STORMHEAD

Wind sighed under the pink sky, moaning up from the sea and across the miles of open flatland. Sam Walvis turned up his collar against it as he left the sectional hut. A month on Ceres, and the wind had never stopped, he thought. It sang in the hut aerials, rushed across the plain, and piped round the five upthrust, gleaming needles that were their only contact with the solar system and earth.

A hundred yards from the huts was an earth mound. He plodded through the loose dusty soil to it. His own height, criss-crossed with many strange feetmarks, it was hollowed in the centre. He halted on the rim.

"Salutation, Adik Na."

The Ceran curled in the basin depression straightened and rose upon its four rear feet. Caterpillar-like, with four anterior and four posterior limbs, its head rose level with Sam's.

"Greetings, earthman."

The voice was thin. Sam put his thumbs in his leather belt. "You will parley, Adik Na? I speak for my people. We would live in peace."

Adik Na momentarily hooded the two black discs of his eyes. "When darkness has come and gone three times I will parley."

"Very Well."

Sam let his gaze stray again to the five ships. They had cleft light years of space and stood balanced on tail fins. They were his responsibility. And, through them, the lives of every earthman on Ceres became his responsibility too. With three-quarters earth gravity, the planet had promise. There was water, a well-oxygenated atmosphere, but no ores or minerals. At first that had seemed a vital failing. Investigation had proved it was not. The system had a second planet, Tagus, dense and small and locked with Ceres in binary orbit. It was thirty percent solid ore, if calculations were correct.

Wind flapped his coat as he descended the mound. He halted, re-ascended.

"You have bad storms on this planet, Adik Na ? " he asked

Adik Na made a spreading gesture betokening assent. "Very bad The last bad storm killed many of my tribe."

Sam recalled the only storm since their landing. The weather station had clocked 90 m.p.h. winds. The Cerans had retired into their mounds, burrowing once more to daylight when the storm passed.

"You said nothing of deaths then," he pointed out

"There were none." The Ceran seemed to follow his line of thought. "The storm was before your coming. Since your coming there has been but slight winds."

"I see."

Sam descended the mound. If 90 m.p.h. was a slight wind, what was a storm? Probably an earth gale meant little to the Cerans. Large as a man, they moved flat and low on leathery stomachs, hairless from rubbing over the ground. Cat-like fur covered their backs. They might plod on against winds no human could face. He hoped the old native leader would speak peace when the day came.

Back at the huts he started a weather truck and rode out to the five rockets. Bunker Flats was smooth sandstone, an ideal site. A hoisting cable descended from a derrick in one ship's port, lowering a cage. Its inmate waved.

Sam Walvis left the truck and waited until the cage bumped to rest A stocky man of forty, with dry, humorous eyes, stepped out.

"How long before the ships are ready ? " Sam asked

Captain Jim Newlyn looked cautious. "Perhaps two months. All the reactors have been serviced, and some of the tube liners replaced. Every ship is at least two-thirds ready. Why? Expecting to leave early? "

"Not yet." Sam listened to the moan of the wind round the five long, slender hulls. A ship was set down on her stern, blasting against gravity. That was the only position from which she could take off. He eyed them, upthrust against the pink sky. "Think they'd stand a real gale? "

"A 150 m.p.h. side wind, according to data."

"And at above that?"

" They'd go rolling like empty bottles." Newlyn studied him You're not suggesting we shall have winds like that--? "

Sam shrugged. A new planet always had unknown factors. So far there had been no danger.

"See the gangs keep right on," he said

He briefly inspected the five ships, then took the vehicle back across the flats. Head to tail, a score of Cerans were winding slowly among the mounds beyond the sandstone. Other leaders going to consult with Adik Na, he decided. He had never seen so many on the move together.

A thin, lanky man with red hair was waiting. His expression was so patently eager that Sam halted the weather truck and got out. Shilton Judy was the oddity of the group, but made up in brains what he lacked in convention.

"Is a ship ready to cross to Tagus, sir ? "

Sam shook his head. None of the five were ready to blast off. He would not risk a trip even across the few thousand. miles to their companion planet.

"Not yet, Judy. Have you finished ? "

"About all I can from here, sir. Spectrum tests, radar soundings. Also density, calculated from size and perturbation of Ceres."

"Good." Sam knew Tagus, minor in the binary, could be important. "Tell me."

"I've got it all on record, sir." Judy jerked his ruddy-maned head at his makeshift laboratory building. "Tagus keeps the same face towards us, like earth's moon. Ceres has a very slow relative rotation- once in 200 years, near as I can calculate. Put another way, Tagus circles Ceres once in two centuries. Meanwhile the two spin in their binary orbit, giving us a day of just over thirty hours."

Sam nodded and removed his gauntlets. It had seemed a long time since dawn. Judy followed him into the hut.

"The Cerans are waking up," he said.

Sam wondered at the note in his voice. "There's a parley with old Adik Na."

"And other things. I took the copter out and I've never seen so much general movement among the Cerans since we came. They're on the move."

Sam let it pass. It was time he went into the radio room for the usual evening check

with the camps remote from base. Furthermore, scientific and sociological problems were Shilton Judy's pigeon. Responsibility for the five ships on Bunker Flats was enough for one pair of shoulders.

The distant camps were based on weather trucks that had spidered out slowly from the hut base. Each truck held three men, was self contained, and good for an out and back trip of two thousand miles without refuelling. Systematically he contacted each and heard them out. The last was to the west. The report terminated with wind velocity readings that made Sam's brows rise. He studied the map where a pin showed the truck's position.

"55 m.p.h. and rising," he said. "Check that."

"No error." The radio seemed to have a background whistle. Listening, Sam knew it was wind- a gale howling round a metal truck over seven hundred miles away. "Bearing 2 degrees off West."

"Thanks." His fingers poised on the switch. "If anything arises drop the regular report schedule and report at once, as arranged. '

"Aye, sir."

Sam stood in thought. Peters had been at sea once and perhaps wind meant less to him than to a landsman born and working always in sheltering cities. Five tall ships stood balanced on slender fins on Bunker Flats, too.

"On second thoughts, report every hour," Sam ordered.

"Aye, sir."

He heard Peters silence the transmitter. Shilton Judy had placed an outline report on the table that served as desk and Sam took it up. Covering Tagus, it confirmed what Judy had said. Sam frowned at the last line only. "Spectrum tests show the presence of some atmosphere, fairly high in oxygen content." Oxygen, Sam thought. Odd, when Tagus was manifestly naked rock and ore! He wondered if Judy had slipped, there.

An hour passed. Outside, a high wind swept across Bunker Flats, bringing a spicy smell like nutmeg and juniper. Sam sniffed with apprehension. Hundreds of miles away to the west were forests of aromatic trees. Only once before had their fragrance come so far. And within six hours the 90 m.p.h. gale had been howling over the flats.

He rode across to the five ships and found Jim Newlyn standing with his back to one wide pedestal fin. Wind tugged at Newlyn's jerkin coat and flapped his trousers tight round his legs. His face had the carven appearance of old oak. His light eyes were set

to the west and his nostrils twitched visibly. .

"Don't like that, Captain Walvis," he said.

Sam looked up at the towering pinnacle of steel. "Nor I." He wished the designers had given a bigger tail-spread to increase the ship's base area. Newlyn followed his glance.

"Only other time I smelt the spice forest was before the last storm, Sam," he said.

Sam lowered his eyes to the other's. When Newlyn used his first name he was being unofficial and had something to say as friend to friend. Sam nodded.

"That's the only other time I smelt it, Jim." Newlyn put a hand on the thick edge of the rocket fin. "I'd like go put guy cables from high up top out as far as we can. We could splice a cable round up for'ard and take the guys out to anchors a hundred yards from the ship's base. It should help."

"It might."

He watched Newlyn go. He doubted if cables would help much if wind pressure on the hulls grew too strong. A tumbled ship was a lost ship. No power on Ceres could right them if such a disaster arose. As well might ants try to right a child's tumbled skittles.

He went back to the huts, wondering what Peters would report. The scheduled radio contact with his own immediate superior was also nearly due. Major Fohn never used christian names. His cruiser would be on Ceres within the week.

The Cerans were still on the move traversing the rim of the flats with a wobbling, humping movement. Sam noted they had divided into two streams, and only one kept to the near side of the flats, where old Adik Na had lain.

He looked into the laboratory hut. Shilton Judy sat at a bench.

"Like a little local field investigation for a change ?" Sam asked.

Judy put on his spectacles. "Can do."

"I'd like you to find where the Cerans are going, and why. Keep an eye on Adik Na. He's the only one can parley with us and act as intermediary. If the Cerans object to our presence they may be more dangerous than we think."

Judy put on a coat and hood. Sam noted he put dust goggles in a pocket. He remembered the report.

"There is oxygen on Tagus, Mr. Judy?"

"There is, sir." Judy drew up the hood. "The spectrum test is quite conclusive."

" But there's no vegetation there !"

"None, sir, nor any form of apparent life."

Sam looked at the wall clock and saw it was nearly time for the Major's call. He stopped with a hand on the door.

"Then how do you account for the oxygen ?"

"I can't, sir."

Judy left with him, coat zipped tight, and struck off along the edge of the flats, bent against the wind. Somewhere in the building a loose partition grumbled repetitively and Sam realised the wind had increased. It snatched at his garments, buffeted his face, and sang like a harp under the pink sky.

Peters was just coming through from the weather truck. Excitement edged his voice.

"This is some wind, sir- 110 m.p.h. and rising !"

A muffled, boisterous piping was background to his words. The wind seeking round the hut so far lacked its keen whine.

"I see," Sam said. "How do things look ?"

"Bad, sir. This is a special storm, right enough l We're exposed here. Got high to examine the area. Dead west is what we think must be a cyclone. It looks ten to fifteen miles distant. It's big!"

"Try to map its path and report regularly."

Sam turned the switch to stand-by as the bulb on the space radio glowed red. Major Fohn did not like waiting, either.

"Ceres H.Q. here."

"Command cruiser here. Contacted and over "

"Am receiving you."

There was a delay, then a clipped, military voice replaced the radio-man's. "Major Fohn contacting."

"Captain Walvis here, sir." Sam listened to the piping of the wind round the building. Steel, based in concrete, it would stand. He wished his confidence extended to the five ships.

"Good. We are now in corrected orbit and can supply time of landing."

"Yes, sir." Somewhere outside loose equipment fell with a clatter. Sam hesitated. "We anticipate a storm. Will you delay a definite landing schedule until you have our O.K.?"

Silence, then: "If you recommend, Captain. Our present orbit gives touch-down in five days. We will maintain it provisionally."

"Very well, sir." _

"Meanwhile, safeguard your ships and the Ceran leader. He is important." A pause. "What is that noise ?"

"The wind, sir !" Sam felt glad the sound had got over the space radio.

If Fohn was impressed, he did not betray it. The radioman's voice returned.

"Command cruiser over and listening out."

"Out," Sam said automatically, and opened the switch. He thought uneasily of the wind, undeniably rising. Better see how Newlyn was getting on, and warn him.

Wind dragged the door from his grasp, keening viciously round the building. He heaved it shut, almost lost balance, and ran to the weather truck. Gusts tore round it and he closed all the ventilator flaps. Something Fohn had not said remained in his mind. This would make or break his career in the service. No excuse would help if the ships toppled.

Men worked furiously, bent against the wind. Cables, each anchored in several places to the sandstone, were being hoisted up the silver hulls. They quivered vibrantly as longest strings of a giant harp.

Newlyn battled through the wind to the vehicle, entered, and let a gust slam the door.

"Looks worse than I thought !" he said. -

The truck shook under a squall. Sam listened to the eddying thunder outside.

"Worse still is on the way, Jim. The cables won't hold if it gets too strong."

"They won't," Newlyn admitted. "They're too few and too small."

"I wish the ships could be taken up -- they'd be safe then !"

Wind thrummed on the vehicles. Jim Newlyn shook his head.

"That would be suicide, with the tubes not serviced !"

"I know," Sam said flatly. A light blinked on the dash-- indication that someone back in the radio shack was trying to contact him. He turned down the switch.

"Is that Captain Walvis ?"

He recognised the urgent voice of one of the radio watch men, just returned to duty.

"Yes, Smithson."

"I saw you drive out, sir. Peters from the western survey point is calling you--"

"Put him through !"

Silence, then the relay brought Peter's voice. "Wind is clocking 150 m.p.h. and rising, sir." There was panic audible above the back- ground howl. "The cyclone is growing and near. Its path is dead from the west. It's several miles across-"

"Sit tight !" Sam wondered if the cyclone would die before it struck Bunker Flats.

"I doubt if we can, sir !"

"What?" Each truck contained upwards of ten tons of gear, and was strong as a tank. "Why not ?"

"The wind, sir. Squalls are topping 180 m.p.h. We can't promise to maintain contact."

Peters was shouting. Behind the voice howled and piped such a bedlam as crisped Sam's scalp. He realised he had been shouting too, both to overcome that din and the roar outside.

"It's shaken the truck badly, sir-"

"Then withdraw to shelter !" Sam half bellowed.

"We can't, sir. A gust lifted us and smashed an axle. It's bad, sir- we--"

The voice ended. A scrape as of steel on rock, then radio silence. The carrier had gone from the band. Sam looked at Newlyn. His face was set and white.

"Some wind to turn over a weather truck, Sam," Newlyn said.

His gaze went up to the five ships. Sam guessed his thoughts. No guying possible would hold such tall pinnacles of steel upright against gusts like that.

Newlyn grasped the door. "I'll be going back--"

"Keep radio watch from all ships."

"We will, Captain."

The door banged open and shut, steel ringing. Newlyn staggered bent double. Men were abandoning the half fixed guy ropes, unable to stand. Unchecked wind raced across the flats, striking the ships like giant fists pounding a gong. The truck vibrated and Sam saw fragmented leaves racing past the curved window. The smell of juniper and nutmeg was very strong.

He swept in a curve for the huts. At the edge of the flats Shilton Judy was battling against winds that threatened to send him cart-wheeling. Sam slowed, and saw that a Ceran was following Judy, stomach on the earth and black hair smoothed sleek as silk. Sam jerked open the door. It banged the truck's side, rebounding with a clang. Wind screamed into the vehicle, carrying a debris of torn leaves. No scented tree grew nearer than a hundred miles. The blizzard of fragments suggested the forest itself was being stripped. Judy almost fell inside, followed by the Ceran, who mounted as a caterpillar would. With both hands Judy closed the door, panting. He jerked his head at his companion.

"Most of them are retiring to caves a mile or more from here."

"It is always so with those tribes at the time of the storm," the Ceran said.

Sam realised it was not Adik Na, but a smaller, ancient native. His voice had the same whispery sibilance. Wind shook the truck.

"I did not know others of you spoke our tongue " Sam said.

The Ceran made a spreading gesture showing assent. "We have- ways. It is not difficult."

The howling gusts rose and fell. "You expected such a storm ?" Sam asked, astonished.

The large disc eyes were momentarily hooded "Legend tells that it is always so. I and all other old ones have seen such storms and know. It is a tidal movement of the atmosphere, and arises each two hundred years-"

"The rotation of Tagus round this planet !" Judy put it.

"As you say. Only once in such a period are our sun and secondary planet so positioned as to cause so great a movement of atmosphere."

Sam thought of tidal waves on earth, where seas rose scores of feet. How much greater would be the movement of air, with Tagus so near! He looked up through the curved window. As always, the slight pinky tint of the miles of atmosphere above hid the position of the smaller binary.

The Ceran turned his disc eyes upon the five ships. "They will fall-"

"There are guy wires," Sam pointed out.

The Ceran took up a fibre of torn leaf in its nippers and pulled. The fibre snapped. "Thus when the wind comes."

"The caves are to the south," Judy stated. "The general exodus wasn't to Adik Na's parley at all."

"No caves are found elsewhere." The shiny black eyes watched them both. "We need protection when the storm comes. Your ships will fall, earthmen." .

He slid from the seat, opened the door with two limbs, and descended to the earth. Sam watched him move away, stomach brushing the ground. Stronger winds screamed round the truck, whipping up dust that obscured the view. Thin twigs raced on the storm, pattering on the window. The wind itself seemed to push the vehicle's flank like a great soft beast, shouldering the steel so that she rocked on her springs. An anemometer handle was near the driving seat. He slid it up. The wind gauge showed 110 m.p.h. Five beautiful silver skittles, he thought.

Five beautiful silver pieces of junk lying on Bunker Flats. Mildly dented, perhaps, slightly scratched. But utterly useless. A spaceship could only take off vertically, and men were not giants.

He tried the radio, and found Jim Newlyn was setting up contact with the H.Q. radio shack. The anemometer showed 115 m.p.h. and the wind had a new, high, piping

undertone.

"Captain Sam Walvis here." He thought of Jim perched high in his ship. If one silver skittle should accidentally fall...

"Newlyn here," the radio said. "We've abandoned work. It became impossible. The wind-"

"I know," Sam agreed. "Can you have all ships prepare for blast off ?"

"Blast off! It would be suicide, Captain! The liners aren't replaced. You know what happens if a liner goes when a ship's rising, Blast off wasn't scheduled for over two months--"

"We haven't got two months." Suicide, Sam thought bitterly. It was suicide to let them remain there, if the wind topped the stability figure.

"I won't be responsible for what happens." Newlyn's voice had an edge to it. "There's not one of these ships will live the attempt."

Sam listened to the piping fury outside. "The responsibility is mine. All ships prepare."

"If it's an order."

"It is."

"Very well, Captain." Wind pummelled the truck. "And- Sam- there's not one of these ships will reach space. The liners won't take it !"

The radio went silent. Sam's gaze rested on the five ships, away across the flats beyond the hurricane of leaves. He bit a lip. As Jim said, the rocket tube liners wouldn't take it.

Wind velocity increased steadily the next hour. Gusts were topping 140 m.p.h. and three of the ships stood ready under skeleton crews. In the other two electricians strove to make complete firing circuits that had been left disconnected pending the completion of re-fitting. The hail of leaves had thickened, then ceased. The forest was stripped. The hut rang like a tin box thumped on the outside. Far away on Bunker Flats the five tall ships seemed to sway. Sam contacted each in turn. Three were to stand by for take off. The remaining two were to report when the propulsion units were ready for firing; He felt very tired. Rotten luck, he thought. He had been anticipating a crown to replace his three shoulder pips. The only crown on Ceres would be Major John's. There would be no Major Walvis- only investigation, court-martial, ignominious discharge.

He contacted a weather truck south east of Peters's position and instructed it to move north and report regularly. Within half an hour it reported sight of the cyclonic stormhead, still moving directly east. Sam felt the five ships were doomed.

"Avoid exposed ground. Try to get readings of actual cyclone velocities. When conditions permit search for Peters."

Field, in Truck 9, was reliant. His figures would condemn or reprieve the five ships.

The door opened to a flurry of wind and slammed, again muting the fierce piping. Shilton Judy, flustered and hatless, pressed his back to the panels as if to prevent them being pushed inwards.

"Some of the natives are moving east," he said, shoulders rising There are no caves that way. It's blank ground."

Sam groaned. "Are they to be my responsibility too?"

"Old Adik Na is-- and he's among them !" Difficulty on difficulty, Sam thought. The old Ceran must not die. The radio indicator glowed. He closed the switch. "H.Q. through." "This is Truck 9."

Sam noted the excitement in a voice that was usually calm and factual. "Go ahead, Field."

"The storm should hit Bunker Flats in under three hours."

"You've not mistaken the direction or velocity? "

"No, sir." Field was shouting above the hammer of wind on the truck. "We're lying in a cleft near the perimeter of the cyclone. The average periphery wind speed is 250 m.p.h. and rising. Gusts top 300 m.p.h." A violent drumming made his words momentarily inaudible. "The scented forest is stripped. The trees themselves are going, uprooted-"

A howling blast shook the cabin so that Sam lost the rest. He remembered the trees, observed from a copter, vast, stout, oaklike in strength. Three hours !

"Keep reporting," he ordered

He met Judy's gaze. "I'm going out after Adik Na. You'll come to show me. Smithson can stand by here and relay to the truck."

The wind was a solid wall of pressure upon their bodies. Sam gasped under its force, breath driven from his lungs. Here by the huts gusts were reaching 150 m.p.h. He ached at the thought of the five tall ships.

The truck quivered like a coracle under the impact of wind-driven seas. Shilton Judy was pale.

"That way," he said.

Driving with one hand, Sam put on the radio equipment. A hundred fists pounded the truck and he stepped up volume. The relay from Truck 9 fluttered with the dancing aerial. "The wind is rolling boulders along the flat," Field was saying. The howl of wind around his truck had a sharper, higher tone, screaming, piping. "Gusts topping 320," he said.

"Keep reporting !"

" Yes, sir."

Sam took the shivering truck on along the rim of the flats. Adik Na and his companions had apparently moved with unusual speed, trailing head to tail into a wilderness offering no shelter, he thought uneasily. The whole affair seemed very like a major disaster for the complete outfit, and Captain Sam Walvis in particular.

Wind struck the truck with new vigour. "They've gone a long way!" Judy yelled.

His gesticulating arm took in the barren, undulating terrain beyond a deep cleft. Sam saw it meant a long detour. The Cerans had negotiated the sharp depression, might even have followed it before climbing to its exposed far rim. But the truck could not. To try would be suicide.

He turned dead into the wind, engine whining. Major Fohn had ordered Adik Na be saved. Even without that order Sam would not have let him and his companions die.

He adjusted the radio. The power was sufficient for direct local working and Captain Jim Newlyn might have been waiting his call. Sam held the mike near his lips, shouting.

"You all ready for blast-off?"

" We are." A humming organ note backed Newlyn's words. That and the background of wind, did not drown the overtone of emotion.

"Wait my order!" Sam yelled.

" We will. But with the tubes as they are you know what the result will be !"

Still following the cleft, Sam felt for words. If the ships blasted off, one or two might survive. The trajectory of the rest would be spectacular- but unpleasant. Yet if all stood grounded, all would fall And a toppled ship was scrap for ever. Worse, to a spaceman ship meant life. Heroes uncounted had given their lives that their ship might be saved, knowing that on those ships many comrades' lives depended. He licked his lips.

"Stand by for signal, Jim."

" Aye." The radio brought the sound of the wind round the tall ships.

"The skeleton crews are ready?"

"All volunteers, sir."

"Good. And the best of luck !"

Sam felt there was nothing further to say. Duty would compel he give the order. The men who would obey would know their duty too. As he broke truck-to-ship communication the radio shack came over above the piping wind.

"Major Fohn in the command cruiser is wanting you.

"Relay him through."

The Major's voice was weak against the gusts pummelling the truck. " I have been in contact with earth. It seems Ceres is more important than we thought. She will be a step outwards to other systems. But we must build on peace-"

Sam listened as the voice droned on. Fohn was obviously repeating instructions from a higher authority. Continued occupation by men could only be based on peace, so negotiation with the Cerans was vital.

Adik Na was the only leader who had shown any inclination to negotiate, and he must thus be protected second only to the five ships, which were to carry men on to further systems. As the truck lurched down a slope amid flying sand Sam groaned. Adik Na and his followers seemed bent on self-destruction miles from cover in the cyclone's path. The next two hours or less would show. He heard Fohn out and returned his attention to the search. From here Judy did not know which way the Cerans had gone. Drab coloured, moving low on their stomachs, they would be difficult to spot.

The truck gained a rocky hump and shook as if struck by a giant hand. Judy blanched.

He raised a gloved hand and shouted some-thing above the hammering wind.

Away to the west a swirling funnel stretched from earth to sky, its attenuated middle writhing and swaying. Still many miles distant, it rose above them like a huge pillar, its flattened base sucking over the ground, its top lost amid tumbling cloud. Never had Sam seen any-thing one tenth as awesome. From it, carried even above the howling wind, came a bugling rumble, vast and thunderous. Around its giant rim flew debris from the forest, a scurrying, swirling cloud stretching miles high into the heavens. Aghast, he tore his gaze away and thumbed the switch.

" Radio hut here."

The tone told Sam the operator had seen the terrible spout. He raised the microphone to his lips bellowing above the thrumming wind

" Check the cyclone bearing and speed, and keep reporting to me."

He left the set on. Very remote beyond a thin screen of flying sand a long, humpy rope seemed to be dragging itself away into the distance. He jerked the truck into motion, wondering what queer error or instinct was taking Adik Na and his followers away into bare regions giving insufficient protection for a rat.

" Hut here," the radio said. " Field in Truck 9 has been reporting. They lay in a cleft. Periphery gusts have been topping 350 m.p.h. Their instruments don't record above that. The cyclone path is unchanged and dead east. Its foot is two to three miles in diameter. From his readings and ours, it will pass directly across us here, and across Bunker Flats." The element of panic was stronger in the voice now.

" If you think the huts won't stand it, get a truck."

" Yes, sir." The voice sounded relieved.

Sam watched his anemometer dial. Gusts were exceeding the safe stability level of the five ships. He switched to Newlyn's band.

"Still standing by to fire ?"

"Still standing by."

Newlyn's tone said that he would fire when instructed, but considered it suicide. Sam wondered if it was right to risk men's lives on the chance of saving some of the ships. If the ships toppled they would be bruised but alive. When tubes blew the crews were not merely bruised, but shattered- and dead. Against that was his duty to take any chance to save the ships, which were in their turn indispensable to Ceres and a score

of other planets scattered half across the Milky Way.

"We're rocking," Newlyn said. A taut wailing backed his words.

"Let me know when you judge you've reached the limit."

"I will, Captain."

The tone implied the limit was not far away. The truck bumped down a declivity and ascended to higher ground. Adik Na and his companions had camped in a circle on bare rock.

"They're bent on mass suicide !" Judy growled.

As Sam drove through the howling wind he wondered why so few of the Cerans had attempted communication with the earthmen. Half a dozen ancients alone had spoken with him, and of those Adik Na was the only one to see an earthman's viewpoint. The others were hostile, or completely indifferent, like the young Cerans who went about their own affairs as if the earthmen scarcely existed.

The truck crossed the naked plain, hammered by fierce gusts. The Cerans lifted their heads. One came towards the truck, and Sam recognised Adik Na with relief. He slewed the vehicle so that one door was to leeward, opened it, and braced himself in the opening.

"Adik Na !" he roared.

The words were lost in the wind, but the old Ceran appeared to understand, and came on. Several paces from the truck he halted, flattened close against the rock.

"You come to try to save us."

The whispery words were as if spoken in Sam's ear, clear as if breathed against a background of silence. Abruptly he knew the truth. It explained why there had been no apparent period of learning. The old Ceran employed telepathy of a high order . . .

" That is so." The whisper was in Sam's head. " It is a power that only comes after hundreds of years. That is why our young pass you in silence."

Sam's wonder died in the face of the greater emergency. "You shouldn't be exposed ! You'll be wiped out. Other Cerans have gone to the caves south."

He halted as the radio sprang to life. " This is Newlyn. We haven't much longer. I can't promise the next gust won't have us over-" His voice faded in a momentary fiendish

howling. The cyclone was bigger, more awesome, striding in a wavering column towards the ship site. Sam dragged his gaze from it, back to Adik Na.

" Get into the truck ! Bring as many of your companions as can enter- quick!"

The old Ceran braced his legs upon the rock and lifted his head, scanning the cyclone. "It is thus every two hundred years," he murmured. " It is a vast tidal wave of the atmosphere. Tagus, as you name our second planet, is very near. In two hundred years Tagus, sun, and our rotation all reach this critical point . . . it was so in my youth."

" Even so- but jump in !" Wind curled round the truck and almost plucked Sam out of the door. " I may have time for two trips to the caves-"

Adik Na made the odd gesture which showed agreement. "You would risk that much to save us. You come with kindness in your minds. It is good."

" Not when we're left with five wrecks !" Sam snapped. Irritation rose momentarily in him. " I should be on one of those ships, doing what I can !"

Jim Newlyn's voice cut across him. " Do we blast ? If not we're done--"

Sam shot a glance at the cyclone. Humming like a hammered drum, it was near. Eddies from its forefront caught them, changing the wind direction fitfully. The truck door smashed back against the vehicle's side. Something broke and the truck shivered. They must blast, Sam thought. It was the only chance of saving even a single ship of the five.

His lips opened. " Prepare -"

Then something seemed to cut into his mind. For a brilliant moment contact such as he had never known came. He stood with Adik Na facing the wind, experienced with him the memories of two hundred years. In an instant it all fitted. Kindness for kindness, Adik Na murmured. Then the contact was gone, but the knowledge remained.

He licked his lips. Prepare to fire ! Never ! " Prepare to leave ships," he said.

Judy gripped his arm. "They'll never stand ! Half this cyclone would topple them !"

" It would-- if it struck," Sam said. Relief surged through him, twofold and sweet. Thankfulness that he had come to save Adik Na was first, with extreme gratitude that the old Ceran had halted the order which would have almost certainly sent the ships to destruction.

He pressed the radio control again, to make doubly sure. " Stay grounded, Jim."

"I will."

" The path of the storm is always the same, every two hundred years." Sam dragged shut the door so that the humming wind was quietened. " Some Ceran tribes shelter. Others come here, as Adik Na and his forebears before him. It's not suicide, but wisdom." He slewed in the seat. " You found oxygen on Tagus, Mr. Judy. I thought that was an error."

" It wasn't- "

"I know." Sam pointed at the cyclone. " That's where she goes!"

A shrill piping drowned his words. The metal panels of the truck vibrated. Twigs rained around them and the swaying foot of the huge, weaving pillar swept like an express train at them-- and rose. Up, up, cloud-like, screaming away higher and higher up over the plain, over the five ships, away up into the turbulent sky.

" Tagus is near;" Sam breathed in the sudden stillness. " Ceres loses that much of her atmosphere to her companion's gravitational pull every two centuries."

The humming was fading, organ-like, receding. Swirling clouds closed round the foot of the pillar. Below, abrupt calm had settled over the plain. Sam looked at the anemometer and saw it was registering an even 45 m.p.h. The storm had funnelled away up to the binary, as it always did.

"Thanks, Adik Na," he said.

Adik Na rose upon his posterior feet, his head level with the weather truck window.

"Return to your ships. I will come later, to parley."

Sam nodded and turned the truck. The wind was at about its usual level, for Ceres, and sang quietly across the flats, where the five ships glinted. A descent cage was creeping down the side of one. Driving with one hand he rubbed his shoulder where the door had bruised it. A gold crown would look rather well there, he thought. Major Walvis sounded good, too.