wish to bargain . . . ?"

"The offer is fair. Begin."

"When Jason the Giant would leave Fair Galliale to seek again his homeland," Jimper chirped, "Jimper was chosen to travel at his side . . ."

14

There was a moment of silence when Jimper, assisted at points by Vallant, had finished his account.

"So," the being called Yapud said, "the mind-fleas admit they burrowed a path through our walls—"

"A remarkable achievement, for such simple creatures," Brometa said calmly.

"Hmph! I see nothing remarkable in the series of blundering near-disasters these fleas have managed to devise for themselves; why, even a slight exercise of intelligent effort would have aligned their environment correctly—"

"Yes, Yapud, I've been puzzling over that; and I think I have the answer; these tiny mites dwell in a three-dimensional space—"

"Spare me your allegorical apologia—"

"I'm being quite objective, Yapud! These entities—intelligent entities, too, mind you—are confined to a three dimensional frame of reference; obvious relationships are thus forever beyond their conceptualization."

Vallant and Jimper stood together, watching the vast faces change and writhe like shapes of smoke as the creatures conversed.

"Remind them of their promise, Vallant," Jimper chirped.

Vallant cleared his throat. "Ah . . . now, about our difficulty; you see—"

"You mean," Yapud said, ignoring him, "that they crawl about, cemented to a three-dimensional space, like so many Tridographs?"

"Precisely! As we move about, presenting various three-dimensional views to their gaze, our appearances must seem to alter quite shockingly. Of course, the concept of viewing our actual forms in the hyper-round from outside, as it were, is quite beyond them!"

"Poof! You're quite wrong; you've already admitted they tunneled into the Hall, which certainly required manipulation in at least four dimensions!"

"Hmmm." Another pause. "Ah, I see: the tunnel was punched through their space by another more advanced species; look for yourself, Yapud."

There was another pause. "Well . . . yes, I see what you mean. . . . Odd. . . . Did you notice the orientation of the tunnel?"

"No, I hadn't—but now that you mention it, I'm beginning to see why these poor creatures have had such a time of it . . ."

"Please, fellows, if you don't mind," Vallant broke in. "My friend and I are hoping you'll be able to help us out; you see, it's very important that we

get back—"

"That, of course, is out of the question," Yapud interrupted. "We'll swat these fleas and plug the hole, and then on to other matters . . ."

"Not so fast, my dear Yapud. The energies required to plug the tunnel would be quite fantastic. You realize, of course, that it constitutes an infinitely repeating nexus series—"

"All this is very interesting, I'm sure," Vallant put in, "but unfortunately, it's over our heads. Couldn't you just direct us back to our-uh-tunnel—"

"That would do you no good; you'd end in Null space—"

"But it leads to the Tower of the Portal—"

"Surely you understand that since you're traversing a series of tri-valued pseudo-continua, via— Dear me, I'm afraid you won't be able to grasp the geometry from your unfortunate three-dimensional viewpoint. But—"

"Here, Brometa, you're only confusing things. Place yourself in their frame of reference, as you suggested yourself a moment ago. Now—"

"But the Portal opened from the Tower; it has to lead back there—" Vallant insisted.

"Tsk tsk; three-dimensional thinking. No, the tunnel was devised as a means of instantaneous travel between points apparently distant to a tri-dimensional being. Naturally, the energy displaced by such a transposition required release; thus, a non-entropic vector was established to a locus bearing a temporal relationship to the point of origin proportional to the value of C."

"Here," Vallant said desperately. "We're not getting anywhere. Could I just ask a few questions—and could you answer in three-D terms?"

"Very well. That might be simpler."

"Where are we?"

"Ummm. In the Hall of the T'tun, in the Galaxy of Andromeda—and don't say you don't understand; I plucked the concepts from your own vocabulary."

Vallant gulped. "Andromeda?"

"Correct."

"But we were on Galliale—"

"The use of the past tense is hardly correct, since the Portal you used will not be constructed for three million years—in your terms, that is."

"I'm not sure my terms are equal to the job," Vallant said weakly. "How did we happen to get into the past?"

"The velocity of light is a limiting value; any apparent exceeding of this

velocity must, of course, be compensated for. This is accomplished by the displacement of mass through quaternary space into the past to a distance equal to the time required by light to make the transit. Thus, an 'instantaneous' transit of ten light years places the traveler ten years in the subjective past, relative to the point of origin—three-dimensionally speaking."

"Ye Gods!" Vallant swallowed. "Andromeda is over a million light years from Earth; when I went through the Portal, I stepped a million years into the past?"

"A million and a half, to be precise."

"But—when the Illimpi came to Galliale through the Portal, they didn't go into the past—or did they?"

"Oh, I see; there's a further projection of the tunnel, leading . . . Brometa, how curious! The tunnel actually originates here, on the site of the Hall! Just a moment, while I scan through . . ."

"Vallant," Jimper piped, "what does it all mean?"

"I'm not sure. It seems the Illimpi started from here in Andromeda—and threw a link across to our Galaxy; then they went through, and colonized Galliale—a million and a half years in their past. When I stepped through the Portal, I dumped us another million and a half years back—three million years from Cessus—"

"And, of course," Brometa said, "the Gateway between Galliale and Olantea will be a similar link, when it is built; it will span merely twenty light-years—"

"Aha!" Vallant exclaimed. "So that's why no one ever comes back from the Cave of No Return, Jimper—they step twenty years into the past when they go out—and another twenty when they come back!"

"Then I came back to Galliale forty years ere I departed?" Jimper squeaked. "Small wonder King Tweeple was leaner, and knew me not . . ."

"But the Niss—the ones that poured through the Gateway into Galliale, back when the giants were killed off—"

"Twenty thousand years ago," Yapud put in.

"Huh? How do you know?" Vallant said, surprised.

"How? Why, I simply examined the data—"

"Remember," Brometa put in, "your three-valued space places unnatural limitations on your ability to perceive reality. Three-dimensional 'time' is a purely illusory discipline—"

"Please, no extended theoretical discourse, Brometa! I'm answering the flea's questions!"

"So twenty thousand years ago, the Niss invaded Galliale from

Olantea—and dropped twenty years into their past in the process. They couldn't go back, because they'd step out into Olantea, another twenty years earlier—"

"—where they promptly expired, as is their custom when surrounded by their enemies," Yapud cut in. "However, on Galliale, they were successful!—for a while. When they came, they blazed a path before them with disruptor beams; then they spread plagues which only the Spril survived."

"And then the Spril wiped out the Niss, by hiding and picking them off," Vallant put in. "But . . . the Galliales should have warned the Olanteans; the invasion came from Olantea—twenty years in the future—and they were in communication with the Olantea of twenty years in the past—"

"They had no opportunity; the Niss held the Gateway. On Olantea, the Niss struck with blind ferocity from space; they descended first on the Olantean satellite; there they set up an engine with the power to shatter worlds. To save the mother world, the Olanteans launched a desperate assault. They carried the dome under which the engine had been assembled, and then, quickly, before they could be overcome, they triggered the energies buried deep in the rock. Thus died the moon of Olantea."

"What about the Niss?"

"It was a terrible defeat—but not final. The mighty detonation of the Olantean moon destroyed the equilibrium of the system; vast storms swept the planet; when they ceased, it was seen that Olantea had left its ancient orbit, and drifted now outward and ever outward. Snow covered the gardens and the fountains and the towers of Olantea; the seas froze. A winter came which never spring would follow.

"The Niss—those who remained—struck again—a last desperate bid to annihilate their enemies. They attacked Olantea, seized the Gateway to Galliale, and poured in their numbers through it, fleeing the cold that now locked Olantea in a mantle of ice. Their fate, you know."

"But—what happened to Olantea?"

"It found a new orbit at last, far from its sun. You call it Pluto."

"And the remains of the moon are the asteroids," Vallant said, awed.

"But—Cessus said that we humans were related to the Illimpi . . ."

"Some few Illimpi escaped from dying Olantea to colonize the Earth. There they lived in peace for two hundred centuries—until the first flashes of nuclear explosion summoned their remnant from Mars."

"And now they're occupying us," Vallant said. "Snooping around to find a clue to the Portal . . ."

"Bah! That would merely provide us with a plague of the evil nits!" Brometa burst out. "That we cannot allow to come to pass. We must give aid to these inoffensive fleas, Yapud—"

"True," Yapud agreed. "I confess I was quite carried away, viewing the Niss

onslaught and the death of a world as I did, from the three-dimensional viewpoint. I see now that even these mites have feelings of a sort—and the destruction of beauty is a crime, in any continuum!"

"I suppose the old man—" Vallant stopped suddenly. "He came back from Galliale! That means he went there after I met him—and then came back through time, twenty years—"

"Forty years; twenty when he entered Galliale, and twenty more on his departure."

"And he knew! That's why he waited, Jimper! You said he told the King he couldn't leave until the time was right; he posted sentinels by the Gateway to watch the Valley of Blue Ice, and settled down to wait. When the Survey Team landed near the Gate, he had his chance!"

"And knowing he would emerge into his past, he brought me with him to prove that he had indeed visited Fair Galliale—"

"But who told him about the Gateway? He—"

"Vallant!" Jimper squeaked. "He came to you, spoke of old days of comradeship, and the war against the Niss. He showed you pictures—"

"Then—that means he was Jason—the same Jason I knew!" Vallant shook his head. "But that means I've already—I mean, will see him again. But how can I get three million years into the future?"

"Yes . . . that is something of a problem," Yapud conceded.

"Uh—I know it's asking a lot," Vallant said, "but if you could just transfer us ahead through time . . ."

"No . . . we can scan it—as you visually scan space when you stare into your night sky—but as for traveling in substance—or transmitting three-dimensional beings—"

"Wait—I have a thought," Brometa put in. "You spoke of the three-dimensional framework; why not . . ." The conversation turned to technicalities.

"Vallant," Jimper piped. "Will I ever see again the towers of Galliale?"

"We'll know in a minute; they seem to be discussing ways and means . . ."

". . . the whisk would be simpler," Yapud was saying, impatiently.

"These Illimpi," Brometa said. "It's just occurred to me that they're remote descendants of ours, Yapud! We can't allow these Niss fleas to trouble them—"

"Impossible!"

"But the relationship is quite obvious, once you examine it—"

"Nonsense! Next you'll be saying these fleas are our kin!"

"Hmmm. As to that, they appear to be ancestral to the Illimpi—"

"Nonsense. They are the degenerate descendants of the Illimpi who escaped from freezing Olantea to Earth—"

"True—but later, they crossed space via mechanical FTL drive, and colonized Andromeda; later, they recolonized the Milky Way via the Portal—"

"Then it's quite clear!" Yapud exclaimed. "I told you the Illimpi were no descendants of ours. They're our ancestors!"

"Ancestors?"

"Certainly; they will set up a Portal here, a few years from now, and use it to retransmit themselves to the Milky Way, an additional million and a half years in the past, and from there, they will reestablish a new link to Andromeda, three million years prior to now, and so on, in order to study their past—"

"Stop!" Vallant called. "You're making my head ache! Compared to this, the business of Jason and me telling each other about the Gateway is nothing! But how can I start the ball rolling if I'm stranded here?"

"Obviously, we can't allow that to happen," Brometa said. "There's no telling what it might do to the probability stress-patterns. But as to how—"

"Just a minute, Brometa," Yapud put in. "Place yourself in their three-valued universe for a moment; if the transit were made strictly within the parameters of their curious geometry, the aleph and gimel factors would cancel out nicely—"

"Why—how obvious! It should have occurred to me, Yapud!"

"Have you thought of something?" Vallant asked anxiously.

"Fleas, if we place you back in your native spatiotemporal coordinates, will you pledge yourselves to purge your Galaxy of Niss? We'll prepare a simple pesticide for you; an elementary excitor effect should be adequate; direct it on a Niss and the creature will blaze up nicely, without affecting other forms of energy concentration. I think a range of one light year for the hand model should do . . ."

"I'll attend to preparing a suitable three-dimensional capsule," Yapud put in. "Rather amusing to realize that these fleas can be confined merely by drawing a plane about them . . ." his voice faded.

"What are you going to do?" Vallant asked nervously. "I hope you're keeping in mind that we don't live long enough for any really extended processes . . ."

"We'll give you a—ah—ship, I think the term is. It will travel at a velocity just under that of electromagnetic radiation—and will follow a route which will require three million years for the transit to your home galaxy. Naturally, the subjective elapsed time aboard will be negligible. The duration of the voyage will be adjusted with precision so as to place you in the close vicinity of earth at the same time that you departed. We'll take a

moment to encapsulate the vessel in certain stress patterns, which will render it impervious to unwelcome interference by the Niss or any others—"

With a whoosh! of displaced air which sent Vallant and Jimper skittering across the spongy plain, a gleaming, hundred-foot hull swooped down to settle gently a hundred yards away.

"I've taken the precaution of installing a duplicator for the production of the anti-Niss weapons," Yapud said. "Just set it up in any convenient location and shovel dirt in the hopper at the top—and stand well back from the delivery chute."

"One other detail," Brometa added. "Since the Illimpi will be our ancestors, I think we owe it to them to help all we can. If we nudge Olantea from its cold orbit and guide it back to its ancient position, fifth from the Sun, once more it will flower. There seem to be some fifty million Illimpi still there, carefully frozen in special vaults under the ice, awaiting rescue. We can time matters so that they thaw as the Earth fleas eliminate the last of the Niss."

"That should be a joyous reunion. I note that the first of the new colonists will begin to cross to Galliale as soon as the Haik follows the fleas here . . ."

"What of Jimper?" the Spril piped. "Long have I fared from the hills of fair Galliale. . ."

"Don't worry, Jimper. I'll drop you off; you'll arrive home another twenty years in your past, but I guess it can't be helped."

Jimper looked startled. "I have but remembered another fanciful tale, told to me long ago, by the father of my grandfather, when he was well gone in strong ale. He told of venturing into the Tower, and traveling far, only to return at last to Galliale . . ."

"The old boy had a tale for every occasion," Vallant said.

"You fail to grasp the implication," Jimper sighed. "For him was I named, Vallant . . ."

15

Aboard the ship, Vallant slept for a week. When he awoke, Pluto hung silver-black in the viewpoint. He brought the vessel in over the Blue Ice Mountains, settled it by the Cave, watched as Jimper scampered to its opening, turned to wave, and disappeared within.

Nine days later, he swept past startled Niss patrols to slide into Earth's atmosphere; one alien vessel which came too near plunged out of control into the Atlantic.

Vallant landed in wooded country north of Granyauck, left the ship by night, caught a ride into the city. On the campus of the University Complex, he found the vast dormitory in which Jason Able was housed, followed numbers until he reached his room. He knocked. A tall, square-jawed red-head opened the door.

"Oh, hi, Ame," he said. "Haven't seen you for a day or so. Been on a trip?"

"I guess you could say that," Vallant said. "Pour me a beer, Jase, and I'll tell you all about it . . ."