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PAWN OF THE SPACE INVADERS

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THE MARTIAN MISSILE

DAVID GRINNELL



**Complete &
Unabridged**

THE MAN WHO RODE THE SPUTNIK

The dying Martian said, "I am the bearer of a message. It is written in molecular charges on the bone of your left arm. Nobody can read and remove that message but my people. If you do not deliver it, you will die painfully. Your only hope of avoiding that fate is to deliver the message."

That was Kermit Langley's reward for rescuing this space creature from his crashed ship. Like any other man, Kermit wanted to live—and the only way he could would be to try to carry out the Martian's command.

Only how can you get to Mars—and beyond—when the year is now and the best that the Earth has in space-rockets are unmanned Luniks and one-way miniature Discoverers?

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The Altaireans

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The Thubanese

They had a method of warfare which would baffle any foe, but they planned too far ahead for safety.

The detective

He tried to put his hands on a shadow.

THE MARTIAN MISSILE

by
DAVID GRINNELL

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David Grinnell is the author of:

ACROSS TIME (D-286)

EDGE OF TIME (D-362)

THE ATLANTIC ABOMINATION

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CHAPTER 1

I SEE that we still have several hours to wait until dawn, and since you've already told me that you don't intend to try to get any sleep, I'll stay up with you. Not that I'm at all anxious to see the dawn, at least in your company, but after all, I have no other choice—or do I?

Since you're determined to keep your eye on me, you may as well keep an ear on me, too. So just relax, light up your pipe if you have one, and we'll try to pass the time in talk. Television isn't very good this distance from the stations, and at this hour of the night there wouldn't be much on. Besides, I find reception tricky in these mountains; they're so isolated. Remind me to ask you how you ever found my place.

But now that you're here, and, as it were, a self-made captive audience, I'm going to tell you something about myself you'll be glad to know. In fact, it will fill out your records of Kermit Langley. I'm sure you'll be grateful. You people have a pretty good rundown on my life both early and late, but I do know there's a gap of a sizable chunk in your files covering a period in the early 1960's. You know my earlier life by direct evidence, and my later life by inference and deduction, but you don't know this special little section. It's important, believe me.

Now as it happens, I've no objection to telling you where I was and what I did in that year. I don't know whether you will accept everything I say; it doesn't matter to me, just as long as you listen. For I've always had a desire to tell some-

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one about it. It's true, all of it, yet it will take a lot more years than you or I have left before it could be proven to the satisfaction of the whole world. Meanwhile, I want to see the reaction of a hardheaded audience such as yourself.

I'll put another pot of coffee on the stove, if you don't mind. Oh, you do mind . . . so put it on yourself and I'll stay here in this comfortable chair and start talking. No time like the present . . .

The thing started one evening in June in that year. I had just completed a little business affair in Los Angeles and had retired to a place I own, a comfortable distance away from the scene of my recent activities. I don't believe you know the spot, but it's in Arizona. A charming spot, quite isolated, remote from any roads, a couple days' ride from the nearest town, and yet comfortable. It was once a ranch, I assume, but long since abandoned, and I had fixed up part of the ranch-house to my liking. I could sit out on the porch, light my pipe of an evening after the sun had sunk behind the mountains, and look out over the miles of scrub land, now long since returned to the toads and cactus and just nature.

The bunkhouse had fallen down too, but the old well was still able to bring up water enough for me. So there I would sit, quietly enjoying myself, quite safe from uninvited eyes, thinking of life in general, reviewing some of my exploits of the past and thinking of things to do in the future.

I'll admit that I had retired to my place in a hurry. My original intention for that year was to travel abroad a bit, spend money pleasurably; but my business venture had turned out rather troublesome. In fact let's admit it—I had to remove myself from public vision without delay, and so it was the old ranch for me.

You see how little you know me, after all. I know you've all assumed I was strictly a city man. Sure, I was raised and educated in the big city. Your records will show it. Kermit Langley was not only a graduate of City High but even spent two years at State U. He may be short, but he was long on

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brains. Oh, I've read the stories in some of the columns. The fact is that I never really liked the barren city streets.

I grew up on them, I ran with the kid gangs, learned to use my head when I couldn't use my fists because I was always outweighed. They respected me, the other kids, because they soon learned that brains can match brawn any time it gets half a chance. But I always longed for the greenery, for the open spaces, for the wide horizons. I used to go off sometimes to the big park and find a spot on a hill as far away from anyone as possible and just sit and dream. I used to imagine myself a cowboy on the plains, or an explorer in the jungles, or a mountain climber.

But I learned what it took to make my way. So when the day came that I had enough money, had succeeded in my chosen profession, I found a couple of nice places stashed away in the remote spots. This is one; the Arizona spot was another.

Now, that particular evening, I'd finished my supper, washed my dishes, and was out in the old weathered rocker on the porch looking over the empty landscape. I was watching the sky go from blue to violet to purple and then finally to the blue-black dark of night. The stars out there in Arizona are like nowhere else on Earth. The sky's so clear, the air so calm, you could just lean back and let yourself go off in reverie. If you've ever been there, you'll know why they located a great observatory out at Flagstaff. Not that my spot was close by, but I've been there like a lot of other rubbernecks. I've been farther, though, than any of those astronomers ever have.

So at first, as the twilight deepened, I was thinking cowboy thoughts, imagining the men riding out in the brush chousing the cattle, thinking of Indians skulking the dry breaks, maybe of the jingle and clank of Coronado and his Spaniards, making their way across the New World somewhere about there.

Then as the sky darkened, and things turned to purple

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and began to disappear in the gathering darkness, I turned to watch the stars appear; first Venus, brilliant near the still-glowing mountain peaks, then the brighter ones popping into view, as if lit from behind the screen by some greater Hand, then finally the whole array of the heavens. And of course I would think of the sky, of the efforts being made to travel out among the stars, and of the worlds that might lie hidden among them.

I saw a meteor flash down once or twice, saw its trail vanish somewhere in the black sky. I had thought a couple times of hunting for meteor fragments. There are said to be a lot of them around in Arizona, because for some reason the region attracts them. I guess I could go prospecting for meteorites; as I remember, I had been thinking of doing it the next day.

That was when I saw the biggest, brightest meteor of them all. It appeared suddenly in the sky, right overhead, brilliant and white. It came racing down; and as it came, it got brighter and I heard a singing noise, like the whine of a projectile.

It brought me to my feet, just staring with my mouth open. The thought that it was going to crash down on me ran through my head. *This is it*, I thought; *this one's coming my way*.

The meteor seemed to balk a bit; I saw that the light came from some sort of radiation—maybe flames from a rocket tube. There was a sudden puff, then, a sort of lightning-bolt *bang*, and for an instant the whole scene was lit up in stark white. The darkness that followed made my eyes blink. For an instant, I couldn't see anything.

I heard a roaring sound; the whine grew sharp, then died away, and from far away I heard a deep *thump*. The ground shook as if it had been hit with a huge hammer.

When my eyes cleared, the sky was still strewn with stars and I could see no sign of the meteor. But I knew that it

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had hit the ground somewhere nearby, and I knew that it had been a big one, a mighty big one.

When I finally hit the sack that night, I knew I was indeed going to go meteorite hunting the next day. This time I knew in what direction to walk.

Next morning I set out. The thing might have landed anywhere within a dozen miles of my place. The Arizona air is so clear that the impact sound could be deceptive. So I saddled my horse, took lunch grub, and rode out in the direction the sound of the impact had come from.

To cut this short, I found it. It was about six miles away, and it had dug a neat little crater in the ground, bowling over a lot of sage, ripping up and throwing around plenty of rocks and ground. I got off my horse, looked into the crater and saw the thing.

I knew at once that this was no meteor. My first thought was that it was one of the government rockets. It was artificial, made of polished metal; it even had some sort of fins at the end—the end that was sticking up out of the ground. This is the one that didn't orbit, I thought to myself.

For a moment, I wasn't sure whether I ought to go down and look at it, those things carry a lot of highly explosive fuel. If it still had any left, it might just go off if I start to poke around. On the other hand, I told myself, if it didn't go off when it hit, then why should it now?

Besides, I thought, as I made my way right up to it, climbing the jumbled churned dirt inside the little crater, *I've always wanted to have a closer look at one of the Jupiters or Thors or Vanguard's, anyway.*

So I reached it and looked around. I think I knew right off that it wasn't one of ours. It would have had markings; something chalked on the fins like "this end up" or assembling instructions or a blueprint number. I know these government installations. They always mark everything with a code, and I'm sure rocket parts wouldn't be any different.

Well, to begin with there wasn't anything like that on this.

This thing was marvelously well put together. I couldn't tell whether the tall, bent fin that stuck up from the rounded rear of this was cast in the same piece as the body itself or had been joined. Because if it had been joined, the technique was good for our own sort of work. I mean, it just wasn't experimental. It looked too professional, too finished, too—I think mass-produced is the word.

There was perhaps ten feet of body sticking up out of the ground. It had a slight dent in one spot, but had withstood the impact amazingly well. I've seen airplanes that crashed at a lot less speed than this thing was going, and they were scattered over a half-mile of territory. This darn thing, by gosh, was still basically in one piece!

So I suspected right then and there that this was nothing from Earth. I thought of flying saucers, but this was no saucer. This thing worked on some sort of real explosive power. It had certainly tried to brake its fall with an explosion of sorts, and probably had succeeded in that it at least hadn't dug itself in a half-mile deep.

That in turn raised the thought that it was a guided vehicle. It had been piloted. From within? Or from beyond?

Rounding the other side, I saw one set of markings. I couldn't read them. There were a few symbols in some sort of square and crescent alphabet, and a round rim in the shell that could have been a door.

I'm not exactly a coward, in spite of my small size—as you have reason to know—and I didn't bother to worry about whether it was going to explode after all this time. I stuck my ear up against that circular rim and listened.

Something was moving inside. Not much, but I could hear a faint scraping, and a sort of low noise like somebody moaning. The pilot of this thing was inside, and he was injured. It seemed to be a miracle that he was still alive at all.

But who could tell what would kill a Martian? I'd read a lot of crazy newspaper stories about life on Mars and the Martians. Wells, Burroughs, and that sort of stuff. I thought

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to myself then. *This must be from Mars. This is a ship come from Mars and there's a Martian in it, just like the Wells novel.*

I stood back from this Martian missile and looked at it awhile. Suppose there was a giant brain inside, like an octopus. Maybe it would squirm out and aim a heat ray at me. Or maybe it was a green man with four arms and carrying a radium pistol. What should I do?

As a matter of fact, I didn't think about that too long; I'm not the kind of man to run away from a mystery. Ever since I was a kid, I was intrigued by locked doors, padlocks, vaults, and so forth. Here was a lulu, the biggest mystery of them all, sealed in a wrecked spaceship.

I said to myself, *The devil with the danger!*, and I bent over to that rim and banged on it. I listened. The moaning had stopped. Then it started again, and I could hear a faint flopping sound against the inner wall. It seemed sort of sickly to me.

I set to work then and there to open that door. No missile from Mars was going to remain closed from my eyes. I know a thing or two about opening vaults, and I have a theory that there are only so many ways to lock anything in the universe, either here, on Mars, or anywhere else.

Besides, I knew that this one was made to be opened, and I could figure out what kind of systems would be likely. I got some tools from the saddlebag on my horse—I had to climb up the crater to do it—and set to work.

It took me the better part of an hour, and the sun was beginning to turn hot, but I finally got that Martian missile open. I found out how to twist the round lid that sealed the entrance to this spaceship. Maybe I had some help from inside, but I got it unscrewed and opened it.

It unplugged at last, swung out on some sort of universal gymbals, and I looked into a crowded, jumbled little chamber inside the missile. The first thing I saw was the man.

Yes, it was a sort of a man. Not really a human being like

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us, but at first glance you knew it was a kind of human-type creature. Humanoid I guess is the right word.

He had crawled over to the door and must have been trying to open it himself. He was badly hurt. His skin, which was a sort of lemonish yellow, was smeared now with big blue-gray bruises. One of his round, dark-brown eyes was closed; the other was staring at me in a sort of desperate appeal. He had a little thin mouth, a wide brow, and a sort of silver cloth skullcap over his hairless head. He must have been in great pain, but he tried to say something to me, sort of reached out a hand, and then fainted dead away.

I climbed in and carried him out and laid him on the ground in the shade of the rocket. He was a slight creature—must have been about four and a half feet from the soles of his spadelike feet to the top of his skull. I'm only five feet one myself. He was dressed in a gray-silver coverall, now ripped and smeared with his blood, which was a sort of sickly brown-red, not too different from our own.

He was still alive—that much was clear—but how long he had to live was anybody's guess. I thought he must have been badly broken up inside.

I went inside to see if there were any others, but I saw no one. The front part of the rocket, or at any rate the part that hit the ground, was crushed and impassable inside. The rear part was a jumble of broken wires and valves.

I crawled out again, and by this time the Martian, as I was thinking of him then, had regained consciousness. He was trying to raise himself up. I bent over him. He had a wide belt about his waist with a couple of pouches like large kit bags.

I knew there wasn't a chance for him if I left him there. So I picked him up as gently as I could, staggered up the pit to my horse, and loaded him onto the saddle. I climbed up behind, holding him, and rode back to the ranch.

He was unconscious by the time I got back. I stowed him into my bed, washed his wounds, and waited for him to

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come to again. There was a greater mystery waiting to be unlocked this time—the mystery that was hidden within his skull.

CHAPTER 2

THE MARTIAN lay in my bed unconscious. He was breathing raggedly, and involuntary moans would occasionally issue from his lips. I sat around awhile wondering what else to do. It was much too far to the nearest town to bring in medical help, and as I have previously explained, I was not at all anxious to have others hanging around my place. Besides, I reasoned, it was probable that there wouldn't be anything any Earth doctor could do for a character like this. Probably his insides were quite different from ours—or at least so much so that our kind of medical science would not only do no good, but might even hasten his death.

Then there was the question of the wrecked spaceship. I am not one to pass up an opportunity for self-enrichment, and it was quite likely I could salvage something among the Martian's equipment that might earn me a pretty penny. Who knows—he might have equipment of gold or platinum, or gears made of precious jewels. Or, much more likely, some of his gadgetry might prove patentable inventions. I looked on the wreck as mine—a little gift from heaven, you could say.

So while humanity as a whole might benefit from whatever pearls of wisdom might fall from the spaceman's lips, if he could be saved, it was I, Kermit Langley, who could benefit more directly and certainly. Besides, to judge from the newspaper accounts of American and Russian progress in rocketry and space exploration, I figured we'd be on the moon in

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another three or four years, and we'd get to Mars in another twenty. So by then we'd find out for ourselves all this dying character would be likely to tell us. Since we people on Earth have been doing without this knowledge for thousands of years, another decade or two wouldn't matter.

Well, I was wrong about that; but I'm not gifted with prophetic vision any more than you are.

When it seemed likely that my Martian wasn't going to come to in a hurry, I left him there in my bed and went back to the wreck. I poked around it for several hours and finally returned near sunset with a couple of sackloads of loose instruments, odds and ends, and everything else light enough and loose enough to pack. I'd sort the stuff out at leisure in the next few days and see what I could make of it. Most of it was sufficiently obvious to be recognizable as articles of clothing, personal stuff, hand recorders, hand-equipped gadgets, etc. Experiment would determine which were which.

I entered my ranchhouse to find that the little yellow-skinned humanoid had come to. He'd dragged himself out of bed and was slumped in an easy chair in my big room, where the fireplace was. He'd apparently been poking around my papers, for a couple of things were on the floor, but now he was in a state of near exhaustion. I told you he was a very sick boy.

I looked at him and he looked at me. I shook my head. "You better stay in bed, fellow," I said to him, even though I knew he couldn't understand me. "You look like hell."

His one good eye watched me unblinkingly. It was deep and round, like the eye of a deer or an antelope. His face twitched, and it was easy to see he was still in great pain. He opened his mouth, wheezed a little and then said something.

I was startled, I'll tell you, for it sounded almost like English. I couldn't quite make it out, for it was very peculiarly pitched and the pronunciation was all wrong. But it sounded as if I should have understood it. "What did you say?" I gasped. "You talking English or Martian?"

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He clutched at his throat with the fingers of his right hand. There were three long fingers and a thumb, thin and fragile. He spoke again, slowly, more carefully. "Thank you for rescuing me," he said, and this time, in spite of the very odd way he said it, I understood him.

This somehow was the biggest surprise of all. How could he have come from outer space and still speak English? I drew up a chair and sat down facing him. "How come you speak my language?" I asked him. "Do they know it up there?" I gestured toward the ceiling.

He sort of smiled, that's all I can say. It was a smile. Then he moaned a little and waved a hand vaguely. "I learn it from watching Earth people from up there. In orbit."

Ah ha, I thought. *So we're already under observation.* He was studying us in secret. A spy of some sort. "How come you crashed?" I said. "Engine failure?"

He looked away from me painfully. "Not now," he said. "I feel very weak, cannot talk much now. Help me back to rest. Tomorrow we talk."

He started to get up and almost toppled; I grabbed him and half-carried him to my bed, where he fell asleep again almost at once. Or maybe he just passed out. He must have drained all his reserves getting up and looking around.

I made my supper and noted that he hadn't attempted to touch any food. After that I took the stuff I had salvaged from the sacks and set them out on the floor. I still couldn't make too much out of the things, but now I hoped the Martian would stay alive long enough to explain it all to me the next day. I didn't think he had much longer to live.

I made my bunk on the couch in the main room, and by the time it was dark I was asleep.

I opened my eyes feeling lousy, knowing at first glance that it was late in the morning. I am a man who usually awakes at the crack of dawn, so something was wrong. From the headache, the pain in my arm, and the ringing in my

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ears, I knew I was a sick man that day. I sat up, feeling weak and dizzy, and knew I ought to lie down again.

Had I caught something from the spaceman—picked up contagion on the spaceship? Maybe I'd die alongside the Martian. Someday, I thought, as I sat there holding my throbbing head in one hand, while the other hand hung limp and tinglingly in my lap, some prospector would come out to this ranch and find two skeletons here. Nobody would know who they were. We'd die together.

Groggily, I raised my head, wondering where the Martian was. There was a dragging noise in the other room, and he came in slowly. He was sinking, his skin was paler and grayer than yesterday, but he seemed more in control of his senses. He saw that I was awake, came over to me, plumped himself down before me in the big chair.

"Oh, man," I mumbled. "I guess I caught something from you."

He looked at me with a curious sort of expression, half-sorry, half-mocking. "No," he said. "You didn't catch it. I gave it. You will be all right soon. But I—I think I am going to die. Today. I know."

I pulled myself together, raised my head, and began slowly rubbing my tingling left arm. In a little while, I found I did feel better. The headache was slowly going away, the dizziness, too. My arm still tingled and I looked at it. There was a thin red line running from my elbow halfway down to my wrist. It was beginning to disappear slowly, but it sure looked as if something had scratched me during the night. The Martian?

I looked around. The stuff I had taken from the ship was gone; there was smoke coiling from the fireplace. I looked there, and I could see a mass of ashes and bits of twisted metal and plastics. The spaceman had destroyed it all! I started to rise angrily, but had to sit down as the sudden movement made my head reel.

The spaceman frowned. "Don't try to move around. You

will be weak for a time, long enough for me to explain something you must know." His accent was still thick and strange, but I understood him all right.

I sat there and cursed him. I called him all the things I could think of, the very least of which was a dirty slimy ingrate misbegotten son of a wall-eyed hoptoad. He simply sat there coldly until I had finished, and then he began again.

"I am sorry to have to use you, but you were the only one available to me. My purpose is much more important than my miserable life and yours. Yet you must live, since I cannot. I have a message for you to deliver. It means a very great deal to me and to my people. You will deliver it."

"I will like hell," I snarled, wishing I had the strength to get up and strangle his ugly alien face.

He shrugged. "I am the bearer of a message. I have given it to you. Last night, I put you to sleep, and I operated on you. You were so kind—or so greedy—as to bring me the tools I needed from my ship. I wrote the message in molecular charges on the bone of your left arm. Already the flesh is healed over it. Nobody can read and remove that message but my people. You will go to them, they will read it, and they will reward you."

"And if I don't, then what?" I snarled. "Who needs your sneaky reward? Besides, who believes you?"

"I care not what you think. You will go because if you do not get there you will die—painfully. I have also implanted in you a certain vibratory note. It is throughout your body, in your bones everywhere. You may have heard a ringing in your ears when you came to. You do not hear it now, because it has attuned itself to your normal rate of living. But it is there.

"In about five years' time this vibration will kill you. It will splinter your bones apart, break them up into dust. The process is slow, sufficiently slow to be a very painful lingering death. It will not begin until about four years from now."

I was horror-struck. I gasped at him, suddenly terrified. "You're going to kill me . . . and that's my reward!" I managed to get out. The enormity of it—the utter vicious inhuman gall of it. I could see now what I was in his eyes. I was just a beast, an experimental animal to be sent out as we would a messenger pigeon, or a guinea pig in a cancer experiment.

He shook his head, and again he looked a little bit sorry. "No. You will not die if you deliver the message. When the message is read, the vibration will be canceled out. Your only hope of avoiding your fate is to deliver the message."

I sat there and felt that I was regaining strength. I think that if I had tried, I could have reached the little humanoid and strangled him to death. But I no longer felt like it. Though it would be so satisfying, still it would mean my own death sentence. I like to live as well as the next guy.

Then it occurred to me to wonder where I was to go to deliver the message. He spoke our language, so that must mean he had a spy base somewhere on Earth. I would have to go where he told me, and his chief spy would do the rest. He must have known what thought was in my head.

"It will not be an easy message to deliver. But I have given you another special factor that will assist you in your trip. I have also implanted in you a very valuable military secret of our people. You will be able to go where you want without being seen. With this you can pass all sorts of barriers."

"Invisibility!" I said. "You mean I can make myself invisible?" Already things sounded a little better; I could think of a number of interesting excursions I could make while delivering his little message.

"No, no," he said. "True invisibility is not possible. You will be quite visible. What I did will make you not noticeable. It is more in the mind than in the eye. People will simply fail to pay attention to you. In their eye they will see you, but in the mind you will attract no attention. You will understand when you start out. Nobody will bother you."

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I nodded. *Just as good*, I thought, *just as good*. I got suspicious again. "Any other little tricks?" I asked.

The Martian looked at me for a while, his face twitching as if he were in pain. He started to say something, then choked a bit, bent over, coughing. He turned even paler; I thought he was a goner then and there.

But he recovered. I made no effort to help him, you understand. I could have gone over to him now, for the pain had almost gone, my arm had stopped tingling, and the red line of the scar had vanished. What I couldn't have done with that operating instrument and healer alone, if he hadn't already destroyed it!

He caught himself in hand, gathered a little more strength. Then he nodded. "You guessed right. One more thing I did to you when I put that vibration on your bones. It will also serve you. The vibratory pitch is tuned to certain little space-ships that my people have strung out at certain spots in space. When you get near them, they will seek out the point the vibration comes from—you. You will be able to use these space buoys for your trip to deliver the message."

He fell back again, began gasping for breath. It looked to me as if his last moments had come. I myself was feeling dizzy from shock, from the enormity of what his words had suggested. "You mean," I gasped, "you mean—space? You mean I have to deliver this message somewhere out there? Out in space?"

The little humanoid was silent awhile, struggling with an obvious inner pain. He coughed, and I saw suddenly that his good eye was getting a ruddy, fixed stare in it. He had maybe a few minutes left, maybe less.

He made a final effort, slowly choked out: "My people's—base—is on—last planet—outwards. On world—you call—Pluto. You must go to Pluto. To Pluto. Get out to Moon. On other side of your moon—first space buoy— Get there— Keep going—Pluto destination."

He conked out, slumped back. I could see he was through.

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In a second more he had a spasm and turned all grayish. He was dead.

And I? Was I as good as dead? How was I going to get to Pluto when we Earth people hadn't even managed a landing on our own moon?

CHAPTER 3

Do not suppose I believed this statement at first any more than anyone else would. After all, no one likes to believe his days are numbered, and no one likes to believe he had been given a task so outlandish that in all the history of humanity nobody else has dreamed of it.

For the next two days, I will tell you quite frankly, I tried to ignore what had happened. I buried the spaceman out behind the ranch. I kept his clothes and what other stuff he had left and stuck them in a box, with the intent of examining it all later when I felt less upset about the incident. The scar on my arm had now vanished, and by and by I wondered whether it had ever been there in the first place. The bits and pieces of stuff which my visitor had shattered and burned, I salvaged and put away in the same box.

I attempted to forget the whole thing, but after the dawn of the third day my curiosity got the better of me. I went out to the spaceship. It was still there, the same wreck. Some little animals had gotten inside, for there were bits of dirt and evidence of surveyal by wildlife. I poked around the interior a bit, but found nothing left from my first expedition that was worth the taking.

So I sat down on the edge of the pit, looking down at the crooked, bent fin and the pitted rear of the craft, and thought. I went over in my mind all I knew of space or had read of speculation on life on other worlds. I carefully reconsidered

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all that had happened to me and all that I had been told. After about two hours, it dawned on me that I would have to test it out. The thought that four years from now I would start undergoing an agonizing and fatal dissolution was not pleasant. At that time, assuming the spaceman had told the truth, I would certainly regret not having attempted to make the trip to Pluto.

Besides, there was a certain hysteria underlying my emotions. This seemed like a chance never before given anyone. Out beyond, on the other side of the moon, my chariot awaited. Or so it could be thought. All I had to do was make the first connection.

But first things first, I thought. I had to test this claim of non-noticeability. If that proved false, then the whole thing was some sort of hallucination; but if that worked, the rest might also be true. Besides, I felt the need of doing a little library research. I'd better bone up on current affairs in space research and refresh my memory on planetary lore as well.

It all called for a trip to Phoenix.

I wasn't worried about someone else finding the wreck of the alien spaceship, because, if you know Arizona, it isn't likely. It might be years before anyone else would come along this way and stumble over it. By then they'd probably suppose it a dud U.S. rocket anyway. So I returned to my ranch house, and next day, set out.

As soon as I hit town, I began to understand what had happened to me. I wasn't noticed by anyone. I went to the bus depot and sat down— and nobody spoke to me or paid me the slightest attention. They could see me, because people didn't stumble over me or try to sit on me. But they just acted in every other way as if I weren't there.

When the bus came, I simply got on and took a seat. The driver made no effort to collect a fare, and nobody else paid me notice. It was rather disconcerting, at first.

In Phoenix there was again no effort to stop me as I left the bus after the free ride. I wandered around the city awhile

trying out my powers, working out the peculiar effects of this gift from the stars. By and by I got the hang of it, and then for a while I had the time of my life.

I found that I was not invisible, but somehow I just didn't register on people's consciousness. I was there, but of no consequence. I could get attention only by deliberately forcing myself on people. For instance, when I was hungry, I tried stepping into a good restaurant and sitting down at a good table. Nobody else tried to take my table, but I couldn't get the attention of a waiter. The place filled up; other orders were being taken and served, but nobody ever asked me what I wanted. Finally, I grabbed the elbow of a waiter as he went past. He looked at me and I asked to be served. He nodded, gave me a menu. But he never returned to ask my order. Plainly, the moment I took my hand off his arm and let him go, he simply ceased to notice my presence.

Eventually I caught wise. I left the place, again without a query or nod from the cashier, and went to a cafeteria. Here I took a tray, went along the counter, piled it up with what I wanted, and walked past the checker's counter without being noticed. This is how I fed myself generally after that.

I could walk through crowds and not be seen. I tried an experiment. I walked over to a lady standing on a corner and took her handbag from her; then I stepped back a few feet and watched. She was panicked, as any woman would be whose purse had been snatched. She looked all around, yelled for help. Excitedly, she explained what had happened to the small crowd that immediately gathered. Meanwhile I stood there in plain sight holding her bag, but she never indicated me. She looked right at me and nothing registered. Finally I walked up to her caught her eye and held out the bag. "Excuse me," I said, "but is this yours?"

"Oh, yes," she said, grabbing it. For an instant she saw me, but no sooner did she have the bag in her hand and was looking into it to see if anything had been taken than she

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again forgot my existence. No suspicion of me, though she was on the verge of hysteria and ready to suspect everyone else. I simply couldn't register on her.

This sort of thing went on all over town. As I have since figured it out, what the phenomenon amounts to is a sort of psychic block. There is something about each living thing that makes itself felt on every other living thing. Call it personal magnetism, bodily heat, mental aura, or what not, we all have it. Somehow we tend to know when there is someone else around and when there is not. Everyone has had the sensation of being watched. In me, this mental aura had been simply blanked out. If I watched you, you would not have the sensation of being watched. Unless I touched you and physically distracted you, your mind simply would register me as an image lacking reality. You would see me, step aside to make way for me, accept my presence, but never become really aware of me.

The best simile is that of a dog's reaction on seeing his reflection in a mirror. Everyone who knows dogs knows that they simply ignore mirror reflections. His eyes tell him there is a dog there, but his nose says no—so his conscious mind, trained to accept only the final evidence of his nose, refuses the evidence of his eyes. There is no image there, no dog. Therefore ignore the mirror.

With me, people's eyes and ears say I am there, but something else, something in the human mind, doesn't register me. So I am not there.

I took a hotel room—simply moved in. I picked up some new clothes, took them from the stores, with the clerks indifferent to my presence. I appropriated money from cash registers, just for the fun of it, though it was soon obvious that I wasn't going to need the stuff.

I spent a few days in Phoenix in various libraries and bookstores, boning up on what I needed to know. I mastered what was public knowledge about the various rocket programs, and what was known about the planets. I soon saw

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that I would have to go to the actual rocket research bases to learn what was still top secret, and it was evident that a lot of the recent progress in rocketry was in the highly classified realm.

My next stop was at the Vandenberg Air Base in California. That was the nearer of the two main American experimental rocket fields. I went there by train from Phoenix; I found the place and walked past the guards and defenses as if they weren't there.

There was a reaction. These places have radar sweeps covering the grounds. The guards knew I was coming. They were alerted at their posts, for the radar said some one was on the outer grounds. But when I reached their posts at the gates I walked past without a query. Believe me, it was a bit eerie, and not without certain danger. I was uneasily aware that if any of these jumpy guardsmen took it into his head to spray a little lead around just for the fun of it, it would be likely to kill me as dead as if I were the target.

However, they didn't try shooting, and I went in. I spent several days there, walking about, poking in all the top secret places, sitting right under the staff's nose pulling out files and riffling through papers. When I wanted information clarified, I'd use the top command's telephone and ask.

I learned exactly where the United States stood at that moment in the race for space control. It was far ahead of what I'd thought, from the newspapers. We were getting up some promising stuff, and we had a few remarkable projects up our sleeve, but, well, you know of them by now, considering that all this was several years ago.

What I did discover was that the Russians still held a lead on us in some fields. The field that was important to me was one of them—the heavy cargo rocket capable of escape into outer space. The U.S. rocket men didn't know for sure how much they could do, but they knew for a fact that the Soviets could boost a payload large enough to include a living man out beyond the moon. Whether they could bring

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him back was still something uncertain, but this was what I wanted to know.

Finally I found an Intelligence letter in the chief's desk. In it was information that a large Russian rocket was about ready to try a circumlunar orbit later that summer. It would be a big one, with television cameras, live animals, and so forth.

If I was ever going to get out into space to make that rendezvous with the spaceman's promised first buoy, it would be on a Russian rocket. I couldn't afford to wait the year or two that it would take to produce an American attempt.

The answer to my problem lay somewhere in the hidden rocket fields of the Soviet Union. I'd have to go.

Now, I've always cherished a secret desire to travel and see the world; but with one thing and another, that hasn't been either practical or probable. This time I was ready.

I went to Russia.

I traveled across America by jet plane. It was as easy as the bus trip. No queries as to my passage, no notice from the passengers, no service from the stewardess. When she trotted down the aisle with a food tray for some other seat, I simply rose in mine and took it gently from her hands. She would give a glance at me, sort of shrug, and go back and get another tray for her original customer.

In New York I took off for Europe the same way. No passport inquiry, no trouble. I took a plane at London for Prague, and at Prague for Moscow. I disembarked at the Moscow airport and wandered the streets of the Soviet capital without the slightest difficulty. Never was an international trip made with so little red tape. No customs, no questions, no tips, no tickets.

Moscow was a bit difficult to get oriented in, as I don't know any Russian. I picked up a Russian-English dictionary and worked out the store names and the street directions. It took awhile, I must admit to figure out my next step. But after four days of fruitless searching, I found the location of

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the most important rocket base by searching the files of the Red Air Force headquarters at the Kremlin. Dangerous? It was just a tedious matter of checking file-case words with my dictionary.

I suppose I could have gathered a bit more information there and passed it along by telephone to the American Embassy. But I reasoned that they wouldn't believe it in that fashion, would suppose it a plant.

Anyway, I had other things on my mind, and it would have proven too laborious to translate some of the other secrets undoubtedly tucked away in that top-secret file.

This time I went by train to the Caspian region, got to the bustling new industrial city that flanked the rocket base, and went out to the works in one of the morning busloads of workers. We went through the gates without a hitch, and I found myself in the great fenced-in heart of the Soviet experimental rocket fields.

Oddly enough, I saw the rocket I wanted almost at once. It was a big one, towering several hundred feet into the sky. A four-stage monster; this was the one. It was the next Lunik. Carrying a full ton payload, it would boost its nose into an orbit calculated to take it around the moon, swing it about several times in a lunar orbit, enough to take pictures and test effects on a cargo of monkeys and dogs, and then to push the rocket back into the Earth's pull to try for a landing.

It was ambitious, all right. I might succeed, though I confess I had doubts. I had seen the big American rockets, and now I was possibly the first to also see the competition. The difference was apparent. The U.S. rockets are neat, streamlined, painted, beautifully gotten together, a pleasure to the eye. The Soviet rockets were obviously the product of hard-headed technicians with no time or funds to spend on beautifying them. They were not painted. Crude metal, bolted together, some of different tints, a couple of pieces almost rusty. It looked incomplete, though it wasn't.

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But it was bigger. And they had a way of stringing the booster rockets together that was different from ours. I guess that was their secret—a different setup of boosters and a tougher fuel.

I examined the nose cone, which hadn't yet been boosted in place. I saw what I would have to do. After four days' wait, they boosted the cone into place, fixed its wires for the takeoff. They brought the animals in, put them in place, and I knew it was zero minus two hours. I had already found where they stacked their fliers' high altitude suits—spacesuits actually—and I found one that fit me. I am a small man, as I have said before, but the Russians are practical people. Most of their test pilots were women, and hence there were plenty of small-sized sections of spacesuits available. I outfitted myself. I took what I thought I'd need. I kissed this world goodbye, and I went up that scaffolding and broke into that nose cone.

I dumped the animals; I reconnected the valves and the oxygen supply. The only cargo in that cone was to be Kermit Langley—plus some television equipment, recorders, and such that I'd disconnect as soon as I was on the way.

I think they discovered that something was wrong before the takeoff. I saw a lot of activity around the ground, and I saw someone arguing way down near the cement blockhouses, someone carrying what was obviously one of the dogs I had ditched. But it was evident that the shoot was not going to be postponed. I had counted on this sort of inflexibility to protect me.

Undoubtedly, the firing had been anticipated in the Kremlin, and probably the new postage stamps commemorating it were already printed and ready for distribution. They wouldn't dare hold up the shoot just because the gadgets had been left behind. The machinery of propaganda had been set in motion for this day's firing, and they couldn't hold it.

So the countdown went on, and I snuggled down in the deep rubbery mattresses originally intended to absorb the

shock for the animals. I had given up thinking about what I was doing. I had set my mind on going ahead, and I tried to avoid thinking the obvious—that I was going to my certain death.

The countdown wound itself up. The rocket was fired.

CHAPTER 4

LET ME say right here and now that if you're ever planning to ride a rocket that wasn't made for human piloting, don't. If you can avoid it, don't. This Russian rocket wasn't made for humans. It was padded well enough for the animals it was supposed to carry, but the animals had been fitted into the padding, and I'd had to rip it out along with them, tearing away the various meters and connections.

I was therefore riding in a sort of cramped position, sometimes curled up, sometimes squatting, sometimes lying on my back with my feet arched upwards, as if reclining in a badly sagging not-quite-large-enough hammock. There were various things squeezing into the space around me, such as oxygen tubes, a water tank, and a small but workable water purifier, and all sorts of other electrical gadgets. I assume they included cosmic-ray counters and other devices, but as I am not familiar with these things, I couldn't positively say.

The takeoff was brutal. It started slowly, and I could feel the rocket straining to rise above its guiding posts. Slowly it did so, and then, once that started, it accelerated at an unbearable pace. I was forced against the floor, lying on my back, and I could feel my body fighting against the force pressing me down. Just when it seemed as if I couldn't bear it any more, it got worse again. There were three distinct tremors I felt. These were undoubtedly the different steps of the rocket burning out and detaching. By the last one, I

was ready to keel over and pass out. But that was the last—and suddenly everything inside me sort of whooshed upwards. Gravity had vanished, acceleration had ceased; I was in free flight.

The noise on starting had been terrific, deafening, but as the thing speeded up there came a point when this abruptly vanished. The greater part of the drive upward was silent save for a certain rustling and vibrating in the tight walls and stuff surrounding me. I assume that when the rocket passed the speed of sound, the noise stopped for me.

Free flight is another thing that I don't recommend. Coming directly after the terrible weight and pressure of the upward rocket-driven drive, it's a vicious experience. My heart had been pounding heavily under the strain; suddenly it was like being flung forward. I felt as if I was exploding inwards. My brain reeled, I blanked out.

When I came to, I felt as if I had been pounded black and blue. Just opening my eyes made them ache; my ears rang; my mouth felt salty and crusty—evidence that I must have bitten my lips bloody. I simply lay like a limp rag in the narrow confines of the nose capsule and wished I were dead.

It must have been several hours later that I felt like stirring myself. I had been sort of half-touching, half-dangling in the narrow encircling space. Something was ticking away in the mess of tubes attached to one side. Something else would give occasional clicks and squawks. There was a slight hissing sound from the air tubes, a bubbling every now and then from other gadgets.

My first problem was to find a way to see where I was going. I squirmed around, examining everything. Light came from a small hooded lamp that had been poised where the animal carriers had been. Evidently the poor beasts' morale was better when they could see about them and eat their food supply.

I surmised that there would be cameras to film—and possibly to televise—outer space and especially the near sur-

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face of the moon, which this thing had been intended to orbit. My surmise was correct as I probed about. I found the camera and the TV stuff, and it all occupied a good section of the space. I proceeded forthwith to dismantle it.

What the Russian space engineers thought then would have been interesting. I will bet they let out every curse the Russian language is capable of uttering. For whatever they may have been getting on their eager receivers was cut off sharp as I tore away the wires connecting their television cameras, and began to unscrew the bolts that held them to the inner surface of the capsule. There were two such cameras, at opposite poles to each other. When I had loosened them and pulled them away, my hope was verified. There were small, round, thick but clear bulls'-eye windows in the shell of the space capsule.

Looking through them, I was able to discern that space outside was already the black of the void, and that the convex bulk of the Earth was taking up much of the vision on one side of the space missile.

The sight was an unusual one. It didn't look quite real, and at first it didn't even look like Earth. Somehow I guess I had a layman's mental image of the Earth, derived from globes in school. I unconsciously expected a smooth round ball with the outlines of continents and islands clearly and plainly marked, all fitting and proper. Perhaps without realizing it I even expected nicely ruled lines of latitude and longitude.

What I saw was therefore at first unrecognizable. I was looking out at a wide, slightly bulging section of bluish-green stuff, sort of unclear and slightly misty. There were rills of dirty gray and white fluff scattered over parts of it. Here and there something shone very brightly, as if the sun was glinting off some wet spot (which as a matter of fact was exactly the case). The ocean part of this mess was blue, and much brighter than the muddy land sections.

It was at first quite disappointing. My first thought was

astonishment. "What the devil," I said under my breath, "what's this? Where am I?"

It took a while to reconcile myself to the fact that I was looking at Earth. And when I had convinced myself of that, it took even longer to try to figure out what part of the Earth I saw. Nothing was proper up and down, north at the top and south at the bottom, as we instinctly all learn when maps are our only guides. The real thing is quite a puzzler.

I can't tell you now exactly what part of the world that was. I had plenty of time to watch the earth as it receded from me, and my memory is therefore clouded as to what I saw at any one time. Eventually I did piece it together and finally learned to read the face of the Earth and identify its parts.

It took about two days to reach the vicinity of the moon. I didn't feel like eating at first, but near the end of that first two days I tried some of the concentrated nutritive mash that had been prepared for the experimental animals. It wasn't bad. I wouldn't recommend it, but it was tolerable.

One thing that bothered me then was the problem of radiation. You know that the world is surrounded by a fairly wide belt of strong radiation, possibly lethal. I had passed through it; I had been exposed to it for possibly a couple hours. This couldn't be helped. Whether this radiation has had an effect on me, I don't know. Not so far as I can tell several years after the event. It may be that the capsule was shielded in some way, or it may be that the vibratory note that had been wished on me negated the problem.

The moon is quite a sight seen up close. Unlike the Earth, old Luna looks much the same seen from space as it does seen from a terrestrial telescope. It's a forbidding place, all grays and glaring whites, with only a faint suggestion here and there of the blue or a yellow tint to break the monotony. Its craters are as bleak and ugly and inhospitable as they seem in photographs, and close up to the moon, the ugly cracks that gash its surface are even uglier and more ominous.

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I've never set foot on the moon, but I don't envy the first men who will. It's a dry, cracked, pocked world.

I watched with care as the Lunik neared the moon and began the swing that was supposed to bring it into an orbit around the satellite. I saw the surface of the moon that has faced the Earth slowly slide aside, and I saw the emergence of the other side, which was my evidence that my free-floating space carrier was passing it.

The other side of the moon? It's every bit as ugly and unpleasant as the side we know. Different craters, different jagged mountain ranges, different "maria" with cracks and rills and clefts, but basically nothing whose equivalent we have not already seen on the Earthly side of the satellite.

But for me there was something different. Somewhere amid that inhospitable, airless terrain there was a spaceship waiting, my next chariot to carry me on toward my destination. The message to Pluto wasn't going to get any farther if that spaceship failed to respond to the vibratory note I carried.

At one time I got the notion that perhaps this note could have been canceled by the shell of the Lunik. I tried to put the thought aside as I scanned the face of the other side of the moon, looking hard for that next carrier. But gaze as I could, I saw no sign of activity on that lifeless pocked surface.

Then I became aware of something else. I had supposed the Lunik would swing around it, gradually emerge on the other side, and come again in view of the Earth face of the moon. I watched, expecting the moon to come closer or to return to its familiar side. But that did not happen.

Instead it seemed to recede slowly but surely. And while receding, it did not continue to shift; rather I found I had been looking at the same Lunar features for a longer while than before. They were beginning to become less distinct, as if my space missile was drawing away.

I hoped it was an illusion, but before another half-hour had passed I knew it was no mistake. There would be no neat orbit around the moon. The Lunik had failed in its

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mission. It had swung a little around the moon, but its speed had been too great, or its trajectory too far out. It was swinging away from the moon, away from Earth, beginning a long, looping million-year orbit outwards into interplanetary space. It would become yet another *Mechta*, another "artificial planet of the sun."

I began a search again through the mechanisms that remained within the narrow confines of the capsule. Something among them may have been the controls that would operate the auxiliary rockets that had been intended to bring the Lunik back into Earth's gravitational clutch again. Undoubtedly I had disconnected these controls when I had messed around with the interior. Either that or when I had detached the radio and TV apparatus, I had rendered the Earth-based operation of the rocket blind, so that whatever scheme the Russian engineers had had for turning the thing in its orbit had had to be abandoned.

I did not find any means of operating such auxiliary rockets. It may have already been too late to dare them anyway. Possibly they might have merely accelerated my lost orbit, or might have brought me crashing down on Luna, a man-made meteor.

I saw the moon become smaller and the Earth beside it dwindle into a larger, bluer, brighter moon. I saw myself in space, heading out away from the sun on a slow track somewhere between Earth and Mars, a lost experiment. I watched the brilliant white stars of outer space—and their numbers were vaster and their brilliance more eye-piercing than ever seen on Earth—and saw no light among them that could be a rescuer.

I saw the far ruddy disc of Mars and the tiny banded disc of Jupiter with four visible satellites, all far away and impersonal.

Just how long I rode in the Lunik I cannot say; I lost track of time. I know only that gradually the water tasted worse and worse as impurities gathered beyond the scope and

intent of the limited installation in the capsule. I know that the air, which was being repurified, was growing foul, and I began to see that my life expectancy was nearly up.

I still had two tanks of compressed air in the capsule which could be attached to the helmet of my space suit when necessary. When they gave out—and I wasn't going to use them until the inner air system of the capsule absolutely gave out—Kermit Langley would be through.

Grimly I watched the stars of outer space through the two little eyes in the shell. I saw nothing. I slept; I woke; I thought about my past and the mad thing I had done, and I said to myself that I must have been out of my mind to have done it.

Because a creature from space said to do it, I did it. That's the only basic reason I can give. Yes, he'd threatened a painful death, but what was I facing now? I had reasoned it out, yet how honest was my reasoning? Had I not more likely been rationalizing *what had really been a post-hypnotic command?*

Why should a creature from space—my Martian, if that is what he was—expect someone like me to sacrifice myself for him or his mysterious message which could mean nothing to me?

I had been victimized. I had thought I was acting on my own initiative, to save my life, to satisfy my curiosity about space, to glorify myself perhaps, and all the time I was just a sort of trained dog following an order.

It was a little late to be sorry for myself. I had rushed around the planet, climbed aboard a one-way rocket, and rushed to my sure death. Whether there was, or ever had been, a waiting rescue space craft was problematic; now, certainly it would never be known by me.

I would remain inside the capsule of this rocket for all eternity, a cold and lifeless creature, frozen solid as the capsule's heating units gave out, as the solar batteries finally ran down. Maybe thousands of years from now some inter-

planetary vessel of a future civilization would pick me up, examine me, wonder about the how and wherefore of this curious antique, and stick me into some Wellsian Museum of Green Glass.

I began to cough and sensed that the time had come to seal my space helmet and attach the tubes of air. I lifted them on my back, worked their connections in, closed myself off from the no longer inhabitable interior of the capsule.

The fresh flow of air revived me. Suddenly my brain cleared, and I realized that I had indeed been slowly poisoned by the fouling air. I gazed around with a fresh eye—for how long? I wondered even as I did so—and looked again through the little round bulls'-eye of one of my two viewing spaces.

Part of the stars had been blanked out strangely. I squinted, stared again. Was my eyesight going bad now? But no, the stars had indeed been blotted out in one large section.

I looked carefully and gave a gasp. There was something between me and the starry sky. There was something close enough to fill up the visible space on one side of the Russian space capsule.

It must be another object, hanging near me in space. Then I caught a glint of sunlight on one side of it, and in the glint of reflected metal I saw that it was an artificial construction, an ovoid-shaped thing with two large fins at the rear and a shiny, glassy bullet-shaped nose at the front.

The space rescuer had arrived. The vibratory note had brought it across space from its berth on lonely Luna. I felt the tingle in my bones, and I realized that only my sickly, semi-comatose state had prevented me from noticing the reappearance of the tingling hours ago.

Now all I had to do was break out of the Lunik and make my way across to the strange vessel.

CHAPTER 5

THE PROBLEM of shifting vessels was not as difficult as you might suppose. Bear in mind that out in space, in free-fall orbit, I had no weight. I could therefore propel myself by a simple push, and float in that direction until stopped by collision. So it resolved itself down to my emerging from the space capsule and shoving myself in the direction of the other craft until we met.

Of course there was always the little question of what would happen if my judgment was off and I floated past it. However, I was counting on the vibratory note; that should be a saving factor.

So, since I was already sealed into my spacesuit and breathing my tanked air, I twisted myself around in my cramped quarters and found the sealed door of the nose cone. It was, as I should have remembered, fixed from the outside.

For a moment I was stumped. The door had not been designed to open from within, and it was thick enough and insulated enough to withstand the stress of escape velocity through the outer atmosphere. I pushed on it, but there was no give. I thumbed around it, trying to see what I could do. Finally I simply resorted to force. If it wasn't designed to open from within, it also had never been built to take violent hammering blows from within.

With a fairly solid chunk of material that had been the base of one of the Russian instruments, I battered away at that door until I felt some response. Then I put my shoulder against it, braced my feet against the opposite wall and strained.

I felt the hatchway strain; then the gaskets and sealing material must have finally given way and the little round door fell open with a *pop*. I went out with it, sliding out like a shot out of a gun; and if I hadn't managed to hook my toe on the edge of the doorway, I would have gone out into

outer space on an orbit of my own that might take me a few miles in free flight.

I hung there, stunned. The little air that was in the capsule vanished with the opening of the hatch—that was what had made the popping noise. All around me now, up and down, was the terrifying emptiness of the Great Abyss of space. I hung out over the stars, above, below, on all sides save at my feet, where the little, pitifully small bunk of the aluminized exterior of the Lunik reflected the sun.

I pulled myself back to it with my feet, got a gloved hand on the rim of the door, and drew myself astraddle the capsule. Looking around, I saw the eclipse of the stars caused by the other vehicle. It now looked unpleasantly far away for a jump.

But there was nothing to be gained by delay. I reached into the capsule, felt for a few bits of parts and stuff, which I clasped in my arms. Holding these, I worked my way to face the distant space buoy, and pushed gently off.

With an eerie suddenness the Lunik faded away into the black and airless sky. I moved freely through the void, gently but relentlessly toward the alien vehicle waiting out there. Rapidly it grew larger, and as I neared it, I saw that I would just slide past it by a few yards.

But I had prepared against this. As I came up to it, I carefully heaved one of the bits of junk away from me in the direction opposite to that which I desired to move. Immediately the reaction of my throw made my body drift in the other direction—toward the space buoy. This was the rocket principle, applied manually.

I touched the surface of the alien spacecraft, clung to it, moved along it.

I found a round hatchway, similar to that on my original Martian missile. This one opened to the touch; I worked my way inside, and closed it behind me.

As it closed, light went on inside. There was a ring of soft circles which lit up with an orangish light when the hatch

was closed. At the same time, I heard the hissing of air being pumped back into the little cabin of the craft. When the hissing ceased, I unbuckled my face plate and breathing tube. It made really no difference at all if this air should prove unbreathable—I had no other choice.

It wasn't unbreathable at all. It was perhaps a little thinner than our own, and smelled somewhat odd—there was a sort of lush growing-things scent in the air that hinted at a jungly sort of parent world. But it was good to breathe, and fresh.

The cabin became warmer after a while, and I was able to unbuckle the tight leather and rubber of my high-altitude suit and get comfortable.

Until that moment, I had concealed from myself the effects of my cramped existence in the Lunik's cargo compartment. I was stiff and aching in all my joints. I had lived and slept in unnatural positions and cramped quarters. The suit was binding and uncomfortable; the cramping in the Lunik very distressing. Now all the aches and pains hit me at once.

But the cabin of the alien relay ship was comfortable. And I found a soft and resistant mat on which I was able to stretch out at full length for the first time.

I fell asleep.

How long I slept I don't know, nor did it matter. When I woke, I felt more like my natural self than I had since I had stowed away. I lay there on the mat and reflected on my surroundings. I sat up, looked around.

The alien ship had been designed to be a one-man vehicle. It had just the one chamber—a circular space in the nose of the craft, the "forward" part of which was entirely translucent. There was just the one mat to fit one small person; there were some panel controls that turned out on experiment to be food warmers and suppliers, a sound-record player, and a self-lighting series of charts. The food was of three or four kinds, probably all synthetic in nature, but edible. The sound-player gave forth with different voices reciting different things.

Since the language was strictly that of some distant planet, nothing that was said made sense to me. I suspect from the nature of some of the recitations that they may have been figures for space directions, for in parts there was a rhythmic droning that is so obviously the sound of a series of numbers, similar in tonal qualities in all languages.

The charts meant nothing to me. If they were star maps, the aliens who had built the ship had developed their own system of symbols, for I could make nothing of them.

There was a control board. It was unexpectedly simple; it had exactly one large button on it, big as a knob.

I looked at it, looked out the nose plates at the surrounding darkness of space. I saw Mars off to one side, saw Jupiter, saw the myriad stars. Was the ship moving?

There was no way of telling whether the ship was traveling anywhere or just drifting. There was no apparent motion of the stars, but spatial distances are so vast that had we been going a thousand miles a second, it would still not be noticeable.

I found a discoid seat that drew out from the control panel and sat down on it. Reflecting, I decided the Martian ship—though by now I knew it was not nor could it be from that red neighbor of Earth, yet kept thinking of it in those terms—was simply drifting parallel to the orbit in which the Lunik had been drifting. It had automatically propelled itself from some hidden spot on the moon out to meet me in space. Once it had picked me up, it would be up to me to pilot it. Or so I thought.

How to pilot it? Use the controls. What controls? The knob—there were no other controls.

So I put my hand firmly on the knob. I twisted it, but it didn't twist. I pulled it, but it didn't pull. I pushed down on it; it went down.

I slid back in my seat, slipped off it, hit the mat. How the driver of the ship was supposed to cushion himself at takeoff I'll be blazed if I know. For the ship had started off

immediately. The second the knob went down, there was a roar from the hidden, sealed-away engines in the rear. The roar became a steady rumble as the ship moved off under its own power. I got myself to my feet, marveling at discovering that with the new acceleration I had acquired a certain amount of "weight,"—though through some miracle of engineering, the designers of the craft had warped this apparent weight around to follow the floor of the craft rather than stick me to the back of it. Maybe this was an illusion—after all I don't know what the ship's actual shape was when in power flight. It's not impossible that the nose had twisted at right angles. How could I, Kermit Langley, tell?

I was off. Where to? I regained my seat at the controls, studied the situation. The stars were unchanged, but Mars was in a different position, so the vessel had swung about and was heading off somewhere to a definite junction.

I tried the knob again. Maybe I could turn the ship, drive it. But no—the knob remained stuck firmly to the control board and could not be raised, twisted or turned. The little craft was indeed a simple relay vessel designed to carry one messenger to one prearranged destination.

Grin and bear it. Besides, the sooner I got to Pluto, the better. Pluto was at the end of the Solar System, a mere three and a half billion miles away. I knew I might as well relax. I had four years to get there—and considering the distance, that was optimistic.

So I caught up on my sleep, gazed at the stars and listened to the meaningless recitations on the sound-record player. If that was meant to entertain the buoy's passenger, I was forced to conclude that here was an intelligent race that had somehow failed to discover music. There was a definite poetic rhythm in many of the pieces that the voices intoned; I theorized that the sound system gave out with culture as well as mechanical theorems. Unfortunately, it was worse than Chinese to me.

After what may have been about three weeks of flight, I

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knew that the rendezvous was just off Mars; the red planet was the only object in view that was definitely changing. It was growing steadily, becoming a disc, assuming surface features. I began to watch space for the appearance of the next relay vessel, the one that would take me out beyond Mars.

The red planet, the sun's fourth, and the Earth's next outward neighbor, was looming large in my view, large enough to occupy a good section of my vision. The little ship must have been not more than a half-million miles away from it and still approaching it, though at something of a tangent.

The planet was a glowing wonder. Its surface was a mixture of dull orange-red and yellowish brown, with patches of greenish blue here and there. At one pole there was a brilliant white glistening cap that came down quite a ways toward the equator; at the other pole a small ring of white only.

Canals? From where I watched, I did not exactly spot any of the delicate lines so many astronomers claimed to have seen. On the other hand, there were some thick fuzzy greenish lines which seemed straight enough and which connected a couple of the larger patches. But these were all in the hemisphere where the ice cap was tiny. In the other half, the ice cap dominated; the greenish areas were few and toward the equator. I noticed that there was a thin marginal band of blue-green that outlined the edges of the larger polar cap. What this was I did not know nor care—at that time.

It seemed to me that the relay vessel was going to skirt Mars and possibly make its meeting with the vessel somewhere just beyond the red planet. The rumble of our movement had died down some time ago, and now, as I watched Mars draw closer, the noise stopped.

I suddenly became panicky. It dawned on me that I had not been preparing for the shift. I slid off the control-panel seat and found myself floating in free gravity. Hastily I gathered together the parts of my Russian high-altitude suit

and climbed into them. I buckled the outfit around me, worked on my helmet, slung my two air tubes to my back, and readied myself. Then I sat down at the nose and watched.

Rapidly I grew warmer. The cabin was still heated, but I was afraid to take off my protective clothing. Who knows what method the ship might have for transferring its cargo? I envisioned an automatic ejection, which could be quite startling.

So I waited and perspired and watched Mars draw in.

I caught a glimpse of one of its two little moons transitting the face; it was just a tiny dot close to the surface. I watched it and thought of meteors, and thought of the other vessel that must be coming toward me, drawn by the call of the vibratory note in my bones. I thought of the damnable message implanted in my arm. But I felt no tingle, and I wondered how long I had to wait.

There was a grinding noise, a sound as if something jagged had torn along the side of the ship. Miraculously—or so it seemed—the side of the ship opened up to reveal space. I felt a *whoosh* of air across my face, and snapped shut my helmet just in time.

This was a strange way of ejecting a passenger, I thought. To tear the ship apart like the envelope of a special delivery letter!

Then it dawned on me that it was all wrong. This was no prepared meeting; this was a disaster! This was a meteor striking the ship, tearing it open. This was a spacewreck.

I grasped the control board and hung on. Around me the ship was airless, but it was not out of commission. The ring of lights was still aglow; the ship was still in commission.

There was a vibration in my suit as the engines came back to life. The knob of the control board jumped back up, spun around on its own volition, and popped back down again. Automatic action, I thought, and hung on.

I looked out at Mars. It had shifted violently; it was filling the entire viewplate. The little ship was turned aside

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from its tangent and was heading Marsward as fast as it could go.

I watched us close in, sitting in my airtight outfit in the ripped-up passenger cabin. I saw the surface of the world fill out, saw it assume convexity, and felt the first hissing jerks and quivers of the thin Martian outer atmosphere.

The ship twisted sharply, reversed, the engines roaring again. Part of the cabin wall buckled out, tore off. The little ship fell through the Martian atmosphere, fighting all the way. Heat was consuming the cabin. I clung desperately to the control board, hung on for dear life as things fell away around me.

Then there was a violent explosion and the control board, seat, and myself seated on it were hurled away from the burning hulk of the falling ship. Something orange blossomed in the air above me, and I fell, seat and all, by a great unsuspected parachute down to the surface of Mars.

CHAPTER 6

UNDOUBTEDLY you have a mental picture of Mars drawn from the Sunday supplements and the works of science-fiction authors. This picture is probably that of a world of deserts, of an old world where water is scarce and it never rains and a distant cold sun shines in a cloudless sky. Such, I shall admit, was my own impression of Mars. There is, as a matter of fact, some justice to this conception, but it is not the Mars where I landed.

I came down with a splash. Had it not been that I was a good deal lighter in the lower Martian gravity, I imagine I would have been badly hurt. I might have been injured even so, had I not hit where I did. For as I said, I hit with a splash. Nothing could be more unexpected.

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I landed in a sea; I hit the surface with my feet, went over backwards, and did a somersault in water. The parachute dragged me back, and I was pulled along on momentum through mud and mush and puddles. Finally I pulled myself to my feet, got loose from the control seat and the parachute attached to it, and stood alone on the surface of the red planet.

Red? From where I stood it was a horizon-to-horizon stretch of muddy sea. Looking down, I saw that the water I was standing in came up to my ankles, although I was smeared with mud from shoulders to legs. The sea—which was actually a planet-banding puddle—stretched as far as my vision reached. In a few spots a hummock of sand poked itself a foot or two above the morass. On one edge, the polar edge, there were some glistening patches of white and gray that must have been snow or ice.

It was cold, but the high-altitude suit was warm enough for this. I loosened the face mask and tried a breath. The air was thin, cold, and damp. A few moments of it, and I began to feel slightly dizzy. I refastened the face helmet loosely and let the air-tank tube hiss slightly, so that I got enough air to augment the meager Martian supply.

I took a few steps and found that the water was about the same level. This sea was but a thin layer of melting snow over a surface of equally shallow shale chips and thin patches of mud. I found this out as I started my trek toward the equatorial horizon.

I knew where I had landed, for I had seen the appearance of Mars from space. This was that bank of greenish blue that rimmed the larger pole. It was the season of the spring thaw in this hemisphere. The great polar cap, a shallow layer of ice and snow, was beginning to melt as the season warmed up. As it melted, its edges turned to water, and the water would flow off somewhere as the polar cap dwindled toward the summer. The sea which filled my vision could be but a few miles wide, and I had only to walk across it to find dry land.

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So I set out. I wasn't thinking about anything at all; there would be plenty of time later to think about my plight. But I couldn't make camp where I was.

It took only about two hours to reach dry land. The puddle-sea became shallower and shallower, and the dry areas more frequent; and finally I came out to the belt that marked the more expected Martian landscape.

It was indeed a desert world. Before me stretched a vast escarpment of reddish shale and patches of brownish-gray sand. It was not a plain landscape, for though there were nothing like mountains, the landscape sloped. This is what struck me most forcibly. The ground had a gradual elevation, as if it were for dozens of miles just one big slab of rock which had sunk in at one end. I could see that this was indeed so, for there was in the distance at my left a line of cliff that ran ahead into the horizon.

I walked over to the cliff—it was a mile or two from where I came out—and as I drew near I saw that here was a place where two vast areas of dry crust had cracked apart and where one such area had *tilted* so that it left the sharp edge of the adjoining rock mass several hundred feet higher in the air. The result, a cliff front that ran straight as an arrow for hundreds of miles, with its base the gently sloping basin formed by the sagging edge of the next block of Martian terrain.

I came to the cliff edge and the lowest part of the ensloping, and I saw that the thin sea of molten polar water was already running along its base, a stream of water running on toward the horizon—the first current of what would become in a few days a wide waterway of newly melted snow. Even at this early stage, I saw that there was vegetation sprouting along the edge of this newly formed spring freshet, and going among it, I examined it.

Here was something I could possibly eat. The problem of food was bothering me, as you can well imagine. I wasn't going to be thirsty—that much I knew—for I had drunk of

the water and found it fresh. There was a faint taste of iron, but it was icy cold and not salty in any way.

The vegetation was young and tender. It had a curious resemblance to cactus in consistency. Breaking open a few of the somewhat bulby fleshy growths that were springing up in profusion along the banks of the cliff-bottom stream, I saw that they soaked up water and that they had curiously constructed porous pulps. I suspected then, and confirmed later, that at night they closed up tight, shielded from the cold.

They were edible. If they weren't, I would have died. Since beggars cannot be choosers, I ate what I could without concern about food poisoning. But I think that poison in a vegetable is a matter of the plant's protection against voracious beasts—and where there are no such beasts, there is not likely to be the evolution of poison plants.

For I saw no large beasts on Mars. There were some creatures like insects, tiny things that came to life when the first dampness watered the dry pockets of soil. These were like caterpillars, all furry and leggy; but this form, I think, was their permanent one—not a larval stage like those of terrestrial moths and butterflies. I saw no flying things among the Martian fauna.

Night fell then, and I curled up on a dry hummock near the stream which, even as I watched the sun setting in the dark horizon, was already slowing and turning to ice.

High-altitude space suits may be binding and uncomfortable, but they are also heat-insulating. I closed off my face-place to protect my face from the night, and went to sleep. I was exhausted, and I slept like a log throughout the Martian night.

I awoke in a strange world. All about me there was mist, and I sat up in puzzlement. Dimly I could make out the features of the ground and the nearest scape. I could hear a rushing sound—that of the cliffside stream—but there was fog and mist in the air, and it was distinctly warmer than it

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had been. I waited, but the mist did not clear; I set off again, following the stream.

The mist cleared after about three hours, though a cloud hung in the air for the rest of the day. There went another of my misconceptions about Mars, but I reasoned that I was in an unusual season time. A fortunate one for a wanderer like me.

I followed that cliffside stream for several days, going steadily south. In that time I resolved a number of things about Mars. I came to a junction where two cliffsides met, and the land was jumbled briefly as several great land blocks had pushed against each other. This then was the secret and mystery of the canals!

There were indeed water channels on Mars, but they were neither man-made nor artificial. They were straight because they followed the uneven edges of these vast dry crusted land surfaces. Mars was dried and cracked, just as my Earthy area of mud dries and cracks. But as the surface was not mud but rock, these blocks are not even with each other. Some were about to tip over—in fact, all were tipsy in relation to each other, due to the inbalance of weights and the probable flaws in the interior structure of the planet. Along this series of declivities, the water from the melting poles flowed. As the water moved to the equator, so the vegetation sprang up alongside; and the occasional mists and clouds of that spring period hastened the growth and spread of the belts of vegetation.

I came finally out on a vast valley. Here was where one such block of surface, hundreds of square miles in size, had sunk a half-mile or more below the surface of the rest of the surrounding land blocks. In this valley there was no desert. Water ran through it, following smaller cracks, and the whole land here was green with growing things.

It was an area as nearly habitable for my kind of life as is ever likely to be found on that otherwise not very desirable planet. The air, too, was denser and more breathable, and I

had no need for the occasional recourse to my nearly depleted tanks. I suppose I was getting acclimated to the Martian atmosphere.

During my trek down to this haven I had wondered what was to become of my mission. I, Kermit Langley, was here, on Mars, the first Earthman to make it. I could not expect rescue by any Earth expedition for at least twenty years, if I correctly estimated progress back on my home world. By that time I would have been long dead—painfully I gathered—and the mysterious message of my arm would be gone, along with me.

Surely, I conjectured, it could not end so simply. There was supposedly another space relay ship waiting somewhere off Mars to pick me up. The meteor accident had forced my own ship to make automatically for the nearest world—which was this one. But the vibratory note in my bones should eventually bring the second relay ship to me. I had therefore but to wait.

Besides—did I have an alternative?

It turned out that perhaps I did.

In this valley I found a ruin. I was tramping through a low jungle of what seemed like a thick-limbed fir-tree-type plant—a sort of cross, if you can picture it, between a cactus and a fir—not more than about five feet high at this early time of the season, when I stumbled over something and fell.

I got to my feet and looked. I saw a ridge along the ground, and bent to examine it. It was made of symmetrical blocks of stone. I traced it with growing excitement, and before long I saw in it the outline of what must have been a structure. Some time, perhaps a hundred thousand years ago, a building had stood here. Now only the outline of its base remained; the rest was ground down to powder, shattered or simply deteriorated.

But it *had* been a building. Who had built it? I could not imagine, for I was sure by then that there were no large animals native to Mars. This building had been built to house

and shelter some creature of intelligence of my own human scale and size.

I went on searching carefully, and I found many more such signs. At one time, this sunken fertile valley had housed a settlement. I saw a line of what might have been some sort of road. I saw other structures, and I finally found one wall that was still several feet high.

I spent a day digging, with considerable results. I used some sharp-edged bits of shale to dig into the softer areas in the ruin section, and every thrust brought forth fragments of worked rock, a bit of clay, and every now and then some fragment of metal or ceramic.

What did these Martians look like? I got no hint of that. Did this civilization last long? Was it native to Mars? I believed the answer to be no. It was, and still is, my opinion that at some time or other a colony from some other world had tried to establish itself on Mars. I believe their efforts may have lasted a thousand years but probably not more. How they vanished, whether they emigrated or died out, will have to be left to the terrestrial explorers of the future.

But it meant hope to me. At first, my thought was that somewhere there might be a still-living city. Then my thought was that since there were no beasts native to Mars, they must have come themselves by spaceship. Perhaps—perhaps they still had a spaceship intact somewhere.

And so I had a goal of my own.

I resumed my trek southward. I reasoned that these ancient Martians would have clustered more thickly in the warmer equatorial regions, and my memory of Mars as seen from space told me that there were more of these greenish fertile areas along the equator than here in the northern latitudes.

I crossed out of this patch, followed along another declivity—now a thriving belt of growing things—and came to still another such sunken and fertile region. As I entered this new land night was falling, and I curled up to sleep in a sheltered spot, tired and weary and homesick.

I looked out over the alien sky, with the stars already shining—though the sun had not yet set—and saw the brilliant Evening Star glowing there. I looked at it with great feeling in my heart, for this Star of the Evening was not the one seen on my home world. This brilliant jewel of the sunset sky was the planet I called my birthplace, the star called Earth.

As the sky darkened I saw a flash of white shoot across the sky. A meteor, I thought, and I watched it. Then I saw another, and the light came nearer and flashed whitely toward me. I held my breath in surprise. There was a puff of light a few hundred feet away, then the highpitched sound of an explosion, altered by the thinness of the air.

What sort of meteor explodes like that? What sort of meteor follows another? I got to my feet, ran to a patch of thick fir-cacti and hid myself beneath them. There was another explosion, far away this time.

Something had spied me out; something had been looking for me. And that something was antagonistic.

I lay beneath that clump of vegetation until full darkness had come; then I got to my feet and moved myself away from that part of the valley. I put two and two together as I went.

What was the nature of this message I carried to "a base on Pluto"? Could it possibly be military?

Why did a meteor hit my spaceship just off Mars, when no meteor had endangered me during the whole trip up to then? Had it been a meteor, or a missile?

Why had the space relay ship not found me on Mars long before this, by the sure note of my special vibration? Had it been deterred by military action?

As I ran by night across the valley, dodging the heavy vegetation, I noted in the brilliant starlight that there were ruins here, too—and bigger and more substantial ones. I saw the outlines of a house that seemed still standing save for

a roof; I saw a wall. I ran part way along what seemed a road.

Then, half-sunk in the surface, in the center of a tangled mass of vegetation, I saw a building that gleamed bright and sharp. I ran to it; its wall was glossy ceramic, pitted here and there but still holding up over the millennia that had passed. I found an open doorway and went in. In the darkness within, I curled against a hard-baked wall where I could see the starry sky through the round patch of the doorway; and there, exhausted, I slept.

If there were other explosions probing for me that night, I heard them not.

CHAPTER 7

THE FACT is that I slept more comfortably that night than at any other time since my landing on Mars. In spite of the mysterious attack—or even possibly because of it, as it indicated that I was not just a forgotten and marooned being on an alien world—the place I had found in my hasty flight proved to be a building sufficiently intact to afford protection from the frigid chill of the Martian night, and to allow some warmth.

When I awoke I looked over this place, the only standing remnant of some alien colony on this neighbor world of Earth's. It was built far more firmly than the few ruins I had seen previously. Its walls were of some sort of stone composition, overlaid with a weather-resisting ceramic surface. This surface was badly pitted but still primarily intact. On it I could see occasional traces of arabesques, non-pictorial patterns, and something which might have been ideographic writing.

The building was one-storied and appeared to have a base-

ment which may have sunk into the ground more than had been intended when it was designed. It had several rooms, all empty. In places the roof had cracked, allowing in light and a good deal of wind-blown sand.

There was a pit in a protected alcove which led into a dark area, undoubtedly the sunken or cellar portion. I looked down it and saw that whatever stairs had been there had long since vanished. With nothing to lose, I leaped down, the lessened gravity allowing me to float ten feet and land without damage.

It was darker down there than above, yet light penetrated from various breaks that must have been present. When my eyes had come accustomed to the dimness, I saw that I had found a treasury of Martian artifacts. There were various humped objects, which upon uncovering showed what seemed pieces of machinery, or boxes, or even a group of rather artistic vases. I was wary of touching them too much, bearing in mind that someday, years from now, other Earthmen would be landing here and that this material had, in a sense, become a heritage of our own world.

I wandered among these treasures, seeking to find something which might be handy to me. I found a long sharp-edged object which could do service as a sword, and I took that with me. Not that I expected to find native beasts, for I was sure there were none, but it would help should the mysterious others who had shelled the valley find me out.

From somewhere above I heard a thud and a vibration. I stood stock still, listened. It was another explosion. Somehow those others had determined that I was somewhere in that fertile valley. Undoubtedly they sought to flush me out by their occasional shots. I conjectured that, quite possibly, the vibratory note imbedded in my system could be used by a foe to locate me, as well as by robot ships attuned to me. It looked as if my days were numbered, for surely they would pin me down in time. I had no resources; they obviously had at least a working spaceship.

I searched the basement but found nothing that seemed useful to me, until I found there was another alcove with another passage down to a subbasement level.

I went down this, landing with a heavy *thud* about twenty feet below the basement level. It was quite dark here, and I stood without moving for a couple of minutes. Gradually my eyes adjusted, and I could make out darker bulks in the large one-chamber area revealed down there. One great bulk dominated all others.

I went to it, felt around, studied it in the faint light of the subbasement. It was a large, ovalshaped thing, whose sides were coated with the same baked ceramic as the upper structures of the building. This seemed not at all pitted. It gave the impression of being a huge egg—the first thought that popped into my head was the whimsical one that this was the biggest china Easter egg I had ever seen. It was an Easter egg that was at least twenty feet long, and twelve feet at its highest.

I walked around it and saw to my astonishment that the resemblance was even greater, for there was a flat glassy inset at the nose of the egg, just like the little window set in children's candy eggs. I stood on my toes but couldn't reach high enough to see in.

At the other side I found a curving door in the side of the egg. It pushed inward when I shoved on it. The door was thick, beveled to stand pressure. I went in, and at my entrance a faint yellowish light went on somewhere inside. I stopped in astonishment. After how many thousands of years, this thing was intact enough to still function?

Inside, it was a crammed mass of ceramic sealed blocks, with some markings and a number of rubbery mats scattered about the base. I looked around and realized that I was in the presence of a spaceship of some sort. Certainly it was a vehicle designed to fly, for there was an unmistakable mat and ceramic seat by the window-nose. The nature of the machinery, sealed within the blocks, was unknown. Probably

atomic or electrical in nature, and definitely not rocket-driven.

The light came from a small sealed-in globe. I saw there were others, and that on the control board—which surely must have the same functional position on any planet in this universe—there were indentations which might well be the manual controls.

I sat myself down before this board and thought. I was afraid to voice to myself the hope that this ancient craft could still run. If it could, dare I, Kermit Langley, use it?

I must have sat there for half an hour, not touching the controls, just wondering whether I should tamper with them, afraid that the whole thing might just fall apart. It could hold up; it might not. If it did, I could escape Mars, go back into space—possibly stay alive there long enough to catch the next relay ship waiting for me. Could I dodge the unknown enemy?

There came a sudden loud thump from above and the space-egg rocked on its base from the shock. A shell had hit close to this museum-storehouse of the last Martian colony. I had better make up my mind. Should I run, hide like a helpless rabbit, eventually to be found out and killed; or else to escape to wander the rather inhospitable surface of Mars for a few months until death by starvation, oxygen strangulation, or cold finally got me? Or should I risk all on getting this fossil ship into the air and into space?

If it broke apart then, crashed or exploded, at least I would have died fighting like a man of Earth.

I pushed several of the less imposing, smaller indentations ringed at the top of the board. I suspected they might be simply lights or minor things, and I was right.

Several lights went on inside the ship, also uncomfortably dim. Something hummed in one of the ceramic blocks and I felt a stir of air as if a circulation system had been put into motion. I glanced through the window and saw that a beam of light had sent its ray from someplace on the outside surface of the space-egg. I looked and saw that this egg was not in an

enclosed subbasement as I had surmised, for ahead of me there was a long circular tunnel that curved upward. A launching rack?

The dimness of the inner lights gave me pause. The ship was still charged, but hadn't the charge dissipated in the ages? I climbed down from my seat, pushed the door shut, and was happy to hear the tight suction of it as it closed. *Still airtight*, I thought.

I went back to my seat, took a deep breath, and punched the major buttons, wondering which would do the trick.

Somewhere inside the egg, something hummed loudly, first on a low note, then rising to a high-pitched scream and dissolving in inaudibility. The ship quivered, shook, and then started slowly to slide forward. I hung, tense, over the board, watching. It slid, moving up the tunnel, gaining speed.

It slid along in the darkness, the beam lighting the way. Ahead of us I saw a dot of light—the open sky—and it began to come closer with steadily increasing speed. By the time it was a wide circular opening, framed in ceramic, the huge egg shot through it and bulleted on up into the deep blue of the Martian sky.

I clung to the board, holding myself against the inexorable acceleration as the ancient Martian vessel proved worthy of the arts of those lost and unknown colonists. Upward it went without a falter, gaining, ever gaining. Behind me, I felt the throb of some sort of strange atomic engines, and I felt that this ship was a master product of the master civilization.

The sky darkened; the ship moved on; and I suddenly caught a glimpse of a long, dark, pencil-like vessel, rear-streaking a white trail of rocket flame, circling around as if to catch me and follow. I stared at it, but it fell from my vision in seconds as the space-egg plunged outward.

I clung to that panel, transfixed with excitement, for hours, I believe. I cannot say now, for the time was incredible with

fortune; I was numbed, half-starved, and wild with elation at this victory.

If the pencil-shaped foe was following me, I could not see it. But I was out in space; I was outside the gravity of Mars; I was plunging along in the darkness of the interplanetary void, with Jupiter far in my viewplate, and the first planetary discs of the asteroids beginning to dot the starry field.

Finally I relaxed at the controls, rested a bit, turned to survey my situation. I found that I had jumped from the frying pan into what might well prove to be the fire.

There was no food. If this ship had been stocked, there was no way to detect it. Several of the ceramic blocks turned out to be chests and containers; they were quite empty. There was a water purifier, for I found a chest that trickled water when opened. Plainly I would not go thirsty, for it could condense whatever moisture was in the air, or came from natural sources, and make it reusable. But of food there was none.

It was also logical to believe that the mysterious enemy ship would be pursuing me. As for weapons, there was no sign of any aboard this egg.

The air system was also not as adequate as I might have hoped for. The air within the ship remained thin—as thin as the atmosphere of Mars—but at least the ship's system put more oxygen in it; for though I felt myself always a little breathless, I was not fainting.

My hope then was that it would sustain me long enough for the next relay ship to be attracted.

For a period that probably was about six days I stayed in that space-egg without anything happening out of the ordinary. It was speeding onward through the asteroid belt, at a steady acceleration. Jupiter was drawing closer at a rate that hinted at the steadily increasing magnitude of the ship's drive. The secret of that atomic drive was surely that of the step beyond rockets—the drive that would finally enable

man to attempt interstellar distances—for whatever the source, the power seemed apparently inexhaustible, able to accelerate indefinitely.

The great belted disc of Jupiter, the sun's largest planet, was drawing visibly closer. There must have been several narrow escapes with the tiny rocky bodies that circled between Mars and Jupiter as the asteroids, but somehow—or by some means not noticeable from within—the space-egg avoided them.

I was hungry, but having little to do, conserved my dwindling energies. I drank sparingly, rested by the controls, simply watching the black reaches of space.

As I rested there, I felt a faint ringing in my ears. I knew that sooner or later hunger would claim me. I shook my head, hoped that it was not beginning to undermine my system so soon. But the humming persisted; I felt my arms tingle as if I were growing numb all over.

I stood up, tried to walk about swinging my arms, but the tingling did not go away. Then it struck me, like a bolt, that this was not the tingling of a nervous system going awry, but the sensation that I had experienced before. This was the vibratory note responding to a similar pitch somewhere in the vicinity!

I returned to the single viewplate and searched the heavens. There was another relay ship nearby, and it was coming to meet me! I waited for it eagerly, for it would mean food and the next step of a more comfortable journey.

As I strained my eyes to make out the approaching shape of the ship, distinctive by its tail fins, I could see that it was moving ahead of me, on a course similar to that of the space-egg. But it was being definitely overhauled by another ship. A clever system, for this would allow the ships to draw alongside long enough for me to make the crossing.

I looked at my spacesuit, which I had mostly discarded for the sake of comfort. I drew it on once more, buckling it tight, protecting me by its compression and padding. I drew

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on my helmet, hefted the one of my air tanks which still seemed to have a little air left, possibly ten minutes' supply. I attached it, readied it for the quick passage.

I watched through the nose window as the finned ship drew closer, now alone, brought nearer by the call of the tingling which now flooded my system.

As I watched, I saw a little bloom of light far off beyond the ship. It was like a tiny white fire-flower coming into existence and vanishing. I stared at it, wondering; then I saw another, and thought that this was a strange place for fireworks.

I stared out into space beyond the relay ship and in the sudden light of a larger fire-flower that came into being nearer the relay ship, I caught a momentary horrifying glimpse of something long and slender and black out there beyond.

As I watched there was a speck of light from the side of this object and a fire-flower suddenly came into being right beside the relay ship. This time there was an answering series of sparks, and when the flare vanished, one of the tail fins was missing.

The mysterious foe had followed the space-egg all the way from Mars. It had been waiting for the relay ship to show up; it was systematically blasting it from the skies, blowing it to pieces!

I think I went mad then. I yelled for it to stop. I beat upon the transparency of the window with my fists and raged. But nothing would prevail. Before another minute had elapsed, another scored a direct hit on the defenseless robotic relay ship. It tore apart before my eyes, disintegrated into splinters of metal to disperse among the infinity of space forever.

I gripped the control board with my hands, conscious that the tingling had abruptly vanished from my body. I foolishly punched several of the master control indentations in hopes that something would discharge a weapon. The

space-egg bucked, and swerved. There was a flash-sensation of no-gravity as the engine stopped and restarted.

Whatever I did, it must have startled the black, pencil-shaped enemy. A shot was sent in my direction; it burst in a flash of explosion over the space-egg. Possibly they thought I might succeed in making this ancient antique a fighting ship.

There was another spark as the black foe fired once again. This time there was a terrific shock against the egg. The ship began to rotate on its axis like an egg sent spinning. I was hurled over and over inside it, slamming against the ceramic bulkheads and chests. The lights went out and the space-egg hurtled on, helpless and rolling, on through the void of interplanetary space, with the vast bulk of mighty Jupiter dead ahead.

I was knocked unconscious as I slid against one of the engine blocks.

CHAPTER 8

I CANNOT say how much time had passed when I regained consciousness. I had the sensation of being giddy, of riding a crazy merry-go-round among the stars while comets flashed by me. When I opened my eyes, I found the sensation persisting.

The ancient Martian ship was still lightless and powerless; it was also still spinning on its longitudinal axis. By now the spin had established a regularity, and the effect oddly enough was one that gave me a vague semblance of gravity. The centrifugal force of the spin made me lie against the wall of the egg.

When I staggered to my feet I found myself swaying, and was immediately seized by a dizziness and the strange sensation of falling apart. I stood a moment, then dropped

again to my knees and held my head down; at once the dizziness passed.

I realized that the spin was imparting some weight to me, but that the gravitational effect diminished as I stood up. When I stood, my head was nearly in the polar axis of the ovoid ship, and therefore in a zone where the effect of the whirling rotation was not operative. Thus, when I stood, my head was without weight, and my body gained internal weight only as it reached down to my feet, that part of me farthest from the rotational axis.

This had a most disturbing and eerie effect. I crawled along the floor in the direction of the nose-window, which had become the only source of light. As I reached it, climbing with my whole body toward the axis, the effect diminished somewhat; finally I was able to crouch by the observational nose and look out.

The stars whirled around as the ship whirled. It took all my concentration, and a lot of squinting and flash-blinking of my eyes, for me to focus on anything long enough to get a picture. What I saw, through the blur of motion, was that the mighty banded features of Jupiter were dead ahead, and that otherwise there was no hint of any pencil-shaped craft in sight.

Unquestionably, the foe had assumed my destruction and had left. I could conceive of a space-telegram being dispatched to some base commander: "Mission accomplished."

I drew myself back to a hunched and more comfortable position and rested awhile. I had several bruised spots, but otherwise had suffered no major injuries. I looked around in the semi-darkness of the out-of-commission vessel. There was no visible damage within.

I sniffed and was aware that the air had not fouled yet, that possibly the system of ventilation was still functioning. I tried the board, but its controls went in and out with no evidence of contact and produced nothing. The power system that drove the vessel was out.

Food? There was none.

My time was limited. I looked again and there was no doubt that the powerless space-egg was headed directly for the planet Jupiter. It might not be too long before it was sucked into the grasp of its outer atmosphere. Hours?

I could at least make myself more comfortable, if I could stop the mad spinning of the ship. I thought about this for a while. I crawled back to the center of the vessel, looked about and over me to ascertain that there would be a cleared area in the belt of latitude in which I stood. I faced opposite to the direction of the spin and started to walk. As I walked, the effect was always as if the ship itself was moving under my feet, for wherever I set foot the sensation was that that part was down and all the rest curving up and over. I walked right around the ship, up walls and curved ceiling and back to the floor. My head, upright, seemed to linger near the center of the axis and I felt very dizzy.

But I stuck to it, and next time increased my speed until I had managed a sort of running gait around the equatorial belt of the spinning ship. Running counter to the rotation, I hoped thereby to slow the rotation, by the steady push of my feet against the walls, to drag it back, finally to stop it.

I ran around and around like a squirrel in a cage, and when I paused for breath I saw that it was working. The spin of the stars as seen from the nose window was definitely slower than before. Reassured, I took to my heels again.

Eventually it worked. By making myself the counterweight, I had brought the spin to a halt. When I saw that the stars were steady—and that was perhaps a half hour later—I sank to the floor exhausted, covered with perspiration.

I looked again from the window, crouched now in total weightlessness at the control seat. I had gained—a little comfort before my death. Jupiter loomed across the entire vision plate of my ship; I saw that I was heading for a direct fall.

Jupiter is a monster planet, the largest in the Solar System.

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Eighty-six thousand miles in diameter, it could swallow many planets the size of Earth and not notice them.

Helpless, I sat there and watched the vast bulk come ever nearer. It was an awesome sight, this world, and a strange one. It was a world without visible land markings, for Jupiter's atmosphere was thick and not readily penetrable. I knew from my readings in the library at Phoenix that it was a poisonous atmosphere, heavy with methane and chlorine and ammonia. It was from my position a swirling surface of yellow gases.

It was banded, for this atmosphere spun about its hard core in different latitudes at different rates of speed; so the differing belts of gases could be clearly marked. Here and there a splotchy bit of green, and in one place swinging slowly into view a vast red spot—an oval area larger than even the planet Earth, yet just part of the general surface-scape of Jupiter.

Into this mass, my little egg-ship would plunge and that would be the end of Kermit Langley. I would be incinerated in the fall, and not even ash would drift eventually down through the storms and whirlwinds of the Jovian atmosphere to ever reach the surface.

What then was I to do? I knew of nothing left for me. Unless there was still another space-buoy ship nearby to rescue me, I was doomed. My time was, perhaps, now measured in but the few hours it would take me to enter the outermost fringes of that monstrous atmosphere. I found myself becoming strangely calm. I was exhausted, worn out, and now the whole mad adventure was due to achieve its obvious end.

So I sat there waiting for destruction and thought about myself, my life and the weird series of circumstances that had brought me here. I had convinced myself that I was acting of my free will—enjoying an adventure which normally Earthmen would not win for themselves for a century more to come. Yet in reality I had been but a pawn. Un-

questionably, the real will that drove me from my home, that took me across the continents to beyond the moon, and even to the inhospitable surface of Mars, was not my own. I had obeyed only the implanted orders of the being I had been foolish enough to rescue.

How much time passed while I rested I do not know. Probably I fell asleep, or at least into a semi-coma, for I was pulled back to reality by a new vibration. For an instant, I thought it was indeed the unlikely rescue ship, but this vibration was at once identified as not that of my own body. It was a low-pitched hum which seemed to be coursing through the entire egg-ship.

I glanced out the view port and saw that a sea of billowing yellow was below me and that, apparently, I hung suspended over this horizon-to-horizon bowl of churning soup. Then I knew my final moment had come. The vibration was the first impact of the outermost tenuous fringes of gaseous molecules of that Jovian air blanket. Within seconds, the ship would heat up, and in a few more seconds, burst ablaze from the friction of its passage.

I sat and stared down at the world which lay so close to me and to my death. I waited for the heat to rise. I waited.

And it did not rise.

The ship continued to vibrate; the humming was a high-pitched shriek which screamed out of every surface within the egg-shaped vessel. But it did not heat up, nor did it begin to break up.

I suddenly gripped the panel and rose to my feet. Was it possible? Was it possible that the builders of this ship—those millennially ancient colonizers of Mars—had perfected a re-entry mechanism which could throw off the friction of a spaceship's return to atmosphere at spaceflight speed?

I waited, my senses now alert, hopes I had long abandoned all returned in full color to my mind. I might yet survive the plunge. This ship might yet master its re-entry and make good its rest.

But of course not, I thought. For even if the ship did not burn, surely its impact would smash me to molecules. Yet, once hope was aroused, it would not be crushed.

Around the ship, judging from what I could see, there no longer was the black of outer space. Instead, there was a dark blue, growing, as I watched, lighter and faintly greener. I saw the cloud surface of pea-soup gases come into greater perspective, saw that the eternal night of outer space was giving way to the day of a sunlit planet. The ship was falling now, in screaming friction-resistant molecules, through a yellow-green daylight.

Below, the clouds were sorting out, and I could see that from above they seemed like an ocean of racing, boiling waves of yellow—with here and there a flicker of green or blue, or even red, as the uppermost layers of the thick atmosphere caught the glint of the sun's rays.

Down I came, and the clouds drew apart and became now great foggy masses of color. Before I knew it I was in them. The ship was immersed in yellowish fog and plunged on, in its fantastic fall to the still far-distant surface.

Through yellow fog I descended and then through a layer of green and again one of orange-gray, and the yellow air of Jupiter once more, though not as foggy, no longer clouds but what must pass for air. The ship began to rock and sway to the impact of the rising winds about me.

I felt that the ship was no longer plunging straight down but beginning to move along with the roaring, raging winds of this upper Jovian atmosphere. Soon its resistance was ended and it was tossed along on the endless hurricanes that rage beneath the upper clouds of Jupiter.

For Jupiter's atmosphere rolls about it in an eternal monsoon, varying in different belts according to the composition of the gases and the speed of rotation from the poles. I was in one of the central belts and swept along with it, a dust mote borne upon the tornado.

Yet my ship was still moving slowly down, even while

traveling with the wind. I hung there, faint with hunger, exhausted, staring with wild surmise, and finally crumpling at the panel until I was unconscious.

I came back still once more to life, and staggered again to my feet. Now I looked down upon a surface, a dark, stark solidity, streaked with rapidly moving lights as the sun filtered down through madly changing clouds and hundreds of miles of varying gases. I saw a surface of hardswept plains, and deep rills, and passed a chain of ugly rounded mountains besides which the Himalayas would have been mere foothills. The ship swept across an ocean of fuming, bubbling liquid, and another ocean beyond that which looked like water but which could only have been liquid ammonia; and coming ever lower, I could see mighty ammoniac breakers rushing onto a beach of sharply poisonous green sand, and battering away at a cliff of purple.

My egg was coming down, losing momentum in the mighty currents of air, and before me there came a valley between high cliffs of blue rock. Into that valley the ship was blown and in the relative quiet of that protected region it came sliding down to the surface, carving a rut in a thick mat of black, hairy growth, and then settled with a strangely gentle bump against the overhanging ledge of the cobalt-blue up-thrust rock.

I lay over the panel at the observation window and could not comprehend it. Somehow I had landed safely; somehow I was alive. Unquestionably, it was not luck—it could not be luck. The ship had beaten off the friction of the re-entry, and the builders must have built better than I had ever dreamed. It had landed itself, even against the fantastic hurricane atmosphere of the largest planet known to man.

But what now? Had I not but postponed my death—given up a quick, merciful one for a slow one of starvation or asphyxiation within the egg-ship?

I could still prevent that, I thought; all I had to do was to open the door of the ship. The atmosphere outside was dead-

lier than the deadly gases in the most sinister execution chamber on Earth. Cyanide was but one minor constituent of that air. Most of it was ammoniac gases, and chlorine, and that poisonous malodorous swampgas, methane. Oxygen? If there was any, I would never have time to know it.

I tried to rise to my feet, but the effort only unbalanced me; I found myself sliding down from the seat at the panel to the floor of the ovoid spaceship. I slid down until I lay sprawled on my back on the floor.

I tried to rise, but found I could barely move my arm. I struggled again, raised my head slightly from the floor, and felt as if my eyeballs would sink into my skull. I lay back, pondering this new weakness.

I rested, tried again. This time I almost sat up, but it felt as if every bone in my body was protesting, as if my flesh was loaded down with lead weights. As the thought hit me, I let myself down again and lay flat and looked at the ceiling of my ship with eyes whose pain must surely have been caused by ruptured capillaries.

I knew what the trouble was. Jupiter is a big planet, and the bigger the planet, the greater the gravity. Fortunately, perhaps, Jupiter rotated fast, and that centrifugal force alleviated in part the gravitational pull of the surface. But not enough. For I must now be weighing over two and a half times my normal weight.

I, who had on Earth weighed perhaps one hundred and thirty pounds, now must weigh about three hundred and forty pounds, just my flesh and bones and blood! My clothes too must have more than doubled in weight. I was loaded down with chains greater than any medieval prisoner had ever worn. For I could move nothing, not even the smallest finger, nor twitch my skin without bearing the burden of Jupiter's mighty gravity.

I could feel my heart pounding against the intolerable weight of my chest and blood. I could live, for a while longer,

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only by not even attempting to move. For any more effort would surely burst my heart from the strain.

This then, this ghastly doom, was to be my end. All the cunning of Mars's forgotten inhabitants, all the schemes of the warring Plutonian who had launched me, had come to nought by the mere weight of my own body!

CHAPTER 9

How LONG I lay there I cannot say. Every breath was intolerable agony, every heartbeat painfully like my last. Probably I again passed out of consciousness, but my next clear memory is that of being rocked, rocked like a baby in a cradle.

I rested there. The swaying continued, and I simply wondered about it. My mind revived from its stupor and began to conjecture the reason for this new sensation. The egg-ship was being swayed by the winds which had finally sought out this protected spot? There was a quaking in the ground? I had landed not on solid ground but on marsh or perhaps some strange not-solid-nor-yet-liquid substance produced by the pressure of the atmosphere and the unearthly gases?

The swaying, which had no certain pattern, was not violent. I had the impression that the ship was moving, and the thought came that it was mighty like what a pet must feel when carried in a traveling bag. This thought persisted and, I rolled my eyes painfully about, but I could make out nothing; the rim of the viewplate was over my level of sight.

The swaying stopped after a while. I rested and again felt something. I could feel thumpings and a rumbling noise coming through the floor of the ship. That, too, subsided after a while; now there was a period of quiet in which I resigned myself to my fate.

This period was abruptly broken by a curious grinding noise. I raised my eyes to the ceiling curving above me. The sound seemed to be coming from there. I stared, and as I watched I saw a crack suddenly appear on the surface of the ship. I stared at it, not knowing what to think, and the crack spread until it ran across the entire longitudinal axis of the upper half of the ovoid. Then it widened and as I watched in amazement the ship was quite neatly split in half, even as we might split an egg.

I waited for my laboring lungs to take in the first deadly whiff of the Jovian atmosphere. Possibly, I braced myself for the shock of that ammoniac stench, debated holding my breath so as to get at least one second's glimpse of whatever was outside before I was snuffed out. But the delay was in vain. I breathed—and I breathed air.

It was not poisonous. It did have a faint trace of ammonia gas in it. It was not Earth air; it had unpleasant undertones of impurities; but it had oxygen, and it was of about the same density as the air of Earth.

I breathed it and wondered how that could possibly be. Now I took note of what I could see. The two halves of the ship had folded back, and above me I made out at first only a confused kaleidoscope of yellows and grays and blues. This resolved itself into moving shapes and still ones, and finally I saw.

The ship lay open under a transparent canopy very much like a long, flat, gigantic bell-jar. Within this space was the air I breathed, air like that of Earth, obviously made to order for this operation.

Through the walls of this canopy, within which projected various long metallic levers and arms, the mechanisms which had split open the ship, I could see the true Jovian background. Whether I was in the open or in a structure, I do not know for sure. The ceiling must have been hundreds of feet high—if ceiling there was. It seemed to me that the sur-

roundings were always obscured in a yellowish fog whose thin clouds closed out clear vision beyond a hundred feet.

I could see that there were at least two beings hovering about the enclosure in which my ship and I lay. They were grayish in color and of gigantic size. I felt that I was to them much as a mouse is to a man in volume.

Their exact shapes I cannot positively say. I have a memory of being surprised at what seemed a certain delicacy and refinement of line, for somehow I could only associate creatures who could contend with Jovian climate and gravity as being somehow thick and monstrous. Yet my mind also somehow says that this, too, was correct. There was weight and solidity in these creatures—and that unexpected laciness too. Delicacy and yet rigidity—you would have to see them yourself to understand this.

I look upon them in my memory's eyes as being humanoid, yet that cannot be entirely true. They must have had certain resemblances to humanity, for I believe that all intelligent beings must follow the patterns Nature lays down for her creatures. Just as dolphins and porpoises must resemble each other, yet are vastly different in physical genera, so must beings that use the mind have things in common.

Their skins were grayish with sometimes flashes and hints of other colors, which might suggest they wore some sort of garments; yet this, also, might be illusion. They had eyes; this I know. They looked at me, and I saw great swimming pools of deepest maroon, warm, soft, strangely lambent with understanding. I lost my fears when I saw them; I resigned myself to their "hands"—as, indeed, I had no other choice.

There was a new humming noise, and the long cranelike levers which penetrated my space moved easily toward me, carrying things. Quickly, while I lay there gasping and in pain, a structure of wires and glassy rods was built up around me, covering me from head to foot. Then when this was completed, there was an audible click.

I froze, gripped in the rush of an electronic current. It did

not hurt me, but it froze me. I felt my pains vanish; my chest, my eyes, my heart—all seemed relieved of agony, yet they still functioned. I was unable to move a conscious muscle, however. I lay rigid in the grip of a tingling flow of force, but the weight which had oppressed me vanished.

Plainly the Jovians had encased me in some sort of device which had augmented my own muscular energies and supplied sufficient outside forces so that I could hold my own. The cost of this was the complete paralysis of my body.

I was rigid but safe. The levers came over now, picked me up, held me up for examination. I looked then into those great eyes of which I have spoken, and felt no terror. Perhaps to them I was a curiosity, an experiment, an interesting guinea pig of another kind of life, but they meant no ill.

How long I remained under the canopy of oxygenated air I cannot say. I felt no hunger—whatever were the forces coursing through me, they supplied the needs of my cells.

There was a coming and going of the Jovians, and at one time the whole air pocket, ship and myself, were carried somewhere. I was propped up, and I saw tantalizing glimpses of a world no Earthly telescope will ever penetrate.

At times the misty atmosphere faded, for apparently it was the way they preferred their personal surroundings, and I caught glimpses of Jovian landscape as I was carried in some monster vehicle.

I saw buildings constructed in arrow form, the points of the arrow always lying in the direction from which the tempests blew—the tempests which constitute a normal peaceful day on Jupiter. I saw great wheels revolving in the power of these endless winds and deduced that the Jovian civilization was amply supplied with power from its own air currents. I saw at one point that we passed over—or through—a lake of flames, yet the bearers of my vehicle seemed unharmed.

I saw glimpses of huge blue mountains in one unexpectedly clear-air valley, with rolling rills of red ore thundering against their base with the billowing caps of an angry sea.

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I saw bits and snatches of a city, veiled in trails of thick yellow fog, a city of such stature as a mouse would see wandering through New York.

In this city, somewhere, I was again in a chamber, and this time there were many Jovians about. Now and then one would loom out of the fog and peer at me; and I could hear booms and thundering of sound ebb and flow. I became aware that there must have been a conference about me—that I Kermit Langley, was the subject of their discussions.

What would be their conclusions? I knew not, but I began again to regain something of that personal concern which had been numbed away from me by my landing. I could think and reason, though I could not move a muscle. I could again ponder my present and my future, though I was wholly dependent upon the unearthly electronic strait jacket which alone kept me alive.

Was I to end as an exhibit in some museum, a rare specimen preserved for the curious? Or would some faction of the debaters win for me dissection? And what of the vibration that had been implanted within me—the message on my bones? Could these Jovian scientists detect this? Had they tried?

Again, after an indeterminate time, I was removed from that place and taken again to another part of this city. I found myself in a place of inexplicable sparks and heavy thundering noises.

I was picked up by levers, held upright until I saw the transparent walls of my enclosure suddenly peel away. The protective canopy of air vanished like a burst bubble, but before I could gain even one whiff of the poison air, I was moved with split-second speed to a point over what looked like a steaming lake of boiling liquid, then dropped into it.

Even as I dropped, the structure of wires and rods which had fed me and supported me was ripped away. I regained control of my muscles for one fraction of a second, and at

the same moment felt a shock of pain. Then I was under the liquid, immersed in the mysterious vat.

Again all pain and feeling vanished? But this time I lost even the sensations of my body. My skin, my physical substance, lost all sensation, even as a man undergoing anesthesia. There was but a momentary coldness and then nothing.

I saw only that I was surrounded by blue depths. I heard nothing, felt nothing. I was as if bodyless.

I must have remained in that vat for several minutes or hours; how can I judge? The blue sea surrounding me seemed gradually to lighten in color, to become clear, then finally to fade out of visibility, and I saw myself as if hanging motionless in the center of an empty coppery vat. A yellow light filtered through from above, but there were no clouds directly about me.

Then I rose into the air, and the vat slid away below. I could see that all around me, for about six yards in all directions, was cool, clear space. Beyond that the Jovian confusion showed up.

I grasped then that I had been placed within the center of a mass of clear transparent substance, like a fly in clear amber or a seahorse imbedded in lucite. I was not dead, but all my activities, save my brain and sight, seemed suspended.

The block of lucite-substance hung in the grip of a monster crane and was moved across a space. I saw below me the mouth of a vast deep black pit. I watched it as the block in which I was suspended was brought over to the mouth of this pit.

The realization came to me then that I was strangely like a solid shell about to be fitted into the muzzle of some giant cannon. It was obvious when I saw it, and I could not even think of an alternate possibility.

The transparent mass, very like a huge projectile in its size, holding me within it, was lowered into that monstrous muzzle, and about me then was darkness. Down the block of

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matter plunged, perhaps half a mile, into the maw of a cannon beyond conception by Terrestrial ballistics.

It came to rest, and I could see nothing in the darkness.

I waited. I had no doubts as to what was going to happen; I was going to be a human projectile. For what mad game was this? Was this some common means of transportation on this vast, vast planet? Perhaps I was just a Jovian package about to be transmitted by cannon-mail across half a world for delivery to some other group of investigators.

There was an instantaneous flash of intolerable brilliance beneath me. The gun had been fired!

I felt nothing. The shock, if there had been any, had obviously been transmitted throughout the monster projectile, and all parts of it carried the blow as one unit, myself included.

But it had been fired. I could not see the emergence of the projectile from the muzzle, for it was too fast for my eye to register. I know that there was the brilliance and then there was passage through thick yellow clouds.

The shell was rising, and must have been rising at tremendous speed. Heat up? No, for in what must have been but a few seconds the masses of thick atmosphere cleared, the sky passed from light blue to dark blue, and then to black.

I was out in space, fired by one monster burst from that incredible cannon. I was in the center of a solid projectile traveling outward at a vast rate.

I watched for the trajectory to level out, to turn back, to bring me down again on Jupiter. I watched and I waited.

It never did.

The gun, fired by what unknown fuel, had given the projectile a velocity exceeding the escape velocity of Jupiter. I was fired into space, heading outward, never to return to Jupiter. I was a shell speeding toward some as yet unknown target—for what purpose, only the Jovians could tell.

Returning to Earth? I thought at first that that might have

been the Jovian intent—a sort of philanthropic tip of the hat to a brother world.

But as I watched the stars and saw the planets, I knew it was not so. The sun was receding. I was heading outward, farther and farther into the depths of space. What then was my destination, where my target?

CHAPTER 10

I WAS alone in infinity; I hung between the worlds, in a vastness that had no end. All around there were only the stars in their hundreds of billions, the stars of our own galaxy, and the stars of the myriad galaxies that hang beyond ours, hundreds of thousands of light-years remote.

I was close to being a disembodied spirit as I think it will ever be possible for a living man to be. I could not move a muscle, yet I felt no need to do so. The life current of my body was kept flowing by some means unknown to myself, though surely it must have been slowed to a minimum. Having neither eating nor sleeping times, being without need of either, I had lost all sense of time.

Though I moved through space with a speed greater than that of planets, so vast are the distances between even the worlds of our little sun's system that my progress could not be detected. All I could do was contemplate the universe and think.

At first I found myself reviewing my life, going over it step by step, day by day almost, weighing each act and decision, wondering about the probable outcome had this or that action been different. But eventually this line of thought petered out, arriving always at the events that led me to my present position, that of an object, imbedded in a projectile, traveling through space.

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I turned over the philosophies of the world in my head, and regretted that I really knew so little of them. My life had not been a studious one, but now I turned my mind to conjecture on the why and wherefore of existence until I must have discovered for myself all the possible lines of philosophic thought, the speculations of thinker and lama, of priest and skeptic.

All about me there shone the veritable ocean of stars, the constant reminder of the existence of creation a million million times over. Saturn for a while was a distant sight until it faded subtly into the array of infinite specks.

That was a hint of my speed. I, Kermit Langley, was alive; I had not died, I was heading outward. Had the Jovians a motive? Had I direction, or was I destined to travel forever outward, for billions of years until the end of the universe, or until my translucent block was consumed in the fires of some sun that might by cosmic accident pass directly across its trajectory?

I gave up thinking and let my mind rest, absorbing in an apathy that must have been near the blank of death all the endless rays of light and unseen vibrations that bathe the universe.

Then it seemed to me that I imagined music, and I listened to it for an endless period, just hearing in my mind the tones and strains of instruments. After a period of this, I had a curious thought. This I thought was just another mental review—I was recalling all the music I had heard, conscious and unconscious, throughout my lifetime. And I tried to identify some of the pieces that it seemed to me I was hearing.

I could not. I could not. I listened and I rather definitely heard it; this was not music I could place. Not Beethoven or Bach, nor jazz nor boogie-woogie, nor anything I knew.

Now I came alert and I listened, not with half my awareness but with all. And I realized that the music was not the reconstruction within my brain but sounds that I was hearing

with my ears. They seemed at times faint and far away, and at other times near; and I realized that I could hear different music at different times and by different efforts.

The music was real. Somewhere there was music traveling through the universe and I could hear it. Within the lucite-block it was resolved, picked up like a giant crystal radio receiver. I concentrated, and for varying periods some of it came clear and strong, acting upon my mental desires.

I became selective. There was a band somewhere playing something deep and poetic on instruments primarily strings. Elsewhere there was another band blaring noisy airs like a military band. But neither of these were Earthly bands, for the melodies and rhythms were unfamiliar, and the airs were none that any Earthly band had marched to.

I worked in my mind at perfecting my tune-in. And having all the time in the universe at my command and no physical demands, I extended my range. I picked out single tunes and vast orchestras; I caught sounds different from those of any human instruments but yet pleasant, and I heard cacophonies which were very jarring and irksome.

And then I heard a distinct break in one theme I was listening to and the sound of a voice! What it said I cannot say in words, but as it spoke, I had a vision. I saw a slight greenish man standing in a vale of emerald, and surrounding him were other greenish people holding odd instruments. There was just this flash and the music resumed. Now, somewhere between Saturn and the orbit of Uranus, I began to be able to visualize more and more the sources of the music. Without paying too much attention, I could reach out and draw down from space a vision for a split second that paralleled the mysterious sonata.

The visions were all different. I never saw the green musicians again, but I saw others, hundreds of visions. I saw tall beings standing before machinery; I saw wispy ones like insects; I saw ugly ones and curious ones and many-legged ones. I saw landscape after landscape, wild, eerie, bland,

frightening, mechanical, blue-skied, black-skied, high-ceilinged, lit by fires and lit by glows.

I could hear their voices, and sometimes it seemed that they conveyed messages. Then I became aware that, all along, I had been able to hear voices behind and through and around the channels on which the myriad music bands came.

Thus I tuned it at random on a range that seemed to me to be quite infinite. Taking stock gradually, I came to a rather astonishing conclusion.

The universe was inhabited. There were, just as our astronomers had finally come to speculate, hundreds of thousands of inhabitable planets. And if inhabitable, they were therefore, by some divine law of nature, inhabited. And of these worlds, thousands and maybe tens of thousands had advanced to the point of Earth and beyond.

The galaxy was bathed in radio and thought-waves. Wherever intelligence lived and breathed, there radiated a source of thought and vision, of music and life. What was it I was hearing and seeing?

It was the deliberate broadcasting of thousands of planets near and far. Sending to each other on the waves of mental thought, on the vibrations within which men's minds function, their choicest musics, their thoughts, their philosophies, their opinions. So the galaxy was awash with the mental radio of its inhabitants and when a planet grew to the stage wherein it could tune in, on this, it could take part in this concert of intelligence.

That was how I first thought of it, and I set out then to try to piece together the various threads of what I was tuning in and to make a pattern. I could not, not at first.

It was hard to get the same planet twice. I became confused among the innumerable transmissions, and I realized, after an indefinite time, that these stations were primarily sending, rarely receiving. I could detect no messages that seemed "tight," that seemed question and answer, telegraphic.

Were they then stations? Or was all this the accidental

transmission of mere life processes in the higher advances of civilizations? Were the planets themselves aware of each other? Were these all local transmissions echoing endlessly through space, from planets that might themselves have vanished or died a million or ten million years before?

This thought intrigued me, and I listened and watched as curious cities flashed before me, as strange landscapes and snatches of action and movement and love and hate flitted back and forth, on tunes and themes of all kinds.

Spaceships? I saw one at last, resting on the brown desert of a mountainous world while odd tanklike vehicles rolled down the slopes to it. This scene lost, I found another eventually of a different ship taking off on a different world amid the towers of an unearthly architecture.

But spaceships were few and far between, and finally I had to admit that travel between these myriad planets seemed a rather scarce thing. I saw then what should have been obvious: that one world does not want anything of another.

When a world has achieved the heights of civilization, the power of the atom entirely at its service, there is nothing that it really needs from other worlds. Rare elements can be made by atomic fission as needed. Scarcities can be met by scientific invention and creation. Automation can supply all the cheap labor of a billion slaves. Food can be created by synthesis from sunlight and rock. What price interplanetary commerce?

Yes, there would be a little of it, probably at the dawn of this period of scientific abundance, just for curiosity, exploration. But no other world can ever be as comfortable for a race as the one it was born to. There are few instances of two intelligent races in the same solar system. As for the stars, travel between them is possible, but the time consumed is beyond the scope of normal life-spans. It is resorted to only as desperate measure.

So what do the worlds have to tell each other? Only what they can convey easily by the mental radios of future science. Their music, their philosophy, their art, their fantasies of

fiction and history. This is what they do. They treasure only the various ideas that traverse the cosmos.

So I traveled on, tuning in on the worlds. By and by I became aware of something else, something strange. Every now and then I caught a visual reference to something different—some sort of remark or speculation about another type of beings, something not very comprehensible even to the advanced worlds. I caught at these hints and wondered whether my own experience were not somehow meshed in with this.

I sought out in my mind for further hints and fragments of this puzzle, the problem that was not quite solved to the satisfaction of any of the hundreds of planets I had heard. I reached out deliberately now for answers, cast my mind about in all directions of the starry surroundings to find some further clue.

Then I saw a vision of a world of greenish-gray clouds, with odd monsters moving among them, and sounds unlike any made by the humanoid intelligences. It flashed past and was gone. I searched again, for there was something terribly alien there and yet something that struck an answering chord in my memory.

I saw another vision of the purple world with yellow masses, and the same alienness rushed through me, and again the hint of familiarity. And then I saw Jupiter again. For an instant I was in the yellowish fog with the gray creatures so delicate and so massive. And though the Jovian vision was different from the previous two, yet it too was familiar, and I knew then.

There were two types of intelligences in the universe. There were inhabitants of small, solid Terrestrial worlds who breathed oxygen and drank water. And there were inhabitants of large ammoniac-methane worlds who breathed those poisonous gases and drank corrosives that would destroy any Terrestrial creature. In our Solar System, Earth was the intelligent oxygen world, Jupiter the intelligent ammoniac world.

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There were hundreds of thousands of Jovian worlds throughout the universe, and they carried on among themselves transmissions and mental intercourse, just as the advanced Terrestrial worlds did. But the two sets of life did not mingle. They were aware of each other, but not able to comprehend each other. They could gain nothing by communication. Their philosophies were meaningless to the minds of oxygen breathers, their music unrecognizable, their histories incomprehensible, their chemistries useless to each other, their life conditions so alien that nothing whatsoever could be gained by communication between them.

So I hurled on through space, beginning to absorb the knowledge of the cosmos, steeping myself in the life of its worlds and nibbling at the edges of that other bloc of planets to which somehow I myself now was indebted. I was on my way from Jupiter and my movement must follow some line of Jovian purpose. What it could be was not apparent, for how should the Jovians interfere with the actions of the oxygen worlds when other creatures of their type had never cared or could care?

I reached back now and tried again to recall the Jovian band to my attention. After a time, again indefinite because immeasurable to me, I brought a Jovian vision back to mind, and then once more. Finally I became adept at it, and could tune in on the yellowish fog world, on its stormy surface and its Gargantuan cities, and its strange beings.

Beyond the orbit of Uranus, still rushing ahead, on some unknown ballistic mission, I attempted transmission to Jupiter.

In all this sun's family, only Jupiter radiated such mental programs. Earth was silent, still beneath the level of such powers. Venus was silent, Mercury silent, Mars silent.

Now, oddly enough, I got a message from Jupiter. It was not in words, not even in clear thoughts, but it showed me a vision of other worlds in our system. In it I saw beneath the methane clouds of Saturn and Uranus, and I saw that on these giant worlds—near-twins to Jupiter—there were

primitive life forms of the Jovian types. These had not reached the stage of civilization, might not do so for millions of years. But in this manner the Jovians led me to the knowledge that they were the advanced race of their kind on the Outer Worlds.

What then cared they for the fate of the advanced race of the Inner Worlds, the people of the third planet, Earth?

But, through some unimaginable twist of their impenetrable philosophy, they did care.

They told me.

CHAPTER 11

THE JOVIANS did not come right out and tell me what the situation was. This was not their method, nor was it the way in which I could have followed them. Bear in mind that I, Kermit Langley, though physically, solidly, and immovably encased in a mass of some unknown Jovian compound, had lost all contact with my own body. I breathed not, nor did my heart beat detectably. No sound carried by air or molecule penetrated my ears, no movement touched my skin. Whether my body was cold or hot, I know not. I was to all practical effects a disembodied intelligence, fixed in one limited area of empty intra-planetary space.

It came about first as a perfection of my contact with the Jovians. My mind acquired a sensitivity to their particular channel, something which it had not quite achieved with any of the countless other channels. I could tune in on them at will, even though such visioning was always unclear and vague, and the outlines of their world and the direction of their thoughts and communications always evasive beyond solution.

But as I idly attuned to their shifting images, a sudden shock like that of an electric wave struck me. In the midst of the vagueness there was a cold, direct picturization, for me. I saw a planet impinged like a picture torn through the fabric of the misty Jovian landscape.

Set in the blackness of outer space, it was a palely glowing world, gray against the black. I could see shadows and lights across its surface, and I could see from the cold sharp outlines that it was a world without atmosphere. What world was it?

The picture held strong and sharp for a surprising time, and in that time I studied it. It flicked out. I thought about this for a period, and when next I tuned in on Jupiter's channel, the same vision was repeated. This must be a message for me, I realized. Something was deliberately being told me. What?

I pondered this planet. If it was shown me, it must concern me. Was it my destination?

I added up my knowledge of the sun's family of planets and arrived at the obvious conclusion. This world was solid, it was not a gaseous giant, yet it was but dimly lit; the sun must be far, very far.

Only one world fitted that description, and that was Pluto, the ninth planet, the farthest from the sun. It was to Pluto that I was supposed to deliver that message. I knew that I must then be heading for Pluto.

What did this mean? Were the Jovians actually allies of my starman? Were they obeying orders and continuing to relay the helpless Terrestrial messenger to his starry base?

This contradicted everything I had deduced from the messages of the stars. No ammoniac world would ally itself with an oxygen-breather planet.

I returned my thought to Jupiter. Again I felt myself drawn into the mesh of their unearthly imagery; and somehow through the medium of pictures and images and strange sounds I finally learned the background of my starman's actions.

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I saw, in the vivid colors of my mind's eye, a sector of the galaxy. I saw stars limited in number so that there was but a cluster of them in an area near the rim of our disc-shaped galaxy. One of them was our own sun.

Far to one side of this sun among the stars was one which became of especial importance in my vision. Around this star there was an inhabited oxygen world and a world of the giant ammonia type. Both were inhabited; neither had anything to do with the other. On the Earth-type planet I saw a civilization, and I saw that the inhabitants were small men with yellow skins and no hair on their heads.

I recognized the type; this was the real home of the being I had called a "Martian." This then was his point of origin.

This world had achieved great heights of civilization, but they had never quite managed that harmony of the mind that enables a race to tune in to others. They had achieved space flight, had examined and rejected as possible colonies the other worlds of their system.

Now there was a crisis in the life of this world. Internal shifting of the crust, a new Ice Age, the natural turns of geology's implacable wheel, had rendered much of their world no longer pleasant and habitable. The planet was seeking a new home. They had sent out a number of expeditions to the nearer stars. One of these had arrived in our system, landed on Pluto, and was exploring our worlds.

I pondered this thought for awhile. It occurred to me that it was still unlikely that they could hope to conquer us. The time involved in the space trip had taken dozens of years even at near-light speed, beyond which they could not go.

By the time they could bring up a sizeable colonizing expedition, Earth would be in the full flower of its own space-flight dawn, and our mastery of atomic power would make us fully able to defend ourselves.

But the yellow-skinned patrol thought otherwise. They had probed the Earth, and a theory had been worked out. It involved a line of action which their historical analysts had

evolved and which might ultimately bring them victory over Earth.

But there had been a sudden and unexpected attack on their large scout vessel hanging behind the moon. A ship of space had attacked it, taken it by surprise, destroyed it. One man had escaped in a small scouting vessel, had crashed on Earth. He had transmitted the key to the plan, the all-important datum, to an Earthman and sent him on his way back.

I pondered this thought in shock. The message I was carrying would contain the means for the thwarting of my own world's progress. If my mission were successful, I would be providing the means of my planet's ruin!

Yet the Jovians apparently were doing just that!

My thoughts were confused and angry. Why would they interfere, they who had never done so before, who could not gain in any way from the outcome?

Then again I remembered the vision I had been shown of the attack on the spaceship by the other ship. Another ship? Indeed! From where?

And again, as if in answer to my mental query, I saw the sun and the stars recede until once more the segment of the galaxy's rim could be seen as a unit. And on the other side of the sun, in a triangular cluster, I saw one bright star a little larger than our sun. Around this star there was a planetary system one member of which was an Earth-type world.

Again this world had surpassed Earth but had not achieved the harmony of the spheres. Again this world was in trouble, but trouble of its own making. Wars had racked it, and a defeated side had cast itself away in its last remaining fleet of warships, stocked hastily with everything available for starting a new world colony. They had crossed some sixteen light-years of space, and they had landed on the outermost planet of a new system—a system I recognized again as our own.

They found that another desperate expedition had arrived

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and was exploring the new sun's planets. They sent out to overtake the other group of explorers, and their space cruiser had fallen upon the other's main base-ship and ruthlessly ambushed it.

Scout ships from this new foe had tracked down several of the relay-buoy ships. Well did I know it, for I recognized the long, black pencil-like shapes of this other invader's scouts.

There were then two alien expeditions on Pluto, and I was on my way with a strategic message. To whom? Which did the Jovians favor?

In the time that has since passed, I have pondered the location of the parent suns of these worlds, and by study of sky maps and the memory of the stars as the Jovians had pictured them I believe I can safely put a name to these invaders.

The first, the yellow-skinned men, had come across the Constellation of the Dragon, from the star we know as Thuban.

The second, whose shapes I had never seen close up, had come to Sol from the Constellation of the Eagle, from the brightest star in that group, which is known as Altair.

Thuban and Altair, two stars with our own sun a way station between them, both on the same mission, both ignorant of the other until their fatal landing.

Whichever won, the Earth must be the loser.

I rushed on through space, nearing the orbit of Neptune, and for a long time I could not again contact the Jovians. I wandered through the myriad messages of space, but now my mind was troubled and I could not find peace in the strange musics and the wonderful images. My role in this weird war of two suns was not completed; I had a part to play. But what?

Then once more I contacted Jupiter, or perhaps it contacted me. And again I saw the yellowish mists and the gray creatures moving ponderously graceful through that wonderful yet frightening world, the giant of our family of worlds.

I tried to reach out to them, to ask for an answer. They

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reached out to me in turn and made themselves understood.

Truly the inhabitants of Jupiter did not concern themselves with us. They were a respected world in the harmonium of the ammonia-methane worlds of a thousand light-years around them. They had their own worries and their own affairs, none of which had the slightest application to anything that need ever concern humanity.

But they also had some peculiar quirks of ethical order. Somehow, the conflict of the two invaders and their separate plots against the natives of another Sol world offended the Jovian artistic sense, or their philosophical serenity, or something less comprehensible to us.

Not all of Jupiter was involved. In fact I gathered that just about nobody on Jupiter cared, save a small group of eccentric philosophers. It was these who had had me delivered into their hands, who had built the space gun and launched me.

I was on my way to Pluto. They were putting a lost pawn back into the game. They were, through me, taking a hand in that game.

Their motive will always elude me. I have conjectured philosophical or artistic reasons, my vanity insists on this. I do not like to think of what seems the third and more probable alternative—that they put me back in the game for the same reason that an idling little boy might gently drop a twig across the paths of scurrying ants. They did it for a moment's amusement.

Enough of these thoughts; the speculation is futile. The die was cast, and I was it.

For how much longer I traversed space I cannot say, any more than I could tell you how much time had passed since the cannon went off. But somewhere past the orbit of Neptune, somewhere where the pale glowing dot that was a visible Pluto could be seen in my physical eye, I felt a strange sensation.

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Something was tingling in my shoulders; something was itching in my legs; something hurt my foot.

I wondered what new communication this could be until it dawned on me that the sensations were real. I felt my tongue against the top of my mouth, and I could sense the warmth spreading around my face, and my hands came back to my attention.

I had come back to life; I was being restored to my physical sense. And this could only mean that the block of matter which had formed my projectile, my shell, my suspension block, was vanishing, dissolving back into the atoms of space.

In a matter of minutes—for time suddenly came back to me with the first sudden surge of my heart and the first flood of blood through my waiting arteries—I would be fully alive, conscious of the heat and light and cold of the universe, trying to breathe.

I would be floating unprotected in space, with nought but my flimsy Russian-built experimental spacesuit for a ship, destined to freeze and die in a short time.

Even as I thought this, even as I moved my fingers for the first time, there came a flicker of motes in space and the last of the translucent block vanished about me.

Also at that very moment a vibratory note sounded sharply in my body.

CHAPTER 12

I REALIZE now that the Jovians had undoubtedly timed the diffusion of their projectile with the approach of a robotic relay ship, but then it seemed like an act of sheer providence. I twisted around and immediately my eye fell on the dimlit shape of the relay ship.

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It was so close to me that I could almost touch it. Breathing a sigh of relief under my breath, I reached out for it; but it remained elusively just beyond my touch.

I twisted and squirmed, but hanging as I was in space, it availed me nothing. Finally, just as panic was setting in, I remembered what had to be done. I looked for something loose, but the only thing available to me was one of the two nearly empty air tanks strapped to my back. I twisted around, unhooked one, and threw it away from me in the direction opposite to that in which I wanted to go.

In a few seconds I bumped against the side of the rescue vessel. Once my grip was established, I worked my way around to the lock and got in.

It was quite the same as the first relay ship I had reached, the one in which I had gone to Mars. I breathed deeply of the fresher air, unbuckled my tight spacesuit, and hunted for the food dispenser. I was suddenly ravenously hungry.

After I had eaten, I plumped myself down at the control panel facing the wide translucent nose and gave some thought to my situation. I had been heading outward in the general direction of Pluto, propelled by a cannon shot. My momentum could not have been diminished, because there was no friction in my course to slow me down. Yet this ship had seemed to be standing still when I saw it. Hence, this ship was also moving toward Pluto at the same fantastic rate of speed.

How did this come about? Either the Jovians had diverted my projectile until it matched the speed and direction of the relay vessel, or else the relay vessel had come alongside some time before and hastened its speed automatically to stay alongside the source of the commanding vibration. The latter, I presume, is probably the answer.

The control panel had the same single knob on it. Again I was faced with the nature of the ship. It was put here into orbit for but one purpose. Push the knob down and it would set out to its prearranged destination. And, following the same

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logic, that destination would be the base on Pluto to which my message was directed.

Should I shove in the knob and take my chances after I arrived? Or should I wait and see where the vessel would take me without this final directive?

I tried to estimate the present movement of the ship, but that was hopeless, since I could not read the controls or understand the words of the sound-recorders. I decided after awhile that the ship would probably continue in an aimless orbit near Pluto but never going there. It was up to me to control it.

I explored the craft again, finding it much the same as the other one. I found several things of interest. There were some containers which hissed compressed air when their fixtures were tampered with in the right way. That replenished my suit's portable air supply. And I turned up a panel behind which a set of tools were affixed.

Taking these, I went to work on the control panel, ripping away the protective covering, getting at the underside of the panel. I saw how the main knob was rigged and what it connected with.

Studying it with care, I saw several places where I could rig other control wires to them. I decided I had a fair chance of getting manual control of this ship at the strategic moment. Meanwhile, let the automatics take care of the main task of getting me to the planet itself.

Watching the action of the rig, I shoved the single control knob down. I saw rods slip over and connect, two little wheels whirl about to a different setting. The ship spun about on its axis, and began on a different acceleration. I looked through the vision panel and saw that it had turned itself directly toward Pluto and was heading—judging from the slight pull of the screened acceleration—toward it.

Pluto could not have been more than a half-million miles away. It was a large round disc, pale and eerie in the starry sky. There were darker patches on its surface—presumably

low, level areas—several streaks of bright glints which may have been either mountaintops or rays of frozen gases, and other shadowy markings. There was no aura around it, no cushioning belt of gentle atmosphere.

It was odd having time and feeling restored to me. I sat at the board and tried again to pick up the mental emissions which blanketed the space between the stars, but nothing came to me. Whatever it was that had brought me to that pitch of sensitivity was blanked out by the mere sensation of just being. Before I had been like a disembodied spirit—and had shared the cosmos with the togetherness of a thousand thousand worlds. But just feeling, having the blood move through my veins, having my brain active in the subconscious control of the inner movements of my body's organs, being aware of the beating of my heart and the movement of air in and out of my lungs, that was enough to blank out the transmission of thought.

Perhaps an advanced type of human would be able to regain this ability. I began to see that humanity indeed may still have thousands of years to go before its evolutionary rise could equip it to tap this cosmic music.

I thought then of the legends of the holy men of Earth. The tales that come down of dedicated lamas in Tibet, who could concentrate motionless hour after hour in order to mingle their thoughts with that of some heavenly choir. There was the belief that in the highest level of being the Brahmin could become one with the All, share in the state of cosmic harmony called Nirvana, a state which was attainable only by the highest purity and the greatest removal from physical being.

Obviously, somehow, some people had managed by extreme concentration, by utter selflessness, to tap for just a bit some of this cosmic transmission. The ability was there, even in the conditions of Earth, but how hard it was to achieve, how perfect the removal of self must be!

That boded better for humanity's ultimate fate.

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Sitting like this in thought, I spent most of the intervening time. Space is conducive to the deepest meditation, for when confronted with the apparently endless depths of the universe, the little spark of being that is a single man is face-to-face with his own insignificance and the overwhelming size of the puzzle of mere existence.

Pluto was the destination of this last of the space-buoy ships, for it was growing steadily in my vision. In the full rays of the sun, it was yet a dim world, for the sun was a star already three and a half billion miles away—a star larger than others in Pluto's ebon sky, but surely no spectacular blinding vision. The planet was pale and cold and, as it drew nearer, presented the same uninviting appearance as Luna.

The automatic little craft began to close in, started in on a slow long orbit around the planet as it brought its speed down until it could safely come in for a landing. I wondered again whether this world, like Earth, had a belt of deadly radiation about it. I suppose that the damage had been done me already, but still I felt apprehensive.

It seems unlikely that Pluto does possess such a belt, or certainly not one of the size and potency of Earth. For one thing, it's believed that the proximity of the sun and its radiation has a great deal to do with the origin and strength of this belt, which is also derived from the magnetic zone of Earth. And the sun being where it is from Pluto, and that planet lacking an atmosphere, it is probably entirely safe to enter its field.

On the other hand, it seems probable that these interplanetary craft—the Thubanese ships I rode, as well as the ancient Martian vessel—had been insulated against such planetary barriers. It would seem to be an elementary necessity, which undoubtedly Terrestrial spacemen will work out before they get much further into this game.

Pluto was leveling out beneath me, a grim and unfriendly world. I could see that it had great deposits of gleaming

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whites and yellows, which must have been eternally frozen lakes and rivers of solidified gases. I could see vicious, sharp-edged mountain chains, untouched by the normal erosion of air and rain that softens our home world's mountains. I saw sharp valleys which were not the channels of million-year water flows but the harsh cracks of a shrinking planetary crust.

Of signs of life there were none, nor had I expected any. Instead, I watched the terrain as the ship moved along its prearranged path to whatever was the hidden Thuban base on the outpost of our solar system.

I kept my eye on the exposed controls, ready at the right moment to break off the automatic guidance and take my own control. For I did not have any intention of simply delivering myself, message and all, into the hands of those who had sent me.

Perhaps they would have spared me, even as the promise had been made to me. Perhaps they would remedy the curse that had been laid upon me, and I would not come to a painful death at the appointed time. But what difference would that have made, if in the saving of my own life the freedom or future of Earth was lost?

In the past I was not the kind of person to be patriotic or have loyalty to any but myself. You know of my youth, of the gamin existence that made Kermit Langley the lone operator I am. But the experience of deep space raises all kindreds to a point of intensity. There was none on Earth I would call brother, or beloved, or even friend; and yet now, as I hovered the surface of cold Pluto, I felt a deep and passionate attachment for my warm, green home planet and for all its inhabitants. I had acquired the kind of planetary patriotism which I think will be common among space travelers—which I suspect will confound those who think of space travel as only another instrument of miserable and petty surface politics and the nose-to-the-dust manipulations of those whose uniforms reflect only the color of the driest dirt.

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Now, as my craft moved miles above the surface of a slatelike desert, I caught a gleam of star-flecked brilliance and I singled out a new and unusual feature of the surface. In a corner of this desert, protected on two sides by the up-thrust planes of mountains beyond, there was a large metallic dome.

This then was the encampment of the Thubanese, the yellow-skinned men from the Constellation Draco.

I watched it like a hawk as my craft began the long swooping dive that would bring it to a skidding halt on the plain just outside the dome. I saw that there were several small dots which must be similar craft, just outside the dome. From the corner of my eye, as I started to take personal control from the automation drive, I caught a glimpse of a large thing which could only have been the mass of the main interstellar vessel which had made the crossing of the stars.

It is my impression from this glimpse that it was a wreck.

I tore loose the wires that held the knob down, even as a series of blinking lights started to signal for my landing from a point at the edge of the great dome.

The ship swung about, almost stood on its end, as I tried desperately to get the knack of directing it myself. I imagine that from below those watching must have supposed the ship to have gone haywire. I clung to the controls with desperation while the ship twisted, turned, headed first this way and that way. I was trying out all the revealed dials and levers, to see which did what. Finally, I had the ship heading upward again in a rising slant and kept it on course.

I shot over the dome, seeing for an instant the wild blinkings of light that must have been signals intended to help the unknown Thubanese the craft supposedly contained. I've no doubt that had I turned on the sound-speaker, I'd have gotten their frantic calls, but I had neither the time nor the foresight for that.

The craft skimmed the ugly jag-tooth tops of the mountain

and speared on into the black and airless sky. Once out of sight of the dome, I felt a certain easiness come over me, as if somehow my clumsy efforts to gain complete mastery of the craft would not expose me to the ridicule of the experienced pilots down below.

But I had made the basic experiments; I knew now what would send the ship forward, what would increase its speed, what would slow it down, and the other basics. I had cleared away some of the loose wire that apparently related only to the fixed directional knob, and I had worked out for myself a method of handling the vessel.

I drove it now, high above the surface of Pluto—a hundred miles or so by Earth standards—and I roared on, watching the strange and terrible ground below me.

Here was no world to be stranded on. Here was no world to offer life, based on warmth and love, any foothold. Here was only sterile desolation, icy death, barren ugliness.

On and on I drove for what must have been hours, and half a world moved beneath me. For one long section of that time I crossed a veritable ocean of frozen gas—a gleaming mirror-like mass of whites and yellows, in some places rilled and cracked as if struck by meteors from above or by cracks and breaks below. In other places it was as flat and polished as the surface of a mirror, for I could see the white dots of the stars glistening on the surface of this eternal ocean, unmoving in the grip of a temperature only a few degrees from the absolute zero that physicists declare to be the end of all molecular motion.

Beyond this ocean began again a slaty barren desert, and I crossed a region of choppy foothills, broken canyons and rocky upthrusts like the badlands of the West, but on a more magnified and deadlier scale.

I crossed those badlands, crossed yet another desert, passed over a river of glistening green frozen gas; and beyond it I came unexpectedly to a place of light. There was a valley,

a flat, leveled bowl amid the jags and rills of the broken land, and this bowl glowed.

There was a gleam of soft yellowish light bathing it, and as I came within clearer sight, I saw that in the center of this valley there was another dome—this one of yellowish hue—and alongside it a long black thing which looked like a huge crayon laid on its side. But this was no crayon, and the tiny splinters of black alongside it were no shards of clay. This was the vessel of the invaders from Altair, and the shards were the little scout vessels.

The yellow light bathing the valley came from a bulbous eminence atop the great dome which must have been the Altairean encampment.

As my ship passed over this valley, high up though I was, there was a series of sparks from the valley below. To one side of me a flash of white appeared, and I realized that I was under fire.

The Altaireans saw me as a ship of their rivals, and they had no doubts as to their actions. They were trying to bring me down, to destroy me. I put on speed and left the lit valley behind. But as I moved on across the barren landscape, I had a feeling that I would no longer move unaccompanied. The Altairean black-pencil ships would be on my trail. I had to look for a hiding place, and fast.

What I would do after that was in the laps of the gods. Two armies contended here for the control of a system, and a third army had entered the fray. The third army consisted of one man—me.

CHAPTER 13

I BROUGHT my ship down lower and lower, coming as near the surface as I dared, I knew the risk—an unseen mountain peak, and no time to dodge. How many relatively slow-

moving airplanes had perished the same way on Earth? The thought pushed itself into my consciousness.

I was now down low beyond a chain of mountains, coming into a choppy ragged area of canyons and rills. I tried to stay the speed of my vessel, bringing it ever closer to the perilous surface. Then I saw a long, low, apparently bare patch of surface coming into view before me.

I took the risk; I sank my ship down toward it, gauging my speed by guesswork. At the final second, with the rocky surface in full focus before my eyes, I came down. The ship bumped, there was a grinding screech, and I waited with beating heart for the bottom to rip away. But it held.

The motion stopped. I had landed. As I turned from my seat at the viewplate panel, I caught a momentary glimpse of three dots of light flashing by overhead in the cold airless sky, like meteors burning through the atmosphere.

There could be no burning meteors here. What I had seen was the pursuit from the Altairean encampment. They had not seen me. For the meteoric dots vanished as rapidly as they had appeared, and though I waited for many minutes, they did not reappear.

Adjusting my protective covering, fastening the new air containers to my face mask, turning on all heating units, I emerged from the ship onto the surface of Pluto. My weight felt almost normal, and I realized that the surmise of some astronomers that this dark and far-off world was of much the same size as our own Earth must have been correct.

I walked cautiously over the hard surface of the shallow valley, and I rested finally on a clump of rock a few dozen feet away. I turned and looked at my ship. Even this close, how small it seemed, how little with which to fight an incredibly hostile world and two hostile intelligences. I sat, and for a moment felt great gloom. How to proceed? What to do?

As I watched, I saw the three meteoric dots reappear in the sky, flash across the horizon in a return route, and vanish

again. Then I knew that I had to carry the fight to them. I would have to go to one of the encampments, reconnoiter, see what was what.

To wait out here was either to die or to be found. To go there might bring about death, but meanwhile, who knows what havoc I might wreak? I decided to go back to the region of the Altairean base, this time with caution, and to make my way in. I did not know whether the gift of non-noticeability would still hold true—whether it would fool these non-humans as well as it had fooled the Terrestrials. But I could try.

I let several hours pass, as much as I dared. I do not think I could have stood much more of that Plutonian landscape. Never in one's wildest imagination could one conceive of a more hopeless, deadly place. There were glistening patches of white and yellow in some corners and spots—bits of frozen gas, flakes of air turned solid from the cold. The ground, chill, hard, ungiving. The rocks and risings as viciously fractured as on the day they were created in the birth convolutions of this desolate world. It was a place of despair, needing a Dante to describe it.

When I thought enough time had elapsed for any other pursuers that may have been sent out to have returned and given up, I raised the ship from this hellish surface and moved carefully and at maximum slowness in the direction of that second valley, the one with the golden glowing dome and the great black starship—the Altairean outpost.

Hours more must have passed under this slow passage. I clung close to the surface, moving cautiously over the miserable terrain, rising gently up the slopes of the sharp juttings that were mountains and which bore such a spine-chilling resemblance to the bared teeth of a beast.

Finally I came up slowly over another such ridge to spot a glow of yellow edging over the top of one such mountain. The valley of the Altaireans lay just beyond. I stopped my

ship's rise, waited, then worked it around until I found a lower gap between peaks and slipped slowly through it.

I could see the faint light of the great dome paling over the inner sides of other surrounding peaks, and I pushed my little ship forward until it rested at last just at the edge of the lighted area.

Sealing my face mask, and hefting my air tanks so that they were secure, I looked about the ship for a weapon. The only thing of the sort I could find was a metal rod similar to a short crowbar, and this I took with me.

I left the ship, crept forward to peer down into the bowl of the Plutonian valley. The entire scene below was lit by the eerie glare of the yellowish light atop the dome. The dome itself I observed to be about forty or fifty feet high, covering an area of several acres. It appeared to be put together by a series of connected metallic strips. I could see several hooded sections along the base which were almost certainly means of entry and exit.

Beyond the dome on the other side of the valley lay the bulk of the starship, and I could now realize just how huge this ship was. It would dwarf out largest aircraft carriers, were it to be placed side-by-side with such a vessel. Beside it I could make out the black splinters that were the Altairean scout craft.

Between me and the dome was an area of several hundred feet of flat rocky plain beginning at the base of the rise atop which I was hiding. On this there were several little bubbles which gleamed metallically and undoubtedly were housing outside equipment or the devices which had fired at my ship the first time I came over. I saw that the area was patrolled.

There were several manlike figures in form-concealing rubbery spacesuits moving steadily around the grounds, and I watched them long enough to determine that they were walking routine beats, doing sentry duty. They carried some sort of ball-like contrivance in one of their hands.

Obviously I could not hope to slip past them unnoticed—

not if I had lost the gift of non-noticeability. Ought I to stake everything on just strolling out in plain view? If they did notice me, I wouldn't have a chance. If they didn't, well—we'd see.

I hesitated, and while I did so, my decision was made for me. For suddenly the Altairean sentries stopped in their tracks and turned in my direction. At the same time, the nearest of the little hummocks fell apart like two halves of an egg to reveal a large mechanism suspiciously like a gun being rotated in my direction by a group of suited figures.

I jumped to my feet and even as I did so, the solution hit me. How could I have been so foolish as to suppose these advanced people did not know of radar? Of course they did, and they would certainly have had the entire surrounding area covered by such a radar screen. Now my ship had been spotted; before, en route, it had perhaps been protected by the peaks around the encampment and by my caution in hanging low over the ground.

I ran—straight down the side of the slope and onto the plain. If the ship was their target, it would have to be sacrificed, but I would try to close in and account for one or two of them before they got me. I grasped my crowbar firmly and raced toward the oncoming group of sentries.

But as they drew close to me I saw that they were not heading for me, but seemed to have their attention fixed on the upper slope. I paused, then stopped still.

The first Altairean sentry reached me in full run. A man-like figure despite the rubbery garment which cloaked him, I caught a glimpse of a curiously triangular face beneath the shimmering amber face mask. He was not looking at me, but up at my ship.

There was a flash of yellow from the gunlike device, and something shot over my head on a flare of fire. I looked over my shoulder and saw rock explode just above where my ship must have been hidden. The thing was a rocket gun.

The nearest runner passed me by without a glance. With

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vibrating steps, three others raced past me and never looked at me.

I drew a deep breath then. Radar or not, I would still remain not noticeable to the conscious mind. I retained, after all, this most valuable weapon.

When the running beings had passed me, I started leisurely strolling toward the main dome. I turned my head when a particularly violent shock rolled through the floor of the valley, and I saw that my ship had been blown up at last by a hit from the gun. Following in the cloud of settling particles of rock dust, the sentries were scrabbling up the slope to see what was left.

I walked on, apparently in plain sight of the dome, and came at last right to its edges. It loomed over me like a great metallic circus tent. One of the hooded entries was before me, and it was quite obviously an entry port. I went up to it, pushed upon the sloping triangular door set at the other end of the hooded passage. It gave at once.

I stepped within to find myself in a small ante-chamber, and the door swung to behind me. There was a hissing noise, which, audible within my suit, proved that air was being pumped into the entry lock. I waited patiently until the hissing stopped, then stepped forward and boldly pushed open the inner door.

I stepped out to find myself beneath the Altairean dome.

It was an open space, cluttered with supplies, opened crates, a number of low-walled enclosures which apparently were serving as offices or centers of work. The whole thing was a temporary setup, and the first impression was chaotic.

But as I stood there I began to make out what the dome was. At one side there was a pit and a number of intricate machines clattering away beside it. Beings worked around this, and little cars were carrying things to and from the setup. It was plainly a sort of mining and storage operation. Evidently some sort of raw material needed in the main-

tenance of their spaceships was located here, and the dome had been set up to mine and refine it.

At the same time it was a sort of auxiliary base for Altairean operations on Pluto against the Thubanese. There were several of the rocket guns ranged in an artillery park. There were all the other little signs, common throughout the universe, that mark a military establishment.

I saw then also the physical nature of the Altaireans. I cannot say they were ugly. Nor were they human. They had the clear symmetry of insects, but they were not insects. Quite manlike in shape—for I already knew that this type of body is the one nature has designed for the housing of intelligence in animals—their heads were more triangular than round. Their eyes, four in all, were two tiny black spots side by side on one side of the jutting wedge face and two similar dots on the other side of the face. A small mouth puckered into the symmetry of the head, and there was no hair at all.

Their skins were of a fleshy bluish tinge, their chests wide, and their torsos tapering down more definitely than those of humans. Two thin long arms and two equally thin long legs made up their limbs. They wore only slight clothing—more belts and slings for carrying things than protective clothing.

I waited until it was quite certain that even here I was going unnoticed, and then I strolled carefully around observing. After I had gone a good way into the dome, there was a commotion near the entrance in which I had come. I turned and saw that one of the outside sentries had come in and was conveying a report to within the dome. While making his way—still clad in the rubbery spacesuit, though with the amber headpiece thrown back now that he was in the air of the enclosure—he was obviously giving the members of the various work parties who saw him an account of what had happened. There was a sort of waving cheer rising from about him, and his voice came to me in a sharp-pitched squeaking.

On inspiration I turned and followed him. As I had guessed, he led me directly to the commander of the dome. This individual, seated within one of the enclosures, was at a table covered with various panels. The being turned, heard the sentry's story, then dismissed him.

I walked up to the Altairean commander, looked over his shoulder. He twitched, as if vaguely aware that I was there, but he never looked up. I could not tell any distinction between him and the rest of the Altaireans, which is not surprising, for it would take much more familiarity to note personal differences. This commander had touched a panel on his table and was now squeaking away into it.

I looked at the table, at the panel. Obviously, this being was not the head of the entire expedition. With whom was he communicating? I looked into the small face of one of his panels, and I saw reflected therein a tiny picture of another such being sitting at another such board. But this board was built into a much more permanent face, and behind him I could see the solid walls and-surfaces of real construction. The headquarters then were still within the bulk of their great starship.

I studied the encampment carefully, then went into action. Stepping up behind the commander, I brought my crowbar down on his head. He slumped to the ground. I swept it violently over his table, smashing equipment. One blow, then another. Sparks leaped up.

The light within the entire encampment flickered wildly. It went out. On went little emergency lights at the various entries.

Around me, the place was in turmoil. I saw workers running hither and thither. And several Altaireans were heading on a run in the half-darkness for the commander's table.

I slipped away, made my way to the exit nearest the great starship. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment it opened to let in several running figures, which I assumed had come

from the ship itself. I went out of the airlock as they came in, and crossed the narrow space. I found the main lock of the great starship open.

Several other space-suited figures were clustered in the doorway of the ship, looking about them. I came right up to them, crossed their path without being noticed, and entered the great starship from Altair itself.

I was in a main corridor, which stretched away for a great distance. I saw the openings of chambers and sections upon it, and I saw that many of the crew were hustling about as if on emergency duty.

I strode along it, still unnoticed, heading for the front section of the ship—or what I surmised was the front.

As I walked, I glanced into the various chambers and at long last came to the end of the corridor and saw before me the entry into a great front section—the control room of the star-crossing vessel, the headquarters of a conspiracy from Altair to seize Earth before the foe from Thuban could do so.

I walked boldly into this chamber, intent on repeating here the damage I had done in the dome outside.

As I moved among the machines here, the place was crowded with the beings who ran the ship. I saw two of them seated before a large round mirror-like device peering intently within it. I stepped up to them and looked into it.

I saw that it held a picture reflected within it. A transmission of some sort, for it showed in miniature the very same control room that I now stood in with the very same beings engaged in what they were doing at that very moment. And quite clearly visible in it, leaning between two bluish-skinned beings who were even then rising to their feet and grasping ball-like weapons, was the miniature vision of a human being, clad in leather and rubber, wearing a breathing mask and a face helmet, having two ungainly air tanks crudely strapped around his back and grasping a crowbar in one gloved hand.

I stared at this vision in amazement—and then I recog-

nized the sight. It was myself. And even as I saw that, I felt my arms grasped by the beings on each side of me, and I knew that I had been trapped.

CHAPTER 14

I WAS SO surprised that I almost forgot to struggle. By the time I got over the shock, they had me firmly. I looked at them, and they were looking at me, fixing their gaze on me firmly—so far as I could tell, considering the peculiar nature of their double set of eyes.

One of my captors called out, and several others rushed over to them. It was odd watching them. At first these newcomers, evidently responding to alarm, never glanced at me. But once appraised of my presence, they would search around, passing over me three or four times before they finally fixed on my person.

It could have been predicted, of course, that like every other new weapon the one of non-noticeability would have its antidote. This was the device on which I had been seen. A sort of radar which would bring onto its screen everything real—whether psychically veiled or not—and bring the vision on in such a way as to be immediately observable.

This fact occurred to me, and I glanced at the rig on the table. Sure enough I was still in the picture, in miniature, held tightly by the Altaireans. I looked at the apparatus and saw that, unlike most of the stuff in the great ship, it was not neatly tooled and encased. Instead it showed all the signs of being a hasty, experimental rig.

Unquestionably then, these invaders had already sampled the tactics of the Thubanese and had penetrated to the root of the problem. They had at least this one guard up against spies of that sort.

The six beings who now surrounded me held me tightly, while my hands were tied behind my back. They unfastened my face mask and let it hang. I took a deep breath and found the air passable. It was somewhat acrid, rather stale, with a hint of molten metal—the pressure was a little lower than that on Earth—but it was breathable.

Their squeaking words shot at me, but I didn't bother to answer; needless to say, nothing they said had meaning. After they had quieted down, one, a leader, gave some command, and I was marched down the room into the corridor and down to another chamber.

Here sat still another Altairean, in a room filled with little shelves and discs. This person upon being directed to my presence, stood up and stared. He sat down again, reached over to one of the shelves, took it out, and withdrew some sort of device, which looked like a card-sorter. Consulting it, he turned to me—first having to trace the lines of my captors' arms to find me—and spoke in a high, slow, squeaky voice. What he said was in a curious falsetto, as if blindly imitating the sounds of some animal. But it sounded familiar, though I did not at first understand.

"What?" I said. "Say it again."

The Altairean looked at me, pursed its mouth, ruffled through the card-sorter again, then, looking back, repeated his first words more slowly.

"How—did—the—you—be—get—to—here?" That's what I made it out to be.

I shouldn't have been surprised, though I was then. After all, I should have remembered that these people had been in the vicinity of Earth also, had been scouting. Naturally they must have their interpreter trying to pin down our languages.

I think I gawked at the creature, then said something about how did he talk our language. The interpreter simply went through his routine again, repeating his words.

By this time I got over my surprise. I hesitated for an answer, wondering what to say, what not to say. Finally I

decided to keep mum. Plenty of time to talk later, when I'd figured out what was next in their program.

I shrugged my shoulders, said nothing. The being rifled through his cards again, said something else in the same unaccented squeaking. This time it must have been in Chinese or some other Earth language, for I didn't understand a word of it.

He tried it in several more languages, and my captors were becoming somewhat irritated and were shaking me, but I said nothing. *Let 'em guess*, was my motto then.

Finally, he gave up. They conferred awhile; then I was frog-marched out of there, back down the corridor a long way, near the rear of the vessel. It was a huge craft, with innumerable rooms, passageways going up, others going down, and yet without many inhabitants. It seemed to me half deserted.

I was taken to a doorway on a lower level; the door was thrust open, and I was pushed inside. As it locked behind me, I saw that I was in a small room, sparsely furnished with a few low settees and no window.

I looked around, shrugged, and sat down awkwardly, as my hands were still tied.

I sat there awhile catching my breath, wondering if I could work my hands free and figure a breakout. My first efforts at working my wrists loose didn't produce any favorable results.

I glanced around to see if there was anything there that might help me. And as I looked around, something tapped me on the shoulder!

I swung about, startled. There was a scuffling noise as if someone had jumped back. I had a peculiar feeling then that I should have spotted something that was right before my eyes. I squinted hard, stared in the direction of the noise.

Something touched my shoulder again. I held my breath, stared directly at the spot.

Sure enough. There was a lemonish yellow hand touching

my shoulder. I stared at it, followed the line of the hand to the wrist along to the elbow, then to the shoulder, and finally I saw the man.

He was right there before me in plain sight. He'd been there all the time; he was a Thubanese—a little fellow, like the man I'd buried on the Arizona desert. He was wearing a rather torn silvery coverall. His round brown eyes were staring at me.

Now I knew what it was like to be confronted with the non-noticeable talent. My brain signaled to me that he'd been there all the time. Somehow I knew that I'd actually been seeing him all along, but that my mind had somehow been censoring his presence. My eyes, my ears, both had been playing tricks on me.

So I was not the only prisoner in this ship; another prowler had been nabbed by their mental radar.

"You—are an—Earthling?" the yellow-skinned man said to me in the same peculiar intonation that marked my previous encounter.

"Yes," I said, "and how do you come to speak English?"

I found that once I had identified him mentally, I could keep track of him more easily. The Thubanese stepped back and sat down. "I learn. Part of my duty. I on—ug—intelligence—duty. So you see my capture here, too."

I digested this awhile. From Earth's point of view, this man was as dangerous as the other set of captors, but right now we were both in the same boat. "I was sent here by one of your fellow-operators. I have a message for your headquarters. That's how I was given your trick of passing unnoticed. Can you get my hands free?"

The little man became very excited when I said that. He jumped up. "Then he did it! He got the final quotient through in spite of them!"

He rushed over to me, quite overjoyed, and worked at the cords tying my hands. In a short while he had them off and I was rubbing my gloved wrists to restore circulation. "Yes."

I played his game. "I'm on your side. Is there any way we can get out of here and get back to your encampment?"

He sat down again. "I haven't worked it out yet," he said. "But I am sure that once we could get out of this cell, they would have difficulty in finding us. They must still have only the one detector."

I sat down beside him. "Well, now that there are two of us, maybe we can work it. If they still can't notice us easily, maybe we can outwit them."

The Thubanese whistled. "That is so. We can try."

I guess I spent several hours in that room with L'Prat, as he called himself. We never got really chummy, because I never allowed myself to forget what a dirty trick his other Earth spy had played on me. But he evidently accepted me as a loyal stooge at once.

So I pried gently into this message. What was this "final quotient" he spoke of? In an hour or so, I got in the question, worked around to the mysterious message. I didn't tell him where it was, and he didn't ask me. I guess he knew.

"The final quotient?" he said. "Oh, that is the necessary ratio-speed of Earth inhabitants."

"What's that? Ratio of what to what, and at what speed?" I asked.

"We have worked out many laws of planetary and evolutionary development. We have worked out the differences between species, and between different intelligent societies, and the ratio between their control over nature and their speed of social growth.

"You must know," he went on carefully picking his words, "that different intelligent beings develop at different rates. We measure the time between such cyclic discoveries as the stone axe and the bow and arrow, as the use of bronze and the use of iron. We determine the period required for a wandering nomadic group to become a settled hunter tribe, and for a hunter tribe to become an agricultural tribe. This

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rate differs for species and for planets. So we were trying to determine the evolution-progress-ratio of the men of Earth."

"Umm," I said, thinking it sounded a little abstract for a people bent on invasion. "And what good would this knowledge do you?"

He looked at me, but probably didn't notice me too well, since he was concentrating on his answer. "Everything," he finally said, "depends on that. It is no use conquering a lesser people if their ratio-speed is greater than yours. For then they will only catch up to their conquerors and, in time, surpass them. If we are to conquer a world, we must know whether we can always be the master. If we cannot, we would kill off the inhabitants, if that were possible; or else we would have to give up the conquest as a dangerous delusion."

"So the conquest of Earth depends on knowing exactly whether our ratio is greater than yours or lesser?" I asked, keeping my voice calm.

"More or less," he said. "You see, you on Earth are not too far behind us already, but it looked to me as if it had taken you a long time to get where you were. If you are only equal in ratio-speed to us, you will never catch up. If you are a little faster, we can find ways to keep you down—divide you up, exhaust your energies, and so forth. If you are slower than we, that process goes on even faster. If you are very much faster than we, however—and that is certainly not so—then we quit."

"I see," I said. Then the message I was carrying engraved on the bone of my arm was a simple number. Just a number that would tell them whether to attack or not, that would tell them how to proceed to master us. I could see why it was so all-important. But why had the Jovians helped forward this damnable piece of data to the enemies of Earth?

"The man I rescued—he must have been the one who finally worked out the data for Earth?" I asked. L'Prat agreed.

I sat awhile pondering. What was the likely ratio-speed of Earth? I wished then that I had paid more attention to the

study of history and anthropology than I had. It seemed to me that mankind had come through its period of caveman life for a long time. I remembered newspaper articles about the Java Apeman, and the Peking Man. That last lived a million years ago. Man had been around that long and only in the last few thousand years had gotten anywhere.

It looked to me as if our ratio-speed couldn't have been too awfully fast. I knew what a stubborn lot we Earthlings are; how obstinately people cling to old, outworn ideas—and how few, really, are the people who have actually grasped the fundamentals of the new age of space that was dawning. Sure, we had progressed—but the rate?

It surely wasn't too fast. Not faster, anyway, than the Thubanese, though of course, I knew nothing about their background.

I had a suspicion then that that message had better never reach its destination. Why the devil had the Jovians passed it on?

On the other hand, if it didn't get there, I was a goner.

"How are we going to get out of here?" I asked.

We talked about that the rest of the time. He'd been dropped off by a spy ship. It was supposed to pick him up again. Probably had already tried and failed. If we could get out, we could make the next attempt.

The door opened suddenly, and a group of Altaireans moved in. They had a net which they hurled before them, and whatever scheme L'Prat and I had for dodging went to pot. We were both tripped neatly by it, and while we were untangling ourselves, our captors, knowing we were there, finally managed to locate us.

They grabbed us both, moved us out into the hall, started us forward. I saw that the interpreter was waiting outside and coming along with us, his four eyes slitted with the effort to keep watch of me. I was pushed, force-marched, along the hall, L'Prat behind me, but I managed to ask this Altairean what they were going to do.

"You—have—something we need," he said after flipping through a sorter he'd had with him. "We are going to get it. We cut it out."

Coming with that total lack of intonation, that was a shock. They were going to cut it out. This meant—vivisection.

It also meant a painful death. What did these creatures know or care about human medicine?

I kicked and struggled. The two who held me found it hard to keep their grip, and they called for help in piercing squeaks. One of the four-eyed holding L'Prat, who must have been keeping calm and quiet, released his grip and jumped forward to hold me. At that moment L'Prat, who had slumped down and was acting tired, came to life.

His other guard must have been lulled, must have been taking his attention off him to watch the jumps and efforts of the guards with me. For L'Prat broke free, dodged to one side, and passed out of my vision.

He was still non-noticeable. Once loose, who could find him? Only the men at the mental radar could say where he might be.

The guards dashed around hunting for him. But they didn't see him—nor did I, though I knew he could be right in front of our eyes.

Then the grip on me was tightened even more, and before I could hope to win freedom, I was practically carried forward to another and grimmer chamber, as obvious an operating room as any planet could present.

They strapped me to a table, wheeled in the mental-radar vision plate to keep me firmly in observation, and stepped back. Two beings came up then, swathed in black cloth, and they carried sharp little knives.

In a few moments, the final quotient of Earthly humanity would be in the hands of its deadliest foes.

CHAPTER 15

IT SEEMS to me in afterthought that I was not as frightened as I should have been. The passage through space in the heart of that Jovian projectile, and the subsequent attunement to the thought radiations of the galaxy had somehow made me a little more than just a frightened flesh-and-blood man. I had immersed myself in the color and glory of too many worlds, and though I was of Earth, I was yet a little more than that.

I lay there awaiting the peeling away of my protective space clothing, awaiting the probing painful cuts of their scalpels as they sought the fatal notation. That I would die on that table I had no doubt. These were beings capable in their own way of kindnesses—for no intelligent creatures can create a high level of civilization without the qualities of empathy and sympathy—but they were also beings reduced to desperation. History has shown too well that in such cases humane considerations are usually the first to go by the board.

I lay there, my head turned, watching the two confer who were to do this to me. Then I gritted my teeth as they approached and reached for my helpless body.

At that moment there was a sudden rise in the glare of lights. This huge vessel was illuminated from within by glowing panels that ribbed the walls. The source of the power for these lights, I assume, came from some central power plant which broadcast this energy within the whole radius of the ship and its immediate environment. For there were no plug-in connections or obvious power boxes connected with the other contrivances I had noticed in operation.

Now the softly glowing light ribs that banded the room and the halls suddenly flared up in a blinding brilliance. At the same moment, as all those around me recoiled from the

sudden glare, there came a shower of sparks from the mental-radar set, sizzling sounds from the power-scalpels, and more sparks from the weapons held in the guard's hands. Even as this flareup came, the power source suddenly blew completely.

There was a puff of violent light from all directions, and then the ship was plunged into darkness.

I tried to rear up from my place on the table. I suddenly became aware of the silence. Unconsciously, I had been hearing the soft hum of the various air ducts and ventilators that kept this great vessel alive. Now those sounds too had died with the break of power.

Immediately after there came a roar of noise, as the Altaireans began a cacophony of calls, queries, and excited squeaks in their inhuman voices. I heard them rushing about, and I then heard, over that, the sounds of things smashing.

As I squirmed in my bonds, trying to free myself, I felt another's hands on me. Someone was trying to loosen my bonds. I pulled and twisted with my hands to help him, and in a few seconds, with the unknown's aid, I was off the table and on my feet.

There was chaos in the chamber and all around the ship. I felt several heavy thumps resound through the ship as if explosions were going on outside. I swung about me, grabbed something movable, and started to swing my way around, bashing everything in reach.

At the same time, I tried to make my way in the direction of the exit. I was still wearing my outfit; if I could get out, I had a chance.

Of course—it must have been L'Prat who had rescued me. He must have taken advantage of the use of the mind radar in the operating room to get to the controls somewhere and sabotage the works. It seemed to me that he must have traveled awfully fast to do it.

What were those other noises now? I heard sounds of agonized yells in all parts of the ship. I had made my way to the main corridor by then, though the darkness was in-

tense. The air was already stale, and I heard the running and bumping of the crew trying to find their way around. Someone blundered into me, and I swung the weapon—a chair leg or a tool or something—and had the satisfaction of feeling something crunch against it.

Then there was a new sound and at the same moment a stirring of the air. There was a whistling noise, and I felt the air in the corridor suddenly turn into a breeze; and in a second more, a wind was blowing about me.

I shoved my way through three or four wildly screeching Altaireans and braced myself against the wall of the corridor. Then I fastened my face mask and fumbled my breathing apparatus back into operation. I hoped my helmet outfit was still airtight.

The air was leaving the ship. Someone had opened the main lock's double doors, and this wind was the outrushing of the air that had been bottled up in the great ship. In a few minutes, unless that door was closed, the inside of this ship would be as cold and airless as the barren surface of Pluto.

That is exactly what happened. There were more sounds, vibrated back through the floor of the starship, sounds that indicated scuffling and mad fighting. Then the noises died away, and in a little while I stood in the dark corridor in airless, soundless silence. I waited, the faint hissing of my air tubes the only noise that reached me.

I started slowly down the wall in the direction in which the brief wind had passed, seeking some sign of light, some flash of stars that would show the open port.

Someone bumped into me. I grabbed with my hands, felt a rubbery space-suited figure, which slipped away even as I touched it. I whirled around, but I could not detect it again.

I listened, but could see and feel nothing. I remembered that I had a searchlight somewhere on my person. I fumbled into the pockets of my suit, felt my kit, and finally turned it

up. I hefted the round cylinder a moment, then flicked it on and off, gaining myself a split-second glimpse.

I saw the corridor stretching before me, an eerie tunnel of glistening metal. I saw a number of bodies, lying in oddly distorted positions, here and there down the view. I could see in the distance a little huddle of motionless figures around a ceiling-to-floor break in the wall which must have been the inner door of the main lock.

But I saw nothing that moved or stood. I waited in the darkness, then moved forward again. I reached the exit of the ship, and in the light of the stars I could see the bodies of those who had died there. Not all had died of suffocation.

There were unmistakable signs of combat. Most, in fact, of those at the door had died by violence, by weapons.

I walked through and stood in the main port of the ship, above the gangway that led down to the cold stony floor of the valley. The dome was dark and, in one spot, collapsed. I saw gaping pits where some of the gun emplacements had been. Several of the little scout ships—the black pencil-like ships—were lying twisted.

Clearly the valley had been the scene of a sudden attack. But where were the foemen? Where were the attackers?

Something brushed against me once again. I twisted aside, and this time charged down the gangway. I hit something else full tilt. At the moment of my collision, I saw the startled round brown eyes of a helmeted and sheeted figure appear before me. I saw in that moment that I had bumped into a Thubanese in spacesuit. He had been trudging up the ship's entrance, carrying a pack of some sort.

I was past him and at once he simply vanished from my view as if he had never been. I slipped around the end of the gangway, moved around it, and pushed to the side of the ship partially covered by the rise of the incline. I figured that here was a spot least likely to be in the path of the invaders.

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For that one glimpse had told me the whole story. I could piece together what had just taken place.

The Thubanese were the more desperate of the two alien expeditions. They had probably arrived first, made the main survey of the system, done the spadework of Earthly research. But their primary ship, the great starship, had been put out of commission and would never take off again. In the struggle undoubtedly their supplies and reserves—and probably numbers—had been cut down.

When the long black ship from Altair had arrived, the newcomers caught the Thubanese at a disadvantage. Their great star-crossing vessel had landed safely and in full control. Their stock of small scouting craft had taken off in greater number and had more or less managed to cut down and eliminate the exploratory parties of the Thubanese. The spaceman I rescued in Arizona had been shot down at that time, just as he was about to return with the final results of their careful survey.

That left the Thubanese with but one arrow remaining in their quiver—the secret of non-noticeability. It was the only card left for them to play. They had apparently sent a few spies into the Altair camp, enough for the blue-skinned ones to get wise and work out the first emergency mental-radar detector. With this, the Altaireans had caught L'Prat—and me.

L'Prat however was not just a spy. He had been sent into the great starship with a mission; he was the advance paratrooper of the final attack.

He had been caught. Thanks to my intervention, he had managed to escape in time. He had blown the main power chamber of the starship, from which all else in their encampment drew strength. At that moment, signaled by the failure of the dome light, the rest of the Thubanese, covered by non-noticeability, attacked.

Their success was obviously complete. I could see no sign of any opposition in the darkened valley. And the peculiarity

of their weapon was that I could also see no sign of the conquerors. They were certainly present; perhaps a whole army was marching in before my eyes. I simply could not notice them.

On the other hand, they could not notice Kermit Langley, Earthmán.

I wondered how they kept track of each other. My question was answered as I felt something brush against me. I twisted and saw by the push of my hand that I had been found. A Thubanese was revealed to me, wearing a curious flat-paneled face mask over his space clothing, and he was reaching again for me.

I tried to dodge, shook loose from his grasp, and ran. I headed directly for a small black scout ship which seemed to have survived the assault undamaged.

I slammed into someone else, twisted, lost my balance, rolled on the ground. Something pushed past me; I turned and eluded it. I scrambled to my feet, but was hurled back on the ground by the force of a body landing against me. I saw as I struggled that I was being pinned down by two of the yellow-skinned little men in their cumbersome suits both wearing the flat-paneled fronts, which must have been their own device for unscrambling the mental invisibility block.

The fight was futile, for I was as one who fought with phantoms. They could see me; I could not easily notice them.

It was but a few moments before I was dragged to my feet and found myself returning to the main port of the great captured starship. I could see the two who held me—a pair of little lemonish men, whose faces I could make out through the distortion of their helmet panels. Their faces were lined and fatigued.

Inside the ship I was held near the lock for a period. I saw the inner lock door swing shut again, and I felt the faint hissing of air being pumped again into the ship's interior. There was a flickering, and the lights began to go on in the ribbed sides of the hallway and door entries.

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Strangely, I could notice nobody save my captors.

They started me walking along the corridor again, and once more I found myself in the great forward control room.

As I entered the room, my first impression was that it was empty. I would have sworn there was no one there. But in a moment, I blinked with amazement, for now there were a dozen or so persons present—some sitting on chairs, others grouped around a flat panel in discussion.

I turned and saw that one of my guards had flicked a switch on some sort of pack he carried on his back. Undoubtedly it served to bathe the room in some neutralizing current, so that the gift of non-noticeability was countered.

The others in the room noticed us at the same time we saw them. I looked around, and as I felt my hands freed, opened my face panel as the guards were doing.

As I walked by myself to the center of that room, the others gathered silently around me. I looked around at them and thought I saw one who looked faintly familiar. "L'Prat?" I asked quietly, just as if nothing had happened.

He smiled slightly, nodded. "Yes," he said. "I am glad to see you—not harmed."

"You might have warned me what was coming," I said to him calmly, wondering whether I could bluff it out that I was on their side.

"Sorry, but it was our last chance. You can guess."

So I could. I glanced around at the starmen surrounding me. They did seem like a sorry lot. They looked tired, as if they had come a long way on little reserve; their equipment was rather the worse for wear. But they showed a hard set in their wide-browed faces. They were a grim, back-to-the-wall lot.

These were the leaders. How many followers they had left I could not guess. Not too many, I thought. But these were the victors.

L'Prat and several of the others conversed rapidly in their

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native tongue. I recognized the language I had heard over the soundtracks in the little buoy ships.

Then L'Prat came over to me. I saw the others stiffen up, noticed them line up their hand weapons on me. I stared at him as he came up to me.

"You know," he said slowly and calmly, "what we need. You have carried the message to its directed source. We expect you to cooperate with us and deliver this message. In return we will remove the fix that was set upon you, and you will have a long and untroubled life."

"I will, eh?" I said. "Where? Here? Or back on Earth?"

L'Prat shrugged. "That is not essential. Are you going to cooperate, or shall we take it anyway and leave you unrewarded?"

I had had one narrow escape from death at the hands of an operating party; now I was faced with another. These people could make the examination and do it painlessly. That I knew from experience. If I submitted, I would be none the worse for it, and would probably return to Earth eventually to live out my life.

I would return—but with them. I would live out my life on Earth—as what? A pet dog? A slave of alien conquerors? A Quisling leader, an object of contempt to every living man, woman, and child.

At that moment, as I was about to refuse, to seek some crazy way to destroy myself before they could read the number hidden on the bone of my arm. I saw a curious vision.

I saw in my mind's eye a great pool of deepest maroon, a well of calm understanding, a great glowing warm eye that looked deep into my soul. I stood transfixed by this vision, and I felt a curious relaxation reach down into my spirit. In that moment I heard again the whispers and songs of a thousand worlds. My mind's eye probed into that pool of light that was an eye of Jovian dimensions, and I saw a myriad civilized populations reflected therein, happy, contented, joyous.

The vision passed. I looked around at the bitter, hard

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invaders from the Dragon Star, the would-be conquerors of a new solar system, and I laughed softly.

"All right," I said. "Go ahead. Read your message."

CHAPTER 16

LOOKING back on that moment over the years I have had many occasions to doubt my cocksureness. It was, as I have come to look back on it, a period when I was certainly in no position to make a level-headed decision. I was tired, deeply tired. It may well have been the wrong mixture of oxygen in the air—whether an underdose or an overdose wouldn't matter—either would be likely to disqualify me as the proper judge of my destiny.

For when I consider the antics of my fellow humans, I don't know whether the figure that the Thubanese got was the biggest bluff in history or an accurate listing. Consider the human species, that wonderful fearful mixture of blunder and genius, of stubbornness and daring. Consider the history of the Earth. Long periods of stubborn, willful ignorance; cycles of hundreds of years of no apparent development—the same peasants grubbing the same soil, the same savages dancing the same foolish tribal rituals, the same old charlatans bilking the same old crowds in the same old manner. Nothing apparently learned, nothing moving forward.

And then consider the opposite. Crazy periods of wild flux, the charging advances of the last hundred years; in three generations from the horse-and-buggy to the rocket ship, the soaring ultra-high-speed conquest of ground and air, of radio and electronics, of the atom and nucleonics—and the adaption of these things, too, to daily life. What can you make of it?

All that and war, too. Still the foolish methods of dividing

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ourselves by race and language and social concepts. An advanced people? Or a backward people? Quick to learn, or slow to learn?

I find myself shifting views. Sometimes I think the listing was a hoax, a deliberate alteration of the actual number jotted on my arm after the careful Thubanese scientific survey of *Homo sapiens*. I find it hard to believe that the inhabitants of this Earth are so all-fired quick on the trigger.

Because, when I recovered consciousness, after gently falling asleep in the operating room of the captured starship, I found the little yellow-skinned men strangely sober and silent. They stood around me in little groups in that alien chamber and talked in unhappy whispers.

I sat up, got to my feet, still a little dizzy and uncertain. I was conscious of a certain change in me, which on afterthought I have realized was the cessation of the vibratory note. Probably this pitched tone had been present, inaudibly, ever since my first encounter back on that Arizona ranch. But it was gone now.

This, in itself, gave me evidence that the Thubanese at least lived up to their word. They had opened up my arm, read and presumably erased the number listed on it; and at the same time they had removed that vibratory note, which I am certain is what in time would have killed me.

There was a scar on my arm, a new one, but it too has since disappeared. I sat up, looked at it, felt the difference in myself, looked at them.

None of them was interested in talking to me at the moment. I sensed that my guess had been correct. *Trust us*, the Jovian vision seemed to have said to me, and I had not been wrong in following that mood. No people who had ever tuned in on the harmony of the spheres were likely to have watched the ruin of a fellow world, however alien it might have been to their way of living.

I had had my glimpse of the intercourse of civilized worlds, and this made me just a little more than the masters of super-

science from the Dragon Star around me. I looked around at this band of world conquerors and saw them with a new eye.

There were perhaps fifty of them left, out of an expedition that may have numbered several thousand. They were a grimmer, more battered group, a group hardened to an exile that had lasted many many years and that would now last many more. Yet these few dozen could, for all that, have conquered the Earth had they attempted it.

Their technique of non-noticeability alone would have been enough. They could have gone about the Earth, stirring trouble, shifting political papers, backing demagogues, sabotaging here and there, working to widen the many splits that exist in our mixed-up society. In time they could thus have sundered humanity into camps of mutual destruction. Out of the ruins the Thubanese could have arisen as the new masters of the world.

But what good would it have done them if their human slaves were quick-minded enough to catch on, to pierce their techniques, to master their advanced science—just a thousand years or so beyond our own level, and that isn't much in cosmic terms—and in a few hundred years not only erase the damage but become the masters of Thubanese lore, and advancing upon it, return the conquest to the original star?

For that is what the ratio-speed of humanity was, according to the message I carried to Pluto. It was so high, so incredibly fast, that either we humans were potentially the hottest creatures in the whole galaxy or their science was completely cockeyed. They couldn't believe the latter, so they had to believe the former.

The number was tops; it was the maximum advancement figure on their scale. It meant that while we might be behind them today, we'd darn well be ahead of them tomorrow, no matter what they did—short of wiping us out man, woman, and child.

And you can't wipe out a people with an adjustment ratio like that. Some are bound to slip out of the net, just as people

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have somehow managed to survive all the plagues, floods, earthquakes, wars, and disasters of our checkered history.

It was L'Prat who told me what the number was. I found him huddled in conference with several of the leaders. He separated from them and told me. "Then what's the decision now?" I asked. "You going ahead?"

He looked at me out of his tired brown eyes and turned to the others. He said something, probably repeating my question. The others looked at him, there was a sort of negative shudder, and L'Prat turned back.

"We don't think it is advisable. Our leaders are deciding now what to do."

"Well," I said, "whatever they do, they had better return me to the Earth. It was part of the bargain."

I don't really know whether it was, but I still had that old desire to keep on living. I couldn't see the Jovians coming out here and returning me to my home. I think from their viewpoint I was a shot bullet.

The Thubanese leaders debated this point for several days, while preparing the captured starship for a new takeoff. I wandered the vessel during that time, watching and wondering what I could learn to take with me. They cleaned out the effects of the old crew, the Altairean builders, and they moved a lot of their own possessions in from their original base across the other hemisphere of Pluto. They retooled the controls so that they could handle the ship according to their own system; I gathered the drive systems were not too different from those of their own kind of ships.

They stowed aboard three of the Altairean scouting ships—the only ones left in workable condition—and one of their own craft as well. Then they blasted all the stuff left behind, sailing over the world to their own original encampment and blowing that to powder.

I watched this from a viewing plate within the great starship and wondered. But when I asked L'Prat, all I got was a rather knowing look. I was puzzled about that, until I

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realized that they expected us Earth people to arrive on Pluto ourselves in a few generations. They weren't leaving any traces for us to check up on.

This amused me. Aboard that ship the neutralizing current kept everyone in plain visibility all the time, and I noticed that they tended to skirt me as if I were just a little dangerous. At about that time, just as they finally lifted from Pluto for the last time and set sail for their home star across the light-years, I was of a mind that the Jovians had tampered with the number.

You see, I keep on varying in my opinion of people. I can't believe we are *that* smart. I see, in the course of my own chosen occupation, so much that is foolish and thoughtless. I keep weighing the matter, and keep returning to the thought that the Jovians must have changed that number.

But I don't *know*. After all, what is the Thubanese number? What is the Altairean number? The Jovian number? They appear to be far in advance of us—their present level is, of course—but how long did it take them to attain their present state relative to the amount of time it took Earthmen to arrive where we are now?

The starship did not simply take off from Pluto into the depths of outer space. I wouldn't be here to tell the tale if it did. There were still a couple of buoy ships hanging in orbits closer in the solar system, and the Thubanese were first going to pick up those ships.

So we shot inward as far as the orbit of Earth. The trip was short, but this was a ship of huge dimensions capable of reaching speeds near that of light itself.

I was left much to my own interests during this time, and I tried to learn what I could. But I am no scientist, and that ship was well beyond my own comprehension. I don't even know its method of propulsion.

I did pick up a few things—certain gadgets, a weapon or two left over from the original makers, and other things I thought would be useful to me in my profession.

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I packed the lone Thuban buoy ship with these, for it was to be used by me for my return to Earth. I was ready for my homecoming.

We came close to Earth at last, and it was still the best view in this system. The only world that looks warm and green and friendly out of the whole lot, and I could see a certain amount of envy mixed with the apprehension among the members of the one-time invasion expedition.

At last we reached a point beyond which they would not bring the giant vessel. L'Prat escorted me to the little ship which would take me back to Earth. He showed me several more of the gadgets the ship contained, emergency landing techniques, etc. I stepped aboard it with my load of stuff which would have proven highly profitable and valid evidence of my story.

I took off again, once more alone in space, at about two hundred thousand miles from Earth. I punched down the prearranged single control knob, and the little ship pushed off, left the big star-traveling cylinder behind, and headed in for the great ball of misty blue and flecked green which was my home world.

The ship came down on a long curving orbit, circling the world lower and lower until it was moving through the winds of the upper stratosphere.

At this point, the engine quit. I had been watching my course at the viewplate, wondering just where on Earth it was likely to make its landing. The cessation of the engines caught me by shock. The ship began to buck and pitch; a whirling started in, and I was tossed around like a pea in a shell.

I managed to catch at the control again, but the ship was through. I clung to the pitching board and reached the emergency landing control. I pulled it.

The ship broke up. The nose separated from the rest, with me in it, and fell like a stone through the upper atmosphere. I hung there in weightless drop, wondering, waiting for the

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heat to burn me up. But the drop was not that fast, and gradually I realized that the fall was under control.

Then this nose in turn split apart and I found myself outside, in stratosphere, clinging to a great blue parachute which had sprouted from the skeleton remnants of the control board. Around me the remains of the ship whirled into oblivion, the hand weapon, the tools, the gadgets I had carefully collected, going to blazing ruin in the air of Earth.

I landed at last somewhere in the wilderness forests of Northern Canada, dressed in a worn and battered Russian pressure suit and with not a darn thing of extraterrestrial origin on me except that ridiculous parachute and the trapeze bar that remained.

I dumped these, shucked off the cumbersome space outfit, and started back to civilization. It took me ten days of trekking before I came to a trading post. By that time I looked like a pretty weather-beaten, unshaven tramp.

Then, as I walked into that trader's cabin, I found that I had indeed brought back one gift of the Dragon Star's super-science. For I came through into the warmth of that post, and the two Indian trappers and the French-Canadian who ran the post never looked up and never said a word to me.

I was still a non-noticeable object.

Now that you've heard my story and the dawn is coming, perhaps you'll be reconciled to your continued failure to catch up with me. You can understand how you haven't really got a chance. I know you think you've got me now, but really, that's only because I have been squatting here in this particular hideout of mine for several weeks, just to see how long you—the most persistent of all those who have sought me—would take to find me out.

You are to be congratulated, at that. You must be a master at your profession. But it is dawning now, and I'm tired of this game; I've told you my story, so I must be going. If you'll

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take my advice, you'll give up this futile chase and seek other quarry.

For you may track me; you can even outwit me, but you can never hold me. Don't blame yourself, though; my technique is a gift—a gift from the stars which was just perfect for my chosen profession. So don't keep looking into the corner at the rocking chair where you've been allowing yourself to think I've been sitting. Right now I've been walking around the room, and I'm behind you. And now I'm going out the door and I will bid you good-morning.

* * *

The man who had been holding a pistol on the narrator suddenly leaned in astonishment across the table. He stared with startled eyes at the empty rocker. It had seemed to him that just a moment before, the mocking eyes of that notorious bank robber had been smiling at him from the rocker's depths. And now there was no one there.

The detective jumped up, dashed around the table. The seat of the rocker was still warm! His sharp eyes peered around the room, but he saw no one. He ran for the open door, looked out. Nobody was in sight.

Kermit Langley was gone. This had been his hideout; that deduction had been right. A good many months had gone into the careful locating of Langley's lair, and he had trapped the man at last.

And now, after all that work, with a fortune in rewards waiting for the capture of the most elusive and audacious thief in criminal history, he had allowed the man to walk away from him.