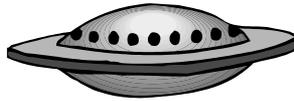




Richard S. Shaver
Earth Slaves to Space

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by Richard S. Shaver



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P.O. BOX 20256
MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55420 USA
WWW.LUMINIST.ORG

EARTH SLAVES TO SPACE by Richard S. Shaver first appeared in *Amazing Stories* magazine, Vol. 20, No. 6, September 1946. The cover art is based on the original *Amazing Stories* painting by Robert Gibson Jones. Interior art is by Julian Krupa and Harold W. McCauley.

This LUMINIST edition published
January 2010

FOREWORD

This is 1946. This story is not about the future or the past. It is about the present, the atomic era. Last year the first atomic bomb was dropped by the enlightened United States upon the unenlightened Japanese. Next year—well, a number of things may happen. Remember, these things are happening today as described in this story—to people from New York, from Ashtabula, from Kansas. And, too, it happens to people from Tibet.

To believe this story, you must understand that the “Missing Persons Bureau” can be as much a mythical institution, and as useless in a practical way, as any bribed policeman. And the “Missing Persons Bureau” is a much less numerous personnel than one might think till one learned it could be bribed with a very few dollars, considering that they didn’t want to die to be replaced by more tractable people. A person gets very tractable when an invisible ray starts burning his feet, and he knows if he mentions it to any one they will say, “Poor fellow, he’s nuts.”

Remember you didn’t know much about the atomic bomb till it was actually dropped? There are other things you don’t know anything about, and they are apt to drop on you any day! Some of those things dropped on me.

— Richard S. Shaver

CHAPTER I

The *Darkspear’s* bow-jets thundered mightily as she slowed to spiral about Earth. The spiral tightened, braking against the air, braking against gravity, and the thin stratosphere mists screamed madness...

Andy Aliller rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and sprang to the ports to look. They were swinging open at last! After so long closed against the deadly rays of deep space, Andy

wanted to know where he was, what was cooking. He didn’t have the nerve to ask the big-shot, Ru-Non, who seemed the only one aboard who knew their destination or their business.

“North America,” grunted Andy to himself. “Mu, they used to call it. I’ve seen the name on the ancient charts they run this thing by. The whole universe must have changed since those things were made. This ancient crate! If I had a pleasant enough life to worry about, I’d be plenty scared navigating at the speeds Ru-Non makes out of the old hulk.” Andy stood watching the great continent spread wider, ever wider as the ship plunged down—down...

Soft, secret-sounding feet slid to a stop behind him. Andy half turned, throwing up an arm toward the expected slash of a whip. Just habit, damn it! As the silken shimmer of blonde hair thrilled him, telling him it was Nan King, the females’ overseer. He turned back to watch the great round of earth below. He grunted his acceptance of her, peering over his shoulder at the world, with a brief “Hello, Nan.” No use building himself for a heartbreak when some big-shot male of the Tirans took a fancy to Nan’s lovely figure and soft mouth.

“Lo, Andy.” Nan’s voice was soft, too. Friendly, with a little something special in it for him. As he didn’t say anything more, she elaborated—“So this is the dinky little planet our ancestors were shanghaied for a century ago? I’ve heard these people for the most part don’t even know we exist. Is that true, Andy?”

“Yes, it’s true, Nan! Even if you went down there in that city,” Andy pointed to Cleveland slipping aft far

below, "they wouldn't listen to you, wouldn't believe you if you stood on a corner and told everyone you saw—they would have you arrested for a crazy woman. I've been here before, Nan. I know how they are. They think because they didn't invent spaceships, that there aren't any. You couldn't make them believe in us at all, no matter how you tried. They just couldn't be told."

"Poor dupes!" Nan's voice was full of pity for the defenseless country below, full of good, innocent people who didn't know they were preyed on by Ru-Non and others like her.

"No, Nan, they don't know from nothing, and never will, the way things look. I'll wager we're landing here to do some lousy trick that'll set 'em back another century so they'll never find us out."

"Such innocence must be a kind of happy state, eh Andy? Thinking you have a right to do as you choose—even if it ain't true—would be a big relief for me."

"If I could give them a ship like this—prove it to them by showing them the ancient work, wake them up. Geez, what a man could do with a race of men as educated as those innocents are. Geez!"

"Quit dreaming, Andy. Besides, what would Ru-Non do to you if she heard you?"

"I know it's hopeless, Nan, but a guy can't help dreaming, can he? Like I dream about you, nights, locked up in my cubbyhole. I know it can't be true—but still I can't keep you out of my mind—you... you..." Andy ceased for lack of an adjective worthy of use on her. She looked like too much for any words he knew.

"I wish..." began Nan, but Andy seized her arm, shushed her, as the

sharp steps of an officer sounded behind them. It must be Ru-Non on her way to the bridge to take over the landing operations. She came out of the red-lit opening of the 'tween decks stairwell, her eyes, grey as steel, alert under frowning brows as bushy as a man's. Her muscled, masculine figure military in its erectness, she hitched her sidearm dis-bulb higher on her slim hips—paused beside them, her brutal slash of a mouth sneering at them. Her square, strong face looked with suspicion at Andy.

"Andy Miller, some of your loose talk has been reported to me. Better remember that you can become a slave again, little man."

"Sure, Chief. I get it. Button my lip, eh?"

Her piercing, insolent grey eyes, cold as a fish's and as empty of human expression, looked at both of them curiously for a moment, intently, as though photographing them for future reference.

"Get your account books ready for a cargo, Nan King. There will shortly be an overturn in a certain government below."

Ru-Non, sometimes called "the Cruel," and many another name when one was sure she was not going to be told about it, strode off. Andy turned to Nan.

"Now just what do you suppose some squealer told her I said?"

"Aw, she was just poking in the dark. Don't worry, Andy, we ain't much better off than slaves anyway. It's purely a matter of mental wool. We ain't got any freedom, we gotta work, we get about the same food. We get an occasional night out—when we're in port—yeah; 'be back at twelve.' Nuts to 'em. There's lots of slave compounds more fun than this

old boat, Andy.”

The ancient black hulk of the *Darkspear* screamed on down through the air, heated to a dull red. Her speed slowed now to a mere ten or twelve hundred miles per hour. She cooled off, her hull black again all over as the night shadow of Earth swallowed her rakish, time-mottled length. Visibility range? Sure, but it didn't matter if they were seen, Andy thought savagely. Some smart reporter would figure out an explanation as “hallucination”! “Space ships haven't been invented, unfortunately,” the reporter would say, in several inches of valuable space, “so it couldn't be anything but hallucination. Sun in their eyes, sure.”

Far below New York spread now a vast pin-pointed pattern of wonder in the sudden night, and the *Darkspear* shot on over and down in a long arc, to plunge at last into the sea with a great smack. A giant's bellywhopper geysered behind them as she sought the black pressuring depths of the Atlantic. The air compressors built up resistance with a laboring throb, and deep within the hiding water, the *Darkspear* circled back toward Manhattan Island, and to a tryst with one Red Nake, of Ontal City.

Ontal, in case you don't know, is a great cavern city under New York. It is largely uninhabited, as it has a surface area about twelve hundred times larger than the floor space of New York itself, due to its endless tiers of borings and chambers in the mother rock of earth under New York. Put Rockefeller Center into solid rock, multiply its floor area by a million, and you have a rough idea of the labyrinth of empty antique building and boring under New York. But Ontal has inhabitants, quite a few of

them, though their contact with New York's warehouses is necessarily secret. For the residents are descendants of people who have parasitized Earth's surface races for uncounted centuries. Too, there is a steady influx of surface men and women—but, of that, later.

Far out in the Atlantic, the black, deadly length of the *Darkspear* came to rest. Her long-range space visi-rays reached out invisibly, through the water, through the rock, focusing, unnoticed by any in the Stem of Ontal, upon the throne room of the Stem Palace, the place where the ruler of Ontal, Ben Uniatty, was just then seated.

At the great vision screens within the ship's war-ray chamber sat RuNon, reading the thoughts of the old man as the conductive beam augmented them, watching his face. Interested, she leaned forward, for old Ben Uniatty was marked for death—and she was checking his thoughts for the information she had had of him, to see if it were correct. Beside her, Altor, her chief subordinate, flicked a ray over each guard ray position in the whole stem palace, counting, estimating the range, checking everything in the palace of the Stein, for the accuracy of this check with their information would tell them two things. One, was their informant, Red Nake, a liar or not? Two, was the Stem too strong for the war-ray of the *Darkspear* to crush?

At a dozen other great old screens in the war-ray chamber, a room that ran the full length of the underside of the ship, sat women startlingly like Ru-Non in appearance—as alike as identical twins. Centuries of inbreeding on their planet, years when the men had been killed a-warring, and

centuries of life when a few men had fathered the whole race of the Tiran, had resulted in Ru-Non's race, a race of people nearly identical in appearance. They were Amazons for the same reason, war had nearly removed the male from their race, except as a necessity for propagation. They were a despised but tolerated necessity, though some few Tiran males were rich and powerful.

Altor, waiting at Ru-Non's side to relay her orders over the ship's sound system, was some years younger than Ru-Non, and better looking.

Ru-Non spoke at last, her voice cold, incisive as a bit turning on metal in a lathe, the words like falling metal cuttings.

"Altor, the young snake, son of Red Nake, gave us accurate data. For that we will play his game. Old Ben Uniaty is a people's man, means to give the ancient secret to the surface. Even now he has inserted ads in the newspapers of the city overhead, calling for young men to train, and has offered them fabulous salaries. We have arrived just in time to scotch a powerful rival in space, for once these Earth people get space ships, we would have an endless battle with them. Old Ben would never sell us a slave, and if he knew we lay here, he would order every ray in the stem trained on us. We are even now in such jeopardy from that old man that it seems safer to attack than to flee. What say you?"

"I have heard of Old Ben Uniaty. He is a wizard who has fought all his life for the people of Ontal, and to bring the ancient secret sciences to the people of Earth's surface. If we take this place, my Ru-Non, save the old wizard for ourselves. You and I might learn many a trick from the old magi-

cian."

"People!" Ru-Non was not listening to Altor, but to her own savage thoughts. "Why do these fools care so much for the stupid workmen? It is always strange that they should give so much of their own lives for others' goals, to make it possible for people to multiply until they crush each other underfoot. Bugs!"

"You are right, my Ru-Non. Life is wholly a matter of survival, of struggle for survival. Only the strong have the right to life or the rich things of life. The rest must perish. Why worry about them? Blast the life from the whole city with your ray, and we will be on our way. Kill them all! They would prove unwilling slaves." Altor knew that the way to get Ru-Non to do anything was to urge the opposite, hoped that if she said "kill" Ru-Non might save them all for slaves. And Altor wanted Old Ben to teach her some of the things she had heard he could do with the antique mystery mech.

Ru-Non responded, enigmatically to her hopes, "Nay, I must wait till Red Nake's son and his father's veterans—what are left of them—are admitted to the palace. It is the hour of audience, and as a ruse to gain entry, the Son of Red Nake is petitioning Old Ben for a favor—for a 'pardon' so that he may 'live in peace in Ontal.' This hour of the audience is the only hour he is safe within Ontal—the only time we can get a man into the palace, who knows how to work the water gates lock."

Ru-Non sat watching the scene within the throne room of the Palace of the Stem, where, unsuspecting the gathering death-storm, Old Ben Uniaty sat in state.

The "Stem Palace" straddles with

its ancient bulk of connected chambers several great continent-long under-earth tube-ways of the Elder race.

This strategic dominance of the Stem Palace served to make it a natural bottleneck for levying tribute from all the commerce of the underworld. He who held the Stem held Empire over all the subterranean of the Eastern United States.

Ben Uniatty has held power in the Stem palace for over a year now. Today, July 4th, 1946, he sits there on the great crystal throne which once long ago seated an Elder God-man, and has since seated a long line of bloody tyrants over the underworld, and has at last fallen into the wise and gentle hand of Ben Uniatty. Over his head are the miles of granite and above that the towering beehive of Manhattan.

The gloomy grandeur of the ancient throne room with its massy crystalline seat of power, a throne built as if made of flames of pure yellow crystal, the points of the flames upholding the seat, and the back of the throne accented into a glory of dignity of power, into a mystic impression of God-head by the outspread fan of shimmering, flame-carved crystal. It is a throne room surrounded by vast caryatids that carry in their faces all the grandeur and wisdom of that Elder race who placed them there, and by some chance left the seed of man on Earth. These pillaring sculptures are of a rock hardened by some process of the Elder race's science to a vast harness, so that one pillar takes the place, in strength, of a score of square yards of ordinary rock. Their engineering, using such hardened rock, was able to remove vast areas of rock without weakening the strata that supports

the whole upper surface of Earth. This hardening of the remainder of the rock during their removal of rock in boring their endless dwellings was the secret of their ability to build so far beneath the crushing weight of Earth's crust.

Surrounded thus by all the wisdom and glory of the ancient race whose passing has left earth heir to all the misery we call modern life—sits one of the few hopes of modern man for wisdom and swift progress. The scientist, the Ruler of the Stem and of all the city of Ontal—Ben Uniatty.

Ben is a man whose age nears the century mark, but his use of the antique mechanisms for renewing his youth leaves him looking like a man of forty. His hair is white, but his flesh is firm and ruddy, his step strong and agile, his hands steady and clever as a youth's. Ben Uniatty is that fabled human we so often read of, a wizard of the antique magic, and his wizardry is based upon the firm rock of his study of the terrific ancient science of a wiser race.

Ben sits on the great throne, waiting to hold audience with the people of Ontal—those unfortunate victims of Bonar Golz, whom Ben has replaced by poisoning him as he deserved. Ben loves these poor, emaciated, huge-eyed, pallid-skinned, distorted-limbed products of an age of life in the dark, under the failing synthetic sun rays of the beneficial ray-mech of the Elder race, and is trying his best to start them back on the road to greatness.

At Uniatty's feet on the step of the great throne sits Nita Onray Flores, lovely mistress of the ancient dances of the caverns, a woman vastly popular with the poor and beloved of her

husband. Her flower-fragile face with its too great eyes bends diligently over one of the tremendous metal foil books of the Elder race. She is puzzling out the difficult symbols (it would take me paragraphs to describe the packed meaning of one of them, as they used a multi-concept symbol since vanished from human thought). Nita has learned to read these books by means of the text books in the ancient stores and is a real "witch" of the antique secrets in her own right. Too, the beneficial rays of certain ray-mech make the brain active and such deep things open easily to the mind of one with beneficial rays turned on the head.

Brack Longen, long-nosed descendant of the Picts of England (those not mentioned in "public" English "history" who dwelt in the Elf-mounds and the underworld of the British Isles)—whose trade, an hereditary one, is repairing and keeping in running order the ancient unrusting mechanisms of the Elder race—is working in one corner of the throne room. He is tinkering with a brain-converting machine left by Bonar Golz, the one Bonar had used to take the mind of a man and replace it with a slavish submission.

Tim Shanter, that redheaded descendant of the Irish "Fey," happens to be sleeping, as he is now in charge of the night watch, and of night repairs on mechanisms when needed.

Bill Flores, elegantly dressed in a suit of linked "netznot," the Elder fabric of impervious metal fibers, cut for him by Nita's clever fingers, leans against the throne's great arm negligently, idly looking over Nita's shoulder at the wonder pictures in the great old book of Metal Foil. At the door sits a guard, watching the multi-

screen to which all the guard rays—rays reaching out over the whole vast near-empty warren of Ontal—are relayed into one composite picture of the whole city and the cavern ways from fifty miles beyond. Now and then, into this multi-picture of the city protrudes the head and shoulders of a pacing guard, checking the ray nozzles which circle the whole upper balustrade of the Stem tower, a tower that stretches straight up through the open bowl of Ontal and on into the solid rock of the upper strata. This balustrade surrounds the whole vast pillar of pierced rock which is the top of the Stem, and serves to hold the auto rays, which are ever a-swing over the whole vast ancient glory of forgotten Ontal.

Into this gloomy but peaceful scene on the multi-screen came sudden motion, and a certain threat! A cavalcade of men, mounted on the antique mechanical animals called "Xontors" (a machine built like an animal by the artistic Elder race, but filled with powerful machinery to drive the legs tirelessly). The Xontor resembles a sleek, metal-scaled lizard, and is beautiful in a shining, reptilian way. These men rode carelessly up the great Central "Way of the Stem," the tube road to which all the eastern underworld ways connect at some point, to lead at last to the very center point, "The Palace of the Stem."

The guard at the wall-filling multi-screen called out anxiously to Ben Uniaty—"Bunch of outlaw guys mounted on Xontors coming up the main Stem. Can't make out who they are, but they look to me like some of the guys that used to work for the late Red Nake. Looks like they might mean trouble, Chief!" (Ben, far from insisting on formality among his men,

encouraged familiarity, his theory being that love and loyalty were far more important among his followers than formal discipline. In return he got a beautiful discipline without throttling red tape.)

Ben Uniaty lay down the "surface" newspaper he had been looking at, rose and walked down the ramp which had sometime been built beside the too high steps of the throne (designed as it was for the twenty foot adults of the Elder race) and took the guard's place at the controls of the multi-mental-screen. "Stop that bunch in the court. Admit one man only, and that one their leader!"

The newcomers, about twenty in number, young, confident, marked with the cold eye and brutal, callous face of killers, who had made Red Nake, the elder, the most feared man of Ontal next to Bonar Golz, remained beside their mounts. The son of Red Nake strode with an insolent smile forward into the gates which by all logic should prove an entrance for him but to death. The gates swung gloomily, slowly open, their ancient mechanical innards groaning, and then clanged shut ominously behind him.

At the sound one of the older of Nake's men murmured, "If those space slavers don't show up, that's the last of the line of Nake. Small loss, I guess."

"Shut up, you fool! The rays'll catch on. Trying to kill him?"

"I got no quarrel with Ben Uniaty. He helped many an outlaw against Bonar Golz."

"Sure, but he can't buck the space trade. They don't want any smart guys like Ben Uniaty running the Stem or any other underworld outfit. They would be afraid of him. They

want a young fool like Nake that they can wind around their fingers. They want someone who hates the surface men. They'd be afraid to come within a light year of Earth if Washington had real antique rays to fight 'em with. Get wise to yourself—Ben Uniaty ain't got a chance. Nobody has that don't play the space slavers' rotten game."

"I'd like to try it just the same. They're plenty too rotten to work for. They hate anything connected with Earth. We never get anywhere working for them."

"Well, shut up, before you arrive somewhere dead! Where do you expect to get? Ain't you got more now than guys that have to work for a living?"

The thin, sneering-lipped, long-nosed, narrow face of young Red Nake appeared at the great arch of the entry to the throne room and bowed mockingly to Ben Uniaty...

Outside in the cold, pressuring depths of the Atlantic, Ru-Non, breathing hard under the thick, impressing air, raised one hand slowly, then dropped it in a sharp cutting motion. Altor, watching her, began barking orders into the microphone...

Ben Uniaty, angry through and through, barked at young Red Nake.

"You know I've placed a price on your head, you young devil. What in the Demon's name do you want here, what do you think I'll do with you?"

"I claim the ancient customary safety of the audience. I came to beg a pardon, to show my willing..."

Even as he spoke, outside in the Atlantic the orders were being relayed along the great old ship's

sound system.

“Battle Stations! Kill each man who is in place at a weapon in the Stem palace or in the city. Then kill each man that attempts to reach the controls of a mech. Do not kill unnecessarily, we want a cargo of slave-flesh out of this—as well as the main part of the loot of the Stem. Fire!”

A good hundred terrible, flaming penetrative rays flashed suddenly from the long war-ray chamber of the *Darkspear*—lanced swiftly here and there through the palace of the Stem. Within seconds no ray mech of the Stem palace’s formidable armament was attended by any but dead or near-dead men. Ru-Non laughed, a short triumphant bark.

“Hah! So much for your wizard of righteousness. He lies where your ray put him, unconscious. Are you sure you want him, Altor? He has not been such a successful wizard that I would value his wisdom over-highly!”

Altor did not answer directly, only said: “Just to be careful, I’ll order no man of Red Nake’s left near a ray, so long as we are vulnerable from the Stem. Keep each man of them constantly under a ray until we are clear of this ancient Fool’s nest.”¹

CHAPTER II

Red Nake looked proudly around at the sudden doom that had struck the men who had poisoned his father. Nake took one kick at the recumbent body of the old man, then mounted leisurely to the throne, savoring the feeling of power it gave him. If all went well, that deadly ally of his, lying in the depths of the Atlantic outside the dense under-rock walls of Ontal, might leave the rule of the place to him, as they were known to despise Earth and all its poverty; it was “no place to live.” Nake found a button near the throne which released the lock on the great valves of the outer door, where his father’s followers, who were lately his own slightly doubtful retainers, waited. No use giving the space raiders all the advantages. His own men could invest the palace, then let in the warriors from space. Not until his men had been stationed about the palace did he turn toward the levers activating the mechanism of the little used water gate. His men had been warned away from the stationary weapons by rays which stopped their approach, and Nake realized that he was completely at the mercy of the ship outside anyway. He gestured at the man who stood by the doors of the water lock.

The water gurgled beyond the

1. No, the year is not 2,000,000 A.D. or any other imaginary number—it is the year of our United States 1946. These dead shells of underworld empire have been lived in, under our feet, by Indians long ago, and in later days by an influx of underworld predators from Europe. Long before Columbus sighted Haiti, the “Black Man” was known to the Indians of the North American continent, and the “Great Spirit” had his imitators who produced his image from the ancient machinery of the caves. Even today the natives or the Indians of some parts of the world know and use the ancient lost world of the caves, and keep the knowledge from the white man. They were built by an ancient race, perhaps before Earth had a sun, and the super dry air of the depths, insulated perfectly as they are by the pressured miles of rock, which under such pressure is impervious to the slightest moisture, has resulted in a perfect preservation of all the superior scientific living tools of an ancient God-like race.

metal wall-sheaths of the throne room. Nike sat down gloomily, waiting the coming of the slavers from Space. He knew that expecting anything in return for his services was a gamble. But the sooner they got what they wanted and were off into space again where nothing could happen to him and his plans, the better. He felt distinctly unsafe; they held all the cards. He had but one little dis-bulb gun-tube at his hip, which he had picked up from the fallen Brack Longen's holster as he passed. A ray from the *Darkspear* had pricked his hand in warning, but he had boldly thrust the thing into his belt.

The gurgle of the water ceased, and a prolonged throb and hiss told Red Nike the pressure pumps were driving the stored air into the lock from the great pressure tanks—driving out the water, freeing the submersible space ship from the pressure of the ocean depths beyond. Canny of the Elder race, Nike mused, to build cities in the rocks so deep even an atomic bomb could not touch them, to place the only big ship-size exit to the upper world where even penetrative rays could not find it, in the depths of the ocean. Handy for a bunch of ray-men who wanted to prey on the upper world unnoticed. For nothing but the most superior types of antique penetray could penetrate through the material that separated the Elder world from the upper. And there was little chance of upper world men getting those into their hands. Not now, with Ben Uniaty helpless at his feet!

A vast metal segment of the wall swung out, and Nike could see the dripping walls of the waterlock room beyond, the gleaming sides of the vast *Darkspear* lying in her cradle, and

looking like a terrible and deadly leviathan of power. He could hear the officer; his officer, Nike thought proudly, barking his invitation to conference at the tall, short bodied figure standing in the opened lock door of the mighty ship.

"An Amazon!" mused Nike, noting the shot kilt and jeweled halter, the side-arm dis-ray handy at her waist, the erect alert carriage. He had heard of these warlike women slavers, but had not expected them to turn up after he had told the moon agent of the slavers to communicate with them. He had expected, well, most any one else, and the Devil cared who. The voices from the ship's entry port boomed hollowly through the wet tunnel—ominously, it seemed to Nike's ears.

Nike's officer turned on his heel, came striding back, the Amazon chieftainess matching him stride for stride and doing it a little more efficiently, more martially, beside him.

The officer, a smaller replica of Nike's slim, dark, deadly masculinity, stood at attention. "Nike the Red, son of Nike the Red, Noble of Ontal—Her Honor, Ru-Non, The Cruel, commander of the Tiran space-warship, the *Darkspear*, just taken cradle in our water entry port."

"Welcome, Commander Ru-Non." Nike was negligent of true courtesy, did not rise, only looked gloomily down upon the stiff, unsmiling Amazon from space. Nike hoped vaguely that his officer had got the titles straight—was glad he had not announced him as "Lord" of the Stem—for his succeeding to the power in the Stem Palace depended on this Ru-Non. Nike did not know properly how to treat her, but decided it was best to bluff at being not

overawed by her power. "I have not had the honor before."

"Never mind the formality, Red Nake's son. I knew your father, and I do not think more of you, which is not much. I am here for a cargo of slaves; I can dispense with other folderol. Round up the followers of this Ben Uniatty whom I have disposed of for you. Let me see them. As for the loot of this place, I will look it over with my rays from the ship; I doubt there is much here worth my bothering with."

Nake signaled to one of his men, who, with a half dozen others, began prodding the unconscious fallen into wakefulness. They were for the most part not dead, but knocked out by a sleep-ray of high power.

Shortly some hundreds of the followers of Ben Uniatty were shoved into a line and chained wrist to wrist. Among them were the lean, desperate face of Bill Flores, and the drooping, flower-fragile face of Nita Flores. They looked at each other with a horror of realization in their eyes. The life of slaves in the far off cities of the space pirates was known to them, was miserable. Ben himself was kicked awake, chained into line with Tim Shanter and Brack Longen. Ru-Non looked the long line over deprecatingly.

"Is this all?" Ru-Non was scornful. "Small pay for risking my neck for you under Ben Uniatty's ray. I would not have turned aside had I not expected to get something worthwhile out of it."

"Be not discouraged, honorable one. There will be others shortly. I have been keeping tabs on old Ben for some time. He has ads in the daily papers on the surface. Look here."

Nake picked up a paper lying

beside him on the wide seat where Ben Uniatty had dropped it but a short time ago. It looked incongruous there on the wide, gleaming seat of the wonder-carved throne, speaking of an antiquity so great that no man can give a date to it. Nake pointed out the caption at the top to Ru-Non, *The New York Times*. She stepped up the three tall steps of the dais and leaned to see better what he was trying to show her. Nake's hand slid fearfully in spite of his will toward the sidearm he had taken from Ben, which was about his waist. But Ru-Non fixed him with a scornful eye; the hand stopped. Nake leafed rapidly through the paper to the ad sections, pointed out to Ru-Non a lavishly spaced ad.

WANTED: AT ONCE, YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN, TECHNICALLY TRAINED—ABLE TO TRAVEL. TOP PAY AND ALL EXPENSES. WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY. VALUABLE TRAINING COURSE IN ELECTRONICS INCLUDED. APPLY TO SYNTHA METALS LABORATORIES, 1182 NORTH CENTRAL AVENUE.

Nake went on, pointing to the ad—"This address is an office connected by a door with one of the great warehouses where Bonar Golz used to buy the foodstuffs he sold to Ontal and all the eastern cities. Bonar used to use the same kind of ad to get himself slaves to sell—so I have heard. Ben was going to train these men in the use of the antique rays, then send them back to the surface world to break the ancient secret once and for all. They will be pouring down here in trucks, brought by Ben's own men, soon. We take over, send our own men back on the truck for more, and thus take over the office of the surface

warehouse. You should have a full cargo from this ad within days."

Nake's eyes were watchfully on Ru-Non, measuring her, and not getting very far with the job. Why did she leave the Stem Palace to him when she could put her own men in? He was in no position to resist her! To Nake it was the acme of desire, the only great value in a life of no value. To Ru-Non it was a ruin on a backwater world which no sane person would inhabit had they the sense to take to space. Let the fool have it, she wanted it not. Her eyes were non-committal, her face as stony and unreadable as a block of granite. She was not greatly interested in the whole thing, now that the Stem had fallen.

Nake went on. "When the young flesh arrives, they will be hired, all of them, no matter what their demands or objections. They are told the work is of a confidential nature, and they must be prepared to leave at once for a destination they are not given. So had Ben arranged it. This need for secrecy they are told is due to the development of an invention not yet on the market which might be stolen by a competitor. The young people leave, enthused by their acceptance at a rate of pay they had not expected to get for many years in their line of work. They thus relieve us of the necessity of explaining their disappearance by doing it themselves naturally, and the laugh is that Ben had all this arranged for his own plans. When they return, ready for travel, we ship them down here by the truckload. They are never heard from again. After a few weeks the office of Syntha-Metals will be sealed off from the warehouse and rented to another tenant. No one ever inquires where

they have gone, and if they do, from whom should they inquire? Thus the ancient secret is kept for us. Simple?"

"Simple, yes." Ru-Non nodded wearily, a little bored with the son of Red Nake, who did not appeal to her. "This ad business will fill my ship with labor in how long—how many days?"

"Three to four days should jam your cabins to capacity. New York is vast, you know. Young people of this United States all pour into New York City—it is to them the land of opportunity."

"Good. So long as you remember who put you in that glittering seat of power, we should have a long and profitable association in the future. New York is a vast city. Nake, you see that you have ever a cargo of these young things from overhead waiting here for me, and you need not fear from space. Forget you are my man, and I will bring death swiftly to you." Ru-Non's voice lost its emotionless monotone, became for an instant the real cold of space, of death itself.

Nake looked at her eyes, blue as the sky in this artificial light, yet grey and cold inside as death. Nake shivered. He realized how short a man's tether would be with this woman his master. He had heard of her. But he managed a grimace of pleasure in answer, though even his cool was somewhat chilled by this slaver's manner.

"I will have always a cargo of the best waiting here for you, whenever you may find your space path near to Earth. That is not much to do for the favor you have done for me. They will cost you nothing, ever."

Bill Flores, worry for Nita's fate making him weak, leaned against his companion, the wiry, long-nosed Brack, while with his other arm he supported the drooping, weeping Nita. Both were heartsick at the death of all their plans, to teach the surface men of wisdom, to make Earth so vastly better a place to live, as they could have done. Gone, gone, all gone. Now they knew they had but to hope for a life of drudgery on an alien planet, among people who would beat them for speaking in an alien tongue. They watched the pair scheming, their heads together on the throne. *Nake's* cruel, sharp-nosed serpentine coldness contrasted with the brutal, muscular *Amazon's* hard face so eclipsing *Nake's* in inhuman expression.

"Pair of birds for you," muttered Brack into Bill's ear.

"Lovely ending for our plans for the men of the surface. What has become of the 'Helpers'? They always pulled Ben out of these jams before."

"It was more likely Ben pulled them out of their jams before, and today Ben has fallen. They must have been killed."

A whip lashed out from the guard who had lined them up, struck Bill Flores across the naked shoulders. Blood dripped from the barbed thong marks down his arm.

"Silence, lice!" The guard's voice shouting at them seemed the signal for *Nake* and *Ru-Non* to break up the conference. *Ru-Non* raised a hand and gestured with it toward the great door still hanging on its multiple hinges, showing the still-wet sides of the ancient *Darkspear* within the water lock. The guard barked, and his whip lashed out again—the line of drooping-shouldered slaves moved off into

the damp water entrance.

CHAPTER III

For days Nita, Bill, Brack Longen and Tim Shanter had lain in the long slave hold of the space ship, chained to the wall, and daily the quota of captive "Earth-creatures" had grown.

Brack and Bill watched these tall, muscled, well-nourished men of the surface thrust into the dark, smelly hold—their consternation and unbelieving realization that what they had thought an excellent job had turned into some kind of slavery—what kind they had yet to learn. From what Brack had heard the learning would not be pleasant for them.

The slave compartment of the *Darkspear* was what had once been a ballast compartment, perhaps. It was a low, narrow chamber running the full length of the ship, beneath the weapons chamber. It was bare, there was barely room to stand up, and the slaves were chained to wall bolts, placed as closely as possible. The air was foul and there was no room for movement to ease cramped muscles. There was a guard to release a man when necessary for natural reasons, but half the time he was asleep, and angry when awakened. The hundred-odd men from *Ontal* filled but a small space in one end of the long compartment. The hold filled gradually day by day. The ads old Ben Uniaty had placed for his projected organization of modern surface men into a fighting ray outfit to clean up the caverns bore fruit—fruit for *Ru-Non's* pocket. The young men, and a few women, were thrust by ones and twos into the hatches, to be chained against the walls by the guards. Their talk was a mixture of questions, of wonder at

this ship, its nature, what had happened to them—where were they being shanghaied to—what it was all about anyway? Brack pitied the disillusionment they were due for. He engaged one of them in conversation.

“Surprised to be here, eh?”

“Surprised is an inadequate word. Just what is this ship, anyway? What is this all about?”

“You’ll learn. You probably wouldn’t believe me now if I told you.”

“Well, you can try! You don’t seem to be very busy.”

“Well, this thing you’re in is a space ship. You are going to a great slave mart in space, under another sun, where skilled men like yourself bring high prices—as slaves.”

“Isn’t there anything a man can do about... say, a space ship! There aren’t any space ships. They aren’t invented yet.”

“You’re right, but you’re wrong. These ships were built an age ago by a forgotten race. That race lived in all the planets of space that we know of—long ago. Sometime, unknown when, they abandoned this whole part of space. Since then, their ancient homes have been taken over by savage, barbaric native people—and on Earth, these people have managed to keep the existence of the ancient caverns—the places where these ships and similar mechanical marvels of the Elder race are stored—secret from the surface people. This makes it handy for a slave trade with the people living in neighboring planets. Do you understand?”

The young man, a graduate of Harvard Technical Laboratories, gasped a startled wonder. “You said I wouldn’t believe you. I don’t! You are stringing me!”

“No. You see, I’m a native of the secret Earth caverns myself! And I’m fallen to this. I know what it’s all about. You’ll learn. So will these others.”

The young men began to digest Brack’s info slowly, with much talk, much speculation as to its possible truth. Then, with the hold jammed with some 1500 young men and two or three hundred females—the jets began to pulse, the *Darkspear* to move out to sea in the depths. Then the space-power jets took over, the *Darkspear* thrust up to the surface with a terrible rush of force—outraged gravity and inertia crushed them to the metal walls and floors painfully. The chains tore at their limbs as the ship rushed on and up into the dark night sky. The *Darkspear* climbed, a great rocket of dark force—skyward—spaceward. Pain and the crushing force stilled all voices but curses and low groans. Then the pressure eased off. Earth’s hold was broken. They crouched there in the pitch dark, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, and nothing but the roar of the drivers, the tramp of military sounding feet overhead, the sharp bark of an occasional order, and their own low pitched murmuring. Then from the far end of the hold, a deep voice spoke sadly.

“These people from space, they are enemies of our government, aren’t they?”

“These people who have us are pirates, the scum of space, the worst hands into which a man could fall!” Bill answered.

Shortly from the same direction came a sharp, short struggle. A scuffling noise. A barked “What’s going on?” The lights flashed on and the guard came running down the short

stairwell. Toward the far end of the hold he paused, bent over, then lashed out three times with his whip. "Don't try to hang yourself again—there ain't room in those chains for it. Lots try it, none ever succeed. Now quit your acting up, I need some sleep."

When the guard had returned to his cubbyhole above the stairwell, Brack called, "Just why were you trying to hang yourself?"

"Well, I shouldn't tell you, but I don't seem able to keep my mouth shut. I have been working during the past war on the development of the atomic bomb. Naturally I don't want the secret of the atomic bomb falling into any space-pirate's hands—even if I never knew there was a space pirate before today. I figured all I could do was hang myself."

"You were right. These people probably haven't even read a newspaper—don't even know or care if we had a war in which atomic bombs were used. But they read minds with the ancient teltaugs, and they will sooner or later find out that you have a valuable secret. Then it's curtains for many a nation of space. Nothing could stand against these space ships, equipped with atomic bombs."

"Oh God." The deep voice was desolate in his helplessness. "Now I've told you men. They read minds! They are bound to read it in some of your minds! I won't get a chance to do away with myself. I'll be making atomic bombs for things worse than Hitler, probably."

Brack held out little hope. "That's exactly what you'll be doing within a fortnight or two. If you are going to kill yourself—better get it done."

A ray lanced down into the dark hold, and a mocking face appeared in

the ray's nimbus. The measured mechanical tones of Ru-Non's voice spoke. "You needn't bother killing yourself. We have acquired the bomb plans long ago. It is good for Earth that we dwell too far away to want her—that there are richer planets to be had for the taking nearer our home. The bomb plans were acquired by our agents nearly as soon as your government had them ready for use. Those plans are one reason I have been ordered to acquire a number of technically trained young people for development of suitable plants for the manufacture of these bombs."

"Go away, you harpy. You give me a pain!" One of the young Americans expressed himself to Ru-Non's superior, objectionable image in true American fashion.

Ru-Non's reaction was instant. "Your name, you fool, is known by me. Any further instances of your insolence will be punished by a lashing you will not forget, if you live through it!"

The ray vanished, but Ru-Non's angry voice seemed to hover in the dark hold.

The fellow who had insulted the ray spoke again. "Just who do they think they are, anyway?"

"They have been raised in and have inherited many centuries of absolute power—are descendants of a race who took to space in these antique ships long ago. They have been looting the caverns of many planets of slaves and necessary weapons and similar ships for no one knows how long. They are an hereditary ruling race—you are only 'slave' people—they despise you. Do not give them an excuse to be angry; take everything—do exactly as told. Many of them kill for the pleasure of it!"

Brack's voice was hopeless as he explained. He knew explanation was an impossible job. For surface men could never understand the caverns and their contact with space until they had known it, been part of it for years.

In the dark, the time dragged interminably, and apprehension as to their fate occupied the men, made them question Brack and Tim Shanter and Bill for their more cogent ideas on their probable life after the ship reached its destination. Old Ben was very sick, space sick—did not talk.

Their answers to the men's questions went like this: "When you arrive, you will be catalogued, your mind carefully examined for info on your training and capabilities—aptitudes, etc. Your description, your weight, character, etc., are all entered in the lists of the slave mart—to attract bidders. You are held there for weeks, well fed and groomed daily like a horse—to get you in the best possible appearance—as women who have money often pay large prices for attractive male slaves. These women are dominant in their society, you know. The men are usually nobodies, nasty little runts. Some of you fellows who have particular trainings they desire greatly may be offered jobs at regular wages, taken out of the slave class—and made a soldier in their army, or given the rating of a technician of their space organization. The whole thing seems flexible, a matter of chiefs under a kind of privateer charter—who are subordinate only to their ruler at their home planet. They live on a dozen large planets, and prey upon all others for three suns distance. Their home government steadily expands—a kind of Rome of space."

Came the day when the air screamed again around the hull of the *Darkspear*, and they knew they would soon feel the brand of the buyers of the slave marts burning their thighs.

The *Darkspear* lay in water, along a stone quay, and the sun above was bigger and vaguely different in color than the sun they were used to. The landscape they could see mounting up and up in rocky hills away from the docks was wild, wooded with trees they had no names for—conifers and hardwoods vaguely alien and monstrous in size, incredibly old. There were few buildings, and as they filed off the ship they learned why, for the guards led them directly to a cupola under which an elevator waited. They plunged down and down, miles of rock swept past the walls of the great cage before it braked to a halt. Out, and down the long corridors of the same kind of caves one was used to in Ontal—but which were new to the surface men from Manhattan.

The place was filled with life, like a tremendous fair, and barkers hawked their wares over megaphones and sound systems, and as they filed up a man behind a wire cage spoke to Ru-Non, who strode ahead of the party.

"Register your stock here, Lady." Ru-Non handed him a sheaf of papers, and the man spent minutes photostating the papers, stamping them, handing them back.

"Tier 32, Right Hand, Section A, quarters for your stock. Bidding starts at nine, goes on till three. Your stock will go on sale about three days hence, if the sales are lively. There are many buyers lately from Talamoff, they are rich, prices are good. You

seem to have some fine stock.”

“Best Earth blood!” Ru-Non was short-spoken, the man was a menial to her.

The line filed on, were presently quartered like animals in rude wooden stalls, with straw for bedding. Food was brought them in wooden bowls. There were no spoons; they ate with their hands. The meat was half cooked, but plentiful, and the milk was strangely flavored, but rich. Ru-Non did not want her “stock” looking haggard.

Outside their stalls, which extended tier after tier as far as the eyes can see, filled with men and women from a hundred planets, green men, blue men, women with four breasts, men with four legs and a body mounted on it like a centaur on a horse—a hundred types of life scrambled about the place in a business-like but mad bustle. In the distance they could hear the old “And the dance they do...” while through the crowd they caught a glimpse of the shameless nude dancer, and the barker promising even greater revelation and delight inside.

Bill Flores, separated from his Nita for the first time in years, kept climbing to peer through the cracks to catch a glimpse of the women’s stalls some distance away. It was hopeless, but he saw a blue eye peering through a crack and consoled himself with the thought that Nita was as desolate as himself. They both knew they had nothing to look forward to except drudgery or debauchery under some master—and the nature of that master would determine their life to come.

CHAPTER IV

Brack, curious about this place and the nation of Amazons controlling it, engaged their guard in conversation. He was named Andy Miller, he told Brack when asked. “I’m a son of a man from Earth like yourself.”

Andy looked Brack over, liking the shrewd, kindly, gnome-like face, the lean, muscular figure.

“Tell me something about this race of Tirans. I’ve heard of them now and then. I knew Bonar Golz did business with them sometimes. But I never ran into them myself before.”

“Well, it’s a long story, to give you all the dope on these people. They have fought in space for centuries, regular full-scale interplanetary wars. They became an Amazon race because so many of their men were killed in their everlasting fights. They are a race that conquered themselves to death, if you know what I mean. A hundred planets pay them tribute, and when the warlords ran out of Tiran manpower, the women took over and became soldiers. Now it’s a woman’s nation, through and through. Men like you and I are despised, even when free, menials—servants—you know how servants are looked down on, on Earth? I’ve talked to lots of slaves from Earth; it’s always interesting to hear about the place my ancestors came from!”

“How come everybody talks English?” asked Brack. “I’d expect a foreign language.”

“Well, it seems that a language very like English was once the universal language of space. They call it ‘Mantong.’ It’s different—but what we’re talking is a kind of ‘pigeon’ Mantong that has grown up through their use of English speaking slaves

for centuries."

This Andy Miller interested Brack; he seemed to know the answers. "What effect do you think their acquisition of the atomic bomb will have? A warlike race like the Tirans, they'll raise plenty hell with that bomb, eh?"

"You said a large chaw, there, friend. There's a couple of bigshot races on planets bordering the Tiran Empire. These Amazons have been putting off attacking them for a long, long time, because they are not only numerous, they live on planets of greater density and size than the kind the Tirans are hereditarily adapted to. Hence they are powerful physically. They have a lot of science, which they inherit from what they call their Titan ancestors. They are plenty different, tall, very dark people, and strong as oxen.

"There's a second race they are also very careful not to anger, a race of very tiny people, who live on an asteroid belt around a distant sun. They also have space ships and an advanced science, and have weapons superior to those of the Tirans. The Tirans have a kind of superstitious fear of them, as every time they have crossed them in the past, they have met with disaster. But now they have the bomb their feud with the nearer of these races, the heavy-planet people, who are called 'Divi,' will probably be fomented into a war. That will

mean the death of a good dozen great planets, for I know they have now no weapon capable of resisting these atomic bombs."

"Divi, eh? That's a funny name. Never heard of them. How are they at fighting?"

"Plenty tough, but they are more industrial than warlike. They despise the Tirans, but have enough respect for them to stay out of their way. But this bomb puts a different aspect on the thing—I would bet anything the Tirans take them on within months."²

Andy glanced up as a smooth looking blonde, in Tiran kilt, side arms and harness, sauntered over from her place by the female slave pens. "Hello, Andy. Who's your friend?"

"Name's Brack Longen, honey. He's a sharp fellow from Earth, one of the slaves we picked up in Ontal. Brack, this is Nan King, women's overseer under Ru-Non. She was along on the ship. I'm sweet on her, but I know I ain't got a chance against the big shots she runs into around this place. Sooner or later one of them will grab her."

"I don't blame you," Brack grinned. "Nan King is certainly an eye-ful."

Nan looked at Brack archly. Her smooth curves and honest, direct blue eyes, coupled with a fine regularity of feature, made Nan King a prize in any lottery.

2. The weapons and ships of the ancient elder race were familiar to the Tirans, and their centuries of use of these tools of the Gods had made their equipment as familiar and standardized as the rifle and the foot soldier are to us. Now this new element, the atomic rocket bomb, had entered the picture. The race of Tirans was the first to bring this rocket from Earth, and their endless laboratories and armament plants on a dozen planets were at work now building these bombs in a hundred variants, for use in their warfare. The leaders of the race saw before them endless, victorious conquest of all. There were, on the rims of their empire, a thousand planets they had not yet touched because of inability to get past the antique space defense ray with which the planets were defended.

Brack sounded her out, for he wanted to get the temper of these "servants" of the Tirans. All his life Brack had been struggling with one hard master or another, ducking corrupt lawmen in Ontal, keeping out of sight and out of custody while he operated against such men as Bonar Golz and Red Naked, the Elder. Brack knew he was not through. He was up against the same old struggle still, just the personnel had changed.

"You two seem to have a pretty good job with these Tirans. Do you like them?"

"Some of them; and some of them are pretty lousy bosses to be around. The Tirans are apt to have a swelled head, as you may have noticed."

Andy nudged Nan, shaking his head. Nan glanced quickly around, and Brack knew that they both hated the Tirans, would do anything to change their lot with them. For he had swung his head in just that furtive look for informer's ears too often not to know what it meant. It meant they were so used to repressive tyranny that they could not even think an honest thought without worrying about it.

"Do these Divi's you spoke of have a bigger fleet than the Tirans? Do they build their own ships? Or do they use the same old ships of the Elder race like the Tirans do?"

Andy answered, for he understood who Brack was, and he wanted to give him all the info he could, for his heart was with him. He had known of Bonur Golz and his repression of the people of Ontal, had transported many of them into slavery after their sale by Bonur to the space captain. He had been overjoyed to hear of Bonur Golz's death, and the seizing of the power in Ontal by Ben

Uniaty, known for his kindness and wisdom. Now both Ben and his chief aides, Tim and Brack, were here in these pens, waiting for sale. His heart went out to them; to lose everything after a lifetime of planning and work had been successful was a sad thing. He realized that these men would prove valuable in any movement against the repressive Amazons from among the slaves, and Andy was not unaware that such a movement existed, for some darn funny things happened to Tiran Amazons sometimes. So far such things as a poisoned Amazon had been laid to foreign agents from the Divi or the diminutive race of Freyans—of whom the Tirans were afraid. But sooner or later they would realize their own slaves were working under cover against them, and there would be a housecleaning. Andy had no wish to talk about such things, had shushed Nan who was apt to be careless with talk. But he saw that to tell Brack Longen everything he could was only doing his duty by his own kind.

"The Divi have a dozen heavy planets covered with armament plants, laboratories and vast, many-tiered cities. Compared to the Tirans, who hold a hundred planets under their Empire, one would think they were weak, but the truth is they are more than a match for the Tirans, for their planets are densely populated, and they are a smarter race—all free men, with a voice in their government. But the atomic bomb will change all that. It looks like the end of the Divi to me. The Tirans will never stop their conquest now, and a thousand planets lie within reach of these terrible ancient ships, yet untouched because they could not get past the space defense rays set up to keep off

just such an invasion. But with the atomic bomb, they can lie out of range in space and drop an endless stream of bombs till every city is wiped out. Nothing will stop them!"

"One thing could, Andy! If you got me and a bomb expert from Earth out of here and on our way to the Divi planets, we would get them ready for the Tirans, and it might mean the end of your servitude under these heartless Amazons. It could even mean you would win Nan King, if we made out successfully. The Divi would wipe the Tirans out with atomic bombs out in space—sweep in here and release all the slaves. Think about it, Andy; see what you can do."

Andy looked speculatively at Nan King's provocative back, moving so deliciously, away toward her job at the women's pen. Then his hand reached into the pen, shook Brack's skinny claw. He did not say a word, only his eyes shone hopefully at Brack.

Brack said, "I'll wise up the guys. There'll only be two or three of us. More would make it harder. If we win, you'll be a big shot. Then Nan couldn't help but fall for you."

"It ain't that with Nan, Brack. It's a lot of other things. We Earth servants, children of slaves, are despised, can't have any fun. If she married into another class, she could have parties, fun, clothes, all kinds of things I can't give her. It's hard to forget that. And these Tiran doctors ain't much, but if she had a kid, I couldn't even hire one of them. See, that matters. It all adds up to no sense to it, see, Brack. She wants to live, like anybody else."

"I see, fellow. Play it my way. I ain't exactly the dumbest slave they ever brought from Earth, you know."

"I've heard of you, Brack Longen. Ru-Non used to laugh, tell stories of how Bonur Golz used to curse you and Ben. But don't talk in front of Nan. She's only a woman, and she can't always keep her lip buttoned."

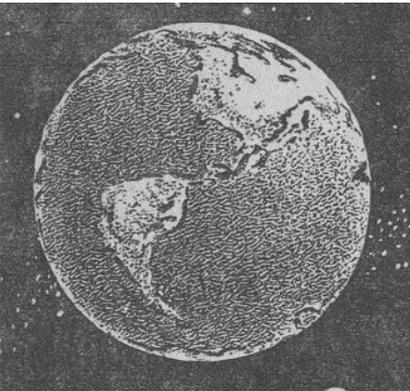
Brack was not exactly as lost as one might think, for these caverns had been built by the same race that had built the caverns under Earth's surface.

Brack knew that once loose in the abandoned parts of these labyrinths, which he had no doubt were as extensive, as empty for the most part as those on Earth, and he would find ways of getting along. For Brack knew a great deal more about the Elder race than do many living men; he was of a family who had handed down many secrets from the far past of life in the Elder caverns. If there were machines left intact by the Tirans because they didn't know what they were, Brack knew he would find some of them and be able to use them. And Brack wanted freedom as soon as he could get it, for once the Tirans realized what he had in his head, what old Ben had in his head for them that they did not know—they would not be allowed to do anything but sit at a "thought-augment" making steno notes for their officers to study. Now Andy Miller had given Brack hope that his end as a reference automaton for inquisitive Tirans might be avoided.

As the days wore on, Bill realized, from bits of conversation, from rays which swept in to the pens occasionally to pump the new Earth slaves of information, and which were in turn pumped by the Earthmen of everything they would answer—that space held no hope for Earth! Space was, in truth, a vast barbarism where war

and stupidity held terrible unbreakable chains around all progress. The hereditary rulers, steeped in a vitiating luxury of pleasure and dissipation, had no plans—no liberal minds, so near as he could learn. And in all space, as he questioned the people about it, and the rays that came from invisible sources—in all space there was no hope such as his heart longed for—some word of a superior, idealistic and cultured race equipped as were these cruel barbarians with the vast strength of the antique ray mech, the antique space ships—there was no such government that he could learn about. The future stretched before him—a labor for unwanted ends, a slavery for unloved masters, a nothingness until grey-death overtook him. This terrible despondency of truth-seeing absorbed him, and he slumped in his chains in a corner of the pen, not speaking to anyone—dumbly, hopelessly waiting for nothing he wanted. But the rays he had talked to had lied to him! There was hope!

Came the day of the sale. They had been examined, scrubbed, their bodies oiled, and they stood in long lines, mother naked, awaiting to take

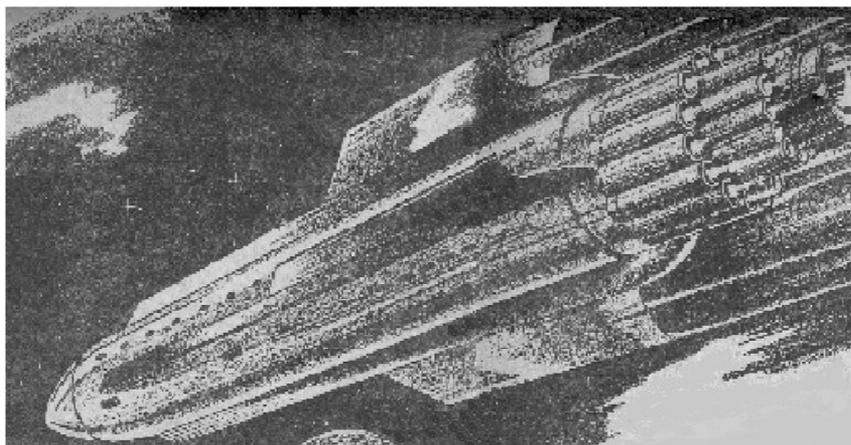


their place on the blocks, of which there were several, and at each one an auctioneer—barking, reading from the dossier that accompanied each slave. Next to the line of which Bill, Brack, and Tim made three was the line of women from Earth, mixed now with women from other places—and Bill cast despairing eyes at Nita, chained wrist to wrist within the line of women.

Above their heads the auctioneer barked data from the sheets of the dossiers. "Name: Al Waters—graduate of a technical college—engineer of electricity—Earth born, 22 years of age, 178 lbs., blond, blue-eyed—strong, healthy—who wants him?"

The buyers seated in circles of wider and wider cushioned chairs about the booths where the sellers barked, looked at the slave through glasses, chattered to each other, their silken robes shining in the blue rays of artificial lighting—gems gleamed on their fingers as they held them up to indicate their bids. They were a sharp-faced, lean lot, many of them looking like Arabs, but seated among them also were the tall, strong Tiran women and a few other women of blue skin from God knows where. The men seemed to be officials of factories buying for labor, while the women had their eyes on the men for other, more obvious reasons. The blond Al Waters brought a good price from a blue-skinned woman of uncertain age, bidding against a small, dark man whose pockets bulged with notebooks. He seemed to Bill to be a man who speculated in slaves and was buying only to get a better price elsewhere.

But Bill's eyes were watching the women's block, where a clerk from



the Fifth Avenue shops stood naked before these people from a hundred different planets. "Jean Frain, stenographer, age 23—married and divorced—no children—weight 120 lbs.—height 5'4"—brown hair..." etc.

She was turned slowly about by the Amazonian auctioneer, her legs stretched and flexed to show her supple beauty, made to squat, to leap, to skip from one foot to the other. Her face was a mask of embarrassment and fear; Bill wondered if she would not collapse before the ordeal was over. Bill noticed that on her back were the red weals of a beating; evidently it had taken the whip to apprise her of her status as a non-citizen, a bit of "stock." She brought a good price for she was pretty.

Bill's heart sank to his bare feet as Nita stepped to the block. Said the auctioneer: "Here we have a rare value. This little lady is mistress of the ancient art of dancing to thought-record organs—an art rare on Earth, but an old one among certain lordly families of the caverns, which are secret there to the majority. She is also well trained in the use of the stim organ, and has been trained by the

secret scientists of Earth caverns for a part in their plan to rid the caverns of the chaos which reign there—she knows her rays, gentlemen, and would be a valuable little ally for a gentleman who treated her right, as well as an expert dancer to entertain man's leisure moments. She is married, and her husband stands over there where he belongs." The auctioneer pointed to Bill. "He probably never treated her rare beauty with the respect it demands from every discerning man anyway—so bad cess to him, say I."

His sally against Bill was greeted with a roar of laughter, and the bidding on Nita rose to heights far beyond the previous sale of women. Strangely enough, a glittering matron of the Tirans won out in this bidding, and Bill noted by the manner in which the others bid against her that they were afraid to raise her more than a pittance, afraid of her, plenty; it was on their faces. Bill hoped vaguely that she wished Nita for other reasons.

As Bill's turn came on the block, this same bejeweled, oldish woman bid high again, raising every other

bid by the double. Again the bidders dropped off; that they did not wish to anger her was obvious.

Bill found himself led to a waiting globe car outside the auction rooms. Inside squatted a dozen naked Earth exiles, mixed equally, male and female. Presently the trim bodied matron entered, looked them over shortly, and said:

"You are going to my home, to act as my slaves. You are very fortunate to be bought by me, instead of by others. I happen to be very high in the Tirane government, and my slaves take on an importance and a certain beneficial aura of influence. I know you men and women of Earth were born free, and I will make allowances. I am not an evil person, as you will learn—but am ruled by expedience, as I advise you to be. I bought this Nita and Bill because I hated to see man and wife separated, and so that you can see I have a kind heart, and thus feel not alarmed at your strange fate on this alien world. Wait until you understand our life before you condemn it."

She locked the compartment in which they were confined. The half globe lifted on some ancient anti-gravity device, glided down the center of the great way-tube through the rock of this planet, Tirane. Presently the car stopped before the brightly lit entrance to an upward pointing ramped opening which led up into their new life. Bill's arm was about Nita again—and life had lost its bitter taste.

CHAPTER V

Brack had not long to wait before his conversation with Andy Miller bore fruit. He stood there beside

Tim Shanter and old Ben, silently watching the auction and waiting their turn to be hustled from their stalls and lined up with the rest. Though Brack doubted that they would be sold, but would be held by Ru-Non, and then taken from the pens as unsaleable so as to have them for herself. Then he heard the crisp metallic sound of a key grating in the lock. A young man in a guard uniform stood there, the door open.

"Brack Longen, I am here to get you and two others for Ru-Non's pre-sale examination."

Brack sauntered over to the man, and looked significantly at two men of the surface of Earth seated against the wall. The young guard looked at an official-looking paper in his hand, walked over to the two Earthmen, and carefully kicked each one of them hard in the thighs. They stood up. One took a sudden swing at the young guard's head, but he ducked it and promptly knocked the Earthman down.

"No more of that, you scum." The guard seemed very angry. "Come along."

Brack bent over the man, helping him to his feet and in the process managed to wink at him. He became instantly very manageable. Tim and Old Ben Uniaty looked at Brack curiously, wondering what Ru-Non could want of him. It wrung Brack's heart to leave them, but he had things to tend to, and knew that the fewer the better. One guard would not be sent for five men, but would for two or three. And he had but one ally, Andy.

The guard followed them, flicking at them with his whip to guide them at the turns in the caverns. They en-

tered, and the elevator rose silently to the surface of Tirane. Soon the dark sides of the *Darkspear*, still lying in the water where they had disembarked, loomed before them. Overhead were only the stars, and about was the shrill, insect-chirping night, the mighty alien trees, and the smell of freedom. And freedom with an alien smell—with alien air. Strange that the thought of freedom could bear such alien sensing, Brack thought.

The guard ushered them aboard the mighty craft. Here and there about the craft could be heard muffled movement, the sounds of sleepers, the unsteady steps of a late returning warrior from the caverns—when she was supposed to be on duty on the *Darkspear's* deserted, tiered decks. Discipline was relaxed here on Tirane where they had nothing to fear.

Straight to the vaulted, complex, control cabin machinery of the Elder ship bridge Andy led the slaves—and once inside, Andy threw shut the great valves of the bridge door, screwing down clamps once designed to protect against air loss in accident.

"Get her off, Brack. We'll hunt down the remaining Tirans aboard with a ray from here while you get her into space."

Brack stepped to the great control board, pulled a lever here, shot home a switch there. Within seconds the *Darkspear* glided out to sea, and within minutes she was blasting skyward. Nervously Andy Miller searched the ship with the visi-ray. Some fifty Tiran Amazons were sleeping aboard, and now acceleration held them with bands of steel within their sleeping bunks. But it didn't hold Andy, for he was seated before the screen in an acceleration chair before the ship took

off. Andy had been to space before! Andy swiftly swung the sleeper-ray about the ship, and his smiling face told Brack those proud Amazons would sleep a long time.

"Don't kill them, Andy. The Divi will want to pump them of info on the Tiran progress in bomb making, their plans, etc."

"Right, Chief!" Andy realized he had a chief now and one he could be proud to obey.

The two Earth men stood, or rather were held against the bulkhead motionless, not only with the acceleration, but with the wonder of what was happening. The tall, dark one looked at his shorter sandy companion. "Just like—that! They walk right out of that place as if they owned it and steal a whole damned spaceship."

"What beats me," answered the other one, "is that space ships don't exist. I went to school. They—just—don't—exist!"

"I always did suspect them school books," agreed the tall one, grinning.

With anxious eyes and a nimble ray Andy searched the sky behind them for sign of pursuit. There must have been some alarm; a ship couldn't take off without some guard ray seeing it. There was!

Andy began to count aloud as one after another the fiery streaks of the jets showed in long arcs in the dark sky behind—then narrowed and shortened into tiny dots denoting head-on pursuit. One—two—three—Andy counted up to twenty.

"Some pursuit—twenty of them! They're smaller ships, I think, ships they use for local trips between neighboring planets. They're fast—but not too fast. Give her all she's got, Longen. They're hornets with a ray!

Damn big-headed women....”

Brack worked over the control board, looking with his clever mind for some way of increasing the drive. All his life Brack had tinkered with and repaired the antique machinery and he had a pretty good idea what had gone on in the minds of the super-men who built them—although if he had to put his knowledge into words he would have been at a loss.

Brack noted on the slot in which the great drive lever slid, a little angle iron, of some corroded metal, bolted on to halt the long slide of the lever.

“Andy, do you know anything about this?” Brack pointed to the bit of metal and screws that held it to the untarnished surface of the antique non-corrodable alloy.

Andy looked, shook his head. “I’ve seen it before, on other ships, too. I figured they put it on to keep these female boneheads from wreckin’ themselves and the ship. Take it off, see what happens.”

“You might be right, at that. They wouldn’t have the coordination of the Elder race, couldn’t handle a ship in maneuvers as fast as the men who built it. It may have been a necessity.” Even as he talked Brack was at work removing the block to the drive lever. Behind them Andy and the two Earth men watched the pursuing dots of flame draw closer, felt the first terrible blight of the energy of the death rays the Tirans were throwing, even though not yet in range. Andy flung off the bit of angled metal, pulled the great lever back to the full length of the slot. And that was the last act either of them remembered for some time! Blackness swept down, engulfed them!

None knew how much later they came to consciousness, slowly, pain-

fully. They were floating in the air—and that peace that can be found only in space when all gravitational and other influences such as acceleration are in abeyance enveloped them. Andy struggled slowly to the wall by kicking, pulled himself to the floor by means of the hand rail, shook Brack awake with difficulty.

“What happened?” Andy asked Brack when he opened his eyes and registered consciousness again.

“I have an idea. What we can do about what happened is what worries me.” Brack rubbed his head where a large egg-sized bump was turning a royal purple on his forehead.

“You gave her so much juice that she just shot out from under us, eh?”

“You know anything about these drives?” Brack asked Andy.

“The only thing I know is they put water in for fuel before a trip. That is definitely all I ever learned.”

“Well, you’re right, water is the fuel. I’ve taken these ships apart in the past to see what made them tick. In the drive chamber is a series of plates, which are electrified by some mysterious current generated by special dynamos within the drive compartments. That electricity tears the water apart into its atoms, and I guess it tears the atoms apart a bit too. Anyway, from a little water they get an enormous stream of gases at terrific pressure. When I pulled that lever back farther than the Tirans had fixed it to be pulled, those dynamos went into high speed, and that juice that tears the water apart started to tear the water apart into a lot smaller parts than usual. What we got out of it was some kind of over-drive, a near approach to atomic power, I’ll guess. If we hadn’t been out in space and nearly weightless, the sudden in-

crease in momentum would have killed us. As it is—we don't know where we are. There's a hell of a lot we don't know right now, boys!"

"You're telling me!" ejaculated the tall New Yorker. "I never knew I didn't know so much in my life!"

"Not only that." Andy pointed to the water gauge. "We're out of water. We can't get back from where we don't know—without some water we ain't got no way of gettin'."

"Well, I don't know about you guys, but I feel a lot safer not knowing where I am than I did when I knew where I was. I like it lots better." Andy grinned—kept on grinning.

Brack was activating a vision ray screen in the bow, looking over the old star-charts—so old no man knew when or who had made them—handling the time worn metal-foil sheets with the reverence they deserved. "Show me where we were, maybe we can figure where we have arrived."

"It's all Greek to me, Brack. I never had a chance to look at those things before, close like this. They guard all that stuff. It is their caste secret, you know. The secret of the 'eminence' of the Tirans."

"Probably don't want everyone to find out how dumb they are about it all!" Brack was poring over the old charts, looking for some marking that corresponded with the great stars that evolved slowly on the visi-screen as the great *Darkspear* rolled gently over and over, powerless, dead.

"Here," Andy pointed to a mark on the chart over a tiny dot, "that is the mark they placed to show where Tirane is on the chart. And here is an arrow pointing toward that great sun there. Can you find that sun?"

"I can't read this gibberish they've scrawled on the charts. I can't figure how we can tell where or how we are going to get anywhere—it just doesn't make sense. If you knew some of these stars and where the direction of Divi lay in relation to some fixed star—look at that screen again, tell me something is familiar."

Andy looked at the star-screen, picturing the whole hemisphere of the heavens at which the bow of the *Darkspear* pointed. "It seems to me, coming back from Earth, Ru-Non used to point the ship toward the little dipper there, a little left of it, see, and steer by sight."

"I see." Brack was scornful. "If she missed home the first shot, she just drove around the block. Navigation of space by sight driving. Well, if they can, we can. Divi should be at right angles to that course, eh?"

"But we don't know for sure, now, whether we have been asleep for hours or days, we don't know whether Divi lies ahead or behind. We just don't know what to do."

"Andy, it's up to you. You just sit there and turn the ship around till you get a sight on something familiar and go for it till we see something more familiar and presently we will find a way of knowing where we are."

"You guys are forgetting one thing. We are out of joy-juice. We ain't going none—see. It is all burned up—gone out."

"Go through the cabins, find all the drinking water on board, pour it into the fuel tanks. We'll get somewhere by pointing the nose at something familiar—giving the drives one good shot of disintegrating water—and then let her coast."

CHAPTER VI

Rill and Nita entered the great, luxurious chambers of the home of the Divnani Marnio Tiran, Head of the Department of Commerce. Smiling Earthman faces showed them to their quarters, and Bill and Nita were soon asleep in each other's arms.

The morning found them still asleep, and beside their bed was the trim Divnani Marnio, shaking them to wakefulness. Bill did know what to say—it was somehow hard to realize that this smiling woman owned him as she owned her horses, her dogs—body and soul.

"Good morning. I am sorry to disturb you"—(which incongruity in her bearing Bill could not fathom)—"but I must seize this opportunity of being alone with you to explain many things to you so that you do nothing rash before you are adjusted. Just lie there like the young angels you probably are, and listen to me.

"I am the descendant of an Earth slave. Long ago, my great grandfather sired children to a Lord of the Amazon Tirans, and the scandal was hushed—for with proud Tirans it is a disgrace to bear of a male slave—and the children made legal. But we of Earth blood and normal Earth emotions are rather numerous and, as you can understand, form a clique which has certain power. I bought you two, spending far more than I could well afford for you, because I was told by my informers who and what you are. Such knowledge as you two have can be immensely valuable to we of the mixed blood, for much of the ancient knowledge is secret—is available only to the inner cliques—of which I lead one. But my sympathies for you of Earth having unfortunately been noted—I am not trusted. They are

suspicious of the growing unity among the slaves, and suspect Earth men of secretly organizing against them. If their suspicions ever come to a head, many such as you will die—innocent or guilty will not matter—it will be a holocaust."

"What can we do? Just what can we do to show our gratitude?" Nita was fully conscious of what their benefactor had done for them, and her voice shook with her earnest will to prove to this woman that her unlooked for favors were not unwelcome. The trim old lady smiled at her young, fragile beauty—so beautifully expressing the clean young will within her.

"You can help me to keep the Earth slaves from getting themselves blamed with everything that goes wrong. Certain corrupt ones in the government have been looting, killing rich Tirans, taking over their riches by ruse—and the Earth slaves are blamed for their deeds. Naturally they are glad to find so ready a goat."

"Nero and the Christians," Bill said to himself.

"What was that?" The white-haired vigorous Divnani was nonplussed.

"An Earth expression—it means: the goat is a white one."

"We of Earth blood must band together and find a way of getting rid of those who blame us for all the evil of this land. I must go now—I have a government office to attend to. You behave yourselves, do a little work around the place—and presently you will find a way of making yourselves useful to me and to our mutual friends. Goodbye and don't try to run away. Your friend Brack had means, it seems, which I doubt you would be so lucky to find again. They will not

allow that to happen soon again."

"What is this about Brack—what did you mean?"

"Last night Brack Longen and two guards—or one guard—took two surface men from New York City—the atom bomb experts who were trying to keep it secret, and escaped. There was a terrible flurry all through the government, for the atomic bomb is now the big war secret of the Tiran government. They stole Ru-Non's ship—the *Darkspear*—and escaped with it into space. Twenty pursuit type smaller ships took off after the *Darkspear*, but once in space that wizard Brack did something to the drive, and the ship disappeared in an instant. We know what he did—but the pursuit was afraid, for they never have used the overdrive and returned to tell the tale. It is too powerful for their skill in navigation of space to keep track of their whereabouts. They returned empty handed. The atomic bomb is no longer the exclusive property of the Tiran race in space. Does that amuse you?"

"I am glad, of course. I suppose we will never see our friend again, though it is good to know he is free. But tell us, before you go—what of the old man Ben Uniaty? He is like a father to us—what has become of him?"

"Ru-Non's chief officer has claimed him for part of her share of the booty of the raid—he will probably not be harmed. Perhaps I can buy him cheaply; he is old, and Altor is not greedy, is friendly with me. We will see. You will see him, sooner or later."

The Divnani turned, left with a quick step.

As Bill and Nita rose to dress, they heard a sharp cry not far off out-

side their door. Following the cry there was a sound of struggle, then the thump of a falling body. They rushed out of the tiny chamber to find the trim old lady sprawled on the floor, bleeding from a nasty head wound. They bent over her, and Nita took her head in her lap. She made an effort to speak—then her shaking hand took a tiny black metal foil book from her breast, pressed it into Nita's hand. "I am dying," she murmured. "Guard this book with your life. It is a very great secret." She closed her eyes and lay limp in Nita's arms.

As Bill and Nita shouted for help a tall Tiran female ran up, snarled: "So, two beastly murderers so shameless they do not even flee. You shall die a thousand deaths for this. You shall be a lesson for every slave in Tiran's wide empire!"

The two Earthmen from New York introduced themselves to Brack and Andy as Lee Jonklin and Henry Arnholm. Both were engineers, physicists, held several degrees. Both had worked on the atomic bomb during the intense United States development of the atomic fission of uranium and of the metals for the bomb. Both had concealed their identity after the bomb had become a fact in order to enjoy freedom—erasing their records from the secret service rolls by moving to new locations before the lid of governmental caution and fear had clamped down, making them virtual prisoners—as they had foreseen. Both had changed their names—turned to other work to avoid the personal control of their lives they knew that an attempt to keep the bomb plans long secret would mean for them. It was in this search for new work of a different nature they had fallen into Ru-

Non's and Nake's net. They would have been valuable men for old Ben Uniaty's plans, Brack mused.

"Can you build such a bomb?" asked Brack—somewhat fearfully, for much hinged on their ability to do that job right.

The two men looked at each other. They laughed, looked around at empty space stretching forever on all sides, and the tall Lee Jonklin said: "We are so used to keeping our lips buttoned on that particular fact that we have a hard time saying it. But the truth is, we can build an atomic bomb!"

"Well, that is exactly why Andy and I picked you two strangers to escape. If you had not known how to build a complete atomic bomb, we would not have even attempted an escape. We are looking for a race in space—a group of a dozen heavy planets on the rims of Tiran's space empire—whom the Tirans mean to strike; to war on with these same bombs. We meant to take you to them—you can guess the rest. To get a good poke at those Tiran fish-faced women would do you good, eh?"

"Let's get that water!" Henry Arnholm, his short legs moving with a comic rapidity, started off down the corridor, picking up a bucket from a cabin door as he passed. Lee laughed. "One of those women gave Henry a good beating for saying he had seen better washing dishes in the automat. She read his mind with a portable ray she was carrying—a little gadget, you know, and did she burn up! She took it out on his back with a whip. He was right, at that. I'd as lief embrace a dead mermaid as that Ru-Non and some of the others."

Brack smiled, and they spread out on the search for water through the

great ship. Meanwhile, Andy, who was not being careless with anybody's freedom anymore, sat down at the bridge ray and swept the view-ray penetray through the whole ship, checking each still unconscious Tiran and giving each a dose of the high-voltage sleep-ray. Then he picked up a coil of rope and set off to bind each one of them, in case he should forget they had dangerous passengers.

Several gallons of water served to start the great drive dynamos humming the jets to shooting their grey atomized steam, shot with the flames of partial disintegration, out to the rear again. A slight acceleration gave them a sense of orientation, and the gravity devices went back into operation, making their feet stay on the floor. Their world was coming right again. Just how they would have found their way again to the borders of the Tiran space empire, and then found that point in space that was the Divi race's home, they would never learn; for even as they swung, searching for some familiar aspect of the stars to orient themselves by, a tiny ship shot alongside the slowly spinning, turning leviathan, Brack was quite unaware there was anyone within miles, until a ray reached out from the tiny ship and carried a voice of thunder into his ears.

"Speak out, and declare your identity or we will disintegrate you—you will become the ash of ashes, Tiran slaves, devil's dupes."

Brack looked up from his study of the peculiar alien stars to see before him the projected face of a tiny, elfin creature. He exclaimed, "Well, I've heard of them all me life, but I never expected to see the 'little people', Leprechauns—what be you anyway, man of might?"

Brack's whimsical surprise was not pleasing to the tiny creature whose face was projected before him. "Stop your ancient junk—you insoulerial rogue. We are boarding of you!"

Brack, nothing loath, and very much relieved to find a living mind about who at least had a destination and knew how to get there, slid the great drive lever to neutral—and the *Darkspear* ceased her slow return to cruising momentum.

The tiny ship shot out a magnetic grapple and the tiny men, seeming to run not more than two feet high, walked carelessly across the cable stretching between the two ships and entered the air lock as Brack turned the air pumps that released the vacuum's grip.

The tiny men filed into the vast Elder ship. "Devils Tiranian, how came you to penetrate the Freyan spaces to this ultra-special sacredity?"

Brack looked questioningly at Andy—this peculiar tongue, so familiar yet so utterly alien? Andy said, "This is even better than the Divi, Brack, they are Freyans. The Tiranians fear them like they fear God's hand in the flesh! We can work with them on the bomb, surprise the Tiranians on their way to the Divi—and among these Freyans there is no chance of spies letting the Tiranians in on it, for certainly there are no spies among them—they would not be the right size!"

"It could be, but what are they saying? We've got to get along with them."

Andy stepped forward, bowed before the little gorgeousness of the gnome-like leader.

"Oh, Freyan, we are lost like sheep without shepherds, we know

not what has driven us here. We fearfully fled from the Devils Tiranian; and our ship has cast us unconscious—where we know not. We have little knowledge of your ways, but we crave speech with those of you who can speak our tongue. We have much to discuss—and we bring Tiranian women as prisoners, as you can see."

Andy flung open a stateroom within which lay a bound Tiran warrior woman, who cursed and struggled at sight of them.

The Freyan smiled widely at the furious face of the Tiranian, and turned to Andy, a smile of vastly different import on his face.

"You strangers of 'what-spaces' be inherently opposed to the essential vapidity of the Tiranian under-ego, aye! I see!"

"That's the general idea, O mighty Freyanian."

"Some lingo," Lee Jonklin winked at Brack.

Brack nodded. "Surprisingly the same language, I find. It is always remarkable to see how the tongue of the Elder race has persisted in all space where they touched," Brack said gravely. "You can hear it in most Earth languages, though Earth men have been out of contact with each other and with space for so many centuries of darkness that colloquialisms have nearly drowned out the ancient source of words. Here we strike a purer English than English—the 'mother' of English."

"Not their real tongue, though, Brack," Andy corrected Brack. "They are trying to speak our tongue. Their own is not understandable. I'll ask him to shoot some of it at you."

"O leader of these who guard here from the Tiraniana, speak your

mother tongue that these strangers may hear it."

"Strangeriana, mu tonga ess a Essentialiality ess basicalaity of diminutive rootnesses identity ess, but time on and on has varied all chainedness of relationalaity into complexum un mentality morass!"

"I see. Some of the ancient Elder symbols I know by sight, but not by sound very well, the records are so much thought."

The little man gestured. "Time on, we speak on. These latterday tonga, heterogeneity of nonconcordances, eh?"

With the little chief standing on the bridge watchfully behind them, they steered the great *Darkspear* after the homing flight of the tiny ship of the Freyanania.

After a flight of some hours at top speed the little man pointed to a belt of tiny green asteroids strung across the sky like emeralds on a string, swinging round a small but very brilliant white sun.

Brack, who was something of a collector of the legends and stories of the underworld peoples, knew that these tiny Freyans must somehow be connected with the stories of the "little people" of the Earth-caverns, and a great interest, a curiosity as to their tiny green worlds arose in him. For the legends of the "little people" had described them as wonderworkers of the first magnitude—as masters of the ancients' arts.

CHAPTER VII

The Tirans had a kind of judicial system, and Bill and Nita found themselves waiting in a cell for a hearing by a police official. That it would be perfunctory and that the sentence would be death, Bill had not

the slightest doubt, for he had seen enough of the Tiran women to know they thought little of a slave's life; would not hesitate to make an example of them even if their innocence was obvious. And it was far from obvious! Bill sat figuring out a defense which he doubted he would have a chance to present.

They had not long to wait. Came striding Altor, whom Bill had met when she came down into the hold of the *Darkspear*, and another Tiran officer, their short kilts crisp, bright plaids in the blue light, their side-arms glittering, their eyes straight ahead. The Tirans were born soldiers.

"Oh, here they are. The two murderers who are here but one night when they find a way to murder a woman who bought them but to keep the young couple together. Poor old Divnani, to die so of a kindness. Her soft heart..."

"We had nothing to do with her death! She was very good to us. Why should we want to harm her who had proved herself kind among so many who proved otherwise?" Bill broke into the talk of the two women. "Altor, I remember you when you came down into the slave hold to see old Uniaty—you should know enough about us to know we didn't do it."

"I have little doubt of your innocence—you look like a couple of innocents of the first water, anyway. But there have been quite a number of deaths of high-born Tiran women recently, and they had to catch someone—and you were very handy." Altor looked at them amusedly—and Bill wondered whether she, too, was as heartless and cold as the other Amazons.

Altor had something on her mind,

Bill decided. She beckoned to the prison guard.

"Open the door. I would have a little private speech with the prisoners."

"But, honorable sub-commander Altor, these prisoners are charged with murder. It is forbidden to have speech with them."

Altor looked the man in the eye. "It might pay you to be a little more observant of your own welfare and a little less of the formalities of the injustice you profess to uphold. You know as well as I that these two are as innocent as I of the murder of their mistress. They had been here but a few days—I knew them on the ship."

"The matter is in your hands, highness. If you insist, I am not the man to say nay to the chief officer of Ru-Non, who is well known for..."

The man quailed before Altor's steely eyes, and flung open the cell, locking it after she entered. Altor came at once to the point.

"I have it on pretty good authority that old Ben Uniaty is over ninety years old. Yet he looks but fifty or so, and is as active and strong as a man of forty. It is whispered among the other captives from Ontal that Ben has some secret of defeating age. I want that secret! Ru-Non has heard the rumor, has made Ben her personal prisoner, and intends to get it for herself. I may never get it from her; then again I may be given the use of the secret. Her friendships and kindnesses are as unpredictable as her hatreds and cruelty. But I do not wish to take chances. Has Ben such a secret?"

Bill looked gravely into Altor's eyes. Thinking swiftly, Bill realized there would be no advantage in denying the fact that Ben had found a

way of fighting age successfully. And there would be a distinct advantage in telling her the truth, as he then had something with which to bargain with Altor, something she wanted for which she might be able to use her influence in their behalf. So Bill answered without perceptible hesitation. "Yes, Ben Uniaty has a method of casting off age and becoming young again. He would be now a young man, but he was fifty before he found the secret—and the method only keeps a man at the age in which he begins using the method."

"I want that method, you Earth scum! I want it! Tell me what it is!"

"First, my beautiful Altor, smile! Then promise to release us from this threat of being sentenced to death for a murder you know well we had nothing to do in committing. We are innocent."

"I will do what I can for you. But give me the secret."

"You should not be so forward, Altor. If we told you now, what would the hold be, where would our promise go? Payment will be given on receipt of the goods—for we not only want freedom, we want transportation to a country where we will not be slaves, where we will not be beaten; and release—freedom. When we have freedom, Altor, then we will tell you how to remain as young as we appear to be. We are both quite a few years older than we look, you know. You should take that into account in your attempts to out-think us."

Altor considered the very young appearing couple appraisingly. A great idea came then to her—as she realized the fact that she was dealing with people mentally superior as well as vastly more experienced than her-

self. Slowly a humble expression stole over her face, and she bowed her head a little, and one could see that even in Altor something of the little girl still remained and meant well by the world.

"I will get you released from these charges. Then I will buy you from the owners. Then I will take you to the borders of the Divi planets and set you adrift in a lifeboat. From there you will be able to make your way to the Divi. There you should be well able to get along. But before you go, you must then give me the secret."

"Of course, how else should we win your kindness? Also, Altor, it might be wise to buy us from the owners of the Divnani's heirs' property, whoever they may be, before you get our sentence and trial canceled, as we will be much cheaper while we are going to be killed than when he finds out you have had the charges canceled."

Altor paused as she left the cage of iron, and spoke rather brusquely to the guard. "I shall hold you personally responsible if anything happens to these people. They have a vast value in my eyes, and will one day be my property."

The guard bowed from the waist.

"I shall take good care of your future property, renowned Altor."

After her long strides and the jingle of her war harness had faded from sound down the corridor, the guard turned to Bill and Nita.

"Now what have you got that she wants?"

"Plenty," answered Bill shortly.

"Well, I don't want her on my tail, so if anyone else starts kicking you around, yell good and loud for Jan Sobon."

Bill grinned. "We'll yell, and be glad. Let's hope we don't have to."

"Chances are you will. Your wife is good looking, and there are quite a lot of male guards. Some of the women just love to give a good looking guy like you a beating, too. And it would look so noble to beat you who have killed a noble of the Tiran upper caste—get me? Some of 'em may try it. Yell, the minute anybody threatens to get nasty. If anybody has the guts to save you, Altor has. Nobody ever accused her of lack of spine, but until she does find a way you are as good as dead."

The days dragged on for Bill and Nita, and Bill kept thinking of the secret of immortality via the teleport³

3. Teleport method of immortality: The Elder race had discovered several methods of defeating age. One was their teleport machines—a device which was described in the companion story "The Masked World." The teleport mech subjected matter to force rays so strong the matter flowed along the ray, was reassembled by the machine instantaneously at the beam focus—which focus was a repetition of the field pattern controlled in the sending cabinet by the matter in the cabinet. The mech had a magnetic screen excluding all but certain materials, and in some types of teleport mech this magnetic screen was adjusted to admit only the organic material of flesh and bone—to exclude all else. A teleportation of living people by this machine excluded the radio-active, accumulative poisons that are the main cause of age, and the result was a young body for an old one. The teleport was a delicate, intricate device, required an expert in its operation—which old Ben Uniaty was—and from whom Bill and Nita, had received their training. Hence the secret alone was of no use without the years of training in properly focusing and adjusting the mech—hence the persons of Ben, Bill and Nita were necessary and invaluable to the Tirans, Ru-Non and Altor.

method being in Tirane hands—it would mean that in time they would engulf all the other mortal races of space, as their wisdom leaped ahead of the other races whose wisdom dies with the body. But Bill saw no way to keep it from them and still keep his life. When he looked at Nita, he realized he could not worry that much about posterity; he could not be that heroic for any supposed evil. There were too many factors; if they used it generally and stayed young they would in time learn to be less evil.

Nita cut his worries short. "Don't worry so about it. If Altor carries out her part in the bargain, and we give it to the Divi who are enemies of the Tirans, they will automatically check each other's expansion, and the evil will not be any greater than if they did not know anything. It is better that such things should live in many minds than not to live at all in any mind. You should see that, Bill!"

Daily the lower class Tirans came to peer at Bill and Nita, the two who had murdered a high class Tiran and still lived, and the day when they were supposed to be tried and executed was now long past. Then came the day when a party of Tiran noblewomen arrived, and they were drunk. They peered through the darkness in the cell and one tall, space-burned female, her burly body aglitter with metal ornaments, and with a long dis-ray hung on each hip, her leather harness chased with figures of the outlandish animals of Tiran, cried: "Here they are; two slaves who flaunt their murder of our highest and our best, Divnani, the kindest, most worthy of all the Tiran women! They murdered her in cold blood—and yet they live on, the trial is put off! Who runs Tirania—the rulers or

the slaves?"

A wiry, blond female beside her echoed: "It looks as though the slaves are running a bit too much of the place to suit me!"

Bill shouted above their voices, which broke into vituperation and the use of many words strange to him, for they were from a ship from another planet—and there were several varieties of the Tiran tongue.

"You have no real idea that we murdered that sweet old lady. Why don't you interview her heirs? They are the most probable suspects. Nita and I found her bleeding. We were taking care of her, not fleeing, not trying to evade anything. The guard said we did it and let the old lady die while he took us to jail. She might not have died if anyone had sense enough to get her a doctor—"

The tallest warrior took out her sidearm dis-tubes holding one in each hand, preparing to shoot them through the bars, and Bill and Nita both started shouting at the top of their voices. "Jan Sobon! They are killing us—Jan Sobon!"

The guard came running from the little office at the end of the corridor of black bars—and the half dozen drunken warrior women took to their heels, suddenly turning it into a lark, laughing and fleeing in panic from the fat Jan Sobon. But the tall red-faced Amazon turned her two side weapons upon Jan. Jan put up his hands.

"You don't really intend to do anything about anything we do, do you, my little man?"

Two of the women returned, backing up the tall one. Jan stopped, tried to talk his way out.

"Look here, soldiers, quit the rough stuff. I've got a job to do. I

don't come up when you're guarding your ship and try to run off with the cargo, do I? Besides Altor said these two were innocent, and she would get the real killer or get the charges killed. If she stands up for them it's enough for me. You women are always afraid the slaves are getting too forward. If you ask me, they ain't forward enough for some of you. Now go on, and leave me and these two young people alone. We both tend to our business. These young'ns were tending the old lady after she was attacked and some dumb bunny like you came along and arrested them. They may kill them for the murder of Divnani, but if you knew the Divnani you'd know ding danged well no slave would ever kill the Divnani—she was always fighting for their rights. She was their best friend. The heirs killed her—her own daughter more likely."

The blond Amazon suddenly saw a light, and started explaining:

"Yeah, and who got us drunk and started us down here? Divnani's step-daughter, the one she kicked out years ago. Pretending she loved her mother and all that stuff and somebody ought to see justice done. Just for the hell of it, let's get to the bottom of this, sober up, and we'll find out where Nadiani was at the time of the murder. Ten to one she was in her mother's house for the first time in ten years and hasn't been there since the murder. What'll you bet? Let's pin it on the rotten... Eh, Marty, what say we do it right? There is such a thing as being a little too dirty, and mother-killing is one little step too far for me."

"Could be," the tall, space-burned red-haired Marty considered, and then shoved her long dis-tubes back

in their holsters. "We'll see, my birds in the cage. If that rat did it—you won't have to worry. Some of the Tirans ain't as bad as the slaves paint 'em. We may do you two a favor at that."

"We may do you one some time, too. I wish you luck, if you are actually going to look for the real killer. Death is so permanent. We—Nita and I—would do a lot of appreciating if you could free us."

The tall, suddenly human Tiran woman thrust a hand through the bars, patted Nita's head with a motherly gesture, turned and the soldiers trooped off, quiet and sober, now.

Jan Sobon leaned against the bars, mopping his forehead. "You never can tell. I've seen them women grow up, and I would swear there wasn't a human, kind hair in their heads. But they think they are human—and when it touched a mother the only really human trait in the Tiran came out. They really love their mothers—it beats all!"

Bill grinned at the frank Jan. "Where did your people come from, Jan Sobon, that you have such a clear view of the traits of the Tirani?"

"Me? If I told you, you wouldn't know any more than you do now. I never said a word." And Jan Sobon winked at them sagely. "I'm a Tiran male of the best kind. We can see our women for what they are, see?"

"Sure, sure." But Bill knew better; wondered just where the man came from, but space was large, there were many races, and he knew little of it. "It is curious that their most human trait comes out in their reverence for motherhood. A woman is still a woman, no matter how many male attributes you deck her with."

"Yeah, a woman is still wonder-

ful, curious and mule-headed, no matter how much they act like a man."

Nita who had been listening, broke in. "And a man is still the most egotistic of all creatures, even though in Tirana the women think they have usurped the privilege of thinking themselves the dominant sex."

Jan clapped his hand to his head in mock pain. "You win, darling. Women are women and men are men, and it's a wonderful idea, and they are both too dumb to figure out why they are different. And it is I that thinks you are a very sweet edition of the sex yourself—pardon your husband's presence, if I may."

"She is that, Jan, the best of her sex."

Nita flushed, retired to the rear of the cell in the shadow. Jan returned to his cubby-hole and the hours dragged on. Death still awaited the official word to come to visit them.

Back on the *Darkspear* (as Brack described it later) the Freyan introduced himself to us as the Tor of Veynania, whatever that was. We figured he was a chief or elected leader of a group of a certain number of people, who had been allotted a certain amount of ground, and that they had built a place called "Veynania," and that he was thus the "Tor" of Veynania. He pointed now down and to the left of the course the *Darkspear* was taking.

"The home of we it is, Veynania."

We saw that he meant a glittering little city topping the others on the tiny globe. But we were not landing in Veynania. It was toward a much larger little planet, looking quite imposing in contrast to the other tiny worlds, that the *Darkspear* was head-

ing.

The Tor pointed to it. "Freyanania, the incomparable. The light of all darkneses—the wonder of all spaces."

Why the Freyans hung their speech with such a lot of super-words, I couldn't figure unless the habit of making all they thought of attractive by a kind of illusional distortion of the truth. But I had much to learn, for as the *Darkspear* nosed down to a landing beside the Freyan ship in the sea of Freyanania, I saw that there were indeed wonders on this little planet, which had quite a strong gravity, for as we shut off the grays and all the motors of the *Darkspear*, the load on our feet decreased but little. One of these wonders was the coastline, which was not forest or hills or beach, but solid glass, the handiwork of man, colored with brilliant, prismatic hues, shifting in the light, so that what one saw there was a shifting, evanescent scene of magic, a mirage of tiny homes of solid glass, forming the whole coastline as far as the eye could see, and apparently poured into place as molten glass—fixed there forever. The homes of the Freyans were the soil of Freyanania, and the soil was cast glass. Shaped into place, the glass was rounded, spired into a Christmas-tree-ornament's complexity of glittering prismaticism—and each protuberance, set with rails and stairs of chrome-bright metal, was a home. It was as if a factory of Christmas tree ornaments had operated at full speed for centuries, and lined the whole short of a sea with piles of the bright things. Christmas balls—Freyan homes. Yet none of the brightness was tawdry or ill conceived, but rather served to express the greatness

of certain musics that glitter with ornamentation yet are grand in overall design, the ornamentation had an over-all ruling plan. And each glittering facet of bright glass or glittering metal served to accentuate the intricate, fascinating beauty of the whole.

I gasped my wonder to the Tor, who smiled. "It is the work of many, many centuries of a people building homes for themselves in harmony with each other's lives."

Over the sea waves skipped innumerable little sailboats, canoes, and similar craft, some motored, some not. These collected around the two ships, and the huge *Darkspear* aroused a chatter of questions. As we huge captives strode out to take our place in the tiny boats, none of which were big enough to carry more than one of us at a time as passenger, they all squealed—and I saw that most of them were girls, beautiful little fairy-like creatures, playing on the water. We made a long procession of boats, each of us passenger in one tiny hull, and around the parade sculled or darted or sailed the cockleshells of squealing, laughing young Freyans, making sport of the bringing home of the "bacon" by the Tor of Veynania.

Over the city, as we drew near the shore line, boomed suddenly a great gong, and I had no doubt some kind of a council was being summoned together.

We were led through the tiny streets, a procession of Gullivers on their way to see the Lilliputian monarch—but in this case he was an elected ruler, I found.

We did not try to enter the palace, but squatted outside of the intricate fairy wonder of the glasslike minarets and endless shining towers, in a kind of park. We ruined the shrubbery, but

for the most part the trees were full size, and were something to cling to in this land of diminution of the natural scale of things. We had little to say in the conference (but were allowed to hear by means of a sound system), much less than I would have liked, but my message of the atomic weapon, and the preparation of the Tirans for war—had a tumultuous effect. The proceedings were as noisy as if full-sized people were having a free-for-all inside the palace.

When things quieted down, the whole assembly filed out in a long line, the ruler at their head. He was dressed in a skin-tight suit of spun glass, and about the neck of a gold chain hung a sunburst of gold upon his breast.

The line advanced directly to where Brack and Lee Conklin, Henry Arnholm and Andy Miller were sitting. Gravely the ruler walked up to our great size (we were more than three times his height, and our relative bulk was probably ten or more times a Freyan's—who must have weighed about twenty pounds at most). From his neck he took the great sunburst which must have been some decoration conferred upon him in the past. His speech was short and to the point.

"The Freyanania have done many things of vast import. But you, my friend, who have brought us this atomic explosion, so that the evil Tiranian devils might not use it upon our good friend, the Divianania; you who have managed to escape from a place no slave ever escapes from—the city of Tiran ruler; who have brought that great ship the *Darkspear* here single-handed with great skill—with your two friends who know how to build these terrible weapons.

"Ah, you have this day brought life to a nation close to death. We, of the Freyanania, shall endeavor to show you all the time you are with us that the Freyans are not cold-hearted to their friends—and you may always remember that the Freyanania were worthy of your saving, that you made no mistake. The Tirans would have exterminated us in time with that weapon. Sooner or later they would have stolen close and blown our little universe to nothing."

Such was his meaning as translated from his queer other-world English.

I accepted the great star of gold, for I did not know how to refuse—and they set to work at once to build us homes with them. Meanwhile the Ruler himself took the two atom men to the various factories which would manufacture the bomb parts and work was started on the bombs. The rockets to bear them in space, and the steering devices—which in such bombs must be duplicate or triplicate to insure no error. The Freyanania had realized what we had brought them. They had worked upon the problem, but it had eluded their scientists as it had the technicians of Earth for so long. They just hadn't invented the cyclotron, and I suspected their science lay along other lines of development than the electronic fields which had brought forth the bomb.

That nation of little giants went to work with a vengeance, and they worked us just as hard. My eyes glittered with the thrill of just thinking of the industry and canny ability of these diminutive people.

They rushed us from factory to factory and we spent every waking hour going over conversion plans so

that they might use their present equipment to create uranium piles; heavy water; rocket motors to take the bombs where they would do the most good; the delicate magnetic devices to guide the rockets toward an evasive target; the thousand and one details of the manufacture of an article that took the whole United States three and a half years. They proposed to make the bombs, rockets to carry them, controlling devices, the whole works in a month—and, by working the heads off Lee Conklin and Henry Arnholm, they made it.

That was a month like no other in my life. All my life I have had plans, plans that were feasible—if I had had the men to carry them out. Plans that were but dreams because life on Earth is so cumbersome in so many ways: thought is hampered by its incommunicable nature, hampered by the ever-secrecy of the two opposed worlds (which are the subterranes fearing to let the upper-world advance), well, you know how life is there. But these Freyanania! The step between a plan and a fact, between a dream and its actual creation in matter, has been made so simple, so possible, that it is like heaven to an inventive mind. If you conceive a plan for some device, no matter how impossible it may seem, some Freyan hears your thought, puts it all down on thought record, refers it to the engineering department who go into a huddle on it—and the next day but one, you find yourself with a working model of a device you had only dreamed of, and then forgotten!

A good hundred such things they created for me, which I had been thinking of all my life, and never finding a way to make into actuality. Thus it was with the atom bomb; they

not only created a perfect and devastating bomb, but a perfect carrier for the bomb, a rocket equipped with well-nigh human intelligence that would seek out the target at which it was pointed no matter what impossible evasive maneuvers the target may go through.

The days of that month flew by and they were crammed more full of work and creative fulfillment than any days of my life.

Then came the news we were waiting for. Down toward the cleared landing space on the little sea of Freyanmer came a screaming war-rocket, a single-passenger space ship they use for messenger service. It travels at impossible speeds between their worlds and its outposts, which are wide flung. Their spies had reported the Tiran fleet aloft and heading toward the Divi area of space.

I thought I had seen activity before, but now the Freyans came out of their work-a-day pace and really went to work. From our underground hangars, where they had been preparing them since they knew conflict was unescapable, came the sleek little war-ships; pocket-space-ships of unbelievable power, and into their holds went the cargo of terrible explosive power—the atomic bomb rockets. Steadily, all day and all night, from every little world, the warships took off, one after the other, and one could not look up without seeing a long line of the shining space ships fading away into the distance. The Freyans were not going to stand by and see the friendly worlds of the Divi destroyed by their enemies the Tirans. For they knew that if success attended the Tirans, it would not be long before the same fleet would head toward the Freyan's homes. They

preferred to keep the war at as great a distance as possible.

So it was that I was invited by the ruler, the little Dagnania, the man who had presented me with the great gold star for bringing the atomic experts from from Earth to him—to accompany him on his own ship and observe the battle “from a safe distance,” he assured me, “if any distance should prove safe in a war of atomic bombs.”

CHAPTER IX

Bill and Nita sat in their cells for two weeks, expecting every day to be their last. They did not hear from Marty, the tall impulsive Tiran who had promised to hunt down the daughter of Divnani and make her confess her crime. They did not hear from Altor, who had promised to find a way securing their release. Then, as they lay on their pallets during the sleep period, as the mid-part of that period when most life of the Tirans is quiet (and no one wakes but those who must, the guards and sentinels) came a familiar military step, the hard, evenly spaced heel sounds of someone they thought they must know. Bill sat up, watching for the passing of this person. The steps neared, stopped outside in the darkness—then a tiny needle beam of light came into the cell, flashed briefly upon each of their faces, blinked out. A key grated in the lock, the door swung open and the harsh voice of Ru-Non grated on their ears. A natural repugnance, born of their fear of she who had been the cause of their presence in this inhospitable life—made them hesitate as she said: “Come, I have arranged your escape!”

They sat there, rubbing the sleep

out of their eyes, trying to figure why RuNon of all people, should have bothered to “arrange an escape” for them, two slaves she seemed to despise. “Come, there is no time to waste on explanations. I have bribed the guards, and you are to come with me. Move your stumps, you wretches, or I’ll give you something to make them move.”

“What would you help us for? I don’t get it, Ru-Non.”

“If you must have it, Old Ben Unity has promised me the secret, if I get you two and Tim free and bring you to him. When he has given me the secret, I will set you all down where you can reach the Divi or the Freyans—such is the bargain.”

“Ru-Non, you will never keep such a bargain. We know too much for you to let enemies get hold of us.”

“That may be. Come along. You are to die tomorrow without any more delay. Such is the official order, and that is why I am here. It is your last chance. Are you coming?”

“Come on, Nita. It is better than rotting here.”

Nita stumbled to her feet, and together they followed Ru-Non’s long strides down the dim corridors of the prison. Into a waiting Xonton—a floating, degavitized half-globe—they piled after her, and she set it speeding down the center of the round way-tube toward the surface of Tirania.

The Xonton emerged on the surface, sped over the water, and sat down on the deck of a ship similar to the *Darkspear*, though larger. They stepped out, and Ru-Non called a sentry, saying: “Get Jon Karka to take the car back and leave it at 2231 Xtine, the garage where I rented the thing. He is to do so at once, and if anyone

asks him any questions, he knows nothing.”

Then she strode off, and Bill and Nita followed her to her quarters.

Within the cabin Nita flung herself into the arms of Old Ben, whose smile was threatening to crack his face, which looked as if it had not smiled recently for other reasons. Bill pumped his hands flinging questions at him.

“You old wizard, how did you do it? I have been expecting to wake up in Heaven so long that I’m not sure this isn’t it!”

“It isn’t heaven, but we may make it to reach something comparably heaven to what we have all been enduring. Ru-Non has found that I can teach her things of value, things she can’t learn without my hands to help her; things my brain alone can’t teach her—through the telaug. For such teaching she has guaranteed to set us down where we may reach freedom and a new life. That is all.”

“She must have taken quite a risk, rescuing us from prison?”

“I doubt it; she is a pretty powerful personage in the city.”

It was a more pleasant evening than they had expected. But morning and the sun of the surface brought also news that Ru-Non had not expected—or had she? War!

The Tiran fleet was ordered into space, the whole works; war was declared! They didn’t declare war by telling the Divi—they just loaded up the ships with atom bombs and took off—and reluctantly Ru-Non obeyed the order to take to space in formation with the rest of the war-fleet. Technically and in time of peace Ru-Non was a privateer, but her articles included compulsory obedience in time of war and a state of war had

been declared. Soon they were in space, surrounded by the great, speeding, ancient war-ships of a race who had more sense than to wage wars, yet had built the best warships in the known universe.

Looking out the port of their chamber, where Ru-Non had locked them, Bill and Nita and Ben stood in awe—not of the Tirans, but of the immense ability of the antique race who had built those ships that stretched in unbroken formation right and left and back as far as the eye could see—ships whose unscarred metal hulls gleamed with a polishing of recent date—which might have been manufactured yesterday for all the marks of time upon them. Only a slight mottling effect told of the time gone by.

“All that mighty product of the idealistic efforts of a noble race—why did they leave it all behind them? Where did they go? That they could leave it to these stupid, swell-headed ignoramuses—the Tirans. It is always the greatest puzzle to me where the Elder race went and why they went there?”

Nita answered Bill’s question:

“I found a small clue or two in the old writings. I was just getting on the trail of some writings that told of their last days on Earth; a book called ‘Mandark’ that told of the Exodus was mentioned in their great ‘Book of the Cross’—the T symbol of growth, you know?”

“Yes,” answered Ben, “it has always amused me that the early Christians adopted the Cross and the story of the infallible God from their records of the ancient ‘Book of the Cross’—which was in truth not a cross but a T. The whole thing was so much greater than the Bible and the

Cross, it is too bad they do not have the true story of the past, instead of wasting so many efforts on a later distortion of the true history of the Elder race. As if the whole Elder race was but one god; it is too bad. Their ruler was so great a god, he should be better known!”

“The traces I found said they left all these machines and ships because they were infected with radioactivity—were deadly to life; and the radio-activity from the sun was their reason why they migrated from Earth. These Tirans have so many ships because, here on these planets—which were before then cold, having no sun—they abandoned all their old, infected ships and built a new fleet, entire, to voyage far, far into dark space where no sun’s rays can ever reach them. The radio-activity they knew to be the cause of age, and they abandoned everything for they had a horror of it, as we do of leprosy.”

“Radioactivity is terribly infectious, and spreads to everything it touches. That is true!”

Ben commented: “You have but to bring a radioactive object into a room for awhile, and then take it out. Radioactivity can be detected in the room for many days, even weeks, afterward. It may be that an immortal would have to be as wary of it as were the Atlans and Titans of the Elder race.”

Bill broke into Nita’s and Ben’s deep introspective conversation. “Your studies are interesting, but tell me, just what is this war going to mean to Ru-Non’s plans for us? Why does she take us along?”

“I have told Ru-Non of my use of the antique teleport mech to transport the body, and thus leave behind alien substances. I also told her that the

machine transported only those parts of the body which were flesh and bone, leaving behind all such things as radioactive particles of metal, alien poisonous matter such as selenium and lead—told her it could be used as a treatment for age which was so effective as to prolong a man's life ten to twenty times."

"But why, Ben? Why does she need you or us?"

"She does not know how to use a teleport mech—there are very few of them you know—and the government of the Tirans has forbidden their use, as so many were injured in a catastrophe when some fool left one 'on' and teleported the whole underpinning of a city full of Tirans into space! She needs me to show her how to focus, how to care for all the little details of its operation. She can read it in her telaug pictures of my mind—but she could not get it from such things in such a way she could use it. There is no substitute for experience; and she knows that!"

"And you insisted on us as the price of your assistance?"

"Sure, I wanted freedom and what is freedom without friends. You two and Tim and Brack are my home, my freedom."

"Thanks, Ben. You are the best father we ever had—both being raised by strangers, you know."

"These ships are carrying atomic bombs—are they not, Ben?"

Nita's face was quizzical. She was a little frightened at the thought of all that power of death beneath their feet in the hold.

"Yes, Nita. We carry, now, death to a whole race of people, a people inhabiting some dozen or more planets. Very large planets, densely populated, are to be completely wiped out

by these murderous Tirans. It is a terrible thing to know, to have a part in committing such a vast crime, even if an unwilling part as is our own."

"You didn't help them with bombs, not the manufacture?"

"No, they got all the plans over their spy rays on the American bomb plants—but we are here. We are not going to try to explode the bombs before they kill a billion—wipe out whole cities—are we?"

"That is hard to do. We can only pray—and I am going to pray."

"You don't believe in any ordinary God, that I ever heard you mention, Nita?"

"I believe in the essential Mother of All, on Earth I called her Mother Earth, out here I will call her mother Universe—and I will pray."

As Nita knelt by her bunk, Bill and the old grey head of Ben Uniaty were bowed in silent communion with their own idea of what the great beneficent power of nature might be.

Terribly, resistlessly, the vast fleet of the Tirans rushed on and on into the night of space, bearing death for a whole race of men.

CHAPTER X

Brack's story of the Freyan defense of the Divians, as he told it later to Bill, went as follows:

We boarded the little Freyan battle cruiser, and believe me, they didn't build for any six-foot men. They could barely find a place for us to lie down, but a Freyan tech brought a visi-screen mech of the diminutive models they have copied from the huge sized antique models, installed it in the big double cabin which was just large enough for us to lie down in.

It took him about two minutes to

run the wires and plug it in for us and we were watching a panorama of the most wonderful little war fleet ever in existence, I'll bet. And packing a punch now second to nothing in space. I could not believe the Tirans, no matter what plans they brought from Earth, could have built anything like the automatic self-steering rocket the Freyans had built to carry the atomic bomb to its target. That device was doom on a lightning bolt — fast. In space, with no atmospheric or gravity drag, I'll bet that thing would get up a speed a light ray would get discouraged about.

Stretched out on the screen, as far as the penetrative ray, would reach, as far as could travel in time to be seen with nearby objects, was a solid phalanx of little space ships, heading for the Divi area.

They intended to surprise the Tiran fleet, and believe me they had been careful to let no hint of unusual activity get noised about. If they had warned the Divi of what was coming, it made one more loophole, and a mighty big one, for the Tirans to realize what was up. And the cocky little men decided that the lesser risk for all concerned was to let the Divians wait in ignorance. They knew what they were doing, and it only serves to show the unusual and independent nature of their minds that they chose such a course than the more natural one of warning the Divi and trusting to luck that the Divi could keep a secret from the Tirans. They knew that was nigh impossible, for the Tiran spy system was so wide, so numerous that little escaped them. But they knew of no traitorous Freyans.

For a day and a night that endless fleet sped on, unbroken, endless; there was no way of knowing how

many of them there were. When I asked the Dagnania, he told me a lot of words that meant millions or billions or only thousands, it was too much for me to change the Freyan numbers into English. Somehow it didn't matter, they knew what they were doing and I didn't.

Twice around the clock, and the formation broke up. We were alone in space. The intership communicators buzzed steadily. They were extending an unbroken headge of ships between the Tiran areas and the Divi areas of space control. They settled down to wait, and I knew that their great long-range ray-eyes were sweeping endlessly up, down, across and back, so as not to miss the oncoming Tiran fleet. Those headstrong Amazon super-women were certainly walking into something!

Somehow a great elation filled me, for I knew that the Tiran nations were responsible for the age old secrecy on Earth—had encouraged the underworld in their ancient policy of keeping the antique mech secret from the people of the surface. Merely to have a place to pick up slaves occasionally; merely to hold back one small world from becoming a rival; they held back the whole race of Earth-men from proper development. But that was perhaps the least of their crimes; those crimes reaching back into the centuries; the endless conquering wars of the Tirans which had eliminated the male from his dominant position and left the Tirans a race of warrior women. There was little about the whole Amazon nation to cause one to pity the fate they were racing to meet.

The tension mounted and mounted; and at last we saw—faint but unmistakable on the screen—tiny dots

of light that marked the vanguard of the great Tiran fleet, the scouting squadrons of lighter ships racing ahead of the great main fleet.

The Freyans had extinguished all lights upon taking their position, and they lay silently, immovably, spread so wide that even if an obstacle ray located one of them the others would still be out of range of sight. On came the dots of light, unwavering, and presently the now discernibly wavering pulse of the jets causing the lights became evident—the fleet was in sight! Still the Freyans waited; but I could hear, off in the ships nose, the intership signals buzzing, droning, and knew the Dagnania, the ruler of the notion as well as here the supreme command, was calling in the outer horns of the great crescent of ships he liad thrown as a protective bulwark around the Divi planets.

Now, behind the wavering lights that indicated the forerunners of the main fleet of the Tirans showed the vast pinpointed patterns; the formations of the main fleet of the Tirans. They filled the screen with a regular pin-point pattern; a counterpoint of racing death bearing down upon us. Still the Dagnania waited, still we lay silent and unseen, tiny wasps waiting to sting the great female, Tirania, to death—waiting for prey; tiny wasps invisible and deadly in the ever-night of space.

Moments crept by painfully, and I could hear the buzzing of commands, of exhortation to hold fire till the command. He was certainly waiting for the last of them to get into range. I only hoped he could figure the extent of the blasts that were going to be released here in space; nervously wondered just what the effective range of an atom bomb might be in

space with no air or gravity to cushion the blast.

The great, ancient ships of the Elder race, some thousand times the bulk of the tiny Freyan craft, were visible now on the ray screen, not as points of light, but as long, sparkling hulls, lit by the flare of their driver jets. Lit by a riding light on the bow to avoid collision with each other. They counted on their terrible, and, as they thought, unsuspected armament to offset the need for surprise. But they counted without the escape of three despised slaves from their pens in the auction chambers. I realized now how much had hung on the balance that night of our attempt at stealing a vast warship—and succeeding.

Suddenly the diminutive, but mighty Dagnania barked one word—“NOO” (now) into the screen before him, and magically as though he were God himself, at the word, a tremendous line of unbroken jet-flares appeared; a line reaching out and out into the night as far as the powerful sight rays reached—and the lines converged toward the oncoming Tiran fleet, a vast wheel of death had suddenly blossomed with spokes of fire; lances of terrible power

Baring down, down, toward the ships of the enemy. If I had known Ben Uniaty and Nita and Bill were aboard on. of those ships with Runon, it would not have been so thrilling, so satisfying a sight. The bomb torpedoes, manufactured so hastily by the little people, were performing apparently perfectly. At the sight of those oncoming projectiles appearing so magically out of the blackness ahead the mighty fleet of the Tiran’s broke into a sudden display of fiery curves, inextricably intermingled —

as apparently no prearranged evasive tactics had been practiced by the overconfident Amazons. Or perhaps the whole thing had been too quick, too sudden...

CHAPTER XI

Aboard the ship of Ru-Non, Bill and Nita stood watching through the ports, which had been opened, as they expected soon to orbit around the first great planet of the Divi.

They saw, far off to the right from the utter blackness of space, a line of fire. Then another and another, until as far as they could see blossomed suddenly in the night an endless line of lances of fiery death all rushing irresistibly down upon them. Old Ben gave a short cry of exultation. "Brack has made good. I knew he would do it.

They are prepared! But..." he turned suddenly and placed his hand on Nita's soft hair. "Child, I fear that we shall all meet our death here on this ship within short minutes. If the work on those bomb-rockets is good work—and Brack is no fool—we are dead, right now."

Nita kissed him swiftly, saying, "Goodbye, my good friend." Then she turned and embraced Bill, trying to put a lifetime of love into a few seconds of impassioned, tender regret.

"Bill, this is the last kiss..."

"Nita, love has never wavered for us—goodbye—utterly beloved utterly worthy of love—goodbye."

The great ancient ship lurched suddenly under their feet as Ru-Non threw the great old hulk into violently evasive maneuvers, and the jets flamed bright as the ship swerved so violently the spurt of the jets could be seen from the ports. But ever relent-

lessly after flowered the fire of the rocket atomic bomb, nearer and nearer. The great ship was now fleeing directly away from the rocket, but the relentless magnetic scent of the automatic nose of the rocket kept it doggedly after, gaining, gaining...

Now to their ears came sound, such sound that the leaping of the violently thrown-about ship, struck by the terrible, far reaching force of the bomb explosions, seemed as nothing beside the agony of terrible concussion tearing at their ears! Nita fell to the rocking, reeling floor, her hands clasped about her bleeding ears, and Bill and Ben fell beside her, Bill managing to cover her body with his own. Still the terrible concussions went on and on, and the picture Bill glimpsed through the port was one of terrible, repeated fire-blossoms of such terrible brilliance that his eyes burned like wounds in his face—he did not look again.

Outside in the ever-night surrounding the peaceful, unsuspecting planets of the Divi, the night saw with startled, suddenly fire-lit eyes the vast, formidable, old God-built dreadnaughts of the fleet of the Tirans vanish; swift titanic explosion by swift relentless concussion as the fleet war-torpedoes caught up with the fleeing old ships. Even that impervious metal with which the Elder race had built was no match for the vast explosive force flame of the atomic bomb; and the ships, burst now into minute fragments, were but great, flaming dust clouds in the fire-shot dark. The deeds of the Tirans had at last borne their terrible fruit—and that night vengeance was atomic.

At last the fire lessened, the night grew quiet, and was now but a great drifting whirl of glowing dust and

gleaming red hot bits of metal. Outside the fiery ring of death that had closed upon the speeding might of the Tirans, waited the endless ring of tiny, triumphant, and somehow awe-inspiring Freyan ships, waited for yet one more Tiran ship to show its jet upon the quiet, star shot face of night. The waiting grew into an hour, and at last, the terrible deed glowing like fire in their minds, the little Freyans urred on the jets, and their trails were many joyous fireflies coming again toward home.

The ship on which were the Dagnani and Brack and Lee Conklin waited still; for scores of Freyan ships had remained. For "To a certain on the extent of the force of the explosion-on and to surveys-ion the nature of the metal damage and the completion of the mighty smallnesses of the fragmentation of the enemy ships—onnerstan?"

Brack nodded at the Dagnani's attempt at English, mentally agreeing that his use of it was more understandable than many who knew the language better, and mentally he made a resolve to get on the wrong side, never, of these Freyans, for they made of a "job-on of work" such a "completioness."

So it was that Brack and the Dagnani cruised slowly about the area, still glowing, a great kind of nebulae reaching out of sight, and here and there could now be seen the undemolished hulk of a ship which had not been the recipient of a direct hit, but had been put out of commission by concussion, as Dagnani explained.

"The concussioniananity of the atomic unlocking had rendered any ship in the area inoperative by eliminating the on-impossibility of unin-

errupted electric flows, by jarring loose all electric contact, by shaking the machinery out of alignment—by a thousand damages to the old hulls of the antique ships. The atomic bomb has at last shown the way to bursting asunder the heretofore unburstible metal of the Elder race."

Brack agreed, watching over the great screen to which he had focused the little screen of the cabin where they lay in their cramped quarters, Brack saw lying dead ahead the gleaming nose of an unburst bomb, now exhausted of fuel, or rendered inoperative by the "concussionianity."

Brack shouted at the Dagnani, pointing out the sudden danger upon which they were rushing—knowing the bomb was now, after their abuse in that terrible sunburst of atomic release of energies from a hundred thousand bombs, in all probability building up slowly the necessary chain reactions to set it off — and the Dagnani leaped to the controls and swerved the tiny ship in a short arc away from the bomb. As it receded into the dark the sudden arcing turn of the ship's nose and obstacle locator bearing the view-ray revealed to one side the lightless hulk of a great Tiran ship.

The bomb, now some thirty miles to the rear, was suddenly touched by the destroying finger of the war-ray pointer beside Dagnani, and exploded with the terrible light-emitting flare which characteristic of these terrible weapons. In that short flare of light, all-revealing and eye-searing as it was, Brack searched the great dark hulk beside which their ship was passing. And he saw the figures of the crew, strewn everywhere about the ship, the ports blasted open, the gaping wreck in which were now

only frozen corpses. Something familiar about those corpses struck his eyes—an old white head, the dark hair of a girl streaming out on the deck, the young form of a man. Then the sudden light faded as swiftly as it had come, and the ship was far to the rear. But memory, intuition, the instinct of protection (what is it that causes miracles?), made Brack think of Bill Flores, of Nita and of old Ben Uniaty. Tears came unbidden to his eyes, for he knew that now that the fleet of the Amazons was no longer in existence, the Freyans—or the Divi would rain bombs upon the planets of the Tirans and still forever the fire of conquest which had burned there so long and so destructively.

Brack, under the stress of the past month, under the added terrible sight of the destruction of a whole vast war fleet of human beings, under the wearing impact of the effort of the past days, gave way; now that need for effort was gone—and unashamedly began to weep. Tears streamed down his face, and the thought of all their efforts for the people of Ontal, frustrated at the last by these Tiran women — of all their plans defeated, of their enslavement in alien planets. A man can bear up only so long, and under the stress of battle many men break down. Brack was no exception.

The Dagnani, seeing the tears streaming down his straining face, asked: "Why do you weep for the Tirani? They are better dead than we."

Brack quieted, and the tears ceased. He looked at Dagnania, the leader of the little people sadly. "I thought I saw the bodies of my friends upon that blasted hulk, and the sight set up a chain of thoughts. There have been so many losses, so

much frustration of so great plans for me and my friends, and I fear that I will never see my friends again."

"You do think it was really they upon the ship?"

"Them or not, the sight tore my heart. I am sure they're dead."

"If it is them, they are dead. But the miracle of life—it is not always so easily stilled. And the miracle of second sight—that too is not to be denied! Mayhap it is your friends. We will search that ship. We want to note the effects of the bombs anyway."

Some time later a party of little people, all in space suits, were picking carefully over the wreck; the "papaers" from the great fore-cabin; the log from the bridge; some of the unexploded bombs from the hold—which they quickly decided to abandon again, upon Lee Conklin's advice, as no atomic bomb is safe that has been near an atomic explosion. And they came back bearing four stiff corpses, which Brack had identified with the view-ray as they were held up for him to examine.

The bodies were those of Nita, and of Bill and the old wizard, Ben Uniaty and of Nan King. The Dagnani examined the bodies closely—pushing back the hair, looking into the blood dabbled burst ears, touching the glowing, radioactive skin. He shook his head gravely, like a doctor examining a sick patient, and for some fool reason Brack's heart leaped at the sight of that slowly shaking, thoughtful head. The Dagnani motioned to the men who bore the corpses, and they bore them aft through the tiny runways, just large enough to force the stiff bodies through. Brack turned to the Dagnani.

"Why do you examine the dead

so closely?"

"I have nothing to tell you. They may, and they may not! These conditions of subjection to such vast energies of destruction are new to me. I can or cannot say with any positiveness whether or not they will live."

"But they are dead! What can you mean?"

"They are dead, as you call it, yet there is no finality of death among the Freyan people. We are not an ignorant race born yesterday. Some things we can learn from such as you, but not about life, I fear."

"You mean there is a process for restoring life to a dead body? That is news, but like you, it holds little hope for my heart, for I cannot believe it. If it was old Ben Uniaty said that, I would know there was a chance, but I do not know what you are accustomed to mean when you say words so strangely like English, yet so utterly different at times. The ancient tongue which mothered our languages has passed through so many bad times that meaning is different."

"When home is reached, you shall know. I will see that all is done."

Now homeward bound upon the trail of the fast Freyan fleet that had preceded them, was seen a fleet of ships mounting, mounting up toward them from a vast green ball below.

The Dagnani pointed. "The Divi have come to their appreciation feast. They have slept through a vast fire, have they not? This lesson may do them good, and they need it."

The two groups of ships drew abreast did now the sounds of a strange language struck Brack's ears, the Divi were questioning, were realizing, were shouting delight at the news.

A race of great people, the lean, dark, hairy strength of the Divi, whose hearts were as big as their broad smiling faces—were learning of the deed of the Freyans. If ever a people owed another a debt, these dark, hairy men owed the tiny Freyans a debt of gratitude they might never be able to repay.

It was later—many days later—when Brack was sitting sadly alone in one of glorious gardens near the home of the Dagnani, in T'Freyania, the planet's most beautiful home, watching the softly chirping and loving antics of pairs of fire-winged birds, the rare and beautiful Otnarko, as they swung and dipped their wings in the water of a fragrant pool.

His lean back against the trunk of a flowering crab, his feet on the soft moss-like grass of the Freyan woodland, his fingers idly caressed a lovely tame fox-squirrel which had come begging for nuts.

Suddenly the startled squirrel scampered for cover, and Brack's lonely eyes looked up—into the face of Nita!

He leaped to his feet. "It can't be! I saw you dead. Am I mad, then, or dead myself—as I wished I was, too often, lately?"

"I do not understand either, you lean old faker, Brack Longen; my brother, you seem. But I am alive, and the queer Freyan talk tells me they did it with their medical 'on-magic.' Something about supplying dead cells with the flows of life energy natural to them until they take up the labor themselves. Can you understand such an explanation?"

"Aye, girl, I can understand it when I see you. Ah, Nita, give a long

broken-hearted friend your embrace.”

Nita wrapped her arms around the suddenly joyous Brack, and over her shoulder he saw approaching slowly across the shadowed flower starred moss-grass the halting feet of old Ben Uniaty, supported by young Bill Flores—who looked himself as if he needed support until his eyes met Brack’s joyous ones, then he shouted with sudden new energy: “Hi, you son of a worthless gun, you—how in Hell did you get here in Heaven, too?”

“Bill, it wasn’t Heaven for me until this moment. Honest, I never came out of the glooms so fast in my life. All our work—we can do it over! The Freyans—they may set us back on Earth. Everything we hoped for may yet come true! And best of all, my friends are alive.”

“It only remains to find Tim Shanter before these Freyans and the Divi get together and blow the whole Tiran nation out of space forever.”

“We can do anything after this.”

“I believe it!”

Nita’s eyes were wet with happiness—and silently her heart thanked the universal mother of all to whom she had prayer on the eve of the battle as the atomic bomb-rockets had pursued Ru-Non’s craft.

That pursuing rocket must have been knocked out of order by the titanic concussion of the other ships’ explosions.

Or had her prayer stopped it?

But her mind told her she should thank the little people.

In the distance, Andy Miller strolled through the fairylike gardens, his arm about the waist of Nan King—very possessive, very sure! The Dagnani had just married them in the Freyan love-temple.

So we leave the reunited friends—and may Earth know their work in the future—when the secrecy that shrouds the good of the caverns, as well as the bad, shall be lifted. 🌿



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