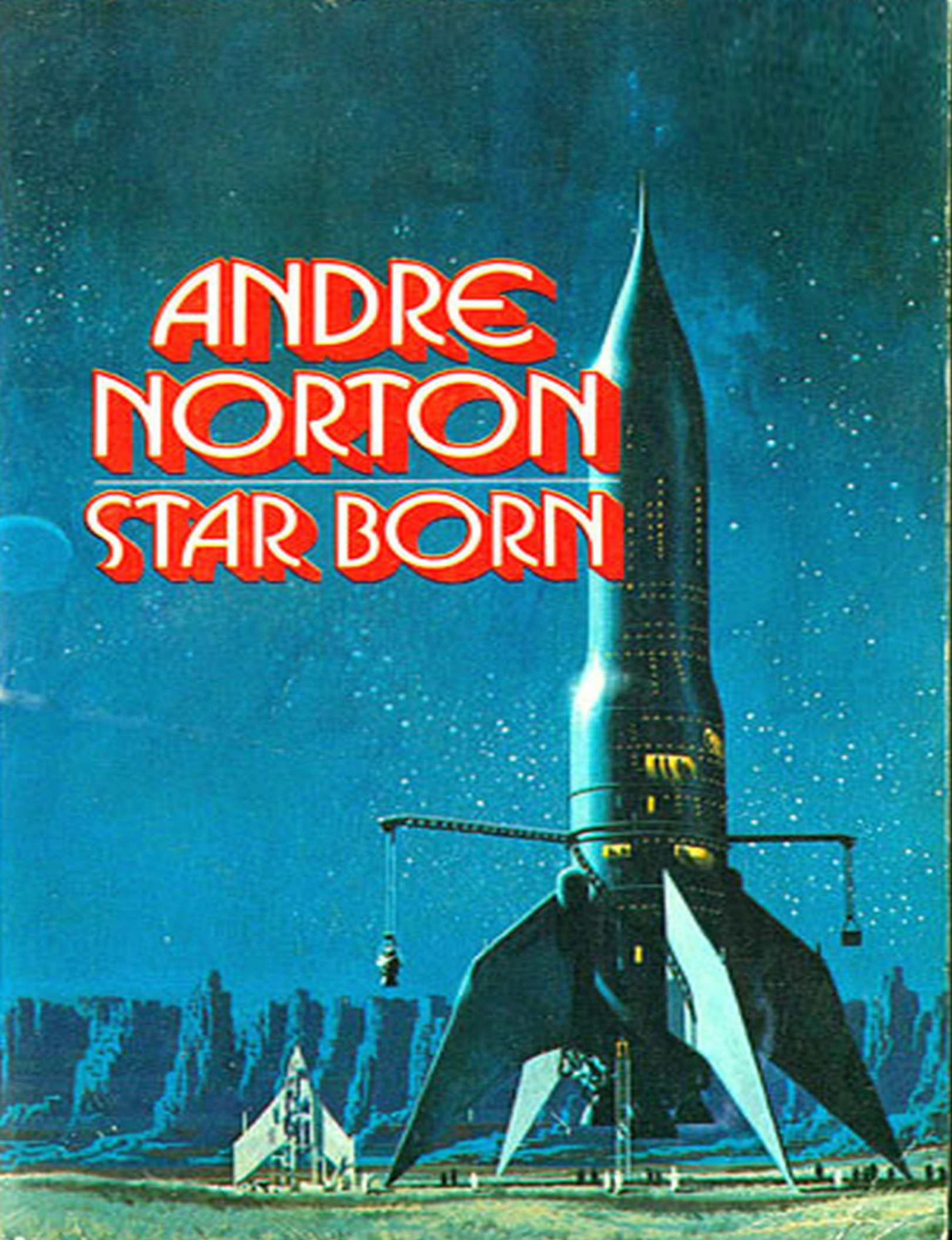


ANDRE
NORTON
STAR BORN



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"What of our children—the second and third generations born on this new world? They will have no memories of Terra's green hills and blue seas. Will they be Terrans—or something else?"

—Tas Kordov, *Record of the First Years*

1

SHOOTING STAR

The travelers had sighted the cove from the sea—a narrow bite into the land, the first break in the cliff wall which protected the interior of this continent from the pounding of the ocean. And, although it was still but midafternoon, Dalgard pointed the outrigger into the promised shelter, the dip of his steering paddle swinging in harmony with that wielded by Sssuri in the bow of their narrow, wave-riding craft.

The two voyagers were neither of the same race nor of the same species, yet they worked together without words, as if they had established some bond which gave them a rapport transcending the need for speech.

Dalgard Nordis was a son of the Colony; his kind had not originated on this planet. He was not as tall nor as heavily built as those Terran outlaw ancestors who had fled political enemies across the Galaxy to establish a foothold on Astra, and there were other subtle differences between his generation and the parent stock.

Thin and wiry, his skin was brown from the gentle toasting of the summer sun, making the fairness of his closely cropped hair even more noticeable. At his side was his long bow, carefully wrapped in water-resistant flying-dragon skin, and from the belt which supported his short breeches of tanned duocorn hide swung a two-foot blade—half wood-knife, half sword. To the eyes of his Terran forefathers he would have presented a barbaric picture. In his own mind he was amply clad and armed for the man-journey which was both his duty and his heritage to make before he took his place as a full adult in the Council of Free Men.

In contrast to Dalgard's smooth skin, Sssuri was covered with a fluffy pelt of rainbow-tipped gray fur. In place of the human's steel blade, he wore one of bone, barbed and ugly, as menacing as the spear now resting in the bottom of

the outrigger. And his round eyes watched the sea with the familiarity of one whose natural home was beneath those same waters.

The mouth of the cove was narrow, but after they negotiated it they found themselves in a pocket of bay, sheltered and calm, into which trickled a lazy stream. The gray-blue of the seashore sand was only a fringe beyond which was turf and green stuff. Sssuri's nostril flaps expanded as he tested the warm breeze, and Dalgard was busy cataloguing scents as they dragged their craft ashore. They could not have found a more perfect place for a camp site.

Once the canoe was safely beached, Sssuri picked up his spear and, without a word or backward glance, waded out into the sea, disappearing into the depths, while his companion set about his share of camp tasks. It was still early in the summer—too early to expect to find ripe fruit. But Dalgard rummaged in his voyager's bag and brought out a half-dozen crystal beads. He laid these out on a flat-topped stone by the stream, seating himself cross-legged beside it.

To the onlooker it would appear that the traveler was meditating. A wide-winged living splotch of color fanned by overhead; there was a distant yap of sound. Dalgard neither looked nor listened. But perhaps a minute later what he awaited arrived. A hopper, its red-brown fur sleek and gleaming in the sun, its eternal curiosity drawing it, peered cautiously from the bushes. Dalgard made mind touch. The hoppers did not really think—at least not on the levels where communication was possible for the colonists—but sensations of friendship and good will could be broadcast, primitive ideas exchanged.

The small animal, its humanlike front pawhands dangling over its creamy vest, came out fully into the open, black eyes flicking from the motionless Dalgard to the bright beads on the rock. But when one of those paws shot out to snatch the treasure, the traveler's hand was already cupped protectingly over the hoard. Dalgard formed a mental picture and beamed it at the twenty-inch creature before him. The hopper's ears twitched nervously, its blunt nose wrinkled, and then it bounded back into the brush, a weaving line of moving grass marking its retreat.

Dalgard withdrew his hand from the beads. Through the years the Astran colonists had come to recognize the virtues of patience. Perhaps the mutation

had begun before they left their native world. Or perhaps the change in temperament and nature had occurred in the minds and bodies of that determined handful of refugees as they rested in the frozen cold sleep while their ship bore them through the wide, uncharted reaches of deep space for centuries of Terran time. How long that sleep had lasted the survivors had never known. But those who had awakened on Astra were different.

And their sons and daughters, and the sons and daughters of two more generations were warmed by a new sun, nourished by food grown in alien soil, taught the mind contact by the amphibian mermen with whom the space voyagers had made an early friendship—each succeeding child more attuned to the new home, less tied to the far-off world he had never seen or would see. The colonists were not of the same breed as their fathers, their grandfathers, or great-grandfathers. So, with other gifts, they had also a vast, time-consuming patience, which could be a weapon or a tool, as they pleased—not forgetting the instantaneous call to action which was their older heritage.

The hopper returned. On the rock beside the shining things it coveted, it dropped dried and shriveled fruit. Dalgard's fingers separated two of the gleaming marbles, rolled them toward the animal, who scooped them up with a chirp of delight. But it did not leave. Instead it peered intently at the rest of the beads. Hoppers had their own form of intelligence, though it might not compare with that of humans. And this one was enterprising. In the end it delivered three more loads of fruit from its burrow and took away all the beads, both parties well pleased with their bargains.

Sssuri splashed out of the sea with as little ado as he had entered. On the end of his spear twisted a fish. His fur, slicked flat to his strongly muscled body, began to dry in the air and fluff out while the sun awoke prismatic lights on the scales which covered his hands and feet. He dispatched the fish and cleaned it neatly, tossing the offal back into the water, where some shadowy things arose to tear at the unusual bounty.

"This is not hunting ground." His message formed in Dalgard's mind. "That finned one had no fear of me."

"We were right then in heading north; this is new land." Dalgard got to his feet.

On either side, the cliffs, with their alternate bands of red, blue, yellow, and white strata, walled in this pocket. They would make far better time keeping to the sea lanes, where it was not necessary to climb. And it was Dalgard's cherished plan to add more than just an inch or two to the explorers' map in the Council Hall.

Each of the colony males was expected to make his man-journey of discovery sometimes between his eighteenth and twentieth year. He went alone or, if he formed an attachment with one of the mermen near his own age, accompanied only by his knife brother. And from knowledge so gained the still-small group of exiles added to and expanded their information about their new home.

Caution was drilled into them. For they were not the first masters of Astra, nor were they the masters now. There were the ruins left by Those Others, the race who had populated this planet until their own wars had completed their downfall. And the mermen, with their traditions of slavery and dark beginnings in the experimental pens of the older race, continued to insist that across the sea—on the unknown western continent—Those Others still held onto the remnants of a degenerate civilization. Thus the explorers from Homeport went out by ones and twos and used the fauna of the land as a means of gathering information.

Hoppers could remember yesterday only dimly, and instinct took care of tomorrow. But what happened today sped from hopper to hopper and could warn by mind touch both merman and human. If one of the dread snake-devils of the interior was on the hunting trail, the hoppers sped the warning. Their vast curiosity brought them to the fringe of any disturbance, and they passed the reason for it along. Dalgard knew there were a thousand eyes at his service whenever he wanted them. There was little chance of being taken by surprise, no matter how dangerous this journey north might be.

"The city—" He formed the words in his mind even as he spoke them aloud. "How far are we from it?"

The merman hunched his slim shoulders in the shrug of his race. "Three days' travel, maybe five. And it"—though his furred face displayed no readable emotion, the sensation of distaste was plain—"was one of the accursed ones. To such we have not returned since the days of falling fire—"

Dalgard was well acquainted with the ruins which lay not many miles from Homeport. And he knew that that sprawling, devastated metropolis was not taboo to the merman. But this other mysterious settlement he had recently heard of was still shunned by the sea people. Only Sssuri and a few others of youthful years would consider a journey to explore the long-forbidden section their traditions labeled as dangerous land.

The belief that he was about to venture into questionable territory had made Dalgard evasive when he reported his plans to the Elders three days earlier. But since such trips were, by tradition, always thrusts into the unknown, they had not questioned him too much. All in all, Dalgard thought, watching Sssuri flake the firm pink flesh from the fish, he might deem himself lucky and this quest ordained. He went off to hack out armloads of grass and fashion the sleep mats for the sun-warmed ground.

They had eaten and were lounging in content on the soft sand just beyond the curl of the waves when Sssuri lifted his head from his folded arms as if he listened. Like all those of his species, his vestigial ears were hidden deep in his fur and no longer served any real purpose; the mind touch served him in their stead. Dalgard caught his thought, though what had aroused his companion was too rare a thread to trouble his less acute senses.

"Runners in the dark—"

Dalgard frowned. "It is still sun time. What disturbs them?"

To the eye Sssuri was still listening to that which his friend could not hear.

"They come from afar. They are on the move to find new hunting grounds."

Dalgard sat up. To each and every scout from Homeport the unusual was a warning, a signal to alert mind and body. The runners in the night—that furred monkey race of hunters who combed the moonless dark of Astra when most of the higher fauna were asleep—were very distantly related to Sssuri's species, though the gap between them was that between highly civilized man and the jungle ape. The runners were harmless and shy, but they were noted also for clinging stubbornly to one particular district generation after generation. To find such a clan on the move into new territory was to be fronted with a puzzle it might be well to investigate.

"A snake-devil—" he suggested tentatively, forming a mind picture of the

vicious reptilian danger which the colonists tried to kill on sight whenever and wherever encountered. His hand went to the knife at his belt. One met with weapons only that hissing hatred motivated by a brainless ferocity which did not know fear.

But Sssuri did not accept that explanation. He was sitting up, facing inland where the thread of valley met the cliff wall. And seeing his absorption, Dalgard asked no distracting questions.

"No, no snake-devil—" after long moments came the answer. He got to his feet, shuffling through the sand in the curious little half dance which betrayed his agitation more strongly than his thoughts had done.

"The hoppers have no news," Dalgard said.

Sssuri gestured impatiently with one outflung hand. "Do the hoppers wander far from their own nest mounds? Somewhere there—" he pointed to the left and north, "there is trouble, bad trouble. Tonight we shall speak with the runners and discover what it may be."

Dalgard glanced about the camp with regret. But he made no protest as he reached for his bow and stripped off its protective casing. With the quiver of heavy-duty arrows slung across his shoulder he was ready to go, following Sssuri inland.

The easy valley path ended less than a quarter of a mile from the sea, and they were fronted by a wall of rock with no other option than to climb. But the westering sun made plain every possible hand and foot hold on its surface.

When they stood at last on the heights and looked ahead, it was across a broken stretch of bare rock with the green of vegetation beckoning from at least a mile beyond. Sssuri hesitated for only a moment or two, his round, almost featureless head turning slowly, until he fixed on a northeasterly course—striking out unerringly as if he could already sight the goal. Dalgard fell in behind, looking over the country with a wary eye. This was just the type of land to harbor flying dragons. And while those pests were small, their lightning-swift attack from above made them foes not to be disregarded. But all the flying things he saw were two moth birds of delicate hues engaging far over the sun-baked rock in one of their graceful winged dances.

They crossed the heights and came to the inland slope, a drop toward the central interior plains of the continent. As they plowed through the high grasses Dalgard knew they were under observation. Hoppers watched them. And once through a break in a line of trees he saw a small herd of duocorns race into the shelter of a wood. The presence of those two-horned creatures, so like the pictures he had seen of Terran horses, was insurance that the snake-devils did not hunt in this district, for the swift-footed duocorns were never found within a day's journey of their archenemies.

Late afternoon faded into the long summer twilight and still Sssuri kept on. As yet they had come across no traces of Those Others. Here were none of the domed farm buildings, the monorail tracks, the other relics one could find about Homeport. This wide-open land could have been always a wilderness, left to the animals of Astra for their own. Dalgard speculated upon that, his busy imagination supplying various reasons for such tract. Then the voiceless communication of his companion provided an explanation.

"This was barrier land."

"What?"

Sssuri turned his head. His round eyes which blinked so seldom stared into Dalgard's as if by the intensity of that gaze he could drive home deeper his point.

"What lies to the north was protected in the days before the falling fire. Even *Those*"—the distorted mermen symbol for Those Others was sharpened by the very hatred of all Sssuri's kind, which had not paled during the generations since their escape from slavery to Astra's one-time masters—"could not venture into some of their own private places without special leave. It is perhaps true that the city we are seeking is one of those restricted ones and that this wilderness is a boundary for it."

Dalgard's pace slowed. To venture into a section of land which had been used as a barrier to protect some secret of Those Others was a highly risky affair. The first expedition sent out from Homeport after the landing of the Terran refugee ship had been shot down by robot-controlled guns still set against some long-dead invader. Would this territory be so guarded? If so they had better go carefully now—

Sssuri suddenly struck off at an angle, heading not northeast now, but directly north. The brush lands along the foot of the cliffs gave way to open fields, bare except for the grass rippled by the wind. It was not the type of country to attract the night runners, and Dalgard wondered a little. They should discover water, preferably a shallow stream, if they wanted to find what the monkey creatures liked best.

Within a quarter-hour he knew that Sssuri was not going wrong. Cradled in a sudden dip in the land was the stream Dalgard had been looking for. A hopper lifted a dripping muzzle from the shore ripples and stared at them. Dalgard contacted the animal. It was its usual curious self, nothing had alarmed or excited its interest. And he did not try to establish more than a casual contact as they made their way down the bank to the edge of the stream, Sssuri splashing in ankle-deep for the sheer pleasure of feeling liquid curl about his feet and legs once more.

Water dwellers fled from their passing and insects buzzed and hovered. Otherwise they moved through a deserted world. The stream bed widened and small islands of gravel, swept together in untidy piles by the spring floods, arose dry topped, some already showing the green of venturesome plants.

"Here—" Sssuri stopped, thrusting the butt of his spear into the shore of one such islet. He dropped cross-legged on his choice, there to remain patiently until those he sought would come with the dark. Dalgard withdrew a little way downstream and took up a similar post. The runners were shy, not easy to approach. And they would come more readily if Sssuri were alone.

Here the murmur of the stream was loud, rising above the rustle of the wind-driven grass. And the night was coming fast as the sun, hidden by the cliff wall, sank into the sea. Dalgard, knowing that his night sight was far inferior to that of the native Astran fauna, resignedly settled himself for an all-night stay, not without a second regretful memory of the snug camp by the shore.

Twilight and then night. How long before the runners would make their appearance? He could pick up the sparks of thought which marked the coming and going of hoppers, most hurrying off to their mud-plastered nests, and sometimes a flicker from the mind of some other night creature. Once he was sure he touched the avid, raging hunger which marked a flying dragon,

though they were not naturally hunters by darkness.

Dalgard made no move to contact Sssuri. The merman must be left undisturbed in his mental quest for the runners.

The scout lay back on his miniature island and stared up into the sky, trying to sort out all the myriad impressions of life about him. It was then that he saw it....

An arrow of fire streaking across the black bowl of Astra's night sky. A light so vivid, so alien, that it brought him to his feet with a chill prickle of apprehension along his spine. In all his years as a scout and woodsman, in all the stories of his fellows and his elders at Homeport—he had never seen, never heard of the like of that!

And through his own wonder and alert alarm, he caught Sssuri's added puzzlement.

"Danger—" The merman's verdict fed his own unease.

Danger had crossed the night, from east to west. And to the west lay what they had always feared. What was going to happen now?

2

PLANETFALL

Raf Kurbi, flitter pilot and techneer, lay on the padded shock cushion of his assigned bunk and stared with wide, disillusioned eyes at the stretch of stark, gray metal directly overhead. He tried to close his ears to the mutter of meaningless words coming from across the narrow cabin. Raf had known from the moment his name had been drawn as crew member that the whole trip would be a gamble, a wild gamble with the odds all against them. *RS 10*—those very numbers on the nose of the ship told part of the story. Ten exploring fingers thrust in turn out into the blackness of space. *RS 3*'s fate was known—she had blossomed into a pinpoint of flame within the orbit of Mars. And *RS 7* had clearly gone out of control while instruments on Terra could still pick up her broadcasts. Of the rest—well, none had returned.

But the ships were built, manned by lot from the trainees, and sent out, one every five years, with all that had been learned from the previous job, each refinement the engineers could discover incorporated into the latest to rise from the launching cradle.

RS 10—Raf closed his eyes with weary distaste. After months of being trapped inside her ever-vibrating shell, he felt that he knew each and every rivet, seam, and plate in her only too well. And there was no reason yet to believe that the voyage would ever end. They would just go on and on through empty space until dead men manned a drifting hulk—

There—to picture that was a danger signal. Whenever his thoughts reached that particular point, Raf tried to think of something else, to break the chain of dismal foreboding. How? By joining in Wonstead's monologue of complaint and regret? Raf had heard the same words over and over so often that they no longer had any meaning—except as a series of sounds he might miss if the man who shared this pocket were suddenly stricken dumb.

"Should never have put in for training—" Wonstead's whine went up the scale.

That was unoriginal enough. They had all had that idea the minute after the sorter had plucked their names for crew inclusion. No matter what motive had led them into the stiff course of training—the fabulous pay, a real interest in the project, the exploring fever—Raf did not believe that there was a single man whose heart had not sunk when he had been selected for flight. Even he, who had dreamed all his life of the stars and the wonders which might lie just beyond the big jump, had been honestly sick on the day he had shouldered his bag aboard and had first taken his place on this mat and waited, dry mouthed and shivering, for blast-off.

One lost all sense of time out here. They ate sparingly, slept when they could, tried to while away the endless hours artificially divided into set periods. But still weeks might be months, or months weeks. They could have been years in space—or only days. All they knew was the unending monotony which dragged upon a man until he either lapsed into a dreamy rejection of his surroundings, as had Hamp and Floy, or flew into murderous rages, such as kept Morris in solitary confinement at present. And no foreseeable end to the flight—

Raf breathed shallowly. The air was stale, he could almost taste it. It was difficult now to remember being in the open air under a sky, with fresh winds blowing about one. He tried to picture on that dull strip of metal overhead a stretch of green grass, a tree, even the blue sky and floating white clouds. But the patch remained stubbornly gray, the murmur of Wonstead went on and on, a drone in his aching ears, the throb of the ship's life beat through his own thin body.

What had it been like on those legendary early flights, when the secret of the overdrive had not yet been discovered, when any who dared the path between star and star had surrendered to sleep, perhaps to wake again generations later, perhaps never to rouse again? He had seen the few documents discovered four or five hundred years ago in the raided headquarters of the scientific outlaws who had fled the regimented world government of Pax and dared space on the single hope of surviving such a journey in cold sleep, the secret of which had been lost. At least, Raf thought, they had escaped the actual discomfort of the voyage.

Had they found their new world or worlds? The end of their ventures had

been debated thousands of times since those documents had been made public, after the downfall of Pax and the coming into power of the Federation of Free Men.

In fact it was the publication of the papers which had given the additional spur to the building of the *RS* armada. What man had dared once he could dare anew. And the pursuit of knowledge which had been so long forbidden under Pax was heady excitement for the world. Research and discovery became feverish avenues of endeavor. Even the slim hope of a successful star voyage and the return to Terra with such rich spoils of information was enough to harness three quarters of the planet's energy for close to a hundred years. And if the *RS 10* was not successful, there would be *11*, *12*, more—flaming into the sky and out into the void, unless some newer and more intriguing experiment developed to center public imagination in another direction.

Raf's eyes closed wearily. Soon the gong would sound and this period of rest would be officially ended. But it was hardly worth rising. He was not in the least hungry for the concentrated food. He could repeat the information tapes they carried dull word for dull word.

"Nothing to see—nothing but these blasted walls!" Again Wonstead's voice arose in querulous protest.

Yes, while in overdrive there was nothing to see. The ports of the ship would be sealed until they were in normal space once more. That is, if it worked and they were not caught up forever within this thick trap where there was no time, light, or distance.

The gong sounded, but Raf made no move to rise. He heard Wonstead move, saw from the corner of his eye the other's bulk heave up obediently from the pad.

"Hey—mess gong!" He pointed out the obvious to Raf.

With a sigh the other levered himself up on his elbows. If he did not move, Wonstead was capable of reporting him to the captain for strange behavior, and they were all too alert to a divagation which might mean trouble. He had no desire to end in confinement with Morris.

"I'm coming," Raf said sullenly. But he remained sitting on the edge of the

pad until Wonstead left the cabin, and he followed as slowly as he could.

So he was not with the others when a new sound tore through the constant vibrating hum which filled the narrow corridors of the ship. Raf stiffened, the icy touch of fear tensing his muscles. Was that the red alarm of disaster?

His eyes went to the light at the end of the short passage. But no blink of warning red shown there. Not danger—then what—?

It took him a full moment to realize what he had heard, not the signal of doom, but the sound which was to herald the accomplishment of their mission—the sound which unconsciously they had all given up any hope of ever hearing. They had made it!

The pilot leaned weakly against the wall, and his eyes smarted, his hands were trembling. In that moment he knew that he had never really, honestly, believed that they would succeed. But they had! *RS 10* had reached the stars!

"Strap down for turnout—strap down for turnout—!" The disembodied voice screaming through the ship's speaker was that of Captain Hobart, but it was almost unrecognizable with emotion. Raf turned and stumbled back to his cabin, staggered to throw himself once more on his pad as he fumbled with the straps he must buckle over him.

He heard rather than saw Wonstead blunder in to follow his example, and for the first time in months the other was dumb, not uttering a word as he stowed away for the breakthrough which should take them back into normal space and the star worlds. Raf tore a nail on a fastening, muttered.

"Condition red—condition red—Strap down for breakthrough—" Hobart chanted at them from the walls. "One, two, three"—the count swung on numeral by numeral; then—"ten—Stand by—"

Raf had forgotten what breakthrough was like. He had gone through it the first time when still under take-off sedation. But this was worse than he remembered, so much worse. He tried to scream out his protest against the torture which twisted mind and body, but he could not utter even a weak cry. This, this was unbearable—a man could go mad or die—die—die....

He aroused with the flat sweetness of blood on his tongue, a splitting pain behind the eyes he tried to focus on the too familiar scrap of wall. A voice boomed, receded, and boomed again, filling the air and at last making sense,

in it a ring of wild triumph!

"Made it! This is it, men, we've made it; Sol-class sun—three planets. We'll set an orbit in—"

Raf licked his lips. It was still too much to swallow in one mental gulp. So, they had made it—half of their venture was accomplished. They had broken out of their own solar system, made the big jump, and before them lay the unknown. Now it was within their reach.

"D'you hear that, kid?" demanded Wonstead, his voice no longer an accusing whine, more steady than Raf ever remembered hearing it. "We got through! We'll hit dirt again! Dirt—" his words trailed away as if he were sinking into some blissful daydream.

There was a different feeling to the ship herself. The steady drone which had ached in their ears, their bones, as she bored her way through the alien hyper-space had changed to a purr as if she, too, were rejoicing at the success of their desperate try. For the first time in weary weeks Raf remembered his own duties which would begin when the *RS 10* came in to a flame-cushioned landing on a new world. He was to assemble and ready the small exploration flyer, to man its controls and take it up and out. Frowning, he began to run over in his mind each step in the preparations he must make as soon as they planeted.

Information came down from control, where now the ports were open on normal space and the engines were under control of the spacer's pilot. Their goal was to be the third planet, one which showed signs of atmosphere, of water and earth ready and waiting.

Those who were not on flight duty crowded into the tiny central cabin, where they elbowed each other before the viewer. The ball of alien earth grew from a pinpoint to the size of an orange. They forgot time in the wonder which none had ever thought in his heart he would see on the screen. Raf knew that in control every second of this was being recorded as they began to establish a braking orbit, which with luck would bring them down on the surface of the new world.

"Cities—those must be cities!" Those in the cabin studied the plate with awe as the information filtered through the crew. Lablet, their xenobiologist, sat

with his fingers rigid on the lower bar of the visa plate, so intent that nothing could break his vigil, while the rest speculated wildly. Had they really seen cities?

Raf went down the corridor to the door of the sealed compartment that held the machine and the supplies for which he was responsible. These last hours of waiting were worse with their nagging suspense than all the time which had gone before. If they could only set down!

He had, on training trips which now seemed very far in the past, trod the rust-red desert country of Mars, waddled in a bulky protective suit across the peaked ranges of the dead Moon, known something of the larger asteroids. But how would it feel to tread ground warmed by the rays of another sun? Imagination with which his superiors did not credit him began to stir. Traits inherited from a mixture of races were there to be summoned. Raf retreated once more into his cabin and sat on his bunk pad, staring down at his own capable mechanic's hands without seeing them, picturing instead all the wonders which might lie just beyond the next few hours' imprisonment in this metallic shell he had grown to hate with a dull but abiding hatred.

Although he knew that Hobart must be fully as eager as any of them to land, it seemed to Raf, and the other impatient crew members, that they were very long in entering the atmosphere of the chosen world. It was only when the order came to strap down for deceleration that they were in a measure satisfied. Pull of gravity, ship beaming in at an angle which swept it from night to day or night again as it encircled that unknown globe. They could not watch their objective any longer. The future depended entirely upon the skill of the three men in control—and last of all upon Hobart's judgment and skill.

The captain brought them down, riding the flaming counter-blasts from the ship's tail to set her on her fins in an expert point landing, so that the *RS 10* was a finger of light into the sky, amid wisps of smoke from brush ignited by her landing.

There was another wait which seemed endless to the restless men within, a wait until the air was analyzed, the countryside surveyed. But when the go-ahead signal was given and the ramp swung out, those first at the hatch still hesitated for an instant or so, though the way before them was open.

Beyond the burnt ground about the ship was a rolling plain covered with tall

grass which rippled under the wind. And the freshness of that wind cleansed their lungs of the taint of the ship.

Raf pulled off his helmet, held his head high in that breeze. It was like bathing in air, washing away the smog of those long days of imprisonment. He ran down the ramp, past the little group of those who had preceded him, and fell on his knees in the grass, catching at it with his hands, a little over-awed at the wonder of it all.

The wide sweep of sky above them was not entirely blue, he noted. There was the faintest suggestion of green, and across it moved clouds of silver. But, save for the grass, they might be in a dead and empty world. Where were the cities? Or had those been born of imagination?

After a while, when the wonder of this landing had somewhat worn away, Hobart summoned them back to the prosaic business of setting up base. And Raf went to work at his own task. The sealed storeroom was opened, the supplies slung by crane down from the ship. The compact assembly, streamlined for this purpose, was all ready for the morrow.

They spent the night within the ship, much against their will. After the taste of freedom they had been given, the cramped interior weighed upon them, closing like a prison. Raf lay on his pad unable to sleep. It seemed to him that he could hear, even through the heavy plates, the sigh of that refreshing wind, the call of the open world lying ready for them. Step by step in his mind, he went through the process for which he would be responsible the next day. The uncrating of the small flyer, the assembling of frame and motor. And sometime in the midst of that survey he did fall asleep, so deeply that Wonstead had to shake him awake in the morning.

He bolted his food and was out at his job before it was far past dawn. But eager as he was to get to work, he paused just to look at the earth scuffed up by his boots, to stare for a long moment at a stalk of tough grass and remember with a thrill which never lessened that this was not native earth or grass, that he stood where none of his race, or even of his kind, had stood before—on a new planet in a new solar system.

Raf's expert training and instruction paid off. By evening he had the flitter assembled save for the motor which still reposed on the turning block. One party had gone questing out into the grass and returned with the story of a

stream hidden in a gash in the plain, and Wonstead carried the limp body of a rabbit-sized furred creature he had knocked over at the waterside.

"Acted tame." Wonstead was proud of his kill. "Stupid thing just stood and watched me while I let fly with a stone."

Raf picked up the little body. Its fur was red-brown, plush-thick, and very soft to the touch. The breast was creamy white and the forepaws curiously short with an uncanny resemblance to his own hands. Suddenly he wished that Wonstead had not killed it, though he supposed that Chou, their biologist, would be grateful. But the animal looked particularly defenseless. It would have been better not to mark their first day on this new world with a killing—even if it were the knocking over of a stupid rabbit thing. The pilot was glad when Chou bore it off and he no longer had to look at it.

It was after the evening meal that Raf was called into consultation by the officers to receive his orders. When he reported that the flitter, barring unexpected accidents, would be air-borne by the following afternoon, he was shown an enlarged picture from the records made during the descent of the *RS 10*.

There was a city, right enough—showing up well from the air. Hobart stabbed a finger down into the heart of it.

"This lies south from here. We'll cruise in that direction."

Raf would have liked to ask some questions of his own. The city photographed was a sizable one. Why then this deserted land here? Why hadn't the inhabitants been out to investigate the puzzle of the space ship's landing? He said slowly, "I've mounted one gun, sir. Do you want the other installed? It will mean that the flitter can only carry three instead of four—"

Hobart pulled his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. He glanced at his lieutenant then to Lablet, sitting quietly to one side. It was the latter who spoke first.

"I'd say this shows definite traces of retrogression." He touched the photograph. "The place may even be only a ruin."

"Very well. Leave off the other gun," Hobart ordered crisply. "And be ready to fly at dawn day after tomorrow with full field kit. You're sure she'll have at least a thousand-mile cruising radius?"