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by **Calvin M. Knox**

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# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2

No. 2

DEC., 1957

## New Novels and Stories by Top Writers!

### Short Novels:

#### VALLEY BEYOND TIME.....Robert Silverberg 4

It was Sam Thornhill's valley; the intruders had no right there. So he thought, until he remembered a spaceflight that ended mysteriously—and met the Watcher . . . .

#### EARTH SHALL LIVE AGAIN!.....Calvin M. Knox 50

The prize was Earth and its entire future. The arena was alien Jorus. And the odds were one man against a vicious, heavily armed planet! (A sequel to *Chalice of Death*.)

### Stories:

#### MOON DUST.....Richard R. Smith 88

#### FINAL VOYAGE.....Basil Wells 101

#### CAPTAIN BEDLAM.....Harry Harrison 114

### Departments:

#### THE EDITOR'S SPACE..... 125

#### THE READERS' SPACE..... 126

COVER, illustrating *Valley Beyond Time*, by Ed Emsh.

ILLUSTRATIONS by Bowman, Emsh, Kluga and Martinez.

Publisher—IRWIN STEIN

Production Manager—HELEN SKALET

Art Director—RICHARD P. KLUGA

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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, published monthly except February, July and November, by Royal Publications, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York 36, N. Y. Single copy 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1957 by Royal Publications, Inc. Second-class mail privileges authorized at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental.

Printed in U. S. A.



*It was Sam Thornhill's valley;*

*the intruders had no right there.*

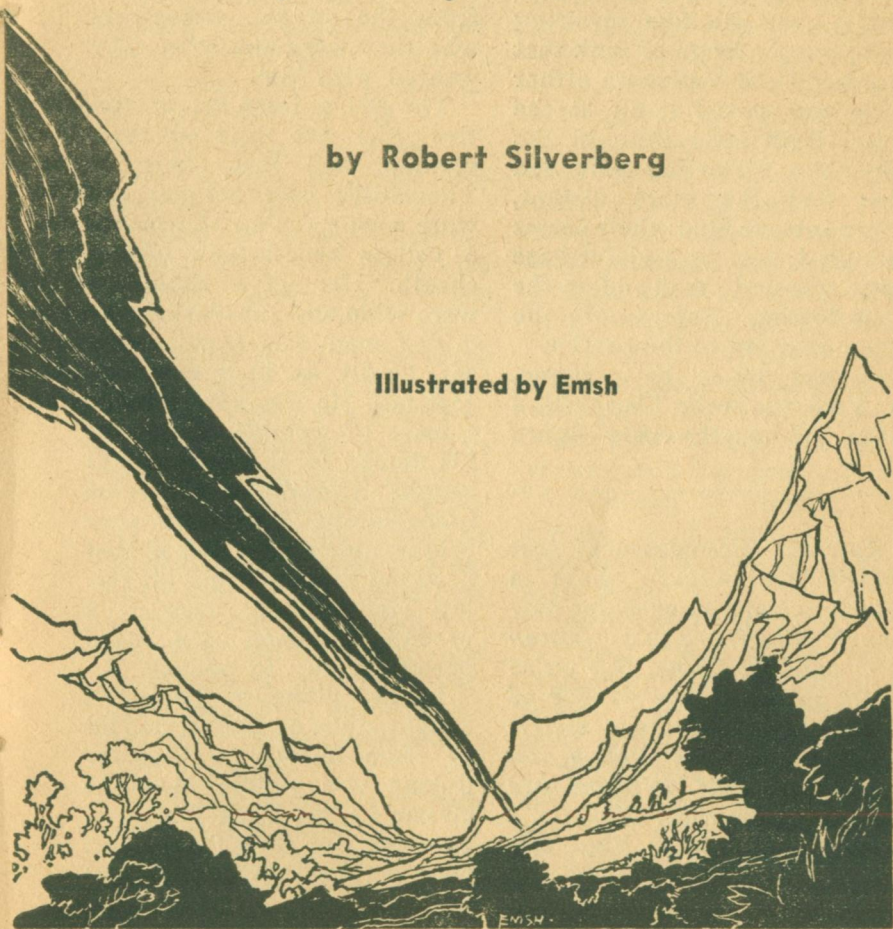
*So he thought, until he remembered  
Vengamon—and met the Watcher. . . .*



# Valley Beyond Time

by Robert Silverberg

Illustrated by Emsch



# Valley Beyond Time

by Robert Silverberg

## CHAPTER I

THE VALLEY, Sam Thornhill thought, had never looked lovelier. Drifting milky clouds hung over the two towering bare purple fangs of rock that bordered the Valley on either side and closed it off at the rear. Both suns were in the sky, the sprawling pale red one and the more distant, more intense blue; their beams mingled, casting a violet haze over tree and shrub and on the fast-flowing waters of the river that led to the barrier.

It was late in the forenoon, and all was well. Thornhill, a slim, compactly-made figure

in satinfab doublet and tunic, dark blue with orange trim, felt deep content. He watched the girl and the man come toward him up the winding path from the stream, wondering who they were and what they wanted with him.

The girl, at least, was attractive. She was dark of complexion, and just short of Thornhill's own height: she wore a snug raylon blouse and a yellow knee-length lustrol sheath. Her bare shoulders were wide and sun-darkened.

The man was small, well-set, hardly an inch over five feet tall. He was nearly bald; a maze of wrinkles furrowed his domed forehead. His eyes caught Thornhill's attention immediately. They were very bright, quick eyes that darted here and there in rapid glittering motions—the eyes of a predatory animal, of a lizard perhaps ready to pounce.

In the distance, Thornhill caught sight of others, not all of them human. A globular Spican was visible near the stream's edge. Then Thornhill frowned for the first time; who were all these, and what business had they in his Valley?

---

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"Hello," the girl said. "My name's Marga Fallis. This is La Floquet. You just get here?"

Thornhill shook his head. "I don't follow you. What do you mean, *did I just get here?*"

She glanced toward the man named La Floquet and said quietly, "He hasn't come out of it yet, obviously. He must be brand new."

"He'll wake up soon," La Floquet said. His voice was dark and sharp.

"What are you two muttering?" Thornhill demanded angrily. "How did you get here?"

"The same way you did," the girl said. "And the sooner you admit that to yourself—"

Hotly, Thornhill said, "I've always been here, damn you! This is the Valley! I've spent my whole life here! And I've never seen either of you before. Any of you. You just appeared out of nowhere, you and this little rooster and those others down by the river, and I—" He stopped, feeling a sudden wrenching shaft of doubt.

*Of course I've always lived here,* he told himself.

He began to quiver. He leaped abruptly forward, seeing in the smiling little man with the wisp of russet hair

around his ears the enemy that had cast him forth from Eden. "Damn you, it was fine till *you* got here! You had to spoil it! I'll pay you back, though."

Thornhill sprang at the little man viciously, thinking to knock him to the ground. But to his astonishment he was the one to recoil; La Floquet remained unbudged, still smiling, still glinting birdlike at him. Thornhill sucked in a deep breath and drove forward at La Floquet a second time. This time he was efficiently caught and held; he wriggled, but though La Floquet was a good twenty years older and a foot shorter there was surprising strength in his wiry body. Sweat burst out on Thornhill. Finally, he gave ground and dropped back.

"Fighting is foolish," La Floquet said tranquilly. "It accomplishes nothing. What's your name?"

"Sam Thornhill."

"Now: attend to me. What were you doing in the moment before you first knew you were in the Valley?"

"I've always been in the Valley," Thornhill said stubbornly.

"Think," said the girl. "Look back. There was a time before you came to the Valley."

Thornhill turned away, looking upward at the mighty mountain peaks that hemmed them in, at the fast-flowing stream that wound between them and out toward the Barrier. A grazing beast wandered on the upreach of the foothill, nibbling the sharp-toothed grass. Had there ever been a someplace else, Thornhill wondered?

No. There had always been the Valley, and here he had lived, alone and at peace—until that final deceptive moment of tranquility, followed by this strange unwanted invasion.

"It usually takes several hours for the effect to wear off," the girl said. "Then you'll remember . . . the way we remember. Think. You're from Earth, aren't you?"

"Earth?" Thornhill repeated dimly.

"Green hills, spreading cities, oceans, spaceliners. Earth. No?"

"Observe the heavy tan," La Floquet pointed out. "He's from Earth, but he hasn't lived there for a while. How about Vengamon?"

"Vengamon," Thornhill declared, not questioningly this time. The strange syllables seemed to have meaning: a swollen yellow sun, broad plains, a growing city of

colonists, a flourishing ore trade. "I know the word," he said.

"Was that the planet where you lived?" the girl prodded. "Vengamon?"

"I think—" Thornhill began hesitantly. His knees felt weak. A neat pattern of life was breaking down and cascading away from him, sloughing off as if it had never been at all.

*It had never been.*

"I lived on Vengamon," he said.

"Good!" La Floquet cried. "The first fact has been elicited! Now to think where you were the very moment before you came here. A spaceship, perhaps? Travelling between worlds? Think, Thornhill."

He thought. The effort was mind-wracking, but he deliberately blotted out the memories of his life in the Valley and searched backward, until—

"I was a passenger on the liner *Royal Mother Helene*, bound into Vengamon from the neighboring world of Jurinalle. I . . . had been on holiday. I was returning to my—my plantation? No, not plantation. Mine. I own mining land on Vengamon. That's it, yes: mining land." The light of the double suns became oppressively warm; he



felt dizzy. "I remember now: the trip was an uneventful one; I was bored and dozed off a few minutes. Then I recall sensing that I was outside the ship, somehow—and—blank. Next thing, I was here in the Valley."

"The standard pattern," La Floquet said. He gestured to the others down near the stream. "There are eight of us in all, including you. I arrived first—yesterday, I call it, though actually there's been no night. The girl came after me. Then three others. You're the third one to come today."

Thornhill blinked. "We're just being picked out of nowhere and dumped here? How is it possible?"

La Floquet shrugged. "You will be asking that question more than once before you've left the Valley. Come. Let's meet the others."

**T**HE SMALL MAN turned with an imperious gesture and retraced his steps down the path; the girl followed, and Thornhill fell in line behind her. He realized he had been standing on a ledge overlooking the river, one of the foothills of the two great mountains that formed the Valley's boundaries.

The air was warm, with a

faint breeze stirring through it. He felt younger than his thirty-seven years, certainly; more alive, more perceptive. He caught the fragrance of the golden blossoms that lined the riverbed, and saw the light sparkle of the double sunlight scattered by the water's spray.

He thought of glancing at his watch. The hands read 14:23. That was interesting enough. The day-hand said *7 July 2671*. It was still the same day, then. On 7 July 2671 he had left Jurinalle for Vengamon, and he had lunched at 11:40. That meant he had probably dozed off about noon—and, unless something were wrong with his watch, only two hours had passed since then. Two hours. And yet—the memories still said, though they were fading fast now—he had spent an entire life in this Valley, unmarred by intruders until a few moments before.

"This is Sam Thornhill," La Floquet suddenly said. "He's our newest arrival. He's out of Vengamon."

Thornhill eyed the others curiously. There were five of them, three human, one humanoid, one non-humanoid. The non-humanoid was a being of Spica, globular, in its yellow-green phase just now

but seeming ready to shift to its melancholy brownish-red guise. Tiny clawed feet peeked out from under the great melon-like body; dark grapes atop stalks studied Thornhill with unfathomable alien curiosity.

The humanoid, Thornhill saw, hailed from one of the worlds of Regulus. He was keen-eyed, pale orange in color. The heavy flap of flesh swinging from his throat was the chief external alien characteristic of the being. Thornhill had met his kind before.

Of the remaining three, one was a woman, small, plain-looking, dressed in drab gray cloth garments. There were two men: a spidery spindle-shanked sort, with mild scholarly eyes and an apologetic smile, and a powerfully-built man of thirty or so, shirtless, scowling impatiently.

"As you can see, it's quite a crew," La Floquet remarked to Thornhill. "Vellers, did you have any luck down by the barrier?"

The big man shook his head. "I followed the damn stream as far as I dared. But you get beyond that grassy bend down there and you come smack against that barrier, like a wall you can't see planted in the water." His accent was broad and heavy; he was

obviously of Earth, Thornhill thought, and not from one of the colony-worlds.

La Floquet frowned. "Did you try swimming underneath? No, of course you didn't. Eh?"

Vellers' scowl grew darker. "There wasn't any percentage in it, Floquet. I dove ten-fifteen feet and the barrier was still like glass—smooth and clean to the touch, y'know, but strong. I didn't aim to go any lower."

"All right," La Floquet said sharply. "It doesn't matter. Few of us could swim that deep anyway." He glanced at Thornhill. "You see that this lovely Valley is likely to become our home for life, don't you?"

"There's no way out?"

The small man pointed to the gleaming radiance of the barrier, which rose in a high curving arc from the water and formed a triangular wedge closing off the lower end of the Valley. "You see that thing down there. We don't know what's at the other end—but we'd have to climb twenty thousand feet of mountain to find out. There's no way out of here."

"Do we *want* to get out?" asked the thin man, in a shallow, petulant voice. "I was almost dead when I came here,



La Floquet. Now I'm alive again. I don't know if I'm so anxious to leave here."

La Floquet whirled. His eyes flashed angrily as he said, "Mr. McKay, I'm delighted to hear of your recovery. But life still waits for me outside this place, lovely as the Valley is. I don't intend to rot away in here forever—not La Floquet!"

The scholarly-looking man named McKay shook his head slowly. "I wish there were some way of stopping you from looking for a way out. I'll die in a week if I go out of the Valley. If you escape, La Floquet, you'll be my murderer!"

"I just don't understand," Thornhill said in confusion. "If La Floquet finds a way out, what's it to you, McKay? Why don't you just stay here?"

McKay smiled unhappily. "I guess you haven't told him, then," he said to La Floquet.

"No. I didn't have a chance." La Floquet turned to Thornhill. "What this dried-up man of books is saying is that the Watcher has warned us that if one of us leaves the Valley, all the others must go."

"The Watcher?" Thornhill repeated.

"It was he who brought you

here. You'll see him again. Occasionally he talks to us, and tells us things. This morning he told us this: that our fates are bound together."

"And I ask you not to keep searching for the way out," McKay said dolefully. "My life depends on staying in the Valley!"

"And mine on getting out!" La Floquet blazed. He lunged forward and sent McKay sprawling to the ground in one furious gesture of contempt.

McKay turned even paler, and clutched at his chest as he landed. "My heart! You shouldn't—"

Thornhill moved forward and assisted McKay to his feet. The tall, stoop-shouldered man looked dazed and shaken, but unhurt. He drew himself together and said quietly, "Two days ago a blow like that would have killed me. And now—you see?" he asked, appealing to Thornhill. "The Valley has strange properties. I don't want to leave. And he—he's condemning me to die!"

"Don't worry so over it," La Floquet said lightly. "You may yet get your wish. You may spend all your days here among the poppies."

Thornhill turned and looked up the mountainside toward the top. The mountain's

peak loomed snow-flecked, shrouded by clinging frosty clouds; the climb would be a giant's task. And how would they know, until they had climbed it, whether merely another impassable barrier lay beyond the mountain's crest?

"We seem to be stuck here for a while," Thornhill said. "But it could be worse. This looks like a pleasant place to live."

"It is," La Floquet said. "If you like pleasant places. They bore me. But come: tell us something of yourself. Half an hour ago you had no past; has it come back to you yet?"

Thornhill nodded slowly. "I was born on Earth. Studied to be a mining engineer. I did fairly well at it, and when they opened up Vengamon I moved out there and bought a chunk of land there, while the prices were low. It turned out to be a good buy. I opened a mine there four years ago. I'm not married. I'm a wealthy man, as wealth is figured on Vengamon. And that's the whole story, except that I was returning home from a vacation when I was snatched off my spaceship and deposited here."

He took a deep breath, drawing the warm, slightly moist air into his lungs. For the moment, he sided with

McKay: he was in no hurry to leave the Valley. But he could see that La Floquet, that energetic, driving little man, was bound to have his way. If there were any path leading out of the Valley, La Floquet would find it.

His eyes came to rest on Marga Fallis. The girl was handsome, no doubt about it. Yes, he could stay here a while longer, under these double suns, breathing deep and living free from responsibility for the first time in his life. But they were supposed to be bound together: once one left the Valley, all would. And La Floquet was determined to leave.

A shadow dimmed the purple light.

"What's that?" Thornhill said. "An eclipse?"

"The Watcher," McKay said softly. "He's back. And it wouldn't surprise me if he's brought the ninth member of our little band."

Thornhill stared as a soft blackness descended over the land, the suns still visible behind it but only as tiny dots of far-off radiance. It was as if a fluffy dark cloak had enfolded them. But it was more than a cloak—much more. He sensed a *presence* among them, watchful, curious, eager for their welfare as a brood-



ing hen. The alien darkness wrapped itself over the entire Valley.

*This is the last of your company*, said a soundless voice that seemed to echo from the mountain walls. The sky began to brighten. Suddenly as it had come, the darkness was gone, and Thornhill once again felt alone.

"The Watcher had little to say this time," McKay commented, as the light returned.

"Look!" Marga cried.

Thornhill followed the direction of her pointing arm, and looked upward, toward the ledge on which he had first become aware of the Valley around him.

A tiny figure was wandering in confused circles up there. At this distance it was impossible to tell much about the newcomer. Thornhill became chilled. The shadow of the Watcher had come and gone—leaving behind yet another captive for the Valley.

## CHAPTER II

THORNHILL narrowed his eyes as he looked toward the ledge. "We ought to go get him," he said.

La Floquet shook his head. "We have time. It takes an hour or two for the newcomers to lose that strange illu-

sion of being alone here; you remember what it's like."

"I do," Thornhill agreed. "It's as if you've lived all your life in paradise . . . until gradually it wears off, and you see others around you. As I saw you and Marga coming up the path toward me." He walked a few paces away from them and lowered himself to a moss-covered boulder. A small wiry catlike creature with wide cupped ears emerged from behind it and rubbed up against him, and he fondled it idly as if it were his pet.

La Floquet shaded his eyes from the sunlight. "Can you see what he's like, that one up there?"

"No, not at this distance," Thornhill said.

"Too bad you can't. You'd be interested. We've added another alien to our gallery, I fear."

Thornhill leaned forward anxiously. "From where?"

"Aldebaran," La Floquet said.

Thornhill winced. The humanoid aliens of Aldebaran were the coldest of races, fierce savage men who hid festering evil behind masks of outward urbanity. Some of the outworlds referred to the Aldebaranians as devils, and they were not so far wrong. To have one here, a devil in

paradise, so to speak—

"What are we going to do?" Thornhill asked.

La Floquet shrugged. "The Watcher has put the creature here, and the Watcher has his own purposes. We'll simply have to accept what comes."

Thornhill rose and paced urgently up and down. The silent small mousy woman and McKay had drawn off to one side; the Spican was peering at his own plump image in the swirling waters, and the Regular, not interested in the proceedings, stared aloofly toward the leftward mountain. The girl Marga and La Floquet remained near Thornhill.

"All right," Thornhill said finally. "Give the Aldebaranian some time to come to his senses. Meanwhile let's forget about him and worry about ourselves. La Floquet, what do you know about this Valley?"

The small man smiled blandly. "Not very much. I know we're on a world with Earth-norm gravity and a double sun system. How many red-and-blue double suns do you know of, Thornhill?"

He shrugged. "I'm no astronomer."

"I am . . . was . . ." Marga said. "There are hundreds of such systems. We could be anywhere in the galaxy."

"Can't you tell from the constellations at night?" Thornhill asked.

"There are no constellations," La Floquet said sadly. "The damnable part is that there's always at least one of the suns in the sky. This planet has no night. We see no stars. But our location is unimportant." The fiery little man chuckled to himself. "McKay will triumph. We'll never leave the Valley. How could we contact anyone, even if we were to cross the mountains? We cannot."

A sudden crackle of thunder caught Thornhill's attention. A great rolling boom reverberated from the sides of the mountains, dying away slowly.

"Listen," he said.

"A storm," said La Floquet. "Outside the confines of our barrier. The same happened yesterday, at this time. It storms . . . but not in here. We live in an enchanted Valley where the sun always shines and life is gentle." A bitter grimace twisted his thin, bloodless lips. "Gentle!"

"Get used to it," Thornhill said. "We may be here a long time."

**H**IS WATCH read 16:42 when they finally went up the hill



to get the Aldebaranian. In the two hours he had seen a shift in the configuration of the suns—the red had receded, the blue grown more intense—but it was obvious that there would be no night, that light would enter the Valley round the clock. In time, he would grow used to that. He was adaptable.

Nine people, plucked from as many different worlds and cast within the space of twenty-four hours into this timeless valley beyond the storms, where there was no darkness. Of the nine, six were human, three were alien. Of the six, four were men, two were women.

Thornhill wondered about his companions. He knew so little about them, yet. Vellers, the strong man, was from Earth; Thornhill knew nothing more of him. McKay and the mousy woman were ciphers. Thornhill cared little about them. Neither the Regulan nor the Spican had uttered a word yet . . . if they could speak the Terran tongues at all. As for Marga, she was an astronomer and she was lovely, but he knew nothing else. La Floquet was an interesting one—a little dynamo, shrewd and energetic, but close-mouthed about his own past.

There they were. Nine pastless people. The present was as much of a mystery to them as the future.

By the time they reached the mountain ledge, Thornhill and La Floquet and the girl, the Aldebaranian had seen them and was glaring coldly at them. The storm had subsided in the land outside the Valley, and once again white clouds drifted in over the barrier.

Like all his race the Aldebaranian was well fleshed, a man of middle height and amiable appearance, with pouches of fat swelling beneath his chin and under his ears. He was gray of skin and dark of eye, with gleaming little hooked incisors that glinted terrifyingly when he smiled. He had extra thumbs on each hand, and Thornhill knew there were extra joints in his limbs as well.

"At last some others join me," the alien remarked in flawless Terran Standard as they approached. "I knew life could hardly go on here as it had."

"You're mistaken," La Floquet said. "It's a delusion common to new arrivals. You haven't lived here all your life, you know. Not really."

The Aldebaranian smiled. "This surprises me. But ex-

plain, if you will."

La Floquet explained. In a frighteningly short space of time, the alien had grasped the essential nature of the Valley and his position in it. Thornhill watched coldly; the speed with which the Aldebaranian cast off delusion and accepted reality was disturbing.

They returned to the group at the river's edge. By now, Thornhill was beginning to feel hungry; he had been in the Valley more than four hours. "What do we do about food?" he asked.

La Floquet said, "It falls from the skies three times a day. Manna, you know. The Watcher takes fine care of us. You got here around the time of the afternoon fall, but you were up there in your haze while we ate. It's almost time for the third fall of the day now."

The red sun had faded considerably now, and a haunted blue twilight reigned. Thornhill knew enough about solar mechanics to be aware that the big red sun was nearly dead; its feeble bulk gave little light. Fierce radiation came from the blue sun, but distance afforded protection. How this unlikely pair had come together was a matter for conjecture—some star-cap-

ture in eons past, no doubt.

White flakes drifted slowly downward. As they came, Thornhill saw the Spican hoist its bulk hastily from the ground, saw the Regular running eagerly toward the drifting flakes. McKay stirred; Vellers, the big man, tugged himself to his feet. Only Thornhill and the Aldebaranian looked at all doubtful.

"Suppertime," La Floquet said cheerfully. He punctuated the statement by snapping a gob of the floating substance from the air with a quick sharp gesture, and cramming it into his mouth.

The others, Thornhill saw, were likewise catching the food before it touched ground. The animals of the Valley were appearing—the fat lazy-looking ruminants, the whip-petlike dogs, the catlike creatures—and busily were devouring the manna from the ground.

Thornhill shrugged and shagged a mass as it hung before him in the air. After a tentative sniff, he swallowed a hesitant mouthful.

It was like chewing cloud-stuff—except that this cloud had a tangy, wine-like taste; his stomach felt soothed almost immediately. He wondered how such unsubstantial stuff could possibly be nour-



ishing. Then he stopped wondering, and helped himself to a second portion, and a third.

The fall stopped, finally, and by then Thornhill was sated. He lay outstretched on the ground, legs thrust out, head propped up against a boulder.

Opposite him was McKay. The thin, pale man was smiling. "I haven't eaten this way in years," he said. "Haven't had much of an appetite. But now—"

"Where are you from?" Thornhill asked, interrupting.

"Earth, originally. Then to Mars when my heart began acting up. They thought the low gravity would help me, and of course it did. I'm a professor of medieval Terran history. That is, I was—I was on a medical leave, until—until I came here." He smiled complacently. "I feel reborn here, you know? If only I had some books—"

"Shut up," growled Vellers. "You'd stay here forever, wouldn't you now?"

The big man lay near the water's edge, staring moodily out over the river.

"Of course I would," snapped McKay testily. "And Miss Hardin too, I'd wager."

"If we could leave the two of you here together, I'm sure you'd be very happy," came

the voice of La Floquet. "But we can't do that. Either all of us stay, or all of us get out of here."

The argument seemed ready to last all night. Thornhill looked away. The three aliens seemed to be as far from each other as possible, the Spican lying in a horizontal position looking like a great inflated balloon that had somehow come to rest, the little Regulan brooding in the distance and fingering its heavy dewlap, the Aldebaranian sitting quietly to one side, listening to every word, smiling like a pudgy Buddha.

Thornhill rose. He bent over Marga Fallis and said, "Would you care to take a walk with me?"

She hesitated just a moment. "I'd love to," she said.

**T**HEY STOOD at the edge of the water, watching the swift stream, watching golden fish flutter past with solemnly gaping mouths. After a while they walked on upstream, back toward the rise in the ground that led to the hills which in turn rose into the two mighty peaks.

Thornhill said, "That La Floquet. He's a funny one, isn't he? Like a little gamecock, always jumping around

and ready for a fight."

"He's very dynamic," Marga agreed quietly.

"You and he were the first ones here, weren't you? It must have been strange, just the two of you in this little Eden, until the third one showed up." Thornhill wondered why he was probing after these things. Jealousy, perhaps? Not *perhaps*. Certainly.

"We really had very little time alone together. McKay came right after me, and then the Spican. The Watcher was very busy collecting."

"*Collecting*," Thornhill repeated. "That's all we are. Just specimens collected and put here in this Valley like little lizards in a terrarium. And this Watcher—some strange alien being, I guess." He looked up at the starless sky, still bright with day. "There's no telling what's in the stars. Five hundred years of space travel, and we haven't seen it all."

Marga smiled. She took his hand and they walked on further into the low-lying shrubbery, saying nothing. Thornhill finally broke the silence.

"You said you were an astronomer, Marga?"

"Not really." Her voice was low, for a woman's, and well modulated; he liked it. "I'm

attached to the Bellatrix VII observatory, but strictly as an assistant. I've got a degree in astronomy, of course. But I'm just sort of hired help in the observatory."

"Is that where you were when—when—"

"Yes," she said. "I was in the main dome, taking some plates out of the camera. I remember it was a very delicate business. A minute or two before it happened someone called me on the main phone downstairs, and they wanted to transfer the call up to me. I told them it would have to wait; I couldn't be bothered until I'd finished with my plates. And then everything blanked out, and I guess my plates don't matter now. I wish I'd taken that call, though."

"Someone important?"

"Oh—no. Nothing like that."

Somehow Thornhill felt relieved. "What about La Floquet?" he asked. "Who is he?"

"He's sort of a big game hunter," she said. "I met him once before, when he led a party to Bellatrix VII. Imagine the odds on any two people in the universe meeting twice! He didn't recognize me, of course, but I remembered him. He's not easy to forget."





"He is sort of picturesque," Thornhill said.

"And you? You said you owned a mine on Vengamon."

"I do. I'm actually quite a dull person," said Thornhill. "This is the first interesting thing that's ever happened to me." He grinned wryly. "The fates caught up with me with a vengeance, though. I guess I'll never see Vengamon again now. Unless La Floquet can get us out of here, and I don't think he can."

"Does it matter? Will it pain you never to go back to Vengamon?"

"I doubt it," Thornhill said. "I can't see any urgent reason for wanting to go back. And you, and your observatory?"

"I can forget my observatory soon enough," she said.

Somehow he moved closer to her; he wished it were a little darker, perhaps even that the Watcher would choose this instant to arrive and afford a shield of privacy for him for a moment. He felt her warmth against him.

"Don't," she murmured suddenly. "Someone's coming."

She pulled away from him. Scowling, Thornhill turned and saw the stubby figure of La Floquet clambering toward them.

"I do hope I'm not interrupting any tender scenes,"

the little man said quietly.

"You might have been," Thornhill admitted. "But the damage is done. What's happened to bring you after us? Is it just the charm of our company?"

"Not exactly," said La Floquet. "There's trouble down below. Vellers and McKay had a fight."

"Over leaving the Valley?"

"Of course." La Floquet looked strangely disturbed. "Vellers hit him a little too hard, though. He killed him."

Marga gasped. "McKay's dead?"

"Very. I don't know what we ought to do with Vellers. I wanted you two in on it."

Hastily Thornhill and Marga followed La Floquet down the side of the hill, toward the little group clumped on the beach. Even at a distance, Thornhill could see the towering figure of Vellers staring down at his feet, where the crumpled body of McKay lay.

They were still a hundred feet away when McKay rose suddenly to his feet and hurled himself on Vellers in a wild headlong assault.

### CHAPTER III

THORNHILL froze an instant, and grasped La Floquet's cold wrist.



"I thought you told me he was dead!"

"He was," La Floquet insisted. "I've seen dead men before. I know the face, the eyes, the slackness of the lips—Thornhill, this is impossible!"

They ran toward the beach. Vellers had been thrown back by the fury of the resurrected McKay's attack; he went tumbling over, with McKay groping for his throat in blind murderousness.

But Vellers' strength prevailed. As Thornhill approached, the big man plucked McKay off him with one huge hand, held him squirming in the air an instant, and, rising to his feet, hurled McKay down against a beach boulder with sickening impact. Vellers staggered back, muttering hoarsely to himself.

Thornhill stared down. A gash had opened along the side of McKay's head; blood oozed through the sparse graying hair, matting it. McKay's eyes, half-open, were glazed and sightless; his mouth hung agape, tongue lolling. The skin of his face was gray.

Kneeling, Thornhill touched his hand to McKay's wrist, then to the older man's lips. After a moment he looked up. "This time he's really dead," he said.

La Floquet was peering grimly at him. "Get out of the way!" he snapped suddenly, and to Thornhill's surprise he found himself being roughly grabbed by the shoulder and flung aside by the wiry gamehunter.

Quickly La Floquet flung himself down on McKay's body, straddling it with his knees pressing against the limp arms, hands grasping the slender shoulders. The beach was very silent; La Floquet's rough irregular breathing was the only sound. The little man seemed poised, tensed for a physical encounter.

The gash on McKay's scalp began to heal.

Thornhill watched as the parted flesh closed over, the bruised skin lost its angry discoloration. Within moments, only the darkening stain of blood on McKay's forehead gave any indication that there had been a wound.

Then, McKay's slitted eyelids closed and immediately reopened, showing bright flashing eyes that rolled wildly. Color returned to the dead man's face. Like a riding whip suddenly turned by conjury into a serpent, McKay began to thrash frantically. But La Floquet was prepared. His muscles corded momentarily as he exerted pressure;

McKay writhed but could not rise. Behind him, Thornhill heard Vellers mumbling a prayer over and over again, while the mousy Miss Hardin provided a counterpoint of harsh sobs, and even the Regular uttered a brief comment in his guttural, consonant-studded language.

Sweat beaded La Floquet's face, but he prevented McKay from repeating his previous wild charge. Perhaps a minute passed; then, McKay relaxed visibly.

La Floquet remained cautiously astride him. "McKay? McKay, do you hear me? This is La Floquet."

"I hear you. You can get off me now; I'm all right."

La Floquet gestured to Thornhill and Vellers. "Stand near him. Be ready to grab him if he runs wild again." He eyed McKay suspiciously for a moment, then rolled to one side and jumped to his feet.

McKay remained on the ground a moment longer. Finally he hoisted himself to a kneeling position, and, shaking his head as if to clear it, he stood erect. He took a few hesitant uncertain steps. Then he turned, staring squarely at the three men, and in a quiet voice said, "Tell me what happened to me."

"You and Vellers quarrelled," La Floquet said. "He . . . knocked you unconscious. When you came to, something must have snapped inside you—you went after Vellers like a madman. He knocked you out a second time. You just regained consciousness."

"No!" Thornhill half-shouted, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. "Tell him the truth, La Floquet! We can't gain anything by pretending it didn't happen."

"What truth?" McKay asked curiously.

Thornhill paused an instant. "McKay, you were dead. At least once. Probably twice, unless La Floquet was mistaken the first time. I examined you the second time—after Vellers bashed you against that rock. I'd swear you were dead. Feel the side of your head . . . where it was split open when Vellers threw you down."

McKay put a quivering hand to his head, drew it away bloody, and stared down at the rock near his foot. The rock was bloodstained also.

"I see blood—but I don't feel any pain."

"Of course not," Thornhill said. "The wound healed almost instantaneously. And you were revived. *You came back to life, McKay!*"

McKay turned to La Flo-



quet. "Is this thing true, what Thornhill's telling me? You were trying to hide it?"

La Floquet nodded.

A slow, strange smile appeared on McKay's pale, angular face. "It's the Valley, then! I was dead—and I rose from the dead! Vellers—La Floquet—you fools! Don't you see that we live forever, here in this Valley that you're so anxious to leave? I died twice . . . and it was like being asleep. Dark, and I remember nothing. You're sure I was dead, Thornhill?"

"I'd swear to it."

"But of course you, La Floquet—you'd try to hide this from me, wouldn't you? Well, do you still want to leave here? We can live forever in the Valley, La Floquet!"

The small man spat angrily. "Why bother? Why live here like vegetables, eternally, never to move beyond those mountains, never to see what's on the other side of the stream? I'd rather have a dozen unfettered years than ten thousand in this prison, McKay!" He scowled.

"You had to tell him," La Floquet said accusingly to Thornhill.

"What difference does it make?" Thornhill asked. "We'd have had a repetition sooner or later. We couldn't

hide it from anyone." He glanced up at the arching mountains. "So the Watcher has ways of keeping us alive? No suicide, no murder . . . and no way out."

"There is a way out," La Floquet said stubbornly. "Over that mountain pass. I'm sure of it. Vellers and I may go to take a look at it tomorrow. Won't we, Vellers?"

The big man shrugged. "It's fine with me."

"You don't want to stay here forever, do you, Vellers?" La Floquet went on. "What good is immortality if it's the immortality of prisoners for life? We'll look at the mountain tomorrow, Vellers."

**T**HORNHILL detected a very strange note in La Floquet's voice, a curiously strained facial expression—as if he were pleading with Vellers to support him, as if he were somehow afraid to approach the mountains alone. The idea of La Floquet's being afraid of anything or anyone seemed hard to accept, but Thornhill had that definite impression.

He looked at Vellers, then at La Floquet. "We ought to discuss this a little further, I think. There are nine of us, La Floquet. McKay and Miss Hardin definitely want to re-

main in the Valley; Miss Fal-lis and I are uncertain, but in any event we'd like to stay here a while longer. That's four against two, among the humans. As for the aliens—"

"I'll vote with La Floquet," said the Aldebaranian quietly. "Important business waits for me outside."

*Troublemaker*, Thornhill thought. "Four against three, then. With the Spican and the Regular unheard from. And I guess they'll stay unheard from, since we can't speak their languages."

"I can speak Regular," volunteered the Aldebaranian. Without waiting for further discussion he wheeled to face the grave dewlapped being, and exchanged four or five short crisp sentences with him. Turning again, he said, "Our friend votes to leave. This ties the score, I believe."

"Just a second," Thornhill said hotly. "How do we know that's what he said? Suppose—"

The mask of affability slipped from the alien's face. "Suppose *what?*" he asked coldly. "If you intend to put a shadow on my honor, Thornhill—" He left the sentence unfinished.

"It would be pretty pointless dueling here," Thornhill said. "Unless your honor sat-

isfies easily. You couldn't very well kill me for long. Perhaps a temporary death might soothe you, but let's let it drop. I'll take your interpreting job in good faith. We're four apiece for staying or trying to break out."

La Floquet said, "It was good of you to take this little vote, Thornhill. But it's not a voting matter. We're individuals, not a corporate entity, and I choose not to remain here so long as I can make the attempt to escape." The little man spun on his heel and stalked away from the group.

"There ought to be some way of stopping him," said McKay thickly. "If he escapes—"

Thornhill shook his head. "It's not as easy as all that. How's he going to get off the planet, even if he does pass the mountains?"

"You don't understand," McKay said. "The Watcher simply said if one of us *leaves the Valley*, all must go. And if La Floquet succeeds, it's death for me."

"Perhaps we're dead already," Marga suggested, breaking her long silence. "Suppose each of us—you in your spaceliner, me in my observatory—died at the same moment and came here. What if—"



The sky darkened, in the now-familiar manner that signalled the approach of the Watcher.

"Ask him," Thornhill said. "He'll tell you all about it."

The black cloud descended.

*You are not dead*, came the voiceless answer to the unspoken question. *Though some of you will die if the barrier be passed.*

Again Thornhill felt chilled by the presence of the formless being. "Who are you?" he shouted. "What do you want with us?"

*I am the Watcher.*

"And what do you want with us?" Thornhill repeated.

*I am the Watcher*, came the inflexible answer. Fibrils of the cloud began to trickle away in many directions; within moments the sky was clear. Thornhill slumped back against a rock and looked at Marga.

"He comes and he goes, feeds us, keeps us from killing ourselves or each other. It's like a zoo, Marga! And we're the chief exhibits!"

La Floquet and Vellers came stumping toward them. "Are you satisfied with the answers to your questions?" La Floquet demanded. "Do you still want to spend the rest of your days here?"

Thornhill smiled. "Go

ahead, La Floquet. Go climb the mountain. I'm changing my vote. It's five-three in favor of leaving."

"I thought you were with me," said McKay.

Thornhill ignored him. "Go on, La Floquet. You and Vellers climb that mountain. Get out of the Valley, if you can."

"Come with us," La Floquet said.

"Ah, no—I'd rather stay here. But I won't object if you go."

Fleetingly La Floquet cast a glance at the giant tooth that blocked the Valley's exit, and it seemed to Thornhill that a shadow of fear passed over the little man's face. But La Floquet clamped his jaws tight, and through locked lips said, "Vellers, are you with me?"

The big man shrugged amiably. "It can't hurt to take a look, I figure."

"Let's go, then," La Floquet said firmly. He threw one black, infuriated glance at Thornhill and struck out for the path leading to the mountain approach.

When he was out of earshot, Marga said, "Sam, why'd you do that?"

"I wanted to see how he'd react. I saw it."

McKay tugged at his arm fretfully. "I'll die if we leave

the Valley! Don't you see that, Mr. Thornhill?"

Sighing, Thornhill said, "I see it. But don't worry too much about La Floquet. He'll be back, before long."

**S**LOWLY the hours passed, and the red sun slipped below the horizon, leaving only the distant blue sun to provide warmth. Thornhill's wrist-watch told him it was past ten in the evening . . . nearly twelve hours since the time he had boarded the space-liner on Jurinalle, more than four hours since his anticipated arrival time in the main city of Vengamon. They would have searched in vain for him, by now, and would be wondering how a man could vanish so thoroughly from a spaceship in hyperdrive.

The little group sat together at the river's edge. The Spican had shifted fully into his brownish-red phase, and sat silently like some owl heralding the death of the universe. The other two aliens kept mainly to themselves as well. There was little to be said.

McKay huddled himself into a knob-kneed pile of limbs and stared up at the mountain as if hoping to see some sign of La Floquet and Vellers. Thornhill understood

the expression on his face; McKay knew clearly that if La Floquet succeeded in leaving the Valley's confines, he would pay the price of his double resurrection in the same instant. McKay looked like a man seated below a thread-hung sword.

Thornhill himself stared silently at the mountain, wondering where the two men were now, how far they would get before La Floquet's cowardice forced them to turn back. He had no doubt now that La Floquet dreaded the mountain—otherwise he would have made the attempt long before, instead of merely threatening it. Now, he had been goaded into it by Thornhill, but would he be successful? Probably not; a brave man with one deep-lying fear often never conquered that fear. In a way Thornhill pitied little La Floquet; the gamecock would be forced to come back in humiliation, though he might delay that moment as long as he possibly could.

"You seem troubled," Marga said.

"Troubled? No, just thinking."

"About what?"

"About Vengamon, and my mine there . . . and how the vultures have probably al-



ready started to go after my estate."

"You don't miss Vengamon, do you?" she said.

He smiled and shook his head. "Not yet. That mine was my whole life, you know. I took little vacations now and then, but I thought only of the mine, and my supervisors and how lazy they were, and the price of ore in the interstellar markets. Until now. It must be some strange property of this Valley, but for the first time the mine seems terribly remote, as if it had always belonged to someone else. Or as if it had owned *me*, and I'm free at last."

"I know something of how you feel," Marga said. "I lived in the observatory day and night. There were always so many pictures to be taken, so many books to read, so much to do—I couldn't bear the thought of missing a day, or even of stopping my work to answer the phone. But there are no stars here, and I hardly miss them."

He took her hand lightly in his. "I wonder, though—if La Floquet succeeds—if we ever do get out of this Valley and back into our ordinary lives—will we be any different? Or will I go back to double-entry bookkeeping and you to stellar luminosities?"

"We won't know until we get back," she said. "If we get back. But look over there."

Thornhill looked. McKay and Miss Hardin were deep in a serious conversation—and McKay had shyly taken her hand. "Love comes at last to Professor of Medieval History McKay," Thornhill grinned. "And to Miss Something-or-Other Hardin, whoever she is."

The Regularan was asleep; the Aldebaranian stared broodingly at his feet, drawing pictures in the sand. The bloated sphere that was the Spican was absorbed in its own alien thoughts. The Valley was very quiet.

"I used to pity creatures in the zoos," Thornhill said. "But it's not such a bad life after all."

"So far. We don't know what the Watcher has in store for us."

A mist rolled down from the mountain-peak, drifting in over the Valley. At first Thornhill thought the Watcher had returned for another visit with his captives; he saw, though, that it was merely a thin mountain mist dropping over them. It was faintly cold, and he drew Marga tighter against him.

He thought back over thirty-seven years as the mist

rolled in. He had come through those thirty-seven years well enough, trim, athletic, with quick reflexes and a quicker mind. But not until this day—it was hard to believe this was still his first day in the Valley—had he fully realized life held other things besides mining and earning money.

It had taken the Valley to teach him that; would he remember the lesson if he ever returned to civilization? Might it not be better to stay here, with Marga, in eternal youth?

He frowned. Eternal youth, yes . . . but at the cost of his free will. He was nothing but a prisoner here, if a pampered one.

Suddenly he did not know what to think.

Marga's hand tightened against his. "Did you hear something? Footsteps, I think. It must be La Floquet and Vellers coming back from the mountain."

"They couldn't make it," Thornhill said, not knowing whether to feel relief or acute disappointment. He heard the sound of voices—and two figures, one small and wiry, one tall and broad, advanced toward them through the thickening mist. He turned to face them.

DESPITE the dim illumination of twilight and the effects of the fog, Thornhill had no difficulty reading the expression on La Floquet's face. It was not pleasant. The little man was angry, both with himself and with Thornhill, and naked hatred was visible in his sharp features.

"Well?" Thornhill asked casually. "No go?"

"We got several thousand feet before this damned fog closed in around us. It was almost as if the Watcher sent it on purpose. We had to turn back."

"And was there any sign of a pass leading out of the Valley?"

La Floquet shrugged. "Who knows? We couldn't as much as see each other! But I'll find it. I'll go back tomorrow, when both suns are in the sky—and I'll find a way out!"

"You devil," came McKay's thin, dry voice. "Won't you ever give up?"

"Not while I can still walk!" La Floquet shouted defiantly. But there was a note of mock-bravado in his voice. Thornhill wondered just what had really happened up there on the mountain path.

He was not kept long in ignorance. La Floquet stalked



angrily away, adopting a pose of injured arrogance, leaving Vellers standing near Thornhill. The big man looked after him and shook his head.

"The liar!"

"What's that?" Thornhill asked, half-surprised.

"There was no fog on the mountain," Vellers muttered bitterly. "He found the fog when we came back down, and he took it as an excuse. The little bullfrog makes much noise, but it's hollow."

Thornhill said earnestly, "Tell me—what happened up there? If there wasn't any fog, why'd you turn back?"

"We got no more than a thousand feet up," Vellers said. "He had been leading. But then he dropped back, and got very pale. He said he couldn't go on any further."

"Why? Was he afraid of the height?"

"I don't think so," Vellers said. "I think he was afraid of getting to the top and seeing what's there. Maybe he knows there isn't any way out. Maybe he's afraid to face it. I don't know. But he made me follow him back down."

Suddenly Vellers grunted heavily—and Thornhill saw that La Floquet had come up quietly behind the big man and jabbed him sharply in the small of the back. Vellers

turned. It took time for a man six feet seven to turn.

"Fool!" La Floquet barked. "Who told you these lies? Why this fairy tale, Vellers?"

"Lies? Fairy tale? Get your hands off me, La Floquet. You know damn well you funked out up there. Don't try to fast-talk your way out now."

A muscle tightened convulsively in the corner of La Floquet's slit of a mouth. His eyes flashed; he stared at Vellers as if he were some beast escaped from a cage. Suddenly La Floquet's fists flicked out, and Vellers stepped back, crying out in pain. He swung wildly at the smaller man, but La Floquet was untouchable, humming in under Vellers' guard to plant a stinging punch on the slab-like jaw, darting back out again as the powerful Vellers tried to land a decisive blow. La Floquet fought like a fox at bay.

Thornhill moved uneasily forward, not wanting to get in the way of Vellers' massive fists as the giant tried vainly to hit La Floquet. Catching the eye of the Aldebaranian, Thornhill acted. He seized Vellers' arm and tugged it back, while the alien similarly blocked off La Floquet.

"Enough!" Thornhill snapped. "It doesn't matter which one of you's lying. Fighting's

foolish—you told me that yourself earlier today, La Floquet."

Vellers dropped back sullenly, keeping one eye on La Floquet. The small man smiled. "Honor must be defended, Thornhill. Vellers was spreading lies about me."

"A coward and a liar too," Vellers said darkly.

"Quiet, both of you," Thornhill told them. "Look up there!"

He pointed.

A gathering cloud hung low over them. The Watcher was drawing near—had been, unnoticed, all during the raging quarrel. Thornhill looked up, waiting, trying to discern some living form within the amorphous blackness that descended on them. It was impossible. He saw only spreading clouds of night, hiding the dim sunlight.

He felt the ground rocking gently, quivering in a barely perceptible manner. What now, he wondered, peering at the enfolding darkness. A sound like a far-off musical chord echoed in his ears—a subsonic vibration, perhaps, making him giddy, soothing him, calming him the way gentle stroking might soothe a cat.

*Peace among you, my pets,* the voiceless voice said, soft-

ly, almost crooningly. *You quarrel too much. Let there be peace. . . .*

The subsonic note washed up over him, bathed him, cleansed him of hatred and anger. He stood there smiling, not knowing why he smiled, feeling only peace and calmness.

The cloud began to lift; the Watcher was departing. The unheard note diminished in intensity, and the motion of the ground subsided. The Valley was at rest, in perfect harmony. The last faint murmur of the note died away.

For a long while, no one spoke. Thornhill looked around, seeing an uncharacteristic blandness loosen the tight set of La Floquet's jaws, seeing Vellers' heavy-featured, angry face begin to smile. He himself felt no desire to quarrel with anyone.

But deep in his mind the words of the Watcher echoed, and thrust at him: *Peace among you, my pets.*

*Pets.*

Not even specimens in a zoo, Thornhill thought with increasing bitterness, as the tranquility induced by the subsonic began to leave him. *Pets. Pampered pets.*

He realized he was trembling. It had seemed so attractive, this life in the Valley.



He tried to cry out, to shout his rage at the bare purple mountains that hemmed them in, but the subsonic had done its work well. He could not even vocalize his anger.

Thornhill looked away, trying to drive the Watcher's soothing words from his mind.

**I**N THE DAYS that followed, they began to grow younger. McKay, being the oldest, was the first to show any effects of the rejuvenation. It was on the fourth day in the Valley—days being measured, for lack of other means, by the risings of the red sun. The nine of them had settled into a semblance of a normal way of life by that time. Since the time when the Watcher had found it necessary to calm them, there had been no outbreaks of bitterness among them; instead, each went about his daily life quietly, almost sullenly, under the numbing burden of the knowledge of their status as *pets*.

They found they had little need for sleep or food; the manna sufficed to nourish them, and as for sleep, that could be had in brief cat-naps when the occasion demanded. They spent much of their time telling each other of their past lives, hiking

through the Valley, swimming in the river. Thornhill was beginning to get terribly bored with this kind of existence.

McKay had been staring into the swiftly-running current when he first noticed it. He emitted a short, sharp cry; Thornhill, thinking something was wrong, ran hurriedly toward him.

"What happened?"

McKay hardly seemed in difficulties. He was staring intently at his reflection in the water. "What color is my hair, Sam?"

"Why, gray—and—and a little touch of brown!"

McKay nodded. "Exactly. I haven't had brown in my hair in twenty years!"

By this time, most of the others had gathered. McKay indicated his hair and said, "I'm growing younger. I feel it all over. And look—look at La Floquet's scalp!"

In surprise, the little man clapped one hand to the top of his skull—and drew the hand away again, thunderstruck. "I'm growing hair again," he said softly, fingering the gentle fuzz that had appeared on his tanned, sun-freckled scalp. There was a curious look of incredulity on his wrinkled brown face. "That's impossible!"

"It's also impossible for a man to rise from the dead," Thornhill pointed out. "The Watcher is taking very good care of us. We're getting the best of treatment."

He looked at all of them—at McKay and La Floquet, at Vellers, at Marga, at Lona Hardin, at the aliens. Yes, they had all changed. They looked healthier, younger, more vigorous.

He had felt the change in himself from the start. The Valley, he thought. Was this the Watcher's doing, or simply some marvelous property of the area?

Suppose the latter, he thought. Suppose through some charm of the Valley they were growing ever younger. Would it stop? Would the process level off?

Or, he wondered, had the Watcher brought them all here solely for the interesting spectacle of observing nine adult beings retrogressing rapidly into childhood? It was hardly a thought to make him cheerful.

**T**HAT "NIGHT"—they called the time when the red sun left the sky "night," even though there was no darkness—Thornhill learned three significant things.

He learned he loved Marga Fallis, and she him.

He learned that their love could have no possible consummation within the Valley.

And he learned that La Floquet, whatever had happened to him on the mountain peak, had not yet forgotten how to fight.

Thornhill had asked Marga to walk with him, into the secluded wooded area high on the mountain path, where they could have some privacy. She seemed oddly reluctant to accept, which surprised and dismayed him, since at all other times since the beginning she had gladly accepted any offers of his company. He urged her again, and finally she agreed.

They walked silently for a while. Gentle-eyed cat-creatures peered at them from behind shrubs, and the air was moist and warm. Peaceful white clouds drifted high above them.

Thornhill said, "Why didn't you want to come with me, Marga?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said.

He shied a stone into the underbrush. "Four days, and you're keeping secrets from me already?" He started to chuckle—then, seeing her expression, he cut short his



laughter. "What's wrong?"

"Is there any reason why I *shouldn't* keep secrets from you?" she asked. "I mean, is there some sort of agreement between us?"

He hesitated. "Of course not. But I thought—"

She smiled, reassuring him. "I thought, too. But I might as well be frank. This afternoon La Floquet asked me to be his woman."

Stunned, Thornhill stammered, "He—why—"

"He figures he's penned in here for life," Marga said. "And he's not interested in Lona. That leaves me, it seems. La Floquet doesn't like to go without women for long."

Thornhill moistened his lips, but said nothing.

Marga went on, "He told me point blank I wasn't to go into the hills with you any more. That if I did, he'd make trouble. He wasn't going to take no for an answer, he told me."

"And what answer did you give—if I can ask?"

She smiled warmly; blue highlights danced in her dark eyes as she said, "Well—I'm here, aren't I? Isn't that a good enough answer to him?"

Relief swept over Thornhill like an unchecked tide. He had known of La Floquet's rivalry from the start, but this

was the first time the little man had ever made any open overtures toward Marga. And if those overtures had been refused—

"La Floquet's interesting," she said, as they stooped to enter a sheltered, sweet-smelling bower of thickly-entwined shrubs. They had discovered it the night before. "But I wouldn't want to be number four hundred eighty-six on his string. He's a galaxy-roamer; I've never fallen for that type. And I feel certain he'd never have been interested in me except as something to amuse him while he was penned up in this Valley."

She was very close to him, and in the bower not even the light of the blue star shone very brightly. *I love her*, he thought suddenly to himself, and an instant later he found his voice saying out loud, "I love you, Marga. Maybe it took a miracle to put us both in this Valley, but . . ."

"I know what you mean. And I love you too. I told La Floquet that."

He felt an irrational surge of triumph. "What did he say?"

"Not much. He said he'd kill you if he could find some way to do it in the Valley. But I think that'll wear off soon."

His arms slipped around

hers. They spoke wordlessly with one another for several moments.

It was then that Thornhill discovered that sex was impossible in the Valley. He felt no desire, no tingling of need, *nothing*.

Absolutely nothing. He enjoyed her nearness, but neither needed nor could take anything more.

"It's part of the Valley," he whispered. "Our entire metabolic systems have been changed. We don't sleep more than an hour a day, we hardly eat (unless you call that fluff

food), our wounds heal, the dead rise—and now this. It's as if the Valley casts a spell that short-circuits all biological processes."

"And there's nothing we can do?"

"Nothing," he said tightly. "We're pets. Growing ever younger, and helpless against the Watcher's whims."

He stared silently into the darkness, listening to her quiet sobbing. How long can we go on living this way, he wondered. How long?

*We have to get out of this Valley, he thought. Somehow.*







But will we remember one another once we do? Or will it all fade away, like a child's dream of fairyland?

He clung tightly to her, cursing his own weakness even though he knew it was hardly his fault. There was nothing they could say to one another.

But the silence was abruptly broken.

A deep, dry voice said, "I know you're in there. Come on out, Thornhill. And bring the girl with you."

Thornhill quickly rose to a sitting position. "It's La Floquet!" he whispered.

"What are you going to do? Can he find us in here?"

"I'm sure of it. I'm going to have to go out there and see what he wants."

"Be careful, Sam!"

"He can't hurt me. This is the Valley, remember?" He grinned at her and clambered to his feet, stooping as he passed through the clustered underbrush. He blinked as he made the transition from darkness to pale light.

"Come on out of there, Thornhill!" La Floquet repeated. "I'll give you another minute and then I'm coming in!"

"Don't fret," Thornhill called. "I'm on my way out."

He battled past two clinging enwrapped vines and

stepped into the open. "Well, what do you want?" he demanded impatiently.

La Floquet smiled coldly. There was little doubt of what he wanted. His small eyes were bright with anger, and there was murder in his grin. Held tight in one lean corded hand was a long, triangular sliver of rock whose jagged edge had been painstakingly abraded until it was knife-sharp. The little man waited in a half-crouch, like a tiger or a panther impatient to spring on its prey.

## CHAPTER V

THEY CIRCLED tentatively around each other, the big man and the small one. La Floquet seemed to have reached a murderous pitch of intensity; muscles quivered in his jaws as he glared at Thornhill.

"Put that knife down," Thornhill said. "Have you blown your stack, La Floquet? You can't kill a man in the Valley. It won't work."

"Perhaps I can't kill a man. Still, I can wound him."

"What have I ever done to you?"

"You came to the Valley. I could have handled the others, but you—! You were the one who taunted me into climbing



the mountain. You were the one who took Marga."

"I didn't take anyone. You didn't see me twisting her arm. She picked me over you, and for that I'm genuinely sorry."

"You'll be more than sorry, Thornhill!"

Thornhill forced a grin. This little kill-dance had gone on too long as it was. He sensed Marga not far behind him, watching in horror.

"Why, you murderous little paranoid, give me that piece of stone before you slash yourself up!" He took a quick step forward, reaching for La Floquet's wrist. The little man's eyes blazed dangerously. He pirouetted backward, snapping a curse at Thornhill in some alien language, and drove the knife downward with a low cry of triumph.

Thornhill swerved, but the jagged blade ripped into his arm three inches above the elbow, biting into the soft flesh on the inside of his biceps, and La Floquet sliced quickly downward, cutting a bloody trail for nearly eight inches. Thornhill felt a sudden sharp burst of pain down to the middle of his forearm, and a warm flow of blood gushed past his wrist into the palm of his hand. He heard Marga's sharp gasp.

Then he moved forward, ignoring the pain, and caught La Floquet's arm just as the smaller man was lifting it for a second slash. Thornhill twisted; something snapped in La Floquet's arm, and the little man gave forth a brief *uh* of pain. The knife dropped from suddenly uncontrollable fingers and landed slightly on an angle, its tip resting on a pebble. Thornhill planted his foot on the dagger and leaned down heavily, shattering it.

Each of them now had only limited use of his right hand. La Floquet charged back toward Thornhill like someone possessed, head down as if to butt, but at the last moment swerved upward, driving his good hand into Thornhill's jaw. Thornhill rocked backward, pivoted around, smashed down at La Floquet and heard teeth splinter. He wondered when the Watcher would show up to end the fight—and whether these wounds would heal.

La Floquet's harsh breathing was the only sound audible. He was shaking his head, clearing it, readying himself for a new assault. Thornhill tried to blank out the searing pain of the gash in his arm.

He stepped forward and hit La Floquet quickly, spinning him half around; bringing his

slashed right hand up, Thornhill drove it into La Floquet's middle. A wall of rocklike muscle stunned his fist. But the breath had been knocked from La Floquet; he weaved uncertainly, gray-faced, wobbly-legged. Thornhill hit him again and he toppled.

La Floquet crumpled into an awkward heap on the ground and stayed there. Thornhill glanced at his own arm. The cut was deep and wide, though it seemed to have missed any major veins and arteries; blood welled brightly from it, but without the familiar arterial spurt.

**T**HERE was a curious fascination in watching his own blood flow. He saw Marga's pale, frightened face beyond the dim haze that surrounded him; he realized he had lost more blood than he thought, perhaps was about to lose consciousness as well. La Floquet still slumbered. There was no sign of the Watcher.

"Sam—"

"Pretty little nick, isn't it?" He laughed. His face felt warm.

"We ought to bind that some way. Infection—"

"No. There's no need of that. I'll be all right. This is the Valley."

He felt an intense itching in the wounded arm; barely did he fight back the desire to claw at the gash with his fingernails.

"It's—it's healing!" Marga said.

Thornhill nodded. The wound was beginning to close.

First the blood ceased flowing, as ruptured veins closed their gaping sides and once again began to circulate the blood. The raw edges of the wound strained toward each other, puckering, reaching for one another, finally clasping. A bridge of flesh formed over the gaping slit in his arm. The itching was impossibly intense.

But in a few moments more it was over; a long livid scar remained, nothing more. Experimentally he touched the new flesh; it was warm, yielding, real.

La Floquet was stirring. His right forearm had been bent at an awkward angle; now, it straightened out. The little man sat up groggily. Thornhill tensed in case further attack was coming, but there was very little fight left in La Floquet.

"The Watcher has made the necessary repairs," Thornhill said. "We're whole again, except for a scar here and there. Get up, you idiot."



He hoisted La Floquet to his feet.

"This is the first time anyone has bested me in a fight," La Floquet said bitterly. His eyes had lost much of their eager brightness; he seemed demolished by his defeat. "And you were unarmed, and I had a knife."

"Forget that," Thornhill said.

"How can I? This filthy Valley—from which there is no escape, not even suicide—and I am not to have a woman. Thornhill, you're just a businessman. You don't know what it's like to set codes of behavior for yourself and then not to be able to live by them." La Floquet shook his head sadly. "There are many in the galaxy who would rejoice to see the way this Valley has humiliated me. And there is not even suicide here! But I'll leave you with your woman."

He turned and began to walk away, a small, almost pathetic figure now, the fighting-cock with his comb shorn and his tail-feathers plucked. Thornhill contrasted him with the ebullient little figure he had first seen coming toward him up the mountain path, and it was a sad contrast indeed. He slouched, now, shoulders sloping in defeat.

"Hold it, La Floquet!"

"You have beaten me—and before a woman. What more do you want with me, Thornhill?"

"How badly do you want to get out of this Valley, La Floquet?" Thornhill asked bluntly.

"What—"

"Badly enough to climb that mountain again?"

La Floquet's face, pale already, turned almost ghostly beneath his tan. In an unsteady voice he said, "I ask you not to taunt me, Thornhill."

"I'm not. I don't give a damn what phobia it is that drove you back from the mountain that night. I think that mountain can be climbed. But not by one or two men. If we *all* went up there—or most of us—"

La Floquet smiled wanly. "You would go, too? And Marga?"

"If it means out, yes. We might have to leave McKay and Lona Hardin behind, but there'd still be seven of us. Possibly there's a city outside the Valley; we might be able to send word and be rescued."

Frowning, La Floquet said, "Why the sudden change of heart, Thornhill? Why the sudden desire to get out of

the Valley? I thought you liked it here . . . you and Miss Fallis both, that is. I thought I was the only one willing to climb that peak."

Thornhill glanced at Marga, and traded secret smiles with her. "I'll decline to answer that, La Floquet. But I'll tell you this: the quicker I'm outside the influence of the Valley, the happier I'll be!"

**W**HEN THEY had reached the foot of the hill and called everyone together, Thornhill stepped forward. Sixteen eyes were on him—counting the two stalked objects of the Spican as eyes.

He said, "La Floquet and I have just had a little discussion up in the hill. We've reached a few conclusions I want to put forth to the group at large.

"I submit that it's necessary for the well-being of all of us to make an immediate attempt at getting out of the Valley. Otherwise, we're condemned to a slow death of the most horrible kind—gradual loss of our faculties."

McKay broke in, saying, "Now you've shifted sides again, Thornhill! I thought maybe—"

"I haven't been on any side," he responded quickly.

"It's simply that I've begun thinking. Look: we were all brought here within a two-day span, snatched out of our lives no matter where we were, dumped down in a seemingly impassable Valley by some unimaginably alien creature. Item: we're watched constantly, tended and fed. Item: our wounds heal almost instantly. Item: we're growing younger. McKay, you yourself were the first to notice that.

"Okay, now. There's a mountain up there, and quite probably there's a way out of the Valley. La Floquet tried to get there, but he and Vellers couldn't make it; two men can't climb a 20,000-foot peak alone, without provisions, without help. But if we all go—"

McKay shook his head. "I'm happy here, Thornhill. You and La Floquet are jeopardizing that happiness."

"No," La Floquet interjected. "Can't you see that we're just house-pets here? That we're the subjects of a rather interesting experiment, nothing more? And that if this rejuvenation keeps up, we may all be babies in a matter of weeks or months?"

"I don't care," McKay said stubbornly. "I'll die if I leave the Valley—my heart can't take much more. Now you tell



me I'll die if I stay. But at least I'll pass backward through manhood before I go—and I can't have those years again outside."

"All right," Thornhill said. "Ultimately it's a matter of whether we all stay here so McKay can enjoy his youth again, or whether we try to leave. La Floquet, Marga and I are going to make an attempt to cross the mountain. Those of you who want to join us, can. Those of you who'd rather spend the rest of their days in the Valley can stay behind and wish us bad luck. Is that clear?"

**S**EVEN OF THEM left the following "morning," right after the breakfast-time manna-fall. McKay stayed behind, with little Lona Hardin. There was a brief, awkward moment of farewell-saying. Thornhill noticed how the lines were leaving McKay's face, how the old scholar's hair had darkened, his body broadened. In a way, he could see McKay's point of view—but there was no way he could accept it.

Lona Hardin, too, was younger-looking, and perhaps for the first time in her life she was making an attempt to disguise her plainness. Well, Thornhill thought, these two

might find happiness of a sort in the Valley—but it was the mindless happiness of a puppet, and he wanted none of it for himself.

"I don't know what to say," McKay declared as the party set out. "I'd wish you good luck—if I could."

Thornhill grinned. "Maybe we'll be seeing you two again. I hope not, though."

Thornhill led the way up the mountain's side; Marga walked with him, La Floquet and Vellers a few paces behind, the three aliens trailing behind them. The Spican, Thornhill was sure, had only the barest notion of what was taking place; the Aldebaranian had explained things fairly thoroughly to the grave Regular. One factor seemed common: all of them were determined to leave the Valley.

The morning was warm and pleasant; clouds hid the peak of the mountain. The ascent, Thornhill thought, would be strenuous but not impossible—provided the miraculous field of the Valley continued to protect them when they passed the timberline, and provided the Watcher did not interfere with the exodus.

There was no interference. Thornhill felt almost a sensation of regret at leaving the Valley—and in the same mo-

ment realized this might be some deceptive trick of the Watcher's, and he cast all sentiment from his heart.

By mid-morning they had reached a considerable height, a thousand feet or more above the Valley. Looking down, Thornhill could barely see the brightness of the river winding through the flat basin that was the Valley, and there was no sign of McKay far below.

The mountain sloped gently upward toward the timberline. The real struggle would begin later, perhaps, on the bare rock face, where the air might not be so balmy as it was here, the wind not quite as gentle.

When Thornhill's watch said noon, he called a halt and they unpacked the manna they had saved from the morning fall, wrapped in broad coarse velvet-textured leaves of the thick-trunked trees of the Valley. The manna tasted dry and stale, almost like straw, with just the merest vestige of its former attractive flavor. But, as Thornhill had guessed, there was no noon-time manna fall here on the mountain slope, and so the party forced the dry stuff down their throats, not knowing when they would have fresh food again.

After a short rest Thornhill ordered them up. They had gone no more than a thousand feet when an echoing cry drifted up from below:

"Wait! Wait, Thornhill!"

He turned. "You hear something?" he asked Marga.

"That was McKay's voice," La Floquet said.

"Let's wait for him," Thornhill ordered.

Ten minutes passed—and then, McKay came into view, running upward in a springy long-legged stride, Lona Hardin a few paces behind him. He caught up with the party and paused a moment, catching his breath.

"I decided to come along," he said finally. "You're right, Thornhill! We have to leave the Valley."

"And he figures his heart's better already," Lona Hardin said. "So if he leaves the Valley now, maybe he'll be a healthier man again."

Thornhill smiled. "It took a long time to convince you, didn't it?" He shaded his eyes and stared upward. "We have a long way to go. We'd better not waste any more time."

## CHAPTER VI

**T**WENTY THOUSAND FEET was less than four miles. A man should be able to walk four



miles in an hour or two. But not four miles *up*.

They rested frequently, though there was no night and they had no need to sleep. They moved on, inch by inch, advancing perhaps five hundred feet over the steadily more treacherous slope, then crawling along the mountain face a hundred feet to find the next point of ascent. It was slow, difficult work, and the mountain spired yet higher above them until it seemed they would never attain the summit.

The air, surprisingly, remained warm, though not oppressively so; the wind picked up as they climbed. The mountain was utterly bare of life—the gentle animals of the Valley ventured no higher than the timberline, and that was far below. The party of nine scrambled up over rockfalls and past sheets of stone.

Thornhill felt himself tiring, but he knew the Valley's strange regenerative force was at work, carrying off the fatigue poisons as soon as they built up in his muscles, easing him, giving him the strength to go on. Hour after hour they forced their way up the mountainside.

Occasionally he would glance back to see La Flo-

quet's pale, fear-tautened face. The little man was terrified of the height—but he was driving gamely on. The aliens straggled behind; Vellers marched mechanically, saying little, obviously tolerant of the weaker mortals to whose pace he was compelled to adjust his own.

As for Marga, she uttered no complaint. That pleased Thornhill more than anything.

They were a good thousand feet from the summit when Thornhill called a halt.

He glanced back at them—at the oddly unweary, unlined faces. *How we've grown young!* he thought suddenly. *McKay looks like a man in his late forties; I must seem like a boy. And we're all fresh as daisies, as if this were just a jolly hike.*

"We're near the top," he said. "Let's finish off whatever of the manna we've got. The downhill part of this won't be so bad."

He looked up. The mountain tapered to a fine crest, and through there a pass was visible, leading down to the other side. "La Floquet, you've got the best eyes of any of us. You see any sign of a barrier up ahead?"

The little man squinted and shook his head. "All's clear, so far as I can see. We go up,

then down, and we're home free."

Thornhill nodded. "The last thousand feet, then. Let's go!"

**T**HE WIND was whipping hard against them as they pushed on through the dense snow that cloaked the mountain's highest point. Up here, some of the charm of the Valley seemed to be gone, as if the cold winds barrelling in from the outlands beyond the crest could in some way negate the gentle warmth they experienced in the Valley. Both suns were high in the sky, the red and the blue, the blue visible as a hard blotch of radiance penetrating the soft, diffuse rays of the red.

Thornhill was tiring rapidly—but the crest was in sight. Just a few more feet and they'd stand on it—

Just up over this overhang—

The summit itself was a small plateau, perhaps a hundred feet long. Thornhill was the first to pull himself up over the rock projection and stand on the peak; he reached back, helped Marga up, and within minutes the other seven had joined them.

The Valley was a distant spot of green, far below; the air was clear and clean, and

from here they could plainly see the winding river heading down valley to the yellow-green radiance of the barrier.

Thornhill turned. "Look down there," he said in a quiet voice.

It was hardly a cheering sight.

"It's a world of deserts!" La Floquet exclaimed.

The view from the summit revealed much of the land beyond the Valley—and it seemed the Valley was but an oasis in the midst of utter desertion. For mile after gray mile, barren land stretched before them, an endless plain of rock and sand rolling on drearily to the farthest horizon.

Beyond, this. Behind, the Valley.

Thornhill looked around. "We've reached the top. You see what's ahead. Do we go on?"

"Do we have any choice?" McKay asked. "We're practically out of the Watcher's hands now. Down there, perhaps we have freedom. Behind us—"

"We go on," La Floquet said firmly.

"Down the back slope, then," said Thornhill. "It won't be easy. There's the path, over there. Suppose we—"



The sudden chill he felt was not altogether due to the whistling wind. The sky suddenly darkened; a cloak of night settled around them.

*Of course, Thornhill thought dully. I should have foreseen this.*

"The Watcher's coming!" Lona Hardin screamed, as the darkness closed around them, obscuring both the bleakness ahead and the Valley behind.

Thornhill thought, *It was part of the game. To let us climb the mountain, to watch us squirm and struggle, and then to hurl us back into the Valley at the last moment, as we stand on the border.*

Wings of night nestled round them. He felt the coldness that signified the alien presence, and the soft voice said, *Would you leave, my pets? Don't I give you the best of care? Why this ingratitude?*

"Let's keep going," Thornhill muttered. "Maybe it can't stop us. Maybe we can escape it yet."

"Which way do we go?" Marga asked. "I can't see anything. Suppose we go over the edge?"

*Come, crooned the Watcher, come back to the Valley. You have played your little game. I have enjoyed your struggles, and I'm proud of the battle*

*you fought. But the time has come to return to the warmth and the love you may find in the Valley below—*

"Thornhill!" cried La Floquet suddenly, hoarsely. "I have it! Come help me!"

The Watcher's voice died away abruptly; the black cloud swirled wildly. Thornhill whirled, peering through the darkness for some sign of La Floquet—

And found the little man on the ground, wrestling with—something. In the darkness, it was hard to tell—

"It's the Watcher!" La Floquet grunted. He rolled over and Thornhill saw a small snakelike being writhing under La Floquet's grip, a bright-scaled serpent the size of a monkey.

"Here in the middle of the cloud—here's the creature that held us here!" La Floquet cried. Suddenly, before Thornhill could move, the Aldebaranian came bounding forward, thrusting beyond Thornhill and Marga, and flung himself down on the strugglers. Thornhill heard a guttural bellow; the darkness closed in on the trio, and it was impossible to see what was happening.

He heard La Floquet's cry: "Get . . . this devil . . . off me! He's helping the Watcher!"

Thornhill moved forward. He reached into the struggling mass, felt the blubbery flesh of the Aldebaranian, and dug his fingers in hard. He wrenched; the Aldebaranian came away. Hooked claws raked Thornhill's face. He cursed; you could never tell what an Aldebaranian was likely to do, at any time. Perhaps the creature had been in league with the Watcher all along.

He dodged a blow, landed a solid one in the alien's plump belly, and crashed his other fist upward into the creature's jaw. The Aldebaranian rocked backward. Vellers appeared abruptly from nowhere and seized the being.

"No!" Thornhill yelled, seeing what Vellers intended. But it was too late. The giant held the Aldebaranian contemptuously dangling in the air, then swung him upward and outward. A high ear-piercing shriek resounded. Thornhill shuddered. It takes a long time to fall 20,000 feet.

He glanced back now at La Floquet and saw the small man struggling now to stand up, arms still entwined about the serpent-like being. Thornhill saw a metal-mesh helmet on the alien's head. The means with which they'd been controlled, obviously.

La Floquet took three staggering steps. "Get the helmet off him!" he cried thickly. "I've seen these before. They are out of the Andromeda sector . . . telepaths, teleporters . . . deadly creatures. The helmet's his focus-point."

Thornhill grasped for it as the pair careened by; he missed, catching instead a glimpse of the Watcher's devilish, hate-filled eyes. The Watcher had fallen into the hands of his own pets—and was not enjoying it.

"I can't see you!" Thornhill shouted. "I can't get the helmet!"

"If he gets free, we're finished," came La Floquet's voice. "He's using all his energy to fight me off . . . but all he needs to do is turn on the subsonics—"

The darkness cleared again. Thornhill gasped. La Floquet, still clutching the alien, was tottering on the edge of the mountain peak, groping for the helmet in vain. One of the little man's feet was virtually standing on air. He staggered wildly. Thornhill rushed toward them, grasped the icy metal of the helmet, and ripped it away.

In that moment both La Floquet and the Watcher vanished from sight. Thornhill brought himself up short and



peered downward, hearing nothing, seeing nothing—

There was just one scream . . . not from La Floquet's throat, but from the alien's. Then all was silent. Thornhill glanced at the helmet in his hands, thinking of La Floquet, and in a sudden impulsive gesture hurled the little metal headpiece into the abyss after them.

He turned, catching one last glimpse of Marga, Vellers, McKay, Lona Hardin, the Regulan, and the Spican. Then, before he could speak, mountain-peak and darkness and indeed the entire world shimmered and heaved dizzily about them, and he could see nothing and no one.

**H**E WAS in the main passenger cabin of the Federation Spaceliner *Royal Mother Helene*, bound for Vengamon out of Jurinalle. He was lying back in the comfortable pressurized cabin, with the gray nothingness of hyperspace outside forming a sharp contrast to the radiant walls of the cabin, which glowed in soft yellow luminescence.

Thornhill opened his eyes slowly. He glanced at his watch. 12:13, 7 July 2671. He had dozed off about 11:40, after a good lunch. They were

due in at Port Vengamon later that day, and he'd have to tend to mine business immediately. There was no telling how badly they'd fouled things up in the time he'd been vacationing on Jurinalle.

He blinked. Of a sudden, strange images flashed into his eyes—a valley, somewhere on a barren desolate planet beyond the edge of the galaxy. A mountain's peak, and a strange alien being, and a brave little man falling to the death he dreaded, and a girl—

*It couldn't have been a dream, he told himself. No. Not a dream. It was just that the Watcher yanked us out of space-time for his little experiment, and when I destroyed the helmet we re-entered the continuum at the instant we'd left it.*

A cold sweat burst out suddenly all over his body. *That means, he thought, that La Floquet's not dead. And Marga—Marga—*

Thornhill sprang from his gravity couch, ignoring the sign that urged him to PLEASE REMAIN IN YOUR COUCH WHILE SHIP IS UNDERGOING SPIN, and rushed down the aisle toward the steward. He gripped the man by the shoulder, spun him around.

"Yes, Mr. Thornhill? Is anything wrong? You could

have signalled me, and—"

"Never mind that. I want to make a subradio call to Bellatrix VII."

"We'll be landing on Vengamon in a couple of hours, sir. Is it so urgent?"

"Yes."

The steward shrugged. "You know, of course, that shipboard subradio calls may take some time to put through, and that they're terribly expensive—"

"Damn the expense, man! Will you put through my call or won't you?"

"Of course, Mr. Thornhill. To whom?"

He paused and said carefully, "To Miss Marga Fallis, in some observatory on Bellatrix VII." He peeled a bill from his wallet and added, "Here. There'll be another one for you if the call's put through in the next half an hour. I'll wait."

**T**HE SUMMONS finally came. "Mr. Thornhill, your call's ready. Would you come to Communications Deck, please?"

They showed him to a small, dimly-lit cubicle. There could be no vision on an interstellar subradio call, of course, just voice transmission. But that would be enough. "Go ahead,

Bellatrix-Helene. The call is ready," an operator said.

Thornhill wet his lips. "Marga? This is Sam—Sam Thornhill!"

"Oh!" He could picture her face now. "It—it wasn't a dream, then. I was so worried it was!"

"When I threw the helmet off the mountain—the Watcher's hold was broken—did you return to the exact moment you had left?"

"Yes," she said. "Back in the observatory, with my camera plates and everything. And there was a call for me, and at first I was angry and wouldn't answer it the way I always won't answer, and then I thought a minute and had a wild idea and changed my mind—and I'm glad I did, darling!"

"It seems almost like a dream now, doesn't it? The Valley, I mean. And La Floquet, and all the others. But it wasn't any dream," Thornhill said. "We were really there. And I meant the things I said to you."

The operator's voice cut in sharply: "*Standard call time has elapsed, sir. There will be an additional charge of ten credits for each further fifteen-second period of your conversation.*"

"That's quite all right,



operator," Thornhill said. "Just give me the bill at the end. Marga, are you still there?"

"Of course, darling."

"When can I see you?"

"I'll come to Vengamon tomorrow. It'll take a day or so to wind things up here at the observatory. Is there an observatory on Vengamon?"

"I'll build you one," Thornhill promised. "And perhaps for our honeymoon we can go looking for the Valley."

"I don't think we'll ever find it," she said. "But we'd better hang up, now. Otherwise you'll become a pauper talking to me."

He stared at the dead phone a long moment after they broke contact, thinking of what Marga looked like, and La Floquet, and all the others. Above all, Marga.

*It wasn't a dream, he told*

himself. He thought of the shadow-haunted Valley where night never fell and men grew younger, and of a tall girl with dark flashing eyes who waited for him now half a galaxy away.

With quivering fingers he undid the sleeve of his tunic and looked down at the long, livid scar that ran almost the length of his right arm, almost to the wrist. Somewhere in the universe now was a little man named La Floquet, who had inflicted that wound and died and returned to his point of departure, and who now was probably wondering if it had all ever happened. Thornhill smiled, forgiving La Floquet for the ragged scar inscribed on his arm, and headed up the companionway to the passenger cabin, impatient now to see Vengamon once more.

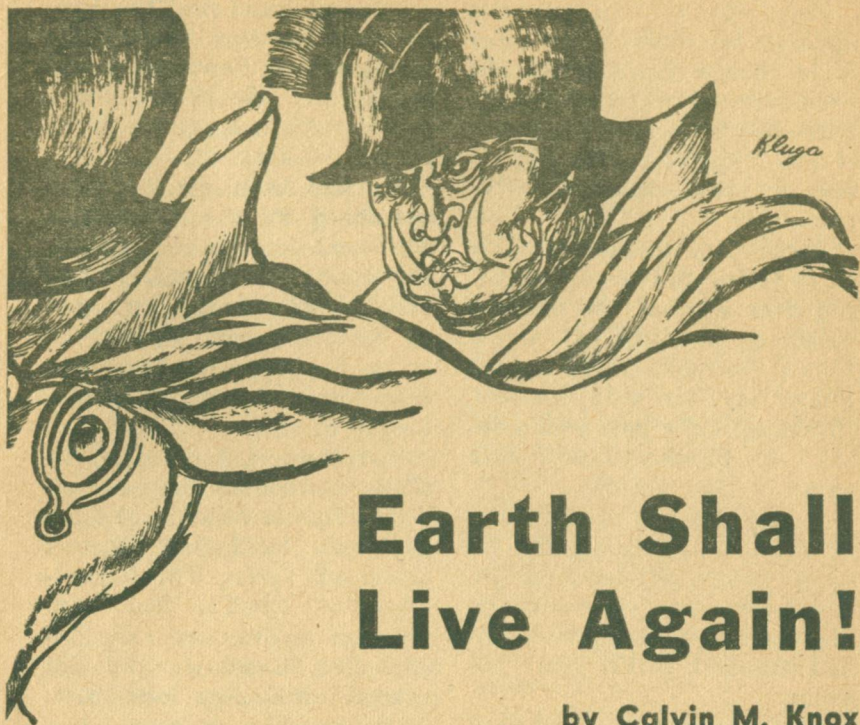


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# Earth Shall Live Again!

by Calvin M. Knox

*The prize: Earth. The arena: Jorus. The odds: one man against a planet!*

*A sequel to Chalice of Death*

## CHAPTER I

COMING HOME to a planet that was not home was a bleak, painful business, Hallam Navarre thought.

The Earthman stood on the concrete landing-apron of the great spaceport of Jorus City, seeing once again the alien

blue sun of the planet of his birth. About him, life was going on smoothly and ordinarily. A Dergonian who had travelled with him aboard the liner from Kariad jostled past him, yelling noisily for a porter. Two sleek Kariadi girls, vacationing on Jorus, winked at Navarre and moved on.

He felt the sunlight hot against his bald scalp. For more than a year, it had not been necessary to shave his hair—but now, back on Jorus, it was imperative for him to reassert his status as an Earthman.

Jorus City loomed blurrily three miles away—and towering over all was the massive palace of Joroiran VII, Overlord of Jorus. Navarre smiled. *Some day, he told himself, thinking of the past year's doing, an Earthman will rule again in that palace.*

He stood alone in the midst of the crowd, letting the familiar colors and smells of Jorus become part of him again. He wondered just how much had changed, in his year's absence.

One thing was certain: Kausirn, the Overlord's Vegan adviser, had solidified his position with Joroiran. Perhaps, thought Navarre, Kausirn had been making ready against the eventual return of Navarre from his wild quest. He would find out soon.

He hailed a jetcab.

"To the Palace," he said.

The driver shot off toward Jorus City. They took the main highway as far as the Street of the Lords, swung round into Central Plaza, and halted outside the Palace.

"One unit and six," the driver said. Navarre handed the man a bill and two coins and sprang out. He paused for a moment at the approach to the Palace, looking up.

He had been gone a year, searching at the Overlord's command for the semi-mythical Chalice of Death. It had been a fool's errand, arranged by Navarre's rival Kausirn in order to keep the Earthman from court for an indefinite length of time.

But Navarre had found the Chalice, aided by his two comrades, Helna Winstin of Karriad and halfbreed Domrik Carso of Jorus. The legend-shrouded Chalice had been situated on even more legend-shrouded Earth, in the Sol system of Galaxy RGC18347. It had proven to be no less than a crypt containing ten thousand Terran men and women who had slept a hundred thousand years, through the long night of Terra's decline.

Earth now was inhabited by dwarfish descendants of men; the true Earth-line was scattered through the million worlds of the galaxy. But Navarre had planned wisely. Six thousand of his reborn Earthmen he had left on Earth, instructing them only to marry and bring forth chil-



dren. The remaining two thousand couples he had transported to the neighbor system of Procyon.

The years would pass, and children would be born, and children's children. And a restored race of Earthmen would spring up to reunite their shattered empire of thirty thousand years before.

Navarre smiled. If only he could keep his plan a secret for a few years, until they were ready. . . .

Well, he would manage. But he was apprehensive about the reception he would get in the Overlord's Palace.

**T**HE PLACE hadn't changed much physically. There were still the accursed fifty-two steps to climb, still the black-walled corridor guarded by bland monoptics from Triz. But he became conscious of the first change when he reached the Trizians.

He shucked back the hood that covered his scalp, and, thus revealed, started to go past. But one of the Trizians thrust out a horny palm and said, in a dull monotone, "Stop."

Navarre glared up angrily. "Have I been forgotten so quickly?"

"State your name and pur-

pose here, Earthman."

"I'm Hallam Navarre, Earthman to the Court. I've just returned from a long mission on behalf of His Majesty. I want to see him."

"Wait here," the Trizian said. "I'll check within."

The monoptic vanished down the corridor, while his companion rigidly blocked Navarre's path. He realized that these two must be new to the palace; the previous Trizians had always recognized him and given him admittance without question.

He waited impatiently. After a few moments the Trizian returned, followed by two armed members of the Overlord's personal guard—Daborians, tusked, vicious-looking seven-footers.

"Well?" Navarre demanded.

"I was unable to reach His Majesty. But the Lord Adviser wishes you brought to him for interrogation."

Navarre tensed. The Lord Adviser, eh? Undoubtedly Kausirn; the Vegan had coined a shiny new title for himself in Navarre's absence.

"Very well," he said. "Take me to the Lord Adviser."

**K**AUSIRN was sitting behind a desk about ten feet wide, in a luxuriously-appointed office

one floor beneath the main throne room. His pale, ascetic face looked waxier than ever—a sign of health among the Vegans, Navarre knew. He sat hunched forward, his astonishing nest of fingers twined together before him.

The Daborian guards at either side of Navarre nudged him roughly. "Kneel in the presence of the Lord Adviser, Earthman!"

"That'll be all right," Kausirn said stiffly. He gestured dismissal to the guards with one dizzying wave of a ten-fingered hand. "Hello, Navarre. I hadn't expected to be seeing you so soon."

"Nor I you, Kausirn. Or is it *milord* I should address you as?"

The Vegan smiled apologetically. "In your absence, Navarre, we thought it wise—the Overlord did, I mean—to consolidate your post and mine into one more lofty rank, and so the office of the Lord Adviser was created. Joroiran handles little of the tiresome routine of state now, by the way. He spends his days in contemplation and profound study."

That was a flat lie, Navarre thought. If ever a man were less fitted for a life of contemplation and profound study, that man was Joroiran VII,

Overlord of Jorus. Aloud he said, "I suppose you'll be happy to have some of the governmental burden lifted from your shoulders, Kausirn. I mean, now that I'm back."

Kausirn sighed and inspected his multitude of fingers. "This must yet be decided, Navarre."

"What?"

"The workings of our government have been quite smooth in your absence. Perhaps His Majesty will not see his way clear to restoring you to your past eminence—inasmuch as you failed to bring him that which he sent you forth to find. I speak of the Chalice, of course—and the immortality he so desires."

"And what makes you so sure I failed to find the Chalice?" Navarre asked bluntly. "How do *you* know?"

Kausirn smiled faintly. "Obviously you were not successful. The Chalice is a myth—as both you and I knew before you undertook your little pleasure-cruise around the universe." He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "Besides, if you *had* found the Chalice—would you bring it back for Joroiran, Earthman? You'd keep it for yourself!"

"As you say, Kausirn. I found no Chalices for His Majesty. Still, I don't doubt



but that he'll welcome me back to his service. The Overlords of Jorus have always found the advice of an Earthman useful."

Stern coldness replaced the mocking warmth in Kausirn's eyes. "He has no need of you, Navarre."

"Let *him* tell me that. I demand to see him!"

"Today is Fourday," Kausirn said. "His Majesty holds public audience on Threeday, as you should well be aware . . . unless you've forgotten. I suggest you return next week. If fate should fall upon you, you'll have ample chance to plead your case before His Majesty and myself at that time."

Unbelievably Navarre said, "You *forbid* me to see him? You want me to come like a commoner to seek his ear at a public audience? You're mad, Kausirn!"

The Vegan shrugged humbly. "His Majesty is deep in meditation. I wouldn't dare break in on his contemplations . . . particularly since he told me only last week that government was much simpler for him now that he had but one adviser. You seem to be superfluous, Navarre."

The alien had done his job well, Navarre thought grimly. He started forward. "I'll see

Joroiran with or without your word, Vegan! I don't need—"

Kausirn's fingers flickered almost imperceptibly. Suddenly Navarre felt Daborian hands clutch each of his arms. He was drawn backward, away from the Vegan.

Boxed in! Betrayed at every turn, sewed up neatly by the scheming Vegan. Navarre began to wish he had never let Carso talk him into returning to Jorus. The halfbreed had been damnably persuasive in his arguing, though.

"Take the Earthman out of the Palace," Kausirn commanded. "And don't let him back in."

There was no sense in resisting; these Daborians would cheerfully break his arms at the first sign of struggle. Navarre scowled at the Vegan and let himself be hustled out of the Lord Adviser's office and up the stairs.

**E**ND OF PLAN ONE, Navarre thought bitterly as he sat in the plaza facing the Palace.

He had hoped to regain his old position as Joroiran's right-hand adviser, with the eventual intention of making use of the Joran fleet as the nucleus of the reborn Terran space navy. But Kausirn had moved swiftly and well, push-

ing Navarre out of influence completely.

He had to gain the ear of the Overlord. But how, if Kausirn governed all approaches?

Navarre wished Carso were here. But the stocky, bearded halfbreed was still under sentence of banishment, officially, and had remained in the neighboring system of Kariad, awaiting word from Navarre. And any word he might get from Navarre now would be far from cheerful.

He looked up as a vendor came by, hawking confections.

"One for you, Sir Earthman? A sweet puff, perhaps? A lemon-tart?"

Navarre shook his head. "Sorry, old one. I don't crave sweets now."

He glanced down at his shoes, but the old vendor did not go away. He remained before Navarre, peering intently in deep interest.

Exasperated Navarre said, "I told you I don't want anything. *Will* you go away, now?"

"You are Hallam Navarre," the old man said softly, ignoring the Earthman's impatient outburst. "Returned at last!" The vendor dropped down on the bench alongside Navarre. "For weeks I have tried to see

the Vegan Kausirn, to plead my case, and have been turned away. But now you have come back to Jorus, and justice with you!"

Navarre eyed the old man curiously. "You have a suit to place before the Overlord?"

"Nine weeks I have come to the Palace on Threeday, and been passed over each time. I try to speak to the Vegan in private, to ask him to consider my plea—I am ignored! But now—"

Navarre held up one hand and said, "My help would be doubtful at the moment. I have my own troubles with the Vegan."

"No!" The old man went popeyed with astonishment. "Even you—the many-fingered one weaves a tight web, then. I fear for Jorus, Eathman. We see little of the Overlord, and Kausirn signs most royal proclamations. I had hoped, seeing you—"

"Not a word of this to anyone," Navarre cautioned. "I have a private audience with Joroiran later this day. Perhaps things will improve after that."

"I hope so," the vendor said fervently. "And then will you hear my suit? My name is Molko of Dorvil Street. Will you remember me?"

"Of course."



Navarre rose and began to stroll back toward the Palace. So even the people were discontent and unhappy over the role the Vegan played in governing Jorus? Perhaps, Navarre thought, he could turn that to some advantage.

As for the "private audience with Joroiran" he had just invented, possibly that could be brought about after all. Navarre pulled up his hood, shielding his bald scalp from view, and walked more briskly to the Palace.

## CHAPTER II

SEVEN GENERATIONS of Navarres had served seven generations of the Joroiran Overlords of Jorus. The relationship traced backward three hundred years, to brave Joroiran I—who, with Voight Navarre at his side, had cut his empire from the decaying carcass of the festering Star-kings' League that had succeeded Earth's galactic empire.

The Joroiran strain had weakened, evidently; the seventh of the line had been persuaded by an opportunistic Vegan to do without Earth advice. And so Navarre had been sent forth on the quest of the Chalice. But he knew he could use his seventh-gen-

eration familiarity with the Palace surroundings to find his way back in.

Once Earth's empire had spanned the galaxy; then the billion-parsec domain had collapsed of its own mighty weight, Earth forgotten, her people reduced to a bare few million scattered on almost as many worlds—retaining their sense of identity with lost Earth even though they knew not where the ancestral planet was.

Navarre had found lost Earth. Given time, he would re-establish Earth's empire in the stars. But now—

Hooded, cowled, deliberately rounding his shoulders, he shuffled forward down the flowered path to the service entrance of the Overlord's Palace.

Even the service entrance was magnificent, he thought. A high, arching vault of black stone it was, with a glittering red burnished metal door set in its heart. Bowed diffidently, Navarre touched the entrance-buzzer, then drew back his hand in mock fright. A televisor system within was, he knew, spying on him; he had put the practice into operation himself to ward off assassins.

A window in the door pivoted upward; a cold Joran face

appeared—an unfamiliar face.  
“Yes?”

“I am expected within.” Navarre constricted his throat, making his voice little more than a choked whisper. “I am the vendor of sweets to His Majesty, Molko of Dorvil Street. I would see the Royal Purchase Officer.”

“Hmm. Well enough,” the guard grunted. “You can come in.”

The burnished door hoisted. Navarre groaned complainingly and moved forward as if his legs were rotted by extreme age.

“Get a move on, old man!”

“I’m coming . . . patience, please! Patience!”

The door clanged down hard behind him. He pulled his cowl down tighter around his ears. The Purchasing Office was on the third level, two flights upward, and the liftshaft was not far ahead.

“I know the way,” he said to the guard. “You needn’t help me.”

He reached the liftshaft, stepped in, and quickly pressed the second floor button. A moment later, he nudged the stud marked 3.

The liftshaft door slid noiselessly shut; the tube rose and stopped at the second level. Navarre stepped out, stepped back in, and pressed 7.

Knowing the system was an immeasurable advantage. The stops of the liftshaft could be monitored from the first level; thus, if the old vendor were to claim to be going to 3 and should go to 7 instead—the Overlord’s floor—there would be cause for immediate suspicion. He had carefully thrown confusion behind him, now. There was no certain way of knowing who had or had not entered the liftshaft on the second level.

He waited patiently while the door opened and shut on third level; then it was up—to the seventh.

Navarre emerged, shuffling wearily along. He knew precisely where Joroiran’s private study was located, and, more, he knew precisely how to get there. He counted his steps . . . eleven, twelve, thirteen. He paused thirteen steps from the liftshaft, leaned against the wall, waited.

Counterweighted balances sighed softly and the wall swung open, offering a crevice perhaps wide enough for a cat. Navarre was taking no chances. He squeezed through and kicked the counterweight, sealing the corridor wall again.

Now he found himself in an inner corridor. A television screen cast an invisible de-



fensive web across the hall, but again Navarre had the benefit of having devised the system; he neatly extracted a fuse from a concealed panel in the dark stone of the corridor wall, and walked ahead in confidence.

Joroiran's study door was unmarked by letter or number. Again, Navarre's doing. He huddled deep into his robes, listened carefully for any sound of conversation coming from within, and, hearing none, knocked three times, then once, then once again. It was a signal he had used with the Overlord for years.

Silence for a moment. Then: "Who's there?" in the hesitant, high-pitched voice of the Overlord.

"Are you alone, Majesty?"

Through the door came the impatient reply: "Who are you to ask questions of me? Speak up or I'll summon the guards to deal with you!"

It was Joroiran in his most typically blustery mood; that probably indicated he was alone. Speaking in his natural voice Navarre said, "Know you not this knock, Majesty?"

He knocked again.

Suspiciously, from within: "Is this a joke?"

"No, Majesty. I have come back." He threw back his hood and let Joroiran's tele-

visors pick up his face and shaven scalp.

After a moment the door opened perhaps half an inch. "*Navarre!*" came the whisper from within. The opening widened—and Navarre found himself face to face with his sovereign, Joroiran VII of Jorus.

**T**HE YEAR had changed Joroiran, Navarre saw. The Overlord wore a shabby gray lounging-robe instead of his garments of state; without the elaborate strutwork that puffed out his frame when he appeared in public, he looked vaguely ratlike, a little bit of a man who had been thrust into a vast job by some accident of birth.

His eyes were ringed with dark shadows; his cheeks were hollower than Navarre remembered them as having been. He said, "Hello, Navarre," in a tired, husky voice that had none of the one-time splendor of an Overlord.

"I'm happy to be back, sire. My journey was a long and tiring one. I hope I didn't disturb your meditations by coming to you this way—"

"Of course not."

"Oh. Kausirn said you were too busy to be seen now." Navarre chose his words care-

fully. "He told me you regarded me as superfluous."

Joroiran frowned. "I don't recall your name having come up in discussion for the better part of a year," he said. "I recall no such decision. You've always been a valuable adjunct to the Court." The sudden pose of regality slipped away abruptly, and in a tired voice the Overlord said, "But then what I recall doesn't matter. Navarre, I should never have sent you from the court."

Despite himself, Navarre felt pity for the defeated-looking monarch. Evidently Kausirn had usurped more of the Overlord's power than Navarre had suspected.

"A year has passed since last I was here," said Navarre. "In that time—"

"In that time," Joroiran said mournfully, "Kausirn has taken increasing responsibility on himself. About my only remaining official duty is to hold the Threeday audiences—and were it not for public opinion, he'd soon be doing that himself."

Navarre's face took on an expression of shock. "You mean, sire, that he has taken advantage of my absence to seize some of your power?"

"Navarre, I'm little more than a prisoner in the Palace these days."

"He said you spent your time meditating, in serious contemplation," Navarre began.

"I?" Joroiran pointed to the endless rows of books, costly-bound volumes of great scarcity gathered by his father and his book-loving grandfather. "You know as well as I, Navarre, that I never touch these books. I stare at them day after day. They haunt me. They haunt me with their memories of the past—of Overlords who ruled, and were not ruled themselves." Joroiran flushed. "But I talk on too much, and perhaps I overestimate Kausirn's powers. I sent you on a mission. What of it?" Anticipation gleamed in the Overlord's sallow face.

"Failed," Navarre said bluntly, at once.

"Failed?"

"The Chalice is a hoax, a legend, a will-of-the-wisp. For a year I pursued it, searching trail after trail, always finding nothing but dreams and phantasms at the end. After a year of this I decided I could be of better use to your Majesty here on Jorus. I returned—and found *this*."

Joroiran's face was bleak. "I had hoped . . . perhaps . . . you might find the Chalice. But to live forever? Why?"



For what, now that . . ." He shook his head. "But you have come back. Perhaps things will change."

Impulsively Navarre seized the Overlord's hand. "I feared Kausirn's encroachments, but there was no way of pointing out the way of things to your Majesty a year ago. Now that I have returned and the pattern of events is clearer, I can help you. You let Kausirn poison your mind against me."

"A fool's error," Joroiran exclaimed.

"But not of permanent harm. The Vegan certainly will not be able to defy you openly once you restore me to your side—and together we can thrust him down."

Joroiran smiled. "Navarre, you'll be rewarded for this. I—"

The sudden sound of clicking relays made Navarre whirl. He spun to see the Overlord's door fly open. Kausirn stepped into the chamber.

"Away from that traitor, sire!"

Navarre stared into the snout of a sturdy blaster held firmly in the Vegan's polydactylous hand.

**F**OR HOW LONG has the Vegan held the right of un-

announced access to your Majesty's chambers, sire?" Navarre asked angrily.

Joroiran shrugged. "He insisted on it—as a safety move, he said."

Kausirn strode quickly forward and ordered Navarre to one side with a brusque gesture. Navarre obeyed; it was obvious Kausirn would relish an opportunity of using that blaster.

Suddenly Joroiran drew himself up and said, "Why the gun, Kausirn? This is most unseemly. Navarre is your fellow adviser as of this moment, and I won't tolerate your uncivil behavior in here."

*Good for him*, Navarre thought, smiling inwardly. He had succeeded in winning Joroiran over, then. But would it matter, with Kausirn armed?

Turning, the Vegan chuckled gravely. "I mean no disrespect, sire. This man is a deadly enemy of us all. He schemes not only your death but the conquest of the Cluster and of all the galaxy."

"Have you gone mad?" Joroiran demanded. "Navarre is loyal to me and always has been! Put down that weapon, Kausirn! Put it down!"

"Navarre is loyal but to himself," said the Vegan. "I

took the liberty of listening outside your Majesty's door for some moments. He told you, did he not, that he had failed to find the Chalice?"

"He told me that," Joroiran admitted. "What of it? The Chalice is a mere legend. It was foolish of me to send him chasing it. Had I not listened to you—"

"*The Chalice exists,*" said the Vegan tightly. "*And Navarre would use it as a weapon against you.*"

"He's mad," Navarre said. "I spent a year tracing the Chalice and found nothing but false trails. It was all a trick of yours to get me from Jorus, but—"

"Silence," the Vegan ordered. "Majesty, the Chalice is a crypt, located on the ancient planet Earth. It contained ten thousand sleepers—men and women of Earth, suspended since the days of Earth's empire. I tell you Navarre has wakened these sleepers and plans to make them the nucleus of a re-established Terran empire. He intends the destruction of Jorus and all other worlds that stand in his way."

Dumbstruck, Navarre had to fight to keep his mouth from sagging open in astonishment. How could Kausirn possibly know—?

"This is incredible," Navarre said. "Sleepers, indeed! Sire, I ask you—"

"There is no need for discussion," said Kausirn. "I have the proof with me." He drew a gleaming plastic message-cube from his tunic pocket and handed it to the Overlord. "Play this, sire. Then judge who betrays you and who seeks your welfare."

Taking the cube, Joroiran stepped aside and converted it to playback. Navarre strained his ears but was unable to pick up more than faint murmurs. When it was over, the ruler returned, glaring bitterly at Navarre.

"I hardly know which of you to trust less," he said somberly. "You, Kausirn, who have made a figurehead of me—or *you*, Navarre." He scowled. "Earthman, you came in here with sweet words—but I see from this cube that every word was a lie. You would help overthrow Kausirn only to place yourself in command. I never expected treachery from you, Navarre."

He turned to Kausirn. "Take him away," he ordered. "Have him killed. And do something about these ten thousand awakened Earthmen. Send a fleet to Earth to destroy them." Joroiran sounded near tears; he seemed to be chok-



ing back bitter sobs before each word. "And leave me alone. I don't want to see you any more today, Kausirn. Go run Jorus, and let me weep."

The little monarch looked from Kausirn to the stunned Earthman. "You are both betrayers. But at least Kausirn will let me have the pretense of ruling. Go. Away!"

"At once, sire," said the Vegan unctuously. He jabbed the blaster in Navarre's ribs. "Come with me, Earthman. The Overlord wishes privacy."

### CHAPTER III

THE LOWER DEPTHS of the Overlord's Palace were damp and musty—intentionally so, to increase a prisoner's discomfort. Navarre huddled moodily in a cell crusted with wall-lichens, listening to the steady pacing of the massive Daborian guard outside.

Not even Kausirn had cared to kill him in cold blood. Navarre hadn't expected mercy from the Vegan, but evidently Kausirn wished to observe the legal forms. There would be a public trial, its outcome carefully predetermined and its course well rehearsed, followed by Navarre's degradation and execution.

It made sense. A less devious planner than Kausirn might have gunned Navarre down in a dark alcove of the Palace and thereby rid himself of one dangerous enemy. But by the public exposure of Navarre's infamy, Kausirn would not only achieve the same end but also cast discredit on the entire line of Earthmen—a line still somewhat in favor among the people of Jorus.

Navarre cradled his head in his hands, feeling the tiny stubbles of upshooting hair. For a year, he had let his hair grow—the year he had spent in the distant galaxy of Earth and Procyon, where the ways of galactic culture had been left behind, where he was under no compulsion to display the universal trademark of the Earthman. His hair, thick, dark-brown, had sprouted. Helna Winstin, the female Earthman from Kariad—her hair had been red. And Domrik Carso had issued forth with a flax-yellow that contrasted curiously with his rich brown beard.

But at the end of the year, when the seeding of Procyon was done and already half a thousand new Earthmen had been born, Helna and Carso and Navarre had come together, and it had been decid-

ed that they should return to the main galaxy.

"It's best," Carso had growled. "You stay away too long, it's possible Joroiran may decide to trace you. You never can tell. If we remain here, we may draw suspicion to our project. We'll go back."

Helna had agreed. "I'll return to Kariad, you to Jorus. We can return to the confidences of our masters; perhaps we can turn that to some use in the days to come."

Navarre remembered that he had been reluctant to leave Earth, where the air was fresh and clean and he could walk freely with unshaven scalp. But finally he had agreed. Leaving Helna and Carso on Kariad—for Carso, under sentence of banishment from Jorus, feared to re-enter without permission—Navarre had come back.

And been trapped.

He wondered how Kausirn had found out his plans, how he had known that a new race of Earthmen was growing in Galaxy RGC 18347. It was too accurate to be a guess. Had they been followed this past year? Kausirn's assassins had nearly finished Carso and Navarre at the beginning of their quest; perhaps that had just been a blind.

Somehow his ten thousand would have to be warned. But first—escape.

**H**E SQUINTED through the murk at the Daborian guard who paced without. Daborians were fierce warriors, thought Navarre, but not overlong on brains. He eyed the tusked one's bulk appreciatively.

"Ho, old one, your teeth rot in your head!"

"Quiet, Sir Earthman. You are not to speak."

"Am I to take orders from a mouldering corpse of a warrior?" Navarre snapped waspishly. "Fie, old one. You frighten me not."

"I am ordered not to speak with you."

"For fear I'd befuddle your slender brain and escape, eh? Milord Kausirn has a low opinion of your kind, I fear. I remember him saying of old that your usefulness ends at the neck. Not so, moldy one?"

The Daborian whirled and peered angrily into Navarre's cell. His polished tusks glinted brightly. Navarre put a hand between the bars and tugged at the alien's painstakingly-combed beard. The Daborian howled.

"It surprises me the beard did not come off in my hand," Navarre said.



"Goad me not," muttered the Daborian. Navarre saw his jailer was approaching the boiling-point.

"Is it not true," asked Navarre, "that on Dabor a tuskless one such as you would be used as a kitchen-sculd rather than a warrior?"

The Daborian grunted and jabbed his fist through the bars; Navarre laughed, dancing lightly back. He offered three choice curses from the safety of the rear of his cell.

The Daborian, he knew, could rend him into quivering chunks if he ever got close enough. But that was not going to happen. Navarre stationed himself perhaps a yard from the bars and continued to rail at the guard.

Maddened, the Daborian reversed his gun and hammered at Navarre with its butt. The first wild swing came within an inch of laying open the Earthman's skull; on the second, Navarre seized the butt and tugged with sudden strength. He dragged it halfway from the guard's grasp, just enough to get his own hands on the firing stud.

The bewildered Daborian yelled just once before Navarre dissolved his face. A second blast finished off the electronic lock that sealed shut the cell.

Fifteen minutes later Navarre returned to the warm sunlight, a free man, in the garb of a Daborian guard.

**V**ERRU, the wigmaker of Dombriil Street, was a pale, wizened little old Joran who blinked seven or eight times as the stranger slipped into his shop, locking the door behind him and holding a finger to his lips for silence.

Wordlessly, Navarre slipped behind the counter, grasped the wigmaker's arm, and drew him back through the arras into his stockroom. There he said, "Sorry for the mystery, wigmaker. I feel the need for your services."

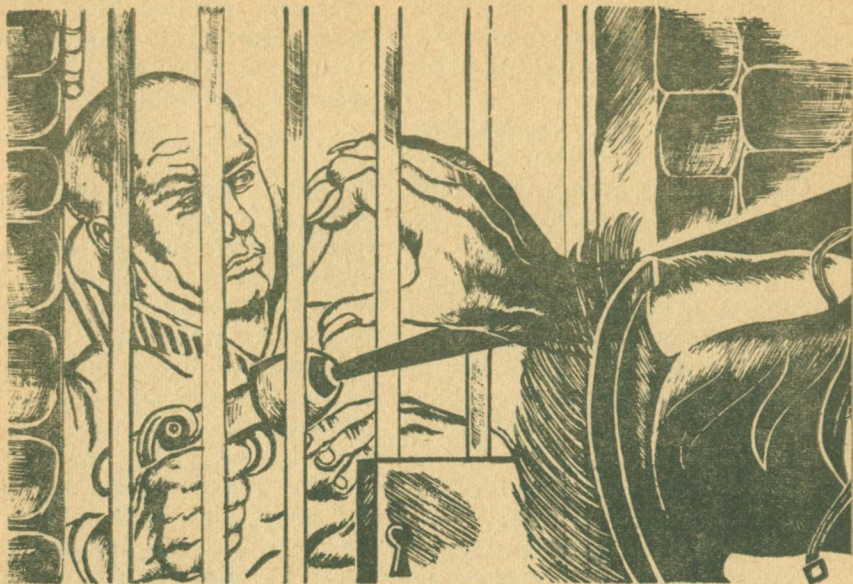
"You . . . are not a Daborian!"

"The face belies the uniform," Navarre said. He grinned, showing neat, even teeth. "My tusks do not meet the qualifications. Nor my scalp." He lifted his borrowed cap.

Verru's eyes widened. "An Earthman?"

"Indeed. I'm looking for a wig for—ah—a masquerade. Have you anything Kariadi in style?"

The trembling wigmaker said, "One moment." He hustled through a score or more of boxes before produc-



ing a glossy black headpiece. "Here!"

"Affix it for me," Navarre said.

Sighing, the wigmaker led him to a mirrored alcove and sealed the wig to his scalp. Navarre examined his reflection approvingly. In all but color, he might pass for a man of Kariad.

"Well done," he said. Reaching below his uniform for his money-pouch, he produced two green bills of Imperial scrip. One he handed to the wigmaker, saying, "This is for you. As for the other—go into the street and wait there until a Kariadi about my

size comes past. Then entice him somehow into your store, making use of the money."

"This is very irregular. Why must I do these things, Sir Earthman?"

"Because else I'll have you flayed. Now go!"

The wigmaker went. Navarre took up a station behind the shopkeeper's door, clutching his gun tightly, and waited.

Five minutes passed. Then he heard the wigmaker's voice outside, tremulous, unhappy.

"I beg you, friend. Step within my shop a while."

"Sorry, wigmaker. No need for your trade have I."





"Good sir, I ask it as a favor. I—have an order for a wig styled in your fashion. No, don't leave. I can make it worthwhile. Here. This will be yours if you'll let me sketch your hair-style. It will be but a moment's work..."

Navarre grinned. The wig-maker was shrewd.

"If it's only a moment, then. I guess it's worth a hundred units to me if you like my hair-style."

The door opened. Navarre drew back, let the wigmaker enter. He was followed by a Kariadi of about Navarre's size and build. Navarre brought his gun-butt down

with stunning force on the back of the Kariadi's head, and caught him as he fell.

"These crimes in my shop, Sir Earthman—"

"Are in the name of the Overlord," Navarre told the quivering wigmaker. He knelt over the unconscious Kariadi and began to strip away his clothing. "Lock your door," he ordered. "And get out your blue dyes. I have more work for you."

The job was done in thirty minutes. The Kariadi, by this time awake and angry, lay bound and gagged in the wig-maker's stockroom, clad in the oversize uniform of Joroiran's

Daborian guard. Navarre, a fine Kariadi blue from forehead to toes, and topped with a shining mop of black Kariadi hair, grinned at the grunting prisoner.

"You serve a noble cause, my friend. It was too bad you had to be treated so basely."

*"Mmph! Mgggl!"*

"Hush," Navarre whispered. He examined his image in the wigmaker's mirror. Resplendent in a tight-fitting Kariadi tunic, he scarcely recognized himself. He drew forth the Kariadi's wallet and extracted his money, including the hundred-unit Joran note the wigmaker had given him.

"Here," he said, stuffing the wad of bills under the Kariadi's leg. "I seek only your identity, not your cash." He added another hundred-unit note to the wad, gave yet another to the wigmaker, and said, "You will be watched. If you free him before an hour has elapsed, I'll have you flayed in Central Plaza."

"I'll keep him a month, Sir Earthman, if you command it." The wigmaker was green with fright.

"An hour will be sufficient, Verru. And a thousand thanks for your help in this matter." Giving the panicky old man a noble salute, Navarre adjusted his cape, unlocked the shop-

door, and stepped out into the street.

He hailed a passing jetcab.

"Take me to the spaceport," he said, in a Kariadi accent.

AS HE SUSPECTED, Kausirn had posted guards at the spaceport. He was stopped by a pair of sleek Joran secret-service men—he recognized the tiny emblem at their throats, having designed it himself in a time when he was more in favor on Jorus—and was asked to produce his papers.

He offered the passport he had taken from the Kariadi. They gave it a routine look-through and handed it back.

"How come the checkup?" he asked. "Someone back there said you were looking for a prisoner who escaped from the Overlord's jail. Any truth in that?"

"Where'd you hear that?"

Navarre shrugged innocently. "He was standing near the refreshment dials. Curious-looking fellow—he wore a hood, and kept his face turned away from me. Said the Overlord had captured some hot-shot criminal, or maybe it was an assassin, but he got away. Say, are Jorus' dungeons so easily unsealed?"

The secret-service men ex-



changed glances. "What color was this fellow?"

"Why, he was pink—like you Jorans. Or maybe he was an Earthman. He might have been bald under that hood, y'know. And I couldn't see his eyes. But he may still be there, if you're interested."

"We are. Thanks."

Navarre grinned wryly and moved on toward the ticket-booths as the secret-service men scooted off in the direction of the refreshment dials. He hoped they would have a merry time searching through the crowd.

Having passed the police screen, he entered the ticket-booths, reached a stat, and punched out his destination, Kariad. He slid his passport and a hundred-unit note into the slot and waited; moments later there came a ticket entitling him to one-way passage on the royal liner *Pride of Jor-us*, along with his passport and a few demi-units in change.

He gathered up money and papers and ticket and stepped through the gate toward the field itself. Looking back, he saw secret-service agents busily buttonholing people here and there in the line.

*Kausirn is probably nibbling his multitude of fingers to the bone*, Navarre thought. But

the fact that he was effecting a successful escape afforded him little joy. The Vegan knew of his plans, now—and the fledgling colonies of Earthmen in Galaxy RGC-18347 were in great danger.

He boarded the liner, cradled in, and awaited blastoff impatiently, consuming time by silently parsing the irregular Kariadi verbs.

#### CHAPTER IV

CUSTOMS-CHECK was swift and simple on Kariad. The Kariadi customs officers paid little attention to their own nationals; it was outworlders they kept watch for. Navarre merely handed over his passport, made out in the name of Melwod Finst, and nodded to the customs official's two or three brief questions. Since he had no baggage, he obviously had nothing to declare.

He moved on, into the spaceport. It was late afternoon on Kariad; Secundus, the yellow main-sequence sun of the double system, was high, while red giant Primus lay flattened at the horizon. Navarre had always thought it wasteful that a one-planet system should have two suns. The double stars together cast an almost purple glow, bordering on brown.

The money-changing booths lay straight ahead. He joined the line, reaching the slot twenty minutes later. He drew forth his remaining Joran money, some six hundred units, and fed it to the machine. Conversion was automatic; the changer clicked twice and spewed eight hundred and three Kariadi credit-bills back at him. He folded them into his wallet and moved on. There was no indication of pursuit this time.

He recalled his last trip to Kariad. Then, he and Carso had been chased by two assassins sent by Kausirn. Passing the weapons shop where they had eluded their pursuers, Navarre glanced up at the arcade roof; there was no sign of the damage that had been done earlier.

Deliberately he walked on through the crowded arcades for ten minutes more. Then, all seeming clear, he stepped into a public communicator booth, inserted a coin, and requested information.

The directory-robot grinned impersonally at him. "Yours to serve, good sir."

"I want the number of Helna Winstin, Earthman to the Court of Lord Marhaill."

His coins came clicking back. The robot said, after the moment's pause necessary to

fish the data from its sponge-platinum memory banks, "Four - oh - three - oh - six - K."

Quickly Navarre punched out the number. On the screen appeared a diamond-shaped insignia framing an elaborate scrollwork M. A female voice said, "Lord Marhaill's. With whom would you speak?"

"Helna Winstin. The Earthman to the Court."

"And who calls her?"

"Melwod Finst. I'm but newly returned from Jorus."

After a pause the Oligocrat's emblem dissolved. Helna Winstin's head and shoulders appeared on the screen. She looked outward at Navarre cautiously. Her face was pale, with sharp-rising cheekbones. She seemed to have shaved her scalp not long before.

"Milady, I am Melwod Finst of Kariad West. I crave a private audience with you at once."

"You'll have to make regular application. I'm very busy just now. You—"

Her eyes widened as the supposed Finst tugged at his foremost lock of hair, yanking it away from his scalp far enough to show where the blue skin color ended and where the pale white began. He replaced the lock, pressing it down to rebond it to his



scalp, and grinned. The grin was unmistakable.

"I have serious matters to discuss with you, milady," Navarre said. "My—seedling farm—is in serious danger. The crop is threatened by hostile ones. This concerns you, I believe."

She nodded. "I believe it does. Let us arrange an immediate meeting, Melwod Finst."

**T**HEY MET at the Two Suns, a refreshment-place not too far from the spaceport. Navarre, unfamiliar with Kariad, was not anxious to travel any great distance to meet Helna; since he was posing as an ostensible Kariadi, any undue lack of familiarity with his native world might seem suspicious.

He arrived at the place long before she did. They had arranged that he was to find her, not she him; not seeing her at any of the tables, he took a seat at the bar.

"Rum," he said. He knew better than to order the vile Kariadi beer.

He sat alone, nursing his drink, grunting noncommittally any time a local barfly attempted to engage him in conversation. Thirty minutes and three rums later, Helna arrived. She paused just in-

side the door of the place, standing regally erect, looking round.

Navarre slipped away from the bar and went up to her.

"Milady?"

She glanced inquisitively at him.

"I am Melwod Finst," he told her gravely. "Newly come from Jorus."

He led her to a table in the back, drew a coin from his pocket, and purchased thirty minutes of privacy. The dull blue of the force-screen sprang up around them. During the next half hour they could carouse undisturbed, or make love, or plot the destruction of the galaxy.

Helna said, "Why the disguise? Where have you been? What—"

"One question at a time, Helna. The disguise I needed in order to get off Jorus. My old rival Kausirn has placed me under sentence of death."

"How can he?"

"Because he knows our plan, and has painted me to Joroiran as a black villain."

"Which you are, of course."

"True. But they should never have found out. Kausirn's spies are more ingenious than we think. I heard him tell the Overlord everything—where we were, the secret of the Chalice, our

eventual hope of restoring Earth's empire."

"You denied it, of course?"

"I said it was madness. But he had some sort of documentary evidence he gave the Overlord, and Joroiran was immediately convinced. Just after I had won him over, too." He scowled. "I managed to escape and flee here in this guise, but we'll have to block them before they send a fleet out to eradicate the settlements on Earth and Procyon. Where's Carso?"

Helna shrugged. "He has taken cheap lodgings somewhere in the heart of the city, while waiting for word from you that his banishment is revoked. I see little of him these days."

"Small chance he'll get unbanished now," Navarre said. "Let's find him. The three of us will have to decide what's to be done."

He rose. Helna caught him by one wrist and gently tugged him back into his seat.

"Is the emergency so pressing?"

"Well—"

"We have twenty minutes more of privacy paid for; should we waste it? I haven't seen you in a month, Hallam."

"I guess twenty minutes won't matter much," he said, grinning.

**T**HEY FOUND CARSO later that day, sitting in a bar in downtown Kariad City, clutching a mug of Kariadi beer in his hand. The half-breed looked soiled and puffy-faced; his scalp was several days dark with hair, his bushy beard untrimmed and unkempt.

He looked up in sudden alarm as Helna's hand brushed lightly along his shoulder. "Hello," he grunted. Then, seeing Navarre, he said, "Who's your friend?"

"His name is Melwod Finst. I thought you'd be interested in meeting him."

Carso extended a grimy hand. "Pleased."

Navarre stared unhappily at Carso. Filthy, drunken, ragged-looking, there was little of the Earthman about him save the bald scalp. True enough, Carso was a half-breed, his mother an Earthwoman—but now he seemed to have brought to the fore the worst characteristics of his nameless, drunken Joran father. It was a sad sight.

He slipped in beside the halfbreed and gestured to the bowl of foul Kariadi beer. "I've never understood how you could drink that stuff, Domrik."

Carso wheeled heavily in his seat to look at Navarre. "I



didn't know we were on first-name terms, friend. But—wait! Speak again!"

"You're a bleary-eyed sot of a halfbreed," Navarre said in his natural voice.

Carso frowned. "That voice—your face—you remind me of someone. But he was not of Kariad."

"Nor am I," said Navarre. "Blue skin's a trapping easily acquired. As is a Kariadi wig."

Carso started to chuckle, bending low over the beer. At length he said, "You devil, you fooled me!"

"And many another," Navarre replied. "There's a price on my head on Jorus."

"Eh?" Carso was abruptly sober; the merriment drained from his coarse-featured face. "What's that you say? Are you out of favor with the Overlord? I was counting on you to have that foolish sentence of banishment revoked and—"

"Kausirn knows our plans. I barely got off Jorus alive; even Joroiran is against me. He ordered Kausirn to send a fleet to destroy the settlement on Earth."

Carso bowed his head. "Does he know where Earth is? After all, it wasn't easy for us to find it."

"I don't know," Navarre

said. He glanced at Helna. "We'll have to find the old librarian who gave us the lead. Keep him from helping anyone else."

"That's useless," Carso said. "If Kausirn knows about the Chalice and its contents, he also knows where the crypt was located and how to get there. At this moment the Joran fleets are probably blasting our settlements. Here. Have a drink. It was a fine empire while it lasted, wasn't it?"

"No Joran spacefleet has left the Cluster in the last month," Helna said, suddenly, quietly.

Navarre looked up. "How do you know?"

"Oligocrat Marhaill has reason to suspect the doings on Jorus," she said. "He keeps careful watch over the Joran military installations, and whenever a Joran battlefleet departs on maneuvers we are apprised of it. This information is routed through me on its way to Marhaill. And I tell you that the Joran fleet has been utterly quiet this past month."

Reddening, Navarre asked, "How long has this sort of observation been going on?"

"Four years, at least."

Navarre slammed the flat of his hand on the stained table-

top. "Four years! That means you penetrated my alleged defensive network with ease—and all the time I was trying to set up a spy-system on Kariad, and failing!" He eyed the girl with new respect. "How did you do it?"

She smiled. "Secret, Navarre, secret! Let's maintain the pretense: I'm Earthman to Marhaill's Court, you to Jorairan's. It wouldn't be ethical for me to speak of such matters to you."

"Well enough. But if the fleet's not left yet, that means one of two things—either they're about to leave, or else they don't know where to go!"

"I lean toward the latter," Carso said. "Earth's a misty place. I expect they're desperately combing the old legends now for some hint."

"If we were to obtain three Kariadi battle-cruisers," Helna mused aloud. "And ambush the Joran fleet as it came down on Earth—?"

"Could we?" Navarre asked.

"You're in Kariadi garb. What if I obtained an appointment in our space navy for you, Navarre? And then ordered you out with a secondary fleet on—ah—maneuvers? Say, to the vicinity of Earth?"

"And then I tell my crewmen that war has been de-

clared between Jorus and Kariad, and set them to destroying the unsuspecting Joran fleet!" Navarre went on.

"Not destroying," said Helna. "Capturing! We make sure your battlewagons are equipped with tractor-beams—and that way we add the Joran ships to our growing navy."

Carso nodded in approval. "It's the only way to save Earth. If you can handle the appointments, Helna."

"Marhaill is a busy man. I can handle him. Why, he was so delighted to see me return after a year's time that he didn't even ask me where I had been!"

Navarre frowned. "One problem. Suppose Kausirn *doesn't* know where Earth is? What if no Joran fleet shows up? I can't keep your Kariadi on maneuvers forever out there, waiting for the enemy."

"Suppose," said Helna, "we make sure Kausirn knows. Suppose we *tell* him."

Carso gasped. "I may have been drinking, but I can't be *that* drunk. Did you say you'd tell Kausirn where our settlements are?"

"I did. It'll remove the constant pressure of his potential threat. And it'll add a Joran fleet to a Kariadi one to form a nucleus of the new Terran



navy . . . if we handle the space-battle properly."

"And what if Kausirn sends the entire Joran armada out against your puny three ships? What then?"

"He won't," said Navarre. "It wouldn't be a logical thing to do. He'd expose Jorus to too many dangers."

"I don't like the idea," Carso insisted, peering moodily at the oily surface of his beer. "I don't like the idea at all."

## CHAPTER V

FOUR DAYS LATER Navarre, registered at the Hotel of the Red Sun, received an engraved summons to the Oligocrat's court, borne by a haughty Kariadi messenger in red wig and costly livery.

Navarre accepted the envelope and absently handed the courier a tip; insulted, the messenger drew back, sniffed at Navarre, and bowed stiffly. He left, looking deeply wounded.

Grinning, Navarre opened the summons. It said:

BY THESE PRESENTS  
BE IT KNOWN

*That Marhaill, Oligocrat of Kariad, does on behalf of himself and his fellow members of the Governing Council invite*

MELWOD FINST  
*of Kariad City to Court on the 7th instant of the current month.*

*The said Finst is therein to be installed in the Admiralty of the Navy of Kariad, by grace of private petition received and honored.*

The invitation was signed only with the Oligocrat's monogram, the scrollwork *M* within the diamond. But to the right of that, in light pencil, were the initials *H.W.*, scrawled in Helna's hand.

Navarre mounted the document on the mantel of his hotel room and mockingly bowed before it. "All hail, Admiral Finst! Melwod Finst of the Kariadi navy!"

He examined his makeup to see that the blue remained consistent and unblotched; the wigmaker had done a good job, though. He was still the impeccable model of a Kariadi gentleman.

Inspection over, he dialed Helna at the Oligocrat's Palace.

"Melwod Finst speaking. My invitation to Court came today, and I wish to tender my gratitude for securing this appointment for me."

"It was but your just desert," Helna said gravely.

"The rank of Admiral is not dispensed lightly. I hope to be seeing you at Court tomorrow."

"Indeed you will. And may I have the pleasure of dinner with milady tonight?"

COURT WAS CROWDED the following day when Navarre, in a rented court-costume, appeared to claim his Admiralty. The long throne-room was lined on both sides with courtiers, members of the government, curious onlookers who had wangled admission, and those about to be honored.

Marhaill, Oligocrat of Kariad, sat enthroned at the far end of the hall, sprawled awkwardly with his long legs jutting in separate directions. At his right sat Helna, befitting her rank as Earthman to the Court and chief adviser of Marhaill. On lesser thrones to both sides sat the eight members of the governing council, looking gloomy, dispirited, and bored. Their functions had atrophied; Kariad, once an authentic oligarchy, had retained the forms but not the manner of the ancient government. The governing council had value only as decoration.

But it was an imposing tableau.

Navarre stood impatiently

at attention for fifteen minutes, sweating under his court-costume—and praying fervently that his dye would not run—until the swelling sound of an electronic trumpet called the assemblage to order.

Marhaill rose. He was a gigantic man, almost seven feet high at Navarre's rough estimate. How much of that was built up in his footgear, Navarre could not judge; but he bore in mind that even Joroiran was an imposing figure when he chose to be.

The Oligocrat made a brief speech, welcoming all and sundry to Court, and finished by declaring that today was the day those who had performed meritorious service to the realm were to be rewarded. Helna surreptitiously slipped a scroll into his hands, and he began to read, in a deep, magnificently resonant voice which Navarre suspected was his own, and not simply magnified by a micro-amplifier embedded in his larynx.

Navarre counted. His name was the sixty-third to be called; preceding him came three other new admirals, four generals, seven ministers plenipotentiary, and assorted knights of the realm. Evidently Marhaill believed in main-



taining a good number of flashily-titled noble gentry on Kariad. It was a way of assuring loyalty and service, thought Navarre.

Finally:

"Melwod Finst. For meritorious services to the realm of Kariad, for abiding and long-standing loyalty to our throne, for generous and warm-hearted qualities and for skill in the arts of space. We show our deep gratitude by bestowing upon him the rank of Admiral in our Space Navy, with command of three vessels of war."

Navarre had been carefully coached in the procedure by Helna. When Marhaill concluded the citation, Navarre clicked his heels briskly, stepped from the audience, and advanced to the throne.

He gave a military salute. "Thanks to Your Grace." He knelt.

Marhaill leaned forward and draped a red-and-yellow sash over Navarre's shoulders.

"Rise, Admiral Melwod Finst of our Navy."

Rising, Navarre's eyes met those of Marhaill's. The Oligocrat's eyes were deep, searching—but were they searching enough to realize the new Admiral was a shaven Earthman, renegade from Jorus? It didn't seem that way.

The shadow of a smile flickered across Navarre's face as he made the expected genuflection and backed from the Oligocrat's throne. It was a strange destiny for an Earthman: Admiral of Kariad. But Navarre had long since learned to take the strange in stride.

He knelt again before Helna, showing the gratitude due his sponsor, and melted back into the crowd, standing now in the line of those who had been honored. Marhaill called the next name. Navarre adjusted his admiral's sash proudly, and, standing erect, watched the remainder of the ceremony with deep interest.

**A** GRAND FETE followed, at which the hundred-thirty-eight recipients of honors were granted a luxurious banquet in the Palace. Marhaill himself put in only a token appearance at the beginning; his place was taken by Gobrovir, a wizened little member of the governing council.

The food was good, the wine superb. Navarre sat as far from the other new admirals as he possibly could, planting himself among the ambassadors-designate at the lower end of the table. During the

vague period of after-dinner chatter before the breakup of the group, Navarre had his one close moment of the day.

That occurred when a balding but fierce-looking Kariadi in an admiral's red-and-yellow sash drifted toward Navarre, drink in hand.

"Melwod Finst, isn't it? I'm Admiral Jollin Garsignol, First Navy."

The new Admiral Finst muttered a greeting.

But Admiral Garsignol was persistent. "I can't quite seem to place you, Finst. You a First Navy man, by any chance?"

"Eh?" Navarre cupped his ear. "Speak up, please."

"I said, are you *First Navy*?"

Navarre considered that for a moment, before shaking his head. "No. Not."

He edged toward the bar, but Garsignol said, "Third, then? Seems to me I saw you in the Vallibin action, now that I think of it. Third?"

"My ears," Navarre explained loudly. "Suffered injury in last campaign. Haven't heard worth a damn since then. You just have to write things out if you want to ask me things, Admiral Gilsogno."

"*Garsignol*. I'll—oh, never mind."

Chuckling, Navarre helped

himself to another drink.

He escaped further questions on the part of his fellow admirals, and managed to leave the hall at a seemly hour, stomach well-filled, warm of heart.

Helna met him outside. "Your ships have already been assigned," she told him. "Three of the biggest cruisers we have. I'm having them specially refurbished for the occasion with ultrapowerful tractor-beams and whatever artillery can be scraped up."

"Good. Won't Marhail suspect anything, though?"

"Him? He's too busy with his current mistress to pay any attention to what goes on around him. I could requisition the whole planet over to you and he wouldn't find out about it for a week."

"When do I take over my command?"

"I'll show you the ships tomorrow. Then we send word to Kausirn—we can do that through regular spy channels—and take off for Galaxy 18347 to wait for the Joran ships to arrive."

Navarre nodded. "It sounds good. I think we'll swing it, after all."

"Somehow," she said. "Somehow—Admiral."

He returned to his hotel-room and spent the evening



reading. About midnight he felt the urge to celebrate, and put a call through to the lodgings of Domrik Carso. But the halfbreed was nowhere to be found, and Navarre, not caring to drink alone, went to sleep.

**T**HE MILITARY SPACEPORT closest to Kariad City was the home base of the Fifth Navy, and it was to this group that Helna had had Navarre assigned.

He reported promptly the following morning, introducing himself rather bluntly to the commanding officer of the base and requesting his ships. He was eyed somewhat askance; obviously he was not the first sheerly political appointee in the history of the Kariadi navy. In any event, a sullen-looking enlisted man drove Navarre out to the spaceport itself, where three massive battle-cruisers stood gleaming in the bright morning rays of Secundus, the yellow sun.

Navarre nearly whistled in surprise; he hadn't expected ships of this order of tonnage. He watched, delighted, as Kariadi spacemen swarmed over the three ships, getting them into shape for the forthcoming battle maneuvers.

They weren't expecting an actual battle, but from their enthusiasm and vigor Navarre knew they would be grateful for the opportunity just once to experience actual combat.

"Very nice," he commented, whenever any of the base officers asked his opinion of his command ships. "Excellent ships. Excellent."

He met his underofficers, none of whom seemed particularly impressed by their new commander. He shook hands coldly, rather flabbily. Since they all knew he was a political appointee, he was determined to act the part fully.

At noon he ate in the officers' supply room. He was in the midst of discussing his wholly fictitious background of tactical skills when a frightened young orderly burst in.

"What's the meaning of this disturbance?" Navarre demanded in a gruff voice.

"Are you Admiral Finst? Urgent message for Admiral Finst, sir. Came in over top-priority wires from the Palace just now."

"Finst" took the sealed message, slit it open, read it. It said:

COME BACK TO THE PAL-  
ACE AT ONCE. TREACHERY.  
SERIOUS DANGER THREAT-  
ENS. HELNA

"You look pale, Admiral," remarked an officer nearby.

"I've been summoned back to the Palace," said Navarre. "Urgent conference. Looks very serious, I'm afraid. They need me in a hurry."

Suddenly all eyes were on the political appointee who had in a moment shown his true importance. "What is it, Finst? Has war been declared?"

"I'm not at liberty to say anything now. Would you have a jet brought down for me? I must return to the Palace."

**H**ELNA WAS PALE and as close to tears as Navarre had ever seen her. She paced nervously through her private apartment in the Palace, telling the story to Navarre.

"It came through my spy-web," she said. "We were monitoring all calls from Kariad to Jorus, and they taped—this!"

She held out a tape. Navarre stared at it. "Do you always tape every call that goes through?"

"Hardly. But I suspected, and—here! Listen to it!"

She slipped the tape into a playback and activated the machine. The voice of an operator was heard, arranging a

subspace call from Kariad to Jorus, collect.

Then came the go-ahead. A voice Navarre recognized instantly as that of the Vegan Kausirn said, "Well? This call is expensive. Speak up!"

"Kausirn? This is Carso. I'm on Kariad. Got some news for you, Kausirn."

Navarre paled. *Carso?* Why was the halfbreed calling Kausirn? Suspicion gnawed numbly at him as he listened to the unfolding conversation.

"What do you have to tell me?" came the Vegan's icy voice.

"Two things. The location of Earth, and something else. The first will cost you twenty thousand units, the second thirty thousand."

"You drive a hard bargain, Carso. We have our own lead on Earth. Fifty thousand credits is no small amount for such information."

"You've heard the price, Kausirn. I don't really care, you know. I can manage. But you'll feel awful foolish when Navarre pulls what he's going to pull."

"Explain yourself."

"Fifty thousand credits, Kausirn."

A moment's silence. Then: "Very well. I'll meet your terms. Give me the information."



Carso's heavy chuckle was heard. "Cash first, talk later. Wire the money to the usual place. When it reaches me, I'll call you back—collect."

Kausirn's angry scowl was easy to imagine. "You'll get your filthy money," he said.

*Click!*

"That's all we got. The conversation was held at 1100 this morning," said Helna. "It takes about two hours to wire money from Jorus to Kariad. That means Carso won't be calling back for a half hour yet."

"I can't believe it," Navarre said. He clenched his blue-stained fists. "Carso? Selling out?"

"He was only a halfbreed," Helna said. "He didn't have the pure blood. He didn't care, he said. It was just a chance to get money. All the time he journeyed with us to Earth, he was doing it as a lark, a playful voyage. The man has the morals of an earthworm!"

Broodingly Navarre said, "He was banished for killing a tavern-keeper. He would have killed the old Genobonian librarian who helped us, had we not stopped him. Everything in his character was sullen and drunken and murderous, and he fooled us! We thought he was a sort of

noble savage, didn't we? And he's sold us out to the Vegan!"

"Not yet. We can still stop him."

"I know. But he's obviously the one who betrayed us to Kausirn while I was journeying back to Jorus; heaven knows why he didn't give Kausirn the coordinates for Earth while he was at it. I guess he was holding out for a higher price; that must be it! Well, Kausirn's met his price." Navarre glanced at the time. "Order a jetcab for me. I'm going to see Carso."

CARSO'S LODGINGS were in the center of Kariad City, in a dilapidated hotel that might have seen its best days during the time of the Starkings' League. There was something oppressively ancient about the street; it bore the weight of thousands of years.

Navarre kept careful check on the time. Helna's astonishingly efficient spy system was now monitoring the influx of wired cash from Jorus to Kariad, and she would arrange that the fifty thousand units from Kausirn would be delayed at least until 1300. The time was 1250 now.

Navarre left the cab half a block from Carso's lodging-

house, and covered the rest of the distance on foot. A tired-looking Brontallian porter slouched behind the desk in the lobby, huddled down reading a tattered fax-sheet. When Navarre entered, clad still in his admiral's uniform, the porter came to immediate attention.

Navarre laid a five-credit note on the desk. "Is there a Domrik Carso registered here?"

The porter squinted uncertainly, pocketed the five, and nodded. "Yes, Admiral."

"His room?"

Another five. "Seven-oh-six, Admiral."

Navarre smiled mildly. "Now give me the pass-key to his room."

The porter bristled. "Why, I can't do that, Admiral! It's against the law! It's—"

A third time Navarre's hand entered his pocket. The porter awaited a third five-credit note, but this time a deadly little blaster appeared. The Brontallian cowered back, clasping his webbed hands tightly.

"Give me the key," Navarre said.

Nodding vociferously, the porter handed Navarre a square planchet of copper stamped 706. Navarre smiled and gave the Brontallian the

third five. Turning, he moved silently toward the elevator.

If anything, the residence floors of the building were seedier and less reputable-looking than the lobby. Navarre waited, poised outside 706, blaster cupped innocently in the hollow of his palm. He had, it seemed, arrived at just the proper moment. He could hear Carso's voice as he tried to put through a collect call to Kausirn.

Minutes passed; the operator's voice was all but inaudible through the door. Once a drunk came out of 703, stared at Navarre, and reeled toward him.

"Eaveshdropper, eh? You know what we do—"

Navarre took three steps forward and caught the man by the throat. He tightened his grip; the drunk reddened. Navarre let go of him, hit him in the stomach, caught him as he toppled, and dragged him back into his room. Carso was still expostulating with the operator when Navarre returned to his post outside the door.

Finally a familiar thin voice said, "I take it you've received the money?"

"It came," Carso rumbled. "I'm delivering my end of the deal. Navarre left settlements on Earth—now called Veli-





doon by its inhabitants, and on Procyon IV, which used to be called Fendobar and is now Mundahl. These worlds are in Galaxy RGC18347. The co-ordinates are—"

Navarre listened as Carso offered a full and detailed set of instructions for reaching Earth. He tensed; timing now would be of the utmost importance. The bait had been cast. He had to stop Carso before the halfbreed told Kausirn how to avoid the hook.

Navarre touched his key to the platestud of the door, and it swung back, revealing Carso squatting before the televisor.

"Now, as to the second bit of information, Kausirn. It's simply this: Navarre and—"

Navarre threw the door open noisily. Carso sprang up, caught totally by surprise. Navarre raised his blaster and put a bolt through the televisor, cutting off an impatient expostulation on the part of Kausirn. Hefting the blaster speculatively, he looked at Carso.

"You've greatly disillusioned me, Domrik. I clung to the outmoded belief that Earthmen had a certain higher loyalty, even halfbreeds. Even the drop of Terran blood in their veins would—"

"What are you talking

about, Navarre? What's the idea of busting in here and wrecking the 'visor?"

Navarre tightened his grip on the gun. "Don't try to bluff. I listened to your conversation with Kausirn. I also heard your words of this morning. You sold us out, Domrik. For a stinking fifty thousand credits, you were willing to hand Earth and Procyon over to Kausirn's butchers."

Carso's eyes were angrily bloodshot. He had obviously been drinking heavily—to soothe his conscience, perhaps. He said, "I wondered how long it would take you to find out about me. Damn you and your pure blood lines, Navarre! You and all your Earthmen!"

He came barrelling heavily forward.

Navarre swung the blaster to one side and met Carso's charge with his shoulder. Carso grunted and kept on; he was a stocky man easily fifty pounds heavier than Navarre.

Navarre stepped back out of the way and jabbed the blaster into Carso's stomach. "Hold it, Domrik, or I'll open you up!"

Carso swung wildly at Navarre; the Earthman jumped back and fired. For a moment, Carso stood frozen in the



middle of the room, knees sagging slightly. He glared at Navarre as if in reproach, and dropped.

"I still don't believe it," Navarre said quietly. He slipped the blaster out of sight and left, locking the door behind him. He stopped for a beer at the dingy bar on the corner; forcing an entire mug of the nauseous stuff down his throat helped to ease the shock.

Then he dialed Helna. Briefly, he told her Carso was dead. Hanging up, he decided he needed another beer. His mind still had trouble accepting the fact that the halfbreed had been a traitor.

## CHAPTER VI

**I**N THE CONTROL CABIN of the Kariadi flagship *Pride of Kariad*, lurking just off the ringed world that was Sol VI, Admiral Melwod Finst, otherwise Earthman Hallam Navarre, sat behind a coruscating sweep of flashing screens.

"Any sign of the Joran ships yet?" he asked.

From the rear observation channel came the reply: "Not yet. We're looking."

"Good." He switched over to master communications and ordered a hookup with his number two ship, the *Jewel of*

*the Cluster*, lying in wait just off Procyon VII.

"*Jewel to Pride*. What goes?"

"Admiral Finst speaking. Any sign of a Joran offensive yet?"

"Not a one, sir. We're keeping the channel open to notify you of any attack."

"Right."

Navarre paced the length of the cabin and back. The constant inaction, now that they were actually here in the Sol system, was preying on his nerves. They were eight days out from Kariad; the hop had been made in due order two days after Carso's death, and even the mighty generators of the three battle-cruisers had required six days to cross the billion light-year gulf through hyperspace.

He had stationed one ship off the Procyon system, and his two remained in the Sol group, waiting for the Joran fleet to appear. The men knew they were to fight Jorus; they were primed for battle, keen for it. The communications network was kept open constantly. Whenever the ships of Jorus made their appearance, Navarre and his fleet would be ready.

Helna had remained on Kariad, controlling operations from that end. Her spies had

reported that Kausirn was sending a fleet to Earth; Navarre awaited it.

On the fifth day, his radar operator reported activity. "They're emerging from hyperspace at the very edge of the Sol system, sir. Four billion miles out, intersecting the orbit of Sol IX."

"Order battle stations," Navarre snapped to his aides. Flipping the master channel, he sent a command rifling along subspace to the *Jewel of the Cluster*: "Get here at once—or faster!"

The *Jewel* hopped. A passage of a mere eleven light-years was virtually instantaneous; within minutes a compact wedge of three Kar-iadi ships waited off ringed Sol VI for the oncoming Jorans.

"We're looking to capture, not to destroy. Our defensive screens are to be up at all times, and no shots are to be fired unless I give the order to do so."

Two of Navarre's aides exchanged glances as he delivered this order, but said nothing. Qualified or not, he was the Admiral, to be obeyed implicitly.

The fleet shifted into defensive position. Navarre ran a final check on the tractor-beams. All reported in work-

ing order at maximum intensity.

"Okay," he said. "They're heading inward on standard ion-drive. Formation A, at once."

**F**ORMATION A was a basket arrangement, the three ships swinging high into a triangular interlock and moving downward on the unsuspecting Joran ships. At that angle, the tractor-beams would be at their greatest efficiency.

Navarre himself remained at the master communications screens. He leaned forward intently, watching the dull black shapes of the three—only three!—Joran ships moving forward through space.

"Now!" he cried.

The bleak night of space was suddenly lit with the flaring tumult of tractor-beams: golden shafts of light lanced across the black of space, crashing down on the Joran ships, locking them tight.

The Jorans retaliated: their heavy-cycle guns swung into action, splashing megawatts of energy forth. But Navarre had ordered full defensive screens; the Joran guns were futile.

Navarre ordered contact made with the Joran flagship. Admiral Druik, eyes



blazing with rage, appeared on the screen.

"What does this mean? You Kariadi have no jurisdiction in this sector—are you looking to touch off a war between Jorus or Kariad? Or is there such a war already in progress, that we don't know about?"

"Jorus and Kariad are at peace, Admiral."

"Well, then? I demand you release us from traction at once!"

"Impossible. We need your ships for purposes of our own. We'll require immediate surrender."

Drulk stared at him. "Who are you?"

"Admiral Finst, of Kariad." Grinning he added, "You knew me at Joroiran's court as Hallam Navarre."

"The Earthman! But—"

"No buts, Admiral. Will you surrender—or do we have to tow you into the sun?"

**S**IX SHIPS stood nose-upward in the bright golden sun that warmed Terra. A hastily-constructed stockade contained six hundred bewildered prisoners, the original crews

of the Kariadi and Joran fleets.

It was a pleasant sight, Navarre thought, as he stood on the hillside in the hip-deep green grass. And he would never forget the look on the faces of his own men when Admiral Melwod Finst unwigged and wiped away the blue dye that turned a Kariadi Admiral into a sardonically-smiling Earthman.

The original six thousand sleepers now numbered more than eight thousand; many of the women were soon to bear their second children.

It would take time. But the dominion of Earth would be reborn through the galaxy—with six mighty battle-cruisers to serve as the first of its navy.

A subspace message was on its way across the galaxy to Kariad, to Helna, telling her of the victory. It would take five more days to reach her; so great was the size of the galaxy.

It would take time. But soon the sons of Earth again would rule the stars. The blue sweep of the sky overhead seemed to be promising it, as Navarre stared upward.



# MOON DUST

by Richard R. Smith

*"Red dog alert" meant there  
were enemy agents on the moon.  
And for Colonel Hughes, it meant  
a real chance to earn his stars!*

Illustrated by Martinez

FOR THE HUNDREDTH time, Colonel Hughes opened the box and looked at the two stars. He studied them very thoughtfully a few moments, then closed the small box for the hundredth time and placed it in a drawer.

They had said his promotion would be unofficial but assured him that when he reached the moon, he had permission to wear the stars. But it was a small honor: he had been chosen for the top secret operation because although he was a capable officer, his non-aggressive, ambitionless character was a type that espionage

agents paid little attention to. They had very frankly told him that and although it was the truth, it had hurt....

His thoughts were interrupted by the frantic buzzing of the telephone. Lifting the receiver, he said mechanically, "Headquarters Detachment, Colonel Hughes speaking."

He listened intently to the frantic voice and then broke the connection without warning by slamming the receiver in its cradle. A split second later he picked it up again and ordered, "Red dog alert!"

Moving faster than he had in years, he dropped the





phone and ran from the room. Once outside the door to his office, he sprinted down the narrow hall and opened one door after another while alarm bells began ringing with a deafening crescendo. The room behind the fourth door was occupied.

A dark-haired man stood with his back to a large control panel, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He turned toward the door when he heard it open.

To most observers, the man's reactions would have appeared normal, but Hughes had spent a lifetime watching men's faces while completely disregarding other physical actions. He had seen this automatic reaction many times before: the wrinkled forehead, the abruptly blanched face, the twitch of colorless lips, and eyes that suddenly widened.

He drew his automatic, aimed and fired in one swift motion. While the explosion echoed through the room, the man staggered backward, bounced off the maze of dials and crumpled to the floor.

**H**UGHES replaced the gun in its holster as Sheldon ran into the room. The blond-haired civilian exclaimed, "My God!"

and knelt to examine the dead man. He felt absently for a pulse and stared at Hughes as he moved toward the control board.

"Why'd you do it?"

Hughes' gray eyes surveyed the dials before him while he replied coldly, "He had a guilty look."

"A guilty look!" The public relations official backed toward the door and collided with a group of men who were entering the room.

"What happened?" someone asked.

"He killed him! Killed him because he had a guilty look! He's crazy. *Crazy!*"

Hughes finished his examination of the control board, deftly flipped various levers and turned to face the expectant group. He nodded at the corpse and explained, "He opened the outer tank valves and let most of our oxygen escape."

"How much?"

Instead of replying, he nodded at a nearby sergeant. "Find out, Hendricks. When you've finished that, have everyone make an inspection of every piece of equipment, supply room and launching station. Give me the results as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"For the benefit of those



who don't know," Hughes explained, "the code 'Red dog alert' means that our unit has been infiltrated by enemy agents. Everyone is to travel in groups of three or more and ten minutes after alert is declared—" He glanced at his watch. "—two minutes from now, anyone found *not* in a group is to be shot immediately and without question. That means *anyone*, whether he's your best buddy or your brother-in-law."

A FEW MINUTES later there was a meeting of the base's executive personnel. Twelve men were crowded in the small office and smoke from twelve cigarettes formed a fog-like haze that drifted lazily toward the air-conditioning unit.

When everyone saw their commanding officer intently studying some papers on his desk, they maintained a polite silence. But their superior did not see the papers before him. Instead he saw the barracks back on Earth where their group had lived together during a compatibility test. He remembered distinctly one night when someone had smuggled some whiskey into the barracks and he had stayed up half the night

drinking and talking with a likable dark-haired fellow.

He mentally cursed the luck that had made him commanding officer of the First Lunar Base. It was a general's job but they had chosen a colonel because a general's absence would be noticed and questioned too much. Some officers would have given their right arm to be in his shoes but his ambitions didn't go that far: he had joined the army solely for the pension and other benefits and didn't fool himself with false noble thoughts.

Why had they selected him? He knew he wasn't an incapable officer, but he had spent the last decade of his career in a training camp ordering men to pick up cigarette butts around the company area! Perhaps that was why they had picked him—it was harder to make men pick up trash under their feet than it was to make them fight for their lives. Perhaps the wheels had figured that if an officer was proficient in making men pick up cigarette butts, he could make them do *anything*. . . .

Putting the papers aside, he began, "From all appearances, Crisconi wasn't insane. Since he destroyed most of our air supply, there is only one conclusion . . . he was a traitor."

Sheldon cleared his throat noisily. "Colonel, there's a point that's not clear in my mind. How did you know Crisconi was emptying our oxygen tanks?"

"A guard outside the base saw the gas escaping and phoned." He continued rapidly, "If there was one enemy among us, there can be others. We have to assume there are more and decide upon a method of detection. With the Red Dog Alert, everyone has to travel in groups." He couldn't resist grinning. "Intelligence on Earth has calculated that, considering the degree of screening we've undergone, it will be difficult for two spies to get into a group of three and *impossible* for three to form one group. If that's correct, any foreign agent on Fort Lunar will have someone watching him constantly. The point is—"

The phone rang and he grabbed it. The excited voice on the other end was audible throughout the room, "Sir, every rocket has been sabotaged!"

"How?"

"A small pin in the gyroscope. I looked it up—it hasn't got a name. It's pin number 38-D, about two and a half inches—"

"Never mind that. Can the

pins be repaired?"

"No. They've been melted out of shape by an acetylene torch."

"Can they be replaced?"

"Yes, sir. But, the parts aren't in stock and it'd take at least two weeks to manufacture them."

"How much oxygen did we lose?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the voice replied slowly, "We have enough oxygen to last approximately one week."

Replacing the receiver, he relayed the message to the others. He hesitated, but there was no comment other than exchanged glances and grimaces. "That puts us in a bad situation," he said. "It would take two weeks to make the bombs operative again and there's only enough oxygen for a week. Originally we had enough oxygen to last two months, which allowed a margin of safety since our supply ship is due in a month. Now, the supply ship will arrive *after* we've run out of oxygen." He shrugged his shoulders and at the end of the gesture, they remained sagged as if the situation had become a physical weight. He minutely examined an aluminum paperweight as he toyed with it and admitted, "It looks



as if we're a bunch of wingless ducks in a rain barrel."

The situation reminded him of how Mary had reacted a long time ago when she learned he *didn't* want to go to Korea. She had been very young then and thought all soldiers wanted to fight for their country although some might not want to die for it. He had disillusioned her and explained curtly, "Mary, don't be silly. What man wants to go someplace where he might get his head shot off? I'll tell you. There's two kinds of men like that . . . *liars* and *fools*!"

He smiled at the memory. Mary had changed considerably during those years of his absence and now she would probably faint if she knew where he was.

"Isn't there some way to contact Earth so the supply ship will arrive within a week?" someone asked.

"There is *no* way," Hughes assured him. "We don't have a radio."

"Isn't there some way to contact them with flashes of light or something?"

Hughes chuckled. "We do have a fair stock of small flashlights."

"Well, can't we—"

"Across two hundred and forty thousand miles?"

Sheldon rose to his feet, his

face getting redder by the minute. "Will someone please explain why Fort Lunar isn't equipped with a radio? It seems to me that would be the most *important*—" He hesitated and looked challengingly from face to face.

"Our government concentrated on building one-way spaceships," Hughes explained. "It was costlier but faster than waiting for various problems to be worked out; and the race to the moon was important." He held a hand before him and counted on his fingers. "The first ship brought materials for ten rocket launching stations, their crews and supplies, two hundred bombs and ten half-tracks. That was the most important: to establish launching stations. The second ship was larger and brought the equipment for Fort Lunar, its staff and their supplies, equipment for twelve mines, men to operate the mines, their supplies and more bombs. There wasn't room on either ship for our radio—which is bigger than you'd imagine—or our oxygen-rejuvenating system, which is half the size of Fort Lunar.

"Those items, together with more bombs and other equipment, will be on the next ship."

SHELDON opened his mouth once more but Hughes waved a restraining hand. "Even if we did manage to contact Earth, it wouldn't do any good. It will take that ship a month to get here, working at *maximum* speed. Don't forget, this whole operation has top priority and everything about it is being rushed as much as possible."

Sheldon sat down and lit a cigarette with surprisingly steady fingers.

"So, that leaves only one alternative," Hughes continued, "which is purely defensive. As I said before, we have to decide how to detect other espionage agents."

He turned to face Lapasnick, the only psychiatrist on the moon. "How in hell could spies possibly get past the screening we had?"

Lapasnick did not inspire confidence as a psychiatrist. Afflicted with a physical ailment that made his eyes blink and a corner of his mouth twitch incessantly, he looked more like a prospective patient. He glanced self-consciously at the other men as he responded, "Ordinarily no foreign agent would get past our screening tests. But, this isn't a normal situation. Control of the moon means control of the Earth, and a gov-

ernment could afford to spend millions to train a few spies. It's the old story that you can do anything if you've got the money."

"How could any amount of money make a spy our secret service couldn't detect under ordinary circumstances?"

"This is merely a theory, Colonel. But . . . a government willing to spend millions on a few agents who might eventually net them world control could select certain men in the United States—" He waved a hand vaguely. "—like Crisconi. They wouldn't contact such a man openly, but could surround him with competent psychologists in positions where they'd be near him frequently. Positions such as school teacher, neighbor, friend, employer and blood relative. Agents in such positions could, over a period of years, by methodical application, develop a man's character into any desired form. They could mold his personality by creating thousands of minor and major incidents, making suggestions, implanting propaganda in his mind, emphasizing certain facts, nullifying others and exposing him to selected influences and situations. In such a way, a person's character could be



shaped so he wouldn't be unloyal when he took the screening tests, but would later develop into a traitor *when confronted with certain conditions that activated implanted thinking processes.*"

"Certain conditions such as being on the moon?"

"Exactly."

"That's fantastic," Sheldon jeered. "Such an operation would take a lifetime."

"Our enemy could have used a lifetime," the psychiatrist retorted. "It was known more than thirty years ago that we'd reach the moon first. Our enemy could have selected intelligent *children* and molded their characters until they were adults. And actually, foreign agents in the United States could have trained their own children!"

"Can you think of any other way that spies could have gotten past the screening?"

"I haven't thought of any other method so far."

"Assuming your theory is correct," Hughes inquired, "how can we detect such agents?"

The psychiatrist smiled apologetically. "Sir, without encephalographic equipment, it would take days to analyze one man."

Hughes shrugged his shoulders with an air of finality.

"Since the Eastern Federation plans to gain control of the moon and is making good progress, we must booby-trap every installation."

When the maps were spread on the desk, he studied them intently and said, "Major Rodowicz, you'll be in charge of this operation. All bombs are to be booby-trapped with as many variations as possible. We have three hundred." He paused to light a cigarette while his eyes remained focussed on a map. "Plant one in each of the launching stations, one in each mine shaft; put one in each of these locations—" He produced a red pencil and muttered as he marked the map, "Mare Imbrium, Mare Serenitatis, Grimaldi, Copernicus, Caucasus, Kepler, Eratosthenes, Appennines and Tycho. Scatter the rest on the other side of the moon." He drew another map before him and made rapid marks.

Major Rodowicz's thin face was puzzled. "But sir, planting bombs on the other side where the enemy probably won't explore until after—"

"That's my order," Hughes replied coldly. "Put all personnel on it immediately, except Sergeant Hendricks. Tell him to find a soft chair and keep an eye glued to the tele-

scope. If the Eastern Federation is on its way, there isn't much we can do—but it'll be nice to know when they arrive. Sheldon and Lapasnick, will you remain here, please?"

**W**HEN THE ROOM had cleared, he informed the two remaining men, "I'm going to give each of you an interesting problem I thought of. Your records show you both have a good knowledge of math, and I'm hoping you'll both arrive at the same answer. There's a possibility that one of you is a spy. If one answer differs from two identical others, I'll kill the man who submitted it slowly and painfully.

"That might seem harsh but you'll understand when you read the problem." He reached into a drawer and produced two envelopes. "In each envelope is all the data and a written explanation of the problem. You'll work here, one on either side of the room."

He held out the envelopes. After a slight hesitation, each man accepted one and went to chairs on opposite sides of the room.

Sheldon ripped open the envelope, glanced at the contents and spun in his chair to

stare unbelievably at the colonel. When he saw the other's expression, he slowly turned around and began working on the problem. Lapasnick's shoulders sagged visibly when he read the notes but he started on the calculations immediately.

When the room was quiet except for the faint whisper of pencils on paper, Hughes drew the drapes that covered the only window in Fort Lunar. Through the polarized glass, he watched the seemingly endless plain bathed in two hundred and fifty degrees of glaring light as three half-tracks crawled into view. They gathered speed and suddenly sped across the desert, leaving behind twisting clouds of pumice that rose hundreds of feet in the light gravity.

The half-track was the oddest vehicle he had ever seen: eighteen feet long, seven feet wide and twelve feet high. Because of the light gravity on the moon, its engine was small and compact while the greater part of its bulk was in the reinforced top that covered its entire length. The top-heavy construction that was a protection against meteors frequently caused the vehicles to turn upside down when climbing a steep cliff and they had quite naturally



earned the name "tumble-bugs."

He was often envious of the "tumble-bug" drivers who sped across the moon's surface and sometimes found himself wishing he could exchange places with one. Although the drivers had their problems, they were relatively simple, and the lives of many men did not depend upon their decisions.

When Sheldon and Lapasnick finished the calculations, he collected the papers and studied the answers carefully.

"Congratulations, gentlemen. I calculated the problem myself and all three solutions agree for the most part. Mine was slightly different but that's probably because I'm an inferior mathematician." He grinned and the others seemed to relax.

He glanced at his watch. "We don't have too long."

The phone erupted and he snatched it before it completed the first ring. "Sir, I just spotted an Eastern Federation ship. It'll reach the moon in about an hour."

"Are you sure it's an enemy ship?"

"Yes, sir. I know all the basic designs of our ships and—"

"How come you didn't spot it before this?"

"Well, sir, this telescope isn't very strong and it came toward the moon from—"

"I understand. Will you report to my office for further orders?"

When Hendricks arrived, he was surprised to find that the "further orders" were, "Have a seat."

Hughes opened a desk drawer and removed a bottle and glasses. "This occasion calls for a celebration, gentlemen. I have just the thing—top secret nerve medicine for commanding officers. It was given to me in strictest confidence but I don't suppose anyone will mind if we all use it to steady our nerves."

They all drank thirstily. The liquor formed a comfortable warmth in Hughes' stomach and after several drinks he felt some of the tenseness leave his body. As a precaution, he removed his automatic from its holster and placed it on the desk where it would be easier to reach if he became *too* relaxed.

Before long he had enough dutch courage to push the button that connected his intercom with every phone and loudspeaker on the moon. "Men, this is Colonel Hughes. I don't know how to say this in a gentle way, so I'll tell you

bluntly. We have approximately one hour to live. Sorry it had to end this way—it's been a pleasure working with you."

He hung up the phone reluctantly and cursed beneath his breath. Telling men they were going to die was a dirty job and there seemed to be no *right* way to do it.

Hendricks glanced at his watch and asked unbelievably, "We're going to die at seven-forty?"

Hughes nodded and couldn't resist smiling at the thought. He had no suicidal impulses but death would be a release from all responsibilities. He had reached a ripe age and after a full life he would die quickly with a minimum of pain instead of dying by degrees of senility. More than that, he realized with pride that he had fulfilled his job in such a way that he would be immortal. His name would be in the history books and whenever anyone looked at the skies for the rest of eternity, they would think of *him*. . . .

**T**AKING a generous drink from his tumbler, Hendricks coughed and inquired, "Sir, do you mind telling me *how* we're going to go out?"

"The truth is," Hughes replied slowly, "we're going to blow up the moon. Don't look at me like I'm crazy . . . there's three hundred atomic bombs out there . . . each more powerful than any ever before made. In my desk is an electronic device tuned to every bomb. It's a simple gadget, but when I press the button, all the bombs will explode simultaneously at their various locations. The shock will be too much for this ancient, brittle hunk of rock. It'll break into a million pieces."

Hendricks gestured to show his bewilderment. "Why destroy the moon?"

"If we're going to lose control," Hughes answered, "we should keep the Eastern Federation from gaining control. A short time from now, there will be nothing left of the moon but a lot of small, useless rocks."

He pointed toward a globe of the Earth on his desk. "Another reason is that, although most of the moon will be hurled toward outer space or form an orbit around Earth, a good portion will be thrown *toward* Earth. The smaller fragments will be burned up when they pass through the atmosphere but the larger ones will get through.

"I gave Sheldon and Lapas-



nick the mathematical problem of calculating at what time the moon should be exploded in order for those fragments to strike a particular location . . . namely, the Eastern Federation."

He spun the globe and stopped it by slapping it sharply with the palm of a hand. "A mass of rock half a mile in diameter weighs more than 10,000,000 tons. The moon's diameter is 2,160 miles so you might partly imagine what we're going to throw at our enemy. Most of that mass will strike the eastern hemisphere, specifically Russia. The fringes of the bombardment will be as far east as Germany, as far west as Japan and the Pacific Ocean, as far south as Australia and Africa and as far north as the Arctic Ocean.

"A lot of innocent people will be killed but the majority of casualties will be numbers of the Eastern Federation and the blow should cripple them so much that a global atomic war will be prevented. In the end, our action should save more lives than it takes. Do you understand?"

"I propose a toast to Colonel Hughes and his ingenuity," Sheldon said shakily as he rose to his feet.

They raised their glasses

and drank—with the exception of Sheldon. He slowly raised the tumbler to his face, then carried it farther back and hurled it.

Hughes ducked, but too late. The glass grazed the side of his head and knocked him backward.

Moving with the incredible speed of a man fighting for his life, Sheldon crossed the distance to the desk, grabbed the automatic and yanked open a desk drawer. Giggling insanely at the fantastic luck of finding what he wanted on the first try, he placed the electronic device on the desk and stepped back.

"You're not going to kill me, Colonel. I'd rather live with the hope of becoming a prisoner of war. *I don't want to die!*" As he spoke, his finger jerked spasmodically at the trigger.

Bullets struck the metal box and the group stared at the maze of broken tubes, wiring and tiny mechanisms.

Hughes rose to his feet and rubbed the bruise on his forehead. "I was ready for something like that," he said with a weak grin, "I pushed that button an hour ago. The electronic impulse has already reached the bombs and activated timing units. There's nothing anyone can do now."

Removing the eagle emblems from his shoulders, he found the two metal stars and fastened them in their place. For the first time in his career, he felt as if he had earned a promotion.

**G**ENERAL ZEDOBIN had watched the sky almost constantly since the moon had first exploded; and during this last day, while the population of Moscow was packed to overflowing in the air-raid shelters or fleeing the city, he remained on the balcony.

He sat quietly, as one might sit while watching a television play, occasionally smoking a cigarette or drinking from the bottle of vodka at his side. He had drunk a lot in the past few hours, but still remained perfectly sober.

The spectacle in the heavens fascinated him more than

anything he had ever seen. At first the moon had broken into no more than a hundred visible sections. But now, as the fragments neared the Earth, they continually separated into an ever-increasing number until the sky was filled with millions of meteors that constantly grew larger.

Being a good general, he had foreseen what would happen to his native country when the fantastic mass struck, and had fired every available rocket at the descending doom. The explosions in the stratosphere had been quite a sight—but as useless as a small bird beating against a boulder.

Realizing he had done everything he could, he closed his eyes and listened in awe as the sky became blindingly radiant and the air was filled with the roar of a billion thunderous hammers. . . .



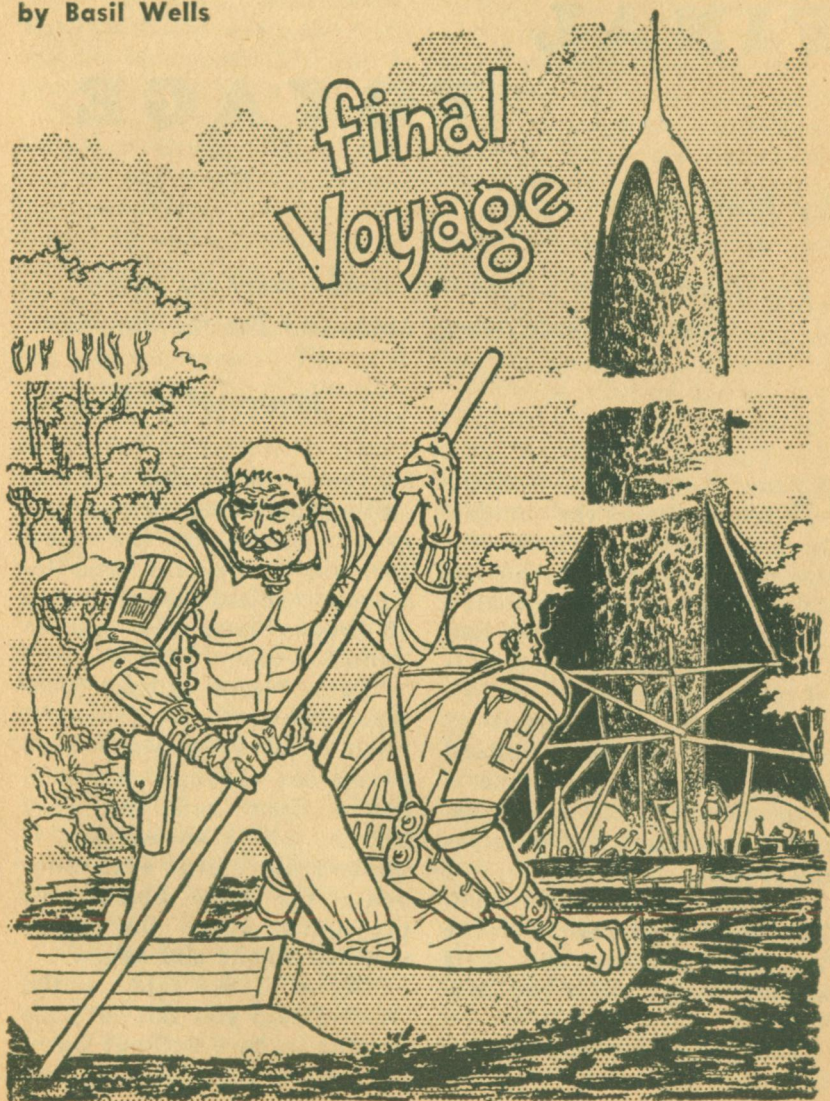
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by Basil Wells

# final Voyage



# FINAL

# VOYAGE

by Basil Wells

*The Janelace was a hulk that would never fly again.*

*Even I couldn't deny that—and I'm the Janelace!*

Illustrated by Bowman

**M**YRA LACEY came swiftly down along the muddy ditch of trail that links the spaceport dump with the native city. Grayish ooze coated her plastic mudalls and had splashed as high as her shielded, pert-nosed face.

She clawed frantically at my outer lock. As she stumbled inside, for the first time I sensed the vibrations of distant flame blasts and paralyzing lectros.

I knew what that meant. The threatened revolt of the Venusian colonists and their native "Frog" allies had broken out.

The girl's feet raced across the inner lock and I felt her

hurrying down my empty, rusting corridors toward my galley. As she ran, she threw back the transparent hood designed to shield her wavy mop of bronze from the endless Venusian rain.

"Peter!" she called. "Volcano—Brand!"

An unlovely scrawny neck poked out through my open galley door and the gray bearded old head capping it blinked water gray eyes. Suddenly the huge black pipe projecting from the beard vomited smoke and ashes.

"Myra," he said sadly, "ain't I told you not to come busting in here without warning? Here I be wearing just



my pants and undershirt. No way to greet the owner of the *Janelace*."

"Volcano!" gasped the girl, "the rebellion has come. They've taken over the city and the spaceport. The Earth garrison won't last a day."

"Nice going," applauded Volcano Manby, his loose-jointed old frame straightening painfully, "maybe now they'll be work enough to go around. About time Venus was free."

"But Volcano, they're mining the spaceport!" The girl was breathless. "Don't you understand? My brother Ralph's with the Earth fleet. Due here next week, all four ships. The rebels will mine the landing port—blow them up!"

"Myra!" The dark-eyed young man came up behind her with his quick hitching gait. Captain Peter Durfee had lost his leg in a power explosion just off Ganymede, an explosion that had cost him his ship and his job with Planetary Trading. Since then he had been living here in my old rusting hulk with two other unemployed spacers, Volcano and squatty Brand Parker.

"We've got to warn them, Peter." Myra's fingers clamped Durfee's arm nervously. "They've stripped all the space freighters in port of their fuel

mixers; they can't take off. I thought maybe your radio beam . . ."

Durfee shook his head. His straight lips tightened. "I'm sorry, Myra," he said. "So far all my experiments have bumped into a blank wall. I can't punch through the Heavyside. Once in space the beam will carry messages for an unlimited distance, depending on the power of the impulse, but we are not in space."

"And won't be," said Myra bitterly. "If only the *Janelace* were in shape for a takeoff."

Volcano cleared his throat. "The old *Janelace*'d take off now," he said, "if we only had a goop mixer. We been working on the old tub these last three years, Myra, patching up the plates and trimming the jets. She'd carry us out into space easy."

"But we have no mixer." Durfee frowned and snapped his fingertips at a fraying cuff. "If the Frogs and the colonists have seized all the mixers, the *Janelace* is helpless."

"Couldn't we blast off with manual controls?" Myra demanded.

"And get the life jarred out of us with every blast even if the jets didn't explode?" Durfee shook his head. "Human bones will stand only so much. The rocket fuel must be fed

into the jets in mathematically exact proportions at exact intervals—that's why we need that robot control."

"Nothing to worry about," a deep hoarse voice roared at Myra's elbow, and Brand Parker's squatty scarred body bow-legged past her to face the trio. "Nothing to worry about," he repeated with a blink of his one good eye.

"What do you mean, Brand?" Durfee snapped. "Not that I love the Earth fleet so much, but this trap the rebels are planning turns my stomach. When Earth learns of it they'll really bomb the life out of Venus. If we can prevent the fleet's destruction, Earth may grant us independence—"

"The *Janelace*'ll take off again," grinned Brand lopsidedly through his ragged pinkish moustache, "yep, she'll take off again."

**T**HE THOUGHT of being in space again made me forget for the moment the conversation of the humans inside my clumsy bulk. A ship in the course of thirty or forty years of use in space absorbs the personalities and knowledge of her crews in a way that's hard to explain. Perhaps it's the action of the unshielded radiations out there in the blessed

weightlessness of space, or perhaps . . .

So here I lay in the lowlands below the plateau island of Tular with the thidin vines covering my scaling plates and the ugly debris of Tular City's city dump heaped around me, and I was dreaming of the chill airlessness of space. I'd still be blasting along out there, I reflected bitterly, if Planetary Trading hadn't planted one of their men on board to wreck my controls as we braked down for a landing here on Tular.

I'd been the last of Corwin Lacey's fleet of spacers to go, and when Corwin Lacey was killed in my final crash his daughter had found work as a waitress in one of Tular City's smelly cafes. With the stubborn pride of the Laceys, she and her brother had refused to sell my broken hulk for scrap. Someday they had hoped to repair my shattered drive mechanisms and again blast spaceward. Only two of the crew had stayed with me. Old Volcano Manby, the cook, and Brand Parker, a tube man. Later, they had brought a broken, drink-fogged wreck of a man to live with them in their quarters—the now trim-looking, graying-haired young captain without a ship, Peter Durfee.

And for three long years I'd



wallowed in the sour smell of gray Venusian mudland with the scaly yellow *vallids* scabbling lizard-like across my plates and nesting in my rocket tubes, while the *nik-nik* brush and snaky twining thid-in vines closed in to bury me from the sight of men. . . .

**"B**RAND, YOU dirty pirate!" Captain Durfee's voice was suddenly more alive and vibrant with excitement than I had ever heard it before. "Not that I blame you for not reporting your discovery of that missing Planetary freighter before, but—ten crated mixers!"

"Wouldn't have got more than fifty credits reward for finding them," grumpled Brand. "No more than fifty. Nope. Wouldn't buy another mixer for the *Janelace*."

"This may save Ralph's neck, and block a real war with Earth, Myra!" Durfee's arm was tight around the girl's waist, and she seemed pleased that it was there. I may be a welded conglomeration of metal and plastics, but I know what love means. They were just finding out.

Volcano grumbled. His pipe had gone out, and he was laddling a new charge of home-grown greenish tobacco into

its amazingly capacious maw.

"A goop mixer weighs quarter of a ton," he said. "You said the wreck's three miles out in the swamp. How do we get one of them here? Fly it out? Or hire a half dozen swamp Frogs to freight it out on their backs?"

"We'll use mud boats." Captain Durfee's voice was crisp and incisive. "Today we'll check over the ship and get it ready for space. I imagine the *vallids* have fouled up the jets again with their nests; they'll have to be cleaned out. Check up on the two spacesuits, Brand, we may need them if the *Janelace* cracks open on the takeoff."

"Do I smell something burning?" Myra wrinkled her generous uptilted nose.

"My stew!" Volcano dashed madly into the galley.

"You boys haven't eaten yet?" Myra smiled. "Of course not. I came back from the city when I first heard the news. The boss will be firing me if I don't hurry back."

"He'll never miss you." Durfee laughed. "There'll be so much excitement in Tular City today that there'll be no eating. Better stick around for lunch."

"What you having, Volcano?" Myra called.

"Vallid steaks and stew,"

Volcano admitted gloomily.

"With thidin shoots and nik-nik fruit on the side," groaned Durfee. "That's our regular diet here aboard the *Janelace*. If it wasn't for the stale bread and cakes Brand wangles from the wife of some city baker we'd get indigestion."

"Why, Brand!" Myra grinned cheerfully at the tubeman's reddening face. "I'm learning a lot about you today."

She turned to Durfee. "Sorry, Peter," she said sweetly, "but I think I'll eat at the cafe today. I'll get enough swamp food after we blast off for Earth."

With a squeeze of Durfee's arm she was gone back along my corridor. She adjusted the transparent hood of her mudalls as she opened my outer lock and went out into the misty thickness of the outer atmosphere.

"She thinks we'll take her along!" Durfee rubbed at his bleached-out square chin. "But she can't go. I doubt if we have fuel enough to more than escape Venus' drag. There'll be no landing on Earth or any other planet."

"One way trip?" Brand scratched at his scraggly pink locks with a thick-nailed thumb. "Oh well, suits me fine,

just fine. Be good to see the stars again. Stars and sun. Good place to die. Yep, good place."

Volcano's pipe jutted around the door-frame. Smoke belched. "Ain't you spacers hungry?" he demanded. "Fill up. We got plenty work to do."

"**L**EAVE the dishes, Volcano." Durfee was strapping on one of his ancient revolvers, one of the dozens salvaged from the tons of debris heaped around my resting place. "We're going out to take a look at the wreck."

"Follow my directions carefully," warned Brand, "in this everlasting fog you can lose your way easily. Lose it very easily. Maybe I better go along. Maybe I better."

"You have work enough here checking the tubes and the wiring," said Captain Durfee as he zippered shut the front of his patched yellowish mudalls. "If you get all the vallid nests dug out before we get back, you can gather thidin shoots, mush roots, and shoot a few more vallids."

"Yessir," said Brand. Now that an emergency had come the old easy relationship was gone. Durfee was the captain now.

Volcano struggled and wrig-



gled his lanky warped old body into another of the yellowed plastic envelopes that are standard equipment for mudland colonists on Venus, and with his unlit pipe clenched between his teeth followed Durfee out of the galley. I saw them go down to the vine-hidden dock where their two flat-bottomed swamp boats were tied, and then the swirling grayish mist swallowed them.

Deep down inside my vitals, Brand worked with wrenches and blowtorch. He checked over the crude but sturdy repairs they had made upon my twisted plates and framework. He tested the circuits that operated the emergency locks and the individual fire controls of each of my sixty-seven major and minor jets. And on the swivel joints of the dozens of hydroponic tanks, where the oxygen-freeing green growths of three worlds luxuriated, he squirted oil.

Then he went outside to check my jets. The wooden plugs that sealed off their narrow mouths were covered with fungus and purple mould, so he did not touch them; but half a dozen of my main jets had been invaded by the lizard-like vallids and these he set about ejecting from their snug nests. Brand knew that

any obstruction, even the eggs or bony-plated body of a vallid, might cause the rocket tubes to explode. The jets must be cleared of all foreign matter.

Brand grinned suddenly, his scarred face twisting. "They hate smoke," he said, "especially tobacco smoke. Yep, tobacco smoke. Remember when Volcano drove off half a dozen of 'em with that pipe of his."

A quick trip back into his quarters yielded about four pounds of the flaky green-leaved tobacco that Volcano smoked. This he divided into six piles and heaped deep inside the tubes. A moment later six trickles of acrid smoke rolled sluggishly out into the shifting dank fog.

The tube man scurried for the shelter of my outer lock—nor was he a moment too soon. For from the jets' interiors vallids came boiling out, great five-foot lengths of black-splotched yellowish ferocity with snaggle-toothed long snouts gaping savagely. Behind the males came the shorter-snouted females, their eight stubby legs clawing them along, and their jaws champing angrily as they kept up an eternal complaining whistle.

Most of the vallids headed

for the swamplands at once but two of the more persistent required a touch or two of Brand's flameblast before they retreated. After that it was a simple matter to rake out the empty nests, and the few lopsided reddish eggs in two of them, before turning an air hose into the jets.

Brand plugged the cleaned jets before he left, and spent the remainder of the day polishing up my corroded control-room metal. From time to time he peered out the porthole facing the landing dock, and by chance saw the return of Durfee and Volcano Manby.

They were not alone. Five of the short, gray-skinned Frogs, the naked web-footed natives of the Venusian swamplands, were with them, and balanced on a framework linking the two mud boats sat the crated cube that was a fuel mixer!

He hurried down the soupy slope to join them as they brought the boats ashore. With the help of the natives the mixer was on the semi-solid mud of the landing before he reached them.

"We'll be blasting off in the morning," said Durfee tautly.

"How about the natives?" Brand asked, frowning. "Won't they report our having a goop mixer? Won't they?"

"These are swampers." Durfee barked something at the Venusians in their native tongue and they heaved up on the poles lashed across the mixer's bulk. "They don't know there's been a revolt yet. By the time they do report us we'll be gone—or dead!"

The five Venusians and the three Earthmen staggered up the sticky slope, their feet sinking deep into the quaggy gray soil. Once they reached the cargo lock, however, Durfee ordered the mixer set down.

"Go get your tobacco, Volcano," ordered Captain Durfee. "About a pound for each man. And give them five of those necklaces you've been making of plastic bottle tops."

"**L**UCKY I HAD another four pounds of tobacco stored away," said Volcano half an hour later as they eased the mixer down upon its permanent mountings in the engine room. "Those Frogs cleaned out the rest of it."

Brand chuckled, choked and then snorted loudly again. "You'll be sucking a dry pipe this flight, Volcano," he said. "I used that extra tobacco you had hidden to smoke out the vallids."

Volcano lunged at the



squatty spaceman, his long legs tripping over the rollers they had used in transporting the mixer from the cargo lock. He sprawled into Brand, knocking him down too. They rolled over and over on the deck, the waterproof strips of the mixer's protective envelope tangling around them stickily. Brand's fists thudded meatily into Volcano's skinny ribs, and the lanky cook's sharp elbows jabbed savagely into Brand's sides and face.

Durfee reached down and jerked the two men apart. He grinned boyishly, his face shedding for the moment the dour lines gained in the preceding gloomy four years.

"Won't you ever grow up?" he demanded. "Go out and get some nik-nik leaves, Volcano. You used to smoke them before you started growing your own tobacco."

Volcano growled something under his breath and headed for the galley.

"Let's get this mixer hooked up tonight, Brand," said Durfee, "so if we have to blast off in the forenoon, after Myra leaves for work, we'll be ready to go."

"Only," he paused and his dark eyes were pained. "Don't tell her we're ready to leave. Let her think she's going with us."

**B**UT WITH the steaming morning light of the hidden sun I knew that Myra was destined to go with us on our mad flight into outer space. For, from the mile-distant barrier that surrounded the spaceport, a column of armed Frogs and revolting colonists was marching raggedly toward us.

I tried to warn Volcano as he worked over his stove in the galley, but the creaking of a slightly loosened girder and the rattle of an electrical cable beneath my deck could carry no message to the lanky old cook's hairy ears.

He was grumbling as he sucked at his empty pipe, and when he put down a dish he landed it with an emphatic slam. And the party of rebellious Venusians was slogging steadily nearer.

Captain Peter Durfee was working over a chart in the navigation blister. A filing cabinet was bolted to the deck behind him and I fought the worn bolt that secured its left corner. Suddenly the metal parted and Durfee's head snapped up with the sound. His eyes glanced momentarily outside, as I had hoped they would, and he saw the shadowy outlines of the approaching force.

He snapped over the worn switch of the intercommunication system and pressed the little red stud in its side. The staccato buzz of the general alarm echoed through the metal hollowness of my four hundred feet of rusting metal—the signal to prepare to abandon ship, or prepare for crash landing.

"Brand!" he barked into the mouthpiece, "we've got to unplug the main jets. Don't bother with the auxils; we can remove them in space if the cold doesn't shrink them enough to drop out. I'll take care of the braking jets in the bow.

"Volcano!" He waited for the cook's reply. "There's a party of Venusians coming. Get one of the converted gas rifles and cover me when I try to free the braking jets. Don't shoot to kill; we're on their side only they don't know it."

Under his breath Durfee cursed as he snapped off the switch. If only he had insisted that Myra Lacey get a room in Tular City, rather than keep on living aboard . . .

He slipped into his plastic mud gear and ran out of my forward lock, a hammer and short pointed bar in his hands. Quickly he drove the bar into one of my sealed tubes with a rap of the hammer and jerked

at the plug. With a plop the plug came free, and he hurried on to my next braking jet.

Ten of the twelve jets in my blunt bow were free when the Venusians came within range. They came forward then at the double, their flame blasts breathing searing yellow jets, and their paralyzing lectros snapping and crackling as their invisible bolts of energy lashed out at Durfee. Pale nik-nik brush and the pulpy purple-veined vines of thidin blackened and withered all around Durfee but the young spacer doggedly worked away at his task of clearing the jets.

The cough of a gas gun, one of the ancient rifles equipped with a pressure tank of rocket fuel instead of utilizing water-hungry gunpowder, sounded then, and sudden bursts of explosive bullets threw up jets of mud in the attackers' faces. They hugged the ground, slithering quickly into the water-filled depressions that would afford some measure of protection. Old Volcano Man-boy was in action at last.

Durfee cleared the last two jets quickly, and jumping down from the half-rotten scaffolding of poles that reached almost to my forward control blister, he raced back toward the main driving jets.



For there had come the fog-muffled sounds of battle from there.

A party of Frogs had circled down along the swamp and come by boat to take Brand by surprise from the rear. The jets were clear, but Brand crouched behind a spongy fallen log while the Frogs poured a barrage of flame at his shelter. Steam poured upward, but as yet Brand was untouched.

Captain Durfee shouted as he rounded the blunt swell of my side, tugging at the rebuilt old revolver, also gas-operated, in his waterproof holster. The Frogs lost all stomach for battle as he poured explosive bullets in their general direction, and they headed back toward the swamp.

"Let's go, Brand!" shouted Durfee yanking at the dazed oldster's shoulder.

Brand weaved to his feet, sweat pouring down his face and soaking his ragged pink moustache. He blinked his one good eye. Steam was yet pouring from his patched mudalls.

"Broiled like a lobster," he whispered hoarsely. "Broiled alive."

**D**URFEE fed a warming blast into my jets. I felt new life quiver through my ancient frame, and I sensed the insid-

ious tug of the swamp mud at my lower plates. Volcano climbed down from the upper blister where he had been holding off the attackers and hurried into my galley. There were loose dishes to be battered down before the take-off. And Myra Lacey strapped herself into one of the worn pressure seats in my control room ready for the initial shock of the blast-off.

"First pancakes in two months," grumbled Volcano, champing savagely at his lifeless pipe, "and we can't eat 'em."

"I hope that number five doesn't blow," muttered Brand uneasily as he checked the gauges deep down in my vitals, "we patched her up as best we could but . . ."

"Ready, darling?" asked Durfee as he sent another, hotter, blast roaring out into the sticky dankness of the mudlands.

"Any time," smiled Myra. She bit her lip. "Blast off," she said, "any time you're ready, Peter."

"Volcano—Brand," Durfee said crisply into the intercom mouthpiece, "blasting off."

His hand tugged downward gently on the controls that linked with the mixer. The blasting of my jets deepened and steadied. I quivered and

fought back at the hungry fingers of the swamp. The slimy mud slipped suddenly from my rusty old plates and the rotted scaffolding at my bow crumpled as I surged skyward at an almost horizontal angle.

Steering jets thundered at Durfee's trained touch. I curved upward more steeply, the endless clouds of Venus smothering all vision of what lay behind us. I felt a main drive tube explode, but I bored onward. I was empty, my cargo bins hollow and my fuel tanks less than a third full. When I was younger three jets could have carried me beyond the tug of Venusian gravity.

"We'll chart a course about Venus," Durfee was saying breathlessly, "that will make the *Janelace* a satellite. Then when the Earth fleet comes within range of my radio beam we can warn them."

He smiled rather grimly at Myra. "That's providing the *Janelace* holds together long enough to reach such an orbit," he added.

And at that moment, as the secondary cloud envelope of Venus thinned and the sun shone through, I felt my plates grinding and my inner girders twisting. The stress of the blastoff, and now the sudden decrease in the outer atmos-

pheric pressure on my weakened structure, was too much for me. Great sections of my skin ripped free. Air hissed out through a thousand rents, and automatic doors clanged shut. Alarm lights blinked. Buzzers went mad.

The control room was intact, and down in the tube room Brand was clamping shut the helmet of one of the two spacesuits hanging there. He yelped through the intercom that he was all right.

"How about you, Volcano?" Durfee asked.

He heard a connected string of warmly purple space oaths. "I'll be okay," he roared, "if these pancakes hold out."

"Pancakes!" gasped Captain Durfee blankly.

"Yep." The sound of teeth grinding on a pipestem was plainly audible. "I'm plastering them on the leaks. They freeze fast as the air pressure squeezes 'em through."

Durfee laughed. "Once we hit our orbit we'll rig up some low pressure patches and link the galley and the control room together. Until then keep the pancakes working."

"Yes, sir!" agreed Volcano emphatically. "I will!"

**A** MATTER of twenty-four hours later a cruiser out near



Lunar, pirate-patrolling, answered Captain Durfee's beamed radio call, and a rescue ship, a freighter, headed in our direction. The warning of the Venusian rebels' trap was relayed to Earth by means of a speedy two-man jetter. And word was flashed back along Durfee's beam that Venus had been granted autonomy only three days before by the World Union! Their rebellion had been needless!

The unshielded sun of space felt good on my old plates. There was no relentless drag of gravity here to warp and strain my weary framework. Drowsily I heard Captain Durfee and Myra, talking with their heads very close together.

"The beam will make you wealthy," Myra was saying. "You can buy another freighter and we'll recommission the *Janelace*. We'll show Planetary Trading we're a long way from being licked."

Durfee shook his head. His arm tightened around Myra. "No, dear," he said. "The *Janelace* has made her last voyage. We're going to hook a solar reflector on her and

leave her here to circle Venus eternally. She's earned that.

"We'll come out to visit her occasionally, and we'll tell our grandchildren how she averted a war between Earth and Venus."

Down in the galley Brand laughed and slapped a stubby-fingered hand against his bow-legs. Volcano snarled, his pipe bobbling angrily. The smell of the nik-nik leaves made both their eyes water.

"A filthy habit," said Brand soberly, waggling his head. "A filthy habit." He pawed savagely at his pink moustache, and his eyes leaked moisture. . . .

The sun, shielded from me so long by the cloud-shell of Venus, felt good on my old plates. The chill of space crept in and the sunlight routed it as I slowly revolved. I dreamed of the voyages I had made in those dimming years. Long forgotten faces of the crews that had lived, and fought, and worked between my decks grew more vivid as I drifted there, inert and weightless.

Space had claimed me at last.



• The next SFA goes on sale November 14! •

*"What is space like?" Captain Jonathon Bork  
was about the last man on Earth to be able  
to answer that question truthfully. And the  
frustrating reason was: he was a space pilot!*

# CAPTAIN BEDLAM

**by Harry Harrison**

**“WHAT IS SPACE LIKE?** How do the naked stars really look? Those are hard questions to answer.” Captain Jonathan Bork looked around at the eager, intent faces waiting for his words, then dropped his eyes to his space-tanned hands on the table before him.

“Sometimes it’s like falling into a million-mile pit, other times you feel like a fly in the spider web of eternity, naked under the stars. And the stars are so different—no flickering, you know, just the

tiniest spots of solid light.”

Even as he told them he cursed himself a thousand times for the liar he was. Capt. Bork, spaceship pilot. The single man privileged to see the stars in the space between worlds. And after five round trips to Mars he had no idea of what it was really like out there. His body piloted the ship, but Jonathan Bork had never seen the inside of a ship’s control room.

Not that he ever dared admit it aloud. When people asked him what it was like he



told them—using one of the carefully memorized speeches from the textbook.

With an effort he pulled his mind away from the thought and back to the table surrounded by guests and relatives. The dinner was in his honor so he tried to live up to it. The brandy helped. He finished most of it, then excused himself as soon as he could.

The family house was old enough to have a pocket-sized backyard. He went there, alone, and put his back against the dark building still warm from the heat of the day. The unaccustomed brandy felt good, and when he looked up the stars wheeled in circles until he closed his eyes.

Stars. He had always looked at the stars. From the time he had been a child they had been his interest and his drive. Everything he had ever done or studied had that one purpose behind it. To be one of the select few to fly the space lanes. A pilot.

He had entered the academy when he was seventeen, the minimum age. By the time he was eighteen he knew the whole thing was a fake.

**H**E HAD TRIED hard to ignore the truth, to find some other explanation. But it was no

good. Everything he knew, everything he was taught in the school added up to one thing. And *that* was an impossible conclusion.

It was inescapable and horrible, so finally he had put it to the test. It happened in physiology class, where they were working out problems in relation to orientation and consciousness in acceleration, using Paley's theorem. He had raised his hand timidly, but Eagle-eye Cherniki had spotted it and growled him to his feet. Once he was committed the words came out in a rush.

"Professor Cherniki, if we accept Paley's theorem, in a problem like this with only minimal escape-G, we go well below the consciousness threshold. And the orientation factor as well, it seems to me . . . that, well . . ."

"Mr. Bork, just what are you trying to say?" Cherniki's voice had the cold incision of a razor's edge.

Jon took the plunge. "There can be only one conclusion. Any pilot who takes off in a ship will be knocked out or unable to orientate enough to work the controls."

The classroom rocked with laughter and Jon felt his face warm and redden. Even Cherniki allowed himself a cold grin when he answered.

"Very good. But if what you say is true, then it is impossible to fly in space—and we do it every day. I think you will find that in the coming semester we will go into the question of changing thresholds under stress. That should—"

"No, sir," Jon broke in "The texts do *not* answer this question—if anything they avoid it. I've read every text for this course as well as other related texts—"

"Mr. Bork, are you calling me a liar?" Cherniki's voice was as frigid as his eyes. A dead hush fell over the classroom. "You are dismissed from this class. Go to your quarters and remain there until you are sent for."

Trying not to stumble, Jon went across the room and out the door. Every eye was fixed on him and he felt like a prisoner on the last mile. Instead of getting an answer to his question it looked as if he had got himself in deep trouble. Sitting in his room, he tried not to think of the consequences.

He had never been certain he could get into pilot training—even though it had been his only ambition. Just about one out of 100 made it that far, the rest ending up in the thousand other jobs of the

space fleet. Very few washed completely out of the Academy; the entrance requirements were so high that deadheads never got that far. Of course, there were exceptions—and it was beginning to look like he was one of them.

**W**HEN THE INTERCOM finally called him to the president's office he was almost ready for it. He still jumped when it barked for him, then he got up quickly and left, taking the elevator to the executive level. The cold-faced secretary nodded him in, and he was alone with the Admiral.

Admiral Sikelm had retired from active service when he took over the presidency of the Academy. He had never lost the manner or voice of command and everyone on campus referred to him only as "The Admiral." Jon had never been this close to him before and was struck speechless. The Admiral however, did no barking or growling, just talked quietly to put him at ease.

"I have seen Professor Cherniki and he told me what happened in class. I have also listened to the taped recording of your conversation with him."



This doubly surprised Jon: it was the first he had heard that the classes contained concealed recorders. The Admiral went on, with the very last words Jon had expected to hear.

"Congratulations, Mr. Bork, you have been accepted for pilot training. Your classes begin next week—if you wish to continue training." Jon started to talk, but the Admiral stopped him with an upraised palm. "I want you to listen first before you give me your answer. As you have already discovered, space flight is not all that it appears to be.

"When we first hit space we were losing nine out of ten ships. And not through mechanical failure either. Telemetering equipment on the pilots showed us where the trouble lay—space is just not made for human body. Gravity changes, blood pressure, free fall, radiation narcosis, all of these combined with a dozen other causes we discovered later to put the pilot out of action. If he didn't black out completely or lose control, the disorientation of the new stimuli made it impossible for him to operate the ship.

"So we had a stalemate. Plenty of good ships with no one to fly them. We tried drugs, hypnosis and a number

of other things to fit men for space. They all failed for the same reason. By the time we adjusted men for space they were so doped and controlled that they were again unable to do the job.

"It was Dr. Moshe Kahn who solved the problem—you've heard of him?"

"Just vaguely—wasn't he first director of the Psych Corps?"

"Yes—that's all he is known for in the public record. Maybe, some day, he can get the credit due him. Dr. Kahn was the man who enabled us to conquer space.

"His theory, that was proven to be absolutely true, was that man as we know him, *homo sapiens*, is unfit for space. Dr. Kahn set out to create *homo nova*, men who could live and work in space. Under the correct mental conditions the human body is capable of unusual feats—such as walking through fire or possessing the rigid strength of a hypnotized patient. Dr. Kahn reasoned that the body's potentialities are great enough, all he had to do was create the *mind* of *homo nova*. This he did by inducing a condition of dual personality in adults."

"I don't understand, sir," Jon broke in, "wouldn't it have been easier to work

with children, babies—condition them from the very beginning?”

“Of course,” the Admiral said, “but happily we have laws to prevent just that sort of thing. Dr. Kahn never considered that approach; he used men, volunteers—most of them with some experience in space. Cases of multiple personality have been documented as far back as the nineteenth century, but no one had ever tried to *create* a separate personality. Kahn did it and he created the kind of personality he wanted. What is terrifying, upsetting or uncomfortable for a normal person is the natural environment of these new personalities. They are able to pilot ships between the planets. Using frozen sleep, passengers could also be carried to the planets without experiencing the terrible rigors of space.

“The entire program has been kept a secret—for good and obvious reasons. I can hear the howls now if people knew they were traveling with an unconscious pilot—an insane pilot I imagine they would call it since this is a kind of induced insanity. The only people who know about the program are the instructors, the pilots and a few high officials.

“Since the pilots are all volunteers—and the program *works*—there are no ethical rules being broken. As you have seen, even the students in this school have no idea of the real nature of a space pilot. If they accept the cover-up in their text books they go on to other jobs in the Corps. If they have the capacity to think and understand—like you—they will understand the need for a program like this. They will have the knowledge to know what they are getting into if they volunteer.

“I think that covers the whole picture—unless you have any questions.”

Jon thought a moment. “Just one, and it may sound a little foolish. Just what are—the physical symptoms connected with this training? I mean will I really be a little bit—”

“Insane? Only by definition. The new personality, Jon II, can only exist in the specialized environment of the ship’s control cabin. Your original personality, Jon I, assumes command all the time on the outside. The only sensation you will have will be periods of amnesia. The personalities are distinct and separate. Each blacks out completely when the other is dominant.”

Jon’s mind was made up—



had been made up for quite a while.

"I still look forward to being a pilot, Admiral. I don't see that all of this alters that fact any."

They shook hands then, the Admiral a little sadly. He had done this many times before. He knew it did not always turn out exactly as the young volunteers imagined.

**J**ON LEFT the school the same afternoon, without seeing any of his classmates. The Pilot Training School was in a different part of the same base and a new world altogether.

The thing he liked the most was the feeling of having arrived. He was no longer treated like a student, but as a responsible equal. He was one of a select few. There were only twelve students in the school at the time and over 1,500 men on the training staff. It soon became obvious why.

The first few weeks were mostly physical examinations and tests. Then came the endless sessions with the encephalograph and in the hypno chambers. Jon had nightmares at first and many days had a period of half-awake, strange sensations. This was only in the beginning. The first step

in the program was separating the two personalities completely. Once this happened Jon I had no knowledge of Jon II. Time went by very fast for him since he wasn't aware of most of the training.

Part of the program was orientation, teaching him how to accept and live with the hidden half of his mind. He, of course, could never meet Jon II, but he did watch another pilot's II personality. Jenkins was the one he saw, a slim boy about a year older than Jon. It was a Fine Motor Control Under Acceleration test that he watched. He found it hard to believe. The Jenkins in the test chair only faintly resembled the one he knew. Jenkins II had an expressionless face and a smoothness of motion that Jenkins I could never have. He sat in the acceleration cage that moved in sudden surges in random directions. At the same time Jenkins II had to throw small switches on a control board in response to a changing signal pattern. His fingers moved carefully, flicking the tiny switches placed only an inch apart—while the cage made sudden 3-G swoops. Jenkins II's muscles were bar-hard to counteract the acceleration, but it was more than mere strength that

gave the control. Heightened perception noted every thrust as it started and the opposed muscles countered with exactly the right amount of counterthrust. It was the automatic balance of an old sailor on a pitching ship, refined down to the smallest motion.

When Jon II was firmly established, Jon I had some uncomfortable experiences. Instead of coming through in the psych room one day, he found himself in the hospital. There was a tremendous gash across his palm and two fingers were broken.

"Training accident," the doctor said. "Something went wrong in the G cage and you saved yourself a good bit of injury by grabbing a bracing rod. Hurt your hand a little, that's all. Here's the rod."

The doctor smiled when he gave Jon the piece of metal—and he could see why. It was half-inch steel and the weight of his body on his fingers had bent and broken the rod. Jon I would have difficulty bending it with a hammer.

All of the training was not for Jon II's benefit. Once the second personality was strongly established, training time was split about 50-50. Jon I learned everything there was to know about a spacer—outside of the control room. He

took charge of the ship on the ground—check-ups, repairs, even passenger good will. Jon I was the pilot and everyone had to have faith in him. They could never know that he blacked out whenever he entered the control room.

He tried many times to see it, but never could. The control room was the deeply implanted device that triggered the personality shift. As soon as Jon I took a step through the door or even as much as glanced inside—he was through. Jon II was in his domain and took over instantly.

Graduation day was the most important, and the same time the most frustrating day of his entire life. There was no such thing as a graduating class. As each pilot finished his training he graduated at a public ceremony. Most of the base personnel turned out, at least 30,000 men. They paraded and Jon marched out in front of them in his pilot's black uniform. The Admiral himself took out the platinum wings—oldest symbol of man's flight—and snapped them on. It was a moment to remember.

There was just time to say good-bye to his family, when the ship was ready. That was another feature of graduation day. The new pilot made his



first flight. A short hop to the moon with a shipload of supplies—but still a flight. He had climbed the ramp to the entrance, turned to wave to his family, small specks in the distance. Then he had stepped into the control room.

Then he had stepped out through the lock onto the surface of the moon.

**T**HERE HAD BEEN no sensation of time. One instant he had been on Earth; in the next breath he was on the moon. Only the fact that he was wearing a spacesuit and his muscles were tired and sore convinced him. It was the most anti-climactic experience of his life. . . .

In the garden on Earth, looking up at the newly risen moon, Jon thought about the past and tasted it dry as ashes in his mouth. Inside the house someone laughed and he heard the tinkle of bottle against glass. He pushed the thoughts away then and remembered where he was.

His family's house, the party in his honor. He had put them off time after time, then was finally forced to accept. It was just as bad as he had thought it would be. It is one thing to live a lie with yourself—something totally differ-

ent to be a false hero in your own home.

Squaring his shoulders and flicking a speck of invisible dust from his jacket, he went back inside.

The following morning he reported to base for the 48-hour examination and sweat period that preceded all flights. His physical system was tuned to maximum potentiality by the doctors while he was briefed on the flight. It was to be the longest yet, and the most important.

"A long trip," the briefing officer said, tapping the chart, "to Jupiter—or rather the eighth satellite. One of the retrograde ones. There is a base and an observatory there now, as you know, but a new bunch of observers are going out. Astrophysicists to do work with Jupiter's gravity. Twelve of them and all their equipment. That's quite a load. Your main concern—or rather II's—will be the asteroid belt. You can't get too far away from the ecliptic so you may contact meteoric debris. We've had some trouble that way already. With a little luck you should complete a successful flight."

Jon shook hands with the passengers when they came aboard and checked the technicians when they sealed the

freeze chambers. When everything was secured he climbed an internal companionway to the control room. This was the point where he always held back a bit. Once he pushed open the door he was committed. It was the last act of free will he had, then Jon II took over. He hesitated only a second, then pushed the door open, thinking to himself—*next stop, Jupiter.*

Only it wasn't Jupiter, it was pain.

**H**E COULDN'T SEE and he couldn't hear. A thousand sensations were forced on him at once. They added up to pain. Bigger, redder and more horrifying than he ever thought possible. It took an effort of will to blink his eyes and try to focus them.

In front of him was the viewport and beyond it was the stars. He was in space, in the cabin of the ship. For an instant he almost forgot the pain at the sight of the stars spread out before him. Then the pain was back and he was trying to understand what had happened, wanting to do something to end the torment. The cabin was dark, the only illumination the lights on the giant control boards. They flickered and changed, he had

no idea of their meaning or what to do.

Then the pain was too much and he screamed and lost consciousness.

In the few moments Jon I had been in command of their body, Jon II had drained away a little of his panic. He had lost control and blacked out. He couldn't let it happen again. Neural blocks cut off a good deal of the pain, but enough seeped through to interfere with his thinking. A meteorite—it must have been a meteorite.

There was a fist-sized opening in the front bulkhead, and air was roaring out through the gap. He could see a single star through the hole, brighter and clearer than any star he had ever seen before. The meteorite had made that hole, then hit the wall behind him. That must have been the explosion and the glare when it vaporized. It had done a lot of damage, sprayed molten metal all over him and destroyed the circuits in his chair pedestal. It was getting hard to breathe; the air was almost gone. And cold.

The spacesuit was in its locker, just ten feet away. Only the straps that held him in the chair couldn't be opened. The electric release was destroyed, the mechanical



release jammed. He struggled with the clasps, but he only had his bare hands.

All the time it was getting harder to breathe. The panic was there again and he could no longer fight it away.

Jon II gasped and his eyes closed. Jon I opened them.

The pain was overwhelming and washed over him instantly. Jon's eyes closed again and his body slumped forward.

Then he straightened and jerkily the eyelids opened. For a moment his eyeballs rolled unsteadily, then fixed. They looked straight ahead and were almost vacant of anything like reason.

For Jon III was closer to the basic animal than any man or animal that had ever walked the earth. *Survive* was the only thing he knew. *Survive and save the ship*. He was dimly aware of Jon I and Jon II and could call on their memories if he needed to. He had no memories or thoughts of his own—except pain. Born in pain and doomed forever to live in pain, his whole world was pain.

Jon III was a built-in safety device, an admission that there might be times when even the II personality of a pilot couldn't save the ship. Only in the last extreme, when all else had failed, could the

III personality assume control.

There was nothing at all subtle about Jon III's control. *See a problem—solve the problem*. The memory, still in his forebrain, was "get the space-suit." He started to stand up, then realized for the first time he couldn't. With both hands he pulled against the strap across his chest, but it didn't break. The clasp was the answer; he had to open that.

No tools, just his hands. Use his hands. He put one finger inside the clasp and pulled. The finger bent, stretched and broke. Jon III felt no pain at all, no emotion. He put his second finger in and tugged again. The second finger was almost pulled off, and hung only by a piece of flesh. He put in the third finger.

The clasp finally broke when he pulled with his thumb. The rest of the hand hung, broken and disfigured. With a surge of power he pushed himself out of the chair. The femur in his right leg cracked and broke at the same time the lower strap did. Pulling with his good hand and pushing with his left leg he squirmed across the floor to the space-suit cabinet.

The air in the cabin was almost a vacuum. He had to keep blinking to wash away

the ice crystals that formed on his eyes. His heart was beating at four times its regular rate to force the trace of oxygen to the dying body.

Jon III was aware of these things, but they didn't bother him. His world had always been like that. The only way he could regain the peace of his mindless oblivion was to finish what he had started. He never knew, had never been taught, that dying was also a way out.

Carefully and methodically he pulled down the spacesuit and climbed into it. He turned the oxygen on and closed the last zipper. Then he closed his eyes with a sigh of relief.

Jon II opened his eyes and felt the pain. He could bear it now because he knew he was going to get out of this mess and save the ship. An emergency patch stopped the rush of air and while pressure was building up from the reserve tanks he examined the board. The ship could be flown on the secondary and manual circuits. All he had to do was rig them.

When the pressure reached seven pounds he stripped off

the spacesuit and gave himself first-aid. He was a little surprised to see the state his right hand was in. He couldn't remember doing that. Jon II wasn't equipped to solve that kind of problems though. He hurried the dressings and burn ointment and turned back to his repairs. It was going to be a successful trip after all.

**J**ON NEVER KNEW about Jon III—he was the unknown safety factor that was there always, dormant and waiting. Jon I thought Jon II had got them out of the mess. Jon II didn't bother to think about things like that. His job was to fly the ship.

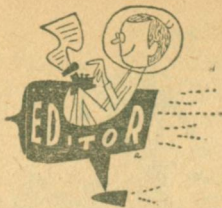
Jon recuperated slowly at the hospital on Jupiter 8. He was amazed at the amount of damage his body had suffered, yet pulled through. The pain was bad for a long time, but he didn't really mind. It wasn't too high a price to pay.

He wasn't going to be a liar any more. He had been a pilot, even if for only a few seconds.

He had seen the stars in space.







## THE EDITOR'S SPACE

**F**AIRLY OFTEN, I get a letter from a reader who wants to know if I'll consider for publication stories by unknown writers. Since I don't always have time to answer these in full detail by return mail, I'd like to say a word or four hundred on the subject here.

Obviously, many people have a distorted picture of how magazines are published. To destroy as many misimpressions at one crack as possible, I'll make a flat statement: it's never impossible for a new and unknown writer to get his stories published if he has talent and common sense.

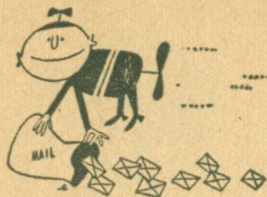
Let me hasten to add that it is often extremely difficult. Writing is a craft. To succeed at it, you must study and learn its techniques. The beginning writer, automatically, has plenty to learn. If he believes that it's all a matter of "genius," or of knowing the right people, he may never get off the ground.

What does it take to sell stories? It takes ideas, naturally. But as a matter of simple fact, new writers have as many original ideas as old ones do. Sometimes they have *more* original ideas, because they have fresher approaches.

It takes writing technique—which includes a basic knowledge of grammar as well as some idea of how stories are constructed. If you flunked third grade English, you'll have a tough time. Books on how to write can help you a lot in mastering technique—but intensive study of stories already published is almost as good.

And there *are* a few rules. It's awfully hard to read a story that is handwritten in pencil. Type your stories, double-spaced, on one side of the paper only. And enclose stamped, self-addressed envelopes if you want them back.

I'll read them. I was a new writer once, too.—LTS



## THE READERS' SPACE

**J**UST FINISHED the September issue of SFA and I thought I'd write in and tell you how much I have enjoyed it.

"The Slave" by Kornbluth outranks anything that has appeared in SFA before in my book. It outranks "Gulliver Planet," "Spawn of the Deadly Sea," "Yesterday's Man" and "Run for the Stars." Those four stories I consider tops in SFA, but "The Slave" was better than all of them. "Mission to Oblivion" was good, but I thought the plot he used has been overworked. Silverberg's story was weak; it didn't have as much action as "Spawn of the Deadly Sea."

"Thunder Over Starhaven" sounds like it will be a good story. I hope it won't be the only story in the issue. Jorgenson's usual novels and all of the novels you have had average about 45 pages. It will be a welcome change from the usual stories. That's a hint, I

like long stories. I've even read *Gone With the Wind* and *My First Two Thousand Years*.

That's a nice collection of monsters on the reverse of the cover. Has Bowman been reading *Mad?* (*Who hasn't?*—LTS) Speaking of covers, every cover that has come out on SFA has had a female on it, not that I object. I read *Playboy*, but I'd like to see a cover without them. (*Why?*—LTS)

Does anybody have *Garden of Fear* by Robert E. Howard? It's a paperback that was offered by Readers Service Book Club. Also does anybody have any material on Howard that can be published in a zine, *Hyborian Age*?

Keep up the good work.—Franklin Bergquist, Eddyville, Iowa.

This is by way of an open letter to reader Billy Meyer,



and his letter in the September SFA. In that letter, to refresh your memory, he was commenting on my story "Run for the Stars" and he said: "Who the hell wants to see a rat like Tallant conquer the universe?" I'd like to make a couple of points in reference, and take a stand in defense of that story. Knowing it is impossible to please everyone, I would usually not bother to defend myself, but this transcends the mere boundaries of story. It is a sort of philosophy in my yarns. If I may—

Now granted Benno Tallant was not a particularly virtuous soul. Granted he was a looter, and a junkie, and at the outset the worst kind of a coward. Still, do these characteristics mean he is doomed to lose? Because he *is* a coward, and because he is *forced* to fight for his life, he makes good in an untenable situation. Isn't that proof enough the guy deserves any kind of destiny he can carve out for himself; isn't it proof that he finally got the guts to fight? So why should the conditioning of a reader like Mr. Meyer convince him that just because Tallant wasn't a pristine-pure goody-goody he had to lose? Are the readers of science fiction so hammered into shape by Hollywood happy endings

that they can't accept an alternate *denouement* in which a rat succeeds?

If every story in every magazine ended happily, ended with the Good Guys beating down the Bad Guys, we'd all switch to Scrabble or parchesi for our entertainment, pretty quickly. It strikes me, and struck me when I plotted that story, that Tallant developed talent for himself, and strengthened his backbone, and came through when he had to.

On the other hand, the Earthmen who condemned him with that bomb in his belly were nothing but cowards, and buck-passers. Sure there was a job to be done, but what right did they have to condemn Tallant to doing it, with death as the only payoff?

If I had been that man, I'd have reacted the very same way, and in the end, I'd have gone off to get my revenge.

Who wants to see a rat conquer the universe? No one, I guess, but Genghis Khan did it, and Tamerlane did it, and Caesar did it, and even Hitler almost did it, and not one of those men was a paragon of the virtues. Even Attila and Napoleon did it, Billy Meyer, and I'm inclined to believe it takes a certain sort of man cast in their mold, to do the

job. The guy who plays fair and who has nothing to hold him back, just never has the incentive to do it.

So maybe there are nicer guys around than Tallant, but for my dough, Tallant is a far better man than the Earthies who planted the bomb in his gut.

And who says Tallant succeeded? That's another story.—Harlan Ellison.

*(Sequel, anybody?—LTS)*

This is my first time to write to any SF magazine. But SFADVENTURES is the best mag I have read. I am a high school student and like SF and believe in it. I usually read book length novels. But I have tried other SF magazines, but I don't like those short stories. In my opinion SFADVENTURES has the best in SF. And I like just three long novels and how about trying two novels!—J. W. Poole, Route 1, Sophia, North Carolina.

I have just finished reading my first copy of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES and I think it is the greatest. I am 14 and I am at the stage where I criticize very easily but I could find nothing to criticize in those three superb stories.

One more magazine like this one and I will subscribe to it.—Bob Bruce, 1125 East Ortega Street, Santa Barbara, California.

I was just recently introduced to your fine magazine by a friend.

I am 16 and have been reading science fiction for four years. And I think your mag puts out the best sf stories of all other mags on the market.

Keep it up.—Butch Manka, 526 West Riverside Drive, Jeffersonville, Indiana.

After reading "The Readers' Space" for issue No. 6 of your fine magazine I just couldn't resist the temptation to put in my nickel's worth. I see that you are getting all kinds of suggestions, among them one proposing more short stories or one long novel with a few shorts to fill in. This is, in fact, what scared me into writing this letter. I think SFA is the absolute best in SF mags, as it is! You started, somewhat courageously, what I believe to be the best policy now existing (three complete novels). I know many people were rather pessimistic about its chances of success but after it going over with such a



bang I sincerely hope you will not alter this policy. Reassure me on this point and all will be well.

In your September issue I rate the stories as follows:

1. "The Flame and the Hammer"

2. "The Slave"

3. "Mission to Oblivion"

They were all good of course but I must admit I'm rather partial to Silverberg.

As my all-time favorite yarns in SFA I'd pick "Chalice of Death," "Spawn of the Deadly Sea," and "Battle for the Thousand Suns" in that order. Glad to hear that there's a forthcoming sequel to "Chalice of Death." How about getting Silverberg to do a sequel to "Spawn of the Deadly Sea." Keep those thrillers by Knox and Silverberg coming! *(Even with the change in policy, this issue should keep you happy!—LTS)*

Congratulations on another expected high quality issue.—Bruce Fredstrom, 719 North 3rd Avenue, Sandpoint, Idaho.

Thanks to September SFA, I spent an enjoyable July 4th. "Mission to Oblivion" by Peterson is one of the best science-adventure yarns I've read in ages. Gripping! Suspenseful! and excitingly different!

It has polish. The characters come alive. More by this author, please.

"The Flame and the Hammer" by Silverberg comes second. Well written but hard to get into. No tie-in with Earth at all. Story otherwise good.

Sorry but I have to rate Kornbluth's "The Slave" last because I just don't like this type of story. I like Kornbluth usually and I suppose this story is adequate and might have done better without such tough competition. Psi has just about had its run, I'm afraid. Think you should let John Campbell continue it and that you should give us more of the real science-adventure type of yarn with logical extrapolation of present science such as Peterson has given in his aforementioned yarn. Yours for more solid science-adventure and monthly issues.—Philip C. Pollini, 23-14 163rd Street, Whitestone 57, New York.

What really prompted me to write this time above anything else was C. M. Kornbluth's "The Slave." I don't usually admire much from his pen, but I thought that *Search the Sky* was a neatly contrived and written affair. *(Hmm. But how did you like "The Slave?"*

—LTS) I feel sorta like David Rolfe. INFINITY had better watch out. SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES is progressing sciencefictionally just exactly like a real farmer. It is ploughing up all of dark space with the best possible kind of adventures, and the seeds of the worlds will be bearing the Fruit of Tomorrow.

I sorta like the usual policy of running three short novels an issue. I can't think of any other magazine that really does this. I think that an out-

standing novel has come along, at last. I liked "Mission to Oblivion" like nobody's business. I can sit down again and read said material with the same sort of satisfaction as before.

I am simply feeling fine today. I am thinking of nothing at all but science fiction. It has the best Frontiers and I'd like to do a lot of other things besides read and write. I'm too anxious.—James W. Ayers, 609 First Street, Attalla, Alabama.

## ADVENTURES IN TOMORROW

If there is one thing Ivar Jorgenson is noted for, it's surprises. Never afraid to blaze new trails, or to combine tremendously exciting action-adventure plots with the best literary techniques, Jorgenson refuses to fall into a predictable rut. Even editors who like to think of themselves as hardened and sophisticated are sometimes knocked out of their comfortable chairs by his work. And we don't mind confessing that is just what happened to us when we read his latest manuscript.

*Hunt the Space-Witch* is genuinely new and different. It is loaded with action and excitement. It is written with the smooth, compelling quality of any recent best-selling novel. It breaks taboos so subtly and thoughtfully you'll never realize they've been broken until you go back to read it the second time. It's genuine science fiction, all the way!

And as you've guessed by now, it will appear in the next issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES—on sale November 14.



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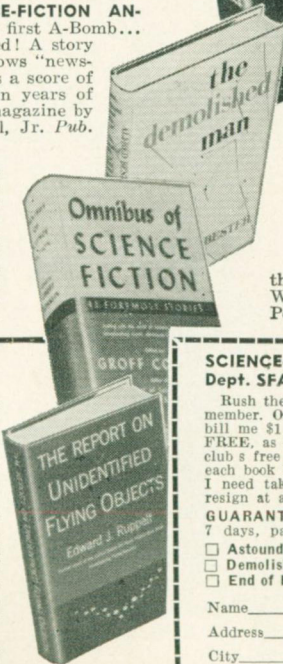
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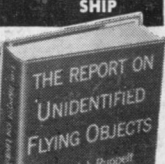
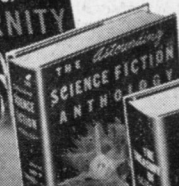
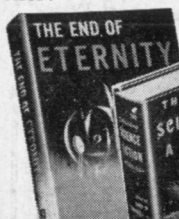


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