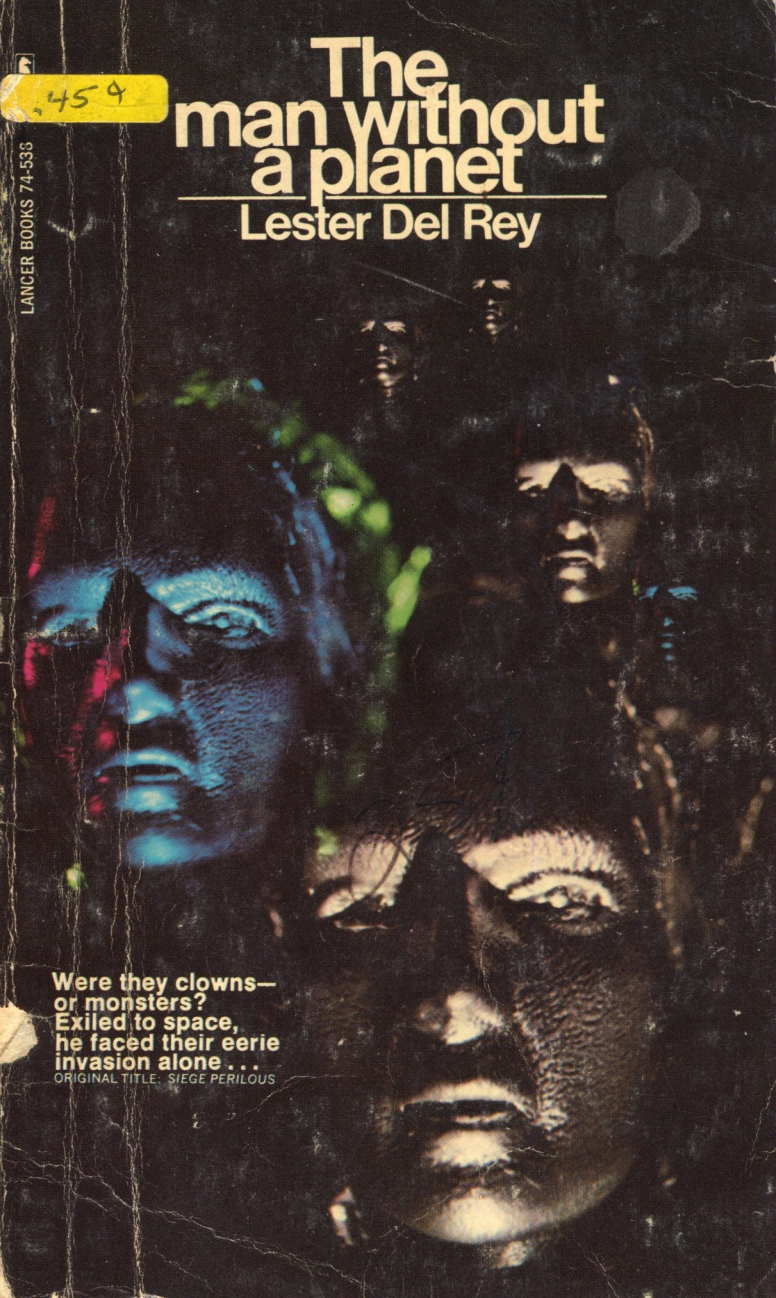


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The man without a planet

Lester Del Rey

LANCER BOOKS 74-533



Were they clowns—
or monsters?
Exiled to space,
he faced their eerie
invasion alone . . .

ORIGINAL TITLE: SIEGE PERILOUS

The Incredible Invaders . . .

Multiple footsteps sounded from the corridor: the heavy, slow tread of booted men.

Men?

Fred Hunter, hiding—now trapped—in a locked room of the lonely space station, heard the invaders' sudden pounding on the door. He had seen their weirdly antiquated helmets—*what were the faces like inside?*

"YOU IN THERE! OPEN UP!"

English!

The aliens' next command snapped Hunter upright in disbelief.

"MOUNT YOUR CAYUSE AND RIDE OUT IF YOU DON'T WANT A BELLYFULL OF HOT LEAD!"

**The
man without
a planet**

Lester Del Rey

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THE MAN WITHOUT A PLANET

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A THOUSAND MILES below, Earth swam in the vast bathtub of space, like a monstrous child's water toy left until all the colors had run.

The sun was shining on the whole of the visible hemisphere down there, saturating the greens and browns of its surface, glaring off the cotton insulation of the cloud formations and haloing the edges of the atmosphere.

It was a gaudy, improbable world.

But still Fred Hunter longed for it, yearned for its green hills and gleaming cities, but knowing them as places he would never see again except as they blended into the pastel whole of Earth's visible side.

This, because Fred Hunter was a man who could not go home. The space station, the ungainly orbiting doughnut, from which he gazed toward Earth and imagined the smell of wet May woods and the sound of trees bending in October winds, had been his home for ten years and would remain so until he died, or until medical science worked a miracle that did not appear to be in the offing.

Standing alone in the outer end of one of the station's spokes, he allowed the longing and yearning to

reflect in his face. For a man of his age, it was a firmly contoured, youthful face. But that was a result of a phenomenon of space. It dealt kindly with living flesh. Out in the reaches, human bodies healed quickly when injured and mainrained the glow of youth. But sadly, this was not necessarily true of the subtler elements—mentalities and emotions.

Proof that space gnawed at men's minds lay, for instance, in the Paulson tragedy. And its eroding effects were recognized in the brief tours of duty assigned to spacemen.

So it was a tribute to Fred Hunter's fiber that he had survived ten years in space and still showed no signs of cracking.

But the cost to him in suffering had not been missed by those close to him. And he had earned the respect of the others; those who came and left. Hunter? Oh, certainly! A real man. Guts by the yard. No doubt about it.

Commander Masters was one of these. Otherwise, he would probably have slipped off to Earth that day without a word to Hunter. Dealing with a weaker man, a goodbye and good luck might have been considered rubbing it in.

But Masters knew a wordless departure would have hurt Hunter's strong, proud spirit.

Still, when the signal came over the intercom from Masters—"Hunter. A word with you?"—the station's permanent resident reacted. His shoulders slumped and something of the eagle look vanished. An older eagle now perhaps—a hermit bird, brooding in a lonesome cyrie, its clipped wings hanging dejectedly.

But then the moment was over and Hunter turned to

answer the summons with head high, shoulders back, and the weary look gone.

The door to the commander's suite was partly opened and, as Hunter paused, Masters looked up from packing his last bag.

"Come in, Fred." Then he glowered around the cabin. "Hell of a time to leave! Hell of a time!"

"They refused the request for postponement, then?"

"Flat denial. Those bastards down there go by the written form. Reports on a piece of paper. Twenty replacements have arrived. They're all alive and breathing. Sufficient!"

Hunter's smile was tight. He sympathized with Masters, but the pigheadedness of the Earthside brass was not news to him. He listened in silence as Masters went on.

"All twenty of them under barbiturates from the strain of the trip, but what difference does that make? The roster is technically filled. It looked right on the books, so it *is* right. Damn their Maginot Line type of thinking!"

Hunter nodded. Men didn't change as fast as technology, and that was the plain truth of it. Masters' reference had been to a stupidity that was now history. Decades earlier, prior to one of their wars down there, France had built an "impregnable" line of defenses called the Maginot and had immediately stopped thinking in terms of any potential peril. Safe and snug behind their beautiful bastion, they'd been swiftly taken by quick flanking movements, but no lesson had been learned from the defeat. Now that the space station had been built, the same type of thinking was prevalent under the American brass hats: the doughnut's mere

presence in the sky was sufficient guarantee of safety below.

The cost of creating it had been in the neighborhood of five billion, but now every cent for maintenance seemed to arouse resentment. It was cheaper to take back the retiring shift on the same ship that brought up replacements, so no overlapping duty was permitted. When the annual appropriations hearing came up, the commander and half the staff had to go down and haggle for funds.

That was Masters' job of the moment. The fact that his departure would leave Lieutenant Jeffroe, a man of proven incompetency, in charge during the readjustment period made no difference.

Nor did Masters dare imply such a thing. As one Senator—the one who coincidentally happened to be Jeffroe's uncle—had once thundered from the rostrum: "There *are* no incompetent men in Space Service."

And even the Paulson case could not be used in rebuttal because it was top top secret. Hush-hush because if word of Paulson's madness had gotten out, the taxpayers might have grown uneasy and started regarding the doughnut as a bomb rather than an umbrella.

Down on Earth, the Paulson file had been locked deep in a vault. And on the space station, only Masters, then second in command, Hunter, to whom Paulson had shown his cards, and a good man named Callaghan had been aware of what had come close to happening—global destruction.

Of course, Hunter realized that thinking of Paulson at this moment was unfair to Jeffroe. The lieutenant-

ant was not a madman. He was merely weak and incompetent, which made him highly desirable by comparison.

As Masters slammed his suitcase shut, Hunter said, "You'd think the sticky peace between us and the Eurasian Combine would worry the brass hats—"

"Oh, they worry! But only about our accountings!" Masters glanced around the cabin, making a final check, and then his face softened as he turned his eyes on Hunter.

"What about your boy, Fred?"

"Doing fine," Hunter answered quickly. But a slight frown wrinkled his forehead and he unconsciously took a letter from his jacket pocket. "This came with the replacements."

Masters' perceptions were as keen as his vision, and he did not miss the frown. Also, he considered Hunter a close friend, close enough so that he could extend a hand and ask, "Mind if I read it?"

He went through the letter quickly. "Hmmm. Doesn't say much, does he?"

"Then you get the same impression I do?"

"That he's covering up something? Or at least evading? Yes."

Hunter's smile was quick and rueful. "That's the trouble with honest kids. Or adults, too, for that matter. They evade so honestly that they do it poorly."

Masters' direct reply was characteristic. As he handed the letter back, he said, "I'll find out what the young man's up to. Depend on me. I'll be in touch."

His frown came back, and he turned toward a switch and reached for the wall mike. He flipped the scanner switch. The viewplate darkened to a picture

and Spaceman 1st Class Callaghan's flat, good-natured—but now unhappy—face appeared on the screen.

"Callaghan, any sign of that object we spotted last time around?"

"No, sir. Either it's out of range or in one of the top-side blindspots. Want me to try copping the big dog-house scope?"

"See what you can do. It's probably only a meteorite, but I don't like anything that size in our territory. And tell the pilot I'm on my way out."

"He's already screaming his head off, sir. Take-off's in nine minutes."

"Tell him to keep his pants dry," Masters growled, and turned and thrust his hand out at Hunter. "Good luck, Fred. See you after I've convinced the brass we're still worthy of our pay checks."

"Good luck, and don't forget fringe benefits," Hunter grinned. Then Masters was gone.

Alone, the grin faded from Hunter's face. He frowned, and while the workings of his mind were vague at the moment, he was to recall them later as danger signals, the stirrings of instinct.

A UFO off the space station. Masters' inquiry of Callaghan had been no cause for excitement. It had merely demonstrated the Commander's conditioning: to function as a commander even in small routine matters right up to the moment of his departure.

An oversized meteorite winging in too close. Nothing more. And with competent men and instruments giving it attention.

But an uneasiness had roiled in Hunter as Masters asked the question; a routine query on a routine day,

on a space station that had been built to function in a routine manner.

Hunter was aware of all this even though he was neither in Space Service nor of Assigned Technical Personnel. He had been ATP at one time, but those days were long gone. Now he was nothing more than the only recipient of a unique status. He was a PRTSAC. This translated into a Permanent Resident Through a Special Act of Congress.

This had come about as a result of the accident he still sometimes dreamed about—relived in nightmares—the accident that had occurred two days after the moment of high triumph that had crowned his professional life. When he sent the message back down: *Project Monitor completed. Space station functioning.*

It had been a moment of triumph although Fred Hunter would never have admitted it, even to Callaghan or Masters. He'd assured them more than once that it had been just another job, building that doughnut. That he'd never had stars in his eyes or space dust in his blood. If a span between two Andean peaks or a tunnel under the Baltic had paid more, he'd have kept both feet planted on Earth. That was what he had told them.

Of course they hadn't believed him.

But a triumph or merely a job well done hadn't really mattered. The accident had made all that academic. The accident that had marooned him permanently in space and had made him famous by its very novelty as a Man Without a Planet.

All that had occurred ten years ago, and his now having been forgotten touched him with bitterness even though he realized he had no right to be bitter.

They'd been more than decent about the whole thing. They, as he, had done their best with what was available. Clare's health had prohibited her coming to him even if he would have allowed her to share his exile, which he would not. Even visits were impossible. And sending a child up was out of the question. So Fred Jr. and Clare stayed Earthside, and when his mother died, the boy no doubt got better care than Hunter could have given him if he'd continued to function professionally—knocking around the world—going places he could never have taken Fred Jr.

No, he had no complaint; only the burden of his own existence, and the sometimes shattering thought that the son he remembered as a boy was now a man—a twenty-three-year-old medical student. A young man, incidentally, whose letters had become quite evasive lately.

Those were his memories and this was his life and perhaps his uneasiness was more simply explained than it appeared. His instincts were no doubt capable of subtle response because, in a sense, he *was* the space station—a living, breathing part of it. He knew its every cabin and passage, its every bolt and coupling, its every response and reaction to an unstable environment.

But it was also logical that he brushed away his nervousness of the moment as the petty inner grumblings of a man who had been too long in one place. A man bored and trying to create interest from stuff of no substance.

But the feeling came back; an inner itch that he couldn't scratch.

Something was wrong. . . .

SANDRA (Sandy) Rothman was Assigned Technical Personnel because she needed a vacuum to work in and there was no better place to achieve total emptiness than in space.

Sandy was also a female, a redhead, and not bad-looking. Or perhaps she was merely *not bad-looking* from Hunter's carefully conditioned viewpoint. He'd thought the matter over carefully after she arrived on the doughnut and decided that classifying her as attractive would not be psychologically sound, all things considered. When you saw a girl as attractive you were tempted into a progression of thinking that could ultimately threaten the emotions and that, in his situation, could be bad.

At times, maintaining this aplomb was difficult for Hunter. Not that Sandy employed any siren-like tactics. In fact, she was thoroughly and totally engrossed in her work. But those enthusiasms made her gorgeous blue eyes sparkle nonetheless.

They sparkled now as she intercepted Hunter in one of the corridors that led through a spoke to the outer rim of the station. She held something up in triumph.

"Eureka!" she cried, her smile dazzling. "At least—I think so."

She appeared to be merely holding up two fists, and Hunter squinted into the light from the quartz port at the far end of the corridor and saw a faint glint.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A piece of my wire—what else?"

"Well I'll be—! So it is!"

Hunter was well aware of Sandy's project, research into tensile strength potentials with the idea of coming up with something beneficial to mankind.

"Looks like a cobweb."

"It's five time the thickness of a cobweb," Sandy replied, "and five million dollars more difficult to create."

"Then you think you've got it?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

Hunter was only vaguely aware of the technology involved. He knew that the experiments had to do with the crystal formation of metals. Crystals processed under the atmospheric conditions of Earth had never achieved the potentials indicated by available formulae. They developed faults and impurities that translated as weaknesses and discontinuities. Sandy had been working on the theory that under perfect vacuumatic conditions, the crystal formations of metal could be developed and made to behave so that their increased strength could be comparatively unlimited.

"Would you say that wire might hold up two spiders?—three?—maybe four?"

Sandy's eyes sparkled so much Hunter felt like suggesting dark glasses. She said, "Mr. Smartypants, you bring me an average-sized bulldozer and an anchor

point to lift it and I'll swing it like a pendulum at the end of this little old piece of spider web."

"Congratulations. Now I suppose you'll be going Earthside for your just reward."

Hunter spoke lightly, or thought he did. And if any bitterness crept in, Sandy either missed it or ignored it.

"Not yet a while. I want to make a few more tests. And besides, I like it up here. I appreciate the scientific climate."

Hunter knew this was meant as a compliment to his own scientific "dabblings," as he'd called them. But in truth, they were far from that. Furnished with all the equipment he'd requested, and ample time, he perhaps started out as an amateur, but his delvings into biochemistry—no doubt motivated by a wistful hope of facilitating his own return to Earth—had reached no mean proportions. He'd spent a great deal of time watching cells change growth patterns under low-gravity conditions, trying to discover why certain life forms—starfish, lizards, and such—are able to regrow complete parts of their original structures.

There had been times when he'd felt himself to be close to great secrets. But they had always faded away like irritating whispers.

Thus, his admiration of Sandy was that of a fellow scientist and was in no way qualified. The importance and value of what she'd achieved was of staggering value to mankind.

"Careful," Sandy said as his hand moved toward the wire. "You'll cut yourself."

Hunter touched the miracle strand lightly. "It will be great for razor blades," he smiled.

"And holding up bridges." Sandy reached into her pocket. "I have a spool of it here in case you ever want me to sew on a button for you."

"I'll remember that. Have you seen Callaghan?"

"No, I haven't. I stopped off to give Lieutenant Jeffroe my condolences."

"Condolences for what?"

"Why, his uncle, the Senator, died of a stroke. Haven't you heard?"

"No. I suppose I was in my lab when the news came. He must be badly racked up, the news coming at a time like this."

"What do you mean?" Sandy asked.

"While he's taking over command of the station for Masters."

Sandy's glance was a shade keener than usual. "You don't have much confidence in Jeffroe as an officer, do you?"

From anyone but Sandy, Hunter would have considered that a hostile statement. At least a defense of Jeffroe. But Sandy had an open, honest nature and wasted no energy on antagonisms. Thus, Hunter knew she was not chiding him nor defending Jeffroe and he answered honestly.

"Such things are comparative, of course. But I think there are more reliable men."

"Are you sure you don't resent the fact that his uncle's influence got him the assignment?"

"No, I don't think so. But possibly I resent that influence's being necessary."

Sandy smiled. "Neatly put."

"How did he take the news?"

"Not too well. He was upset and jittery when I spoke to him."

"Where is he now?"

"In Control, I think."

"It's logical that he would want to be alone, I suppose."

Suddenly Hunter wanted very much to be alone also. A heavy "finger" had touched him deep in his vitals. A dreaded feeling, and that was the only way he could describe it even to himself. A probing finger. It came rarely, thank God, but when it did, it signaled a bad time, the onset of a kind of nightmare without benefit of unconsciousness.

For want of a better explanation, Hunter attributed this phenomenon to the general instability of the space station. His body, as those of other spacefarers, had adjusted to negligible gravity and the complex motion-in-miniature of the space station. But physical structures affinitized since the dawn of life to the vast and solid Earth need more than one lifetime to make the complete space adjustment.

At least that was what Hunter told himself, and he used that explanation—for want of a better one—as the basis for his occasional waking-dream condition.

It was coming on fast as he moved along the inner wall toward the closest elevator-equipped spoke. He pushed the button and the doors opened and he went inside, bracing his body against the weight of the outer hull where spin gave a pressure of a third normal gravity.

Fighting the spell, seeking to hold it off until he could reach his quarters, he pressed his face against the metal wall of the lift and gritted his teeth.

But it was there, upon him, and he pushed the *stop* button on the board and then snapped off the alarm. This would give him privacy for a reasonable length of time.

And the playback began. A picture ten years old. An ordinary inspection trip outside. He'd made hundreds of them during the long period of construction. He had used hundreds of hand jets to push himself around out there.

But this one exploded. If he'd been holding it away from his body it could have merely numbed his arm. But at that moment he was gripping a stanchion for anchorage and the hand jet had been thrust into his belt.

It ripped away a section of elastic wall in his suit. At the same time, his abdomen was torn like a paper bag, the gaping wound suddenly exposed to the tender mercies of space.

Now, cringing against the elevator wall, Hunter again heard the shrill death scream that had erupted from his throat. Death by torture, the subzero fingers of space clawing and tearing at his insides.

The shock alone could have killed him, but it did not, and at the time he cursed this hardness of his physique. Why couldn't it let go and die? Why did it have to exert such a tenacity? The law of survival went only so far. When a body was torn to pieces it was supposed to quit.

But Hunter's body refused to quit. It preferred the torture. He screamed again while the blood literally boiled out of his gaping belly.

He could feel his stomach writhe against the pres-

sure inside that jammed the soft flesh outward in a seeming desperate effort to plug the hole with anything at hand; squeezing farther and farther out until the suit was again sealed.

But at a cost of incredible agony. The constriction cut off circulation as he hung there in space. He stayed where he was because even under torture one of his hands acted with a mind of its own, and when they got to him they had trouble prying it loose from the stanchion. That stubborn hand would not even trust his friends.

But in the meantime, physical chaos had taken place. The exposed tissues had frozen around the fabric as though to seal the break permanently.

He was still conscious when they brought him inside to die. The poor devil! Death would be a mercy, they all agreed.

The emergency light, a red eye of inquiry, appeared on the elevator control board as Hunter crouched there and looked into the sympathetic faces of long ago. The horrified faces. He cursed them, cursed the emergency light, cursed his inability to go unconscious. And at the same time, cursed this fiendish torture of replay.

Back in the station to die.

But then the miracle took place. The fantastic healing power of space. Without gravity pulling at it, the human body seemed indestructible. The doctors worked and marveled and worked some more. Convinced finally of the impossible—that this man was going to live—they went about an ingenious patchwork operation and put him together again, as much of him

as was left. Then came the time when they smiled with idiotic cheerfulness and said, *Close brush old chap. But you made it. You really did.*

Fine. How soon would he be shipped back to the blessed green hills below?

Well, there was a bit of a complication there—

What complication, for God's sake?

A general weakening, my dear fellow— That head doctor they'd sent out had been an Englishman, the Lord preserve him, and had somehow made the whole thing sound like a cricket match on the hallowed fields of Eton.

I may as well give it to you straight. You can't ever go back.

Those terrible words had stunned Hunter even more than had the exposure of his open body to space. Or so it had seemed at the moment.

After the English doctor went away—to dress for dinner in some jungle, no doubt—Hunter had stared at the ceiling and allowed the truth to run like a tape through his mind until it had achieved a dreadful rhythm:

*You can't go home again—You can't home again—
You can't go home again—*

But he had survived that also.

And here he was.

Now he straightened slowly and took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. With his other hand he made a quick swipe on one side of his neck and his fingers came away soaking wet. He flipped his fingers and watched the resulting drops hang lazily in space and then drift ever so slowly

downward. Lazy. Uncertain. The non-world of instability.

God! what he would have given for ten minutes of cold, needling Earth rain beating down into his face.

But this thought was a signal that the spell had ended. It always tapered off into a mawkish moment of self-pity that he speedily rejected.

The emergency signal sounded. "Keep your pants on," Hunter snarled at whoever it was demanding the lift, and cleared it for its rise to the vacuum-lab area. He got out at that level and headed for the sanctuary of his private lab.

But he never made it because at that moment, Callaghan's plaintive voice came over the intercom. "Hey in there! What's happened? Where is everybody?"

Hunter went to the wall mike outside his door and identified himself.

"Fred. Where are you?" Callaghan asked.

"At the vacuum labs. Where are you? In the doghouse?"

"Yeah."

The doghouse was one of two appendages that trailed along behind the big doughnut at the ends of cables. They were variously named by people with various backgrounds. The nautical-minded college them dinghys. To the astronomers, they were moons. And to those devoted to the old fictional West, they were dogies, motherless calves, following along behind. All fanciful, of course, but the space station had been the subject of a great deal of fanciful writing. One imaginative columnist had described them as what had come out of the hole in the doughnut.

To the men of the station, one of them was the doghouse and the other, the larger globe, the observatory where a special breed of men, the astronomers, worked in splendid isolation.

The doghouse was an observatory post also, the space in the station itself too precious to house a bulky telescope.

"Like Masters said," Callaghan went on, "I came out here to conn that UFO, but I can't find it."

That indicated one of two things. Most probably, the object had been a snoop meteorite that had swung in close and was now off on other business somewhere in the vast, round emptiness beyond. Most probably.

The other possibility was a thousand-to-one shot. A sneaky ship standing carefully off the station in a blind spot. In this case, assuming such a ship, its mission had to be sinister because, while it could accidentally hold to a blind spot so far as the station was concerned, only skilled handling would keep it out of the freer eye of the doghouse scope.

Hunter faced this possibility even while his good sense dismissed it as too wild for consideration. Recalling his earlier uneasiness, he ran the current Earth situation through his mind.

Who, down there, would be capable of a sneak attack on the American scanner? Theoretically, the Eurasian Combine. But practically? If they had a vessel standing off the station it meant they were ready for all-out war down below. And so far as Hunter had been able to gather from the news reports, things hadn't reached that stage.

In fact, there was a guarded but ever-growing optimism in the capitals of the world. This was based

primarily on mankind's skill—or luck—at having avoided atomic destruction during the crises of the late 60's and early 70's.

During that time, world alliances were shifting. The Communistic bloc had run into trouble when newly Communist China challenged Russia's leadership, apparently anxious for war with the West and contemptuous of the West's atomic power. Russia, however, had come into a position to enjoy the fruits of a long and bitter struggle and was loathe to risk their atomic destruction.

When the United States challenged China in the Far East, a holocaust seemed inevitable. But it did not come about. A quick and risky use of atomic weapons did not flare worldwide, no doubt because of China's inability to retaliate successfully. There were conferences, hasty face-saving compromises, and when it was all over a most curious new balance of power had been established. The central European nations, excluding the Netherlands and Britian, took Russia's place in the Communist bloc. Russia retained the Communist name but changed her economy radically and openly allied herself with the United States.

Thus the Eurasian Combine, with both giants now competing for the allegiance of Africa.

So it boiled down to that. Was the Eurasian Combine ready for war? If so, their first move would of course be an attempt to knock out the American atomic watchdog that orbited over the poles as Earth turned below it exposing a new segment to the big eye every two-hour revolution.

All this flashed through Hunter's mind as he called himself a nervous old woman. But there remained the

conviction that Jeffroe was not the man to handle an emergency. He had the uncanny ability to make a mess even out of nothing.

During his last assignment as acting commander, he'd gone military and started running the station by the book, even to the point of threatening ridiculous disciplinary action against men who didn't keep their shoes shined.

The station had been close to mutiny when Masters returned.

So, taking his whole appraisal into consideration, Hunter told himself: No problem. A roaming meteorite in and out. No ship.

Then Callaghan's voice came over the intercom in a whisper of excitement:

"A ship! Standing blind on the sunside. Can't make it out clearly, but it looks like a fighter . . . !"

THE WORD for Hunter's next half-hour was *frustration*. His first thought was of three people: Callaghan, Sandy, and Jeffroe.

"You'd better get in here, Sam," he said.

"Okay," Callaghan replied. "I'll crawl in on the cable. But how come no response from Lieutenant Jeffroe?"

"I don't know. I'll try to find out."

As Callaghan cut out, Hunter snapped more inquiries over the intercom. No one answered. The silence gave Hunter an eerie feeling.

Then a sleepy voice responded. "What's the trouble, Mr. Hunter?"

It was the respectful voice of one of the younger space assignees.

"What's the matter?" Hunter asked sharply. "Are you ill?"

"No, sir. I'm just getting in a little sack time."

"At this hour of the day?"

"It's all right, sir. Lieutenant Jeffroe called all personnel into the recreation room. He's in Control talking to them."

"What about?"

"Well, just a friendly chat, sir. As near as I can make out. It's a party, sir—I think. Lieutenant Jeffroe had the station put on automatic control and called everybody in. They're having a few drinks. He's—"

"Why aren't you there?" Hunter asked.

Not that he cared. It was just something to say while his mind raced. Several questions had been answered. Jeffroe had not responded to Callaghan's warning because he no doubt had the intercom snapped off in Control while he talked to the men. They, in turn, would be using the immediate intercom circuit to get Jeffroe's speech.

As to Jeffroe himself, there could be only one answer. Now in command of the station, he was going in the opposite direction from his earlier tough stand. Shaken, perhaps, and feeling insecure after word of his uncle's death, he was trying to solidify his position with the men.

The thought of treachery flashed through Hunter's mind. Jeffroe had set up an ideal take-over situation with a ship, no doubt hostile, standing silently off the station.

Could it possibly be that Jeffroe had thrown in with whoever was out there and was delivering the station?

Hunter scowled as he shook his head vigorously. The answer was negative. Jeffroe had much wrong with him, but he wasn't a traitor. His present actions were logically explained. And the ship had picked this time of personnel transfer as ideal for attack. Jeffroe's stupidity was merely a break for them.

"Me—I, sir?" The young spaceman was explaining.

"I don't drink and the party wasn't an *order* and I was tired, so—"

"Go back to sleep," Hunter growled, and started down the corridor toward the recreation hall. The station had to be alerted, and fast.

But then he stopped, turned back, and hurried to the door of Sandy's lab. He entered and looked through the glass wall of the suiting lock and found things as he'd suspected. Sandy was in the vacuum lab bent over a table hard at work. The vacuum in these labs was easily achieved. A panel in the outer shell of the big rim was drawn back and the air rushed out. Thus, Sandy was clad in a helmet and space suit, cut off from communication.

Hunter pounded on the glass wall, hoping that the vibration would carry through to her, but she gave no sign. That meant he must get into his own suit and go in after her or wait until she happened to turn and catch sight of him.

He had no time for either course of action. Precious minutes were slipping away. He went back out into the corridor and again started toward the recreation hall.

His route was around to the far side of the outer rim and down the elevator into the residential quarters of the hub where the hall was located. And the only way to get there was to run.

Running was a peculiar process in the faint gravity of the doughnut. A certain pressure was created by the electric "glove" around the station that balked the X-ray peril of the van Allen Belt and made it behave, just as Earth's magnetic fields held it in check.

But still, the process of getting from one place to another was more like swimming than walking.

Hunter moved along in grotesque strides of haste and then pushed himself to an even more grotesque emergency halt as he caught outside movement through the port in the rim's shell.

When their time had come to move, the invaders had been swift indeed. They had sent scouts in with hand jets. This advance unit had found it ridiculously simple to commandeer the taxi that had lately carried Masters, the last man off, to the transfer ship already in far orbit toward Earth. Not only that, but the air-lock of the main port stood open, and as Hunter looked out, his face a mixture of anger, disgust, and horror, a suited unit was already entering the lock.

Again the thought of treason entered Hunter's mind. But again he rejected it. Jeffroe's talented inefficiency had merely brought the functionings of the station to a complete halt while he was engaged in his ingratiating endeavors. And Hunter had to grudgingly concede that under ordinary circumstances the laxity would have made no difference. Jeffroe saw no reason to be on military alert.

But the fact remained, this would no doubt go down in history as the easiest take-over on record. If Jeffroe survived—and the West also survived—Jeffroe would be executed for negligence.

But none of that was important now. With a feeling of utter helplessness, Hunter reversed his course and ran toward the arsenal which was in the outer section of the station beyond the vacuum labs. So far as Hunter knew, the lock combinations had not been changed from the ones he remembered. He cursed the slow

going, and as he ran, he tried to make his mind work.

Callaghan would be coming up the wire on the far side of the station. There, he was blind to the invaders at the main lock. He would ease along the rim surface and enter through one of the smaller locks. When he got inside, he would no doubt contact Hunter through the intercom if it was still working. But if these jokers were as efficient as they appeared to be, they would probably disconnect the system.

Hunter passed the labs and began spinning the dials on the arsenal doors. Result, negative. The combinations had been changed.

Hunter turned and swam back to Sandy's lab. Contacting her was now imperative for two reasons. She had to be alerted, and there was an interstation scanner plate in there. Hunter had to see what was going on.

He got a break as he entered the inner lock of Sandy's lab. She was just straightening from her work and turning. He went into a pattern of exaggerated motions that caused her to stare in amazement. Then she read his grim expression, decided he hadn't gone mad, and approached the inner seal.

Hunter stepped out into the corridor and counted fifteen, knowing that in that length of time Sandy would close the outer rim air release and enter the inner airlock.

He cut the count to twelve, and the seal was just closing as he entered. He left the corridor door open and immediately reopened the inner seal to get at the scanner. The air content of the lab itself was thin and it jerked at his lungs, but enough oxygen flowed in to suffice.

Her expression one of question, Sandy followed

him, working at the clasps on her helmet. Hunter snapped on the scanner plate and turned to help her.

"What's happened?" she demanded.

"Invasion!"

"You're joking!"

"No joke! We're being taken over. In fact, the operation seems to be finished. Look at that."

Hunter had run through the scanner positions and came to Control. Jeffroe was there. He was still at his desk with the intercom mike before him and appeared to be still talking. But behind him stood a half-dozen suited figures.

Sandy stared in amazement. "What's going on? I don't understand."

"I'll piece it together for you," Hunter said, his voice tight, his words clipped. "Those men, whoever they are, came in through the main airlock and found conditions perfect for take-over. They're probably all over the station by now."

"But who are they? Why isn't anyone resisting them?"

Hunter chose to answer the latter question. "Because practically every man is in the recreation hall listening to a please-love-me speech by Jeffroe. He's giving them a party."

"But what's wrong with them? They can see those men in Control! Why don't they do something?"

"They can see only Jeffroe at the desk. Their scanner doesn't cover the whole cabin the way this one does."

Sandy laid a quick hand on Hunter's arm. "What can we do? We've got to do something!"

"There isn't much at the moment. I can't even get

a weapon. I don't know the arsenal combination." Hunter moved forward. "Wait a minute."

He snapped on the intercom switch, but nothing happened. "They've cut off the sound, but not the scanner."

"I wonder why?" Sandy said. "I mean one but not the other."

"The only reason I can think of is that maybe they aren't aware Jeffroe is being scanned. There's no plate working in Control."

"Then why are they making him stay at his desk?"

"I don't think they are. I think he's just too scared to move."

"But the men must know something's wrong. Look at his face."

Jeffroe wore an interesting expression indeed. It was a mixture of fear and defiance, and Hunter, grimly amused even in a situation so disastrous, thought the men in the recreation hall must have been checking two alternatives: Had Jeffroe been suddenly taken with a stomach ache, or was he suddenly angry with them for something?

"Where could they come from?" Sandy cried. "What do they want?"

"What they want isn't too hard to figure out. They're after the station. And they seem to have it."

"But—but it just doesn't make sense! Assuming they're from the Eurasian Combine, that's the only place I can think of—this is such a silly way to invade. Their chances of succeeding were so small."

"But they *have* succeeded."

"It was sheer luck, though," Sandy insisted stubbornly. "A small commando group." The Eurasian

Combine forces would have stood off the station with heavy armaments and demanded our surrender."

"Not necessarily. Perhaps hostilities haven't broken out on Earth yet. In that case, a sneak attack would be logical. Possession of the station would put the West at their mercy."

They were both watching the scanner plate with a mutual feeling of helplessness. "I wish the intercom was working," Sandy said. "Have you any idea what they're saying?"

Jeffroe had gotten up from the table now and was facing the invaders, who were still out of range of the recreation room scanner. Hunter tried to read his lips and failed. The invaders, hidden by their bulky suits and helmets, remained unidentified, their faces only vague blurs behind their viewplates.

"Those are odd suits," Sandy said.

"I was thinking the same thing."

"So clumsy. Like old diving suits they used to use years ago."

"I'd say they're about fifty years out of date."

"Eurasian Combine equipment is more modern than that."

"I wonder—" Hunter murmured.

"You wonder what?"

"It might not be the Combine."

"Then who could they be?"

"One of the smaller Earth nations. Maybe one of the African confederations. In that case, this would be a daring coup."

"Sensational," Sandy replied doubtfully.

"But not impossible. One of those splinter dictators

might have visions of controlling the world through control of the station."

"I wish we could see under those suits."

"That explanation would account for the obsolete equipment."

"What are the men doing?" Sandy fretted. "Why aren't they resisting?"

Hunter snapped the scanner and got a blank plate. "They channeled their scanner on Control and left it there. We can't use that part of the circuit."

"Do you think Jeffroe was plotting to replace Masters?"

"Hardly likely, with his uncle dead and his influence gone. But it really doesn't matter now."

Jeffroe appeared to be arguing with the invaders, and while Hunter had no idea of what was being said, he was struck by the flashes of sudden amazement that kept touching Jeffroe's face. It was as though the man couldn't believe what he was hearing. His expressions didn't reflect fright now so much as total bewilderment and unbelief.

It was a subtle point, but Hunter's mind held to it. Upon discovering who the invaders were—and Jeffroe certainly knew by this time—he should not have continued to remain amazed and bewildered. It was as though there was something incredible about all this that Jeffroe still couldn't figure out even with the information he now must have. He appeared to have difficulty in understanding whatever demands they made. An unfamiliar language certainly couldn't be the block because invaders with any sense would have seen to it that at least an interpreter accompanied

them. But far more likely, some of them would speak English.

"We've got to get out of here," Hunter said. "I mean, *I* have to. I've got to find Callaghan and warn him if he hasn't already been taken. Also, there must be a few men around the station I can alert."

"The men in the recreation hall must have left by now," Sandy said. "At least some of them. Maybe resistance has already started."

"I want you to stay here. Disconnect everything and keep yourself locked in."

"I'm going with you! I'm not going to stay here alone."

"Now look!" Hunter snapped. "Don't give me any trouble. I've got a lot to do."

"But I can help."

"You can be the most help by doing as I say, so that I won't be worrying about you."

They had been approaching the corridor door, and now Hunter opened it cautiously.

"Wait a minute," Sandy said, "the scanner's working again." Then she stood staring at the plate, dumbfounded.

Hunter had previously snapped the switch to the recreation-hall channel. He turned to follow Sandy's gaze and instantly shared her expression.

"Good lord!"

"They've killed them all!" Sandy gasped.

That appeared to be the situation. At least fifty men were sprawled about the recreation hall in varied and ominous-looking positions.

None of them moved. . . .

AT THAT MOMENT, heavy clumping footsteps sounded from the corridor, and Hunter cursed under his breath as he leaped toward the door. He'd left it standing partially open as the horror on the plate had drawn both him and Sandy toward the scanner. And now even temporary survival depended on his reaching the door and locking it before the lumbering, spacesuited invader gained entrance.

Hunter didn't succeed. As he hurled himself against the door, a foot shod in a heavy, grapple-equipped shoe was thrust into the opening. Hunter leaned desperately on the panel. Then he heard a familiar voice.

"Ouch! Watch it there! You want to cripple me?"

"Callaghan! Get in here!"

"That's what I was trying to do. Close the door and let me get these grapples off. I didn't have time out there."

"What's the situation? Those deep-sea divers must be all over the place by now."

"I saw two or three, but they missed me. Those silly helmets cut their sighting range down to straight ahead."

"They've killed everybody in the recreation room!" Sandy cried.

Callaghan kicked the second grapple off. He closed the window of his fishbowl and removed it, and began skinning out of his spacesuit. He was scowling.

"There are things about this invasion I just don't get," he growled. "You know what I saw out there?"

"Gunfire, I imagine," Hunter said.

"No. But they used a Morse blinker on that ship. The message couldn't have been seen on the station, but some joker sent, 'Heave to, or I'll put three shots across your bow.' They must be nuts or drunk."

"They don't act drunk. The operation was pretty efficient."

"But that crack—those crazy suits. They act like they're taking over a battleship on the high seas."

"Maybe it's a code," Sandy suggested.

"Some code!"

"Callaghan, where can I find the combination to the arsenal locks?"

Callaghan shrugged his broad shoulders. His flat, homely, Irish face reflected strength that was good to have around in a situation such as this.

"In Masters' safe, I guess. Jeffroe would have it."

"They've got him. He's hardly in a position to make use of arms."

Running footsteps were approaching along the corridor, the sound of them coming through the wall. The three stood motionless. The movement stopped and there was a pounding.

"The door to my lab," Hunter said.

Then there was a quick, short run outside and the pounding was closer.

"Maybe one of our guys," Callaghan said. "Shall we take a chance?"

"Whoever it is isn't wearing an invader's suit," Sandy said.

Hunter went to the door and turned the knob. He motioned to Callaghan, and both men put their shoulders against the panel in order to apply quick pressure if they were wrong.

"Okay," Hunter said, "I'll ease it open a crack. Get set."

A few moments later, he pulled the panel wide. The man standing in the corridor was young, blonde, and frightened. He said, "Mr. Hunter! There has been—" He froze with his mouth still open, and a look of vacant surprise spread over his face. Then he dropped to the floor and lay still.

Callaghan leaped forward, toward him, but Hunter, jerking suddenly into action, seized Callaghan's shoulder, hurled him back into the lab, and slammed the door.

Callaghan staggered and righted himself. "We've got to help the guy!"

"Too late. We'd just go with him. He was gassed. That corridor is full of gas. Come here."

He drew Callaghan toward the scanner. It was still trained on the recreation hall, and Hunter touched the plate with his finger.

"Look at those men. They haven't been slaughtered."

"They've been gassed," Sandy cried.

"Exactly. Those jokers have some pretty modern equipment to go with their museum spacesuits."

"But it's still murder," Sandy interjected.

Hunter considered the point as he frowned at the scanner plate. He turned to Callaghan.

"See if you can bring me a suit and helmet from my lab. Get your own suit back on first."

Callaghan slipped cautiously into the corridor and, while they waited, Hunter got Sandy back into her suit and helmet. She opened the door for Callaghan while Hunter waited inside the lab, the inner seal protecting him from the gas.

Then, when the three of them were using independent oxygen supplies, they pulled the stricken spaceman into the lab and Hunter examined him.

"Some kind of nerve gas," he reported, getting to his feet. "He'll probably be out for some time. But I'm sure the effects wear off eventually."

"What made you so sure the gas wasn't lethal?" Sandy asked.

"Common sense. Or rather, attributing common sense to the characters who took us over. There are a lot of high-power brains on the station—a lot of invaluable training. It hardly seemed likely that they would destroy the only people who are capable of operating the complex mechanisms here."

"It does make sense."

"But it doesn't do us any good," Callaghan said. "We've got to get a message out. We've got to let Earth know what's happened."

Hunter, however, seemed in no hurry. "Let's not rush out and get into trouble. We're in enough already. Let's do a little thinking first."

Both Sandy and Callaghan obviously looked to Hunter for leadership. "Such as—?" Callaghan said.

"First, let's consider our position. The invaders are

in control. They've got the station. Even if we could reach Earth with a message, which I doubt under the circumstances, it wouldn't save the situation here. The station is already lost."

"Then there's nothing we *can* do," Sandy said.

"Not necessarily, but we can't go out there and meet them face to face. They'd cut us down. I think our main weapon, and our only one at the moment, is that they don't know we're here."

"But they'll search the station. They've got to find us eventually."

"Maybe—maybe not." Hunter smiled grimly at Callaghan. "You'll recall that I built this station. I know its every nut and bolt. I know things about this doughnut you never dreamed of."

"Well, don't keep them a secret now," Sandy implored.

"You mean you know a place where we can hide?" Callaghan asked.

"It's possible."

"Where is it?"

"In the exact center of the doughnut," Hunter said, "where the hole is supposed to be."

He was smiling now, and a subtle change had come about. He looked younger, more alert, more competent. It was as though the long boredom of a dull existence had ended for him.

"Come here," he said, and Sandy and Callaghan followed him to the left wall of the lab. But once there, all three of them stiffened. Multiple footsteps sounded from the corridor; the heavy, slow tread of booted men. There were poundings now, and voices coming out of miles in the old helmets.

"Hey, you in there! Open up! We've got you covered!"

The three trapped people stared at each other.

"English," Hunter whispered.

"I guess so," Callaghan whispered back doubtfully, "but—"

"We've taken the joint over," another voice announced.

Sandy looked at Hunter, her frown one of bewilderment.

"The wheel says if you all come out quietly, nobody'll get hurt!"

"We've been invaded by crazy men!" Callaghan muttered.

Hunter's eyes touched him sharply. "What makes you think so?"

Callaghan didn't seem to be sure himself. As he searched for words, the pounding moved on down the corridor and became fainter.

A far voice called, "Mount your cayuses and ride out if you don't want a bellyful of hot lead!"

"It sounds like they're doing a comedy act of some kind out there," Callaghan marveled.

"There was nothing funny in their tones."

"They sounded like old TV movies," Sandy murmured.

Hunter glanced quickly in her direction as though the remark had stirred something in his mind. Then he turned back to the wall.

"They'll be back for a thorough check," he said. "We've got to hurry. Find me something that looks like a wrench."

It was Sandy's lab, so she went searching while Hunter called Callaghan's attention to a series of two-foot-square plates bolted at intervals along the base of the wall.

"Two of us can slip out," he said. "One will have to take a chance on the corridor."

"I don't get it."

Hunter had counted six plates over from the rim side of the lab. "This is a passageway."

"Where to?"

"Not exactly a passage. An air duct. It leads down to the old hydroponic unit in the center of the station. The unit was one of our early emergency measures—before the big conversion machinery could be brought in. The new algae strains outmoded this unit, too. But in the beginning we used the old unit to remove the carbon dioxide and process it electronically in order to provide sufficient oxygen."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Callaghan said, "but it listens good. Where will you and Sandy land when you slide down the duct?"

Hunter's eyes narrowed just slightly. "*You* and Sandy will land inside the old unit. It will be a cozy little headquarters."

"How long will it take them to find us?"

"An indefinite period. It depends on the mechanical talents of the invaders. They won't just stumble on the spot. There's a maze of new machinery around it. Maybe, though, they've got someone who can take measurements of the station and find several hundred cubic feet unaccounted for."

Sandy came back. She had a wrench. "They left

some tools when they unbolted my table and moved it."

Hunter unfastened the plate and motioned to Callaghan. "You'd better go first. Sandy, you crawl along behind. You can't get lost. There's no way to go but the right one."

"Not me," Callaghan said, "you."

"Somebody's got to stay behind and bolt this plate back on."

"I'm smart enough to bolt a plate."

"Sure," Hunter smiled tightly. "But do you know how to reach the old unit from the corridor?"

"You can tell me."

"It would take too long. Get going. They'll be back any minute." 2

Grumbling, Callaghan scowled at Hunter. Then he went to his knees and crawled into the vent. As she prepared to follow him, Sandy laid a hand on Hunter's arm. Her eyes softened.

"Be careful—please."

Hunter refused to admit to himself that her obvious concern warmed him. "I'll be all right," he replied gruffly. "Hurry. I've got to get this plate back on."

After they were out of sight in the narrow darkness, Hunter quickly replaced the cover. As he tightened the last bolt, the ominous footsteps again sounded in the corridor. And again, the weird jargon:

"Okay—give this one the works!"

There was a crash. They'd smashed a door in.

"Watch it! Those sidewinders are tricky."

A few moments later, "No soap. They all scrambled out of here."

But Hunter wasn't paying much attention to the curious dialogue. His own predicament was too perilous. They had smashed into the lab next door. This one was next.

He was trapped. . . .

IT WAS logical that Hunter would think of the outside only at the last moment. He'd been conditioned for too many years to thinking only of the inside.

You might as well face it, old chap. You're inside this doughnut for good. Conditions out there would be too damaging, even in a suit. . . .

So therefore, it was perhaps not strange that Hunter faced his present peril with elation. He was going out! He had to. And that meant a freedom he had not enjoyed for ten long years. As he grinned coldly at the lab door and heard a weight thud against it, he put on his lab helmet and also donned a pair of Sandy's grapples, the magnetic plates that would hold him to the hull outside. Then he pulled the unfamiliarly heavy boots, equipment he'd never needed in the lab, toward the switch beside the hull panel.

Actually, Hunter had needed the suit and helmet rarely. He never worked in complete vacuum and used the outfit only during experiments where total sterility was needed.

The door shuddered as Hunter threw the switch and watched the panel slide open. Instantly the air in the lab rushed out and was lost forever in space.

Then, bracing himself, Hunter threw the switch to the *closed* position and struggled toward the panel as it began to slide back.

He just made it. The panel, sliding to, barely missed his heel.

And he was outside!

For a few moments the pure exhilaration of it drove everything else from his mind. The sense of freedom, almost forgotten, was indescribable. So that British medico hadn't believed he could take it, eh? Why, there was no reaction at all.

Of course, in all justice to the long-gone physician, Hunter had to admit that his condition had steadily improved over the years. A thrill of excitement keened through him. If he'd come this far, perhaps—just perhaps—he might be able to stand the low gravity of Earth!

He caught himself up sharply. It was childish to occupy his mind with thoughts of a highly doubtful trip; one he would probably never make even though he were able to stand it physically. Before too long, the West would be promoting its survival by blasting this now hostile station into atomic dust. And they would not stop to negotiate for the return of hostages.

Hunter put his mind back on the situation at hand and clung to a stanchion as he got his bearings. Just around the bulge of doughnut's arc was the main port. It would be manned by hostiles, and he'd never pass for one of them in his modern-day suit and helmet. The station was a great wheel a trifle more than six hundred yards in diameter from rim to rim. Eight spokes radiated out from a global core. The outer section was a circular tube some fifty yards in cross-section

diameter, and Hunter was clinging to the outer surface of this section—the thread of the great space wheel.

His objective was a third of the circumference distant, a small service port he could work from the outside with a master key that had been on his ring for almost ten years. His reason for keeping it had been sentimental. But now, happily, sentiment was going to pay off—if he could reach the port.

There was another fortunate aspect. The station's night—when the Earth blocked out the sun—was due shortly and would last about an hour, or half the doughnut's orbit time. It would not bring pitch dark, but there would be a twilight that would give Hunter a better chance than he would have in the present glare.

Thus, it behooved him to remain out of sight during the interval. His present position was a blind spot so far as the interior of the station was concerned, but there was a chance that invader scouts might circle the doughnut.

With this in mind, Hunter eased himself down the surface of the hull and got behind the railing. This was a four-foot-square tube that circled the rim of the wheel like a belt. It was a part of the ventilating system, constructed with an eye to inner-space economy. Wedged in between its inner side and the hull, he could be spotted only if scouts came over him and moved perpendicularly to his position.

His anchorage secured, he almost surrendered to the pure pleasure of being again in space. But there were more important things, and he pointed his mind at the prime mystery that plagued him.

The clowns who had taken over the station.

At least they gave indication of being clowns. Hunter clung to the railing, scowled, and racked his brain. Who were they? Where could he find a logical point of departure in reasoning out their identity?

He seemed perfectly justified in eliminating the Eurasian Combine. And he had little difficulty doing this because they had been a dubious factor from the start.

All right. A splinter federation? But if so, they wouldn't be speaking to each other in English. Not unless things had been happening down there that the radio and the periodicals hadn't touched on.

Hunter did a great deal of reading, and in trying to fit the invaders to their dialogue, he saw them as a bewildering mixture. Some of the slang marked them as men from the early American West. There seemed to be a touch of prohibition gangster in them also, if Hunter's ear for slang was accurate. And all of it American; another significant point to ponder.

But pondering didn't help. Then, in a matter of moments, the twilight of night set in, and Hunter slipped from behind the railing and faced right.

He had no hand jet, so the going would be slow. He could use the grappling plates on the hull and walk like a man pulling his feet out of deep mud; either that or test his old skills at swinging along on the railing.

He chose the latter method, gingerly at first, as he kept darting his eyes in all directions for danger.

The trick was to push himself forward and achieve movement without going beyond arm-length distance from the railing.

In the beginning, he pulled himself along hand

over hand. Then he became a shade more daring and moved without touching metal. It worked. In no time at all, it seemed, the old skill reasserted itself. It was like swimming. Once you learned it, you never forgot.

But then, quite suddenly, he was in deadly peril.

It came as a result of absent-mindedness. He'd concentrated too sharply on handling himself in the alien element, and his alertness had thus dulled. Next there had been a mistake born of over-confidence, the railing brushed his fingertips as he reached for it, and his trajectory was carrying him away from the station.

Men had panicked under such a condition. The feeling was somewhat like that of a man afloat in an ocean seeing his boat move away from him; a boat he would never again be able to reach.

Hunter had the vision. He saw himself moving helplessly off into space, drifting on at this same leisurely speed until death caught up with him.

Then he quieted the touch of panic. Drift-off could be avoided. There was a certain skill to that, also. He still benefitted by the movement of the station. In fact, he was whipping through space at thousands of miles a minute regardless of the feeling he experienced—a lazy drift from the motionless.

This lazy drift could be counteracted and reversed by seemingly clumsy gymnastics that roughly corresponded to swimming.

But then all that was forgotten as the diving-suited invader appeared over curve of the hull. And percentages said it was the end for Hunter, because the man spotted him and instantly drew a glittering blade

from his belt, the action unmistakably marking his intent. He was going to kill Hunter.

And it looked as though he would have little trouble because he held a hand jet in his other fist. He moved his jet to alter direction slightly.

Hunter's mind raced while his body hung motionless. He did not for a moment concede death even against the obvious odds. His reaction was one of cold, somewhat rueful humor, as thought-fragments flashed through his brain. Fine situation! *A man not even allowed in space, and I've got to get into a fight the very first thing.* His thinking was still tinged with Western slang, and he compared his position to that of a man who'd never ridden being placed on an unbroken cayuse.

Perhaps Sandy and Callaghan would never find out what had happened to him. He visualized them crouching in that hiding place in there until hunger and thirst drove them out.

These things flitted through his mind as he watched the invader's approach. A movement of the hand jet had changed the man's trajectory, and now he was on target less than fifty feet away.

Hunter drifted farther from the hull. That didn't matter now. The odds in force here said that he would not live long enough to die in space.

That's funny, he thought absently, his eyes riveted on his approaching enemy. I'm not going to live long enough to die.

He strove to keep himself erect to the plane of the station and the approaching man, fighting body movement that might put him into a totally helpless posi-

tion by the time the man arrived. And it was indicative of his background that, while his eyes never left the knife in the man's hand, his mind was centered on the antique spacesuit. He knew a great deal about space equipment.

The invader was coming closer. He could have destroyed Hunter by merely turning the hand jet on him just beyond arm's length. But the drawing of the knife seemed to indicate that he preferred the bloodier method.

Therein lay Hunter's hope. But it was still a slim one, because to get his hands on the man, he had to fend off both the knife and the hand jet.

He waited. The man came in, a picture of complete self-confidence. This last was natural. He faced an unarmed opponent.

He was close enough now, and the knife hand came up. That was his first mistake. He should have thrust straight out. It flashed through Hunter's mind that this joker must have been watching the melodramas on TV with their ridiculously exaggerated movements—the roundhouse right to the jaw, the sweeping knife thrust.

At any rate, it was a mistake. Hunter reached out and grasped the descending wrist. Using his other hand, he grasped the same arm above the elbow and used it as a fulcrum to swing his body around behind the man in a counter-action that was ridiculously simple.

Immediately, their interlocked bodies began rolling aimlessly in space, but Hunter felt not the least touch of dizziness.

The business end of the hand jet was pointed back-

ward, and Hunter, having locked the knife hand against the man's body, reached desperately for his other wrist.

Stunned at the sudden reverse in his fortunes, the man waved the jet wildly, trying to keep it beyond reach. As things stood now, he would have to be careful with the jet. In order to reach Hunter without destroying himself he would have to aim it carefully over his shoulder and downward.

But he was never given that opportunity. Gluing himself tight to the man's back, Hunter sought for and found the hand valve on the lower rear edge of the bulky helmet. This was one of the safety devices they'd put on earlier space suits. In case of sudden excess interior pressure, the man inside could save himself from being pushed up into his helmet by a quick manual release.

Later, with this device still in use, an inner check valve was inserted to block the release at the normal level. If this valve was so equipped, Hunter knew he would have to think of something else quickly or die, because he was weakening and knew he was no match for his enemy in a protracted struggle.

But the valve was not so equipped. Hunter felt the suit flatten. The man struggled violently as Hunter felt the body in the deflated suit pressed against him.

His own victory assured, Hunter found it in his heart to pity the poor wretch, dying in there so horribly.

But he did not allow that to take his mind off securing the hand jet. It was the difference between his own life and death. The knife also might come in handy.

There was also another factor. A possible new at-

tack upon him by the invaders. As he threw the jet on full power, risking detection of the bright blue flame it threw, he wondered about the startling inefficiency of this crew. A single scout prowling the perimeter of the station was unheard-of.

One of the most elemental rules of warfare in any form was teamwork. Scouts always worked in pairs. This was just one more curious bit for Hunter to consider. But he was certain of only one thing. These invaders were a strange crew.

He got back to the hull, apparently without being detected, and reduced the jet power as he skirted the railing, in close, and approached his objective.

He made it without incident. The key worked smoothly, and he pulled the outer lock door open slowly. But this was mainly for the sake of silence. He hardly expected to find anyone in the airlock.

He was fortunate here, in that this airlock was not like others in the station. Its walls were not of plexiglass.

The inner door would be the important one. He opened it very carefully, the merest crack, and put his helmet microphone against the opening. It picked up nothing.

He pushed the door open wider, the hand jet secured to his belt and the knife gripped tight in his fist. He scanned the short areaway that led into the main corridor. He listened again. There were no sounds.

Then, suddenly, there were; the heavy clump that signaled an approaching squad.

Hunter faded back into the areaway and crouched low. His hope of survival lay now in staying out of their line of vision. The windows in the antique hel-

mets were comparatively narrow rectangles at eye level. They gave a horizontal range of perhaps a quarter-circle and a forward range of not more than twenty-five feet.

So, as the squad, six of the invaders, marched by in single file, Hunter lay in the areaway practically at their feet. He held his breath as he continued to wonder about this invasion force. They marched in squads inside where it was less dangerous, but sent lone men beyond the outer rim. Also, why did they remain in their hampering space suit under inner-station conditions?

The men marched past, and Hunter was ready to breathe again. Then the last man broke step, hesitated, and turned to face the areaway. He checked it but did not bend forward, and Hunter stayed below his range of vision. Then the man moved slowly on.

With the squad out of sight, Hunter left the areaway and moved in the opposite direction toward a second one a hundred feet farther on. It had a lower ceiling, and by stretching to his total height and reaching upward, he was able to grasp an overhead grating. It was held by two screws that gave him a little trouble, but he managed to turn them with the blade of the hunting knife.

Springing upward and pushing the grating aside was not difficult. But after he was safe in the abandoned air duct behind the grating, there followed the ticklish business of reaching through the metal strands to put the screws back into place. He could not risk having them found later by the invaders. Those strange beings would certainly be smart enough to wonder what they were doing there.

Strange beings. The words struck a chord in Hunter's mind. They were an irritation that brought a frown. Then he concentrated his whole mind on the screws, secured them, and crawled swiftly along the duct.

It was a long and difficult passage, and there was a strong sense of entrapment in Hunter. The tight, narrow darkness. It grated on every sensibility of the spaceman-instinct. Claustrophobia. The fear of small, enclosed places.

It would not have been difficult for Hunter to surrender to it and go into panic, and he had to exert strong will power.

After a very unpleasant half-hour, he came to the end and dropped down into a steel-walled open space about ten feet square. Once a converting unit had stood there, but it had been long since removed. Now it should house two fellow beings.

"Sandy—Callaghan," Hunter whispered as he floated down.

He heard a quick catch of breath in the pitch darkness. Then words that were a sob of relief.

"Fred! You made it!"

"Sandy! Where's Callaghan?"

"He's gone."

"Gone! I told you both to stay here—to wait for me. He shouldn't have—"

"But we weren't sure you'd make it, Fred. Callaghan said we were helpless here without supplies. Not even a light!"

"I'm sorry. Just a moment."

Hunter groped his way into the room and activated the hand jet. He set it to a fine blue flame and then

pressed the grip-end against the wall to hold against the jet's push. It cast a faint, eerie light, but this was enough to allow Hunter to see Sandy huddled in a corner.

She pointed. "Callaghan felt around and found that outlet. We got the grating off, and he squeezed through and went foraging. I wanted to go with him, but he wouldn't let me."

The escape hatch was against the floor in one corner. It had been used for cleaning filters in the old unit. Hunter searched his memory. There would be a dozen or so vents off the air duct in the direction of the residential section.

"He'll be in dangerous territory and probably lose all sense of orientation. I'll go after him and see if I can get to him in time."

"Callaghan is pretty resourceful," Sandy said.

"That's true, but it's too bad he didn't give me a little more time to get here. I'd have gone with him."

Hunter's anger had faded. He realized that in protesting, he'd assumed a leadership to which he was not entitled. Callaghan had a perfect right to do anything he thought best.

The room was warm, and even in the dim light, Hunter could see wet ringlets on Sandy's forehead. Given the least encouragement, her hair curled attractively all over her head. She wiped perspiration from her face with a nervous sweep of her hand and tried to smile.

"I'm afraid I'm playing the nervous female, Fred."

"You certainly are not! Sitting there silently while I crawled down took courage. I might have been anyone."

She laughed a trifle jerkily. "I'm glad you were *you*. I'd been praying fervently. Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"I killed one of them."

He saw her eyes widen. "Were you hurt?"

"No. I was lucky. I met him outside."

"Outside? But you aren't supposed to—"

"It's all right. Everything worked fine. I didn't have any trouble at all."

"If you killed one, there will be an alarm."

"Not for a while. I pushed him off on a trajectory. He was out of sight in moments. He won't be missed until they have a roll call or whatever it is they do to check their roster. And even then they can't be sure."

"That we're here, you mean?"

"Yes. No one saw the fight. He could have lost his hand jet and drifted away."

"Fred! What are we going to do?"

"First off," he replied quietly, "we aren't going to panic. I'll admit that things look very bad. But we aren't going to start thinking negatively. By that I mean we aren't going to sit here with the assumption that we're merely waiting for the end." He paused. Then his voice sharpened. "Is that understood?"

His instinct had told him that this was the wrong time for either unsupported optimism or sympathy. Sandy was a sensible, level-headed girl, but she had to be blocked off from feeling sorry for herself.

He waited for a reaction and was pleased with it when it came.

"You're quite right, Fred," she replied quietly. "But exactly what chance do you think we have?"

"Well, let's recap the points in our favor. First, I don't think they know we're here."

"But Jeffroe will tell them."

"I don't think so. I don't think any of the men will volunteer any information."

"You believe then—"

"I choose to believe that we have no Quislings aboard."

"Beyond that, have you figured out anything?"

"I'm beginning to get a hunch about all this. The germ of an idea. But I definitely need more data. At the moment we'd better concentrate on one thing. Survival—that and nothing else."

There was a long pause while Hunter waited; a gap of dead silence, which was broken by Sandy.

"We're going to make it, Fred," she said quietly. "We're going to hold this fort one way or another until help comes."

"That's my girl!" Hunter said warmly. "We'll accept nothing less than total victory. And now you're going to have to hold *this* fort alone for a while. I'm going to find Callaghan."

"Don't be too long," Sandy replied with a casualness she obviously forced into her voice. "And by the way—how did they work in this room with no doors? How did they get in?"

"The unit was lowered from overhead. The gauges and controls were connected through those holes in the ceiling. Space is precious out here. If anything had gone wrong with the unit, the roof would have been lifted off."

"What's above us?"

"A maze of pipes."

"If we had a saw we could cut them and incapacitate the station."

Hunter grinned. "A little impractical at the moment, but that's the kind of thinking we need. I'll go find Callaghan and be right back."

Sandy matched his grin with a smile. "And bring a few crackers along. I could do with a snack. . . ."

As Hunter crawled along the narrow duct, he wished his inner confidence justified the reflection he'd projected for Sandy's benefit. . . .

As HUNTER wriggled his way along the duct, he realized that the actual time-lapse since the take-over and the present moment had been less than two hours. It seemed incredible. So much had happened. The tense moments had dragged so slowly.

In truth, however, the invaders had only started securing their beachhead there in space.

But then he was again reminded that under emergency conditions such as these, a man had only scant moments to consider even the most pertinent facts. Survival demanded too much attention. So all thought of time and its passage left his mind as he came laboriously abreast of the third grating in the old air channel and found it gone. He pushed his helmeted head cautiously through the opening and saw an empty cabin. The grating lay below, on the floor.

He immediately identified the cabin as one of three that had been cleared for use as data-processing space. The electronic equipment was due from Earth in the next freight shipment.

In the meantime, the room stood empty, and Hunter was sure he could trace Callaghan's thinking. Callaghan, evidently determined to secure supplies at any

risk, saw this empty cabin as the safest place from which to attempt a raid on the storage section. And thus committed, Callaghan's choice—though perilous—was not totally foolhardy. From this cabin there wasn't more than a hundred feet of open corridor to the door of the "C" storage sector. And it was the one to supply them if supplies were to be gained. "C" storage had food. The kitchen abutting the residential section was at its far end. Nearby were the various small items they would find useful.

But where was Callaghan? Had he already penetrated "C" sector? There was only one way to find out, so Hunter dropped through the vent into the empty room and went to the door. He opened it and checked in both directions. To the right, toward "C" sector, there was nothing. To the left, two motionless bodies lay on the floor; two spacemen caught by the stunning nerve gas and dropped in their tracks.

Hunter did not for a moment consider going to their rescue. Any attempt to help them loomed in his mind as a luxury he couldn't afford.

Conceding that this was it, win or lose, he turned right and ran clumsily toward the supply sector door. As he floundered along, cursing the faint gravity, he evaluated the presence of the two stricken spacemen in the corridor. It could mean only one thing. The invaders had not as yet gotten their consolidating action into full swing, because they certainly didn't intend to leave bodies lying around the station.

This led to the hope that perhaps Callaghan had reached his objective, this section of the station not having been covered by the mop-up squad.

The supply section door looked to be closed and

locked, but when he pressed against the panel, it gave. He entered and closed it behind him and crouched on the floor, listening. There was only dead silence.

But then came the sound of a crash like a falling carton and an explosive, "Damn!"

A variety of curses followed as Hunter moved in that direction. He came to a stack of boxes. They formed the corner of a long stack that reached across the storage area and formed, in turn, one wall of a passageway.

He pushed his head carefully around the corner and saw a red-labeled can flying in his direction. He jerked back just in time to keep his helmet from being dented and then leaped into sight and called, "Sam! Hold it! It's me!"

Callaghan came to an alert rest with one arm back, like a pitcher ready to let go of his fast ball. "Hunter! Where did you come from?"

Hunter scowled. "Why don't you shut up? Those jokers aren't exactly deaf, and our luck won't hold forever."

They came together a third of the way down the passage, and no more time was wasted in useless conversation.

"I've got a radio and some rations stacked by the door," Callaghan said.

"We need tools."

"What about water?"

"With tools I can tap a pipe down there."

"Okay—what else shall we grab?"

"You get the tools," Hunter said. "I'll move the stuff at the door into the other room. You follow me."

He hadn't noticed the pile on the way in, but when he returned to it, he decided Callaghan must have expected to spend the day moving the stuff. He secured the radio and as much of the canned rations as he could carry and again braved the corridor.

Their luck was still holding. He made the empty room without any trouble, noting that the bodies of the two luckless spacemen were still there. Then, while waiting for Callaghan, he began transferring the supplies into the duct. This wasn't too difficult even though the opening was ten feet above his highest reach. He merely jumped, floated up, deposited supplies, and floated back down again.

He had everything except the radio out of sight when Callaghan poked his head in the door. His face was grim.

"They're coming," he whispered.

As Hunter picked up the radio and braced his legs for the jump, he heard the heavy, slow tread he now associated with the advancing enemy.

He floated upward, deposited the radio in the duct and drifted back down again.

"We can't make it," he whispered. "If they find the grate here, they might just as well find us."

The marching beat was louder.

"Lock the door!" Hunter ordered. "Maybe they won't break in."

"I can't. I had to break the lock to get out."

"Then we make a stand." Hunter took out his knife.

"I looked for guns," Callaghan scowled. "I couldn't find any."

He'd brought a sack of tools, and he selected a heavy wrench as he turned toward the door.

But Hunter tapped his shoulder and pointed upward. "You get clear," he whispered. "You're not armed."

"We'll stick together."

"No, we won't. There's Sandy to think of. If I'm stopped, you get back there and do what you can to protect her."

The scowl remained on Callaghan's face, but he accepted the order as logical. He dropped the wrench and went to the point directly under the duct, where he leaped upward, caught the edge of the opening, and pulled himself in.

The footsteps were close now, and Hunter put his shoulder against the door to fully close it. Left to itself, the lack of a lock caused it to swing slightly inward.

The marching tread came abreast of the door in the passageway. But the rhythm of the thumping did not break. Hunter heard another of those weirdly unreal statements from one of the invaders as the latter passed the room.

"A couple more of the varmints. Load them on and let's head for Boot Hill."

Hunter was more bemused by the odd command than relieved by the passing of the invaders. In fact, he was somehow disappointed by the latter development. He'd adjusted himself to a fight and found himself actually annoyed by his good luck in avoiding it.

With the invaders now beyond the door, he allowed it to open slightly, affording a narrow viewing area into the outer corridor.

What he saw chilled him and brought a quick urge

to throw caution to the winds and hurl himself at the retreating invaders.

He checked this surge of anger and stood watching, his tightly closed fist aching from the strain. Then he heard Callaghan's hard whisper.

"What about it? What goes on?"

Without answering, Hunter turned from the door and tossed the tools up to Callaghan, who caught them and deposited them in the duct. Then he handed the grating up, picked the screws off the floor, and leaped toward the opening.

Callaghan pulled him in, and they spent the next few minutes getting the grating fastened back into place.

Callaghan understood that this came first, but when they were safely back in the air duct he demanded, "What did you see? They weren't checking the rooms?"

"No. They were gathering up our men."

"Then we made it just in time. They'll start combing the place before long."

"They had a truck they were pushing along the corridor. It had men on it—stacked up like cordwood." Hunter's voice was thick with anger. "Like cordwood. They picked up the two men and threw them on the truck as though they were just two more logs."

Callaghan eyed Hunter keenly in the light that came through the grating. "Take it easy," he said. "We've got to keep cool or we'll start making mistakes. When a man gets mad he doesn't think straight."

Hunter conceded the wisdom of this, but he was still surprised to hear it come from Callaghan, and he

readjusted his estimate of the Spaceman 1st Class. He'd seen Callaghan as the hot-headed type who would fall victim to the anger that he himself had experienced. And it occurred to him, ruefully, that perhaps Callaghan was more temperamentally suited to leadership than he himself.

"You're right," he said. "Let's get about moving this stuff."

It was a slow, clumsy trip, pushing along the narrow duct while they shoved the supplies ahead of them. But they reached their goal, and when Hunter flashed a beam of light into the room and saw the look of relief on Sandy's face, he was thankful that he'd kept his head.

In a few minutes they were again safe in their hidden room, but with the odds of survival now turned somewhat more in their favor.

Callaghan was proving himself an ever more valuable asset. His grin and brisk self-confidence had a contagious quality, and Hunter silently thanked him as he saw the smile on Sandy's tension-weary face.

Callaghan had rubbed his hands briskly together and said, "Well, shall we plot strategy, or let those jokers live a little longer while we eat?"

"Let's break out the rations," Hunter said.

"They're a little dry."

"I think I can fix that. The four pipes out there beyond the wall—the cold one is water. Hold it a second."

Sandy and Callaghan watched Hunter as he unclasped his helmet. Sandy's eyes mirrored quick concern, and she extended an impulsive hand.

But she drew it back, and Hunter lifted the helmet

off, sniffed the air carefully, and then took a deep breath.

"No gas," he said. "Either the oxygen neutralized it or it didn't reach this area."

Callaghan seemed happy with the news, but he was still puzzled. "What did taking a chance like that have to do with getting water?"

"We've got to have something to carry it in. It wouldn't taste very good out of your shoe."

Callaghan grinned. "That's what comes of having a thinking man in the group. There's a drill in that sack of tools. You get the water and I'll open some cans." He glanced at Sandy. "We'll have a picnic."

Hunter went through the escape hatch and brought back a helmet full of water. And it was not until he'd returned and set his teeth into a chunk of excellent corned beef hash that he realized he was ravenous. As they ate, he pondered their situation without bringing it up as a subject of discussion. But he did try to put the results of his observations—the hunches he'd formed—into some sort of order. And he fully expected one of these conclusions to surprise Sandy and Callaghan.

But it was Callaghan who sprang the first surprise. The spaceman wiped his fingers on his shirt with the satisfied air of a man finishing a pleasant picnic meal and said, "Well, now that we've fed the inner man, let's scan the station and lay out a campaign."

"Scan the station?" Hunter asked. "With what?"

Callaghan reached into the tool sack and brought out an instrument that looked like a telephone repairman's handset except that it had a two-inch-square window in the shaft.

"With this."

Hunter's eyes lighred. "We're in luck!"

"But are we near any circuit boxes?"

"Back toward the outer section. About forty feet."

"Then there's enough wire in that roll to bring a picture in here." Callaghan handed Hunter a screwdriver and a pair of pliers. "While you're gone, we'll try the radio."

It took Hunter ten minutes to connect the handset, get a blur that proved it was functioning, and return to the room. He found both Callaghan and Sandy wearing worried looks.

"This is getting to be a real *Alice in Wonderland* operation," Callaghan said.

"Did you pick up Earth? What are they saying?"

"We picked up Earth. But they aren't saying anything. That's the trouble. No state of alert. No crisis reports. Listen."

Callaghan fingered the knobs, cut out a sudden surge of interference, and a meticulously impersonalized voice announced:

". . . and so while the heads of the State Department maintain an optimistic attitude, sources close to the White House told this reporter only hours ago that the Copenhagen Conference is practically stalemated. The threatened Eurasian Combine walkout, while not yet having materialized, is expected momentarily. Lo Pi Wan, the Chinese Prime Minister who heads the delegation, stated that . . ."

Static crackled in again, but Callaghan lowered the power.

"They haven't heard that the station is in alien hands," he said.

"It may be that the government censored the news," Sandy observed. "They may want to stave off panic."

Hunter shook his head. "Keeping it quiet would be impossible. There are too many monitors tuned to every wave length we can possibly use up here."

"What about code?"

"Not practical. These jokers wouldn't contact our government in code even if they knew it. What would be the point?" Callaghan scowled at the radio as though he held it personally responsible.

Hunter said, "Washington is wondering, right now, about the silence from the station, or Jeffroe has been forced to send down reassuring reports."

"The trouble is," Callaghan growled, "we have to sit right here in the middle of it and wonder what's going on."

"I'm more inclined to think that nothing's gone out from the station."

"What makes you think so?" Callaghan asked.

"The regular reports go out in code, and the timing is precise. Any variation in the method or timing would create suspicion down there."

"You've got a point."

"But there's an even stronger one. If these invaders have allowed Jeffroe to send a message in a code they don't understand, they aren't as smart as I think they are."

"But if something isn't sent, there will be an investigation damned quick."

"Right. So what follows logically?"

"You tell me," Callaghan said.

"Assuming these people have a plan, and they certainly must have, they're pushing it along as fast as

possible. They've captured a space station with atomic missiles pointed Earthward. So Earth must be their objective. Either they want all of it, or some power down there intends to assert global control. And so," Hunter finished grimly, "that makes our role pretty obvious."

"Sabotage," Callaghan said.

"Exactly. So let's try scanning."

At first the tiny plate in the handset showed zig-zags and interference. Then there was a clear signal. Hunter had picked up a monitor in the outer section corridor. As Hunter worked the controls he felt Sandy's nails in his shoulder. Then another image flashed—one that drove Sandy's nails deep and brought a gasp.

"It's the main storage bin." Callaghan said.

"But it's filled with—"

"Bodies," Hunter growled.

This was true. The scanning revealed the fate of the station personnel. They'd been stacked like cordwood in the storage bin.

"That's what they've been busy at for the last three hours—piling the gassed men out of the way."

"It's so cruel," Sandy said, "so heartless."

"They're unconscious," Callaghan told her. But it was obvious that he meant this as comfort to Sandy—that it didn't quiet his own anger.

"I think it tells us something," Hunter said. "It gives us some idea of the gas-effect span. They wouldn't leave them stacked there unguarded if the span was short."

The next station they cut in on gave further data. It was also a corridor monitor, and a group was ap-

proaching, moving toward camera. Hunter counted six invaders in their antiquated suits, and three men in the modern, fishbowl-helmeted suits used by station personnel.

"They've captured three of our men," Sandy said, "three that must have escaped the gas."

This seemed logical at first look, but then Callaghan said, "It can't be that way. The three aren't prisoners. They're in command."

The image blurred. Then it came back. But it was so ridiculous that Hunter found himself doubting the accuracy of the handset. He blinked and peered at the image.

"Good lord!" Callaghan exclaimed. "They're goose-stepping!"

This was undeniable. The picture was clear enough now to show the squad in precise marching formation, moving stiffly, their arms rigid at their sides, their legs rising and falling in the clumsy, knee-locked movement of the goose-step.

"We've been taken over by comedians!" Callaghan muttered.

Hunter had remained silent, trying to make sense out of the ridiculous picture. It was certainly true that the three fishbowl helmets weren't prisoners. They were functioning as officers commanding the squad.

"I think I know what's happened," Sandy said.

"What?" Hunter asked the question even though he was sure of the answer.

"Three of them have switched equipment. They've found our spacesuits more practical."

"I think you're right."

They watched in silence as the marching unit passed the camera eye. It was not until then that Callaghan, speaking in a voice half-grim, half-stunned, said, "Am I the only one who saw it?"

Sandy asked, "What do you mean?"

"Those three men. Didn't you recognize them?"

"I didn't," Sandy said.

"What are you talking about?" Hunter demanded sharply. He was annoyed. Callaghan appeared to be trying for dramatic effect.

"One of them was Al Conti," Callaghan said. "Al was one of the radiomen that just finished his tour. He went back a few hours ago on the exchange ship. Another was—"

"Now wait a minute! Let's not go off our rockers here! You're dreaming!"

"I'm not," Callaghan replied stubbornly. "I know the men I worked with. And I know all three of those men. One left the station two months ago—"

"But none of them could have been a man who left a few hours ago. That would mean the exchange ship has been taken over, and it's impossible!"

Callaghan's nerves were raw. His anger flared. "Look, Hunter! I'm not contradicting anything you say—expect one thing. I know those three men. And one of them was Al Conti!"

Hunter checked his reply. This was no time to get into a fight among themselves.

"Hold it. Let's scan further."

They fell silent as Hunter worked the hand scanner. There was a blur and a new image formed. Control, with two men in the picture.

Hunter stared. The hand that gripped the instrument ached from muscle tension, but he did not feel it.

"I guess I owe you an apology," he muttered.

"Skip it," Callaghan muttered back.

"That's Lieutenant Jeffroe," Sandy cut in, "but who's the other man?"

"You wouldn't know him," Hunter replied, his voice tight.

"A guy named Paulson," Callaghan told her grimly. . . .

PAULSON HAD come back. He'd taken over. That meant that madness was in command of the station.

As this stunning fact hit him, Hunter suddenly felt terribly inadequate. This job of trying to save the station against impossible odds was beyond him. His talents were those of peace. He would be no good at military tactics, commando operations, or the cold-blooded thinking that this job required.

Yet he'd been cast in the role and he had to play it through.

"Sabotage," he repeated. "It's doubly important now. Paulson wants to destroy Earth. There's no doubt about that. We've got to see to it that any atomic missiles he fires don't reach their target."

"That's a tall order," Callaghan said. His words didn't reflect lack of courage. Merely lack of ability.

They'd continued to gaze into the hand scanner plate, and now Jeffroe left Control and they saw only the sinister figure of ex-commander Paulson. As Hunter watched, a puzzled frown spread over his face.

The figure in the tiny plate stood looking about the room that housed Control. And the plate showed a frown on his face also.

As the three of them watched in silence, Paulson began opening drawers and closers. He was evidently in search of something. He covered two sides of Control before he found it. The chart files.

Locating them, he selected the ones he wanted, laid them out on a table, and began studying them.

"That's odd," Hunter muttered.

Sandy put her hand on his to steady the small plate. "What's odd?"

"Why would Paulson have to hunt for the charts? He'd know exactly where they were."

"He's an ex-commander of the station, isn't he?" Sandy asked.

"That's right," Callaghan said. "I guess you wouldn't know the rest about him."

He went that far and then stopped, leaving it to Hunter's judgment as to whether Sandy should be told.

Hunter saw no reason why not and said, "He was removed after a complete mental and emotional breakdown. It was hushed up for security reasons, but he tried to take over the station and turn the missiles on Earth."

"Good lord!" Sandy gasped. "And now he's back?"

Hunter was scowling at the plate. His expression also reflected confusion and bewilderment. "There's something radically wrong with this whole thing. Too many crazy angles to it. Too many contradictory aspects."

"One thing's clear," Callaghan said. "Paulson's in command."

"Are you sure?"

It was Callaghan's turn to look confused. "What the hell! You can see him standing there, can't you?"

"Yes, but why did he have to hunt for the charts? And why—"

Hunter's reply faded, unfinished, as Jeffroe returned to Control. He'd relinquished command in every aspect, psychologically also. His manner was in every way subservient as Paulson spoke to him and he replied.

Hunter would have given a great deal to have known what was said, but the plate on the hand scanner was too small to even attempt lip-reading.

"Why don't you try hooking that radio into the intercom," Hunter said. "Maybe we can pick up some of the orders that are being sent out."

This suggestion was made as Paulson turned to the microphone and barked an order.

"There ought to be an old outlet around here close," Callaghan said. "But wouldn't it be smarter to start laying some sabotage plans? That maniac might start throwing atomic warheads at Earth any second."

"I've got an idea about that. It will work until they figure out what we're doing."

"What's your idea?"

"Water."

Callaghan got it instantly and nodded in approval, neither of them stopping to explain it to Sandy.

Then Callaghan said, "Damn! I've used up all the wire."

Sandy reached into her pocket and brought out a roll of the miracle wire she'd previously shown Hunter. "Here, use this. It should be satisfactory."

Callaghan stared. "That's wire?"

"The toughest and strongest ever made," Hunter cut in. "Sandy invented it while she's been vacationing up here."

Callaghan touched it with a gingerly finger. "You can't even see it except where the light hits it."

"Take the end and crawl out and find a connection. I'll unroll it for you as you go."

Callaghan went about the task assigned to him, and Hunter slowly unrolled the wire as it fed out.

Sandy was slumped against the wall. She looked pale in the light thrown by the electric lamp. "A lot of things are bothering you, aren't they, Fred?"

It seemed a ridiculous statement in the face of the situation, but he knew how she meant it. "Quite a few things. The whole plan is cockeyed somehow. A hostile force taking over a base such as this should comply to a pattern. It should be—well, logical. But this one—"

"The crazy way these people talk," Sandy said.

"That's one point. Another is the casual way they walked in and took over. But of course that can be attributed to sheer luck."

"Paulson not seeming to know his way around bothered you, too, didn't it?"

"Shouldn't it?"

"I don't know. You say he had a mental breakdown. Maybe he suffered brain damage."

"That's possible. Another thing that I don't understand is why only a few of them switched to our space equipment. It's obviously better. So why are the others still going around in those diving suits?"

"I don't know. But you wondered why they were

wearing spacesuits at all in the station. Wouldn't that be to protect themselves from the gas?"

"Perhaps, but I think people as advanced as these would have provided a simpler method of self-protection in the first place."

Hunter doubled a fist in frustration and slammed it into his open palm. "Every question that comes to my mind can be answered. But the answers themselves are questionable. I think there's a single key answer to the whole thing. And when we get that all the other pieces will fall into place automatically."

"Have you any idea what that answer is?"

"I thought I did, until I saw Paulson."

"What was it?"

"That these invaders aren't from Earth at all. I got an idea they might be from Mars."

"But Mars is uninhabited. It's been photographed."

"Once. And that was quite a while ago. A single scanner orbited it and sent pictures back to Earth of a strip down the planet."

"But they found it to be arid—unable to support life. It was more like the Moon than Earth."

"That's true. And I'm not faulting their findings. But at best it was a superficial look. If you'll recall your history, the political situation on Earth ended the planetary projects. It became suddenly more expedient to put money and time into the space station race. They did get a lot of data on Mars, but they didn't eliminate the possibility of a race that went underground."

"But granting what you say—why would they come here and take the space station?"

"They obviously have an advanced science—again

granting my supposition—and they could well feel that this station is the first step of an advance against them.”

Sandy’s eyes were vacant with thought. “You pose a strong case.”

“But the arrival of Paulson and this Al Conti that Callaghan says he saw knocks it to pieces.”

“I suppose it does.”

The reappearance of Callaghan ended the discussion. His strong, homely face pushing in through the escape hatch warmed Hunter. And again came the conviction that Callaghan was more suited to leadership than he.

“I found a connection,” Callaghan said.

Hunter had the back plate of the radio off, and he glanced at Sandy. “Is there any way to separate this wire?”

“Only one way,” she replied. “Acid.”

“Great,” Callaghan said ruefully. “Well, I suppose we can make the connections without cutting—”

Sandy smiled, evidently happy to be of value to the trio. She took a small, tightly corked bottle from her pocket.

“Be careful with this. It will eat a hole right through you and the floor. Bend the wire where you want it cut and push the bend into the mouth of the bottle.”

Working carefully, Callaghan did as she instructed. There was a slight acrid flaring, and he drew the two separated pieces out.

“Don’t touch the end,” Sandy said. “Make your connection away from it.”

The wire was fastened to the radio terminal as Hunter put the balance of the wire into his pocket. He

snapped on the set. The intercom had been opened, and it was working. But what they heard was not reassuring: Paulson was on the dial of the handset, speaking into the Control mike and now they heard his voice:

"Okay—now listen to me, you guys—"

The words were so amazing that they brought a reaction from Callaghan. Part of that reaction was physical. A jerk of his leg moved the radio dial and knocked it off the channel. He grabbed the set and fumbled with the dial.

Hunter and Sandy were staring at each other. "Was that familiar to you?" Hunter asked.

"There was a movie star who made that line and its delivery famous," she replied. "He appeared in old gangster pictures of the thirties."

"And those pictures have been on TV for years."

"That's true, but I don't get the connection."

"I get a connection, but you'd call me crazy if I told you," Hunter said.

Callaghan, more a man of action than theory, came to his feet and glowered down at the radio. "It works out very simply. Paulson is in charge. Paulson is a madman. We've got seventeen atomic missiles in the station and he's going to smash up Earth with them—unless we stop him. So let's get back to it—sabotage."

"You're right," Hunter said, getting to his feet from where he'd been crouching over the handset. "We can throw their aim off with water until they get onto what we're doing."

"I don't understand," Sandy said.

"The stabilizing system is based on the use of water. It can be moved from one tank to another if neces-

sary. And we can do this without going into the open."

"You mean you can tilt the station so that the missile trajectories will be off?"

"Exactly," Hunter said.

"Except," Callaghan cut in, "the three missiles in the doghouse. But they're crash units—emergency. They'll use them only when they find the missiles from the station are off-target."

"Let's go," Hunter said."

"What about me?" Sandy asked. "What can I do?"

"Your job will be very important. Cut that radio off the intercom and start monitoring Earth contact. If I know Paulson, he'll want to gloat. He'll warn them first."

"And alert them?"

"They'll be alerted automatically if they aren't already."

"That means Paulson will be moving fast. We'd better move, too."

"Right," Hunter said. "We'll be back. Hold the fort."

Hunter went first, with Callaghan crawling along behind. He moved in the direction opposite from the supply area and unscrewed the first grating he came to. They wriggled their way through the tight outlet, but this time they found themselves in a more difficult situation than an empty cabin would have presented. The maze of pipe, tubes, and conduits left little space for maneuvering.

Hunter touched one of the pipes. "This one transfers ballast clear across the station," he said. "From Tank One to Tank Eight. It's our best bet."

"We've got to get to the valves, though."

"That's this way. And watch those lower pipes. They're hot."

Twenty minutes later, two hundred feet farther on, an important decision became necessary. At that point, they reached an abandoned valve-head that had been eliminated by a newer one in a section of the water-ballast system installed at a later date. This was still an effective valve, however, except that it wouldn't work.

"Damn!" Hunter grunted as he applied leverage to the valve knob. "It's frozen."

"Can you turn it without snapping the shaft?"

"I'm afraid to try. If we crack this pipe, things will go out of control."

Callaghan shrugged. "We've *got* to try. If we bust the pipe it still throws the balance of the station off."

"Uh-huh. But they'll look for the leak and find the pipes have been tampered with. Then they'll hunt us down."

"What's the alternative?"

"The new valve."

"It would be in Orbit Control."

"That's right. Out in the open."

"Let's get going, then. I'm itching to smash a few of these bastards, anyhow. Maybe we'll get a chance."

"It seems to be the only answer—except—"

"Except what?"

"Crawling clear over to the other side and checking the old valves on Tank Eight."

"That would take a couple of hours of crawling."

"It would," Hunter said grimly, "and a half a dozen missiles could be on their way by that time."

"Then let's head for Orbit Control."

That was matter of half an hour's struggle through the maze. As they labored along, Callaghan grunted, "You put this doughnut together, didn't you?"

"I was involved in the construction—yes," Hunter replied.

"Are you sure you weren't drunk at the time?"

Hunter chuckled. "You should have seen some of the specifications we had to work with."

"They must have been something."

There was little conversation. The struggle of pushing forward was too great. And the farther they went, the uneasier Hunter became as he thought of Sandy alone and the laborious job of getting back to her. He tried to comfort himself with the thought that she was well-hidden. It helped some.

Then, to pass the tedious moments and keep his mind from beating against itself, he pondered the question of whether he was in love with Sandy. Normally he would not even have allowed himself the luxury of such thoughts. But now they seemed academic. All logic told him that they were lost, that they would not get out of this mess alive. This, to a certain extent, gave his ponderings an objectivity.

Sandy was an attractive girl. He thought, quite openly, of her legs and her figure—of the whole female aspect of her.

But he allowed himself, even under these circumstances, to arrive at no conclusion as to his own emotional regard for her. He admitted that he would have enjoyed getting her into bed and let it go at that.

"That elbow ahead," he called out in a low voice. "A grating there will drop us into Orbit Control."

He stopped at the elbow, and Callaghan crowded

in beside him. During the whole snail-like trip, they hadn't mentioned the most dangerous possibility of all—that Paulson would loose another gas attack. There was no point in worrying about that, because the narrow passages eliminated any possible use of helmets and they had no other protective equipment. But the fear of disaster had lain always in the back of their minds—wondering, with each breath, whether or not the sickening sensation of approaching unconsciousness would hit them.

Now they peered down into Orbit Control. It was a comparatively small cabin, leaving room for little more than a veritable jungle of valves, dials, and control switches.

"Can you find what you want in that mess?" Callaghan asked in a whisper.

"If I can get down there and they leave me alone for five minutes."

There was no one in the cabin, but that was not surprising because Orbit Control didn't require permanent watch. It was a check point on a sixty-minute schedule except in emergencies.

But that had been the worry. This situation could certainly have been classed as an emergency, and Paulson might have put a permanent watch in the cabin.

"Let's make it fast," Hunter said, going to work on the grating screws.

"I'll follow you down and cover the door in case you're interrupted."

A few minutes later, Hunter was checking through the maze of valve controls. Callaghan, poised tensely at the door, asked, "How's it going?"

"Okay. I'm a little rusty on these sequences. Haven't worked with them for a long time."

There was silence. It was broken by Hunter. "That's it. A five-degree tilt will throw their trajectories off and put the missiles into orbit around Earth where they can be destroyed. But it isn't enough to notice unless they happen to catch it on the dial. Let's go."

"Too late," Callaghan snapped. "No time to get back into the duct. They're coming. We've got to run for it."

Hunter didn't question the judgment, nor did he argue. He followed Callaghan out into the corridor and they ran in the direction opposite to the sound of heavy-booted approach. . . .

THEY DIDN'T make it—the turn in the corridor that would have hidden them from the advancing invader unit. As they loped clumsily along, cursing themselves for the short-sightedness of not providing themselves with hand jets, they heard a strange cry from behind—a single word shouted out in triumph and excitement: “Geronimo!”

It was so amazing that it brought both of them around to stare. Far down the corridor beyond Control they saw a squad of diving suits with a fishbowl-helmeted officer in command. The cry had come from his helmet microphone, and he dropped instantly to his knee and brought a rifle to his shoulder.

This ended the staring so far as Hunter and Callaghan were concerned. They lunged toward the bend in the corridor as a series of *pings*, almost a single sound, reached them. Only after they were around the bend and out of range did Hunter realize what the sounds were—a metal slug bouncing off the corridor walls from one side to the other as it came down the corridor.

Aside from the fact that such a weapon was antiquated equipment for a space invasion, it also marked

the fact that the man who'd fired the rifle was an incredibly bad shot. He hadn't been able to fire a rifle down a straight corridor at a target two hundred yards away.

Hunter filed that away among the other ridiculous aspects of the invasion and labored along beside Callaghan.

"We've got to get under cover," he said.

"There's a manual hatch down the line around the next angle. We could—oh, hell! We can't go outside!"

Hunter knew that Callaghan had momentarily forgotten they were without helmets. "When word of this gets to Paulson, he'll flood the place with gas again. We've got to find protection."

"We can either take helmets away from somebody or reach the storage area where they stacked those bodies. There are probably some there."

"It's a long way."

There was only one answer and they both knew it—to keep going until they reached the big storage bin or strip two helmets off a pair of the invading officers on the way. The only rub in the latter situation was that they would have to fight for the helmets with a single weapon—the knife that Callaghan was now carrying.

"How far are we from an air-duct grating?" Callaghan asked.

"We're cut off completely. We'd have to go back through that squad or go clear around to the other side of the station. Either way, we're in trouble."

They were in the outer-section corridor. It circled the rim of the doughnut, and the direction they were going would lead them to the arsenal, which was sure

to be heavily guarded. But turning off into any of the spoke corridors or using any of the elevators seemed equally dangerous.

"The safest place is out here on the rim," Hunter said. "There's less chance of interception."

"But we're almost sure to be seen before we get to the other side."

"The odds are against making it all the way."

"Then let's go inside. Out here, we haven't got a chance if they spot us."

It seemed the smartest thing to do. The corridors were shorter in the hub of the station, and the odds of possible combat would be evened accordingly.

"Okay," Hunter said. "We'll cut in at the next corridor if we get that far."

They reached the doorway to one of the shorter corridors without being detected and changed direction. "In case the gas comes," Hunter said, "I hope Sandy has enough warning to put that helmet on."

"There's nothing we can do about that now," Callaghan replied. Then he seized Hunter's arm.

But Hunter had already heard it. The heavy footsteps of the invaders. They were coming along the secondary ring of the station—the smaller one that lay halfway between the central core and the outer rim.

"It's too late to go back," Callaghan whispered.

"It doesn't sound like a full squad. We'll wait at the intersection and take our chances. It's all we can do."

Callaghan, the knife gripped in his fist, crouched on one knee against the intersection wall. Hunter pressed against the wall just behind him. The steps drew closer.

If it turned out to be a unit of the antique-suited invaders, their chances would be better. But they had to assume that an officer in a fishbowl helmet would be leading them. They would be clearly in his range of vision, so their strategy had to be one of speed; get to the officer instantly, kill him and gain possession of his weapon. From that point on, there was no use in planning. Things would work out one way or another.

The marching beat came closer. Callaghan and Hunter tensed, preparing to spring. But no officer came into view. Instead, the front rank of a squad appeared, two abreast, and they turned in the direction opposite from where the two men crouched.

Twenty of them filed past, their helmets cutting off any view of Hunter or Callaghan. They had all made the forty-five-degree turn and were marching away when the officer appeared. In this case he'd chosen to bring up the rear, and it cost him his life.

Callaghan sprang forward and plunged the knife into his chest just as his eyes were slanting down in their direction. Hunter was already behind him, clawing at his throat just below the lower edge of the helmet, hoping to stifle any death cry.

At the same time, he was pulling the body back out of sight of the marching unit.

He had fallen forward, and they quickly rolled him over on his back. The eyes were open and fixed, but the mouth had not gone lax.

Callaghan, who had withdrawn his knife and thrust it back into his belt, said, "I guess I got him in the heart."

"Get that handgun," Hunter snapped. He'd grabbed the rifle himself, and as Callaghan opened the invader's

holster and removed a heavy-butted weapon, Hunter, scanning the corridor ahead, said, "Let's go."

"How about the helmet?"

"Put it on. The gas may come at any second."

Callaghan had already unclasped the helmet and pulled it off. The invader's head hit the floor with a soft thud.

Hunter began to move. He glanced back. "Put the helmet on!"

Callaghan's face was grim. "Not me. Not 'til we find another one."

"Don't be a fool! This is no time to be noble."

"You put it on, then."

It was no time to argue, either. Both men pushed on through the secondary corridor, Callaghan clutching the helmet in one hand and the gun in the other.

Leaving Hunter to maintain the alert, Callaghan gave attention to the gun. "It looks like those .45 automatics they used years ago," he said.

Hunter didn't take his eyes off the corridor ahead to even glance at the gun. "Like you see in the old TV movies?"

"Uh-huh. But it's different. I think it's an air gun—or compressed gas."

"They wouldn't necessarily have invented gunpowder on Mars."

Callaghan glanced curiously at Hunter. "I guess so, but what's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, maybe. Can you figure out how to fire the thing?"

"Sure. There's a trigger."

"Then you may get a chance to use it pretty quick. Do you hear them?"

Callaghan jerked his eyes to the corridor ahead. "Lighter steps," he whispered. "And not so many."

"A couple, maybe. They're coming out of the next spoke."

"We're close enough. Let's get set."

It was this incident that proved something to the two men. They were able to rise to the occasion. They could adapt themselves to the iciest aspect of warfare—deliberate, cold-blooded destruction of the enemy.

The previous engagement had been a little different. An element of chance had been involved. But here the technique demanded quick, cool slaughter.

"We'll assume there are two," Hunter whispered. "I'll take the first one out. You take the second. If there are any more, we keep firing."

There were only two, and they both wore fishbowl helmets. Also, they emerged from the corridor one at a time, not side by side, so there was no confusion. Callaghan's automatic bucked slightly in his hand and made only a faint sound as it sent a missile of some sort through the helmet of the lead man.

Hunter had checked the rifle only to the point of finding the trigger and the safety catch. He aimed for the body of the second invader and hit his mark.

But the reactions of the two were far different. The one with the punctured helmet froze for a moment and then slid to the floor, his back against the corridor wall. His knees bent and splayed outward, and he remained in that posture, seated clumsily on the floor. His eyes remained open, his face freezing into an expressionless mask.

The second man died more realistically, his body

jerking sideways from the impact of the slug and then sprawling full length on the floor.

"Grab the helmet," Hunter directed as he turned to check the corridor through which the two men had come.

But Callaghan was slow to obey. He was staring at the man whose helmet his slug had punctured. "All right, look!" he said. "If that isn't Al Conti, I'd like to know who the hell it is!"

"I'll take your word for it," Hunter shot back. "Grab that helmet! We've got to get out of here."

Moments later, Callaghan still grumbling to himself, they moved on.

"Turn in at the next spoke," Hunter said. "We'll hit the first grating we come to. It will put us back into the duct system. We've got to get back to Sandy."

They reached the grating without mishap and went swiftly to work on the screws.

"Is there any use taking time to put this back?" Callaghan asked. "They'll know we're around now."

"Let's cover our tracks anyhow. There are a lot of places they can hunt before they think of the old ducts. . . ."

The long, laborious trip back was wearing on both muscles and nerves. As he inched along, Hunter thought of a thousand things that could have happened to Sandy.

Behind him, Callaghan struggled and grunted and complained. "This is a hell of a way to run a guerrilla operation," he growled. "Crawling around in a lot of pipes without any idea of what's going on. We've got weapons now. Let's go out and start cutting the bastards down."

"It's frustrating, I know," Hunter replied. "But don't forget, we have struck a blow. Any missiles fired from this station are going to be a little off-target until they readjust the balance."

"Sure," Callaghan answered. "But if we win, we lose."

"What do you mean?"

"We've given Earth a chance to blast this doughnut out of space. We go with it."

"I thought that was pretty well understood in the beginning."

"Sure it was. But if I'm going to die, I'd like a choice of ways. And being squashed like a cockroach in a sink drain isn't my choice."

"What's your suggestion?"

"Out in the open. Blasting a few of them down. I'd like to leave my mark before I go."

"I go along with you on that. But first things first. And Sandy should have a say in the matter, too."

"Okay," Callaghan grumbled. "I'm not too hard to get along with. But I still believe in free speech."

Hunter's grin mirrored an affection for the extrovert Irishman that he was glad Callaghan didn't see. Before he could answer, there was another grumbling complaint from behind him.

"That bastard Conti! Turning traitor on us! I'm glad I drilled him."

"I wish it had been Paulson."

"It's so damned crazy! It just doesn't figure. All I can see is that Conti, and maybe more of the men, figured a way to keep from boarding the exchange ship. They can't be here and there too. And if the ship had been taken, Masters would be around."

"We'll find the answer eventually—if we live long enough."

But the questions were to be compounded before they were answered. The next shock came when they got back to Sandy.

They found her unharmed, but so tense from waiting that she had difficulty in controlling her emotions. She went into Hunter's arms momentarily and buried her face in his chest.

"I imagined any number of things happening to you. You mustn't leave me again."

"We did some worrying ourselves," Hunter said. "I saw things happening to you."

"What's the situation in Control?" Callaghan asked.

"Nothing new," Sandy replied. "I've been watching. Paulson got a message and seemed terribly agitated about something. He lashed out at Jeffroe, and it was pitiful the way Jeffroe cringed."

"We killed some of their men," Callaghan said. "Paulson probably got the word."

Callaghan had picked up the hand scanner and was studying the image on the plate. Suddenly he stiffened and grabbed Hunter's arm.

"Look at this! Tell me if I'm seeing things. Tell me if I've gone crazy!"

Hunter studied the plate in turn. He saw a fishbowl-helmeted man enter Control, come to attention, and salute his leader in a stiff-armed gesture. It was an antiquated form of salute Hunter had seen only in TV movies—the one used by the followers of the maniac, Hitler, during Germany's last bid for power, long ago.

But he noted this curious fact only in passing. His eyes studied the saluting figure.

"It's Conti all right."

"Then I haven't gone out of my orbit?"

"If you have, I'm right along with you. There's no doubt about it. That's the man you pointed out to me as Al Conti."

"But it's impossible. That shot went right through—"

"What are you two talking about?" Sandy demanded. "What's so surprising about the man talking to Paulson?"

"Nothing," Callaghan muttered like a man in the depths of confusion. "Nothing at all except that I just killed him. . . ."

"ALL RIGHT," Callaghan said, "where do we stand?"

His tone and manner indicated a man completely out of his depth. Before Hunter could answer, he went on. "I see a man who can't possibly be in the station. So I kill the guy. Then we scan Control and see him making his report as though nothing happened."

"It will all be quite logical when we find the key," Hunter said.

Speaking to Callaghan, Sandy said, "Fred has a theory that would answer everything. But it's so weird that he hesitated to—"

"Weird?" Callaghan retorted. "What's any weirder than the things I've seen myself? Trot out your theory, Fred. I'm ready to believe anything."

"You know what it is—that these invaders come from Mars. Now I'm more convinced than ever. I've been doing a lot of thinking—fitting what's been happening to that theory. It's the only way the events make sense. But even then the explanations I come up with are pretty far-fetched."

"Then they'll tie right in with everything else around here."

"Let's take the crazy things we've heard them say.

They could be quotes right out of old TV movies. That point keeps intruding itself."

"But why would they act like old movie characters?"

"Because that's the way they think we act. Obviously they have radio contact with Earth, and they pick up TV off our UHF signals."

"But why—?"

"I know what you're going to ask. Why copy the corny old TV movies? I think the answer is that there they see Earth people in both word and action. Translating radio pickups—the strange language—into working concepts could be difficult. But on TV movies, they've got the language and the action blended. So what's more logical than to suppose they used the movies as study pieces to find out about us?"

"I guess I can go along with that," Callaghan said doubtfully.

"Then too," Sandy cut in, "there's the dramatic element in the movies. They aren't corny to the Martians because they are new and fresh—"

"Another thing," Hunter said, "the Martians are probably underground, subsisting on a planet that gives diminishing returns for their efforts at self-survival. Their science could well be more ingenious and inventive than ours because we haven't been forced to think in terms of physical survival."

"But it would definitely be a sparser life for them." She was functioning on Hunter's side, trying to convince Callaghan. And the latter was striving to accept, although finding it difficult.

"Under those conditions," Hunter said, "they could

have made us objects of their envy. "They see the image of our people and our civilization reflected in the movies they see on TV, and they like what they see."

"All right, but what are they doing here taking the station over?"

"I think maybe they see this station as an Earth step toward taking Mars over. It's just a hunch."

"Or maybe they plan to take over Earth," Sandy said.

"We're only surmising, of course," Hunter replied, "and I don't think we're hitting the whole scheme right on the nose. We may even be wrong about the Martian angle."

"Let's say you aren't wrong," Callaghan said. "Stick to that theory and explain some other things. What about the station crew members involved? What about my killing Conti and finding him still alive?"

Hunter held up a restraining hand. "Let's look at one question at a time. Sticking with the Mars theory—it's likely that they're much different, physically, than we are; that if we saw them, we would spot them instantly as aliens and make the station take-over more difficult."

"They certainly couldn't have expected things to work the way they did." Sandy interjected. "To just walk in."

"I think, on our present line of conjecture," Hunter said, "we can bring robots into our picture. Every face we've seen so far they could have picked up from the station documentary that was made two years ago—while Paulson was in command, incidentally. If they have the ability to construct robots—and why not?—

they could have built figures, bodies, similar to those they saw working the station. That could have been a part of their invasion plan."

"We're going 'way out, aren't we?" Callaghan frowned.

Hunter shrugged. "We might as well. The whole take-over is *'way out*. And there's something to support the robot-camouflage theory."

"What's that?"

"Those two we killed. You shot Conti through the head and he's still alive. That suggests a robot. I put my slug into the body of the other, and from the way he went down, I'll bet everything I've got that he was dead."

"I stabbed one in the body—an officer."

"Let's see your knife."

"What for?"

"You didn't stop to wipe it off. I want to check it for blood."

Callaghan took the blade from his belt and held it close to the electric lamp. There was a stain on it; one the three of them stared at in silence for several moments.

"Green," Sandy whispered.

"Green blood," Callaghan said with a kind of awe in his voice. "Aliens." He raised his eyes to Hunter. They mirrored respect as he added, "You and your Martian theory! It looks as though you've got something."

"At least we can be sure aliens are involved. The Martian angle seems logical because Mars is closest to the station. They could lift off the thin atmosphere

there and reach the station even with ships inferior to ours. Mars is in the right position, too."

Callaghan's smile and his eagerness may have sprung from the fact that he now had a contribution of his own to the thinking:

"Another thing. The reason they wear helmets in the station. For the opposite reason that we wear them. They have to keep the heavy oxygen out. It would probably kill them."

"That's logical," Hunter said. "They—"

"Hey—you in there! We got you covered! Come on out!"

The harsh, strident words were hurled through the old air ducts and hit the hidden room with almost a physical force.

"They've found us!" Sandy gasped.

Instinctively, Hunter laid a palm over Sandy's mouth. Callaghan jerked the handgun from where he'd thrust it into his belt and faced the escape hatch.

"You haven't got a chance," the voice taunted.

"They're not close," Hunter said. "That bull horn is a long ways away. They've found the air ducts, but they haven't found us."

"That was a neat trick with the water, chum," the voice went on.

"They found it pretty quick," Callaghan growled.

Hunter had picked up the hand scanner and was checking the plate. He smiled in spite of himself at the curious image that was revealed.

"It's Paulson talking to us," he said.

They pressed their heads together to peer into the plate, and they saw Paulson on a chair with a bull horn in his hand talking into the ventilator.

"I think it's a stab in the dark," Callaghan said.

"It doesn't look as though they've found the old air system," Hunter conceded.

"They're searching, though," Sandy said. "Look at that pile of blueprints on the table."

"Jeffroe wouldn't be much help in checking the construction plans."

Callaghan pulled away sharply, doubled his fist, and struck the wall. "What the hell are we going to do? Hide here like rats until we're hunted down?"

"Martians," Hunter muttered. "Green blood. I wonder what they're really like inside those diving suits?"

"Let's go get one and find out."

"Do you suppose it's the real Paulson?" Sandy asked. "Could he possibly have made contact with those people? Maybe he's just using them."

"I'm tired of wondering about things!" Callaghan growled.

"It's only been about five hours since the take-over," Hunter said. "Pull the intercom wire off the radio. See what we can pick up on the signal channels."

Callaghan jerked Sandy's wire off the terminal post, moved the dial, and a static-ridden voice came in:

" . . . It has now been established that the three atomic missiles that were destroyed in orbit came from our space station. However, the situation at the station itself is unknown as of this moment. Inquiries from Earth have been ignored and the station has remained totally silent.

"Experts here in Washington eliminate all possibility of accidental firings. They are sure the missiles were fired from the station by some hostile force.

"Frantic international communications are in progress, and both the West and the Eurasian Combine have officially denied responsibility for the firings. The West has conceded loss of control of the station but are able to give no information beyond that. None, other than to state that scanning the interior of the station from Earth is impossible because the inner-station scanning points have been closed by whoever is in power there.

"As of the present moment, the heads of various Earth governments are in conference over closed video circuits, and the word that comes to us is that they hesitate to visit reprisals upon the station without clearer knowledge of what is taking place out there. . . ."

"It looks as though we jiggled the water system just in time," Hunter said.

"Sure," Callaghan replied. "But what are we going to do for an encore?"

"I wonder if we could roast them out?" Hunter asked suddenly.

"Roast them?" Sandy echoed.

"I've been wondering about their physical resistance. Another reason for the suits may be their inability to stand normal temperatures."

"We can't reach the heating units from here," Callaghan said.

"No, but I can get at the wiring, the control circuits."

"We'd have to work fast. They've probably got the station stabilized again by now. They fired those three missiles without warning, so they must intend to destroy Earth. No parley—no warning whatever."

"But that's crazy!" Sandy said. "Why would they want to disrupt the whole solar balance? It would be a form of suicide."

"You forget—Paulson is mad."

"But you can't be sure it really is Paulson."

"Talk—talk—talk!" Callaghan snarled. "Let's do something! What are we? A debating society?"

Hunter reached for the tool sack. "I'll hit the heat-control circuit."

"What can you actually do to it?"

"The station stands at a normal seventy-two. I can push it up thirty or forty degrees in half an hour—"

"If they don't turn the circulating system off," Callaghan countered.

"By the time they get around to that, it may be too late." Hunter was crawling toward the escape hatch.

"Remember," Sandy cautioned, "they're hunting for us now. Be careful."

"I'll go with you," Callaghan said. "You may need protection while you're working."

They all paused as the voice they now identified with Paulson came over air ducts again. "Look, kiddies. The hide-and-seek game is over. Uncle Milty's tired of playing. We've got you zeroed in and the tracer bullets will start flying at any moment."

"It isn't Paulson," Hunter said. "He's not that crazy."

"Whoever he is," Callaghan said, "he's bluffing. They haven't located this place yet."

"But after we trick up the heating system," Hunter said, "we'd better move. If it works, their confusion might help us."

"Move where?" Sandy asked.

"I've got an idea."

"Another one?" Callaghan asked.

But there was more general anger and frustration in his voice than personally directed hostility, and Hunter replied, "We've got to try and reach the doghouse. It's a desperate chance, but the only one we've got left."

"What will we do out there?" Sandy asked.

"Cut it loose and take our chances. That is, if we can get control of it."

"But they've certainly got their men out there."

Hunter paused as he was about to go through the escape hatch after Callaghan, who had already gone through. "Sandy," he said quietly, "there's no use fooling ourselves. Our chances of survival are very small. But Callaghan is right. We must try to do something." His eyes held on hers, and they tried to say a great deal. And perhaps he got some of it over to her because when he told her, "I'd blow up this station if I was able to," it did not shock her.

She merely nodded and replied, "Be careful, Fred."

"I will," he replied, and went through the escape hatch. . . .

Fifteen minutes later, with Callaghan holding the light on a heat-control circuit box, Hunter said, "If I throw power from this water system wiring into the heat control cable I think we can blow the fuse in the main thermostat."

"But won't the heat go down instead of up?"

"No. The furnace goes right on producing. More heat will be generated. The fans will rev up."

Callaghan grinned. "Maybe it'll fry those bastards to a crisp."

"It's a nice thought; but I'll be happy if it just takes their minds off their work for a while."

Disruption of the heating controls took only a short time, after which Hunter, grinning himself now from the satisfaction of striking a blow, announced, "There she goes. With all the engineers stiff in the storage bins, it may take our friends a while to figure out what happened."

They started crawling back, and so successful was the operation that they were both perspiring heavily when they got to the room and they found Sandy practically gasping for breath.

"Okay," Callaghan said, "we've got to go now. We've driven ourselves out. Let's move."

Hunter found himself a part of the excitement now. The time for objective planning was over. "There's another line out of one of those old movies," he said. "A war picture—a regiment whose slogan was 'Go For Broke.'"

"That's us," Callaghan said. "It's the doghouse or nothing. Which way? You lead, we'll follow."

The long crawl started; the painful push through the now-stifling air ducts, Hunter in the lead, Callaghan bringing up the rear, with Sandy between them.

Without their helmets, they would have soon collapsed. The units resisted the heat somewhat, and the oxygen in the supply capsules would remain breathable longer than that now rushing through the ducts. As he crawled along, Hunter was surprised at the rapid rise in the temperature. He was sure it had passed ninety and was heading for a hundred.

The old feeling of claustrophobia hit sharply as he pushed along, and he staved it off by worrying about

Sandy. He had no way of knowing how she was taking it except to feel her groping hand on his ankle at times as they moved along.

He'd planned to make the whole trip—clear back to the port he'd used after killing the alien outside the station. But a convulsive grip on his ankle told him Sandy was in bad trouble. She would collapse before they got there. That made desperate measures imperative, and he stopped at the next grating and peered down into the room below.

He saw two aliens in their clumsy diving suits. He did not know nor care what they were doing there. He was interested only in killing them as soon as possible.

As lead man, he'd taken the handgun, with Callaghan dragging the rifle along behind. Peering down into the room, he gently pushed the barrel tip between the meshes in the grating. But then, as he was about to press the trigger, one of the aliens collapsed and sank to the floor.

Hunter waited as the other pawed helplessly, trying to help his comrade. Then he too collapsed. Apparently the heat had gotten to them.

Pulling the gun back, Hunter didn't take time to reach through the grating and fumble with the screws. He braced himself as best he could and threw his shoulder against the grating. Four straining heaves and it gave at one end. He pushed it out of the way, took a tight grip on the gun butt, and pushed himself head first through the vent. Clear of the tube, the gravity pulled him down. He landed on his feet, noted that the aliens hadn't moved, and turned to help Sandy.

She was already on the way down, having been

pushed out by Callaghan. Hunter caught her and eased her to the floor as Callaghan pushed through. The aliens remained an inert pile on the floor.

As Callaghan stripped off his helmet, Hunter turned Sandy over and saw that her breast was rising and falling in rapid gasps. He unclasped her helmet and took it off, and collected perspiration dripped out onto the floor. Then he removed his own helmet.

Sandy opened her eyes and forced a smile. "Sorry to be such a weakling."

"You did fine," Hunter said. "We seem to be safe here. Just relax."

Callaghan was already giving undivided attention to the fallen aliens. He'd wiped the sweat from his eyes with a sweep of his hand and was pulling the weapons from their holsters.

"Okay," he said. "Now let's get one of these jokers out of his suit and see what he looks like."

As Callaghan unfastened the helmet of the alien on top, Hunter went to the door and looked carefully out into the corridor. It was deserted. He closed the door.

"We can't waste time," he said. "We've got to break for the port while they're in trouble from the heat. We can't be sure it will stop them cold."

Callaghan grinned. "Stop them *cold*. That's a hot one." But he had the helmet off now, and Hunter forgot to grin at the quip.

The alien was hideous by any standards Hunter could use. As he stared at the bare, pallid skull, at the head with pale skin stretched over it, at the sunken eyes—now closed—and the bloodless lips, he saw the cruel environment from which the poor creature had come. Out of a cave, surely, the green cast of the skin

indicating absence of sunlight. From a place where there was little moisture because, even though the alien had been overcome by unaccustomed heat, there was no perspiration on his face.

Callaghan hadn't stripped the suit down from the body, but Hunter could see the pathetically bony shoulders and almost fleshless bones through the wide neckpiece.

And oddly, despite the survival-situation in which he found himself, Hunter felt a stab of pity, an actual surge of compassion for these beings. They had answered the primal demand and fought extinction as best they could. And regardless of his subjective feelings, he was forced to admit them.

"Is he dead?"

"I don't think so," Callaghan replied, "but I couldn't care less."

Hunter turned to Sandy. "How do you feel? Are you up to a try for the port?"

She was coming resolutely to her feet. She smiled. "I never felt better. After that rest I can go on for hours."

"Then let's get started," Callaghan said.

But there was a delay. As he moved toward the door, a voice over the air ducts stopped them:

"All right, you guys. You were real cute. But we're through playing around, see? You get the hell over here to Control and tell me what you did to jimmy up the heating system or I'll start knocking off a few of your boys—get me?"

They stared at the open vent in silence while Paulson, or whoever he was, paused. Then he went on:

"I know damn well you can hear me, and I'm giving

you half an hour to get here. In thirty minutes we push ten of your buddies into space without their suits. The time for kidding around is past."

"What will we do?" Sandy cried.

Callaghan's face was tight, his mouth savage. "They're dead anyhow, so what difference does it make?"

"But to let him just push them out—!"

"We've got to be realistic," Callaghan said. "This isn't for us or for them any longer. We're all dead here at the station. We've got to think about Earth. And giving in to that bastard won't be helping them down there."

Hunter had waited for their reactions. Now he said, "He's desperate. No doubt about that. His men are dropping all over the station. If they don't get the heat adjusted, they're through. And we do have half an hour."

Callaghan said, "These two dropped in less than forty minutes. Maybe in half an hour—"

"But we can't let him murder the men!" Sandy cried.

"He told us to come out," Hunter reminded them. "So we ought to be safe out in the open. Let's start moving and play it by ear."

It seemed the most logical thing to do.

"Let's go," Callaghan grunted, and started putting on his helmet. . . .

"ONE THING is for sure," Callaghan said as they moved along the corridor. "These characters are new at the take-over business."

"Why do you say that?" Sandy asked.

"Bad generalship. We've passed three groups of them, and they paid no attention to us."

"That's true—"

"It looks like the word has gone out to leave us alone but Paulson forget to tell them to pick us up if they saw us."

"That may be it," Hunter said, "but from what I've seen they aren't in condition to pick anybody up."

The trio had come out into a corridor in one of the spokes and moved toward the rim of the station rather than in toward the hub where Control was located. They'd been on the alert when they'd met their first unit of five aliens. They'd all been wearing the antique suits and were not moving in any semblance of formation. They'd been staggering along, rather, apparently hardly able to stand.

The first meeting had been tense and most curious. Hunter and Callaghan, their weapons poised, had stopped to face the approaching aliens with Sandy be-

hind them. As the aliens came forward, Callaghan raised his gun. But then he held it poised at half-position as they watched the staggering pace of the aliens.

After that, nothing had happened. The aliens reached and passed them as though they hadn't been there.

The next two contacts had been the same and now, as they approached the outer point of the spoke, Hunter said, "It looks as though they don't know what to do about the heat."

But he was wrong. They knew what to do, and they were doing it. The beleaguered trio discovered this when they came into the outer-rim corridor and saw a crew at work with a cutting torch.

"Good lord!" Callaghan growled. "They're slicing chunks out of the hull-plates!"

Hunter couldn't suppress a grim smile. "Crude, but effective."

"Won't that throw the station off balance so they can't fire missiles effectively?" Sandy asked.

"If they cut enough of them," Callaghan told her.

"This changes the picture," Hunter said. "Paulson will be in good shape again pretty soon."

"And I think he means what he said about killing the men," Sandy said.

"What the hell's happening on Earth?" Callaghan demanded. "Why haven't they got some missiles on the way?"

"There's the political aspect to be considered," Hunter replied. "All in all, it's a complex picture down there, you can be sure of that. Chaos and confusion. If word has gotten out, there must be panic all over Earth. You've got to remember that they've never had

a dry run on a thing like this. No rehearsal. It's the first time they've actually been faced with destruction from space—the real thing.”

“Maybe they're playing it by ear the same way we are,” Sandy said.

“The way we *were* doing it,” Hunter said. “But that's all over. We've got to split up.”

This frightened Sandy. “But—”

“I'll go to Control and face Paulson. Callaghan, you take Sandy and try to reach the doghouse.”

Surprisingly, Callaghan didn't object. No doubt he too, Hunter thought, had been having thoughts along the same line. Both their efforts to save the station—with water and heat—had failed. There wasn't much more they could do by way of sabotage. The doghouse was all that was left.

“How about me facing Paulson?” Callaghan said.

“It would be all right, but I think you could do a better job at the doghouse. What you'd better do is try to cut it loose and then get far enough away to point a missile at the station.”

The implication of this brought an expression of alarm to Sandy's face. “But you'll be in the station—”

“So will all the rest of the men,” he reminded her.

“Then that's it,” Callaghan said, and a clumsy moment was shaping. The moment when they would move in new directions. Callaghan grinned to cover his emotions. “We made quite a team.”

“And we'll keep right on doing it,” Hunter said. “We'll get things straightened out here yet.”

His smile was false and his heartiness a most transparent mask, and he admired Sandy for her self-control as she took his extended hand and clasped it firmly.

"We'll get together again, I'm sure," she said quietly.

"Of course we will. Now you go left. That will take you toward the manual lock. And maybe you'll find some holes they've cut that you can use."

He watched as they passed the nearby cutting crew without being stopped. The aliens working to let the heat out of the station paid no attention to them. Then Hunter moved in the opposite direction and signaled for an elevator in the spoke at the next intersection. He took off his helmet, sure that gassing the place was not, at the moment, on Paulson's program, and wiped his face as he waited.

Again, with time to think, he felt that surge of complete inadequacy, and he realized how much he had depended on Callaghan's practical brand of simple aggression. The hell with strategy—go out and get 'em. That had been Callaghan's way of doing things, and it was probably superior to Hunter's more cautious policy.

But in the end, he was forced to tell himself, it would probably make no difference. Soon now, missiles would be winging toward the station from Earth if they hadn't already been sent on their way. This seemed a certainty, and with the thought came a certain self-satisfaction. The true story would probably never be known, but if Earth survived, Callaghan and Sandy and he would have helped—perhaps would be responsible for saving the beautiful green globe down there by diverting the three missiles they'd been able to destroy. But, oddly enough, that was the first piece of misinformation that Paulson straightened him out on when he arrived at Control. . . .

"They were only practice shots," Paulson said. "Your playing around with the balance of the station just made it more dangerous down there."

"I see," Hunter answered quietly.

He'd had no trouble at all in entering Control. There had been no guard at the door, and the only aliens he met were in no condition to stop anyone.

Hunter had put his helmet back on, which had been wise because he found Paulson and Jeffroe both wearing helmets in Control, a hole having been cut in the ceiling to let the heat out.

Paulson was suffering no physical discomfort whatever. His manner was alert, his attitude jaunty, but Hunter, after a quick examination of the man's face, reached a definite decision.

The man was not the Paulson he'd known. The plastic surgery work, or whatever had been done to the alien's face, had been of a fantastically advanced nature. It showed a skill far above that of Earth specialists in the field.

But there was a stiffness, an artificiality about the work that could not be hidden. And another of Hunter's uncertainties had been dispelled by Paulson—which was what Hunter had decided to call the alien for want of a better name.

"We really didn't need this face work, chum," the imposter said. "But we didn't expect to just walk into the place. We had a real cute caper figured out. Didn't think you guys were so stupid."

"You're a long way from your objective," Hunter reminded him. "You seem to have the station—yes—but—"

Paulson's laugh was brittle, and Hunter sensed a completely artificial personality-image; one tediously manufactured for the occasion. Talking to this invader, Hunter thought, would tell him little about the true personalities of the race he had to deal with.

"You *are* from Mars, aren't you?" he asked.

"Sure thing," Paulson answered with a kind of cracked heartiness that made Hunter wince.

Jeffroe, seated nearby, made a gesture and opened his mouth to break into the conversation, but then drew back. Hunter, beyond a quick cursory glance, had ignored Jeffroe and given Paulson his whole attention.

"What you'd better do first," Paulson said, "is tell us how to straighten out this heat bit. Then we can plug up the holes we had to make and get down to cases."

Hunter considered the situation swiftly. There now seemed no point in refusing. The Martians were getting rid of the heat, and they didn't need the oxygen in amounts whereby its escape would inconvenience them too greatly.

"All right," he said. "Cut off the power to the water circulation system and throw on the auxilliary. Then replace the main heat-circuit fuses, and things will go back to normal."

"Clever, clever," Paulson grinned. He turned to Jeffroe. "Can you handle that, buster?"

When Jeffroe didn't answer, Hunter glanced at him contemptuously. "He knows that routine," he said. "All officers are put through a course of station maintenance."

"Then get with it," Paulson said. "My pal and I here have some jawing to do."

Fascinated by the language and the jargon Paulson could have gotten only from the TV movies accessible by UHF on Mars, Hunter wanted to inquire into that aspect. But other things seemed far more important at the moment.

"I'm quite harmless to you at the moment," he said, "so why don't you brief me on what's been going on. What are your objectives?"

Paulson appeared to struggle for a few moments with the meaning of Hunter's words. Then he said, "Objective? Oh, sure. We just beat you guys to the punch, chum, that was all."

"You did take the station over, but you certainly must realize that Earth will retaliate. Missiles are probably on the way now."

Paulson grinned and shook his head. "Not hardly. You're way behind the scene. Hell, man! I sent down an ultimatum they chewed over, and they didn't spit it out, either. I told them I wanted total surrender in two hours—that gives them about forty minutes to go—or we'd blast 'em real good." The gay, brittle grin deepened; a grin so out of place and so out of rapport with the situation that it chilled Hunter.

"They spotted the three missiles," Paulson went on, "and they clobbered 'em. But they don't know we aren't on target if we want to be. They don't even know who we are. They don't know a damned thing about us."

"But why are you doing this? What do you want from Earth?"

The question surprised Paulson, if Hunter's judgment of his expression was at all accurate. "What do we want? That's a hell of a thing to ask. You guys started moving in on us. You built this station. When the orbits are right, it swings in on us. We just moved in before you sent an ultimatum to us."

Paulson's language and method of delivery were so unrealistic that Hunter had difficulty in taking it seriously. The whole thing had the aspects of a grade-B drama being acted out before cameras. He had to remind himself that this was far from the case.

"I don't suppose it will do any good to tell you that we had no such intention."

"Are you kidding? We've got the pictures to prove it the other way. You didn't know we've been looking in on you, did you?"

A fantastically naive outlook coupled with a dead scientific ability. That about summed them up, Hunter thought.

"Those pictures you've been seeing," he explained, "have no connection with reality. They're nothing but fictional stories put together for entertainment."

"Oh, sure," Paulson jeered. "We've got twenty-six of your *fictional* attacks on our planet. They're crazy, sure, but that's because your guys down there aren't on the ball. They've got us looking like everything from eight-legged monsters to broads that don't wear any clothes. But one thing comes through sharp and clear—they intend to conquer Mars."

Hunter had never felt so completely frustrated in his life. This was a comedy scene with the fate of Earth hanging in the balance. There was no other way to evaluate it.

"If you'd just suspend operations for a while—"

"Not likely," Paulson retorted. "You killed some of our guys. If you're so friendly, how come?"

"Good lord! Our station had been taken over. You came as a hostile force. We had a right to fight back."

"We didn't kill anybody. Your guys are okay. They're just out for a while."

"But you've threatened to kill hostages."

"Why not? That's your technique. Your guy Hitler made a good thing of it according to our information."

"But Hitler wasn't our *guy*!" Hunter said.

"You mean he was fictitious too?"

"No, but—"

"Well make up your mind, chum. He was or he wasn't."

Hunter felt like gnashing his teeth. How did you go about getting to a person with Paulson's entrenched misinformation? It seemed so terribly futile to even try.

"Oh, by the way," Paulson said, obviously trying for some underplayed effect he'd seen in a cheap Earth movie. "Your pals, the guy and the broad, they goofed real good. Their little idea to blow us up from your doghouse fizzled."

Hunter came out of his chair. "You didn't—"

"Rub them out? No. They're on ice."

Relief swept Hunter. He eased back into his chair, conscious of Paulson's keen scrutiny. Nor was there any madness in the washed-out, colorless eyes.

"You go for the broad, don't you?"

"She's a—friend—"

"You shack up with her?"

"I said she was a friend."

“Okay—okay! Who shacks up with their enemies?”

Paulson's face shaped into a crude leer, and Hunter realized cynicism was a universal reaction. “You know that what you're trying to do is impossible, don't you?”

Paulson went to the Control mike and began talking into it. But in his native tongue, now, and Hunter was intrigued by the highly sibilant singsong. There didn't appear to be any word divisions in the language. It reminded him vaguely of Chinese, yet there was a marked difference. He was sure, however, that the ever-varying pitch was a vital part of the language.

Paulson finished and came back and sat down. He swung one leg over the arm of his chair in a studied gesture of nonchalance.

“Impossible, friend? We've got it made.”

Desperately, Hunter tried to gauge his man. He sensed the possibility of a quick victory here. For all his apparent self-confidence, he saw this synthetic Paulson, by the very nature of the Martian's counterfeit approach, as an impressionable follower rather than a leader.

“I can understand why you feel that way,” Hunter said, “but it just won't work. You've been misinformed about the people of Earth. In the first place, taking the station was easy because we weren't on the alert. We didn't expect a hostile move. It was like—” Hunter searched for a simile—“It was like a band of Indians walking in on a settler—a Texas sodbuster. They could take him easily, but they couldn't take the fort over yonder. And as soon as the bluecoats found what had happened they would run the Indians out.”

Paulson considered the preposterous comparison

gravely. Hunter went on. "Tell me—did you ever see a case where the fort surrendered just because a band of Indians demanded it?"

"But friend," Paulson said, "this isn't Texas. And we aren't pesky redskins. The bad guys are down there on your planet. The bad guys always fold when the going gets tough."

"You're being naive, Paulson—"

"Naive? What's that word? I never heard it."

"It means gullible."

"Never heard that one, either. You're going long-hair on me."

"You're being a sucker! That's what I mean. You're a fall guy for your own wrong ideas. Believe me. I know!"

Paulson cocked an eye and studied Hunter. "You giving me the straight dope, pally?"

"I'm on the level, old buddy. I wouldn't con you. What word did you send down to them?"

"Unconditional surrender."

"Like the war pictures."

"Right. This is war, isn't it?"

"I suppose so, but they won't give up that easily. Missiles are probably on the way now."

Paulson considered this possibility, but without any sign of apprehension. "You mean they'd ignore a flag of truce?"

"What flag of truce? You gave them an ultimatum."

Obviously, Paulson was a little confused on the definitions here. "It's a truce until they answer yes or no, isn't it?"

"No, this is a different thing."

"You mean those varmints would—"

"There would be no dishonor in your evacuating your position. In the first place, you've made the whole move on a misunderstanding of the situation. Earth isn't after your planet."

"That's what the bluecoats told the Indians. 'We don't want your land. We come in peace.' Then, when the Indians laid down their guns, the bluecoats didn't take a piece—they took the whole thing."

"Another thing," Hunter said. "You don't realize what you're up against. The firepower from down there is indescribable. The combined forces of Earth can put a thousand warships into space against you. They've got atomic warheads that can turn this station to vapor. Tell me—could you Martians have *built* this station?"

Paulson considered that carefully. There was a innate honesty about him even as he functioned in his absurd never-never land of fiction.

"It would have been damned tough." But he gave that answer while evidently thinking of something. "A thousand ships! Cripes! We were lucky to get ten buckets into space."

He glanced at the clock. "Time's about up," he muttered.

Hunter realized he was close to success. He'd swung the impressionable Martian from one side to the other. Now, if he could convince him that there would be no reprisals—

"The people of Earth aren't—"

Hunter stopped as the radio speaker cut in. There was a crackle of static, then a clear voice.

"The combined governments of Earth have studied your ultimatum," it said, "and they accept your terms

unconditionally. We can only await further word from you."

Hunter didn't hear the rest of it. He was stunned. He stared at the Martian. The Martian stared back. A grin spread over his face.

"Pally," he said softly, "you were giving me the business. Shame on you . . ."

EARTH HAD surrendered! It was too incredible to contemplate, and for a few moments Hunter saw the reality of the situation on Paulson's side rather than his own. The mad fictional structure under which Paulson functioned was the real truth. His own beliefs and ideas were fantasy.

It was hard to think otherwise, the pattern of things fitting perfectly into the formula for a grade-B melodrama. A handful of space adventurers bringing a mighty planet into submission. David and Goliath. A lone detective against the rooted powers of corruption. A single cowboy, honest and pure, bringing the bad-guy gunslinger to his knees.

But then Hunter had a second thought on the subject. David and Goliath was not fiction. It had the authenticity of the Bible behind it.

Groping like a bemused idiot, he searched his mind for other instances of ridiculous impossibilities. He couldn't think of any, but he was sure they must exist. After all, a unit of weird play-actors had just boarded the space station of the planetary system's most power-

ful nation and had gotten an unconditional surrender from everybody involved.

Paulson sat sprawled in his chair gazing at the ceiling with a pensive look on his synthetic face. He was no doubt unconsciously aping the triumphant hero of a movie.

"I wonder," he muttered, "if those joes down there would double-cross me."

"What do you mean? You just heard them surrender."

"Uh-huh. But you started me thinking. Maybe it's a stall."

"I don't think so."

"You just said I couldn't trust 'em."

"But they hadn't surrendered then."

"Does surrendering make 'em honest?"

Hunter threw up his hands. "You just don't understand."

Paulson slumped deeper into his chair and set his fingers together in a steeple. And it was only now that Hunter noticed his gloves. They were skin-tight and flesh-colored, and Hunter wondered what they covered. A green skin, perhaps?

"I've got to do some thinking," Paulson said. "Get lost."

Hunter blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"What for?"

"I mean—am I free to go?"

"Just give me your word you won't try no funny stuff."

Hunter was tempted to ask for a clear definition of *funny stuff*, but he decided he'd better let well enough

alone. While Paulson seemed friendly, almost personally so, Hunter sensed that he could change in an instant. It all depended upon the role he assumed at any give time. Perhaps this one would bore him soon and he might decide to play a concentration camp overseer.

"May I see my two friends?"

"Sure, sure. Ask the guard out in the hall. Go wherever you want to. But if a guard stops you, go the other way."

As Hunter left Control, he conceded that Paulson had added a certain originality of his own to the role he played. It was not entirely a cardboard rendition of the character he was portraying; this character, as nearly as Hunter could tell, was a casual mixture of the stereotyped gangster with the nobler philosophies of the early West mixed in. He wondered what the result would have been if Paulson had chosen to be the hero of the conventional sex drama. Sandy, he conceded, might have been in trouble under such circumstances.

He found a fishbowl-helmeted invader outside the door, one who knew the jargon; and he wondered if he'd been right in thinking that only officers had been given the android-type camouflage of Earthman faces.

"What's the gripe, buddy?" the guard asked.

"The head man says I can see the guy and the broad," Hunter replied.

"Okay." The guard pointed with his rifle. "Down in the mess."

Hunter decided that meant the dining lounge. He had a vague recollection that in the army it was referred to as *mess*. He moved in that direction.

He walked slowly and pondered the stunning sur-

render of Earth. How could such a thing have come about . . . ?

Callaghan had an answer, one with a depth of thought behind it that surprised Hunter.

"They're getting soft down there."

Callaghan was a picture of dejection. He and Sandy had been detained in one of the small dining cabins off the main hall. They were guarded by one of the diving-suited aliens, but he had evidently been apprised of Hunter's new freedom because he stepped aside after giving an exaggerated Nazi salute. Aware that this did not have the remotest connection with political ideology, Hunter had gone on in and closed the door behind him.

Sandy had come to her feet and gone quickly into his arms. She buried her face against him for a few moments while she struggled with her emotions. Then she straightened and smiled and said quietly, "I'm glad you're all right, Fred."

Callaghan had stayed where he was, in a chair with his elbows on his knees and his shoulders bowed.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"The surrender? I guess it is. I heard it come over the radio first-hand."

They didn't ask each other how things had been; Callaghan did not explain why they'd failed. The self-evidence of the failure was enough.

The surrender. Its importance transcended all else.

"When you think about it," Callaghan grumbled, "I guess it's logical."

"How can you say that?" Hunter demanded angrily.

"Look back. Analyze things a little. It's been a long time since anybody on Earth fought a war."

"You're out of your mind. The world has been in a state of cold war for—"

"Sure, but what the hell is a cold war? It's nothing but a process of avoiding real war. The whole of Earth is saturated with negative thinking—that war has to be avoided at all costs. In crisis after crisis, the pitch has been, 'My God! We can't fight! We'll destroy the globe.' So what did you expect?"

It was so logical as to be suspicious. Too simple. But Hunter could find no words of rebuttal. From their point of view down there, the threat from the space station constituted the threat of annihilation. The world population had been conditioned against world annihilation. Avoid it at any cost. Honor? What was that? Bravery? Don't be silly. Who wants to be a dead hero?

Thus, instead of denying Callaghan's argument, Hunter found himself dredging up supporting thoughts.

But he didn't voice them. And he warmed inside when he found that Callaghan hadn't caught the contagion.

"I've got an idea," Callaghan said in a low voice.

Hunter made a wry face. "I hope it's better than the last one I had."

"We've got to kill a couple of those diving-suit characters."

"What good will that do?"

"We need their suits. Then, whatever we can do to save the station will have to be done before they find out we're hiding in those stupid suits."

"We might be able to move around for a while, but what could we accomplish now that Earth's surrendered?"

"Deactivate the warheads on the missiles. Either that or cripple the range finders."

"Both areas are heavily guarded," Sandy said. "They brought us past the Missile Control cabins, and there were squads of the creatures in front of every door."

"Maybe we ought to go underground again," Hunter suggested.

"We couldn't get ten feet that way. They've got patrols covering the vents. Our only way is to walk in as a part of their outfit."

"We could be sure of success one way," Hunter said. "That is, if we could get into the master cabin in the missile section."

"You mean—"

"What else would be certain? Explode a warhead."

"Suicide," Sandy murmured with a catch in her throat.

Callaghan's eyes were narrowed. He spoke with bitterness. "There's only one thing. They quit down there without firing a shot. Are they worth it?"

"Our situations are different," Hunter said. "I've been away from Earth for a long time, and even though I got the idea recently that I might be in shape to go back, I'm sure I couldn't stand the pressure. So

it's only a dream to me. I wouldn't be giving up a thing—"

"But your life," Sandy said.

"A restricted life isn't worth as much as a free one. So I'm not in a position to tell you what to do, or to urge you in the least."

Callaghan snorted. "You know what we're sitting here doing, don't you? We're acting the same way they did down there before they decided to surrender. Weighing the values. Callaghan's homely face was set in an expression of rage and dignity. "To hell with them! To hell with everything. I'm interested in me! The way *I* feel. I don't want to live to be conquered. If I can take those bastards with me, I'll go here and now." He looked at Hunter and Sandy through cold, somber eyes. "And if some good people have to go with me, I'm sorry."

"I'm ready," Sandy said.

"First," Hunter said quietly, "we'd better find out if the truce I made with Paulson—"

"It isn't Paulson, is it, Fred?"

"No. It's a Martian, but he likes that name. First we'd better find out if the truce goes for you two also."

Callaghan shrugged. "I'll try walking out."

"If they let you out, we'll meet you by the recreation-hall door in five minutes," Sandy said.

"Okay." He obviously understood that Sandy wanted a few minutes alone with Hunter.

Nor did Sandy waste any of the precious seconds she'd been given. As the door closed behind Callaghan, she moved close to Hunter.

"Fred, I love you. And to me, it's all very simple. If you die here, I want to die with you. If all this passes over and you stay here, I want to stay with you."

Only a situation such as they were in could have justified such a declaration, and not many women could have made it even then. There had never been a reference to love between them. There had never been a kiss.

"Sandy, you don't know what you're saying."

"Let's not waste time, Fred. We haven't got it. No time for courtship and finding each other. Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you, Sandy. But I haven't let myself think of—"

"Then *do* think of it while you're kissing me."

She went into his arms, and what they knew might be the whole physical contact of their love came about during the next cruelly short minutes. Then Sandy drew back.

Hunter's mind was in a whirl of chaos. But there was a warmth and an exultation in him such as he'd never known. Quite suddenly, everything was changed. Up to that moment, his fight had been for the only thing he had in life—Fred Hunter Jr. His son, who had just begun to live and had the right, with so many other sons, to the free life of an Earthman.

But the one had suddenly become three. Fred Jr., Sandy—and himself. He wanted to live! He wanted to go back to Earth and have a wife and a son.

And he knew he would be able to if—as Sandy had put it—if *all this passes over*.

"Honey," he said, "I know there isn't much time,

but I just discovered something else. I've been feeling sorry for myself—so damned sorry for myself that—well, I can't explain, but I know! Now I *know*. What's been wrong with me. I want you to stay here. Stay here and wait for me. When Callaghan comes back, tell him there were things I had to do." Hunter kissed Sandy quickly, and turned to the door. "Tell him he's on his own and good luck!"

Outside, Hunter found that the guard had left. Evidently Paulson had given the three of them the run of the non-vital areas of the station. But Hunter didn't head for the other side of the doughnut. He returned to Control and strode in past the guard who stood at the door.

Paulson was rolling some charts up. He was surprised to see Hunter. He put a consciously loose grin on his face and said, "I thought you and your pals would be trying to get through Security to blow up the station or something."

"I thought of it."

"I figured you might try to kill a couple of my men and steal their suits. By the way, they have to wear those outfits to keep your damned thick oxygen from smothering them."

"I thought that was probably the reason."

"Are you really that smart, or are you just kidding me?"

"Forget it. Let's both quit kidding each other. What was your idea in faking that surrender broadcast from Earth?"

Paulson blinked. "Cripes! How in the hell did you figure that out?"

Hunter grinned. The grin was generated partially by Paulson's surprise and partly by the new life that was singing through him. It was as though he were a man new-born. And it took the rebirth to make him realize that, by comparison, the old Fred Hunter had been a walking dead man.

"I was stupid in not figuring it out sooner. I know my people. They may be a little slow in reacting down there because they aren't under one head. A lot of minds have to get together. But when they do, chum, and it's probably already happened, you're dead. We're all dead."

This puzzled Paulson. "You mean they won't send a rescue squad to get their guys off?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Then the Japanese must be in charge."

"Why?"

"They're the kamikaze boys. Not you white guys."

"You watched the wrong movies, Paulson. Do you think for a minute they'd hesitate to trade the handful of men on this station for the security of Earth?"

"That's a new angle," Paulson said with a kind of thoughtful uneasiness.

"What was your idea?" Hunter demanded. "What did you expect to accomplish with your fake surrender trick?"

One thing Paulson had learned was embarrassment. He grinned and tapped his helmet in the neighborhood of his forehead. "The bean, old chappie. The skull. I want you on my team, and so I used my head. I figured the thing to do was make you think your team had gone to the showers."

He beamed at Hunter as though waiting for his praise.

"Why do you need me?"

"Your knowhow, chum. You see, we goofed a little bit when we took over. We sent all your boys to dreamland, and we need your help on the missiles and anti-missiles."

"How do you know I've got any?"

Paulson's expression changed. It turned icy—as cold as Valley Forge. If he had practiced this expression, he'd learned it well.

"You'd better have, friend."

Prior to Sandy's declaration, Hunter knew exactly what he would have done. He would have told Paulson to go to hell without even considering the demand. But now it was different. No vestige of his martyr complex was left. He wanted to live. This and this alone turned him into a dangerous adversary.

"What's the real situation on Earth?"

"As near as I can figure from monitoring their radio, panic and confusion. But they'll shape up, I guess."

"They'll shape up."

"That's where you come in. You're now my Vice President in Charge of Missiles."

Hunter's momentary impression of Paulson was that of a child playing with lethal toys and thus a very dangerous child. He neither accepted nor declined the post. "Tell me something else. What's your master plan? How do you think you can possibly subjugate Earth?"

Paulson frowned. He was handling his artificial face with ever-increasing skill.

"Subjugate. I'm not with that one."

"Conquer—take over. It's a trifle bigger than this station. A few more people. And what have you got? A ship that wouldn't lift off Earth and two hundred handicapped men at the most."

"Cut that up a little. Why wouldn't my ship lift off Earth?"

Hunter controlled his irritation. He hated the interruptions, but there was nothing he could do about them because Paulson obviously intended to learn as he went along. He was a child hungry for knowledge.

"It's geared to the Martian atmosphere, or rather, lack of it. The difference in thrusts involved is enormous, and I don't think you built the ship to the tougher specifications."

Paulson nodded with approval of Hunter's brilliant reasoning.

"And my handicapped men?"

"They'd be sitting ducks on Earth in those space-suits."

"Sitting ducks—" Paulson mused.

"Never mind! We'll have a language lesson tomorrow. Keep your mind on what's important!"

The demand was both that and a probing gesture. Hunter wanted to find out how sharply he could push Paulson without retaliation in kind.

He was nowhere near the danger point because Paulson steepled his gloved fingers and played the part of a savant expounding wisdom.

"A good little man can always beat a good big man."

Hunter blinked. There had been fight pictures on

TV, of course. It seemed that Paulson had studied them.

"You've got that backwards. The truism is that a good big man can always beat a good little man."

"The hell with it," Paulson retorted. "We blast. That's where you come in. We play fair, though. We wait 'til they fire. Then we knock out their missile and blast one of their cities. Which city do you think we ought to blast, pally?"

"Will you quit calling me that?"

As Paulson grinned, Hunter growled at himself inwardly. Was he going to let this Martian actor get to him through minor irritations?

"I don't think we ought to blast any of them. It won't be necessary. This station wasn't built as a jump-off pad to attack Mars. I told you you were wrong on that."

"Sure, *you* told me. And if it's true, Earth's got nothing to worry about. What's one little city to them?"

"You don't believe me?"

"Sure I do."

"Then why do you want to blast a city?"

"Because when they know I mean business, they're sure to be peaceful. After all, that's your own way of doing things."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't there a saying on Earth—Remember Hiroshima?"

"That was different!"

"Tell me, pally, how was it different?"

He did not give Hunter a chance to answer as he suddenly slipped into a new role. His face went flat

and expressionless. "We've horsed around enough. Come on. We're going to Missile Control."

He marched out into the corridor, and Hunter followed him, swiftly assessing the situation. He still had a little time. Paulson had said Earth must fire first; that he would be required to knock out the missile. A few hours earlier, he would have told Paulson to go to hell. But now it was different. His thinking had come down to a highly subjective point. An Earth missile hitting the station would kill Sandy. Perhaps she *would* die. Perhaps they would all die. The odds said so.

But with anti-missiles at hand, he wasn't going to allow her death. . . .

TWO UPPER-ECHELON Martians stood before the missile control board. Their synthetic faces wore expressions of uncertainty. These expressions turned to relief when Paulson and Hunter appeared.

Paulson maintained the cold exterior. "At ease," he snapped, the command changing the attitudes of the two Martians not a whit.

"Your new head man," Paulson said. "What does the radar show?"

"Nothing—sir."

There was a faintly insolent inflection on the *sir*, but Hunter thought no negative implications were involved. The Martian had merely been intrigued with that film bit and was making it a part of his image.

Paulson took no offense. He addressed Hunter. "What do you think the situation is down there?"

"I have no way of knowing."

"They're your people," Paulson replied.

"I'd say that they've been slow in meeting the crisis. International communication was probably the stumbling block. Checking the situation and informing each other. The airwaves were probably full of denials

and counter-denials. But, very soon, they'll join in mutual defense and start throwing warheads."

"A neat summation," Paulson said. "But if they don't hurry up, I won't wait. We'll start throwing first."

"What's the thinking behind that change?"

"Can't give 'em too much time. Can't let 'em get set. They may throw more stuff than we can stop."

The station wasn't locked into its orbit. With enough warning, Hunter could get it out of the way. But Paulson hadn't thought of that and Hunter, at least at the moment, was not inclined to bring it to his attention.

"Did you get the water balance straightened out?"

"Everything is on key. This damn board is automatic, isn't it?"

Hunter's eyes were grim. "I couldn't handle it if it wasn't."

"Blip on the scope," one of the Martians announced, and even with the deadly seriousness of the situation, Hunter heard it as a comedy line.

Crazy, he thought, with a bemusement hard to shake away. He turned and looked at the radarscope and saw the lethal speck of light bearing in. A second one appeared behind it. This was official now. Earth had gotten organized, and while the time span seemed eternal to Hunter—as though Earth had finally awakened from a deep sleep—he realized that they'd moved with fair speed. He knew also that there had been queries, communication, which he'd not been in on. Paulson hadn't informed him on that score.

But it didn't matter now. He turned to the control board. Paulson was watching him.

"By the way," Paulson said, "Your friend Callaghan is on ice again. He tried to knife one of my men."

"Is he hurt?"

"He's got a headache."

"What about the rest of the men? How long does that gas hold?"

"They'll be snoozing for another five or six hours."

"Where's Jeffroe?"

"Him?" Paulson sneered. "I locked him up to get him out of the way. He's a zero."

"Are any of the station men conscious?"

"It was a clean sweep."

Hunter's mouth bent into a mirthless smile as he studied the board. "What would you do if I'd been caught by the gas, too?"

"I'd have been in trouble. But I was playing it by ear when I found I could walk into the joint and my luck held. Leave it at that. And watch what you're doing there."

It wasn't a complex operation. A switch activated the radar guide beams and a light went on when they found the target and began following it. Another switch brought the heat sensor units in the two anti-missile warheads into play, and Hunter watched one of the green bulbs for the signal.

Then he threw the interlocking switch and waited again as the two blips arced across the scope. Even with his everyday knowledge and familiarity with things of this nature, he had always stood somewhat in awe of their functionings. And the feeling came again with something added as the radar talked to the heat and they both conferred with the stabilizer and

then mutually consulted with the computer and okayed the flashing of a green master light.

Hunter felt a twinge at the thought of that light not going on. Suppose its red companion had flashed instead? Then he would have had to turn to Paulson and say, "Sorry, old man, we're cooked. What gods do you pray to on Mars?"

But that hadn't been necessary, and he saw the precise electrical unit as a friend who stood intent on keeping Sandy from being killed.

"Take 'em, baby," he muttered.

That alerted Paulson. "What are you muttering about? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. And I have a suggestion."

"Spill it."

"When invasion time comes, why don't you try slingshots and bows and arrows? Your men could catch onto them real quick."

"Very funny," Paulson commented.

There was a faint sound from the bowels of the missile shafts, and two more blips appeared. Hunter watched tensely. The blips began to bend, and he traced ahead with his mind's eye, followed the trajectories toward intercept as the finders in the station had proposed them.

Paulson watched also, and Hunter noted that his gloved hands were doubled into fists behind his back.

"Go you bulldogs! Drive down the field!" Paulson muttered.

College football movies, no doubt.

Intercept approached. And when no follow-up blips appeared on the scope, Hunter realized what

had happened. Earth had underestimated the situation. They'd sent too little. And too little might fast develop into too late.

Also, he realized his own test was fast approaching. Paulson's next order. Take out one of the cities down there. What would he do?

He might have planned a dozen things before the fact, but it was only when facing the situation that he could truly know. The decision itself was still to be made, but his loyalties had dwindled. He thought only of two people. His son, on Earth, and the woman he loved at the station. But when the demand came to fire at Earth, he would pass a point of no return.

Paulson had asked for only one city, that was true, but Hunter had no doubts as to escalation. Earth would fight back. There would have to be a second city, and a third, so he could find no comfort in hoping that one shot would do.

Nor would he be justified in banking on Earth's anti-missile equipment. His guilt would be the same whether it succeeded or failed. Again, he could not hide behind hope.

The station anti-missiles did not fail. There were two succeeding interceptions—suddenly enlarged blips on the scope—and Paulson clasped his hands over his head and shook them in a victory gesture.

"Bull's-eye. Now you're on our team, buddy. And I'm going to let you pick the target. What city did you maybe get a parking ticket in?"

"It isn't as simple as that," Hunter said. "Firing interceptors is simple beside pinpointing a target on Earth."

"You're telling me you haven't got the knowhow?"

"I'm telling you it isn't all automatic."

"And I think that's the crap."

"The firing data has to be fed into the computer."

"Then get feeding."

"I have to have the data, first."

"Where do you get it?"

"In Control."

"What do you have to have?"

"Data on our trajectory. The Earth is moving four ways at once. We're moving around it. The missile takes X length of time to reach Earth. Our target is located at Y spot on Earth. You don't figure out problems like that on a ouija board."

Paulson didn't ask what a ouija board was. Hunter got the feeling he didn't give a damn as he turned angrily toward the door.

"Come on then, let's get with it." He looked back at his two subordinates. "Let me know if you sight any more blips."

Hunter then followed Paulson along the corridor, amazed that he'd gotten away with it. It seemed incredible to him that Paulson did not question his statements. The data he'd outlined had been the original problem of missile firing. It had been long since figured out and automated. He wondered how long he could stall Paulson with the outrageous lie.

Back in Control, Paulson dropped sullenly into a chair and Hunter, trying to make his act look convincing, took a pencil and pad from a desk and began reading dials.

As he put figures on the pad, he asked, "How is it on Mars? You do live in caves, don't you?"

"Where else? We went underground over ten thousand years ago."

"How were you able to build your spaceships?"

"Watch what you're doing," Paulson said, "and don't talk so much." But then he promptly answered the question. "They date farther back than that. They were used by the Old Civilization." He paused and his eyes went vague. "That was the time of Martian Glory." He focused his eyes on Hunter with a touch of contempt. "My ancestors traveled to Earth when yours hadn't crawled out of the sea yet."

"What happened to that civilization?"

"We don't really know. Legends claim that it split into two parts and the side in control went and found a better planet in a different system. We found their ships, though, buried in the sand while we could still stay on top. Then we began to develop our own civilization for survival. It wasn't 'til a few thousand years later that we had time to look into the spaceships and analyze their mechanics."

"What's your position? You must be pretty high up in the government."

"I'm—"

But Hunter didn't find out what Paulson was. The latter suddenly scowled at him. "Just what the hell *are* you doing there?"

"I've got to get the data," Hunter said patiently. "It's a four-sectional problem facing the computer. The first problem involves the interaction of two jet streams—one from the airflow around the missile, and

the other from the rocket stream. It becomes a wave-recirculation problem and the computer is already primed to apply the Method of Characteristics approach. The aerodynamicist who—"

Paulson had sprung to his feet. "What the hell kind of crap are you giving me?"

"You asked me."

"It's a stall! Nothing but a goddam stall!"

Hunter took a deep breath.

"Look here, I—"

He stopped, and they both looked up at the ceiling. Water was falling. The sprinkling system had been turned on.

"There must be a fire somewhere," Hunter observed mildly.

At that moment the door opened, and one of Paulson's lieutenants raised a hand in sort of a saluting gesture and spoke in his native tongue.

Paulson lashed back at him in the same tongue, and he left as fast as he'd arrived.

"That bastard got away. He killed one of my men and he's sneaking around somewhere in his suit. I gave orders to gun him down."

"He must have turned the sprinkler system on."

"Well, damn it to hell, go turn it off!"

It occurred to Hunter, grotesquely, that under the right circumstances it would have been easy to like Paulson. But at the moment, if he hadn't been deprived of his gun, he would have promptly killed the Martian.

"I'm no plumber," he retorted. "Turn it off yourself."

"It was the crap, wasn't it? All this data bit."

"Figure it out for yourself, then."

"Okay. I've been a nice guy. Now I'll get tough."

He went to the door and shouted in high-pitched Martian. Then he vanished along the corridor, and Hunter waited, not knowing what to expect. Two of the lower-echelon men entered. One of them trained a handgun on him and motioned with it. He moved toward the door and was taken into the corridor with the gun at his back.

As they proceeded, they met Paulson, scowling in anger. He'd reversed himself and was hurrying in the other direction. He would have ignored Hunter if the latter hadn't addressed him.

"Paulson! Use your head. You can't win, whatever you do. You're an amateur up against professionals. I told you before and I'll tell you again. Earth has no hostile designs on Mars. But if you put a missile down there, they will have. They'll send a fleet out and blow your people out of their caves. Use common sense, Paulson!"

Paulson had been listening, the scowl still on his face. He had not stopped, however, but as he passed, he turned and was walking slowly backward, watching Hunter like a sulky child. His reply was straightforward and to the point.

"Put him on ice. I'll see him later."

They took Hunter to a small cabin nearby where the ventilation grate was too small to crawl through and locked him in. He felt as though he'd been walking in a heavy downpour, and he stood as far from the cabin's sprinkler unit as possible and shook the water out of his hair. He was grinning in spite of himself,

and he silently lauded Callaghan for his efforts. There was an appreciable nuisance value to turning on the sprinkler system, and as yet the Martians hadn't figured out how to turn it off.

But they were trying, and Hunter laughed aloud as the lights went off. "Wrong switch."

The water poured down for another five minutes, and Hunter was standing in six inches of it before the rain stopped. He watched it gurgle down into the drains that would carry it back into utility circulation and passed the time by wondering what was happening on Earth. They'd seen their two missiles aborted. What was the next move in their plan?

He had been trying to keep his mind off Sandy, but he gave that up and allowed her image to come into his mind. He didn't think Paulson would harm her. That didn't seem to be his style. In fact, Paulson measured up as a pretty decent character in Hunter's book. If the idiot would only listen to reason.

But Hunter knew that nations had been decimated because idiots refused to listen to reason, so he could hardly exonerate Paulson on those grounds.

He paced the cabin like a caged tiger, trying the door several times although he knew it was locked.

Then he tried it again and it opened. He'd jerked the knob out of the hand of a fishbowl-helmeted Martian.

"Okay, buster," the Martian said. "We're going to see the wheel, so be a good boy and we'll let you keep your head on straight."

They'd really worked at the hep dialogue, Hunter thought. But he was wondering mainly what Paulson had in store for him next. Would he try torture

to force him to fire the missile? Hunter's smile was grim and humorless. He'd been there before. He doubted if Paulson could dream up any form of physical torture that could exceed that in his memory.

They reached Missile Control, and the Martian opened the door. Hunter went inside.

Sandy was tied to a chair with a gag in her mouth. . . .

"OKAY, buster," Paulson said. "We're going to play it your way."

"My way!" Hunter retorted. "Since when is abusing women my way?"

He lunged toward the chair in which Sandy had been tied, but three of the Martians were able to restrain him. Her ankles were tied to the chair legs and her hands lashed behind the upright back in true grade-B melodrama fashion. The gag in her mouth didn't seem necessary to Hunter, but it completed the classic picture.

"I've picked the city," Paulson said. "Washington. And I'll give you ten minutes to get that missile into space."

Hunter turned toward the board.

"Hold it, chum. Let me give you the whole picture. You've got no margin for error. If the missile goes off-target, your girl friend gets a hot brand put on her pretty face. How do you like those apples?"

It was the triumph of Paulson's whole crazy conception, his idea of how things were done on Earth; so incredible, Hunter had to believe it was a cruel farce.

But it was no such thing. It was in deadly earnest.

"Ten minutes," Paulson said.

"But what good will hitting Earth do you?" Hunter pleaded.

Paulson put the sneer on. "We knock out the establishment, baby. Then we've got it made."

"But you've been misinformed! It's not like that at all!"

"Hit Washington or—"

He glanced toward the door where two of his men were entering. They'd sloshed through the wet corridor carrying one of the larger trays from the commissary. On the tray, a small fire burned, a fire built from slivers of one of the chairs in the Commander's dining cabin, the only genuine wooden pieces in the station.

But that was not all. Lying on the tray was the long handle of a soup ladle, the bowl part twisted off. The end of the handle was twisted into a flat, circular surface.

Hunter roared out a protest and lunged, but four Martians seized him and their combined strength was enough. He recognized the play. Paulson had gone back to the TV westerns. The fire, the branding iron, the virtuous maiden used to force the hero into ignoble actions.

"Paulson! You're crazy as a coot! Untie her. Cut out this nonsense!"

"A nice brand on her pretty face. Like I said. Your way, baby."

"But it's not our way. All those movies were pure fiction. Earth people don't act this way."

"Knock out Washington, baby. I'm not kidding."

And Hunter knew Paulson spoke the truth. He meant what he said. Bolstered by what he considered Earth procedure, he would go through with it. Then a thought struck him that brought desperate hope.

"But you never saw a girl actually hurt. Doesn't that prove my point?"

"They always cut that part out . . . or the guy gave in. That's what you're going to do. Get to work on that board."

One of the Martians had taken the handle out of the fire and was approaching Sandy with the standard leer on his artificial face.

Hunter turned toward the control board. Paulson held up a gloved hand. The Martian stopped.

The time of decision had come for Hunter. He knew that Paulson had meant what he'd said about a miss. If the warhead did not hit its target, the Martian would do his work with the makeshift branding iron.

He began setting the controls even as he fought with himself. But as he worked, the mental struggle went on. They were all sure to die anyhow. This crime he was committing would kill hundreds of thousands of people, and it would achieve nothing for Paulson. Sandy was going to die. The disfigurement of her face meant nothing. That left the pain. Would he be able to spread infinitely greater pain and agony over an Earth city to prevent the few moments of agony she would suffer?

Sandy was watching him, her eyes above the gag stark. He knew what they were telling him:

No, Hunter. No—No, Fred. Don't do it. Never mind me. Don't do it!

That was what her eyes said, but Hunter went on

setting the controls. Deep in the station, a hydrogen warhead was moving in its cradle, pointing its ugly nose into a deadly trajectory.

Red lights flashed and faded. Green lights flared on and held steady. The deadly pattern shaped as sweat poured off Hunter's face.

"You're stalling, man."

"Shut up," Hunter snarled.

Paulson grinned.

Then there was the crash of a door opening, and Hunter turned and all sense of reality vanished. It *was* a play act. A cheap, lousy, second-rate melodrama, because Callaghan was standing in the doorway with two Martian pistols trained on the scene.

But even he was amazed. For a few moments, he stood staring like an actor who had forgotten his lines. "What the hell is this?" he mouthed.

Hunter heard laughter inside himself; and the old, corny words long vanished from Earth drama, surviving only in the old movies that went on and on.

The villian foiled. The hero arrives in the nick of time.

The scene was over. Now it was time for the actors to take off their make-up and go home.

But the melodrama played on, aided by Hunter, who lunged at Paulson even as he wondered whether the assembled Martians had sense enough to know this was the time to stand to with their hands up.

They didn't. They charged Callaghan, and the handguns coughed out their gas loads in quick succession. Three men dropped at Callaghan's feet, and that gave the rest of them the idea.

Paulson, as an objective of Hunter's rage, was no

problem physically. Hunter could have broken the slight body inside the suit with a twist of his fists.

Not that Paulson was a coward. As Hunter lunged, Paulson started a long, roundhouse right, the variety expected in all movie fights, the exaggerated swing that is so easily blocked by the hero.

Hunter blocked it, but he had only the hard, knuckle-bruising surface of Paulson's helmet against which to retaliate. His punch knocked Paulson down, and the Martian struggled gamely to rise.

In a flurry of pure frustration, Hunter unclasped the Martian's helmet and pulled it off.

And now, satisfying retaliation was coupled with a certain curiosity. What was the Martian reaction to the heavy atmosphere of the station? Hunter held the struggling Paulson on the floor and watched for reaction.

Paulson was in trouble almost instantly. He was suffering. "Take it easy, pal," he muttered.

"You crazy bastard—" Hunter grated.

But a lot of his anger was directed at himself. Even with the justification involved, even at the height of his towering rage, he had the feeling that he was mauling a child.

"Take it easy on the face, pal," Paulson gasped. "It wasn't easy to make."

"You're through, Paulson. Tell them to untie Miss Rothman. Then surrender this station to me."

"Let's negotiate," Paulson said weakly.

A comedian to the end, Hunter thought. "How long can you live without the helmet to thin down your air?"

"We start getting sick pretty soon."

"Then get with it, *pally*, or you're going to be sicker than you have any idea."

But a new aspect of the situation intruded at this point. A voice coming in over the radio on the control board.

"What the hell goes on in there? Answer—repeat—answer. You've got sixty seconds."

It was Masters' voice. Callaghan belted one of his handguns and leaped to the board to snap on the scanner. He swung it in a circle.

Outside, the station was ringed by countless fighting ships. Battle craft with varying insignia. The combined fleets of Earth.

But Hunter, still partially lost in the cockeyed shooting script of the production, got a different impression.

The Indians all daubed up in their war paint surrounding the beleaguered wagon train.

Then he came out of his bemusement and jumped to the mike. "Hold off with the fire," he called. "Repeat, hold off with the fire. It's okay in here. Move in and board."

"Is that you, Hunter?"

"Yes. Everything is under control here." He turned hard eyes on Paulson who was getting feebly back into his helmet. "Everything is under control, isn't it, chum?"

"Sure, pal," Paulson moaned dismally. "It's under control."

Callaghan was disappointed. He glowered at the defeated Martian leader. "Hell," he muttered. "No competition. I only got to kill a handful of the bastards!"

No one had obeyed Hunter's order to release Sandy. He crossed the cabin to do it himself. Gently, he removed the gag, and then went to work on the cords that bound her to the chair.

"Are you all right?"

Her hand brushed his face as soon as it was freed. "I'm fine," she said. "And I'm very proud of you—for not killing him."

Hunter slanted a glare at the defeated Martian leader, who still sat on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms clasped around them.

"A bust," Paulson mourned. "A real bust."

And never in his life had Hunter felt more like laughing. . . .

"THERE'LL be hell to pay over this," Masters fumed darkly.

But Hunter, caught in a calm mood of anti-climax, couldn't get very excited nor drum up much indignation. It was over now. Everything else would be conversation.

"What will happen to Jeffroe?"

"Trial for criminal negligence. Maybe execution."

"I suppose there'll be a big investigation with every politician on Earth getting in on the act."

Masters glanced at Hunter curiously. "What have you been reading lately?"

"Why?"

"The way you talk. You sound like—"

"Like the old TV movies? Uh-huh. It's the company I've been keeping. These Martians are a strange lot."

"The crazy bastards! Thinking they could take this station!"

"You'd be surprised how close they came to collecting the whole pot. What have you done with the fake Paulson?"

"He's locked in one of the restraining cabins with a couple of his top men."

"Mind if I talk to him?"

Masters replied, "Be my guest," as he made a wry face. As Hunter smiled, Masters said, "I know a few of those old cliches myself. . . ."

Hunter left and went to the restraining cells, the jail of the station. On the way, he stopped to pick up Sandy.

As they walked along the corridor, he said, "I think I'll have a try at going back to Earth."

"Why?"

"Why? Isn't the answer to that obvious?"

"I'm not sure. I want you to come back to Earth, of course, but not for me. I'll stay out here with you. I wouldn't want you to risk it if there is the least danger—"

Hunter wanted to stop and take her in his arms. But there would be plenty of time for that. And the warm feeling of quiet closeness as they walked side by side was a precious thing also.

There was a guard in front of Paulson's restraint cabin, but he allowed Hunter and Sandy to enter without question. They went in and closed the door, and Hunter's jaw dropped at the scene that confronted them.

A makeshift altar of some kind had been arranged on a chair. Paulson's two lieutenants stood at attention against the wall, and Paulson himself was kneeling before the altar. He had a knife in his hand.

"My God! Hari-kari!" Hunter exclaimed. "This tears it!"

Paulson looked up sadly. "One must die with honor." There was a pathetic dignity in his tone.

Hunter kept a straight face even though he felt like

laughing. He took the knife from Paulson and regarded him as a disapproving adult would regard a disobedient child.

"You've got it all wrong, chum. This just isn't the way any more. What do you think you are, a Japanese emperor?"

"I have the right to avoid the shame of a public execution."

"Cut it out! Nobody's going to execute anybody."

"Death is the reward for defeat."

"Look, pal. Be sensible. Earth has been hoping to meet up with your people for centuries. And they didn't have any plans to conquer the planet, no matter what you think. They want peace and friendship and co-prosperity. That's the theme nowadays. So do you think their public relations people would let them start off by killing the first Martians they make contact with? Not hardly."

"Your words are very encouraging."

"Paulson, you're an idiot. Get up off your knees and get ready for the new interplanetary era that's coming. There'll be a little of this restraint nonsense until they find out the score and have a few conferences, but it won't last. You're going to be a big man, pally."

"A big wheel?"

"The biggest. And now, congratulate me and my future bride. Do you have love and marriage on Mars?"

Paulson arose and bowed. "Oh, indubitably," he murmured in a polished drawing-room manner.

"*Indubitably?*" Hunter marveled. "Where did you get that word?"

"In a movie starring your Ronald Colman," Paul-

son said. "And by the way, do you have any new movies here at the station I might view?"

Hunter laughed as he squeezed Sandy's hand and thought of what had taken place. The comedy that had almost broken up Earth.

And it was funny, except for one thing. The breaking up had come too close to happening literally.

Too close for the really loud belly laughs the performances had merited. . . .

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