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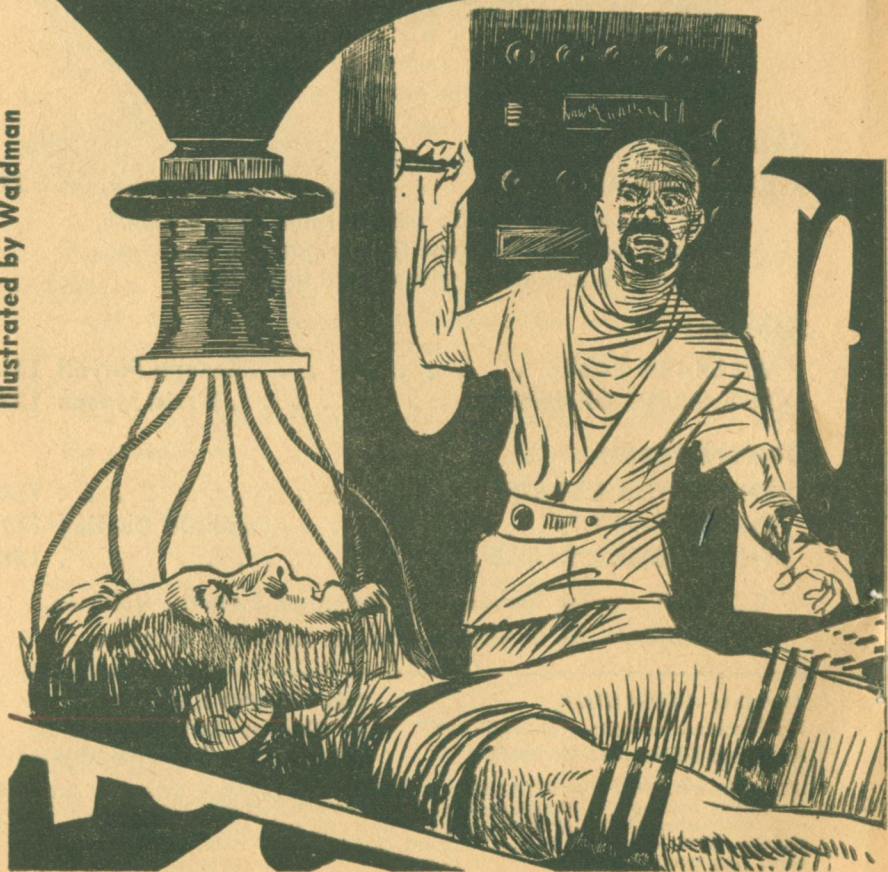
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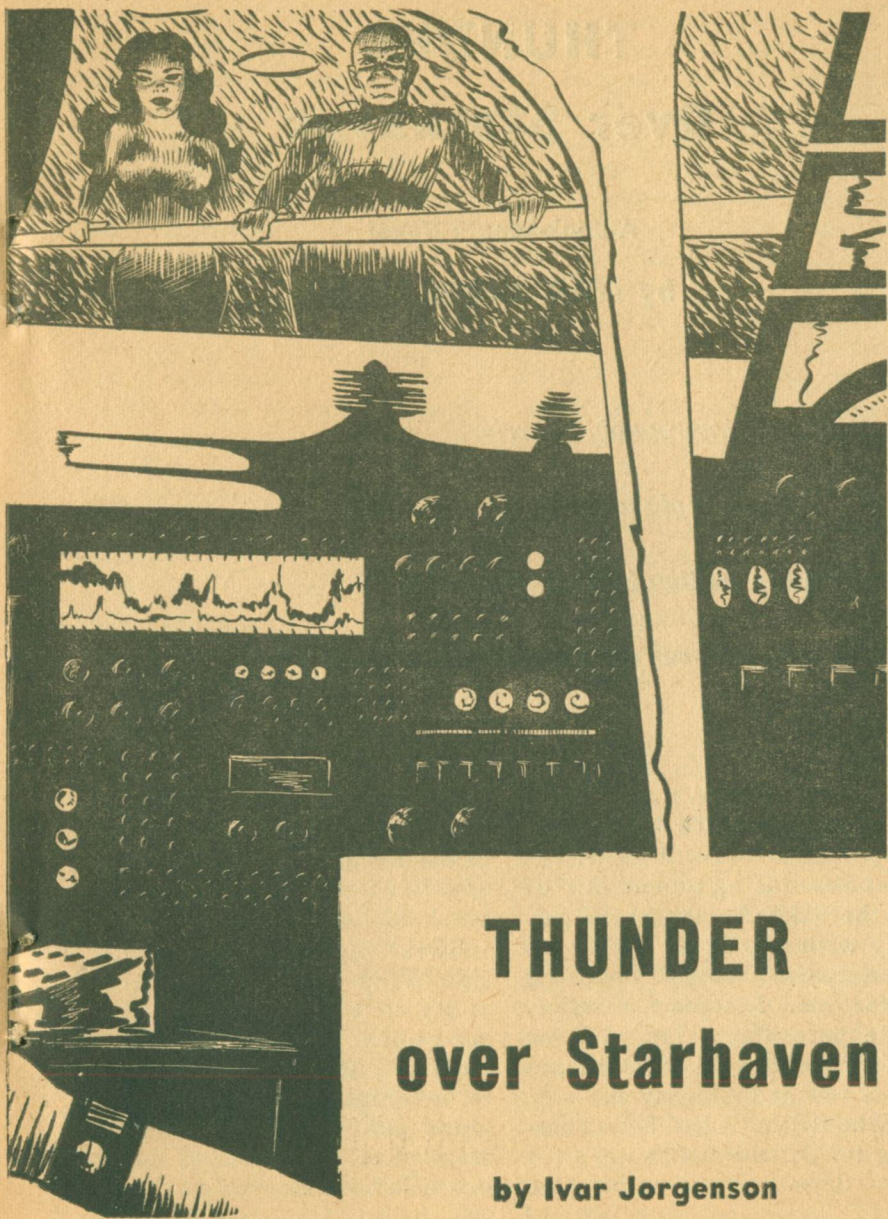
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# THUNDER over Starhaven

by Ivar Jorgenson

# THUNDER

## Over Starhaven

A Book-Length Novel

by IVAR JORGENSON

*Behind its impregnable barrier,*

*it was a planet of desperate men:*

*twenty million hunted criminals*

*whose only law was the word of a madman!*

### CHAPTER I

I CAME racing down out of the Fifth Octant of the galaxy with two squat little two-man patrol ships shrieking after me. I wasn't worried. The percentages lay with me—if I could hold them off until I reached Starhaven.

The SP boys had been chasing me in and out of warp for two days now, struggling to match velocities with me and

clamp my ship in metamagnetic grapples and tow me off to the Keep. Somehow the idea of a lifetime spent at hard labor held little appeal.

Sweat dribbled down the side of my face as I sat locked at my controls, trying to urge my stolen ship on by sheer body-english. It's frustrating to be whipping along at three point five lights and still to seem utterly stationary, hung in stasis without motion. That was the way it seemed in warp

with nothing but the grayness all around, and the snub-nosed SP ships behind me.

My screen panel lit. A green blossom of light told me that I had reached my pre-set destination, and I jabbed down hard on the enameled red stud that—

*Flick!*

—wrenched me out of hyperspace and back into non-warp existence.

The ship's detector buzzed—once, twice—as my two pursuers made the shift-over maneuver only seconds later. But I hardly cared about them now.

Ahead of me, Starhaven filled the sky.

I saw it as a giant coin floating in the sea of space, a burnished copper coin studded with rivets the size of whales. I saw it full-face, head-on. Behind me lay Nestor, the red supergiant sun whose faint rays would have warmed Starhaven if Starhaven weren't shelled over entirely with metal and completely self-sufficient power-wise.

I locked my ship into orbit around the metal world. The mass detectors told me that my pursuers were doing the same thing. But I couldn't be caught now; my ship was at full ion-drive velocity, and all they

could do was tag along behind me at a constant distance.

I snapped on the communicator. After the first quick hum of contact the SP scramblers cut in, but I switched circuits on them, into the vhf where they couldn't scramble, and said, "Come in, Starhaven. Come in!"

Silence for half a minute. I looked back via my rear screens and saw two snub-nosed Patrol ships hanging there waiting for me to falter. "Come on in, Starhaven," I said again.

A moment's pause. Then:

"This is Starhaven. Who the dickens are you?"

"I'm Johnny Mantell, and I want in! Two SP ships chased me down from Mulciber. They're still on my tail."

"We see them, Mantell. You're in an SP ship yourself. Where'd you get it?"

"Stole it." The ship whipped around Starhaven for the fiftieth time since I'd fixed orbit. "I'm asking for sanctuary. They want me for murder."

"Okay. We won't turn down a plea for sanctuary." Whoever was at the other end of my conversation turned off-mike for a second and mumbled something. Then he said, "Stay in orbit. We're going to blast your pursuers and pick you up."

I grinned. I had made it!  
"Be seeing you soon!"

"Yeah. Sure, Mantell."

I kept my eyes on the vision-screens. For a moment, now that I knew I was home free, I cut velocity 10 percent—just enough to give the boys behind me one last fighting chance. They were wide awake. A double blast of energy raked my screens, but my defenses held. Then there was a sudden burst of light from the metal-skinned planet ahead of us.

The legendary heavy-cycle guns of Starhaven, coming into play! I saw the first of my pursuers shudder as his defense screens threw off the first blast. But while the screens labored to absorb the overload, Starhaven sent up an additional blast. The total megawattage must have been enough to sink a dreadnaught. One moment the little SP ship was there; a second later, it wasn't.

As for the other ship, he wasn't staying around to fight a one-man battle with Starhaven. He turned tail at 6 g's and streaked outward.

The gunners below let him run for about six seconds. Then a lazy spiral of energy came barreling up from Starhaven, and suddenly I was alone in the sky.

Free. Safe.

I hung limply to my control rack, waiting for them to pick me up.

**I** DIDN'T have to wait long. I orbited Starhaven again and noticed a hatch opening on its metal skin, fifty thousand feet below me. My next time around a ship had come forth from that hatch—and my next time around, the ship had matched orbits with me and was following me along quite nicely.

Only this was no little SP ship. It was a monster that overhauled me with ease. I lowered my screens and let the metamagnetic grapples snare me without resistance; gently I was drawn "upward" into the belly of the big ship. A hatch closed over me.

My communicator crackled. A heavy voice said, "Stay right where you are, Mantell. We'll come to get you. Open your rear lock."

I nudged the control. The lock slid open. I heard a faint hissing sound that grew rapidly stronger; I smelled a sweetness in the air.

I passed out.

When I woke, I was out of my spacesuit and in a cabin in the other ship, surrounded by four men in civilian clothes. One of them held a blaster

trained at my midsection.

"Please don't move, Mantell. You're on your way to Starhaven now."

"How come the hocus-pocus? What's that gun for? And why the sleeping gas?"

The man who seemed to be the spokesman said, "We like Starhaven the way it is. We don't let strangers in without taking precautions. This may be some kind of SP stunt, for all we know."

"An SP stunt that costs them two ships and four lives?" I snapped hotly. "You're carrying caution to the point of foolishness. I'm—"

"Until you've been psychprobed, you're nobody," the man with the blaster said.

"Psychprobed?"

"Everyone coming into Starhaven gets psychprobed. It's a security measure."

I felt myself go pale. "How can you—I mean, do you have someone qualified to do the job? You can mess a man's mind up good if you psychprobe him the wrong way."

He grinned. "Don't worry about that, Mantell. The guy who does our probing is named Erik Harmon. That make you feel better?"

*Erik Harmon?* I blinked. Harmon, here? The man who invented psychprobing and

vanished ten-twenty years ago?

"I guess he'll do," I said.

The ship came to a feather-light landing. The hum of the inertialess drive ceased.

"Welcome to Starhaven, Mantell. Let's go meet the boss and get your mind looked at."

**F**IVE MINUTES LATER I was standing outside the ship, in the middle of a very well-equipped spaceport, on what seemed to me like a sunny afternoon on any Earth-type planet. It was impossible to tell that Starhaven was completely ringed by a metal sheath.

Overhead the sky was blue, flecked with puffy clouds, and a sun glowed brightly. I knew it was probably a deuterium-fusion synthetic of some kind, but I couldn't help thinking of it as a real star. As for the planet's metal skin, there was no sign of it; most likely it was ten or twelve miles, perhaps twenty, above ground level, and artfully disguised to look like an authentic sky. The engineers who had built this world had known their stuff, regardless of which side of the law they operated on.

"You like the set-up?" my guide asked.

"Damn convincing. You wouldn't know there was a roof overhead."

He chuckled. "You know it whenever the SP decides to come after us. They haven't made a dent in thirty years, ever since Ben Thurdan set Starhaven up."

A landcar came squirreling along the field to meet us, and drew up almost at my toes. We got in. I looked back and saw mechanics removing my little SP ship from the hold of the monster that had picked me up.

I licked my lips. The idea of a psychprobe didn't amuse me much, even with Dr. Erik Harmon himself doing the probing. "Where are we heading?"

"To Thurdan's headquarters. That's where new arrivals get processed."

We drove through heavy traffic in a busy-looking city. I wondered what kind of industries Starhaven could have—a planet populated exclusively by criminals.

By criminals. *Like me.* Sudden guilt racked me as I thought back over the trail that had brought me to Starhaven, to this dead-end for a civilized man.

I had plenty of time to get used to the idea of being a criminal. Starhaven was a sanctuary, but you didn't

leave it. Not if you had any sense, anyway.

We pulled up outside an impressive-looking office building. I was escorted upstairs by men with drawn blasters. They weren't taking any chances at all.

"Do you go through this rigmarole with every new arrival?" I asked.

"Every one. We don't take chances, Mantell."

A door rolled back. They had a welcoming committee ready for me. The office was furnished like that of a galactic president, and there were three people in it.

One was a man in a white smock, old, wrinkled, tired-looking. That would have to be Erik Harmon, the psychprobe man. He stood to the left of a tall glowering man in purple synthilk shirt and bright yellow tights; he was bald and looked about forty, but was probably older. He had to be Ben Thurdan, Starhaven's guiding genius.

And next to him was a girl with hair the color of Thurdan's shirt and eyes the color of blue-white diamonds or blue-white suns. I didn't recognize her at all.

Thurdan said, "You're John Mantell?"

I nodded.

His voice was the expected

bass boom. He gestured to Dr. Harmon, who stood poised like a withered prune about to take flight. "Erik, take Mr. Mantell into the lab and give him the full probe." He looked at me and said, "You understand that this is a necessary precautionary measure, Mr. Mantell."

*Mister Mantell!* To an ex-beachcomber who hadn't been called mister in twelve years! But Thurdan seemed strictly business, and his business was breaking the law.

Harmon beckoned to me, and I followed him, accompanied by the ever-present gunmen. As I passed through the actuator beam of the door, I heard Thurdan say, "He looks all right. But that's the kind we have to watch out for."

The girl said, "I hope we don't have to kill this one, Ben. I like him."

Then the door scissored shut behind me.

## CHAPTER II

I ENTERED a well-furnished laboratory. Set in the center of the room was the familiar spidery bulk of a psychprobe, while flanking it I saw a standard-model electroencephalograph and some other equipment that was un-

recognizable to me and probably was Harmon's own work.

Gently they propelled me to the couch and strapped me in. Harmon lowered the probe-dome to my scalp. It was cold and hard, and knowing that an incautious twist of a lever now could cook my brains or scramble my synapses didn't make me any more cheerful.

Harmon's eyes were bright. He touched his hands to the control panel. He smiled.

"Tell me a little about yourself, Mr. Mantell."

"I'm a former armaments technician who ran into some trouble twelve years back. I lost my job. I lived on Mulciber for a while, and—"

As I spoke he went on making adjustments, staring over my shoulder at an image-screen out of my line of sight, where the electric rhythms of my brain were being projected by an oscilloscope.

"I was out on the beach combing for pearls when—"

*Wham!*

Something crashed down on my head like a weighted bludgeon. It seemed to split the hemispheres of my brain apart, to wedge deep in my scalp, to blast off fusion bombs back of each eye.

It lasted perhaps half a second, I thought, and that was about enough. The tide of

pain receded, leaving a numbing headache. I looked up at old Harmon, who was squinting gravely at his dials.

"What happened?" I asked.

"A slight error in calibration, nothing more. My apologies, young man."

I shuddered. "I hope you don't do anything like that when you psychprobe me, Doctor!"

He looked at me strangely. "You've *been* psychprobed already. It's been over for fifteen minutes. You've been unconscious all this time."

Fifteen minutes—and I thought it had been a fraction of a second! I rubbed my aching scalp. Something was throbbing just behind my eyebrows, and I wanted to rip off the plate of bone that covered my brain and press my hands against the ache.

From behind me the booming voice of Ben Thurdan said, "Is he conscious yet?"

"He's coming around. There was a stress-pattern I didn't foresee, that's all."

"You'd better foresee more carefully in the future, Erik," Thurdan snapped. "Or else we'll put you out to pasture and let one of your technicians do the probing. Mantell, are you steady on your feet yet?"

"I don't know," I said. "Let me see."

I clambered off the couch and wobbled around for a moment or two. "I guess so. The pain's starting to fade. I could have done without this whole thing, you know?"

Thurdan grinned hollowly. "Maybe so, but we couldn't have. For your information, you're clean and acceptable. Come on into my office and I'll fill you in on the general picture here."

**U**NSTEADILY I followed him back out of Harmon's lab and into the luxuriously-appointed office. Thurdan sprawled out in a webfoam couch specially designed to cradle his long powerful body, and casually gestured for me to sit opposite him.

"You want a drink?" he asked abruptly.

I nodded. I hadn't had one since leaving Mulciber, and that had been two-three days ago. He nudged a sliding knob in the base of his couch and a portable bar came rolling out of a corner of the room. It stationed itself in front of me.

I dialed a sour choker, third strength. Almost before I was through the robot bar was extending a crystal beaker full of cloudy green joywater. I took it. The bar swivelled away and went to Thurdan,

who ordered a straight bourbon.

"Good stuff," I said.

"Synthetic. All synthetic. We don't bother smuggling it any more." He leaned back and stared intently at me, his eyebrows meeting in one dark slash across his face. "You said you used to be an armaments technician, and the probe verified it. That automatically makes you a valuable man on Starhaven, Mantell."

He had dropped the *mister*. That was only for newcomers. "Valuable? How so?" I asked.

"Starhaven lives and dies by its armaments. The moment our screens weakened, SP would have an armada crashing down on us from every octant at once. I spent billions shielding Starhaven, Mantell. It's the first absolutely impregnable fortress in the history of the galaxy. But it's no stronger than the technicians that keep its screens and guns in good repair."

"It's a long time since I did anything like that," I told him. My hands were quivering slightly. "Twelve years. I hardly remember my stuff."

"You'll learn," he said. "The probe gave me your history. Twelve years of beachcombing and bumming after you lost your job. Then you killed a man and ran here."

"I didn't kill him. I was framed."

Thurdan smiled bleakly. "The probe says you *did* kill him. Go argue with your own memories, Mantell."

That stunned me. I remembered every detail of that drunken brawl in the beachside cafe, remembered that fat tourist accosting me and claiming I'd stolen his wife's brooch, remembered his flabby palm slamming into my cheek—

Remembered him slipping and cracking his skull open before I laid a hand on him.

"I honestly thought I didn't do it," I said quietly.

Thurdan shrugged. "You did. But that doesn't matter, here. We don't have any *ex post facto* laws." He rose and walked to the tri-di mural that swirled kaleidoscopically over one wall, a shifting pattern of reds and greens, a flowing series of contrasting textures and hues. He stood with his back to me, a big man who had done a big thing in his life. The man who built Starhaven.

"We have laws here," he said after a while. "This isn't any damn anarchy. You break into a man's house and steal his money, he'll go after you and make you give it back. You do it often enough and he

may kill you. But nothing in between. No brain-burning and no jail sentences that let a man rot away his life in something worse than death." He turned. "You, Mantell—you could still be working for Klingsan Defense Screens, if you hadn't gone on a binge and been canned. But the forces of law and order canned you—and ruined you as a man from then on."

I took another drink. "Don't tell me I've run into a damned reform school, now!"

He whirled, dark eyes hooded and angry. "Don't say that! There won't be any reforming here. Drink all you damn please, lie, cheat, gamble—Starhaven won't mind. We're not pious here. A fast operator here is a pillar of society. We won't preach to you."

"You said you had laws. How does that square with what you just told me?"

"We have laws, all right. Two of them. Just two."

"I'm listening," I said.

"The first one is something called the Golden Rule. The way I put it: *Expect the same sort of treatment you hand out to everyone else.* That's simple enough, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. What's the other law?"

He grinned darkly. "The second law is even simpler. It

says: *Ye shall do whatever Ben Thurdan tells you to do.* Period. End of the Starhaven Constitution."

I was silent for a minute, watching this big rawboned man in the blaring costume. Finally I said, "That contradicts your first law, doesn't it? So far as you're concerned, I mean."

He nodded. "Yes."

"How come you rate, then?"

His eyes flashed. "Because I built Starhaven," he said slowly. "I devoted my life and every penny I could steal to setting up a planet where guys like you could come and hide. In return I ask absolute dominance. Believe me, I don't abuse my power. But Starhaven couldn't exist without it."

There was truth in what he said. It was a weird, fantastic, even devilish philosophy of government—but it seemed to work, on Starhaven. "Okay," I said. "I'm with you."

"You never had any choice," Thurdan said. "Here."

He handed me a small white capsule.

"What's this?"

"It's the antidote to the poison that was in your drink. I suggest you take it some time within the next five minutes, if you're going to take it at all."

Shivering, I popped the capsule into my mouth. So this was what it was like to be absolutely in the grasp of one man!

Well, I had chosen Starhaven. Here I was, and here I would stay.

"You have a week to learn the ropes here, Mantell. Then you'll have to earn your keep. There's plenty of work here for a skilled armaments man."

He grinned at me. "Have another drink?"

"Sure," I said. I dialed and drank without hesitation.

**N**OT MUCH LATER Thurdan buzzed and the girl with the star-blue eyes came in. She was wearing a sort of transparent blouse and a mesh skirt. I suppose it was calculated to make an effect, and it did.

"Mantell, this is Myra. My secretary." The way he said the word *secretary*, he made it sound obscene. I suppose that was as intended, too.

"Hello," I said. I lowered my eyes, not wanting to stare and somehow arouse Thurdan's jealousy so early in the game. I hadn't seen a woman like her since—since—well, the early days on Mulciber.

"Mantell's going to be an armaments technician. I want you to show him around, first,

though. He's got a week to see the place."

"It's going to be a very pleasant week, too," I said.

He ignored that. He took a crumpled handful of bills from his pocket and handed them over. "Here. Here's a grubstake for you. You go on the payroll a week from now."

I looked at the bills. They were neatly printed, in various colors. They looked vaguely like Galactic currency. But they weren't. In the center, where the stylized star-cluster is on the high bills and the atom-diagram on the low ones, there was a portrait of Ben Thurdan, in remarkable detail. He had given me two hundred-chip bills, a fifty, a twenty, and some single-chips.

"Chips?" I said, puzzled.

"The local unit of currency. It seems appropriate on a world like Starhaven, I've always felt. One chip equals one credit. A hundred cents equals a chip. Originally I was going to have blue chips, red chips, and so on, but that was too complicated. Show him around, Myra."

It was a dismissal.

**D**OWNSTAIRS there was a car waiting for us—a slinky tear-drop style late model. Myra got in first, said something to

the driver, and by the time I had both legs in the car it was under way.

A few minutes later we pulled up in front of a glittering chrome-trimmed building. Myra handed me a key. "This is where you'll live. You're in room 1306. The name of the place is Number Thirteen; any time you want to get here, just tell anyone that and they'll show you the way. You want to take a look at your room?"

"Only if you'll come up with me."

"Not just yet, I'm afraid. Thurdan doesn't care for that sort of stuff."

"I figured you'd say that."

We drove on. As we drove, I kept one eye on Myra and one on the scenery outside. Starhaven was quite a place.

"That's the main hospital over there," Myra said.

"There's everything here, isn't there?"

"What did you expect? Three poolhalls and a bordello? Just because Starhaven is a sanctuary for—for criminals, that doesn't mean there isn't civilization here."

I flinched. "Okay, okay! I'm sorry!"

"Thurdan built this place himself, thirty years ago. It was an uninhabited world, too cold to be of any use to anyone. He had a lot of money.

Never mind where he got it, but I wouldn't bet it was legally. He got together a crew of men like himself, and they built the shell and the inner sun. That was the beginning. Then they built the armaments, and suddenly there was a fortress in space where there had been just a cold empty world. And that was the beginning of Starhaven. Twenty million people live here now—and no one hounds them with false piety."

"And how did *you* come here?" I asked.

She started to unsheathe her claws and let her fur rise; then she said, "I almost forgot you were new. We don't ask that, Mantell. That's the one thing only you and Thurdan knows, and no one else."

"Does he know everyone on the planet?"

"He tries to. Everyone who comes gets a personal welcome from him, same as you did. He gives them a job to do. You're in the armaments division, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Anyone with a specialty is needed. But someone has to drive the cabs and someone has to sell popcorn at the sensostims, and if Thurdan tells you that's your job, that's it. It's the only way to make this world run."

"He seems to do a pretty good job of running it," I said. "And of picking secretaries."

"Keep me out of this," she said, but she was grinning. "We get off here."

The cab whirled to a halt. The doors telescoped open, and we got out.

We were in front of a domed building set back behind a grassy lawn. It seemed crowded. It was immense, a hundred stories or more high.

"This," Myra said, "is the second most important building on Starhaven. Second only to Thurdan's headquarters."

"What is it?"

"The Pleasure Dome," she said.

**W**E STEPPED ON a slidewalk and let ourselves be carried up a gently sloping ramp into the vast building. I found myself in a cavernous antechamber, at least a hundred feet high and acres square. It was packed with people. The walls were decorated with obscene murals. *Pleasure Dome?* Sure. This planet was a private dream-world for Ben Thurdan.

As I stood there gaping, someone jostled against me, and I felt a hand slide into my pocket. I clamped my fingers around the wrist, whirled, and

grabbed the pickpocket by the throat.

He was a small ratty man half my size, with bright eyes and close-cropped hair and a hooked nose. I tightened my grip on his throat and yanked his hand from my pocket. I glanced at Myra. She was laughing.

"Is this how they sell admission tickets to this place?" I asked. The pickpocket was pale. He said, "Let go of me, huh? I can't breathe."

"Let go of him, Johnny," Myra said. She hadn't called me Johnny before. I shook the pickpocket once, just for good measure, and let go of him.

A second later he had a blaster pointing at my navel. "Okay, friend. Since subtlety won't work, I'll try this. Hand over your cash.

I was astonished. People were milling all around, ignoring a holdup going on in their midst! Then I remembered where I was. Coldly I drew my bills from my wallet.

Myra was still laughing. She put her hand over mine, keeping it there for a second, and pushed it back toward my pocket. With her other hand she deflected the blaster.

"Put the gun away, Huel. He's new here. He just came from Thurdan. That's all the cash he has."

The blaster was lowered. The pickpocket grinned up at me. "I didn't mean any harm, friend. It's just between pals, that's all." He winked at Myra and said, "Thurdan told me to do it."

"I thought so," she said. "You usually aren't that clumsy about getting caught."

I understood. Thurdan had arranged this as a demonstration of the way Starhaven worked: he wanted me to see it in action. It was all right for a pickpocket to practice in public, if he wanted to—but he ran the risk of trouble if he got caught by his intended victim. As for pulling the gun on me—that was well within the Starhaven ethic too. You gave the same kind of treatment you expected. In that framework, you could be as brave or as weak as you chose. The brave and the quick-triggered came out better, in the long run.

It made a crazy sort of sense.

"What kind of place is this?" I asked Myra.

"Everything happens here. You can eat and drink and see shows. There's gambling on the tenth level. There's a girl parlor on the twentieth if your tastes run that way—and if they run the other way, you can probably make some spe-

cial arrangement. They're very obliging up there."

"And why'd you bring me here?"

"For a meal, mostly. And for a couple of drinks. We can dance, after that. And after that—well, we can see about that."

I looked at her strangely. For a second I wished I was a telepath—just for that second. I wanted to know what was going on behind those radiant eyes.

Telepathy wouldn't tell me. But maybe a good meal and some wine would.

I extended my arm to her. She took it, and suddenly all the long weary years of beach-combing on Mulciber dropped away, and I was Somebody again.

### CHAPTER III

A GLEAMING slidewalk took us to a balcony, where a bank of liftshafts stood waiting. Myra entered first, and dialed for 9.

"The ninth level dining hall is the best," she said. "Wait till you see."

We zipped upward, passing the seven intermediate floors in one long swoop, and the lift tube stopped. A sheet of blank metal faced us—shining, highly polished, reflective. Myra

touched her signet-ring to it and the door crumpled inward. We went in.

A bland robot waited within. "Good evening, Miss Butler. Your usual table?"

"Of course. This is John Mantell, by the way. My escort for the evening."

The robot's photonic register focused on me for a moment, and I knew I had been indelibly photographed and pigeonholed. "Come this way, please."

The place was sheer luxury: velvet synthetic drapes muffling sound, faint traces of aromatic scent in the air, soft music playing. I felt terribly out of place. But the robot glided along, and Myra glided behind it with floating grace that seemed almost too perfect to be natural.

We reached a table set against the curving silver wall. A little window, crystal-clear, looked out on the city below. It was a city of parks and lakes and soaring buildings. Ben Thurdan had built an incredible fairy garden of a world here.

And dedicated it to crime. I scowled at that; then I remembered that I was a drifter, a vagrant, a—a *killer*—myself, and had no right judging. I was here; I was grateful for that.

The robot drew out Myra's seat, then mine. I sat quietly, looking at her. Those marvelous strange blue eyes held me—but that was far from all of her there was to see. I couldn't fault Thurdan on his choice of women. She was wide-shouldered, high-breasted, with flawless lips and a delicate nose. Her eyes flashed when she spoke; her voice was soft, well-modulated.

I said, "Does every newcomer to Starhaven get this sort of treatment?"

"No."

The muscles around my jaws tightened. I sensed that I was being toyed with, and I didn't care for that. "Why am I being singled out, then? I'm sure Thurdan doesn't send his—secretary—out to dinner with every stray beachcomber who comes here."

"He doesn't," she said sharply. "What would you like to drink?"

I ordered a double kiraj; she had vaffa, very dry. I sipped thoughtfully. "You're being mysterious, Miss Butler."

"My name is Myra."

"As you wish. You're still being mysterious."

She laughed prettily, reached across the table, took my hand. "Don't ask too many questions, Johnny. It's a dangerous thing to do on Star-

haven at any time—but don't ask questions so soon. You'll learn."

"Okay," I said, shrugging. I wasn't that deeply concerned. Twelve years of roaming shoreline on Mulciber had left me indifferent to most things; I was good at drifting on the tide of events, letting things happen. This girl had taken some special interest in me; I'd accept that on face value and let it go.

"Starhaven's a little different from Mulciber, isn't it?" she asked suddenly.

"Very different," I said.

"You were there twelve years?"

"You saw my psychprobe charts. You don't need to get a verbal verification." We were fencing, dancing around a conversation rather than engaging in one. I felt uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rake up old wounds. Ben built this place so people like you could come . . . and forget. Mulciber's just a bad dream now, Johnny."

"I wish it was," I said. "But I spent twelve years begging for nickels there. I killed a man there." I said it harshly, and she reacted as if I'd slapped her across the face. The liquor was getting to me, I thought.

"Let's forget, shall we?" she said, with forced light-heartedness. She lifted her glass. "Here's to Ben Thurdan. Here's to Starhaven!"

"Here's to Starhaven," I echoed.

We drank, and then we had another. My head was beginning to swim. Somewhere along there Myra ordered dinner—truffles, baked pheasant, white and red wine, Vengilani crabs as a side dish. I stared at it all, aghast.

"Something the matter, Johnny?"

"This is a twenty-credit—twenty-*chip* dinner. That's a little out of my league."

She smiled. "Don't be silly, Johnny. This is Ben's treat. I have a pass that takes care of things like this. Dig in!"

I dug. I hadn't eaten that well in my life—and certainly not since August 11, 2793, which was the day Klingsan Defense Screens decided it could do without me.

I remembered that day vividly. I recalled picking up my pink slip at my desk and storming down to see Old Man Klingsan. I burst into his office, half crooked as I was, and demanded to know why I was being fired.

I was told. Then I told him three or five things. And by the time I was through I was

blacklisted from Rim to Core and there wasn't a world in the galaxy that would give me employment. There had been the job on Mulciber, of course; I shot my last ninety credits getting there from Viltuun, just in time to learn that my reputation had preceded me and I wasn't wanted.

But I couldn't leave. And for twelve solid years I wasn't able to accumulate enough cash to get off that stinking semi-tropical world, until the day the SP came after me on a murder charge and I *had* to run.

To Starhaven.

"You're very thoughtful, Johnny," Myra said. "I told you not to think of—of Mulciber."

"I wasn't," I lied. "I was thinking—thinking that it's perfectly permissible for me to skip out of here without paying the check. I mean, the restaurant owners don't have any legal recourse—not without any laws!"

"True enough," she said. "But you won't have any recourse either if they catch you and slice you up for steak. Or poison you the next time you come in here."

I thought that over for a moment or two. Then a new and startling conclusion hit me. "You know something? A le-

gal set-up like this is going to work better than one based on virtue. It all cancels out in the end!"

"That's Ben's big idea. If you take a group of people none of whom are cluttered up by morals, and enforce this kind of code on them, their collective rascality will all even out into a kind of law-abidingness. It's only when you start throwing virtuous people into the system that it falls apart."

"I think I'm going to like this place," I said.

**W**E FINISHED eating in silence, except for a few stray threads of conversation that petered out quickly. This was quite a woman, I was thinking. But I couldn't imagine what she could have done that would have brought her here to Starhaven to hide from the system police.

She was too clean, too—well, *pure*. I knew she wasn't any angel, but yet she gave the appearance of innocence, as if she always acted out of the highest motives.

Then I thought about myself. I wasn't any criminal, either, as I kept telling myself—just a victim of circumstances. The breaks might have gone the other way, and

I'd still be an armaments technician back on Earth.

I scowled. I was *still* an armaments technician. Here. Where there wouldn't be any cheap moralizing.

And where there was Myra.

I wondered how I was going to get away with it. She was obviously Thurdan's mistress—and you just don't take an absolute tyrant's mistress away and hope to live long. Of course, there was the chance he might tire of her—

Sure. Any minute now, I thought, bitterly. Who would tire of *her*? I saw I was well on the way to deep trouble here on Starhaven, and I was hardly here a day.

The meal over, we rose to leave. "Where to now?" I asked, feeling warm and well-fed, with the taste of rare wine still on my lips.

"Do you dance?"

"More or less."

"The ballroom's three levels above. I love to dance, Johnny. And Ben won't ever dance with me. He hates dancing of any kind."

I shrugged. "Anything to oblige a lady, then. Let's dance for a while."

We drifted out and into the lift tube, and up three levels to the ballroom. It was a huge arching room, magnificently decorated. Music throbbed out

of a hundred concealed speakers. Glowing dabs of living light, red and blue and soft violet, swung and bobbed in the air just above the dancers.

"For a man who doesn't like to dance, Thurdan sure built quite a dancehall," I said.

"That's one of Ben's specialties—catering to other people's likes. It keeps people loyal to him."

"True enough." We stepped out onto the dance floor. Myra glided into my arms. We began to dance.

It was years since I had last been on a dance floor. On Mulciber there hadn't been the opportunity; on Earth, I'd always been too busy. But here, on this pleasure planet—

There was a modified anti-grav shield beneath the gleaming luciphrine of the dance floor; the field was on lowest modulation, not strong enough to lift us from the floor but mustering sufficient power to cut our weight down, way down. It was more like floating than like dancing. I felt Myra's warmth against me, clinging; the bobbing living-light swirls in the air circled around us, giving her face sharply-accented multicolored highlights. The music beat beneath us, swelling deeply.

And around me they danced, the people of Starhaven, each

carrying the burden of some crime, each a hunted man safe from the hunters. They laughed, joked, clung to each other—just like ordinary people. Just like those who lived everyday lives within the law.

We danced on. An hour, two hours, maybe; under the low grav, time sped on imperceptibly.

Finally, at the end of one number, Myra said, "Okay. Let's leave now. It's getting late."

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly midnight. "Where do we go now? The gambling den? The bar?"

She shook her head lightly. "We go home," she said. "It's close to my bedtime." She grinned, ambiguously. An invitation, I wondered? There was no way of telling.

We coasted off the dance floor, past crowds of pleasure-seekers, and out into the brightly lit plaza outside the Dome. As if from nowhere the teardrop car that had brought us here appeared; we got in.

"Take us to my place," Myra said.

The trip was over almost before it had begun. We were in front of a handsome apartment building. She got out; I followed.

I escorted her as far as the door of her apartment. She

touched her thumb to the door-plate; the door started to roll back. As if reading my mind she said, "I won't ask you in, Johnny. It's late, and—well, I can't. Please understand, won't you?"

I smiled. "Okay. I won't press my luck. Good night, Myra. And thanks."

"I'll be seeing more of you, Johnny. Don't worry about that."

Frowning, I said, "But Ben—"

"Ben may not be with us too long," she said in a strange voice. "Good night, Johnny."

"Good night," I said, bewildered. She showed a set of white teeth and then I was staring at the outside of her door, alone and well-fed and feeling warm inside. It had been a peculiar day.

#### CHAPTER IV

I SAW a man die my second day on Starhaven. It taught me not to judge by first impressions. Starhaven wasn't entirely a pleasure-planet. There was death here, and evil.

I had slept late that day; at 1100 my room-phone buzzed, waking me from an involved dream of SP men, fugitives, and psychprobes. I rose, walked across the austere, simple

room that had been assigned to me, and switched on the phone, rubbing sleep from my face.

It was Ben Thurdan.

Even on a vision screen his face had a terrible brooding intensity, a dark-visaged strength. He said, "I hope I didn't wake you, Mantell."

"I overslept, I guess. It's a bad habit of mine."

"What did you think of the Pleasure Dome?" I started to say something, but before I could he added, "—and Myra?"

That threw me off base. I said, "It's a fabulous place, Mr. Thurdan. And—and Miss Butler was very helpful in explaining Starhaven to me."

"Glad to hear that," he said slowly. There was a long moment of silence. I fidgeted before the screen, acutely conscious of the man's power. At length he said, "Mantell, I liked you the second I saw you. You've got *character*."

I wondered what he was driving at. "Thanks, Mr. Thurdan."

"Call me Ben." The deep piercing eyes studied me until my flesh crawled. "I trust you, Mantell. And I don't trust many people on Starhaven. Suppose you do me a little favor, Mantell."

"If I can—*Ben*."

"Keep your eyes open. Miss Butler—Myra—will be with you again today. Listen to things carefully, Mantell. And get in touch with me if you think there's anything I ought to know."

I frowned and said, "I'm not sure I understand. But I'll keep it in mind."

"Good. Stick with me, Mantell. Life can be very good for a man on Starhaven if Ben Thurdan is on his side."

He grimaced in what I suppose was a friendly smile and rang off. I stared at the dead screen for a second, trying to figure things out.

This tied in somehow with Myra's enigmatic words at her door last night. Ben Thurdan was afraid of something, and had picked me to serve as an extra pair of ears for him. Maybe—I caught my breath—maybe he suspected Myra of something, and had arranged for me to keep company with her so I could report to him if I gained her confidence.

I shook my head and gobbled a breakfast tab. Then I dialed Myra and arranged to meet her at the Dome for lunch. I looked at my hands. They were shaking. I was playing with big trouble.

And I found out later in the day what happened to men who crossed Ben Thurdan.

SHE MET ME at the Dome on time, and we had a brief, nervous lunch, chlorella steak and fried diamante potatoes, with golden Livresae beer. We sat opposite each other across a crystal-topped table in which strange horned fish swam. We hardly spoke.

"Ben called you this morning, didn't he?" she asked after a while.

I nodded. "He seems to have taken a liking to me. Something in my psych chart must have impressed him."

She laughed softly and drained her beer. "Something in your psych chart impressed all of us, Johnny. We can't figure out why you let yourself drift so long. There's a real core of toughness in you. Ben spotted that in a flash. *'That guy's got something,'* he told me."

"Maybe. I hide it well, though." I remembered the shambling unshaven figure who was me weaving drunkenly over the shining sands of Port Mulciber, cadging drinks from sympathetic tourists, and wondered where that core of toughness had been all those lost years.

"Last night," I said. "You made a funny remark just before you said good night. You—"

"*Forget it!*" Real terror appeared on her face; she went suddenly pale. I realized there was no privacy booth around us. "That was . . . a sort of a joke. Or a hope. I'll tell you more about it some day . . . maybe."

Shrugging, I said, "That's a lousy thing to do—drop a lead and then not follow through. But I won't push you. You *can't* be pushed."

"There's a good boy," she said. "I want another of these beers. Then I'll show you some of the Dome's chief dens of iniquity."

We had another round; then we rose, moved past the barriers into the lift tube, and headed up to the tenth level. We emerged in a hall lined with black onyx and gleaming chalcedony; voices shrilled noisily further ahead.

"There are eight casinos on this floor. They operate twenty-four hours a day." We turned down a narrower corridor that opened out suddenly into a room the size of the ballroom.

Pinwheeling lights blinded me. Spirals of circling radiance danced in the air. Richly dressed Starhavenites were everywhere.

"Most of these are professional gamblers," Myra whispered. "Some of them prac-

tically live in here. Last month Mark Chantal had a run of luck on the rotowheel and played for eight days without stopping. Toward the end he had two companions feeding him lurobrin tablets by the bushel to keep him awake and nourished. He won eleven million chips."

I whistled. "The house must have hated that!"

"The house is Ben Thur-dan. He was here cheering Chantal on for the last two days of the run."

I glanced around the crowded hall. Games of every sort were in evidence, some of them tended by robots, others by girls with sweet voices and bare breasts. In the back I saw a row of card tables; sleek-faced house operators waited there to take on all comers in any kind of game.

"What shall we play?" she asked. "The rotowheel? Swirly? Radial dice?"

"Let's start over here," I said, indicating the green baize surface of a radial dice table. Four or five smartly dressed gamblers clustered around, studying the elaborate system of pitfalls and snares that inhibited the free fall of the dice, making alterations in the system and placing their bets. The houseman waited, his metal face frozen in a cyn-

ical smile, his circuitry computing the changing odds from moment to moment.

I drew out a ten-chip bill. Suddenly Myra touched my arm.

"Don't bet yet. There's going to be trouble."

I turned to follow her gaze. The big room had become strangely quiet. Everyone seemed to be staring at a newcomer who had just entered.

He was tall—six-eight, at a conservative estimate—and chalk-pale; a livid scar ran jaggedly across his left cheek, in odd contrast. He was fleshlessly thin and wore black-and-white diamond-checked harlequin tights and a skin-tight shirt. A glittering blaster was strapped to his side. He was an arresting figure, standing quietly alone near the entrance.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Leroy Marchin. I thought he left Starhaven a month ago. He shouldn't be here."

She started across the floor; I followed her. The silence in the room broke, finally, as a croupier began his chant again. Myra seemed to have forgotten me completely now that Marchin, whoever he was, had arrived.

"Hello, Myra." His voice was deep but without resonance.

"What are you doing here?"

Don't you know that Ben—"

"Ben knows I'm here. The robots tipped him off ten minutes ago. I'm hoping he'll show up in person. Maybe I'll get the first shot in."

"Leroy—"

"Get away from me," Marchin said. "I don't want you near me when the shooting starts." He looked terribly pale and tired, but there was no fear on his face. With exaggerated casualness he stepped past Myra to the rotowheel table, and put a hundred-chip bill down.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"He . . . tried to kill Ben, once. He didn't succeed. He and Ben built this place together, but Marchin was always pushed aside."

The tension in the air was numbing. I said, "Why'd he come in here, then?"

"He's been in hiding. I guess Ben flushed him out and he wants to fight it out with him here in the casino. Oh—look out!"

Again the hall became silent. This time, it was a silence more profound than the last. A figure entered the hall. A robot, square-built, stocky, at least eight feet tall. I saw Marchin turn to face it, and those around the pale man melted quietly away, to the side. Myra was trembling.

"Hello, Roy," the robot said. In Ben Thurdan's own voice.

Marchin's eyes blazed. "Damn you, Thurdan! Why didn't you come yourself? Why'd you have to send a robot to do your filthy job for you?"

"I'm too busy to bother with such things in person, Roy. And there's less doubt this way."

Marchin drew. His finger tightened on the firing stud and the robot was bathed in flame. The metal creature waited impassively, unharmed by the deadly blast. Almost a minute passed; then, seeing he was doing no harm, Marchin cursed and hurled the blaster across the room at the stiffly erect robot. It clanged off the creature's chest, and the robot laughed—in Ben Thurdan's special way.

Marchin began to run. I thought he was going to run out the door, but instead he ran toward the robot in some mad suicidal dash.

He traveled ten feet. The robot lifted one arm and discharged a bolt of energy. It caught Marchin in the chest, lifted him off the ground, and hurled him back against a swirly screen. He didn't get up.

The robot about-faced and

vanished; from somewhere came the sound of music, and the tension dissolved. The croupiers began to chatter again; the jingle of falling chips could be heard. Two attendants appeared and removed the charred, blasted corpse.

I felt a hard knot of fear in my stomach. Ben Thurdan was no man to cross.

**T**HE KILLING put finish to any pleasure I might have had from gambling that afternoon. Myra, oddly, was outwardly unmoved, except for a certain paleness and tenseness of face. And I could see why. Death—violent death—was nothing uncommon here.

We gamed for perhaps an hour; my mind was only partly on what I was doing, and I quickly dropped half my bankroll on the rotowheel and at radial dice. Myra had some luck at Swirly, and recouped most of our losses. But my heart was hardly in the sport now. I waited for Myra to collect her winnings, then tugged on her sleeve and said, "Let's get out of here."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. I need a drink."

She smiled, understanding. We cut our way through the thick noisy crowd, heading for the entrance. More and

more people were flocking toward the casino; we had to fight our way through like fish swimming upstream.

"Gambling's the number one industry on Starhaven," Myra said when we emerged at the lift shafts. "The working day starts around noon for most of them. It gets heaviest at four or five, and continues all night."

I wiped away perspiration, without making any reply. I was thinking of a pale man named Leroy Marchin who had been gunned down in full sight of two hundred people, without arousing more than polite comment here and there.

Myra led the way to a bar somewhere in the building, dim, smoky with alcohol vapors, lit only by faint light-tubes. We took seats at an ornate table far to the rear; a vending robot came over, and we dialed.

I ordered rye, straight—nothing fancy this time. I gulped the drink and had another. Myra was drinking clear blue wine.

There was a video set back of the bar; I glanced up and saw the drawn face of Leroy Marchin depicted in bright harsh colors. "Look," I said.

As Myra looked, the camera panned away from Marchin to show the entire casino at the

moment of the duel. There was the robot, smugly supreme; there, Marchin. And I saw clearly in the vast screen my own face, staring uncomprehendingly, Myra at my side. An announcer's voice said, "This was the scene as Leroy Marchin got his in the Crystal Casino shortly after one-thirty today. Marchin, returning from self-imposed exile after an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Ben Thurdan, entered the casino alone."

The audio pickup relayed the brief conversation between Marchin and the Thurdan-voiced robot. Then the drawing of blasters, the exchange of shots—

And a final close-up of Marchin's seared body.

"Death Commissioner Brian Varnlee was on hand to certify that Marchin died of suicide," said the announcer. "Meanwhile, on other fronts—"

I looked away. "That's all it is," I said. "Just suicide. And no one cares. No one gives a damn."

Myra was staring at me anxiously. "Johnny, that's the way Starhaven works. It's our way of life. If you can't accept Ben's laws, you'd better get off Starhaven fast, because it'll kill you otherwise."

I moistened my lips. Some-

thing strange was happening to me—some as yet unnameable fear was welling up from the hidden depths of my brain. I shuddered involuntarily as pain swept over me.

"Johnny! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I said weakly. "Nothing."

But something was wrong. In one wild sweep the last twelve years rose before me, from the day of my dismissal at Klingsan to the day I fled, a hunted murderer, from Mulciber. Those memories arrayed themselves in a solid column—and the column toppled and fell, shattering into a million pieces.

Starhaven spun about me. I burst into a sweat and grabbed hold of the table-top to keep from tumbling to the floor. Dimly I sensed Myra grasping my cold hands, saying things to me, steadying me. I fought to catch my breath.

It was over in a second or two; I sat exhausted, bathed in sweat, my head quivering.

"What happened, Johnny?"

"I don't know. Some after-effect of the psychprobing, I guess. For a second I—I thought I was someone else." I laughed sharply. "Too many drinks, probably. Or not enough. I better have another one."

I downed another rye. Nervously, I gathered up the fragments of my identity and pasted them together. Once again I was Johnny Mantell, ex-beachcomber, late of Mulciber in the Fifth Octant.

"I feel a lot better now," I said. "Let's go get some fresh air."

## CHAPTER V

THE REST of my week of indoctrination passed quickly. I saw Myra often, though not as often as I would have liked, and our meetings always seemed to be held at arm's length; veils blocked any real communication between us, I realized. There was something she was not telling me because she would not, and something I was not telling her because I did not know it myself.

The thing that had happened to me in the bar happened twice more during that week: the sudden cold sweat, the sudden swaying, the sudden feeling that I was somebody else, that the life I had lived was not that of a beachcomber on Mulciber.

Once it happened at three in the morning. I woke and sat upright in bed, staring into the darkness, shaking uncontrollably. On a wild impulse I bolted to the phone and punch-

ed out Myra's number, hoping she'd forgive me for waking her at this hour.

Only I didn't wake her. The phone chimed eight, nine, ten times in her apartment; then a robomonitor downstairs cut in, and the blank metal face told me, "Miss Butler is not at home. Would you care to leave a message? Miss Butler is not at home. Would you care to leave a message? Miss Butler is—"

I listened to the chant for almost a minute, hypnotized. Then I said, "No thanks. I don't have any messages."

I broke the contact and returned to bed. But I remained awake until morning, tossing restlessly. There was only one place Myra could be.

She had to be with Ben Thurdan.

I threw that thought around for five hours straight. At eight in the morning I rose, gobbled down some defatiguing tablets, and, with a hearty but synthetic night's sleep now under my belt, headed for the Pleasure Dome to iron some of the tensions out of my system.

**I** DRIFTED. It came naturally to me, I told myself. On the seventh day, Thurdan called me.

"It's time to put you to work, Johnny. You've had a week to rest up."

"I'm ready," I said. "It's twelve years since I last had anything like a job—and that's enough of a vacation for any man."

He met me in an aircab and we set off for a distant part of Starhaven. I had already discovered that though the shell extended around the entire planet, only part of one continent had been settled. Starhaven was one gigantic city of twenty million people, sprawling ever outward with each influx of new inhabitants. Beyond the city borders lay the barren land that had been here before Thurdan had taken over the planet.

We came to rest on a landing stage atop a square windowless building far to the west of the last outskirts of the settled area. "This is the guts and brain of Starhaven right here," Thurdan told me, as we entered.

Men in lab outfits greeted him. He introduced me as an armaments technician recently arrived.

The tour began.

"Starhaven's defenses operate on two principles," Thurdan said, as we crawled through a tunnel lined with electronic approach percep-

tors. "One is that you need a protective barrier. That's why I built the metal shell. Second, and more important, you need a good offense. Starhaven has the best offensive battery in the universe—and when you couple that with our defensive screens, our energy-field, and the sheer strength of the shell itself, you'll understand why the SP is helpless against us."

We entered a vast room walled completely about with computers. "Nothing is left to chance," Thurdan said proudly. "Every shot that's fired by a heavy-cycle gun is computed precisely before release. We don't miss often."

I was dazzled by the display. A bright array of meters and dials met my eye on a higher level.

"The energy flow controls," Thurdan said. "You ought to see what happens when we're under bombardment. Every watt of energy that's thrown at us is soaked up by our screens, fed through the power-lines here, and converted neatly into useful energy for operating Starhaven. We haven't had a decent bombardment in years; the SP's caught wise. We hardly needed to use our own generators for a while, thanks to the set-up here."

I whistled. "What genius designed all this?"

"Genius is right," Thurdan said, fondling an outjutting toggle switch. "Lorne Faber built this for me. It took him three years to design it."

"Faber? Killed his wife, didn't he? I remember reading about the case."

"A brilliant electronics man," said Thurdan. "Too brilliant. It killed him, eventually. I knew he was insane when I first met him."

"What happened to him?"

"Saw the ghost of his wife in a neutrino screen and took a hatchet to it. It took days to unscramble the short circuits."

**T**HE TOUR lasted over an hour; I was dizzy by the end of it. Forgotten knowledge welled back into me. I remembered hours spent designing defense screens, calculating inputs, tabulating megawatts, long columns of resistances and amperage.

We were on the topmost floor of the building. Thurdan led me into a room lined completely with vision screens. It was similar in tone and furnishings to his office back in the center of the city.

"And this is the sanctum sanctorum," he said. "The nerve-center of the whole

planet. From here I can control the defense screens, fire any gun from any emplacement, broadcast sub-radio messages to other planets." His deep voice was throbbing with pride; I could see he gloried in this room, from which he could control a world.

He threw himself heavily into a relaxing cradle. "Now you've seen it, Mantell. What do you think?"

"It's incredible. Starhaven's completely impregnable. I've never seen anything like it."

"I'm still not satisfied," Thurdan said. "There's a flaw in the defense."

"Where? I'm rusty, Lord knows, but I'd swear that this is the most absolutely unassailable fortification that could possibly be built."

He smiled. "That's true as far as it goes," he said. "But there's a gaping hole. Inside."

"Inside?"

"Starhaven can be attacked from within. If someone got control of this room, for instance, he could drop the screens and surrender us to the Patrol in a minute. Of course, he'd have to kill me first. The man who you saw executed the other day tried."

"Marchin?"

"Yes. He was one of my original colonists. We never got along well, Marchin and

me." Thurdan swung up to face me. "I've got a job for you, Mantell. A special job."

Frowning, I said, "I'll do my best. What is it?"

"According to your psych-probe, you were a damned good defense-screen man once. And unless Harmon's machine was cockeyed, you've got plenty of solid stuff inside you. Johnny, there's a plot to kill me."

"What? Who—"

"Never mind who. The fact remains that people on Starhaven want to kill me. I'm well protected, but not well enough. I'm going to turn an entire laboratory over to you, and the sky's the limit on your budget. I want you to build me a personal defense screen."

I was silent for a moment. The personal defense screen was the goal of every defense outfit in the galaxy—but so far it had eluded everyone's grasp. The problem was a complex one: some arrangement had to be made to keep blaster energy out and let air in, and while this could be done without too much difficulty with a planet- or ship-sized screen, the problems of making a unit small enough for a man to carry, of grounding the diverted energy somehow, and of providing a steady power flow

had been too much for some of the best brains in the field.

And even if these problems were to be solved, such a screen would be useless. It would be a perfect guard against energy weapons, but then such weapons would be obsolete and the old, crude ones would return. Then there would be the difficulty of providing a screen that would keep out knives and bullets without shielding off air, food, and such things.

"Well?" Thurdan said.

"It's damned close to impossible," I told him.

"So was building Starhaven," he shot back immediately. "But I built it. I don't know a damned thing about electronics, but I found men who *did* know. They said Starhaven would be unbuildable, too. I don't take impossibles for answers, Mantell."

I shrugged. "I didn't say I wouldn't try. I'm just not promising success."

"Fair enough," he said. "Don't promise anything. Just deliver. I don't want to die, Mantell."

I caught the undertone there. Behind the bold voice, the commanding note, there was fear, and pleading. Ben Thurdan didn't want to die. He didn't want to lose his empire out here on Starhaven.

Well, I didn't blame him. "There's one other thing, Mantell. The matter of Miss Butler."

I tensed. "What does she—"

"I asked her to accompany you for your first few days on Starhaven, Johnny. Just until you got your footing here, you understand. But let's avoid any future conflict right here and now. *Myra isn't available.*"

"I—I never—"

"You called her place at three o'clock the other morning," he said quietly. "I don't know what you had to say to her, but I can guess. There are plenty of women on Starhaven; I'll see to it you can have your pick. All but her."

There wasn't any arguing

with that. If Thurdan had kept close enough tabs on me to monitor my phone, then lying to him was pointless. I said, "Thanks for warning me, Ben. I wouldn't want to cross you."

"No," he said. "That wouldn't be wise."

I SPENT another hour listening to Thurdan daydream out loud about Starhaven. He showed me a room near his which would be my office, introduced me to three or four lab workers to whom I'd be responsible and who would supply me with any materials I might need in my research, and handed me five hundred chips pocket-money as a starting salary.

"After this you'll draw your pay off the standard payroll here," he said. "It'll be five hundred a week. That ought to keep you comfortably alive."



"I don't doubt it. I scrounged for pennies for years."

"All that's behind you now, Mantell. This is Starhaven, and things are different."

He drove me back to the center of the city. I watched his broad figure vanish into the doorway of his office, turned, walked away. I was thinking of Myra.

It was going to be my job to keep Ben Thurdan alive. But while he lived, Myra was his.

As I stood there, she came out of another office on the floor. We nearly collided.

"Hello, Johnny," she said coolly. "I thought you were out at the control tower with Mr. Thurdan."

"I was. We just got back. He's in the office."

"Oh— I'll have to see him, then. Some messages came for him, and—"

She started away; I caught



her by the arm. Then I remembered that hidden photon-absorbers in the ceiling were probably soaking up every bit of this scene. Or perhaps Thurdan was watching it directly.

"What is it, Johnny?"

"I—just wanted to say so long, that's all. I won't be seeing much of you now that—now that I'll be working at the tower most of the time." My voice came tensely, haltingly; both of us knew what I was trying to say. Thurdan had probably warned her to keep away from me, too.

"Sure, Johnny. It was swell." She disengaged her hand gently but emphatically, turned on a wholly mechanical smile, clicked it off again like the closing of a camera shutter, and walked through the barrier-beam into Thurdan's office. I stood looking after her, then shook my head and turned away.

I caught a passing cab and drove home. The robot attendant held out a package for me as I entered the lobby.

"Hello, Mr. Mantell. This just came for you by special courier."

"Thanks," I said abstractedly. The package was bound in a plain plastic wrapper; it was about the size of and felt like a book. Upstairs, I threw

the package on the bed, depolarized the window, stared out at Starhaven, stared up at the fake sky and the fake sun and at the clouds circling under the metal skin.

*Starhaven*, I thought. *Ben Thurdan, Proprietor*. Lord and master of a world of fugitives, and I was the foundation of his hope to avoid death.

I tried to picture Starhaven without Thurdan. The entire planet revolved around his whims; he was an absolute monarch, though an enlightened one. The social system he had evolved here *worked*—though whether it would work with any other man at its helm was a debatable point.

And what would happen if Thurdan died? Probably the whole delicate fabric of the Starhaven system would come tumbling in on itself, ending a unique experiment in political theory. There would be a mad scramble for power; the man who grabbed possession of the control tower would rule . . . until the assassin's bullet struck *him* down.

Suddenly I went cold all over. If anyone were to gain control of that tower, it would be me, I realized: my research lab was close to the central control room, and I guessed that I would become a close associate of Thurdan during

the course of my work. New ideas occurred to me.

After a while I turned away and glanced at the package lying on my bed. I held it to my ear; there was no sound of a mechanism within. Cautiously, I opened it.

It was a book—an old-fashioned bound kind, not a tape. Inscribed on its drab jacket was its title:

A STUDY OF HYDROGEN-  
BREATHING LIFE IN THE  
SPICA SYSTEM

A joke, I wondered? I opened the book to the title page.

A folded slip of paper lay between the flyleaf and the title page. I drew it out, unfolded it, read it—and a moment later it flared heatlessly in my hand, ashed itself, and was gone, drawn quickly into the air-circulating system of the room along with all other molecule-size fragments in the air.

It had been a very interesting message, printed in square vocotype capitals, standard model. It said:

TO JOHN MANTELL,

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN  
BRINGING ABOUT THE DEATH  
OF BENJAMIN THURDAN,  
VISIT THE CASINO OF MASKS  
IN THE PLEASURE DOME  
DURING THE NEXT SEVEN

DAYS, BETWEEN THE HOURS  
OF NINE AND TEN IN THE  
EVENING. THERE WILL BE NO  
DANGER TO YOU.

## CHAPTER VI

THREE DAYS later, I went to the Casino of Masks.

The decision cost me three days of agonizing inner conflict. My first reaction had been one of immediate anger; I didn't want any part of any conspiracy against Thurdan, at least not yet.

But then I recalled Myra's strange words that first night, and thought of the possibilities Thurdan's death might hold for me. I began to consider the idea.

The book held no further clues; after a detailed examination of it I concluded it had simply been a vehicle for the message, and I destroyed it rather than risk being forced to explain what I was doing with so unlikely a volume.

I had a week to make up my mind. During the first two days I spent most of my time in my newly outfitted lab, giving myself a refresher course in defense-screen logistics—it was astonishing how the old knowledge sprang brightly into the front of my mind again after so many years—

and sketched out a few preliminary functions toward the possible design of Thurdan's personal defense screen. My sketches were simply trial hypotheses, shots in the dark, but I seemed to see a few stray glimmers of light ahead. It might take months or years of work, but I perceived a possible line of attack, and that was a big chunk of the battle won already.

During those first days I had little contact with Thurdan and none at all with Myra. When I thought of her it was only as a girl of a dead romance; there was a brief ache, nothing more. I hadn't known her long enough for anything more, and I had become accustomed to disappointment in my life. I buried myself in my work; it was exciting to rediscover techniques and thought-patterns I had thought lost forever. I met my fellow technicians—Harrell, Bryson, Vorilainen, six or seven others. Most of them were brilliant eccentrics who had fallen foul of the law one way or another and had fled to Starhaven, where technicians of all kinds were given warm welcome.

Bryson gave me an uneasy moment. He was in my lab one day observing and helping, and I asked him where he had

picked up his vast skill in electronics.

"I used to work at Klingsan Defense Screens," he said. "Before my trouble."

I dropped a packet of junction transistors; they scattered everywhere. "*Klingsan*, you said?"

He nodded. I said, "I worked there once, too. From '85 to '93. Then they canned me."

"That's odd," Bryson said. "I was there from '91 to '96. I should have known you, then. But I don't. I don't remember any Mantells there. Was that the name you used then?"

"Yes." I shrugged. "Hell, that was twelve years ago. Maybe we worked in different departments."

"Maybe," he agreed.

I tried to remember a Bryson at Klingsan, after he had left. I couldn't. Something was very wrong.

But I pushed it to the back of my mind, back with my life on Mulciber and my brief few days with Myra and all the other things I wasn't anxious to think about, and returned to my workbench.

That night I went to the Casino of Masks.

**T**HERE WERE eight separate casinos on the tenth level of the Pleasure Dome, each with

its own individual name and its own regular clientele. Myra had taken me to the Crystal Casino, largest and most popular of the group, the casino of widest appeal. Others, further along the onyx hallway, were smaller; in some, the stakes ran dangerously high, highly dangerous.

The Casino of Masks was farthest from the lift shaft. I identified it solely by the hooded statue mounted before its entrance.

The time was exactly nine. My throat felt dry. I pushed my wrist through the barrier beam; the door slid back and I entered.

I found myself in darkness so complete that I was unable to see my hand before my face, or the watch on my arm. Probably I was getting a black-light scanning from above. A gentle robotic voice murmured, "Step to your left, sir. A booth is ready for your use."

I stepped to my left. I was now in an enclosed booth, still wrapped in darkness. "Welcome to the Casino of Masks, good sir," another robot voice said. "Please remove your clothes and place them in the locker you see. Your mask will be issued when you are ready."

Hesitantly I peeled away my clothing. Nude, I stowed my

clothes in a small locker which was dimly lit from within, and waited. Nothing happened.

"Your wristwatch too," the voice said. "The mask will not function until all non-organic matter is removed."

I unsnapped my watch and added it to the pile. Weapons, cash, watch, clothes—all were in the locker. My unseen mentor said, "Now you may receive the mask. Please turn."

Turning, I saw a dim red light glow, and by its light I saw a triangular slotted mask lying in a lucite case; above it, in a mirror, I could see my unclad form. "Lift the mask from its case and slip it over your head," I was instructed. "It will afford complete protection of privacy."

With tense fingers I lifted the mask and donned it. "Activate the stud near your right ear."

I touched the stud. And suddenly the naked image in the mirror gave way to a blur of the same height. Just a blur, a wavering blotch in the air, concealing me completely.

I had heard of these masks. They scattered light in a field surrounding the wearer, allowing one-way vision only. They were ideal for those desiring anonymity—as in this casino.

"You are now ready to enter

the Casino," the robot said. "Withdraw from your locker as much money as you wish to take with you."

I drew out my wallet. I discovered a pouch on the left side of my mask where chips could be stored.

"Close your locker now. Seal it by pressing your thumb against the charging plate."

I swung the locker door closed, and extended my hand, or the blur that was my hand. Within the field, of course, I could see no blur—but looking over my shoulder I caught the mirror's view of me, and smiled. I touched my thumb to the plate, sealing it until such time as I touched my thumb there again.

The booth opened, and I stepped out into the Casino of Masks.

**I**T WAS LIKE the old dream of entering a crowded room and finding yourself totally naked. I stood at the entrance, adjusting to the situation. It seemed to me that I wore nothing, and indeed I felt a faint chill. But as I looked across the hall, seeing no people but only gray blurs and shorter pink ones (women, I supposed), I knew that I was not only concealed but utterly anonymous.

I wondered how the conspirators were going to achieve contact with me. Or if there were any conspirators at all.

From the first I had considered the possibility that this was some elaborate hoax of Thurdan's making. Well, in that eventuality I was prepared; I would simply tell him I was conducting an unofficial investigation, hoping to unmask the conspirators.

The Casino had the usual games of chance—and a great many card tables in the back. I imagined that bluffing games, such as poker, would be the order here; no involuntary facial manifestations would give away strategy in the Casino of Masks.

I drifted to the rotowheel table. It was as good a place to begin as any.

The table was crowded with blurred gesticulating figures, placing their bets for the next turn. In the center of the huge round table was a wheel covered with numbers. It would swing and halt, and when it halted a beam of light would focus sharply on it, singling out a number. The man who played the winning number would collect the numerical value of that number from every other player: if he won on 12, everyone present hand-

ed in twelve chips for him and paid the house the amount of his own losing number. It was possible to win or lose heavily on the wheel in a matter of minutes.

There were some sixty people at the wheel. I put my money on 22.

"You don't want to do that, mister," said a tall blur at my side. His voice was metallic and as anonymous as his face; a further concealment of the mask. "Twenty-two just came up last time around."

"The wheel doesn't remember what won last time," I snapped. I left my chips where they were. Minutes later, the croupier called time and the wheel started to swing. Around . . . around . . .

And came to rest on 49. I added forty-nine chips to the twenty-two out there already, while the lucky winner moved forward to collect. His take would be nearly 3,000 chips, I computed. Not bad.

I stayed at the board about fifteen minutes, dropped 280 chips in that time, then cashed in on 11 (I was playing cautiously by then) and came away with winnings amounting to about 500 chips. Without a watch I had no way of knowing what time it was, but I knew it was still short of ten o'clock by some minutes.

A gong sounded suddenly, and the place became quiet. I saw a robot ascend a platform in the center of the hall.

"Attention, please! If the gentleman who lost a copy of *A Study of Hydrogen-Breathing Life in the Spica System* will step forward, we will be able to return his book to him. Thank you."

The crowd tittered. This was my message, I realized—and it had probably been read off every night this week, in case I were here. I paused just a moment, then made my way forward through the crowd of laughing blurs to the dais.

I confronted the robot. "I own the missing book," I said. "I'm very anxious to have it returned."

"Of course. Will you come this way, sir?"

I followed him back through the crowd to an alcove near the entrance. "To your left, sir," the robot said.

A door opened to my left. I entered a booth similar to the one in which I had undressed and donned my mask. Only there was a pink blur waiting for me in this one, holding a copy of a yellow-bound book which looked very much like one I had seen recently.

The blur held the book out to me. "Is this the book you lost, sir?"

I nodded stiffly. "It is. Thanks very much for returning it. I was worried about it." I stared at the blur, trying vainly to peer behind it. I reached out my hand to take the book.

"Not yet, sir. One question first. Have you read it?"

"No—yes," I said. "Yes."

"Are you interested in the subject with which it deals?"

I was silent for a moment, knowing what that "subject" was. "Yes," I said. "Who are you?"

"You'll see. I want absolute assurance of secrecy in this matter."

I looked down at myself and saw sweat running down my bare chest. "All right, I vow secrecy."

The blur opposite me moved slightly, lifting one hand to the activating stud on the right side of the mask. I heard a click—and then the masked figure of a nude girl stood before me, slim, high-breasted, lovely. I gasped.

She slipped the mask from her face for only an instant, long enough for me to see the delicate features, the star-blue eyes. Then the mask came down again, the activating stud clicked—and where Myra's nude form had been a moment before, I saw only a sexless pink blur.

IT TOOK ME a moment to recover from the double shock of seeing Myra revealed that brief instant and of finding her part of the conspiracy against Thurdan. I stared steadily at the blur before me.

"Is this a joke?" I asked.

"Hardly. It's been planning for a long time. Too long, maybe. But we have to gain strength first, before we can take over."

"Aren't you afraid to speak out in a booth like this?" I asked. "There might be a pipeline to—"

"No," she said. "This booth's all right. The manager of the Casino of Masks is with us. There isn't any danger in here."

I sat down limply. "Tell me about this thing, then. When do you plan to do it?"

Blurred lines that might have been shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Sooner. Later. We haven't set the exact time yet. But we have to get rid of Thurdan."

I didn't ask why. I said, "How do you know I won't tell Ben all about it? I'm sure he'd be interested."

"You won't," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Your psychprobe patterns. You're not a betrayer, Johnny. I picked you as one of us

from the minute you were probed."

I stopped, thought about it, realized it would be almost as impossible for me to betray this to Thurdan as it would be for me to sprout wings. "How about Marchin? Was he part of this too?"

"No. Marchin knew about us, but he had his own plans. He wanted to rule the way Ben rules."

"And your group?"

"To set up a civilized government on Starhaven. A democracy instead of a tyranny."

"Ben does a good job of running things," I said. "You can't argue with that."

The blur moved—shaking its head in disagreement? She said, "I won't try to argue with it. Ben has Starhaven on an even keel. But if he should die today, there'd be a fierce scramble for power that would turn this planet into a madhouse. That's why we have to kill him and take over ourselves. Nothing less than killing would work; he's too strong a man to take part in any other form of government. He can't just be deposed; he has to be put away permanently."

"I see the logic there. Ben's all right, but the chances are the next boss of Starhaven won't be quite so enlightened.

So you get rid of the boss system now, before the struggle for the throne begins."

"Exactly. Are you with us?"

I hesitated, thinking of powerful Ben Thurdan and his fear of dying, thinking of Myra, thinking of many possibilities. There was no longer any doubt in my mind.

"Of course I'm with you," I said.

She sighed. "Thank God you said that, Johnny. I would have hated to have to kill you—darling."

## CHAPTER VII

**K**NOWING of the existence of a plot against Ben Thurdan's life didn't keep me from work on my project, even though my success would have meant the end of all hopes of an assassination. I was on the track of something, and I knew there would be some use for my personal defense screen even if Myra's group killed Thurdan.

I withdrew almost completely into my lab. Myra had warned me not to see her again until everything was settled, and the promise of seeing her later took away most of the pain of not seeing her now. We met briefly, twice, in the Casino of Masks, during the following week, identifying

each other by a pre-arranged sign. But it was a short and unsatisfying contact.

The second time I asked her again what was delaying the coup. It seemed to me that the more time spent planning, the greater chance Thurdan had of discovering and ending the plot.

"It'll come soon, Johnny," she said. "It's like a jigsaw puzzle. All the pieces have to be where they belong before the game is won."

After that, I stopped asking. I plunged into my lab work with furious energy—the energy of twelve years of idleness, stored and now unleashed. I designed cumbersome screens too massive for an elephant, then refined them down, down—until, on one model, the field winked out, lacking sufficient strength, and I began again. I didn't mind failure. I was *working* again, and that was enough.

Thurdan kept in regular contact with me. Hardly a day went by without a call from him. I learned that Starhaven was going through a period of peace, untroubled by the outside universe, and so Thurdan rarely visited the lab tower in person.

Until the day of the SP raid.

It had been going on for al-

most an hour before I knew anything about it. My first hint came when someone threw open the door of my lab as I bent low, squinting over microminiaturized positronic dispersers.

Startled, I glanced up and saw Thurdan striding heavily into the lab.

"Hello, Ben. What brings you here?"

His dark craggy face was taut and tense. "Bombardment. Fleet of Patrol ships chased some fugitive here, and they're blasting us. Come on with me."

I followed him down the hall to the central control room. "What about the fugitive?" I asked.

"He's here. An assassin."

Despite myself I paled. "What?"

"Killed the President of the Dryelleran Confederation and lit out for here. We took him in safely enough—Harmon's psychprobing him now—but he brought a Patrol armada behind him. They've got some new kind of heavy-cycle gun. If you listen you can pick it up."

I listened. I heard a dull boom, and it seemed to me the floor shook just a little.

"That's it. They're blasting away at our screens." He sat at the control console, switch-

ed on the vision screens. I saw a thick cloud of Patrol ships orbiting beyond Starhaven's metal skin, wheeling and discharging incredible bolts of radiant energy.

But now Thurdan was grinning. He emanated confidence. His thick strong fingers rattled over the controls.

"Our defensive screens can soak all that stuff up, can't they?" I asked.

"Most of it. Theoretically they have unlimited capacity—but these boys really mean it." He pointed to meters whose indicators swung dizzily up into the red of *overload* and dropped back as Starhaven's enormous power piles drained away the excess. And again the Patrol ships slammed down their bolts, and again Starhaven negated them.

"We can't do anything but defend, yet," said Thurdan. "The load on our screens is too great to give time for a return blast. But we'll fix them. Watch this."

I watched. With harsh staccato thrusts of his fingertips over the control boards, Thurdan brought the defense-screens out of synchronised equilibrium, established a shifting cycle-phase relationship. "The screens are alternating now," he grunted. "Read me the differential."

I squinted up at the dials and fed him figures. He made delicate adjustments. Finally he sat back, grinning satanically, sweat pouring from every pore.

A chime sounded outside the room. "See what they want, Mantell."

A handful of the defense-screen technicians stood there. They wanted to know what was going on; the screens were phasing wildly, and close to overload. I said, "Ben's in charge. Come on in and watch."

I led them to where Thurdan sat, staring into his vision plates, watching the orbiting Patrol ships. There must have been a hundred of them, each smashing into Starhaven with every megawatt it could muster.

"They've been planning this attack for a year," Thurdan said, half to himself, as he made compensating adjustments to absorb the ferocious attack. "Waiting for a chance to get this fleet out here and break Starhaven open once and for all. And they're sure they're going to do it, too—the pitiful things!"

He laughed. "Mantell, are you watching?"

"I'm watching," I said tensely.

"Good."

Thurdan's right index finger jabbed down on a projecting stud. The building shook. A violet flare of energy leaped into sight on the vision screen, and where eleven SP ships had been in formation, there were none.

Thurdan chuckled. "They didn't expect that, I'd wager! They didn't think it was possible to take this kind of attack and still return fire! But I'm giving them their own juice back twice as hard!"

His finger came down again, and a flank of the Patrol attackers melted into nothingness. I saw what he was doing: firing in the millionth-of-a-second between phases of our screens, squirting a burst of energy out in the micromoment when Starhaven was unguarded—but the force of the beam coming up from the planet served as a screen itself, keeping the metal world safe.

Again and again Thurdan came down heavily on the firing stud, until the sky cleared of ships, and the cloud of energy-spitting gnats that had been plaguing us was gone.

Except one. One SP ship remained.

Thurdan spoke into a microphone. "Get our ships up there and grapple that one on. I want that ship. I want to study those guns."

He flicked away sweat, rose, yawned and stretched. Starhaven had again triumphed.

**I** WAS in Thurdan's office when four of his private corpsmen brought in the crew of the captured SP ship.

Thurdan was expounding the virtues of his screen setup to me, with what I thought was excusable pride. The big man had just given an awesome demonstration of skill, and I had told him so. My years on Mulciber had made me an expert fawner, when I wanted to be.

"A hundred eighty-one ships it was," he said. "Over five hundred Patrolmen dead, and at a cost of billions to the Galaxy."

"Without one casualty on your part," I added.

"That's only part of it! We soaked up enough power in that raid to run Starhaven for a year. I've ordered the three auxiliary generators shut down indefinitely, until we use up the trapped power surplus. We—"

The door chimed. Myra appeared from the inner office and said, "I'll see who it is, Ben."

A moment later she reappeared. "The captive SP men are here, under guard."

Thurdan scowled. "Captives? Who said anything about prisoners? Myra, who was it who brought in the SP ship?"

"Bentley and his crew."

"Get Bentley on the phone, fast."

Myra punched out the number. I was trying to stare away, not to admire her liquid grace of movement. I knew Thurdan was keeping close check on me.

The screen swirled and the face of the man who had brought me down to Starhaven appeared. Thurdan said, "Who issued orders to take prisoners, Bentley?"

"Nobody, sir. I thought—"

"You *thought*! Don't think, in the future, Bentley. Leave that to me. Starhaven isn't a jail. We don't want prisoners here. You quite sure you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Next time you capture a ship, jettison any SP men aboard."

Thurdan broke contact and turned to me. "There's a bunch of SP men outside the office, Mantell. Have them killed. Then report back to me."

He said it in a cool, even tone of voice; all excitement seemed to be gone from him. *Have them killed.* Just like that.

"What are you waiting for, Mantell?"

"Killing's a little out of my line, Ben. I'm a research man. I can't murder a group of innocent SP men just because you don't—"

His fist came up faster than my eyes could flicker, and I went crashing into the wall. I heard Myra gasp. I realized he had opened the fist at the last second and merely slapped me, but I felt as if I'd been pole-axed.

I wobbled unsteadily away from the wall, keeping well out of firing range of those fists. Thurdan said, "I thought you were loyal, Johnny. I gave you an order. You stopped to argue. That doesn't go, on Starhaven."

I nodded. My jaw was throbbing. "Yes, Ben."

"*Make sure you mean it!* Get out of here and dispose of those SP men. Come back here when you've done the job. And remember that I can order anyone to do anything on Starhaven, without getting arguments." His voice had regained the cool, level quality by the time he finished speaking.

Behind him, Myra was looking expressionlessly at me. "Okay, Ben," I said hoarsely. "I'll take care of it right away."

I STEPPED OUT into the ante-room, where four pale SP men waited, guarded by Thurdan's private corpsmen. The corpsmen recognized me.

"Thurdan wants these guys put out of the way," I said, in a dry harsh voice.

Ledru, the head corpsman said, "Locked up, you mean?"

"No. Killed."

"But Bentley said—"

"Bentley just got raked over the coals for having taken prisoners," I said. I glanced at the SP men, who were registering as little emotion as possible. "Come on. Take them down the hall. We can shove them down the disposal unit there." I shuddered at my own calmness. But this was Ben Thurdan's way. This was Starhaven.

The corpsmen shoved the four SP captives along, down the brightly-lit hall toward the empty room at the end of the corridor.

We went in. "Okay, Mantell," Ledru said. "Which one goes first?"

"Just a second," said a tall SP man, staring at me strangely. "Did he say *Mantell*?"

I nodded impatiently. Perhaps this fellow was from Mulciber.

"*Johnny Mantell*?" he went on.

"That's me. Let's get this over with," I snapped.

"I thought I recognized you. I'm Carter, Fourteenth Earth Platoon. What the hell are *you* doing in this outfit? And on Thurdan's side? When I knew you you were a lot different."

"I—you *knew* me? Where?"

"In the Patrol, of course! Five years ago, when we were serving in the Syrtis Insurrection!" The way he said it, it sounded like self-evident truth. "Don't tell me you've forgotten *that* so soon, Johnny!"

"Five years ago," I said quietly, "I was a stumblebum prowling the beaches on Mulciber. Six years ago I was doing the same thing. Also ten years ago. I don't know who you are, and I never was in the Patrol."

He was shaking his head incredulously. "They must have done something to you. Same name, same face—it *has* to be you!"

I realized I was shaking. "You're talking nonsense just to stall for time." I glanced at the corpsman leader. "Ledru, get the disposal functioning."

"Sure, Mantell."

The Patrolman named Carter was staring at me aghast. "You're just going to shove us down that thing? *Alive*? But

we're Patrolmen, Johnny! Just like you!"

Those last three words got me. I knew the reputation of the Patrol well, knew they'd pull any kind of trick at all to stay alive. That was why Thurdan didn't want them kept prisoner; SP men on Starhaven were potential dangers, behind bars or not.

But there was something in his tone that rang of sincerity. And it was impossible! Those twelve stark years on Mulciber burnt vividly in my memory—too vividly for them to have been only dreams.

"Is the disposal ready?" I asked.

Ledru nodded. He signalled to his men and they grabbed one of the SP boys.

The one named Carter said, "You must be out of your head, Mantell. They did something to you."

"Shut up," I said. I looked at the corpsman chief. "Ledru, put this one down the hole first."

"Sure thing." They released the man they held and moved toward Carter.

Suddenly the thing that had happened to me three times already on Starhaven happened again. That feeling of unreality, that all my past life was hallucination, came bursting up within me. I swayed.

Sweat poured down me. The floor seemed to melt. The corpsman dragged the struggling Carter toward the open disposal hatch, and I knew I couldn't watch, that I had to get out of here.

I turned and ran toward the door. I threw it open, lunged blindly out into the hall.

A yell came from the room I had left. A long dying yell—and then, silence.

I started to run up the corridor, stopped, leaned against the cool yielding wall, caught my breath. The corridor revolved around me. *Five years ago, when we were serving in the Syrtis Insurrection.*

Lies! Hallucination!

The golden sands of Mulciber rose before me, the purple fronds of the heavy-leaved trees, the mocking faces of the rich tourists who threw me coins to see me scabble for them in the warm sand.

Hallucination?

I quivered uncontrollably. Once again I started to run, hearing only the clatter of my feet against the floor, seeing nothing, not knowing where I was heading.

I ran into something hard and rebounded, stunned. I looked up, thinking I had collided with the wall or with a door.

I hadn't. I stared up into the

sculptured face of Ben Thurdan, looking as bleak and baleful as it had at the moment of the SP attack. He grasped my shoulder in an iron grip.

"Come on in my office a second, Mantell. I want to talk to you."

## CHAPTER VIII

NUMB INSIDE, I faced Thurdan across the width of his plush office. The door was locked and sealed. Myra stared palely at me, then at the glowering Thurdan.

He said, "I didn't like the way you were talking when you went out of here, Mantell. I couldn't trust you, for the first time. And I couldn't allow four SP men to run around Starhaven unchecked. So I used this"—he indicated a switch-studded control panel back of his desk—"and monitored your conversation all the way down into the room at the end of the hall."

I tried to look cool. "What are you trying to say, Ben? The SP men are dead, aren't they?"

"They are, no thanks to you. Ledru and his men finished the job, while you were dashing away at top speed up the hall. Listen to this."

He flipped a switch. I heard Carter's voice say, "*In the Pa-*

*trol, of course! Five years ago, when we were serving in the Syrtis Insurrection! Don't tell me you've forgotten that so soon, Johnny!"*

"It was a trick," I said calmly. "SP is good at that, as you ought to know. He was trying to confuse us all and perhaps escape. And you—"

"I don't necessarily believe it," Thurdan said. "You were psychprobed when you got here, and the probe said you had lived on Mulciber. It didn't say anything about your being in the Space Patrol." Thurdan's dark eyes narrowed and bored high-intensity holes through me. "Maybe the psychprobe was wrong, though."

"How can that be?"

He shrugged. "Maybe the SP has discovered ways of planting fake memories good enough to fool a probe. Or maybe my operator deliberately altered the readings. Or he just bungled it out of sheer old age." Thurdan turned to Myra. "Send in Harmon."

Harmon appeared, withered-looking, mumbling to himself. He looked ancient. He was ancient—well over a hundred, I imagined, and even modern techniques couldn't keep a man young and hale past eighty-five or so. "Something the matter, Ben?"

Thurдан glared at him. "Maybe or maybe not. Seems one of the SP men Bentley captured recognized Mantell here—claimed to have served with him five years ago!"

"Served with—but that's impossible, Ben. I probed Mantell myself. He hadn't been off Mulciber in twelve years. And surely if I had seen anything about the Space Patrol there I would have told you—"

"You're an old man, Erik. You were old when you had that vivisection trouble and came here, and you haven't gotten any younger since. Maybe you didn't do a very good job of probing Mantell. Maybe you overlooked some facts here and there."

Harmon went white. Angrily I said, "Look here, Ben. Just because an SP man pulls a desperate stunt to keep himself alive a few minutes more—"

"Shut up, Johnny. That SP man sounded convincing. I want to clear this business up to my own satisfaction right here and now. Harmon, get your equipment set up. We're going to probe Mantell again."

There was an instant of dead silence in the room. Myra and I must have come to the same conclusion at the same split second, because we looked at each other in that iden-

tical second, eyes wide with horror.

If I were probed again—this time, they'd discover the conspiracy against Thurдан. That hadn't been in my mind the last time Harmon had peered in it. Now it was, though, and it would be finish for both of us the moment the delicate needles of the probe hit my cerebrum.

Myra reacted first. She came forward and gripped Thurdan's corded biceps with her hand. "Ben, you're not being fair. Johnny was probed just a couple of weeks ago. You're not supposed to probe a human being more than once a month; you can damage his brain otherwise. Isn't that right, Dr. Harmon?"

"Indeed it is, and—"

"Quiet, both of you!" Thurdan paused a moment, then said, "Mantell's a valuable man. I don't want to lose him. But Starhaven's policy is never to take an unnecessary risk. If that SP man was telling the truth, Mantell's a spy—the first one ever to get past the gate. Erik, get your machine set up for the probe."

Harmon shrugged. "If you insist, Ben."

"I do. Oh—and then get Polderson in to take the reading."

Polderson was Harmon's

chief assistant. The older scientist looked up, bitter-faced. "I'm still capable of handling the machine myself, Ben."

"Maybe so—or maybe not. But I want somebody else to take the reading on Mantell. Is that understood?"

"Very well," Harmon said reluctantly. I could see what he had at stake: his professional pride. Well, he would be vindicated, of course; Polderson's reading would coincide with the one he had taken on my arrival, in all but one detail—that detail being the conspiracy. My hands were shaking as I walked through the passageway from Thurdan's office to the psychprobe lab.

It would all be over soon. All.

**T**HE LAB looked much the same as before, couch, paraphernalia, gadgets and all. There was one addition: Polderson.

Dr. Harmon's right-hand man was a cadaverous youngster with deepset, brooding eyes and all the outgoing gaiety of a decomposing corpse. He peered at me as I came in. "Are you the subject?"

"I am," I said hesitantly.

Behind me came Harmon. Thurdan and Myra remained in the other office.

"Please lie down on this couch for the probe reading," Polderson intoned. "Dr. Harmon, is the machine ready?"

"Want to make a few minor checks," Harmon muttered. "Have to see that everything's functioning. Want this to be a perfect reading."

He was puttering around in back of the machine, doing something near a cabinet of drugs. He looked up, finally, and, crossing the room, clapped Polderson affectionately on the back, smiled a withered smile, and said, "Do a good job, Polderson. I know you're capable of it."

Polderson nodded mechanically—but when he turned back to me his eyes had lost their intense glitter, and now were vague and dream-veiled. Dr. Harmon was grinning. He held up one hand for me to see.

Strapped to the inside of his middle finger was the tiny bulb of a pressure-injection syringe. And Polderson, shambling amiably about the machine, had been neatly and thoroughly drugged.

I climbed onto the couch and let Polderson fasten me in. He placed the probe-dome on my head.

Suddenly the old doctor leaned over and whispered something in Polderson's ear. I missed the first few words, but it finished up, ". . . see to it that his probe-chart is identical to the earlier one in all respects."

Polderson nodded. He crossed the room, opened a file drawer, examined a folio that was probably the record of my last probing. He nodded, after a while, and turned back to the machine.

Voices sounded suddenly. I heard Myra's voice saying, "Ben, it's cruel to probe him a second time! He might lose his mind! He might—"

I heard the sound of a slap. Then Thurdan threw open the lab door and bellowed, "*Harmon!* I thought I told you to have an assistant conduct the probe!"

"I'm doing so," Harmon said mildly. "Dr. Polderson here is performing the actual probe. I'm merely supervising the mechanics of the work."

"I don't want you anywhere near Polderson or the machine while this is going on," Thurdan snapped. "I want an absolutely untinkered response."

Sighing, Harmon nodded and moved away. "Let's all wait in your office, then. It's bad to have so many people in here while a probe is on."

And he moved slowly past Thurdan into the passageway. Thurdan turned and followed him, closing the door. I was alone with Polderson—and the machine.

Polderson's lean fingers caressed the keyboard of the psychprobe. He said, "Relax, now. You're much too tense. You have to ease up a little."

"I'm eased," I said, stiff with tension. "I'm as eased as I'm going to get."

"Loosen up, please. You're much too tense, Mr. Mantell. There's really no danger. None at all. The probe is a harmless instrument that merely—"

*Wham!*

For the second time since coming to Starhaven I felt as if my skull had been cleft. When I woke I was staring into the face of Ben Thurdan.

The *smiling* face of Ben Thurdan.

"You up, Johnny?"

I nodded groggily.

"I guess I owe you an apology," Thurdan said. "Polderson just showed me your new chart. The reading's the same as when Harmon took it. That SP man was talking nonsense."

"I told you that all along," I said feebly. My head was spinning.

"I couldn't accept that, Johnny. I have to make sure.

*I have to.* Do you see that, Johnny?"

"Sort of. But I hope you're not going to split my skull like that any time someone says crazy things about me."

He chuckled warmly. "I think I can trust you now, Johnny."

I looked around and saw other figures in the room—Polderson, Dr. Harmon, Myra. My head began to stop whirling.

"And I owe you an apology too, Erik," Thurdan was saying to Harmon. "Don't ever say Ben Thurdan can't back down when he's wrong. Eh, there?"

Harmon smiled, showing yellowed teeth. "Right you are, Ben, Right you are!"

Thurdan turned and left, followed by Myra.

Harmon said, "All right, Polderson. I'll take care of the lab now. You can go."

"Certainly, Dr. Harmon." He left also, and I was alone with Harmon.

"**W**E HAD a close escape that time," Harmon said, leaning close to me and whispering. "Would you care for a drink, Mr. Mantell?"

"Please. Yes."

I sipped the sour choker he brought and said, "What did you mean, we?"

"Those of us who stood to risk exposure if Thurdan ever saw a true psychprobing of your mind."

"You mean you're one of us?" I asked.

He nodded smilingly. "I was the first. Then came Myra, and the others. It would have been all over for us if Thurdan had seen your probe, knowing what you now know."

"How did you keep him from seeing it?"

"I slipped Polderson a hypnodrug while he was setting up the machine. The rest was simple; I ordered him to see only those things I wanted him to see. He took your probe. There was no mention of—ah—us on it."

Suddenly I sat bolt upright. "What about that Space Patrolman's story, though? Was there any truth in it? I mean, about his knowing me back when—"

Harmon shook his head. "No. Both times the probe told me you spent the last twelve years on Mulciber. Unless there are new techniques for misleading the psychprobe, that's the truth, Mantell."

That was one bit of reality I had salvaged from all this, then. I climbed off the couch, feeling my feet rocking beneath me. "Was there anything in what Myra said—about a

second psychprobing damaging my mind?"

"It's been known to happen," said Harmon. "It didn't, in this case. Let's be thankful for that."

Relieved, I followed him into Thurdan's office. Ben was behind his desk, looking just as massive seated as he did when standing.

"Feeling better?" he rumbled.

"A little. Not much." I flopped into a beckoning foam cradle and tried to scrub the throbbing out of my forehead with my fingertips.

"May I leave?" Harmon asked. "I'm very tired myself. I'd like to—"

"Stay here," Thurdan said, in that level voice that was so terribly unanswerable. "You're a scientist, Erik. I want you to hear what Mantell's going to tell us. Johnny, tell Myra and Dr. Harmon what you've been working on for me."

I moistened my lips. "I've been developing a personal defense screen, invisible-field, body-size. A shield a man could wear which would be absolutely invulnerable while he had it on."

Myra tossed an interested glance my way. I saw Thurdan was knuckling the portfolio I had sent him on the previous day, outlining my work.

"Is such a thing possible?" Harmon asked.

"Tell them, Johnny."

"I didn't think it was possible either," I said. "But I seem to have something—"

"What?"

"It's not finished yet," I added hastily. "It won't be for a week or more, at least. But when I'm done with it, it will—"

"It's going to keep me safe," Thurdan said. "At last." He peered intensely at the three of us. "You see? You see what Johnny is doing—and yet I was willing to damage his brain rather than let a possible threat to Starhaven's security go unchecked."

Thurdan was sweating. He seemed to be under tremendous strain. His powerful fingers toyed with the crystal knick-knacks on his desk.

"All right," he said finally. "You can go. All of you. Leave me alone."

**W**E LEFT. Myra and Harmon vanished in opposite directions down the corridor; I caught the lift tube and left the building. I was on my way to my hotel room, to rest up. The probing had left me exhausted.

I reached the room in pretty soggy shape, showered, took a

fatigue tab, and sprawled out on the bed, utterly worn out from strain and from the probing.

It had been close. Only Harmon's fast work had saved us—and there was no telling how soon it would be before some accident would put information of the conspiracy into Thurdan's hands. That would be the end. Ben was quick and ruthless, and would spare no one—*no one*—to keep Starhaven under his domination.

I half-dozed. The door-chime rang, twice, before I got up to answer it.

One of the house-robots stood there, smiling metallically. He held a package in his rubberized grips.

"Mr. Mantell? Package for you."

"Thanks very much," I said wearily. The package was the size and shape of a book. I knew by now that it must contain another message.

I unwrapped it. The book, bound in quarter-morocco, was *Etiology and Empiricism*, by Dr. F. G. Sze. A folded note was inserted between pages 86 and 87.

I withdrew the note and opened it. It said:

J.M.—

AFFAIRS REACHING A  
CRISIS. WE CAN'T RUN ANY

MORE RISKS. MEET ME AT  
CASINO OF MASKS TONIGHT  
TO DISCUSS DEATH OF B.T.  
IN IMMEDIATE FUTURE. I'LL  
BE THERE AT 9 SHARP.

DON'T BE LATE, DARLING.

M.B.

I stared at the note a long minute, reading it again and again, my eyes coming to rest each time on the *darling* at the end, looking so impersonal and yet so meaningful in the capitalized vocotype.

Then the note began to wither. In an instant it was but a pinch of brown dust in my hand, and then not even that.

## CHAPTER IX

THE CASINO OF MASKS was thronged that night; as I emerged from the dressing-booth and into the main hall, I found myself confronted with hundreds of shadowy faceless figures, people of undeterminable identity. One of them was Myra. But which?

I wandered to the Swirly board, watched the interplay of bright colors a while, placed and lost ten chips on a blue-green-red-black combination. Red-violet-orange-green came in instead, and I turned away in mild disappointment.

Looking through the crowd I saw several pink blurs who

might have been Myra; there was no telling. I lost five more chips in a quick interchange of Flicker, picked up a hundred and fifty with a lucky cast on the Rotowheel. Then, operating our pre-arranged signal, I went to the card tables in the back and took a seat at an empty one.

Almost immediately a house girl, identified by the crimson ribbon she wore tied to her mask, appeared. "Looking for a partner, sir?"

"No thanks. I'm waiting for someone."

I turned down four more offers of a game—three by men, one by another house girl. Finally a pink blur approached and said, "I'll play with you if the stakes are in my league, stranger."

It was Myra. "I don't play penny-ante, miss."

She sat down. "Put your cards out where I can see them, and start dealing."

I dealt. I dealt a hand of pseudo-rummy, and as I dealt I said lightly, under my breath, "Your message reached me. I think it's about time to act."

"So do we. It's inevitable that Ben will psychprobe someone and find out all about it. We have to strike at once."

"When?" I asked.

She tossed three cards to the

table—aces. "Tonight," she said. "At midnight."

My hand shook as I produced the useless fourth ace, drawing it from the cards I held and dropping it atop the ones she had laid out. "Tonight? How will it be done?"

"I'm going to do it," Myra said. The distortion of the scattering field made her voice totally flat, emotionless. "Thurdan has asked me to spend the night with him tonight. I haven't been with him for more than a week, now, and he's angry about it. I'll go to him tonight—with a knife. He'll be surprised."

I dragged in the cards and reshuffled them mechanically, paying little attention to my actions. I was staring at the electronically-induced blur across the table from me, realizing that I hardly knew the girl concealed behind it. She of the ice-blue eyes, Ben Thurdan's mistress, who casually proposed to assassinate Starhaven's overlord in his own bed!

And yet I loved her. Somehow.

"We're all prepared for it," she said. "Key men are ready to take over the moment he's dead. There won't be any lapse in the possession of power. Dr. Harmon will issue the public proclamation! Surbrug of

the Corps is one of us too, and he'll see to it that there's no public disturbance. There'll be a force on hand to capture the control tower. By morning the provisional government will be in full control of Starhaven, we hope without a shot being fired."

"Very neat," I said. "And who's going to head this provisional government? You? Harmon?"

"No," said Myra tranquilly. "You are."

**T**HE TIME was 9:45. In two hours and fifteen minutes, Ben Thurdan would be dead. And Johnny Mantell, late of Mulciber, former defense-screen technician, general drifter, would rule the iron world of Starhaven.

Of course, as Myra explained it to me, I'd be nowhere near the tyrant Thurdan was. I'd simply be acting head of a provisional government, until constitutional law could be established on Starhaven.

The revolution would be quick. By morning, it would be over.

We left the Casino, shedding our masks and resuming our clothing. Myra was wearing a clinging sprayon tunic that outlined her soft figure revealingly. Tonight, I thought, she

would belong to Ben Thurdan for the last time; tomorrow, she would be mine.

We stepped out into the coolish Starhaven night. Overhead the sky was black, except for the mirror-bright moon and the sharp-focussed stars. Ben Thurdan had put the moon and stars there deliberately, to cloak the artificiality of Starhaven. They were simply lens projections that crossed the metal sky and vanished by "morning."

A faintly chill rain-laden wind was blowing out of the east as we stood together in the darkness, thinking of tomorrow and the tomorrows yet to come. Thurdan's weather engineers were shrewd planners; there was little of the synthetic to be found in Starhaven's weather.

"Ben's a great man," Myra said softly, after a while. "That's why we have to kill him. He's big—too big for Starhaven. As Caesar was too big for Rome. I loved Ben, Johnny—for all his cruelty and ruthlessness, he was something special. Something a little more than a man."

"Do you have to talk about him?" I asked.

"If it hurts you, I won't. But I'm trying to square things with my own conscience. Ben *has* to die—now. Or else

there'll be hell on Starhaven when he dies naturally. But still—

It was strange, hearing her talk of conscience on this planet where conscience seemed to be a forgotten myth. "You never told me why you came to Starhaven, Myra. Is it going to be a secret from me forever?"

She glanced up at me. "Do you really want to know?"

I was silent for a moment, thinking. How terrible could her secret be, I wondered? Was it some crime so ghastly it would drive a wedge between us forever? "Yes," I said. "I want to know."

"It wasn't because I committed any crime, Johnny. I'm one of the few people on Starhaven who isn't a fugitive from the law in some way."

My eyes widened. "You're not—"

"No. I'm no fugitive."

"Then how did you come here?" I asked. "Why?"

"Eight years ago," she said, speaking as if from a great distance, "Ben Thurdan left Starhaven for the first time since he had built it. He took a vacation. He traveled incognito to Luribar IX, and spent a week at a hotel there. He met me there—my family helped to colonize Luribar a century and a half ago. He took me danc-

ing—once. He was so terribly clumsy I laughed at him. Then I saw I had hurt him—a powerful man like that, and he was next to tears. I apologized. He's never gone on a dance floor again. But he left Luribar the next night, to return to Starhaven. He told me who he was and what he was, and asked me to come with him."

"And you did."

"Yes."

"Oh," I said, after a while. I glanced up at the star-speckled bowl of the night, thinking of Ben Thurdan. Then I turned to Myra.

She seemed to flow into my arms.

I LEFT HER at 10:45; Thurdan was expecting her in less than an hour, and she had to prepare herself. In seventy-five minutes Thurdan would be dead. The seconds dragged by interminably.

Myra had asked me to arrive at Thurdan's apartment at 12:10 that night, to help her with the body. I passed half an hour in a bar near the Pleasure Dome, paced the streets of Starhaven for half an hour more.

11:35. Now Myra was readying herself for the trip from her place to Thurdan's. I downed another drink to calm

myself. She was so slim and small, Thurdan so powerful—

11:40. 11:45. She would be reaching his apartment by now. I caught an aircab and gave the robodriver a street not far from Thurdan's private dwelling.

11:52. I stood alone beneath a flickering street-lamp, waiting for the minutes to pass. By now Myra was upstairs, in Thurdan's penthouse apartment. Eight minutes to go. Seven. I began to walk toward the building.

I reached it at 11:57. Three minutes. Of course, there was no assurance Myra would act precisely at the dot of twelve; there might be unforeseen delays of a moment or two. I prayed the blade would be keen, her aim true.

A robot waited in the lobby of Thurdan's building.

"Yes, please?"

"I'm going to see Mr. Thurdan," I said.

"Sorry, please. Mr. Thurdan has retired for the night. He does not want to be disturbed."

"This is urgent, though."  
11:59. At this very moment Myra might be unsheathing the weapon. The robot smiled pleasantly at me, blocking my path.

I drew my blaster and fired once, at the robot's neural channel. The smile remained

fixed idiotically on the metal face. "Mr. Thurdan is not to be disturbed Mr. Thurdan is not to be disturbed Mr. Thurdan is not to be disturbed—"

I fired again. The robot sagged and toppled to the deep wine-red carpet, lying there in a useless chrome-plated heap. Just scrap, now, its delicate cryotronic brain hopelessly shorted out.

Midnight.

**T**HE ELEVATOR seemed to take forever to climb the forty-eight stories to the penthouse. I counted seconds, waiting, watching the clock's hands moving. Twelve-oh-one. Myra had told me to be there at ten past twelve.

I stepped through the lift tube door on forty-eight and found myself in an endless brightly-lit corridor. A robot patrolled the area; Thurdan took few chances. His apartment, like Starhaven itself, was well guarded—but subject to attack from within.

The robot turned and shouted a quick "*Halt!*" at me. This one, I knew, was set for guard duty; it wouldn't be as slow on the draw as the lobby attendant. I slid into an alcove, hoping the robot wasn't equipped with range perceptrons keen enough to smell me out.

Metal feet clattered down the hallway. "Halt! You are ordered to appear! Mr. Thurdan does not wish to be disturbed!"

The robot steamed on past me. I emerged from the alcove and blasted through its spinal column, paralyzing it and blocking its motor responses. Then, ducking around it, I shorted out its brain. The time was twelve-oh-five. I sprinted down the corridor toward Thurdan's suite.

I stopped outside. And listened.

And heard the sound of sobbing. Myra, sobbing—in an agony of remorse, I wondered?

Twelve-oh-six. Thurdan lay six minutes dead now; I had to go in, to snap Myra out of the state of shock she probably had entered. I pushed against the door, and to my surprise it gave. She had left it open for me.

I burst into Thurdan's apartment, which seemed to stretch in every direction. Rare and costly draperies cloaked the windows; rich rugs brocaded the floor. This was the suite of a czar, a possessions-hungry potentate.

The sound of sobbing grew louder. I ran toward it.

I heard Myra shouting, "Johnny! Johnny! No!"



But by then it was too late.

I blundered into the room and two hundred forty pounds of irresistible force crashed into me. The drawn blaster I had been clutching went clattering across the room; I reeled back, struggling for balance.

Ben Thurdan was still alive.

The room was brightly lit. With terrible clarity I saw the disorderly bed, its sheets blood-stained. Myra lay sprawled across it wearing only a pair of sprayed stockings. Her face was tear-streaked; her upper lip was split, and a dab of blood oozed from it. One whole side of her face was livid where she had received a ferocious blow. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

As for Thurdan, he was naked except for a pair of shorts, and his bare body was immense and muscular. He glistened with sweat. A jagged red line ran some six inches across his hair-matted chest, beginning below the left clavicle and ending just above his left breast. It was only a flesh-wound. Somehow Myra had failed in her attempt, scratching him where she should have torn.

"Are you in this thing too, Mantell?" he bellowed at me. Even naked, he was a figure

of terrifying authority. Sweat poured down his hairless scalp. "You're all against me, then? Harmon and Polderson and Surbrug and Myra—and even you, Mantell. Even you."

He advanced slowly toward me. We were both unarmed—Myra's knife was nowhere in sight, and the blaster lay out of reach. But I knew he could tear me to pieces barehanded.

I backed up, moving warily to keep from stumbling. I was astonished to see tears starting to form in the fierce eyes—tears of rage, probably.

"All of you wanted to kill me, didn't you?" Thurdan said slowly. "I didn't do enough for you. I didn't build Starhaven and take you all in. But you won't kill Ben Thurdan! You *won't!*"

I tried to signal to Myra to scramble across the room and seize the blaster where it lay. But she was too numb with shock to catch on. She lay across the bed, shaking violently, a pale huddled figure.

Thurdan reached out for me. I ducked, swept in under his mighty paws, landed a solid punch on his jutting jaw. He didn't seem to feel it. His hands clutched my shoulder; I twisted and slipped away.

"The blaster, Myra—*pick up the blaster!*" I said harshly. "Pick it up!"

That was a mistake. Thurdan flicked a glance over his shoulder, saw the blaster where it lay, then scooped it up in one huge paw, and in the same motion hurled it through the bedroom window. Now it was bare hands against bare hands, and that could have only one finish.

I edged back as far from his reach as I could. His breath was coming hard and thick. "Kill me, will you? I'll show you! I'll show all of you!"

He charged forward, caught me around the middle with one great hand, and hurled me crashing into a table laden with fine pottery. I rolled over and waited for him to pounce and finish me off.

But he didn't pounce. He stood over me, rocking unsteadily, face contorted.

Finally he said, "I built Starhaven—and I can destroy it too!" Wildly he laughed and swung away, running down the hall and out into the darkness.

## CHAPTER X

I PULLED MYSELF to my feet and stood frozen, shaking away the pain. Thurdan's sudden flight left me utterly bewildered. I turned to Myra.

"Did you see that? He just ran out!"

She nodded faintly. One eye was nearly puffed closed, I saw. She drew a tattered robe around herself. "Come on," she said. "There's a private landing port out on the balcony. That's probably where he went."

"What—"

She didn't wait to explain. She headed in the direction Thurdan had gone, and I followed. We passed through a dark corridor, into a large sitting-room whose balcony doors hung open, swaying back and forth in the night breeze.

"There he goes!" Myra exclaimed. She pointed.

An aircar had just left the balcony; a fiery streak against the blackness indicated its direction. Two more cars were parked on the balcony landing-strip.

"He's heading for the control tower," I said. "Like Samson bringing down the temple—he's going to lift the screens and bring all Starhaven down to ruin around him!"

We leaped into one of the waiting aircars; I prodded the engine to full power within moments after takeoff, and we soared out over Starhaven. The city, far below us, looked tiny, insignificant.

Myra huddled against me for warmth. She was still

quivering, not entirely from the cold.

"What happened before I got there?" I asked.

"Everything went as scheduled . . . until I drew the knife. I . . . hesitated. Just a fraction of a second too long. Ben saw what I was doing. I managed to strike anyway, but he got out of the way and I only scratched him. And then—he knocked the knife out of my hand and hit me. I thought he was going to kill me. Then you came."

"And Harmon and all the others? Still waiting?"

"I guess so. We allowed for something like this to happen; I was supposed to give the signal before we made the announcement of Ben's death. And now—"

"Now everything's changed," I said. The dark windowless bulk of the control tower loomed up ahead; I saw the smoking exhaust of Thurdan's aircar, and brought our vessel down on the landing stage.

We plunged through the entrance into the control building itself, Myra half-dragged behind me. My hand encircled her wrist tightly; there was no time to lose.

"He must be in his little control-center room," I said. "Lord knows what he's doing in there."

The first three lift tubes we tried had been shut down for the night—and I had no idea how to get them started again. The thought of running wildly upstairs through the darkened tower was hardly appetizing; instead we circled the level we were on until we found a functioning lift.

We took it. We emerged outside my defense-screen lab; down the hall was Ben Thurdan's control room, the nerve center of Starhaven.

And the light was on in there.

I left Myra behind, and dashed down the hall. Thurdan was in there, and he had the door locked and the small room-screen turned on, so it was impossible to enter. It was possible to hear what he was saying, though. The vision-screen was on; he was talking to a gray-faced man in the uniform of the Space Patrol. And Thurdan was in the process of saying—

"I'm Ben Thurdan, Commander. *Thurdan*. You know me. I'm calling direct from Starhaven." He looked wild, half-mad almost. The iron reserve of poise was gone.

The SP man looked skeptical. "Is this some kind of joke, Thurdan? Your foolishness doesn't interest me. One of these days you'll find we've

broken through your defenses and—”

“*Shut up and let me talk!*” Thurdan roared. “I’m offering you Starhaven on a plutonium platter, Commander Whitestone! All right, *send* your damned fleet—I’m *dropping the screens!* I’m surrendering! Can you understand that, Whitestone?”

The figure in the screen peered curiously out at the wild-eyed, sweating Thurdan. “Surrendering, Thurdan? I find it hard to believe that—”

“Damn you, I mean it! Send a fleet!”

I heard Myra approach behind me. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Thurdan’s cracked up. He’s busy surrendering Starhaven to Whitestone of the SP. He’s inviting them to send out a fleet, and he’s going to drop the screens when they get here.”

“No! He can’t be serious!”

“I think he is,” I said. “He would never be able to understand why you tried to kill him tonight. He thinks it’s the ultimate betrayal of all he’s worked for—and it threw him off his trolley.”

“We have to stop him,” Myra said. “If the SP gets in here they’ll carry us all off for brainwashing. People who’ve been law-abiding citizens for twenty years are going to suf-

fer. The place will be destroyed—”

“He’s got a screen around the room.”

“Screens can be turned off. You’re a defense-screen expert, Johnny. Can’t you think of something?”

“No,” I said. “Yes. Yes. I can. Wait here, will you? And scream good and loud if Thurdan comes out of that room.”

“What are you—”

“Never mind. Just wait.”

I RACED DOWN the hall to my lab, punched my thumb savagely into the doorplate, and kicked the door open. The light switched on automatically. I began to rummage through my workbench for that pilot model—

Ah. There it was.

I snatched it up. Glancing around, I found a pocket welding torch, the only weapon I could see handy. I gathered these things up, turned, ran back up the corridor to where Myra waited.

“Anything happen while I was gone?”

“He’s still talking to that SP man. I think Whitestone finally believes Ben’s serious.”

“Okay. Watch out.” I hammered on the plexipla door with my fists, as the screen within went dead. “Ben!”

I yelled. "Ben Thurdan!"

He turned and blinked at me. I called his name again, and yet again.

"What do you want?" he growled. "Liar! Betrayer! You'll die with all the rest of them!"

"You don't understand, Ben! I'm with you. I'm on your side! It's all some mistake. Look! I've brought you the personal defense screen." I held up the model—the useless, unworkable model. "I finished it tonight," I said desperately. "I was working on it all evening. Then I ran the final tests. It's a success! You can strap it around your waist and no weapon can touch you."

"Eh?" he grunted suspiciously. "I thought it would take a week to finish it."

"I thought so too. But it's finished now. That's why I came to see you."

He was staring through the thick plastic of the door, shielded both by that and by the bubble of force around his room. There was no way I could get inside—but if I could get him to come out—

I seized Myra roughly and ripped her robe off. She stood naked, arms outstretched to Thurdan.

"I brought her too," I said. "She's yours. She wants to explain. There never was any-

thing between her and me, Ben. Come on out of there. Don't give up Starhaven now. Don't give up everything you've built, all you've planned, just for *this*!"

I was getting through to him. His lips were fumbling for words; his deep hard eyes flicked back and forth, bewilderedly. *Poor Ben*, I thought. It was a sad thing to see a man like that crack open like a moldy melon.

His hand wavered on the switch; then in a quick convulsive gesture he yanked downward, shutting off the screen-field around the room. I heard him jiggling with the lock; then the door swung open.

He came out, walking unsteadily, swaying like a mighty oak about to fall. In a surprisingly quiet voice he said, "All right, Johnny. Give me the screen."

I tossed my model to him. "There. Go ahead. Strap it to your waist."

Myra was sobbing gently behind me. For once I felt no fear, only a cold icy calmness inside me. I watched Thurdan as he strapped the rig around himself.

"Come here, Myra," he said crooningly. "Here to me."

"Just a second, Ben." I got between him and the girl. "We

have to test the thing first. Don't you want to test it?"

His eyes flashed. "What the hell is this?"

I pulled out the welding torch. "You can trust me, Ben. Can't you?"

"Sure, Johnny. I trust you. About as far as I can throw you!" Suddenly sane, realizing he had been tricked into coming out of his sanctum, he came lumbering toward me, murder in his eyes.

I turned the welding torch on.

There was a momentary hiss as the arc formed; then the globe of light spurted out and cascaded down over him. He took one difficult last step, like a man slogging forward through a sea of molasses. He was dead then, but he didn't know it.

I heard a whimper. Then he fell.

I clicked off the torch. Ben Thurdan was dead at last.

I looked away from the thing on the floor. It wasn't pretty.

"Sorry, Ben," I said softly. "And you'll never understand why we had to do it."

**I**NSIDE THE ROOM, a quick glance at the meters told me that the defense screens were down all over Starhaven. For

the first time in decades, the sanctuary-world lay utterly open to SP attack.

I jabbed down on the communicator stud and told the operator, "This is Johnny Mantell. Get me the call that was on this line a minute ago—to SP headquarters on Earth, Commander Whitestone."

The ten-second delay of sub-radio communication followed, while arcs leaped across hyperspace, meshed, returned. The vision screen brightened. The face of Whitestone reappeared on the screen.

"The fleet's on its way, Thurdan. Don't tell me you've changed your mind, or—"

He stopped. I said, "Thurdan's dead. There's been a revolution of a sort here on Starhaven, and I'm in charge. My name is—"

"Mantell?" The SP commander burst in suddenly, interrupting. "You're still alive, Mantell? Why didn't you report to us? What's been going on?"

Stunned, I looked up at the image in the screen. When I spoke, my voice came out as a harsh whisper.

"What did you say? How do you know me?"

"Know you? I picked you for this job myself, Mantell!"

We probed every member of the Patrol until we found one who could adapt well enough."

I took a hesitant step backward and sank into what had been Thurdan's chair. "You say I'm in the Patrol?"

"A member of the Fourteenth Earth Platoon, Mantell. And we chose you to enter Starhaven bearing a false set of memories. It was a new technique our espionage department developed; it was necessary to get you past Thurdan's psychprobing. We invented a wholly fictitious background for you and instilled it sub-hypnotically, with a post-hypnotic command that you'd revert to your true self twenty-four hours after entering Starhaven."

"Johnny, what's he talking about?" Myra asked in a wondering voice.

"I wish I knew."

"What's that, Mantell? You're in complete charge of Starhaven, now? Fine work, boy! The fleet will arrive in less than an hour to tend to the mopping up."

"You don't seem to understand," I said in a flat, dead voice. "I never recovered my—my true identity. I don't know anything about this business of my being an SP man. So far as I know I was a beach-

comber on the planet Mulciber, and before that a defense-screen technician."

"Yes, yes, of course that's so—that's the identity pattern we established—though you were a defense-screen man originally, of course. But—"

"But I don't remember anything about the SP. My own memories are real!"

The SP man was silent a long moment. Finally he said, "They assured me the treatment would be a success—that you'd recover your original identity once you were past Thurdan's psychprobes. But that's easily fixed; we'll have our psychosurgeons restore your original identity just as soon as you're back on Earth."

I shook my head dizzily; I seemed to be shrouded with cobwebs. The room, Myra, the image of Whitestone, Starhaven itself, finally the universe—all took on a strange semblance of utter unreality, like the purplish glow objects get when you stare at them just the right way through a prism. I seemed to be moving in a dream.

Myra was very close to me. "Is all this true?" she asked. "Or is it just some SP trick?"

"I don't know," I murmured. "Right now I don't know anything at all."

Whitestone said, "It seems

the project was a success, at any rate. Whether you're in full possession of your self-awareness or not, the fact remains that your mission has been a success. Starhaven's screens are down. Within an hour an SP squadron will be cleaning out the universe's sorriest hellhole, thanks to you, Mantell."

"I'm not so sure of that," I said heavily, weighing each word and releasing it individually.

"What?"

I sank back tiredly in the chair, and a torrent of images flooded through my mind. The days at Klingsan Defense; the long weary years on Mulciber, scrabbling for crusts of bread and cadging drinks. Now this faded little man in an SP uniform was telling me that all this was unreal, that those were artificially-planted memories, placed in my mind solely to get an SP man through the defenses of Ben Thurdan's fortress Starhaven.

Well, perhaps they were.

Perhaps.

But to me they were real. To me, this was the life I had lived. That suffering was real.

Starhaven was real.

The SP—that was a vague dream, a shining bubble of unreality, a hated enemy.

A moment of choice faced me. I could go back to Earth, have Mulciber and all its attendant bitterness peeled from my mind like the skin of an onion, and emerge fresh, clean, an honored member of the Space Patrol once again.

Or I could stay here. With Myra.

"Mantell, are you all right?" Whitestone asked from the screen. "You've turned utterly white."

"I'm thinking," I said.

I WAS THINKING of Ben Thurdan's dream, and of what the SP would do to Starhaven once they penetrated its defenses. Twenty million fugitives carted off to justice at last; honor and decency restored to the galaxy.

But was that the only way? What if Starhaven were to continue as it was, as a sanctuary for criminals . . . but run by Myra and me, neither of whom was a lawbreaker? Suppose . . . suppose we gradually transformed Ben Thurdan's metal fortress into a planet for rehabilitation . . . without the knowledge of those being rehabilitated?

That seemed like a better idea to me. Much better.

Very quietly I said, "You'd better tell that fleet of yours

to turn around and head for home, Whitestone."

"Eh? What's that?"

"You might as well save the government a lot of lost time. Because when that fleet gets here, they'll discover that Starhaven's just as impregnable as ever. I've decided to stay here, Whitestone. I'm putting the screens back up again. And we don't want anything to do with the galaxy from now on."

"Mantell, this is madness! You're an SP man, a native of Earth! Where's your loyalty? Where's your sense of honor, Mantell?"

I smiled at him. "Honor? Loyalty? I'm Johnny Mantell of Starhaven, late of the planet Mulciber, before that a drunk and disorderly employee of Klingsan Defense Screens. That's my biography, and that's who I am. I'm not letting Starhaven fall into SP hands."

I moistened my dry lips and managed a grin. Whitestone stared incredulously at me. I reached up and broke the contact; his face dissolved into

an electronic swirl of colors.

I felt very tired, suddenly. It had been a busy day. Thunder boomed in the sky outside. That meant it was nearly two in the morning—for, at two, thunder sounded over Starhaven, and then the nightly rains came, refreshing the planet, sweeping away the staleness of the day and leaving everything clean and bright.

Myra was smiling at me. I reached forward and tugged down the master switch; instantly, meters and dials leaped into jiggling life. Once again, Starhaven was surrounded by an impassable network of force-shields; once again, we were protected from the outside.

The rain started to fall, pattering lightly down. I pulled Myra close against me.

Then I released her; there was time for that later. "You'd better get in touch with the rest of the provisional government of the Republic of Starhaven," I told her. "There'll be some changes made by morning."



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# Earth Aflame!



**by Harry Warner, Jr.**

*He stole Earth's  
only starship—  
and terror stalked  
its corridors!*

# Earth Aflame!

by Harry Warner, Jr.

## CHAPTER I

A FEW MINUTES after he threw the switch, Ross Coulter began to sober up.

His head began to ache as the floor of the control room tried to press through the metallic soles of his shoes. The reactors began to whine as they whipped the basic particles of the universe into unbelievable velocities. All around him, the Basket gave little squeaks and groans, as if surprised at finding itself in flight for the first time.

Ross swallowed a soberative, and immediately felt better,

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HARRY WARNER, JR., works for a Hagerstown, Maryland, newspaper, and has been a science fiction fan for 20 years or so. Recognizing his talent, his fellow fans often urged him to turn to *sf* writing. Recently, he gave in and started selling to a wide variety of markets! Now, however, he has switched to serious novels—leaving the many new fans he has acquired completely frustrated!

physically. Mentally, he wasn't sure. While he was tight, it had seemed a fine and noble notion to remove the threat of the Basket from Earth at the cost of his own life. Now that it was too late to change the situation, his life seemed quite precious.

Ross lowered himself into the pilot's chair, symbolically but uselessly. The Basket virtually flew herself, once the course was plotted.

He tried to sort out his emotions. He found astonishment, at the ease with which he had committed the biggest larceny in mankind's history. Dead sober, he wouldn't have conceived the project of stealing the first completed spaceship. The party celebrating its completion had been so violent that a small amount of drinking had given Ross the crazy notion.

Sober, he would have hesitated before the closeness with which the spaceship was guarded, the enormous task of setting it into operation, the consequences that the theft might cause on Earth. He had been just drunk enough to

proceed calmly when he found the guards celebrating at a clandestine party of their own, located the takeoff specifications in the chart room, and decided that Transeuropa would decide that the spaceship had suffered a tremendous short circuit that set it into flight.

He found relief, at the sudden realization of the war that would have erupted if he had been discovered in the act of stealing the craft. As a trusted liaison man during its construction, he knew every nook and cranny of the Basket. But he wasn't trusted enough to go aboard without authorization. Transeuropa had more than enough tricks in its investigating repertoire to force him to disclose the nation for which he had been working. Disclosure that a saboteur had been close to the entire Basket project would be the excuse Transeuropa sought to plunge the world into its greatest war.

He found bewilderment, an unwillingness to believe that he was the first man to fly through space. The Basket had been a big project, in every way. Big in physical dimensions, big in the daring design with its squat main section and delicate handle-like runways to the control quarters at the

very top. Big in original purpose, that of assuring the continuation of Transeuropean ideals in the event of war.

At the outbreak of hostilities, picked families were to hustle into the spaceship, and it was to take them to the nearest habitable planet, there to await the war's outcome. A Transylvanian victory would mean control of two planets. Transylvanian defeat on earth would leave the colony on another planet to prepare for revenge; the victorious nations of Earth would be too exhausted by the cost of the victory to think of space-flight for decades.

He found confidence and reassurance in the fact that the risky deed had been accomplished without disaster. Theft of the spaceship might very possibly prevent war; Transeuropa would be reluctant to risk a conflict, knowing that defeat on earth would end the philosophy of ruthless subjugation of the individual to a tyrannic government.

But there was fear, too. Ross felt terror at the long years that suddenly stretched before him like an endless road from which no sideroads branched. He wasn't thirty yet; another half-century of life might face him. He didn't dare to land on Mars or Venus, to satisfy his

curiosity about the existence of life elsewhere in this solar system. Transeuropa could undoubtedly construct a tiny spaceship within the next few years that would carry a picked crew to recapture the Basket, if a landing were risked on any nearby planet. He must keep moving, far beyond the solar system, to insure the permanent loss to Transeuropa of the Basket to which the whole nation's eggs had been entrusted. A couple of decades from now, he might risk a landing on a planet of one of the nearer stars.

Worst of all, Ross was quite certain that he would remain dismally sane and fully alert through the loneliness of the rest of his life. He had been picked for his delicate assignment in Transeuropa as a man with the fullest mental abilities, with the least probability of yielding to neurosis or suicide if things should go wrong.

Ross looked down at his shoes: special magnetic footwear that he must wear for years to come, to substitute for the sense of gravity in the Basket. He looked straight ahead at the chronometer: he had been completely cut off from the rest of mankind for four hours, if the alcohol hadn't completely destroyed

his sense of time, and the slowly accelerating Basket should be past the orbit of the moon by this time, gradually picking up speed. He looked up at the bank of monitors that lined the far wall of the control room. A red light glowed above one screen.

It was the first thing to worry about, the first indication that the Basket might not be functioning to perfection. Ross reached for the control that would trace the source of the wiring trouble that had caused the red light to illuminate. Those red lights would be useless to him; they were intended to indicate the presence of humans in other sections of the Basket.

And there wasn't anyone in the Basket, except for himself in the control room—the pilot, the crew, and the loneliest man in history.

**R**OSS WASN'T a perfectionist. But he pressed the verification button. The light might have blinked on because of some harmless bug in the wiring, or it might be a symptom of more important trouble in the operation of the Basket.

The automatic equipment behind the panel buzzed busily. After a couple of minutes, the buzzing stopped. There

was a slight delay, then a click. A neatly printed card fluttered from the slot in the verification device.

"No mechanical difficulties," the card stated in half-dry black ink. The light continued to cast a soft, red glare over the bluish steel of the panel.

Ross tore the card in two, angrily. The light worried him beyond logical reason. If the Basket could find no defects in its own mechanism, he might pass away the first hours of this endless trip by hunting for the trouble personally. It might be something too simple for the detecting device to locate, like a loose wire in the monitor. To check the monitor's condition, he snapped on the screen. It flashed into light.

Ross leaped to his feet. The screen showed a human figure, in black outline against the glow from distant engines. The figure darted across the screen. Its arm drew back and it threw something bulky. Ross ducked senselessly as the missile barely missed the monitor's pick-up "eye" deep in the Basket's interior.

Ross took three fast, automatic steps toward the door of the pilot quarters. The magnetic substitute for gravity, sticky to his feet, betrayed

him and he toppled to hands and knees. He pulled himself upright, and hesitated. There couldn't be another person aboard the spaceship. He had taken the trouble to count the guards when he caught them at their spree. Nobody else could have managed the combination of personal prestige and threat of reporting their party to force a way aboard the spaceship, but himself.

But that screen couldn't have reflected his own image, mirrorlike. He hadn't been moving across the room, had thrown nothing. And Ross knew that the Basket contained only its interior, closed-circuit television system. There was no point in cluttering up the spaceship with other equipment, designed as it was for use billions of miles from the nearest transmitters.

Ross' lips were in a thin, straight line as he turned back to the giant control panel. He punched a series of buttons. They sealed off hermetically tight the engine quarters of the Basket where the monitor had peered. The monitor no longer showed the figure. But the other person wouldn't go far. Those doors were designed to stop anything from a smashed-open hull's air leak to a mutinying crew.

Ross turned to the public address sector of the control panel, studied the labels under the switches, and picked up the microphone. He tried to choose his first words. The impossible person to whom he intended to speak might be a tramp who had stumbled through the guards or another agent like himself, unknown to him. He decided on a simple, non-communicative sentence and said calmly into the microphone:

"Come to the monitor and identify yourself."

He set the microphone down gently. It chattered when it touched the receptacle, betraying his shaking hand. He listened. The amplifying devices around the monitor should be sensitive enough to detect the fluttering of a moth within a hundred feet. They produced no sound.

Then the monitor light flickered out. The screen went black.

Ross looked around the control board. It was blank, everywhere. But the monitors should react to any individual, anywhere in the Basket. They were activated by the heat of the human body. Jumping overboard or death would be the only way to escape their surveillance.

Ross checked the blockade

of the engine unit. It was still operative. At that moment, the whine of the Basket's engines stopped.

**T**HE PANELS on the control board went hysterical with flashings and buzzings. Ross leaped to the velocity and distance meters. A quarter-million miles up, one dial declared. But its needle slowed perceptibly as he watched. Ross thought he detected in the pit of his stomach the instant when the Basket began to fall back to earth.

Ross opened the emergency doors in the engine quarters with one sweep of his hand. The stowaway was less important now than saving the Basket. He pounded down the long, narrow handle of the spaceship toward its main section, realizing: If this thing crashes, they'll find what is left of me inside, and my drunken scheme will touch off the war.

Ross bulled into the great main section of the spaceship, then slowed as he approached the engine area. Suddenly he remembered that he was weaponless. He darted quick, futile looks into the side corridors as he passed them, hoping to see something that would serve as a club. The Basket

was in apple-pie order; nothing of the sort was available.

Nobody was in sight when Ross scented the sharp odors of the drive, which the ventilation system had not entirely removed. He crouched cautiously, zigzagged across the main engine room, and found the source of the trouble with absurd ease. The manual control had simply been turned off. He threw it back into operating position. Instantly the whine picked up life again and there was an audible jolt as the Basket's fall was checked.

And there was a tiny, independent sound behind him. Ross whirled toward it. He saw a dark shadow slip into a side passage.

"Hey!" he shouted. The figure vanished into the corridor. He wasted precious seconds, yanking loose from its screw fastener a lubrication lever, then galloped in pursuit, the heavy piece of metal in his right hand.

He veered into the passage where the stowaway had disappeared. Something yanked at his left foot and he tumbled flat on his face, the lever clanging loudly against the metal floor.

Ross shook his head to clear it and pulled his foot loose from the wire that had been

stretched, six inches high, across the corridor. A fool trick, he told himself, and I fell for it. More cautiously, he hurried ahead, watching for another trap, but certain that an armed stowaway wouldn't have resorted to this type of tactics.

The corridor came to a dead end, near the living quarters of the spaceship. It branched to both sides. Ross wheeled and rushed down the corridor. The stowaway might be harmless, or he might know the potentialities of the pilot quarters. Cursing himself for not returning to the control center immediately, Ross galloped up the handle of the Basket, retracing his steps from the engine room.

The door to the pilot quarters was closed. Ross pushed the button that should open it. The mechanism whirled but the door didn't budge. He slammed his lever, crowbar-fashion, against the locking mechanism. The clang echoed brassily from the narrow corridor's sides.

"Stop that!" The voice inside the pilot quarters was faint, barely audible behind the thick door. Ross slammed again, desperately. The door creaked and yielded a trifle. An instant later a six-inch hole appeared in the door, just

above his head. He jumped back, out of the way of the drops of molten metal that trickled from the hole.

Ross flattened against the wall, away from the door, and wiped sweat from his eyes and forehead. The stowaway had found a powerful hand weapon to create such a hole; the next blast might be accurately aimed. The stowaway who had found that blaster could discover the far bigger potentialities of the pilot's quarters.

"Do you surrender?"

The voice came louder through the perforated door. The echoes were deceptive, but it was unmistakably a woman's voice.

## CHAPTER II

"**W**HAT's the big idea?" Ross yelled back. He felt an irrational sense of relief that he had only a woman to deal with. "There's nothing to surrender about. Come on out, and let's make friends."

"Shut up!" The voice was still a woman's, but it was dangerously hard and cold. "Stand where you are and tell me how to turn this ship back to Earth. I've got you spotted on the monitor. Take one step, and I'll shoot."

"We can't go back to Earth," Ross lied. "The Bas-

ket's on automatic controls to go to a star a dozen light-years away. It's too complicated a job to put it on manual controls for me to explain. Let me in and I'll show you how."

He moved cautiously toward the door, then dived to the floor as another blast melted the panel of the wall just above him. But he was too low for the monitor's searching eye, and safe for a moment.

"Who are you?" The woman was speaking less loudly and the voice had taken on an odd nuance of familiarity.

"Ross Coulter. Who are you?" He was trying to place the voice when the answer came:

"Katherine."

The name bounced back from the metal corridor like the echo chamber of a television melodrama. Ross fought to hold himself motionless while his mind raced through the implications of that name.

Katherine was the daughter of the dictator of Transeuropa. Ross could think of no man who would be more dangerous an enemy than this girl. He had never met her. But her picture appeared daily in every country of the world, as she bulled her way ruthlessly through one fantastic escapade after another. No magazine published more than

three consecutive issues without an article describing her craze for sensation and thrill, speculating on her choice of a husband, predicting the world's future if the dictator should die and she should take up the reins of the government. Her will-power had given her the run of the ship while it was under construction. She must know nearly as much about it as he did.

So he was trapped in a spaceship with a woman who was more deadly than any man he had ever fought, one of the few persons alive whom he couldn't hope to convince of the rightness of his cause. And she was the one person who more than any other would have every incentive for getting the truth about the spaceship's theft back to her homeland.

"Did you fall asleep out there?" The voice was harsher, more steel-like in quality. "You know, I think I can wake you up. I remember watching when they were putting in the electrical system. One of the workmen told me that pulling the right levers would send a couple of thousand volts through any part of the ship. I think I can figure out exactly which levers he showed me."

"Better be careful," Ross said. "You might fry your-

self." He fought to keep his voice level. Even if he stood erect, his metal-soled shoes were excellent conductors of electricity.

"I don't think so. I remember something about an interlock to protect the pilot. Damn you, anyway. I came into the Basket to get away from stupid people for a few hours. Now I'm stuck in it with a very stupid person aboard."

Ross heard a series of clicks. She was throwing levers at random. He didn't know if she had picked the bank that governed the electrical circuits of the Basket but it wasn't safe to wait. In one quick, awkward thrust, he threw his lever viciously upward. It scored a direct hit on the monitor's screen. There was a blue-white flash and the hollow sound of an implosion.

**R**OSS CLOSED his eyes an instant until the glass stopped flying. Then he jumped upright and sprinted headlong down the corridor, away from the pilot's quarters, ducking as he passed monitors. He heard Katherine's curses dying away in the distance.

When Ross reached the main section of the Basket, he veered into the passageway

that led to the ramp that gave access to the storage hull. He yanked off his shoes, tossed them over the side of the ramp, then vaulted over the side. He half-floated, half-fell, the slow rate of his fall governed by the small amount of metal in his pockets. He landed atop a giant carton, near the point at which his shoes had landed. Lying flat on his stomach atop the box, reaching down, and stretching, he was just able to fish up the shoes. He put them on, then sat tailor-fashion atop the box, motionless, listening, waiting.

He might be safe, for the moment. The monitors didn't cover this storage area thoroughly. He was insulated up here from an effort to electrocute him. If Katherine was going to apply high voltage to the entire ship simultaneously, she'd do it immediately. After that, he counted on her feminine curiosity to bring her on the search for his body.

But Ross had a deep, lurking fear that standards like feminine curiosity didn't apply to Katherine. A normal woman didn't shoot first and ask questions afterward. She had known enough about the Basket to knock out the engines at the source; she had every capability of turning the spaceship back to earth from

the pilot room. Did he dare to wait?

Ross knew roughly where the fire controls for the Basket were located. They had been installed close to every important electrical circuit and in every area where inflammable materials were stored. He climbed to his feet, finding himself alarmingly stiff from the exertions of the past hour, and kicked violently at the carton.

The stuff was a very tough, paperlike substance, that gave reluctantly to the pounding of his heel. When he had forced a hole, he yanked at the padding, excelsior embedded in a soft, pulpy sort of thick papier-mache. He tossed huge handfuls of it into a cleared space in the cargo hold, at a point where the curve of the hull hung low over the deck, and safely away from the other supplies. When the pile of padding had reached nearly his own height, he tossed a lighted match into it.

Clamping his jaws, he leaped to the deck. He found himself trotting safely away from the tower of flame that shot up. There wasn't any voltage in the floor at present.

He pressed against a wall, just inside the door leading to the storage area, and listened. Twice the pounding of his

heart betrayed him, causing him to tense at the thought that he heard footsteps approaching. But everything outside himself was silent, aside from the slight crackling of the fire he had set.

Ross was about to jump through the door and return to his hiding place when he heard the siren. Jets of chemicals erupted behind him in the storage area, blanketing indiscriminately the fire and the intact cartons. Seconds later, he heard feet clanging down the long handle of the Basket.

The chemical extinguishers were making visibility difficult. Katherine burst through the door in a haze of smoke and chemicals. Ross jumped at her. She snapped a shot from a hand weapon. He heard a bullet clang against the wall, inches from his head. Katherine dived into the densest of the smoke and chemicals and fired again. Ross leaped for the entry into the handle's passageway. Three seconds after he got through, the fire doors clanged down with a violence that shook his teeth.

Ross sprinted to the pilot quarters, gasping for breath. He knew that he had a few moments to spare. The fire doors didn't unlock automatically with the end of a blaze, as a safety measure against the

possibility of a fire serious enough to destroy their control mechanism. But Katherine was heavily armed by now, and he didn't know how long she would stay bottled up.

The pilot room monitors showed that the extinguishing system had already put out the blaze. Temperatures had returned to normal, one meter showed, and the ceiling monitor gave an overall view of the storage area that was hardly blurred by the smoke. An ant-like figure that was Katherine moved across the wide-angle screen, circling the storage area, searching for the open door that wouldn't exist until he released the fire doors.

Ross looked rapidly around the control board. The panels were as messed up as if a kindergarten class had been playing with them. Katherine had obviously been trying to get the ship back to Earth, and hadn't been patient enough to do it systematically. But nothing appeared to be presenting an immediate danger to the Basket, and it was accelerating, the distance gauges declared: nearly one million miles up, by now.

**R**OSS KNEW that he must make a quick decision. The woman didn't have his knowl-

edge of the spaceship. It was conceivable that he might capture her alive, now that she was cornered. He tried to tell himself that it was against all his principles, to kill cold-bloodedly a woman who couldn't fight back.

But Ross felt the real truth struggle for emergence in his conscience: he hated to kill Katherine because the act would condemn him to solitude for the remainder of his life. Yet sparing her life would be the most dangerous thing to the future of the world that he might do. Alive, Katherine might at any moment contrive to gain control of the spaceship and get a message back to Earth.

He shook his head, as if to clear it. The world's billions were more important than his loneliness. And he couldn't just wait, hoping for her to surrender. Even assuming that she couldn't break out of the storage area, he'd need to get inside himself, eventually, to avoid starvation.

Ross moved his hand toward the electrification circuits. The lever that would send current surging through that part of the Basket and through Katherine's body was strangely small and innocent-looking, a two-inch spike of polished metal.

Ross touched it gingerly, and hesitated. The Basket hadn't been under way very long. The takeoff and the fire had caused severe drains on its power reserves, he knew. The Basket might not possess enough juice just yet to send an instantly fatal surge of electricity through the woman. Ross felt his stomach rebel at the thought of watching a slow, agonizing death of the kind that would be caused by cumulative weak surges of electricity.

There was a better way. He walked slowly across the pilot's room to another bank of controls, and opened the panel that concealed the cargo-unloading devices. The storage area was against the bottom of the Basket, the portion of the hull that curved just a trifle away from the surface, as it lay on earth. Huge sections of the hull were hinged in this section of the spaceship. They swung away, for easy loading and unloading of cargo. To open one section would send air rushing from the entire cargo section. It might cause the loss of a few tons of supplies. But it would also cause Katherine to explode. It would not be a pleasant death for him to clean up, later. But it would be merciful, painless, instantane-

ous, and absolutely, terribly certain.

Ross carefully inactivated the safety locks which prevented the accidental vacuumizing of any section of the Basket. He looked across the room again, and saw the light glowing above the fire doors in the storage compartment. They were still sealed shut. The large monitor had cleared completely from the smoke and haze. He no longer saw Katherine's figure. She was either motionless or hiding behind supplies. Fearing that she might be cooking up some means of escape, he set his jaw and turned back to the cargo control board.

He pressed a button that activated the screen above him, showing the view from just outside the hull for the convenience of the pilot while at rest on a planet. Now it showed nothing but empty space, with a blinding glare from the sun in the center of the screen.

Ross wiped his perspiring hand on his shirt, and tried to grip firmly the control that would set in motion the hinged portion of the hull. He blinked, eyes watering from the glare in the screen, and tried to forget the feeling that the spaceship was falling into the sun.

Then he remembered the filter that was available for the screen, and threw it into place. He glanced directly at the subdued ball of fire. It was unbelievably large.

Puzzled, Ross turned the finder for the screen. A smaller bright disc swam into view from the screen's upper corner. He stared in amazement at the impossible spectacle of two suns.

Ross looked at the chronometer. Only a couple of hours had passed since take-off. It was physically impossible for the Basket to have raced through space into a distant double star system.

He stared at the big and the small circles of light on the screen and felt nausea begin to churn in his stomach. In the corner of one eye, he saw the speck that was Katherine, moving again, in the monitor. But he ignored her, and grabbed for charts. It took only two minutes' calculation to prove his apprehension.

Ross carefully put the safety locks back into place for the storage area, then viciously snapped off the screen. The two discs of light left ghost images for a moment on its blackened surface.

One of those discs was the sun, undoubtedly. The other had been the burning Earth.

### CHAPTER III

USELESSLY, he snapped on the communicator that had not been used since the takeoff. A roar of static poured through the loudspeaker. He twirled dials, exploring wavelengths. There was no trace of a carrier wave.

Earth was burning up. Ross knew that he would never be certain of the manner in which its fate had been consummated. There might have been an accident with atomics. An experimenter might have began a series of tests that proved mightier than he expected. Or war might have broken out between the continents. His theft of the Basket might have been traced somehow.

Whatever the cause, the planet was seared by nuclear fires. He no longer feared that Katherine might pilot the Basket back to Earth.

Ross licked dry lips and threw a switch. "Katherine!" he called into the microphone. His voice sounded high and unnatural to his own ears.

The little figure in the screen straightened. She had been crouched over some object.

"Katherine!" he called again. "I must talk to you. Something has come up,

something very important. You won't want to kill me after you hear about it. I don't want to harm you, either. There's a microphone in the panel to the left of the one under this monitor. Slide back the panel and press the button on the mike to answer me."

She glared up into the monitor and thumbed her nose. Then she knelt again. But she had turned, so Ross could see more clearly the object on which she was working. Its squat shape could be nothing but a blaster.

He cursed inwardly at the stupidity of a woman's monkeying with a machine with such tremendous potentialities. "Listen to me!" he called again, more urgently. "We've got to stop chasing each other around. We've suddenly become very important people. There are two or three ways that I could use to kill you instantly. I'm not doing it. That's proof of my good faith. Stop monkeying with that blaster before you hurt yourself. If you do, I'll open the fire doors and let you out."

She straightened again. Ross thought that he could detect the blaze from her eyes, despite the tininess of the image in the screen. Then she kicked over the blaster and jumped back.

"Katherine!" Ross had time for no other words. The monitor flashed into a spasm of light, then went black, overloaded from the sudden glare. An instant later, vibration shook the chair on which he sat, jolted a couple of switches free from their places on the panels. Red alert warnings flashed out, all around the banks of controls.

Ross stared at the dead monitor. He revised his standards hastily, bitterly. Katherine hadn't been tinkering ignorantly with that blaster. She had set up some kind of short circuit that had caused it to explode. She had obviously been trying to blast loose the fire doors, which were impervious to its beam. The red lights around him told him that she had succeeded in that aim. But the explosion had wrecked so many other circuits that he didn't know if the explosion had been strong enough to stun or kill Katherine. If she had miscalculated, hadn't ducked behind some sort of protection in time, her body might be scattered in a thousand pieces in the storerooms.

Or she might be alive and stalking him again, not knowing that the Earth to which she sought to return was a sheet of flame.

Ross plunged home controls that sealed him tightly and safely in the pilot's quarters, barricading the entry doors, to give himself time for thought. His first impulse had been to explain to the woman that they were the last living persons. On second thought, he wasn't certain that such an explanation was necessary. Now that Earth was gone and every representative of humanity was dead except for the two persons aboard this spaceship, it might be simpler for him to walk unarmed around the Basket until Katherine shot him down. It would end permanently the mess that mankind had made of its future.

But something deep inside Ross rebelled against this plan of action. It might have been the instinct of self-preservation, or it might have been the twinge of conscience that told him that he had no right to decide that mankind should become extinct.

The Basket had been the only spaceship that was capable of flight when Earth still existed. It was inconceivable that anything was left alive on the planet, and there was no other means of escape. So a drunken whim had turned him into the second Adam, and his Eve was a preposterously dan-

gerous woman who didn't have any inkling of her new role.

**R**OSS ROSE slowly, feeling ten years older. There was a deliberation about his actions, as he rummaged through the pilot's quarters for the things that he might need. He located a couple of hand weapons that might incapacitate without killing, a coil of tough rope that might serve to tie the woman, a first aid kit that could save a life if a pitched battle ensued. He stuffed them into his pockets and unlocked the doors to his compartment. Then he set an automatic timing device on the compartment's locks for a dozen hours, and dashed outside before the relays sealed it up.

Unless Katherine short-circuited another blaster, she couldn't get inside the pilot's quarters and sabotage the ship for a safe period of time. He could concentrate his energies on taking her prisoner, without worrying too much about the safety of the spaceship. It was set on a course that would plunge it into the nearest star, about five years from now, and the thought that the contest would be settled when this star came close was somehow comforting to him.

Complete silence surrounded Ross as he walked slowly, calmly down the handle of the Basket toward the storage compartment. He knew that he was thinking in the present tense about a woman who might no longer exist. He also realized that he was avoiding the future tense. Assuming that she had lived through the explosion that she had created, assuming that he succeeded in capturing her, what next? Katherine's basic personality was not encouraging. He realized that her willfulness might prove more powerful than her sense of responsibility to the human race. If she wouldn't listen to reason, if her emotions were atrophied, what would he do next?

Ross had his hand weapon set to stun, not to kill, as he rounded the entry to the storage compartment. He stopped on the threshold, and saw that the area was a complete shambles. Crates and vats had ruptured from the blast. Their contents, unrestricted by gravity, had covered walls and ceiling. Flour was still floating through the room, like a warm snowstorm. Enough of it had settled to the deck to show faint footprints, leading toward the living quarters of the Basket. Ross followed the trail for twenty feet before the

flour became too scanty to leave evidence.

He backtracked, searching for signs of blood. There were none. Katherine was able to walk, and not hurt badly enough to bleed. She was still dangerous and at liberty, somewhere in this spaceship.

He touched the switch that dimmed the light in the corridor that led upward and inward, toward the nest of living quarters. His suit was grimy by now, and splattered with dust and flour, making him a poor target in dim light against the metal walls of the corridor. Katherine had been wearing a flaming yellow dress that should reflect ample quantities of light. And it was doubtful if she knew this part of the spaceship as well as he did. He had helped to design the living quarters, contriving to provide the maximum number of family compartments in the smallest amount of space. And he was armed. Ross felt more confidence.

But he hesitated, just before reaching the end of the corridor that gave access to the compartments. There were fifty of these compartments. Each of them had been intended for a family of the Trans-european elite, in case establishment of a colony on another world had been started.

Each compartment was capable of being partitioned into smaller rooms at the flick of a finger on a button in the wall. Entire compartments could be locked up, for the safety of the occupants' privacy. Every compartment contained closets in which Katherine might hide, cots behind which she might be crouching, furniture that could conceal boobytraps for him.

Listening, he heard nothing. But he thought he sniffed the faintest tang of smoke. The ventilating system had removed it before he could sniff again. But the smoke was evidence that Katherine was here.

He found the cigarette stub just before the door to the first living compartment. It was no longer burning, but hot to the touch. He tried to tiptoe cautiously forward, cursing silently the fact that he couldn't remove his noisy shoes.

He saw the woman's handkerchief on a small table in the second living compartment. With infinite caution, he moved into that compartment. This is too good to be true, too pat, something deep within him shouted inaudibly. Be alert, one section of himself told the rest of himself. Would Katherine absent-mindedly permit clues to remain so plainly in sight,

one to each compartment?

He had started to back out of the second compartment, when the black cloud rushed out of the first compartment toward him through the open doors. As it engulfed him, he fired twice, blindly, into its center. Katherine had counted on his growing suspicious at that particular moment, he realized as the black cloud ruined all visibility.

**R**OSS YANKED OUT a handkerchief and pressed it against his eyes, which were beginning to smart. He stumbled ahead, deeper into the nest of living quarters. He thought he heard a quick cry of exultation, close behind him. He snapped another shot over his shoulder, then turned his attention to guessing the location of the doors.

Ross had been through this section of the ship a thousand times. But always before, his eyes had guided him. Now he must trust his body to move as the eyes had so frequently instructed it to.

He blundered into the side of a wall after passing safely through a half-dozen compartments. He fell to one knee, then righted himself as Katherine's footsteps became audible behind him. He quickly

picked up his lead against her pursuit. She would be wearing a helmet for protection against the blinding stuff that she had released. But the gas was installed in the ship to quell mutineers, in case of insurrection. It was potent stuff, and even the helmet offered only partial visibility.

Now the gas was seeping through his handkerchief, attacking the membranes of his eyes. It was designed to torture, not to blind. Ross forced his hand to remain steady behind the protective cloth, fighting an overwhelming urge to rub and scratch the irritated eyelids.

He risked a halt at a washstand, twisted the faucet, and heard the water splash into the bowl. He bent awkwardly until the liquid struck his handkerchief and face. The pain eased a little. But Katherine was audible again. And when Ross straightened, he realized in panic that he had lost his sense of position, while soothing his eyes.

He waited until her footsteps sounded just outside this compartment, then fired against the ceiling. The concussion in the tiny cabin almost knocked him flat. Her footsteps halted abruptly.

"You're licked!" he shouted, forcing exultancy into his

words. "You'll never see me through that mask. I've got a better one. Throw your gun onto the floor."

"Damn you!" The voice was just around the partition. He heard the shuffle of feet. It sounded as if she were attempting to sidle around the corner of the partition. But it might be a bluff of her own, and the gas was working on the mucous membranes of his nose, making breathing a torture. He had to get out of this, fast.

He fired again at the partition that was inches from his face. Katherine's footsteps broke into a run. He turned the wall himself, feeling for the corner with the fingers of his free hand, and reoriented himself. She was heading for the central core of the living quarters, the captain's cabin. It was airtight, and would be free from this black cloud.

The flash from a weapon poured through the gas and the handkerchief. The rush of energy was like a physical blow, burning Ross in a full circle. But the shot had missed him. He leaped toward the source of the flash. Something soft gave way before his lunge, and rolled from beneath him as he sprawled on the floor.

Ross grabbed blindly for

the woman's mask. His fingers brushed hair that slipped through his fingers as he attempted to grab it. Then the piercing agony of his face told him that he had lost his handkerchief. Instincts of self-preservation took over. Ross leaped to his feet and galloped toward the captain's quarters. He twisted the combination on the handle that gave him access and slammed it shut behind him without really knowing what he was doing.

It was only seconds before Ross felt the agony subside in the clean air of this cabin. He grimly forced one eye open with a finger, despite the new pain that the action caused. The gas had bored into his eyes so badly that he could see only a dim outline of the room. But that glance told him that the gas had not penetrated here. He was safe, until Katherine deduced where he had gone and blasted down the door.

Ross coughed, spat phlegm until his throat eased, and blew his nose, striving to remove the last irritating traces of the gas. His eyesight was improving rapidly. But when he looked for his weapons, they were gone. He must have dropped one of them in the collision with Katherine. And he couldn't remember what he

had done with the other.

The only exits from this captain's cabin was through the nest of other living compartments. All of them would be saturated with the gas by this time, with Katherine prowling through them, waiting to shoot him down.

There were no weapons in the captain's quarters. He was unarmed, while awaiting the moment when the woman would burst into this section of the living quarters.

#### CHAPTER IV

ROSS SUDDENLY SAW the alternatives in pitiless reality. His refuge time here was limited to scant minutes. When Katherine found him, she would probably shoot him down like a dog. If she missed him, it might be that killing her would be the only way to subdue her. Either way meant the end of humanity.

An appeal to her better instincts, to whatever remnant of emotion she possessed, was needed. Ross grabbed a microphone before he could change his mind, snapped the switch that was supposed to send the captain's voice throughout the Basket, and called:

"Katherine! Katherine! I'm surrendering. I'm in the captain's cabin. I'm not armed

and I won't fight. I have something very important to tell you."

He stopped. There was silence, except for a barely audible hum in the loudspeaker beside the microphone. Ross blinked a couple of times, to try to destroy the impression that the cabin's air contained a slight haze. He felt a sudden urge to cough and rub his eyes. Gas might be seeping through tiny crevices.

He opened his lips to call Katherine again, when her answer came:

"Stop trying to play possum. But I need help." Her tone was firm, fearless, but urgent.

"Then come to the captain's cabin, Katherine. This isn't a trick. I'm—"

"Shut up, and listen to me. I can't find the thing that stops this damned gas. It's all through the spaceship and it's getting through my mask. I'll be blind in another ten minutes. What should I do?"

Ross grabbed the microphone so tightly that little squeals erupted from the speaker. "The controls look like round plungers. Can't you remember where you found them when you turned on the stuff?"

"Of course, I remember. But I've gotten lost in these

stupid cabins. I can't see well enough to find my way out, and I wouldn't know what direction the controls are in, even if I did get out." He heard her sneeze a couple of times.

"The controls are in the ventilation compartment. It's just this side of the engine room. Go out B passage— Oh, hell." He realized that she wouldn't know the names of the passages, even if she could locate them.

"You go out and turn off the stuff. I won't shoot. I don't want to grope around a spaceship where I can't see a thing. This mask is clouding up."

"I can't. I don't have a mask. Remember?"

"They certainly must have put a mask in the captain's cabin."

Ross banged the microphone down onto its rest. The clang that resulted fed back into the loudspeaker with a detonation that jarred his aching head. Furious with himself for his own stupidity, he rummaged in cupboards until he found three masks, lined up in neat order. He pulled a mask over his head, folded another and hid it beneath his shirt, trying to tell himself: *I'm really not as stupid as I seem, my reactions were slowed up by that gas.*

Earth Aflame!

"I'm ready," he said more quietly into the microphone. "Remember, I'll be able to see perfectly for a while, until the mask gets saturated. You're nearly blind by now. If I hear you close to me, I'll have plenty of time to hide before you can shoot. Then I'll just lie low until you're completely blinded." It was a lie, of course, because the mask when fresh merely protected the face, and had no power to penetrate the murk.

"Agreed," her voice answered. "Remember, this is a temporary truce until we clear the air. I have every intention of killing you as soon as I can see again."

"Better wait until I tell you something, Katherine. You might not want to kill me, then."

She started to laugh but fell into a fit of violent coughing. When she could talk again, she said: "There isn't anything on Earth that could change my mind about you."

"There's nothing on Earth any more, period."

He heard a click in his speaker. She had cut the circuit, and he was speaking into a dead microphone.

**R**OSS FELT his back prickling in irritating, nervous

fashion as he walked slowly through the maze of living quarters. Furniture and doors wavered as if ten feet under a sea of grayish ink. Somewhere behind him, he heard the deliberate clang of Katherine's feet, as she followed the noise of his own footsteps. In the haze of this gas, it was hard to judge distances by noise. She might be close enough to see him, ready to shoot him in the back the instant he made one move that would show her the location of the control which would shut off this flow of blackness. But her saturated mask must be interfering with her vision by now. Twice as he walked toward the engine room, her footsteps faltered and he heard a dry, painful coughing.

He led her on a circuitous route around the engine room, trying to enlist time as an ally, hoping she would fall into a panicky state from the irritation around her eyes and nose. A hundred feet before the entrance to the ventilation room, where the gas was emerging and the air was even blacker, Ross stopped his forward motion, and raised and lowered his feet methodically, as if marking time in a parade.

Her footsteps sounded on top of him before they stopped. He crouched, prepared to

spring as she became visible in the wavering darkness. Her voice sounded almost on top of him:

"Don't try that." It was a hoarse, painful wheeze, like a very sick person. "No tricks."

His eyes battled the swirl, and his ears weren't sure of her precise direction, in this place of echoes and reverberations. With infinite, silent caution he slipped his feet from his shoes, and pushed himself upward toward the ceiling, freed from the artificial gravity.

"The door is two steps to your right," he told her. "You go first. You'll never find it, if I go in before you do."

He heard two steps. There was a pause. Then he counted four footfalls. They were headed in the opposite direction. Katherine suspected a trap. Then the mists swirled less densely for an instant. He saw the bright yellow of her blouse, three feet beneath him, six feet to his right. He shoved with his left hand against the ceiling, sideways. He shot downward like a rocket—and missed.

He grabbed for the woman, invisible again. The grab sent him spinning upward again. Somewhere close to him a door clanged shut and a magnetic lock buzzed into action.

Ross propelled himself back to the floor, swept his arms in a wide, circular motion, and found the shoes. It required a contortionist's feat to get his legs into position to put them on without floating away again. By the time he had managed, he thought that he could discern the outline of the door. The air was clearing perceptibly. He stepped back ten feet and threw himself against the door, with a jolt that sent numbness through his right shoulder. The door held firm, tightly locked and thick.

Ross had Katherine's location pinpointed, and he knew where he could find weapons. It might be possible to arm himself again, and make a quick-moving forced entry into the ventilation area, striving to capture her before her slowed reactions could quicken again to normalcy.

He had just pulled a blaster from a locker down the hall when he realized that he was still wearing his mask. He pulled it off, and found that visibility was virtually normal once again. She might be coming out of there very soon. The lights above the hall bored into his eyes. He rubbed the eyes, fearing that they had been affected by the gas, then looked more critically at

the glaring light sources above him. They seemed inordinately bright.

An air pressure meter on the wall near him stood out like a circle of fire. Normally its illumination level was just high enough to be conspicuous. Ross stared at the needle. It showed zero, indicating that the hall in which he stood was an impossible vacuum. As he stared, the light on the meter flashed and blinked out.

An irritating, barely audible hum was singing all around Ross, the hum that machinery will give out when it is working too hard. He galloped back to the door leading into the ventilation area, put his mouth against the cold metal, and yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Katherine! Are you monkeying with things in there?"

Her voice was barely audible through the thick panel: "None of your business, Buster."

"Don't mess with those controls. You might break something."

"It was hard to see in here." He pressed an ear against the metal, striving to hear the faint words. "I found a panel with switches and dials and I twisted some of them pretty far. But it made the lights brighter."

"Turn them back, right away. You've overloaded the electrical circuits. Things are burning out from too much juice."

"I can't be bothered. Now go away."

He pounded clenched fists uselessly against the door. "Katherine! Listen to me! You'll burn out every control device on this spaceship. You've ruined some of the meters already. Turn down that voltage. Do you want to spend the rest of your life in a spaceship that's out of control, dark as pitch?"

The door vibrated roughly against his face, as Katherine threw something against it, vigorously.

A NEW KIND of fear began to pluck and goad somewhere deep inside Ross. It was the primitive fear of the dark and the cold. A flaming crash into a sun would be infinitely preferable to decades of hurtling aimlessly out of control aboard a spaceship whose electrical circuits were dead.

A wisp of burning rubber from an insulator or connector roused Ross. He turned away from the door, realizing the futility of further pleading. His wristwatch told him that hours remained before he

could regain entrance to the cutoff control area, where he might be able to repair the damage that Katherine was doing. By then, every electrical connection in the ship might be a useless, fused hunk of melted wires.

He turned the blaster full strength against the ventilation area's doors. They didn't even scar. The far end of the corridor suddenly darkened. A whole bank of lights had burned out in that section. The hum was growing louder and the ventilation system was no longer able to keep the air free from a scent of combined ozone and burning insulation.

Katherine's trick of short-circuiting a weapon to break down the door wouldn't work here. The door would come down, but in this confined space the blast might put the entire mechanism of the Basket out of commission permanently.

The socket at the side of the door caught Ross' attention as he turned off the blaster. It was an ordinary plug for any device without a built-in power source.

The blaster was self-contained—but Ross felt a sudden surge of hope. He clawed at the shield, ripping it from the blaster, and yanked loose the two wires that formed the

blaster's internal circuit. Fumbling in his haste, he improvised a connection to the socket.

It was a crazy hope, but he turned on the blaster, aimed it at the door, and jumped back. The weapon hissed and spluttered under the load from the ship's augmented current, far in excess of the power that the blaster normally generated for itself. Smoke curled up from the gun, but its beam held steady against the door and Ross saw tiny blisters, then small drops of metal begin to trickle down the surface of the door.

Ross didn't realize he was holding his breath until the black spots before his eyes and the oppression in his chest forced him to draw a deep gulp of air. By that time, there was a hole in the door the size of a watermelon. An instant later, the blaster burst into a sheet of blue-white flame and subsided into a half-melted chunk of metal, fused from its internal overload.

Ross kicked loose the wires with one foot, and leaped through the gap in the door. One leg brushed the white-hot surface of the door, sending a scald of pain through his body. He ignored it, and hunted feverishly for the large switch that controlled this

entire sector of the ship. It was jammed so tightly that it took all his strength to yank it into inoperative position.

As if the spaceship were a theater where a play was about to begin, lights all around him dimmed suddenly. The hum ceased magically. Ross simply sat down on the floor, feeling suddenly on the point of complete exhaustion.

*Don't try to relax, he told himself fiercely. You're still in trouble. Katherine may be sighting a weapon now.*

He shook his head, trying to rouse himself, and looked around. Nobody was in sight. The room was silent. There were vast machines standing near him. Katherine might be lurking behind any of them, but Ross suspected that he would be a dead man by now if she were that close.

When he rose, he stumbled over the burner. It was a small hand weapon that was particularly deadly for its ability to produce and pinpoint heat. Exactly the kind of weapon that Katherine would prefer, he thought, picking it up and wondering what had caused her to forget it. Holding it at readiness, he searched the ventilation quarters methodically, expecting a blast to tear open his body at any instant.

Katherine wasn't there.

## CHAPTER V

**C**OULD she have suffered an accident or killed herself? Ross toyed with the idea for a moment, then gave it up. She hadn't been in a mood for suicide ten minutes earlier. He would have found her, if she had been hurt badly.

But she hadn't come out the door he had entered. And there was no other exit from this ventilation area, except for the airlock which led to outer space. And there would be screaming sirens and flashing lights all over the room if Katherine had committed suicide by stepping into outer space.

Ross thought that the pounding in his ears was the blood hammering at his temples. He was deadly tired, too hungry to think straight, completely baffled by this new problem.

Then he realized that he would be a dead man if his heart were beating that slowly. The clomping was coming from a definite direction, in front of him. It was an infinitely heavier and more ponderous noise than shoes would cause.

The truth hit Ross like a thunderbolt. Katherine was in the airlock. But she had no

intention of walking into outer space. She had remembered the spacesuits.

They were stored in the airlock. It was difficult but not impossible for a person to clamber into a spacesuit unaided. They were intended for use in outside repairs on the hull. But there was nothing to prevent Katherine from walking into the spaceship encased in the impregnable, powerful-driven garment that was a machine in its own right.

He jumped back, hid behind a generator, and listened to the measured pounding of the spaceship's boots as she walked experimentally around the airlock. Ross didn't know if Katherine knew that she couldn't move fast in the thing. But he suspected that she realized that there wasn't a weapon in the Basket that could penetrate the tough spacesuit or hinder her progress while wearing it.

The panel to the airlock opened. Like a seven-foot robot, the spacesuited figure strode out, then stopped, as if Katherine were pondering her next move.

Ross snapped a shot with the burner at the shoulder of the spacesuited figure. The effect was as negligible as he expected. A slight discoloration appeared on the outer

covering, nothing more. Katherine turned her head ponderously in the direction from which the shot had come. She began tramping toward him.

He darted away from the generator, moving five times faster than her maximum speed, grabbed a long-legged stool, and tossed it deftly between the legs of the spacesuit, while Katherine was in mid-step. The metal stool caught between the swinging legs, like a walnut in a nutcracker. The stride halted for a moment. Then the power-motivated suit bent the stool's legs as if they were made of matchsticks, and the stool clanged to the deck.

Katherine turned away from Ross and put her bloated arms on her grotesquely swollen hips in a gesture of thought that was unmistakable, despite her weird appearance.

Ross moved swiftly sideways, out of the direct range of her vision, and closed in on Katherine laterally, just avoiding her view. He noted with grudging admiration that she had no weapons in the mitts of the spacesuit. She had known enough of the spacesuit to realize that he could duck before she could aim.

He was two feet away from

her, stretching his arm to its fullest extent toward the fastenings at the front of the spacesuit, when she saw him from one corner of an eye. He had barely touched the lock when she swung. He hung on for an instant, trying to open the suit far enough to permit a shot, then ducked as her right arm swung toward him, irresistibly but slowly.

The blow that would have crushed his skull missed his head by a foot. He danced back, like a sparring partner, trying to move inside her area of defense again. This time, she wheeled, keeping him in view, both arms raised, ready to strike.

Ross turned and ran, ignobly. He couldn't take her by surprise, for the time being. Whatever she planned to do in the spacesuit, she would require several minutes to accomplish, hampered as she was by its weight and slowness to react. Ross sprinted back into the living quarters, and sank exhaustedly on the cot.

**E**VEN from this distance, he heard her footsteps or their reverberation, clanging faintly in the distance. He tried desperately to put himself in the place of a determined

woman who still believed she could turn the Basket back to an intact Earth by getting rid of him.

She had put on the spacesuit for some reason. Of that, he was certain. The noise had stopped, indicating that she was still in the ventilation area, or near it. He didn't think she would risk the black gas again. She was too sensible to try to foul the air for him by cutting off the purification. She must know that in a ship of the Basket's size, it would take years for one person to exhaust the oxygen, and she couldn't have more than a couple of hours' air in her spacesuit.

Ross jumped to his feet as the loudest crash so far resounded. Whatever she was attempting, it involved physical force. He took the time for one deep breath, to try to clear his thinking. It did. The physical action of the conscious breathing galvanized the thought and the realization. The crash had sounded like the airlock panel. Katherine was attempting to vacuumize this part of the ship.

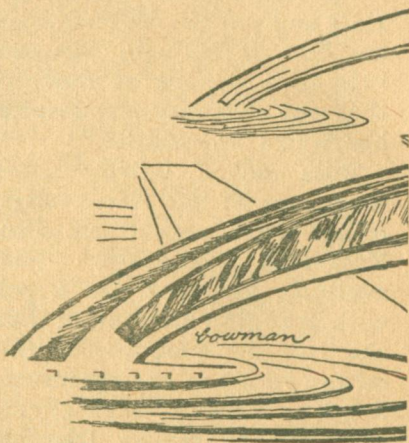
He sprinted for the ventilation quarters again on legs that dragged like the familiar nightmare of a chase with leaden feet. At the ruined doorway he stopped, from ex-

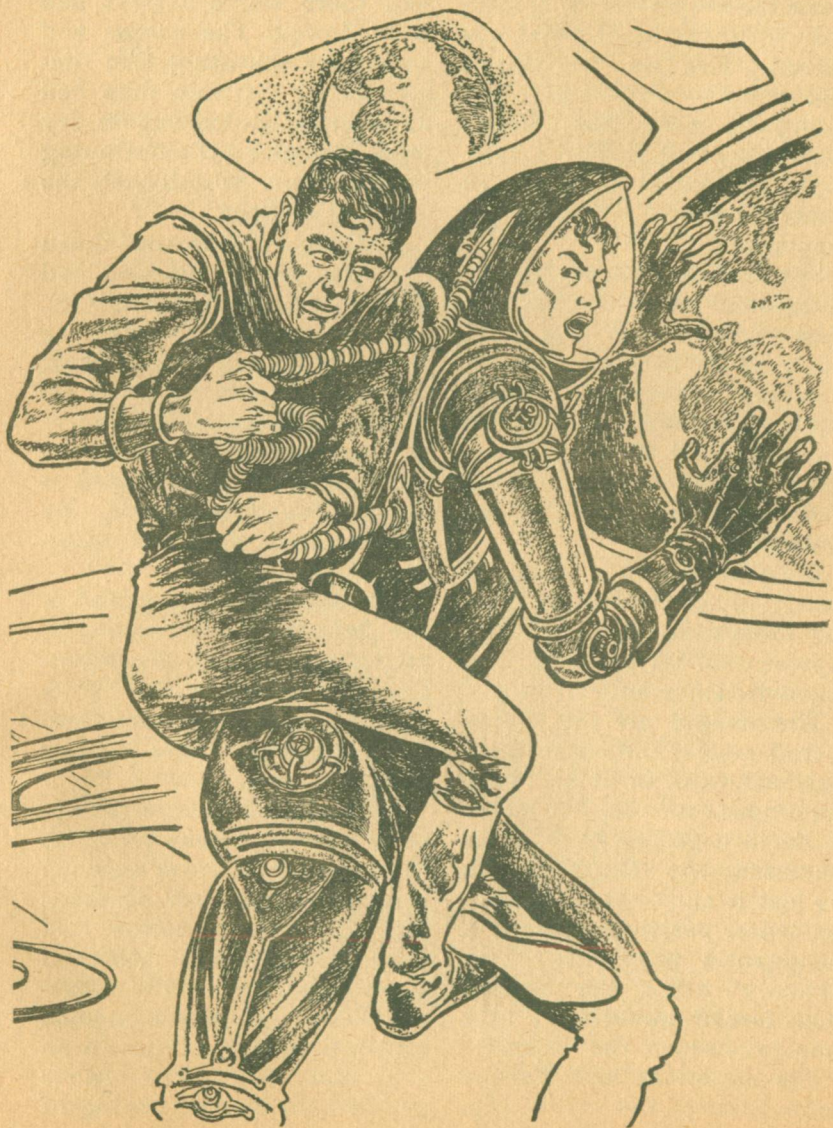
haustion, not from hesitancy.

The inner panel of the airlock was open. Katherine's spacesuited figure was in the airlock. Methodically, she was battering with a heavy crowbar at the fastenings of the outer panel.

Ross climbed through the door, then grabbed at the wall for support. The presence of air in the airlock had automatically activated the view-screen on the wall beside him. For an instant, he had the sensation that he was about to fall into the depth of space, from the clarity and enormity of the view which appeared on the giant wall screen.

Katherine pounded again. The noise was driving what-





ever thoughts might form out of Ross' head. He knew instinctively why she couldn't force the outer door: it opened only when the inner panel was locked. But no mechanism was going to survive that battering for very long. When the outer panel yielded a half-inch, the entire hull of the Basket would become a vacuum.

She hadn't noticed his return, intent on her destruction. Ross crouched for one final, futile effort to divert her attention, steadying himself against the wall, and threw one last look at the penny-sized image of the burning Earth near the center of the screen.

Dials were only a couple of feet from his hand. Ross grabbed them suddenly, as if they represented his survival, and began twisting and turning.

The images on the screen veered crazily, swam forward and backward, until he found the proper controls. The image of Earth began to grow, as he increased the magnification. He lost it once, returned it to the center position, brought it to gigantic proportions that virtually filled the screen, then forced himself to take time to sharpen the focus.

The Americas and Europe were facing the spaceship.

The image on the wall showed coal-black continents, except for a tiny silver thread here and there where a river had once flowed. The oceans and seas were sparkling like diamonds. The atomic fires had apparently burned out on dry land, but were still continuing in the water. Ross locked the controls tightly.

Katherine had thrown down her crowbar in disgust, had moved backwards a few feet, and was apparently preparing to throw herself at the outer panel of the airlock in an effort to dislodge it. Ross snapped a shot with his burner at a ceiling light. It exploded in a cascade of brilliance. He darted across the room, dodging flying glass.

The flash of light glared in the helmet of the spacesuit, attracting Katherine's attention. She turned to look for its source. She stared straight into the giant image of the burning Earth.

Katherine's hands moved upward a few inches, as if to push the vision from her eyes. Then Ross was behind her. He leaped bodily onto the spacesuited figure. His knees tightened around the legs of the spacesuit, like a telephone lineman attempting to hold firm to an enormous pole. His hands grabbed the slender tubing of

the airhose, bent it into a tight loop, twisted it again with all his strength.

**K**ATHERINE didn't know he was there, Ross suspected. She stared at the image of Earth for what seemed to him to be minutes.

Then the absence of the hiss of air in her ears must have told her that something was wrong. Her helmet twisted to the full limit of its turning ability. He pulled himself to the side, keeping out of her direct line of vision. Her eyes were only a foot from his, as she craned her neck.

She must have seen him in the corner of an eye. She bent forward majestically, as if to throw him off, as an untamed horse throws its rider. Ross hung on, clenching his elbows against the rough covering of the spacesuit for better support. The hose, impervious to the force of weapons but flexible to permit free movement of the spacesuit, was becoming slippery in his perspiring fingers, but he kept the kink in it as taut as the substance permitted. He could feel the air pressure building up at the cutoff point.

Katherine straightened, and began to back with awful inevitability toward the nearest

wall. Ross waited until the last instant, then loosened the hose and swung himself around to her side, clinging to her gigantic upper arm to cushion the shock of impact. She bounced back from the force of the impact that would have crushed him like a bug.

Again she tried to smash him, this time ramming herself into a corner formed by the wall and an air compressor. He saved himself by climbing, standing a precarious moment on her shoulders. The shock of the spacesuit meeting the corner jarred him to the floor. He landed with a jolt that knocked the burner loose from his waist. He ignored it, and again clenched the air-hose, begrudging the oxygen that had reached Katherine during those few seconds.

She bent and awkwardly picked up the burner. He couldn't wrench it from her gloved suit fingers while holding the air-hose, but he released one hand long enough to shove the safety lock into position on the burner as it swung to face him. She squeezed the trigger without result.

Ross felt himself weakening, as if it were his air supply that had been blocked. He had an irritating sensation that the entire spaceship was describ-

ing great circles as he hung to the air-hose, watching Katherine turn the burner over and over awkwardly, striving to unlock the weapon. The gloves of her spacesuit were too awkward to manipulate the tiny lever.

She dropped the burner. He kicked it out of reach. She stood motionless, as if deciding on her next move. An eternity passed before Ross dared to hope that her failure to act was due to lack of oxygen.

He pulled his protesting body to one side, hanging to the air-hose, and twisting his head to peer through the visor. Katherine's head lay on one side, against the helmet, and her eyes were shut.

To be on the safe side, he kept the air blocked for a few more seconds. Then, half-fearful of killing her in this manner, he released the hose and grabbed for the fasteners of the spacesuit.

They worked stiffly, but finally yielded to his sore, fumbling fingers. He opened the spacesuit, peeling it back from its center seam. Its rigidity held Katherine upright, like a mummy in a half-opened case.

Awkwardly he worked one of her hands and arms free from the sleeve of the space-

suit. When he was about to pull the other arm free, something about the fresh color of Katherine's face made him pause, suspicious.

He pushed back the upper eyelid from Katherine's right eye. The eyeball glared straight at him. It was not rolled upward in unconsciousness.

He leaped back when the eyeball rolled violently. The split-second's warning saved him. The knife in Katherine's right hand flashed by his throat, missing him by an inch.

Ross jumped for the burner, twenty feet away. From the corner of his eye, he saw Katherine's arm draw back. He realized that he wasn't going to make it.

The knife flashed through the air, striking Ross in the pit of the stomach as he tried to dodge. He grunted, then realized that he wasn't hurt. Katherine wasn't accustomed to throwing knives.

"You're supposed to hold them by the point when you throw them," he yelled at her. "That way, the point hits the target."

He strode almost leisurely back to Katherine, who was trying to climb out of the spacesuit, her eyes glued on the burner that lay safely be-

yond her reach. When she had both legs free from the spacesuit, Ross hit her on the jaw, putting every ounce of strength at his command behind his fist.

She crumpled instantly at his feet, out cold.

## CHAPTER VI

Ross walked across the ventilation chamber like an old man, to pick up the knife and the burner. Then he sat on a chair and felt very tired.

He looked at an unconscious girl whose nose was just a trifle too large, and whose chin had a small, sore pimple on one side. He felt a completely irrational impulse to protect this girl from a menacing woman named Katherine. His back refused to stop prickling in anticipation of an attack from Katherine; his subconscious mind insisted that the woman might be stalking him at this instant. Consciously, he realized that he had created an image far more than life-size for Katherine. It was hard to reconcile that mental picture of a deadly woman with the actuality of the girl whom he had just knocked out.

Some time since the takeoff, Katherine had changed into slacks. When Ross caught

himself wondering why he hadn't realized that a woman wearing a skirt couldn't crawl into a spacesuit, he decided that he had better keep himself busy; it was a wild fancy such as usually came just before he dozed off. And it wouldn't be wise to doze off just now.

He sighed and stood up. His muscles were stiffening already. But he picked up Katherine, who was surprisingly light, and carried her carefully down the long corridor into the living quarters. With grim appropriateness, he took her straight to the captain's quarters, and dumped her onto the cot. She hadn't stirred.

At least I've fulfilled one condition, if I'm going to be Adam to her Eve, Ross told himself. I've carried her over the threshold.

As abstractedly as if a sack of potatoes lay on the cot, he searched her clothing, finding only a handkerchief and a few pathetically useless coins. Then he pulled from his own pocket the coil of rope which he had placed there at a time that seemed months ago. He lashed her wrists behind her back with the rope, pulling it brutally tight, then looped her arms snugly against her waist. He tied her legs both at the ankles and just above the knees, and finally ran a short,

taut stretch of rope between ankles and wrists, to prevent her from sitting up. As an afterthought, he removed the clip from her hair, fearing that it might serve to pick a knot if she should shake it loose.

Feeling a bit safer, he examined her jaw carefully. It felt solid enough, despite his fears that his blow had broken it. A dark, purple patch was forming where his fist had connected; that was all. He opened her mouth and ran a finger cautiously inside her cheek, trying to determine if it was cut. His finger was red when he pulled it out, but not with the dark, dull red of blood. He stared at the stain and finally realized that it was lipstick. He shook his head in wonder at the woman who kept her lipstick fresh while attempting to kill the last living man.

Weakness was adding a quiver to his stiff muscles. Ross realized that he hadn't swallowed a mouthful of food since coming aboard the Basket. Katherine seemed safely immobilized, and the risk of leaving her now was less than the danger of his collapse from sheer exhaustion and lack of nutrition.

He walked unsteadily, aimlessly, until he remembered where the galley lay. When he

arrived, he found a can of soup heating in a stove. He gulped half of it through the can's nipple while walking back to the captain's quarters, suddenly fearful that Katherine might escape. In his presence, she seemed safely prisoner; the moment that she was out of his sight, she assumed terrifying potentialities.

SHE HAD REGAINED her senses while he was gone. Something made him reluctant to meet the glare of her eyes as he stood awkwardly above her.

"That was a good trick, that picture of Earth," she said, bitterly and quietly. "How did you do it? If you hadn't caught me off guard that way, you'd never have licked me."

"It wasn't a trick." He finally looked straight at her. She lay quietly. But her hair was tumbled and the cot was rumpled. He guessed that she had made a titanic attempt to break free while he was gone. He sat on the cot beside her, lifted her slightly, and looked at her bound wrists. There was blood around the rope, from her vain wrenching.

"Earth is gone. You and I are the last two people alive. That is why I've captured

you, instead of killing you."

Their eyes locked. This time, she looked away first. "I believe you," she said, so quietly that he barely caught the words. "I just didn't trust the evidence of my own eyes. What are you going to do with me? Hold court proceedings all by yourself so you can execute me legally?"

"I'm not going to do anything to you. Nothing, except what I've just done."

She squirmed violently until the bite of the rope brought a twist of pain to her face. "But you can't just keep me tied up like this."

"If it's necessary, I will. But I think I can rig up some chains and weld them around your neck so that you'll be a little more comfortable."

"You can't take me back to Earth if that's gone. What do you—"

Almost gently, he put one hand on her shoulder and pushed the hair out of her eyes. "We're going to the nearest star to look for a habitable planet. If it doesn't have such a planet, we'll go to the next star and the next until we find one. If we don't have any luck at first, we'll start to raise a family aboard the spaceship."

She writhed, pressing her lips tightly together. He waited until she subsided. She

said finally: "Aren't you taking a lot for granted?"

"I've thought everything out. I've taken nothing for granted. Too much is at stake to take things for granted, Katherine. I haven't the wisdom or the nerve to say that humanity should end. You and I are the only people who can keep it going. It's going to be a very unpleasant job, but I'm going to make sure the race survives."

"I'll kill myself first."

"You won't get a chance to kill yourself."

"But you can't keep your eye on me all the time."

"There are ways. This ship was very well supplied with all sorts of drugs, enough for a large population. Some of them are habit-forming. Others can deaden a person's will. After a few weeks of injections, you'll behave better."

"No, not that," she whispered. "Don't. I'll obey."

He laughed briefly. "I don't think that I can trust your promises. This is going to be nasty, all around. It means hatred between you and me, for decades to come. It means incest for our children, because there isn't any other way for the second generation to do its work of keeping humanity going. It means—"

"You needn't worry about

incest," she said. "Maybe I know something that you don't know."

Ross frowned, trying to guess her meaning. Then he rose. He suddenly felt a strange recurrence of the sensation that he had experienced when his favorite girl in high school had announced her engagement to another fellow. It hadn't occurred to him until this instant that Katherine might be pregnant.

He pulled out his handkerchief and folded it carefully. "I've got to get some sleep. Hold your head still." Roughly, he turned her over and tried to slip the handkerchief over her mouth, unwilling suddenly to hear her talk. She twisted away from the cloth and said hastily:

"Wait a minute. Before you gag me, you're going to have to feed me. I haven't eaten anything since we left Earth. Unless you want me to starve while you sleep, that is."

He muttered something and dropped the handkerchief. The tin of soup was still warm, he found, picking it up from the shelf where he had left it. He wiped the nipple clean and raised it to Katherine's lips. She looked at the can, getting crosseyed in the process for an instant, and grimaced.

"Drink it," he said, "or I'll knock out a couple of teeth and pour it down your throat."

"God, no," she said. "It's poisoned."

"Don't be silly. I've just explained to you why I've got to keep you alive. I'm not going to poison you." He pushed the tin against her lips. She butted it away with her chin.

"I tell you, it's poisoned. I put booby traps like this one all over the Basket. I thought you'd get hungry sooner or later and taste my cooking."

Ross thought that he felt something chewing and nibbling in his stomach. He blamed it on imagination, but he sniffed at the soup, then looked at Katherine. She looked up at him, and began suddenly to fight convulsively against the ropes.

"Let me loose, if you've eaten part of it," she screamed up at him, half-hysterically. "Right away. The stuff paralyzes, then it kills. If it hits you while I'm tied like this—"

Ross rose, to take the soup back to the laboratory. He was no chemist, but he thought that he might relieve his own mind by rigging up a rough analysis of the soup, proving that Katherine was trying to trick him into freeing her. He had taken two steps when the

thing that was nibbling in his stomach suddenly took a giant bite. He bent in pain, turned back toward Katherine, felt himself falling before he had reached the cot, and blacked out.

**W**HEN ROSS came to his senses, he believed that years had passed and he had become an old man while unconscious. His mind skipped and jumped senselessly, in senile fashion. His limbs had the quiver and the weakness of a nonagenarian.

He was in a bed. He tried to sit up, but fell back weakly. His motion jangled a bell that was attached by a thread to his upper arm. Quick footsteps clanged. Katherine came into the room.

Ross pawed under the sheet for a burner or a blaster. The motion took all of his strength. He realized that he couldn't have lifted a weapon if he had found it. He also discovered that he was dressed in some kind of pocketless hospital garment.

Katherine was hovering above him, saying: "You'd better take it easy. You're only about halfway out of the woods."

Feeling an instinctive terror of the woman who loomed

above him, discounting her words, he tried to roll to the other side of the bed, away from her. She put one hand lightly on his chest and held him down, as if he had no more strength than a newborn infant. Somehow, the gesture relieved him. He caught himself staring at an ugly, three-inch black scar that encircled the wrist above the hand that held him.

"Now, don't worry," Katherine was saying quietly. "The spaceship's going along just fine. I've finally driven the poison out of your system, but you've lost most of your strength. And don't fret about me escaping. There's no place for me to go, so I'm still your prisoner."

A thousand questions raced through his mind and he could bring only the most trivial of them to utterance: "What happened to your wrist?"

She raised her other arm and he saw a twin scar on the other wrist. "Medium-heat burner wounds. It's a good thing that you collapsed pretty close to me. I was able to roll myself off the cot and squirm close enough to you to get hold of your burner. I'd have never gotten myself untied in time to keep you alive, any other way."

"You fool," he said. "You could have turned down the burner to minimum power. It would have charred the ropes and wouldn't have burned you a bit."

"Too slow. I had to get loose fast, to save you."

"You did it deliberately?"

He took both her hands, knowing that she could pull away with the least exertion from his weak muscles. She said nothing. Finally he continued: "You didn't need to keep me alive. There's a fifty-fifty chance that your child will be a boy. That would mean—"

She looked worried at his words, then puzzled, finally delighted as she understood his meaning. She burst into a fit of giggling. "You thought I was pregnant? Hell, no. I was talking about the semen on this ship. They stored lots of it with some kind of preservative to keep it potent for years. They did it just in case radioactivity did anything to the men aboard ship, preventing them from fathering children normally."

Ross loosened his grip on her hands. He felt the rest of his strength draining from him. "Then you wouldn't have needed me, all along," he murmured.

She slapped his face, very

gently. "It's a wonder I didn't slug you while you were delirious," she said irrelevantly. "You kept calling me Kate, while you were yelling around out of your senses. I never can stand it when men call me Kate. What made you call me Kate?"

"You've cut your hair," he said, just as irrelevantly.

"That's another thing. What did you do with my hair clip? I couldn't keep it out of my eyes without the clip, and that's one thing that I couldn't find in the ship's stocks, spare hair clips. But why did you keep calling me Kate?"

"I don't know." But something crept out of Ross' shuffled memories. He looked up at Katherine, calculating her probable reaction. "I'm lying. I think that I do know. This whole mess seemed just a little familiar to me all along. I couldn't figure out why. Now I remember a play called 'Taming of the Shrew.' Shakespeare made a woman named Kate the main character. She turned out to be a nice woman, after all."

Katherine pulled up a chair, sat down, and bit her lip. She said: "That play was our production when I was in college. I took a terrible kidding from the girls about my name and the central character. I've

never been able to stand Shakespeare since then. Are you strong enough to listen to a true confession?

"I've been a shrew like Shakespeare's Kate. The only trouble was, I was in a stronger position than Shakespeare's Kate. Men have always been scared of me, because my father was boss. I did as I pleased, tried to get into every kind of trouble. I must have wanted to get myself beaten by a man. Every girl wants a man who is stronger than she is. But they all cringed from me.

"Then you came along. You fought back. I wouldn't have played so rough, if I hadn't been trying to prove to myself that here was a man who could really conquer me. And I suppose that I made it pretty rough on you, in the process. I don't expect you to believe all this. But I think it's true. I've tried to prove it, by nursing you back to health. As soon

as you're strong enough, I'll let you tie me and I'll be your prisoner again, if you like. I'm finished with fighting back, thanks to you."

Ross managed a weak grin. "I never thought I'd be a Petruchio, even by accident. I just knew that all of humanity's eggs were right here in this one basket. I'll behave myself, by the way. That artificial insemination stuff can keep humanity going without the need for me to molest you, if you don't—"

"Hell, no." The old Katherine flared up for a moment in her eyes. "If we're going to be Adam and Eve, we'll do it in the traditional way. We'll save the test tubes for the kids. That way, there won't be incest in the second generation. Maybe there won't be any Cain or Abel if we toss some variety into the race that way."

Ross fell asleep, and had no more nightmares.

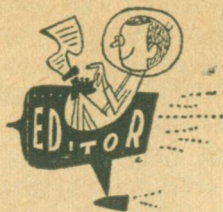


***Earthmen were the pets of an alien master!***

**VALLEY BEYOND TIME**

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## THE EDITOR'S SPACE

EVERY once in a while, somebody steers the conversation back to the old question of what distinguishes man from the so-called lower animals. Veterans of such bull sessions seem to agree that intelligence alone is not a good enough answer. Other animals are intelligent, too—only not quite as intelligent as man (it says here). For the sake of the argument, we're looking for a difference in kind, not merely one in degree.

Man's sense of humor has been suggested as his distinctive characteristic fairly often. But just to be different, I've got another idea I think is worth kicking around. Man is the only animal that gambles.

It's true. Other critters may appear to take chances occasionally, but they don't really. Wild game goes in for protective coloration so it can stay out of fights it knows it can't win. And the wisdom of running away to fight another day

can be observed anywhere and any time in cats and dogs.

Man is not only willing to take chances—he *likes* to. The United States considers most forms of gambling illegal, but people find ways to gamble anyway. And the propaganda for legalized gambling never stops.

Of course, there are two kinds of gambling. The kind that goes on in Las Vegas is one; Ivar Jorgenson obviously thinks this kind will always be with us, and I definitely agree. It may not be very productive, except of thrills—but the other kind is definitely worthwhile.

The Wright Brothers gambled when they tried to fly. And space travel will be the biggest gamble of all. But the long odds encourage man instead of making him hesitate. It's a darned good thing, too; otherwise we'd still be squatting in caves.

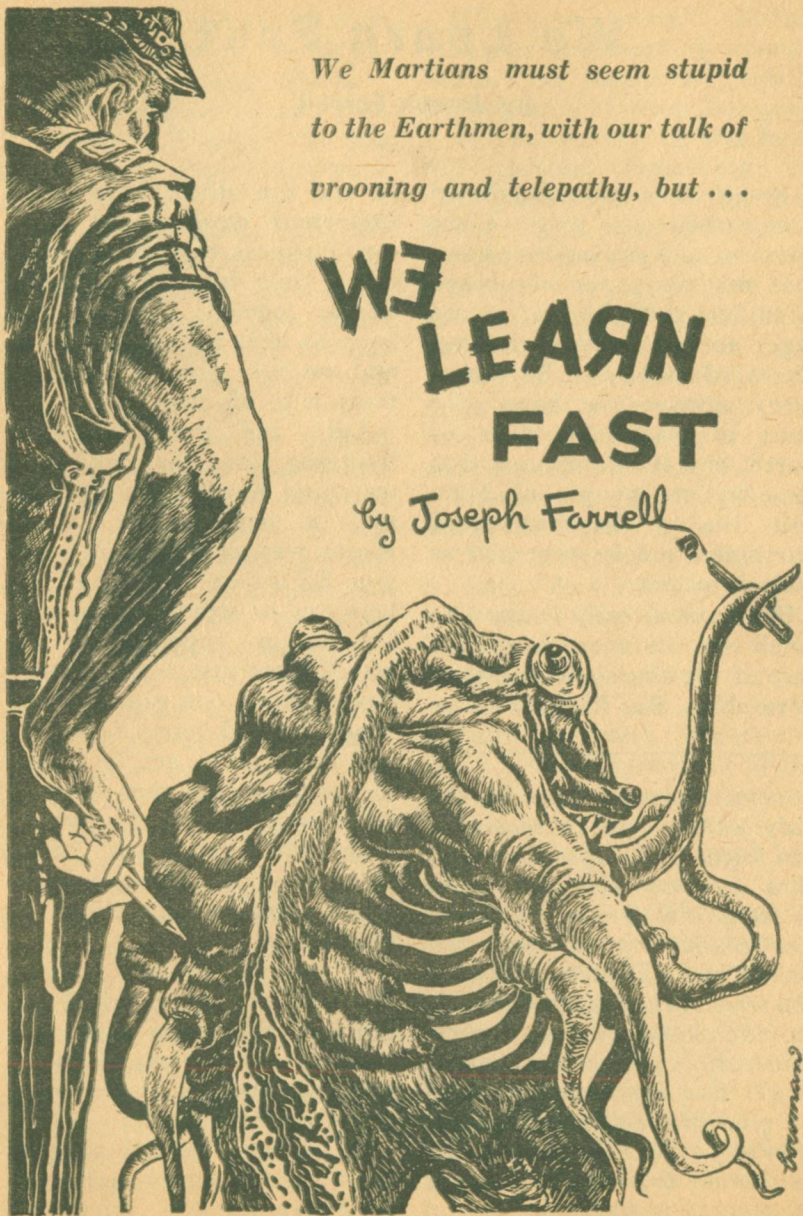
Anybody want to bet that I'm wrong?

—LTS

*We Martians must seem stupid  
to the Earthmen, with our talk of  
vrooning and telepathy, but ...*

# WE LEARN FAST

*by Joseph Farrell*



*Sturman*

# We Learn Fast

by Joseph Farrell

I KNOW what some Earthmen say about us, that we are ignorant and superstitious and that our ways are not based on logical thought. But we are eager to learn. We drink up the wisdom of the Earthmen every chance we have. We want to learn the ways of Earth, and it is our hope that someday we people of Mars will live in the manner of Earthmen and be accepted as their brothers.

We have already learned as much as the men from the ship of the sky could find time to teach us. But Captain Lang-

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JOSEPH FARRELL *may be the only writer ever to receive a fan letter praising a story before it was accepted. The artist, Bill Bowman, picked up the manuscript before the editor had a chance to contact the writer, read it, and liked it so much he dashed off an enthusiastic note. We think you'll like the story too, and be glad Mr. Farrell (no relation to James T.) has returned to science fiction after a lapse of several years.*

ly and the others have much important work about their own business and cannot spare much time for us. The little doctor named Fuornot has been to visit us several times, and we have given careful attention to his words.

Like the time we were lounging along the canal bank watching Kanar building himself a new winter home. Kanar was squatting on what you Earthmen might call his legs, and he was vrooming with his vroom appendages. He waved them just so and a stone down along the side of the canal worked loose from the soil and rolled gently uphill to the plain. Another vroom—sometimes the rest of us would help him vroom a real heavy stone—and the stone would be set in place on the wall of the new house.

It was a lazy late summer day and we were just lying there in the warm noon sun, putting up Kanar's house, when we saw Fuornot coming along the canal bank.

Of course we all stopped work on the house and gathered around the Earthman.

There was myself and Kanar, and Kanar's young one Bryd-lon, and a few dozen others.

"We are glad to see you, Earthman," I said. "It has been a long time since your last visit."

I spoke in Earth talk, because our primitive language is so barbarous and—holo-phrastic, Fuornot once called it. The Earthman are too advanced to be able to learn such an uncivilized tongue.

"I know." Fuornot puffed, the way Earthmen do. "We've had some troubles—two of our buildings went down in that sandstorm three days ago, and we had a devil of a time getting them up. Too heavy to lift, had to cut the walls into sections and weld them back together again. Our Marsjeep is buried someplace in a sand dune and we can't locate it until we get the sand out of the mine detector. We're far behind schedule."

"You should have called us," said little Bryd-lon. "We could have vrooned your house up in no time."

Kanar slapped his young one across the vocal bladder for butting in on the Earthman. Fuornot was looking puzzled:

"Vrooned? Is that what he said? What did he mean by that?"

"Oh—you know." Kanar wriggled his vrooning appendages. "He meant we would all get around your building and—just vroom." He was having trouble explaining it. "But pardon his breaking in—he is only a baby. Of course, we know you Earthmen have a better way of putting up your buildings. We could only gather around and vroom. You know, make them rise into place by all wishing that they would. That's the only way we would know of doing it."

Fuornot looked hurt and shook his head.

"You look so intelligent," he said. "And yet you live in a dream world of superstition. It has been proven that telekinesis is impossible."

I dragged a tentacle through the sand. "Telekinesis?" I was ashamed to show my ignorance, but I wanted to learn.

"Yes. That is our word for what you call vrooning, and of course the whole idea is ridiculous. Since you seem to learn so well, I'll try to explain it to you."

He looked around, picked up a long piece of Xwirk-leather that Kanar had been resting on. "This will do for a board." He placed the middle of the board on a stone so that it was balanced and neither

end touched the ground. "Now—"

He placed another stone on one end of the board and it went to the ground. We crowded around, eagerly drinking in the lesson.

Fuornot held his hand above the high end of the board. "Now let us say that we wish to lift the stone, which weighs about one pound, to a distance of one foot, which is about the distance it can rise in this case. We cannot do this without applying one foot-pound of energy."

He blinked and looked down quickly, for the stone had started to rise. Kanar cracked Brydlon again for starting to vroom it. "Watch and do not interfere," he told his young one. "The Earthman may be angry."

Fuornot was frowning at the stone, which had fallen off the board. "Now how did that happen? Well, I must have accidentally kicked it." He shrugged and replaced the stone.

"As I said," he went on, "I can lift that one-pound stone one foot only by applying one foot-pound of energy. Like this."

He pressed down on the other end of the board, and the stone rose. We stood attentively, absorbing this

knowledge from the far planet Earth.

Fuornot rose, the stone now held in his hand. He raised it up and down slowly several times.

"You see—each time I lift this stone, I apply energy from the muscles of my arm. The energy comes from the food I eat, and if my body didn't have food to turn to energy, I couldn't do it. If we used a machine, we would have to put some other kind of energy into the machine, and we could not get more out of the machine than we put in. If we used electric power, we could not get more power than we used in the first place to generate the electricity. Do you understand?"

"I think so," I told him slowly, not quite sure.

But I understood after he explained it more fully. The law of the conservation of energy, he called it, and as I said, we learn quickly. Fuornot asked us questions to test our knowledge and was very pleased.

"You really learn fast," he said. "I've sent reports back to Earth about your learning ability, and they think I exaggerate. And," he laughed good naturedly, "if they heard you talk about vrooming, they'd be sure of it. What ever

made you think such a thing could be possible?"

We all felt a little sheepish. Kanar held out his vrooning appendages. "We always thought it was done with these," he said. "We always wave these when we vroom—to make things move in the right direction."

Fuornot examined the appendages. "Why, I've studied these and identified them as tactile organs. You will notice—" he waved the rest of us closer, "these tiny protuberances. Just one moment."

He pulled a thick glass object from his knapsack and held it over the tactile organs.

"If you will look through this, you will see that each is covered with a multitude of tiny hairs, or cilia, which no doubt convey information to the brain. I'll admit that I haven't been quite able yet to integrate them with the rest of your bodies, but by the time I finish my book on Martian anatomy, the answer should be clear." He peered thoughtfully through the glass. "Hmmm. Strange—but obviously tactile organs."

He let us take the glass and look in turn at the tactile organs. We murmured in wonder at this marvel he had shown us. This had been be-

fore our eyes all of our lives, unseen until a man from the sky came to educate us.

"We are indeed grateful to you, man of Earth," I said shyly. "It was truly foolish of us to imagine that vrooning was possible."

Fuornot showed his dental bone growths in what the Earthmen call a smile. "It makes me happy to help you out. Captain Langly has a stiff schedule lined up for me, but as soon as I can get away for a few hours, I'll be back to see you. You are certainly a pleasure to teach."

AND SO WE no longer believe in the old superstition that we can vroom. Sometimes one of us tries, because of old habit, to vroom something, but nothing happens, which of course it can't, because we know it is not possible. Then the others laugh at him. Brydlon tried it for fun a few times, being a playful youngster, and cried because it wouldn't work.

It is annoying to have to climb down into the canals and carry up those stones one by one. Harder than when we used to believe in vrooning. But of course this is just a temporary inconvenience. We realize there are more lessons

to come, and the people of Earth will show us the better way of doing things.

I just received a thought from Kanas. Fuornot has come to visit us again. I shall leave my house and hurry out to meet him as soon as I make myself presentable.

While I am on the way, Kanar is keeping me informed about what the Earthman is saying. He is explaining that telepathy is impossible. It is getting hard to understand what Kanar is sending me. Something about there being

no kind of wave on which thought could be modulated. And no way of the brain generating enough power. And then there is something about an inverse square law. . . .

Now I can't catch a thing from Kanar. It seems as if he has closed his mind. What was that about telepathy? Is it truly impossible? Have we only imagined all this time that we were reading each other's thoughts?

I must hurry out and learn more of the wisdom of the Earthmen.



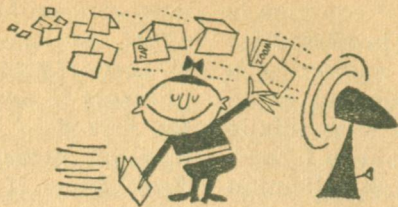
## ADVENTURES IN THE FUTURE

With this issue, SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES begins its second volume. Taking stock of our first, we find it practically impossible to decide which of the authors we've published so far was top favorite with the readers. But it would be easy to choose the *two* top favorites. In spite of stiff competition, Robert Silverberg and Calvin M. Knox ran neck-and-neck in taking the honors.

And in next issue you're going to get stories by both!

Silverberg leads off with his best and most unusual short novel (somewhat longer than usual, too) so far: *Valley Beyond Time*. On the surface, there's nothing very strange about the valley of the title—in fact, it seems to be an unusually quiet and peaceful place. The trouble is that its inhabitants don't know how they got there, and can't find any way out. Then they realize they're *pets*. . . .

Knox returns, by popular demand, with a sequel to *Chalice of Death*. In *Earth Shall Live Again!*, Hallam Navarre returns to Jorus—and walks smack into the middle of trouble. His struggle to return Earth to its rightful place in the galaxy has only begun—and the forces ranged against him are vast!



# THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

THE THREE short novels in the last issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES ran so long that this department was crowded out. For some strange reason, Editor Shaw couldn't be persuaded to leave one of the novels out and let me fill the space instead, even though I pointed out to him how easy it would be for me to do so and how pleased the readers would be if I did. Editors are the most arbitrary people!

And so, this time, I have a lot of things to catch up with. Fandom, these days, seems to be in the throes of a real renaissance. New fanzines are appearing almost every day, from almost every State in the Union and a surprising number of other countries (the sun never sets on fandom!). Old ones are being revived, too, just to provide a nice balance. But one of the most interesting and pleasant aspects of the

boom, to me, is the fact that so many of the fans who regularly write letters to INFINITY and SFA are actively engaged in editing and writing for the new crop of fanzines. It's a common canard that fans aren't really interested in science fiction—and it's nice to know that the canard is untrue, at least in the present case.



THE FIRST ISSUE of *The Trading Post*, the all-advertising fanzine I mentioned in the August issue, has appeared, and the second one should be out by the time you read this. If you want to buy or sell books, magazines, or fanzines, I don't see how you can do without this one. It's small so far, but bound to grow if it gets the circulation it deserves.

Aside from advertising, the

only feature *TTP* contains is a contest; a prize is offered for the first person answering a published question correctly. The only trouble with this is that it's too easy; even *I* know who edited the first collection of science fiction to appear in pocket book form. I'd advise tougher questions, but otherwise this is a nice idea. *TTP* costs 10¢ a copy, or three for a quarter, from Fred Tilton, 37 Eighth Avenue, Haverhill, Massachusetts. Your Uncle Arch says: get it!

A NEW TYPE of fanzine, it says here, is *Zap!* Ted Johnstone, 1503 Rollins Street, South Pasadena, California, pulled the trigger on this one. The idea is that it will be issued only on special fannish occasions, such as conventions and the like. Thus the editor hopes to guarantee that all issues will be lively and worthwhile—and the first one tends to indicate that he is right. It commemorates the 1957 "Fanquet" held by the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society in honor of Forrest J. Ackerman, and is full of nice things the attendees said about Forry in their after-dinner speeches.

Forry, who used to be a bewilderingly active fan and is

now a bewilderingly active agent, critic, and man-about-sf, certainly deserves the compliments if anyone does; and the first *Zap!* is an admirable way of preserving them. I don't know if any copies of this issue are still available, but you can get the next one (which will be published for the 10th Annual Westercon) by sending a dime to Johnstone.

ANOTHER special - interest item is *Rockets*, published by the U. S. Rocket Society, Inc., at Box 271, Pittman, Nevada. If you're vitally interested in rocketry, and want to support anything remotely connected with it, you can get this for 50¢ an issue or \$2.00 per year. Frankly, considering the price, the magazine strikes me as extremely small and ineptly edited. Chances are you can get more up-to-date information from an issue of *Scientific American*, which sells for the same price. Sorry, fellows.

IN FOUR PAGES, I can't, just can't, review all of the fanzines sent to me. This time, with so many in the stack, I won't even attempt to do so. Instead, I'll print a list. *All* of the fol-

lowing are worth reading, and seem to appear with reasonable regularity. Go ahead and send for any one of them, and you won't be getting off on the wrong foot in fandom. Better yet, send for several; they vary widely in editorial tone and type of material published. Besides, if you send for only one, the editor may not have any copies on hand when your letter arrives, and you'll have to wait until he finishes another—which can be a matter of months.

You'll note that several of the fanzines are available free—but this usually means that they're free *only* to people who show sincere interest by writing letters of comment and criticism or in some other way. If you're a new fan, the least you can do is enclose a postage stamp or two with your request.

Here's the list:

*Aberration*; Kent Moomaw, 6705 Bramble Avenue, Cincinnati 27, Ohio; free.

*Cry of the Nameless*; Box 92, 920 3rd Avenue, Seattle 4, Washington; 10¢, 12 for \$1.00 (and I can't resist mentioning that the issue on hand of this official organ of the Nameless Ones of Seattle is #104—which must certainly be a record).

*Fan-Attic*; John Champion & Id, Route 2, Box 75B, Pen-

dleton, Oregon; 10¢, 3 for 25¢.  
*Hyphen*; Chuck Harris (and Walt Willis), "Carolyn," Lake Avenue, Rainham, Essex, England; 15¢.

*Innuendo*; Dave Rike (and Terry Carr), Box 203, Rodeo, California; free.

*Mana*; Bill Courval, 4215 Cherokee Avenue, San Diego 4, California; free.

*The New Futurian*; John Michael Rosenblum, Leeds, England; United States representative: Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Avenue, Hyattsville, Maryland; 15¢.

*Opsla*; Gregg Calkins, 1068 Third Avenue, Salt Lake City 3, Utah; 25¢.

*Ploy*; R. M. Bennett, Harrogate, Yorkshire, England; United States representative: Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Avenue, Hyattsville, Maryland; 15¢, 4 for 50¢.

*Retribution*; John Berry (and Arthur Thomson), 31 Campbell Park Avenue, Belmont, Belfast, Northern Ireland; 15¢.

*Sata Illustrated*; Bill Pearson (and Dan Adkins), 4516 East Glenrosa, Phoenix, Arizona; 25¢.

*Science Fiction Parade*; Len J. Moffatt, 5969 Lanto Street, Bell Gardens, California; free.

*Sigma Octanis*; John Mussells, 4 Curve Street, Wake-

field, Massachusetts; sample copy free.

*Stf-In-Gen & Bolide*; Jerry DeMuth, 3223 Ernst Street, Franklin Park, Illinois; 15¢.

*Triode*; Eric Bentcliffe and Terry Jeeves, Stockport, Cheshire, England; United States representative: Dale Smith, 3001 Kyle Avenue, Minneapolis 22, Minnesota; 7 for \$1.00.

*Twig*; Guy E. Terwilleger, 1412 Albright Street, Boise, Idaho; 10¢.

*Vertigo*; Wm. C. Rickhardt, 21175 Goldsmith, Farmington, Michigan; 10¢.

*Void*; Jim and Greg Benford, c/o Lt. Col. J. A. Benford, G-4 Sect. Hq. V Corps, APO 79, New York, New York; 15¢.

*Yandro*; Buck and Juanita Coulson, 407½ East 6th Street, North Manchester, Indiana; 10¢.

IF YOU didn't delay in buying this issue, and if you don't delay now, there's still time to attend the Fifth Annual Oklahoma Science Fiction Convention, which will be (or is being) held August 31, September 1 and 2, at the Youngblood Hotel in Enid, Oklahoma. This will probably be one of the most prominent regional conventions to be held in the

United States this year. Even if you can't attend, you can support it if you wish by sending your dues (only \$1.00) to Oklacon V, Box 64, Enid, Oklahoma. Co-chairmen Walt Bowart and Kent Corey will be happy if you do.

BRIEFLY NOW! Philip Jacobs, 454 Mariposa Avenue, Sierra Madre, California, wants to contact persons who can give him information about the writings and life of Isaac Asimov. He is also interested in buying, selling, or trading magazines and books, particularly anything by Edgar Rice Burroughs. . . . Stephen Stiles, 247 East 93rd, New York 28, New York, collects E.C. comics. Any information on how he can obtain them will be appreciated. . . . Stuart Wheeler, 728 Stout Avenue, Wyoming, Ohio, wants to buy back issues of the 10¢-size *Mad*. He has for sale several mint copies of the first issues of the 25¢ size, or he might trade. Lance Schlitt, 195 Senate Drive, Pittsburgh 36, Pennsylvania, wants to purchase paperbound science fiction or fantasy books, *Galaxy Novels* 4 and 8, *Avon Fantasy Readers*, and back issues of *Imaginative Tales*.



# The Gates of PEARL

by David Mason

*'A space station, of all places, should  
be off limits to unauthorized  
personnel—especially when they're dead!*

**H**ENRY GORDON closed the rubber - gasketed door marked ASTROPHYSICS SECTION 22 behind him, and went to the panel. He checked the clock settings that drove the telescope and changed the plate holder. For a moment he stopped to look out through the tiny viewport at the deep black of space outside, spanned with unblinking stars. Henry was still a little new to life on the Orbit Station; it would be a long time before

he could look at the outside view without excitement.

He turned away, and started for the safety door.

At that moment, Athalie Gordon (1919-1972) entered through the solid steel bulkhead at Henry Gordon's right elbow, and walked through the other wall, outward, in the general direction of the constellation of Bootes. Henry had been only a child in 1972, but he remembered his aunt quite well. He also remem-

bered that she was definitely dead.

She was wearing her good dark serge, the one she had worn often before that unfortunate attack of flu. Her expression was much more relaxed than Henry Gordon ever remembered it to have been, and she appeared to be consulting a road map as she walked through.

Henry Gordon, shuddering slightly, kept a firm grip on the star plates as he closed the door behind him. He walked down the passage, his magnetic shoes clanking firmly on the floor, to the Developing Section, where he left the plates. He then proceeded to Personnel, where he filed an immediate request for return to Earth and a resignation on account of ill health, forms 2234 and 7166, in triplicate.

After this, Henry Gordon had a fit of shrieking nerves, and managed, in spite of Service Rule 22, to get disgustingly drunk.

"Now, sergeant, I'm not trying to refuse you your permanent transfer if you really want it that way." Doctor Vanderdecken smiled in a paternal manner. "Everybody wants you boys in our most difficult branch of service to be happy.

If it's a little too tough for you out there . . ."

"I didn't say that, doctor." The bulldog face of the sergeant showed some irritation.

Thought that would get a rise out of you, the doctor thought. He said aloud, "Well, you say right here on your request form that you feel you might get sick if you continued to remain on Orbit Station duty."

"That's what I meant, doctor," the sergeant repeated doggedly. "Sick. You know, funny in the head. I feel fine right now, and I'm gonna stay that way. That's why I put in for a transfer. That's why I ain't gonna go up again if I can help it."

The doctor exhaled slowly, tapping his teeth with a pencil. He increased the fatherly tone a little.

"Sergeant, what it amounts to is this. We need men like you, men that we've had to train for this special duty. That's the first space station in history up there; you men are making history. Some day there will be more stations, there'll be rockets going to other worlds, and we'll need you for that job too. Now, if a good man like yourself is going to give up before the job's even properly started, what do you expect the

Army's going to think about that?"

The sergeant remained silent.

"What I'd like to know, sergeant," the doctor resumed, "is simply this: have you got any really good reason for wanting to transfer? You can trust me; believe me, you'll get your transfer anyway, and we need to know."

The sergeant pulled very thoughtfully at his slightly cauliflowered ear. He knitted his brows. Then he shook his head.

"I just don't want to get sick in the head. And I ain't got no other reason. If I had, I'd be really buckin' for a Section 8, so let's leave it that way, hey, doc?"

Dr. Vanderdecken shrugged, and reached for the pen. He scrawled "Approved for transfer" on the sergeant's form, and silently waved him out.

**T**HAT was the fourth one this month," Vanderdecken said, slumping further down in the big chair. Young Dr. Prior, the newest man in the Center, had been listening as respectfully as became his junior status. He had also been losing his fourth chess game to Dr. Vanderdecken. Prior

was an excellent psychologist in more ways than one, and he was also a very good chess player.

"Ghosts?" Prior said. "Your move, incidentally, doctor."

"Ghosts," Dr. Vanderdecken said, studying the board. "They keep walking through the space station. Certainly, I know it's nonsense. So do the station personnel. So, when they ask to be transferred out, they give every reason but that one. That's the reason, though."

Vanderdecken moved, and Prior carefully placed a rook in mortal danger. Then he asked, "If that's the reason, but they don't mention it, how do you know? Have you been there, up on the station?"

"No, no, of course not. I don't have to go up there to know. The first five or six that asked for transfers gave that as their reason. We had to have a couple of them committed, and the others got psycho discharges, of course." Vanderdecken moved, obstinately missing the rook. "But of course, that's made the rest of the station personnel a little suspicious of us, of course."

"Foolish of them," Prior commented, absently. He regarded the board, realizing regretfully that he would have

to win this one. "But what's your theory, doctor?"

"Oh, it's easy enough to understand. The cultural complex contains the basic idea of Heaven being in the sky, and the dead going there. And, in addition, there's the lack of normal gravity, the unusual environment . . . all that sort of thing. It's a neurosis. But stopping it's the big problem. We need a full crew on duty up there, all the time. We've tried sending professed atheists up, but we stopped that. The first four of those went completely out of phase with reality after they saw their first ghosts."

Vanderdecken moved, exposing his king from three different directions. Prior studied the board, and decided to stretch it out one more move or two.

"Saw ghosts, doctor?" Prior asked. "I should think an atheist wouldn't have that particular delusion."

"Cultural syndrome, my boy," Vanderdecken said. "Read Jung. Common undermind. Of course, trained scientific men like ourselves wouldn't be likely to see anything. If we did, it wouldn't mean that these superstitious notions had any basis. Just that we had—well, weakened a bit."

"What do these ghosts do, anyway, that disturbs the men so much?" Prior asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all. They don't even seem to notice the men or the station itself. They just walk straight through it."

"Oh, gosh, doctor, I'm afraid you've given away the game there," Prior said, moving his bishop. "Check and mate, I think. But it's almost certainly a complete accident; you're a very much better player than I am."

Vanderdecken gazed at the board. "Umm. Yes, I think you have it. Well."

"Tell me, doctor, what is the upper echelon going to do about all these transfers, anyway?"

"Eh?" Vanderdecken looked up. "Oh, well, I've been told to return any of those transferring to duty on the station after a two-week rest. Unless there's a really valid reason, of course. But the top brass isn't going to put up with any more 'sick' transfers. No, sir. Matter of fact, I've got one now, a young scientist on the civilian staff, name of Gordon. Going to ship him right back in a week, though he doesn't know it yet."

"Gordon?" Prior asked. "Henry Gordon, in astronomy?"

"That's the one. Do you know him?"

"Went to school together. I know him very well." Prior looked puzzled. "Why, I ran into him a few months ago, just before he took the station job. Do you mean to tell me he's been seeing ghosts? Why, he's the most unimaginative . . ."

Dr. Vanderdecken chuckled. "He didn't say he had, but he muttered a long tale about having stolen some money from an aunt of his when he was ten, and feeling that he wasn't honest enough to work for the government. Excuses, naturally."

"So you're returning him to duty, doctor?"

"Of course; he signed a contract, and the government's going to hold him to it. Another game, doctor?"

**I**N POWER SECTION, Quadrant Two, an engineer was checking gauges on the giant sun-heated boilers. As a pair of children ran happily, but inaudibly, out of the face of the boiler and into the solid mass of pipes, he checked off three more readings. Instinctively, he moved aside to let the next one pass, an emaciated man who muttered and pulled at his hair as he walk-

ed through. Otherwise, the engineer paid no attention. He had been seeing them for a long time now, but he was a devout Presbyterian. He had expected to see them, and was not surprised.

The only thing that really gave the engineer any feeling of disturbance was the occasional presence of a clerical collar among the passing crowds that wandered idly through. The occasional bearded, skull-capped orthodox Jew did not trouble him, but the presence of Papists, up here, did.

"**M**Y NAME is Prior—Doctor Prior," the young man said, extending his hand. "Medical Center asked me to come up here, to see if there's anything can be done about some of your personnel problems. You're Doctor Welty, I presume?"

"That's right," the gray man said, shaking hands limply. "You're an M.D., I hope, Prior?"

"Certainly, doctor," Prior smiled. "Not one of the lay psychoanalysts. You've probably received notice of my coming up, then?"

"Oh, sure." The gray man closed the dispensary door, and sat down. "Take a chair.

You'll find the whiskey just behind you."

"But regulations . . ."

"You'll need it," the gray man advised him.

SIX THOUSAND MILES below, Henry Gordon sat at his desk and carefully reread his notice of refusal of transfer. When he had finished the last sentence, which said ". . . in view of the above mentioned contract, we find that you still have fourteen months to remain on duty," he put the letter down. He opened the desk drawer and took out a Smith & Wesson, caliber .32, five-chambered, single action revolver.

Henry Gordon then shot himself in the head, once.

PRIOR poured a small drink, studying the other doctor carefully. Obviously the neurosis was present, but a trace of alcoholism was also there. This man would have to be recommended for transfer, for the good of the profession. As for the ghosts . . .

Susanna Smedley (1948-1981) trotted hastily through the room, bisecting the examination table in her arrowlike passage.

Prior spilled what was left

in his glass. Dr. Welty refilled it for him.

"I imagine you occasionally have a little trouble with—well, slight optical effects?" Prior asked, trying not to look at the bulkhead.

The gray man chuckled, grimly. "Ghosts, you mean?"

"Well, now, doctor, if the men call them that . . ."

"Call them that? That's what they are. Son, you're sitting in the midst of the Great Beyond. The population of the heavens is continually walking through here, back and forth. And . . . and a drink's what I need." He took one, quickly.

Prior laughed, a little hollowly. "Come, now, doctor. We're both too intelligent to fall prey to superstition—ulp."

He looked down at the table, but it was hard not to notice Elwell Thompson (1834-1863). The gray man chuckled.

"Superstition, doctor," Prior continued. "I realize you people up here are having some sort of difficulty, but I'm sure it can be worked out on a scientific basis. I can't see that these things we see—you do see them too, don't you, doctor?"

The gray man nodded. "I see 'em, all right."

"Well. Now, there's no

reason to think these are the spirits of the dead. Gravity may have something to do with it, or possibly—well, there's a fantastic idea which I'd still consider preferable to any pseudo-religious notions. Just suppose that these are some sort of projections which the Russians have rigged up to keep us from making a real success of . . . oop."

Prior stared up into the pale, slightly transparent features of Henry Gordon, still carrying the impress of a 32-caliber slug. He walked slowly through the room, wearing

a felt hat tipped back on his bullet-pierced head. Prior knew the hat; Henry had worn it all through college. He had been quite attached to it.

In the middle of the room, Henry stopped, and looked back at Prior. He lifted the hat politely, and stepped out through the wall, walking in the general direction of the Lesser Pleiades.

"Must be a friend of yours," Doctor Welty said. "Never saw one of them take any notice of us before . . . hey. Now, what's the matter with you, anyway?"

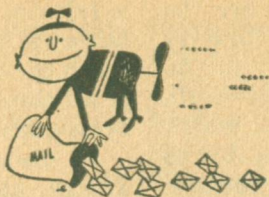


## ANYBODY CAN BE A MONSTER . . .

. . . but not everybody can be a *Monster of Distinction*. The *MoD* is easily recognized by his impeccable good taste and faith in the wonderful world of tomorrow. And having these rare and admirable qualities, he inevitably subscribes to SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES and INFINITY.

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But we don't want to brag—only you can decide if you want to be a *Monster of Distinction* or an ordinary, sloppy old *BEM*. A subscription to either magazine costs \$3.50 for 12 issues (\$4.50 to monsters living outside the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada); and the address is Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, New York. Invest in your future—subscribe now!



## THE READERS' SPACE

I PICKED up SFA#5 the other day and I am hereby prepared to comment on same. First, let me say this; Harlan Ellison *is* my favorite author. It might be said that I am the first (surely *one* of the first) Harlan Ellison fan, so I can say that truly I am sad to hear that his writing career will be slowed by the Army.

There were two illustrations that I particularly like: the cover (which goes to show that black-and-white illustrations aren't always a sound basis for judgment) by Engle, and . . . a *cartoon!* Hurray! I'm all for them, as long as they are good.

When I started "This World Must Die!", I thought I was going to be disappointed in the now traditional SFA—but how wrong can a guy be? Jorgenson came up to bat for me with two strikes on him, since I usually don't care for his stuff. But there I made my mistake—I threw him a strike

and he knocked a home run with bases loaded!

I wish you would have saved "Alien Night" for another time. It makes me sad to see a very good story with two excellent stories, because that story must be overshadowed by the other two.

Of course "Forbidden Cargo" was the very best as far as my humble tastes go. Being a Harlan Ellison fan, as I have stated before, some just may think that I am prejudiced for him. However, I would like to assure the readers that I *am*.

Now a few Miss Alaneus—

Arch Destiny: Hoboy! Is Bill Pearson to blow his stack! Unless I am very much mistaken, *you* are very much mistaken. I would like to state that I have the most recent (I think) copy of *Sata*, and it is not hectograph, but a ditto. In my opinion, the ditto is the best process as far as art is concerned, and hecto the worst! (*As a punishment for*

*his error, I have ordered Mr. Destiny to eat a quart of hecto jelly.—LTS)*

David Orr: It's sad, true, but fantasy doesn't sell. Even tho I agree with Bill Meyers when he says that fantasy is better written than sf, the fact that it doesn't sell stands out like a fat lady in a satin skirt. (*Check!—LTS*)

Qrrytyuiop 2: Boy, are you demented. It seems your idea of a good stf story would have the heroes standing around talking on the Quadraturia-tional quality of 8th Dimensional Hyper Time. Ok, fine and dandy; out of 23 mags on the market well over 50% present sociological stories much of the same type. But for the sake of fandom, leave SFA be! It's the only decent mag that presents a-a decently! So go soak your head.

Doesn't anybody wanna have a friendly little fight in this hyar lettercolumn?—Richard Brown, 127 Roberts Street, Pasadena 3, California.

I'm new to SF (9 months) and even newer to SFADVENTURES (2 issues) but, in my opinion (it isn't my parents'), science fiction is the most entertaining form of literature and SCIENCE FICTION ADVEN-

TURES is the best magazine of science fiction.

This may sound familiar but how about going monthly? This is original (I think): have one or two short stories every issue. (*Done.—LTS*) I like the idea of having a fan-space.

I made myself a bet you wouldn't print this letter.—Robert Bunck, 8 Ontario Avenue, Plainview, Long Island, New York.

Thanks for the nice review of Les Gerber's and my *Tribute to Ray Cummings*. Good ish of SFADVENTURES, nice layout. You, Mr. Shaw, write good editorials. As a matter of fact they're better than almost anybody else, 'cept maybe H. L. Gold.

Ed Emshwiller draws some pretty good covers, but he's in a rut. As far as I know, two covers so far have been a lovely damsel shot down by a miz-zuble alien. (*We lose more damsels that way!—LTS*)

Keep up the good work, and get maybe an E. (Edward) E. (Elmer) Smith (S.) short novel. I bet your circulation would hit 1,000,000,000,000-001½ if you did. (*Counting extraterrestrial editions, may-be.—LTS*)

Les and myself have another publication called *The Croaker*. It is an anti-Elvis Presley bulletin and it's free (oh, happy thought). Just send a 3¢ stamp to me.—Andrew Reiss, 741 Westminster Road, Brooklyn 30, New York.

Believe me, this last SFADVENTURES was better than ever. I enjoyed "This World Must Die," and also the little caption about one of my favorite authors below. It's quite interesting to note that he wrote his first published story while on shipboard. I welcome and like any and everything by Ivar Jorgenson that I get my hands on. I surely haven't read one bad story by him yet. If I do I'll sure let the whole world know about it. And loud.

"This World Must Die" was indeed one of his best.

"Slave" by C. M. Kornbluth sounds thrillingly good next issue.

I'm not commenting on the other stories. They were all good. Cover beautiful. The only objection, it should have been: "Smashing New Ivar Jorgenson Novel of the Science Fiction Ages!" (*Not bad. Want a job writing blurbs?*—LTS)

Well, I think that's certainly

a good idea, letting Ellison's mind run completely dry before the service gets him.—James W. Ayers, 609 First Street, Attalla, Alabama.

Congratulations! I now have all four of the issues of your terrific magazine and I'm proud to say that I rate SFA as one of the top three SF magazines (*Galaxy*, INFINITY, SFA). In spite of the regular mistakes of a new magazine, I feel that SFA is the best action-type science fiction magazine. The art work is tops, too.

Why don't you have a story by Robert Sheckley? (*Good suggestion. We'll see what we can do.*—LTS)

I have only one request; that is, why don't you run a contest in which the readers of this magazine could send in short stories they had written to be judged and published in your magazine? (*No contest is necessary. Any reader is welcome to submit stories at any time. They'll be judged—and purchased if they're good. And, yes, paid for at our usual rates.*—LTS)

Good luck, and keep up the fine publication!—Colin G. Cameron, 2561 Ridgeview Drive, San Diego 5, California.

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