

AVON/G1310/50c



**SAVAGE EXPLORERS OF FORGOTTEN MOONS BATTLE
FOR TREASURE IN THE LAWLESS RINGS OF OUTER SPACE**

MINERS IN THE SKY

MURRAY LEINSTER

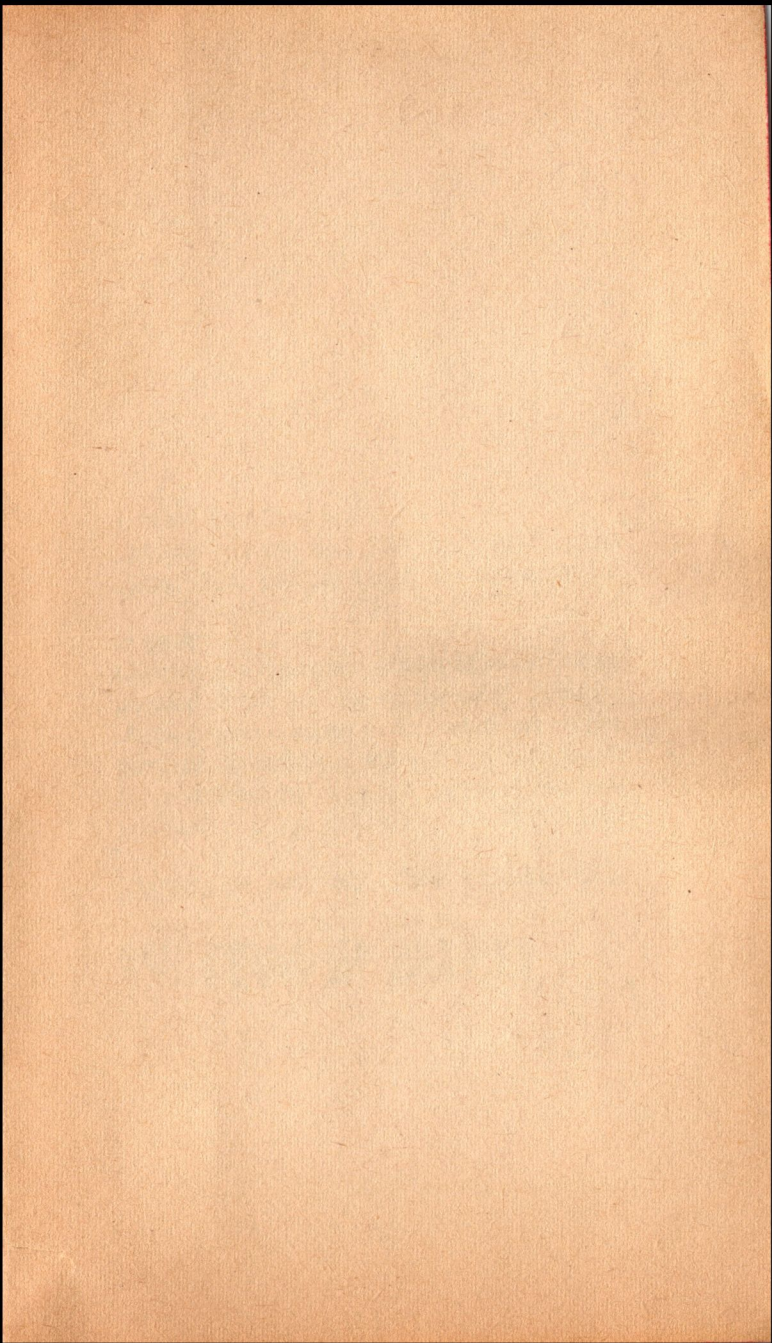


AIR LEAK IN SPACE!

"Wait!" he snapped. "Look at your suit!"

He held her. He pointed to the proofs that there was no air, that the inside of the life-boat was as empty of anything to breathe as space between a pair of stars. He cut off her helmet-prone. He cut off his own. Then he touched the metal of his helmet to the metal of hers.

"Keep your helmet shut!" he commanded.
"We've lost our air! The hull's punctured!
The air's all gone!"



MINERS IN THE SKY

MURRAY LEINSTER

AN AVON BOOK



This Avon Edition is the
first publication in any form
of *Miners in the Sky*.

AVON BOOKS

A division of
The Hearst Corporation
959 Eighth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10019

Copyright © 1967 by Murray Leinster.
Published by arrangement with the author.

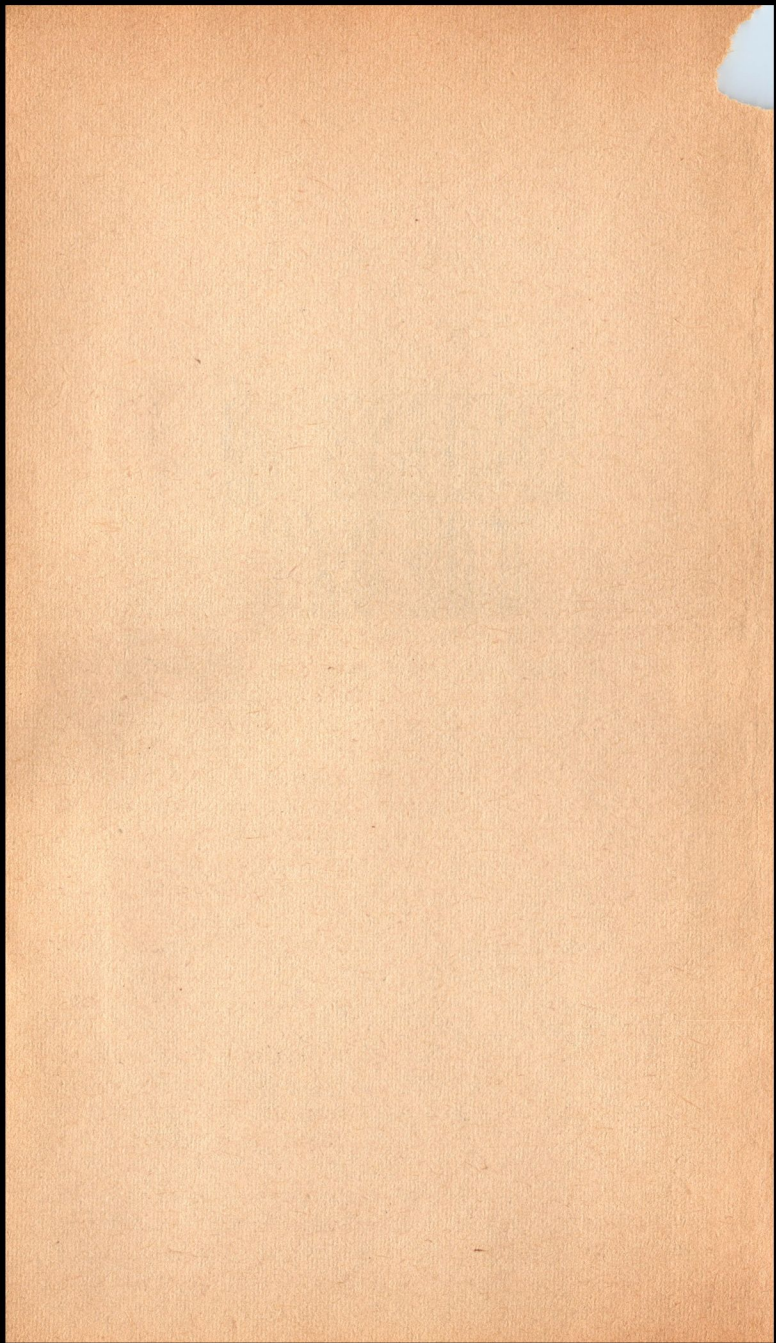
All rights reserved, which includes the right
to reproduce this book or portions thereof in
any form whatsoever. For information address
Avon Books.

First Avon Printing, April, 1967

Cover illustration by Paul Lehr

Printed in the U.S.A.

**MINERS IN
THE SKY**



1

The rock which was also a mine floated in a golden, sunlit mist. There was a brighter part of the mist and behind that there was a sun, some scores of millions of miles away. There was a dimmer part of the haze, with two or three glittering specks where it was thinnest. They were stars, whose distance could only be expressed in light-years. All the rest of the mist or haze was equally bright, to the right and left, before and behind. The rest was bright and wholly featureless except for the rock. It was seventy feet in its longest dimension, and at its thinnest it measured possibly fifty feet. Its substance, save for a single streak of gray matrix, was crystalline brown stuff broken violently away from something else and larger.

It floated in emptiness. It did not fall, because it was in orbit around a planet hidden by the shining haze. There was nothing to explain its presence here, but men had found it.

In straggly painted letters somebody had marked "GH-37" on it, the letters and numerals plainly visible from a distance. And then somebody else had painted "DK-39" on the same surface, partly over the first. This was all on one side of the rock.

On the other side, past occupation was more obvious. There was the half of a transparent bubble stuck firmly to the rocky substance. It was fifteen feet across. Its rounded surface reached a height of perhaps eight feet.

There was a thin, tubular, metal-and-plastic frame on one side, which amounted to a transparent airlock. And inside the bubble there were objects known only to man. A sleeping bag with a hood over the head end. A cubical object which was an air-freshener. There were tanks piled up, with pipes and stopcocks sticking out of their ends. They were marked "Oxygen." There were cases marked to show that they did or had contained food.

But there was no movement anywhere about the rock. Seventy by fifty by forty feet, it had a mass of some thousands of tons. It turned deliberately on some indefinite axis, making a complete revolution once in ten minutes or so. Nothing happened.

The rock had no name of its own. It floated in a mist in a vacuum, a cloud in emptiness, a vast glowing disk of brightness in interplanetary space. It floated in the rings of Thothmes, of which the Space Directory said without interest that it was a gas-giant planet in the solar system Niletus, that it was the fourth planet out from its sun, and that it was surrounded by huge rings of dust and debris from shattered moons. Which was to say that it was a ringed world like the First System's ringed planet Saturn.

The rock with the painted letters and numerals on its side floated in a golden luminosity. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. Even what was in the sleeping bag did not move. Not even to breathe.

Dunne scowled as he drove his donkeyship through the Rings of Thothmes. He scowled because he was headed for Outlook, where the pickup ship ought to arrive very soon, and the need to travel just now was disturbing. There'd be practically hysterical festivity when the pickup ship grounded; but this wasn't a time for Dunne to be moving about. Sheer necessity had made him leave his partner, Keyes, back in emptiness on the Ring-fragment they'd found and were mining. There was a two-foot vein of abyssal matrix in plain view on that rock, and it would have been insane to leave such a treasure unguarded. It was marked, of course. It was marked "DK-39" over an earlier "GH-37," but the markings didn't really mean anything. There was no law in the rings of

Thothmes, and that was another reason for disturbance. Keyes had a strictly limited store of oxygen, and nobody else knew where he was.

But it happened to be necessary for somebody to go to Outlook for supplies, which could only be had when a pickup ship was there. From the rock Dunne and his partner had been working, it was a two-and-a-half-day drive to Outlook, through a golden mist conspicuously devoid of route-markers. But of the two men Dunne was the better astrogator. If Keyes had taken the ship and left Dunne behind, he mightn't have been able to find his way back again before the oxygen gave out. Dunne wasn't likely to miss the way. But if both of them had left their precious find, somebody else could have come along and taken it over, painting new initials and numbers—if he was prepared to fight for it.

So Keyes was back there in the bubble, two days behind, and Dunne drove hard to get to Outlook and the pickup ship. They had to have oxygen. They had to have food and mining supplies. Dunne had to get them from the pickup ship that brought them all the way from Horus, which was the next planet out from this particular sun. Incidentally, he had to dodge ill-intentioned persons who might want to make use of the lack of laws in this neighborhood. His errand was not only urgent but difficult, and he scowled as he drove. He needed not only to get supplies, but to get back to the rock without anybody trailing him there. If he managed it, he and Keyes would be moderately well-to-do by the time the pickup ship arrived again. If he didn't—

He had to. With luck he might have no trouble at all. But he didn't like some of the possibilities.

From where he drove, the Universe looked very improbable. There was a bright and radiant mistiness all about, and the donkeyship swam through it. The haze seemed to have no limits anywhere, but Dunne drove for Outlook through it. Outlook was the floating mountain—one of the innumerable fragments in Thothmes' Rings—which was the accepted spaceport for this area.

Some millions or tens or hundreds of millions of years before, certain formerly solid satellites of Thothmes had blundered inside Roche's Limit for that particular primary-

satellite system. They crumbled because of tidal strains that nothing—literally nothing—could withstand. They broke up. In the process they ground themselves in part to impalpable dust particles, and in part to gravel and fist-sized stones; and parts of them clung together to form boulders and larger masses up to the size of mountain ranges floating in their orbits.

The dust and the debris of this ancient disaster now formed the shining rings around Thothmes. Each dust particle had its orbit, and every larger object its; and every particle of gravel or boulder or monster mass like Outlook went rolling through emptiness on a duly established path. They floated in the dust clouds which formed the Rings so much like those of Saturn back in the First System. And of course men found reason to risk their lives among them.

In the case of Thothmes, the reason was simple. Different objects floating in the Rings had different constitutions. Some were scraps of surface rock from long-vanished moons. Sometimes they were lumps of nickel-steel from the cores of the split-up moons. And here and there, in random distribution, there were objects made of abyssal rocks in contact with such metal core substances. Some of those abyssal combinations contained crystals. They existed only where worlds or moons had once existed. They could only be obtained where moons or worlds had shattered. They looked rather like lumped rock candy, but they were the most valuable objects in the galaxy. They'd made and they kept space-travel possible.

The ships that went singing to the galaxy's very rim depended on the special properties of abyssal crystals for the generation of their drives. Without them there would be no space commerce or any colonies. Earth would be a crowded slum with people trampling each other underfoot because there were so many of them.

And on one good-sized fragment in the Rings, Dunne and Keyes had discovered a streak of the gray matrix in which abyssal crystals occurred. They'd already made a good thing of it. Now Keyes, back in the bubble, was guarding the find and working out more of the crystals while he waited for Dunne's return. And Dunne didn't like it at all.

He watched his radar screen sharply as the donkeyship drove on. There was a pebble a mile to his right. It might be half an inch in diameter. It could be ignored. A fist-sized object floated three miles to the left. That could be ignored, too.

Then a clucking came from his detectors. There was a much larger object on ahead. The instruments had analyzed their own findings and called for Dunne's decision. Some object behind the mist had moved otherwise than in an orbit around Thothmes. It couldn't be a rock. It was large enough to be a ship. It might have sent out a radar pulse. The clucking sound seemed indignant.

Dunne growled to himself. He got into a space-suit—fast. He watched his instruments as he wriggled into the armor against emptiness. He picked up the stubby miners' bazooka which fired very small shells to crack open rocky masses for examination of their inward parts. He stuck small shells in appropriate places in his space-suit belt.

He took a last look at the instruments and went to the airlock. He clipped a lifeline in place. He closed the inner door and opened the outer. This was standard for the examination of bits of celestial debris, but a man with a bazooka in an open airlock door can be a very deadly fighting unit.

He stared ahead into a mere mistiness lighted by the sun. But presently there was a shadow which became a shape; and then something solid, floating in nothingness. It was an irregularly shaped mass of rock, practically the size of a donkeyship. A small one could hide behind it, if aligned just right.

Then the bit of solidness was two miles away. Dunne opened fire. He loosed three bazooka-shells at it. The small projectiles flashed away. Here where there was no gravity they would travel in mathematically straight lines. When the rocky object was only one mile away, the first of the bazooka-shells hit. The rocky mass crackled. It began to break. A second shell hit. The third.

The rock seemed to disintegrate, and behind it there was a donkeyship. This other ship had been lying in wait. Most likely it had heard the whine of Dunne's ship's drive before he heard of it. It had cut its drive and made itself into an ambush. But now it was the center of a

mass of explosion-driven stones flying in all directions. And Donne, forewarned and demonstrably able to take care of himself, was boring in on it.

The strange donkeyship fled, with a last shell from Dunne's bazooka to urge it on. He closed the outer airlock door and opened the inner. He went back to his instrument board. He dismissed the incident from his mind. There was no point in being upset about it. This was the Rings, and this was the time when lucky space-miners were carrying abyssal crystals to a pickup ship. This was when unlucky ones were apt to take desperate measures. He dismissed the whole matter. But he was very much concerned about Keyes.

He changed the course of his donkeyship. If he was to get back as he should, no one should be able to back-track him. The ship he'd just discouraged from lying in wait, for instance. Not many of the less desirable characters in the Rings had the stomach for a fight. But a donkeyship heading for Outlook often carried enough crystals to be worth a murder or two.

So Dunne headed for Outlook. From time to time he changed his course—always when his detectors picked up no trace of any other ship's drive. He drove more or less by dead reckoning, but he heard other ships in motion, and they sheered away. Which was wisdom.

But eventually there were several thin, buzzing whines picked up by his communicator at one time and relayed to him by loudspeaker. They were all drives in action and heading for one destination which was now near. After a little more, he heard a voice at the lower limit of hearability. It was called exuberantly: "Hi! Who's comin' in?"

The call meant that somebody was aground on Outlook and another ship was within seeing distance. And then Dunne knew everything that was happening, and what would happen.

One donkeyship had landed. It had come in cautiously, with an airlock door open and a space-suited figure in the opening holding a bazooka ready for use. It approached very, very cautiously, as if the appearance of Outlook gave it pause. But that wasn't the case. Everybody knew what Outlook was like. It was a mountain—

a solid mass of nickel-steel from the very center of a dead moon's heart. It was more than a mile long, and its shape was that of a nightmare. One end was like a cone, and the other like a roughly rounded half-globe. And all its surfaces were twisted, shattered, tormented metal, except at one spot.

There was one place which was a sheer plane, an almost flat surface created by some sliding, grinding collision a few scores of millions of years ago. That flat area, without a beacon or a building or any single marking to say that men had ever been there—that was the spaceport on Outlook. The first ship to arrive would approach its prospective landing place with great caution. Eventually it would land and make contact with its magnetic grapples. It would then settle itself where nobody could approach it from any direction unseen.

Then it would wait. Dunne, for one, knew exactly what went on. Presently another donkeyship appeared. When it was the merest speck in the glowing golden fog, the ship aground hailed it: "Hi! Who's comin' in?"

Dunne heard this, and the reply. The second ship called down an identification. It settled on another place, not too close to the first-landed ship. Then talk between the two ships began. At first it was cautious and restrained. But the men in each of the twin space-craft had gone long weeks with only each other's voices to hear. They were hungry to listen to the new ones.

Another ship. Two more. Many! The emptiness about Outlook became filled with short-wave conversation. Suddenly there were jests, there were jokes, and there was exaggerated, change-hungry laughter. Some of the jokes had been old before space-travel began. Very few of them were genuinely new, but men howled with laughter at them. There were questions. Did so-and-so still do this or still do that? Did somebody else still have nightmares and start fighting in his sleep? Remember the time—? Had anybody seen so-and-so? He wasn't here last pickup ship. Was he here now?

Questions like that weren't approved. They didn't fit the mood of Outlook at pickup-ship time. The men now aground waited impatiently to get out of the rotund little ships that had been mere movable prisons for many weeks

past. They didn't want to hear that this or that team of donkeyship men had vanished. The presumption could only be that they were dead.

There was also a tacit agreement not seriously to ask what luck others had had. Anybody who boasted would practically invite less-fortunate others to trail him when he left. They'd want to know where he found the precious crystals all the galaxy bid for. But there were always two questions asked of everybody as they arrived. The first was, had they seen any gooks? This was considered very humorous. Had anybody seen any gooks? Laughter. The other question was, had they found the Big Rock Candy Mountain. This was excruciatingly amusing to men waiting hungrily to get out of their ships if only for minutes.

Dunne knew that these things went on, though he hadn't yet reached Outlook. They were traditional.

Then his drive-detectors picked up the booming sound of the pickup ship. Its drive sounded quite unlike that of a donkeyship. It was bringing oxygen and food and mining supplies and mail, but mostly it was bringing a change, a relief, a temporary forgetting of life in the Rings of Thothmes. It was coming from Horus, the next planet out from the sun.

Its drive-sound, as the detectors reported it, was a deep-toned rumble. It came swiftly nearer. The voices of men aground on Outlook stopped abruptly. Dunne felt the desperate impatience everybody knew at moments like this. He wanted to fling his ship into top-speed, crazy rush to get to Outlook first. But he held himself in check. He heard the pickup ship's drive stop, and reverse, and he knew that the large space-vessel was matching velocity and approaching the slowly rolling mountain with care through the haze of moondust floating in space. He drove on and on, and a confused notification appeared on his radar screen. There was something very large ahead. It was too far away to be identified, but he knew what it had to be. Outlook. He heard the pickup ship's drive go on for half-seconds, and other half-seconds, and he knew that it was maneuvering to match velocity and rate-of-turn with the mountainous mass of nickel-steel.

There was an abrupt spurt of full-power drive, and

then everything stopped. The communicator brought in fresh excited babblings of the men who'd come here to meet this ship. The pickup ship was aground.

Hilarious questions assailed the pickup ship. How was the weather on Horus? How did the Panthers make out in the planetary series? Did the pickup ship have any cold beer? Men shouted orders for civilized meals that they wanted to describe item by item; it could be guessed that in their past isolation they'd dreamed of special dishes unavailable in the Rings, and by the time the ship arrived they were waiting as hungrily for some special foodstuff as for the oxygen and other needs the pickup-ship came to Outlook to satisfy.

Dunne came in, checking velocity with fierce, full-power reversals of his ship's drive. He hovered over the clustered donkeyships, arranged in an incomplete circle on the nearly level space which was the spaceport of Outlook. He was sighted. Ribald greetings came to him from the childishly excited space-miners of the Rings. Who was he? Why was he late? Had he seen any gooks? He was too late. All the food and supplies on the pickup ship were already spoken for. What was the news from the Big Rock Candy Mountain? References to that fabled Golconda were jokes, of course, but not altogether jokes. There was actually something, somewhere in the Rings, which had been christened the Big Rock Candy Mountain because it held the answer to every man's dream of riches and magnificence. Dunne knew a little more about it than most, because his partner Keyes was the nephew of that Joe Griffiths who'd found it, and brought out untold wealth, and who'd gone back to get still more, and was never heard of again. Keyes didn't want the relationship known because there'd be suspicion that he had special useful information about the Mountain and was in the Rings to make use of it.

But the Big Rock Candy Mountain was part of the ritual on Outlook. There were men who believed in it implicitly, and accepted every mouth-watering detail of the tradition. Some believed in it with reservations. But nobody wholly disbelieved, because there was fact behind the legend. There was no miner in the Rings who didn't dream of finding riches incalculable in some Ring-frag-

ment he was sure to come upon eventually—perhaps before the pickup ship came again.

Dunne curtly gave his name and settled down on a place just beyond the donkeyships around the spaceport's edge. It wasn't one of the better landing places. He could see all that went on in the spaceport, but nearby there were crazy upcroppings of the kind usually called metal trees. They weren't trees, but they were metal; and because of them, a man in a space-suit could get close to Dunne's donkeyship unseen. But it was the best place left.

Voices babbled at him, struggling for humor and for wit. Dunne, eh? How many kilos of crystals had he brought back? The question was genial mockery. A gram of crystals wouldn't be despised, and ten grams was a fair average for the Rings. A kilogram would be spoken of with awe for years to come if anybody actually brought in so much. In any case, no man would answer such a query, not even on Outlook with the pickup ship nearby. Someone asked how Dunne's new partner liked the Rings? Who bossed the ship? This last was reference to the psychological warfare that often developed when two men were imprisoned together for weeks or months on end. Some men came to hate each other poisonously under such circumstances. Sometimes one partner arrived at Outlook fiercely demanding that the partnership be dissolved. And it was done, on the pickup ship. Sometimes two sets of partners switched companions, to find out later that the situation was not relieved.

Dunne was known to have Keyes as a partner. Keyes was relatively new to the Rings. There were humorous queries. Had they fought? How had Keyes made out in the Rings? Hey, Keyes! How're you doing? Is Dunne a tough character to get along with? They say he's scared all the time he's out of the ship in a space-suit. Does Keyes make you do all the out-of-ship work?

The talk was ridiculous. It was childish. But it expressed the frantic impatience of the men in the donkeyships for a change of any sort, any new sight or voice. Keyes didn't answer. He couldn't. He was back on the ring-fragment he and Dunne had discovered. The voices called for Keyes, to tell him hilariously of alleged tricks

and chicaneries an experienced space-miner like Dunne might practice on him. But Keyes wasn't there to answer.

Dunne grimly got his ship to ground and anchored with its magnetic grapples. Voices called again for Keyes.

Dunne said curtly, "He's not here."

Voices said, "What happened?"

Dunne said, "He's not here!"

Then he realized that he'd made a grave mistake. If he'd said that Keyes had cracked his faceplate when out of the ship, it would have been better. That was a perfectly credible accident. It might or might not be believed, but nothing would be done about it. Or if he said he'd killed Keyes, it would have been nobody's business. But he shouldn't have refused to give any explanation at all. That would lead to guesses. Guesses might be dangerously close to the truth—that Dunne and Keyes had found a rock too precious to be left unguarded while one of them went to the pickup ship for air to breathe.

There was a sudden silence. For a full half-minute the space about Outlook was startlingly still. Then somebody said something in a dry voice about the pickup ship taking its time. Other voices joined in. There was a sudden, absolute avoidance of the subject of Keyes. Because men would be making guesses. Dunne realized that he'd made an appalling blunder. Possibly half, or more than half, of the space-miners on Outlook would be debating whether or not to try to trail him when he went away. Their guess would be unanimous that Dunne and Keyes had found riches. Some would guess at enormous riches. A few would even guess at the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

Then a booming voice spoke from Dunn's communicator. It was the ultra-powerful transmitter of the pickup ship. It said, growling: "All right! I don't hear any more drives. Maybe we're all here. Let's get to business. Who landed first?"

A voice answered hilariously. It named a name. Another voice gave another name, very curt and business-like. It had been second to arrive. There were other voices. A voice said, "Smithers." There were other voices giving other names. An unctuous voice said, "Haney." Dunne

kept count. When it was time, when every other ship had answered, he said, "Dunne."

There was a pause. The names were being checked. Mail was doubtless already sorted, but men who had wives or kindred to write to them devoured mail just as men in prison do. But as for checking the names, Dunne could have done it himself. It was simply a matter of comparing the names just given with the names given on the pickup ship's last visit. There was a difference between the lists. Some ships didn't answer.

There was no comment. Nobody could know what had happened. When a ship dropped out of sight, it dropped out of sight. That was all. Nobody had to go to the Rings. It was their own decision, and they bought their own donkeyships and came to the Rings in full awareness that the death rate among space-miners was thirty per cent a year. The planetary government of Horus sent the pickup ships to supply their needs and bring back the treasure—the abyssal crystals—they found. But the pickup ships weren't here to prevent or punish crime. That simply wasn't practical. So Dunne wished bitterly that he'd said he'd killed Keyes instead of giving an excuse for guesses. In the Rings no governmental authority went outside the hull of a pickup ship. But curiosity had no limit.

"Okay," said the pickup ship's booming voice. "Let's get at it!" It read off a name. It was the first name recorded. "Waiting for you, now!"

A pause. Then a man in a space-suit clambered out of a donkeyship. He carried a parcel. He went across the relatively flat surface of glittering metal. Magnetic-soled space-boots accounted for the fact of walking. A ladder reached down from the pickup ship. He climbed it. He was inside the larger space-vessel for some minutes. He came out and went leisurely over to the donkeyship from which he'd emerged.

The pickup ship boomed a second name. Another man in a space-suit came out of another donkeyship. He went in the pickup. He came out and went back to his own small craft. Donkeyship by donkeyship, as the ship from Horus called their names, men went to the large and

infinitely welcome pickup ship. They carried parcels—small parcels—into it. They came out without them.

The man who'd said his name was Haney went in, swaggering even in his clumsy space-suit and with his magnetic-soled boots clinging as if sticky to the metal under him. Another man—the one who'd answered "Smithers." Then Dunne answered to his name, and went. He was the last, because he'd arrived last. He turned over a parcel of abyssal crystals to the pickup-ship skipper. They were the reason for everything that happened in the Rings. He made the formal statement that he and Keyes had found a ring-fragment marked such-and-such, but obviously abandoned. They'd painted their own initials and a year on the rock. They were working it.

"Yeah!" said the clerk who took down his statement. "I remember them!" He spoke of the former owners of that fragment. "Doin' well, they were, when they just didn't come back."

Dunne said, "Mail?"

He didn't expect any, but Keyes should have a letter. He had a sister on Horus and was deeply concerned about her. Not to get a letter on the pickup ship would disturb Keyes. Dunne asked for a second look. There was no letter.

Dunne gave his order for oxygen and supplies. It would be made ready for delivery presently. He went back to his ship. A pause, seemingly for no particular reason. The booming voice of the ship said: "Any more? Any more coming in?"

It was a call for any donkeyship that might still be on the way to Outlook. The call could be picked up an astonishing distance away. But there was no answer. Silence. The voice from the pickup said dryly:

"All right, boys! Come aboard and spend your money!"

Instantly there was activity all around the spaceport's edge. Men emerged from each of the ships. They headed for the ship from Horus. Now there was no silence. They babbled via their space-phones as exuberantly as before the pickup ship's arrival. They were starved for conversation with strangers. They were ravenous for experiences they did not have in their ships. There were two men from

each of the ships, except Dunne and that of the man named Smithers.

They trooped to the ladder of the supply-ship. They clambered up like small boys let out of school. They chattered like schoolchildren. Those who'd had mail were most exuberant of all. They went into the big cargo-lock which had room for all of them and had been pumped out earlier. As individuals they'd used a smaller, personnel lock. Now all crowded into this big lock, and the outer door closed. Air came in, turning misty from the chill of its own expansion into the vacuum of the lock. Then the inner doors opened and they were in the ship. They made yapping noises at the sight before them.

All of this was standard. All of it was familiar. Every man had been through it before and each one was anticipating every item which his ordinary life—life in the Rings—did not provide.

There was food spread out on tables, waiting for them. There were white cloths and silver. There were drinkables. There was artificial gravity set at a little less than was customary in donkeyships. With space-suits stripped off, everybody felt lighter. Everything in the pickup ship made for euphoria. Only so often did pickup ships come to Outlook, and only then could the men who sought and found mines in space live for a little while as their dreams demanded. Without this, they'd forget what they were working for and become less than human. With it, they knew the sensations of children.

Dunne felt all the urge to extravagance of behavior that the other men felt, but his partner Keyes was in a plastic bubble, many hundreds of mist-miles away, waiting for him to come back. He reminded himself. Their rock had been found by another donkeyship team, and the initials and year of its discovery was painted on it. GK-37 was the marking. But that pair of Ring-miners had disappeared. Nobody knew what had happened to them. But the fragment went unworked for two solar years. Then Dunne and Keyes found it, and put their initials and the year on it. "DK-39." Now Keyes stood guard against someone else appropriating it, and waited for Dunne to get back with food and oxygen. If Dunne didn't come back, Keyes would die. If he were delayed too

much, Keyes would die after so many days, hours, and minutes. His oxygen would be finished. Dunne had to keep that in mind. He did.

The donkeyship men rushed upon the tables. They gulped down filled glasses. They devoured the food. Donkeyships carried no fresh food—fruits, meat, vegetables. Such things took up too much room, and they'd be impossibly expensive to ship from Horus to the Rings. So the pickup ship provided one banquet. It helped men endure the Rings, and therefore it was profitable to the planetary government of Horus. Very much of the budget for that planet was earned by men who lived in donkeyships and worked the Rings. The crystals they found made it possible for freighters to ply between star-clusters. They furnished the means by which great passenger-liners went singing through the void.

Dunne ate. He drank. But he did not rejoice. He'd made a grave blunder in failing to account for the absence of Keyes. It would have been sufficient to say that he was dead. It would have caused no trouble if he claimed to have murdered Keyes. But he'd aroused suspicion of riches.

Actually, he'd just delivered to the pickup ship a full double handful of crystals. Against their value he'd ordered oxygen and food and water and mining supplies, all of which had been brought millions of miles from Horus. Now he waited to get started back to Keyes with them. The others from the Rings made merry. They acted as if made drunk by the mere spaciousness of the pickup ship and by the hydroponic-tank fragrance of the air, and especially by having mail to reread presently and new companions to talk to now.

Everybody talked at once, and at the top of their voices. Everybody made exaggerated gestures. They babbled. They cracked jokes—stale ones, but nobody minded—about gooks. They talked about the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Then they were likely to search with their eyes to make sure that Dunne hadn't slipped away. They sang songs—several of them at the same time. They stuffed themselves. They were slightly insane. But none of them were unwise enough to boast of the quantity of greasy crystals they'd brought in, nor did anybody let slip the

slightest clue to where they worked floating rocks with initials and numerals painted on them.

Only Dunne didn't talk. He'd made a mistake and even in this festivity he was being watched every second. His problem had become multiplied by a mere slip of the tongue.

Presently a ship's officer went quietly past Dunne. He beckoned unobtrusively. He moved on. Dunne, after a moment or two, followed him.

The pickup ship's officer waited beyond the first closed door. He regarded Dunne sharply when he appeared.

"You're Dunne?"

"Yes," said Dunne defensively. "What's up? Did you find some mail for us after all?"

"No. You've got a partner named Keyes," said the ship's officer. "Where is he?"

"He's back at a rock we're working," said Dunne. One could speak freely to a pickup ship's officer. They were chosen with great care. They had to be dependable because too much wealth passed through their hands, and the government took a part of it. They had to be capable of trust.

The officer said skeptically, "Look here! There's no law in the Rings. You know it! If he's dead—"

"He isn't," said Dunne irritably. "We found a rock. It was worked before, and abandoned, or the men died, or something. Anyhow we're working it. I brought in a double-handful of crystals from it. You can check that! Our rock is too good to leave unguarded. But we needed oxygen and food. Somebody had to come here to get it. If Keyes had come, he might never have found me again. So I came. I can find him again. I don't like it, but there wasn't anything else to do."

The ship's officer said vexedly, "The devil! Do you know anything about Keyes?"

"He's my partner," said Dunne. Men who'd been partners and weeks or months isolated in the Rings were apt to know pretty well everything about each other.

"His sister—"

"I mailed a letter to her," said Dunne. "I put it in the mail when I ordered my supplies and turned over my crystals. Keyes wrote it for me to mail to her."

"I know," said the ship's officer. He shrugged. "She's read it. She wants to talk to you."

Dunne stared. It was, of course, completely impossible. Women didn't come to the Rings! He said angrily, "Is that your idea of a joke?"

"She came on the ship to talk to her brother. She has a round-trip passage. Naturally!"

It was necessary for anybody going to the Rings to have their return passage paid. Even men heading out to the Rings in donkeyships—a matter requiring very much stored fuel and foodstuffs—paid in advance for passage back to Horus if they should need it and were able to make use of it. That was a condition required of them if they were to deal with the pickup ships.

"It's crazy!" said Dunne fiercely. "It's lunacy! Why the devil—"

"She wanted to see her brother," said the pickup ship man distastefully. "He should have been here with you today. If he'd been here, it wouldn't have been crazy. Since he isn't here, she wants to talk to you. This way."

He led Dunne through another doorway and then another. Ships for long-distance travel were large, because size didn't matter in space—only mass; a lightly built ship could be roomy. But a donkeyship had to be small to be maneuverable.

Here was a passenger lounge. It was luxurious. But Dunne didn't look at the room. He stared at the girl who stood there, waiting for him. He recognized her from a picture Keyes had had. Keyes' sister, Nike. She looked frightened. She looked tense and strained and nerve-racked. She searched his face almost desperately.

"I'm sorry," said Dunne. "Your brother should have come with me, but we both thought somebody ought to stay with the rock we've found. And he wasn't sure he could find his way back to it. So I came."

"I—have to talk to him," said the girl unsteadily. "I—I simply have to!"

Dunne fumbled in his pocket. He brought out the receipt for the double-handful of crystals he'd turned over less than an hour ago.

"Look!" he said. "This represents money. Your brother and I have some credit with the Abyssal Minerals Com-

mission. I can give you an order on them for money for another round trip. So you'll go back to Horus and come out again next trip. I'll have your brother here to talk to you. All right?"

Nike was very pale. She shook her head.

"No. I can't wait to talk to him. It has to be soon. Now."

"He's two and a half days from here," said Dunne, "and the pickup ship won't wait for me to go and get him."

She swallowed. She held up the letter he'd put in the mail for her. Somebody had broken all sorts of regulations to give it to her here.

"He thinks a great deal of you," she said shakily. "Very much! I know what he'd tell me to do if he knew I were here. So—I'm going back with you. To see him. I have to!"

"No," said Dunne. "Your brother wouldn't tell you to do that! Not to go riding in the Rings! Anyhow, I won't take you. You'll have to do as I said. Go back, come again, and I'll have him here to talk to you or do whatever you please."

"But I have to talk to him—now! I must!"

"Not with me you mustn't," said Dunne grimly. "See here! You say your brother trusts me. Wouldn't he trust me to tell you the right thing to do? Wouldn't he expect me to give you the same advice he would?"

"Yes. . . ." But she looked at him as desperately as before. Then she said, shaking a little, "But—the trouble is that I have to see my brother! I—have to!"

"Unfortunately, you can't!" Dunne scowled. He came to a decision. "I'm going to be here in the ship until my supplies are ready. That'll probably be an hour or more. You write your brother a letter. I'll give it to him. Meanwhile, I'll arrange your passage back to Horus and back out here again. And while you're traveling, he'll think over whatever your problem is; and when you get back he'll be all set to tell you exactly what to do. That's the most I'll do. It's the most I'll even think of doing!"

"But—it's life or death!" The girl wrung her hands. "Really!"

"I can't think of anything else you can do," said Dunne. "Nothing will keep me from going back to my partner. His life depends on my getting back. But I won't take

you. I know you're his sister. I've seen your picture. Short of taking you into the Rings, there's nothing I won't do for you on his account. But that one thing I will not do! I won't!"

He turned away. He made his way back to the tumult and the shouting where all the Ring-miners behaved like drunken men because for one hour or thereabouts they did not have to stay on the alert lest they die.

His own nerves jangled. They'd been taut enough before he arrived at Outlook. Now they were worse. He bitterly regretted that he'd left Keyes behind. It would have been wiser to risk the loss of their rock to a later claimant than to have made the blunder of not accounting for Keyes, and to have this situation arise.

He'd brought a double handful of crystals to the ship. Added to the sum already to their credit with the Abyssal Minerals Commission, there was almost riches. If he and Keyes divided it, they'd each be moderately well-to-do. If Keyes divided again with his sister—and that was his intention—the sum for each wouldn't be negligible. Keyes could quit the Rings and take care of his sister. Dunne knew that he wouldn't quit, himself; but Keyes could, and he ought to.

This girl . . . Donkeyships were bare and barren functional devices, by which two men could track down solid objects in the golden mist which was the Rings. Normally they'd inspect hundreds before they found one worth testing. And not all those they tested yielded any trace of the crystals all men coveted. And, once in a donkeyship in the Rings, there was no backing out. There was nowhere to go until another pickup ship arrived. The bedlam here and now was proof enough of the intolerable strain of life in a donkeyship in the Rings. But for men there was the bright and shining hope concerning the Big Rock Candy Mountain. That was at once a dream which kept men from suicidal despair, and—since Dunne was suspected of finding it—made this the worst of all possible times for Keyes' sister to come up as a problem. When they were suspected of such infinite good fortune, the only place for her was somewhere else. Anywhere else!

A grizzled spaceman came and sat beside Dunne. Dunne knew him. His name was Smithers and he was

considered slightly cracked. He was the only donkeyship man in the Rings who habitually worked alone. He'd had a partner, and the partner disappeared; and from that time on, Smithers protested vociferously that his partner had been killed by gooks and that ultimately he'd avenge him. He talked about gooks to anybody who'd listen, and probably between pickup ships he talked to himself.

"They're calmin' down now," confided the grizzled man of the revelers about them. "They acted crazy at the beginnin', but they're calmin' down now."

Dunne nodded. He was inclined to grind his teeth because of his own folly. He'd given his order for oxygen and foodstuffs and mining supplies. His order was being made ready. Similar orders would be delivered to each donkeyship team, in the order of their arrival and delivery of their accumulation of crystals. Now Dunne had to wait his turn to receive them. But he'd become an object of suspicion. He was suspected of having found the Big Rock Candy Mountain. It was senseless. But it was very dangerous! Lonely, isolated men were apt to be cranks. This grizzled character was an example.

"Have y'heard," he demanded of Dunne, "that there was gooks sighted down yonder? Fella named Sam told me so last pickup ship time. He heard 'em first. Their drive don't make a whine like a human drive does. It goes tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet instead." He nodded portentously. "This fella Sam heard it. An' then he saw a gook ship. It come for him. He lit out an' lost it. But it was a gook ship!"

Then Smithers said, more protentously and more ominously still, "And Sam ain't back this trip. He was here last time. He ain't here this time. Somethin' got him! It was gooks! We got to do somethin' about gooks!"

Dunne shook his head, not paying attention. It was wholly likely that somebody'd been joking with Smithers, and Smithers didn't see it. There had always been rumors of gooks in the Rings. The word meant something like "ghost." Communicators occasionally picked up noises for which there was no explanation, but it did not follow that there must be alien entities to make them. Gooks were supposed to be inhabitants of the planet Thothmes, and some people believed that they'd made space-ships

and came sneaking about the Rings, spying on humans and on occasion sniping them. But the evidence for them wasn't good.

A world suitable for life to develop has to have heavy elements and rocks and metal compounds to provide the raw material for living things to be made of. But Thothmes, if one judged by its gravitational field, was not nearly as heavy as a same-sized globe of water. That ruled out the possibility of gooks. And it was believed that if there were a solid center under Thothmes' turbulent veil of clouds, it must be frozen gas-ice or perhaps methane or ammonia. And life couldn't originate or continue there!

The grizzled Smithers went on with sudden passion: "You listen here! You found the Big Rock Candy Mountain! Maybe you think you goin' to keep it secret! Maybe you left Keyes behind on it to keep anybody else from minin' it. But there's gooks goin' around, snipin' men's ships! All of us together, we c'n handle a lot of gooks! But you try it by y'self—"

Dunne said, "We didn't find the Big Rock Candy Mountain!"

Smithers ignored the statement. He said firmly, "Remember what happened to Joe Griffiths. *He* found the Mountain! Everybody knows it. There's millions an' millions pilin' up interest on Horus, waitin' for the courts to find out who it belongs to. But what happened to him? The gooks got him, that's what happened to him! Now you an' Keyes, you found the Mountain. Keyes stayed on it to keep anybody else from bargain' in. You go back to him without us fellas along to help fight off the gooks, an' what'll happen to you? The gooks!"

"We didn't find the Big Rock Candy Mountain!" said Dunne.

"You better," said Smithers ominously, "you better let us in on it. There's plenty there for everybody. But you try to keep it all to yourself an'—pfft! You're gone! There's gooks watchin' that Mountain! They know we lookin' for it! They ain't goin' to let us have it if they can help themselves! That means you! You open up an' talk, an' you can lead two dozen men back to that there Mountain, an' we can hold off any number o' gooks an'

clean up. You too! But try it by y'self an' the gooks'll get you sure! Certain! They'll get you!"

"We haven't found the Big Rock Candy Mountain!" said Dunne for the third time. "We simply haven't found it!"

The grizzled Smithers said shrewdly, his eyes gleaming, "That wasn't a ship's officer that took you aside just now, was it? He didn't take you off to try to get outa you where you found the Mountain? Huh? You just had ordinary luck, bringin' in just enough crystals to keep you goin' till another pickup ship comes by. Huh? That ship's officer didn't take anybody else off for a private talk about how much crystal they brought back! He did take you! I'm tellin' you, there's gooks sneakin' around the Rings, an' around the Big Rock Candy Mountain! You let us in with you, an' we can fight 'em off an' get rich besides. But you try to go back there by y'self— What'd that ship's officer tell you? Didn't he tell you the same thing?"

Dunne's jaws clamped tightly. There was, perhaps, just one disclosure likely to make more trouble than belief in the Big Rock Candy Mountain. That one more menacing disclosure would be that there was a girl on the pickup ship. Nobody in the Rings had seen a girl since he'd been here. They'd been nearly hysterical simply because they were able to be out of their own ships for an hour or so while they bought supplies and oxygen. But if they saw a girl!

Smithers said warningly, "You better let us in on it! There's the gooks!"

"We didn't find the Big Rock Candy Mountain," said Dunne, drearily, "and you can go to hell."

Smithers, sputtering, went away. Later Dunne saw him cornering other men. His idea was evidently to organize men who'd already resolved to track Dunne wherever he went after leaving the pickup ship.

Time passed. Smithers went from one to another of the men who'd come to Outlook in their donkeyships. He talked volubly. Each buttonholed man listened tolerantly. But nobody took Smithers too seriously. Some men let him talk to them while they continued to stuff themselves at the nearly denuded tables. A few hunted for something to put into the formerly filled glasses. There were

one or two clusterings of men who'd calmed down from their first exuberance and now talked (Dunne was sure) of the totally unprovable guess every man was only too ready to make: that Dunne and Keyes had found the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

Presently a ship's officer tapped a man on the shoulder. His ordered supplies were ready for him to take possession. He and his partner departed. Ordinarily they'd load up and get as far as possible from Outlook before the next ship was supplied. That was to keep anybody from guessing where they mined a fragment floating in the Rings. Now, Dunne knew angrily, it wasn't unlikely that they'd wait nearby to follow him when he departed. He began irritably to plan evasive tactics.

A second pair of donkeyship partners was tapped. They also seemed to leave. It was unlikely that they'd go off about their private affairs. They'd try to involve themselves in Dunne's. It was pure silliness. Dunne had made a single unqualified statement, and instantly he was suspected of the success every other man had dreamed of! It was partly his fault. But Nike's situation wasn't! He wouldn't take her into the Rings! He was desperately uneasy about Keyes, but he wouldn't take Keyes' sister into the Rings!

A loudspeaker barked: "Attention! Somebody's moving about outside! If you want to check your ships, the lock's ready!"

Instantly there was pandemonium, with men getting into space-suits faster than should have been possible. Dunne heard the grizzled Smithers cursing furiously: "It's gooks! Them gooks! They come to stop us workin' in the Rings!"

Dunne paid no attention to him. He was getting into his own suit. He was one of the first ten men to crowd into the big cargo-lock that would let all of them out at once.

The inner lock-door closed. The outer opened, with a vast rushing-away of air. The men in the lock dived out, and the urgency they felt was made clear. Every man used his emergency jet. They are normally reserved for ultimate emergencies when a man's lifeline parts or something else occurs to make it necessary for him to propel himself in space.

They flew like birds across the spaceport, every man bound for his own ship.

Dunne heard the click of an electric detonator.

He saw his ship fly to bits with a momentary flash of monstrous intensity and violence.

2

The rotund little donkeyship split up into fragments, some of which disappeared with the velocity of rifle bullets. Pure emptiness was left where it had been. No debris. No fragments. Nothing. The gravitational pull of Outlook could only draw objects to it with an acceleration of inches per standard year. Any moving object touching Outlook bounced. Every scrap of the shattered ship that hit anything rebounded away, and all the fragments together amounted to no more than new fragments in new orbits in the Rings of Thothmes.

Dunne came to ground where his ship had been. His magnetic boot-soles clung to the metal. He could see where the explosion had taken place, because the mirror-bright metal had been slightly oxidized by the flame of the ship's detonated fuel store.

He ground his teeth. He began to hunt doggedly for some evidence, some clue to who had bombed his ship and why. There was nothing to be found. Naturally!

The delivery of ordered supplies to donkeyship operators continued. At another place, where there was law, there would probably have been an investigation, and the taking of evidence, and maybe a conclusion about the guilt or innocence of someone or other. But here nobody had authority to investigate. Nobody had authority to question witnesses. Certainly nobody had authority to punish.

So everyday business resumed. The cargo-lock of the

pickup ship opened, and two men came out towing their bundled supplies by a rope. Two men could move tons, here where nothing had any weight. With magnetic boot-soles clanking on the metal substance of Outlook, a donkeyship man hauled his purchases to a waiting ship. His partner would have opened the loading lock-door. The mass of floating stuff went inside. The door closed. The donkeyship went away.

Other business went on, only it wasn't quite ordinary business. There was the firm, irrational conviction of the miners of the Rings that Dunne and Keyes had found great treasure. The reason for the guess was that Dunne had come to Outlook alone, and had let it be implied that Keyes stayed behind to guard their fabulous discovery. Which was correct, except that their discovery wasn't fabulous. Rich, perhaps, but by no means unprecedented.

Again and again the pickup ship's large lock opened, and a man or men brought out oxygen tanks and water-containers and food-stores and mining supplies and the like. They towed them, floating, to their ships. One went inside and a lock-door opened. The supplies went in. The ships went away. This sequence of happenings went on steadily. But the ships didn't really go away—at any rate, not all of them. Somehow the destruction of Dunne's donkeyship increased their belief that the Big Rock Candy Mountain had been found. Dunne must make a bargain with somebody to take him back to it. Those he didn't bargain with would follow and make their own decisions. They lingered, tens or scores of miles from Outlook, hidden in the golden glowing mist. Because Dunne had to do something. He had to deal with someone. The others would combine—perhaps!—against whoever he made a deal with.

He'd already decided on the beginning of a course of action, but he went tramping about the place from which his ship had been blasted as if unable to believe in his disaster.

A donkeyship lifted off and went away into the all-concealing haze. Only one thing about it was certain. It wasn't going far. And it wasn't heading in the direction in which it had been searching for—or working—abyssal,

crystal-containing matrix. Dunne tramped around the oxidation smear on the bright metal, apparently looking for evidence. Another ship took off. Another.

A voice from the pickup ship's communicator, booming in the headphones of Dunne's helmet.

"Calling Dunne! Calling Dunne! Come in, Dunne!"

"What is it?" growled Dunne.

"How's your oxygen?" asked the ship curtly. "You've been out there a long time."

Dunne checked his oxygen tank. In the vacuum of space a man doesn't carry a tankful of air to breathe. He carries oxygen. He breathes oxygen at three pounds pressure instead of air at fourteen point seven, and he saves the weight of the useless four-fifths of nitrogen that ordinary air contains.

"I'm all right," growled Dunne. "I'll come in presently. I'm thinking, right now."

The carrier-wave from the ship clicked off. A moment later it hummed again in his headphones. The voice boomed once more.

"Dunne?"

"What?"

"Miss Keyes asks if you'll pay for a donkeyship team to go and pick up her brother, since you can't do it with your ship destroyed, and he'll die if nobody does. Will you pay?"

Dunne could have groaned. Now everybody knew there was a girl on the pickup ship.

"Tell her no," he snapped. "I'll take care of the situation!"

A donkeyship released its magnetic grapples and floated away. It put on power and vanished. More objects came out of the pickup ship. Wire-wound oxygen tanks. Foodstuffs. Mining equipment. Fuel. Reaction drills. Bazooka-shells to split a moon fragment with their shaped charges and so allow the inside to be examined.

A figure in a space-suit came out, towing the mass of stuff. The towing figure swaggered a little, even with magnetic soles to induce a plodding gait instead. Dunne noted it. It was Haney. Haney got his supplies to his ship. His partner took charge of stowing them. Haney himself swaggered to Dunne and ostentatiously turned off his space-

phone. He grinned at Dunne through the helmet faceplate. He beckoned.

Dunne irritably accepted the signal. Ordinarily, speech in emptiness goes by space-phone, radiating microwaves from a tiny antenna. Such speech can be picked up for miles. Here there was no air to carry sound, but it was still possible to speak direct. As in a liquid ocean, helmets touched together conveyed sounds by solid conduction. The quality of the sound was not remarkable, but at least it would not be overheard.

The helmets clanked into contact.

"A bad business!" said Haney. "Do you know who did it, or why?"

"I can guess why," said Dunne savagely.

"Somebody," said Haney's tinny, unctuous voice through the helmets' contact, "somebody knows what you've found and where it is. Eh?"

Dunne was silent for long seconds. Then he said, "We didn't find the Mountain."

"Okay," said Haney blandly. "Cut us in on what you did find, and we'll block the scheme the others have made and ferry you to your rock. You and the girl and supplies. We'll land you. We'll set up a bubble. Then we'll stop by and pick you up next pickup-ship time, you and the girl and Keyes."

"Is this charity?" asked Dunne coldly.

"It's a gamble," said Haney. "We get half the crystals you find while we're gone. Half."

It was plausible. Had someone else made the offer, it might even be attractive. To take a man to and from his working—his mine—for half his take while there . . . It wasn't bad under the circumstances. But Haney didn't insist on the Mountain's discovery, which might mean that he knew the facts. He might know what they'd found. And there was no assurance at all that he'd keep to such a bargain. Dunne knew better. There was no law in the Rings. There was nothing but his own self-respect to make a man keep a bargain when he could profit by breaking it.

And there was the girl Nike. She definitely shouldn't go off in Haney's donkeyship.

Dunne said, "No."

He let it go at that. Haney grimaced inside his helmet. He moved away. His partner was already stowing the supplies purchased for their ship. Haney went to his partner and touched helmets with him, for conversation not to be picked up by the pickup ship or Dunne.

Haney went back to the pickup ship. He mounted the ship-ladder. His partner completed getting stores aboard.

Something made Dunne stare after Haney. Nike was desperate to find her brother. Some unimaginable emergency had driven her to ask to go into the Rings with Dunne, to find her brother and to keep from traveling back to Horus and then back out to Outlook again. She didn't realize how dangerous such a thing would be. She'd never been where there was no law and order. She couldn't imagine the risks a completely lawless environment implied. They were bad enough for a man. They'd be impossible for a girl. But she was desperate, or thought she was. She'd have risked trusting herself to Dunne. When he refused to take her, had she tried to make a bargain with Haney?

Dunne began to cross the spaceport above which the golden haze hovered perpetually. He saw the pickup ship's personnel lock again. He noted that Haney's stores were all aboard, and his partner was in the act of dogging the lock-door shut.

Haney came out of the pickup ship. Behind him there came another figure in a space-suit. Haney helped it down the ladder with exaggerated chivalry—but there was need of assistance, at that. The first time one uses magnetized shoes in no gravity, clumsiness is inevitable.

Dunne leaped, with his belt-jet for propulsion and guidance. He went soaring across the relatively level metal plain. He landed with a clank, facing Haney savagely. He turned on his helmet-phone and said coldly;

"Oh, no, you don't! Nike, back into the pickup ship! Haney, get into your ship and get to hell away from here!"

Haney had to raise his own hand to make his own helmet-communicator go on. Dunne watched sharply. He saw the girl's eyes turn, and faced himself so Haney was between Dunne and Haney's partner. Haney's partner was in the airlock with a bazooka in his hand.

"If your partner pulls trigger on that thing," said Dunne icily, "you'll be blown apart before the shell gets here."

Haney protested, "She wants to find her brother! You won't take her! So she asked me to take her. Why not?"

Dunne's voice was very deadly indeed. "Because if you know where to take her, you'll be the man with a reason to blow up my ship so I can't get back there! If you know where Keyes is, all you have to do is stop me from getting to him and you'll have the rock we're working!"

The pickup ship would hear all this, of course. The helmet-phones carried for miles.

"Say it," snapped Dunne. "If you know where to take her—if you know where her brother is—say it!"

His belt-weapon bore upon Haney's middle. It was a weapon of ancient design, because there was no need for anything more deadly than a missile-weapon in space. A space-suit puncture anywhere was a mortal wound. Blasters suitable for use in atmosphere could do no more than kill. And the blasters were bulky and leaked their charges. In a fire-fight over a source of abyssal crystals, an automatic pistol firing lead bullets was actually to be preferred to a blaster. It was always charged and it fired faster and it could be recharged without a return to a source of power.

Dunne thrust his weapon deeper into Haney's middle.

"Where'll you take her?" he raged. "Where!"

Haney's voice went shrill.

"I was—I was going to look for him," he panted. "I—I tried to get you to go along to show the way. But y'wouldn't go, so I was goin' to look for him as best I could."

"With her aboard. But you're not going to do it now, Haney!" Dunne's voice was thick with fury. "Are you? You're not going to take her off into the Rings and come back next pickup-ship time and say she died. Are you? You're not going to take her."

"No!" panted Haney, more shrilly than before. "No! I ain't! I give it up! I wouldn't do nothing like that."

"Then move!" rasped Dunne. He was acutely aware that he could pull the trigger and kill Haney, and that absolutely nothing would be done to him as punishment, because these were the Rings. "Get to your ship and away!"

I'll take care of getting to Keyes and picking him up. You—move!"

He stood shaking with fury as Haney stumbled to his ship. Haney wasn't swaggering now. Once his partner moved as if to lift his bazooka. Dunne's weapon came up. As a missile-gun it could be deadly accurate, because there was no gravity. Haney's partner lowered his weapon with exemplary haste.

Haney climbed into his ship. The airlock door closed. It locked. The donkeyship floated free. It suddenly drove, accelerating swiftly. In seconds it had vanished in the mist.

Dunne practically drove the girl up the companion-ladder and into the pickup ship. She was affrightedly silent. He didn't speak until the inner lock-door opened and they were both inside the ship.

Then the girl said desperately, "But—there's my brother! What are you going to do about him? Somebody has to go for him!"

Dunne nodded, his eyes still hot and angry.

"Somebody will. In fact, I will. You can come back next pickup ship and talk to him."

"But how—what—I have to—"

Dunne was gone, tramping in his space-suit through the open space where the donkeymen had feasted. They were all gone now. It looked very much as if a hurricane had struck it. Dunne went through, looking for the skipper's cabin.

He found it, and the skipper inside, with all the small bags of abyssal crystals neatly ticketed with their masses and owners. He looked up sharply when Dunne came in the door.

"I thought you might be interested," said Dunne, "to hear how I'm going to get to my partner with oxygen and food so we can wait for the next pickup ship's arrival."

The skipper looked definitely skeptical. He swept the bags of crystal into a drawer, out of sight. As he did so, Dunne plucked a bazooka-shell from his belt and began to toss it thoughtfully from one hand to the other. The skipper jumped.

"Put that thing away!" he snapped.

"Presently," said Dunne. "Let me explain. I had a

donkeyship. It's been blown up. That leaves my partner marooned. I haven't any way to get back to him and keep him alive until you or another pickup ship comes back."

"I can't help that!" said the skipper. He added sharply, "Put that thing away! If you drop it—."

"I won't let it fall," Dunne promised. "I even juggle! Look!"

He brought out a second bazooka-shell from its pocket in his space-suit belt. He began to juggle the two of them, more or less competently. The pickup skipper's face began to turn slowly white. A bazooka-shell is a tiny rocket, with a fuel-load that detonates as a shaped charge when it hits something. If Dunne should drop one of those small spinning objects, weighing only ounces, the result would be rather like a hundred-pound demolition charge exploding in the skipper's cabin. It might not break so large a ship into pieces, but it would never be able to make its way back to Horus.

The skipper sat still, frozen, while Dunne juggled the little shells. Once he almost missed a catch.

"I was thinking," said Dunne pleasantly, "how careful traffic controls are about things. For instance, you couldn't lift off of Horus without lifeboats. You have to carry enough lifeboats not only for the crew you have, but the passengers you usually don't."

He seemed almost to miss a catch, again. The skipper went whiter still. But there was no possible way to stop Dunne.

"In fact," said Dunne, "I was thinking that I brought enough crystals aboard, just now, to pay for a lifeboat and stores for it. I was thinking that it would be a very fine solution if you sold me a lifeboat. If you do, and launch me well away from Outlook, I'll go and pick up my partner Keyes."

The skipper, watching the twinkling shells, involuntarily cried out in an agonized tone as Dunne just barely caught one of them only inches from the floor—and destruction.

Dunne said soothingly, "It's all right. I'm a little out of practice, but the knack seems to be coming back. I think I'll try three in the air at once."

He tossed a shell higher than usual, while he tried to pluck a third from his space-suit belt. The third seemed

stuck. Dunne balanced off that difficulty by keeping two shells in the air with one hand while he tried to extract the stuck shell with the other. The skipper gulped.

"All right!" he said hoarsely. "All right! Stop the juggling! You can have the lifeboat!"

"Finel" said Dunne politely. He ceased his juggling, but kept the two shells ready in his hands. "You make out a bill of sale. I'll give you an order for the money. Next trip I'll be here at the spaceport with the boat *and* Keyes, and we'll all have a hearty laugh over it. Eh? Now, you arrange things."

The pickup ship's skipper stood up. He was obviously badly shaken. He might have defied threats, or disbelieved that Dunne would actually take any drastic measures. But Dunne had taken the one course to make the skipper believe that he must be supplied with what he demanded. He'd risked his life to do it, but nothing else would have done.

As the skipper moved to leave his cabin, Dunne said: "You might tell that girl that I'm going for her brother after all, and she can write him a letter. I'll see that he gets it. And she can talk to him next time a pickup ship comes to Outlook."

He relaxed. He even reflectively put one of the two bazooka-shells back in its pocket. But he kept the other ready in his hand, tossing it meditatively up and down.

The ship seemed very silent. Only by straining his ears to the utmost could Dunne detect small noises that were signs of movement on the pickup ship.

It was half an hour before the skipper came back. He said grimly, "Here's the charter agreement. I can't sell you a lifeboat. I can only charter you one; and I don't know how legal that is! But you make a deposit of the lifeboat's full value. Sign this. Then I sign here, and that's all I can do. The lifeboat's stored and fueled."

"Splendid," said Dunne politely. He read and signed. "A most businesslike proceeding! You've told Miss Keyes what I'm doing? Did she write a letter for me to take?"

The pickup ship skipper snorted.

"She was told, of course. Come and get in your damned lifeboat. Of course, I hope you make out!"

Dunne followed him out of the cabin. He went along the

patterned steel floorplates that were used everywhere on the ship that wasn't considered a habitation. Nobody can live long in a completely artificial environment; but these were corridors in which nobody lived.

And here was the lifeboat. Dunne couldn't see more than the quasi-vestibule between the ship and the lifeboat's entrance-lock. He went in, looked over the control panel, and nodded. The seal-off door closed. A voice from a speaker in the ceiling of the tiny control room made the conventional reports. The pickup ship lifted and, as seen from near Outlook, dwindled to insignificance and vanished.

Dunne strapped himself in before the control board. He said, "Ready!" and on the outside of the big ship a pair of mussel-shell blister-doors opened. They were designed for the launching of lifeboats. From the direct-view ports Dunne could see that golden haze which was, actually, the rings of Thothmes.

"Ready to clear?" asked a booming voice from overhead.

"Ready," said Dunne again. He frowned.

"Ejection coming," said the speaker.

There was a shock. The lifeboat hurled itself violently to one side. It began to turn end-for-end, and he could see the pickup ship as a monstrous shadow, already with all details wiped out by the haze.

Up to this instant, Dunne had been almost satisfied. Not pleased, but confident. The miners of the Rings had every reason to believe that he was leaving Outlook as a passenger on the pickup ship. There hadn't seemed anything else for him to do. Believing this, it would seem to most of the men in the Rings, convinced that the Big Rock Candy Mountain had been found again, that Dunne had sacrificed his partner to the secret of the Mountain—left him to die because Dunne couldn't get to him and still keep the secret.

But then the speaker in the ceiling of the lifeboat's control room boomed with the full volume of the ship's transmitter. The voice of the pickup ship's skipper came out.

"Luck to you, Dunne! You made me mad, and it's crazy not to stay aboard. But luck to you anyhow!"

And then the pickup ship's drive boomed, and the ship moved away. It accelerated swiftly. Almost immediately it was out of sight in the Ring mist. It vanished before Dunne could draw a single infuriated breath. He was speechless with fury. Anybody within a thousand miles could have picked up that foolish, that stupid, that damning three-sentence farewell of the pickup ship's skipper.

Anybody who heard it would know that Dunne had been able to stay behind when the ship from Horus left. And anybody could reason that Dunne had gotten a lifeboat with which to go after his partner. The men who'd intended to trail Dunne's donkeyship would now shift their attention to a lifeboat, as soon as they could locate it. And in particular, whoever had destroyed the donkeyship would now set about trying to destroy the lifeboat. Without turning on the drive, Dunne knew it would have a completely distinctive drive-sound, and couldn't pass as just another donkeyship.

It needn't have happened. It was unnecessary. It was more than infuriating. It could easily be fatal.

He heard a stirring in the central cabin of the lifeboat. He whirled, his hand going to his belt-weapon.

The door to the tiny control room opened wider. A girl stood there, very pale. She was Keyes' sister, Nike.

"They told me," she said shakily, "that you'd gotten this boat to—go get my brother. And I've got to see him. So I came along. I—stowed away."

Dunne ground his teeth. The pickup ship was gone. It would be in overdrive by now, heading across the many millions of miles between Outlook and the inhabited planet Horus. There was no way to call it back. There was no place to which this girl could be taken for safety or simply to keep her from interfering with the troubles and the dangers of normal life in the rings of Thothmes.

"I suppose," said Dunne bitterly, "that you consider you've won the argument with me. Maybe you have. You're going with me to see your brother! I'm taking you along because I can't do anything else. But you're going to be sorry!"

He clenched his fists. He repeated, with emphasis, "You're going to be damned sorry!"

3

The galaxy went about its business, and Dunne went about his. There are various opinions about what the business of the cosmos may be, but there was no doubt about Dunne's. At this particular time he needed, first, to stay alive and keep Nike from harm. He hadn't asked for the latter responsibility, and he resented it. After that, it was necessary to get rid of the donkeyships prepared to follow him anywhere, under the delusion that ultimately he must lead them to the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

There was no doubt about the existence of such followers. They stayed at the extremest range at which they could know when he changed course, and to what. They probably hoped the lifeboat's communicator system wasn't as far-reaching or as sensitive as those of donkeyships. And Dunne had a third obligation, to get back to Keyes in his bubble on the big rock fragment before Keyes' oxygen gave out.

He was a day and a half from Outlook before he explained the situation in its entirety to Nike. In that time he'd done everything he could to carry out his original plan. He'd exhausted the bag of normal evasive tricks. Now the lifeboat drove—its drive a nagging, humming sound—through the mist which was the Rings. It should have given the impression that he'd given up hope of slipping away from those who followed him and was heading where he had to go. Dunne watched the radar

screen of the lifeboat. It had a somewhat longer range than that of a donkeyship, but it didn't bring in nearly as much information about the objects reported.

Only a short time after leaving Outlook, though, was needed to sort out trailing donkeyships from merely floating Ring-rocks. The rocks were left behind as the lifeboat drove on. The other space-craft kept pace with it.

The atmosphere in the lifeboat was peculiar. Dunne was bitterly angry, mostly with himself. If he'd simply said that Keyes was dead, nobody would have raised any question at all. But he'd let other space-miners suspect that he and Keyes had made a very considerable discovery. They immediately interpreted this to mean the Big Rock Candy Mountain. There was some substance to the legends about that fabulous lost mine in the sky. But it didn't happen to have anything to do with what Dunne and Keyes had found.

The accompanying donkeyships followed happily. Their occupants told each other about Joe Griffiths. He'd brought to Outlook more crystals than all other space-miners had found in years. He'd gone back and come out again with an additional incredible treasure. He boasted that there was a hundred or a thousand times as much more waiting to be brought in. And then he had vanished on his third trip to what he called a mountain in the sky, the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

It wasn't likely that he'd been killed by another miner, because nobody else made any spectacular findings afterward. Some believed he'd fallen a victim to gooks, but there was no very convincing evidence that things like gooks existed. There were occasional noises, picked up here and there, for which there was no explanation; but they didn't have to have gooks as their cause. They might just possibly be caused by something else.

Dunne kept the keenest of watches on the radar screen of the lifeboat. He pointed out to Nike that this blip represented a natural Ring-fragment, because it moved at the proper orbital speed for an object this far from Thothmes. On the other hand, this indication had to be a donkeyship because it kept pace with the lifeboat. And that blip was a donkeyship.

"Are we headed for where my brother is?" asked Nike uneasily.

Dunne shook his head. "Not yet. We have to get rid of this mob of donkeyship trailers first."

She hesitated for a long time. Then she said, "You—won't let him run out of air to breathe if you can't get rid of them?"

"If I don't get rid of them," said Dunne dourly, "all three of us are likely to die! Why do all of us carry weapons all the time? Why are men with crystals to be sent to Horus only allowed on board singly until every one is due to lose by a pirating of the ship? And even then, why do they see only one or two of the crew, who're waiting with ready weapons in case there's an attempt of that sort?"

Her expression was distinctly uneasy.

"Why?"

"Because," said Dunne acidly, "we're a pack of outlaws. We're a pack of scoundrels. Cutthroats! There's no law here. There can't be! Ships disappear. Sometimes they're found again—looted. Somebody's killed the missing men for the crystals they've found, or for a rock they were working. Who? Nobody knows. Nobody cares! I shot my way through one ambush on the way to Outlook. It's quite possible that somebody else didn't, but the crystals they carried have been taken to Horus to be put to somebody else's credit by the Abyssal Minerals Commission!"

She looked incredulous.

"We're a hard crew here," Dunne told her. "It's said that the death rate in the Rings is thirty per cent a year. Some of that is accident, but a lot of it is murder! If we got to Keyes' and my rock with half the Rings trailing us, would the extra visitors go politely away because we saw it first? The devil they would! In the Rings, finders are keepers—if they can keep what they find. If I get you to your brother, he and I will have to decide whether or not to abandon the rock we've been working—for your safety. If you're there, and somebody came along, we'd have to fight them because they'd want to keep it secret too—but they'd be the secret-keepers."

She stared at him. Then she said, uncertainly, "It's—hard to imagine."

"With an average life of three years in the Rings," he said shortly, "a man has to get rich quick or he won't. So everybody's in a devil of a hurry to get rich. And they'll take short-cuts when they can; and sometimes murder is a fast short-cut!"

This was in the tiny control room of the lifeboat. The drive-sound was a moaning, humming noise, quite different from that made by the drive of a donkeyship. From time to time there was a stirring of air all through the boat; then the air-freshener was at work removing carbon dioxide and odors and excess moisture from the air. Once, during the past few hours, a blip on the radar screen had seemed to drift closer to the center. Dunne headed the lifeboat off to one side. Immediately other radar blips shifted position. The one that had moved first went back to its original position. So did the others. They wanted to follow the lifeboat to its destination. But there was one donkeyship that didn't want Dunne to reach any destination at all.

Dunne hadn't pointed that out to Nike. The blowing-up of his donkeyship wouldn't have told anyone where their rock was. So when Dunne's ship was destroyed, the purpose wasn't to find where he'd found his reputed treasure. It was to keep him from going to it. And anybody who wanted him kept away from a certain place, must know where that place happened to be.

Which meant that somebody appeared to know where Keyes was. If it were true, Keyes might already be dead. The destruction of Dunne's ship might simply have been intended to keep him away until the current possessors of the Rock had finished cleaning up the gray matrix and the crystals.

It didn't have to be so tragic. Keyes had become a good man in space, in the six months he'd been Dunne's partner. He should have been able to take care of himself. He might be perfectly all right. But on the other hand, he might not.

Dunne wasn't going to suggest disaster to Nike, but he couldn't help thinking about it. The worst of it was Nike's presence. He owed it to Keyes to make sure whether

he was all right. Inevitably, she shared any danger that came. If Keyes were dead, all the dangers they faced were futile. But there was no possible place to put Nike for safety while Dunne went about such matters as his self-respect demanded that he do.

The lifeboat went on and on and on. It was trailed by donkeyships hidden from view by glowing mist, but unerringly pointed out by radar. Nike prepared food for the two of them and brought a plate to Dunne in the small control room.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked hopefully.

"We're nearing where something may happen," admitted Dunne. "But we're not even heading toward your brother."

He lifted his eyes from the radar screen and stared out a viewport dead ahead. He seemed to strain his eyes. Then he said, "Look!"

He pointed. Nike followed his pointing and shook her head. "I don't see anything."

"There's something bright out there. Remember that at Outlook you could see some faintly brighter dots when you looked straight away from the sun? They were stars. Outlook is close to the outer edge of the Rings. This is the side of them. It's the same thing. We'll see stars presently."

She didn't understand. He tried to make it clearer. The lifeboat went on and on. Presently, dead ahead, there was a pinpoint in the haze which was brighter than the haze itself. Then there were two. Three. Half a dozen.

"We'll be out of the Rings in minutes," said Dunne.

He was right. Suddenly the ever-present golden fog seemed to fade. The fog ahead became more tenuous, and there were fixed bright spots. They were stars. And the mist thinned again, and more and more stars showed; and then within the quarter of an hour the haze vanished everywhere except behind them. They saw myriads of stars against the blackness of space. They saw the Milky Way. They saw red stars and blue stars and green ones. There were yellow stars and pink, and there were areas in the sky where multitudinous bright specks of light seemed to cluster, and there were other places where stars were blotted out by who-knew-what in the heavens.

They looked at the cosmos from clear space. But they seemed to be rising from a vast plain of mist. It spread out for thousands and thousands of miles. The total diameter of the Rings was about two hundred thousand miles; and all of them, seen from the side, look perfectly flat and even. But much of the center was occupied by the planet Thothmes, only sixty or seventy thousand miles away. They saw it. This is one of the most magnificent spectacles men have yet found in the Galaxy.

But Nike gasped. Nowhere but near a ringed planet could such a sight be seen. The curvature of any conceivable world set a limit to possible flatness. But the Rings of Thothmes were not limited. They were no more than four hundred miles thick, but they spread out to unthinkable remoteness. The two in the lifeboat saw the Rings as not even the pickup ships had occasion to see them. They were seen as objects; but no other object could ever seem so huge. They looked solid. They appeared to fill half the universe. It seemed that all the minute and glittering specks which were the stars gazed at Thothmes' rings in perpetual astonishment.

Nike stared and stared. Then Dunne grimly got into a space-suit.

Nike said, "What—"

"You can't aim a bazooka by radar," he told her, pulling the space-suit up past his chest. "You have to see what you're aiming at. I'm going to discourage some of our followers."

She looked at once alarmed and bewildered.

"You mean—you're going to fight them?"

"It won't be a fight," he assured her. "Unless with one of them only. All but that one are following us to find the Big Rock Candy Mountain. If they shot at us and hit us, they'd spoil their own fair dream. So they can't afford to shoot. Only one of them knows where we're actually trying to get to, the place where your brother's waiting for us. So I can drive the others off. They'll hope to pick up our trail again presently. And the one that wants to get us—maybe I'll get!"

He zipped the throat enclosure of his space-suit and picked up the space-helmet that went with it.

"I'm taking a chance," he added, "with your life as well as mine. And your brother's. I'll be careful!"

He filled the belt-pockets with tiny bazooka shells. They were normal equipment for Ring-rock mining, breaking up Ring-fragments so their interior parts could be gotten at. But they were very handy weapons, too. Accuracy was necessary for their use in mining. Their range was almost indefinite. Their rocket fuel was also their explosive charge. They were designed for a purpose where a small cannon could have been used, and they could be used like artillery in a fire-fight in space.

Dunne settled his helmet and sealed it with the customary half-turn. He moved toward the airlock's inner door. He went into the lock and closed the door behind him.

Nike wrung her hands. There was nothing for her to do. It was silent for a second or so; then the lock-pump whirred, exhausting the air in the airlock. Nike heard it stop, and the clatter of the undogging of the outer door. Then silence again.

It was an appalling silence. When the air-freshener suddenly started its cycle of air-cleansing, she jumped. Then she went into the control room and peered out a viewport.

She saw the stars by hundreds of millions. She saw a bright spot, so bright that it seemed to have a disk. It was the planet Horus of this same solar system, a mere few millions of miles away. She saw the Milky Way coming out beyond the edge of the Rings, and she saw the Rings as the most preposterous of objects. They were too big to be possible.

But she pressed her face against the viewport to look astern. She saw nothing but the metal plating of the life-boat. She felt a convulsive flash of fear. Her teeth chattered. Perhaps Dunne had stumbled and tumbled out to nothingness when he opened the outer airlock door! Then he'd be left to die in pure emptiness. She couldn't locate him; and even if she did, she couldn't handle the ship to try to pick him up again. She'd be alone in the life-boat to wait until the air gave out. Designed as a life-boat to carry many people, that might be years. She'd go mad from solitude and despair. . . .

She moved to another viewpoint and gasped in relief. She saw Dunne. The airlock door was open. He stood in it. She saw the clips which held him safe against just what she'd irrationally feared.

He did not look human. He seemed to be a thing of metal, monstrosly shaped to resemble a man but in no detail to be like one. He had a miner's bazooka in his metal-gauntleted hands. Matter-of-factly, he put shells in its magazine. He raised it. He plugged in the cord which would relay the telescopic sight image to a minute screen inside his helmet.

He seemed to aim for a long time. Then there was a flare. A bazooka shell small enough to be held in the hand went away like a flash of lightning. Another. Another. Another. He loaded the bazooka for more shots.

He raised it again and seemed to search for a second target. Again the four flashes as four more bazooka shells went away.

He found a third target. More bazooka-shells flashed toward the distant stars. Yet again, and again, and again.

He closed the outer lock-door. The inner door opened. He came in and closed it behind him. He took off his helmet. Nike gulped. She was deathly pale.

"I should give you some lessons," said Dunne, "in handling this ship."

He went into the control room and abruptly swung the ship end for end. He pointed it back toward the shining, misty, unbelievably enormous surface of the Rings.

"We're still going away," he observed, "and we've got a good velocity toward nowhere. But it'll be some time before the other ships realize that we're heading back into the Rings. Seeing the stars will confuse them. We should gain a good bit on them."

Then he pointed out the viewport. There was an infinitesimal thread of white vapor coming toward the lifeboat. The donkeyship that had fired it was too far away to be seen with the naked eye. A second and third and fourth thread of vapor sped toward them. Dunne was unmoved.

"They didn't like it that I shot at them," he said matter-of-factly, "but the men in the other ships won't like

it that Haney returned my fire. That tells me which ship is his. The other ships want to trail me, not kill me."

She tried to match his calm. "Haney?"

"He's the man who offered to take the two of us to your brother, and then bring all three of us back next pickup-ship time," said Dunne evenly. "He's my best guess. Here come the bazooka-shells."

He watched without apparent concern. Infinitely tiny rocket trails leaped toward the lifeboat. They went past, astern. One missed by hundreds of yards only. The others were more widely out of line.

"It's not easy to shoot at an accelerating or decelerating target," said Dunne detachedly. "You can't figure out how much to lead."

He went back to his subject. "When I didn't take up those very kindly offers," he said with the same detachment, "he offered to take you alone. I should have killed him then. But I was thinking about your brother and my smashed-up ship. I didn't realize how completely he'd given himself away."

"I didn't know he gave—"

"He was the only one, the only man," said Dunne, "who didn't believe I'd found the Big Rock Candy Mountain. He took my word that I hadn't found it. He offered a bargain he'd never have thought of if he believed I'd found it. So he must have known what Keyes and I had. I should have killed him," repeated Dunne reflectively. "I simply didn't think of it in time. Too bad!"

He stripped off the space-suit and put it away.

"I'm going to give you a lesson in ship-handling," he said. "If you can drive while I act as artillery from the airlock door, we've a better chance of living."

He sat her at the control board and began to instruct her in such maneuvers as might be needed in a fire-fight or in the Rings. He could use only one airlock at a time from which to aim a bazooka. That necessarily left one side of the ship unarmed. He showed her how to rotate the lifeboat to swing the airlock to the other side. He showed her how to swing the ship to allow for bazooka fire directly ahead and directly astern. He showed her evasive tactics that sometimes worked when bazooka shells were flashing about through space.

She accepted the lessons with what he felt was a fine yet unhappy resolution. But he was giving her lessons to keep her from thinking of Keyes, just then. Something had become evident to him, and he was trying to keep her from thinking of it. The thing was that his donkeyship had been destroyed to keep him from getting back to Keyes. To desire such a thing, somebody had to know where Keyes was. In fact, it looked as if someone had killed Keyes and wanted Dunne out of the way—whether killed or marooned—while the rock Keyes was guarding was worked out, cleaned up, finished.

So Dunne taught Nike how to handle the ship so that she'd be too busy to reason out how likely it was that her brother might already be dead.

She spoke suddenly, and not of the lesson in progress.

"You said," she observed, for no apparent reason, "that a man lives only three years on an average in the Rings. How long have you been here?"

"Two," said Dunne. "Your brother and I have done pretty well. If we can clean up this last rock we've found, he should be urged to quit."

"I'll urge him," said Nike. "There are only the two of us. Where were you before you came out to the Rings?"

"Here and there," said Dunne.

He went over the instruments. He peered at the outer universe. He nodded.

Now the lifeboat headed back toward the Rings; and most of the donkeyships awakened to the fact that Dunne intended to get them out of listening range of his drive by a maneuver not unlike "cracking the whip" on ice. But they'd lost ground, and some of them could only follow the chase by following ships that followed ships that could pick up the lifeboat's humming drive. Ahead of the lifeboat lay that golden fog which was the Rings. It looked like a solid, unimaginable wall against which anything solid might dash itself to pieces. But it wasn't solid. It was the Rings. And now as the lifeboat was about to plunge in, there were wisps and tendrils of what looked like vapor but were actually dust clouds.

The stars behind the lifeboat faded as mistiness encompassed it. The boat went on into the cloud-stuff.

There an odd thing happened. The communicator re-

ported the whining noise of donkeyship drives, and soft rustling whispers and very faint cracklings. All these sounds had their proper explanations. But now it reported a new sound entirely. There was an uncanny, monotonous, "*tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet.*" It was unearthly. It was weird. It was unbelievable that twitterings like those of a flying bird should be heard by the communicator in a lifeboat in the Rings.

"What's that?" asked Nike uneasily. "It sounds queer!"

It stopped. And now the ship was deep in the mist. Dunne swung the ship. On full acceleration it shot ahead. Five seconds. Ten. Twenty. . . . Dunne cut off the drive. There was nothing to be seen through the viewports but sunlit mistiness. The radar reported something moving away to the left. It was not visible. Dunne cut off the radar.

And then the lifeboat went floating onward, masked against sight by the mist of the Rings, hidden against hearing by the cutting of its drive and even its radar, and concealed against discovery by the abandonment of every means by which it could discover its own danger. It floated in the fog, the mist, the haze. There were other solid objects floating in the same obscurity. Some of them were stones from the surface of long-shattered moons. Some were rocks from deeper strata. Some were metal masses.

"We're drifting," said Dunne in a dry voice. "We're not driving. We're not using our radar or doing anything to distinguish us from any piece of floating rock hereabouts. Our admiring followers ought to plunge into the rings with radars working and communicators listening for any sign of life. But they'll hear each other, and their radars will detect each other, and they'll be considerably confused. It'll be some time before they think of looking for something floating around with an orbital velocity that isn't the right one for something out here."

Nike looked at him strangely. "What was that queer noise?"

"I don't know," said Dunne. "Nobody knows. It's been heard before. Back at the pickup ship there was a man named Smithers who insists it's gooks. Unfortunately there's no other evidence for the existence of gooks."

The air-freshener began to whirr. Dunne cut it off. There was only silence in the lifeboat. Outside, in the mist, donkeyships hunted for it. They had been outfitted very carefully to detect masses of rock or metal floating suspended in emptiness. They had been designed to discover solid objects in just this filmy glowing haze. And the lifeboat was a solid object. If it remained still, it would have been possible for the hunters to examine every fair-sized floating object in a hundred cubic miles, or a thousand, or ten thousand, and very certainly find it. But it was moving. And unless it was detected by its motion, after so long, ten thousand cubic miles of space could contain it anywhere; and after so much more time it could be anywhere in a hundred thousand cubic miles. Ultimately, its motion could have taken it anywhere within a million cubic miles of emptiness—all of which would have to be searched to be sure of finding it.

In the lifeboat there was silence. The radar didn't hunt for anything. The communicator didn't report anything. The lifeboat drifted on the course and at the speed it had possessed when Dunne had turned off all equipment. It was self-blinded and self-deafened. All Dunne could do was wait.

But it was nerve-racking to know that at any instant one of his pursuers might blunder on the lifeboat or that it might collide with one of the Ring-fragments it was the purpose of men in the Rings to mine. The feeling was of blind and helpless suspense, with no way to know if it had been discovered within the past half-second. It could not even find out whether its now-raging pursuers were within yards of it or searching futilely hundreds of miles away.

If it were found and challenged, it would not hear the challenge. It wouldn't know of threats. At any instant an angry spaceman, yards only from the lifeboat, might carry out a threat to destroy it. A bazooka shell could detonate against its hull now, or now, or now, because it did not answer threats or promises.

Nike swallowed. Then she said unsteadily, "This feels queer!"

Dunne nodded. He said drily, "It's a nasty feeling. They know we're somewhere in the Rings. They know

we're coasting. But they've no idea in what direction or how fast. And every one of them is scouring space for us alone. They're not cooperating. They don't trust each other. They can't. Here in the Rings it isn't possible to be a pleasant character. We're here to get rich before we're killed. We may be killed by accident, or by somebody who wants something we've got. If we do get rich, it may be by accident, or by taking something somebody else has got. We're not nice people, here in the Rings!"

She moistened her lips. "My brother said something about it. But he made it seem like—adventure. Danger, yes, but thrills. And he said that you—"

"He was trying to keep you from worrying," Dunne said in the same dry tone. "So he praised me. But a man doesn't live long in the Rings if he practices many of the virtues. If every man here were noble and self-sacrificing and helpful to the rest, it would be a very nice business. But put one cutthroat among the lot of us, and we all have to turn cutthroat in self-defense. So we're a pack of scoundrels."

The lifeboat floated on. Nothing happened. Outside, in the mist, many donkeyships blundered about trying to make something happen. They sheered off from each other's drive-fields because they did not want to find each other, but the lifeboat. Hours went by. Two. Four. Ten. Sixteen.

"H-hadn't we better—listen?" asked Nike. "To see if there is anybody—?"

"No," said Dunne. "This is not pleasant, though I'm getting used to it. But they won't think we could possibly wait this long without trying to find out how we stand in the chase. That's why we have to do it."

Again there was silence and stress and unrelieved tension. The inside of the spaceboat was brightly lighted. There were no viewports in the cabin section. There was nothing that needed to be done. There was nothing that could be done except wait. And waiting was a horrible, unending strain. The lifeboat had undoubtedly appeared as a blip on more than one radar screen among the searching donkeyships. But it radiated nothing. It merely floated in shining emptiness. So far they'd disregarded it. But if any other ship came near enough, it could be seen

through the mist. If it were seen, angry men would demand that Dunne lead the way immediately to the Big Rock Candy Mountain—or die. And he couldn't lead them there.

There was one alternate possible happening, though. Haney might blunder within the distance in which the lifeboat could be seen visually. He'd not waste time demanding anything. He'd destroy the lifeboat while they did not even know he was near.

Twenty hours after Dunne had cut off all contact with the cosmos outside the lifeboat's hull, Nike said nervously, "Certainly it wouldn't do any harm to look out the viewports!"

"No harm," agreed Dunne. "But very little good."

Nike went into the control room. She looked out each of the ports in turn. She saw nothing but the featureless sunlit dust-mist outside. Perhaps she could see half a mile, but she couldn't tell. There was nothing on which to focus one's eyes. The rings were unsubstantial. There was nothing real to look at. The haze was so completely uniform that the viewports might have been closed by blankets—lighted from behind—in contact with their transparent plastic. It was as nerve-racking as a blindfold would have been. It seemed that at any instant some dark shape must appear, swimming through the fog. . . .

She went back to the main cabin, shivering.

"It's—awful," she said shakily.

"You could get used to it," Dunne told her. "You're already used to things you couldn't have imagined on the way to Outlook. The thing is, you can adjust—even to being scared."

She stared at him. "I can't imagine you frightened!"

"Say, uncomfortable, then," he told her. "The longer we stay undiscovered, the better our chances of staying undiscovered. I think the odds are well in our favor, now."

She was silent. He looked at his watch.

"In an hour I'll try listening in on the universe," he said. "If there's nothing to hear, I think we can go about our business. We'll have lost our trailers. And, as it happens, I *think* we're not too far from where we're bound."

"You mean we can go and get my brother?"

He nodded. But he did not look at her. "We can try."

"And then—he can go back to Horus with me?"

"If you want to try it in this lifeboat. I wouldn't like to try it without extra supplies. It's a long run. A lot depends on how many crystals he's found. The next pick-up ship would be a better way to travel. I pretty well cleaned our account with the Minerals Commission to get this boat. If your trouble calls for money—"

"I don't know what it calls for," said Nike unhappily. "I have to ask him."

Dunne nodded grimly. He began to pace up and down the cabin of the lifeboat. There was much more room here than in a donkeyship. But a donkeyship was built for highly special work in a highly special environment. The mining of abyssal crystals from their gray matrix required operations quite unlike the proper demands on a space-liner's lifeboats.

The hour he'd mentioned went by. It seemed to last for centuries. Then Dunne went into the control room. He looked out the viewports, without expectation. He flipped on the communicator. Moments later, he turned on the radar.

He saw nothing but mist out the viewports. The radar showed nothing especially menacing. The communicator picked up only appropriate sounds, faint rustling sounds that came by short-wave from the sun. Small, crackling, crashing sounds considered to be lightning bolts in the atmosphere of the planet Thothmes. That was all.

No. There was a faint series of sounds from the speaker. They weren't drive-noises. They were musical. The effect was eerie. The sounds were a barely audible, monotonous, "*tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet . . .*"

They stopped abruptly. Nike barely whispered. "That's the same sound . . ."

"Supposedly," said Dunne, "it's the noise of a gook ship, creeping about the Rings to spy on us men and snipe at us when the chance comes." He added humorously, "Anyhow, that's supposed to be the reason donkeyships sometimes vanish without explanation."

He felt a certain definite reluctance to do what he now must do. He hadn't wanted Nike to think of any possible linkage between the blowing up of his donkeyship and what happened to Keyes, guarding the rock-fragment that

was too valuable to be left unwatched. He'd thrust the suspicion away from his own mind as well as he could, but it was back.

The drive of the lifeboat began its moaning, humming sound. The boat surged ahead. He set the controls. He watched the radar screen, again working. He listened to the speaker over his head. Nike stood just behind him. He stood still, watching and listening, his hands unconsciously clenching and unclenching because he was very much afraid of what he was going to find out. He was fairly confident of his astrogation, but he didn't like to think of what it *might* lead him to.

Presently, at the very utmost limit of the radar's range, there was the beginning of an indication of something solid. Dunne swung the lifeboat in that exaggerated fashion needed for a change of course in space.

"Is that it?" asked Nike anxiously.

"Perhaps," said Dunne.

His tone was unconsciously cold. The birdlike twittering he'd heard was unnatural. It was wrong. Somebody knew where Keyes was. That last, alone, could add up to disaster. Dunne smelled disaster. Something was wrong. Very wrong!

The lifeboat moved on, pointing on a course that seemed to have no connection with the direction of its motion. But the radar image began to take recognizable shape. There was still nothing to be seen out the viewports. That was merely pure golden haze. But the radar said that the lifeboat was moving toward something solid. Then it said toward something large. Then it said something near.

"It's our rock, I think," said Dunne quietly. He spoke into the communicator's transmitter. "Keyes?"

There was no answer. He spoke again. Then he fell silent until the featureless haze ahead began to show a formless darkening at one particular spot. Then he said, very carefully, "I don't like this, Nike. Watch, will you? I'm going to get into my space-suit."

He went back. Nike, her heart in her throat, watched ahead while she heard Dunne getting into the suit which allowed him to work and move outside of the ship in emptiness. The last time, he'd stood in an airlock door

and fired bazooka shells at donkeyships that trailed him. Now—

The dimness took shape. Nike said tensely, "We're very close!"

Dunne came waddling into the control room, working himself swiftly into his space-suit. He reversed the lifeboat's drive. The small space-vessel came to an almost complete stop only fifty yards or so from a mass of stony stuff many times the volume of the lifeboat. It was seventy feet high—"high" being the longest dimension of any object in space where there was no up or down. It was totally irregular in form. There were painted letters and numbers on it. Its mineral nature was obvious. The lifeboat drifted very, very slowly toward it.

"Aren't you going to call again?" asked Nike anxiously.

"There are detectors," said Dunne. "They should tell him we're here."

His voice was unnatural. This was wrong. It was very wrong. It was appalling.

The big, irregularly shaped lump of stone turned slowly in emptiness. There was a slash of gray along one side. It was that friable matrix material in which abyssal crystals were always found. The stony mass turned further. There was a bubble—a fifteen-foot dome of plastic, welded by its own nature to a hollow part of the stony surface. Inside it there were objects. A small-capacity air-freshener. Oxygen tanks. Mining equipment. A sleeping bag with its light-hood that allowed a man to provide himself with darkness to sleep in, even in a bubble in the Rings. There was something inside the sleeping bag, but the hood was pulled up.

"There he is!" said Nike, her voice trembling. "In the sleeping bag! See? He's asleep!"

Dunne didn't recognize his own voice. "I'm afraid not," he said harshly. "It's your brother, yes. But—he wouldn't be asleep. No. He's not asleep."

He wasn't. He was dead.

4

Dunne anchored the lifeboat to a projecting knob of faceted stone, casting a loop from the airlock door with a spaceman's—specifically, a space-miner's—trick of getting the loop into existence and then floating it to the thing to be gripped. It caught, and he gently brought the lifeboat close. He knotted the rope and went back into the lifeboat. Nike waited there, totally pale.

"Listen to me!" said Dunne sternly. "I'm going to see what's happened. You stay here! You can listen. If you hear a drive or more of those twitterings—I'll be back! I'll hear it too in my headphones. But you stay here. Leave the lock-door alone. You can watch through the viewports, but don't do anything. Not anything!"

She nodded, watching his expression with something of desperation in her own.

"Do you think he—"

"I don't think anything yet," said Dunne. "He should have heard us arrive. There was plenty of oxygen. I've got to find out what's wrong."

He went into the airlock again and checked—as always—the sealing of his helmet to the vacuum-suit. The suit ballooned out as the airlock pumped empty. There'd been much trouble with space-suits in the early days, when men tried to use full-pressure air in them. They swelled and the suit-arms tended to swing out widely, so that a man in a vacuum-suit was spread-eagled by the air pressure inside. He was like a man-shaped toy balloon,

incapable of any purposeful motion. But with only three pounds pressure of oxygen instead of fifteen of oxygen-nitrogen mixture, all suits were manageable. Dunne checked his steering-jet—not to be used if it was possible to avoid it. He checked his belt-weapon. He fastened a lifeline. He went out of the lock, trailing the line behind him.

With no gravity he couldn't very well walk. So he crawled toward the bubble, clutching an extrusion of its surface, testing it, and then trusting to it while he reached for another handhold. This was abyssal rock; and where the lifeboat was nearest, it had slowly crystalized under unthinkable pressure. The stone crystals were six to ten inches in length. The rock as a mass was an intricately interlaced agglomerate of such crystals, ranging through various shades of brown. They had sword-sharp points and edges. A man could rip his vacuum-suit on any of a hundred keen-edged projections in a crawl of a dozen feet.

All about lay the sunlit mist. There was no solidity anywhere away from this rock and this spaceboat. The gaunt, glittering Ring-fragment and the lifeboat were the only things on which one could focus his eyes. They floated, rotating with enormous deliberation, linked together by a slender cord.

Dunne reached the bubble. It had been established here to make room for those activities a donkeyship has no room for. There was much gray matrix to a very little crystal-stuff. Much matrix had to be crushed and sifted to recover the crystals it contained. When there was enough material to be worked, one set up a bubble. One brought the gray matrix into the bubble in sacks, and there crushed it and made a first cleaning of the crystals. When there were many tons of the friable gray stuff to be worked, a bubble was much more practical than taking it into a donkeyship.

Dunne arrived at the bubble. He searched its interior with his eyes. He stayed outside.

Nike watched from a viewpoint in the control room. Nothing changed inside the bubble. The sleeping bag did not stir. Nothing stirred. Dunne looked like a human fly creeping on something mysteriously suspended from no-

where, from which he could fall to infinity if he missed a single handhold.

He pressed on the expanded plastic of the bubble. It pushed in. It did not push out again when he took his hand away. Nike watched, uncomprehending. Dunne made further exploration, still not attempting to enter by the fragile-seeming metal frame and plastic doors which provided an airlock into the bubble. On the farther side of the bubble he halted. He did something Nike could not see. He crawled back to the airlock and entered it.

Here his actions were extraordinary. He crawled around the inside edge of the bubble, where the dome came down to the rock and where nobody would ordinarily try to move. Still nothing moved, anywhere in the dome. He went around to the back of the sleeping bag, ignoring its motionless occupant.

He backed away with an object in his hands. There were wires attached to it. He'd detached them from outside the bubble. Now he removed the wired object from within. But he did not touch the sleeping bag nor lift its hood until all of these preliminaries were completed.

Now he lifted the hood and looked steadily down at what it had hidden. He replaced the hood. He went out of the airlock door, carrying the object from behind the sleeping bag.

In emptiness, then, he threw it away from the rock and the lifeboat together. He drew his belt-weapon. When it was two hundred feet away he fired at it.

The thing he'd brought away from the sleeping bag shattered itself to bits, with a monstrous blue-white flame of explosive. But there was no sound. There was no air to carry sound.

Dunne went sombrely into the lifeboat. Nike faced him as the inner lock-door opened. His expression was that of angry, bitter grief when he took his space-helmet off.

"We're too late," he said savagely. "Much too late."

"He's—dead, then," said Nike. She swallowed. She became even paler. "When you didn't come back right away, I thought it was bad news. When you—exploded that thing . . . I knew."

"It was a boobytrap," said Dunne coldly. "Designed to explode when I looked in the sleeping bag. There are

some holes in the bubble. They could have been made by bullets like mine, but they're larger." He paused. "If somebody punctured the bubble, he'd have just thirteen seconds to get into a space-suit before he died, and he wouldn't make it. But he'd hardly know what happened."

Nike sobbed once.

"Then," said Dunne, "whoever killed him planted a boobytrap for me."

His expression was bitterness itself. Nike swallowed and said, "What do we do now? Can he—can we bury him?" Then she said, choking; "I—I can't think straight right now!"

"Don't try," said Dunne more gently. "I'll take care of things. Everything! You get into a space-suit. I'll come get you."

She turned and went quickly, stumbling a little, into the rearmost part of the lifeboat.

Dunne swore exhaustively when she'd left. He went into the control room and extended the range of the radar to its greatest possible distance. He slowed down its period of sweep to get the utmost of reach. In the area it could report on, there were six indications of solid objects. None of them detectably changed position. They were actually in motion, of course, swinging in their orbits around the planet Thothmes. Two of them were obviously too small to be concerned about. One was as obviously even larger—much larger—than the rock to which the spaceboat was now tethered. The nearest appeared to be not much larger or smaller. But there was nothing in significant motion within the area the radar could examine.

He went out of the spaceboat again. There were tools in the bubble. It was a very convincing trap—or it had been. But Dunne did not bother to rage at the man or men who'd done this murder. The Rings were not centers of refinement or culture. Or or reluctance to violate the essential rules of fair play or good faith. But an attempt to commit murder by boobytrap would not be admired even in the Rings.

He took tools from the bubble. Here was a crack in the rock not far away. It needed very little enlargement for his purpose. He labored carefully.

He brought Nike out. The two of them—with great courage on the part of Nike—conducted a funeral. Dunne packed rock fragments to seal the cover he put in place.

It was an extraordinary action in an extraordinary place. The two space-suited figures performed a ceremony of sorts in what to uninformed eyes would have seemed dumbshow. Dunne did not look like a man. He looked like a machine of metal which for technical reasons only was designed to resemble a man. He seemed, indeed, a strange type of robot, contemplating something incredible when the funeral was finished.

He made a gesture of which he seemed to be unconscious. Then, slowly, he helped Nike back to the spaceboat, arranging her lifeline with his so that their progress was not too grotesque.

When she was inside, he cast off the lifeboat's mooring line. He hauled it in. He closed the outer airlock door. He opened the inner one. He went directly to the control room. The lifeboat's drive began its droning hum. Nike came, speaking through the door behind him.

"Is there anything—"

He shook his head. He kept his eyes on the radar screen. He chose the nearest of the six solid objects the screen portrayed. He lined up the lifeboat's course toward it. Presently he cut off the drive.

"I'm coasting," he explained. "It cuts the drive-time at each end of the run."

"Have you—decided what to do?"

He nodded, watching the radar screen.

"What is it?"

"It will develop," he said grimly. "Just remember that we're all scoundrels, out here in the Rings."

He continued to watch the radar. One of the blips grew visibly nearer and more distinct. The rock they'd left behind became smaller. The other formerly stationary blips moved slowly with regard to the center of the screen, which represented the position of the lifeboat.

There was over twenty miles of sunlit fog between the two floating rocks. It was not possible to see anything at a distance of much more than a mile. So the lifeboat floated through a haze in which there was nothing to be seen at all; and with the drive off there were no sounds

except the whispering, rustling noises made by short waves from the photosphere of the sun, and those tiny cracklings from storms on Thothmes.

Such tranquility and peacefulness, though, was not universal. There was a pickup ship on the way to Horus, whose skipper had worried for several days without finding a solution to his problem. He had to report letting Dunne have a lifeboat. He fretted about that. It was paid for, to be sure, but the Abyssal Minerals Commission might take a dim view of it regardless.

But he'd something much worse to disturb him. It was now appallingly clear that Nike was no longer on the pickup ship. It seemed most likely that she'd either stowed away or been kidnapped in the lifeboat. The skipper of the pickup ship was very much disturbed indeed.

In a certain place on Horus, even greater agitation grew. There were people trying to act secretly, on Horus, as men were openly permitted to act in the Rings—as if there were no law. But they found themselves running into trouble. Their problem had to do with a girl, Nike Keyes, who because of their attempted disregard of laws had taken fright and gone to the Rings to join her brother. And this was very bad business—unless something lethal happened quickly.

So in one place on the planet Horus, and one where the pickup ship drove through the void, and in one place in the Rings—no, two or ten or twenty places in the Rings—men talked disturbedly about Nike or about where Dunne might be. They didn't all know they were talking about Nike, and some didn't know that Dunne was involved; but they all knew some irritation and disturbance and uneasiness. But Nike occupied the back cabin of a lifeboat, and regarded Dunne with frightened eyes on the way to a second Ring-rock, where it developed that Dunne meant to moor the lifeboat and wait for the radar to tell him of another visitor to the rock in which Keyes was now buried.

The discovery of her brother's death was a shock. When she was on the way to join him, she'd been absorbed in a situation which was desperate, but which she felt he would take care of. But now he was dead. There was nobody, anywhere, in whom she had reason to put trust.

She and her brother were orphans. Keyes was the older, and he'd tried to take care of her in a world where the young and inexperienced were considered fair prey for sharpers. What inheritance they'd had, they'd been tricked or cheated out of. And Dunne had taken the last of their inheritance to put with his own money for the donkeyship now floating in small shattered pieces in the Rings. Her trip had been a chancey thing. But now she believed that Dunne had practiced good faith toward her brother and herself. Too, she'd thrust herself into his current affairs. It wasn't his fault or with his consent that she was here, and in this situation. Stowing away on the lifeboat had been her own idea. So she felt a complex mixture of distress and grief and terror and a horrifying isolation. Even from Dunne.

It is the instinct of a man in difficulties to try to plan his way out of them. It is the instinct of a woman in difficulties to try to get somebody to help her out. Some men automatically look for help, and some women face their problems alone. But the instinct remains. And Nike had absolutely no one in any solar system in the galaxy to whom she felt that she could apply even for counsel.

Unless it was Dunne. She'd added herself to his worries without his consent, and he'd told her angrily that she'd be sorry. She was. Even in a situation of no stress at all she'd have known the acute loneliness of a woman who no longer has any ties to anybody else. In the present state of things, she might justly have reacted with hysterics.

But she didn't. She kept out of Dunne's way as much as was possible in a space lifeboat. She closeted herself in the rear cabin, and appeared only when called on. She spoke as little as possible, and only when Dunne spoke first. She believed she was acting to be a minimum of trouble and of irritation to him.

She wasn't. For a time he took her reserve to be grief about her brother. And in no small part it was. But presently he came to the dour conclusion that she was afraid of him—because of his angry reception when she came out of hiding as a stowaway. When two people are isolated from all the rest of the human race, there is bound to be friction unless they are *very* wise. But Nike wasn't

wise. Her upbringing and the present situation made her the least-prepared of all possible persons to establish new ties and acquire self-confidence.

Time passed. Days. More days. Dunne stayed grimly close to the radar. He was waiting for somebody to come to make sure that their boobytrap had worked. The lifeboat was moored to a fragment of stratified surface-rock from a nameless and anciently destroyed moon of Thothmes.

Dunne considered it necessary to stay there. Nike didn't know why. There was nothing to do but watch a radar screen when he had to be absent from it, and listen to a communicator-speaker which gave out no sounds but rustlings from the sun and cracklings from Thothmes.

It would have been bad enough if it had been only isolation. With a basic misunderstanding between them, it was intolerable.

But Dunne stood it for a full eight standard days. Then, without consultation with Nike, he cast off from the lump of surface-rock. The lifeboat's drive hummed.

Nike appeared. She didn't look well. She looked as if she kept herself from trembling by a violent effort.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Dunne nodded without cordiality.

"I thought somebody would have come before now to find out if their boobytrap did its work."

She looked at him in silence.

"You're going back to Horus when the pickup ship comes," he explained. "You'll want money when you get there."

She moistened her lips. "I'll manage. You needn't—"

"Then I'll need oxygen and food," he said impatiently.

"I used up our credit—your brother's and mine—to get this lifeboat. I have to have something to use for more credit, for supplies. In any case, I'm going back to dig out some matrix. Maybe I'll get crystals enough for my supplies and something for you, on your brother's account."

She said nothing.

"I don't like the idea," he added grimly. "They should have come back to work the rock after killing your brother and trying to kill me. They haven't. So I'm going to

work the rock—with a bazooka at hand. You'll watch the radar. When we've even a small stock of crystals, I'll get you away from here until pickup-ship time. After that I'll try to pay you for the money your brother invested as my partner. And I'm going to come back here and find out who killed him."

"It isn't necessary," she protested. "I owe you much more, for the air I've breathed and the food I've eaten and the—trouble I've been to you."

He drew in his breath sharply. Then he shrugged.

"Wait till I send you a bill for that! Right now I have to take care of real things, not feelings!"

His tone was dismissal. She went back to the rear cabin. He headed the lifeboat back toward the seventy-foot mass of abyssal minerals, with its streak of gray matrix promising wealth. Again the lifeboat's drive hummed as it gathered speed to cross the twenty-odd miles of shining emptiness. Again it cut off. And again the spaceboat coasted.

Dunne listened and watched, watched and listened. There seemed to be nothing happening anywhere in the universe except a minute displacement of radar blips on the lifeboat's radar screen. But many things really happened.

Five hundred miles away, a donkeyship which had been coasting put on full power and fled when an unearthly "*tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet . . .*" came from its communicator. There was no explanation for the abnormal noise. Again, more miles in another direction, a donkeyship drove unguided while its crew fought insanely. They'd had nobody but each other to speak to for months. There was a ship that incredibly found matrix material on a hill-sized rock not fifty miles from Outlook. Two other ships found that their Ring-rocks had been cleaned out during their absence at Outlook. There was a place where a human body was pushed out of an airlock and the donkeyship from which it had come had put on power and gone away. There was a place where a hundred-ton boulder had begun to acquire speed in a new direction. A donkeyship pushed it. It moved on and on and on, increasing its speed for many miles. Then it smashed into a monumentally large other rock. The donkeyship

which had turned it into a missile began busily to investigate its fragments.

And the skipper of the pickup ship continued to sweat over the problem of explaining the disappearance of a woman passenger in interplanetary space. It was an extremely difficult thing to account for in terms that would leave him wholly blameless. And there was also the lifeboat he'd allowed Dunne to take.

There were other happenings that could be told, but eventfulness is relative. Dunne, in the spaceboat that had waited so long for murderers to return to the scene of their crime, coasted up to the mass of rock and metal on which he and Keyes had put their signatures. He moored the lifeboat. He landed on the rock. Savagely, because of his feeling of complete frustration, he began to break out lumps of gray matrix and stuff it in a sack for crushing and the separation of any abyssal crystals it might contain.

He worked for a long time, angry because he didn't understand Nike's behavior. He didn't realize that the death of her brother was not only a grief, but total isolation. She felt that she no longer belonged anywhere. She knew a desolation he couldn't imagine. If he'd been shipwrecked on an uninhabited world, Dunne would not have been happy; but he'd have been self-sufficient. Nike wouldn't. No woman would. And by the loss of the one person she was confident she mattered to, she'd lost all confidences in anything.

Dunne labored furiously at the loosening of matrix material. He was too angry to notice the passage of time. But a man in a space-suit mustn't forget how long he's been breathing from the twin tanks on his space-suit's shoulders. Dunne did.

He was getting out an unusually large bit of matrix when he felt a singular movement of the lifeline holding him to the lifeboat. He hadn't caused it. He swung swiftly, and the state of his mind was such that his hand went instantly to his belt-weapon.

He was then crouched beside the vein of matrix which made this particular fragment of a former moon into a mine most men would commit murder to possess. On every hand, the mineralized surface curved downward and

away from him. The horizon was nowhere more than ten feet away. Above that horizon all was shining emptiness. But he saw his lifeline cross it. And the line moved.

Weapon in hand, he scrambled toward it. He was ready to kill. He expected to kill. He raged because Nike was in the ship and he should be there to protect her. And he raged additionally because he was not.

Then he reached the place which had been his horizon. Below it he saw another space-suited figure. The space-suit did not fit; it was too large. There were ballooning where the material of the suit allowed for movement. And the figure carried no weapons.

He swore. The small figure was guiding itself by the lifeline whose movement had startled Dunne. Nike had left the ship to get to him, by following his lifeline. But she had no lifeline of her own.

"Stand still!" commanded Dunne fiercely. "Are you crazy? No lifeline?"

He went to where she'd stopped as if paralyzed with terror when he spoke. He gathered up the rope. He caught her by the arm. He drew her with himself back to the lock. He thrust her in and crowded in beside her. When the inner door could open he followed her into the cabin and instantly took off his helmet. She did not. He had to take it off himself.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded hotly. "I told you to stay here! To watch the radar!"

She compressed her lips and listened in silence. He found himself frightened, now that the danger was over. She could have drifted away.

"I'd have had to come after you if you'd slipped!" he told her angrily. "We mightn't have gotten back! What the devil did you leave the ship for?"

"You told me," she said defiantly, "when we were moored to the other rock, not to use the space-phone. Not ever. But you were gone a long time. And—I worried that you might have forgotten to look at your oxygen gauge."

He turned his head and looked at the gauge. The pressure needle was flat against the pin. The tanks read empty—both of them. In ten minutes more, or fifteen at most, he'd have collapsed from oxygen starvation; he would have

had no warning, because it is excess of carbon dioxide rather than lack of oxygen that makes one feel suffocation. He felt a moment's queasy sensation at the pit of his stomach.

"I apologize," he said ruefully. "You were right and I was wrong. And—it could have killed both of us."

She swallowed. "You said you'd have come after me if I'd drifted away. Why?"

"For the same reason," he told her, "that you came after me. I don't want anything to happen to you."

She searched his face, then shook her head. "No," she said quietly. "It isn't the same reason. But thanks, anyhow."

"You thank me?"

Then he said harassedly, "See here! I want you to do me another favor, besides saving my life. Your brother and I were partners. Now that he's gone, his part of the partnership falls to you. So—will you, as a favor, accept it? Be my partner until I can put you on the pickup ship to go back to Horus? You've been reproaching yourself. There's no sense to it! You just proved I need a partner! Where would I be if you hadn't thought about my oxygen—as a partner does?"

She searched his face again. Then she shrugged her shoulders in a fashion curiously like the gesture he had made.

"All right," she said steadily. "Until then."

She paused. "And now I'll fix something to eat."

She turned to the readier-unit which prepared meals on demand.

"And I," said Dunne, "I'll go get that sack of matrix I was about to bring aboard."

She said warningly, "Oxygen!"

He removed the emptied tanks and twisted two others into place. He re-entered the airlock. He went outside.

Somehow everything looked different when he went out again from the lifeboat. But there was no real difference. There was the bubble he and Keyes had made, with the singular holes in it as if a belt-weapon had made them. There were the objects inside. There was even a sleeping bag with its hood turned up so a man in a bubble could

rest his eyes in sleep. There was the sack of matrix. He moved toward it, his lifeline all secure.

And then he heard the whine of a donkeyship's drive in his helmet-phone. It was very loud. It was very near. It was a ship that had been coasting across the space to yellow haze filled, and that now reversed its drive furiously to come to a stop.

Dunne put the maximum four bazooka-shells into his weapon's magazine. He stood savagely ready to shoot on sight, which was the only practical way to defend oneself in the Rings. Then the drive-whine stopped just as it had reached a loudness to make his eardrums tingle. A voice bellowed: "The gooks are comin'! The gooks are comin'! They're on the way! Come on out an' get set to fight 'em! They're comin'!"

Around a ragged corner of the Ring-rock there came the battered nose of a donkeyship.

Dunne swore.

5

It was the donkeyship of the grizzled space-miner named Smithers, who alone in the Rings habitually worked without a partner. The battered bow of his donkeyship told of innumerable boulders pushed into shattering collisions with each other, for getting at their vitals.

"I heard 'em!" his voice announced fiercely. "They picked up my drive! They're comin' after me! You fellas get set to fight 'em with me an' we can handle 'em! But we got to fight! Might's well fight together. Get set!"

Dunne caught up his bag of gray matrix. He hauled violently on the lifeline fastening him to an eyebolt beside the airlock door. He floated, pulling himself toward the spaceboat.

The grizzled man's voice became a fierce yelping.

"Get set, heah me? Get set! I see you there, haulin' y'self in! Git your bazooka an' shells! Three of us fightin' got more chance than one!"

Then he apparently really saw the lifeboat for the first time and realized that it was no donkeyship such as the miners of the Rings invariably used. A lifeboat wouldn't even be a familiar object to him. Lifeboats belong in the enlongated blisters on the hulls of passenger liners and cargo ships of space. Passengers on ocean ships, in long-ago times, never saw a lifeboat of that era afloat. They were kept hauled up on blocks on the boat decks. Passengers in space never saw lifeboats at all, because they were

kept in the blisters from which they should be launched, but very rarely ever were.

"What the hell," demanded the voice truculently. "What kind'a boat is that?"

His reverse-drive went on again for the fraction of a second. The motion of the battered donkeyship stopped completely. It lay floating a hundred feet from the plastic bubble and the metal-stone substance of the rock. That rock should have made Keyes and Dunne moderately well-to-do, but so far it had cost Keyes his life and might have ended Dunne's.

Dunne arrived at the airlock door of the lifeboat. He braced himself. Then he said very grimly into his helmet-phone, "This is a private rock, Smithers. I'm working it. If I didn't know you I wouldn't be talking. I'd be shooting! Move on!"

A pause. Then the battered donkeyship's airlock opened. A figure in a space-suit appeared. It clipped a lifeline to an eyebolt and soared toward the floating rock that was also a mine. Dunne scowled. The soaring, monkeylike space-suited figure was familiar. The donkeyship was familiar. And Dunne was ready to kill. But a man ready to kill one specific man is not often anxious to kill anybody else. There is a feeling of economy, perhaps, as if one had an allowance of only one killing to be done with impunity, and therefore isn't to be used on just anyone.

"I said this is a private rock, Smithers!" snapped Dunne.

The moving space-suit touched solidity. With an astonishing deftness and agility it tossed a double loop around a protrusion of stone. With a strictly spaceman's jerk, he had the loops tightened. Then the undersized space-suit faced Dunne.

"Shoot, dammit!" said Smithers' voice vexedly. "But you'll wish you hadn't! I'm comin' aboard where we can talk in air!"

He did something mysterious to the rope he'd just made fast. He suddenly had two loops in his two hands. With an extraordinary deftness he snagged a rocky irregularity with the loop in his left hand, and then another with the loop in his right. He advanced, holding himself to the jagged surface of the Ring-rock with the two loops alternately. It was as if he walked with two canes,

save that these held him from floating away instead of holding him up against a fall.

Dunne raised his bazooka, suggestively and grimly. The small man made an inarticulate sound of disgust. He continued to advance. He offered no threat. To shoot him would be murder in cold blood. Dunne did not pull trigger. He knew the indignant frustration of a man forced to yield ground to keep his self-respect.

The little man made his way with astounding agility, for weightlessness, to the lifeboat's airlock door. There he stopped. And now, certainly, if he'd made the slightest move to enter and close the airlock, leaving Dunne outside, Dunne would have had no choice but to kill him.

But he didn't. He held his hands shoulder-high and waited for Dunne to join him in the lock. And, grinding his teeth, Dunne did.

For thirty seconds the two of them were in close physical contact. The sack of matrix crowded them. Dunne's bazooka couldn't be used in the lock, of course, but Dunne had another weapon ready.

The inner lock-door opened and Dunne put his belt-weapon back into its slightly clinging holster. He tossed the sack of matrix inside.

The little man turned his space-helmet and took it off. He grinned. Dunne took off his own helmet.

"Now, what's this?" he demanded coldly. "I've every reason to shoot you, Smithers! Every reason!"

"Everybody has," said the little man briskly. "But nobody does! When I come to a rock that looks promisin', I always start hollerin' about gooks while I'm comin' up to it. If there's somebody workin' it, they know it's me an' they think I'm cracked, so they don't start shootin'. If there's nobody there, it's no harm done."

"And do you explain this," asked Dunne sardonically, "when there is somebody working a rock and they know you can tell where they're working and more or less what they've got?"

Smithers nodded.

"Sure! Sure I tell 'em. I just told you! But it ain't often there's anybody there. An' anyhow, everybody knows I'm huntin' gooks, not crystals. I just do enough minin' to get supplies from the pickup ships. I'm huntin' gooks.

They killed my partner. I got to get even for that! I come mighty close to gooks plenty of times. But they're smart! They come up the Rings from Thothmes. They spy on us. They hide from us! Now an' then they get a chance to kill somebody an'—pfft! He's gone! Just now, just a coupla hours ago I heard one of their ships. Their drive ain't like ours. It goes *'tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet . . .'* Like a bird. I heard it an' I went for it. It stopped. Presently I heard a donkeyship drive. I hailed it, on communicator. It was a fella named Haney. He'd heard the gook ship too. But it was gone, by then."

"When was this?" It was Haney's name that made Dunne ask.

"I guess you'd say this mornin'," said the little man, beaming, "if we had mornin's in the Rings."

There was, naturally, no morning or evening or night in the Rings. There was perpetual sunlit haziness everywhere, reaching for hundreds of miles in three directions, and for thousands in a fourth, toward Thothmes.

"When you came this way, then," said Dunne evenly, "you left Haney behind. Look, Smithers! Haney killed my partner and left a boobytrap here to kill me. I'm waiting for him now to come back and find out whether his boobytrap worked. You'd better go away."

Then he hesitated, twice opening his mouth to speak and then closing it. Then he said as if with reluctance, "In fact, there's somebody who'd probably be a good deal safer with you than with me."

Nike's voice said sharply, "No!"

The little man whirled. He blinked. His mouth dropped open. He craned his neck incredulously. Then he gasped, "It's a woman! A woman in th' Rings! A woman!"

"My partner's sister," said Dunne coldly. "She came to see him. We've found him dead—murdered."

"I ain't seen a woman in years!" said Smithers in a shocked voice. "It was while I was back on Horus. While my partner was gettin' killed by the gooks. It's a—woman!"

"Which," said Nike fiercely, "doesn't mean that I'm leaving here with anybody! I'm a partner in this ship! I'm not going anywhere with anybody! You can't make me!"

The little man said, with a sudden and exaggerated gentleness, "No, ma'm! He can't make you do nothin' you don't want to do! We don't have women to look after here on the Rings, ma'am. We kinda get out'a the habit. But he can't make you do anything y'don't want to!"

He beamed at her. Her hands clenched and unclenched. She breathed quickly. Dunne realized that she was frightened. But he believed it was terror of Smithers. The isolation of miners in the Rings did queer things to some people. Smithers wasn't wholly predictable, but no man would be afraid of him. But Nike might be.

Dunne went into the control room. Just on the off-chance, he thought he'd better consult the radar screen. He came out, his eyes burning. He spoke curtly to Smithers. "You'd better move on now, Smithers. There's somebody else coming. They'll arrive any minute. And somebody's going to be killed."

"Who's comin'?" demanded Smithers.

"Haney, I think," Dunne told him. "And if it is Haney, I'm going to kill him for my partner, because nobody else is as likely to have killed Keyes."

Smithers said in gentle reproach, "He ain't a nice fella, but you hadn't ought to kill 'im!"

"I've got my reasons," said Dunne coldly. "You go on! Out! And get away from here altogether!"

The little man said urgently to Nike, "Ma'am, would you want me to go away from here altogether? Or do you want I should stay an' help Dunne fight, if he has to? He might be mistaken about Haney. If somethin's comin' here it's likely gooks. I heard 'em."

"Get out!" snapped Dunne. "Now!"

He shoved the small man's helmet down on his head and thrust him in the airlock. He pressed the pump-out button.

"Something's coming," he told Nike. "I stand in the lock-door to shoot. You know the rest."

There came a tapping on the lifeboat's outer hull. Nike ran into the control room where she could look out. Smithers was already outside. He'd thrown the emergency release, wasting air. He tapped again. He saw Nike. He held up the severed mooring line for her to see. He'd freed the lifeboat. With an infinite deliberation it began to

move outward and away from the rock. It had partaken of that dark object's rotating motion, and even one revolution in ten minutes was enough to separate the rock and the spaceboat.

"He's cast us off," said Nike. "Now he's going to his own boat. He moves fast."

"Get your helmet on!" commanded Dunne. "Tighten it! Breathe from your tanks!"

Smithers' voice came out of the control-room loudspeaker. He talked into his suit-phone and the communicator picked it up.

"Gooks!" he cried shrilly. "Look out, fellas! There's gooks here! They got me! Git away an' bring help! There's four ships full'a gooks here! They're layin' for you."

Dunne said coldly, "That's not for us, but for what the radar says is coming. Smithers has gone chivalrous and swapped sides. He's on our side now—for what good that may be! Get on your helmet and close the faceplate. If we get hit, the air will go. I showed you how to run the ship! I'll shoot from the lock-door. You take the controls. I'll tell you what to do!"

He went into the airlock. In instants he had the outer door open. He had a lifeline clipped to an eyebolt. He had his bazooka—tied by a cord to his belt—ready for instant use.

The spaceboat was then perhaps a yard from the giant rock that had his and Keyes' initials on it. That was a claim of ownership to which nobody paid any attention if they could avoid it. He saw Smithers. That small person flung his ropeloops ahead of him and pulled on them with extraordinary speed and skill. He reached the mooring line of his battered donkeyship. He jerked at it and the rope was released. Then, clinging to it and climbing it hand-over-hand in monkeylike fashion, he swarmed out on it toward his donkeyship. The line did not sag, because there was no weight; but it twisted and writhed as he climbed.

Dunne strained his ears. He heard no sound of any space-drive in his phones. But the radar had been explicit. Something sped toward this rock from many miles away, from invisibility behind the floating, sunlit, ever-present dust-fog of the Rings.

Smithers reached his own airlock. He swung inside and the outer door closed, but not quite. He opened it again and snatched in the rope. He vanished, and the door closed again, this time firmly.

Then his voice came almost instantly on the donkeyship's transmitter instead of his helmet-phone.

"You, Haney!" he cried shrilly, "you sheer off! You keep away from here! No tricks! There's a lady here! Keep away!"

Yet nothing seemed to be happening. There was a moving blip on the radar screen in the lifeboat. Dunne stood in the airlock door with a bazooka ready to be raised and fired. Nike, frightened, nevertheless went to the lifeboat's control board to try to make use of the lessons Dunne had given her in the handling of a ship. The lifeboat floated with tremendous, dignified deliberation away from the Ring-rock, which moved very slowly around some axis it had discovered within itself. Smithers' donkeyship hung suspended in emptiness, now that its mooring line had been drawn inside. And nothing happened. The stony mass hid a part of the glowing mist which seemed elsewhere to fill all the universe there was.

When the action came, it was too swift to follow. At one instant there were only the three objects floating in nothingness: spaceboat, donkeyship, and huge mass of brown stone crystals with a slash of gray matrix on one side. Dunne raised his bazooka, waiting grimly for a target.

There was a great flash of bright metal. A shape moving too fast and too near to be clearly seen, rushed past the edge of the floating rock. Flashings of light seemed to make a line along its length. Sparks flew. Some of them bounced from the mass of stone. Some seemed to sink into the lifeboat. There was a sort of gridiron of parallel streaks of light going away into the mist beyond the lifeboat. And something else flashed toward infinity and was gone.

And then the lifeboat moved. It seemed to leap. Dunne was flung back and out of the airlock. He fell, with his bazooka—tied to his belt as it was—lost to his fingers. The line from his belt to the eyebolt on the lifeboat tightened. It came taut with a violence that almost cut him in two. But it did stretch. The lifeboat, though, flung

forward with a sort of frenzied energy, with greater acceleration than its drive was ever intended to produce. It drove off to nowhere with such velocity that it seemed to shrink in size like a broken toy balloon, and there was nothing left where it had been except the seventy-foot mass of stone with painted letters and numerals on it, and a donkeyship from which a bewildered and plaintive voice began to call, "Dunne! Dunne! What's happened? Where are y'?"

And a long, long distance away, inside the spaceboat, Nike gathered herself up where the shock of explosive acceleration had flung her. She began to crawl uphill toward the controls again. Outside, Dunne's lifeline stretched itself to its limit from the eyebolt. He dangled, moving feebly at its end.

There was no reaction to this event anywhere else. After all, the Rings were some four hundred miles thick, and they formed a shining golden disk nearly two hundred thousand miles across, though its center was largely occupied by the gas-giant world of Thothmes. In nearly two hundred million cubic miles of glowing haze, what happened to a single space-ship's lifeboat was not apt to appear important. Yet it seemed that a somehow agitated "tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet" sped out from somewhere nearby, and Smithers' voice called dolefully, "Dunne! Dunne! What's happened t'you?"

And there was no answer.

Nike crept to the lifeboat's controls inch by inch. Struggling against the intolerable acceleration, she got within reach of the controls. She reached up and pulled a switch Dunne had shown her.

Instantly the drive ceased. The acceleration stopped. And then it seemed that the spaceboat, in ceasing to drive, began to fall and fall, toward infinity.

Outside, Dunne struggled feebly with the lifeline that had dragged him in the boat's wake. The elastic rope shortened itself. It drew him back. It gave him a certain momentum relative to the spaceboat. He took up the slack and pulled harder. If there had been air outside, of course, he would have thrashed wildly about until the lifeline parted or he crashed against the boat's steel hull. But

here was only glowing vacuum. There was no resistance to his motion.

He caught the airlock doorframe. He got in. His bazooka bumped. He pulled it into the lock. He dragged the outer lock-door shut—and saw a hole in it.

It was a round hole not quite half an inch in diameter. But it meant that the airlock could never be filled with air so the inner door would come unlocked. He was locked out. By every rule known to spacemen it should not be possible to open the inner door to what was effectively empty space.

In a species of peevish fury and fretting horror, he struck the door handle.

And the door opened.

He stepped inside, unbelieving. The door shut behind him. He was suddenly and insanely aware that his suit ballooned and billowed at its flexible joinings. This was the way the suit was in empty space. The inside of the lifeboat was airless. It was empty space.

He saw movement. Nike had turned incredulously from where she'd cut off the drive. She gave a little cry and raised her hand to her space-helmet. She'd sealed it on Dunne's command just before the attack from nowhere. Dunne shouted and leaped. He caught and held her hand from opening her helmet to the emptiness which had invaded and conquered the lifeboat.

"Wait!" he snapped. "Look at your suit!"

He held her. He pointed to the proofs that there was no air, that the inside of the lifeboat was as empty of anything to breathe as space between a pair of stars. He cut off her helmet-phone. He cut off his own. Then he touched the metal of his helmet to the metal of hers.

"Keep your helmet shut!" he commanded. "We've lost our air! The hull's punctured! The air's all gone!"

The sound went by solid conduction from helmet to helmet. She stared at him. He said, more urgently still, "Don't talk by space-phone! Maybe we can patch up!"

He released her. A space-suit, normally, would have oxygen in its tanks for two hours of breathing. The ship had none, if it had leaked as the evidence indicated. Dunne had seen one opening in the hull. It looked like the holes in the bubble in which Keyes had died.

"Let's see how bad the leaking is!"

She didn't hear him say that, but she saw him examine the hole in the outer lock-door. Then he went looking for more. He found them. Nearly a dozen, in all—round holes that looked as if they'd been drilled, but with fringes of torn metal that said they'd been punched. Any one of them would have bled the ship's air to space. Suddenly he realized how they'd been made. Every one had been made within the fraction of a second, while something flashed past and away from the spot where he'd been waiting with a bazooka!

But there was more, and equally bad. The drive had acted in a wholly unprecedented fashion. The spaceboat had attained and still possessed a velocity they could not guess at, in a direction they could not determine, and it would be distinctly unwise to try to use the drive before the cause of its misbehavior could be found out.

The question of air was most urgent. Dunne searched for the cause of the punched round holes. He found something on the cabin floor that had obviously made one of them. It was a slug of hard, pointed metal with a hollow in its unpointed end in which some substance had plainly burned.

He touched helmets with Nike again. Solid conduction carried his voice to her.

"I've found out what hit us!" he told her. "Queer! It's an antique weapon everybody's forgotten. It's like a belt-weapon except it can shoot an indefinite number of times. It's called a machine gun. It shoots missiles, called tracer bullets in the old days. We couldn't have kept from losing our air. We couldn't have gotten into space-suits in time to survive!"

Nike did not speak.

"And it's an antique!" insisted Dunne. "It's like being shot with a bow and arrow! Maybe Haney'll try to track us down to be sure we're dead. We've a terrific built-up speed, though, If I can patch the holes, we may make out yet. This isn't a donkeyship! It's a lifeboat!"

He moved away. The lights in the lifeboat continued to burn. He hunted briskly for the emergency tools a lifeboat would carry. He found them. There were absurd provisions against the improbable. There were not only

tools but seeds—as if a space-ship could be wrecked and a lifeboat make ground on an uninhabited world equivalent to a desert island, with an appropriate atmosphere and a sol-type sun and a tolerable temperature-range, but lacking all edible plants!

He also found emergency sealing-putting which does not harden unless some part of a mass of it is touched to metallic iron, when it polymerizes swiftly to a solid that adheres to anything and becomes almost as hard as iron itself. He took it to the airlock. A round ball of putty pushed into the bullet hole sealed it. He tapped it with the knuckles of his space-gauntlet. The bullet hole was patched. He went to the others, in turn. He had to tear away metal to get at some of the holes in the hull, but he worked swiftly.

He was absorbed in his task, but Nike could not understand it. She saw their situation clearly: When the oxygen in their suit-tanks was gone, they would die. She was alive now only because Dunne had ordered her to seal her helmet before they were attacked. But they could breathe only as long as their space-suits permitted. If there were a place to which they could go—and there wasn't—they wouldn't have been able to breathe long enough to reach it. There was nothing imaginable to be done. They could use some few reserve tanks and stay alive a little longer. But why? It would only postpone the inevitable—death! Anybody can die, but there are things one wants to do first! One can hate the frustration of an early death without being afraid of it.

Dunne finished patching the last hole. He went briskly back to the storage spaces of the spaceboat. Nike looked at the gauge of her oxygen tanks.

She saw Dunne, absorbed again, making electrical connections of heavy blue cables to things she recognized as fuel cells. In them, space-fuel could be used to produce electric current directly. During the time Dunne had waited vainly for radar signs of visitors, he'd done such things as he was doing now. Then, Nike hadn't asked what it was. Now there seemed no point in asking. Then, she'd tried to avoid speech with Dunne, which was folly. Now, rebellious, it seemed folly not to.

He moved back from the electrical connections and

came toward her. She looked at him in desperation. He touched their helmets together.

"This is a lifeboat," he said exuberantly, "and not a donkeyship. Lucky, eh?"

She realized drearily that he wanted her to agree with him. She nodded, but could not trust herself to speak.

"We use a pound of oxygen a day apiece," he said with something like zest. "Donkeyships use oxygen in tanks under pressure. It's cheaper. But a lifeboat has to be designed for a lot of people. Water's more expensive but more practical. It costs more to get oxygen from water, counting the fuel to electrolyze it, but a gallon of water and the fuel to get the oxygen from it weighs a lot less than eight pounds of oxygen in a pressure tank!"

It took time for these comments to become relevant. Then Nike said incredulously, "You mean—you're putting air back into the ship?"

"Not air," he corrected. "Oxygen. The same stuff we're breathing now in our space-suits. We breathe it at three pounds pressure because we've no nitrogen to dilute it with. At full pressure and undiluted it would make us drunk, anyhow!"

"But—"

"We use a pound a day apiece," Dunne repeated. "This being a lifeboat, we can turn out twenty-five if we must. We're all right for oxygen!"

Nike knew relief that seemed almost shameful. But she said with a dry throat, "And the engine? The drive?"

"I've no idea," said Dunne. "I have to see about that now."

He went away, nodding to give reassurance. Nike stared at him in an entirely new fashion. It is the instinct of a woman to look to a man in emergencies. She had depended on her brother. She hadn't known that there was anybody else in whom she could feel the same confidence. Dunne had been a stranger; now, abruptly, he was a person who provided air when the spaceboat was drained of it. He was the person who'd gotten a lifeboat to go find her brother when his donkeyship was destroyed and there was no other way. He'd even been prepared for the attack.

She watched as he uncovered the fuse-box which dis-

tributed electricity to various places in the spaceboat. There was a take-off for light, for the air-refresher, for heat and instrumentation and refuse-cycling. And of course, for the drive.

There was a neat round depression in the box cover. A bullet had penetrated the spaceboat's hull and made a deep dent in the distributor. Then it had fallen to the floor.

Dunne took off the cover. The intricate wiring was pushed about. There was a short-circuit.

He corrected the short. He made an abortive movement with his hand, as if to scratch his head reflectively. He put the distributor box together. He hauled up a floor plate and inspected the drive under the floor. He shook his head. Gingerly, with his movements clumsy because of the gauntlets he must wear, he brought the thrust-blocks up to view. The copper blocks were almost red-hot.

Squatting over them, he stared at what he saw. Nike went to look. She felt not only astonishment but something much more important and basic.

He spoke to her. Naturally, she couldn't hear him. She touched her helmet to his.

"The current got shorted through the drive-crystal," he told her, in a voice made tinny by the method of its passage to her. "Away over normal voltage—overloaded the crystal. It pushed like the devil, but it burned up in doing so. Look!"

He showed her the closely approaching copper blocks, with a single shred of greasy crystal in between.

"It's ruined?" asked Nike.

"It'd have blown everything in minutes," he said. "It was just burning out when you cut off the juice."

He frowned down at the massive thrust-blocks, held apart by the most infinitesimal of single grains of the most precious mineral in the cosmos. A donkeyship needed a half-gram crystal to make its drive operate. A lifeboat needed something larger. A liner on an interplanetary run required a crystal or crystals costing more than its hull and interior and all its furnishings together. The almost-burned-out crystal between the spaceboat's thrust-blocks was now no larger than a grain of sugar.

Nike drew back. He reached up and caught her hand.

He tugged at it. She bent down again. Their helmets touched.

"Oxygen!" he said tinnily. "It's my turn to remind you!"

He grinned at her and she was astounded. But she went obediently to the remaining suit-tanks and replaced the one whose gauge indicated a pressure close to zero.

Far away, a battered donkeyship started its drive and began to move away from the seventy-foot floating rock. Then it stopped. It returned. The whine of its drive, translated into ultra-high-frequency waves, spread out from the rock. It stopped again. The grizzled Smithers called cautiously on his communicator:

"Dunne! Dunne! What happened t'you, Dunne?"

There was no reply. In the control room of his donkeyship, Smithers muttered to himself. He turned off the transmitter.

"Haney shouldn't ha' done that!" he said indignantly to nobody at all. "Not to somebody had a woman with 'im. He lied t'me! Didn't say a word about a lady in the Rings! All he said was he wanted t'know if anybody was there! Anybody'd—." His tone changed to shrewdness. "Figured I'd get killed if somebody was there. . . ." Then he protested, "No harm seein' if anybody was there! Anybody'd shoot anybody who found out they was workin' somethin' good—anybody but me! I coulda 'voided a fight! I ain't got time to hunt crystals. Gooks is what I'm after. Why shouldn't I get me some extra oxygen 'voidin' a fight between men?"

The donkeyboat floated near the rock. Nothing happened, whether visibly nearby, or producing radio waves that would travel vast distances before they became too faint for a donkeyship's communicator to pick them up.

"I tell y'," said Smithers angrily to the walls of his ship, "that fella Haney's a bad egg! Dunne found th' Big Rock Candy Mountain, an' fellas tried to track him, so he didn't go to it. But Haney figured he'd kill 'im because he'd rather nobody had it than not him! Yes, suh! Dunne's stayin' away from the Big Rock Candy Mountain, an' Haney's tryin' to kill him so if he don't have the Mountain, Dunne won't neither!"

There were flaws in this logic, but it satisfied Smithers.

Now he spoke again, with a fine conviction of his own shrewdness: "But now Dunne's gone off. He burned crystals in his drive to get speed nobody else can afford to get, because they ain't got crystals to burn! Yes, suh!"

Then he said confidentially to his donkeyship: "I'll take me a look. Don't blame him for bein' sneaky about it. If I was to find the Mountain. . . ."

He swung his rotund ship about. He did not bother with instruments or computations or any form of astrogation. He belonged in the Rings. He'd developed an instinct for finding his way about, regardless of the entire absence of landmarks. He had the feel of space in the Ring sof Thothmes. Not many people lived long enough to develop so precious a talent.

He steadied the donkeyship on its proper course according to his notions. Its drive began to whine. He headed along the line taken by the lifeboat with Dunne and Nike in it.

"That's it!" he told himself triumphantly. "Yes, suh! That's it! Dunne's found the Big Rock Candy Mountain, an' fellas tried to trail him to it, so he ain't goin' back so's he'll throw folks off his track! So he does it! It's done! Smart fella!" Then Smithers laughed appreciatively. "But not as smart as me!"

At just about that moment, Dunne was seated on the floor of the lifeboat, wearing his space-suit and crushing lumps of light-gray matrix with a hammer. The matrix came from the sack of abyssal mineral he'd dug out to provide a stake for Nike, when she would be sent back to Horus from the Rings. Because, of course, the Rings were no place for a woman to be. Among other reasons, there weren't any laws there.

6

There were sounds transmitted as radio waves. The communicator's loudspeaker in the ceiling reported them with a fine impartiality. It reported the rustling, whispering noises that came from the photosphere of the sun. It reported the tiny crackling sounds credited to lightning in monstrous storms on Thothmes. The speaker reported them. Then it said, "*tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet . . .*" and stopped.

Dunne said reflectively, "That's a queer thing! Nobody has the least idea what makes that noise! We've heard it more often than anybody else ever reported it. But why? Smithers says it's gooks. Some people believe it. But if so, it's the only evidence for the existence of gooks."

He stretched himself—carefully, because he hurt in a surprising number of places from his tow behind the wildly accelerating spaceboat. Nike watched him. She found that it was both comforting and astonishing to look at him.

Now there was oxygen in the spaceboat at a pressure of three pounds per square inch. The accepted norm was fourteen point seven pounds pressure for the oxygen-nitrogen mixture to which the human race had adapted during some thousands of generations. But the nitrogen could be dispensed with. Breathing oxygen was perfectly satisfying. True, voices sounded a little off normal, and it would not have been possible to heat anything containing

water, because water boiled while still little more than lukewarm.

But there was oxygen to breathe, and no reason to anticipate a lack of it.

And the drive was working again. The sack of matrix fragments Dunne had brought in was not a particularly rich sample from the vein. In all the sack there'd been no more than four abyssal crystals. Only one could be used between the drive's thrust-blocks—the others were too small. That one was under half a gram, and the boat couldn't be driven at high speed with so small a crystal. But it could be driven. Dunne had fitted it in between the thrust-blocks and actually turned on the drive for the fraction of a second. It worked. The sound would be unexpected and hardly identifiable unless it had considerable volume. Dunne didn't believe so brief a noise would even be picked up at any great distance. Certainly nobody could have gotten a bearing on its source!

Nike looked at him as he considered his various aches and bruises. Then he said, "I think I'll try the radar long enough to get an idea of our speed. My idea of where we may be is pretty indefinite!"

Nike said, "Can I help?"

It was absurd, but Dunne didn't notice. Neither of them referred to the fact that the spaceboat was hurtling blindly through the Rings with no radar in operation to warn them of possible collisions. But, on an average, there was not more than one object of appreciable size in two cubic miles of space in the Rings. This was enough to make mining for abyssal crystals profitable, but the likelihood of a collision was remote.

Presently Dunne watched the radar screen for blips indicating exactly such floating objects as had created the profession of mining in the sky. He didn't know the direction the spaceboat had taken after the burst of machine-gun tracer-bullet fire. He didn't know the speed it had attained or how far it had traveled. And there was nothing in view but mist by which to tell.

The radar, though, showed blips. They were more widely separated than in the part of the Rings that Dunne and Keyes had worked in. They had motions of their own. They had orbital velocities suited to their distance from Thoth-

mes. But something could be learned from their motion across the radar screen. Dunne learned it.

The spaceboat's speed was very high, relative to solid objects in the mist. Dunne computed, using guesses for quantities and hopes for mathematical signs. Eventually he shook his head.

"We've come a devil of a long way!" he said. "We must have accelerated longer than I believed. We may have crossed the whole first Ring! Anyhow, we can decelerate without too much danger of anybody hearing us."

Nike did not answer, but her eyes followed him as he cut in the drive. It made a brand-new noise. The sound of a drive depended on the size of the crystals which were its heart. A donkeyship whined. A lifeboat hummed. A space-liner or cargo ship boomed. These last required very large crystals to produce their thrust. But the drive in the lifeboat now made a whining, whimpering sound very much like that of a donkeyship. The crystal in its heart was substandard in size.

Dunne nodded with an air of great satisfaction. He continued to watch the radar screen, and from time to time made computations. Once he stared incredulously at his own results. But he said nothing. There was nothing to be seen through the ports in the least unusual. Now and again he did look out, but all he saw was a warmly glowing absence of anything to look at.

The interior of the boat was practically silent. The drive; yes. The small and meaningless sounds made by thunder and by highly complex atomic reactions in the sun; yes. But the eventlessness which is space travel obtained. All space travel consists of seconds of interest or of action, succeeded by seeming centuries of tedium. There was, just now, simply nothing to be done. Time itself seemed to consist of nothing that could happen.

Nike could have retired to the back cabin. But it would have been even more eventless there than in the main cabin, where at least she could see Dunne occasionally moving about. So she curled up on an upholstered seat and lay there with open eyes for a long while. But nothing happened.

Presently she went to sleep.

A great distance away, a donkeyship reversed its drive and came to what its instruments asserted was a stop. Haney was at the controls of this particular craft. It turned about and headed back toward the rock where Keyes had died and Dunne and Nike should be newly dead. Haney and his companion were confident. They'd performed a maneuver they'd previously done often enough so they could rely on its results.

It was very simple and soundly based on the normal reactions of those on whom it was practiced. A donkeyship's steady high-speed dash from beyond radar range would naturally be noted by men working a rock in the Rings. When they knew it would pass close by their workings, they'd cut off all radiating equipment and wait for it to go by. If it had slowed before arrival, it would have suggested grim happenings. But it didn't. It came straight ahead, almost to graze this rock or that, but it gave no sign of a pause or any action at all. The working miners were reassured. So the smothering burst of machine-gun fire, fired as it went by, was total and successful surprise. If there was a bubble, it would be punctured. Where there was a ship, it would be drained of air. Where there were miners—a space-suit pierced by a bullet anywhere was inevitably a fatal wound. There'd never be a single shot fired in return. The killers could go right on, and then later return to find no living soul present to oppose them. They often found good quantities of abyssal crystals already separated from the gray matrix.

It was a perfectly matter-of-fact device for the sort of men who'd use it. It couldn't be prevented. It couldn't be punished. There were no laws to cover it or law officers to enforce them. The fact accounted for part of the Rings' death-rate of thirty per cent of the mining population every solar year.

So Haney and his companion matter-of-factly drove back to the rock where Dunne and Keyes had worked, where Dunne and Nike had been a short while back, where a boobytrap should have done the work they'd just repeated to be wholly sure. It wasn't difficult to find the way back. Haney watched the radar screen and recalled the arrangement of blips he'd passed as a man on a liquid

ocean would remember the bearing and size of objects on a shoreline. He expected as a matter of course that Smithers would have died in the dash-past of Haney and his companion. He'd been useful. He'd made sure that there was somebody alive at the rock. He shouldn't be alive to ask for payment in oxygen or to protest what had been done with his assistance.

But when the seventy-foot rock loomed up through the mist, it was solitary. There was no lifeboat owned by Dunne. No donkeyship belonging to Smithers. Nothing.

It was a good rock. Two men working fast and without interruption could clean it out in a matter of days, especially if they worked wastefully and let much gray matrix escape in the process. But Haney seemed not to be much concerned with working a mine even as good as this one.

He listened, disturbed and enraged. He caught the faintest imaginable whine of a donkeyship's drive. He couldn't imagine why there were no dead men—including Smithers—who should have been left behind by the burst of machine-gun fire.

It wasn't easy to understand. But it wasn't desirable that anybody should escape. If Smithers reported that Haney had a machine gun and had used it in such-and-such a manner, at the next pickup ship gathering it would be discussed. It would be agreed that it was not desirable for Haney and his partner to go on living and practicing this device. There'd be no formality about it. Simply—the man who found it most convenient would kill Haney. Of course, if Dunne and Nike reported their part of the adventure, the need for Dunne to be killed would be even more evident. But he'd be killed anyhow.

So Haney got a careful bearing on the excessively faint drive-whine and set out after it. It was certainly the only chance he had of correcting the mistake by which Smithers had survived. Dunne . . . Dunne must be dead, and Nike with him. Haney believed he had only to kill Smithers.

This decision came before Dunne had completed temporary repairs to the lifeboat. The lifeboat hurtled onward with the velocity that the excess acceleration had given it. Smithers drove after it at the highest speed the noncrystal-burning drive of his ship would give him. He was a

long way behind, until Dunne got settled and began to slow the spaceboat. Haney, in turn, was far behind Smithers. Things began to work out—with that enormous amount of pure tedium in between seconds of action and excitement.

Dunne, waiting for his restored drive to cut the lifeboat's speed down to a manageable figure, found himself trying to put things together in a rational fashion. His original beliefs about his situation—and Nike's—didn't seem to fit what was happening. The idea that his donkeyship had been blasted, on Outlook, to keep him from rejoining Keyes was not wholly plausible. It didn't account for everything—for example, Haney's offer of a deal to carry both of them to Keyes and return all three to Outlook next pickup-ship time. That wasn't necessary. Haney's effort to carry Nike from Outlook in the belief that she was going to join her brother—that didn't fit in. If Haney'd tried that first, and made the proposal to include Dunne later—yes, that would be more reasonable. But the big thing was that after Keyes was killed, nobody went to work feverishly to clean out the crystals in the plainly visible vein of matrix. Haney had come on to Outlook after killing Keyes. He'd left a boobytrap. . . .

Then Dunne scowled to himself. Had Haney done that? Could it be someone else?

The matter of Smithers was a complete answer. He'd talked to Haney by communicator. He'd come to the rock, to find out if there were anybody alive on it. He'd discovered that Nike was there—a girl in the Rings! And when Dunne put him out of the lifeboat, to prepare against an approaching radar blip, Smithers had yelped to surrounding space, "You Haney! You sheer off! You keep away from here! No tricks! There's a lady here!"

And that was proof. Not for a court of law, but there were no courts in the Rings. And the highest court on Horus had solemnly ruled that it had no jurisdiction over events or crimes or property in the Rings of Thothmes. Therefore, every man had to be his own judge and jury in such matters as affected him. And Haney affected Dunne.

With Nike sleeping peacefully on an upholstered seat in the lifeboat's main cabin, Dunne suddenly saw the situation from a new angle. The mine-rock he and Keyes had

found was a valuable find, to be sure. No Big Rock Candy Mountain, but a good rock just the same. But with Keyes dead and Dunne's donkeyship destroyed, it was Haney's if he chose to take it. He needn't hurry. He needn't deal with Dunne. He could have ignored Nike. He didn't have to do anything if what he wanted was the rock and its slash of matrix. Especially, he needn't have joined the pack of donkeyships that tried to trail Dunne to a discovery he hadn't made. Haney knew he hadn't made it. Why, then, had he followed? It wasn't for Nike. If he'd thought of kidnapping her, he wouldn't have flung machine-gun tracer bullets into the lifeboat, where she'd die as the air bled out to space. So Haney would think, anyhow.

Then Dunne whistled softly to himself as recalled events put themselves together in a new pattern. The machine gun, for instance. It wasn't standard equipment for a donkeyship. It was an antique. It was practically a museum piece. But Haney had brought it out to the Rings when he came. He came to hunt crystals, so it appeared, but also he'd come out with the most deadly piece of armament—outdated, but still most deadly against a donkeyship—he could carry. Why?

The Big Rock Candy Mountain might be involved in the answer. Dunne moved to look at Nike. She was asleep. She looked very young and weary, but she slept with a child's tranquility. Dunne couldn't guess it, but it was because she no longer felt that she didn't belong anywhere with anybody. She couldn't have explained it herself, but it was true.

He had only to make one assumption he hadn't thought of before, and everything changed. The assumption was that Haney hadn't planned especially to kill him—Dunne. In the course of more important events, it might be desirable; but it wasn't a major objective. A much more reasonable guess would be that Haney wanted to kill Nike.

She'd come out to tell Keyes something that meant life or death. There was mail service, by the pickup ships, and she could have written. But she'd found it necessary to come out herself. She couldn't go back, though Dunne urged it and offered to pay for her to return immediately. She wouldn't go back! When Dunne forced the pickup

ship's skipper to sell him a lifeboat, she stowed away on it to keep from going back to Horus! She was willing to take any imaginable risk rather than go back. And she desperately wanted to see and talk to her brother. And Haney was responsible for his death and had surely tried to secure Nike's.

Dunne was just beginning to work out the implications of the facts seen from this angle when there came the faintest of possible drive-whines from the loudspeaker. It progressed very slowly from the just-not-inaudible to the faintest clear. He stopped all speculation to hear it. Yes. There was a donkeyship almost out of detection range, but not quite. Dunne threw off his drive. He threw off the radar, which had not yet reported the whining donkeyship. He silenced the air-refresher unit. He waited.

The whining sound grew gradually louder, in the course of hours. Then there came the thinnest of voices clamoring over the drive-whine;

"Dunne! Dunne! Smithers callin'! Come in, Dunne! Come in!"

Dunne hesitated. Nike slept peacefully. There was silence. Velocity away from the outer rim of the Rings remained. The lifeboat, though, was pointed back toward its starting point—the outermost edge of the Rings. Outlook floated there, and other small and giant objects. But though the lifeboat aimed there and its drive operated, so far it hadn't overcome its acquired momentum away. It traveled backward as it drove ahead. But its reverse speed diminished steadily.

"Dunne! Dunne! Smithers callin'! Come in, Dunne! Come in!"

The call continued. Smithers had followed the lifeboat. Dunne heard him. The question was of Smithers' allegiance, to Haney or to the first woman he'd seen in years, who might seem to him to have an irresistible claim on his chivalry.

Then there came a change in the mistiness outside. Dunne jerked his head about to stare. He saw stars, gradually becoming brighter than the dust-clouds which were the Rings.

And then the lifeboat shot out backwards into the clear and dust-free ring of transparency between the two outer

rings. It was called Cassini's Division for the man who first observed it in the rings of Saturn. Its explanation waited for two hundred years.

Here the impalpable, shining dust-particles ceased to be. For a distance of many, many miles, space was clear. But on beyond—it could be seen clearly—the second Ring began. In the interval the spaceboat would be visible. Here it could not hide in shining opacity. But if one looked steadily at the star-field, one could see stars sometimes blink. And stars in emptiness do not blink.

Dunne clamped his jaws together. He waked Nike. She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"It's my time to watch?" she asked.

"No. But we're past the first Ring. We're likely to have company."

She started up. He led the way into the control room. The donkeyship whine was becoming fainter. It appeared not to be following the spaceboat in the exact proper line. But the voice accompanying it was still clear enough for every word to be understood.

"Dunne! Dunne! Smithers callin'! Come in, Dunne!" It went on and on.

Nike looked at Dunne. He shrugged, and flipped on the transmitter.

"Smithers," he said coldly. "Do you hear me?"

A pause. Then Smithers' voice, overjoyed, "Dunne! How you doin'? Are you in trouble? You need any help? Is the lady all right?" Then Smithers said indignantly, "Haney played a dirty trick! He shouldn't ha' done that!"

"I thought so myself, at the time," said Dunne drily. "What're you doing this far from where you were?"

"I was comin'," said Smithers' voice, "to see if I could do anything for th' lady. She's all right?"

"She's all right," agreed Dunne.

"That's fine! Now what?"

Dunne paused. Then, "Goodbye," he said curtly. "That's what. Farewell. You go your way and I go mine. Stop following me. I haven't found the Big Rock Candy Mountain! You won't be led to it in a hundred million years of following me around. Understand? Goodbye!"

He threw the switch that cut off the transmission from the communicator.

Nike said, "Do you really think he—wishes us harm?"

"I don't know," admitted Dunne. "But I'm trying to cut down on the things that *could* do us harm; and having Smithers around, with even the noblest of motives, doesn't seem to work out well. He doesn't seem to realize that we've a sort of disguise. I don't want him to realize it."

"Disguise? We have a disguise?"

"The boat has," Dunne told her. "The drive. You'll notice when you think to listen."

But he didn't turn the drive on again. He examined the radar screen and cut the radar off lest Smithers pick up its pulses. He left the drive off because it had been a moaning hum—peculiar to lifeboats—and now it was a whine almost identical to a donkeyboat's. It was a disguise for everyone in the Rings except Smithers, and he could expose it if he chose.

Dunne paced up and down the cabin, restlessly. Nike watched him. But suddenly she cocked her ears to the ceiling loudspeaker.

"There's another whine," she said. "Or is it the same one?"

Dunne listened. And there were now two faint whines in the Ring. But the loudspeaker also faithfully reported the rustling short waves from the sun and the tiny cracklings of lightning on Thothmes. It had reported birdlike twitterings, to be sure, and that was out of all reason. But now there were definitely two donkeyship drives to be heard.

"Smithers will be worried about that extra whine," said Dunne reflectively.

They heard a voice. Smithers'. It came above the whining drive of his ship. Smithers was alarmed.

"Dunne?" he asked, "is that you? Did y'change your mind?"

There was no answer. There remained the two whinings through the normal noises of space. Smithers sounded scared. If he'd been alone, Dunne might have answered him, even though he wasn't positive that Smithers did not have a working agreement with Haney for the commission of crimes. If Nike hadn't been in the lifeboat, he might have gambled on the idea that Smithers was the simple,

obsessed individual he appeared to be. But he wouldn't bet Nike's life on it.

Smithers' voice came again from emptiness.

"Haney? That you?"

More silence. It lasted a long time. Ten minutes, perhaps twenty. Then Smithers cried out furiously, in the faintest of voices, "Whoever y'are, what you chasin' me for? What're you keepin' right behind me for? I changed course then, an' you changed right after me! What's the idea?"

No answer. There remained two whining sounds in space besides the abstracted, meaningless cracklings and whisperings of the void. There were two donkeyships unavoidably broadcasting their drive-noises on radio frequency. It seemed that Smithers sounded fainter than before, as if he were going farther away. It also seemed as if both drive-whines shared the diminution of his voice. But somehow it was evident that one of the donkeyships fled desperately, and that the other followed implacably after it.

"Who are y'?" Smithers demanded shrilly, though his voice could barely be heard. "Who are you? What you chasin' me for? Keep away, now! Keep away!"

Dunnie's expression was formidable. He muttered under his breath.

"What's happening?" asked Nike worriedly. "You look so angry!"

Dunne took pains to relax convincingly before he answered.

"We're pretty well all scoundrels in the Rings," he said evenly. "This isn't a place for the squeamish. Smithers is being chased, most probably by Haney. Smithers was so unwise as not to be in the line of the tracer bullets Haney pumped into us. He'd scouted our rock for Haney, you'll remember, and reported that somebody was there. It'd been your brother's and my rock. It was supposed to be our death. Haney had some need to be sure it was. So when Smithers reported us there he came along expecting to kill me, certainly, and rather more certainly you; and Smithers should have been killed with us to keep him from talking about the matter next pickup-ship time."

He stopped. The whispering sounds from the sun and the cracklings from Thothmes remained. But the two whinings which were donkeyship drives grew fainter. It was

barely possible to hear a shrill voice protesting, threatening, and even pleading as it fled. But with ever-increasing distance, the words ceased to be distinct. There was only a thin shrill wailing. It went on toward nothingness, and the drive-sounds faded with it.

Nike looked bewildered. "But you mean—he's going to be murdered?"

"Murder," said Dunne sardonically, "is a legal definition. Where there's no law, there's no murder. Not even theft! Somebody is chasing Smithers, yes. It seems reasonable that whoever it is—I suspect Haney—intends to kill him, as he tried to kill us. If I were in Smithers' place—"

"What?"

"Here in the Rings, if somebody chases you without explanation, you start shooting. That's the custom. It's also sense. You may have a small fortune in crystals in your ship. Or your pursuer may think you have, which is just as dangerous. But maybe Smithers knows that a fight with Haney would be fatal for him."

"If you and Smithers joined—"

"No," said Dunne curtly. "Haney has a machine gun. It's an antique, and I can't imagine where he got it; but it's the deadliest weapon in the Rings." He paced back and forth. "Remember, there's no air here. There's no gravity. A bullet once fired goes on forever. There's no limit to its range. It hits as hard at a thousand miles as it does at a hundred feet. It's an admirable weapon for close-range assassination, but it's not one to be dodged at any distance. If I joined Smithers in fighting a man with a machine gun, we'd all wind up dead. And I'm enough of a scoundrel to have other plans for my future."

Nike looked away. She looked uneasy to the point of panic.

Then Dunne said abruptly, "Nike, why does Haney want to kill you?"

Nike started. She stared at Dunne.

"I'm wondering about that," he told her. "Not why Haney wants to kill me. Not why he thinks he has to kill Smithers. Why does he want *you* dead? And what's the situation on Horus that made you feel you'd be safer in the Rings?"

Nike swallowed. Then she said, in a tone that was between despair and defiance, "They were—trying to kill me back on Horus. You won't believe it, but it's so! And I'm not crazy! They tried so cleverly! Things to look like accidents. . . . But—they were going to kill me. I know you think I'm out of my mind."

"Who was it?" asked Dunne. "I don't think you're crazy."

"Why? It sounds crazy! I don't know who they were!"

"I do," said Dunne. "Your brother trusted me. He told me the situation as he saw it. He asked my advice. I advised him to kill Haney."

Nike said in a shaken voice, "Oh, no!"

"Oh yes!" said Dunne. "It would have solved everything. I should have killed him myself, on Outlook, when he was going to take you off pretending he'd take you to your brother. But I didn't want to put your brother under an obligation to me. It was his job. But he didn't do it when it was practical; so when I had good reason to do it on the spaceport, I let it go by. And your brother was already murdered! I regret very much that I didn't kill Haney. There aren't any laws here. I'd have helped establish customs that would grow into law. Too bad! They're needed!"

"I don't—I don't understand!" protested Nike.

"Look!" said Dunne, with the air of someone being very patient under great provocation to be otherwise. "Your uncle was Joe Griffiths, wasn't he? He found the Big Rock Candy Mountain, didn't he? He sent more crystals back to Horus than the Rings have produced in any three other years! Isn't that true? And he went back to the Mountain and brought out more, and he ordered furniture from Horus and bragged that he'd have the richest residence in the Galaxy, and he went back for a third load of crystals—and he was never seen again!"

Nike tried to swallow, and failed. Her throat was dry.

"Y-yes. That's right."

"The money for his crystals is held by the Abyssal Minerals Commission, on Horus. Quite a lot of money. It belongs to his heirs. The Commission has been trying to find out who should get it. Isn't that right?"

Nike nodded, unable to speak.

"The job's done," said Dunne sourly. "You've some distant cousins—so far removed that they don't count. The majesty of the law decided that unless some other equally close heirs turn up, you and your brother should get everything. But there was a possibility of others. The law ordered a search for them. It's finally made sure that there aren't any. So when the matter comes up in court again—it may be months, the law takes its time—a lot of money comes to you."

Nike nodded. She spoke with extreme difficulty.

"But—"

"Yes," said Dunne savagely. "There is a but! If you die before the official decision of the court—if both you and your brother die—your distant cousins get everything. They're not people you've ever been proud of, and they married people you never would be proud of!"

"I've never known them—"

"You've met one: Haney. He's married to one of your second cousins once removed. He came out to the Rings to see what could be done about your brother. Your brother told me who he was. And we've been very, very cagey about Haney! So I'll make a guess that he managed to find out the rock we were working on before the last-but-one pickup ship. I guess that he sent word back to your distant cousins. It would go by mail, and it would be a very innocent message, but it would tell them he was about to kill your brother and for them to attend to you."

Nike spoke with difficulty.

"But—you've known this all along!"

"Would you have trusted me for an instant if I had admitted it? I'd have seemed like any ordinary scoundrel trying to get a rich wife. But for Haney—I didn't know your brother was dead when I didn't kill Haney! I didn't know they'd been trying to kill you, back on Horus! But I did know Haney wasn't the man to take you away from Outlook!"

He paced back and forth. Then he stopped and listened. The ceiling loudspeaker gave out rustlings and cracklings from the sun and the gas-giant Thothmes. But there was no longer any whine of donkeyship drives. They were too far away, now, to be picked up even by a lifeboat communicator.

"Do you think—"

"How'd I know?" asked Dunne irritably. "Smithers may have dodged to safety somehow, or he may not. I don't know! It's even conceivable that he tried to make Haney abandon the chase by telling him where we were—where we are!"

"What are we going to do?"

"Various things that ought to be stupid," said Dunne. "We understand each other now, I think. It isn't going to be easy to get out of the fix we're in. I'll probably have to do some things you won't admire. I'm going to ask you to bear with me. We're in a tight spot. Your brother knew he should kill Haney! Where there's no law, such things sometimes have to be done! But he wouldn't be a scoundrel like Haney, and Haney killed him. Now he'll try to kill you. He has tried!" Then Dunne said coldly, "I'm not going to take on your brother's handicap!"

Nike said, "You haven't acted like a scoundrel toward me!"

Dunne shrugged.

7

All the way back in the First System—where ancient Earth circled the first yellow sun known to men—somebody invented a new device. It crushed deep minerals and separated abyssal crystals from the slurry. Diamonds were hard, but abyssal crystals cut them like butter; so grinding gears could be used that would destroy any other material whatsoever by turning it to mud, and the mud then filtered for crystals. It was an admirable device, but it didn't fit on a donkeyship. It was too bulky. It wasn't practical to take Ring minerals to it. Transportation cost too much. So it looked like the invention was futile.

On the planet the mills of the law also ground. They ground very slowly, but well. Sedate justices wore costumes dating far back, before the time of space-travel. They sat in solemn, formal ceremony. They heard the sworn testimony of men they had appointed to find out certain facts. They debated, using technical terms that had meaning only inside a courtroom. They made a formal decision which was phrased in a manner only intelligible to lawyers. But the decision became a final action on a financially important case.

It assigned divers sums and properties to Nike and her brother with the proviso that if during the consideration of the case one of them had died, the other was to receive the whole. If both had died, their heirs were to inherit. If they had no descendants then their collateral kindred should in-

herit in the same manner and degree as if there had been no such persons as Nike and her brother.

It was noted that one of the justices concurring in the decision remarked, while removing his judicial robe, that the decision practically offered a reward for murder, since neither Nike nor her brother were in court when the decision was reached. But there was a marked difference. It was that if anybody killed either of them on Horus, the law would hang that person if it caught him. On the Rings it wouldn't because there was no law. The difference between Horus and the Rings of Thothmes was essentially that on Horus there was some danger attached to killings, while in the Rings the danger was that one might be killed. The distinction though, was one of theory only.

Dunne let the lifeboat drift across Cassini's Division between the outermost and next inward of the Rings of Thothmes. The supply of oxygen remained adequate. Stored as water instead of gas under pressure, a lifeboat carried oxygen for all the passengers it was designed to carry—many more than Nike and Dunne. There was food for as many people. But there was nothing to do. Clocks told the time and mechanically separated one day from another, and each night from each day. There was no external distinction, but it is necessary for humans to comply with arbitrary intervals of activity and repose. People everywhere in the galaxy find it necessary to live by twenty-four-hour cycles because they are built that way.

Two such cycles passed before Dunne prepared to turn on the drive again, and the radar. The speaker in the ceiling had been left turned on throughout. It had reported nothing but outside radiation, whisperings from the sun, and cracklings from Thothmes. Once, during the second day, there'd been a distant "*tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet . . .*" But that was all. Dunne didn't change the schedule he'd determined on. Some two hours or so later he turned on the drive and the entire atmosphere in the lifeboat seemed to change.

There was still nothing to be seen in the viewports, because they were deep in the second Ring, and that was as dense as the outermost. But the radar showed objects in the mist of this ring as in the other. The drive whined and

whined exactly like a donkeyship. The quality of the sound, of course, was decided by the size of the crystal used in the drive. Dunne felt himself feeling more like a man and less like a fugitive. The idea of hiding from Haney's machine gun and hence from Haney was excessively irritating. But with the boat's drive in action he felt that he was engaged in outwitting Haney rather than in hiding from him.

The new sound of the drive, though, had one consequence he didn't like. It no longer sounded like a lifeboat; but there was only the power of a donkeyship available, and the lifeboat was larger. So the acceleration of the lifeboat was diminished. In a straightaway chase, Haney could overtake it. And if he did overtake the spaceboat, he had a machine gun and bazooka-shells against the lifeboat's bazooka alone. So a fight with Haney was to be avoided, if only for Nike's sake.

She joined him as he made calculations from what the radar told him.

"Queer!" he told her. "We're near enough to Thothmes to have just the orbital velocity of the rocks around us. I've done a lot of worrying about collisions that wasn't necessary!"

He had. Even with only one sizable Ring-fragment in two cubic miles, there was always some chance of smashing into solidity in Thothmes' Rings. At any fraction of any second they could have hit an object from the size of a teaspoon to that of a mountain tumbling through the sky. But with the same speed and course, such a thing was unthinkable.

"I suspect," said Nike, "that you've been keeping other worries to yourself, too."

"Only one," he told her.

"What's that?"

He didn't answer. She frowned a little, watching his expression. She looked at him often, nowadays. She was learning the meaning of his every look and gesture.

"Go on!"

"We have to get to the pickup ship if you're to get back to Horus."

"Where," said Nike, "I'll be in the same danger I ran away from Horus and to the Rings to escape."

"I'll go with you this time," he told her.

"Then you'll take care of it," said Nike. "You've taken

care of everything else."

"Not too well, and this is different," he told her with some grimness. "If Haney knows exactly where we're going to be, he can go there and wait for us."

She considered. "Well?"

Dunne spread out his hands.

"He knows when the pickup ship will be coming and when it will leave. He knows we've got to be there before it goes away again. If he gets there first, he can use bazooka-shells and his machine gun on us when we turn up. And since there's no law in the Rings, it won't be anybody's business either to stop him or pay him off for it."

Nike said confidently, "I think you'll manage!"

"How?"

"To use one of your favorite expressions," Nike told him, "I don't know. But I think you'll do all right." Then she pointed to the radar screen. "What's that?"

There was a peculiarly involuted blip off to the left. For its distance from the center of the screen, it looked remarkably large. Dunne swung the lifeboat.

"We've time to look at it," he said in a dry voice. "I wouldn't mind an extra crystal or two. It would be convenient to find the Big Rock Candy Mountain, just now."

She frowned.

The curving nature of the radar indication became more marked as the blip moved nearer and nearer to the middle of the screen, and therefore to the position of the lifeboat.

"It's very big," said Nike.

He nodded. He cut the drive. The lifeboat floated on. It seemed very quiet, until the air-freshener cut in and began to whirr. A shadow appeared in the haze ahead. It deepened. It expanded. It filled nearly half the cosmos. Then they saw what was behind the mist. It was a Ring-fragment, but like no other Dunne had ever seen. It was more than a mile in extent. Great globular masses protruded from a central core. There were sharp projections scores of yards in length. There were depressions which amounted to the mouths of caves. There was a place where things like ropes stood out stiffly, and diminished to cords, to threads, and the threads to hair-like fibers of stone. It looked as if something molten and adhesive had been torn

away and left these threads behind as it wrenched free from the greater mass.

They regarded it in silence.

Then Nike said, "There are caves!"

"Yes . . ."

Then Dunne said, "It was a volcano, or part of one. When the moon it was part of broke up, it broke up too. The gas that was dissolved in the melted rock expanded. It's not unlike pumice." Then he added, "It's not the Big Rock Candy Mountain!"

He swung the lifeboat away. He set a course with some care.

"You take a watch now," he said briefly. "All you have to do is dodge anything as big as that rock. And keep heading this way. We ought to be far enough from Haney, now, not to worry about him. But if you see anything moving, especially toward us—"

Nike said suddenly, "Will you teach me how to use a bazooka? If we need to fight Haney, I could fight with you! I won't be afraid!"

He put his hand warmly and approvingly on her shoulder. Then he took it quickly away.

"Right," he said gruffly. "Good idea! I'll teach you after this watch."

He went back to the main cabin. He settled himself to rest. He seemed to have some trouble getting to sleep.

Nike, in the control room, stood quite still with a queer expression on her face. She put her own hand where Dunne's had rested on her shoulder. She didn't look uneasy. In fact, she looked oddly pleased.

A long time later she looked out into the main cabin. Dunne was asleep. Nike smiled warmly to herself. But then she turned back to the radar screen. She watched it faithfully.

The Rings of Thothmes floated in space. They were nearly two hundred thousand miles in diameter, but no more than four hundred miles thick. There were markings on the planet around which they floated, markings that could be seen even by the telescopes on Horus. Their positions changed. They were not solid objects. They were storm systems. The planet revolved swiftly on its axis, so swiftly that it was not really a ball; it was noticeably flat-

tened at its poles. The diameter across its equator was a fifth greater than its diameter from pole to pole. Nobody knew the size of its actual solid mass, of course. There were many who denied that there was solidity at all. Taking its cloud surface as its size, the density of Thothmes was less than that of water. But some insisted that deep down there were rocks and metals and possibly even rills. Perhaps a planet the size of Horus was enclosed in a gas ball thousands of miles deep. Almost anything could exist under such a cloud cover which occasionally changed its appearance but never broke to show what was beneath it. But if such a cloud cover swirled to make markings that sometimes lasted for weeks, there must be storms of unimaginable violence below. And those who insisted that there was nothing solid there, unless gas-ice or the like, found themselves agreeing on one point only with those who imagined a miniature world that never saw the sun. The agreement was that there couldn't be any gooks. From one standpoint, the elements necessary for life couldn't exist on Thothmes. From the other, nothing could live in such weather.

On the planet Horus there was a mild flurry of publicity about Nike and her brother. The planet's highest court had ruled that the money held for Joe Griffiths—who had found the Big Rock Candy Mountain—should be turned over to the two of them as his heirs. Both of them were in the Rings at the time. There were news specials about them, but most of the interest was in the fact that there was a Big Rock Candy Mountain, and that an enormous fortune had been taken from it by one Joe Griffiths, who thereupon vanished from the sight of men. One of the newscasters pointed out that the costs of all the legal inquiries had been paid from the fortune itself. It was no longer fabulous. The lawyers involved had received more money from it than would now be left for the brother and sister. They'd get only the remnant. But still it was a matter of some interest. A pickup ship on the way to the Rings picked up the news item.

And somewhere in the Rings there was a donkeyship in which agitation was continuous. This donkeyship contained Smithers. He was terrified. He'd believed in gooks. He'd had to believe in them because he couldn't believe in anything

else that would account for the death of his partner, years ago. But now he'd come to realize that gooks weren't absolutely necessary to explain it. He himself had very narrowly escaped being killed by Haney this past few days.

Smithers was desperate. There was no law. There was nobody to whom he could appeal for justice. He debated anxiously with himself. He argued vociferously with nobody but himself to listen. In the end he came distractedly to the conclusion that he must arouse public opinion in the Rings. If enough Ring-miners knew of Haney's murders, Haney would have to stop.

So Smithers set out fearfully to rouse public opinion.

Presently Dunne and Nike, on their way to a necessary but highly perilous rendezvous with the next pickup ship, presently came to the Cassini Division again. Dunne cut off all apparatus and listened exhaustively before he ventured out. Then, a quarter of the way across stars blinked at him. They were occulted by something gigantic, of which his radar gave cryptic information.

He approached the giant objects. They were three two-thousand-foot masses of stone in a singular close-placed arrangement. Minute as their gravity fields would be, they should have drawn together. But they obviously hadn't. They must revolve very slowly about each other.

Dunne stopped and examined them through the viewports. Nike looked curiously at him.

"I could use a crystal or two," he told her wryly. "If I had anything big enough we'd sound like a pickup ship. Or if smaller, I could still burn it up for speed if I had to. But we've got only one crystal big enough to drive with."

Nike said, "You're going to show me how to use a bazooka. If you have to fight, I'm going to be fighting right beside you!"

He nodded. He completed the examination of the three semi-planetoids. No matrix veins showed. He went on.

He showed Nike how to use a bazooka. He gave her fine points about aiming. He had her put on a space-suit and become accustomed to working the weapons with gauntleted hands. He had no expectation of benefit from her aid, but she wanted to learn.

Then the radar told of something in motion. It was orbital. It was huge. It was invisible.

It went past, in front of the lifeboat. Then there were noises. Rappings. Tappings. Minute things struck the lifeboat's hull. They made sounds equivalent to a storm of hail on a metal roof. The sound had the quality of abrasive. It became horrible. It became deafening.

It went away again. It was a sand pocket; a group of thousands and ten-thousands of infinitesimal sand grains, racing together in orbit around Thothmes. Such things were known. They were one of the reasons for the ships of Ring-miners to accept orbital velocity as no velocity at all. A donkeyship could safely overtake a sand pocket if it traveled not much faster than the sand pocket itself. It could safely be overtaken by a sand pocket, again if the difference was not too great. But to strike one at genuinely high speed meant the effect of a monstrous sand blast on the hullplates, which might be abraded away to the thickness of tissue, and then give way and let the ship go airless.

They had passed through only the edge of this sand pocket, though. The hull would show streakings where it had been rasped away. But Dunne was enraged with himself for not recognizing the danger earlier.

And just before they reached the inner edge of the outermost Ring, when the sunlit cloud of impalpable dust particles filled all the sky before them—just before they were swallowed by the last Outer Ring of Thothmes, Dunne saw yet another monstrous object floating abstractedly in the thinnest part of the haze.

It was two miles from end to end. It was partly metal and partly stone. It was incredibly confused as to its outer surface. There were spires and peaks and protrusions. There were bulbous excrescences. There were hollows. There was a place where an arch of the tortured substance closed over an opening big enough for a space-liner to go through. There was an enormous cavern that seemed hollowed out to make a den for something unthinkable that lived in empty space.

But it was not of the right mineral formation to offer a prospect of abyssal crystals. Dunne went on past it. And then they were fully in the outermost of the Rings again. So many hundreds of miles away—half the span of a continent. The semi-asteroid Outlook rolled clumsily in the haze. Once in so many weeks a pickup ship from Horus came out

to it, and all the inhabitants of the Rings gathered to have an hour of luxury and feasting and contact with people other than their donkeyship partners.

As of now, though, Outlook was deserted, and far away the lifeboat ventured through a golden, shining mist whose particles were too small to glitter as even the tiniest of snowflakes will do. There was nothing to be seen from the control room. The drive whined and whined, very much the duplicate of a donkeyship drive. The ceiling loudspeaker gave out only routine noises, none of them indicating the nearness of anything alive. The radar displayed just such blips and larger markings as it should where Dunne believed it to be—some three drive-days to Outlook and several more to the Ring-rock that Dunne and Keyes had worked together. Outlook lay between.

And Dunne had to take Nike to Outlook. It couldn't be avoided. He viewed the prospect with extreme grimness. Haney wouldn't be entirely certain of Dunne's and Nike's deaths. He'd fired a burst of machine-gun fire into the lifeboat. The bubble on the rock must also have been shattered. But when he returned in calm confidence of murder neatly accomplished, he'd found—nothing. There was a donkeyship whine at the limit of detection. He'd followed it. It was Smithers. But he hadn't found any trace of the lifeboat.

Dunne couldn't know whether Smithers still lived, but he did know what he must do. He must somehow get to ground on Outlook, and he must get Nike into the pickup ship, and she must be alive when the airlock door closed behind her.

The logical strategy for Haney would be to go early to Outlook but not to go aground; rather, to float in the mist of the Rings until either Dunne arrived in the lifeboat or it was certain that he wouldn't. If Dunne arrived, or Smithers if he wasn't dead, Haney would open fire. The death rate of thirty per cent a year was too high. He could give any explanation for murder committed openly, and it was unlikely to be questioned. But if Dunne or even Smithers denounced him. . . . The law couldn't touch him, but somebody would kill him, thoughtfully, as a reasonable precaution against misbehavior where law did not run.

So Haney wasn't in an entirely happy situation. But neither was Dunne. Haney's donkeyship would be faster than

the lifeboat, because of the small-sized crystal in Dunne's drive. Haney had an overwhelming advantage in arms. Neither of them had any reason to be squeamish; in fact, both were under necessity not to be. It was a situation that was going to be deadly for somebody, and quite possibly for everyone concerned. Dunne racked his brains. He made insane, foolish schemes. He couldn't believe in any of them.

It was two days after recrossing Cassini's Division when the ceiling loudspeaker reported a donkeyship's whine, very thin and far away. There were many donkeyships working out of Outlook. This might be any of them. They'd have a hundred thousand cubic miles of Ring space apiece to prospect in, and fifty thousand bits of debris—from sand grains to drifting mountains—to prospect or to mine. The Rings were not exactly overpopulated. Dunne held his course. The whining sound of his own ship, as heard inboard, almost drowned out the noises of the speaker. But it wasn't likely to matter, so long as the other ship went by at a good and generous distance.

It didn't. The whining from outside grew louder. Dunne listened. He looked at the radar screen. He didn't like what he saw. He noted that the sound was irregular. It wasn't right. He listened sharply. There was the whine, but there was something else. The something else became a voice, broadcasting shrilly.

Dunne cut his drive in automatic precaution. If this ship was asking for help, it had to be remembered that men had been known to answer distress calls and never show up at Outlook again.

Time passed. There were always long intervals between happenings in space. Nike went and practiced absorbedly with the bazooka, wearing her space-suit minus its helmet. She showed as much skill as anybody could who'd never actually fired a bazooka at a target.

The voice stopped, and the distant donkeyship drove on steadily, whining in the void. It became distinctly louder. Dunne checked with his radar. Yes. Something showed there, ahead and to the left. It should pass not many miles away. Then the shrill voice uttered words that were now quite distinct.

"Listen here!" cried the voice urgently. "Everybody listen!

Haney's been killin' people! He killed Dunne an' the girl that came out on the pickup ship last trip. He tried to kill me. He killed Keyes. Everybody watch out for Haney! He's been killin' people to get their crystals! Watch him!"

Then the voice came more loudly and more fearfully: "An' you Haney! Everybody knows now! I been tellin' this all over the Rings. If anything happens to me they'll know you done it an' what I've said is true! You better leave me alone!"

Dunne sat upright from a comfortable listening position. It was Smithers, of course. Somehow he'd evaded Haney's savage pursuit. But of all insane things to do! He hesitated a short time, then he flipped on the transmitter and said harshly, "Smithers!"

"Who's that?" By the sound, Smithers had gone into an ecstasy of terror. "Who—who's that?"

"Smithers!" said Dunne again, with impatience and anger, "Shut up!"

He cut off the transmitter. He swore under his breath.

Nike came to the control-room door. She didn't ask questions. She waited to be told what had happened. He told her, infinitely angry with Smithers for being such a fool, and almost as angry with himself for trying to stop him.

"If it hasn't already happened, Haney will hear him!" fumed Dunne. "He's inviting his own massacre! And nobody'll believe him! He's been such a fool about gooks that nobody'll take him seriously! Not even if he's killed!"

"Are you going to back him up?" asked Nike uneasily.

Dunne turned on her.

"I've got troubles enough!" he snapped. "I wouldn't risk your little finger for a thousand like him!"

Nike nodded. She smiled very faintly.

"That's being the scoundrel you said you'd be."

Smithers' voice again, despairing and desperate: "Dunne! Dunne! Is that you? Help me, Dunn! Haney almost got me. He's still huntin' me! An' you too, Dunne! Let's get together! We c'n fight him better! We got to protect that young lady!"

Dunne raged, "The fool! The idiot! The—"

He swung the lifeboat about. He cut in the drive. The boat surged ahead. Dunne savagely regarded the radar screen.

The blips on it began to creep in a new direction, compounded of the course on which the lifeboat had been traveling and the new direction of drive he'd just begun.

Nike was silent as he swung the lifeboat again and again. Course corrections have to be exaggerated, in emptiness. To turn at a right angle is practically impossible, and to get the effect of one requires a change of course of a hundred thirty-seven degrees to start with, to be reduced to ninety only bit by bit and after one's original motion has been canceled out. But Dunne was attempting it. There was a floating object he could use as an aiming point. Such a point was necessary for maximum change-of-direction in the absolute absence of compass points or trustworthy indicators of speed. Dunne did have troubles enough without Smithers to complicate them. He headed as directly away from Smithers as he could.

The ceiling speaker continued to report the drive-whine of Smithers' donkeyship. He continued to call plaintively, with an increasing content of desperation. He wanted Dunne to answer him. To help him would mean exposing Nike to danger for Smithers' sake. Dunne wouldn't do it. He simply wouldn't do it!

He gained speed away from the spot where Smithers called plaintively for him by name, and again and again mentioned the fact that there was a young lady in the ship whose help he implored.

Fury filled Dunne. If Smithers wanted to broadcast his position to all the Rings, having somehow escaped Haney's pursuit a few days back, that was his business! But the fool was telling Haney—directly or otherwise—that Nike was still alive and with Dunne. And then—Dunne fairly foamed at the mouth with rage when Smithers was suddenly stricken with a new terror.

"You Dunne!" he wailed. "Are you Dunne? Your ship don't sound like it did! It sounds like a donkeyship now! But you got a lifeboat! Dunne, answer me! Are you Dunne or are you Haney?"

The blips at the bow end of the radar screen grew larger. They united into a single irregular marking on the radar screen. That became huge. A shadow appeared against the mist. It was gigantic. The boat was headed for collision, and Dunne had to reverse his drive to dodge

it. Then he heard Smithers fairly screaming, "You! You comin' up behind me! Who're you? Who're you? Keep away from me! Keep away!"

Dunne had the tasks of a considerable ship's crew thrust upon him at once. He could see the blip that was undoubtedly Haney's donkeyship. Another mark on the screen moved toward it—and it was not Dunne. It should have taken all of one man's attention to keep that under observation. The blip that was Smithers darted from its former position. The other blip, drawing near to it, changed its course for interception.

"Dunne! Dunne!" wailed Smithers. "If this is kid-din' me, quit it! Keep away from me!"

Another man or two should have watched the slow rotation of the monstrous object in the mist ahead. Still another could have been kept busy managing the lifeboat in its nearing of the fifteen-hundred-foot mass of minerals and metal. There was a columnar protrusion of metal which was as bright as polished platinum. There was a deep hollow, a cave. There was a band of stone as black as jet.

Dunne grimaced unconsciously as he flung the lifeboat about in fashions not intended by her builders. He got the boat stopped in relation to the giant mass of mineralization. He reversed drive with the stern no more than feet from the precipitous rocky side of the monster. The boat backed toward the cave mouth. There was a heart-stopping clang of battering metal. Metallic shrieks and scrapings. An eerie shriek of tortured stone. . . .

The lifeboat stopped with a jerk, which was hair-raising. Then it tried to turn and jammed itself in some fashion, and abruptly there was a feeling of solidity.

Dunne said from between set teeth, "Every other really big rock I've ever seen, except Outlook, has hollows in it that could be caves. When I saw how big this was I took a chance. It's better than I expected. We're sheltered here. Maybe we won't be found. But even against a machine gun, I'd say our chances are not quite as bad as they were before."

"We're hiding from Haney?"

"That's the question. Are we hidden?"

He didn't look out the viewports. He stared at the

radar screen. It had a very peculiar appearance. It was black all over, except for a fan-shaped search beam which went out of the cave entrance.

Nike listened. The ceiling speaker was nearly silent. Then there came cracklings, as from some storm of inconceivable violence on Thothmes, the cracklings died away. There came the rustling sounds originating on the sun; they in their turn were gone. A donkeyship's whine with a babbling incoherency coming from it; it died out. A steady, savage drive-noise. Silence again.

The fifteen-hundred-foot half-mountain turned on its axis. Radio waves could enter the cavern into which Dunne had backed his lifeboat. But they could only enter from one direction at a time.

"We're shielded by the rock," said Dunne. "We can only receive from one direction. And it changes."

The drive-whine of Smithers' ship. He panted, "If that's you, Dunne, say so! Tell me! If it ain't—"

The steady, buzzing whine of a donkeyship with no voice accompanying it. The sound of crackling lightning bolts, then the rustling of the sun's photosphere.

Something fled across the Ring-mist which could be seen from the ports of the lifeboat. Smithers' voice came from it, squealing. It was his fate or destiny always to involve Dunne in events Dunne wished urgently to avoid. He'd done enough harm before, through panic; but now, without knowing it, he'd chosen a course that could not but bring his silent pursuer past the open-mouthed cavern, into which Dunne had moved for Nike's safety.

The slow rotation of the rocky mass cut off Smithers' voice. The sound of another donkeyship replaced it.

"Maybe," said Dunne deliberately, "maybe we can turn this cave into a break. I'm going out to the mouth of it. It looks like Smithers is just running round and round this rock, with Haney after him. I may be able to interfere."

"I go too!" said Nike, fiercely. "If you get killed, I will be too!"

It was true. Haney's primary purpose was to kill Nike, to change the situation in a long-continued lawsuit back on Horus, of which, in turn, the object was to distribute certain treasure from the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

Dunne picked up his bazooka. Nike had hers loaded before he'd more than picked his up. She showed him that she'd put it on safety. He said, warningly, "No space-phones!"

She reached up to her helmet. A light glowed. She looked inquiringly at him. Nothing could be much more useless than a helmet lamp for a space-suit to be used in the Rings. But it was simpler to use a space-helmet with an unneeded feature than to get others made, particularly when so small a number would be required. But a helmet light meant something now, with the spaceboat backed into a cavern.

Dunne nodded. He leaned over until their helmets touched.

"I want to say," said Dunne deliberately, "—something I only admit because I think we're going to be killed. I want to say that I like you very much. I'd like to have you near me permanently. In short—"

But then he put her into the airlock. He said no more until the outer door opened. He fastened the lifelines for both of them. He saw her making ineffectual gestures, and he saw her face and realized that she was crying and trying to wipe away her tears through a space-helmet.

Dunne made his way toward the cavern's mouth. Nike suddenly stiffened, staring toward the back of the cave. She made a curious inarticulate noise, but only she heard it. There were painted symbols on the rocky wall.

But Dunne was facing away from them. He reached the bow of the lifeboat. He saw something solid in the all-enveloping mist. It was a donkeyship. It fled, and careened to turn and get back behind the giant mass of minerals. It was Smithers' ship. It vanished.

A misty moving other object appeared almost instantly. It was Haney's ship. Like a hawk after a sparrow, it flung itself in pursuit. Both ships disappeared.

Dunne shook his head inside his helmet. He found a place in which to brace himself, for the use of his bazooka. And then, practically from under his feet, Smithers' battered ship came eeling out again. It streaked for the concealing mist. A thing came after it. Streaks of smoke—bazooka-shell smoke—came after it. One missed and went on uselessly on toward nothing whatever. But a second

one struck and its shaped charge vaporized a hole in the metal and poured its whole explosive force into the donkeyship. A second bazooka-shell struck the donkeyship's belly as it tumbled. A third hit.

Smithers' battered ship began to come apart in space. The pursuer appeared, incredibly, from the mist to one side. It fired twice—three times more before the mist obscured it again. What wreckage remained connected together went on toward shining oblivion beyond the haze. Twice, Dunne saw a movement in that strange fog. It was each time a ship swirling and circling around its enemy. There were momentary flashings of light, explosions even brighter than sunshine on the dust of Thothmes' rings. Shells were being pumped into the remains of the fragments of the wreck.

Then—nothing. Dunne waited, his bazooka ready, his features contorted with pure hatred. The hatred wasn't on account of Smithers. It was because Haney and his companions had committed cold-blooded murder before his eyes, and he hadn't been able to stop them. And Nike would presently be another victim.

Then Nike pulled at his arm. He touched his helmet to hers.

He said grimly, "If Smithers could track us and try to overtake us so we'd fight for him, then Haney's donkeyship trailed us too. They'll come back."

Nike shook her head impatiently. "No! Not that! Come here!"

She threw the light from her helmet to the back of the cave. Catching onto one handhold after another, she dragged him half the length of the lifeboat. She pointed at the rocky wall where were the initials and numbers "JG-27." Nike narrowed the beam. The light played on gray stuff. Friable stuff. There were actually greasy seeming crystals in view. They actually stuck out of the matrix! And Nike swung the light beam again.

There was an airlock door, made of the same plastic material as the bubbles used in the mining process of the Rings of Thothmes.

Nike touched her helmet to Dunne's.

"This is it!" said her voice in the tinny, resounding helmet. "Don't you see? JG—Joe Griffiths! And 27. That's

the year he found it! This is the Big Rock Candy Mountain!"

And it was. But as Dunne gaped at it, a shadow went past the cave mouth. Dunne jerked his head about. A donkeyship went past the cavern, no more than twenty or thirty feet from the lifeboat's nose. From the airlock of this other ship, a man threw something.

The donkeyship went on. The object that had been thrown revealed its nature by detonating with a monstrous violence. It shattered the entire bow of the lifeboat, back through the miniature control room. The stern of the lifeboat was cracked, and its bow parts were smashed.

Haney's donkeyship was out of sight. Dunne knew that peculiar raging frustration of a man who considers that right and justice and decency have been outraged and realizes that nothing can be done about it. He and Nike had just found the Big Rock Candy Mountain, a fit subject for fables and tales to the end of time. Therefore, they owned it. But they would own it only until the material needed for breathing gave out. There was no need for Haney to do anything more. They were dead. It would be completely, as well as figuratively, true in a very short time.

8

It was undoubtedly curiosity that brought about the final development of the situation. It was Nike's curiosity, perhaps; But Dunne's curiosity may have had a share in shaping the remaining events. Possibly he unconsciously had some hope that made him look alertly about him. Certainly Haney's curiosity contributed. Or perhaps Haney didn't so much want to make sure as he wanted to swagger in the presence of those who had opposed his purposes and frustrated some of his efforts, even if they happened to be dead when he swaggered. Possibly he had a freakish idea that such brilliance and talent as he'd displayed deserved a greater reward than merely being the husband of Nike's second cousin once removed, and thus collateral descendent of Joe Griffiths. He may have had a notion that this was the Big Rock Candy Mountain, but that wasn't likely.

Haney moored his donkeyship to one of the freakish metallic formations on the surface of this fifteen-hundred-foot Ring-fragment. He relaxed in absolute assurance of complete success in all his undertakings. The brother and sister, to whom his wife was a second cousin once removed, were dead. Their deaths had come about in the Rings, where there was no law. The highest court on Horus had officially determined that they had no jurisdiction over events, properties, or crimes in the Rings of Thothmes. Therefore, all must be well. But—just possibly—there might be crystals in the wrecked lifeboat. It would

be interesting to see. It might be a good idea to remove the bodies of Dunne and Nike and send them away as Ring-fragments to find their own orbits and stay in them forever. And it was really possible that Dunne might have some special, large, unusually valuable abyssal crystals he'd hidden from his partner when he came upon them. Haney would have cheated any partner he had; it seemed reasonable to see if Dunne had done the same.

Therefore, after a leisurely, self-satisfied contemplation of all his affairs, Haney took his companion and went to look at the wreckage of the lifeboat. They made the journey with much care and very little exertion.

Meanwhile, Dunne and Nike faced the fact that in every respect but one they were already dead, so they went through the plastic airlock to see what the interior of the Big Rock Candy Mountain was like.

There was no gravity, there was no air in the considerable cave beyond the plastic entrance. Nike's and Dunne's helmet-lights showed them that there was a strong resemblance between this cave and a plastic bubble. Cracks and crevices had been sealed by plastic. There was a living space, floored with planks brought here from Horus—several scores of millions of miles away. There was furniture attached to the plank flooring, which in turn was fastened to the rock beneath. There was an upholstered chair with ribbons to be knotted across the knees to hold a person in. There were lamps with elaborate if not very tasteful shades; they were fastened to the tables on which they stood. There was even a painting hung on a wire stretched across the center of the cavern. The floor and furniture were placed as in theatres "in the round," with no walls anywhere, so the floor and furniture could be seen from any direction.

And the cave had two occupants. There was a space-suit, standing upright. In it there was what had been a man. He stood, because there was no gravity to make him fall. Lying on dried-out, brittle cloth, there was another spectator; he had been murdered many years ago. Neither of these spectators were alarming. They were pathetic. Dunne turned Nike so she did not have to look.

"That'll be Joe Griffiths," he said wryly, "and a certain member of a donkeyship team who probably managed

to trail him here. That somebody killed Griffiths, and then somebody killed somebody else, which left only one of them to own the Mountain.*

But why *he* never showed up with a donkeyship load of crystals, I'll never know!"

Nike stirred. She faced the peculiar, useless airlock through which they'd come. Dunne felt her startled movement. She reached up and turned off her helmet-light. Then his.

Some light appeared where the lifeboat so nearly blocked the entrance to the cave. The light changed. There was nothing outside to change it. It changed again. Something was moving at the mouth of the cave. It could only be human movement.

Dunne drew a deep breath. In the blackness of the cavern, now, he plucked Nike off her feet. He launched himself and her for the back of this peculiar rocky hollow. They floated, until his outstretched hand stopped them just before they collided with the stone wall.

Now his eyes and Nike's were beginning to adjust to the darkness. Some light did filter in, past the lifeboat and beyond where the now useless airlock stood. Dunne and Nike had been long enough in this darkness to be able to see a little of what occurred. They could see vaguely what their helmet-lights had shown clearly.

He and Nike made noises, but only inside their space-suits. They were breath-stoppingly loud. A metallic clanking seemed qualified to wake the two motionless figures who had been in this ultimate of treasure chests for years. But there was no air to carry sound. No noise came from outside.

Helmet-lights came into the outer part of the cave. Somebody had seen the painted "JG-27" and realized that they'd found the Big Rock Candy Mountain. The helmet-

*Perhaps in a century or two, or perhaps not for a thousand years, a donkeyship will be found floating in the Rings of Thothmes and this mystery will be solved. One can guess that one of the partners in the murder of Joe Griffiths was, in turn, murdered by his partner. And one can also guess that the murdered partner had taken measures so that if he were left behind in the Mountain, that the ship would never reach port. This is only a guess, but it seems possible. M.L.

lights were round disks of brightness, slipping frictionlessly over every object they illuminated. The wall-less living room appeared—a plank floor with gimcrack furniture fastened to it. Then the helmet-lights moved, and steadied, and moved again, to limn out the incredible area of gray matrix and occasional dull gleams of imbedded crystals.

Haney and his companion—only Haney left his donkeyship for the pickup ship on Outlook—Haney and his companion went mad with delight and triumph. There could be no value set on the riches in plain view. It would have been ridiculous to speak of the money value in terms of millions. A larger order of magnitude would be necessary. Here were as many abyssal crystals in one place as all the Rings of all the ringed planets had yielded up to date. And the market would not be glutted. It couldn't be. There could never be too many abyssal crystals.

In the darkness Dunne pulled Nike down to shelter behind a mass of rock. He stood up. Helmet-lights crossed and crisscrossed. The emotions of the men who'd found the greatest treasure known in the galaxy found expression. He heard inarticulate noises. He heard gaspings. He heard cursings. He heard the most horrible of blasphemy and obscenity.

And Dunne found himself raging because if Nike turned on her space-phone she would hear them.

He turned on this space-phone and shouted, and his own voice was deafening in the resounding space-helmet. It would be no less numbing in theirs.

"Quiet!" he snapped. Instantly, disks of light went crazily about the cavern, hunting for him. "I doubt you'll have it any other way," said Dunne grimly, "So—"

A light fell on him and a bazooka flashed. But when there is no weight, one must be braced in order to aim a bazooka. The rocket-shell went sliding crazily to a wall of black stone. It burned out in glaring blue-white flame. He felt Nike moving beside him. He raised his own weapon and fired. More glaring blue-white radiance. From the blackness of the tomb—which it was—the cave in the Big Rock Candy Mountain became lighted as brightly as if from a nearby sun.

Dunne fired again, and the little rocket-shell hit Haney's follower in the chest. It went through his space-suit . . . his body and flamed for seconds thereafter.

He could see that Nike was struggling to rise and fight beside him. He suddenly realized that they were not dead. There'd been a standing figure in a space-suit in the cave when he entered it. Now two helmet-lamps played on it and bazooka-shells hit it. But the figure beside Dunne fired. It was Nike. Dunne fired simultaneously. And then Haney realized from where Dunne had been shooting. He aimed crazily and pulled the trigger. The hurtling tiny rocket-shell missed Dunne by yards. It went over his head. It struck gray matrix-stuff in the wall. A portable bazooka and shell, like this, would burn through three inches of solid steel. This one flared an abyssal crystal.

And there was light.

The brightness of that light ended everything. It was in the cave wall behind and above Nike and Dunne. It was the most terrible light in the universe. A thousand thousand strobe lights fired together might provide a comparison. But there could be no equivalent. The light of the one abyssal crystal turning all its stored energy to blue-white glare was the most violent, the most searing, the most blinding light in the universe. Dunne and Nike were made sightless for minutes.

But Haney who'd fired the bazooka-shell, did not see its reflections. He looked, as he fired, where the shell should strike. And he saw the light direct. He was looking when it appeared.

Dunne heard him scream, but Dunne was blinded too for the time being. Nike had no sensation of anything but an intolerable brilliance. It was minutes before either Dunne or Nike could see anything. Then the bright disks of their helmet-lights revealed Haney. He seemed to be trying to see. But he couldn't.

When Dunne and Nike could see again quite clearly Haney was still unable to tell light from dark. He'd looked at the light from a crystal breaking down.

He would never see anything else again.

There were several donkeyships on the spaceport of Outlook when Dunne brought the donkeyship to a landing.

Everybody was in the pickup ship, feasting on its foods and drinking its drinks; they didn't notice when Dunne arrived, and therefore there was no excitement.

Dunne made his way into the ship by the personnel-lock. Presently he was in the skipper's cabin.

"I've got a passenger for you," he said curtly. "Man named Haney. And I want to send some crystals to Horus."

He dumped a quantity on the skipper's desk. It was not all that he and Nike had, of course. It wasn't a tenth, or a hundredth. But the skipper's mouth dropped open.

"I've found the Big Rock Candy Mountain," explained Dunne as curtly as before. "Naturally, I don't want to stay out here in the Rings. I'd be followed everywhere, and ultimately killed, so I'm going to drive my donkeyship to Horus. I want extra oxygen and food and such items. I think it would be wise for you to give me my stores quickly and let me get away before they—" he nodded in the direction of festivity— "hear about it and get too hard to handle."

The pickup-ship skipper found it still more difficult to speak after he'd taken a second look at the crystals Dunne had spilled on his desk.

"Here's a list of supplies," said Dunne matter-of-factly. "When they're ready, I'll get Haney in a space-suit and turn him over to you. He'll tell you everything. He can solve a number of murders that have only been suspected. He's very anxious to talk. And—oh, yes! I want to make a will and get it witnessed. Two wills, in fact. And—"

He wanted a considerable number of things. At least one was quite unprecedented in the Rings. But the large crystals on the skipper's desk were very powerful arguments for giving him whatever he wanted.

The feasting in the pickup ship's main cabin went on longer than usual, this trip, because Dunne was receiving preferential treatment. There were two wills to be witnessed. Dunne wanted to be sure that if anything happened to him, the proceeds of what he'd turned over to the skipper would go to Nike. And Nike was very firm about a similar arrangement for Dunne. And then she composedly observed that for a will to be valid, certain

circumstances were desirable. The relationship between testator and legatee, for example. . . . But it appeared that the captain of a space-ship, like the skipper of old-time ocean-going ships, had the authority to perform marriages. Would the pickup-ship skipper perform one now, so these wills would hold in case of need?

When it was finished, Dunne got ready to start the donkeyship for Horus. It belonged to him. He had a bill of sale from Haney. He got a repetition of the acknowledgment from the man who'd tried so earnestly to kill him. Nike watched with becoming gravity.

"I'll see you off," she said, "because it'll be weeks before we're both on Horus!"

"I'll put a big new crystal in the drive," said Dunne, "to get there quicker. We've plenty!"

She nodded. She went out of the pickup ship with him. They marched together—magnetic boot-soles clanking—across the spaceport of the donkeyship. She went into the ship and removed her helmet. She brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. She smiled at him.

"Alone at last!"

He kissed her. It was very satisfactory.

Then Nike said firmly, "I'm not going back to the pickup ship. I'm going with you! I only suggested the will stuff and the formal marriage so I could refuse to let you go away by yourself!"

Dunne grinned. "You stowed aboard me once. I thought I was arranging a very sneaky shanghaiing. So I might as well lift off."

The donkeyship did lift off. In minutes it was a speck, and after that it seemed not to exist at all. But though absent in fact, it was definitely present on the pickup ship even an hour later, at least as the subject of impassioned conversation. The pickup ship's skipper had introduced Haney to the main cabin. He swaggered, though he had to feel his way from chair to chair. He boasted of what he'd accomplished while he was in the Rings. There were growlings. But he was blind. Nobody would kill a blind man, even where there was no law.

They did, though, threateningly demand clues to the whereabouts of the Big Rock Candy Mountain. And he couldn't give them. He was no astrogator. His com-

panion in the donkeyship had done the astrogation, and Haney was too much absorbed in his need to swagger to bother with that sort of thing. He boasted of what he'd done.

Which was quite intelligent of Haney. He was the husband of a second cousin once removed of Nike. He knew her and he knew the other collateral relatives. They would instantly disown and ignore him to try to avoid the onus of what he'd done. And the only place on Horus where Haney could be sure of support *and* an admiring audience for his blustery boasts of villiany. The only possible future for Haney would be as a man serving life for murder, swaggering before lesser criminals.

And there was one other place in the Rings where there was much agitation over Dunne and Nike and the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Oddly enough, it was at the Mountain. Certain very peculiar creatures had been making a scientific study of recently discovered, systematic, and apparently intelligent noises to be picked up by electronic apparatus from the Rings. They were an expedition sent to study the new noises and their meaning and origin.

They'd found the origin. Animals of previously unknown type were responsible. And the creatures at the Big Rock Candy Mountain were making a final on-the-spot analysis of their discoveries.

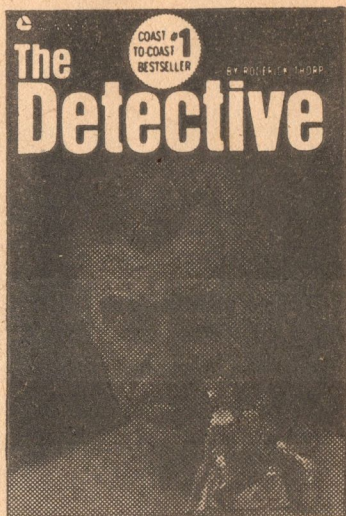
The reaction was similar to a long-continued shudder. There was proof—not suspicion, and not evidence, but proof!—of horrifying acts of violence practiced by the previously unknown bipeds. The bipeds actually used violence against each other! They carried violence to the point of destroying each other! And this, of course, made it unthinkable that gooks could ever have any commerce with them. Gooks did not kill each other. The bipeds must be shunned. Fortunately, they seemed to be totally uninterested in the lovely gas-giant world on which gooks lived such peaceful and contented lives. The decision to send an expedition to find the cause of these novel-type radiations—it was very wise! Humans could be avoided, now. And they would be! It was very fortunate that they weren't encountered by accident . . .

So the gook exploration-ship went back to Thothmes

with enormous relief. The crew of the expedition shuddered whenever they thought of men killing things. But when men actually killed each other—they and all their race must be avoided. Gooks will make very certain that they never come into contact with men again!

**THE MOST TALKED-ABOUT BESTSELLER
OF THE YEAR!**

THE MOST REVEALING NOVEL OF THE YEAR!



A huge novel of love, marriage, murder, and sex!

SIX MONTHS A COAST-TO-COAST BESTSELLER!

365,000 copies sold in hard covers!

A SENSATIONAL LITERARY GUILD SELECTION!

TO BE A MAJOR 20TH CENTURY-FOX MOTION PICTURE!



Avon

N156

95c

Wherever paperbacks are sold.

AVON: THE SIGN OF GOOD READING



BLOOD ON THE MOON AND STARS

Dunne was a crystal miner among
the stars until he discovered
the biggest strike in space.

Drifting through the Rings of the Thothmes
with a mysterious lady stowaway,
the lonely hunter soon realized that
every miner in this golden mist was
out to get him—and the treasure.

Even as bloodshed
spreads across the sky,
eyes both inhuman and unseen
watched, waiting to
close in...