**Black Friar of the Flame**

Isaac Asimov

Russell Tymball’s eyes were filled with gloomy satisfaction as they gazed at the blackened ruins of what had been a cruiser of the Lhasinuic Fleet a few hours before. The twisted girders, scattered in all directions, were ample witness of the terrific force of the crash.

The pudgy Earthman re-entered his own sleek Strato-roctet and waited. Fingers twisted a long cigar aimlessly for minutes before lighting it. Through the up-drifting smoke, his eyes narrowed and he remained lost in thought

He came to his feet at the sound of a cautious hail. Two men darted in with one last fugitive glance behind them. The door closed softly, and one stepped immediately to the controls. The desolate desert landscape was far beneath them almost at once, and the silver prow of the Strato-rocket pointed for the ancient metropolis of New York.

Minutes passed before Tymball spoke, “All clear?”

The man at the controls nodded. “Not a tyrant ship about. It’s quite evident the ‘Grahul’ had not been able to radio for help.”

“You have the dispatch?” the other asked eagerly.

“We found it easily enough. It is unharmed.”

“We also found,” said the second man bitterly, “one other thing—the last report of Sidi Peller.”

For a moment, Tymball’s round face softened and something almost like pain entered his expression. And then it hardened again, “He died! But it was for Earth, and so it was not death. It was martyrdom!”

Silence, and then sadly, “Let me see the report, Petri.”

He took the single, folded sheet handed him and held it before him. Slowly, he read aloud:

“On September 4, made successful entry into ‘Grahul’ cruiser of the tyrant fleet. Maintained self in hiding during passage from Pluto to Earth. On September 5, located dispatch in question and assumed possession. Have just shorted rocket jets. Am sealing this report in with dispatch. Long live Earth!”

Tymball’s voice was strangely moved as he read the last word. “The Lhasinuic tyrants have never martyrized a greater man than Sidi Peller. But we’ll be repaid, and with interest The Human Race is not quite decadent yet.”

Petri stared out the window. “How did Peller do it all? One man—to stow away successfully upon a cruiser of the fleet and in the face of the entire crew to steal the dispatch and wreck the fleet. How was it done? And we’ll never know; except for the bare facts in his report.”

“He had his orders,’” said Willums, as he locked controls and turned about. “I carried them to him on Pluto myself. Get the dispatch! Wreck the ‘Grahul’ in the Gobi! He did it! That’s all!” He shrugged his shoulders wearily.

The atmosphere of depression deepened until Tymball himself broke it was a growl. “Forget it. Did you take care of everything at the wreck?”

The other two nodded in unison. Petri’s voice was business-like, “All traces of Peller were removed and de-atomized. They will never detect the presence of a Human among the wreckage. The document itself was replaced by the prepared copy, and carefully burnt beyond recognition. It was even impregnated with silver salts to the exact amount contained in the official seal of the Tyrant Emperor. I’ll stake my head that no Lhasinu will suspect that the crash was no accident or that the dispatch was not destroyed by it.”

“Good! They won’t locate the wreck for twenty-four hours at least. It’s an airtight job. Let me have the dispatch now.”

He fondled the metalloid container almost with reverence. It was blackened and twisted, still faintly warm. And then with a savage twist of the wrist, he tore off the lid.

The document that he lifted out unrolled with a rustling sound. At the lower left hand comer was the huge silver seal of the Lhasinuic Emperor himself—the tyrant, who from Vega, ruled one third of the Galaxy. It was addressed to the Viceroy of Sol.

The three Earthmen regarded the fine print solemnly. The harshly angular Lhasinuic script glinted redly in the rays of the setting sun.

“Was I right?” whispered Tymball.

“As always,” assented Petri.

Night did not really fall. The sky’s black-purple deepened ever so slightly and the stars brightened imperceptibly, but aside from that the stratosphere did not differentiate between the absence and the presence of the sun.

“Have you decided upon the next step?” asked Willums, hesitantly.

“Yes—long ago. I’m going to visit Paul Kane tomorrow, with this,” and he indicated the dispatch.

“Loam Paul Kane!” cried Petri.

“That—that Loarist!” came simultaneously from Willums. “The Loarist,” agreed Tymball. “He is our man!” “Say rather that he is the lackey of the Lhasinu,” ground out Willums. “Kane—the head of Loarism—consequently the head of the traitor Humans who preach submission to the Lhasinu.”

“That’s right,” Petri was pale but more calm. “The Lhasinu are our known enemies and are to be met in fair fight—but the Loarists are vermin. Great Space! I would rather throw myself on the mercy of the tyrant Viceroy himself than have anything to do with those snuffling students of ancient history, who praise the ancient glory of Earth and encompass its present degradation.”

“You judge too harshly.” There was the trace of a smile about Tymball’s lips. “I have had dealings with this leader of Loarism before. Oh—” “he checked the cries of startled dis-may that rose, “I was quite discreet about it. Even you two didn’t know, and, as you see, Kane has not yet betrayed me. I failed in those dealings, but I learned a little bit. Listen to me!”

Petri and Willums edged nearer, and Tymball continued in crisp, matter-of-fact tones, “The first Galactic Drive of the Lhasinu ended two thousand years ago just after the capture of Earth. Since then, the aggression has not been resumed, and the independent Human Planets of the Galaxy are quite satis-fied at the maintenance of the status quo. They are too divided among themselves to welcome a return of the struggle.

Loarism itself is only interested in its own survival against the encroachments of newer ways of thought, and it is no great moment to them whether Lhasinu or Human rules Earth as long as Loarism itself prospers. As a matter of fact, we—the Nationalists—are perhaps a greater danger to them in that respect than the Lhasinu.”

Willums smiled grimly, “I’ll say we are.”

“Then, granting that, it is natural that Loarism assume the role of appeasement. Yet, if it were to their interests, they would join us at a second’s notice. And this,” he slapped the document before him, “is what will convince them where their interests lie.”

The other two were silent.

Tymball continued, “Our time is short. Not more than three years, perhaps not more than two. And yet you know what the chances of success for a rebellion today are.”

“We’d do it,” snarled Petri, and then in a muffled tone, “if the only Lhasinu we had to deal with were those of Earth.”

“Exactly. But they can call upon Vega for help, and we can call upon no one. No one of the Human Planets would stir in our defense, any more than they did five hundred years ago. And that’s why we must have Loarism on our side.”

“And what did Loarism do five hundred years ago during the Bloody Rebellion?” asked Willums, bitter hatred in his voice. “They abandoned us to save their own precious hides.”

“We are in no position to remember that,” said Tymball. “We will have their help now—and then, when all is over, our reckoning with them—”

Willums returned to the controls, “New York in fifteen minutes!” And then, “But I still don’t like it. What can those filthy Loarists do? Dried out husks fit for nothing but treason and platitudes!”

“They are the last unifying force of Humanity,” answered Tymball. “Weak enough now and helpless enough, but Earth’s only chance.”

They were slanting downwards now into the thicker, lower atmosphere, and the whistling of the air as it streamed past them became shriller in pitch. Willums fired the braking rockets as they pierced a gray layer of clouds. There upon the horizon was the great diffuse glow of New York City.

“See that our passes are in perfect order for the Lhasinuic inspection and hide the document. They won’t search us, any-way.”

Loara Paul Kane leaned back in his ornate chair. The slender fingers of one hand played with the ivory paperweight upon his desk. His eyes avoided those of the smaller, rounder man before him, and his voice, as he spoke, took on solemn inflections.

“I cannot risk shielding you longer, Tymball. I have done so until now because of the bond of common Humanity between us, but—” his voice trailed away.

“But?” prompted Tymball.

Kane’s fingers turned his paperweight over and over. “The Lhasinu are growing harsher this past year. They are almost arrogant.” He looked up suddenly. “I am not quite a free agent, you know, and haven’t the influence and power you seem to think I have.”

His eyes dropped again, and a troubled note entered his voice, “The Lhasinu suspect. They are beginning to detect the workings of a tightly-knit conspiracy underground, and we cannot afford to become entangled in it.”

“I know. If necessary, you are quite willing to sacrifice us as your predecessor sacrificed the patriots five centuries ago. Once again, Loarism shall play its noble part.”

“What good are your rebellions?” came the weary reply. “Are the Lhasinu so much more terrible than the oligarchy of Humans that rules Santanni or the dictator that rules Trantor? If the Lhasinu are not Human, they are at least intelligent Loarism must live at peace with the rulers.”

And now Tymball smiled. There was no humor in it— rather mocking irony, and from his sleeve, he drew forth a small card.

“You think so, do you? Here, read this. It is a reduced pho-tostat of—no, don’t touch it—read it as / hold it, and—”

His further remarks were drowned in the sudden hoarse cry from the other. Kane’s face twisted alarmingly into a mask of horror, as he snatched-desperately at the reproduc-tion held out to him.

“Where did you get this?” He scarcely recognized his own voice.

“What odds? I have it, haven’t I? And yet it cost the life of a brave man, and a ship of His Reptilian Eminence’s navy. I believe you can see that there is no doubt as to the genuine-ness of this.”

“No—no!” Kane put a shaking hand to his forehead. “That is the Emperor’s signature and seal. It is impossible to forge them.”

“You see. Excellency,” there was sarcasm in the title, “the renewal of the Galactic Drive is a matter of two years—or three—in the future. The first step in the drive comes within the year—and it is concerning that first step,” his voice took on a poisonous sweetness, “that this order has been issued to the Viceroy.”

“Let me think a second. Let me think.” Kane dropped into his chair.

“Is there the necessity?” cried Tymball, remorselessly. “This is nothing but the fulfillment of my prediction of six months ago, to which you would not listen. Earth, as a Human world, is to be destroyed; its population scattered in groups through-out the Lhasinuic portions of the Galaxy; every trace of Human occupancy destroyed.”

“But Earth, Earth, the home of the Human Race; the beginning of our civilization.”

“Exactly! Loarism is dying and the destruction of Earth will kill it And with Loarism gone, the last unifying force is destroyed, and the human planets, invincible when united, shall be wiped out, one by one, in the Second Galactic Drive. Unless—”

The other’s voice was toneless.

“I know what you’re going to say.”

“No more than I said before. Humanity must unite, and can do so only about Loarism. It must have a Cause for which to fight, and that Cause must be the liberation of Earth. / shall fire the spark here on Earth and you must convert the Human portion of the Galaxy into a powder-keg.”

“You wish a Total War—a Galactic Crusade,” Kane spoke in a whisper, “yet who should know better than I that a Total War has been impossible for these thousand years.” He laughed suddenly, harshly, “Do you know how weak Loarism is today?”

“Nothing is so weak that it cannot be strengthened. Al-though Loarism has weakened since its great days during the First Galactic Drive, you still have your organization and your discipline; the best in the Galaxy. And your leaders are, as a whole, capable men, I must say that for you. A thoroughly centralized group of capable men, working desperately, can do much. It must do much, for it has no choice.”

“Leave me,” said Kane, brokenly, “I can do no more now. I must think.” His voice trailed away, but one finger pointed toward the door.

“What good are thoughts?” cried Tymball, irritably. “We need deeds!” And with that, he left.

The night had been a horrible one for Kane. His face was pale and drawn; his eyes hollow and feverishly brilliant. Yet he spoke loudly and firmly.

“We are allies, Tymball.”

Tymball smiled bleakly, took Kane’s outstretched hand for a moment, and dropped it, “By necessity. Excellency, only. I am not your friend.”

“Nor I yours. Yet we may work together. My initial orders have gone out and the Central Council will ratify them. In that direction, at least, I anticipate no trouble.”

“How quickly may I expect results?”

“Who knows? Loarism still has its facilities for propaganda. There are still those who will listen from respect and others from fear, and still others from the mere force of the propaganda itself. But who can say? Humanity has slept, and Loarism as well. There is little anti-Lhasinuic feeling, and it will be hard to drum it up out of nothing.”

“Hate is never hard to drum up,” and Tymball’s moon-face seemed oddly harsh. “Emotionalism! Propaganda! Frank and unscrupulous opportunism! And even in its weakened state, Loarism is rich. The masses may be corrupted by words, but those in high places, the important ones, will require a bit of the yellow metal.”

Kane waved a weary hand, “You preach nothing new. That line of dishonor was Human policy far back in the misty dawn of history when only this poor Earth was Human and even it split into warring segments.” Then, bitterly, “To think that we must return to the tactics of that barbarous age.”

The conspirator shrugged his shoulders cynically, “Do you know any better?”

“And even so, with all that foulness, we may yet fail.”

“Not if our plans are well-laid.”

Loara Paul Kane rose to his feet and his hands clenched before him, “Fool! You and your plans! Your subtle, secret, snaky, tortuous plans! Do you think that conspiracy is rebellion, or rebellion, victory? What can you do? You can ferret out information and dig quietly at the roots, but you can’t lead a rebellion. I can organize and prepare, but I can’t lead a rebellion.”

Tymball winced, “Preparation—perfect preparation—” “—is nothing, I tell you. You can have every chemical in-gredient necessary, and all the proper conditions, and yet there may be no reaction. In psychology—particularly mob psychology—as in chemistry, one must have a catalyst.”

“What in space do you mean?”

“Can you lead a rebellion?” cried Kane. “A crusade is a war of emotion. Can you control the emotions? Why, you conspirator, you could not stand the light of open warfare an instant. Can I lead the rebellion? I, old and a man of peace? Then who is to be the leader, the psychological catalyst, that can take the dull worthless clay of your precious ‘preparation’ and breathe life into it?”

Russell Tymball’s jaw muscles quivered, “Defeatismi So soon?”

The answer was harsh, “No! Realism!”

There was angry silence and Tymball turned on his heel and left.

It was midnight, ship time, and the evening’s festivities were reaching their high point. The grand salon of the superiiner Flaming Nova was filled with whirling, laughing, glittering figures, growing more convivial as the night wore on.

“This reminds me of the triply-damned affairs my wife makes me attend back on Lacto,” muttered Sammel Maronni to his companion. “I thought I’d be getting away from some of it, at least out here in hyperspace, but evidently I didn’t.” He groaned softly and gazed at the assemblage with a faintly disapproving stare.

Maronni was dressed in the peak of fashion, from purple headsash to sky-blue sandals, and looked exceedingly uncom-fortable. His portly figure was crammed into a brilliantly red and terribly tight tunic and the occasional jerks at his wide belt showed that he was only too conscious of its ill fit.

His companion, taller and slimmer, bore his spotless white uniform with an ease born of long experience, and his imposing figure contrasted strongly with the slightly ridiculous appearance of Sammel MaronnL

The Lactonian exporter was conscious of this fact. “Blast it, Drake, you’ve got one fine job here. You dress like a nob and do nothing but look pleasant and answer salutes. How much do you get paid, anyway?”

“Not enough.” Captain Drake lifted one gray eyebrow and stared quizzically at the Lactonian. “I wish you had my job for a week or so. You’d sing mighty small after that. If you think taking care of fat dowager damsels and curly-headed society snobs is a bed of roses, you’re welcome to it.” He muttered viciously to himself for a moment and then bowed politely to a bejeweled harridan who simpered past. “It’s what’s grayed my hair and furrowed my brow, by Rigel.”

Maronni drew a long Karen smoke out of his waist-pouch and lit up luxuriously. He blew a cloud of apple-green smoke into the Captain’s face and smiled impishly.

“I’ve never heard the man yet who didn’t knock his own job, even when it was the pushover yours is, you hoary old fraud. Ah, if I’m not mistaken, the gorgeous Yien Surat is bearing down upon us.”

“Oh, pink devils of Sirius! I’m afraid to look. Is that old hag actually moving in our direction?”

“She certainly is—and aren’t you the lucky one! She’s one of the richest women on Santanni and a widow, too. The uniform gets them, I suppose. What a pity I’m married.”

Captain Drake twisted his face into a most frightful grimace, “I hope a chandelier falls on her.”

And with that he turned, his expression metamorphosed into one of bland delight in an instant, “Why, Madam Surat, I thought I’d never get the chance to see you tonight.”

Yien Surat, for whom the age of sixty was past experience, giggled girlishly, “Be still, you old flirt, or you’ll make me for-get that I’ve come here to scold you.”

“Nothing is wrong, I hope?” Drake felt a sinking of the heart. He had had previous experience with Madam Surat’s

complaints. Things usually were wrong.

“A great deal is wrong. I’ve just been told that in fifty hours, we shall land on Earth—if that’s the way you pro-nounce the word.”

“Perfectly correct,” answered Captain Drake, a bit more at ease.

“But it wasn’t listed as a stop when we boarded.” “No, it wasn’t. But then, you see, it’s .quite a routine affair.

We leave ten hours after landing.”

“But this is insupportable. It will delay me an entire day. It is necessary for me to reach Santanni within the week, and days are precious. Now, I’ve never heard of Earth. My guide book,” she extracted a leather-covered volume from her reticule and flipped its pages angrily, “doesn’t even mention the place. No one, I feel sure, has any interest in a halt there. If you persist in wasting the passengers’ time in a perfectly useless stop, I shall take it up with the president of the line. I’ll remind you that 1 have some little influence back home.”

Captain Drake sighed inaudibly. It had not been the first time he had been reminded of Yien Surat’s “little influence.” “My dear madam, you are right, entirely right, perfectly right—but I can do nothing. All ships on the Sirius, Alpha Centauri, and 61 Cygni lines must stop at Earth. It is by inter-stellar agreement, and even the president of the line, no matter how stimulated he may be by your argument, could do nothing.”

“Besides,” interrupted Maronni, who thought it time to come to the aid of the beleaguered captain, “I believe that we have two passengers who are actually headed for Earth.”

“That’s right. I had forgotten.” Captain Drake’s face brightened a bit. “There! We have concrete reason for the stop as well.”

“Two passengers out of over fifteen hundred! Reason, in-deed!”

“You are unfair,” said Maronni, lightly. “After all, it was on Earth that the Human race originated. You know that, I suppose?”

Yien Surat lifted patently false eyebrows, “Did we?”

The blank look on her face twisted to one of disdain, “Oh, well, that was all thousands and thousands of years ago. It doesn’t matter any more.”

“It does to the Loarists and the two who wish to land are Loarists.”

“Do you mean to say,” sneered the widow, “that there are still people in this enlightened age who go about studying ‘our ancient culture.’ Isn’t that what they’re always talking about?”

‘That’s what Filip Sanat is always talking about,” laughed Maronni. “He gave me a long sermon only a few days ago on that very subject. And it was interesting, too. There was a lot to what he said.”

He nodded lightly and continued, “He’s got a good head on him, that Filip Sanat. He might have made a good scientist or businessman.”

“Speak of meteors and hear them whizz,” said the Captain, suddenly, and nodded his head to the right.

“Well!” gasped Maronni. “There he is. But—but what in space is he doing here?”

Filip Sanat did make a rather incongruous picture as he stood framed in the far doorway. His long, dark purple tunic —mark of the Loarist—was a sombre splotch upon an other-wise gay scene. His grave eyes turned toward Maronni and he lifted his hand in immediate recognition.

Astonished dancers made way automatically as he passed, staring at him long and curiously afterwards. One could hear the wake of whispering that he left in his path. Filip Sanat, however, took no notice of this. Eyes fixed stonily ahead of him and expression stolidly immobile, he reached Captain Drake, Sammel Maronni, and Yien Surat

Filip Sanat greeted the two men warmly and then, in response to an introduction, bowed gravely to the widow, who regarded him with surprise and open disdain.

“Pardon me for disturbing you. Captain Drake,” said the young man, in a low tone. “I only want to know at what time we are leaving hyperspace.”

The captain yanked out a corpulent pocket-chromo. “An hour from now. Not more.” “And we shall then be—?” “Just outside the orbit of Planet IX.” “That would be Pluto. Sol will then be in sight as we enter normal space?”

“If you’re looking in the right direction, it will be—toward the prow of the ship.”

“Thank you,” Pilip Sanat made as if to depart, but Maronni detained him.

“Hold on there, Filip, you’re not going to leave us, are you?

I’m sure Madam Surat here is fairly dying to ask you several questions. She has displayed a great interest in Loarism.” There was more than the suspicion of a twinkle in the Lactonian’s eye.

Filip Sanat turned politely to the widow, who, taken aback for the moment, remained speechless, and then recovered. “Tell me, young man,” she burst forth, “are there really still people like you left?—Loarists, I mean.”

Filip Sanat started and stared quite rudely at his questioner, but did lose his tongue. With calm distinctness, he said, “There are still people left who try to maintain the culture and way of life of ancient Earth.”

Captain Drake could not forbear a tiny bit of irony, “Even down to the culture of the Lhasinuic masters?”

Yien Surat uttered a stifled scream, “Do you mean to say Earth is a Lhasinuic world? Is it?” Her voice rose to a frightened squeak.

“Why, certainly,” answered the puzzled captain, sorry that he had spoken. “Didn’t you know?”

“Captain,” there was hysteria in the woman’s voice. “You must not land. If you do, I shall make trouble—plenty of trouble. I will not be exposed to hordes of those terrible Lhasinu—those awful reptiles from Vega.”

“You need not fear. Madam Surat,” observed Filip Sanat, coldly. “The vast majority of Earth’s population is very much human. It is only the one percent that rules that is Lhasinuic.”

“Oh—” A pause, and then, in a wounded manner, “Well, I don’t think Earth can be so important, if it is not even ruled by Humans. Loarism indeed! Silly waste of time, I call it!”

Sanat’s face flushed suddenly, and for a moment he seemed to struggle vainly for speech. When he did speak, it was in an agitated tone, “You have a very superficial view. The fact that the Lhasinu control Earth has nothing to do with the funda-mental problem of Loarism which—”

He turned on his heel and left.

Sammel Maronni drew a long breath as he watched the retreating figure. “You hit him in a sore spot, Madam Surat, I never saw him squirm away from an argument or an attempt at an explanation in that way before.”

“He’s not a bad looking chap,” said Captain Drake.

Maronni chuckled, “Not by a long shot. We’re from the same planet, that young fellow and I. He’s a typical Lactonian, like me.”

The widow cleared her throat grumpily, “Oh, let us change the subject by all means. That person seems to have cast a shadow over the entire room. Why do they wear those awful purple robes? So unstylish!”

Loara Broos Porin glanced up as his young acolyte entered.

“Well?”

“In less than forty-five minutes, Loara Broos.”

And throwing himself into a chair, Sanat leaned a flushed and frowning face upon one balled fist.

Porin regarded the other with an affectionate smile, “Have you been arguing with Sammel Maronni again, Filip?”

“No, not exactly.” He jerked himself upright. “But what’s the use, Loara Broos? There, on the upper level, are hundreds of Humans, thoughtless, gaily dressed, laughing, frolicking; and there outside is Earth, disregarded. Only we two of the entire ship’s company are stopping there to view the world of our ancient days.”

His eyes avoided those of the older man and his voice took on a bitter tinge, “And once thousands of Humans from every comer of the Galaxy landed on Earth every day. The great days of Loarism are over.”

Loara Broos laughed. One would not have thought such a hearty laugh to be in his spindly figure. “That is at least the hundredth time I have heard that said by you. Foolish! The day will come when Earth will once more be remembered. People will yet again flock. By the thousands and millions they’ll come.”

“No! It is over!”

“Bah! The croaking prophets of doom have said that over and over again through history. They have yet to prove themselves right.”

“This time they will.” Sanat’s eyes blazed suddenly, “Do you know why? It is because Earth is profaned by the reptile conquerors. A woman has just said to me—a vain, stupid, shallow woman—that T don’t think Earth can be so important if it is not even ruled by Humans.’ She said what billions must say unconsciously, and I hadn’t the words to refute her. It was one argument I couldn’t answer.”

“And what would your solution be, Filip? Come, have you thought it out?”

“Drive them from Earth! Make it a Human planet once more! We fought them once during the First Galactic Drive two thousand years ago, and stopped them when it seemed as if they might absorb the Galaxy. Let us make a Second Drive of our own and hurl them back to Vega.”

Porin sighed and shook his head, “You young hothead! There never was a young Loarist who didn’t eat fire on the subject. You’ll outgrow it. You’ll outgrow it.”

“Look, my boy!” Loara Broos arose and grasped the other by the shoulders, “Man and Lhasinu have intelligence, and are the only two intelligent races of the Galaxy. They are brothers in mind and spirit. Be at peace with them. Don’t hate; it is the most unreasoning emotion. Instead, strive to understand.”

Filip Sanat stared stonily at the ground and made no indication that he heard. His mentor clicked his tongue in gentle rebuke.

“Well, when you are older, you will understand. Now, for-get all this, Filip. Remember that the ambition of every real Loarist is about to be fulfilled for you. In two days, we shall reach Earth and its soil shall be under your feet. Isn’t that enough to make you happy? Just think! When you return, you shall be awarded the title ‘Loara.’ You shall be one who has visited Earth. The golden sun will be pinned to your shoulder.”

Porin’s hand crept to the staring yellow orb upon his own tunic, mute witness of his three previous visits to Earth.

“Loara Filip Sanat,” said Sanat slowly, eyes glistening. “Loara Filip Sanat. It has a wonderful sound, hasn’t it? And only a little ways off.”

“Now, then, you feel better. But come, in a few moments we shall leave hyperspace and we will see Sol.”

Already, even as he spoke, the thick, choking cloak of hyper-stuff that clung so closely to the sides of the Flaming Nova was going through those curious changes that marked the beginning of the shift to normal space. The blackness lightened a bit and concentric rings of various shades of gray chased each other across the portview with gradually hasten-ing speed. It was a weird and beautiful optical illusion that science has never succeeded in explaining.

Porin clicked off the lights in the room, and the two sat quietly in the dark, watching the feeble phosphorescence of the racing ripples as they sped into a blur. Then, with a terrifying silent suddenness, the whole structure of hyper-stuff seemed to burst apart in a whirling madhouse of brilliant color. And then all was peaceful again. The stars sparkled quietly, against the curved backdrop of normal space.

And up in the corner of the port blazed the brightest spark of the sky with a luminous yellow flame that lit up the faces of the two men into pale, waxen masks. It was Sol!

The birth-star of Man was so distant that it lacked a perceptible disc, yet it was incomparably the brightest object to be seen. In its feeble yellow light, the two remained in quiet thought, and Pilip Sanat grew calmer.

In two days, the Flaming Nova landed on Earth.

Filip Sanat forgot the delicious thrill that had seized him. at the moment when his sandals first came into contact with the firm green sod of Earth, when he caught his first glimpse of a Lhasinuic official.

They seemed actually human—or humanoid, at least. At first glance, the predominantly Manlike characteristics drowned out all else. The body plan differed in no essential from Man’s. The four-limbed, bipedal body; the middling-well proportioned arms and legs; the well-defined neck, were all astonishingly in evidence. It was only after a few minutes that the smaller details marking the difference between the two races were noticed at all.

Chief of these were the scales covering the bead and a thick line down the backbone, halfway to the hips. The face itself, with its flat, broad, thinly-scaled nose and lidless eyes was rather repulsive, but in no way bestial. Their clothes were few and simple, and their speech quite pleasant to the ear. And, what was most important, there was no masking the intelligence that showed forth in their dark, luminous eyes.

Porin noted Sanat’s surprise at this first glimpse of the Vegan reptiles with every sign of satisfaction.

“You see,” he remarked, “their appearance is not at all monstrous. Why should hate exist between Human and Lhasinu, then?”

Sanat didn’t answer. Of course, his old friend was right. The word “Lhasinu” had so long been coupled with the words “alien” and “monster” in his mind, that against all knowledge and reason, he had subconsciously expected to see some weird life-form.

Yet, overlying the foolish feeling this realization induced was the same haunting hate that clung closely to him, growing to fury as they passed inspection by an over-bearing English-speaking Lhasinu.

The next morning, the two left for New York, the largest city of the planet In the historic lore of the unbelievably ancient metropolis, Sanat forgot for a day the troubles of the Galaxy outside. It was a great moment for him when he finally stood before a towering structure and said to himself, “This ‘is the Memorial.”

The Memorial was Earth’s greatest monument, dedicated to the birthplace of the Human race, and this was Wednesday, the day of the week when two men “guarded the Flame.” Two men, alone in the Memorial, watched over the flickering yellow fire that symbolized Human courage arid Human initiative—and Porin had already arranged that the choice should fall that day upon himself and Sanat, as being two newly-arrived Loarists.

And so, in the fading twilight, the two sat alone in the spacious Flame Room of the Memorial. In the murky semi-darkness, lit only by the fitful glare of a dancing yellow flame, a quiet peace descended upon them.

There was something about the brooding aura of the place that wiped all mental disturbance clean away. There was something about the wavering shadows as they weaved through the pillars of the long colonnade on either side, that cast a hypnotic spell.

Gradually, he fell into a half doze, and out of sleepy eyes regarded the Flame intently, until it became a living being of light weaving a dim, silent figure beside him.

But tiny sounds are sufficient to disturb a reverie, especially when contrasted with a hitherto deep silence. Sanat stiffened suddenly, and grasped Porin’s elbow in a fierce grip.

“Listen,” he hissed the warning quietly.

Porin started violently out of a peaceful day-dream, regarded his young companion with uneasy intentness, then, without a word, trumpeted one ear. The silence was thicker than ever—also a tangible cloak. Then the faintest possible scraping of feet upon marble, far off. A low whisper, down at the limits of audibility, and then silence again.

“What is it?” he asked bewilderedly of Sanat, who had already risen to his feet.

“Lhasinu!” ground out Sanat, face a mask of hate-filled indignation.

“Impossible!” Porin strove to keep his voice coldly steady, but it trembled in spite of itself. “It would be an unheard-of event. We are just imagining things, now. Our nerves are rubbed raw by this silence, that is all. Perhaps it is some official of the Memorial.”

“After sunset, on Wednesday?” came Sanat’s strident voice. “That is as illegal as the entrance of Lhasinuic lizards, and far more unlikely. It is my duty as a Guardian of the Flame to investigate this.”

He made as if to walk toward the shadowed door, and Porin caught his wrist fearfully, “Don’t Filip. Let us forget this until sunrise. One can never tell what will happen. What can you do, even supposing that Lhasinu have entered the Memorial? If you—”

But Sanat was no longer listening. Roughly, he shook off the other’s desperate grasp, “Stay here! The Flame must be guarded. I shall be back soon.”

He was already half way across the wide, marble-floored hall. Cautiously, he approached the glass-paned door to the dark, twisting staircase that circled its way upwards through the twilit gloom into the desert recesses of the tower.

Slipping off his sandals, he crept up the stairs, casting one last look back toward the softly luminous Flame, and toward the nervous, frightened figure standing beside it.

The two Lhasinu stared about them in the pearly light of the Atomo lamp.

“Dreary old place,” said Threg Ban Sola. His wrist camera clicked three times. “Take down a few of those books on the walls. They’ll serve as additional proof.”

“Do you think we ought to,” asked Cor Wen Hasta. “These

Human apes may miss them.”

“Let them!” came the cool response. “What can they do? Here, sit down!” He flicked a hasty glance upon his chronometer. “We’ll get fifty credits for every minute we stay, so we might as well pile up enough to last us for a while.”

“Pirat For is a fool. What made him think we wouldn’t take the bet?” ‘

“I think,” said Ban Sola, “he’s heard about the soldier torn

to pieces last year for looting a European museum. The Hu-mans didn’t like it, though Loarism is filthy rich, Vega knows. The Humans were disciplined, of course, but the soldier was dead. Anyway, what Pirat For doesn’t know is that the Memorial is deserted Wednesdays. This is going to cost him money.”

“Fifty credits a minute. And it’s been seven minutes now.”

“Three hundred and fifty credits. Sit down. We’ll play a game of cards and watch our money mount.”

Threg Ban Sola drew forth a worn pack of cards from his pouch which, though they were typically and essentially Lhasinuic, bore unmistakable traces of their Human deriva-tion.

“Put the Atomo-light on the table and I’ll sit between it and the window,” he continued peremptorily, shuffling the cards as he spoke. “Hah! I’ll warrant no Lhasinu ever gamed in such an atmosphere. Why, it will triple the zest of the play.”

Cor Wen Hasta seated himself, and then rose again, “Did you hear anything?” He stared into the shadows beyond the half-open door.

“No,” Ban Sola frowned and continued shuffling. “You’re not getting nervous, are you?”

“Of course not. Still, if they were to catch us here in this blasted tower, it might not be pleasant.”

“Not a chance. The shadows are making you jumpy.” He dealt the hands.

“Do you know,” said Wen Hasta, studying his cards carefully, “it wouldn’t be so nice if the Viceroy were to get wind of this, either. I imagine he wouldn’t deal lightly with offend-ers of the Loarists, as a matter of policy. Back on Sirius, where I served before I was shifted, the scum—”

“Scum, all right,” grunted Ban Sola. “They breed like flies and fight each other like mad bulls. Look at the creatures!” He turned his cards downward and grew argumentative. “I mean, look at them scientifically and impartially. What are they? Only mammals! Mammals that can think, in a way; but mammals just the same. That’s all.”

“I know. Did you ever visit one of the Human worlds?”

Ban Sola smiled, “I may, pretty soon.”

“Furlough?” Wen Hasta registered polite astonishment.

“Furlough, my scales. With my ship! And with guns shooting!”

“What do you mean?” There was a sudden glint in Wen Hasta’s eyes.

Ban Sola’s grin grew mysterious. “This isn’t supposed to be known, even among us officers, but you know how things leak out.”

Wen Hasta nodded, “I know.” Both had lowered their voices instinctively.

“Well. The Second Drive will be on, now, any time.”

“No!”

“Fact! And we’re starting right here. By Vega, the Viceregal Palace is buzzing with nothing else. Some of the officers have even started a lottery on the exact date of the first move. I’ve got a hundred credits at twenty to one myself. But then, I drew only to the nearest week. You can get a hundred and fifty to one, if you’re nervy enough to pick a particular day.”

“But why here on this Galaxy-forsaken planet?”

“Strategy on the part of the Home Office.” Ban Sola leaned forward. “The position we’re in now has us facing a numeri-cally superior enemy hopelessly divided amongst itself. If we can keep them so, we can take them over one by one. The Human Worlds would just naturally rather cut their own throats than co-operate with each other.”

Wen Hasta grinned agreement, “That’s typical mammalian behavior for you. Evolution must have laughed when she gave a brain to an ape.”

“But Earth has particular significance. It’s the center of Loarism, because the Humans originated here. It corresponds to our own Vegan system.”

“Do you mean that? But you couldn’t! This little two-by- four flyspeck?”

‘That’s what they say. I wasn’t here at the time, so I wouldn’t know. But anyway, if we can destroy Earth, we can destroy Loarism, which is centered here. It was Loarism, the historians say, that united the Worlds against us at the end of the First Drive. No Loarism; the last fear of enemy unification is gone; and victory is easy.”

“Damned clever! How are we going to go about it?” “Well, the word is that they’re going to pack up every last Human on Earth and scatter them through the subject worlds. Then we can remove everything else on Earth that smells of the Mammals and make it an entirely Lhasinuic world.”

“But when?”

“We don’t know; hence the lottery. But no one has placed his bet at a period more than two years in the future.”

“Hurrah for Vega! I’ll give you two to one I riddle a Human cruiser before you do, when the time comes.”

“Done,” cried Ban Sola. “I’ll put up fifty credits.”

They rose to touch fists in token and Wen Hasta grinned at his chronometer, “Another minute and we’ll have an even thousand credits coming to us. Poor Pirat For. He’ll groan. Let’s go now; more would be extortionate.”

There was low laughter as the two Lhasinu left, long cloaks swishing softly behind them. They did not notice the slightly darker shadow hugging the wall at the head of the stairs, though they almost brushed it as they passed. Nor did they sense the burning eyes focused upon them as they descended noiselessly.

Loara Broos Porin jerked to his feet with a sob of relief as he saw the figure of Filip Sanat stumble across the hall to-ward him. He ran to him eagerly, grasping both hands tightly.

“What kept you, Filip? You don’t know what wild thoughts have passed through my head this past hour. If you had been gone another five minutes, I would have gone mad for sheer suspense and uncertainty. But what’s wrong?”

It took several moments for Loara Broos’ wild relief to subside sufficiently to note the other’s trembling hands, his disheveled hair, his feverishly-glinting eyes; but when it did, all his fears returned.

He watched Sanat in dismay, scarcely daring to press his question for fear of the answer. But Sanat needed no urging. In short, jerky sentences he related the conversation he had overheard and his last words trailed into a despairing silence.

Loara Broos’ pallor was almost frightening, and twice he tried to talk with no success other than a few hoarse gasps. Then, finally, “But it is the death of Loarism! What is to be done?”

Filip Sanat laughed, as men laugh when they are at last convinced that nothing remains to laugh at. “What can be done? Can we inform the Central Council? You know only too well how helpless they are. The various Human governments? You can imagine how effective those divided fools would be.”

“But it can’t be true! It simply can’t be!”

Sanat remained silent for seconds, and then his face twisted agonizedly and in a voice thick with passion, he shouted, “I won’t have it. Do you hear? It shan’t be! I’ll stop it!”

It was easy to see that he had lost control of himself; that wild emotion was driving him. Porin, large drops of perspira-tion on his brow, grasped him about the waist, “Sit down, Filip, sit down! Are you going crazy?”

“No!” With a sudden push, he sent Porin stumbling backwards into a sitting position, while the Flame wavered and flickered madly in the rush of air, “I’m going sane. The time for idealism and compromise and subservience is gone! The time for force has come! We will fight and, by Space, we will win!”

He was leaving the room at a dead run.

Porin limped after, “Pilip! Pilip!” He stopped at the doorway in frightened despair. He could go no further. Though the Heavens fell, someone must guard the Flame.

But—but what was Filip Sanat going to do? And through Porin’s tortured mind flickered visions of a certain night, five hundred years before, when a careless word, a blow, a shot, had lit a fire over Earth that was finally drowned in Human blood.

Loara Paul Kane was alone that night. The inner office was empty; the dim, blue light upon the severely simple desk the only illumination in the room. His thin face was bathed in the ghastly light, and his chin buried musingly between his hands.

And then there was a crashing interruption as the door was flung open and a disheveled Russell Tymball knocked off the restraining hands of half a dozen men and catapulted in. Kane whirled in dismay at the intrusion and one hand flew up to his throat as his eyes widened in apprehension. His face was one startled question.

Tymball waved his arm in a quieting gesture. “It’s all right. Just let me catch my breath.” He wheezed a bit and seated himself gently before continuing, “Your catalyst has turned up, Loara Paul—and guess where. Here on Earth! Here in New York! Not half a mile from where we’re sitting now!”

Loara Paul Kane eyed Tymball narrowly, “Are you mad?”

“Not so you can notice it. I’ll tell you about it, if you don’t mind turning on a light or two. You look like a ghost in the blue.” The room whitened under the glare of Atomos, and Tymball continued, “Femi and I were returning from the meeting. We were passing the Memorial when it happened, and you can thank Fate for the lucky coincidence that led us to the right spot at the right moment.

“As we passed, a figure shot out the side entrance, jumped on the marble steps in front, and shouted, ‘Men of Earth!’ Everyone turned to look—you know how filled Memorial Sector is at eleven—and inside of two seconds, he had a crowd.”

“Who was the speaker, and what was he doing inside the Memorial? This is Wednesday night, you know.”

“Why,” Tymball paused to consider, “now that you mention it, he must have been one of the two Guardians. He was a Loarist—you couldn’t mistake the tunic. He wasn’t Terrestrial, either!”

“Did he wear the yellow orb?”

“No.”

“Then I know who he was. He’s Porin’s young friend. Go ahead.”

“There he stood!” Tymball was warming to his task. “He was some twenty feet above street level. You have no idea what an impressive figure he made with the glare of the Luxites lighting his face. He was handsome, but not in an athletic, brawny way. He was the ascetic type, if you know what I mean. Pale, thin face, burning eyes, long, brown hair.

“And when he spoke! It’s no use describing it; in order to appreciate it really, you would have to hear him. He began telling the crowd of the Lhasinuic designs; shouting what / had been whispering. Evidently, he had gotten them from a good source, for he went into details—and how he put them! He made them sound real and frightening. He frightened me with them; had me standing there scared blue at what he was saying; and as for the crowd, after the second sentence, they were hypnotized. Every one of them had had ‘Lhasinuic Menace’ drilled into them over and over again, but this was the first time they listened—actually listened.

“Then he began damning the Lhasinu. He rang the changes on their bestiality, their perfidy, their criminality—only he had a vocabulary that raked them into the lowest mud of a Venusian ocean. And every time he let loose with an epithet, the crowd stood upon its hind legs and let out a roar. It began to sound like a catechism. ‘Shall we allow this to go on?’ cried he. ‘Never!’ yelled the crowd. ‘Must we yield?’ ‘Neveri’ ‘Shall we resist?’ ‘To the end!’ ‘Down with the Lhasinul’ he shouted. ‘Kill them!’ they howled.

“I howled as loud as any of them—forgot myself entirely. “I don’t know how long it lasted before Lhasinuic guards began closing in. The crowd turned on them, with the Loarist urging them on. Did you ever hear a mob yell for blood? No? It’s the most awful sound you can imagine. The guards thought so, too, for one look at what was before them made them turn and run for their lives, in spite of the fact that they were armed. The mob had grown into a matter of thousands and thousands by then.

“But in two minutes, the alarm siren sounded—for the first time in a hundred years. I came to my senses at last and made for the Loarist, who had not stopped his tirade a moment It was plain that we couldn’t let him fall into the hands of the Lhasinu.

“The rest is pretty much of a mixup. Squadrons of motor-ized police were charging down on us, but somehow, Ferni and I managed between the two of us to grab the Loarist, slip out, and bring him here. I have him in the outer room, gagged and tied, to keep him quiet.”

During all the last half of the narrative, Kane had paced the floor nervously, pausing every once in a while in deep consideration. Little flecks of blood appeared on his lower lip.

“You don’t think,” he asked, “that the riot will get out of hand? A premature explosion—”

Tymball shook his head vigorously, “They’re mopping up already. Once the young fellow disappeared, the crowd lost its spirit, anyway.”

“There will be many killed or hurt, but—Well, bring in the young firebrand.” Kane seated himself behind his desk and composed his face into a semblance of tranquility.

Filip Sanat was in sad shape as he kneeled before his superior. His tunic was in tatters, and his face scratched and bloody, but the fire of determination shone as brilliantly as ever in his fierce eyes. Russell Tymball regarded him breath-lessly as though the previous hour’s magic still lingered.

Kane extended his arm gently, “I have heard of your wild escapade, my boy. What was it that impelled you to do so foolish an act? It might very well have cost you your life, to say nothing of the lives of thousands of others.” ” For the second time that night, Sanat repeated the conversation he had overheard—dramatically and in the minutest detail.

“Just so, just so,” said Kane, with a grim smile, upon the conclusion of the tale, “and did you think we knew nothing of this? For a long time we have been preparing against this danger, and you have come near to upsetting all our carefully laid plans. By your premature appeal, you might have worked irreparable harm to our cause.”

Filip Sanat reddened, “Pardon my inexperienced enthusiasm—”

“Exactly,” exclaimed Kane. “Yet, properly directed, you might be of great aid to us. Your oratory and youthful fire might work wonders if well managed. Would you be willing to dedicate yourself to the task?”

Sanat’s eyes flashed, “Need you ask?”

Loara Paul Kane laughed and cast a jubilant side-glance at Russell Tymball, “You’ll do. In two days, you shall leave for the outer stars. With you, will go several of my own men. And now, you are tired. You will be taken to where you may wash and treat your cuts. Then, you had better sleep, for you shall need your strength in the days to come.”

“But—but Loara Broos Porin—my companion at the Flame?”

“I shall send a messenger to the Memorial immediately. He will tell Loara Broos of your safety and serve as the second Guardian for the remainder of the night. Go, now!”

But even as Sanat, relieved and deliriously happy, rose to go, Russell Tymball leaped from his chair and grasped the older Loarist’s wrist in a convulsive grip.

“Great Space! Listen!”

The shrill, keening whine that pierced to the inner sanctum of Kane’s offices told its own story. Kane’s face turned haggard.

“It’s martial law!”

Tymball’s very lips had turned bloodless, “We lost out, after all. They’re using tonight’s disturbance to strike the first blow. They’re after Sanat, and they’ll have him. A mouse couldn’t get through the cordon they’re going to throw about the city now.”

“But they mustn’t have him.” Kane’s eyes glittered. “We’ll take him to the Memorial by the Passageway. They won’t dare violate the Memorial.”

“They have done it once already,” came Sanat’s impassioned cry. “I won’t hide from the lizards. Let us fight.”

“Quiet,” said Kane, “and follow silently.”

A panel in the wall had slid aside, and toward it Kane motioned.

And as the panel closed noiselessly behind them, leaving them in the cold glow of a pocket Atomo lamp, Tymball muttered softly, “If they are ready, even the Memorial will yield no protection.”

New York was in ferment. The Lhasinuic garrison had mustered its full strength and placed it in a state of siege. No one might enter. No one might leave. Through the key avenues, rolled the ground cars of the army, while overhead poised the Strato-cars that guarded the airways.

The Human population stirred restlessly. They percolated through the streets, gathering in little knots that broke up at the approach of the Lhasinu. The spell of Sanat lingered, and here and there frowning men exchanged angry whispers.

The atmosphere crackled with tension.

The Viceroy of New York realized that as he sat behind his desk in the Palace, which raised its spires upon Washing-ton Heights. He stared out the window at the Hudson River, flowing darkly beneath, and addressed the uniformed Lhasinu before him.

“There must be positive action. Captain. You are right in that. And yet, if possible, an outright break must be avoided. We are woefully undermanned and we haven’t more than five third-rate war-vessels on the entire planet.”

“It is not our strength but their own fear that keeps them helpless. Excellency. Their spirit has been thoroughly broken in these last centuries. The rabble would break before a single unit of Guardsmen. That is precisely the reason why we must strike hard now. The population has reared and they must feel the whip immediately. The Second Drive may as well begin tonight.”

“Yes,” the Viceroy grimaced wryly. “We are caught off-stride, but the—er—rabble-rouser must be made an example of. You have him, of course.”

The captain smiled grimly, “No. The Human dog had powerful friends. He is a Loarist, you know. Kane—”

“Is Kane standing against us?” Two re3 spots burnt over the Viceroy’s eyes. “The fool presumes! The troops are to arrest the rebel in spite of him-—and him, too, if he objects.”

“Excellency!” the captain’s voice rang metallically. “We have reason to believe the rebel may be skulking in the Memorial.”

The Viceroy half-rose to his feet. He scowled in indecision and seated himself once more, “The Memoriall That presents difficulties!”

“Not necessarily!” ‘There are some things those Humans won’t stand.” His voice trailed off uncertainly.

The Captain spoke decisively, “The nettle seized firmly does not sting. Quickly done—a criminal could be dragged from the Hall of the Flame itself—and we kill Loarism at a stroke. There could be no struggle after that supreme defiance.”

“By Vega! Blast me, if you’re not right. Good! Storm the Memorial!”

The Captain bowed stiffly, turned on his heel, and left the Palace.

Filip Sanat re-entered the Hall of Flame, thin face set angrily, “The entire Sector is patrolled by the lizards. All avenues of approach to the Memorial have been shut off.”

Russell Tymball rubbed his jaw, “Oh, they’re not fools, They’ve treed us, and the Memorial won’t stop them. As a matter of fact, they may have decided to make this the Day.”

Filip frowned and his voice was thickly furious. “And we’re to wait here, are we? Better to die fighting, than to die hiding.”

“Better not to die at all, Filip.” responded Tymball quietly.

There was a moment of silence. Loara Paul Kane sat staring at his fingers.

Finally, he said, “If you were to give the signal to strike now, Tymball, how long could you hold out?”

“Until Lhasinuic reinforcements could arrive in sufficient numbers to crush us. The Terrestrial garrison, including, the entire Solar Patrol, is not enough to stop us. Without outside help, we can fight effectively for six months at the very least. Unfortunately it’s out of the question.” His composure was unruffled.

“Why is it out of the question?”

And his face reddened suddenly, as he sprang angrily to his feet, “Because you can’t just push buttons. The Lhasinu are weak. My men know that, but Earth doesn’t. The lizards have one weapon, fear! We can’t defeat them, unless the populace is with us, at least passively.” His mouth twisted, “You don’t know the practical difficulties involved. Ten years, now, I’ve been planning, working, trying. I have an army; and a respectable fleet in the Appalachians. I could set the wheels in motion in all five continents simultaneously. But what good would it do? It would be useless. If I had New York, now—if I were able to prove to the rest of Earth that the Lhasinu were not invincible.”

“If I could banish fear from the hearts of Humans?” said Kane softly.

“I would have New York by dawn. But it would take a miracle.”

“Perhaps! Do you think you can get through the cordon and reach your men?”

“I could if I had to. What are you going to do?”

“You will know when it happens.” Kane was smiling fiercely. “And when it does happen, strike!”

There was a Tonite gun in Tymball’s hand suddenly, as he backed away. His plump face was not at all gentle, “I’ll take a chance, Kane. Good-bye!”

The captain strode up the deserted marble steps of the Memorial arrogantly. He was flanked on each side by an armed adjutant.

He paused an instant before the huge double-door that loomed up before him and stared at the slender pillars that soared gracefully upwards at its sides.

There was faint sarcasm in his smile, “Impressive, all this, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Captain!” was the double reply.

“And mysteriously dark, too, except for the dim yellow of their Flame. You see its light?” He pointed toward the stained glass of the bottom windows, which glinted flickeringly.

“Yes, Captain!”

“It’s dark, and mysterious, and impressive—and it is about to fall in ruins.” He laughed, and suddenly brought the butt end of his saber down upon the metal carvings on the door in a clanging salvo.

It echoed through the emptiness within and sounded hollowly in the night, but there was no answer.

The adjutant at his left raised his televisor to his ear and caught the faint words issuing therefrom. He saluted, “Captain, the Humans are crowding into the sector.”

The captain sneered, “Let them! Order the guns placed in readiness and aimed along the avenues. Any Human attempt-ing to pass the cordon is to be rayed mercilessly.”

His barked command was murmured into the televisor, and a hundred yards beyond, Lhasinuic Guardsmen put guns in order and aimed them carefully. A low, inchoate murmur went up—a murmur of fear. Men pressed back.

“If the door does not open,” said the captain, grimly, “it is to be broken down.” He raised his saber again, and again there was the thunder of metal on metal.

Slowly, noiselessly, the door yawned wide, and the captain recognized the stem, purple-clad figure that stood before him.

“Who disturbs the Memorial on the night of the Guarding of the Flame?” demanded Loara Paul Kane solemnly.

“Very dramatic, Kane. Stand aside!”

“Back!” The words rang out loudly and clearly. “The Memorial may not be approached by the Lhasinu.”

“Yield us our prisoner, and we leave. Refuse, and we will take him by force.”

“The Memorial yields no prisoner. It is inviolate. You may not enter.”

“Make way!”

“Stand back!”

The Lhasinu growled throatily and became aware of a dim roaring. The streets about him were empty, but a block away in every direction was the thin line of Lhasinuic troops, stationed at their guns, and beyond were the Humans. They were massed in noisy thickness and the whites of their faces shone palely in the Chrome-lights.

“What,” gritted the captain to himself, “do the scum yet snarl?” His tough skin ridged at the jaws and the scales upon his head uptilted sharply. He turned to the adjutant with the televisor. “Order a round over their heads.”

The night was split in two by the purple blasts of energy and the Lhasinu laughed aloud at the silence that followed.

He turned to Kane, who remained standing upon the thresh-old. “So you see that if you expect help from your people, you will be disappointed. The next round will be aimed at head level. If you think that bluff, try me!”

Teeth clicked together sharply, “Make way!” A Tonite was leveled in his hand, and thumb was firm upon the trigger.

Loara Paul Kane retreated slowly, eyes upon the gun. The captain followed. And as he did so, the inner door of the anteroom swung open and the Hall of the Flame stood re-vealed. In the sudden draft, the Flame staggered, and at the sight of it, there came a huge shout from the distant spectators.

Kane turned toward it, face raised upwards. The motion of one of his hands was all but imperceptible.

And the Flame suddenly changed. It steadied and roared up to the vaulted ceiling, a blazing shaft fifty feet high. Loara Paul Kane’s hand moved again, and as it did so, the Flame turned carmine. The color deepened and the crimson light of that flaming pillar streamed out into the city and turned the Memorial’s windows into staring, bloody eyes.

Long seconds passed, while the captain froze in bewilder-ment; while the distant mass of Humanity fell into awed silence.

And then there was a confused murmur, which strengthened and grew and split itself into one vast shout.

“Down with the Lhasinul”

There was the purple flash of a Tonite from somewhere high above, and the captain came to life an instant too late. Caught squarely, he bent slowly to his death; cold, reptilian face a mask of contempt to the last.

Russell Tymball brought down his gun and smiled sardoni-cally, “A perfect target against the Flame. Good for Kanel The changing of the Flame was just the emotion-stirring thing we needed. Let’s go!”

From the roof of Kane’s dwelling he aimed down upon the Lhasinu below. And as he did, all Hell erupted. Men mushroomed from the very ground, it seemed, weapons in hand. Tonites blazed from every side, before the startled Lhasinu could spring to their triggers.

And when they did so, it was too late, for the mob, white-hot with flaring rage, broke its bounds. Someone shrieked, “Kill the lizards!” and the cry was taken up in one roaring ululation that swelled to the sky.

Like a many-headed monster, the stream of Humanity surged forward, weaponless. Hundreds withered under the belated fury of the defending guns, and tens of thousands scrambled over the corpses, charging to the very muzzles.

The Lhasinu never wavered. Their ranks thinned steadily under the deadly sharp-shooting of the Tymballists, and those that remained were caught by the Human flood that surged over them and tore them to horrible death.

The Memorial sector gleamed in the crimson of the bloody Flame and echoed to the agony of the dying, and the shrieking fury of the triumphant.

It was the first battle of the Great Rebellion, but it was not really a battle, or even madness. It was concentrated anarchy.

Throughout the city, from the tip of Long Island to the mid-Jersey flatlands, rebels sprang from nowhere and Lhasinu went to their death. And as quickly as Tymball’s orders spread to raise the snipers, so did the news of the changing of the Flame speed from mouth to mouth and grow in the telling. All New York heaved, and poured its separate lives into the single giant crucible of the “mob.”

It was uncontrollable, unanswerable, irresistible. The Tymballists followed helplessly where it led, all efforts at direction hopeless from the start.

Like a mighty river, it lashed its way through the metropolis, and where it passed no living Lhasinu remained.

The sun of that fateful morning arose to find the masters of Earth occupying a shrinking circle in upper Manhattan. With the cool courage of bom soldiers, they linked arms and with-stood the charging, shrieking millions. Slowly, they backed away; each building a skirmish; each block a desperate battle. They split into isolated groups; defending first a building, and then its upper stories, and finally its roof.

With the noonday sun boiling down, only the Palace itself remained. Its last desperate stand held the Humans at bay. The withering circle of fire about it paved the grounds with blackened bodies. The Viceroy himself from his throneroom directed the defense; his own hand upon the butt of a semi-portable.

And then, when the mob had finally come to a pause, Tymball seized his opportunity and took the lead. Heavy guns clanked to the front Atomos and delta-rays, from the rebel stock and from the stores captured the previous night, pointed their death-laden muzzles at the Palace.

Gun answered gun, and the first organized battle of machines flared into desperate fury. Tymball was an omnipresent figure, shouting, directing, leaping from gun-emplacement to gun-emplacement, firing his own band Tonite defiantly at the Palace.

Under a barrage of the heaviest fire, the Humans charged once more and pierced to the walls as the defenders fell back. An Atomo projectile smashed its way into the central tower and there was a sudden inferno of fire.

That blaze was the funeral pyre of the last of the Lhasinu in New York. The blackening walls of the palace crumbled in, in one vast crash; but to the very last, room blazing about hmia face horribly cut, the Viceroy stood his ground, aiming into the thick of the besieging force. And when his semi-portable expended the last dregs of its power and expired, he heaved it out the window in a last futile gesture of defiance, and plunged into the burning Hell at his back.

Above the Palace grounds at sunset, with a yet-roaring furnace as the background, there floated the green flag of independent Earth.

New York was once more Human.

Russell Tymball was a sorry figure when he entered the Memorial once more that night. Clothes in tatters, and bloody from head to foot from the undressed cut on his cheek, he surveyed the carnage about him with sated eyes.

Volunteer squads, occupied in removing the dead and tend-ing to the wounded had not yet succeeded in making more than a dent in the deadly work of the rebellion.

The Memorial was an improvised hospital. There were few wounded, for energy weapons deal death; and of these few, almost none slightly. It was a scene of indescribable confusion, and the moans of the hurt and dying mingled horribly with the distant yells of celebrating war-drunk survivors.

Loara Paul Kane pushed through the crowding attendants to Tymball.

“Tell me—is it over?” His face was haggard.

“The beginning is. The Terrestrial Flag flies over the ruins of the Palace.”

“It was horrible! The day has—has—” He shuddered and closed his eyes, “If I had known in advance, I would rather have seen Earth dehumanized and Loarism destroyed.”

“Yes, it was bad. But the results might have been much

more dearly bought, and yet have remained cheap at the price. Where’s Sanat?”

“In the courtyard—helping with the wounded. We all are. It—it—” Again his voice failed him.

There was impatience in Tymball’s eyes, and he shrugged weary shoulders, “I’m not a callous monster, but it had to be done, and as yet it is only the beginning. Today’s events mean little. The uprising has taken place over most of Earth, but without the fanatic enthusiasm of the rebellion in New York. The Lhasinu aren’t defeated, or anywhere near defeated; make no mistake about that Even now the Solar Guard is flashing to Earth, and the forces on the outer planets are being .called back. In no time at all, the entire Lhasinuic Empire will converge upon Earth and the reckoning will be a terrible and bloody one. We must have helpl”

He grasped Kane by the shoulders and shook him roughly. “Do you understand? We must have help! Even here in New York the first flush of victory will fade by tomorrow. We must have help!” “I know,” said Kane tonelessly. “I’ll get Sanat and he can leave today.” He sighed, “If today’s action was any criterion of his power as a catalyst, we may expect great events.”

Sanat climbed into the little two-man cruiser half an hour later and took his seat beside Petri at the controls.

He extended his hand to Kane a last time, “When I come back it will be with a navy behind me.”

Kane grasped the young man’s hand tightly, “We depend upon you, Pilip.” He paused and said slowly, “Good luck, Loara Filip Sanat!”

Sanat flushed with pleasure at the title as he resumed his seat once more. Petri waved and Tymball called out, “Watch out for the Solar Guard!”

The airlock clanged shut, and then, with a coughing roar, the pigmy cruiser was oS into the heavens.

Tymball followed it to where it dwindled into a speck and less and then turned to Kane. “All is now in the hands of Fate. And, Kane, just how was that Changing of the Flame worked? Don’t tell me the Flame turned red of itself.”

Kane shook his head slowly, “No! That carmine blaze was the result of opening a hidden pocket of strontium salts, originally placed there to impress the Lhasinu in case of need.

The rest was chemistry.”

Tymball laughed grimly, “You mean the rest was mob psychology! And the Lhasinu, I think, were impressed—and how!”

Space itself gave no warning, but the mass-detector buzzed. It buzzed peremptorily and insistently. Petri stiffened in his seat and said, “We’re in none of the meteor zones.”

Filip Sanat held his breath as the other turned the knob that rotated the peri-rotor. The star-field in the ‘visor shifted with slow dignity, and then they saw it.

It glinted in the sun like half a tiny, orange football, and Petri growled, “If they’ve spotted us, we’re sunk.”

“Lhasinuic ship?” “Ship? That’s no ship! That’s a fifty-thousand ton battle cruiseri What in the Galaxy it’s doing here, I don’t know. Tymball said the Patrol bad made for Earth.”

Sanat’s voice was calm, “That one hasn’t. Can we outrage it?”

“Fat chance!” Petri’s fist clenched white on the G-stick. “They’re coming closer.”

The words might have been a signal. The audiomitter jiggled and the harsh Lhasinuic voice started from a whisper and rose to stridence as the radio beam sharpened, “Fire reverse motors and prepare for boarding!”

Petri released the controls and shot a look at Sanat, “I’m only the chauffeur. What do you want to do? We haven’t the chance of a meteor against the sun—but if you like the gamble—”

“Well,” said Sanat, simply, “we’re not going to surrender, are we?”

The other grinned, as the decelerating rockets blasted, “Not bad for a Loarist! Can you shoot a mounted Tonite?” “I’ve never tried!”

“Well, then, learn how. Grab that little wheel over there and keep your eye on the small ‘visor above. See anything?” Speed was steadily dropping and the enemy ship was approaching.

“Just stars!”

“All right, rotate the wheel—go ahead, further. Try the other direction. Do you see the ship now?” “Yes! There it is.”

“Good! Now center it. Get it where the hairlines cross, and for the sake of Sol, keep it there. Now I’m going to turn to-ward the lizard scum,” siderockets blasted as he spoke, “and you keep it centered.”

The Lhasinuic ship was bloating steadily, and Petri’s voice descended to a tense whisper, “I’m dropping our screen and lunging directly at her. It’s a gamble. If they’re sufficiently startled, they may drop their screen and shoot; and if they shoot in a hurry, they may miss.”

Sanat nodded silently.

“Now the second you see the purple flash of the Tonite, pull back on the wheel. Pull back hard; and pull back fast. If you’re the tiniest trifle late, we’re through.” He shrugged, “It’s a gamble!”

With that, he slammed the G-stick forward hard and shouted, “Keep it centered!”

Acceleration pushed Sanat back gaspingly, and-the wheel in his sweating hands responded reluctantly to pressure. The orange football wobbled at the center of the ‘visor. He could feel his hands trembling, and that didn’t help any. Eyes winced with tension.

The Lhasinuic ship was swelling terribly now, and then, from its prow, a purple sword leaped toward them. Sanat closed his eyes and jerked backwards.

He kept his eyes closed and waited. There was no sound.

He opened them and started to his feet; for Petri, arms akimbo, was laughing down upon him.

“A beginner’s own luck,” he laughed. “Never held a gun before in his life and knocks out a heavy cruiser in as pretty a pink as I ever saw.”

“I hit it?” gasped Sanat.

“Not on the button, but you did disable it. That’s good enough. And now, just as soon as we get far enough away from the sun, we’re going into hyperspace.”

The tall, purple-clad figure standing by the central portview gazed longingly at the silent globe without. It was Earth, huge, gibbous, glorious.

Perhaps his thoughts were just a trifle bitter as he considered the six-month period that had just passed. It had begun with a nova-blaze. Enthusiasm kindled to white heat and spread, leaping the stellar gulfs from planet to planet as fast as the hyper-atomic beam. Squabbling governments, sudden putty before the outraged clamoring of their peoples, outfitted fleets. Enemies of centuries made sudden peace and flew under the same green flag of Earth.

Perhaps it would have been too much to expect this love-feast to continue. While it did the Humans were irresistible, One fleet was not two parsecs from Vega itself; another had captured Luna and hovered one light-second above the Earth, where Tymball’s ragged revolutionaries still held on doggedly.

Filip Sanat sighed and turned at the sound of a step. White-haired Ion Smitt of the Lactonian contingent entered.

“Your face tells the story,” said Sanat.

Smitt shook his head, “It seems hopeless.”

Sanat turned away again, “Did you know that we’ve got-ten word from Tymball today? They’re fighting on what they can filch from the Lhasinu. The lizards have captured Buenos Aires, and all South America seems likely to go under their heel. They’re disheartened—the Tymballists—and disgusted, and I am, too.” He whirled suddenly, “You say that our new needle-ships insure victory. Then, why don’t we attack?” “Well, for one thing,” the grizzled soldier planted one booted leg on the chair next to him, “the reinforcements from Santanni are not coming.”

Sanat started, “I thought they were on their way. What happened?”

“The Santannian government has decided its fleet is required for home defense.” A wry smile accompanied his words.

“What home defense? Why, the Lhasinu are five hundred parsecs away from them.”

Smitt shrugged, “An excuse is an excuse and need not make sense. I didn’t say that was the real reason.”

Sanat brushed his hair back and his fingers strayed to the yellow sun upon his shoulder, “Even so! We could still fight, with over a hundred ships. The enemy outnumbers us two to one, but with the needle-ships and with Lunar Base at our backs and the rebels harassing them in the rear—” He fell into a brooding reverie.

“You won’t get them to fight, Filip. The Trantorian squadron favors retreat.” His voice was suddenly savage, “Of the entire fleet, I can trust only the twenty ships of my own squadron—the Lactonian. Oh, Filip, you don’t know the dirt of it—you never have known. You’ve won the people to the Cause, but you’ve never won the governments. Popular opinion forced them in, but now that they are in, they’re in only for what they can get.”

“I can’t believe that, Smitt. With victory in their grasp—” “Victory? Victory for whom? It is exactly over that bone that the planets are squabbling. At a secret convention of the nations, Santanni demanded control of all the Lhasinuic worlds of the Sirius sector—none of which have been recognized as yet—and was refused. Ah, you didn’t know that Consequently, she decides that she must take care of her home defense, and withdraws her various squadrons.”

Filip Sanat turned away in pain, but Ion Smitt’s voice ham-mered on, hard, unmerciful.

“And then Trantor realizes that she hates and fears Santanni more than ever she did the Lhasinu and any day now she will withdraw her fleet to refrain from crippling them while her enemy’s ships remain quietly and safely in port. The Human nations are falling apart,” the soldier’s fist came down upon the table, “like rotten cloth. It was a fool’s dream to think that the selfish idiots could ever unite for any worthy purpose long.”

Sanat’s eyes were suddenly calculating slits, “Wait a while!

Things will yet work out all right, if we can only manage to seize control of Earth. Earth is the key to the whole situation.” His fingers drummed upon the table edge. “Its capture would provide the vital spark. It would drum up Human enthusiasm, now lagging, to the boiling point, and the Governments,—well, they would either have to ride the wave, or be dashed to pieces.”

“I know that. If we fought today, you have a soldier’s word we’d be on Earth tomorrow. They realize it, too, but they won’t fight.”

“Then—then they must be made to fight. The only way they can be made to fight is to leave no alternative. They won’t fight now, because they can retreat whenever they wish, but if—”

He suddenly looked up, face aglow, “You know, I haven’t been out of the Loarist tunic in years. Do you suppose your clothes will fit me?”

Ion Smitt looked down upon his ample girth and grinned, “Well, they might not fit you, but they’ll cover you all right.

What are you thinking of doing?”

“I’ll tell you. It’s a terrible chance, but— Relay the follow-ing orders immediately to the Lunar Base garrison—”

The admiral of the Lhasinuic Solar squadron was a war-scarred veteran who hated two things above all else: Humans and civilians. The combination, in the person of the tall, slender Human in ill-fitted clothing, put a scowl of dislike upon his face.

Sanat wriggled in the grasp of the two Lhasinuic soldiers.

“Tell them to let go,” he cried in the Vegan tongue. “I am unarmed.”

“Speak,” ordered the admiral in English. “They do not understand your language? Then, in Lhasinuic to the soldiers, “Shoot when I give the word.”

Sanat subsided, “I came to discuss terms.”

“I judged as much when you hoisted the white flag. Yet you come in a one-man cruiser from the night side of your own fleet, like a fugitive. Surely, you cannot speak for your fleet.”

“I speak for myself.”

“Then I give you one minute. If I am not interested by the end of that time, you will be shot.” His expression was stony.

Sanat tried once more to free himself, with little success. His captors tightened their grips.

“Your situation,” said the Earthman, “is this. You can’t attack the Human squadron as long as they control Lunar Base, without serious damage to your own fleet, and you can’t risk that with a hostile Earth behind you. At the same time, I happen to know that the order from Vega is to drive the Humans from the Solar System at all costs, and that the Emperor dislikes failures.”

“You have ten seconds left,” said the admiral, but tell-tale red spots appeared above his eyes.

“All right, then,” came the hurried response, “how’s this? What if I offer you the entire Human Fleet caught in a trap?”

There was silence. Sanat went on, “What if I show you how you can take over Lunar Base, and surround the Humans?”

“Go on!” It was the first sign of interest the admiral had permitted himself.

“I am in command of one of the squadrons and I have certain powers. If you’ll agree to our terms, we can have the Base deserted within twelve hours. Two ships,” the Human raised two fingers impressively, “will take it”

“Interesting,” said the Lhasinu, slowly, “but your motive? What is your reason for doing this?”

Sanat thrust out a surly under-lip, “That would not interest you. I have been ill-treated and deprived of my rights. Besides,” his eyes glittered, “Humanity’s is a lost cause, anyway. For this I shall expect payment—ample payment. Swear to that, and the fleet is yours.”

The admiral glared his contempt ‘There is a Lhasinuic proverb: The Human is steadfast in nothing but his treachery. Arrange your treason, and I shall repay. I swear by the word of a Lhasinuic soldier. You may return to your ships.”

With a motion, he dismissed the soldiers and then stopped them at the doorway, “But remember, I risk two ships. They mean little as far as my fleet’s strength is concerned, but, nevertheless, if harm comes to a Lhasinuic head through Human treachery—” The scales on his head were stiffly erect and Sanat’s eyes dropped beneath the other’s cold stare.

For a long while, the admiral sat alone and motionless. Then he spat ‘This Human filth! It is a disgrace even to fight them!”

The Flagship of the Human fleet lazed one hundred miles above Luna, and within it the captains of the Squadrons sat about the table and listened to Ion Smitt’s shouted indictment.

“—I tell you your actions amount to treason. The battle off Vega is progressing, and if the Lhasinu win, their Solar squadron will be strengthened to the point where we must retreat. And if the Humans win, our treachery here exposes their flank and renders the victory worthless. We can win, I tell you. With these new needle-ships—”

The sleepy-eyed Trantorian leader spoke up. “The needle-ships have never been tried before. We cannot risk a major battle on an experiment, when the odds are against us.”

“That wasn’t your original view, Porcut. You—yes, and the rest of you as well—are a cowardly traitor. Cowards! Cravens!”

A chair crashed backwards as one arose in anger and others followed. Loara Filip Sanat, from his vantage-point at the central port, from where he watched the bleak landscape of Luna below with devouring concentration, turned in alarm. But Jem Porcut raised a gnarled hand for order.

“Let’s stop fencing,” he said. “I represent Trantor, and I take orders only from her. We have eleven ships here, and Space knows how many at Vega. How many has Santanni got? None! Why is she keeping them at home? Perhaps to take advantage of Trantor’s preoccupation. Is there anyone who hasn’t heard of her designs against us? We’re not going to destroy our ships here for her benefit. Trantor will not fight! My division leaves tomorrow! Under the circumstances, the Lhasinu will be glad to let us go in peace.”

Another spoke up, “And Poritta, too. The treaty of Dra-conis has hung like neutronium around our neck these twenty years. The imperialist planets refuse revision, and we will not fight a war which is to their interest only.”

One after another, surly exclamations dinned the perpetual refrain, “Our interests are against it! We will not fight!”

And suddenly, Loara Filip Sanat smiled. He had turned away from Luna and laughed at the snarling arguers.

“Sirs,” he said, “no one is leaving.”

Ion Smitt sighed with relief and sank back in his chair.

“Who will stop us?” asked Porcut with disdain.

“The Lhasinu! They have just taken Lunar Base and we are surrounded.”

The room was a babble of dismay. Shouting confusion held sway and then one roared above the rest, “What of the garrison?”

“The garrison had destroyed the fortifications and evacuated hours before the Lhasinu took over. The enemy met with no resistance.”

The silence that followed was much more terrifying than the cries that had preceded. “Treason,” whispered someone.

“Who is at the bottom of this?” One by one they approached Sanat. Fists clenched. Faces flushed. “Who did this?”

“I did,” said Sanat, calmly.

A moment of stunned disbelief. “Dog!” “Pig of a Loarist!” “Tear his guts out!”

And then they shrank back at the pair of Tonite guns that appeared in Ion Smitt’s fists. The burly Lactonian stepped be-fore the younger man.

“I was in on this, too,” he snarled. “You’ll have to fight now. It is necessary to fight fire with fire sometimes, and Sanat fought treason with treason.”

Jem Porcut regarded his knuckles carefully and suddenly chuckled, “Well, we can’t wriggle out now, so we might as well fight. Except for orders, I wouldn’t mind taking a crack at the damn lizards.”

The reluctant pause was followed by shamefaced shouts— proof-positive of the willingness of the rest.

In two hours, the Lhasinuic demand for surrender had been scornfully rejected and the hundred ships of the Human squadron spread outwards on the expanding surface of an imaginary sphere—the standard defense formation of a surrounded fleet—and the Battle for Earth was on.

A space-battle between approximately equal forces resembles in almost every detail a gigantic fencing match in which controlled shafts of deadly radiation are the rapiers and im-permeable walls of etheric inertia are the shields.

The two forces advance to battle and maneuver for position. Then the pale purple of a Tonite beam lashes out in a blaze of fury against the screen of an enemy ship, and in so doing, its own screen is forced to blink out. For that one instant it is vulnerable and is a perfect target for an enemy ray, which, when loosed, renders its ship open to attack for the moment. In widening circles, it spreads. Each unit of the fleet, combin-ing speed of mechanism with speed of human reaction, attempts to slip through at the crucial moment and yet maintain its own safety.

Loara Filip Sanat knew all this and more. Since his en-counter with the battle cruiser on the way out from Earth, he had studied space war, and now, as the battle fleets fell into line, he felt his very fingers twitch for action.

He turned and said to Smitt, “I’m going down to the big guns.”

Smitt’s eye was on the grand ‘visor, his hand on the ether-wave sender, “Go ahead, if you wish, but don’t get in the way.”

Sanat smiled. The captain’s private elevator carried him to the gun levels, and from there it was five hundred feet through an orderly mob of gunners and engineers to Tonite One. Space is at a premium in a battleship. Sanat could feel the crampedness of the room in which individual Humans dove-tailed their work smoothly to create the gigantic machine that was a giant dreadnaught.

He mounted the six steep steps to Tonite One and motioned the gunner away. The gunner hesitated; his eye fell upon the purple tunic, and then he saluted and backed reluctantly down the steps.

Sanat turned to the co-ordinator at the gun’s visiplate, “Do you mind working with me? My speed of reaction has been tested and grouped 1-A. I have my rating card, if you’d care to see it.”

The co-ordinator flushed and stammered, “No, sir! It’s an honor to work with you, sir.”

The amplifying system thundered, “To your stations!” and a deep silence fell, in which the cold purr of machinery sounded its ominous note.

Sanat spoke to the co-ordinator in a whisper, “This gun covers a full quadrant of space, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, see if you can locate a dreadnaught with the sign of a double sun in partial eclipse.”

There was a long silence. The co-ordinator’s sensitive hands were on the Wheel, delicate pressure turning it this way and that, so that the field in view on the visiplate shifted. Keen eyes scanned the ordered array of enemy ships.

“There it is,” he said. “Why, it’s the flagship.”

“Exactly! Center that ship!”

As the Wheel turned, the space-field reeled, and the enemy flagship wobbled toward the point where the hairlines crossed. The pressure of the co-ordinator’s fingers became lighter and more expert.

“Centered!” he said. Where the hairlines crossed the tiny oval globe remained impaled.

“Keep it that way!” ordered Sanat, grimly. “Don’t lose it for a second as long as it stays in our quadrant. The enemy admiral is on that ship and we’re going to get him, you and I.”

The ships were getting within range of each other and Sanat felt tense. He knew it was going to be close—very close. The Humans had the edge in speed, but the Lhasinu were two to one in numbers.

A flickering beam shot out, another, ten more.

There was a sudden blinding flash of purple intensityl

“First hit,” breathed Sanat. He relaxed. One of the enemy ships drifted off helplessly, its stem a mass of fused and glowing metal.

The opposing ships were not at close grips. Shots were being exchanged at blinding speed. Twice, a purple beam showed at the extreme limits of the visiplate and Sanat realized with a queer sort of shiver down his spine that it was one of the adjacent Tonites of their own ship that was firing.

The fencing match was approaching a climax. Two flashes blazed into being, almost simultaneously, and Sanat groaned. One of the two had been a Human ship. And three times there came that disquieting hum as Atomo-engines in the lower level shot into high gear—and that meant that an enemy beam directed at their own ship had been stopped by the screen.

And, always, the co-ordinator kept the enemy flagship centered. An hour passed; an hour in which six Lhasinu and four Human ships had been whiffed to destruction; an hour in which the Wheel turned fractions of a degree this way, that way; in which it swivelled on its universal socket mere hairlines in half a dozen directions.

Sweat matted the co-ordinator’s hair and got into his eyes;

his fingers half-lost all sensation, but that flagship never left the ominous spot where the hairlines crossed.

And Sanat watched; finger on trigger—watched—and waited.

Twice the flagship had glowed into purple luminosity, its guns blazing and its defensive screen down; and twice Sanat’s finger had quivered on the trigger and refrained. He hadn’t been quick enough.

And then Sanat rammed it home and rose to his feet tensely. The co-ordinator yelled and dropped the Wheel.

In a gigantic funeral pyre of purple-hued energy, the flagship with the Lhasinuic Admiral inside had ceased to exist.

Sanat laughed. His hand went out, and the co-ordinator’s came to meet it in a firm grasp of triumph.

But the triumph did not last long enough for the co-ordina- tor to speak the first jubilant words that were welling up in his throat, for the visiplate burst into a purple bombshell as five Human ships detonated simultaneously at the touch of deadly energy shafts.

The amplifiers thundered, “Up screens! Cease firing! Ease into Needle formation!”

Sanat felt the deadly pall of uncertainty squeeze his throat.

He knew what had happened. The Lhasinu had finally managed to set up their big guns on Lunar Base; big guns with three times the range of even the largest ship guns—big guns that could pick off Human ships with no fear of reprisal.

And so the fencing match was over, and the real battle was to start. But it was to be a real battle of a type never before fought, and Sanat knew that that was the thought in every man’s mind. He could see it in their grim expressions and feel it in their silence.

It might work! And it might not!

The Earth squadron had resumed its spherical formation and drifted slowly outwards, its offensive batteries silent. The Lhasinu swept in for the kill. Cut off from power supply as the Earthmen were, and unable to retaliate with the gigantic guns of the Lunar batteries commanding near-by space, it seemed only a matter of time before either surrender or an-nihilation.

The enemy Tonite beams lashed out in continuous blasts of energy, and tortured screens on Human ships sparked and fiuoresced under the harsh whips of radiation.

Sanat could hear the buzz of the Atomo-engines rise to a protesting squeal. Against his will, his eye flicked to the energy gauge, and the quivering needle sank as he watched, moving down the dial at perceptible speed.

The co-ordinator licked dry Ups, “Do you think we’ll make it, sir?”

“Certainly!” Sanat was far from feeling his expressed confi-dence. “We need hold out for an hour—provided they don’t fall back.”

And the Lhasinu didn’t. To have fallen back would have meant a thinning of the lines, with a possible break-through and escape on the part of the Humans.

The Human ships were down to crawling speed—scarcely above a hundred miles an hour. Idling along, they crept up the purple beams of energy, the imaginary sphere increasing in size, the distance between the opposing forces ever narrow-ing.

But inside the ship, the gauge-needle was dropping rapidly, and Sanat’s heart dropped with it. He crossed the gun level to where hard-bitten soldiers waited at a gigantic and gleaming

lever, in anticipation of an order that had to come soon—or never.

The distance between opponents was now only a matter of one or two miles—almost contact from the viewpoint of space warfare—and then that order shot over the shielded etheric beams from ship to ship.

It reverberated through the gun level:

“Out needles!”

A score of hands reached for the lever, Sanat’s among them, and jerked downwards. Majestically, the lever bent in a curving are to the floor and as it did so, there was a vast scraping noise and a sharp thud that shook the ship. The dreadnaught had become a “needle ship!” At the prow, a section of armor plate had slid aside and a glittering shaft of metal had lunged outward viciously. One hundred feet long, it narrowed gracefully from a base ten feet in diameter to a needle-sharp diamond point. In the sun-light, the chrome-steel of the shaft gleamed in flaming splendor.

And every other ship of the Human squadron was likewise equipped. Each had become ten, fifteen, twenty, fifty thousand tons of driving rapier.

Swordfish of space!

Somewhere in the Lhasinuic fleet, frantic orders must have been issued. Against this Oldest of all naval tactics—old even in the dim dawn of history when rival triremes had maneuvered and rammed each other to destruction with pointed prows—the super-modem equipment of a space-fleet has no defense.

Sanat forceol his way to the visiplate and strapped himself into an anti-acceleration seat, and he felt the springs absorb the backward jerk as the ship sprang into sudden acceleration.

He didn’t bother with that, though. He wanted to watch the battle! There wasn’t one here, nor anywhere in the Galaxy, that risked what he did. They risked only their lives; and he risked a dream that he had, almost single-handed, created out of nothing.

He had taken an apathetic Galaxy and driven it into revolt against the reptile. He had taken an Earth on the point of destruction and dragged it from the brink, almost unaided. A Human victory would be a victory for Loara Filip Sanat and no one else.

He, and Earth, and the Galaxy were now lumped into one and thrown into the scale. And against it was weighed the out-come of this last battle, a battle hopelessly lost by his own purposeful treachery, unless the needles won.

And if they lost, the gigantic defeat—the ruin of Humanity—was also his.

The Lhasinuic ships were jumping aside, but not fast enough. While they were slowly gathering momentum and drifting away, the Human ships had cut the distance by three- quarters. On the screen, a Lhasinuic ship had grown to colossal proportions. Its purple whip of energy had gone out as every ounce of power had gone into a man-killing attempt at rapid acceleration.

And nevertheless its image grew and the shining point that could be seen at the lower end of the screen aimed like a glittering javelin at its heart.

Sanat felt he could not bear the tension. Five minutes and he would take his place as the Galaxy’s greatest hero—or its greatest traitor! There was a horrible, unbearable pounding of blood in his temples. Then it came.

Contact!! The screen went wild in a chaotic fury of twisted metal The anti-acceleration seats shrieked as springs absorbed the shock. Things cleared slowly. The screenview veered wildly as the ship slowly steadied. The ship’s needle had broken, the jagged stump twisted awry, but the enemy vessel it had pierced was a gutted wreck.

Sanat held his breath as he scanned space. It was a vast sea of wrecked ships, and on the outskirts tattered remnants of the enemy were in flight, with Human ships in pursuit. There was the sound of colossal cheering behind him and a pair of strong hands on his shoulders.

He turned. It was Smitt—Smitt, the veteran of five wars, with tears in his eyes.

“Filip,” he said, “we’ve won. We’ve just received word from Vega. The Lhasinuic Home Fleet has been smashed— and also with the needles. The war is over, and we’ve won. You’ve won, Filip! You!”

His grip was painful, but Loara Filip Sanat did not mind that. For a single, ecstatic moment, he stood motionless, face transfigured.

Earth was free! Humanity was saved!