

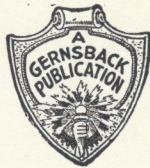
Science Fiction Series

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# THE INVADING ASTEROID

By

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# The Invading Asteroid

By Manly Wade Wellman

HIGHER and higher through the night mounted the small, trim space-launch. Far below the lights of St. Louis, capital of the Terrestrial League, shone as myriad stars and reflected gleams on the flat surfaces and soaring spires of the uppermost levels. From a great height the city resembled a rambling building of tremendous size, wherein little specks of surface-cars scampered over miniature traffic-ways and clouds of air and space-vehicles danced around and over the town like midges.

It was a fighting ship that was mounting upward, one of the many that sped through space in the days of 2675, when Earth and Mars were in the throes of that gigantic and regrettable conflict, the Interplanetary War. However, the disintegrating ray apparatus, a deadly weapon that enabled Terrestrial forces to compete on something like equal terms with the overwhelming numbers of the space-navies of Mars, had been removed from bow and stern. Most of the space inside the cigar-shaped hull was occupied by engines to insure highest maneuverability and speed, but in the center was a cushioned chamber large enough to allow its three occupants to ride in comfort.

They were in Terrestrial uniform, but did not look like the sternest of warriors. A year ago they had been students together at the International University in St. Louis, looking forward to graduation in 2675. But 2675 was here, and already they had participated in the bitter conflicts that marked the beginnings of the war. Even now, when the two worlds had drawn far apart in their orbits and the interplanetary passage was too far for war parties to travel, they were kept in intensive training and their school days seemed memories of a thousand years ago.

"This is a squadron-commander's gig, at the very least," chuckled Bull Mike Tishinev, former star athlete of his university, as he squared his colossal shoulders. "We'll never have a softer trip, nor a freer one, so long as we're in the service."

"And, inasmuch as we *are* in the service, we're apt to catch it for absence without leave, and also for using property of the Terrestrial government for private purposes," suggested Neil Andresson, slim and handsome.



"I wouldn't have suggested it if I had thought there would be danger," assured Sukune, the little Japanese, his young Oriental face shining with a smile. "However, I had free run of the rocketport for my experimentation, and nobody thought anything of it when I checked the ship out. And we have all had two days' liberty and won't be missed. They won't check the rocketport until the day after tomorrow, so we'll have full forty-eight hours in space—first chance we've had to do such a thing without some officer on our necks, directing every move of our fingers."

Into the stratosphere, with the speed steadily and carefully increasing, the ship made its way. The broad Mississippi lay across the terrain beneath them, shrunk to the apparent dimensions of a silver thread. St. Louis was now only a vari-colored, light-flecked blotch lying across the river's course, with the smaller dark areas of suburbs close at hand.

"What a lot of Martian culture could be spread by dropping two or three roving bombs down there!" observed Sukune.

"Where is Mars from here?" asked Neil. The Japanese spun the dial of the television, showing an orange disk blotched with gray-green.

"There you are—seat of Earth's troubles," he said.

"**W**HAT'S that lump traveling along between us and Mars?" was Bull Mike's question.

"That appears to be the asteroid that strayed from its path, the astronomers say," replied Sukune. "It's not more than a mile or so in diameter, and its distance has been computed to be about a hundred and twelve million miles from the sun. That puts it nearly twenty million miles beyond the Earth's orbit, or half-way between us and Mars. However, science doesn't know much more about the thing. It's a bit too far away for exploration just now, especially since all ships are now built for war-service. It ought to come into opposition with us in the spring of 2676."

He delivered this little lecture with the utmost fluency, and his companions, less versed in sky-lore than he, listened admiringly. Bull Mike grinned and patted the Japanese on the back.

"Never knew you to be stumped by anything yet," he cried. "No wonder the ancients used to be afraid that your people would conquer the world!"

Returning to the television, the three young men looked cu-

(R)

riously at the new phenomenon in the heavens. They knew, of course, about the asteroids—fragments of exploded planets revolving just inside the path of mighty Jupiter—but this one, so far from its fellows, presented a different problem.

Leaving the atmospheric envelope, the ship sailed beyond danger of overheating from friction. Like a comet it rose through empty space. A glance from one port showed Earth at quarter-full, a warm, gleaming crescent that clasped a round globe of shadowy blue. Beside and beyond, glowed the white incandescence of the sun, its light intensified by the soft blackness of space. Jewel-like stars were scattered in all directions.

"If Commander Raws could only see us now!" said Bull Mike, boyishly delighted by a sense of freedom.

"If he could, he'd order us all into confinement," Sukune reminded him. "Eh, Neil?"

Before them hung the full moon. Toward this they laid their course and, after twelve hours' flight, they slowed down to drift like a vagrant bit of thistledown above the silent, dead valleys and mountain ranges. Once they dropped down and rested on the ashy surface of the satellite. In a few moments they were able to appreciate the depressed spirits that afflicted the occasional explorers of the lunar wilderness.

For, despite the heavenly-aspiring peaks, the abysmal depths, the far-reaching plains, there was a certain sameness about the moon's scenery. They could see no movement save the shadow of their own craft sliding along beneath them. No green of grass, no brilliant color of flowers showed. No creatures scampered, crept or flew. There was not so much as a heat-flurry in the atmosphere—for there was no atmosphere. Nothing but the glaring white of sun-drenched rock, the inky black of airless shade.

"I wouldn't live here for all the money in St. Louis," said Bull Mike. "As far as that goes, I couldn't."

"I don't see why not," argued Sukune. "Mars' two moons are smaller and rockier than this, and haven't any more air, water or natural comfort. Yet the Martians have built cities under glass domes; pumped in artificial air, and settled right down to keep house."

"That's because they're crowded at home," was Bull Mike's rebuttal. "Well, there's room enough on Earth for me just now. Plenty of girls to keep me company and wine to keep me healthy and excitement to keep me occupied."



They gladly left the Moon behind and continued their journey. They passed the time by eating part of the provisions they had brought along, by observing the heavens and by working practise problems in astronautics and space-maneuvers. At last they idled, a little more than half a million miles from Earth—twenty hours by direct space flight at top speed.

Neil was at the television. Suddenly he started violently and gestured to his comrades.

"Look here!" he cried. "A ship!"

"A patrol scout from the army," groaned Bull Mike. "Now we're in for it."

"That's no army craft!" declared Sukune when he saw the image. "Look at the lines of its hull, see that emblem on the side—it's an armed Martian scout!"

"You're right," said Neil. "It's just about on top of us, too. Let's shake on out of here."

SUKUNE jumped to the control board and began to strike a combination of keys. As quickly as possible he turned the nose of their ship back toward Earth. A glance through a port showed the Martian already within sight of the naked eye.

From the enemy ship came a sudden streak of flame. Desperately Sukune rattled the keys on the board. The Terrestrial craft writhed to one side, barely escaping the explosion of a roving bomb.

"The ratty lizard!" yelled Bull Mike, clenching a mammoth fist. "He sees that we're not armed for space-fighting!"

"What's he doing here, with Mars so far out of travel-shot, anyway?" demanded Neil.

Nobody answered, for another bomb exploded at that moment, seemingly just outside. It was soundless in the vacuum of space, but the force of the detonation shook the ship like a leaf in a gust of wind.

"No chance for escape," said Sukune. He tapped the combination for a halt and rose from his seat.

"Now he'll think he hit us," he told the others. "Let's play dead."

"Why?" asked Bull Mike.

"It's our only hope. Another bomb will do the business if we try to run. But he'll want to capture our ship. If he sees it idling, he'll figure that we're washed out. He'll come on board, and then——"

"And then!" repeated the giant, grinning. "Then we'll have a fair shake with him!"

Quickly the three threw themselves down in attitudes of unconsciousness. Neil flung himself on the sill of the port nearest the Martian, in such a position that he could keep a cautious lookout.

Closer and closer came the enemy. Slowing down, he almost scraped against their side. Peeping out, Neil could see a port directly opposite. A Martian face, swarthy and skeleton-lean, was looking into the interior.

What the fellow discovered evidently reassured him. He could be seen pulling on a heavy space-suit over his scrawny limbs and clasping a helmet into place. Then a long jointed arm of metal extended from his ship to grapple and hold the supposedly disabled Terrestrial. A moment later a lock-panel opened and the Martian emerged to jump lightly across the few feet of intervening space.

They heard him working at their own entrance panel, evidently with some sort of ray apparatus. Soon he had negotiated the lock and entered. Fastening the panel behind him, he stepped over to where Bull Mike lay. He did not even trouble to draw his automatic pistol from its holster as he bent down to examine the silent form.

Easily, effortlessly, Bull Mike shot out his big hand and yanked the Martian's feet out from under him.

Down crashed the Martian. His gloved hand fumbled with the butt of his pistol, but Sukune was there first and snatched the weapon away. Bull Mike sat up quickly, cradling the struggling enemy in his arms as though he were a baby.

"Got him!" snorted the big fellow. "Let's appoint me as a committee of one to break him in two across my knee."

"Wait a minute," said Sukune, flinging out a restraining hand. "I want to question him first."

"What about?" asked Bull Mike.

"Lots of things. About where he came from, for instance."

"That's an easy one. He came from Mars," said Bull Mike.

"Hi, you, lie still or I'll do your legs in a braid!" This last to the prisoner.

"Not directly, he didn't come from Mars," said Neil. "He couldn't travel that far. He must have a base somewhere near. Perhaps he's a survivor from that bunch that was rubbed out on the Moon after they landed their big space-ship there last spring."

"Thunder, that's so," admitted Bull Mike, as with no gentle



hand he unfastened and plucked away the space helmet. The prisoner grimaced in impotent rage.

"You're a heroic customer, attacking a defenseless ship!" scolded Bull Mike in very bad Martian. "What brought you here? Where's your headquarters?"

They rose to their feet and allowed the prisoner to do likewise. He looked at each in turn, undaunted by the reversal of fortunes.

"I'll tell you nothing," he said shortly in their own language. "Kill me if you want to."

## CHAPTER II

### An Incredible Story

**B**ULL MIKE'S open hand drove at him, its hard heel striking his chin. With a gasp the Martian collapsed and would have fallen had not Neil caught and supported him.

"Here, none of that, Bull Mike!" barked Sukune. "You don't know your own strength—and very little else, either. Pour water on the fellow, Neil."

The Martian revived. He fingered his bruised face and glared up at the three Terrestrials. He still refused to answer questions.

But he couldn't have come all the way from home. "How far is it to Mars?" queried Bull Mike.

"We'll see," said Neil, turning to the television and checking the distance-finding device on it. "H'm, Mars is nearly on the other side of the sun. Way out of flight-shot. That little asteroid shows at about a hundred and fifty million miles."

"That asteroid!" repeated the Martian in a frightened voice. All three stared at him in surprise. He recovered himself. "What asteroid?" he queried more calmly.

"Asking, are you?" said Neil. "Well, I think you know. Where does that asteroid come in?"

"I'm not talking," said the Martian doggedly.

"We'll remedy that," announced Sukune grimly. "Get that space suit off of him, you two."

The prisoner struggled fiercely, but his puny strength was futile against their muscles, attuned to Earth's greater gravity. Quickly they overpowered him and stripped away his armor of metal and insulated fabric.

"Make him lie down on his face—so!" The Japanese had a hard gleam in his eye. "Hold him by the wrists, Neil. And you,

Bull Mike, hold his ankles."

They did so. "Will you talk now?" Sukune asked the Martian.

"I'll not!"

"Well," sighed Sukune, "this may seem a little crude, my friend, but it's necessary. Earth needs the information—and, if you'll remember, you *did* attack an unarmed ship."

Kneeling, he laid the tips of his fingers on the prisoner's flanks. It seemed no more than the lightest touch, yet the Martian shrieked out as if in an ecstasy of pain.

"You'll talk?" prompted the torturer.

"I'll talk! I'll talk!"

"A little spot of jiu-jitsu," Sukune said to his friends, rising. "It is strange how much the Martian nerve centers resemble the Terrestrial in position and response to stimuli. Let him up again."

The Martian dropped weakly on a seat, the defiance gone out of him. Sukune produced a metal flask and unscrewed the stopper.

"Here, drink this," he told the captive. "It's Terrestrial wine, it'll strengthen you. There, feel better? All right, tell us where you came from."

The Martian licked his lips with his dark, pointed tongue. "You guessed it at once," he said. "I'm from the asteroid. I was on a lone scout, like you; got too far away from home and ran out of fuel. I thought I'd capture you and fill my tanks."

"Nonsense!" said Sukune. "That asteroid isn't as large as lots of mountains on Earth. If a body of Martians had dwellings and fortifications on it, our astronomers would have made them out. You don't mean to tell us that you've been living on it."

The captive frowned and hesitated until he saw Sukune's wiry fingers crook suggestively. Then he made haste to reply.

"Not on it. Inside it. It's an artificial asteroid."

They looked at him in astonishment, only half-comprehending.

"Already you know about the giant ship on the Moon, that housed so many men——"

"You mean," said Neil, "that the asteroid is a giant ship also?"

**"I**T'S more than one. On Mars we built four tremendous craft, each about one of your Earth miles in length and shaped like a quarter-slice from a round fruit. Then we took



the four into space, one at a time, to the point where we wanted the asteroid's orbit to be. There we joined them together, like the quarters of the fruit fitted into shape again. The outer surfaces of them are roughcast to represent the natural rocky landscape of a little planet. And there we have a little world of our own, midway between Mars and your Earth."

The three Terrestrials were still mute with amazement. The Martian had recovered enough of his courage to laugh at them.

"I know that it sounds impossible. And so it must be, to such as you. Only on Mars, where we have the greatest metal resources, the most skillful mechanics, the wisest scientists in all the great universe, could such a thing be possible."

"Well," said Sukune, "what about it?"

"The Earth revolves around the sun every three hundred and sixty-five days, Mars in twice that. They will not come into opposition again for fully an Earth year from now. Naturally, Earth feels secure. Her mighty ships of war are idle, her millions of manpower loll in peaceful repose. They do not dream that this little artificial world may be dangerous. But it makes its journey around the sun in approximately four hundred and eighty days, and that can be speeded or slowed somewhat by means of tremendous rocket-engines. It will come into opposition with unthinking Earth in one hundred and fifty days, as I approximate it."

"Next April!" figured Neil quickly. "And then?"

"And then the little world will empty itself. It can bring forth two thousand heavily-armed ships, manned by six hundred thousand picked men. The space armies of Earth with their ships and weapons will be mighty and many, but unwary. Those two thousand Martian raiders will sell themselves at the highest cost, crippling and destroying Earth's defenses and cities to the utmost of their power. If they are lucky, you and your comrades will be prostrated, so that, months later, the expeditionary force from Mars can capture the planet without serious opposition."

The Martian bowed slightly, as if he were concluding a public address.

"I wonder if he's lying," said Bull Mike.

"Not at all, gentlemen," said the Martian. "Do you give me credit for inventing such a wonderful tale?"

"Let's get back to Earth," suggested Neil.

"Right," seconded Sukune. "Back there we'll turn ourselves in for being absent without leave, but they'll forget about us



when they check this lad's veracity under the truth-ray."

The three agreed. First they bound their prisoner hand and foot. Bull Mike was told off to mount guard over him and Sukune returned to the controls. Putting on the Martian's space suit, Neil hopped out and across the abyss to the other ship where it still clung by its automatic grapple. Transferring some new fuel to its tanks, he sent it speeding along in the wake of Sukune's craft.

In the stratosphere above St. Louis a patrol sighted and hailed them. The Martian craft was instantly boarded and seized, and the commander of the patrol bombarded the occupants of the two vessels with sharp, suspicious questions. At last he listened to the pleadings of the young Terrestrials and took them and their prisoner direct to their home rocketport, where Commander Scholom Raws, the officer of the space-scout squadron to which they belonged, was called to hear their story.

His first sharp accusation of truancy was stilled as they poured out their strange tale. When they had finished he ordered them to form a guard for the Martian and led the way at once to staff headquarters of the Intelligence Department many levels below.

THE group of intelligence officers who heard the report was deadly serious. First it held a whispered conference behind closed doors. Then the officers emerged again to question Neil, Bull Mike and Sukune, one at a time. The three were sworn not to discuss their adventure, even among themselves, and directed to return to their quarters.

The Martian prisoner also repeated his story. Subjected to the truth-rays, which, properly administered, eliminate the power of lying, he answered all questions in substantially the same manner as before. He was prevailed upon to draw diagrams of the artificial planetoid in which his fellows were whirling ever nearer to their opposition with Earth.

Finally he was imprisoned and a trusted guard set over him, with every precaution taken to insure absolute secrecy. Should Martian spies, still thick in every Terrestrial community, despite the ceaseless war waged upon them, find out the facts of the man's capture, the plans of the Terrestrial high command might go for naught.

Commander Raws mentioned the affair once only. That was



when he called Neil and his two friends into his quarters; and first making sure that nobody could hear them, spoke as follows:

"I do not condone your absence without leave although it may have chanced to bring fortune to our cause. Yet the high command feels that there is some reward due you."

He paused and studied the three young faces.

"That reward will be the knowledge of what your part will be in further action against this Martian force," he continued. "Well, I have asked for and received permission for my squadron to be included in the raiding group that is going to tackle them. No, ask no questions. Dismiss!"

Thereafter nothing more was said and no further hint of the nature of the plan of campaign was forthcoming. Only here and there, all over Earth's surface, isolated flights and squadrons of war-craft were given extra-duty training, were led in longer and more intricate maneuvers than their fellows; were ordered to install fighting equipment on their ships and to practice its use.

The number of Martians inside the round hull of the asteroid, according to the prisoner, was about six hundred thousand. The asteroid would have several thousand swift, light raiding ships, all fully armed and, in addition, the sham world would assuredly be defended and fortified to a high degree. Undoubtedly it was well guarded and observers with television and astronomical equipment would keep close watch on Earth as they approached. A fleet of space-ships could hardly steal upon that mile-size ball through coverless space—surprise would be out of the question. And chances seemed hardly better that the battle could be won by sheer force of arms.

However, a group of six thousand space-ships was organized for the attempt, ranging in size and model from small scouts such as were included in Commander Raws' squadron to huge and powerful dreadnaughts of space. Since these larger, heavier craft were less fitted for long journeys, the start of the expedition was delayed until the middle of January, 2676. Should the group start from Earth at that time, computations showed, the Martian asteroid would be met at a point some seventy million miles away, shortly after the first of March. Even for that comparatively short journey the big ships would have to be refitted with special tanks for reserve fuel and the crews would have to be cut down accordingly. In the end, barely three hundred thousand men were included in the plans.



## CHAPTER III

## The Deserter

**Y**AXA, the prisoner, was of course ignorant of all these things as he sat alone in his secret prison. Food came to him by dumbwaiter and he did not see a human face. It was not until the middle of January that the door of his cell opened and admitted a Terrestrial—a Terrestrial whom he recognized as one of the three who had captured him.

"Courage!" said Neil Andresson. "We're getting out of here."

Yaxa looked at him levelly. They made a striking contrast; the saddle-colored Martian—with his puffy body, his spidery legs and his head that, except for the brilliant eyes, seemed to be a high-craniumed skull covered only with skin—looked like a weird cartoon of the Terrestrial with his fine, muscular proportions, his smooth cheeks and his smiling countenance.

"Are you going to torture me further?" demanded Yaxa.

"Not I," said Neil. "If you'll remember, I never offered you violence at any time. I was not in sympathy with the measures taken to wring information from you, though I was in the minority and had to countenance them. For that matter, I'm not in sympathy with the Terrestrial cause at all."

"Then what are you doing here?" asked the Martian.

"I succeeded in being detailed to guard you. I'm going to set you free."

Yaxa made a helpless gesture. "What can I do if I am freed? I'll be a stranger in a hostile world. Terrestrials will recognize me for an enemy as far as they can see me. I'll be hunted down and killed or injured or, at the very least, brought back to prison."

"I've provided for that, else I would not have made the suggestion," said Neil. "Here, take this pistol. And see the cloak I am wearing. Take it, drape it about you. At first glance you might pass for a Terrestrial. Come, I know where your ship is kept. We'll escape in it."

"We?" repeated the captive.

"Yes, I'm going with you, back to your asteroid. It's within space-shot now. I cannot remain here, I would be punished as a traitor."

His eyes shining with new hope, Yaxa donned Neil's cape and followed him into a deserted hallway, then out into a street where a closed surface-car awaited them. They entered this and



traveled, by traffic-way and by lift, to the very top level of the city.

When Neil opened the door Yaxa peeped out and saw that they had reached a rocketport. Hangars stood at every hand, with rows of space craft, large and small, on all sides. But nearest to them and isolated from the others was the fast Martian scout which had been his when he had flown to his capture.

"Quick, we have no time to lose," Neil urged him, and they left the car. A dozen steps took them to the side of the spaceship. A lock-panel was open and the two of them entered the inner compartment.

Sukune and Bull Mike looked up curiously from their seats inside. The leveled pistols of the two intruders prompted the young guards to raise their hands. "What's the meaning of this?" asked Sukune.

"It's what you Terrestrials call poetic justice," smiled Yaxa. "You captured me—now I have captured you."

"Neil, you traitor!" fumed Bull Mike.

"I wouldn't call names if I were in your shoes," rejoined Neil, crossing to the panel which led into the storeroom, and opening it. "Yaxa, this ship is well supplied with everything we need on the voyage. Shall we leave?"

"Yes, of course. What shall we do with these friends of yours?"

"Don't call me a friend of his," growled Bull Mike.

"We'll take them along," replied Neil, taking no notice of his former chum's remark. "If we let them go now they'll rouse the whole planet on us. As it is, the force that is tackling your asteroid doesn't leave for two days yet. That ought to be head start enough for us."

It seemed that nobody at the rocketport noticed the departure of the Martian ship. If notice was taken, perhaps it was reflected that there were Terrestrial guards on board and that all must be well. Unhindered, the craft went up and out, cleared the atmospheric envelope and headed for the bright speck in the sky that marked the sham world which was its goal.

FOR a few hours there was silence aboard between the captives and the captors, but at length Sukune spoke up with a smile.

"Why be unreasonable about this thing?" he said. "If we're to be together for two months or so in space, we might as well



be pleasant about it. I, for one, will accept defeat gracefully if you'll let me."

"Gladly," said Yaxa.

"Me, too," said Bull Mike.

"That settles it," said Yaxa. "We'll get along together, I'm sure."

"Senator W. L. Marcy of our United States once said, 'To the victors belong the spoils,'" continued Sukune. "We'll admit for the time being that you are victors and we're the spoils. Until the situation reverses itself we'll be model prisoners."

They gathered in friendly fashion around the television screen and dialed in the image of the asteroid. It appeared half light, half dark, like a moon at the half. They could pick out the roughnesses of mountains, ravines and plains, all made in miniature by clever Martian artisans. They discussed what they saw like real comrades, all enmity apparently forgotten.

When two days had passed they watched the diminishing Earth by television and, sure enough, sighted great clouds of shining specks—the hundreds of flights of space-ships that were taking the ether. They saw how some flew slowly, others swiftly, so that in a short time they had formed into the conventional "curtain front"—an open order formation of three dimensions, roughly disk-like in shape and perpendicular to the line of advance. It was about a thousand miles in diameter and about as thick through as the distance in which three or four ships could fly in single column. Against the black sky it looked like a moving galaxy of runaway stars.

In front of this formation danced several flights of speedy scouts. "Raws and the boys are among those," said Sukune.

"Don't the Martians inside the asteroid see that attacking force?" asked Bull Mike. "They can fly away, can't they? Well, why don't they?"

"A body of that size could hardly carry enough fuel for a long, sustained trip," Yaxa explained. "It just boosts itself along occasionally as it follows the orbit to which it is held by the sun's gravitational pull. That being the case, it could hardly hope to escape from those lighter, further-traveling ships. My companions inside doubtless figure that they might as well face the attack first as last.

There was something uncanny in the thought of what was being done and decided inside that floating globe, so like a lifeless planetoid and yet the work of mortal hands. Brimful of men and weapons it was destined to destroy whatever of Earth



it might.

A month passed. And then another week. Larger and ever larger grew the mock asteroid until it filled a sizeable portion of the television screen that reflected it. At last they swooped down toward it, a great uneven globe the color of clay that spun slowly upon its tilted axis. Lightly as a falling leaf the ship descended. Neil was at the controls inside, while Yaxa sent code messages by radio. A great black opening suddenly appeared. Into this the craft slipped.

It fitted into the end of a long tube, like a nut dropped into a mouse-hole. As it came to a stop Yaxa opened the lockpanel to the outside. At once several Martians, all heavily armed, looked in. At the sight of the Terrestrials they levelled automatic rifles and pistols.

"It's all right," said Yaxa. "One of these is a friend, the other two are prisoners."

Still suspicious, a guard took the four to an officer. There Yaxa made a long report in an undertone. The three Terrestrials were questioned next, one at a time. In the end Sukune and Bull Mike were sent away to be confined.

"As for you," the officer said to Neil, "I find that you have done a great service to us and that at a great personal sacrifice. Consider yourself one of us. We are prepared to offer you whatever reward you ask within reason."

"Thank you," replied Neil. "I know nothing that I would like at present except a chance to inspect your wonderful asteroid."

"We will gladly grant you such a chance," he was assured.

Some conversation about the oncoming Terrestrial force then followed, but Neil, a simple scout in rank, was unable to give much information. At last he was allowed to go away with Yaxa, who by this time looked upon him as a close friend.

THEY walked through long, high corridors, walled with gray metal and flanked by doors opening into compartments of various styles and equipment. Aided by Yaxa's explanations, Neil was not long in visualizing the whole structure as a series of spherical surfaces, one within another, each surface utilized as the floor of a level. Artificial gravity was set up at the core and elevators and sloping runways permitted the garrison to progress from one level to another.

"Most of all," said Neil, "I want to view this wonderful mechanism which holds the four parts of your asteroid together."



"A trifle, nothing but a trifle," Yaxa replied with a deprecatory gesture. "The principal is a simple magnetic one. The four sections—the fruit slices, I once described them—bring their inner angles together along a common line. That common line is a long, thin cable made of six different kinds of metal, each of the six connected with a special motor at either end. They set up the current among themselves, and the cable acts as the pole of our world."

"And if the current was cut off?"

"Then the four sections would float apart. But the current will endure as long as the cable is not cut clean in two."

"Then where is the center of gravity?"

"At the very mid-point of the cable, which is also the center of the asteroid and of each concentric sphere within it."

"I would greatly like to see this cable," said Neil again.

"That is the only request I cannot grant you," the Martian replied. "It is the most sacred, the most jealously fenced object of all. Every foot is guarded by trusted men, each one sworn to defend it with his last drop of blood. Only the commander of this garrison can be admitted to the tubular compartment which surrounds its central emanator of gravity, or to the shops where the motors run. But don't feel disappointed over such a prohibition. Come, we'll go to a theater and on the way we'll pass as close to the cable as we're likely to get."

Sure enough, as they walked down the corridor they came to a juncture of four wide passages. Here was a small concourse, thronged with pedestrians, and in its very center a stout metal pillar rose from the flooring to the roof. Two sentries stood vigilantly on opposite sides of it.

"We are now at the point where the four sections meet on this level," Yaxa pointed out. "As you see, the walls are cut well away to allow the passages to cross. That pillar is made of four pieces—the edges of the sections. Enclosed by them is the cable I told you about. The pillar and the cable extend above and below here, from one pole of the asteroid to the other."

Neil looked at the arrangement as if fascinated, but Yaxa urged him on. They came to the spot where opposite partitions of two adjoining sections came together. There was not enough space to insert a knife-blade, so accurately had the structure been made.

"Not very thick for outer walls," observed Neil, measuring the partitions with his eye. "A Terrestrial disintegrator-ray could easily pierce them."



"Of course, but these are only inner walls, after all. The real strong, thick partition is the outside, the tough rind of the fruit. That is too much for the strongest ray or bomb ever made."

"There aren't any bolts to hold the sections together."

"Have you forgotten what I told you about the artificial gravity? That holds everything in place. But here's the theater. Let's get inside or we'll be late."

## CHAPTER IV

### The Great Battle

THE television drama broadcast from the Martian pleasure city of Pulambar, was one of the cynical tragi-comedies that the men of Mars love so well. As it unfolded certain gases were released in the auditorium. They seemed pungent, even acrid, to Neil, who was not used to Martian luxuries, but those around him sniffed the fumes with every evidence of pleasure. He watched the drama progress and was careful to applaud and laugh whenever Yaxa did.

From there they went to an eating-compartment, where a group of young officers first looked askance at the Terrestrial stranger, but crowded around with exclamations of welcome when Yaxa explained his presence in the asteroid. Neil made the best of his limited command of the Martian language. The party seemed to be having a fine time, not the slightest bit worried by the fact that a strong force from Earth was due to attack within a few hours.

"We have only to remain inside our defenses," said one. "They can hammer away on our surface forever without effect, while we can bomb them out of existence one by one."

"It'll be a way to break the tedium of existence," offered another.

"And excellent practice for our coming raid on Earth," added a third.

"Will you fight on our side?" the first speaker asked Neil.

"No, I'll be a non-combatant," grinned the Terrestrial. "After all, I've some old comrades in those ships. However," he continued, "I'll drink in the fashion of my planet to your success and that of your friends."

He was loudly applauded and several raised their glasses in imitation of his courtesy.

The gathering broke up late and Neil confessing himself tired, was allowed to go to bed in quarters near those of Yaxa. Yet

he did not sleep for hours and, when he dozed off at last, it seemed but a moment before Yaxa knocked at his door to waken him.

He dressed and went out into the wide passage that served as a street. The carefree attitude of the Martians was gone now; everywhere he saw bodies of troops drawn up into formation, while here and there sped vehicles laden with munitions and supplies.

"The enemy is almost here and we're getting ready," explained Yaxa. "The commander has told me to bring you to him, that he may ask what part you want to take in the action."

"I've already said that I don't want to fight," said Neil. "As a matter of fact, I think that I'd do best as a guard over the Terrestrial prisoners who came with us. I'm built along the same mental and physical lines that they are, and so I ought to be ideal for the job."

When he faced the Martian chief he made the same suggestion and it was accepted on the spot. Yaxa conducted him to an elevator and they descended, it seemed for miles. At last they stepped out into a narrow corridor the floor of which was sharply curved.

In front of a near-by panel a Martian soldier stood, armed with automatic rifle, pistol and bomb-thrower. Yaxa explained their errand and showed a stamped bit of metal as badge of authority. The fellow saluted and opened the door.

Inside, Sukune and Bull Mike rose from the pallets on which they sat. They were courteous, even cheerful, in their greeting to the newcomers.

"We've been getting ourselves an eyeful of the show that's coming," said the Japanese, pointing to the television screen that was part of the chamber's furnishings. Sure enough, he had dialed in a viewpoint in space from which the artificial asteroid appeared as a sphere about two feet in diameter, while in the distance the "curtain front" of the Terrestrial ships' advance could be seen like a puff of luminous dust.

"There's a lot of friends of ours in that mob," added Bull Mike. "They'll take this little pill of yours without so much as a swallow of water. Then we'll be free, speaking a good word for you, Yaxa."

"That's kind of you," smiled the Martian. "However, I don't think that there will be that much of a reverse."

"We'll soon know," said Neil. "Look, the Terrestrials are about ready to close in."



THE attacking fleet had indeed drawn near its objective. They could see the face of the "curtain" changing, the edges coming forward and the center receding. This was the first move toward the gradual formation of a great net or basket in which to snare the apparently lifeless ball. That accomplished, the open face of the net would close and the ships of Earth would settle like a cloud around their quarry. An hour more, at least, and the thing would be done.

But, as the Terrestrials drew near, a hundred hidden panels flew wide all over the asteroid, exposing dark recesses. From each of these, shot ship after ship, like angry hornets disturbed in their nests, hurtling silently and fiercely to battle.

What followed might seem but a small engagement compared to the later and final conflict between Earth and Mars, wherein full two million ships took part. Yet, for display of grim courage, desperate endeavor and in proportion to the casualties, the fight that ensued around and within the asteroid has no parallel in the history of either planet.

Records show that the Martian commander of the garrison in the huge hull foresaw and planned his part of the battle from the moment the enemy group left Earth. He hoped to launch a surprise attack that it would have been impossible for the Terrestrials to forestall, and to that end he awaited the very instant when the attacking party bunched to close in. Then he sent his entire space-force, something more than two thousand fighting craft, out and at them. Only the smallest possible crews were at the battle stations of these ships and the bulk of the asteroid garrison, more than five hundred thousand strong, remained inside.

The four at the television watched eagerly the miniature reflection of the engagement. The Martians, less in number and lighter in craft, did their best to take advantage of every opportunity. Bunching close together in fours and fives, they hurled into action. They were all raiding models, more maneuverable than most of the battleships and heavy cruisers among the Terrestrials. A quick dash through the ranks of the oncoming enemy, and they might be able to effect an equally quick turn and an attack from the rear.

From every Martian ship streaked forth a volley of roving bombs. These projectiles propelled by ultra-swift rocket engines, were aimed and guided by radio controls so that they could be turned to seek a target missed at first attempt. Some of the fore-



most Terrestrial ships were silently exploded into nothingness before they could fight or avoid the enemy. The others, frantically plied their disintegrator rays, swinging the lean, glowing fingers of flame back and forth in an attempt to blot out the whizzing bombs and the ships that were launching them.

"Say, I'm missing some wonderful fighting," said Yaxa suddenly. "You three will excuse me."

"We three will do nothing of the sort," replied Neil with the utmost calm. "You're staying here with us."

The young Martian looked up with wondering eyes, first at Neil, who stood with drawn pistol, then at Bull Mike and Sukune, who had risen to bar the door. His hand dropped to his belt in search of a weapon.

"Stand still, Yaxa, or I'll kill you," called Neil warningly. Yaxa's hand ceased its motion. Bull Mike reached out and possessed himself of the Martian's weapon. Then, holding the prisoner by the shoulder, he walked toward the door, which Sukune was opening.

Outside the startled sentry brought up his rifle, but paused when he saw Bull Mike interpose the body of Yaxa as a shield.

"Shoot, fool!" screamed the latter. "Don't mind me, destroy these men before they escape!"

The sentry still hesitated for a moment and in that moment Neil shot him down. Sukune sprang out and possessed himself of the fallen man's rifle, pistol and bomb-thrower.

Neil still remained at the television screen for a moment before following the men he had liberated. "Our battleships are already raying the outside," he said, as he came away at last. "We haven't a minute to lose."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Yaxa in a voice that still reflected overwhelming astonishment. "I don't understand——"

"It's perfectly simple," said Sukune. "We were deathly afraid that you'd guess before this, but now you may as well know. The whole business of your rescue, our capture, the flight from Earth, was arranged by our intelligence staff. They wanted to get three determined men inside this shell, where we could in some way lay the inwards open to Terrestrial disintegrators."

"That's why you were so curious about the cable," Yaxa accused Neil.

"Right," admitted the other. "Well, we have little time to lose. Follow me."



SUDDENLY Yaxa began to struggle. "Help! Help!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, and at his cry a little group of Martians came running to view from a side-passage. Bull Mike clouted Yaxa with his fist and the prisoner fell insensible, while the three Terrestrials ran swiftly up the corridor. Behind them came a summons to stop, followed by a scatter of shots. A few leaps, however, left the pursuit well behind.

"There's the cable-pillar, ahead of us," said Neil, pointing ahead. Sure enough they were approaching a pole on their level.

The two guards on duty by the device looked up at the sound of hurriedly approaching feet. Before they could challenge, however, they fell beneath a volley from the Terrestrials. Ignoring the still quivering bodies, the three comrades gathered around the pillar.

"How can we cut it?" panted Sukune.

"I smuggled this along," said Neil, producing a hand disintegrator appliance, about the size of a pistol. With it he began to fuse the metal facings of the pillar.

The Martians who had come at Yaxa's call were approaching now. Bull Mike sent a stream of bullets at them from the rifle of one of the cable-guards. Sukune did likewise. Several of the pursuers fell while the others ducked into sheltering doorways without returning the fire.

"They're afraid they'll hit and damage this pillar," said Neil. "Hang close to it, you two."

He had cut well into one facing of the great upright. Still he had not pierced the layer of metal that protected the cable. On he worked while his comrades faced in opposite directions, rifles at the ready.

The shots had attracted groups in other corridors, and from all four directions bodies of Martian soldiery could be seen stealthily approaching. As they came close enough to be good targets Sukune and Bull Mike sprayed bullets on them. The survivors all sought shelter for a moment, then resumed steady advance from doorway to doorway along the passages. A rush from all quarters seemed imminent.

At last a great oxidized chip fell away from the pillar and Neil gave a triumphant exclamation. He had pierced the metal and inside he could plainly see the cable—a taut, gleaming cord of vari-colored strands, barely six inches in diameter. It was hard to realize that this slender line was the source of the powerful gravity that controlled this synthetic world. He aimed his disintegrator at it anew, but no ray answered his touch on the



button. The charge had been exhausted in forcing a way through the pillar.

He sent a pistol bullet in at the cable. It struck at an angle and glanced away. His action was seen by the Martians in all directions, who gave vent to a loud chorus of desperate shouts and charged forward as if driven by one single impulse.

The rattle of Sukune's and Bull Mike's rifles sounded, but this burst of fire could not stem the rush. In a second the Martians were upon them—dozens of them. Bull Mike clubbed his weapon, swung it like a flail and cleared a space. Half a dozen pistols were fired at him, their muzzles almost against him as they were discharged. He reeled but did not collapse, fighting on with undiminished strength.

Sukune did not fare so well, and out of the tail of his eye Neil saw the Japanese go down and lie still as vengeful Martians showered blows upon him. In desperation he reached a hand through the hole in the cable, grasped the cable and gave it a powerful jerk at the same moment. A moment later he fell sprawling, his body convulsed by a current that gripped and tore at him as though it would rend his every muscle to shreds. He tried to rise again, but the shock had paralyzed him. His ears were dull to the din around him and his eyes were blurred as if with weariness, but he could see that a loop of the cable had been pulled out by his attempt.

Bull Mike, last of the three Terrestrials still on his feet, saw it, too. Hurling his weapon into the midst of the Martians, he sprang to the side of the pillar and thrust his arm through the exposed loop. Claspings his great hands, he hurled his giant body outward with all his strength.

For a moment he seemed to glow as if illuminated from within by a powerful white flame. Then he flew through the air and crashed to the floor. The Martians fairly riddled his fallen form with their bullets. Neil slipped into insensibility, and the last thing he was conscious of was that the cable's loop had been parted, its two frayed ends protruding from the hole in the pillar, fully six inches of space between them.

The mission of the trio had been accomplished.

WHEN he regained his senses at last he could not open his eyes. He moved his hands, and it was as if they were sheathed in massy lead. His very breathing was a distinct effort.

"Bull Mike!" he called. "Sukune!"—but then he remembered



that Bull Mike and Sukune had been killed.

"Lie still," said a female voice. "You're all right."

"Where am I?" he asked.

"In a hospital," answered the voice.

"A hospital? Where? On Earth?"

"Of course," the voice laughed. "You're in Base Hospital Number 61-X, at Delhi. I'm your nurse."

"I see. The battle's over, then."

"Months ago. After our ships fired blasts between sections of the asteroid and then destroyed them, you were one of the few survivors found floating in space among the wreckage. It's been a fight to keep you alive."

He lay still and thought silently.

"Am I blind?" he asked at length.

"No, but leave that bandage on your eyes alone. Plenty of time to see everything when the doctor takes it off."

"I understand," he said. "And am I—badly hurt?"

"You were. But we've put you together, as good as new. It will take many days more, but you'll walk and talk and see and fly again. And you'll still have your good looks, too."

Again he was quiet. The nurse broke the silence.

"Something was left here for you."

He heard the rattle of a paper wrapping. Then a small object was placed in his palm. It seemed to be a bit of metal, cut into the shape of a many-pointed star and depending from a strip of ribbon.

"The president of the Terrestrial League brought you that with his own hands," the nurse told him. "Shall I read the citation?"

"Do."

"Very well, listen. 'In recognition of the intelligent and loyal service rendered in capturing an enemy scout and securing from him information of paramount importance to the Terrestrial arms on or about the first day of October, 2675; and for courageous and successful attempts and actions against and in the presence of a superior armed force of the enemy on or about the third day of March, 2676; I, Silas Parrish, president of the Terrestrial League, by authority vested in me by the government of the planet Earth, do confer upon Captain Neil Andresson, unattached, the highest award for valor and service that is within the gift of the body I represent; to wit, the Medal of Honor of the Terrestrial League.'

She stopped reading. "But it calls me a captain!" exclaimed Neil. "I'm only a scout."

"You have the rank of captain now. It's honorary, of course. You'll be out of the hospital before the beginning of the year, but you won't be able to go into action again before the whole mess is settled."

He heard her lay the medal and document down. Then her footsteps went echoing away.

"Hello, Neil," said a voice he knew.

"Yaxa!" he cried. "You here?"

"In the cot next to you. They picked us up together, I'm told."

"Badly wounded?"

"Worse than you. Both my legs have been taken off."

Neil said nothing for a moment. "It could be worse," he ventured at last.

"Oh yes. Life is worth living, even with artificial limbs."

"Can you see, Yaxa."

"Perfectly."

"Here then. The war's over, at least so far as we're concerned. Let's call it quits."

He painfully stretched out his hand toward the place from which Yaxa's voice came. After a moment he felt the Martian's spidery fingers on it.

"Quits it is, then," agreed Yaxa. "We'll get well together."

Both of them relaxed. The fierce conflict they had both gone through now seemed far away and vague, as if it had been the experience of other men. They felt peaceful and in some measure content.

For they had both fought a good fight. Both had done their best. Both would be honored for their efforts. And, best of all, neither of them would ever need to fight again.

— The End —